

## **An Insight On Guru Nanak's Sensibility On Women Issues-A Sociological Perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper looks into the philosophy of Guru Nanak Dev Ji with regard to the plight of women and the Sikh doctrines regarding women as enshrined in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Nanak Dev Ji advocated and promoted social equality between the sexes and across different castes. He portrayed women as having inner strength and beauty and raised his voice against the evils such as sati, dowry, female foeticide, female infanticide, ban on widow remarriage, child marriage which were prevailing in those times. The present paper will examine the doctrines of Sikh religion with respect to the status of women existing in Nanak's time from the eyes of sociologist. The article will also highlights the changing status and roles of women in the present society and it will be seen further whether our society has followed the path of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and attained gender equality.

**Keywords:** Status, Women, Guru Granth Sahib, atrocities, gender Equality, Modern, Ancient Society.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The status of women is a topic of sociological studies and discussions, for it mirrors the position of about 50 percent of the population of our society. It is generally said that the state of development of a society can be ascertained from the status a woman occupies. A woman performs a number of roles in the family, community and the wider social system. The status of women in the society is determined by her composite status depending upon her various positions and roles. The role that a society assigns to woman in real life determines the extent and level of her participation in the social, economic, cultural and political processes which in turn shapes the demographic portrait of a country. The study of the history of human society reveals that in no society of the world women enjoyed absolute equality at par with men. The status of women has been changing with the metamorphosis in the general conditions of society.

During the Mughal era, position of women was at the lowest ebb. They were considered subservient to man. In this period, female infanticide, sati, purdah system, polygamy and slavery were practiced which deteriorated the position of women tremendously. The only place considered apt for women was kitchen and doing domestic chores.

Sikhism is one of the most recent religion and advocates equality of women and men. Sikh religion took birth in the later part of fifteenth century in Punjab, a province located in the north western part of India. Guru Nanak Dev is considered to be founder of Sikh religion .Guru Granth Sahib- The Holy Scripture contains divine hymns of six Sikh gurus and eighteen divine sages from both upper and lower castes. All the Sikh gurus were family men. They got married, had children and led normal lives. Their wives were full partners in the onward march of the Sikh movement, yet they led their everyday lives with equality.

The condition of women at the advent of Guru Nanak was pitiable. They were leading a life less than the humans. Many social customs had been devised to keep women under the thumb of men for example they were not allowed entry to the places of worship, they could not have thought of receiving education at the feet of a guru. They were considered lower even to the shudra, who were considered lowest in the social hierarchy. The Guru was deeply pained to see the ill treatment being meted out to female half of the community (Prabhjot Kaur, 2012). The principle of Sikhism stated that women are to be given status equal to men. They are to lead in religious congregations, take part in the AkhandPaath, perform Keertan and participate in all social, cultural, religious and secular activities. The Gurbani has played a pivotal role in uplifting the status of women. As a first step towards fulfilment of mission, the Guru raised a powerful voice in favour of the mothers of humanity.

During the British period some substantial progress was made in eliminating inequality between man and woman in matters of education, employment, social and property rights and so forth. During the freedom struggle of India women came out of four walls and demanded for freedom. The Indian National Movement led to the emancipation of women. Women demanded equal social, economic and political opportunities and were given but only in theory and not in practice. The change in the position of women from sheer degradation to equality is not a simple case of the progress of the women in the modern era as women had to encounter many hardships.

#### **ROLE OF GURBANI IN UPLIFTING THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh sacred text, the guru incarnate for the Sikhs, contains poetic compositions of the Gurus, form the core of the Sikh spirituality, the state of soul consciousness. The whole of Guru Granth Sahib is written in the voice of a wedded woman or a maiden pining in love of the beautiful. Both man and woman, are forgotten as sexes in her voice. The revered Sri Guru Granth Sahib expresses the importance of women. Sri Guru Granth Sahib is abounded with feminine symbolism. The Women have been eulogised in Guru Granth Sahib in the following lines:

“We are born of woman, we are conceived in the womb of woman, we are engaged and married to women. We make friendship with woman

and the lineage continues because of woman. When one woman dies, we take another one, we are bound with the world through woman. Why should we talk ill of her, who gives birth to kings? The woman is born from woman; there is none without her. Only the one true lord is without woman.”

This depicts that, throughout man's life, he is dependent on woman at every critical stage. This leaves no doubt in Guru Granth Sahib that the female gender plays a critical part in every aspect of a man's life, someone who is there in one shape or form throughout life and is also critical for the survival of the human race and the very existence of humans to begin with. The Guru Granth Sahib outlines the importance, magnitude, and value of women, in very simple terms, and shows what a significant role they play in propagation of the species as well as multiple other roles.

The Gurus wanted woman to experience the joy of growing up female. They wanted women to know their immense hidden potential. Unfortunately, the prevailing social customs conspired to exclude women from the mainstream societal work. The Sikh gurus were determined to restore unique identity of women. Guru Nanak Dev worked for the upliftment of women by abolishing the system of veils by introducing the system of Sangat (Sikh congregation) where no veil was allowed. Both men and women are required to cover their head in remembrance of Waheguru. Carrying on the task started by the first Guru, the third master, Guru Amardas, diligently worked for the removal of all existing social evils that relegated women to a secondary position. Sikh code of conduct prohibited the wearing of veil by Sikh women. It ordains, “A Sikh women should neither wear a veil nor should keep her face hidden.”

Guru Nanak had been against the practise of sati. The Guru denounced Sati as an infliction of unforgivable cruelty on women and strove hard for the emancipation of women from this forced brutal social practice. He also sought amelioration of the position of women and encouraged widow remarriage.

As a step to discourage sati, Sikh gurus permitted widows to remarry. The practice of sati is condemned in the following lines:

“The widows burn themselves in the fire, along with their husbands corpses. If they truly knew their husbands, then they truly knew their husbands, then they suffer terrible bodily pains. O, Nanak, if they did not truly know their husbands, why should they burn themselves in the fire? Whether their husbands are alive or dead, those wives remain far away from them”

Gurbani negates the idea of attaining the beloved Lord by burning oneself on the pyre of their dead husband. It is stated in the following lines:

“By burning oneself, the beloved lord is not obtained”

Guru Amardas raised his voice and carried out a vigorous campaign against this heinous practice. He strictly prohibited the practice of immolation of the widow

on the pyre of her dead husband and the guru sent instructions far and wide, asking his followers not to let women commit sati and to preach vehemently against barbaric custom

Nanak in there shabad said following things about sati:

“Do not call them 'satee', who burn themselves along with their husbands' corpses.

O Nanak, they alone are known as 'satee', who die from the shock of separation.

...Some burn themselves along with their dead husbands: [but they need not, for] if they really loved them they would endure the pain alive”

The Guru said that if the wife loves her husband, then she should endure the pain of separation alive; that she should rather continue living her life than suffer a quick death in the fire of her husband's funeral pyre. Further, Guru Nanak explains that a true "Sati" is the person who cannot endure the pain of separation from their loved one. The custom of sati was formally banned in 1829 by William Bentinck and Raja Ram Mohan Roy played a pivotal role in the eradication of sati.

The Sikh Gurus spoke against the common practise of dowry where a gifts or valuables had to be given by the bride's family to that of the groom at the time of their marriage. It has historically been regarded as a contribution by her family to the married household's future expenses. The Gurus called this giving of gifts an "offer for show" of the guests, and a "worthless display" which only increased "false egotism." Sikh families were discouraged from continuing this practice, and slowly this trend has diminished in large parts of Indian society.

A novel method applied by the Sikh Gurus for the uplifting of women was the abundant use of feminine symbols in Sikh Scriptures and in day to day life. The Sikh Gurus have used poetry as the medium of communication. The poetic utterances of the Gurus were not called "Guru Vak" which is masculine but 'Guru Bani" which is feminine. Guru Amar Das also established twenty-two Manjiscoversing several parts of India for the propogation of Sikh religion. He entrusted four of these to women. Guru Hargobind Singh, the sixth guru called woman "the conscience of man "without whom moral living was impossible. The girls were also encouraged to receive education. Child marriage was discouraged and the practice of female infanticide was severely banned. Guru Hargobind Dev, the sixth guru, realizing the positive role played by daughters in the family set up, even requested his mother to pray for the birth of a daughter:

“A family without a modest girl is doomed”

The latter was considered so important that it was subsequently made a part of the instructions given to the Sikhs at the time of baptism. The oath required that Sikhs will not practise female infanticide or have any association at all with those who practise it, will not take alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, and will not marry their

daughters for monetary gain. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, firmly endorsed the principle of human equality in all walks of life at the time of administering initiation to his followers. Guru's baptism was and is open to all. A Sikh cannot be called a Sikh if he discriminates between a high and a low or between a man and a woman. Sikhism has thus been a potent influence in the emancipation of Indian womanhood. According to the basic tenets of Sikh religion, a woman has full freedom for worship, education and vocation. She may work in a field or a factory or go to a battlefield as a soldier. There are no obstacles in her way. Further, not only are there no prejudices in Sikhism against women engaging in productive work, it is made obligatory for all individuals, both men and women, to engage in gainful and productive activity and contribute something for the public weal.

Sikhism places a great emphasis on the education of women. Since they are considered as equal partners and are permitted to lead prayers and perform all religious ceremonies, their education is considered an asset for them. In the areas of Punjab and New Delhi, we have a large number of schools for children which are funded by the donations to Sikh Gurdwaras (temples). Free education is provided not only to Sikh girls and boys but also to any other person without distinction of colour, creed, or religion.

Free from the bondage of Purdah, Sikh women made immense contribution to the making of a new social order; first as consorts of the Gurus, contributing to the social reconstruction in every possible way, and then as heads of religious denominations and later on as warriors and as statesmen. Sikh history records how women emerged as leaders and created their niche. Mata Sundri, the wife of the tenth guru, helped to resolve conflicts in respect to several important societal issues amicably; bringing to the fore her excellent leadership qualities. Several dictates issued by Mata Gujri, mother of Guru Gobind Singh; Mata Sahib Kaur, generally ascribed as mother of khalsa and third wife of Guru Gobind Singh and Mata Sundari, wife of Guru Gobind Singh prove that women then had the right to fully participate in the community affairs.

However, there is a wide divergence between the precept and the practice. The Sikh society strongly still sanctifies the patriarchal social structure in which marriage, motherhood and service to husband become the most valuable attributes of woman and which perpetrate the negation of woman's personality. Woman is respected for the above mentioned roles but she is generally placed in a secondary position to man. It is man who takes precedence over her in all privileges of life, whatever may be her merit. Accordingly, a Sikh woman like a Hindu woman does not have much of a say in decisions relating to the number and spacing of children. This affects her so completely that she cannot exercise and enjoy other options in life. Social norms as prevalent in Sikh or Hindu society favour high fertility. A sterile woman is looked down upon and a woman with many sons is greatly respected. It is considered a great

fortune to have many sons. "May you have seven sons" is a blessing given to a newly-wedded girl. Sons are wanted for continuance of the family line, for performance of the last rites of parents, and for looking after parents in their old age. In a society not covered by any public social security system, they offer a safeguard at nothing else does. All this stands in the way of planned families and ends up in high fertility rates.

### **CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE PRESENT SOCIETY**

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few decades. They have now become well educated, independent and strong. The modern woman is so adroit and self-sufficient that she can be easily called a superwoman, juggling many fronts single-handedly. Women are now fiercely ambitious and are proving their metal not only on the home front, but also in their respective professions. Women in Indian are coming up in all spheres of life. They are joining the universities and colleges in large numbers. They are entering into all kinds of professions like engineering, medicine, politics, teaching, etc. In order to prevent crime against women, the Judicial System of the country has created several laws in favor of women. Several laws such as Domestic Violence Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, Prevention of Women from Sexual Harassment etc exists for the protection of women.

Dr H.B Danesh, professor of Psychiatry and Family medicine in the University of Ottawa, expresses his regret that for far too long, humanity has been deprived of women's contributions to the development of civilization. He strongly believed that:

“When women and men are involved on an equal basis in the administration of human affairs(including political, academic, religious and economic areas) and are able to make their unique contributions to family life under just and enlightened conditions, the very quality and character of our world will fundamentally change”

To fundamentally change the quality and character of our world for the better; to follow the path of humanity; it is imperative to involve women and men on an equal basis in the administration of human affairs.

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. The modern Indian women have honed their skills and jumped into a battlefield of life fighting against social restrictions, emotional ties, religious boundaries and cultural clutches. She can now be seen working on par with men in every field. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armoured with their talent. They must avail themselves of the educational opportunities provided and learn to empower themselves.

In today's liberalized scenario, there is not an iota of doubt that women form an indispensable part of the Indian workforce. The status of working woman in India has revamp over the years. Her traditional roles have remained the same; apart from that

she has stepped into the workforce of the country. Earlier the women were only allocated agriculture, teaching and nursing activities but now at present era she is representing the banking, marketing, armed forces, IT and communication services and many other spheres. There is no field where women of our country have not set their foot, they have utilized their full capacity and proved their best in performing these roles. The modern society has started recognizing the individual identity of women. She is believed to have her aspiration, abilities and qualities as a man does have and it is also agreed that she should have the opportunities to develop her faculties and to express them according to her own choice. Women in India now participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. Rather, women have been bringing laurels to our nation. It was woman in the Rio Olympics who showed there shine and brought four medals. Thus, women have broken the shackles and are emerging in the forefront.

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1. PuranSingh, The Spirit Born People, p.36
2. The Guru Granth Sahib was first compiled by the fifth Sikh Guru, Arjan Dev Ji, in 1604 in the city of Amritsar. Its second and last version was the handiwork of Guru Gobind Singh, and it was finalized at Damdama Sahib in the year 1705. He added the hymns of his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur, the Ninth Master, and a couplet of his own to the volume written a century earlier. Since then, the authorized version has been transcribed and printed a number of times, and it abides. Its adoration or veneration is an article of faith with the Sikhs.
3. Guru Nanak, Var Asa, p.473
4. Shiromani Gurudwara Parbhandhak Committee, Sikh Rehat Maryada, p.21.
5. Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p.787.
6. Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p.185
7. Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p.787.
8. Sri Guru Amar Das born in 1479, became the Guru in 1552 when he was in his seventies. Guru Amardas ji condemned hindus for sati, allowed widow remarriage and against caste system. He started guru ka langar. He passed on his guru ship to his son in law, Ramdas Sodhi, who was his most devoted disciple.
9. Guru Amardas ji organised the proleystaion of sikh faith into Manjis. He divided the area into 22 branches called manjis and appointed a local sikh preacher at each place. A Manji is a [Sikh](#) religious administrative unit. Manji refers to each zone of religious administration with an appointed chief called sangatias, with officially appointed representatives known as masand. It

has been conceptually similar in its aims to the [diocese](#) system in Christianity, and has been similarly important in Sikh missionary activity.

10. Guru Hargobind was the sixth of the Sikh gurus and the first one to engage in warfare. He is credited to have organized the first Sikh army which gave the community their military identity. He was highly wary of the Mughal forces as his father Guru Arjan Dev had been tortured and executed by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. Assuming the Guru Gaddi at the young age of 11 after his father's death, he chose to adorn himself with a sword rather than the Seli of Guru Nanak Dev which had been used previously by the earlier gurus. Guru Hargobind then put on two swords, one on the right and the other on the left, representing temporal power (miri) and spiritual power (piri). Upon assuming the Guru Gaddi he emphasized a great deal on the physical and military training of the Sikhs. He himself trained hard and became an expert swordsman, wrestler, and rider.
11. Bhagat Singh, Gurbilas Patshahi, Gurmukh Singh (ed), p.347
12. Guru Gobind Singh was the last of the ten Sikh Gurus. A spiritual master, warrior and a philosopher, he was the only son of the ninth Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur who was executed by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Aged just nine at the time of his father's death, he succeeded him as the leader of the Sikhs at this tender age. The events surrounding the torture and execution of his father affected the young boy deeply. Becoming the guru at such a young age placed immense responsibilities on his young shoulders which he fulfilled with a maturity uncommon for someone who was still a child. He is also credited with the founding of the Khalsa and the introduction of the concept of the Five Ks to Sikhism. He dictated the Guru Granth Sahib to Bhai Mani Singh and at the time of his death, passed the mantle of the Guruship to the holy text
13. Danesh, H.B, The violence free family-building block of peaceful civilization, back page.
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