

Women and Worship - The Sikh Perspective

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TO STUDY THE STATUS OF WOMEN in any religion and their participation in religious worship and religious life, it is pertinent to go through its scriptural basis as well as its past history to evaluate its theological perspective and past and present practices about the contributions of women.

The Sikh religion is a historical religion which emerged on the Indian soil with the advent of its founder, Guru Nanak Dev, in the fifteenth century. Regarding the position of women in religion and religious life in the period prior to Guru Nanak, we cannot make a passing reference in the total negative sense. There is no denying the fact that women, during the Rigvedic period enjoyed almost an equal position alongwith men in the performance of sacrificial rites.¹ Nevertheless, there are conflicting views found in the later literature which is based on *smritis*. The dignified position of women is apparently clear in the passages of *Mahabharata* which state that 'women are to be honoured and adorned by fathers, brothers, husbands and also brothers-in-law'² and a similar expression is found in the passage, stating: "where women are honoured, the gods rejoice, where they are not honoured, all religious rites are of no avail."³ But, at other place, it deprived women of the right to worship and performance of religious rituals by saying that 'sacrifice by women displeases the gods'⁴ and 'the women who burn oblations will sink into hell.'⁵ Hence the condition of women, in the medieval period, was deplorable due to the dominance of priestly class of both Hindus and Muslims. The Hindu priests preferred celibacy and despised women during the period of menstruation and childbirth. They were not allowed to read scriptures and to participate in the religious rites. She was compelled to die on the funeral pyre of her husband, in accordance with the custom of *sati*, as it was considered impious to remain a widow and she was not allowed to remarry. The Muslim woman's condition was more miserable, as she was instructed to keep herself in veil or *pardah*.

The present paper is an exclusive study of the status and role of women in the Sikh religion. It will analyse and highlight, first, the views of the Sikh Gurus about the dignity of women, as are incorporated in the holy scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib; second, the contributions of the Sikh women in the socio-religious sphere; and third, the participation of Sikh women in the religious worship and religious rites.

1. Theological Perspective:

In the fifteenth century, Guru Nanak, through his holy compositions, raised his voice against the injustice done to women and treated them not only as equal to men but also accorded to them a very high and venerable position in society. He criticised emphatically the prevalent priestly class of both Hindus and Muslims for their maltreatment of womenfolk and made them aware of the status and dignity of woman. He says:

'From the woman is our birth, in the woman's womb are we shaped.
To the woman are we engaged; to the woman are we wedded.
The woman is our friend and from the woman is the family.

If one woman dies, we seek another, through the woman are the bonds of the world.

Why call woman evil who gives birth to royalty?

From the woman is the woman; without the woman there is none;

Nanak: without the woman is One True Lord alone.⁶

Admittedly, this verse clearly reflects that the social relationships and social bindings can exist only due to woman. Man's birth, his engagement, marriage, life-long friendship and survival of race is possible only because of woman. The passage is an explicit attack on the prevalent system and elevates the status of woman at the social level.

At the theological level, Sikhism makes no distinction between man and woman. The Sikh religion believes in One God who is both transcendent as well as immanent. The aim of human life is to attain communion with God, which is possible by meditating on the Divine Name, by eliminating one's ego and by surrendering with loving devotion to God. This loving devotion or *prem bhakti* is symbolically presented through the husband-wife relation. God is conceived as Husband or spouse, and the individual soul, i.e. *jivatma* is presented as bride:

'There is only one spouse in the world;
the others are all His brides.'⁷

In this way, the Sikh religion has 'idealized the love of a wife for her husband and held it up as an example for a devotee of God. By doing so, the Gurus greatly exalted the status of woman.'⁸ All the human beings are symbolically taken as women, or brides, who are always eager to meet their Lord, the God:

'We all are the brides of the Lord, and bedeck ourselves (for His pleasure),
But if we are proud of our beauty, no use then are our red robes.
We find not love through deceit; the false show avails not (with God).
The spouse enjoys the bride, whom he likes,
And she alone is His bride, whom He honours by His grace.'⁹

A similar type of description is found throughout the Holy Granth. Guru Amar Das illustrates the selfless devotion of the devotee towards the Lord through the symbol of a bride:

"As in the house of the groom is the devoted bride who longs for him with utter devotion,
And she prepares many delicacies for her man, sweet and sour and all.
The devotees of God too are dedicated likewise to the Lord's praise and are attuned to His name."¹⁰

Apparently, such expressions depicting woman's feelings, emotions, her devotion, her qualities, her yearning for union and her pangs of separation are frequently found in the Holy Scripture. Thus, by making use of the metaphor of husband-wife relationship, to define the mystic experience of union with Lord, the Sikh Gurus have added a spiritual dimension to the personality of woman. To attain communion with God, one must develop woman-like virtues:

"If one embroiders the skirt (of God's love)
for oneself, then alone is one a true bride:
Yea, if one arranges well one's household and

Tastes not vice, one is then beloved of one's spouse."¹¹

In this way, those human beings are the true brides of God who obey the Will of God and love their Lord, by meditation on the Divine Word.¹² A similar expression is found in the (*shalokas*) verses of Sheikh Farid:

“What words to utter, what merits to gather,
What precious charm to master,
Pray, what wears shall I wear to make my love wholly mine?
Humility is the word, forgiveness the merit;
Sweetness of tongue the precious charm,
Wear these three, O bride, and the Lord is Thine.”¹³

However, the mystical way of living is also defined through the symbols of husband-wife relationship. Guru Nanak's two compositions in Rag Suhi under the caption '*Kuchajji-Suchajji*' are spiritual imagination, portraying the condition of mind of two women, one who enjoys the company of her husband due to her merits, and the other who is deprived of the union due to her demerits. The meritless bride, is, in fact, an ego-centred person who being in illusion, remains away from God and then feeling a strong yearning for union, repents:

“Thou has blest all thy brides with thy
company for all these nights: isn't there a night also for me?”¹⁴

On the other hand, the true devotee, due to his merits remains ever contented and surrenders himself to God's will like a true bride, saying:

“What shall I ask, pray, what shall I utter,
Save that I hunger and thirst for Thee.
Through the Guru's Word I attain unto the Lord,
and for this alone do I pray to my God.”¹⁵

Hence the mundane relation of man and woman is transcended to the level of spirituality to portray woman as an emblem of virtues and, if she behaves in a real sense, she becomes 'beauteous, glorious, brilliant, wise and awake.'¹⁶ The yearning of the individual soul for reunion with the God and agony of her separation are beautifully portrayed through the symbols of marriage. The pangs of separation are vividly expressed through the sentiments of a lonely woman:

“The Lord comes not into my home and I am sighing to death and the lightning
flashes and terrifies me.
My bed is lonely and I am in real pain:
O mother, death is here.
Without my Lord, where is sleep for me?
I can suffer not even my clothes.
Nanak: Blessed is the bride who merges in the being of her Lord.”¹⁷

In a similar tone, the blessing and the joy of communion with God is defined:

“And He, who decked me, loved me too, and meeting Him I enjoyed Him too:
And my bed became glorious when the Lord enjoyed me, and my destiny was
awakened through the Guru's grace.
Nanak: I then enjoy my Lord ever, night and day, for, the Lord, my groom stayeth
for ever.”¹⁸

In the last stanza of *Bara-Maha*, a bride (*jivatma*) is ever *suhagan* (married woman) who perpetually enjoys the presence of her Lord. At the climax of mystical experience, there remains no difference between man and woman. Though they appear to be two bodies yet one single soul or divine light prevails through them:

“The bride and the groom are not those who, though together in body, are in spirit alone.
It is when the two bodies have a single soul
That they become one.”¹⁹

In fact, the difference between man and woman is apparent and at the mystic level, no duality remains:

“Through man’s sperm is the woman born;
through woman is the man; know ye, O wise men,
And be attuned to the Word that yet know
The Unutterable Verity.”²⁰

Apart from the theological equation, the Gurus, through their holy compositions and examples of practical life, have taken steps for the socio-religious equality of women. They condemned vehemently the unethical practices of immolation of the widow with the deceased husband, female infanticide, adultery and wearing of veils (*purdah*).

The Sikh religion commends the life of a householder and argues that a householder who disciplines his sense-desires, begs for contemplation, austerity, and self-control is as pure and chaste as the Ganga’s water.²¹ In fact, the marriage rite is not the union of two bodies only, but it is a spiritual bond of souls. It has been given religious sanctity and is regarded as the relationship of God with the devotee. In *Rag Suhi*, the four stanzas, *Lavan* (circling), which were initially composed by Guru Ram Das to describe a seeker’s union with God, are now sung at the wedding ceremony, as the bride and the groom move in circle four times round the Holy Scripture to solemnize their wedding. These four verses have a double significance. On the one hand, they provide advice to the couple and on the other hand, place their union within the deeper content of union with God.²² The last line of each stanza is as:

1. “Sayeth Nanak: In the first round, the Lord Himself initiates His marriage with thee.
2. Sayeth Nanak: In the second round, the unstruck Melody of the Word ringeth in thy mind.
3. Sayeth Nanak: In the third round, divine detachedness wells up in thy mind.
4. Sayeth Nanak: In the fourth round, thou attainest to thy eternal Lord.”²³

Here again, the union of man and woman in marriage is symbolically elevated to the mystic union of the devotee with the Divine Being.

Stressing on the equality of women, the Sikh religion condemns dowry-system. According to the Sikh code of ethics, a Sikh’s daughter should marry a Sikh and neither a girl nor a boy should be married for financial gain. It is stated in the Holy Scripture that all other dowry of the self-willed is false, egoist and a vain show, and the real dowry is blessings with Lord’s Name.²⁴ The basis of householder’s life

depends upon the strength of marriage partnership. So divorce is discouraged in the Sikh religion, though it is made possible by law.

The emphatic condemnation of adultery is regarded as more than a moral injunction. The Sikh code of conduct states that a Sikh should respect another man's wife as he would his own mother, and another man's daughter as his own daughter. A Sikh theologian, Bhai Gurdas observes:

“Having one woman as wife, he (the Sikh) is a celibate and considers any other's wife his daughter or a sister.”²⁵

Again it is mentioned:

“The Sikh ought to treat beautiful women of others as his mothers, sisters and daughters.”²⁶

Among the first four major prohibitions (*kurahts*), one is adultery, and among the lesser prohibitions (*tankhahs*) is arranging one's son's or daughter's marriage for financial gain.

The Sikh religion explicitly rejects the notion that women could be regarded as the legitimate spoils of war. Guru Nanak was outraged to see the tyranny against women and their humiliation during the invasion of Babar. Here are given a few extracts from the long composition, in Rag Asa²⁷, which portray a pathetic scene:

“They whose lustrous hair shone in plaits and were filled with vermilion in the parting,
Their hair was sheared with the scissors and their mouths were choked with dust.

Yea, they who revelled in their palaces, now find not a seat even in the common.[1]

“A hundred thousand coins were offered to them when they sat and also when stood,

And they chewed nuts and dates, and enjoyed the bridal couch.

(But), today around their necks is the noose, and their necklaces of pearls are broken into bits.” [3]

“The Hindu and Muslim and Rajput women some had their veils torn off, while others were licked by flames.

And they whose loved ones returned, not to their homes,

O how did they pass their nights?”[6]

Again in the Rag Tilang²⁸, it is stated:

“The Muslim women read the Qur'an, and, in misery, pray to their God:

And also pray (in distress) to Him, the Hindu women of all castes.

Yea, the wedding song reeks with blood,

And (not with saffron, but) with blood, are the wedded ones anointed!”

In Sikh history, it is evidently made clear that the Muslim women were not to be treated in this fashion. The mention of forbidding of sexual relation with the Muslim women was the necessity of the time, because some Sikhs (during Mughal invasion) approached the Guru for retaliation due to the savage behaviour of the Muslims.²⁹

The Sikh Gurus stood against the practice of seclusion of women by wearing veil (*purdah*) and encouraged their participation in socio-religious activities.

The widely prevalent custom of *sati*, i.e. voluntary immolation on the funeral pyre of the husband, was strongly checked by Guru Amardas who reinterpreted it in a mystical way that *sati* means devout living rather than stubborn or desperate dying.³⁰ In other words, a *sati* is one who lives contented and embellishes herself with good conduct and serves her Lord with all her heart and cherishes Him ever.³¹ Repudiating the notion of *sati*, Guru Arjun Dev observes that the relation of man and woman is ordained in accordance with the Divine Will, and the Union with her loved Lord is not possible by burning (on his pyre) and by becoming *sati* through the effect of wrong deeds. In fact, *sati* in the true sense is one who has self-control, pious conduct, who submits to God's will and who looks upon the Lord as her spouse.³² Commenting upon this custom, Kabir has also pointed out that *sati* is one who, while living, burns herself and dies to attain perfection amidst the allurements of lust, wrath and maya.³³

Nevertheless, the reference to this custom of *sati* is found in the Holy Scripture to denounce it, with its different interpretations in the spiritual terms. But in the later Sikh codes of conduct, the mention of this custom is rarely found as a custom rejected in Sikhism. The Sikh Gurus permitted the remarriage of widows as a practical step to abolish the custom of *sati*. It is also stated in the moral code that, just as in the case of a widower, permission of remarriage of widows be given.³⁴ Besides, the female infanticide is outrightly rejected in the Sikh religion. The social and moral disapproval of this practice is done in terms of social dissociation and excommunication. It is clearly stated:

'Female infanticide should not be practised and social relation with persons indulging in it should not be maintained.'³⁵

At another place it is mentioned:

'Persons indulging in it are to be excommunicated from Sikhism permanently and those having any social relation with them are termed punishable.'³⁶

Arguably, the Sikh religion makes no distinction between man and woman from the theological perspectives, and to implement this conceptual equation, the Gurus ceaselessly worked and raised their voice through their holy writings. They felt the need for the reconstruction of society on the ontological basis of One God, for which the equal participation of women is of utmost importance.



References

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