

Women as Role Models in Sikh history

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GURU NANAK'S DIVINE message to humanity transcends caste and creed, race and gender. He accords a place of honour to women. In the Asa-di-Var he categorically stated that we should not deprecate women folk who give birth to Prophets, Philosopher and leaders. The Tenth Master while baptizing the Khalsa on the Vaisakhi of 1699 used the appellation of Kaur, i.e. Prince and not Princess for the women thereby implying that they are no less heroic than men.

The first pioneering woman who comes to mind instantly is Bebe Nanaki, dotting elder sister of the glorious Guru Nanak. She was among the few persons, like Rai Bular, who recognized Guru Nanak as great divine. She gave abundant sisterly love to Guru Nanak from his childhood, protecting him from parental rage. When Guru Nanak went into a trance in 1499 for 3 days after having dip in 'Vehi Nadi' and was said to have got 'drowned' in the stream, Babey Nanki did not believe this story. She had a firm conviction that her brother Guru Nanak would return soon and he did so.

The Sikh doctrines whose fundamentals have been clearly laid down by Guru Nanak Dev ji had been put to the test of practical living through his nine illustrious successors over a period of 239 years.

Mata (Mother) Khivi, a very pious and devoted women, wife of Guru Angad Dev ji would personally serve in the free community kitchen known as Guru ka Langar which as an institution has continued till date with ever increasing devotion.

Sikhism lays emphasis on household life. The man and woman in their nuptial union, though different in body, are imbued with the same Divine spirit. The Third Master Guru Amar Das ji deprecated the practice of women covering their faces with veils in Gurudarbar, and the pernicious system of Sati prevalent in the Indian society for ages. His daughter Bibi Bhani was a great visionary who visualized, through her intuitive powers, that untold sufferings could befall the followers of Sikhism which only her descendants could withstand. The history is witness to the fact that Guru Arjun, Guru Tegh Bahadur, Guru Gobind Singh and thousands of Sikhs passed through great ordeals. Mata Gujri Ji as the mother of Guru Gobind Singh played a vital role in the history of Sikhs. Mata Sundri Ji and Mata Sahib Devan ji made a signal contribution in day-to-day affairs of Sikhs during the turbulent period after Guru Gobind Singh ji left the transitory world.

Of the 22 "Manjis", i.e. the Centres of *prachar* set up by the Third Master, one Manji was entrusted to a woman. There being no priestly class in Sikhism, both men and women are free to preach its tenets.

During the battle of Anandpur Sahib, 1704, forty of the followers deserted Guru Gobind Singh and, to save their lives, went back to their homes in Malwa. Mai Bhago had then emerged on the scene as a valiant fighter.

The 40 'defectors' having felt humiliated at the hands of their women folk, returned to the battle field, and laid down their lives fighting for the righteous cause of Dharma. Guru Gobind Singh ji reached on time and blessed Bhai Mahan Singh, while in the throes of

death, by tearing off “Baidahwa”, which he had securely kept in his waist belt. He also blessed Mai Bhago who was wounded in the battle field. She accompanied Guru Gobind Singh ji to Nanded and continued to serve the Tenth Master with great devotion. She breathed her last at Nanded.

Another shining example of bravery was shown by Bibi Sahib Kaur, the sister of Maharaja Karam Singh of Patiala, in the late 18th century. The Marathas had invaded the state of Patiala and reached Bahadurgarh, the outskirts of Patiala. Bibi Sahib Kaur, the sister of the Maharaja emerged on the scene and, like a warrior, led the Sikh forces and defeated the Marathas, thereby saving Patiala state for Sikhs at the crucial hour.

Sikhism is essentially a way of life, to be nurtured and cultivated in day-to-day living, consistent with its lofty ideals. There could be no better place than proper social environment.

Thus, it is ordained upon Sikh women to pass on the great heritage and culture of Sikhism to their children by acting as a role model for them in their daily life.

