In 1936, Mahatma Gandhi sought to include more women in the independence struggle and make the world realise the immense potential that lay in strong and opinionated women. In the largely patriarchal society that India, even today, is, it was a mammoth task to bring women out of the four walls of their household and engage them in a pursuit like ‘politics’ - a totally male dominated realm, that had always been perceived to be the last thing on Earth that women should get involved in. How could the Mahatma then transform the way society functioned? How could he change the way people had been conditioned to think in, since time immemorial? Hence, he wrote to Amrit Kaur - “I am in search of a woman who would realise her mission.” He knew, unless there were concrete living examples of women ‘successfully’ and ‘safely’ taking part in politics, a large majority of the public could never be made aware of the fact that how crucial is women’s participation in the society and the polity. And, as long as that did not happen, women in India could not be made the drivers of social change that they ought to be. Hence, he asked Amrit, the Princess of Kapurthala, in present-day Punjab, “Are you that woman, will you be the one?” And clearly, she proved to be ‘that’ woman who the Mahatma was in search of. Here is the story of this lady with an indefatigable spirit, who despite her affluence and intellect, was one of the most humble and hard-working women politicians, the country ever produced.

EARLY LIFE AND CAREER:

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was born in the royal family of Kapurthala, to Prince Harnam Singh Ahluwalia, son of the erstwhile Maharaja of Kapurthala, and his wife Priscilla Golaknath, on 2nd February 1889, in Lucknow. Her father had converted to Christianity before she was born, and her mother was a Bengali Christian. Hence she grew up in a Christian household surrounded by all the riches and comforts of life that a vast majority of Indians in that era could only dream of. She spent her early years in Kapurthala, Punjab; before moving to England to complete her schooling at Sherborne School in Dorset, UK. She was an excellent student who demonstrated
leadership skills at an early age, testimony to which is the fact that she served as the head girl of her school as well as the captain of the cricket, hockey and lacrosse teams while at Sherborne. She then went on to pursue her undergraduate studies from the University of Oxford, the best university in the world at that time.

In 1918, at the age of 20, when the young princess returned to India, she was captivated by Gandhi’s ideology and teachings and hence was quite keen on getting involved with the latter’s struggle for social reforms and the independence of the country. Following the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, Kaur became a strong critic of the British administration in India. However, due to her parent’s objection, despite her father having close relations with some of the Congress’s members, she kept away from joining the freedom struggle for a long time. It was only after her father’s demise in 1930, that Kaur started serving as Gandhi’s secretary, a position she held for the next sixteen years and later, as she got deeply immersed into India’s politics, she even began living in Gandhi’s ashram.

ROLE AS A WOMEN’S RIGHTS CRUSADER

Her Oxford education had transformed Amrit into a woman who thought deeply about social and political issues affecting her country and the world at large, and also implored her to cogitate over the ways one could bring about reforms in the society. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was a firm believer of women’s rights and talked about social maladies facing the Indian society, fearlessly, pushing for women’s education and the right to vote and to divorce. She also, vehemently spoke against the evil of child marriage and worked relentlessly towards the eradication of various social evils such as the purdah system, child marriage, illiteracy, and the devadasi system.
She championed passionately towards the cause of social justice and empowerment of women and served as the secretary as well as the President of AIWC - All India Women’s Conference, an organisation that was dedicated to the cause of women empowerment. It was she, who in 1926, co-founded the All India Women’s Conference.

Kaur also led a campaign against child marriage, through which, she forced the government to raise the marriageable age of girls to 14 and later 18. In her words:

“THE ABOLITION OF EARLY MARRIAGE AND PURDAH... WILL REMOVE TWO OF THE MAIN OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF THE SPREAD OF FEMALE EDUCATION. NEEDLESS TO SAY THAT THE POSITION OF THE WIDOWS IN HINDU HOMES, MARRIAGE LAWS AND THE LAWS RELATING TO THE INHERITANCE OF PROPERTY BY WOMEN NEED RADICAL ALTERATION.”

Since she herself was a highly educated lady, she understood the importance of education for women and how it not only wiped out the darkness of ignorance from their lives but also led to the amelioration of the society at large. Ergo, she was a firm believer of extending quality education to girls and providing them with the opportunity to participate in sports, a crucial step towards ensuring the holistic development of women. She wanted girls to study, think and grow into responsible citizens as well as strong individuals who could shape their country’s future. Hence, she absolutely deplored the idea of getting them married as children. On child marriage, she said:

“CHILD MARRIAGE IS EATING AS A CANKER INTO THE VITALITY OF OUR NATIONAL LIFE. GIRLS BECOME MOTHERS WHILE THEY ARE CHILDREN THEMSELVES, AND BRING INTO THE WORLD OFFSPRING WHO ARE, IN THE VERY NATURE OF THINGS, THE VICTIMS OF DISEASE AND ILL HEALTH.”

While she was fully in favour of equality; irrespective of gender, caste, class, religion and other social constructs, she was not in favour of reservations for women, as she believed, Universal Adult Franchise would be sufficient to ensure that the doors of the legislature and the other administrative institutions in the country are opened for women across all social strata.

**IN VolvEMEN IN POLITICS:**

Eventually, Amrit Kaur immersed herself in the national movement and participated in the civil disobedience movement as well, playing an active role during the Dandi March; for which she was imprisoned too. She got appointed as a member of the
Advisory Board of Education by the British government but resigned in 1942 in support of the Quit India Movement for which she was, once again, imprisoned by the British authorities. Showing full solidarity with the national movement for independence, the Rajkumari took a spinning wheel, the Bhagavad Gita and the Bible with her to jail.

As she interacted with Gandhi and Gokhale, she became more impressed by their contribution to India’s struggle for independence and decided to eschew her princely comforts for leading a more austere life and immersing herself completely into the cause of India’s freedom and the upliftment of its downtrodden. She was one of those few who earnestly wanted to serve their nation.

Over the years she developed a special relationship with Gandhi and revered him a lot. She once said, “The flames of my passionate desire to see India free from foreign domination were fanned by him.” Gandhi and Rajkumari used to write to one another even during their jail times. In the book “Letters to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur”, Gandhi is seen using the terms ‘idiot’ or ‘rebel’ for Kaur, and would sign his letters as ‘robber’ and ‘tyrant’, which depicts their strong friendship and trust towards one another.
In 1945 and 1946, she was sent as a member of the Indian delegation to UNESCO conferences in London and Paris, respectively.

**WORK IN THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY:**

She was elected to the Constituent Assembly from the Central Provinces and Berar. She argued for inculcation of constitutional equality of men and women which is reflected under Articles 14, 15, and 16. She also strongly advocated for inclusion of Uniform Civil Code as it would protect women against the imbalances and asymmetry in the personal laws. Both Amrit Kaur and Hansa Mehta, 2 of the only 15 women in India’s Constituent Assembly, were in favour of making Uniform Civil Code a justiciable right as well as a part of the Fundamental Rights, for which they even wrote to Sardar Patel, arguing in its favour. However, it was later made a part of the Directive Principles of State Policy.
Rajkumari Amrit Kaur served in the following positions in the Constituent Assembly:

Member, Sub-Committee on Fundamental Rights;
Member, Sub-Committee on Minority Rights;
Member, Finance and Staff Committee.
Member, Advisory Committee; and
Member, Provincial Constitution Committee.

**POLITICAL CAREER AND SOCIAL WORK POST INDEPENDENCE:**

Kaur joined Nehru’s cabinet as the first health minister of independent India. Not only was she the first woman cabinet minister of free India but also retained the health portfolio for 10 years. She was instrumental in introducing the AIIMS Bill, 1956; which led to the foundation of India’s first premier medical institute: AIIMS, in Delhi. She made sure that the institute was autonomous and free from excessive governmental intervention in order to ensure quality functioning. She successfully managed to get funding from the US, Australia, Sweden and a few other countries for setting up the institute. In the Lok Sabha, she said, “I want this to be something wonderful, of which India can be proud...”; which showed her vision and dedication towards the country.

In 1950, she also became the first female and first Asian president of the World Health Assembly, WHO’s governing forum and also led India’s delegation to the World Health Organization several times as it’s health minister. As India’s Minister of Health she launched a campaign against malaria, a disease that affected Asia at large. Through her campaign, in 1955, “it was estimated that 400,000 Indians who
otherwise would have died had been saved by mitigation of malaria in their districts.”, as per the New York Times. On a visit to the United States in 1956, Princess Amrit Kaur was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws by Princeton University, in commemoration of her work offering “substantial and highly effective programs of action” to mothers and children, to the sick and starving.

She was a pioneer in setting up and had the honour of serving as the president of the Indian Leprosy Association and the Tuberculosis Association, vice-chair of the board of governors of the League of Red Cross Societies and chair of the executive committee of the St. John’s Ambulance Society. She was also the chairperson of the Indian Red Cross for fourteen years. Her family is also remembered for donating their ancestral estate in Shimla to the AIIMS, so that it could be used as a holiday home by its staff.

She was also the Chairperson for All India Women’s Education Fund Association, and was instrumental in establishing the Amrit Kaur College of Nursing and the National Sports Club of India. She also was awarded the Rene Sand Memorial Award for her contributions to society and the Indian Healthcare and Education Sector.

**DEMISE AND LEGACY:**

She passed away on 6th February 1964 in New Delhi at the age of 75. This year, in 2020, she was featured in the Time’s list of the ‘most powerful women’ who ‘defined the past century’, under a project that focuses on shedding light on those ‘influential women who are often overshadowed’. She was also enlisted as one of the “100 Women of the Year” for the year 1947, with the tag “Championing an Independent India”. 
With her demise, India lost a true feminist; who not only worked towards freeing India from the shackles of the colonial powers but also broke down the age old patriarchal practices by ushering the country in a more gender equal age.

-------------THE END--------------