

# Guru Granth Sahib - A Youth's Perspective

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WE ARE HERE TODAY TO SHARE ideas about Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Before I start I would like you all to consider the following:

A Bengali scholar once wrote, "If the Japji Sahib is conveyed to the people, there would be a new spiritual revolution in the country." Vijay Krishna Goswamy, another writer says that the GGS was "India's greatest writing". Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, eminent Indian philosopher and President, said, "Sri Guru Granth Sahib is the living voice of all the prophets and great souls of all times."

400 hundred years ago the holy Granth was compiled, thereby, a universal message was put in a permanent form. Now, 400 later, the question arises: Is the message still relevant to the youth of today? If so, then how? I was asked to talk about the youth perspective and views on the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. How Sri Guru Granth Sahib has affected our lives, and what we could do to understand it better. The first thought that came to my mind was rather confusing. I thought, how was I going to talk about the youth views on the Guru Granth Sahib, if the youth don't have any views? Now you must be wondering what do I mean by that? The truth is just that. The youth of today have no views on the Guru Granth Sahib, because it is not possible for them to form any.

Today there are so many rituals and restrictions regarding Guru Granth Sahib that it's not possible for the youth to get anywhere near it. As far as I know, not many youth know why we bow to the Guru Granth Sahib or if we are bowing to the Great Book, or the Word. Doesn't this sound like idol worship? That's what it becomes when we don't understand what - or to whom - we are bowing and submitting to. We can talk about all the universal messages in the GGS, but in the end what good is having a universal Scripture which the youth of that religion do not understand? Or, for that matter, even many adults don't understand? When I went to Amritsar about two years ago, I must have seen about 50 different *Akhand Paaths*, in the *parkarma*, Akal Takht and even in the balconies! Everyone came and bowed to the Guru Granth Sahib but no one bothered to sit and listen. It was all pure ritual.

I remember when I was around 7 or 8 years old and wanted to do *chaur sewa*, I was told by a *granthi*, that since I was not *amritdhari*, I couldn't do it. Another time, I wasn't allowed to take *Waak* because the *granthi* thought I was not doing it in the correct manner. Rather than teach me the correct way he got upset. My friend was told he could not do *chaur sewa* because he had cut his hair. He was even asked not to do *ardas* for the same reason. Now, I ask you this: in order to come into the fold of Sikhi, is one supposed to magically know everything about Sikhism? Is one expected to become a practicing Sikh only after taking *amrit*? How is someone who cuts his hair supposed to fall in love with Sikhism if he is driven away from the Guru

in the first place? We speak of the Guru Granth Sahib's universal message, but of what use is that if no one but Sikhs can read it, and at that, only *Amritdhari Sikhs*? We seemed to have created almost a fear about the Guru Granth Sahib. The youth of today can't even think about going near it because they know that someone is going to tell them they are doing something wrong or someone is going to yell at them because they haven't completed all the rituals. In the end they think why even bother? Can any one blame them for this kind of attitude?

I then decided that this was being unfair and that I should look at this issue from a different perspective. So I thought I'd look at it from the East versus the West point of view. I then came to the conclusion that here in West, especially in Canada, we are actually doing a much better job of educating youth than in India. When I went to India I was amazed at the difference. Most Sikhs in India practiced Sikhism as if it was one big ritual in itself. Everything is done because it has to be. The youth are drifting farther and farther away, and no one really seems to care. I stayed in India for almost a month, and I didn't once see a Sikh boy with a proper turban. Even forty year old grown up men were wearing *patkas*! If these people don't know the true value of the turban, what would they know about Sri Guru Granth Sahib?

Here in the West, we find that the youth do want to learn-but learn with an open mind instead of the old fashioned way of "this is your religion, so accept it". They prefer to have an open discussion about it, to exchange ideas and then form their own opinion. This change in way of learning often leads to culture clash.

So what does the Guru Granth Sahib actually contain? Pretty much everything. The Guru Granth Sahib talks about equality amongst all, as displayed through the writings of saints, regardless of their caste, status or class. It talks about women and their rights. How can young women not be proud? Even today women are restricted culturally, yet religiously, there are no limits. There is no inequality. Again the problem is not lack of pride, but rather lack of knowledge. The Guru Granth Sahib discusses how to get out of the rat race of wanting a bigger house, a better car-pretty much every single youth nowadays has money on their minds. Well the question is whether all these material things will lead to happiness? If not, then what will lead to happiness? The Guru Granth Sahib has the answer.

Take for example -Science and the Guru Granth Sahib. Dr. Chahal, in this paper titled, " Interpretation of Gurbani: A scientist[s approach]" explains that about a century before Galileo (during the period of Renaissance), Guru Nanak started the most modern and scientific religion, Sikhism. He explains how Nature and the Almighty are explained by scientists and by Guru Nanak. According to scientists "A creative and controlling force in the universe is Nature." According to Nanak "The creative and controlling force in the universe is the Almighty." Moreover, Guru Nanak also considers Nature as the creation as well as the creator. The misconception that the earth is resting on the horns of a bull was removed by Guru Nanak by explaining that the earth is staying in the universe under the control of the Laws of the Almighty or as scientists say, "the laws of nature." Guru Nanak also explained about the creation of the universe and expansion of the universe according to the Laws of the Almighty (Nature): *Pataala patal lakh agasa agas*.

Guru Nanak also challenged the caste system created by the Brahmins and explained that the whole humankind belongs to one class: *a-ee panthi sagal jamati*.

*Nanak utam neech na koay (p 7 ) : sab ko ucha akhiey neech na deesey koey (p.62).* It is unfortunate that people today feel proud and flaunt their caste. The Guru had proven to us over 500 years ago that all humans were equal when he abolished the caste system; equality today is a fundamental right and freedom guaranteed by all countries in the world. SGGS speaks about the universal truths, becoming aware of our actions and their consequences. It talks about all the various religious paths taken before and what it has led to. There is nothing extreme about Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Everything is to be done in moderation. Just as it is necessary to function in this world and be an active participant, it is also necessary to lead a spiritual life and to be compassionate to others.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib contains a message for everyone. The only problem is how to get it across. Now it has become very difficult to obtain Sri Guru Granth Sahib. To cope in today's world and to have pride in Sri Guru Granth Sahib requires a lot of work. If I may quote Hillary Clinton: It takes a village: It takes a village of people, teachers, parents, various Gurdwara committees, peers and awareness groups to educate and instill pride into the youth. All these efforts must overlap and be coordinated. For that to happen, caste barriers must be removed *entirely*, Gurdwara committees must agree to work together with each other on this common goal and be an active participant and listen to the youth carefully and thoughtfully. It may sound easy, but believe me, it's easier said than done. Sri Guru Granth must be readily available, to read, to understand, to discuss.

There are many ways to achieve this. Recently, many people have started to hold group meetings where all, especially the youth, can ask questions about Sikhism and everyday issues. **Camps, retreats, speech competitions are all very good. In fact I can definitely say that over 80 percent of the knowledge that I have gathered about Sikhism was gathered from such camps and speech competitions. Sometimes its not necessarily the camp itself that motivates youth to learn more, but rather the company or *sangat*.** Guru Granth Sahib has already talked about keeping good *sangat* for this very reason. The Gurus understood how human relationships worked and how they impact human mentality. The Gurdwaras can also be more accommodating. There is no doubt that language is becoming an increasing barrier in understanding the GGS. Why not bring the message into the language that the youth can understand? Translate, bring preachers, or granthis, who can bridge this gap, let the youth know what people of other faiths have said about Sikhism and GGS. One idea would be to permanently install a screen and project the *shabads*, being sung along with the translation. In this way, the youth can attend *kirtan darbars* and actually understand the *shabads* being sung.

Recently I took a course on world religions and learned quite a lot. If nothing else, with all the knowledge about other religions, my faith in Sikhism just got stronger. When I learned about the other religious texts, I realized the uniqueness of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Also having read many views of non-Sikhs on Guru Granth Sahib, I can say that I am filled with pride. But why is it that these people who aren't even Sikhs have read the Guru Granth Sahib but the youth have yet to? We need more workshops (like this one) in order to educate our youth, show them proper methods when reading Sri Guru Granth Sahib. We must encourage them to read, and understand.

One last thing, I think it should be noted that on this occasion, the Washington State legislature adopted a special Resolution to recognize the 400th anniversary of the Guru Granth Sahib. It declared that the Guru Granth Sahib promotes values of truth, compassion, peace, equality, and service towards humankind. Then all the senators rose up from their seats and recognized the Guru Granth Sahib and the contributions made by Sikhs. SGGS doesn't just teach us how to be better Sikhs, it teaches us how to be better human beings. That's not just limited to Sikhism. It's a universal message for all people. Reverend H. L. Bradshaw summed it beautifully when he said: "Sikhism is a universal world faith ... a message for all men. This is amply illustrated in the writings of the Gurus. Sikhs must cease to think of their faith as just another good religion, and must begin to think of Sikhism as being the religion of the New Age."



## What Sikh Women Want

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IN THIS AGE OF DEMOCRACY, when equality has emerged as a keyword, women too have become conscious of their status and are demanding equality in every practical respect. Ask any Sikh what the status of women is in Sikhism, and he or she will proudly say everyone regardless of gender, race, caste is equal. Ask the same Sikh how this equality is practiced in today's society and he or she will try and beat around the bush. The question is: why? To answer this question, we need to look into history.

Everyone pretty much knows that before the Gurus, there were two main religions-Hinduism and Islam, and that both oppressed women. But how and to what extent? In Hinduism, a holy text says, "*Sudar Pashu te Nari, teeno taran ke adkihari*". In the code of Manu, the fundamental basis of Hinduism 5:147-149 it says, "By a girl, by a young woman or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood, a female must subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord (husband) is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent". Islam, on the other hand, taught that, "men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has preferred men over women and women were expended of their rights." [Qoran 4:34.] According to the Islamic Law of Retribution, a woman's worth is half of a man, 100 camels or 200 cows. It does not matter how educated a woman may be or what her earning potential may be. Her worth is half of a man - any man.

Guru Nanak saw this huge injustice and did not hesitate to condemn it. He said, "*So kio munda Akhiay Jit Jamme Rajan*" - how can you demean a woman when she is the one who gives birth to prophets and kings? Later, Guru Amar Das was the first to give women the control of the establishment of the Manjis. The religious seats of Afghanistan and Kashmir were under the jurisdiction of women. These women had complete jurisdiction in decision making as well as preaching to the congregation. He also abolished the practice of Sati and Purdah (which is still practiced in many parts of Asia). Widow remarriage was instituted by the Sikhs. There was no activity

in the Sikh religion reserved exclusively for men. During the historic Vaisakhi of 1699, Guru Gobind Singh gave women the name "Kaur". It is a derivative of the word *Kanwar* meaning prince, whereas Singh is derived from *simha* meaning lion. This initiative was taken not only to eliminate the caste system, but also to give women equality in a society, which had repressed them for thousands of years. Just about everywhere in the world, women change their surnames to their husbands at the time of marriage. In the last few decades, women have started to retain their last name even after marriage. Yet, this freedom was given to us by Guru Gobind Singh. Sikh women have been given an identity independent of their father and their husband. It's too bad western women were never told of this! It's no wonder that many Sikh writers believe that the Gurus were feminists! They went above and beyond the call to free women by giving them a separate identity and making them independent. Birendra Kaur, Ph D in her paper, *Insight and Foresight* says, "Today we women hold our heads high for the contribution of Sikhism. Women of yore joined every sphere, be it service, leadership or sacrifice. Nowhere else does a woman enjoy such a respectable status as in Sikhism. The guru has lovingly called us Kaur, which means a crown prince, on whom lies great responsibility". Keep in mind that while all this was happening on the Indian sub-continent, in the west women were considered property and were not given the right to vote. It was only until the 1930s that women could actually cast their own vote.

If it were not for this amazing feat that the Gurus so elegantly accomplished, our Sikh history would be very different. While Sikh women's contributions are rarely emphasized, it does not mean they did not exist - we just never bothered learning about them. Mata Ajit Kaur nurtured and guided the Khalsa after Guru Gobind Singh's death. Mata Gujari, an inspiring force during one of the most difficult times in Sikh history (and responsible for the training of the Sahibzadas) and Bibi Bhani were all crucial to the development of Sikhism. Later, Sada Kaur (the first woman commander in Chief and her son Ranjit Singh established the Khalsa kingdom), Rani Jind Kaur, the first female freedom fighter in the struggle to drive out the British from India, Mai Bhaigo who fought side by side with Guru Gobind Singh, Bibi Khem Kaur and Bibi Rajinder Kaur (The only woman on the Indian sub continent to win a battle over the British) were all women who either fought side by side with Sikh men or led them into battle.

So where are we today? Can we honestly look in the mirror everyday and say we are treated equally? If so, then why do so many of us continue to celebrate festivals and rituals that degrade and demean us? Practices like Lohri, Rakhri and Kurva Chauth all contribute to our inequality, yet many Sikh women happily celebrate it. Tying a Rakhri implies that a female cannot fend for herself and is dependent on her brother to protect her (even though he may be younger), thereby implying that she is weak and incapable of being independent. Could one who endures hours of labour pains, and overcomes a lifetime of financial, academic and social challenges to raise and sustain a family, be weak? Not by any means. Moreover, this practice never made any sense to me. If a brother was in a different country, how is he supposed to know that his sister would be attacked and get there in time to defend her? This reminds me of an incident that my father told me about. Early in the 1970's, in Vancouver, a Sikh woman was being harassed by some white supremacist on her farm. Her husband was out of town and her father was very old. Her in-laws did offer help but she refused, saying she could handle it. She informed the police many

times but they did not take any action. One day they came to her house and started to threaten her and vandalized the house. At first she told them to leave. But when they didn't listen, she took out a gun and shot one of them. The men were probably more in shock that a woman had shot at them, let alone that one of them was injured and ran for their lives. I am not purporting violence, but when push comes to shove, a Sikh woman does have the right to defend herself and her family, only if practices, such as Rakhri, are eliminated.

Lohri, a festival that celebrates the birth of a male child clearly discriminates against females. It's a time when ladoos are distributed and everyone celebrates. Yet when a female is born, nothing special is done. Many times she is seen as a burden. There are so many Punjabi songs on Lohri, yet not one celebrating the birth of a daughter. Sikhism was supposed to change all that-and it has for those who practice Sikhism. Perhaps this is why Punjab has one of the highest rates of female infanticide in the whole of India. The United Nations has condemned this practice, yet we Punjabis seem to support it. At a rate of 700 females to 1000 males, one really has to wonder why.

Kurva Chauth is another ritual I've seen a lot of Sikh women practicing. In this ritual, a woman is to be grateful to her husband for providing her with food, shelter, clothing, respectability, comfort and happiness. This Indian tradition presents several dilemmas. Firstly, if a woman was a homemaker (an equally respectable life style, if by choice), then obviously that man would realize that the woman works 24 hours a day, versus a full time traditional job any man held. Running a house is not an 8 to 5 occupation. Overtime credit to all the housewives and househusbands is long over due. Secondly, there is a religious dilemma. The Guru Granth Sahib states that God is the one who provides for us all, and that everything except the remembrance of God is only temporary. Lastly, there is a marital dilemma. If marriage is a union of two souls who embark on a life long journey, then both have to work together with each other to run a smooth household.

Speaking of marriage, the concept of "kanya daan" or in plain English donating the daughter to another family is very disturbing. I first heard this phrase at my friend's wedding. I was absolutely oblivious to what it meant, but later, was shocked to hear so many Sikhs use this phrase when referring to the marriage of their daughters. The problem is that it is equivalent to treating a daughter like a possession, which can be given away. The person on the receiving end (this case, the groom and his family) can do whatever he wants with her. You don't have to be very imaginative to figure out what I'm talking about. Why on earth would any parent, especially a mother, who herself was in the same position, say that they have 'donated' their daughter? Dowry is a similar problem that plagues our people. I cannot understand the importance of this moneymaking tradition, which again demeans women. Sikhs are forbidden from marrying their children for monetary benefit. It is against our Rahit Maryada but still many Sikhs practice this tradition. I realize that many of these traditions are cultural. But Guru Nanak Dev Ji clearly stated, "Pilgrimages, fasts, rituals, religious ceremonies are all in vain. Salvation is achieved only by devoting worship to God." (P 75 SGGS). If we women start to choose the Sikh way, rather than the "Punjabi" way, then dowry, female infanticide and spousal abuse would cease to exist.

The Gurus have given up so much, not for their sake, but for ours. Yet we fail to see the advantages time and time again. There is no limit on what we women can do. My purpose is not to put down other religions but to make the point that if we claim Sikhism to be a modern religion, we should know why, and practice it.

So even though Sikhism is an ideally progressive social structure, many still find it difficult to part with the caste names and their culture. Pioneers are needed! The choice is now up to us. Do we choose our cultural path or the Guru's path? If we chose the former, then we cannot complain nor can we have grievances on how we are currently being treated and how our daughters will be treated fifty years down the road.

