

The Indian Society and the Status of Women

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IN THE INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION the cult of Mother Goddess prevailed and in the Vedic civilization period, women enjoyed equal status. But in the post Vedic period, the situation changed to such an extent that women were considered as "*Paer ki jutī*" (footwear). Even Tulsi Dass compared her with an animal and a Shudra. He said, "*Dhol, Gawaran, Shuder, Pashu Nari, Yeh sab taran ke adhikari.*" But during Bhagti movements, it underwent a significant change.

The Sikh Gurus denounced the custom of "*sati*" and sale of daughters. The deep rooted customs and traditions could not change much to improve the pathetic condition of women. The birth of a girl was not regarded as an auspicious occasion. Son was always given preferential treatment. The practice of female infanticide was widely prevalent which unfortunately continues to some extent even now. Economic reason was the basic factor. Punjab being on the direct route of foreign invaders, girls were easy victim of marauders. Deliberate neglect of a girl child was common in the society. The boy was thought to be a carrier of lineage where as none thought about the daughter as a future mother. She was regarded as "*paraya dhan*" and money spent on her education was considered sheer wastage. Purdah system was also responsible for this. In Punjab, it was said -

"Ander biathi lakh di, bahar gayi kakh di"

It also applied to "Muslim Women". The widows were married to elder or younger brother of the husband which led to irregular and unorganized match besides encouraging polygamy. The system kept them ignorant consciously about the world around them. They were regarded as sub-servient, inferior species and were crushed under the burden of custom and convention with the result that they lost the will, the courage, and the power of independent thinking.

The situation began to change in the 19th century. In Punjab, Baba Ram Singh Namdhari played a significant role in creating an awakening among the women. The cruel custom of girl infanticide, child marriage, and immolation was strongly criticised. The movement of Arya Samaj in setting up Kanya Vidyalayas created awakening against the social evils.

In villages and small towns, the women faced the most fatal blows. If society rises to combat centuries old concept about this weaker section, of shame, of dowry, is fought courageously, if male mind set is changed by social pressure, there is no reason why women cannot be liberated from the shackles of weaker section.

Just as human character reaches its heights in the moral life of men, great Sikh women saints, leaders, teachers, and social workers functioned side by side, just as lower passion, greed and sadistic lust drives men to degradation, so also there are women who are obsessed by similar passions and they use this weapon to exploit the situation. This aspect is acknowledged in Sikh scriptures.

Custom as compelling widows to remain unmarried all their life or immolate on the funeral pyres of their husband were rejected outright. When Maharaja Ranjit Singh died, only his Hindu wives were compelled by Dogras of the Durbar to become

Sati, because these women exercised great influence on the hill chiefs and they carried in their mind the secret of many treacherous acts of Dogra brothers. No Sikh wife of Ranjit Singh burnt herself on pyre. An example of degraded and depraved life of widows in Bengal will illustrate the evils of her social status.

“Mrs. Sen, an eminent social reformer, of Bengal said that the worst treatment of widows used to be in East Bengal, now Bangladesh. She talked about her great Grandmother who was married at the age of 13, had two children, a boy and a girl by the age of 15 and at 16 became a widow, shaved head, wore a coarse white sari without border, no blouse, bare feet, no ornament, not allowed to meet any one, had to cook her frugal and monotonous food on a separate chulha, worked for the family, never went out of the house except for the temple visit only if escorted. Had to have a bath if her children touched her while preparing food. It was a defilement of ascetic state in which she was to do her penance. When she was sick with high fever, she had to keep her regular ‘*ekadashi*’ fast. In desperation, she asked her little girl to get her a sip of water. The elder women of the household intercepted, they merely allowed the dry, burning lips to be touched with water. She did not live through the night to drink water or any nourishment next morning. At 18 she was dead of her ‘sins’ of widowhood. How despicable treatment of a widow who was a mother of two children of the family? O’custodian of Dharma, would you ever be pardoned even if you crawl on your naked back with ashes smeared on your body?”

In the Sikh Scriptures, women were considered truly the better half of the human race, by dint of their sincerity, sense of devotion and loyalty in their filial piety and the sacrifice for their children. The example of noble women is repeatedly given when ideal love, ideal devotion and service is given in daily ‘*Ardas*’. The Sikhs are a miniscule minority. Their zeal to initiate the good and bad social custom regularly practiced by other communities has landed them in many wasteful marriage and custom like dowry and other degrading social rituals.

During the Guru period (1469-1708 AD) and Missal time (18th Century), Sikhs assembled in Vaisakhi and Diwali in historic places and simple marriages were performed. The eminent saint and reformer Baba Ram Singh Namdhari and Baba Dayal Nirankari encouraged simple mass marriages. In Kabul, the Sikhs of Afghanistan still follow this practice. Both the Singh Sabha and Akali movement failed to reverse this custom though they stressed simple marriage. But these evil practices sometimes leading to criminal results will be challenged sooner or later.

Women command great respect by virtue of their hard work, dedication to their domestic responsibilities. They have entered different professions, hitherto, male monopoly. While men drink wine, even take drugs, example is not known of a single woman either drinking wine or even taking drugs. They, therefore, form the back bone of the society.

Teaching of Sikh Gurus uplifted the status of women even higher than Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. In Christianity, she cannot be a preacher from the pulpit. In Islam, a woman cannot invite the faithful to prayer in a mosque by Bang or Azon nor could she head a congregation in prayer. Guru Nanak allowed them to sermon along with men. It was the vigorous preaching of Guru Amar Das which banished the curse of *sati* from the land of five rivers. He preached against *Purdah* and advocated widows remarriage. In the neighbouring states ‘*sati*’ is worshipped even now. Guru Hargobind declared that women was the conscious of men.

Even today in the modern world, when social values have undergone change, the evil practice of female infanticide and foeticide is in vogue. In the developed state of Punjab there are 823 girls against 1000 boys. This has disturbed the natural equilibrium between the sexes. The women have to be treated with respect and equal facilities in general upbringing and education have to be provided. It is said that when you educate a man, you educate an individual and when you educate a woman, you educate the whole family. It is she who chisels the raw mind of her children. The notion that "*Istri tawan da attahai under pai noo chuhe khandey nei, bahar nikly noo kan*". (woman is like a dough, if she remains indoor she is exposed to rats, if she steps outside, crows peck her) is not wholly relevant now. The caste system has pushed women to a low position. Many compared her with Sudra. Guru Nanak declared "Why call her bad from whom are born kings." Guru Amardass had established 22 preaching districts and some of them were headed by women. (*The Punjab: Past & Present*). The mother of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia was the supreme leader and religious teacher. Sukha Singh who later became a commander of the battle of Chhota Ghalaghara in 1746, was ostracized for some time by the Khalsa, because he was suspected of having committed infanticide and thereby having violated the traditional ethic of the Khalsa (Rattan Singh Bhangu).

The status of women raised by the movement was reflected when they participated in the revolutionary struggle on equal terms with men. It was Mai Bhago who rallied the deserters from Anandpur and led them to battle of Mukatsar thus erasing the stigma of disclaimer for all times to come (Macauliff). In the early 18th century (1725-55) when Sikhs were engaged in life and death struggle, Sikh women were imprisoned and subjected to barbaric torture but they remained firm in their faith.

A Muslim contemporary writer reported that an example could not be found when they abjured their faith. Rani Sada Kaur of Kanhaya Missal (Batala) and mother-in-law of Ranjit Singh led the armies in battles and Ranjit Singh owed his success to her in capturing Lahore in 1799. Ahmad Shah Batalvi said that Rani Rajinder Kaur was one of the most remarkable women of this period. She possessed all the virtues which man pretend their exclusive preserve. Sahib Kaur (21 years old) was Chief Minister of Patiala in 1793. She refused to leave the battlefield when pressed by Marhattas near Ambala and repulsed the enemy (Hari Ram Gupta).

Rani Aus Kaur, head of administration of Patiala conducted affairs of State with conspicuous success (George Thomas). Women have often been considered as epitome of wisdom, forbearance, patience and kindness. During 1740-55, Sikhs entry into the temple and tank of Amritsar was banned. But Sikhs defied the diktat with vengeance and performed pilgrimage in secret and disguise. Dewan Kaura Mal, Minister of Lahore, Governor Mir Mannu once saw a woman with her child hastily towards the temple. He asked her not to go as soldiers will kill her. She said she knew her fate. At this Dewan asked her to at least take mercy on the child. She replied that if she reached Celestial Darbar why should her son be deprived of this privilege (Dewan Mal was ancestor of Bhai Sahib Vir Singh Ji).

In the contemporary Hindu society, when a girl is married, it is said that *Kanya Dan* is being given. Is she a commodity or a chattel to be given in charity? Does it not defile her dignity and pride. Should this mindset not be changed to treat her as human being?

It is said that God created mother as He wanted some one to share with him the task of bestowing his unbounding blessing on humanity.

