

# Is Equal Status for Sikh Woman Mere Rhetoric?

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Whenever someone speaks on the status of women in Sikhism, one is bound to listen to the hymn of Guru Nanak recorded at SGGS: 473, "**So kiou manda aakhiye, jit janmeh rajaan**". Beyond doubt, this saying of Guru Nanak accords a high status to women who were hitherto subjected to subjugation, humiliation and disrespect by men, in general, and the priestly class, in particular.

Guru Nanak, by posing this question, "**so kiou manda aakhiye?**" brings to mind the stark reality of the status of women in society who were being castigated by men for centuries. Be it Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, women have been, by and large, treated as chattel to be used for man's sexual pleasures and convenience of sorts. Indian culture too downgraded women in several ways through countless generations. They have been regarded unworthy of education; confined, as housekeepers, within the four walls of domesticity and restricted to the sole function of procreation. In general the male children even today, surprisingly, receive preferential treatment over their sisters in almost all spheres of life. Women have been subjected to economic, religious, social and cultural repression from birth till death. They were regarded as an impediment to man's nirvana, a source of sin and devoid of intelligence. Woman was regarded not as a human possessing a soul, but as property 'created out of the rib of man.'

In nature, man is as unique as a woman. There can be no equality comparison between them as far as physical strength is concerned. Of course, they are entitled to all those rights and privileges which men have been denying them for ages. This entitlement factor was exactly what our great Gurus pressed into the psyche of Indian mentality and became the torchbearers of reforms for women, which were later adopted by almost all social reformers in the Indian subcontinent.

Guru Ramdas boldly acknowledged, "*The unfathomable beloved resides in every man and woman's heart.*".... [SGGS : 605] With this, the doors to salvation were made freely accessible to both sexes, not only for the sole prerogative of men.

Guru Nanak declined to wear the *janeu* as a mark of caste distinction and also that it discriminated against women, as a symbol that was worn by men only. This action of Guru Nanak was the earliest protest against discrimination of women. Guru Nanak loved his sister as much as he loved his mother. How can someone who loves another so deeply call that person inferior? Thus was recorded by Guru Nanak,

*"In a woman is man conceived, from a woman he is born.*

*With a woman he is betrothed and married;*

*With a woman he contracts friendship.*

*Why call her inferior, the one from whom royalty begotten?*

*Without woman there would be no one at all."*

[SGGS: 473]

Socially woman was given the status of equality by Guru Nanak while Guru Angad went a step further by encouraging his wife, Mata Khivi, to actively participate in the *pangat, langgar*. Do not mistake it as a trivial action on the part of Guru Angad taking into view the subjugation of women during the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the male dominated bastion. The Sikh Gurus went further. They used the woman symbolically in the *bani* to represent the disciple. "*There is one Lord, and all are His brides.*"

[SGGS:933]

Eversince the advent of the *langgar* (community kitchen) by Guru Nanak and its

consolidation and institutionalization by Guru Angad, one comes across women freely participating in it. Due credit goes to Guru Angad, who encouraged Mata Khivi to participate wholeheartedly in the *langgar* preparations as well as in its servings to the *pangat*. This historical fact is undisputed because of the mention of Mata Khivi in one of the *shabads* of the bards, Satta and Balwand incorporated in the Guru Granth Sahib: "*Mata Khivi seho soee jinni goee uthalee.*"

[SGGS: 967]

Most Sikh scholars stress the equality of woman and man in Sikhism. But is it so in reality? Let's look, examine.

Social evils like female foeticide, dowry deaths, honor killings and domestic violence are still rampant in Sikh society. In addition, there remains hush-hush controversy about the performance of *sewa* in Darbar Sahib by women in the *sanctum sanctorum*.

I recall the hullabaloo created in Amritsar, reverberating all over the diaspora, over a Sikh Anand Karaj (wedding) held two years back in Delhi. Under the reported patronage of Veer Bhupinder Singh of USA, the couple forayed into troubled waters, when two *lavaan*, out of the four mandatory ones, were taken by the bride leading the groom! What a novel way it was of proclaiming to the world that Sikhs believe in equality not only rhetorically but also in action. Instead, this was made into a taboo by the Sikh clergy. **How narrow-minded and retrogressive can we be?** Consider this in the light of a recent Islamic marriage held in Bhopal on 12<sup>th</sup> of August this year. What had been the domain of men, acting as the *gawah* (witness) to the bride's 'yes' to the proposal by the bridegroom, was performed by a Muslim woman, thus breaking the centuries - old tradition. The Islamic scholars clarified it as 'nothing un-Islamic'. Couldn't the Sikh scholars have come forward in support of the daring Sikh couple?

When a baby boy is born to Sikh parents, one observes an exuberant mood in all the family members, with extended celebrations and distribution of gifts. Does the same fever of festivity prevail when a baby girl is born? Rarely! Does this portray equality in our actions towards women-folk?

When it comes to education of the children, the boy is given preference and choice over the girl child to pursue studies. Dowry is another social menace which is eroding the self-esteem and dignity of the Sikh woman. It is quite interesting to note that Guru Ramdas has touched this evil in his hymns: "*O my Lord, give me thy name as my wedding gift and dowry*" and "*Any other dowry offered is a valueless display of false pride and of no earthly use*". [SGGS: 78-79]

The less said, the better about female foeticide. The maximum number of sex determination clinics (though declared illegal) flourish, runs amok in the northern hinterland, with Punjab having the lowest sex ratio of females in India. This scenario is in total breach of the *hukumnamah* of Guru Gobind Singh which demands social boycott of those indulging in female infanticide.

Equality, if it has to settle into the Sikh mindset must be total. It is a three- pronged step. The first is equality, in thought. Until our mind is willing to accept the fact of equality, it will be difficult to accord the status of equality to women in reality. It would be superficial and hypocritical.

Next comes admitting equality in our mindset. Once the mind has accepted the equality status, it should be expressed forth. Once the thought and speech are in harmony, the actualization of the equality status will be observed through our actions. It is our actions and attitude towards women which will in fact reveal our stance on equality status accorded to women.

Guru Amardas condemned the social evils of *sati* and *purdah* of Hindus and Muslims, respectively, which downgraded women. He also encouraged widow marriages. He declared that in the House of God both were equal and both had equal rights of worship and prayer. Guru Amardas opened the future avenues for women to participate in missionary work by appointing 52 women out of the 146 and appointing four women *manjis* out of the 22 working for the spread of Guru Nanak's philosophy.

Unfortunately, what one observes today is the near absence of women *granthis*, *kirtanias*, *kathavachaks* in Gurdwaras. If Sikh women could have dared to work as missionaries almost 440 years back, then what factors are deterring them from venturing now? Even in committees of Sikh organizations in India one hardly comes across female members.

A recent departure from the norm was the creation of 'Eko Pasara', in Kolkata, a social and relief organization, primarily working for the cause of education, run and managed by Sikhs two months ago, which comprise five lady members, four of them Sikhs out of a total strength of ten. Even the recently-formed executive committee of The Sikh Cultural Centre, (publishers of the Sikh Review) now boasts of three prominent ladies of Kolkata. Husbands, fathers, brothers, sons and grandfathers should rather encourage the ladies of their houses, having inclinations towards social, cultural and religious work, to propose their names as members for better utilization of human resources. In sharp contrast, was the unusual 'coup' in the Guru Singh Sabha, Kolkata, managing two strategically located Gurdwaras, wherein the newly nominated Committee was formed without a single woman as a member! After 300 years of the creation of the Khalsa fraternity, and 60 years of independence of India, one has seen only one woman president of the S.G.P.C. who was, ironically, alleged to be a party to the honor killing of her daughter. The incident highlights the generation after generation of the attitude of treating women as property, and not as humans possessing feelings, emotions and sentiments. Having being treated as such down the centuries, even the woman has accepted as natural the fact of the woman being inferior to man. **The woman of today has to break free of this mental bondage and assert her rights of dignity and self-esteem.**

Ideally, every Sikh organization, whether a social or religious outfit, should have a 50% reservation for women. This will speak volumes of the equality status of women in Sikhism. An added advantage to this could be that the unseemly fights that almost all Gurdwara members indulge in will become history with some sobriety and dignity arising in their meetings, now often turning violent.

On the economic front women have come a long way by adopting careers and coming out of the syndrome of housekeepers, but still a lot needs to be done in the shape of a thorough workout with the male progeny, who have to become conscious of the fact that women also do have aspirations and creativity which need to be tapped for harmonious and joyful living. For this achievement, education can be the only solution, and women should be motivated to pursue higher studies.

**The need of the hour is to emerge from the web of male dominance and exercise the privileges given to women by our Gurus.** Women have been taken for granted, and it is high time to be vocal about their due status and transform them to the conscious disciples of the Gurus. After all, it is the woman who, as a mother, a sister, a wife or a grandmother, shall guide the future generations on the path of spirituality. **Remember that equality tolerates no discrimination.**

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