



EQUALITY OF WOMEN IN SIKH IDEOLOGY

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Abstract

The status of a woman in a society shows the social, cultural, religious and political scenario of that society. The position of the woman has passed many phases. It becomes evident after studying the fundamental teachings of different spiritual traditions that different religions accorded high status to the woman. Through this research paper, an effort has been made to know the status of the woman in Sikhism. For this purpose, Semitic and Aryan religious traditions have been made the foundation to understand the status of the woman prior to the emergence of Sikhism. Misogynistic interpretation of the myth of Adam and Eve in Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions and Pursha-Prakriti duality in Hindu Sankh philosophy made it clear that it is male chauvinism and misogynistic bent of mind which undermined the role of the woman in those societies. In the fifteenth century, Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and his successor Sikh Gurus accorded very high status to the woman. Guru Ram Das, fourth Nanak, composed Lavan- the recitation of which became an essential part of the Sikh marriage ceremony. Lawans helped the women to get worthy status with men not only in this world but in spiritual realm also. Women in Sikhism through the institution of marriage regained their lost status. In this research paper, it has been concluded that 'Eve' and 'Prakriti' i.e. women are enabled to play equal and more vibrant role in the socio-religious, political and economic spheres due to the egalitarian and humanistic message of the Sikh Gurus. Sikhism has made it possible to wipe out the gender bias and narrow-mindedness associated with a male dominated society.

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INTRODUCTION

In early Vedic Period, position of women in Indian society was not good. Though there were incidents unwelcoming the female child but the sacred literature was against it. It was not a general practice. Some thinkers have even pointed out that a talented and well-behaved daughter may be better than a son. A drastic distinction between the roles of the male and female exists since inception of human civilization in all of history's modern human societies. People use religious doctrines to define their life styles. Religious scriptures in both the East and West seem to condemn, even discourage, the unequal treatment of women. In the 15th century, Guru Nanak established Sikhism, the first religion to advocate emphatically the equality of all people, especially women.

At the time of Guru Nanak, Indian women were severely degraded and oppressed by their society. Given no education or freedom to make decisions, their presence in religious, political social, cultural and economic affairs was virtually non-existent. Her function was only to perpetuate the race, do household work, and serve the male members of society. Female infanticide was common, and the practice of sati, the immolation of the wife on her husband's funeral pyre, was encouraged, sometimes even forced.

Guru Nanak condemned this man-made notion of the society. He said that it is the women who gives birth to man, it is she who makes the kings and other great men. Without her man is incomplete. Therefore we must not call her bad. To quote him:

From the women is our birth;

in the woman's womb are we shaped.

To the women are we engaged: to the woman are we wedded.

The woman is our friend, and from the woman is the family.

If one woman dies, we seek another;

Through the woman are the bonds of the world.

Why Call woman evil who gives birth to kings and all?

From the woman is the woman;

Without the woman there is none;

Nanak without the woman is the One True Lord alone.

The Adi Granth, p.473

With this assertion, the Sikh Gurus invited woman to join the sangat (congregation), work with men in the langar (common kitchen), and participate in all other religious, social, and cultural activities of the gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship).

There are several examples in Sikh history to show that the women worked and cooperated with men, sometimes with greater vigour. Examples of Bibi Bhani, Mata Gujri (the mother of Guru Gobind Singh), Mai Bhago (who fought valiantly, at Khidrana, now Mukatsar, at the time of Guru Gobind Singh), Mata Sundri are worth mentioning. Mata Sundri provided the much-needed leadership during the critical period after the demise of her husband Guru Gobind Singh in 1708.

In modern times, the Declaration of Human Rights by UNO declares in its article 2 that all human beings are entitled to the rights listed in the charter without the distinction of race, colour, sex and language etc. The Indian constitution also contains similar provisions.

Guru Amar Dass also condemned purdah, the wearing of the veil, and female infanticide. He spoke against the custom of Sati. He put complete ban on the Sati system. He says:

a sati is not she, who burns herself ,

on the pyre of her spouse.

Nanka: a 'sati' is she,

who dies with the sheer shock of separation.

Again:

a sati is one who lives contented and embellishes herself with good conduct (chastity).

and serves her lord (husband) with all her heart and Cherishes him ever.

The Adi Granth, p. 787

Sikhism also condemned the system of dowry. According to the Gurbani, that person who accepts or offers a material should be known as Manmukh (spiritually ignorant or material being). In spite of such stern condemnation of the dowry system, still the majority of Sikhs indulge in this demoniac practice. Why ? It's because many of us are devoid of the Divine wisdom of the Gur-Shabad as well as the true meaning of the words "Sikh" and "Khalsa". As a result, the majority of us are caught in the spell of evil passions, and thereby, act as Manmukhs (material or egoistic beings).



In Gurmat, a Jeeva (individual being) asks her Father for giving her only the Divine Name as her wedding gift and dowry. Nothing else. Nothing more. As declared in the Gurbani, asking for any dowry and gift other than the Divine Name is worthless show of one's false ego or Manmukhtaa.

Hari prabh mere Baabuiaa Hari devahu daan mai daajo ...

Hor manmukh daajji rakh dikhaalahi su koor ahankaar

kach paajo ...

The Adi Granth, p. 78

The gurmat cannot be more clear than this. The illusion is created by our ignorance. The Gurbani affirms that if one tries to understand, realize and comprehend the sublime meaning of the Gur-Shabad then he will know that without the Divine Name everything else is ignorance or babbling in false ego.

Thus a true Sikh only asks for Spiritual dowry-God's Name as gift and God's Name as her wedding Gown and God's name and her glory. This dowry being eternal in nature is sure to bestow on her the True happiness, here and hereafter. Because this dowry of the Divine Name never diminishes by being diffused among all.

Guru Nanak also condemned the idea of impurity of a woman in the days of her menstrual cycle. Guru Nanak said there is no impurity in it. It is a natural cycle. Actual impurity is in the mouth of a person who tells lies after lies. Impurity is due to bad qualities and not due to natural bodily function.

Guru Nanak also condemned the idea of impurity after the woman gives birth to child. There was a system to keep woman isolated from the rest of family for some days after the child's birth. She was not allowed to touch anything because her touching anything would render it impure. This impurity was called Sutak. Guru Nanak raised his voice against this evil practice. He said everywhere reproduction is taking place. Even cowdung-cakes, used to cook food, are not free from it. The insects are reproducing, then, there must be impurity in fire also None of the things we eat or use otherwise is free from life, which is multiplying every moment. He told that actual impurity is due to evil thoughts of mind. In Asa Ki Var he says: If impurity attaches (to life's birth),

then all, all over, are impure.

In the cow-dung and the wood too is the life of worms.

as many are the grains of food, not one is without life.

and, is not water life that brings all to life ?

how can then we believe in life's impurity,

when impurity is in our bread ?

Nanak: impurity goes on otherwise save by being wise.

Further the Guru tells about the actual impurity:

The mind's impurity is covetousness';

the tongue's impurity is falsehood.

the impurity of the eyes is coveting

another's woman, beauty and riches.

the ear's impurity is to hear and carry tales.

Nanak: even the purest of men, thus bound,

go to the city of the dead.

The Adi Granth, p. 472

The Sikh scriptures constantly stresses that unless a man leads a unstained ethical life he cannot realize God, although Sikhism does not confuse or equate the ethical commandment and value with the religious experience as such. A Sikh, engaged in the discipline of name, himself must lead a life of the highest ethical purity in world, thought and deed, and every faltering from his high norm of rectitude constitutes a stumbling block in the progress of his ultimate realization of God.

On the basis of these ideas he described Sutak as an illusion of mind:

all idea of impurity is illusion of mind,

which attaches those who are in the duality of maya,

the creatures take birth and die through his will

through his will one comes and goes.



to eat and drink is pure;
for the lord hast blest us with these in mercy.
Nanak: they who realise the truth through the guru,
to them impurity sticks not.

The Adi Granth pp 472-73

The identity of the two is realized either in cognition of the *a priori* unity, or in union with God through self-absorption. Once this identity is realized, there remains no maya — caused feeling of separate self-identity of the individual.

Now the question arises, why didn't Sikh women rise up long ago in protest against such treatment, reciting the words of the Gurus? Why did we not endeavour long ago to realize fully the freedom and equality the Gurus advocated for all human beings, regardless of Gender? Is the equality of Guru preached, even understood by Sikhs? At one time. Sikhs risked their very lives to fight for equality by opposing the caste system. Yet, Today many sikhs judge each other by the caste they are from and the amount of income they earn.

Indeed, how can women realize equality when the root of the problem lies much deeper then marches of protests or laws can reach ? The sikh community needs to look beyond the ingrained customs, social taboos and know the true salubrious nature of justice and equality; the Sikh community needs to realise its tragic entanglement in a system that embraces practices antithetical to the very basis of the Sikh faith, against the very words of God; the Sikh community needs to shake itself vigorously to awaken and rise into a truly strong and potent religious people, living the way God desires us to life; by freedom, justice, love and equality for all.

Many Sikhs will acknowledge this truth, but instead of finding the enthusiasm and hope to shape the future, they will sadly shake their heads. After all, can we possibly unravel thousands of years of deep seated Indian mentality? Do the power of revolution truly lie within our grasps ? We need only to remember the words of Guru Gobind Singh for as answer.

However, the Guru's teachings of equality have never been fully realized as is clearly evident in the treatment of women even in the Sikh society today because of the influence of the majority community on the Sikh minority.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of mankind woman suffered much in patricidal and male dominated societies due to social customs and misunderstanding of religion. On one hand she was being given the credit as the better half of man and on the other side she was considered a temptress, a troublesome obstacle in the way of spiritual journey of man. Such misogynistic notions regarding the position of woman damaged the status of woman in social, religious and political spheres. In the Medieval India, during the Sikh Guru period, the teachings of Sikh Gurus revolutionised the structure of society, institution of marriage and the role of woman in the society. It is the impact of Sikhism that woman is able to regain her lost glory and status not only in the four walls of house but in all walks of life. Sikhism has rejected all those anti-woman notions and divinised the family life by giving new meaning to the institution of marriage. Sikhism has elevated the status of woman at par with man. Woman in Sikhism is considered as facilitator of the spiritual journey of mankind.

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