

The Ritual Row

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IT IS THE NEWEST CONTROVERSY to creep into the hallowed precincts of the Golden Temple at Amritsar. But this one, questioning age-old traditions in the historic gurdwara, has brought to the fore the issue of gender discrimination and power play among the Sikh clergy. The provocation: on February 13, two NRI Sikh women were prevented from participating in the “*Sukh-aasan*” ritual and allegedly roughed up by male devotees and volunteers of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee .

The *Sukh-aasan* is a daily late-night ritual of shifting the Guru Granth Sahib from the *sanctum sanctorum* to the Akal Takht precincts. *Ironically, the Golden Temple is the only gurdwara where women are barred from taking part in religious ceremonies, including the recital of kirtan.* Five centuries after Guru Nanak Dev propounded gender equality as a cornerstone of Sikhism, it took the two British Sikh women, Mejinderpal Kaur and Lakhbir Kaur, to resurrect the debate. It’s an issue on which the SGPC has been accused of playing to the gallery despite the *hukumnama* (edict) by five Sikh head priests in 1996 that allows ‘baptised’ women to be equal partners in the *seva*.

“We are not seeking a right which does not exist,” says Mejinderpal, a London-based lawyer. She says her visit to Amritsar was prompted by an assurance by Akal Takht Jathedar, Joginder Singh Vedanti, who visited Britain last year, that there would be no restriction on the participation of women in the *seva*. She denies that her campaign represents western or elitist concerns and is gathering support within Sikh organisations in India as well as abroad to mount pressure on the SGPC to implement the edict. “We will not let the campaign die down,” says a defiant Mejinderpal.

The SGPC, meanwhile, is in await-and-watch mode. “It is a sensitive matter. A hasty step could well divide the community,” says SGPC President Kirpal Singh Badungar. Such concerns are not entirely misplaced. After the *langar* controversy of 1998 - there was opposition to community meals being served on dining tables - created a huge furore among Sikhs abroad, the SGPC is treading cautiously this time.

Meanwhile, in a strange co-incidence, on February 23 the SGPC sacked Manjit Singh, head priest of Takht Keshgarh and a staunch votary of the edict. Though ousted officially ‘on charges of corruption,’ the “reformer” priest had earned the ire of the SGPC for trying to queer the pitch on the non-implementation of the 1996 edict piloted by him, as the then acting Jathedar of the Akal Takht. Given the power struggle in the Sikh clergy, Manjit Singh’s tacit motive could be to embarrass Vedanti.

The first effort to remove the gender bias was made after the SGPC was set up in 1925. The SGPC Act granted equal rights to women in the management of Sikh shrines, but it was only in 1940 that the Religious Advisory Board formed by the body recommended that ‘baptised’ Sikh women be allowed to recite *kirtan* at the Golden Temple. The orthodox group opposed the move and it could not be implemented on the pretext of the non-availability of women trained to recite Gurbani in *ragas*. But the matter of women’s participation in the nightly rituals has faced stiffer resistance. In 1996 the Sikh clergy, spurred by the NRI community, sought to

end the gender bias by issuing an edict allowing women to participate in it, with a rider that they should be above the age of 30 and escorted by a male family member. Manjit Singh even led a group of women to the *sanctum sanctorum* to take part in the *seva*.

But it remained just that - a symbolic gesture. The SGPC simply ignored the directive. Even the first woman SGPC president, Bibi Jagir Kaur, found it politically expedient to keep the issue under wraps in the face of opposition by the Sant Samaj - a conglomerate of Sikh seminaries that exercises considerable sway over the SGPC electorate. The SGPC's latest ploy to "first gauge public opinion on the issue" has invited ridicule from liberal Sikhs who see it as "a delaying tactic". "An edict issued by the Akal Takht can't be kept in abeyance as it is binding on the entire community," says firebrand SGPC member Kiranjot Kaur. In the face-saving move, Vedanti has now written to the SGPC to explore the possibility of implementing the edict.

SGPC authorities, however, cite practical problems in executing it. It anticipates bigger problems like "unsavoury" incidents occurring when women participate in the lengthy nocturnal rituals. "Our society is not so advanced as to rule out eve-teasing even in the holy places," says Darshan Singh, a Sikh scholar-member of the Dharam Prachar Committee of the SGPC. "Since carrying the heavy palanquin involves a lot of jostling, it will be unwise to let women take part."

The liberals rubbish the argument. "The SGPC can introduce all-women days of *seva* or earmark separate areas for male and female devotees," says Sikh thinker Gurtej Singh. The problem, he believes, is more to do with attitude. Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon agrees. "The ban on women devotees is an expression of deep-seated patriarchal and chauvinistic mindset," says the Panjab University historian. Badungar feels it will take time to "mould public opinion on changing the Sikh *maryada*". As the debate snowballs into a major row, it has set the tide for a new awakening among Sikh women.

[Courtesy: India Today]

