

The Concept of Ideal Woman in Guru Granth Sahib

ਨਿਜ ਭਗਤੀ ਸੀਲਵੰਤੀ ਨਾਰਿ ॥ ਰੂਪਿ ਅਨੂਪ ਪੂਰੀ ਆਚਾਰਿ ॥ [SGGS: 370]

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'Gurbani' is a treasure trove, a repository of virtues, not an account of Utopian ideas, as the present generation naively assumes. It is an inspirational poetry which, holy wise men, with refined spirit and deep intellect, enunciated from time to time while facing grim hazards of medieval India, thus guiding India's masses of every sect, caste and religion.

While paying homage to the 'Shabad Guru' as enshrined in the 'Jaagat Jot'- Guru Granth Sahib, three centuries after the Tenth Guru ceremoniously proclaimed it as the 'Preceptor Eternal', it becomes imperative to deliberate on the various aspects of life on earth incorporated in the Holy Granth, that are socially and spiritually relevant for all times. The 'Shabad Guru' is a beacon of light for souls in search of truth, love and devotion, a life style steeped in spirituality. It speaks in song to the listener (the daily 'Hukamnama' (instruction) being the living proof); is closer than the intake of breath, and bestows perception of 'Anhad' -the continuous reverberation of 'Naam' in the Cosmos.

Divine Attributes: From times immemorial, women in India have been placed on a high pedestal. Classical Greece glorified woman as a goddess. According to Puranic thought, God's nomenclature as 'Ardhanariswar' suggested that he too was 'incomplete without a woman'. There is also a mention of the existence of matriarchal society in the annals of Indian history. Even the Hindu thought propounds and propagates the worship of deities, many of whom are goddesses, exemplifying virtues aplenty. Traditions like 'Swayamvara' for selection of a husband bespeak of the level of liberty enjoyed by the pristine women. Such glory faded into oblivion with foreign invasions from the north-west and the advent of the Mughal dynasty, which heralded an era of darkness for women, portrayed in Guru Nanak's agonising poetry called 'Babar Vani'. Women began to be traded for slavery and prostitution. Each war for expansion made man more lecherous and greedy, thus pronouncing a marked degradation of women.

Medieval India: If the turbulent social and political scenario of the fifteenth century India is taken into account, it may not be presumptuous to state that women were not accorded a place of dignity. The birth of daughters brought gloom, as the society looked down upon them. The orthodox, male-oriented, caste-ist society had confined the areas of womens' activities to the home and hearth alone, thus reducing their status to devitalised serfs! The systems of 'Purdah' (veil), 'Sati' (immolation of self on the dead husband's pyre), child marriage, denial of education and ban of widow remarriage further added to their ignominy. Guru Nanak's advent (1469-1539) in the sub-continent heralded a new social and moral order based on equality, for he envisioned gender non-discrimination as a pre-requisite for progress of the New Age human society, beautifully conveyed through His composition in Asa Raag:

ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵੀਆਹੁ ॥

Within a woman a man is conceived and from a woman he is born.

With a woman he is betrothed and married

ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਦੋਸਤੀ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਰਾਹੁ ॥

With a woman man seeks friendship and the system of procreation keeps going

ਭੰਡੁ ਮੁਆ ਭੰਡੁ ਭਾਲੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਬੰਧਾਨੁ ॥

When one's wife dies, another woman is sought. It is due to the husband- wife relationship that man restrains his passions

ਸੋ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨ ॥

Why call her bad, for she gives birth to kings

ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੀ ਭੰਡੁ ਉਪਜੈ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਝੁ ਨ ਕੋਇ ॥

From a woman, a woman is born. Without women there can be none

ਨਾਨਕ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਹਰਾ ਏਕੋ ਸਚਾ ਸੋਇ ॥

says Nanak that only the one true Lord has no bonds with women

[SGGS:

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(slightly edited translation by S. Manmohan Singh)

By giving examples, Guruji taught that men were entirely dependent on women for companionship, consultation and continuation of the human race. Hence, they must not maltreat or relegate women. **The above quoted lines of Gurbani encompass the essence of the ethics and social behaviour preached by our illustrious Gurus, who have scathingly disapproved of gender discrimination.**

ਕ੍ਰਮ ਕੇ ਪਰਦੇ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਖੋਲੇ ॥

When the Guru's grace enlightens, the darkness of ignorance vanishes

[SGGS:

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Path Breaking: A devoted musing over the philosophy expounded in the holy Guru Granth Sahib interestingly unfolds the path-breaking idea of 'womanhood' being eulogised and epitomized as a means to the achievement of the spiritual end. 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 truly transcended to achieve special 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 Guru which reflect " *Bairag*" (yearning), ' *priya ki preet*' (love for the lord), ' *Darshan pyas*' (thirst to catch a glimpse), ' *Dhan-Pir*' (the lover and the beloved), ' *sohagan*' (the bride who has won union with her lover). Gurbani describes a woman as ' *battees sulakhani*' - one with 32 virtues, ready for union with the Lord.

If we go by the ' *battees sulakhani*' description of a ' *sohagan*' human soul to please the Lord, then women are more naturally bequeathed with such qualities than men. **Women do enjoy an advantage over men in this respect. More so, as the new age of science and technology makes masculine attributes less relevant to the question of gender equality. Revealing the supreme truth, our Gurus have bestowed true manhood on the one Omnipotent, Omnipresent power alone -**

ਕਹਿ ਕਬੀਰ ਮੋਹਿ ਬਿਆਹਿ ਚਲੇ ਹੈ ਪੁਰਖ ਏਕ ਭਗਵਾਨਾ ॥

says Kabir that that he is betrothed to the Lord, the one and the only male [SGGS: 482]

and irrespective of physical considerations, enunciated the devotion characterized by 'womanhood' for all mortals -

ਮੈ ਕਾਮਣਿ ਮੇਰਾ ਕੰਤੁ ਕਰਤਾਰੁ ॥

I am the bride of the Lord [SGGS :1128]

Modern Era: In context of the current Indian social milieu, it can be assumed that this country has gradually moved into an era where it can match up with international trends, and we can take pride in living our lives as global citizens, thanks to the tremendous progress in technology, communication, trade and commerce, Indian women can 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.

Female Foeticide: 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.

Tragically, 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 raising up the girl child and thereafter marrying her off with huge amount of dowry. To counter female foeticide and abandonment of newborn girls, the Shiromoni Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee 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 responsibility of upbringing these ditched souls by arranging for their education and settlement in a suitable vocation. **There should not be 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!**

Institutional Vigilance: The SGPC must also deliberate on allowing women to perform Kirtan at Harmandir Sahib. Gone are the days when women were asked to stay away from this shrine in wake of attacks by Abdali. While discussing this crucial issue with one of the professors of Gurmat Sangeet Department, Punjabi University, Patiala, we concluded that disallowing women to perform Kirtan at Harmandir Sahib may be relevant at a particular point of time in history, but irrelevant for modern times. Why can't we do away with this biased tradition when our Gurus have advocated equality? It would be a shot in the arm for women who want to take up performing Kirtan as a serious profession. Though controversial, yet Muslim women have gone ahead and shown to the world that they can as "maulvis" (clergy) solemnize marriages and do all that male clerics can!

Other Faiths: A lesson in congregational set-ups needs to be taken from the Christian nuns, who have excelled in managing an amazing network of women, whose inputs are channelised for achieving social good. Young motivated Sikh women need to join hands and co-ordinate activities through their registered offices in Gurdwaras that are employment oriented and serve as a support system for the beleaguered souls, mostly women who are victims of domestic vexation. This is the need of the hour as many women are suffering silently and due, to the absence of any recognized Sikh support group, end up feeling disoriented and suicidal. Propitious and affluent Sikh ladies, instead of partying or clubbing, can plan to spearhead such initiatives, quite in the footsteps of Sardarni Suksham Kaur of

Kolkata, who is the brain behind ‘

Lifeline’, a 24 hour counselling helpline.

In the new Millennium, the social scientists are 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 do read newspaper reports on how the parents are callously turned out of their homes by sons, who cannot look after them.. This should ring an awakening bell for the cravers of sons and make them realize the futility of their desires.

Change Within: As a faith and a community which is ethically bound by moral strictures, like -

ਹੁਕਮੈ ਐਦਰਿ ਸਭੁ ਕੋ ਬਾਹਰਿ ਹੁਕਮ ਨ ਕੋਇ ॥

Everything in the universe operates in His will; nothing is over or beyond His will)
[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 the virtuous 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 (consort of Guru Gobind Singh), whose leadership qualities were a beacon of light for our community **for forty 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 Teg Bahadur (a martyr), the mother of Guru Gobind Singh (a martyr) and the grandmother of the brave Sahibzadas!**

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

