



# The Unsung Heroines Of The First World War- Punjabi Women Who Stayed Home and Fought Their Own Battles.

Dr Ravneet Kaur Gill

Historian

## Abstract:

The women of Punjab who were left at home while an overwhelming majority of their men served abroad in a prolonged alien war is a subject of keen study. The wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of these men played a large role in not only their life, but also in their memories of 'home', while they served overseas. What was their reaction to the war and the part that their men were playing in it? How did they manage to support their men while they were far away from home, hearth and fields? How did they cope with the absence of the men? What was their reaction when the war weary veterans and battle hardened soldiers returned home after years, perhaps lacking a limb and most certainly carrying scars, both mental and physical from their time at the warfront in Europe, Mesopotamia, Gallipoli, Central Asia, Belgium, Egypt and Palestine et al. This paper aims to shed light on the contribution of these women.

**Keywords:** Women, Gender, First World War, Punjab, Soldiers

## Introduction

“The best indicator to the progress of a nation is the treatment of its women<sup>1</sup>”. In the context of Sikh women, there were invariably much in their orientation, reactions and basic outlook that made them well suited to the vagaries and trials of enduring long separations from their men in situations of extreme stress. Historically, Sikh women have enjoyed a much greater freedom, equality and exalted status in the community and society compared to other castes and communities in India. Starting from the time of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, women were accorded respect, equality and a degree of personal and social freedom which is quite unique by the standards of a

<sup>1</sup> A. R. Wani, Role and Status of Women in Sikh Religion through Sri Guru Nanak Perspectives. *Electronic Research Journal of Literature*, 1, 2019, p. 91.

time when Pardah, sati, female infanticide etc were common across India<sup>2</sup>. Even during the days of the later Gurus, Sikh women continued to enjoy a status that was not discriminatory and joined the men in every shade of hardship, including warfare or martyrdom<sup>3</sup>, in addition to accompanying the menfolk in times of danger and war. In the dark and dangerous days after the death of Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh traditions are full of the heroic tales of Sikh women exhorting their menfolk to die in the battlefield or get martyred and the women themselves leading Sikhs into battle as in the case of Mai Bhago<sup>4</sup> etc.

The mothers, wives, sisters, daughters and other female relations of the soldiers knew that it was vital to keep up the morale of the men fighting far from home. The martial identity was so deeply embedded in the psyche and hearts of the men and women folk alike that it was a deeply cherished part of their social and cultural identity and family heritage<sup>5</sup>.

### Role of Sikh Women in Battle

The role of the Sikh women in upholding, propagating and strengthening military traditions is indisputable. The women sent their men to battle when they fought the wild tribes men of the frontier, won Kashmir and Ladakh and even entered Kabul as a part of the Khalsa Army under Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of the Sikh soldiers of the British Indian Army hailed from the same stock. They were the ones who literally held the fort back home, kept the fires burning and the fields tilled while the men were out on campaigns. M.K Gandhi, who was one of the most vocal recruiting enthusiasts for the British Government in India realised fully the power of the women in inducing the men to fight when he said in a speech delivered on June 26, 1918

Sisters, you should encourage your husbands and brothers and sons and not to worry them with your objections. If you want them to be true men, send them to the army with your blessings<sup>6</sup>. Their contribution to the morale, courage and mental strength of their men went far beyond what was conceived by most British writers of the time<sup>7</sup>.

Malcolm Darling, who made an intricate and sensitive study of the conditions of life, in its many different forms in the Punjab villages, writes that the Sikh lady enjoys a better status than any other in central Punjab. A Sikh wife goes to the Gurudwara with her husband, and both men and women worship there equally and quite often, women

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<sup>2</sup> R. S. Chillana, 'Condition of women as depicted', *Punjab Past and Present*, 7(1), Apr 1973, Punjabi University, Patiala, pp.110-18.

<sup>3</sup>S. K. Luthra, 'Out of the ashes: Sikh American institution building and the promise of equality for Sikh women', *Sikh Formations*, 13(4), 2017, pp.308-332.

<sup>4</sup>B. Bertolani, 'Women and Sikhism in Theory and Practice: Normative Discourses, Seva Performances, and Agency in the Case Study of Some Young Sikh Women in Northern Italy', *Religions*, 11(2), 2020, p.91.

<sup>5</sup>A. T. Jarboe, 'Soldiers of empire Indian sepoy in and beyond the imperial metropole during the First World War, 1914-1919', Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University, 2013, p. 126.

<sup>6</sup>M.K. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ahmedabad: India Press, XIV, 1965, p. 454.

<sup>7</sup>Falcon, *Handbook of Sikhs*, p. 45.

take the lead in the collective prayers. Outside the Gurdwara, too, there is no disparity between how a boy and a girl are treated<sup>8</sup>.

Flora Annie Steel, writing in 1929, mentions that when the men went missing in large numbers for long periods of time, the women took on the role of men, and in the doing, helped the process of their own liberalisation and improvement in status<sup>9</sup>. Punjabi women are described by Flora Annie Steel as being tall and physically fit. She further describes how women played a valuable role in cultivation to the extent that a father married off his daughter before puberty, but keep them from their husband's houses as long as possible. Another observation is that the peasant women of the villages, were on the whole, free from the obsession with sexuality, unlike the town bred women<sup>10</sup>.

### **Impact of war on women**

The social impact of the experiences of the men at the front in the war years definitely reflected in their changed attitudes towards women education and empowerment back home. The men were increasingly in favour of education in general and this recognition of the value of education also extended to women's education. According to Annie Besant, as early as 1917, a great wave of change could be seen passing over Indian womanhood... The change is partly due to English influences reacting upon them through their husbands; partly due to contact with Englishwomen...<sup>11</sup>The Sikh people were also very enlightened when it came to the education of the girl child as Darling writes that it was typical of the Jat that he is almost as eager for the education of his daughter as of his son, for the double reason that she may be able to read the Granth Sahib and be an economical housewife<sup>12</sup>."

There was also an endorsement given by an old Sikh gentleman who told Darling that looking back over 70 years (In 1931), he can say that education has made Sikh women more independent and more intelligent. The Sikh women were even financially independent, with some indulging in money lending on the same terms as men, but mainly against jewellery.

No matter how brave a front the women put up in the absence of the men who frequently did not return alive from the war, it is indisputable that the Sikh women faced a very difficult time in their absence. In letters, they implore him to take leave and come back for some time and also to reply to the letter, again and again. In a few lines, the mother and daughter are able to condense a world of emotions and longing into their letter. Scattered incidents give a glimpse into the state of mind of the women and their diverse reactions to the loss of their men. A letter from an

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<sup>8</sup>M. Darling, *Wisdom and waste in the Punjab village*, Oxford: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1934, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> M. Darling, *The Punjab peasant in prosperity and debt*, Oxford: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1947, pp.93-110.

<sup>10</sup>Flora Annie Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity*, London: A. &C. Black Ltd., 1929, pp. 37.

<sup>11</sup>Annie Besant, *Girls' Education, The birth of New India; A Collection of Writings and Speeches on Indian Affairs*, Madras: Theosophical Publications Society, 1929, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Darling, *Wisdom and Waste*, p.112.

anguished wife to her husband serving abroad and it says, “Why do you not return? Your mother has gone out of her mind... The winter nights are ahead, and how can I, a lone woman, stay by myself<sup>13</sup>?”

In rural Punjab, especially in the Sikh traditions, there has been a culture of *Bolis* (limericks) which are sung by a woman and the refrain taken up by the rest and accompanied by dancing of the *Giddha* (traditional dance) and clapping of hands, which sets the rhythm and the tone for the dance and song. The *bolis* cover almost every range of relationships, from that to mother in law to that with the elder brother of the husband, to the younger brother to her parents et al and provide a socially acceptable and natural emotional outlet for the women. These *bolis* are sung on every social occasion and even sometimes, without occasion, when women meet.

The *Bolis* from that time, and also the folk songs preserve a wealth of information about the real state of the Sikh woman’s emotions while their men were away at war for years together. Amarjit Chandan, eminent Punjabi poet has recovered many of these songs and translated them<sup>14</sup>. The songs of these women are filled with raw emotions such as angst, grief, passion, anger, cajoling, mourning, desolation, coaxing and dismay.

May you never be enlisted...

You who leaves me at my father’s house  
Even before we have lived together....

The famous song that was sung in the Hindi film *Rockstar* called ‘Kateya Karoon’ is a Punjabi folk song from the time of the First World War in which the woman says that she will spin cotton and sit at her spinning wheel all night while waiting for her husband to return from war.

Another song as per the translation by Amarjit Chandan talks of the train going to Basra, which is carrying away the husband and the wife left behind is asking the train to go slowly with the precious human cargo.

### Consequences and social impact of the War

A change that was mentioned in the context of Sikh women, especially since the First World War which Darling mentions as ‘striking’ is that women wear much less jewellery now as Sikhs now ‘boycotted’ jewellery, influenced by the example of Europe and also the Akalis who preached against jewellery and drinking.

An important consequence of the Sikh men serving abroad was that there was even further strengthening of the woman’s position in the family and community as the returning veterans of the war carried back a new found appreciation and regard for the women folk which had been missing before. The women, especially the wife began to be consulted in all matters, her food and dress became better, she was given precedence in ceremonies and

<sup>13</sup>S. Das, ‘Reframing life/war ‘writing’: objects, letters and songs of Indian soldiers, 1914–1918’, *Textual Practice*, 29(7), 2015, pp.1265-1287.

<sup>14</sup> Amarjit Chandan, *How They Suffered: World War I and Its Impact upon the Punjabis*, 206, <http://apnaorg.com/articles/amarjit/wwi/> Retrieved on 29 June 2020.

family, her well being and comfort was considered and she could count on her husband's support in most matters<sup>15</sup>. The wives had been managing the fields and the home affairs when the husbands went to war. This had brought a greater sense of freedom and also made it acceptable for the wives to be seen in the fields. They usually arranged for the cotton to be picked and arranged the fields to be harvested and the grains properly stored in the store room at home, or taken to market. In household matters too, the wife began to be given greater independence and she was in charge of what was to be bought and sold from the dairy and grain supplies and the rations and stores. In all the matters of society or ceremony such as weddings, betrothal or childbirth etc, women decided what presents were to be given or gifts exchanged.

## Conclusion

The contribution of the silent women to the war effort from India during the First World War is indeed exceptional. It would not be wrong to say that it was difficult to win the war for the British except for the effort selfless exertion, disciplined outlook and patience, not to mention the heartbreak, anxiety and tension under which the women waited for their men to return. The shortages and even starvation conditions, which prevailed added to the problems of the women who were holding the fort back home and who kept the home fires burning single handedly for years while the men folk were engaged in the war. Their sacrifice and contribution to the war effort is undeniable.

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<sup>15</sup> Darling, *Wisdom and waste*, p.295.