

Marriage, Infidelity and Divorce – A Sikh Perspective

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A marriage is an arrangement between two individuals to live together and to raise a family. The laws and customs concerning marriage are often related to both social rules and religious beliefs and vary from society to society.

The history of the institution of marriage is fascinating and is different from country to country and from tribe to tribe. Some common steps in its development are, however, as follows:

- a. In the pre-historic period there was no such agreement called a marriage. The institution of marriage did not exist. People had children without establishing any permanent relationship with each other. The concept of parenthood was not clearly defined.
- b. When the people did start living together and the concept of marriage emerged, there were still no defined degrees within which marriage could be solemnized. Fathers married their daughters and mothers married their sons. There were also frequent marriages between brothers and sisters.
- c. With the development of social traditions and religious laws the institution of marriage got a clear definition, and marriages between close relations were prohibited in many societies.
- d. Later in history, the world religions played an important part to redefine this institution and imposed their own laws on the marriages.
- e. The governments of different countries also passed local laws to define legal marriages and the rules to inherit parental property.

The forms of a marriage are classified according to the number of the partners involved. This varies according to religious beliefs, social customs, economic situation of the society and the laws of the country.

- a. The concepts of monogamy, polygamy and polyandry emerged in the last 2000-3000 years and are still prevalent all over the globe. Where monogamy means one partner, polygamy means several wives and polyandry means husbands. Other forms of marriages are called sororate and levirate.
- b. Both in India and abroad, there were customs to have many wives. It was sanctioned by both social and religious and law of the land.

c. Muslim law, even today, allows four wives. It also sanctions *mutah* (temporary) marriage to traders or other persons who stay away from home for a considerable length of time.

d. Polyandry, though rare, is still found in both history and modern times. The example of Draupadi, the legendary wife of five Pandavas stands out amongst many other examples. Even now there are certain hill tribes in India where a woman marries all the brothers of a family at the same time.

e. The levirate is a form of marriage uniting a widow and a brother of her deceased husband. Its most common form, called junior levirate, involves the marriage of widow to a younger brother of the deceased husband, who may be or may not be already married. This custom was common amongst Jews and is still prevalent in Punjab's villages.

The Sikh marriage is called Anand Karaj, meaning blissful ceremonial occasion. According to the Sikh thought, a family life is the best form of platform for serving God's purpose and the well-being of the humanity at large. In Sikhism there is no room for renunciation and celibacy. According to the Sikh Gurus, God can be realised living in a happy family environment, and there is no reason to leave the family and go to forests or hill-caves to find God.

Most of the marriages amongst the Sikhs are still arranged by the parents, though love marriage are developing fast in the urban areas. All Sikh marriages are solemnised in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib in a Sikh Gurdwara, or at place specially arranged for the ceremony.

The history of the 'Anand' Marriage, though traced to the times of the third Guru, Guru Amardas, was certainly in existence when the fourth Guru, Guru Ramdas, composed Four-stanza hymns (*chhnats*) for the occasion. The first Anand marriage is said to be the marriage of the sixth Guru, Guru Harobind with Mata Ganga.

Anand Marriage received legal recognition in 1909, when the Anand Marriage Act was passed. The bill was moved in the Imperial Legislative Council in 1908 and was placed on the Statute Book on 22 October 1909.

In the Anand Marriage, the couple sit in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, and listen to the vows and promises, as contained in the four – stanza hymns, first read from Guru Granth Sahib and then sung in the *rag Suhi* (musical tune) by the *ragis*. If the couple does agree with the vows and promises so pronounced, then they show their acceptance by bowing to Guru Granth Sahib. The couple gets two chances to accept or to reject these vows. First, when it is read from Guru Granth Sahib and, secondly, when the hymns are sung, each time they show their acceptance by bowing to Guru Granth Sahib.

The vows and promises in the four stanzas are summarized as follows:

- a. To always believe in One God.
- b. To love each other for ever.

- c. To be faithful to each other, and
- d. To share everything between the two, both in happiness and adversity.

The statement that the ‘marriage is made in heaven’ poses a very pertinent question: are marriages predestined and are made/finalised in heavens? The answer to this question is found in the Karma theory as propounded by the Sikh Gurus.

According to the Sikh theology, there are a number of incidents in a persons life which are predestined, e.g. the date of one’s birth, the family in which one is born, the day of one’s death, etc. In addition to the above few examples, most of the other actions of humans are not predestined and are planned and executed by human themselves. The truth of the matter is that if everything in life is predetermined then there is no objective left in living a useful life. If everything that we do is planned and executed by God himself, then there is no room for any Karma theory.

The fact of life is that only a part of our lives is predetermined and major part of our actions is left to us to execute. It is for this ‘free-action’ part of life that the Karma theory is made. A marriage falls in the second category. It is a human agreement, planned and designed by humans. God does not interfere either in its arrangement or in its execution, but he, of course, does enforce divine laws, through religious pronouncement and sanctions on all human actions. The religious codes have their roots in the commandment of God, Until a person remains married he/she must strictly follow the rules contained in the religious codes and in the social customs.

Guru Granth Sahib contains a number of hymns narrating the occasions of engagement and marriage. It also has hymns containing the miseries of divorce. After studying these hymn we well draw our own conclusions concerning the divine sanction of marriage.

Relevant hymns:

Regarding **engagement** (*kurmai*) before marriage: page 773 *chhant* (2)

squ sMqoKu kir Bwau kuVmu kuVmweI

AwieAw bil rwm jIau]

sMq jnw kir mylu

gurbwxI gvweIAw bil rwmu jIau]

The bride (soul) is embellished with truth and contentment, her Father has come to engage her in marriage to her husband. Joining-in with the congregation and holy-men, we sing *Gurbani* (to give divine stamp to the new relationship).

Regarding the arrival of marriage ceremony (*baraat*) page-764

rwgu sUhl mhlw ñ CMqu Gru ò

<>siqgur pRswid]

hm Gir swjn Awey]

swcY myil imlwey]

shij imlwey hir min Bwey

pMc imly suKu pwieAw]

Our new relations (in-laws) have come into our house. God's will has united us with them. From this union with the chosen ones, we have found peace and contentment.

Regarding tying of knot of a new union – page – 963

slok m: õ]

ausqiq inMdw nwnk jI mY hB vvweI

CoiVAw hBu ikJu iqAwgI]

hBy swk kUVwvy ifTy

qau plY qYfY lwgI]ñ]

I have totally discarded making false praises and slandering others; I have forsaken and abandoned all ego. I have seen that all relationships are false and selfish. I have, now, grasped the hem of your robe (o my husband (God), please be mine for ever) || 1 ||

Wedding Ceremony:

sUhl mhlw ô]

hir pihlVI lwv privrqI

krm idRVwieAw bil rwm jIau]....

SUHI MEHLA 4: In the first round of the marriage ceremony. God sets out his instructions for performing the daily duties of a married life. **Follow the righteous conduct of dharma, and renounce sinful actions.** Meditate on Waheguru's Name; embrace and enshrine the contemplative remembrance of the *Naam*. Worship and adore each other like you worship God, and all your sinful residues shall be dispelled. By great good fortune the relations are made and blended in each other. Nanak proclaims that, in this round of the ceremony, the marriage vows and promises have begun ||1||

In the second round of the marriage ceremony. God leads you to meet the true partner. With the fear of God, and fearless God in mind, the filth of egotism should now be eradicated. Sing the glories of God, and promise, making God your witness, **that you will love each other for ever.** God, Almighty is omnipresent, and is watching your union. Deep within you, make a permanent room for each other and your life will be filled with joy and happiness. Nanak proclaims that, in this second round of the marriage ceremony, the un-struck sound-current of the *shabad* resounds and love of newly united souls prevails ||2||

In the third round of the marriage ceremony, the mind should remain **filled with eternal love and trust for each other.** The true partners are joined by good fortune, be faithful to each other. For this union be thankful to God and keep his memories in mind. Always hum the Word of God's hymns. The Name of God, should always vibrate and resound within your hearts, meditating on Him, you have realized the fruits of your destiny. Nanak proclaims that, in this third round of the marriage ceremony, the mind is filled with divine love for Waheguru and the marriage partners. You both promise that you would be faithful to each other ||3||

In the fourth round of the marriage ceremony, your mind should remain tranquil, You have found your eternal partner. As a true Sikh, you accept each other with heart; both of you should remain sweet to your mind and body. You are made for each other. All your lives you now promise to share both happiness and grief. Henceforth you should focus your consciousness on each other. You have obtained the fruit of your mind's desires. Grace of God who has united you should always resound and resonate in your minds. You are now blended in each other, and your hearts have blossomed. Nanak proclaims that, in this fourth round of the marriage ceremony, you have found the Eternal partnership (and are now man and wife). ||4||2||

Regarding divorce (separated) womanı – page 31 (first pada of shabad 13)

isrIrwgu mhlw ó

sdw hir pRBu rvih qw pwvih moK duAwru]ñ]rhwau].....

SRI RAG, MEHLA 3: The self-willed *manmukh* performs religious rituals, like the make-up of a bride who has got separation from her husband. Her husband does not come to her bed; day after day, she grows more and more miserable. She is not allowed to enter his house, and thus becomes homeless ||1||

SRI RAG MEHLA 1, GHAR 3 (SGGS: 72)

sohwgxI ikAw krmu kmwieAw]

pUrib iliKAw Plu pwieAw].....

What noble deeds have the happy brides performed? They have obtained the fruit of their past-lives (destiny). Showering his grace, the God keeps them united with their husbands ||8|| Those, who act within God's laws, and have the *shabad* abiding deep within themselves, they are happy (married) women, and get love from their husbands ||9||

dohwgxI kw mn dyKu sIgwru]

puqR kliq Din mwieAw icqu lwey

JUTu moh pwKMf ivkwru]rhwau]

What is the value of a divorced woman's make-up and ornaments, when her husband has deserted her! She misses her children, her spouse, and the comforts of her husband's household. She lives in an emotional imbalance in a disturbed state. ||1|| Pause [1] (SGGS:363)

Infidelity of men- SGGS: 155 (Raga Gauri – Gauri Cheti Mehla 1, shabad 13)

hau quDu AwKw myrI kwieAw qUM suix isK hmwrI].....

I say to you, O my body: listen to my advice! You slander, and then praise others; you indulge in lies and gossip. You gaze upon the wives of others, O my soul; you steal and commit evil deeds. But when the swan soul departs, you shall remain behind, like a divorced/disgraced man (abandoned woman). ||2||

Punishment to unfaithful men (SGGS: 315) (Raga Gauri – Var Mehla 4, pauri 27 Mehla 5)

pauVI ð

IY Pwhy rwqI qurih pRBu jwxY pRwxI]

qkih nwir prweIAw luik AMdir TwxI]

You take the noose in your hands, and go out at night to strangle others, but God knows everything, O unfaithful man, why do you spy on other men's women, peeping into their private chambers? Why do you break into well-protected places, and revel in sweet wine. But, at the end, you will regret your actions – you are creating heaps of bad karma. Izrael, the angel of death, shall crush you as sesame seeds are crushed in the oil-press. ||27||

Gr kI nwir iqAwgY AMDw]

pr nwrI isau GwIY DMDw]

jYsy isMblu dyiK sUAW ibgswnw]

AMq kI bwr mUAW lptwnw]ñ]

Then, in Rag Bhairav: SGGS1165- The blind fool abandons his own wife, and has an affair with another woman. He is like the parrot who is pleased to see the simbal (with pointed and sharp branches) tree; but in the end, he dies in agony, trapped to it. ||1||

The above hymns drawn from the vast ocean of *Gurubani* recorded in Guru Granth Sahib touch various aspects of a marriage life and, inter-alia, highlight the following, that:

- a. There were divorces in the Guru period.
- b. Though some of the examples cited above use female genders to highlight miseries and pains of a broken marriage, but in fact they apply to men and women equally.
- c. The sufferings of the divorced couple, including the custody of the children, the ownership of the dwelling house, the social backlash, etc. is also highlighted.
- d. The main reason of divorce was, probably, the unfaithfulness of both men and women.
- e. The religion sanctioned a divorce only under special circumstances.
- f. The sin of being unfaithful applies only if a person has relationship with opposite sex without having married her/him.

The existence of the concept of divorce, and special mention of its pangs nullify the notion that the marriages are made in heaven. Anything which is made in heaven is eternal. The marriages which could be, or can be, dissolved are not eternal and are thus man-made agreements. Again, the history of marriages, the social customs and the local laws which influence marriage-contracts also make it more a man-made institution rather than divine creation.



References

1. *In those times there was no practical difference between a separated (chhutar) woman and a divorced woman. Both words more or less meant the same thing.*
2. In addition to the above examples there are shabads on pages 426, 428 and 430 which also contrast the state of life of a divorced woman with a happily married woman.