

Gender Equality Challenges in Sikhism

Doctrine Vs Reality

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I felt nostalgic when I was assigned the task of writing the editorial for this issue on the above mentioned topic. A trip down the memory lane took me to my undergraduation days and the inter-college debate I attended, organized by the Christian Medical College, Ludhiana, on the topic - 'A Female child is an asset to the family'. This event was presided over by the wellknown scientist and Vice-Chancellor of Punjab Agricultural University, Dr. Khem Singh Gill, with Dr. A.V. Chaudhurie, director of CMC, and a host of other eminent personalities adorning the dais. While speaking 'for' the motion I remember having quoted 'Gurbani' in the context of the prevalent sex-related bigotry: ਸੋ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨ ॥ (Guru Nanak) which clearly reflects the ideology of our illustrious Gurus who have candidly disapproved of gender discrimination.

The Blessed Bride:

As we devotedly muse over the philosophy expounded in the holy Guru Granth Sahib, it dawns on us that 'womanhood' has been eulogised and epitomised as a means to the spiritual goal. In fact, according to Gurmat philosophy, spirituality is a romantic interlude between the 'seeker' and the 'sought'. Physicality (as in gender) of the seeker is transcended truly to achieve attributes of a woman in love - pining, yearning, desiring, for her beloved Lord and Master to be united with her. Indeed, 'womanhood' has been frequently celebrated in the scriptural text. There are innumerable recitations of our Gurus which reflect bYrwg (yearning), 'ipRA kI pRIq' (love for the Beloved Lord), drsn ipAws (thirst to catch a glimpse), Dn-ijr (the lover and the beloved), sohwxix (the bride who has won her lover). Revealing the supreme truth, our Gurus have bestowed true manhood' to the one Omnipotent, omnipresent Power alone - ਕਹਿ ਕਬੀਰ ਮੋਹਿ ਬਿਆਹਿ ਚਲੇ ਹੈ ਪੁਰਖ ਏਕ ਭਗਵਾਨਾ ॥ [SGGS: 482] and, irrespective of physical considerations, enunciated the devotion characterized by womanhood for all mortals - ਮੈ ਕਾਮਣਿ ਮੇਰਾ ਕੰਤੁ ਕਰਤਾਰੁ ॥ [SGGS: 1128]

Matriarchy:

From times immemorial, woman have been placed on a high pedestal. Classical Greece glorified woman as goddess. According to the Puranic thought, God's nomenclature as 'ardhanarishwar' suggested that he too was considered incomplete without a woman. There is also a mention of the existence of matriarchal society in ancient Indian history. Even the Hindu thought propounds and propagates the worship of deities, many of which are goddesses, exemplifying virtues aplenty. Traditions like 'swayamvara' for selection of husbands bespeak of the level of liberty enjoyed by the pristine women. Such glory faded into oblivion with foreign invasions from north-west and the advent of the Mughal dynasty who heralded an era of darkness for women, portrayed in Guru Nanak's agonizing poetry called Babar Vani. Women were traded for slavery and prostitution. Each war for expansion made man more lecherous, greedy, and the women bore the brunt of this. Around this time, the evil systems of veil or purdah, sati, dowry, female infanticide, etc. became prevalent - even promoted strongly

in the daily practice of life, thus pronouncing a marked 'degradation' of women. Paradoxically, the arrival of British colonizers did precious little to reform the social system, except the attempt to stop the practice of *sati*. This despite the fact that the colonial powers were aware of the feminist movement in the West crusading for equal status, with remarks like:

"That little man, he says women can't have as much rights as men 'cause Christ wasn't a woman. Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with Him!"

(excerpted from a speech at Women's Rights Convention in Ohio, 1851).

Rather, when the British rulers quit India in 1947, the partition of the sub-continent witnessed some of the most macabre incidents of violence against humanity as a whole & women in particular.

Equality Under Law:

Post-independence, we've gradually moved into an era where we can talk as well as match up with international trends and take pride in living our lives as global citizens, thanks to the tremendous progress in technology, communication, trade and commerce. Women can now be seen all over the globe juggling successfully between home, hearth and career.

But have we been able to discard the age-old bias against them? A look at statistics would negate the claim that we live in an age free of gender bigotry.

It is ignominious that the state of Punjab, which has the largest Sikh population, happens to top the sharks for illegal 'sex determination tests' and the brutal practice of female foeticide. In defiance of Gurbani edicts, affluent Sikh families want sons to be inheritors of their chattels and assets.

What good are the daughters for them for they will marry and go away with their husbands! So, they nip the 'evil' in the bud and justify their foul act of aborting the female foetus. After the birth of my second daughter, even I was at the receiving end of a lot of 'consolation' from one of the elderly satsangis (member of the congregation) in the gurdwara where I went for paying obeisance! I was made to feel as if something of a tragic dimension had occurred in my life, though my devoted family was extremely thankful to the almighty for this new addition to our fold!

Mother under Duress:

Abandoning the newly-born female child is a matter of daily occurrence in many parts of North India because of the fear of economic outgoings involved in, first, raising up the girl child and thereafter marrying her off with huge amount of dowry. **To counter female infanticide and abandonment of newborn girls, the SGPC, in a recent - if belated - move has quite commendably displayed cradles outside Gurdwaras in Punjab and have thus issued a bold statement against people who abet this crime.** They have vowed to undertake the responsibility of upbringing these 'ditched' souls by arranging for their education and settlement in a suitable vocation. There should not be a second thought on empowering our daughters with education so that they can be financially independent and not be cowed into submission by men who lord over them only because of their gender.

Awakening the Conscience:

The social scientists are also sending another powerful message that daughters are

better caretakers in old age, for 'sons are sons till they get their wives'. We may say, "to each his own", but we continue to read newspaper reports on how the parents are callously turned out of their homes by their sons who cannot look after them! This should ring an awakening bell for the cravers of sons and make them realise the futility of their desires.

The Sikh Ethical Tradition:

As a faith and a community which is ethically bound by moral strictures like -

ਹੁਕਮੈ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਸਭੁ ਕੋ ਬਾਹਰਿ ਹੁਕਮ ਨ ਕੋਇ ॥ [SGGS: 1] we invite upon ourselves great sorrow by tampering with His providence. If God desires to bless us with a girl child, so be it, with a prayer that His gift turns to grow up in the likeness of Bebe Nanaki who possessed the discerning eye to realize that her brother, Nanak was a messenger of God; or like Bibi Amro [the daughter of Guru Angad Dev], who contributed immensely to the growth of Sikhism as a preacher and in-charge of one of the 22 'Manjis' established by Guru Amardas; or like Mata Khivi (the wife of Guru Angad Dev), whose selfless service in the community kitchen immortalised the tradition of serving *langar* in our religion; or like Mata Sundri (the consort of Guru Gobind Singh), whose leadership qualities were a beacon of light for our community for 40 years after the death of our Tenth Guru; or like Mata Gujri, whose bravery and fortitude are unparalleled in history as the first Sikh lady martyr, the wife of Guru Tegh Bahadur (a martyr), the mother of Guru Gobind Singh (a martyr) and the grandmother of the four Sahibzadas.

What a remarkable difference would it bring to our society if our children could imbibe such qualities exhibited by our worthy predecessors! The world would definitely be a better place to live in, then.

