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## **Sarla Devi Chaudhurani: Role and Contribution in the Non-Cooperation Movement in Punjab**

(1920-1922)

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### **An Abstract**

Sarla Devi Chaudhurani was an exceptional woman. She was a prolific writer, an inspiring singer, a political activist and a woman leader. She was the first woman political leader of her time and she was the leader of the anti-British movement as well. This research paper is an attempt to highlight the role of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani in the non-cooperation movement in Punjab. She devoted herself for the promotion of the non-cooperation movement in Punjab and for this purpose she presided over women's meetings at various places like Ludhiana, Multan, Jhang and Ferozepur.

### **Introduction**

Sarla Devi Chaudhurani was an exceptional woman of rare gifts. She was a prolific writer, an inspiring singer, a political activist and a woman leader. She was the first woman political leader of her time and she was the leader of the anti-British movement as well. When the social set-up in India was marked by backwardness, orthodoxy and conservative, women in sizeable number came forward and participated in the non-cooperation movement in Punjab. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani stepped into the political arena to take part in various programmes of the non-cooperation movement. She organized meetings, delivered public speeches and went from door to door urging women to join the non-cooperation movement.

**Keywords:** Swdeshi, Bycott, Untouchability.

### **Material and Method**



In this paper interdisciplinary approach have been used. This research paper is largely based on Primary sources for instance, *Proceedings of Home Department of India, the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi and the Tribune.*

### **Result and Discussion**

Mohandas Karm Chand Gandhi (1869-1948) returned to India in 1915 as the hero of the South African struggle. [1] He entered the arena of Indian politics in 1919. He was the first person who visualized mass participation of women in the struggle for freedom. He traveled all over India to encourage people to take up the programme of the non-cooperation movement. He particularly wanted women actively participate along with men as he believed that the major objective could not be fulfilled if fifty percent i.e. (women) of India's population remained uninvolved in this non violent campaign. He said, "If women do not share in men's task the country is bound to remain in a wretched state." [2] He therefore advised them to do what they could for the sake of the country because every act counted. In fact Gandhi was fully confident of women's strength, ability sense of organization and sincerity in the performance of any kind of duty assigned to them.

In September 1920 the Congress met in Calcutta and accepted the programme of the non-cooperation movement. In December 1920 at Nagpur session of Indian National Congress, programme of Non-Cooperation movement was discussed. Mahatma Gandhi, C. R. Dass and MotiLal Nehru were the main leaders. Following were the main principles of the non-cooperation movement:

- The surrender of Government titles and honors.
- Hand spinning and hand weaving was to be encouraged.
- To maintain Hindu Muslim unity.
- Observe strict non-violence.
- Boycott the foreign goods, and use only country made goods.
- National school and colleges were to be set up.
- Give up untouchability. [3]



Due to the Chauri Chaura incident in the Gorkhpur district of U.P. on 5 February 1922, the non-cooperation movement came to an end on 12 February, 1922.

When the social set-up in India was marked by backwardness, orthodoxy and conservative, women in sizeable number came forward and participated in the non-cooperation movement in Punjab. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani stepped into the political arena to take part in various programmes of the non-cooperation movement. She organized meetings, delivered public speeches and went from door to door urging women to join the non-cooperation movement.

Sarala Devi Chudhurani was born on September 9, 1872 at Jorosanko in Calcutta. She grew up to be a rebellious and independent woman. Her mother, Swarnakumari devi (1855-1932), was the sister of Rabindernath Tagore (1861-1941) and father, Janakinath Ghosal (1840-1913), the son of a landowning family in Krishananagar and a leader of the Indian National Congress. Sarala Devi's family encouraged Sarala to opt. for institutional education. She was admitted to Bethune School at the age of seven. Bethune was at the time the centre of learning for the girls from 'enlightened' and 'progressive' families. After completing her studies, she entered public services at the age of nineteen. [4]

In 1905, Sarala Devi was married to a popular Arya Samajist and a well-known nationalist leader, Pandit Ram Bhaj Dutt Choudhary of Lahore with this marriage her centre of political activities shifted from Bengal to Punjab. However, she maintained contacts with the revolutionaries of Bengal. Rather she continued to exert a powerful influence from Lahore by giving occasional instructions to the members of the Surhid Samiti. She even tried to arrange some *pehlwan* (wrestlers) from Punjab to be in Bengal for wrestling matches. [5]

When Gandhi came to the Punjab in the wake of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre he was Sarala's guest at her house and thus began a close friendship. She took up the cause of swadeshi and spoke out publicly in its favor. Her support for Gandhi, led to some tension with her husband, who did not support Gandhi's non violence movement. [6]

A pertinent point to be noted here is that she began her career as a revolutionary, but changed her ideology, when she came in contact with Mahatma Gandhi and thereafter became a nationalist. So it is clear



that she was highly influenced by Gandhi, who was a nationalist. That created deferences with her husband. So it was a difficult time for Sarala Devi keeping the conservative society of that time in mind.

Before the starting of the non-cooperation movement Gandhi along with Ali brothers, toured the whole country to educate the masses and to mobilize the public opinion. [7] He delivered lectures on Jallianwala Bagh and Khilafat issue and told people about his novel technique of non violence and Non-Cooperation. [8] During his whirl-wind tours, Gandhi was accompanied by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani.[9] At this time no other woman had confidence like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. She was one of a few women who came out from their houses and toured with men.

Gandhi himself claimed that he was taking her all over India with him as she had better understood his Swadeshi principles than his wife.[10] Sarala Devi Chaudhurani also addressed several meeting to promote swadeshi in poetic way in the month of June and July 1929 by exhorting women to come forward.[11] She used several methods to express her views to the other women. She sung many poems to arouse the interest of women, in freedom movement.

*'Kade nahi harna,bhawen sadee jan jae*

*Golian di mar kolon ,bandukhan di awaj kolon*

*Asin nahin darna ,bhawen sadee jan jae'*

(We would never yield even if we lose our live; we are not scared of sets and guns even if we lose our lives.)

At Ludhiana, she presided over a meeting of 6000 audience including 300 women in the month of July 1920. She explained how Gandhi's soul force was greater force. [12] The surrender of titles and honors was the important principle of the non-cooperation, Sarala devi also followed this principle. She returned her war broach granted for requiting services with regard to the formation of Bengali Regiment. [13] Her example was followed by many other people and thus, she became a role model for others. In the Punjab, especially at Lahore, meetings were held almost everyday to explain the non cooperation movement. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani who became a follower of Gandhi in 1919, presided various public meetings at Lahore, Sialkot and Jhelem. A *swaraj* Ashram was also established in her house at Lahore where she delivered speeches for motivating the people. [14]



The General-Secretary of City Congress committee, Lahore writes about the activities of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and states that she succeeded in getting one thousand lady members enlisted within a week by house to house canvassing. She addressed private gatherings of ladies in different quarters of the city. Great enthusiasm prevailed among the women. Many donated ornaments for funds, many took swadeshi vows and to spinning. She herself pledged to enlist 1000 members and for that she worked hard till 12.p.m. in the night. [15] At Jhang, Maghiana the Congress Movement was strengthened by the visit of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani.[16] At Ferozpur, she exhorted on her audience numbering about 8000, that, “We should prove to the world that we are alive.....the degree of responsiveness of swadeshi is the measure of our vitality and our grade in the animated world.”She made her speeches doubly interesting and motivating by quoting examples from epics and singing her self-composed songs in Punjabi. [17]

She composed songs in Punjabi and by doing this she crossed the language barrier. We should appreciate her contribution as it was a very difficult task to Cross the language barrier.

At Multan she said, “We have started war against our government, it is not the war of guns but of soul and *Charkha* (spinning-wheel) is our machine gun.....”She further said, “The struggle would continue unless and until the martial Law officers are removed.” [18]

The Tribune Correspondent remarked that the speeches of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani delivered at Multan, Khanewal and Muzafargarh had produced such a marginal effect on the minds of women that they prepared themselves to observe Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday in a most befitting manner. [19]

In Punjab the boycott movement was launched by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani among the women of the province in July1920. In her long speech at Sialkot, she blamed the foreign traders for the pitiable condition of their country and for poverty. She said, “32crores of Indian men and women have to look up Manchester and Lancashire and their agents .....”she asked her audience to throw off the burden of subjection, dependence and slavery by discarding their foreign garments. She became very emotional during this speech. She told people to take revenge from foreign traders through boycott. [20] Smt. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, who toured the province to make the movement successful, gave an inspiring message to the people of the Punjab. Punjab is the home of "*khaddar*" and that is how it should deck itself on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. She said, “The first of August is the anniversary of the non-cooperation movement as well of



Tilak Maharaj ...She went on "Have two suits only made, one to wash, one to wear, till the nation's stock can afford to supply each family with more. Let every man, woman and child of Punjab be ready for the 1<sup>st</sup> of August with his or her khaddar dress. [21]

In response to the call given by the Punjab Congress committee, special meetings for women were organized to persuade them to discard foreign clothes for burning. [22]

Prominent women like Sarala Devi organized meetings appealing to the people to discard foreign clothes for burning. At Lyallpur, at the appeal of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, heaps of foreign clothes were collected for burning. Women, too, responded to her appeal and discarded their costly foreign made sarees for bonfire. At Tobha Tek Singh, Jhang Maghiana and Multan, too, people responded to the appeal of Sarala Devi and gave several foreign made clothes for burning. The Congress movement was much strengthened at these places by the visit of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. [23]

In Shahpur Distrit weavers's conference at Bhera, Sarala Devi Chaudhuarni said, "foreign cloth is an emblem of our disgrace and slavery, therefore we should discard this emblem in order to gain self respect." after her stirring speech, a large number of foreign clothes were thrown away by the people and these clothes were burnt the next day .The response of people was the same at Malokwal and Miani. The foreign cloths were piled up before her, at her appeal. [24]

The Joint Secretaries of Bharat Stri Maha Mandal, Punjab Branch, Miss Roy and Mrs. Roshan Lal, reported to the Congress Committee about the Swadeshi activities of Smt. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. The report stated that to popularize swadeshi women's meetings were held different places in Lahore. These meeting were held at respectively on 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>h</sup>, and 25<sup>th</sup> June 1920 at three different places in Lahore. These meetings were attended by hundreds of women, who were deeply interested to listen to Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. She told women that she felt more comfortable and free in her khaddar saree because it was a manufacture for which her sister and her brothers had laboured. Her statement pleased her audience so much that most of the women resolved to discard foreign clothes. They asked her to open a swadeshi store. [25]



At Jhelum, about 800 women both Hindu and Mohammdan attended the meetings and her appeal almost all the ladies took swadeshi vows. [26] Here we can say that she worked for Hindu Muslim unity also. It was important principle of the non cooperation movement.

Sarala Devi became a trendsetter for the development of swadeshi movement, when she attended parties, marriages and *purdah* club meetings in a *khadi* sari. As a result many Punjabi women adopted khadi. Increasing use of khadi by Punjabi women indicated a change in their self view. Sarala devi devoted herself for the promotion of the swadeshi movement in Punjab. Gandhi acknowledged the impetus that the movement received from her efforts. She surprised Gandhi by wearing a khadi saree.

In Ludhiana she organized the women of the city to work for popularizing hand-spinning and hand-weaving. But later she concentrated her activities mostly at Lahore in accordance with Gandhi's advice. During the non Cooperation days she arranged to send daily several groups of women to different lanes of the city to sell *khadi* in defiance to the wishes of the authorities. Due to the efforts of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani women of the Punjab did not lag behind in sharing the suffering that Gandhi's non violent non cooperation movement involved. Gandhi admired the courage of women.

### **Conclusion**

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani helped Mahatma Gandhi in his Non- Cooperation Movement through visit to various places and motivated other people by her speeches. She had very deep impact of Gandhi. She filled a new spirit of swadeshism in the minds of the people. Many people followed her footsteps and boycotted the foreign clothes and other things. She encouraged them to use only country made goods in spite of the foreign goods. She became the role model for the people. She was successful to change the attitude of Punjabi people in general and women in particular to participate in the non cooperation movement.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Tribune*, August 25, 1921.

<sup>17</sup> *The Tribune*, September 8, 20 and 23, 1921.

<sup>18</sup> *The Tribune*, October 1, 1921.

<sup>19</sup> *The Tribune*, July 21, 1921.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Tribune*, 24, 25 and September 23, 1921.

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