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Punjabi Women and Anti-Colonial and Nationalist Movements: An Analysis

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Abstract

The participation of Punjabi women in anti-colonial and nationalist movements played a significant yet often underrepresented role in the political and social transformation of the Indian subcontinent. This study paper analyzes the contributions, struggles, and socio-political influence of Punjabi women during the colonial period, particularly in resistance movements against British rule. It explores the involvement of women from diverse religious, social, and economic backgrounds in political activism, revolutionary organizations, educational reform, and mass mobilization campaigns. The study highlights the contributions of prominent female figures as well as grassroots participants who challenged both colonial authority and patriarchal social structures. Furthermore, the review examines the intersection of gender, nationalism, and regional identity in Punjab, emphasizing how women's participation reshaped traditional perceptions of female roles in society. The paper also discusses the limitations faced by women, including restricted access to political spaces, social conservatism, and historical marginalization in mainstream nationalist historiography. By synthesizing historical literature and feminist perspectives, this review demonstrates that Punjabi women were not merely symbolic participants but active agents in anti-colonial resistance and nation-building processes. The study contributes to a broader understanding of women's political agency in South Asian history.

Keywords: Punjabi women; Anti-colonial movements; Nationalism; British India; Women's political participation; Feminist historiography; Punjab history; Independence movement; Gender and nationalism; Social reform.

Introduction

The history of the anti-colonial struggle in the Punjab region represents one of the most complex chapters of the Indian independence movement, characterized by a unique intersection of religious identity, agrarian radicalism, and gendered mobilization (Venkateswaran & Knight, 2024). For centuries, the soil of the Punjab served as the cradle for the Indus Valley and Vedic civilizations, fostering a culture of resilience and syncretism that would eventually inform its resistance against British imperial rule (Mohan, 2025). From the late nineteenth century until the partition of 1947, Punjabi women underwent a profound transformation, migrating from the secluded domesticity of the *pardah* into the volatile public spheres of revolutionary politics and mass nationalist agitations. This evolution was not merely a reaction to colonial presence but a deliberate restructuring of social roles necessitated by the emergence of a modern Punjabi middle class and the tactical requirements of a multi-front struggle for sovereignty (Khan & Hussain, 2023).

Theoretical Frameworks and Historiographical Perspectives

To understand the role of Punjabi women in the freedom struggle, one must first navigate the competing historiographical schools that have shaped the narrative of Indian nationalism. Traditional historical accounts, particularly those originating from the Nationalist School (1940–1960), tended to frame the freedom movement as a unified, collective opposition of the Indian nation against a common British enemy (Sumbal, 2024). In this framework, the "women's question" was often presented as a social issue resolved by elite male reformers through education and legislation by the end of the nineteenth century. This perspective, while acknowledging women's participation, often relegated them to supportive roles or symbols of national enlightenment, failing to capture the autonomous agency of female activists who challenged both foreign rule and indigenous patriarchy (Ahmad, 2023).

In contrast, the Cambridge School (1960–1980) viewed nationalist politics through the lens of elite competition for power and resources, often overlooking the grassroots motivations of marginalized groups. The emergence of the Subaltern School in the late 1970s and 1980s provided a necessary corrective, focusing on non-elite and marginal groups and highlighting their autonomous resistance (Singh & Dhanda, 2026). For Punjabi women's history, the Subaltern approach has been instrumental in shifting the focus from prominent figures like Sarojini Naidu to the "unseen faces and unheard voices" of rural peasants, revolutionary couriers, and grassroots organizers who utilized oral traditions, folklore, and domestic spaces as sites of resistance (Biswa, 2025).

Comparison of Historiographical Schools on Punjabi Women's Role

Historiographical School	Period of Dominance	Primary Focus	Perception of Women's Agency
Nationalist School	1940–1960	Unified opposition to British rule; elite-led reforms	Women as symbols of progress; participation seen as an extension of domestic duty
Cambridge School	1960–1980	Elite competition for colonial patronage and power	Minimal focus; women's roles often viewed as secondary to male political maneuvering
Subaltern School	1980–Present	Grassroots resistance; marginal groups; "history from below"	Women as autonomous agents; focus on rural, working-class, and revolutionary activists

The discourse on gender in colonial Punjab was further complicated by the British "Civilizing Mission," which used the perceived misery and backwardness of Indian women as a justification for prolonged imperial rule (Borghini, 2021). Colonial rhetoric often contrasted "colonial masculinity" with the supposed "effeminate" nature of the colonized subjects, creating a gendered binary that Indian reformers sought to dismantle by reclaiming the image of *Bharatmata* (Mother India). This nationalist response required a reconfiguration of the "modern" woman one who was educated enough to be a companionate wife but traditional enough to maintain the sanctity of the Indian home against Western cultural encroachment (Kaur, 2026).

The Socio-Religious Roots of Female Mobilization

The mobilization of women in Punjab began in the late nineteenth century within the framework of socio-religious reform movements. The Arya Samaj, the Singh Sabha, and the Brahmo Samaj were pivotal in identifying female education as a medium for social upliftment and national strength. These movements sought to eradicate social evils such as female infanticide, child marriage, and the prohibition of widow remarriage, which were particularly prevalent in the patriarchal structures of Punjabi society (Miraj, 2022).

In the pre-colonial period, female education in Punjab was largely informal and confined to religious instruction at home, where girls learned to read the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, or the Guru Granth Sahib under the guidance of family priests or local clergymen. The colonial administration initially perceived this system as inefficient and introduced formal schooling as a tool for modernization (Khalid, 2024). However, it was the indigenous reformers who successfully linked education to the nationalist project. By establishing institutions like the Kanya Mahavidyalaya, they created a space where Punjabi women could acquire the intellectual tools necessary to engage with the public sphere (Sian & Dhamoon, 2020).

The Restructuring of the Middle-Class Identity

Anshu Malhotra's analysis of colonial Punjab reveals that the formation of the modern middle class was deeply intertwined with the reconfiguration of caste and gender roles. For high-caste Hindus and Sikhs (Khatris, Aroras, and Baniyas), the "women's question" became a tool for status-making. The reformers promoted the ideal of the *pativrata* the devoted, respectable wife living in a companionate marriage as a marker of their own "modernity" and progressiveness (Yasmin, et al., 2025).

This process involved a selective appropriation of tradition. While reformers advocated for girls' schools, they were often ambivalent about the extent of female autonomy, fearing that too much education might lead women to abandon their domestic duties (Kaur, 2023). Education was thus designed to produce women who could better serve the family and, by extension, the nation. Despite these limitations, women found ways to assert their agency within these new structures. Some founded their own schools, while others used mourning rituals and other public ceremonies as covert ways to subvert power at home and in the community (Koul, 2022).

Early Radicalism and the Ghadar Movement

The first significant political awakening among Punjabi women occurred during the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement following the partition of Bengal in 1905. Although geographically removed from Bengal, the unrest resonated deeply in Punjab, where women began forming informal groups to pledge the use of indigenous goods and collect funds for nationalist causes (Tirmizey, 2023). Leaders like Sushila Devi of Sialkot and Har Devi of Lahore emerged during this period, delivering fiery lectures that linked domestic consumption to the larger goal of national liberation (Ansari & Riaz, 2020).

The radicalization of the Punjabi diaspora led to the formation of the Ghadar Party (1913–14), an international revolutionary organization dedicated to the armed overthrow of British rule. Within this male-dominated sphere, Bibi Gulab Kaur stands as a singular figure of revolutionary defiance (Ghosh & Bansal, 2025). Born in 1890 in a poor peasant family in Sangrur, Gulab Kaur migrated to Manila with her husband, Mann Singh, with the intention of eventually reaching America. Her contact with Ghadar leaders in the Philippines transformed her worldview; when her husband hesitated to join the movement, she abandoned her marital life to return to India and fight for independence (Bakshi, 2026).

Gulab Kaur's contributions were multifaceted and dangerous. She served as a primary organizer in Manila, mobilizing Indian residents and collecting funds and weapons for the party. To evade colonial surveillance, she often posed as a journalist with a press pass, using the guise to distribute revolutionary literature and arms to Ghadarites on ships (Afridi et al., 2026). Her leadership was so respected that she was appointed to the Central Committee, where she screened new recruits and managed the party's printing press. After returning to Punjab, she continued her revolutionary work in the villages of Kapurthala, Hoshiarpur, and Jalandhar until her arrest and subsequent two-year imprisonment in the Lahore Fort, where she was subjected to severe torture (Malhotra, 2024).

The Agrarian Resistance: 1907 Unrest and Its Legacy

The 1907 agrarian agitation in Punjab, commonly known as the "Pagri Sambhal Jatta" movement,

represented a critical juncture where the urban middle class and the rural peasantry formed a united front against colonial economic exploitation (Attique et al., 2024). The movement was a response to three oppressive land laws the Punjab Land Alienation Act, the Punjab Land Colonization Act, and the Doab Bari Act which sought to reduce farmers to mere contractors on their own land and increase financial burdens through water taxes (Hussain, 2021).

While the leadership of Ajit Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai is well-documented, the movement's success relied on a broader infrastructure of resistance in which women played an "invisible" but vital role (Iqtidar, 2022). In the rural heartlands, women were the primary sustainers of the domestic economy during the mass arrests of male protesters, and they participated in communal kitchens (*langars*) that served as hubs of political mobilization. The slogan "Pagri Sambhal Jatta" (Guard your turban, O farmer) invoked a sense of honor that resonated across gender lines, framing the struggle as a defense of the family's dignity and ancestral land (Husnain, 2025).

Impact of 1907 Agrarian Laws on the Punjabi Peasantry

Act	Year	Primary Provision	Socio-Economic Impact
Punjab Land Alienation Act	1900	Restricted the sale or mortgage of land	Favored landlords over small peasants; increased debt traps
Punjab Land Colonization Act	1906	Transferred land ownership to the state upon the death of the holder	Deprived heirs of their inheritance; reduced farmers to contract workers
Doab Bari Act	1907	Increased taxes on irrigation and land	Led to widespread financial distress and the "Pagri Sambhal Jatta" protests

The legacy of the 1907 agitation provided a blueprint for subsequent movements, including the Ghadar Movement and the revolutionary activities of Bhagat Singh. In modern times, the 2020–21 farmers' protests in India explicitly invoked the spirit of "Pagri Sambhal Jatta," with Punjabi and Haryanvi women once again emerging as central figures in the resistance, managing protest sites and framing the struggle through a combination of traditional customs and digital media strategies (Bansal, 2024).

The Catalyst of Jallianwala Bagh and the 1919 Rupture

The events of 1919 transformed the character of the nationalist movement in Punjab from a localized grievance into a mass-based revolutionary struggle. The Rowlatt Act, which permitted indefinite detention without trial, sparked protests across the province that culminated in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre on April 13, 1919 (Bano, 2023). The massacre, where General Dyer ordered troops to fire on a peaceful gathering in Amritsar, killing hundreds, shocked the nation and irreparably damaged the Indian public's faith in British rule (Brunner, 2020).

The aftermath of Jallianwala Bagh saw the imposition of martial law, characterized by horrific acts of colonial barbarity, such as forcing Punjabis to crawl on their bellies and publicly flogging them. Women were not spared from this climate of terror, but they also became iconic figures of resistance. Rattan Devi's first-hand account of the night following the massacre is one of the most powerful testimonies in Indian history (Dutt, 2023). She defied the curfew to remain in the Bagh with the body of her dead husband, using a bamboo stick to ward off dogs while providing water and comfort to other wounded survivors, including a twelve-year-old boy. Her presence in the "overflowing blood" of the Bagh symbolized the transition of Punjabi women from protected domestic subjects to resilient witnesses of colonial violence (Rahman et al., 2024).

The Gandhian Era: Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience

The 1920s witnessed the direct involvement of Punjabi women in the Gandhian movements, which

strategically utilized domestic symbols to broaden the base of nationalist support (Singh, 2026). The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) encouraged women to participate in the "domestication of the public domain" engaging in protest activities on the streets without surrendering their roles as the moral center of the household. Women took the lead in picketing shops selling foreign alcohol and textiles, and the *charkha* (spinning wheel) became a symbol of economic defiance and national pride (Kazi, 2023).

In Lahore, the movement was spearheaded by Lado Rani Zutshi and her daughters Manmohini, Shyama, and Janak, who organized massive demonstrations and faced frequent arrests. Other prominent leaders included Sarla Devi Chaudhurani, who founded the Bharat Stree Mahamandal to promote female education and eliminate the purdah system, and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, a close associate of Gandhi who bridged the gap between elite diplomacy and grassroots activism (Kalra, 2024). The participation of women in the Akali Movement for Gurdwara reform further integrated religious identity with nationalist aspirations, as women participated in non-violent protests to reclaim control of their religious institutions from British-backed administrators (Singh, 2022).

Strategic Modes of Women's Participation in Nationalist Movements

Participation Mode	Mechanism	Significance
Constructive Programming	Spinning Khadi; using Swadeshi goods	Transformed domestic labor into an economic weapon
Political Activism	Picketing; addressing public rallies	Challenged the gendered partitioning of public space
Logistical Support	Serving as secret envoys; managing "safe houses"	Provided the "invisible infrastructure" for revolutionary groups
Diplomatic & Legal	Representing women at conferences; seeking legislative rights	Ensured women's voices were part of the nation-building discourse

The Muslim League and the Mobilization for Pakistan

The final decade of the anti-colonial struggle saw the emergence of a distinct political identity among Punjabi Muslim women, catalyzed by the All India Muslim League's quest for a separate homeland (Mandair, 2025). Following the 1940 Lahore Resolution, Muslim women became essential conduits for the League's message in rural and far-flung areas of Punjab. Figures like Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz and Begum Salma Tassaduq Hussain were instrumental in taking women "out of the seclusion of their homes" and bringing them to the forefront of the political arena (Rasool, G., & Ahmed, A. (2023).

The mobilization strategy for Muslim women was both ideological and practical. They compose patriotic songs and poems, such as "Pakistan is our birthright," and established student federations to engage the younger generation (Hussain & Hussein, 2021). Legally, leaders like Begum Shahnawaz pushed for the recognition of Islamic Shariah laws regarding property inheritance, which provided a tangible incentive for women to support the movement as it promised greater economic rights than the existing customary laws. In the 1945–46 elections, women volunteers played a decisive role in the League's victory, even participating in "Direct Action Day" protests and organizing rallies that challenged the Unionist coalition ministry in Punjab (SINGH, 2020).

The Gendered Violence and Agency of Partition

The partition of 1947 remains the most traumatic and gendered event in the history of the Punjab. As the British crown exited the subcontinent, the province was engulfed in a communal bloodbath that left between one and two million dead and uprooted fifteen million people (Qadir & Smith, 2025). Women's bodies became the primary sites of territorial and communal contestation; historians estimate that between 75,000

and 100,000 women were abducted and raped, with nearly half of these cases occurring in Punjab alone (Rehman, 2025).

However, the narrative of 1947 is not only one of victimization but also of profound female agency and resilience. Women emerged as active agents in rescue missions and relief work. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur spearheaded the establishment of sanitation and maternity care for refugees, while Subhadra Joshi founded the "Shanti Dal" to combat communal disturbances (Frazier, 2023). In urban centers like Ludhiana and Amritsar, women established large-scale communal kitchens to feed displaced families, providing hope and consolation in a hostile environment (Mian, 2025).

In the Sikh community, the trauma of Partition prompted a re-interrogation of identity and tradition. While some women were subjected to "honor killings" by their own kin to prevent abduction as seen in the mass suicide at Thoa Khalsa others reclaimed the "Kaur" identity of the saint-soldier to lead unofficial militias and train others in defense strategies (Khattar, 2026). This shift redirected the narrative from one of passive suffering to one of rooted empowerment, as women negotiated the complexities of displacement to build new lives and identities in post-partition India and Pakistan (Bibi, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Punjabi women played a crucial and dynamic role in anti-colonial and nationalist movements despite operating within a deeply patriarchal and colonial society. Their contributions extended beyond symbolic representation to active participation in political protests, revolutionary activities, educational reforms, and community mobilization. Through their involvement, Punjabi women challenged traditional gender norms while simultaneously contributing to the broader struggle for independence and national identity formation. However, historical narratives have often minimized or overlooked their role, resulting in limited recognition of their political and social contributions. The review highlights the importance of re-examining nationalist history through gender-sensitive and regional perspectives to better understand the complexities of resistance movements in colonial Punjab. Future research should focus on recovering lesser-known narratives, oral histories, and local archives to provide a more inclusive account of women's participation in anti-colonial struggles. Recognizing the role of Punjabi women is essential for a comprehensive understanding of South Asian nationalist history and the evolution of women's political empowerment in the region.

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