

Women in Sri Guru Granth Sahib

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Abstract–

It is generally said that the state of development of a society can be judged from the status a woman occupies in a society .A woman performs a number of roles in the family ,community and the wider social system .Her status in the society is determined by her composite status depending upon her various positions and roles .The position of woman in our society had not always been the same . There was times when she was accorded a high status as in the Rig vedic period but in the middle ages ,her position was reduced to that of a slave .Many evils pertaining to woman cropped up in the society like polygamy ,sati system, Dowry, female infanticide etc. In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the contribution of the Sikhs Gurus to the cause of the upliftment of women.The Hymns of the Gurus contained in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Holy scripture of the Sikhs , clearly reveals that all the Gurus worked for the emancipation of women .

Key Words – Woman ,Status ,Sikh Gurus ,Sri Guru Granth Sahib

Adi-Granth is the holiest book of the Sikhs. It is the Bible of the Sikhs. Primarily, its name was Granth Sahib which means ‘The Holy Book’. But in order to distinguish it from Dasam Granth-the Granth written by the Tenth Guru-it was named Adi Granth. Adi means that which is in the beginning or the First. Thus. Adi-Granth means the First-

Book. The compiler of this Granth, Guru ArJun dev ji, after giving his followers a central place of worship-Hari mandir, he wanted to give them a Holy Book. So, he collected the hymns of the first Four Guru and to this added his own. Later, Guru Gobind Singh added the hymns of Guru Teg Bahadur and one of his hymns in the Granth.

Guru Arjun Dev ji not only included the hymns of his predecessors but also hymns of other Indian Saints who believed in the Unity of God. Hymns of Jaidev, Farid Namdev, Trilochan, Parmanand, Ramananda, Dhanna, pipa, Ravidas, kabir, surdas, Sain, Mardana, Batta and Balwand were included in the Granth. The composition of chhaju, Kahna, shah hussain were not included as they did not conform to the ideals of Sikhism.

The constituents of the Granth Sahib did not take their birth at one time. They were composed in different periods. The Granth Sahib thus covers a period of 6 centuries.

The Tenth Gurur Gobind Singh bestowed Guruship to Adi Granth. Granth Sahib become Guru Granth Sahib. The Holy book was given a unique position. In no their religion, such a position was given to the holy scripture.

The scripture contains some 6000 hymns of 1430 pages, having the songs of have and peace, written in various languages and dialects. Except, Japuji of Guru Nanak dev ji in the beginning and swayyes and shalokas at the end, all the other composition are set in 31 rages and raginis.

In the words of Prof. Puran Singh,
"The Guru Granth sahib is the scripture of all nations ,for it is the Lyric of divine love ,and all the people of the Earth subsist on such a glowing Lyrical prayers. Guru Granth is but One song ,One idea and One life ."¹

The status of woman in the medieval period

In order to appreciate the contribution of sikh gurus for the cause of upliftment of women ,it is better to examine the general condition of women during the medieval period . The position of woman was different in different ages . With the advent of the Muslim rule ,the status of woman degraded. They had no individuality of thier own. They were treated as slaves .They were considered as an object of man's sexual satisfaction .Many social evils in the society cropped up like female infanticide ,child marriage ,dowry system ,sati system ,polygamy, pitiable condition of widows etc .Young unmarried girls were carried off by the members of the ruling class. To save their daughters from this evil ,the parents adopted two methods - they either killed their new born daughters or married them at the age of 5 or 6. These methods gave birth to new evils - female infanticide and child marriage respectively .The birth of a girl child was considered a source of misery .The condition of widows was miserable .They were forced to die with the funeral pyre of their husband .Although the widower could remarry ,the widows could not

remarry or enjoy the pleasures of life . Polygamy was prevalent in the society ."One wife, One Man "applied only to the woman and not to the man .In the religious field ,they were not allowed to read or study the Holy scriptures.They were denied access to education . The women had no identity of their own .Further ,the ideals of asceticism and Renunciation also had their impact on the status of woman .The attraction of the female was considered to be a temptation .She was called a seducer .Thus ,we find condemnation of woman in this period . In this period of injustice with woman , we find her recieving full respect in SGGS .

The status of women as depicted in SGGS

All the Gurus worked for the social and spiritual emancipation of woman .The Sikh Gurus have got great reverence for women . In SGGS , there are many Hymns which shows that women is given due respect in it .In many religions ,God has been addressed as father .However ,in sikhism ,God has been addressed as mother and father . Guru Arjun dev ji ,raised the status of woman by using the feminine name given to God [mother] before the name of the father. God is the mother as well as father.

"thou o lord ,art my mother and thou my father.

husband and wife ,who have one soul in two bodies ."²

The sikh gurus have made 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 poetry of the gurus were not called "Guru Vak" which is masculine but 'Guru Bani' which is feminine.

There are three important concepts in Sikhism which lay great importance to women.

Firstly, the woman is equated with Nature or Kudrat or Prakriti. Prakriti, is also a feminine gender.

secondly, The Earth or the Dharti is referred to as a Mother.

Thirdly, sangat enjoys a great place in Sikhism. Sangat comes from the word Samiti which means 'Daughter of God'.

Guru Nanak Dev ji, father of Sikhism, was the first to start, a social reform Movement as he raised a strong voice in favour of social equality of women. In his hymns, particularly, ASA DI VAAR and many other hymns enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak dev ji strongly advocated respect and equality for women. The principle of equality was followed and propagated by successive Gurus, in the Sikh Galaxy.

In Sri Guru Granth Sahib, there are several verses which show that women are given due respect. Infact, there is no other scripture in the world which gives so much importance to the women that separate banis present the character and virtues of a woman.

Guru Nanak dev ji has considered Air as the Guru; water as the father and the Earth as the womb of Mother where everything needed by the mankind is produced. Infact, it is the essence of Nanakian philosophy and is given at the end of JAP.

Guru Nanak dev ji advises to practice righteousness for peaceful life and to save this (Mata Dharat Mahat) for coming generation of the humanity. The earth, as a

place, to practice righteousness has also been explained by Guru Nanak dev ji in the stanza 34 of Jap. The tradition of condemnation of women was seen during Guru Nanak's period. In this period of injustice with women, We find her receiving full respect in SGGS.

Guru Nanak dev ji said in Asa di Vaar, "Why call her bad who gives birth to the kings."³

Guru Nanak dev ji emphasized that man must Accept respect and protect the rights of every woman. He also emphasized on the equality of both man & woman. In one of his verses, he said "there is only one male that is almighty God, rest all are females.

Guru Nanak dev ji not only praised women in his verses but also tried her to arise out of slumberness. Guru Nanak dev ji said, "Jaag Salondriye." Wake up, o you sleeping women. It was a slogan to wake up the women not only towards her rights but also towards her womanhood that she had forgotten due to years of exploitation. In SGGS, we find many banis which explain the various qualities a woman should possess.

The life of a woman is divided into 3 parts. The life of a woman as a daughter, as a wife and as a Mother. All these three stages are explained in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The stage of a daughter is the stage of preparation. At this stage, she is always conscious about her future life.

¹ Guru Nanak dev ji says "O damsel, do you not hear this news with your ears: That you will have to come to your in laws, you cannot remain always in your parents home."⁴

After the marriage, a woman as a girl and as a daughter enters into a new life where she plays the role of a wife and a mother. According to SGGS, a wife should be

obedient, wise and beautiful. She should be the best of all her family members.

“Be decked with spontaneously and contentment, she speaks sweetly.”⁵

According to Guru Nanak dev ji, an ideal women is always absorbed in service. She enjoys the love of her lord and is always busy in work. Guru Nanak dev ji says in this connection.

“Only then you can be called the ideal women if you do the appropriate work on the cloth and wear the shirt thus prepared. If you care for your home and do not fell in vices, you will be loved by your lord.”⁶

Guru Arjun dev, the fifth Guru has portrayed “Suhagan” beautifully.

“She is virtuous and fortunate, blessed with sons, character and love of her lord. She is beautiful, and wise, that lady is beloved of her lord. She is high in character and status. She is ornamented with knowledge.”⁷ⁱ

According to Guru Nanak dev ji, women gives birth to man and possess all good qualities. She is superior to all members of the family. Women, who is the pivot of the “ghrist ashram” has been considered a helping hand to man in the achievement of Mukti. She has been referred to as one who provides the maximum comforts to man.

“According to the Vedas and the general opinion of the people, women helps a man in achieving salvation and provides him with maximum comforts of life.”⁸

Women plays an important role as a Mother in the family. A mother has been given a great importance as various verses of Gurbani begins by addressing the mother as “mai”. A mother is the first Guru of every child because it is through her that a child learns his or her first alphabet. It is the mother who makes the child understand the importance of ‘Maa boli’ and ‘Guru Granth Sahib’. Mother is the only person through

whom a child has his first interaction with the world.

Gurbani says

“Mother milks develops first attachment in the child and from mother a value system is passed on to child.”

Againsts the evils of Society:-

In Sri Guru Granth Sahib, we find Banis/verses which deals with some evils of the society like female infanticide, dowry system, sati system extra. These evils of the society were prevalent even during the lives of Gurus. In their Banis, Gurus wrote against these evils. They were in favour of their complete independence and active participation in public life. Guru Amardass was not only a spiritual guide but also a great social reformer. Like Guru Nanak Dev ji, Guru ji paid special attention for the upliftment of women. He condemned sati system, girl infanticide and dowry.

Sati system:- During the period of Sikh Gurus, the custom of sati was prevalent in India. The women used to burn herself with her husband on the funeral pyre after his death. It was a kind of suicide where woman was forced to die against her wishes. Guruji denounced Sati and advocated widow Remarriage. He declared that a true Sati is one who bravely bears the shock of separation with virtues (husband).

“Do not call them ‘satee’, who burns themselves along with their husband’s corpses. O Nanak, they alone are Satee, who die from the shock of separation.”⁹

Girl infanticide:- During the period of Sikh Gurus, girl infanticide was also prevalent. The Sikh Guru preached that there was no difference between a son & daughter. Girl infanticide was also condemned by our Gurus. The Sikh Gurus

gave specific instructions that no one of their disciple will indulge in female infanticide. Guru Hargobind ji, the sixth Sikh guru, requested his mother to pray for the birth of a daughter. Guru Har Rai, the Seventh Guru, when found an abandoned baby girl, he brought her home, adopted her and brought her up like his own daughter. Sri Guru Granth Sahib condemns this evil social practice.

“If a Brahmin kills a cow or a female infant, and accepts the offerings of an evils person, he is cursed with leprosy and criticism; he is forever and ever filled with egotistical pride.”¹⁰

Dowry system:- ‘Dowry’ has been derived from the Latin word ‘Dos’ which means ‘to give, to offer.’ The gifts, money or estate given to the bride at the time of marriage, came to be called ‘Dowry’. The custom of dowry has been prevalent in all times and cultures, in one or the other form. The third Guru, Guru Amardass, spoke against dowry system.

“Give me the name of the Lord as my wedding gift and dowry.

Give me the lord’s name as my wedding gown, as my glory to accomplish my works.”¹¹

Guru Amardass ji condemned the display of dowry in strong words:-

“Any other dowry which the self-willed offer for show is false egoism and worthless display of self”¹²

SGGS, thus, condemns the sati, dowry and female infanticide. It also stands in favour of widow remarriage. Keeping in view, the pitiable condition of a widow, the banis inspires the Hindu society for their (widow’s) reforms.

Guru Nanak devji says

“The widow who sells her body for money can never be satisfied till she is united with her husband.”¹³

Equality of status:- Guru Nanak dev ji raised a strong voice in favour of social equality of women. In “Asa di Vaar” and many other hymns of SGGS, Guru Nanak dev ji advocated respect and equality for women. The principle of equality was followed by successive Gurus.

In SGGS, equal importance is given to Mother & father.

“Wisdom is the mother & contentment is father” and “great is the mother that gives birth to child and great is the father”¹⁴

Guru Nanak dev ji said, “Sikhi does not teach you to raise your hand on a women it teaches you to respect them”¹⁵

Sikhism also preaches that equal respect should be given to women.

“In the earth and in the sky, do not see any second. Among all the women and the men. His light is spinning.”¹⁶

Ad vocation of women Rights in SGGS in prize of women Guru Nanak Units

“From the women is an birth, in the woman’s womb are we shaped;

To the woman we are engaged, to the we are wedded;

The women is our friend and from women is the family;

Through the women are the bonds of the world;

Why call women evil who given birth to the leader of the world?

From the women is the women, without women there is name.”¹⁷

Widow Remarriage:- There are several verses in Granth Sahib which advocated to reform the condition of widows. The Bani inspires the Hindu society to allow widow to remarry. If a young widow, under the impact of lust, surrenders herself to another person,

she can never have the full satisfaction. She should take another husband and pass her life in full satisfaction.

“Just as a widow gives her body to another person, under the impact of lust and Maya, she can never have a satisfaction without a husband.”¹⁸

Thus, there is no ban on widow Remarriage in Sikhism.

Polygamy – In Guru Granth sahib we find many hymns which shows that our Gurus were against Polygamy. Sikhism upholds monogamous ideal of marriage. Sikhs are required by their religion to be loyal to their spouses.

In Sikhism, even celibacy has been redefined in terms of chastity. Sikhism directs its followers to be sincere to their wives, and look at all other women as if they were their mothers, daughters and sisters.¹⁹

EDUCATION OF WOMEN

The gurus regarded education important for the emancipation of woman. The doors of education were thrown open to her. As the women equally participated in the sikh congregations at Dharamsalas, we can assume that they must have been equal partners in the schools attached to the Dharamsalas. On the basis of hymns in Guru Granth Sahib, we can form of the ideal of woman education on the part of the Gurus. The aims of women education were as follows

Women and God Realization -The ultimate of education of the Gurus was God realization and self realization.

"O sister, make humility your education,
Forgiveness, your art of behaviour,
Valuable and creative gems of Nam,

The conquering Formula of your tongue,
And put on the garb of divine culture,
On your body and soul,
Then you will certainly win the heart of the
Universal Husband permanently."²⁰

women and character building

"I embellish myself with truth, contentment,
compassion and righteousness,
so that my bridehood becomes fruitful
And I become endeared to my Lord."²¹

women and household duties

"I have married the bride of pure deeds by
the Guru's grace,
Who looks beautiful in worship as in the
worldly deeds,
she is blest with thirty two kinds of
embellishments."²²

salvation -In sikhism, women can achieve salvation, a realization of God or the highest spiritual knowledge.

"In all beings is the Lord pervasive,
The Lord pervades all forms male and
female."²³

In the Guru Granth Sahib ji, it is emphasized that it is the human birth that is important and the light of God rests equally in us all. Both can obtain salvation by following the Guru.

In conclusion we can say that the status of women in India suffered setback during the period of muslim rule. In this period of injustice with women, we find her receiving full respect in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of the Sikhs. Guru Arjun Dev ji compiled SGGS in 1604. Although this scripture is spiritual but a through study of the scripture depicts political, and social life of the people during the period of the Gurus. There are several hymns which throws flood of light on the position of woman

during that period .Guru Nanak dev ji , the founder of Sikhism was a great reformer .He was the First person to start the Liberation movement for the woman ..The Hymns contained in the SGGS shows that all the gurus were in favour of the upliftment of women .They condemned sati system ,polygamy ,dowry ,female infanticide etc .The approach of the sikh Gurus towards womaqn is an indication of the uniqueness of their message in an age when authority ,both religious and intellectual ,had consigned her to a low level . .Infact the contribution of our Gurus for the cause of upliftment of women was really great .They imagined a society in which women is equated to that of man. Sikhism stressed that all human Beings are born equal ,and are free ,without distinction of sex .All have equal dignity and equal right in the eyes of God .They should ,therefore be respected as much as men are ..Thus common man in the sikh society has a feeling from the equality of status for women .The credit of all this goes to Guru Nanak devji and his successive Gurus .

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