

India's First Health Minister

# Rajkumari Amrit Kaur

The lady who built AIIMS

All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi



[www.sikhism.net.in/aiims](http://www.sikhism.net.in/aiims)



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Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (2 February 1887 – 6 February 1964) was an Indian activist and politician. Following her long-lasting association with the Indian independence movement, she was appointed the first Health Minister of India in 1947 and remained in office until 1957.

She also held the charge of Sports Minister and Urban Development Minister and was instrumental in setting up the National Institute of Sports, Patiala. During her tenure, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur ushered in several healthcare



reforms in India and is widely remembered for her contributions to the sector and her advocacy of women's rights. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was also a member of the Constituent Assembly of India, the body that framed the Constitution of



Guard of Honour for Kaur at the All-India Women's Conference

India.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was born on 2 February 1887 in Badshah Bagh, Lucknow University Campus, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh (then United Provinces), India. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was born to Raja Sardar Harnam Singh Ahluwalia the younger son of the Raja Randhir Singh of Kapurthala. Harnam Singh left Kapurthala following a conflict over succession to the throne. Harnam Singh had ten children, of which Amrit Kaur was the youngest, and their only daughter.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur had her early education in Sherborne School For Girls in Dorset, England, and had her college education at Oxford University. After completing her education in England, she returned to India in 1918.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur died in New Delhi on 6



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From left to right: Amrit Kaur, India's health Minister; H.E. Shri C. Rajagopalachari, GovernorGeneral; the Hon'ble Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Prime Minister of India and Aung San Su Kyi.

February 1964. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur never married, and had no children. She is survived by her elder brother Raja Maharaj Singh's descendants who live between London, Delhi and Chandigarh.

Today, her private papers are part of the Archives at the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, at Teen Murti House, Delhi.

## Participation in India's Independence Movement

After her return to India from England, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur became interested in the Indian independence movement. Her father had shared close association with Indian National Congress leaders including Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who often visited them. Kaur was drawn to the thoughts and vision of Mahatma Gandhi, whom she met in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1919. Kaur worked as Gandhi's

secretary for 16 years, and their correspondence was subsequently published as a volume of letters titled 'Letters to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur'.

Following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre later that year, when the British forces shot and killed peaceful protestors in Amritsar, Punjab, Kaur became a strong



critic of the British rule in India. She formally joined the Congress and began active participation in India's independence movement while also focusing on bringing



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about social reform. She was strongly opposed to the practice of purdah and to child marriage, and campaigned to abolish the devadasi system in India.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur co-founded the All India Women's Conference in 1927. She was later appointed its secretary in 1930, and president in 1933. She was imprisoned by the British authorities for her participation in the Dandi March, led by Mahatama Gandhi in 1930. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur adopted an austere lifestyle despite her aristocratic background.

As a representative of the Indian National Congress, in 1937 she went on a mission of goodwill to Bannu, in the present-day Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The British Raj authorities charged her with sedition and imprisoned her.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur worked to reduce illiteracy, and eradicate the custom of child marriages and the purdah system for women, which were then prevalent among some Indian communities<sup>1</sup>.

## The Princess Who Built AIIMS: India's First Health Minister, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur<sup>2</sup>

A freedom fighter and the princess of Kapurthala, Amrit Kaur was India's first health minister, the first Asian president of WHO's governing body and the founder of AIIMS.

Furthermore, she donated her ancestral mansion in Shimla (called Manorville)



Manorville Mansion Shimla

to AIIMS as a holiday retreat and a rest home for its nurses!

Few Indians know the story of the incredible woman who laid



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the foundation of AIIMS – Amrit Kaur.

In 1950, Kaur was elected the president of the World Health Assembly (which governs the WHO) – she was the first woman and the first Asian to hold the prestigious post. Seven years later, she secured aid from New Zealand, Australia, Sweden, West Germany and USA to establish AIIMS.

Interestingly, few know that Kaur was also instrumental in setting up the National Institute of Sports in Patiala.

In 1961, on the occasion of its 150th celebrations, USA's Massachusetts General Hospital placed AIIMS on its list of the world's most distinguished hospitals. Three years later, on February 6, 1964, Kaur passed away peacefully at the age of 75. The always graceful and simple lady had never married and left behind no children.





## Endnotes

- 1 <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/rajkumari-amrit-kaur-the-princess-who-built-aiims-6570937/>
- 2 <https://www.thebetterindia.com/133160/rajkumari-amrit-kaur-aiims-india-first-health-minister/>