

**Creation of an Impression: The Position of Women in  
Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries  
Punjab and the Sikh Gurus**

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## CERTIFICATE

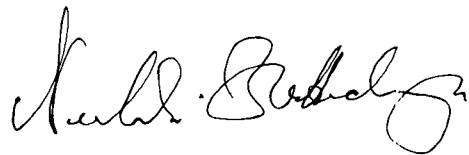
This is to certify that the thesis entitled "**Creation of an Impression: The Position of Women in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries Punjab and the Sikh Gurus**", submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Medieval Indian History, is the original work of research carried out by Pratibha in the Centre for Historical Studies, University of Delhi under my supervision.

To the best of my knowledge, no part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree in any University. I am satisfied that this thesis is worthy of consideration for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



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## INTRODUCTION

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*Religion is experienced as "A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in Men...."*

Clifford Geertz, Religion as a Cultural System, ed. Michael Banton, An Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion, London, 1966, p. 4

*"Among the foremost of institutions which conserves society, encoding stabilising world views and values and transmitting these from generation to generation.....Religion has been an instrument of liberation for women. But religion has just as often become an instrument of women's social oppression."*

Falk and Gross, Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non Western Cultures, XV, XXI

The above lines are a gist of the complex relationship between the religion and the socio-cultural aspects. Its role is still more significant in the context of its over arching influence on the social values, norms and ethos of the time especially in relation to women.

Joan Wallach Scott's well known paper argues for a shift from "Women's History" to 'History of Gender'. According to her, the category of gender not only illuminates the unequal relations of power between males and females, but helps one understand that the unequal male-female relations are extended via metaphors to varied areas of social life so as to signify unequal relations of power in general. One must admit that the gender is an on-going fluid process which is always evolving and transforming. Joan Wallach Scott further insists that a more radical feminist epistemology is necessary in the study of history. She advocates a post-structuralist approach, one that can address epistemology and the status of knowledge and can link knowledge and power. In her own words "the emphasis on 'how' suggests a study of processes, not of origins, of multiple rather than single causes, of rhetoric rather than ideology or consciousness. It does not abandon attention to

structures and institutions, but it does insist that we need to understand what these organizations mean in order to understand how they work.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, it is a well-accepted conceptual assumption that gender relations cannot be studied in isolation. The issue of gender relations has to be looked at in the context of structures and processes in which such relations are embedded. It has been argued that the results of an exclusive focus on women will be disastrous – the male bias of the past will be replaced by a female bias. Can we then really comprehend the social reality? What is really advocated, therefore, is bifocal analysis. Based on the same premise, in the last few decades, women’s studies in religion have been undertaken extensively. The scholarship is distinguished from other approaches to the study of religion by its fundamental concern for gender as its critical variable in religion. Taking “Gender” as a primary category of analysis, women studies in religion examine the function of gender in the symbolization of religious traditions- the institutionalization of roles in religious communities and the dynamics of the interaction between religious systems of belief and the personal, social and cultural condition of women with gender as the primary analytical category. Feminist scholars can pursue one of their main purposes, which is the recovery of women’s distinctive historical and contemporary experiences on the basis of the recovered experience and perspectives of women. Women’s studies offer critics of religion and cultural traditions while at the same time, making the experience and the perspectives of women the starting point for the feminist re-interpretation and reconstruction of both religion and culture.

The close connection between norms is well evinced by our values and the religion and the social behaviour. Institutionalised religion has been at the forefront of conserving and stabilizing societal values and world views and transplanting them from generation to generation. The religious ideology very often plays a crucial role in legitimizing and sustaining the subordination of women. It is in context of this close connection between the religion and the social norm that I decided to study the impact of the Sikh Gurus on the issues concerning women. In sharp contrast to the general social perception and

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<sup>1</sup> J.W. Scott, *Gender and Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 4.

ethos of the time Sikhism advocated an egalitarian society. For Guru Nanak, men and women were equal not only before God, but also before one-another. Women are considered as an integral part of society who must not be excluded by a ritual or doctrinal consideration. Thus, I was inclined to study as to what were the ideals of the gender for the Sikh Gurus? How were these ideals constructed? How did these ideals affect the evolution of the Sikh *Panth*? Was there a difference in perception of women of Guru Nanak and the subsequent nine Sikh Gurus or at a more abstract level was there a difference even at the level of the focuses and emphasis in their teachings. What kind of impact could they make on the social milieu at large? How were these ideals furthered?

The study of the impact of the Sikh Gurus on the dominant patriarchal ideology of the Punjab of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could not be oblivious to the fact that the region of Punjab has been an unusually fluid land, not just geographically but socially and culturally. The boundaries of the present day Indian Punjab for example is just little less than 15% of the total geographical area of the pre-partition colonial Punjab. The boundaries have been redrawn several times over the last few centuries. Socially and culturally too, Punjab has seen many changes in its profile. In course of the study, the myth of a homogenous region i.e. Punjab and the community was clearly demolished. In case of Punjab, the Hindus and the Muslims coexisted and shared a common culture. In the early decades of the sixteenth century, Sikhism in its nascent stage, had not at all evolved as a distinct community and there was no collective urge either on the part of the Sikh Gurus or their followers to evolve a distinct identity of their own. In context of Punjab, multi culturalism is not just a statement of fact, it is also a value. It pictures a society which is characterized not by multiple cultural solitudes or endemic cultural strife but by communities which are not only living together but also sharing a common culture. The society of Punjab, at that point of time, is marked by the fusion of traditions where Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs (if we may use the term) share the aspirations of their lives, the social values and ethos and their social expressions in the form of rituals and rites performed by the society.

When the historians and political analyst look back at the period they need to evaluate the socio-cultural, political and economic significance of events during that period. The cumulative effects of these events cannot be immediately gauged. But there appear to be changes that are both positive and negative. It becomes still more significant as the past has an uneasy relation with the modern Indian woman. Drawing upon the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's theories "Identity is used in the sense of a persons experience of self-sameness and *continuity* in time and space which is contingent on its continued recognition and reinforcement by his or her significant social group."<sup>1</sup>

In field of gender studies it is difficult to account for women's identities as to how they are formed, if they happen to have an identity and what they signify in such a distant past. It is a very apparent limitation for this study as the period under review is sixteenth and seventeenth centuries where it was beyond, anyone's imagination that women can have an identity of her own. However, it has been well-recognised – the value of understanding the processes by which women become the sites for the *construction* of group identities. In this context, the social milieu of the period provide rich material for instance the factors behind the social institution of marriage, child-marriage, relationship between marriage and caste, underlying logistic of ritual-purity behind varied forms of widow-remarriage – '*Karewa*' and '*Chadar Pauna*' or still prevalent, if not predominant, the ideology of domesticity and seclusion.

This work attempts to tap the different and often contentious issues concerning women. The gender negotiations that take place between men and women of the household. How does the patriarchal forces (the society at large) tries to resolve them. Did the Sikh Gurus have any impact on the dominant patriarch ideologies. Could they succeed in formulating or even modifying the formulations of the dominant ideological current and evolve a new social ethos. With this goal, the Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib;

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<sup>1</sup> Sudhir Kakar, The Psychological Origins, Seminar, No. 437

hagiographic sources known as *Janamsakhis*; the contemporary or near contemporary sources ranging from *Prachin Panth Parkash*, to more propitiatory like *Gubilas Patshahi Chhevin*; *Gubilas Patshahi Dasvin* to works focusing on genealogy like *Banswalinamah* to *Sau Sakhi* and *Dasam Granth* to name a few, have been analyzed from a gender perspective to come to an understanding of the discourse surrounding gender during this initial phase of the formation of the Sikh tradition. Due attention has been paid to more popular literary or folk lore tradition from *Hir Ranjah* of Waaris Shah to *Hir* of Peelu and Damodar to *Kaafiyas* of Shah Hussain. The aim is to come to an understanding of gender themes with in the earliest sources, both historical and scriptural.

## **Why Punjab??**

The foremost reason for choosing the Punjab region was being a Punjabi myself. And then inherited knowledge of inherent equality between men and women advocated by the Sikh faith getting the hard blows of the present day realities made me look for paradoxes; if any in the past. Apart from the familiarity with the culture and traditions of the land; on a closer academic scrutiny of the region it appeared to interest me as geographically and geopolitically, Punjab occupies an area of North India which had to bear the brunt of the frontal challenge. In Muhammad Akbar's words "The Punjab was overwhelmed by the intermittent waves of the immigration of hordes of the Aryans, the Scythians, the Greeks, the Arabs, the Turks, the Afghans, the Persians and the Mughals. These groups appearing at intervals and advancing into the peninsula left something to be assimilated by the people already in the province."<sup>1</sup>

In sum, ethnically and culturally Punjab has been home to the people of many ethnic types and cultures, which constantly interacted and influenced each other. Moreover, the region of Punjab has been a hub of *Bhakti* ideology where Guru Nanak was icon of *Bhakti* ideology. In spite of

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<sup>1</sup> Mohammad Akbar, *The Punjab under the Mughals*, Delhi: 1974, p.29.



great similarity in the teachings of Kabir, Dadu Dayal, Guru Nanak on issues like caste system, idol worship, perfunctory rituals et al, when I compared Guru Nanak's attitude towards women and gender in general, there appears to be a subtle break in the similarities between Kabir and Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak's attitude towards women appeared to be in great contrast to the existing social milieu and strands of ideology. For yogis, whose primary objective was the vanquishing of desire, particularly sexual desire, women were great obstacles to be conquered. Kabir viewed women as "seductive" beings, who tempted men away from their spiritual inclinations. Kabir asked men to shun the company of women as "*Kabira tin ki Kya Gat Jo Nit Naari ke Sang*". Sant Tulsidas, the revered hindi poet, the author of *Ram Charit Manas* placed women at par with shudras and animals when he said "*Dhol Gawar Shudra Pashu Naari teeno taran ke adhikaari*". Guru Nanak, on the other hand, criticized the yogis for their solitary ascetic, spiritual search and furthered the ideal of the house holder. The Guru saw the marriage as a sacred institution, spiritual bond between two equal partners, not merely a physical union between two individuals. Guru Nanak propounded that by "living within the family life, one attains salvation".<sup>1</sup> A strict moral code of conduct was prescribed for men and women in Sikhism, where the duties of both husband and wives were defined.

This kind of contrast, in the then general social milieu and Guru Nanak's perceptions on this aspect made me curious as to what extent this contrast might have affected the dominant ideologies of patriarchy. Did it actually manage to formulate a new social ethos on gender relations or could just modify to a limited extent only.

## **Fusion of Traditions**

Interestingly, Punjab of this period had been a home to Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. In fact, Muslims out numbered Hindus and Sikhs put together (J. S.

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<sup>1</sup> G.S. Talib, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, English Translation 4 Vols. Punjab University, Patials, 1990. Hereafter referred to as AG. p 661

Grewal). There is a complex interplay between religion and social change. Religious traditions have been important players in the transformation of societies and have always been of utmost importance in determining the status of women, since such factors exert powerful influence on the thought, culture, and behaviors of the people. This analysis becomes even more complex because in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Sikhs had neither emerged as a distinct community nor there was any collective urge with in the community to distinguish themselves from the pre-dominant Hindu culture, traditions, rituals or religion at large. Consequently, the two communities shared inter-cutting, intersecting relations among themselves. In other words, the fortunes of Sikh women have been inextricably linked with that of Hindu women. In fact, to be more factually correct, Sikhism was itself in an evolutionary stage with its changing ideological focuses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In its course of evolution, a whole lot of dissenting or deviant sects were emerging such as *sangat shahi*, *udasis*, *Kukas*, *Namdharis* etc. The study is further complicated by the fact that initially there were at least eleven known traditions so to presume any kind of homogeneity with in Sikhism would be inappropriate. In fact, at that point of time, the culture of Hindus and Sikhs was some what co-terminus, thus it would be improper to presume them as two communities having their distinct tradition, values and culture. Harjot Oberoi puts it very succinctly when he writes "Sikh notions of time, space, corporeality, holiness, kinship, societal distinctions, purity, pollution, and commensality were hardly different from those of the Hindus. Also the two shared, the same territory, language, rites of passage, dietary taboos, festivals, rituals and key theological concepts. The concept of personhood with in the two traditions and their solutions for existential problems were quiet alike."<sup>1</sup> This kind of common culture is further attested by the heterodox textuality of the contributors of the Guru Granth Sahib combining elements from Muslim, Sufi, Hindu and *Bhakti* traditions. In the similar sprit the inclusion of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, icons

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<sup>1</sup> Harjot Oberoi, Ph.D. Dissertation, Canberra, Australia, Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1987 as quoted in Harjot Oberoi 1988 "From Ritual to Counter Ritual..." J.T.O. Connell, M. Israel and W.G. Oxtoby (eds) *Sikh History and Religion in the 28<sup>th</sup> Century* Toronto; Centre for South Asian Studies University of Toronto, P. 142.

in the premises of Golden Temple till very late is another reflection of common culture.

This fusion of tradition did not leave the Muslim component of population untouched. Kinsley puts it very appropriately when he says "Religion was primarily a localized affair, often a matter of individual conduct and individual salvation. For much of their history, the people of the sub-continent went of their rituals, pilgrimages and acts of religious piety without objectifying religion into an exclusive entity. Religious traditions were based on local traditions and not on pan- regional organization of communities. Islam may have been the only exception to this, but then, Indian Islam, heavily coloured by Sufism, is of a radically different genre from its counterpart elsewhere."<sup>1</sup>

This holds true in the context of Punjab as the influence and presence of Sufi Shrines is more than obvious in the region. Inclusion of poetry of Baba Farid in Guru Granth Sahib and the fact that one of the four persons who laid the foundation stone of Golden Temple was esteemed Miyan Mir cannot be ignored. Similarly, the extensively remarkable influence of Sufi Poets like Warris Shah, Shah Hussain, Bulleh Shah and a whole lot of them on popular culture of Punjab is more than evident. The kind of imprint their works left on the culture of the land is still apparent after centuries. Or for instance a Muslim girl named "*Kaula*" being influenced by *gurubani* accompanied Guru Hargobind and stayed in his hometown for the rest of her life. This fusion of tradition to such a great extent makes the analysis still more complex.

## **Literature Review: Concerns and Limitations**

An attempt has been made to make a nuanced study from gender perspective of different genres of literature ranging from historical to hagiographical and also the popular literature and folk songs. Yet one has to admit the limitation posed by the sources. First of all as pointed out by S. Nurul Hasan the destiny of the Punjab being so closely linked with the rest of the country, there is no

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<sup>1</sup> David Kinsley, Hindu Goddesses. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 197-211, 1986).

worth while medieval history or chronicle dealing exclusively with the region.<sup>1</sup> The historical data regarding the Punjab has therefore to be culled from the general medieval chronicles. Apart from the difficulty of collecting evidence which is widely scattered, bits of pieces of information have to be collected and inferences drawn. In context of the gender studies, the problem gets magnified many times. It's like studying the position of women from the men's lenses. Secondly, the available sources are hagiographic in nature, associating legends and miracles with the Gurus. Or at best, they deal with battles, administrative concerns, economic transactions, struggle with the Mughals and genealogies, in which women had little place as wives and mothers of the Gurus. Extraordinary women do find their way into oral traditions but here one has to be very conscious of not falling into the trap of treating exceptions as common reality. These exceptional women can not be held up as examples of normal larger reality by which to measure the gender egalitarian ethos in any society. It reminds one of Simon Digby's opinion that every source has a discursiveness of its own kind. While examining and exploring about society, we can not afford to ignore either the sphere of ideas, or the socio- economic and political processes that influenced people at a specific time. Gurevich, a well known Soviet scholar of modern European history has rightly observed, that historical research is a dialogue between two cultural backgrounds .i.e. between the culture of the research epoch and that of the researcher himself.<sup>2</sup> It becomes still more critical in context of medieval society and thus, should be handled with care.

It must also be underlined that, given the fact that women have not generally written their own histories historical accounts are written through the lens of the male gender. What was and is important to men thus becomes the thrust of the sources and focus of historical analysis. Man a social instrument which is responsible, if not solely then quite substantially for the fate of women. Most of the textual sources are either silent on women or at best prescriptive with an inherent gender- bias. In other words, they represent the perspectives of

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<sup>1</sup> S. Nurul Hasan, *Medieval Punjab in Punjab Past and Present, Essays in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh*, ed. Harbans Singh, N Gerald Barrier, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1976, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> A. Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, Moscow, 1984, p.8

male members belonging to the upper echelons of the society. What ever the source material is handed down to us from the historical past was considered worthy of being preserved by men. In this entire process, may be the treasures of knowledge might have been lost. There are rare instances of women writers in Sikh history. When they do appear their contributions have often been interpreted as mere guises for the men who were the “real” voices of history. For instance, the *hukamnamas* by Mata Gujri, wife of Guru Teg Bahadur, at a critical juncture of Sikh history which are regarded as binding on the whole Sikh community, yet credit is given to her own brother Kirpal Singh. These *hukamnamas* are not, infact, unanimously accepted as written by Mata Gujri. A set of serious scholars like Ganda Singh believe that they were written by Mata Nanki, wife of Guru Teg Bahadur. However, the net result is that the value attached to a particular source suffers a setback putting a question mark on its reliability.

The Guru Histories are by and large, silent about the wives of the Gurus. From Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh, the wives have been treated as part of the historical background not as individual in themselves.... Needless to say, the overwhelming impression we receive from the reading the text of Sikh history is that women do not have a history. From the silences surrounding the women of history their lives and experiences can be perceived only as inconsequential. Yet, we know that besides the history composed by men, there exists a “her story”. Many aspects of this “her story” has been wiped out so that it is quite difficult to reconstruct its basic elements.

Another major limitation is that what ever little information is furnished by the sources, it is more often than not about the upper echelons of the society. We can easily presume that as wives, sisters or daughters of the Gurus’ or Rajas’, they certainly did not lead lives that were very much akin to their common contemporary sisters. In many ways, then they conjure up false images as to the roles and status of women in society. Adding up to our challenges in words of Clarence McMullen is the gap between the normative and operative belief although his analysis is placed in context of contemporary society but it holds still more true for any medieval society. McMullen defines as “Normative beliefs and practices are those which are officially stated and prescribed or

proscribed by a recognized religious authority, which can be a person, organization or an official statement. Operative beliefs and practices, on the other hand, are those actually held by the people.”

One tends to tap information from the oral tradition with a twin intention of getting a closer glimpse of the common masses, their concerns and aspirations and secondly to overcome the lacunae, at least to an extent of the sources emanating from upper echelons of the society. But this exercise also has inherent limitations of its kind. The written texts assembled from oral traditions are part of a collective oeuvre. Certain parts must have been re-accentuated, certain potentials from the images actualized, others allowed to fade over time. In this sense, the works are inscribed in an extended rather than a discrete moment of production. They represent intentions, beliefs, desires which stretch beyond the individual and thus, need to be used with caution when designated as a definable mode of social perception.

To expect homogeneity in terms of culture, values, rituals, rites, taboos in any society are not only inappropriate but is in fact threatening the very nature of human society. The co-existence of multiplicity of traditions becomes still more apparent in context of Punjab, where the three communities, the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs not only co-existed but to a great extent shared the culture. Thus, one has to be consciously alert of the attempt of the sources to flatten out the diversity. Diversity, especially in context of the Indian sub continent is a pre-eminent reality. This brings us to important aspects of social institutions- the caste system and the class which play a pivotal role in the day to day functioning of the social relations. The caste system, in context of medieval India, is inextricably linked to gender relations. In fact, the diversity of cultural practices amongst different castes becomes most apparent in case of gender relations, for instance the marriage-forms or even the marriage rituals.

In sum, this entire question of position of women in Punjab needs to be placed in the context of caste, class and community and at the same time the fusion of traditions needs to be acknowledged. To see “Hindus”, “Sikhs” or “Muslims” as water tight social compartments would be misleading. We also need to recognize the basic fact that any human society can not be homogeneous and

there is need to place social and economic institutions in their ecological and physical setting. Any attempt to flatten out the diversity by the primary sources or to “idealize” by the successive writings goes against the basic reality of any human society that is - heterogeneity and multiplicity of cultural practices coexisting with each other. To use Neeta Kumar’s words we have to look for “fault-lines” in our sources to understand the complexities, the struggles and turmoil of the age.

It would be appropriate if we make a brief survey of different genres of literature and the kind of information they provide.

## **Punjabi Sources**

**Guru Granth Sahib** is the first and most important original and contemporary source for the lives of the first five Gurus and of the ninth Guru Teg Bahadur. Several incidents in their lives are reflected in their compositions which are incorporated into the sacred volume. These compositions also reflect the social, religious and political atmosphere of those days and the views of the Gurus regarding the prevailing social customs, religious rites and political conditions in the country. The contents of the Guru Granth Sahib also called Adi Granth contains (5894 hymns) compositions of the first five Gurus, the ninth guru, fifteen Bhagats (Jai Dev, Nam Dev, Trilochan, Parmanand, Sadna, Ramanand, Beni, Dhanna, Pipa, Sain, Kabir, Ravidas, Farid, Surday, Bhikhan) and eleven Bhattas (Mathra, Jalap, Harbans, Talya, Salya, Bhai, Kulh, Sahar, Nal, Kirat, Gayand, Sadrang). Among the 922 hymns of the Bhagats, the highest number of hymns vis-à-vis 541 is composed by Kabir.

The compositions of the Gurus are not mere hymns addressed to God since they took a lively interest in the secular welfare of the people, they are outpourings of the heart prompted either by certain historical incidents or by discussion with the masters of other religions, or in the nature of advice or admonition to disciples and other enquirers regarding the conduct of their lives.

Nothing excels the description of Guru Nanak on the condition of the people on the occasion of the sack of Saidpur (Eminabad) during the third Indian

expedition of Babar in 1520-21. His revolt against established formalism and his protest against people giving up their language and dress just to please the ruling class, are reflected in the *Asa di Var*. The *Japji* and other hymns embody his views on Godhead, the relationship between the One Formless Self-existent Creator and His creation, man, and the conduct of human life in this world.

Similarly, the Shabdas of the other Gurus and Bhaktas set forth their views on social and religious subjects, refer to the reforms introduced by them, and trace the gradual growth of the Sikh thought and the evolution of Sikh Sangats into a distinct community.

The Ramkali Ki Var of Satta and Balwand is more historical than religious in nature and is a very important contemporary document for students of Sikh history.

The hymns of Guru Amar Das in the Wadhans Ki Var point to the jealousy of the anchorite (Tapa) of Khadur towards Guru Angad. The fourth Guru Ramdas refers in the *Gauri Ki Var*, to the avarice of a *Tapa* of *Goindwal* on the completion of *bauli* and to the complaint to *Khatri*s of that place against Guru Amar Das, which of course was dismissed as unfounded. In the *Tukhari Chhant*, he describes the visit of Guru Amar Das to *Kurukshetra* and *Haridwar*.

The *Sadd* of *Sundar* is an eye witness account of the death of third Guru. It explains the Sikh attitude towards death and points out the futility of the then prevailing ceremonies. The jealousy exhibited by Prithi Chand on the nomination of his younger brother, Arjun to the *gaddi* of Guruship is hinted at and condemned in *Rag Suhi* and the *Gauri Ki Var*. The admonition of their father, Guru Ramdas, addressed to the quarrelsome son, is given in the *Sarang Rag*.

In the *Majh Rag* are to be found the three letters of Guru Arjun addressed to his father from Lahore and a complimentary note composed on his return to Amritsar in 1581, which formed the part of the test placed before him to prove his suitability to the *Gaddi*.



Guru Arjun sings in the *Suhi Chhant* of the construction and completion of *Hari Mandir* and in the *Sorath Rag*, he describes the advantages of the *sarovar* or the tank of Ramdas. There are about a dozen hymns in the *Bilawal*, *Asagaund*, *Sorath- Gauri*, *Deva-Gandhari* and *Bhairo Rags*, referring to the birth and illness of Guru Har Gobind and to the murderous designs against his lives by the agents of Prithia.

The Shlokas of Guru Teg Bahadur, composed during his confinement at Delhi and incorporated in the *Guru Granth Sahib* by Guru Gobind Singh clearly indicate his detached view regarding impending death. The 54th Shloka in this composition is believed to be a courageous reply of Guru Gobind Singh at the age of nine to his father's shloka [53], sent to him at Makhawal to test the fitness of his successor.<sup>1</sup>

The inclusion of Bhagat Bani in the *Adi Granth* illuminates the process of scriptural adaptation in the Sikh tradition. The process of the integration of the Bhagat Bani in the Sikh scripture was based on the recognition of two major points. First, there was harmonization in it with the Gurus' thoughts in broad outlines. Second, its differences with the Gurus' thoughts at essential points were highlighted to demonstrate the distinctive Sikh viewpoints. These additional reflections of the Gurus were crucial for shaping the emerging Sikh identity.<sup>2</sup>

There is an ongoing debate about the *Adi Granth* as Guru: and the controversy<sup>3</sup> related to its translation, which is well represented by two contrasting view points. The intent here is just to touch upon the sharp contrast in the viewpoints and perceptions about *Guru Granth Sahib* which is well represented by the following quotes.

"The Word enshrined in the holy book was always revered by the [Sikh] Gurus as well as by their disciples as of Divine origin. The Guru was the revealer of

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<sup>1</sup> Ganda Singh, *The Major sources of early Sikh History*, in *History and Ideology: The Khalsa over 300 years*. Ed J.S.Grewal and Indu Banga, Indian History Congress, India :Tulika, 1999,p.11

<sup>2</sup> Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib, Canon Meaning and Authority*, Oxford University Press, India: 2000

<sup>3</sup> Verne A. Dusenbery, *Word as Guru: Sikh Scripture and its Translation Controversy*", *History of Religions*, Vol 31 No 4

the Word. One day, the Word was to take the place of the Guru. The line of personal Gurus could not have continued for ever. The inevitable came to pass when Guru Gobind Singh declared the Guru Granth Sahib to be his successor. It was only through the Word that the Guruship could be made everlasting.”<sup>1</sup>

Since the day of Guru Granth Sahib being installed in Harimandir, on August 3rd 1603, the holy text has been the centre of Sikh life. Ceremonies relating to birth, initiation, marriage and death take place in the sound and sight of it. The community's ideals, institutions, and rituals derive their meaning from the Guru Granth. The other viewpoint, well represented by scholars like McLeod who says that the historian who seeks to it as a source for a wider knowledge of the culture of the period must work hard for a limited return.<sup>2</sup>

The second scripture is the “**Dasam Granth**”, a substantial collection associated with Guru Gobind Singh. Guru Gobind Singh was a prolific writer and went through the whole epic literature of the Hindus. The following are believed to be his important works:

- *Jaap Sahib*;
- *Akal Ustat*;
- *Bachittar Natak*;
- *Chandi Chrittar*;
- *Chaubis Avtar*;
- *Swayyas*;
- *Zafar Namah* (Persian)

All the above works constituted the “*Dasam Granth*”. Although, it too bears the title of the Guru, most of it is seldom read. This can be explained partly by the difficult nature of its language and partly by the considerable attention which it devotes to tales from Hindu tradition. The later feature has produced chronic controversy and largely accounts for the ambivalent attitude towards the

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<sup>1</sup> Harbans Singh, 'Guru Granth Sahib' Guru Eternal for the Sikhs, Sikh Courier 12, number 14(summer 1986); 8.

<sup>2</sup> W.H. McLeod, The Evolution of the Sikh Community, OUP, Delhi: 1975, p.20

"*Dasam Granth*" which still prevails with in the *panth*.<sup>1</sup> There are, however passages, from it which command the highest respect and some of these are prominently incorporated in the daily devotional prayers of the *panth*. All these works are attributed to Guru Gobind Singh. But the most interesting and important source which requires a little detailed discussion is *Charitro Pakhyan* (Vol. IV of *Dasam Granth*) specially in context of a study on women.

*Charitro Pakhyan* (Tales of Deceit), also known as *Triya Charitra*, essentially is a collection of 404 tales about the wiles of women. *Charitro Pakhyan* covering 7555 verses of *Charit Kavya* is the largest composition in the *Dasam Granth*. The 404 tales may be divided into categories such as tales of bravery, devotion, or intelligence of women, (78), of the deceitfulness and unscrupulousness of women, (269), of the deceitfulness of men (26). The sources of the *Charitro Pakhyan* are no fewer than eight ranging from The *Mahabharat*, The *Ramayan* and the *Purans*. The tales from *Panchtantra* and *Hitopadesh* are included side by side with a few selected from Persian books like *Bagho Bahar* and *Chahar Darvesh*. The inexhaustible treasure of folk-lore has been used effectively in this compilation by Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>2</sup> It appears that the framework is based on the contemporary incidents, anecdotes or scandals which might be floating about the folk-lore. It is, therefore, presumed that the author reflects the life and the sentiments of his own days. In this regard, Dharam Pal Ashta observes "In most of the tales, however, the themes are love, sex debauchery, violence, crime or poison. They are extremely racy and frankly licentious."<sup>3</sup> In the sexual intrigues women are often the seducers. Such stories may not be a pleasant reading but they do imply lessons of warning to the reader against feminine wiles. Most of them belong to the upper classes among whom the women lead, an easy and idle life, for the most part, and few being ill-matched or over sexed take to sex intrigues to break the monotony of their dull life. The royal harems appear to be the center of such intrigues which spring from sexual rivalries and jealousies. The mysteries of harem life and the scandals that the slaves

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984, p.2

<sup>2</sup> Dharam Pal Ashta, *Poetry of the Dasam Granth*, 1959, p.151

<sup>3</sup> Ashta, *ibid*, p. 151-153

whispered about the persons like Manucci, collected and treasured, might have exercised some influence on the commoners and affected their morality adversely.<sup>1</sup> As Dharam Pal Ashta notes, while indirectly they instruct men in good moral behaviour, they warn the unwary against womanly enticements. However, the collection also contains a dozen tales in which women play no part at all, as well tales of heroic and honorable women. There are still others which relate to men's wives against women who are the victims of men's high-handedness. Although, women are portrayed as victims also but inherently as powerful over men; yet, most of the themes are of love, sexual intrigue and violence. In the depiction of sexual debauchery, women are often the seducers. One verse sums up their intrigues: "There is no end to the fancies of these women. Even the Creator after having created them repented. Even He who has created the whole universe accepted defeat, after he had probed into the secrets of women". It is suggested that there is some practical wisdom in these tales. They appear to illustrate perversities of love and sex, which may be traced to the frailty of some and intrigues of others. The chief merit of these tales is moral suggestiveness. While indirectly they instruct men in good moral behaviour, they warn the unwary against womanly enticements.

Further Dasam Granth enjoins the following: "Whatsoever calamities be fall a shrewd man, he will endure facing countless tribulations. But in spite of all this, he will not disclose his secrets to women".<sup>2</sup>

Many historians and theologians have downplayed the importance of this work; its actual authorship has also been a point of heated controversy. By and large, it has been posited as unlikely to have stemmed from the tenth Guru. This perspective must be traced to the early twentieth century. More importantly, however, Sikhs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held the Dasam Granth at par with *Adi Granth*. According to Ashta, while these stories may not be a pleasant reading, but they do imply lessons of warning to the reader against feminine wiles.<sup>3</sup> These tales, also, reveal the intellectual level and ethical ideals of the society in general and women *Sadhus* in

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<sup>1</sup> ibid p. 151

<sup>2</sup> Ashta 1959:154,156. Dasam Granth p.418

<sup>3</sup> Ashta, 1959:153

particular. Women are shown capable of doing anything good or bad, with in human endeavour and this is no less true of the *Sadhus*, true or false.

Thus, regardless of whether it's authorship can be attributed to Guru Gobind Singh or not, the work is of considerable importance in understanding gender construction during this period because of its main emphasis on women which is rare to be found in any other contemporary work and more importantly, that the Sikhs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held the Dasam Granth at par with Adi Granth.

Next to the Guru Granth Sahib, in authenticity, is the **Varan of Bhai Gurdas** [1551-1629], who was a contemporary of five Gurus [from Guru Angad to Guru Hargobind] and very closely associated with four of them [from 3rd to the 6th]. Moreover, he was one of the few chosen and favoured disciple, next only to Bhai Buddha, who had the unique fortune of anointing as many as five successors of Guru Nanak with the *tilak* of *Guruship*. He witnessed the peaceful days of reign of Akbar, the execution of Guru Arjun, the martial response of Guru Hargobind to this event and his armed conflict with the Mughal *fauzdars* during the reign of Shahjahan. Thus, Bhai Gurdas lived in a phase of Sikh history that was marked by crisis and transition as pointed by J.S. Grewal.<sup>1</sup>

As already noted, the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas<sup>2</sup> have been held in esteem next only to Guru Granth Sahib, they are regarded as key to Guru Granth Sahib. Apart from the contents of the Adi Granth and the Dasam Granth, they are the only compositions traditionally approved for recitation in Gurudwaras (4.5[10]). There are thirty nine Vars in all, each consisting of a number of *pauris*, stanzas, of five to ten lines, adding up to approximately nine hundred stanzas of about seven thousand lines. Bhai Gurdas' other important work was Kavit Saviyyain, 556 *Kabits*, which are of philosophical nature.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal The Sikh Panth in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas in History and Ideology The Khalsa over three hundred years editor J S Grewal and Indu Banga Indian History Congress, India :Tulika,1999, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> For biographical information see Rattan Singh Jaggi, Bhai Gurdas: Jiwan Te Rachna, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1974; Trilochan Singh, Guru Tegh Bahadur, Delhi: Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1967, pp.16, 19, 23, 30, 41, 54, 58-59, 65, 162, 200-01; W.H. McLeod, Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion, Oxford University Press, 1968, pp, 14-15, 19, 28-30.

The *Vars* of Bhai Gurudas contain references to matters connected with political, economic, social and cultural life during the Mughal period. Besides the general charge of injustice against the rulers and of corruption against the *qazis*, there are references to the *umara*, the *mansabdars*, the *mir-i-saman*, the *bakshi*, the *dewan*, the *karori* and many others connected with the civil and military affairs of the Mughal government. There are references also to the *bazigars*, who entertained the common people with their acrobatics and to *dhadis*, *bhats* and *nais*, who, entertained the common people with their *Var*, *Kabits* and *Sadds*. The love stories of *Laila Majnun*, *Sassi Punnu*, *Sohni Mahiwal* and *Hir Ranjha* had already become a part of the Punjabi folklore; have also been dealt in *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas. The mythological figures in the Guru Granth Sahib like Prahalad, Poodna, Balmik etc have also been explained in the *Vars*. In the first and the eleventh *Var* of Bhai Gurdas, we find a lot of information. In the first *Var*, he depicts the life and travels of Guru Nanak, Guru Nanak's visit to Mecca and Baghdad has been mentioned for the first time. In the eleventh *Var*, are given the names of various Sikhs, who had been near and dear to the Sikh Gurus, the names of castes and places where the Sikhs lived, it also gives a lot of information about the spread of Sikhism and the centers of Sikh faith. Bhai Gurdas was familiar with the Sikhs at *Goindwal* and *Ramdaspur*. He refers to several other *sangats* in the Punjab as well notably those of Lahore, Patti and Sultanpur. But the Sikh *sangats* were not confined to the province of Lahore; there were eminent Sikhs in *Sarhind*, *Thanesar*, Delhi, Kabul and Kashmir, Agra and Allahabad, in Bihar and Bengal, in Rajasthan, *Malwa* and Gujrat. Thus, it is interesting to note that the evidence of Bhai Gurudas on the Sikhs is not confined to Punjab.

The important ideas and attitudes of Bhai Gurdas appear to be closely linked with his understanding of secular history.<sup>1</sup> The polity and economy of Mughal Empire, which made it possible for the followers of Guru Nanak and his successors to move into distant cities and towns widened the horizons of the contemporary world, and awareness which is reflected in the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas. He talks not only of Hindus and Muslims but also of Buddhists and *Jains*, Christians and Jews. Among the Muslims, he refers not only to *Mullahs*

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<sup>1</sup> Grewal ibid p. 29

and Sufis or to the *Sunnis* and the *Shias*, or to the four schools and seventy two sects of Islam, but also to the *Rafizis*, the *Mulahida* and the *Manafiqa*. He refers not only to the Mughals, *Pathans*, the Turks and the *Sayyids* but also to *Armenians* and *Rumis*, the *Habshis* and the *Firangis*.

In the social sphere, there are references to polygamy and polyandry, to divorced and abandoned women. There are references to a large number of sub castes and occupations. This varied information suggests that Bhai Gurdas was widely aware of social environment.

**Janamsakhis:** The word *Janam* means “birth” and *Sakhi* literally means “testimony”. In its literal sense, the composite term accordingly means a “birth testimony”. While the sacred writings of Guru Nanak offer some information with regard to his attitudes towards women, the *Janam-Sakhi* literature of the Sikhs, written during the first half of the seventeenth century, well after Guru Nanak’s time, further add to the picture. There are primarily three traditions of the Janam- Sakhis:

- Puratan Janam- Sakhis;
- Miharban Janam- Sakhis and
- Bala Janam-sakhis.

Given the nature of the *Janamsakhis* they cannot be understood as necessarily biographical but rather as responding to the needs of the later community with in which this genre developed”.<sup>1</sup> No *Janamsakhis* are close to Nanak in terms of compositions, and their true value is therefore to show, how he was perceived by later groups within the Panth. It is an image which testifies to the fact that in history, what is believed to have happened can commonly be more important than what actually did happen. Infact, It is not possible to write a social or economic history of seventeenth century Punjab from *Janamsakhis* alone, but they do nevertheless provide many useful glimpses. The narrators of the *janamsakhis* never divorced themselves from their rural context and as a result, there are recurrent references to the village community and its way of life. We are given glimpses of birth ceremonies,

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. McLeod, 1989

naming ceremonies, marriages and funerals. A child sits with his teacher and is shown how to read. Labourers bring in the harvest for thrashing or carry grass to the village for the buffaloes. Women attend to their cooking duties in their well plastered kitchens etc. The fact that these features are recorded unconsciously adds considerably to their value as there could be no possible reason for mis-representation on such points, for any failure to accord with the experience and understanding of the narrator's audience would merely defeat the purpose of anecdotes. In the *Janam Sakhis*, rural Punjab speaks with an authentic voice, and although they rarely tell us more than a small part, yet the *Janam Sakhis* nevertheless provide a valuable supplement to the Persian chronicles and European reports of the same period.<sup>1</sup> However, while claiming full authority on the life and works of Guru Nanak, the *Janam Sakhis* give rather meager introduction regarding the female members of the family.

It must also be noted that these *janam sakhis* can not be read literally and to be treated as authentic. Most of the scholars admit that it was written at a point of time when "*karamat*" (miraculous) was taken as a measure of piety; of superior being. It must also be noted that the information furnished by the *janam sakhis* should be corroborated with other sources but certainly these *sakhis* form an important genre of sources and can not be dismissed just as a piece of literature. Dr. Fauja Singh puts it very aptly that the *janamsakhis* should be placed somewhere between the two genres of literature. One can not afford to dismiss the fact that the kind of image that is presented of Guru Nanak is historically, a reflection of the image people/ common masses wanted to perceive of him.<sup>2</sup>

**The Gurbilas Tradition and Later Historical Works:** The eighteenth century provided conditions congenial to an aggressively militant spirit and for Sikhs this is the heroic period of the Panth's history. As the form and

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion see McLeod, Early Sikh Tradition- A Study of Janam-Sakhis; Clarendon Press- Oxford 1980. W H McLeod, The Evolution of Sikh Community, Five Essays, Oxford University Press, 1975. "Cries of Outrage; History Versus Tradition In The Study Of Sikh Community" in W H McLeod ed. Exploring Sikhism Aspects Of Sikh Identity, Culture And Thought, Oxford University Press: 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For a thought provoking discussion on the nature and value of the *janam sakhis* see *Janamsakhi Adhyayan* ed. Kripal Singh Komal, pubd. By Principal, Brijendra College, Faridkot and Guru Nanak Foundation, District Bhatinda, 1970.





dominant philosophy of the Panth changed, so did its religious perceptions and the literature which gave them expressions. The *Janam Sakhis* continued to retain considerable measure of their earlier popularity but during the eighteenth and nineteenth century a new approach to the lives of the Gurus appeared. This was the *Gur-bilas* or "Splendor of the Guru" style, a treatment which exalted the courage of the Gurus and lauded their skill in battle. Inevitably, its exponents concentrated their attention on the two great warrior Gurus, on Guru Hargobind and pre eminently on Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>1</sup> Like the *Janam Sakhis*, the *Gur-bilas* literature is far more important as a testimony to the beliefs of the writers and their contemporary circumstances than to the actual lives of the Gurus. In a sense, the tradition is an extension of the *Janam Sakhis'* impulse and style, both forms being clear expressions of devotion to the Guru. It was, however, a very different kind of piety which produced the *Gur-bilas* and it was one which shifted the focus from the first Guru to the tenth.<sup>2</sup>

The first example of the *Gur-bilas* style to appear was *Shri Gur Sobha* by Sainapat. Three other products of the *Gur-bilas* tradition which also deserve to be noted *Gur-bilas Patshahi Dasvin* (Sukha Singh), *Gurbilas Patshahi Dasvin* (Koer Singh), and *Gur-bilas Chhevin Patshahi*, attributed to a poet called Sohan. Although the latter two claim to be eighteenth century works, it has been shown that both belong to mid nineteenth century. Rattan Singh Bhangu's *Prachin Panth Parkash* deserves a special mention. Three years after Rattan Singh had completed his *Prachin Panth Parkash*, another major work was brought to its conclusion, and this was Bhai Santokh Singh's *Nanak Parkash* and *Gurpartap Suraj Granth*. Other *gurmukhi* sources, which deserve a special mention are *Mahima Parkash* (Sarup Das Bhalla), *Panth Parkash*, and *Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa* by Giani Gian Singh. We also have *Banswali Namah Dasan Padshahian Da* by Kesar Singh Chibbhar.

The *Shri Guru Sobha* of Sainapat, one of the rarest contemporary accounts of the life of Guru Gobind Singh, is an admixture of *Braj* and eastern Punjabi. Its historical importance may be judged from the fact that the author was closely

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<sup>1</sup> W. H. McLeod, ed. trl, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, 1984 p.1

<sup>2</sup> McLeod, *ibid* pg 11

associated with the Guru as the resident poet in his *darbar* at *Anandpur* and was an eye witness to most of what he has recorded. The main theme of the book as indicated in the invocatory passages is the praise of Guru Gobind Singh. At least six of the twenty *adhyayas* or chapters, besides several passages in others, are devoted to directly panegyricizing Guru and the Khalsa. This work basically focuses on description of different wars fought by Guru Gobind Singh. It also discusses the war of succession among the sons of Emperor Aurangzeb, the Guru's meeting with Emperor Bahadurshah and the Guru's assassination at Nanded. Infact, *Sainapat* is the only author who helps us with his rational account to clear, to a large extent, the mystery woven around the death of Guru Gobind Singh. His account of the institution and organization of Khalsa deserves the particular attention; it helps elucidate contemporary terminology in at least two instances; *Sainapat* uses the term *misl* as the military sub unit; and Khalsa is defined as the Sikh community in direct relation with the Guru subsequent to the elimination by him of the intermediary *masands* or local community leaders in different parts. In sum, a fairly well defined outline of Guru Gobind Singh's life emerges from the work as a whole. However; there are a few errors in his description of the Guru's travels in Rajputana on his way to Deccan which can be easily corrected with the help of other records.

***Gur-bilas Chhevin Patshahi*** is the written collection of all the oral anecdotes about Guru Har Gobind; his birth, childhood and early education [Cantos 1-3]; his marriage [Canto 5]. It can neither claim to be contemporary nor original. The manuscript preserved in the Punjab University Library, Chandigarh, under accession number 1176, is of anonymous authorship. The contents of the *Gur-bilas* are almost identical with those of the other *Gur-bilas*, commonly attributed to Kavi Sohan. There are many dates given in the text but most of them do not tally with those commonly accepted in the Sikh tradition. The author, nowhere refers to the works, he relied upon, though he does state that Guru Har Gobind's life has been presented before him in great detail and that he was narrating only in brief. The entire volume is divided into several parts, each part dealing with important episode from Guru's life.

*Gur-bilas Patshahi Dasvin* (Koer Singh) and the work by Sukha Singh with the same title give some important pieces of information. *Gur-bilas Patshahi Dasvin* by Koer Singh covers the entire span of Guru Gobind Singh's life. It is the first work to record the details of early years of his career. It also contains references to Guru Gobind Singh passing on the spiritual succession to the Guru Granth Sahib, which was to be the Guru after him. It is a poetized account completed in 1751. Out of a total of 2938 *chhands*, 2901 are written in *Braj bhasha* and remaining 37 in Punjabi. As far as his sources of information, the poet seems to have had access to two preceding works, Guru Gobind Singh's *Bachitra Natak* and *Sainapat's Shri Guru Sobha*. More than that, he has relied on information personally obtained from Bhai Mani Singh. The *Gur-bilas* is, however, not free from faults. Its dates are often erroneous; for instance, 1689, instead of 1699 for the creation of the Khalsa and 1709 instead of 1708 for the death of Guru Gobind Singh at Nanded. A notable feature of the work is the evidence it furnishes about the martyrdom of Bhai Mani Singh and his companions in 1734. Koer Singh seems to have been an eye witness and mentions the names of some of the Sikhs who were executed along with Bhai Mani Singh. No other contemporary source contains this information.

Sukha Singh's *Gur-bilas* was completed in 1797, when he was barely 29. The poetry is more *Braj* than Punjabi, but the script used is *Gurmukhi*. Comprising 31 cantos, the work gives a detailed account of the events of the life of Guru Gobind Singh and of the causes which led to the battles he had to fight. His work combines a rare insight into the prevailing political conditions and also into the moral issues involved in the resistance launched by Guru Gobind Singh. *Gur-bilas*, however, is not a straight chronological record of events, poetic imagination and pious adornment predominant over factual narration. Though most of the historical facts of the book are true but the writer has made it an amalgam of history, fiction and oral tradition. Some of the mythological and fictitious events are also included.

The *Parchian* of Seva Das is an eighteenth century collection of fifty (50) *Sakhis* or anecdotes from the lives of Ten Gurus. Only one *Sakhi* each relates to first eight Gurus; four are connected with the Ninth, Guru Teg Bahadur, and

the remaining Thirty Eight narrates incidents from the life of Guru Gobind Singh. The work is hagiographical rather than historical in nature, although several episodes agree with similar accounts in other sources such as the *Gur-bilases* and *Suraj Granth*. The language is old Punjabi. The *Sakhis* are narrative in style but didactic. Almost all of them convey some tenet or the other of Sikhism.

*Mahima Parkash* by Saroop Das Bhalla is a versified account in *Gurmukhi* script on the lives of Sikh Gurus, completed according to inner evidence in 1776 AD.<sup>1</sup> The first volume (pp. 348) contains 65 *Sakhis* relating to the life of Guru Nanak, whereas the second volume (pp. 900) comprises another 172 *Sakhis* of which 16 deal with the life of Guru Angad, 32 are about Guru Amar Das, 8 about Guru Ram Das, 22 each about Guru Arjun and Har Gobind, 22 about Guru Har Rai, 4 about Guru Har Krishan, 19 about Guru Teg Bahadur and 27 about Guru Gobind Singh. At the end of these, there is one more *Sakhi* about Banda Singh Bahadur. The main sources utilized by the author according to his testimony, were *Puratan Janam Sakhi* and *Adi Sakhian*, and information received from the descendents of the Gurus and some other prominent Sikhs. This is the first work of its kind giving a connected account of the lives of all the Gurus. However, it is not plain history, nor is it free from inaccuracies.

*Mahima Parkash Vartak* recently published contains anecdotes from the lives of the Gurus.<sup>2</sup> *Mahima Parkash Vartak* contains in all 164 *Sakhis* or anecdotes dealing with the Gurus as follows; Guru Nanak, 20; Guru Angad, 10; Guru Amar Das, 27; Guru Ram Das, 7; Guru Arjun, 15; Guru Hargobind, 20; Guru Har Rai, 17; Guru Har Krishan, 1; Guru Teg Bahadur, 4; and Guru Gobind Singh, 43. With respect to Guru Nanak, the work follows in the main the older *Janam Sakhis* such as the *Puratan*. For example, like the *Puratan Janam Sakhis*, it places the birth of Guru Nanak in the month of *Baisakh* and like the *Puratan*, it does not mention the name of Bhai Bala. The structure of the work is episodic. Each *Sakhi* is independent and has its own motive.

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<sup>1</sup> Saroop Das Bhalla, *Mahima Parkash* 2 volumes, ed. Govind Singh Lamba, Khajaan Singh, Languages Dept. Punjab: Patiala, 1971

<sup>2</sup> *Mahima Parkash Vartak*, ed. Dr. Kulvinder Singh Bajwa, Singh Brothers, Amritsar: 2004

Some of the stories are didactical; some interpret *Gurbani* in the style *Miharban Janam Sakhis*, while others deal with historical events. *Mahima Parkash Vartak*, is the earliest known work dealing with the lives of all ten Gurus. Its influence is traceable in at least two other accounts, both written in eighteenth century- Seva Das Udasi's *Parchian* (1741) and Saroop Das Bhalla's *Mahima Parkash* (1776). Some of their stories are apparently drawn from this source.

*Prachin Panth Parkash* by Rattan Singh Bhangu is a chronicle in homely Punjabi verse relating to the history of the Sikhs from the time of the founder, Guru Nanak to the establishment in the eighteenth century of principalities in the Punjab under *misl sardars*. The work completed in 1841 A.D. is owed to the Britisher's curiosity about the Sikhs and about their emergence as a political power. Rattan Singh drew upon the available Sikh sources such as *Janam Sakhis* and *Gur bilas'* and on the oral tradition that had come down to him from his parents and grand parents. The famous Sikh martyr Matab Singh of Mirankot, was his paternal grand father, and Shyam Singh of Karora Singhia *misl*, his maternal grand father.<sup>1</sup> The details and sequence of the events here provided have been generally accepted in later Sikh historiography. The earlier period has been dealt with sketchily. The descriptions of Guru Nanak's life is relatively more detailed, but with miraculous element predominating as in the *Janam Sakhis*. The succeeding seven Gurus have been barely mentioned, except Guru Har Gobind whose battles against the Mughal forces are briefly touched upon. In his account of Guru Teg Bahadur's martyrdom, Rattan Singh follows Guru Gobind Singh's *Bachittar Natak*. He attributes the fall of Mughal Empire to the emperor's sinful act of beheading the Guru. S.S. Hans in his article, "Rattan Singh Bhangu's purpose of writing *Prachin Panth Parkash*" comments that Bhangu is not a mere chronicler of the past, he is deeply involved in the present and he is capable of rising above the contemporary predicament to see that the Sikh kingdoms' only hope lies in the capacity to wage bitter and unequal struggle against the future enemy, in the ability to convince the enemies of Sikh claims

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<sup>1</sup> For details see Harbans Singh, Encyclopedia of Sikh History

to sovereignty and lastly in their own strength.<sup>1</sup> Rattan Singh Bhangu is probably the greatest historians of Sikhs, who wrote the kind of history, demanded by the requirements of the age, instead of being a mere chronicler of events leading to the establishment of the Sikh rule on the very eve of its downfall.

*Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth* by Santokh Singh is a voluminous work of the highest literary merit in *Braj* verse portraying in comprehensive detail the lives of the Ten Gurus of the Sikh faith and the career of Banda Singh Bahadur. Notwithstanding certain drawbacks, which scholars with trainings in modern historiography may point out, it remains the most valuable source book on Sikh history of the period of the Gurus and indeed, on the very roots of the entire Sikh tradition. *Suraj Parkash*, as it is popularly known, is worthy to rank with the classics in this genre. The work is divided into two parts; the first Sri Guru Nanak Parkash in two sections is the story of the life of Guru Nanak. The second, *Sri Guru Pratap Suraj* proper, is divided into portions, *ruth* (season), sub divided into chapters called *Anshu* (rays). According to Ganda Singh, Bhai Santhokh Singh has not been able to penetrate beyond the crust of prevalent accounts. He considers all the Punjabi works on the subjects, from the *Mahima Parkash* to *Sau Sakhi* and other similar works as equally authentic. The historical accuracy of *Suraj Parkash*, therefore, does not remain unquestioned.<sup>2</sup>

Giani Gian Singh's *Panth Parkash* and *Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa* are two of his notable works. He was a theologian and preacher of Sikh religion belonging to the *Nirmala* sect. *Panth Parkash*, published in 1880, is a history of the Sikhs in verse. As the title suggests, it is an account of rise and development of the Guru Panth, which is Khalsa or the Sikh community. Scattered through out the *Panth Parkash* are references to at least 23 different sources which the author consulted or made use of. He has specially mentioned Rattan Singh Bhangu's *Prachin Panth Parkash*, Bute Shah's *Tawarikh-i-Punjab* and Bhai Santhokh Singh's *Suraj Granth*. Other sources referred to include *Gur-bilas Dasvin*

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<sup>1</sup> S.S. Hans, "Rattan Singh Bhangu's Purpose of Writing *Prachin Panth Parkash*", Punjab History Conference Proceedings, 9th session, 1975

<sup>2</sup> Ganda Singh, *Major Sources of Early Sikh History*, *ibid*, p.18

*Padshahi, Banswalinamah* and *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*. Thus, *Panth Parkash* covers a vast span of Sikh history from Guru Nanak to annexation of Punjab by the British and death of Maharaja Duleep Singh. The last three chapters contain an account of some Sikh sects and cults- *Udasis, Nirmalas, Nihangs, Kukas or Namdharis, Gulabdasias, Satkartarias, Niranjaniyas*- and the author's reflection on contemporary social situation, with some autobiographical details.

His other important work is *Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa* is divided into five parts. The first, *Guru Khalsa*, deals with the lives of the Ten Gurus. The second, *Shamsher Khalsa* deals with the military exploits of Banda Bahadur and the Sikh struggle against the Mughals and the Afghans. The third, *Raj Khalsa* deals with Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the Anglo-Sikh wars. The fourth, *Sardar Khalsa*, gives information about Sikh rulers, Sikh chiefs and Sikh sects and the fifth, *Panth Khalsa*, throws light on Sikh Gurdwaras and Sikh sects..

Giani Gian Singh was a devoted religious scholar but not a critical historian. His approach to history was traditional, and the impulse behind his historical writing was the projection of the glory of the Sikh past. Some of the facts, dates and sequences of events in the *Panth Parkash* do not bear scientific scrutiny, yet the work enjoys much popularity and prestige, it is expounded formally in Sikh Gurdwaras and has served to shape the historical imagination of Sikhs over the generations.<sup>1</sup>

*Banswalinamah Dasan Patshahian ka* is a poeticized account of the lives of Gurus by Kesar Singh Chibbar. Bhai Kesar Singh Chibbar was the son of Bhai Gurbaksh Singh and the grandson of Bhai Dharam Chand was the great grandson of Bhai Parag Das (who had embraced martyrdom in the battle of Ruhila in 1621) and cousin of martyrs of Bhai Mati Das and Bhai Sati Das. Thus, Bhai Kesar Singh Chibbar belonged to a family which had been associated with the Guru family for about one century. The term *Banswalinamah* means a genealogy. Another term used in the text is "*Kursi Namah*", which is Persian term for "genealogy". However, this work cannot be termed as purely genealogical. It is a rapid account in rather incipient Punjabi

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<sup>1</sup> Bhagat Singh, Giani Gian Singh, Patiala 1978 and an article by Bhagat Singh, Giani Gian Singh, Punjab History Conference Proceedings, 9th session, 1975.

verse, of the Ten Gurus and of Banda Bahadur. The book comprising 2564 stanzas is divided into fourteen chapters. The first ten deal with the Ten Gurus. There is a chapter each on Banda Bahadur, Ajit Singh, adopted son of Guru Gobind Singh. The last chapter of the book alludes to the state of the Sikhs in the early decades of the eighteenth century, persecution they faced at the hands of ruling authorities. Although his work leaves out few important events yet there are some details which are available exclusively in this source for instance an important event like Guru Gobind Singh awarding “*Gurugaddi*” to Guru Granth Sahib. Significantly, the author also tries to prove the superiority of the Brahmins even among the Sikhs which may be due to his own Brahmin ancestry. In any case, this is contrary to the principles of Sikhism which rejects caste system. Therefore, the work is not free of limitations, the description of historical events and mythological elements occasionally overlap in this work. Its peculiar feature is the wealth of chronological detail it contains about the lives of the Gurus and the members of their families. But the reliability of the dates recorded by the author is not established.

*Hukumnamah* (ed. Dr. Ganda Singh) is a compound of two Persian words. *Hukum*, meaning command or order, and *Namah*, meaning letter, refers in the Sikh traditions to letters sent by the Gurus to their Sikhs or Sangats in different parts of the country. This collection includes two *hukumnamahs* from Mata Gujri; Nine of Mata Sundri and Nine of Mata Sahib Devi. Thus, it emerges out as an important attestation of the power and authority enjoyed by them. Needless to say that *Hukumnamahs* are invaluable historical documents. Names of persons and places to which they are addressed provide clues to the composition, of early Sikhism and its spread. They do furnish the missing links and give contemporary authentic account of the events. Most of these *Hukumnamhas* are dated correctly which help to fix the chronology of certain events. The *Hukumnamahs* are important linguistically as well and provide crucial clues for tracing the development of *Gurumukhi* script and Punjabi prose.

*Guru Kian Sakhian* (ed. Piara Singh Padam) is basically based on the references about Gurus appearing in the *Bhatt Vahis* literally the *Vahi* (register of the records) maintained by *Bhatts*. Before twentieth century, the



records of the genealogies and the specific events of the life of the kings, warriors and the Holy men etc were maintained by the *Bhatts* in their registers called *Vahis*. The same functions were performed by the pandits in Haridwar and Mattan (Kashmir). The Pandits had clients from all sections of the society but the circle of the *Bhatts* was limited to some elite sections. The *Bhatts* had preserved precious data about the families of Guru Sahib and some other Sikhs for the seventeenth and eighteenth century. *Guru Kian Sakhian* a collection of 112 *sakhis* beginning from Guru Hargobind Singh to Guru Govind Singh was written in 1790 by Bhai Saroop Singh. Four of these *sakhis* relate to Guru Har Gobind, nine to Guru Har Rai, four to Guru Har Krishan, sixteen to Guru Teg Bahadur and seventy nine to Guru Gobind Singh. It is a Guru history of 73 years of its own kind and gives new pieces of information. However, the extensive use of *Bhattvahis* in the *Guru Ki Sakhian* makes it little less dependable as the *Bhatts* were not scholars and they were recording these details primarily to fulfill their roles of “*jajmani*” and “*purohit*”. The language of *Guru Ki Sakhian* is a mixture of Punjabi and Hindi. Interestingly, at a couple of places, we find English words, this is plainly anachronistic; it has been so successfully tempered with as to render the authentic portions inseparable from later interpolations. It has, therefore, to be used by the scholars with caution.

***Guru Rattan Mal*** (*Sau Sakhi*) is a collection of approximately 100 “*Sakhis*” (stories) which deals with the important events in the life of Guru Gobind Singh. Basic tenets of religion, code of conduct and political events have formed the main contents of these narrations. This work is probably the first work in Punjabi which criticizes the shrewd diplomatic policies of the English. There is a controversy about the authorship of the work. Some people believe it to be written by Guru Gobind Singh; however the thrust of the *sakhis* do not appear to be in line with the ideological thought process of Guru Gobind Singh. Analyzing the work, it seems more plausible that it is written by Sahib Singh on the basis of the stories narrated by Ram Koer Singh who used to be always present in the services of Guru Gobind Singh. The work is esoteric and prophetic in nature. The book has some historical value too, but has to be

used with great caution because of several anachronisms, mis-statements, interpolations and motivated turns given to the text by different scribes.

As is evident from the above discussion, the contemporary or near contemporary gurmukhi sources focus primarily on the guru period, their ideological formulations and shifting emphasis, principles of Sikhism, institutions and cultural values. Although these sources primarily focus on guru families providing some information on guru- mahals and other female members of the Guru families, yet, in context of their widening appeal, composition of *sangats*, we also get valuable references of common women and her position in religious sphere and household matters.

Apart from this genre of sources, we also have folk- literature and folk songs. Folk poetry in regional languages is perhaps the most important expression of feelings and sentiments of the common people or illiterate masses on various themes and subjects. According to Terence Browne, "Even lyric poems are social facts just as Potato crops, tractors and new industries are".<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal appropriately writes that "unfortunately, there is no general awareness among the historians of our country about the value of literature for social and cultural history. Once we learn to treat literary works as the product of history, it is possible to know much more about the past than what the writers wanted us to know."<sup>2</sup> Around 1300 A.D., Amir Khusrau had observed the people of province of Lahore conducted their daily business of life through a language, peculiar to the region. He called it, Lahaurh. This was one of the 'several dialects spoken by the people. These dialects were popularized by the people, the most notable among them was the *Sufi Sheikh* of the Punjab, *Sheikh Farid-ud-din-Ganj-i-Shakar*, popularly known as Baba Farid. The compositions of Baba Farid were cherished and preserved by his successors at Ajodhan and a large bulk is preserved in Guru Granth Sahib. In his verses, we find enshrined the diction and idiom of the new Punjabi language which by this time had come into its own. Although Baba Farid was proficient in Arabic and Persian, yet his literary command over Punjabi was amazing. A nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-79, Fontana Paper Backs, 1981, p. 9; Prof J.S. Grewal, "Literary Evidence, The case of Waris Shah", PIHC 43rd Session, 1982, p. 388.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 338

century Punjabi poet refers to him as the first and one of the greatest poets of Punjabi.<sup>1</sup> His imagery comes from the countryside, and speaks in a manner that could appeal to the peasant, blacksmith, potter, boatman, fowler. In sum, the tenor of Baba Farid's poetry was social as well as religious. Grewal, rightly comments that in the field of religious poetry, Farid found a great successor in Guru Nanak, but only after a span of two and a half centuries.

Among the Muslim writers of Punjabi, Shah Hussain is regarded as the first major writer after Farid. Shah Hussain was born in 1538 A.D. at Lahore and died in 1601 A.D. at the age of 63 years<sup>2</sup>. In the sixteenth century, Shah Hussain wrote *kaffias* using some of the metres which were used by popular minstrels, and composing in "*Ragas*", in which Guru Nanak and his successors were composing.<sup>3</sup> His *kaffias* till date are regarded as matchless for their lyrical excellence in kafi genre, he was followed by Sultan Bahu, Bulleh Shah and Gulam Farid, during the seventeenth, eighteenth & nineteenth centuries respectively. The most common activity mentioned in the *kaafiyas* is spinning and weaving referred in 26 of his *kaafiyas*, as well containing very interesting references about common women's concerns and their daily routine, enlivening community life. Shah Hussain transformed the entire spirit of Sufi poetry in Punjabi literature. He broadened its sphere from mere philosophical Sufism to encompass the whole gamut of man's feelings.<sup>4</sup>

The secular and oral tradition of Punjabi lore surfaced as the literary phenomenon during the seventeenth century. Most probably Damodar wrote his romance of Heer- Ranjha towards the later times of Akbar's reign and Peloo's "Mirza Sahiban" belongs to the same period. While Damodar wrote the first comedy in Punjabi, Peelo is credited with writing the first tragedy of the language. The first version was written by Damodar – strangely enough no subsequent Punjabi poet who composed the *kissa* of *Heer*, Muqbal, or Waaris Shah has mentioned Damodar's name. Damodar has composed his *kissa* in the *Jhangi* dialect, a sub variety of *Multani*. Considering that even

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, Punjabi Literatures, 1750-1850, p. 152

<sup>2</sup> Sant Singh Sekhon, A History of Punjabi Literature, Vol II, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1996, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> op.cit. Grewal, p. 153

<sup>4</sup> Shah Hussain, A notice in Biographical Encyclopedia of Sufi South Asia, pp. 140-141

*Multani* did not make much progress as a literary language, Damodar's narrative did not attain literary status. Though much later, his narrative was meant to be sung with musical instruments and thus his literary work was very close to oral tradition. The most popular version of *Heer- Ranjha* was authored by Waris Shah. Waris Shah was born in 1735 A.D. at Jandiala Sher Khan, district Shekhu Pura (Pakistan). George Gresson, Usborn, Richard Temple, all appreciated Waris for his supreme command and rich vocabulary of Punjabi language. Amrita Pritam calls Waris "A Solace for the Sufferers, A Balm for Bruised Hearts". Waris's *Heer* is the true representation of a Punjabi girl. She has got the same limitations which the Punjabi girl faces during her youth. Characterisation of *Ranjha* sketched by Waris is the true replica of Punjabi young men, he goes deep in the analysis of his character. Apart from describing in detail the farmer's life in Punjab, Waris Shah has given vivid details of nature. Different types of snakes, fruits, trees and natural remedies are also mentioned by Waris in his verse. Waris Shah's poetry has not left any sphere of the life untouched. It turns out to be a great repository of information for the real position of women and the socio-cultural customs, or even evils associated with her. Waris Shah's *Heer- Ranjha* saga apart from describing different customs at the time of marriage also describes the various methods used, in the killing of infant daughters which included strangulation, poisoning, drowning and suffocation. Waris Shah had both the Hindu and Muslim sections of the populace in mind, when he talked about people of Punjab.

In terms of the timeline, Damodar was followed by Hafiz Barkhudar, who wrote in times of Shah Jahan, Barkhudar penned the popular story of Sassi and Punnun. He is also known to have produced the first known Punjabi version Yusuf and Zulaikha, a popular theme with several Persian poets and based on Quran. The other story, Barkhudar took up was a purely indigenous tale, the story of Mirza and Sahiban. This story too was placed in the lower Rachna Doab, involving two well known tribes, the *Sials* and the *Kharals*.<sup>1</sup> Barkhudar knew that Peelo's version of Mirza Saahiban was sung by popular minstrels (dums) that version, in all probability, belonged to the oral tradition. Hafiz Barkhudar produced the first literary version and recognized Peelo's great merit.

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<sup>1</sup> Grewal, Punjabi Literature, 1750 1850 op cit, p 154

Peelo refers to Raja Rasalu, Dulla and Jaimal and Fatta, who were all subjects of heroic poetry in the Punjabi oral tradition.<sup>1</sup> There were others too, but no Punjabi writer appears to have taken up a heroic theme for literary treatment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Ahmed Gujjar and Muqbal composed still later. Ahmed Gujjar wrote in reign of Aurangzeb in the late seventeenth century, followed by Muqbal in the reign of Mohamad Shah in the early eighteenth centuries. Muqbal was the immediate predecessor of Waaris Shah, already discussed, who wrote after 1750. Muqbal wrote a Jang- Nammah relating to Hasan and Hussain, the tragic heroes of the battle of Karballa along with his kissa of Heer- Ranjah. In sum, it can be said that largely the themes of literary works were drawn from Punjabi, Indian and Muslim sources. It must also be noted that these heroes of popular Punjabi saga formed a respectable reference in the works of Bhai Vir Singh and many others. These characters had become the part of popular culture and were held in high esteem as is evident in the anecdote where Guru Hargobind visits the "Majnu ka Tilla" and explains his accomplices that the way Majnu got emotionally annihilated totally by his love for Laila, similarly, the Guru Sikhs should have the same devotion for the Akal Purakh. This kind of equation of Laila Majnu to spiritual quest of a true devotee testifies that Guru Hargobind had approved of such unadulterated, single minded love and devotion.<sup>2</sup>

The folk songs are also a great treasure of knowledge and address the aspirations of women from their life at large and marital life, in particular. The folk songs sung at the time of marriage ceremonies seem to be giving a platform to vent out her agonies in an appealing and entertaining manner. Though the value of the oral traditions as a source has great potentiality which are till date, largely un-tapped, however, while using popular literature or folk songs etc, one has to be extra careful and should have sensitivity towards the complex nature of the texts. A straight forward linear reading eliciting certainties is equally problematic. The written texts assembled from oral traditions are part of the collective oeuvre. A whole lot of variations may have

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<sup>1</sup> For further information see R.C. Temple, Legends of Punjab

<sup>2</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, op. cit. p.315

been introduced; certain parts must have been re-accentuated, certain potentials in the images actualized, others allowed to fade over time in the process of writing down of oral traditions. Kum Kum Sangari in context of her study on Meera, aptly observed that "In this sense, the songs are inscribed in an extended rather than a discreet moment of production."<sup>1</sup> The folk literature might, infact, represent the intentions, beliefs, desires at least to an extent of a period in which they are penned down.

## Persian Sources

Next comes the category of contemporary Persian sources. Although there are many Persian contemporary sources but they provide very little; rather no information on the position of women in Punjab. However, their corroborative role for weaving the complex picture of society and its values can not be denied. Furthermore, with the exception of the *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*; information on Sikhism and the Sikhs before the time of Guru Gobind Singh is rather meager. Moreover, there is a much greater concentration on Banda Bahadur than even on Guru Gobind Singh.

As may be expected, the bulk of information relates to political history. This by itself is not a limitation. There is little information on political history in the contemporary Sikh sources. Therefore, this information from non- Sikh sources is all the more valuable. In conjunction with later Sikh sources, this information forms the bedrock of the political history of the Sikhs during this period.<sup>2</sup> However, not only the *Dabistan* but also a number of other works provide information on the social and religious life of the Sikhs, which can provide useful insights in the light of evidence coming from Sikh sources. In any case, the image of the Sikhs which the non Sikh writers formed from time to time is in itself a form of evidence for a social historian. To substantiate the point it would be useful to briefly analyze the nature and thrust of different sources.

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<sup>1</sup> KumKum Sangari, Meera Bai & Spiritual Bhakti, ibid, p27

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Grewal and Irfan Habib, Introduction in eds. Sikh History from Persian Sources Translations of Major Texts, Delhi; Tulika, 2001, p2

A number of genres are represented in Persian sources throwing light on Punjab. This in itself is a reflection of the intellectual and cultural richness of the period. First of all, there are well known general works like the *Akbarnama*, the *Kulasat-ut-Tawarikh*, the Tazkiratu's *Salatin-i-Chaghta*, the *Munutakhab-ul-Lubab*, and the *Mirat-i-waridat*. Then there are the histories of short periods or regions, like the *Nuskha-i-Dilkusha*, the *Ibratnamas* of Muhammad Qasim and Imadu's Sa'adat. There are memoirs of the emperor Jahangir; official and semi official documents are represented by *Ahkam-i-Alamgiri*, the *Akhbarat-i-Darbar-i-Mulia*, and the reports sent from Delhi by the representatives of other courts.

There are descriptive works like the *Chahar Gulshan* and *Tashrihu'l Aqwam*. And then there are works which refuse to be easily categorized like *Dabistan*, the *Tazkira Pir Hassu Teli*, the *Nairang-i-Zaurana* and the *Jangnama* of Qazi Nur Muhammad.<sup>1</sup>

The contents of the Persian works relate to four phases of Sikh history "The Sikh Gurus and their followers before the time of Guru Gobind Singh; the life of Guru Gobind Singh; the Sikh uprising under Banda Bahadur and the Sikh resurgence from about 1750 to 1765. However, we will be basically focusing on the sources dealing with our period.

- I. *Tuzuk-i-Baburi* or *Babar Nama*: This autobiography of Babar throws light on the political, social, economic and geographical conditions of Punjab and India at the time of Babar's invasion.
- II. *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Akbar Nama*

The work by Abul Fazl tells us about the historical events from 1556 to 1602 and the Mughal administration. Abul Fazl was the contemporary of Guru Arjun. Abul Fazl is considered to be the official historian of the Akbar's reign and no history of Akbar's time is complete without reference to Akbar Nama. However, Muhammad Akbar in his work "The Punjab under the Mughals" writes that the account of Punjab in *Ain-i-Akbari* is very meagre and incomplete. In his opinion the chapter on Punjab is by far longest and most important in the

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal and Irfan Habib eds Sikh History from Persian Sources, p. 18.

*Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* by Sujan Rai Bhandari. Muhammad Akbar points out that in treatment of the Punjab, Abul Fazl is silent on industries, mines, important cities, holy men and other points on which he has usually a wealth of information in the case of other subahs, on the other hand, the author of *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* was a native of the Punjab and thus, he has lovingly recorded every piece of information he could collect about his own province. His account is, therefore, accurate, complete and up to date and no way inferior to the best descriptive chapter of the *Ain*.<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Sikh movement was becoming important enough to attract the notice of “outsiders” including the state.<sup>2</sup> Akbar’s visit to Guru Arjun in 1598 is presented by Abul Fazl, in the third part of Akbar Nama, as a matter of imperial grace. But this gesture of goodwill had an inbuilt political dimension too. The term used by Abul Fazl for the religious position of Guru Arjun is “Brahmanical”, which is either an intentional slip or just shows that Abul Fazl had little knowledge of the religious aspect of the Sikh movement.

III. *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*: It is variously called- *Tarikhi Salim Shahi*, *Tuzake Jahangiri*, *Karm Nama Jahangiri*, *Iqbalnama* and *Maqalate Jahangiri*.

This autobiography of Jahangir is full of references to Punjab and contains a clear account of the causes leading to Guru Arjun Dev’s martyrdom who was contemporary of Jahangir. In the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* the emperor claims to have watched the Sikh movement with disapproval. He did not like Guru Arjun converting “ignorant” Muslims to his own faith. Indeed, we know that the Sikh faith was open to Muslims. Bhai Gurdas mentions Mian Jamal among the prominent Sikhs of Guru Arjun. However, this was not the only professed reason for Jahangir’s actions against Guru Arjun, his blessings to the rebel Prince Khusroo become the crowning cause of capital punishment.

IV. *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*, “School of Religious Doctrine” or more popularly known as “School of Manners” first came to light in 1787. This manuscript was brought into prominence by Sir William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta. Since that time it has been considered as the

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Akbar, “Punjab under the Mughals”, Delhi: 1974, p.15,16 and 17

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* p.3



only independent contemporary source of early Sikh history.<sup>1</sup> This book long believed to have been written by Mohsin Fani but now believed to be Mubid Zulfikar Ardistani. The author of *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* was a personal friend of Sixth Guru, Hargobind. He stayed with him for some time and was often in correspondence with him and was present at Kirath Pur on the occasion of his death. Infact, on Guru Hargobind in particular there is no contemporary evidence which is as valuable as that of Dabistan. He was also close to Guru Har Rai, the Seventh Guru. The author of the Dabistan does not say much about Guru Angad, Guru Amardas and Guru Ramdas. With the exception of few minor errors, his account of the earlier Gurus and of the beliefs and practices of the Sikhs, recorded on the authority of the best informed people, can be safely depended upon. The chapter called the "Nanak Panthia", which covers some twelve pages of the Dabistan,<sup>2</sup> is the first known account of the Sikh people in Persian. The Dabistan was translated into English by Shea and Troyer for the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland in 1843. The translation of "Nanak Panthia" in Punjabi was published by Sardar Umrao Singh Majithia in the June 1930 issue of the Khalsa Review and by Ganda Singh in Phulwari of Phagan Chet, 1987 Bikrami.

The Dabistan gives not only comprehensive information but also extremely significant for our understanding of the pre Khalsa panth. The author provides extremely useful evidence on the change in the attitude of the Mughal Emperors towards the Gurus and the change in the attitude of Guru Hargobind towards the state. Dabistan becomes still more significant when combined with the evidence of Bhai Gurdas who wrote mostly in the early decades of the seventeenth century. The Dabistan does not provide information on all the dimensions covered by Bhai Gurdas. The evidence of the Dabistan reinforces the suggestive evidence of Bhai Gurdas who was acutely conscious of the change after the martyrdom of Guru Arjun. The Dabistan also contains the extremely useful information on the organization of Sikh community which indicates in several ways that the Sikhs had a religious

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<sup>1</sup> Nawal Kishore edition, 1321 ah

<sup>2</sup> Kirpal Singh, "Perspectives of Sikh Gurus" The Punjab- Past and Present Vol XVIII-II Oct 1984 Sr. No 36, Punjabi University, Patiala, p.35

identity of their own. The Gurus appointed their representatives, called Masands, for the twin purpose of initiating others into the Sikh faith and collecting offerings from the Sikhs. The author of the Dabistan gives information on some of the important Masands of the Gurus. He also indicates at several places that the Sikhs were not much concerned about the caste distinction.

V. *Khulasat-ul-Tawarikh* by Sujan Rai was nearing completion in the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of the spiritual reign of Guru Gobind Singh (AD 1696), as mentioned by the author on page 70 of Zafar Hasan's edition of 1918. This would make him a contemporary of the last four at least, if not five, Gurus, from Guru Har Rai to Guru Gobind Singh. There has been varied opinion on the importance of the work. As the author belonged to Punjab, he was greatly impressed by the Sikh movement and gives some important information about Sikh and Sikh Gurus.<sup>1</sup> Mohammad Akbar in his work, "Punjab under the Mughals" considers *Khulasat* a more important and significant work concerning Punjab than *Ain-i-Akbari*. According to him, Sujan Rai's account is accurate, full and up to date, and in no way inferior to the best descriptive chapters of *Ain*. According to Muhammad Akbar in the century that intervened between the "*Ain*" and the "*Khulasat*", changes occurred in the Mughal Empire. The names of the Sarkars, the numbers of the Mahals, the amount of the revenue and the description of the towns, as given by the author of the "*Khulasat*", enables us to institute an interesting comparison with the "*Ain*". Both "*Ain*" and "*Khulasat*" tell us about the existence of number of mines as well as the weather in the area. According to Ganda Singh<sup>2</sup>, Sujan Rai's description of the religious life of the Sikhs of those days and their deep rooted devotion to Gurus is significant.<sup>3</sup> Other important Sikh topics dealt with in this work are the religious position of Guru Nanak and his successors, Akbar's visit to Guru Arjun, the death of Guru Teg Bahadur in Delhi in 1081 AH( 1675AD), and brief notes on historical places like Nanak Mata, Guru Ka Chak (The present Amritsar), Makhawal (Anand Pur) and Kirat Pur.

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<sup>1</sup> Mohammed Akbar, op. cit, pp. 15-17

<sup>2</sup> Ganda Singh, ibid, p. 14

<sup>3</sup> ibid, p. 12

According to J.S. Grewal, although Sujan Rai, a Bhandari Khatri, belonged to Batala, a place associated with the marriage of Guru Nanak, may be expected to have reliable information on the Sikhs. But he does not seem to have been a close observer or a meticulous researcher. His account of the Gurus is not only brief but full of mistakes. He refers to Guru Nanak's Gnosticism and his verses. Guru Nanak, he says was born in 1469 at Talwandi Rai Bhuna. He showed miracles from very young age. He travelled widely before he got married at Batala and settled in a village on the Ravi. He died at the age of 70-80 years in the reign of Salim Shah. This date is wrong like several other dates in Sujan Rai's account of the Gurus. Grewal further points out, that writing in 1695, Sujan Rai remains silent on the martyrdom of Guru Arjun and the martial activity of Guru Har Gobind and Guru Gobind Singh. Sujan Rai is the only historian, who refers to Guru Har Rai's association with Dara Shikoh in his flight to Punjab.<sup>1</sup> Sujan Rai supports the statement of the Sikh writers that Guru Har Rai came to the assistance of Dara Shikoh on the banks of the Beas with the object of retarding the progress of his brother Aurangzeb against him.

VI. *Muntakhib-ul-Lubab* by Khafi Khan throws light on the history of the Mughal emperors from the beginning till 1722 AD. Khafi Khan has described the rise of Sikhs under Banda and he has furnished great details, though in the usual abusive language often used for the Sikhs in those days. A careful study of the writings of Khafi Khan will yield valuable details and information about the Sikhs. About the early Sikh history that is 1469 to 1708 AD, Khafi Khan has not written much. About Guru Gobind Singh, Khafi Khan has written only the following lines; " During those days when Bahadur Shah had set out on his march towards the Deccan a person named Gobind, one of the leaders of the notorious sect, came to his presence and accompanied him with two or three hundred horse men, lancers and footmen and two or three months later, he died from a wound of a daggers though his murderer remained unknown".<sup>2</sup> The procession of

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid p. 37

<sup>2</sup> Khafi Khan, *Muntakhib-ul-Lubab*, 2 vols., Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1870, Part I. See Kirpal Singh's work "Perspectives of Sikh Gurus" *The Punjab- Past and Present* Vol XVIII-II Oct 1984 Sr. No 36, Punjabi University, Patiala.

Banda and his companions entering Delhi is also graphically described by Khafi Khan.

Guru Gobind Singh receives considerable attention from non-Sikh writers but almost entirely for the post Khalsa phase of his life, that is, the last eight or nine years. Even the institution of Khalsa does not receive much attention. What gets emphasized in non-Sikh sources is the political activity of Guru Gobind Singh and his followers. By far the most important evidence on Guru Gobind Singh comes from "*Ahkam-i-Alamgiri*" and the "*Akhbarat-i-Darbar-i-Muolla*".

"*Ahkam-i-Alamgiri*" is a very important source of information of Aurangzeb reign and significant document for the study of Guru Gobind Singh's last phase of life. It was written by Inayat Ullah Khan. He had been a news writer in Aurangzeb's reign and later he was appointed teacher of *Zeb-un-nissa*, daughter of Aurangzeb who recommended him to her father for employment. The extracts from the "*Ahkam-i-Alamgiri*" have an importance of their own. The first one refers to the destruction of the Sikh temple in the town of Burya in accordance with imperial orders. The mosque built in its place was destroyed by the follower of Guru Nanak, who killed his custodian too. The primary concern of the emperor was with the conduct and the appointment of *qazi* and the *muhtasib*. The spirit of aggression against the Mughal authorities and even more so the confession of murder, strongly suggests the reaction of Khalsa against the aggressive action of Wazir Khan, the *faujdar* of Sarhind, who had already provided support against Guru Gobind Singh. The second extract from *Ahkam-i-Alamgiri* leaves no doubt that detailed report of Wazir Khan's action against Guru Gobind Singh was sent to the emperor and was seen by him. The third extract from the *Ahkam* is an order addressed to Munim Khan, the Deputy Governor of Lahore in which he is told that on a petition from Guru Gobind Singh to be allowed to see the emperor in person. These extracts from the *Ahkam* are useful in themselves what is even more important; they add a new dimension to the evidence of Zafar Namah, and the *Gurshobha*.

The newsletters called *Akhbar-i-Darbar-Muolla* were not exclusively news of the imperial court as the title would suggest but were generally the summary

of the news submitted to the emperor by the official news writers, *Waqia - Nawis*, *Waqai-i-Nigar* etc. The representatives of various states and provinces of the country stationed at the capital passed on these news to their respective masters. Such collection of letters was available at Pune and Jaipur. Late Dr. Ganda Singh examined these letters from 1707AD to 1718AD for Sikh History Research Department, Khalsa College, Amritsar. These letters relate to the last years of Guru Gobind Singh and Banda Singh Bahadur. English translation of Dr. Ganda Singh's selection had been done by Dr. Bhagat Singh, which was published in Punjab- Past and Present.<sup>1</sup>

Other important sources include Abdu'r Rasul's *Nairang-i-Zamana* is an account of his journey through Rajasthan. Among other things, he describes an armed conflict between the followers of Guru Gobind Singh and Rajput garrison of the fort of the Chittor. Writing in 1759-60, Rai Chaturman takes notice of "Hindu Sects" in his "*Chahar Gulshan*". "*Nanak Panthis*" are included in this section of work. In his view, Guru Nanak was a Vaishnava who worshipped Ram. But his followers held that he was opposed to Vedas. The Sikhism had become a separate faith, whether because Guru Nanak himself established a new path or because his successors introduced innovations. In any case, it was necessary to give an account of the Nanak Panthis because in every country and city they were found in thousands. Rai Chaturman's account of Gurus, from Guru Nanak to Guru Teg Bahadur is based on Sujan Rai Bhandari's work. He tries to improve upon his source but without any success. According to Rai Chaturman, Guru Gobind Singh ascended the spiritual seat of his father in reign of Bahadur Shah in 1710-11(Actually 1675). J.S. Grewal questions Rai Chaturman's chronology. If it is presumed that Guru Gobind Singh guided his disciples for twenty one years (which would place his death in 1731-32!). He himself instigated an Afghan to take revenge for the death of his father in the hand of Guru Teg Bahadur, and the Afghan killed him. Rai Chaturman goes on to talk of Ajit Singh, Hathi Singh, Mata Sundari and Mata Sahib Devi as the surviving members of Guru Gobind's family. Ajit Singh, who had been recognized by the Guru as his son after the death of all his three sons. With permission from the imperial court, was

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<sup>1</sup> Ganda Singh, Punjab Past and Present, Punjabi University, Patiala, April 1967, pp. 133-135

enthroned on the spiritual seat. Whereas the other contemporary Sikh writer like Sainapat states explicitly that Guru Gobind Singh did not select any specific person to be his successor instead he declared that Guruship henceforth was vested in Khalsa and the scripture. Thus, J.S.Grewal concludes that Rai Chatturman's evidence on Guru Gobind Singh is grossly wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Bhim Sen's *Nuskha-i-Dilkusha* does not take much notice of Guru Gobind Singh who is stated to be "a descendent of Guru Nanak" after his decisive victory over Prince Azam. The work says that "Guru Gobind Singh obtained the good fortune of presenting himself before the emperor." The reference to Guru Gobind Singh's meeting with Bahadur Shah is found in both Persian and Punjabi sources. What is interesting about the Bhim Sen's notice is that it was not based on information emanating from Sikh sources. His account was based on what he had heard about the Sikhs. For instance, he states that Guru Gobind Singh did not follow the ways of religious men and was proud of his soldierly profession. Bhim Sen refers to Guru Nanak service (*naukari*), his association with religious men, his disciples in the territory of Lahore and Multan, his compositions and his deputies. No country, city, township or village was there without his followers. Offerings were carried to his "descendents" who are his "successors". They spent their lives in splendour and some of them took to the path of rebellion. Guru Teg Bahadur was among them. He called himself *Padshah* and a large number of people gathered around him. When Aurangzeb came to know of his activities, he summoned the Guru to the court and he was executed. As Grewal states we may be sure that Bhim Sen relied on what he had heard from some people who had only a general, rather vague ideas of early Sikh movement. Nevertheless, Bhim Sen's reference to the cause of Guru Teg Bahadur's execution is significant. Most of the non-Sikh sources mention Guru Teg Bahadur's militancy as the reason for Aurangzeb's action. By contrast, the Sikh sources like the *Bachittar Nattak* and the *Gurshobha* dwell exclusively on the religious dimension of the Sikhs.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *ibid*, p. 18.

Mirza Muhammad in his *Ibartnama* looks upon Guru Gobind Singh as introducing some new “customs” of Guru Nanak and his successors who are seen more or less as Hindu recluses. The Sikhs who accepted Guru Gobind Singh’s core group of disciples came to be known as Khalsa. With their support, he began to establish his power over Zamindars of the neighborhood through warlike means. Wazir Khan repeatedly sent forces against him and the Guru lost two of his sons in battles. When Bahadur Shah was marching from Peshawar to Delhi, Guru Gobind Singh in fact, accompanied the imperial camp to win over the grace of Bahadur Shah, Guru Gobind Singh was in Rajasthan at that time, Mirza Muhammad rightly says later that the Guru accompanied emperor to the Deccan. There he was killed by an Afghan who bore enmity towards him. He was cremated according to the customs of Hindus. Although Mirza Muhammad’s *Ibartnama* contains derogatory language for Banda Bahadur and the Sikhs but his account is important as a contemporary witness.

## Foreign Travelogues

In addition, we also have the contemporary Spanish and French sources such as Father Gurreiro’s Spanish Account (letter dates 25<sup>th</sup> Sept 1606 A.D. and 8<sup>th</sup> August 1607 A.D.) and Father Du Jarrics French Account 1614 A.D.<sup>1</sup> Their works are of great value as they throw light on the condition of the people, the state of trade and industry. In a way, their observations have freshness and weight of their own. But apart from the events in which they participated or which they personally witnessed, their report merely reproduced bazaar rumors and the stories current among the populace, and can not be set against the contemporary works. Eugenia Vanina puts it more succinctly when she points out the limitations of the approach where some scholars base their studies of medieval India entirely on European records, which of course, are very useful as sources. She says that “during the period under review [16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries is the focus of her work] European travelers were more interested in cloth and spice prices than in the spiritual riches of India. Even those who were interested in this subject were, in spite of their wisdom and

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<sup>1</sup> C.H. Payne, Scenes and Characters, from Indian History. As Described in the Works of Some Old Masters, O.U.P. 1925.

insight, separated from Indian culture by a huge wall of religious superstitions, ignorance and arrogance of the representatives of the 'highest' culture and most true religion."<sup>1</sup>

## **Secondary Literature**

In this section, I am led by two primary objectives. Firstly, it is an attempt to map the major analytical positions that dominate the historical work produced within the sub-discipline of Sikh Studies in specific, and in a larger framework of Punjab in general. This exercise is undertaken with the hope that both the common ground and points of conflict within the field can be brought out. In other words, an attempt has been made to identify the most important ways in which Punjab of the past has been dealt with. Secondly, it attempts to underline a series of epistemological and methodical problems that influence the historiography over the past few decades. It insists on the inherent need to acknowledge heterogeneity of Punjabi society. Instead of attempting an over-simplified, homogenous and linear presentation of Punjabi society, we need to remember that the regions inherently diverse and hybridized population reflects the reality that Punjab has long stood at the confluence of the Islamic and the Indic worlds and the cultures of Central and South Asia. However, this section also discusses few earlier authors on Punjab and their academic contributions in the field. In the foregoing discussion of secondary literature, one becomes conspicuously aware that the tradition of historical writings on the Sikhs at any rate has been longer and stronger than historical writings on the Punjab. Consequently, very often the Sikh history is equated with the history of the Punjab. However, the history of a part can not be equated with the history of the whole. Nor can the part, especially an important part, be ignored in the history of a whole.

## **Early Scholars**

Modern historical writings on the Sikhs is a legacy of the British.<sup>2</sup> Indian Historians appearing on the scene in the past half a century have written

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenia Vanina, *Ideas and Society in India from 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Grewal, *A Perspective on Early Sikh History in Sikh Studies, A Comparative Perspective on a Changing Tradition*, Berkeley, 1979, p. 33.



largely with reference to British Historians for instance later authors' works revolved around. J D Cunningham who published his "History of the Sikhs" in 1849.<sup>1</sup> However the first attempt at a real study of the Sikhs was that of John Malcolm, "Sketch of the Sikhs (1812)", but he himself admits that the information available to him was extremely limited and often unreliable.<sup>2</sup> H S Wilson's Civil and Religious Institutions of the Sikhs (1848) is based largely on Malcolm.<sup>3</sup> The same is a little less true of Cunningham's monumental History of Sikhs, the first open minded attempt "To give Sikhism its place in the general history of humanity"<sup>4</sup>. For his impartial discussion of the Anglo Sikh War (1845-46) and the British responsibility for it, Cunningham lost his political appointment in Bhopal, but won the hearts of the people of Punjab.

Presenting the movement initiated by Guru Nanak, as a faith that was meant not merely to reconcile but to transcend Hinduism and Islam, J D Cunningham postulated a close connection between the Sikh polity and Sikh faith through the mediation of Guru Gobind Singh, whose essential teachings in Cunningham's view were no different from Guru Nanak. Grewal aptly comments that Cunningham's attempts at discerning a thread of continuity amidst change lends to the treatment of Sikh History a dimension that is altogether missing in the works of other British Historians of the Sikhs. Infact the sort of perspective on Sikh History which we find in his work is rather rare in the entire range of historical writings on the Sikhs. Grewal points out Cunningham's treatment of Sikh History however does not take into account the complexity of historical process under discussion.

Ernst Trumpp, an oriental specialist was sent to Punjab by the India Office to translate Sikh scriptures, produced the first English version of the Adi- Granth (1877). Trumpp's insensitive handling of religious verse, and especially caustic comments on Sikhs in the introduction offended the Sikh community significantly. For instance, in his introduction to the Adi-Granth, he wrote "The Granth is a very big volume, but I have noted incoherent and shallow in the

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<sup>1</sup> J .D. Cunningham, A History of the Sikh, Delhi; S Chand & Company, 1966 (reprint).

<sup>2</sup> Included in The Sikh Religion; A Symposium, ed. Susheel Gupta, Calcutta, 1958, pp 84-145, hereafter: Symposium

<sup>3</sup> Also in Symposium, pp 54-70

<sup>4</sup> op. cit, p. XX

extreme, couched at the same time in dark and perplexing language, it is for us Occident the a most painful and stupefying task to read even a single raga.”<sup>1</sup>

Fifteen years later another European, Max Macauliffe, British Administrator posted in Amritsar, began a similar project, designed to over-turn Trumpp's treatment. He called Trumpp's Adi-Granth “highly inaccurate and un-idiomatic. Macauliffe's Six volume work entitled “The Sikh Religion, Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors” in 1909 created a vision of Sikh Scripture and history that has remained tremendously influential with in the Sikh Panth. Macauliffe insisted that Sikhism was a distinctive religion and its history was characterized by a constant battle against Hinduism. Popular Hinduism, he argued, was like a “boa constrictor of the Indian forests.... its winds round its opponents, crushes it in its fold, and finally causes it to disappear in its capacious interior.” Sikhism was threatened with this same fate, “the still comparatively young religion is making a vigorous struggle for life, but its ultimate destruction is inevitable without state support.”<sup>2</sup>

The above publication was followed by an important work of Khazan Singh on “The History of Sikh religion” in 1915. Khazan Singh offers a philosophical exposition of Sikh concepts on God, Guru, Soul, Karma, Khalsa etc. In the same year appeared a sympathetic study by a British lady- Dorothy Field- under the title “The Religion of the Sikhs”. This is in the tradition of Macauliffe who showed both understanding and appreciation of the Sikhs for she had personal contact with many Sikhs.<sup>3</sup>

As is evident, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the major figures were Europeans- Cunningham, Trumpp, and Macauliffe. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the field has mainly belonged to Indian scholars- Bhai Vir Singh, Bhai Kahan Singh of Nabha and Principal Teja Singh being perhaps the most outstanding Punjabis. The non Punjabi nationalist historians too wrote on the Sikhs like Indubhushan Banerjee with his “Evolution of the Khalsa” and N.K. Sinha with his “Rise of

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Trumpp, London, W. H. Allen, 1877, Introduction, pp. xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Macauliffe, Sikh Religion, I, VII.op.cit.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed understanding on the issue, See Gobind Singh Mansukhani, The Origin and Development of Sikh Studies in Kharak Singh, Gobind Singh Mansukhani and Jasbir Singh Mann, Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh:1992,pp.129

The Sikh Power” and his “Ranjit Singh”. Hari Ram Gupta’s voluminous work on Sikh history belongs to the category of “nationalist” historiography. However, these were individual scholars who worked virtually on their own. Khalsa College in Amritsar, where Dr. Bhai Jodh Singh and Dr. Ganda Singh were the major figures, seems to have been the only place which provided a broader institutional base for the development of this field of study.

The second phase of Sikh Studies can perhaps be dated from 1962 when Punjabi University was established in Patiala. With the establishment of the Guru Gobind Singh Foundation in Chandigarh and the Guru Nanak Foundation in Delhi in 1965, Sikh Studies gained momentum.

The normative tradition of historical writing which evoked ideal types historical role models who embodied the ideals of the Khalsa, looked back to a more distant Sikh past. The heroic martyrdom of the ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur and the martial spirit of the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, served as exemplary models, as did the great protector of the fledgling Khalsa, Banda Singh Bahadur. Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha’s pamphlet “Hum Hindu Nahin” in 1898 was simultaneously an attack on the power of the Hindu reformers of the Arya Samaj in Punjab and also a response to the Sanatan tradition that remained popular with Punjabi aristocrats and the rural masses. This normative tradition of historical writing was consolidated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the likes of Bhai Vir Singh and after partition it was increasingly professionalized by a new generation of scholars, most notably Teja Singh, Ganda Singh and Harbans Singh. Prof. Teja Singh’s early works are booklets on ‘Guru Nanak and His Mission’, (1918), “The Sword and Religion” (1918). However, his more important works came later “Essays in Sikhism” (1944), “Growth of Responsibility in Sikhism” (1948). The reason for these later publications was that the third and the fourth decades of this century were full of struggles for Gurdwara Reform and non-cooperation with the government for limitation of political rights<sup>1</sup>.

However, in 1944 appeared an important publication by Sher Singh entitled “Philosophy of Sikhism”. This scholarly work became a pace-setter for later

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<sup>1</sup> Mansukhani, op. cit. p.129

researchers in Sikhism. Sher Singh's exposition of ideological identity and of Sikh philosophical concepts like *Wismad* was quite remarkable. Another important work of this period was Prof. Kapur Singh's "*Parasharprasan*" or The Baisakhi of Guru Gobind Singh (1959). This book contains a valuable exposition of the Khalsa Panth and the rationale of its distinctive features and symbols.

After the independence of India, Sikh Studies tended to be more critical than philosophical. Both Ganda Singh and Harbans Singh wrote that we might term "corrective histories" works that challenged interpretations of Sikhism popular outside the community (such as the belief that Nanak's teachings were essentially syncretistic) and disputed evidence that indicated diversity in Sikh identity and practice within the historical record. This corrective approach is most obvious in Ganda Singh's edited collection of European accounts of Sikhism, where his glosses and footnotes not only correct European misapprehensions, but also rebut European claims that Sikhs engaged in practices that contravened the injunctions of the *Rahit*. In short, this framing of the Sikh past became the dominant vision both within the Panth and at least within the Khalsa and was increasingly regarded by informed non-Punjabi South Asians and British commentators as the vision of the Sikh history.<sup>1</sup> To use Ballantyne's terminology, the "internalist" approach attempted to correct the way of framing the Sikh past that has dominated the Sikh historiography over the last century. He further points out that despite significant methodological, epistemological and political differences that we can identify as marking four different versions of the internalist scholarship (normative, textualist, political, and cultural), those working within the internalist tradition are united by a common analytical orientation. Internalist scholars prioritize the internal development of Sikh "tradition", rather than the broader regional, political and cultural forces that shape the community from the outside.<sup>2</sup>

The second phase of Sikh Studies as already pointed out, can be dated from 1962 and gained momentum 1965 onwards. This phase is marked by the

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Ballantyne, Framing the Sikh Past, International Journal of Punjab Studies, Vol. 10, Nos. 1 & 2, Jan-Dec. 2003, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p.2

Tercentenary of Guru Gobind Singh's birthday in 1966; in 1969 the Quin centenary celebration of Guru Nanak and then came the Tercentenary of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom in 1975. All these occasions were celebrated on a large scale, whole lot of seminars and conventions were organized along with the publication of many monumental works. The major works on Guru Gobind Singh's Tercentenary was Harbans Singh's biography of "Guru Gobind Singh", R.S. Ahluwalia's "The Founder of the Khalsa", and G.S. Talib's "Impact of Guru Gobind Singh on Indian Society". The Quin centenary celebration of Guru Nanak resulted in a collection of 54 papers, presented in the convention of Punjabi University, Patiala, under the title "Perspectives on Guru Nanak". Other important works published were "Life of Guru Nanak" by S.S. Bal, "Philosophy of Guru Nanak" by S.S. Kohli, "Guru Nanak, His Life, Time and Teachings" edtd by Gurmukh Nihal Singh; "Life of Guru Nanak" by Gobind Singh Mansukhani.

On the occasion of Guru Tegh Bahadur's tercentenary of martyrdom, the significant works include "Guru Tegh Bahadur, Martyr and Teacher" by Fauja Singh and G.S. Talib; "Bibliography of Guru Tegh Bahadur" by Trilochan Singh; Guru Tegh Bahadur Commemoration Volume by Satbir Singh, and Ranbir Singh's work on the Ninth Guru deserves a deep study.

The 400<sup>th</sup> Foundation celebrations of the city of Amritsar in 1977 included a number of books on Amritsar, the Golden Temple and Guru Ramdas. On the same lines, the Quin centenary celebrations of Guru Amardas' Birthday in 1979 included a number of publications of which Narain Singh's "Life Sketch of Guru Amardas", Fauja Singh's "Perspectives on Guru Amardas" and G.S. Talib's "Bani of Guru Amardas" deserve special mention.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's 200<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrations in 1980, produced a number of good books on his life and achievements. The important works are Fauja Singh's "Maharaja Ranjit Singh – Politics, Society and Economics" and J.S. Grewal's "Maharaja Ranjit Singh and His Times".

Now, after a brief discussion about these important celebrations and the monumental academic work generated through combined efforts of the academic fraternity, a broad observation that emerges from most of these

works, if not all, is somewhat perplexing. While these internalist models often recognize that the Sikh community has been molded by the broader structures and institutions and cultural patterns of Punjabi life, they share a tendency to abstract Sikhism from this crucial socio-cultural background. Although this tendency varies between approaches and individual historians yet one can safely comment that this internal scholarship tends to privilege religious identity over social and commercial affiliations or regional identity and Sikhism is extracted from the dense webs of economics, social relations and political relations that have molded its development in Punjab and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

Several historians break with the internalist tradition through their explicit emphasis on the importance of this regional context. The most important among them is Prof. J.S.Grewal. Grewal's works cover a wide spectrum of issues ranging from the history of Punjab, Sikh Gurus, the social history etc and his works are especially commendable as he takes care of the sensibilities of the community, cultural history and its nuances. Grewal has consistently grounded his exploration of Sikhism in the history of Punjab. In fact, of all the historians working on Sikhism, Grewal has published most widely on Punjab history more generally and his research consistently foregrounds the importance of the region's geography, its institutions and political structures, economic fortunes and cultural ethos. In light of this insistence, his work typically uses a broader range of sources and deploys a range of approaches- from literary analysis to discussions on political economy – in picking out the nuances of the multi-faceted nature of Sikh history. For Grewal, Sikh history is a dynamic story of the shifting relationships between this community and its regional environment. It is commendable that Grewal's works are equally well received in "traditionalists" as well as in "skeptical" circles. He has mastered the craft of making a nuanced, analytical study of his sources and putting across his sources in a manner that it is very difficult to disagree. It is telling that the recent festschrift for Grewal was entitled "Five Punjabi Centuries: Polity, Economy, Society and Culture."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ballantyne, p.9

<sup>2</sup> Indu Banga ed., *Five Punjabi Centuries: Polity, Economy, Society and Culture, c. 1500-1900*, Delhi: Manohar 1997. For a detailed list of contributions of Prof. Grewal see the reference list.

Indu Banga's writings primarily covering the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have consistently foregrounded the importance of Punjab as a context. In part, Indu Banga's significant work on Ranjit Singh's kingdom, a state that is frequently imagined as being explicitly Sikh, yet rested upon the Maharaja's skilful balancing of different faiths and ethnicities in both his administration and military establishments. Banga's emphasis on the importance of the regional context also reflects her strong interest in the economic and agrarian history of the region, the crucial milieu within which Sikhism emerged and developed.

The main thrust of the socio-religious evolution of the Sikh Panth in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and its socio-political evolution in the 17<sup>th</sup> century forms the major themes of Sikh history during the time of the Gurus, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. The religious tradition of the Sikhs is historical and scholars in the Punjab have paid considerable attention to the historical development of their tradition. The works of Dr. Ganda Singh, Prof. J.S. Grewal and Khushwant Singh have made scholarly impact and have enjoyed wide usage.

Another trend in studies on Punjab at large and Sikhism in specific is of Western scholars. The idea to use this categorization is not on the basis of any presupposition of any kind of ideological homogeneity among them but just for the convenience of discussion. The most important pioneer among them is W.H. McLeod whose works have always managed to ignite a strong reaction among "traditionalists" and a series of works to "meet his challenge and expose his (McLeod's) distortions.... effectively rebutted the conclusions of McLeod."<sup>1</sup> One must here underline that McLeod is not only held responsible for his works but rather borne to bear the vehement reaction for the works of Harjot Oberoi, Pashaura Singh, N. Gerald Barrier, Doris Jakobsh and the list goes on who has joined the "bandwagon". He has been blamed to "affix a most damaging brand of Sikh "academics". ....One can not imagine if anyone has done so much damage to the Sikh image at so high an academic level as Dr. Hew McLeod."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mansukhani, op. cit.pp.131

<sup>2</sup> A letter of a correspondent to the May 1994 issue of the Sikh Review referring to the Editorial in the January issue.

However, one must admit that even when one does not agree with McLeod's analysis but one can not dismiss his works which cover a wide spectrum of Sikh history.<sup>1</sup> His works have managed to create a powerful impression on Sikh Studies, whether it is in the forms of ripples ranging from vehement reaction or counter works written with an intention to "effectively rebut the conclusions of McLeod." For instance, Gurdev Singh's "Perspectives on the Sikh Tradition" (1986), Daljeet Singh's "Sikhism" (1979) and "The Sikh Ideology" (1984) and a later book entitled "Advanced Studies in Sikhism" in response to McLeod's work "The Evolution of the Sikh Community." At the same time, there are more positive opinions as well like that of J.S.Grewal when he writes "The life of Guru Nanak presents serious difficulties due to the lack in our understanding of his environment. Nearly every book written on the life of Guru Nanak is based primarily and almost exclusively on the testimony of the *janamsakhis*. There is one exception: "Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion" by W.H. McLeod. In this book, the *janam-sakhi* traditions are subjected to rigorous analysis." Grewal further says that McLeod rightly emphasizes that *janamsakhis* are not biographies; they tell us much about the age in which they became current but not about the age of which they speak."<sup>2</sup> Ballantyne writes that "much of McLeod's work proceeds from the close analysis and discussion of a particular key term or concept. McLeod firmly respects linguistics and cultural differences, highlighting the problem of translation and has frequently argued that Sikhism, where possible should be understood on its own terms rather than according to a Judaeo-Christian framework. He has for example been a firm advocate of the use of the term "Panth" to describe the Sikh community, preferring it to other terms such as "sect" or "denomination".<sup>3</sup> The influence of his domineering works is also apparent in the works of Pashaura Singh, Harjot Oberoi, N. Gerald Barrier and now Doris Jakobsh. All these scholars have written extensively on Punjab in general and infact Doris Jakobsh has worked on gender.<sup>4</sup> We can have a discussion about Jakobsh work in the successive section; for the lack of

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<sup>1</sup> See the list of his works in bibliography

<sup>2</sup> Grewal, A Perspective on Early Sikh History, in eds. Mark Jurgensmeyer and N. Gerald Barrier, Sikh Studies – Comparative Perspectives on A Changing Tradition, pp. 34-35

<sup>3</sup> Ballantyne, op.cit.p.13

<sup>4</sup> See the detailed list of her works in bibliography



space it would suffice to say here that all these scholars have added a new dimension to the Punjab Studies per se.

Our discussion of secondary works would be incomplete if we do not bring a set of scholars in the purview of our discussion, who have recently started focusing on the position of women in Sikhism. Till date the question of gender has been afforded little attention from scholars within Sikh studies. What has not caught the imagination within Sikh scholarly exercise will not be recognized as important by those outside this area of study. However, this new academic enthusiasm is well represented by the works of Surinder Suri, Kanwaljit Kaur, Manjit Kaur to name a few.<sup>1</sup> Before discussing their works one would acknowledge at the outset that they have made a fresh attempt to study Sikh history from a gender perspective.

In most of these works, the respective authors are so highly appreciative of Sikh gurus and their ideology that they forget that any human society cannot be viewed in black and white terms; it's bound to have shades of grey. In their urge to project the Sikh Gurus as ardent advocates of women's equality, the respectable position of women in Sikh society, they forget the distinction between "the normative and operative beliefs." "The status of women was not an issue in Sikhism. Equality was implicit..... Women are considered as an integral part of society who must not be excluded by any ritual or doctrinal consideration. Since rituals tend to be exclusive, they cannot be made part of true faith. In other words, the position of women could be a touchstone for the genuineness of a faith".<sup>2</sup>

With regard to inherent egalitarianism between Sikh men and women, one writer notes that "The Sikh women have enjoyed superior status compared to her counterparts in other communities. She has earned this by showing the ability to stand by the side of her husband in difficult times."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See bibliography for the detailed list of their contributions.

<sup>2</sup> Surinder Suri, "Position of Women in Sikhism", ed. Jyotsna Chatterjee, *The Authority of the Religions and the Status of Women*, Delhi, Uppal Publishing House, 1990, pp. 103-113.

<sup>3</sup> Kanwaljit Kaur Singh, "Sikhism", Holm Jeam with John Bowkor ed., *Women in Religion*: Printer; 1994.

Yet, if women and men are inherently equal in Sikh tradition in terms of roles and status, why are they not given similar representations in the pages of Sikh history?

In these works, one notices, an attempt to idealize the aspects of history and scripture as they pertain to women, glorified examples are presented of Sikh women who lived exceptional lives in different roles as the normal, larger reality. These exceptional women are then typically held up as standard by which to measure gender egalitarian ethos of Sikh tradition. The most obvious examples that come to one's mind are like "Sikh Bibiyan" by Simran Kaur, and M.K. Gill's work entitled "Role and Status of Women in Sikhism". Both the titles give an impression about being a study of position of common women in Sikhism. However, the former deals with the women- daughters, mothers, wives of the Guru's families and the latter (Gill's work) focuses on what she presented as the institution of "guru mahals", the wives of the Gurus. It would be highly erroneous to imagine the condition of women of guru families to be anywhere closer to the position and status of common women. The exceptional lives of the women of guru families or of few examples like Mai Bhago are projected as constructs of a larger reality.

While acknowledging the painstaking efforts these scholars have made to gather information and formulate some sort of a biographical note of all the women related to Guru households in different roles which form the thrust of most of the works of Gill's works as well as other scholars. Although Gill admits that the "Guru histories are by and large, silent about the wives of the gurus. From Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh the wives have been treated as part of the historical background, not as individuals in themselves ....."<sup>1</sup> Yet, Gill chooses to emphasize and make the reader believe that the guru mahals were very integral to the development of the fledgling Sikh movement. For the silence in the sources she comments that "it is the silence of respect that is accorded to the womanhood in the Punjabi culture and ethos. It helps surround her with an invisible cloak of dignity..... The silence that surrounds the Guru's family is an intrinsic feature of Sikh

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<sup>1</sup> Gill, *The Role and Status of Women in Sikhism*, Delhi, National Book Shop, 1995, p. 52.

tradition.”<sup>1</sup> Here, one begs to differ that to view the life and position of women of guru mahals as a mirror of general “role and position of women in Sikhism” to use her nomenclature is a fallacy. As wives and sisters of Gurus, they certainly did not lead the lives that were very much akin to their contemporaries. In many ways then, they conjure up false images as to the roles and status of women in Sikh society. And then negating the obvious, namely that even the guru mahals have not been viewed as consequential in the history of the Sikh tradition, to project the guru mahals as very integral to the very development of the fledgling Sikh movement is like creating a mirage for our own selves. Unfortunately, it also tends to oversimplification and at times contains an element of wishful thinking.

Fully appreciating the contributions of this set of scholars, of at least opening the arena of feminist studies among the indigenous scholars; preparing the life-sketches of women of guru families and also penning down the contributions of Mata Sundri which attempt to give her some credit, if not the desired level, for guiding the Sikh Panth in one of its most crucial phases for a long span of 39-40 years. Yet, at the same time I would also like to point out that this framework of idealizing the contributions of gurus and not admitting the gap between the “normative” and “operative” beliefs; that there is no “black” and “white” picture in any human society, that there are shades of grey which are infact closer to “the reality” of social relations. This framework, somehow in an urge to project, rather “create” an image of the Sikh Gurus as ardent advocates of women’s liberation; of egalitarian ethos seems to be self-defeating and in fact, hampers the real credit that can be awarded to the Gurus for their ideology, in which making it a “reality” they might not have succeeded as desired or as projected by these scholars. Admittedly, there are many elements within the Sikh scriptural tradition which are emancipatory but somehow, in this oversimplified, linear presentation of knowledge they get lost somewhere in between.

Now, it would be appropriate to discuss a set of scholars who are trained in the modern historical methodology; applies the same scrutiny of rationally

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<sup>1</sup> Gill, 1995, p. 53

analyzing the study of religion as well. Quite often it invites vehement reaction from religious leaders as well as scholars who are of the firm opinion that the question of faith can not be subjected to any critical analysis. Though there are major differences of opinion among these historians as well, yet they broadly agree in their openness to study religion and its different aspects in a critical manner. It is well represented by Harjot Oberoi, Pashaura Singh, Mark Jurgens Meyer, N.G. Gerald Barrier and Doris Jakobsh. In fact, Doris Jakobsh has written on gender in Punjab.

In their opinion, the principles of silence, negation, accommodation and idealization have formed the general framework guiding contemporary or near- contemporary writings on women and the feminine in general in Sikhism.<sup>1</sup> This set of scholars, somehow, I feel tend to over rationalize, find an explanation or hidden agenda for the Gurus critical comments, as evident from the following examples. In their urge to highlight what has not been criticized, reprimanded they tend to almost negate whatever has been commented upon, while Guru Nanak grieved the rape of women during the time of Babar, these scholars feel that he did not censure the social order on the whole. While aware of the social challenges facing the widows of the day, Nanak censured them for their unrestrained desires. Another limitation these scholars point out that he did not re-evaluate social institutions such as marriage and marriage practices to make them more equitable for women. Moreover, his silence regarding sati is rather surprising there was also no critique of female infanticide, again, a practice closely aligned to the upper caste<sup>2</sup>.

Guru Nanak's vision of ideal women has also been perceived as only limited to procreation, the procreation of souls specifically. An oft-quoted verse:

*"We are conceived in the women's womb and we grow in it. We are engaged to women and we are wedded to them. Through the woman's cooperation, new generations are born. If one woman dies, we seek another; without the women there can be no bond. Why call her bad who gives birth to rajas? The*

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<sup>1</sup> Doris R Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2003 p3

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

*women herself is born of woman, and none comes into this world without the woman; Nanak, the true one alone is independent of women".<sup>1</sup>*

In the opinion of these historians although these words have been lauded as the slogan of emancipation for women in the Sikh tradition, they had none to do with the rejection of prevailing traditions or ritual purity and support of the social hierarchy of the time. For women give birth to sons, especially those of noble birth; how then could they be considered ritually impure?

The second example is concerning Guru Amar Das. During the tenure of Guru Amar Das, both scriptural and popular sources attribute a shift towards the inclusion of women in the Sikh Panth. The tradition credits a definitive criticism of society beyond that of religious ineptitude; much of this criticism is directed towards the situation of women in society. With regard to sati, the third Guru stated, "They are not satis who are burnt alive on the pyres; rather satis are they who die of the blow of separation (from their husbands)."<sup>2</sup> Later accounts present Guru Amar Das as having denounced the custom of purdah; he did not allow visiting queens to remain veiled in his presence.

Female infanticide was also condemned by the Gurus. Rather than appreciating their criticism these historians claim that this practice may well have stemmed from Guru lineage only. According to Punjabi lore, Dharam Chand, a grandson of Guru Nanak was humiliated at his daughter's marriage by groom's family. Chand was so incensed that he ordered all Bedis to henceforth kill their daughters as soon as they were born rather than bear such humiliation. In their opinion Guru Amar Das' condemnation of the practice may well have stemmed from a need to distance the Sikh panth under his leadership from the original Guru lineage that was at the forefront of the practice of female infanticide.

These scholars tend to read the ideology of the Gurus from present day's notion of men-women equality. It is anachronistic to weigh on the modern scale of equality. In those days if women were made to command respect for her "feminine" qualities to see her role in the smooth functioning of a society

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<sup>1</sup> Adi Granth, p. 473

<sup>2</sup> Adi Granth, p. 787

as a “contribution” that also need to be acknowledged. If a voice of dissent was raised for evils against women such as female infanticide, sati, purdah etc. If she was seen/ respected as an equal partner in religious assemblies (sangats); worthy of salvation. If Sikhism stresses family values and faithfulness to one’s spouse. *“The blind man abandons his own, and has an affair with another woman, he is like a parrot, who is pleased to see the simbal tree, but atlast dies clinging to it”*.<sup>1</sup> Sikh Gurus declared that marriage is an equal partnership of love and sharing between husband and wife. Married life is celebrated to restore to women her due place and status as equal partner in life.

*“They are not said to be husband and wife, who merely sit together. Rather they alone are called husband and wife, who have one soul in two bodies”*.<sup>2</sup>

It should not be nullified because it could not succeed in bringing the dramatic, revolutionary change. Moreover, undoubtedly it is a long drawn process to change the perceptions and attitudes leading to any societal change. Thus any endeavour need to be contextualized in the existing socio- cultural milieu.

In sum, we need to admit that any attempt to *idealize* the ideology and the behaviors of the Gurus does more harm to the acknowledgement of their contributions. Harjot Oberoi rightly cautions out “how heterogeneous elements in Sikh history, those labeled deviant, marginal, threatening or unimportant are negated in order to generate homogeneity and represent the Sikhs as a collectivity which shared the same values and movements.”<sup>3</sup> We also need to realize that any human society on any aspect whether it is a question of women’s position or any other socio- cultural dimension can not be and should not be even, attempted to be projected in black and white. It is bound to have shades of grey. Moreover, as appropriately pointed out by Clarence McMullen, we need to make a distinction between the normative and operative beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A G, p.1165

<sup>2</sup> A.G. 1788

<sup>3</sup> Oberoi, 1994, p. 34

<sup>4</sup> Clarence O’McMullen’s work Religious Belief and Practices in the Rural Punjab as powerfully makes the above point though for 20<sup>th</sup> century village. But it holds true for any human society, in context of my study of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries Punjab it is equally valid. Delhi, Manohar, 1989.

## Conclusion

To sum up, it can be inferred that all the primary sources have an intention which determines their content, nature and thrust. In Simon Digby's words all the sources are discursive in nature they can not be viewed as authentic just by the virtue of their being contemporary or near contemporary. Only upon an unveiling of the presuppositions of writers and their writings, a thorough evaluation of the inherent biases and attitudes and practices within these writings, one is hopeful of an analysis somewhat close to reality. If historical research is a dialogue of cultures, it should be held on equal terms. Very often, we face difficulties because scholars sometimes look into medieval sources only for information and ideas that are interesting for twentieth century researchers. But medieval authors had different ways of thinking and to comprehend their viewpoint in right perspective, we must listen to what they say of themselves, and on this basis try to find answers for our questions. For instance, the very notions of "progressive" and "conservative" have a special meaning in context of medieval society and should be handled with care.

One term that is in wide currency amongst Sikh historians, however, requires careful scrutiny and that is "tradition" as a catchall phrase that describes textual corpus, practices and discourses produced by the Sikhs. Yet, this term is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, "tradition" frequently stands in contradistinction to modernity representing the authentic essence of a pre-modern community. Secondly, and following on from this, the use of "tradition" as a concept tends to imagine a homogeneous and strictly unified community. With reference to Sikh history, "tradition" means that which is handed down to within the Panth. The material thus handed down has not been subjected to rigorous scrutiny. It is known to be true because it is said to be derived from sources which are known by the Panth to be absolutely secure. Webster analyzed five works on Guru Nanak, so as to discover at what points, if any, religious beliefs undermine sound historical judgement and concluded "Yet this essay suggests a general reluctance, even among the best historians to

question radically their received religious tradition- specifically in this case the janam saakhi tradition.”<sup>1</sup>

A very cautious handling of the source material becomes still more relevant as a traditionalist historian (this categorization/ nomenclature of “traditionalist” and a “sceptical” historian are borrowed from McLeod W.H.<sup>2</sup>) repudiate the authority of disciplines like history, sociology, anthropology, women’s studies and religious studies. The viewpoint of traditional historians is well represented by G.S. Dhillon as follows:

“A proper study for religion involves a study of the spiritual dimension and experience of man, a study which is beyond the domain of sociology, Anthropology, and History. Religion has its own tools, its own methodology and principles of study which take cognizance of higher level of reality and a world-view which is comprehensive and not limited”.<sup>3</sup> While, Sukhmander Singh has argued that methodologies relevant to Christian ideology where scriptures developed as a result of history and culture are inapplicable to Sikhism where Sikhism is revelatory and authenticated by the prophet himself.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, for a traditional historian the material handed down is known to be true because it is derived from sources which are known by the Panth to be absolutely secure. Not all historians of the traditionalist school would carry the definition so far as that, but essentially they would agree with its substance. The general tenor of their interpretation makes this clear. And opposed to it are historians who embrace the skeptical view with its rigorous examination of sources. In an extreme form this approach requires everything

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<sup>1</sup> John Webster, Modern Historical Scholarship and Sikh Religious Traditions: Some Exploratory Remarks” in J.S. Grewal, Studies in Local and Regional History, Amritsar, Guru Nanak University, 1974, pp.135-136.

<sup>2</sup> W.H. McLeod, “Exploring Sikhism Aspects of Sikh Identity, Culture and Thought, India : Oxford University Press, 2000, p.267 279.

<sup>3</sup> Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon in a review of Harjot Oberoi’s The Construction of Religious Boundaries in Sikh Past, 4.33; May 1/ 15, 1994, p.4. Also in the Sikh Review 42.7 ; July 1994, p.59.

<sup>4</sup> Sukhmander Singh, A Work of Scholarly Indulgence: Invasion of Religious Boundaries; a critique of Harjot Oberoi’s work in Jasbir Singh Mann, Surinder Singh Sodhi and Gurbaksh Singh Gill eds.Vancouver, 1995,p.257.



to be questioned and nothing to be affirmed there is evidence to support it satisfactorily.

One would like to end with a note that it is important to expound on both the positive and the negative messages. To know only the negative message is disempowering; to uphold only the positive images is a naïve and superficial empowerment. To proffer both leads to a more accurate and genuine discussion of the feminine dimension with the Sikh tradition. It also enables us to clearly contextualize the role played by the Sikh Gurus in the then existing social milieu.

Now after a discussion of the primary sources and the review of the secondary works, it would be appropriate to briefly discuss the thrust and focus of the chapters.

## **A Glimpse of Chapters**

The thesis is divided in two section. The first section, comprises two chapters – the first one describing the land and its people and second chapter “Bhakti Sants on Women: A Comparative Trajectory between Kabir and Guru Nanak”; which basically intends to contextualize the study in terms of the geographical, social, religious and economic background (thrust of the Chapter-1) and the different strands of ideological formulations under the aegis of the Bhakti movement (focus of Chapter II).

Part-II of the thesis is entitled “*Stri Svabhav: Stri Dharam and the Prevailing Realities*”. This section has a detailed preface to the section which basically addressed the questions that need to be focused in the successive chapters. This section includes three chapters. Ideally, this entire section should be read as ‘one’ as the position of women, its varied determinants, its social aspects and various social institutions are so much interconnected and interdependent that they make a complex social web where a holistic approach needs to be followed. Yet, for the practical convenience to make it a lucid reading it has been subdivided into three chapters. Chapter III “Marriage” which basically focuses on marriage; marriage and caste and its varied forms. Chapter IV which focuses on the Social Space of Women and Chapter V “Social Discrimination against Women”. In Chapter VI the thrust is on as the

title clearly reflects “The Gender Perspective: The Growth of “Khalsa” Sikhism and its changing emphasis on women and her role”.

Chapter I entitled “**Land and its People**” – No ideology can be properly understood without contextualizing it in its specific historical, social, economic and political milieu; as well known religion plays pivotal roles in social values and social changes, which is the thrust of my study. There can be a gap in what is the historical context of the message of his exponents and its receivers. Finally, how is the message accepted and interpreted by the audience? How popular is it and how is it understood and utilized by the receivers. Milton Singer has aptly described this type of analysis as “The articulation of textual and contextual studies”.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the context is closely related or rather it is a consequence of the “Land” and “It’s People”. Thus, a detailed survey of the area, its geographical and physical features and socio-cultural milieu of Punjab has been studied. A brief survey of the political context is relevant for appreciating the conducive ground for the birth and development of Sikhism. It needs to be appreciated that the total number of Muslims in core region was larger than that of Sikhs and Hindus put together. Moreover, Punjab, which is literally land of five rivers and a place which geographically and geo politically had to bear brunt of the frontal challenge, it is difficult to undertake any significant social study oblivious of these realities. In sum, ethnically and culturally, Punjab has been a home to people of many ethnic types. To capture the intricacies and nuances of the complex social fabric marked by variability and heterogeneity and to understand the complex process by which it eventually fused into somewhat homogeneous people, and cultivate a “Punjabi” identity, the context and the socio-cultural processes must be awarded the due importance. Here I have tried to discuss the main ideological strands prevalent in the area. What were the ruptures, if any, in the social fabric which prepared a conducive socio-cultural background for the rise and growth of Sikhism. An attempt has been made to analyze whether Sikhism owed its success more to its background or was more a consequence of their ideological, moral and ethical yet simple,

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<sup>1</sup> Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1972, pp 39.

practical, progressive ideas right from its inception. A refreshingly liberal approach which inter-wined both religion and society succeeded in winning over the hearts of masses.

Chapter II entitled “**Bhakti Sants on Women: A Comparative Trajectory between Kabir and Guru Nanak**” – Section I of the Chapter briefly talks about the role of ideology and relationship of religion and society. It attempts to touch upon the existing condition of women which enabled me to contextualize the ideological position of important *nirguni* and *saguni* Sants on women. An understanding of the social context is relevant for appreciating the background, understanding the continuum and contextualizing their messages. In next Section, I deal with the perceptions of women of Bhakti Sants like Kabir, Tulsidas etc comparing it with those of Guru Nanak and his spiritual successors. One is tempted to undertake the study of the comparative trajectory which emerges from the sharp contrast in their perceptions on women. Very often women were held in low esteem by *bhakti* sants like Kabir and Tulsidas. They were neglected as living picture of lust and greed. Kabir, who otherwise spoke vehemently against caste system, disparity in society, idol worship etc. spoke ill of women and her “deceitful nature”. Sant Kabir asked men to shun the company of women as “*kabira tin ki kya gat jo nit nari ke sang*”. She was looked down upon as a potential temptress. Sant Tulsidas placed women at par with shudras and animal, when he said “*dhol gawar shudra pashu nari, teeno taran ke adhikari*”. Kabir has been accepted as the most significant representation of the ideological underpinnings which viewed women as an evil. Thus, although perceptions of other *saguni* sants are included, yet, Kabir has been dealt in specific, as a natural choice because it was only Kabir who had so many sayings about (read against) women attributed to him. Thus, due to his loud and clear vehement opinion he provided potent ideological baseline for a comparative trajectory. Against this back drop, it is significant that Guru Nanak made Sikhism conform to enlightened, simple, practical, progressive and humane ideals right from its inception.

The comparative analysis made me realize that Guru Nanak, within the patriarchal framework created a large space for women much larger than

other Bhakti Sants, yet the picture is not so simple and Guru Granth Sahib, at some places, has an ambivalent attitude and it includes passages where the women is projected in negative light.

Part-II of the thesis is entitled “***Stri Svabhav: Stri Dharam and the Prevailing Realities***”, the discussion on varied aspects of women’s life clearly bring out that they are closely interconnected and interdependent. Thus, this section should be ideally read as one piece but just for convenience, it has been sub-divided into three chapters. In this section, I have tried to examine the position, rights, role and status of women in the family in her varied roles, as a mother, sister, wife, daughter, mother-in-law and her individual identity. Women’s role in rituals and spiritual life; public sphere; women and work; her role in economy; property rights; position in the context of institution of marriage. An attempt has been made to contextualise the social customs like *Naata* on other forms of widow remarriage and to study and evaluate the economic logics operating behind the practice of widow remarriage in context of the division of property. It has also been studied that the custom of sati was rare or widespread in Punjab. We also have the instances of polygamy in the case of Gurus. If polygamy was the reality and its extensive prevalence then what was the nature of the relationship among co-wives and the kind of tactics they used to catch the attention, win over the love and care of their husbands? Questions like position of a girl child; differences in rituals performed at the time of birth of a son and a daughter; social position of a woman not being able to bear a child or giving birth to daughters only; female infanticide; responses of the society to parents doing female infanticide; witch craft, insanity, and other customs providing a platform to women to vent out her social aggrandizement etc have also been addressed under the title of “Weapons of the Weak”.

Constant effort has been made to capture the gap between the injunctions of the Guru/Gurus (normative belief) and the existing reality (operative belief). On one hand we have a set of normative norms well represented by the ideals of Gurus and in contrast we have the reality in operation which is in contradiction of the normative. I will be dealing with aspects like female infanticide; differences in rituals at the time of birth of male and female child; sati; polygamy; widow remarriage and its allied customs. One of the emphasis

would be the respective Gurus' viewpoints on these social evils but more important aspect would be to capture the gap between normative and the reality. For instance, as has been often noted Guru Amar Das was highly critical of female infanticide. He, in fact, instructed the Sikhs to shun the company of "*Kurrimaar*" (Killer of a girl child). However, Guru Gobind Singh's strict prohibition of the killing of female babies pointed to a practice which has gone on largely unchecked since the guruship of Amar Das, the first Sikh guru known to have criticised female infanticide.<sup>1</sup> This kind of academic exercise infact called for a rethinking of historiography as a whole; often necessitating a pushing against the well established boundaries of academic/ scholarly endeavors. This process has been characterized by Nita Kumar<sup>2</sup> as finding the "fault lines" in the larger patriarchal structures; the positioning of a spot light on areas where inconsistencies or cleavages in general activity occur. If there is an attempt to justify this gap between the normative and operative aspects or the best suited technique it is to level out the aberrations and construct a homogenized unilateral social fabric.

When dealing with this section, it needs to be underlined that no human society can be so homogeneous that one can perceive the position of women and her status in different roles as one unilateral general truth. Infact it cannot, and even attempted to be seen, existing as one unilateral generalization. One has to acknowledge the variations at all levels like class, caste, communities and even regional variations. Thus, an effort has been made to place this entire question of position of women in the context of caste, class and community; recognizing the basic fact that any human society can not be homogenous and there is need to place social and economic institutions in their ecological and physical setting and accept the multiplicity of cultural practices co existing with each other. One will have to be very careful that the social fabric of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its nuances and complexities are not viewed from the mindset of modern day. To view the then realities from today's yardstick of women's position and her role would be anachronistic and it would be a self defeating exercise.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, Cambridge, C.U.P. 1990

<sup>2</sup> Nita Kumar, *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994

We get a glimpse of the forms of the protests against male dominance, domestic violence in sources like *Charitro Pakhyan* and folk songs etc and also about the notions of honour and morality, notions of fidelity and chastity etc. For instance seclusion and isolation became a symbol of status in a Brahminical Patriarchal system. It was interesting to examine the virtues associated with an “ideal- virtuous” woman as there is projection of 32 virtues “*Batti Gunnī*” in a woman in *Guru Granth Sahib* which were cherished in normal life. The questions which have been dealt with are, what was the mechanism for regulation of social life at the level of family, inter personal, inter caste and inter community relationships, what was the role of customary practices in determining the position and rights of women and did the customary practices manage to give some breathing space or at times platforms to vent out her bottled up anger against the existing system. (Like the rituals of beating up *dever*, younger brother of husband at the time of marriage).

With this background and in this framework, as already mentioned just for the lucid reading, it became imperative to divide this section into three chapters. Chapter III entitled “**Marriage**” focuses on the institution of marriage in detail and acknowledge its importance as an extremely vital social mechanism which regulates the social sexual life of human society. It highlights the perceptions of the Sikh Gurus on marriage where they termed it so important that they proclaimed, “Living within the family, one obtains salvation”. They advocated a position of respect and dignity to women’s role as a wife and urged men to be loyal to their spouses. In this chapter one attempts to observe the intricacies of the complex relationship between the marriage and the caste. The intricacies and the complexities reminds one that no human society can be so homogenous so that one can present a unilateral general truth about the institution of marriage. One is inclined to acknowledge that the variation existed at all levels like class, caste, communities and even regional variations. It also talks about the varied forms of marriages. It is interesting to examine the virtues associated with an “ideal virtuous’ woman as there is projection of 32 virtues “*Batti Gunnī*” in a woman in *Guru Granth Sahib* or the expectation of the society at large and specifically the in-laws. It also tries to

assess the impact of exogamous marriage on women, her social presence and her own understanding of her position. The chapter also tries to understand the varied forms of customs like '*Karewa*' and '*Chadar Dalnaa*'. It strives to understand the economic logistics, if any, behind the system of widow remarriage which successfully succeeded in keeping the possession of land within the husband family and different manifestation of patriarchal guardianships. It also discusses the practice of child marriage and its logistics, polygamy etc.

Chapter IV entitled "**Women's Position in Social Sphere**" focuses on the social space of women and has attempted to make a study under the aegis like marriage rituals and ceremonies and other life cycle rituals. A detailed study of marriage rituals and other life cycle rites is made to clearly see whether the women played a significant role in the rituals or was she marginalized or her social position and expectation of subordination was equally manifested in the rituals as well or may be legitimized by the element of religion which is represented by the rituals.

Position of lower caste women, women's role in economy and inheritance laws etc. have also been awarded due attention. This chapter is concluded with a section on weapons of the weak where many customs like *moh-mahi*, beating up *dever*, younger brother of husband at the time of his marriage have been studied in detail. Folk songs have been studied in detail to assess whether they provided an effective platform to women. What was the role of customary practices in determining the position and rights of women? Did the customary practices manage to give some breathing space or at times platforms to vent out her bottled up anger against the existing system. In this chapter an attempt has also been made to study the complexities of the family as the basic social unit; tried to construct the position of women in her varied roles as a mother, wife, daughter, mother-in-law and her individual social identity, if she had any. It tries to capture the complexities of relationships-bond of love and dependence in the family.

Chapter V entitled "**Discrimination Against Women: Social Evils**" deals with the social discrimination against women. A study has been made on evils

like, female infanticide, *sati*, *purdah*, prostitution and polygamy. This chapter necessitated a very cautious handling of the material and the approach so as not to view the then existing social fabric, its nuances and complexities from the mindset of modern day. To view the then realities from today's yardstick of women's position and role would not only be anachronistic but rather a self defeating exercise. For instance if the polygamy was the reality then what was the nature of the relationship among the co-wives and the kind of tactics they used to win over the love and care of their husband? Questions like position of a girl child; differences in rituals performed at the time of birth of a son and a daughter; social position of a woman not being able to bear a child or one of giving birth to daughters only; female infanticide; responses of the society to parents committing female infanticide, witch-craft, insanity, dowry etc. have also been addressed. The Chapter concludes with the brief recapitulation of Sikh Gurus' perception on women.

In Chapter VI entitled “**Development of Sikh Panth: Construction or Deconstruction of Women's Identity**”, I have tried to identify and study the shift in the dominant concerns of the community with the passage of time, looking for historical and logical connections between the activity and ideas of the various phases. An attempt has also been made to relate the transformation, the changing face of Sikhism to the women's position and her role in religious pursuits; a gender analysis. For instance, the early gurus lived with in or near the Majha area of Punjab, a region which was and still known as a strong Jat constituency. Given the egalitarian nature of the Jats in the early Indo-Islamic period, it is possible that it was women in particular who were attracted to the message of emancipation of the Sikh Gurus and, consequently, to the full participation in developing the Sikh community. It was Guru Amar Das, who is by tradition accredited to make a definitive criticism of society beyond that of religious ineptitude; much of these criticisms directed towards the situation of women in society. He vehemently condemned social evils like *sati*, *purdah* and female infanticide. In brief, women would have had the most to gain from rejecting the restrictions placed upon them by an orthodox *brahminical* system and embracing the egalitarian message of the



early Sikh gurus. The third guru's criticism of the societal norms pertaining to women would conceivably have encouraged their movement into Sikh fold.

It was during Guru Amar Das' time that missionaries were appointed to extend the message of the Sikh panth beyond the immediate surroundings of Goindwal. Thus the *manji* system was created, a word literally meaning "string bed" and referring to the seat of authority. *Manji* were leaders of local gatherings who were directly accountable to the guru and thus an extension of his influence. While sources conflict with regard to the actual number of *manjis* as well their gender, there is evidence that there may have been women sent out to preach the guru's message of emancipation. The very possibility of women being included in such esteemed emissaries speaks, at least to a growing concern about women. Women missionaries would have proven most effective in the recruitment of other women into Sikh fold which would have, in consequence, greatly affected the religious leanings.

During the time of the fourth Guru, the *manji* system was transformed into the order of *masands*. The *masands* had a dual responsibility: they were to preach the message of the gurus and collect the voluntary tribute from the followers. Thus, the new order was tailored to suit both the missionary activities and the economic interests of the gurus. According to all accounts, women were excluded from the new system. Significantly, the fourth guru was highly critical of women in his writings. Similarly, when the development of militancy among Sikhs reached a pinnacle with the tenth guru, the role and the share of women also got affected. Doris R Jakobsh views the episode of Mata Jito adding sweets to water to be used at the site of initiation as "a feminine element thus came to be added to this male- dominated rite of initiation". With the process of institutionalization, gender differences within the Sikh panth became increasingly pronounced. With increased institutionalization, traditionally established role for men and women became more socially and materially feasible and were thus consolidated.

**Conclusion** – The study attempts to remind the close connection between the role of religion and social change. The thrust of my research draws its

perspective by and large from Joan Wallach Scott's (1988)<sup>1</sup> very appropriate and sharp observation that "Gender is an on-going fluid process whereby sexual differences acquire a socially or culturally constructed meaning." A historical focus on Gender thus goes far beyond the mere addition of women to the pre-existing male dominated historical narrative. In fact, Scott insists that a study of women must also include an analysis of formation of the male gender; a shift from "women's history" to history of gender". The category of gender not only illuminates unequal relations of power between male and female but helps one understand that unequal male female relations are extended via metaphors to varied areas of social life so as to signify unequal relations of power in general. The study also intends to highlight that in the study of any religion and its role, we need to go beyond traditional methods of exegesis to a "hermeneutics of suspicion"; Paul Ricoeur defines this "hermeneutics of suspicion" as "set (ting) out from and original negation, advancing through a work of deciphering and struggle (ing) against masks, finally.....put in the quest of a new affirmation."<sup>2</sup>

Only upon an unveiling of the presupposition of writers and their writings, only upon a suspicious reading entailing a thorough evaluation of the inherent sexist attitudes and practices within these writings, is one enabled to go beyond this suspicion to what Ricoeur terms the transformative "power of affirmation".

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *History of Gender and Politics*. New York University: Columbia Press, 1988

<sup>2</sup> Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart, eds., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his work*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.

## CHAPTER I

### THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

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History is the story of human experience and the relationship between history and geography is especially intimate. Geography concerned as it is with human environment; interaction represents the spatial dimension of human activity while history represents the time dimension. Geography is by nature the constant companion of historical studies. The historical record is inextricably linked to the geographic setting in which it developed. In other words, history is concerned with understanding the temporal dimensions of human experience (time and chronology). Geography is concerned with understanding the spatial dimension of human experience (space and place). Key concepts of geography such as location, place and region are tied inseparably to major ideas of history such as time, period and events.

In other words, human culture essentially springs from interaction between man and his non human environment. Logically a change in environment whether due to natural causes or human action, can lead to cultural change. Similarly, a qualitative or quantitative change in interaction itself may result in cultural change. A more obvious source of cultural change may be peaceful or violent contact with the bearers of a different culture. Without minimizing the importance of this cultural interaction, it may be safely stated that non human environment leaves its imprint on cultural formations whether we think of environmental influence in terms of “pre determination” or “adjustment” or “exploitation”. Spatial variations in socio cultural formations can thus be seen as the result of environmental as well as cultural interaction. Material and physical condition do certainly influence the nature of society.

Before discussing in detail, the geography (i.e.) “Land”, it would be worth noting that the human beings (in this case Guru Nanak and his successors to the guru gaddi) and their actions and the events of history derive their meaning from the political, economic, social and intellectual circumstances in which they are placed. The rise of any new awareness thus, marked the

catalytic element not in cultural but also in social system. In itself the product of what probably were deep tensions in the existing order, and of the elements which were its more recent accretions, this consciousness posed a serious challenge to the existing system and heralded the emergence of new formations. Without a proper understanding of the socio cultural and political milieu it would not only be difficult rather de contextualized to appreciate the message of Guru Nanak, in particular and Sikhism at large. What was the nature of socio-cultural context, which permitted this kind of ideological fermentation and expression; what socio political and cultural milieu contributed, at least not deterred, the growth of Sikhism in its nascent stage. If we perceive the concept of ideology as David N. Lorenzen "a form of discourse, primarily verbal but also behavioral, that directly or indirectly claims to describe the structure and functioning of a society in such a way as either to justify, or to protest against an unequal distribution of social status, economic wealth and political power among different groups within the society."<sup>1</sup> We may work on the basic premises that one of the basic functions of a religious tradition is to articulate a social ideology intended to serve as a sort of psychological glue that helps preserve /generate harmony within the religious community and within the society as a whole. Thus, any such ideological fermentation of Guru Nanak is a response or reaction to existing religious, socio cultural and political milieu; his own predilections owe a great deal to his background. Therefore, to comprehend and to appreciate this new thought, an understanding of its context and background is advisable. Moreover, as oft quoted "history is a dialogue between the past, present and future."

## **Punjab: Geographical Understanding**

A geographical region, by definition is a distinct part of a larger whole. It is generally defined on the basis of criterion involving physical features, climate, drainage, soils and the like. To these are added flora and fauna. We must admit that geographical region is not uniform in terms of criterion

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<sup>1</sup> David N. Lorenzen in *Bhakti Religion in North India, Community Identity and Political Action*, Delhi: Manohar, 1996, p.3.

evolved to define it. There are “sub regions”, each marked by differences in relation to others. No region is marked by cultural homogeneity either. There are cultural “sub regions” each marked by differences in relation to others. There is interaction between the sub regions, just as there is interaction between the regions. Regional articulations are the outcome of intra regional and inter regional articulation. The relation between this regional articulation and regional identity will be discussed in subsequent sections.

The Persian word Punjab derives its name from two words, panj [five] ab [water] means “five rivers” and by implication, the land of five rivers. The Punjab thus is a geographical entity loaded with inherent logistic problems. The problem arises when we try to take it literally as “the land of five rivers”. It is not clear however; precisely which region is covered by the term. There are six rivers in the so-called ‘land of five rivers’ and it is not certain whether the river Indus, the river Satlej or river Beas is meant to be excluded. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the term Punjab refers to the valleys of the five rivers or to the area between the five rivers. The Punjab as a geographical entity is not a precise connotation.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless; it is assumed that the Punjab strictly refers to the area lying between the Himalayas and the confluence of all the six rivers of the Punjab. In other words, the Punjab proper consists of the five doabs up to the foot- hills.

The vagueness of the Punjab as a geographical entity is further accentuated by its loose identification with a political entity. For the historian too, the Punjab has carried different connotations. The ambiguity of Punjab as a regional concept has allowed historians the freedom to escape the confines of a geographically delineated area.<sup>2</sup> The first difficulty of a historian is to identify his region at a given time and to be clear about the criteria by which it is actually identified.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, ‘The Historian’s Punjab’ p.1-10, in J.S. Grewal, *Miscellaneous Articles*, Amritsar, 1974. It is a brief survey of the multiplicity of connotations that have been given to the term ‘Punjab’ in Mughal times to the present day

<sup>2</sup> Chetan Singh, *Region and Empire, Punjab in 17th century*, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 12

The term Punjab came into currency during the reign of Akbar. In the documents of the Mughal period; we find the use of the terms Sarkar-i-Punjab and Suba-i-Lahore. The Punjab proper in the Mughal times comprised five main doabs i.e. tracts lying between the two rivers, which were formed and named by Akbar by combining the first syllables of the names of the rivers between which they lie.<sup>1</sup>

**The five doabs from east to the west are as follows:**

- ❖ The *Bist Jalandhar Doab*; comprising the territory between the *Sutlej* and the *Beas*, *Bist-Jalandhar Doab* is a very fertile tract. It contains the important cities of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur.
- ❖ The *Bari Doab*; It includes the tract between the *Beas* and the *Ravi*. The two most important cities of the Punjab, Lahore, and Amritsar are situated in this Doab. This is also known as Majha or Middle tract.
- ❖ The *Rachna Doab*; enclosed by rivers *Ravi* and *Chenab*, this fertile tract comprises notable towns of Gujranwala and Sheikhupura.
- ❖ The *Chai Doab*; lying between *Chenab* and the *Jhelum*, this tract has the important towns of Gujrat, Bhera and Shahpur.
- ❖ The *Sindh-Sagar Doab*; the tract between the *Jhelum* and the *Indus* is known as *Sindh–Sagar Doab*. ‘*Sindh-Sagar*’ literally means ‘Ocean of the Indus’. This area is not very fertile and productive. The important towns of this *Doab* are *Jhelum*, Rawalpindi, Attack, and Mianwali<sup>2</sup> Khushwant Singh, in addition to these divisions also gives a comprehensive list of Punjabi names for different regions have been [and in some cases still are] used.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we can see that the region under consideration is bordered by the Yamuna in the east and the Indus in the west. To its north and north-west lie vast mountain ranges, while its southern extremities are contained by the Great Indian Desert which flings out extensions in two directions .The

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Akbar, *The Punjab under the Mughals*; Delhi; 1974, p.1

<sup>2</sup> L.M Joshi, ed. *History and Culture of Punjab* part 1 Publication Bureau, Punjabi University Patiala; 2000, p.4

<sup>3</sup> Khushwant Singh, ‘A History of the Sikhs ‘vol.I, 469-1839, Oxford University Press Delhi; 1999, pp.3, 4

eastern extension included much of the *Phulkian* states. Chetan Singh's study shows that the introduction of canals here has pushed back the desert and converted into a fertile agricultural region.<sup>1</sup> The western extension went through *Sindh* and up the Indus Valley to the south-west angle of the Salt Range. The region enclosed within these natural boundaries is a great mass of alluvial brought down by the Indus and other five rivers.

In sum, the greater part of Punjab consists of flat alluvial plains which are drained by the Indus river system, thus creating five doabs. The eastern most of this *Bist-Jalandhar Doab*, as already discussed, is formed by the *Satlej* to the east and the *Beas* to the west. By virtue of its proximity to the northern hills the *Jalandhar Doab* receives a higher average rainfall than the other doabs. Through it also flow two small rivers, the *Black Bein* and the *White Bein*, both of which fall into the *Satlej*. The larger part of the other *Doabs*, however, consists of uplands known locally as *bar*. The northern portion of these quasi plateaus receives an annual rainfall which averages around 24 inches. Of these the upper *Bari Doab*, which includes Lahore, receives the greatest amount of rainfall westward the average rainfall decreases steadily. The lower part of these *Doabs* (in particular those of the *Bari* and *Sindh-Sagar Doabs*, which include Multan and the districts of Muzaffargarh) included sandy tracts which were some of the driest parts of India.

Spread across the upper regions of the *Sindh-Sagar Doab* is the *Pothuhar Plateau* upon the southern and south-western fringes of which rises the Salt Range. Its western boundary is marked by the Indus, while to the north it is bordered by the Himalayan foothills. As already noted, in this region are to be found the towns of Jhelum and Rawalpindi as also the medieval fortress of Rohtas. The rainfall in this region varies from 13 to 30 inches annually. Narrow strips of low lying flood plains [bets] ranging in width between 15 and 25 kilometers are to be found along the main rivers. Their limits are to be defined by broken chains of sand dunes or by an abrupt rise of land along

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Chetan Singh, *ibid*, p.25

the river banks<sup>1</sup>. Steep bluffs of 50 to 100 meters in height frequently separate the higher banks from the adjoining bet<sup>2</sup>. The rivers tend to change their course quite freely within these bets and the annual inundation that is witnessed here makes them very fertile.

Thus we see that though Punjab largely consists of a vast plain, it also has easily differentiated sub-regions. These differences probably were even more obvious in medieval times on account of the absence of modern irrigation facilities. This is a factor of utmost significance for it led to divergent socio-economic conditions within Punjab. It was from this diversity that much of the dynamism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Punjab arose. It attests the fact that the history of every country or region is shaped to a great extent by its geographical conditions and the Punjab has been no exception to this truism.

Making a brief survey of the geographical features of the region and acknowledging their role in the making of history, the socio culture of the people of a region, it is the cultural entity of the people which is closely related to its geographical features. For instance, the dress code is also highly influenced by the weather conditions of an area. As noted earlier, the regional articulations are thus the outcome of intra regional and inter regional interaction. The intensity of regional articulation in a particular historical situation may lead to consciousness in which the people of the region are deemed to be different from others. What the people of different sub regions share may appear to be more important than what they do not share with one another. This consciousness of regional identity springs from regional articulation. It creates a kind of self image which is related to objective reality but which may not exactly correspond to it. It would be worth addressing, the usage of the term Punjab. When exactly did it come into currency? Sometimes, it is suggested, as pointed out by J.S. Grewal that we have its prototype in the term *Saptasindhu*, or *Madra Desh*, or *Panchand*. This does not help, because we know little about these "regions" (assuming

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<sup>1</sup> S.L. Duggal, *Agricultural Atlas of Punjab*, Hissar, 1966, p.38

<sup>2</sup> *National Atlas of India*, Northern India, plate 2, 1; 2, 000, 000, 1965. Also see Chetan Singh, p.17



for the sake of argument that they represented regions in terms of geography, polity, culture of self image.<sup>1</sup> The term Punjab does not occur in the compositions of Guru Nanak, although he managed to win over the people's heart and used the language of the people. The term does not occur in the *Tuzuk-i-Baburi* or *Baburnama* which, otherwise, contains interesting information on the geography, society and political divisions of northern India. In *Akbarnama*, however, the term is used rather frequently. It is reasonable to infer that it came into currency during the last quarter of the sixteenth century. It was in the reign of Akbar that the province of Lahore was the only province in Akbar's empire which had five *Doabs*. The names used by *Akbarnama*, incidentally, passed into popular usage. The usage of the term "Punjab" did not remain confined to the politico administrative unit created by Akbar. The inhabitants of the province brought in the usage of the epithet "Punjabi". Infact, it's the Punjabi culture which would be more flexible and fluid in its concept as well as in its operation. In the reign of Aurangzeb, a chronicler refers to Sadullah Khan, the famous Diwan of Shah Jahan, as a Punjabi<sup>2</sup>. It is obvious that even during Mughal times some people were conscious of the fact that people living in a certain geographical region called the Punjab were naturally to be called Punjabis; that is the people of the Punjab. Criteria other than the politico-geographical were being unconsciously added to the original considerations of area and administration. Interestingly, the term "Punjabi" was used for the language of the people of the province. The emergence of the dialects of this language several centuries before the time of Akbar was a great cultural development. Amir Khusrau refers to the language of the common masses of the region around Lahore as "*Lahauri*". When the province came to be known as the Punjab, this language could naturally be called "Punjabi" and with the expansion of the political boundaries of the "Punjab" the orbit of the language increased as well.

In the late eighteenth century during the Sikh times Waris Shah refers to the Punjab as a beautiful forehead of Hindustan. In him, there is the awareness

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, Inaugural Address, Punjab History Conference, Twenty Seventh Session, March 28 / 30, 1995, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Grewal's 'Historian's Punjab p.2

that the region called Punjab, though distinct, was a part of the larger unit called Hindustan. Ahmad Yaar ,a well known Punjabi poet who wrote *The-Shahnamah- i –Ranjit Singh* in Persian, refers not only to the region and the people but also to the language Punjabi. Shah Muhammad, another Punjabi poet writing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, refers to the Punjabi women explicitly as *panjaban*. Also, the Punjabi sentiment is rather strong in his poem and the term clearly cuts across creeds and communities.

Though, not negating the importance of the geographical boundaries, I must confess that one is strongly inclined to agree with J.S.Grewal when he contends that nevertheless, in the narrative part of their [contemporary or near contemporary chroniclers] history of the Punjab, the boundaries of the Punjab expand and contract with the expansion and contraction of the states established in the Punjab. There is no doubt about the primacy of the politico-geographical criterion for them, but they are also aware of the cultural and social entity of the Punjab. Ganesh Das projects the consciousness even backwards when he refers to Rai Inderjit of the ancient times a “Punjabi”<sup>1</sup>

To take the argument little further one is inclined to comment that even the problems of regional history would arise in the mind of a scholar only as a part of the study of the history of a country as a whole, for the process of social change and the factors motivating it can hardly be observed within the narrow field of a region, that too, in terms of a clearly defined geographical entity. In S. Nurul Hasan’s perception, ours is a large country with considerable variations in its different regions. At the same time, the existence of major differences notwithstanding, there is a remarkable unity in the broad pattern of socio-economic development, culture and administrative institutions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ibid, p.1-3

<sup>2</sup> S. Nurul Hasan Presidential Address (Medieval Punjab Section) Punjab History Conference, 1965.Punjabi University, Patiala. Reprint in Punjab Past and Present, Essays in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh, ed, Harbans Singh, N. Gerald Barrier, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1976.

In sum, as also contended by scholars like J.S.Grewal and S. Nurul Hasan, that the Punjab, during the medieval period, had developed a personality of its own. It was socially and culturally distinct from the Ganga-Jamuna Doab on the east, Kashmir on the north, the territory of Roh on the west, and Rajputana on the south. It is true that within this region there were variations from place to place and from one social group to the other, but these variations do not militate against the broader historical unity of the Punjab. Infact, no one had ever seriously questioned this unity until the British imperialist decided to partition it on the basis of religion<sup>1</sup>

### **A Brief Survey of Political Conditions**

A survey of political conditions, that is, to attempt an analysis of the facts, factors and forces that went into the making of a society which provided the characteristic dynamism conducive for the origin and evolution of Sikhism. The period, one would readily note, is all but co terminus with the last days of the Delhi Sultanate and the rise, growth and attainment of the peak of the Mughal imperial power and glory. During the sixteenth century in particular, the region witnessed some of the most significant political developments affecting the entire sub continent. Babur's invasion of India, Humayun's recovery of his lost kingdom, and subsequently, Akbar's defense of his unstable and uncertain inheritance were all initiated in this borderland. It was during this period that the region's role as the threshold of India exposed it to the pressures of external forces. In other words, geographically and geopolitically the Punjab occupies an area of North India, which had to bear the brunt of the frontal challenge of all the peoples and cultures that were borne from outside of the North-Western borders on to the northern plains of India, and this, from the earliest days known to history. Entering through the north – western passes or from across the Northern Mountains; all foreign elements found in the fertile and tropical plains of the Punjab their first haven where they could spread and settle down if they chose to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> It is significant that in the course of the earliest studies conducted by the British administrators, the observation has generally been made that cultural differences on ground of religion are of a comparatively minor nature. Cf. Punjab District Gazetteer. Also see S. Nurul Hasan, Presidential Address.1965

The Archaemenians conquered and made India west of the Indus and its tributaries, a part of their sprawling empire. Alexander pushed right up to the Beas, and though he went back with his army, the strongest political and cultural hold of the Hellenistic Greeks, and following them, of the Parthians, was on the Punjab. Almost simultaneously began the southward swoop down of the Central Asian pastoral and nomadic peoples, avalanche like and in wave after wave, beginning in the pre-Christian centuries with the Sakas and Kushans and ending only with the Islamicised Turks, Afghans and Mughals in the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. To these migrants belonged among others the *Abhiras*, the *Hunas*, the *Jats*, the *Gujjars*, the pre-Islamic Turks, to mention only a few. Then there were the Buddhists and Hindushahis of Afghanistan, who have also to be taken into account. Punjab happened to be the land to challenge and confront them all with all attendant shocks, surprises, and disturbances, settle them down, incorporate and integrate them as far as her people could, and in the process to be transformed by them, before the foreign peoples, and their cultures, transformed somewhat in their turn, could push forward and spread further inland. But as B.D. Chattopadhyaya cautions with regard to the history of ancient Punjab a historian should at least make an effort to understand early Punjab in terms of the local cultural evolution, rather than relegating it to one of the history's eternal "march" regions (where the Indo Greeks, the *Scythians*, the *Parthians*, the *Kushanas* and the *Hunas* all came and left an imprint of their cultures).<sup>1</sup>

What the effect would be of such continuous challenges and pressures on the land and its people, can easily be imagined. Ethnically and culturally Punjab became a great laboratory where many ethnic types and cultures became eventually fused into one.<sup>2</sup> Although this perception of one homogeneous culture needs to be discussed in detail, yet, it clearly hints at exchange of ideas, interaction between different cultures. In other words, the ethnic plurality in the Punjab was matched by the variety in its cultural

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<sup>1</sup> B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *Geographical Perspectives, Culture Change and Linkages: Some Reflections on Early Punjab*, Proceedings, Punjab History Conference, 27th session, Patiala, 1995, p.28

<sup>2</sup> Nihar Ranjan Ray, *The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society*, Delhi, 2nd.ed.1975, p2

tradition.<sup>1</sup> After a cursory glance at the political history of Punjab from earliest times, now it is advisable to focus our attention on the political developments from eleventh century onwards.

From the eleventh century the Punjab became once again a part of large empires when Mahmud of Ghazni annexed it to his dominions in Afghanistan and Central Asia. His successors ruled over the land of five rivers for over 150 years without extending their territory much beyond the river Ghaggar. The last of them was ousted from Lahore by the new rulers of Afghanistan, the Ghurids, before the end of the twelfth century. The Turkish Generals of the Ghurids conquered the whole of northern India, and three Turkish dynasties ruled over the Sultanate of Delhi during the Thirteenth century. During the fourteenth century, much of the Punjab was a part of the large empire established by the Khalji Turks and maintained by the Tughlaqs. The western *Doabs*, however, had come under the influence of the Mongol successors of Chingiz Khan before Timur, the acknowledged ancestors of the Mughal emperors, invaded India towards the end of the fourteenth century. The Sayyid rulers came into power at Delhi during the early fifteenth century and tried to extend their influence over the Punjab, but without much success. This position was inherited by the Afghan ruler Bahlol Lodhi in the late fifteenth century. Under his successors, Sikandar and Ibrahim Lodhi, the Afghan governor of Punjab extended his influence up to river Jhelum. Meanwhile, Babur was keen to expand his dominions in the direction of India.<sup>2</sup>

Babur writes in his Memoirs, "As it was always in my heart to possess Hindustan and as the several countries had once held by the Turks, I pictured them as my own and was resolved to get them into my own hands whether peacefully or by force".<sup>3</sup> Babur made five attempts to conquer this country. All his expeditions were led into Punjab and the final and the decisive battle was fought in this province on April 21, 1526 at Panipat.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* revised ed. The New Cambridge History of India, Cambridge University Press, 1999

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p.9

<sup>3</sup> *Baburnama* Babur, Zahir-ud-din Muhammad, *Baburnama*, Vols II, Eng Trans A.S. Beveridge, New Delhi, 1970, p. 380.

Babur's first expedition bore no fruit. Within a month of Babur's exit from the scene, the territories occupied by him were retaken by its old masters, expelling Hindu Beg, in sept.1519. Babur again entered India through *Khyber Pass*, but the news of disturbance in Badakshan obliged him to go back without achieving anything. Bad faith and an ill-blood had been created between Sultan Ibrahim Lodhi and Daulat Khan Lodhi, the governor of Lahore. Daulat Khan was called to Delhi but in order to avoid the anger of the Sultan he did not go personally but sent his son Dilawar Khan. This further annoyed Ibrahim who treated Dilawar Khan in a shabby manner and made no secret of how he was disposed towards his father.<sup>1</sup> The estrangement between the Sultan and the governor worsened and in order to protect himself against the well-founded apprehensions from the side of Ibrahim; Daulat Khan sent an invitation to Babur to help him against the Sultan. Daulat Khan wanted to be independent of Delhi in Punjab and did not want to give any superiority to Babur or anybody else for any help received. Babur readily accepted the invitation. He did not like to miss the opportunity to interfere in the affairs of Hindustan.<sup>2</sup>

Ibrahim got an incling of the conspiracy between Daulat Khan and Babur and sent an army to Lahore. The imperial army captured Lahore without much difficulty and drove Daulat Khan into exile. But Babur came to Punjab in 1524 in response to Daulat Khan's invitation. He captured Lahore and after a brief stay of four days moved to Dipalpur which fell to his sword. Before returning to Kabul, Babur conferred Sultanpur upon Dilawar Khan, Daulat Khan's son, and assigned Dipalpur to Alam Khan. Lahore was placed under Mir Abdul Aziz, a close relative of Babur. Sialkot was placed under Khusrau Kukultash.

On Babur's return from Punjab, Daulat Khan snatched Sultanpur from his son Dilawar Khan and Dipalpur from Ibrahim's ambitious uncle Alam Khan. Alam Khan went to Kabul and offered Babur full sovereignty over the Punjab in

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<sup>1</sup> See R.P.Tripathi Rise and fall of the Mughal Empire, Allahabad, 1957, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion see Rushbrook Williams, an empire builder of The Sixteenth Century, London; 1918. B S Nijjar, Punjab Under The Sultans 1000-1529, Delhi; 1968. Muni Lal, Babur; Life and Times, Delhi 1977. RP Tripathi, Rise And Fall of The Mughal Empire, Allahabad 1962.

return for his help to conquer the throne of Delhi from Ibrahim. Babur agreed to the proposal as he considered that, "it would give him a legitimate right to what he had only taken by force."<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, Ibrahim sent an imperial army to liquidate the rebels in the Punjab but Daulat Khan got an easy victory over Sultan Ibrahim's army. Leaving Kabul in the charge of his 16 years old son Kamran, Babur set out to an expedition of Hindustan. The coming of Babur unnerved Daulat Khan who was again resorting to conspiratorial maneuvering. He conveyed to Babur as written in Baburnama that "if his own faults were pardoned, he would take service with me and surrender Malot", Daulat Khan was pardoned. Daulat Khan was handed over to Kita Beg to be taken to Bhera for imprisonment, but he died on the way when he reached Sultanpur. Having dealt with Daulat Khan, Babur decided for a major action. He writes, 'I put my foot on the stirrup of resolution and set my hand on reins of trust in God and moved forward against Sultan Ibrahim'.<sup>2</sup> Babur set out his troops in proper battle array at the historic battle-field of Panipat. Babur emerged victorious and with it began the long glorious era of Mughal dynasty with a brief interregnum of Second Afghan Empire.

It has often been suggested that after Panipat, Babur could not pay his full attention to the affairs of Punjab. Actually, after Panipat the theatre of warfare and political activities had shifted to western and later to eastern India. Moreover, major events such as the battle of Panipat and Chausa had been overshadowing the perceptions of the contemporary writers, as well as of the modern historians. Hence, we have very little information of what actually happened in Punjab. J.S.Grewal argues, on the basis of analysis of the phenomena of rehabilitation, resettlement and urbanization in the Punjab province under the Lodhi's, that there were "long spells of peace punctuated by spasmodic warfare in Punjab during the lifetime of Guru Nanak."<sup>3</sup> To advance his argument, he states, 'After the battle of Panipat, the Punjab remained virtually free from warfare and internal disorder.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Details See Baburnama, pp. 167, 78

<sup>2</sup> Baburnama, op. cit. pp. 380-82

<sup>3</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, Punjab University, Chandigarh, 1969, p. 9-10

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* p. 10

After discussing in detail the political developments at the time of the rise of the Mughal empire one would like to remind that the other very important development at the social front was the birth of Sikhism. At this point we would just limit ourselves to a brief chronological parallel drawn between Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and his nine spiritual successors on one hand and the Mughal Empire, the most formidable political power of the time, on the other. In other words, two hundred and fifty years of the life and activities of the ten Gurus witnessed also considerable changes in the political situation of North India; changes that could not but have affected Punjab and the expanding Sikh society.

The emergence of Guru Nanak was co terminus with the disintegration of the Sultanate of Delhi. Some modern historians refer to the Punjab of those times as a place comparative peace and prosperity. W. H. Mcleod says, 'It seems Guru Nanak was born into a favoured period, at least as far as security and economic conditions were concerned'. In J.S. Grewal's opinion, the western dominions of the Lodhi Sultans enjoyed comparative peace for nearly half a century after Guru Nanak's birth, and even during these fifty years "the internal peace does not appear to have been seriously disturbed." On the other hand, Indu Bhushan Banerjee, who wrote on the early history of Guru Nanak as "an age of disintegration and an age of almost constant strife"?<sup>1</sup> So long as Akbar was on the throne at Agra, Mughal policy of non-interference helped the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh community, both directly and indirectly, to further their socio-religious and socio-economic interests. This explains Akbar's double visit to Goindwal, once to meet Guru Ramdas and a second time, to meet Guru Arjun, and his gift of a tract of land on which was laid the foundation stone of the holy city of Amritsar. This policy of Akbar spans the lives and activities of two Gurus and by far the larger part of those of Guru Arjun, i.e., of the great formative period of Sikhism and Sikh society.

But by the time of Jahangir's accession to the throne, taking advantage of comparative peace and direct prestige and patronage of the imperial court in

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<sup>1</sup> Indubhushan Banerjee, Evolution of the Khalsa, p.9



the shape and form of more than one imperial visit, the Sikh Gurus could initiate and carry out policies and programs, which not only went to impart to Sikhism a definite form by providing the faith a dependable body of texts carefully sorted out and codified, but also helped the Sikh community to take a definite shape and form. This was also helped further by the patronage which they came to receive from the trading and commercial communities. This patronage and support was indeed very important and significant during the formative period of the faith and the society. But then the tide turned, and during the reigns of Jahangir, Shahjahan, and Aurangzeb, Mughal imperial policy, especially the policy of these three monarchs towards the Sikhs in general and the Sikh Gurus in particular, seems to have been unfriendly, rather hostile.

### **Guru Nanak on Political Milieu**

To place Guru Nanak's ideological fermentation in the right perspective, we must make an attempt to see the political scenario from the eyes of Guru Nanak, the way he perceived the existing reality. A rigorous analysis of the compositions of Guru Nanak reveals that there is hardly anything in contemporary politics, society or religion that he finds commendable.<sup>1</sup> It becomes still more relevant in light of the fact that the age of Guru Nanak was not fundamentally or even radically different from the previous or the following few centuries. For a rational conceptualization of his position it may be suggested that the entire social order had lost its legitimacy in the eyes of Guru Nanak.

Guru Nanak's sharp response to Babur's invasions underlines the most important political development during his life, the transition from Afghan to Mughal rule in the Punjab and in northern India. The Guru was an eye-witness to the massacre of the town of Saidpur [now Eminabad, in West Pakistan] during the third invasion of Babur in 1521; he referred it as a 'marriage - party of sin'.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*; *The New Cambridge History of India*, Cambridge University Press, 2nd.ed.1999; p.28

*"With the bridal procession of sin, Babur issued forth from Kabul and by force demanded the hand of the bride, Oh Lalo."*

What pained Guru Nanak the most were the pitiable sufferings of the women-folk carried away and dishonored by the ruthless soldiers of the Mughal army?

*Those who wore beautiful dresses and had the partings of their hair dyed with vermilion have their locks now shorn with the scissors, and dust is thrown upon their heads.*

*Broken are the strings of their pearls. Wealth and beauty have now become their bane. Dishonoured, and with ropes round their necks, they are carried away by soldiers.*

*When Babur's rule was proclaimed, no one could eat his food<sup>1</sup>*

Guru Nanak was thoroughly familiar with the politico-administrative arrangements made by the Afghan rulers, particularly in the Punjab. This familiarity, reflected in the use of the metaphors, is a measure of his preoccupation with this vital aspect of the social situation. Moreover in Guru Nanak's verses, there is a direct denunciation of contemporary rule. For instance, he said, the rulers are unjust; they discriminate against their non-Muslim subjects by extorting *jaziya* and pilgrimage tax. The ruling class is oppressing the cultivators and the common people. The rajas prey like lions and the *muqaddams* eat like dogs; they fall upon the *raiya* day and night.

Infact, the Turko-Afghan rule is seen equated as a mark of the *kaliyuga*.

*"The kaliyuga is a knife; the rajas are butchers; dharma is fast vanishing; in the dark night of falsehood the moon of truth nowhere seems to rise."<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> These verses occur in the compositions of Guru Nanak referred to as Babur-vani or 'the utterances concerning Babur'; Adi Granth 360,417-18; 722-23. I, Tilang, 3-5; 1,Asa Astapadian,1,3-5; 1Asa, Ghar vi.39. Also see Ganda Singh, History and Culture of Punjab through the Ages, in History and Culture of Punjab; ed. Mohinder Singh, Delhi; Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1988.p. 1-24. ibid, Grewal p.9

<sup>2</sup> Adi Granth, Raga Majha, M.1;145;1288.

In Guru Nanak's experience corruption is so rampant in the administration that there is no one who does not receive or give bribe. Even the raja does justice only when his palm is greased but not in the name of God.<sup>1</sup> "They live and die in ignorance of the lord; singed by their own pride, they would burn like the forest reed in a wild fire".<sup>2</sup>

Here an attempt may be made to sum up briefly Guru Nanak's position in respect of his response to his political milieu. According to Guru Nanak, ruler ship and riches come not as acquisition of men but as God's gift. Guru Nanak does not attach divinity to the office of the King but as a God's gift. The raja as well as the beggar exists because of divine dispensation. Some he has raised to ruler ship; others wander about begging and God is the fountain of the whole authority. It is in God's power to degrade the Sultan just as His power to exalt the man. According to Guru Nanak, if the ruler's order was against the justice and equity, it was not obligatory on the people to honour him and in that lay the seeds of defiance and challenge to the authority of an unjust ruler and his rule. There is a general comment first that the rulers (rajas) are avaricious and full of 'ahankar'. *Maya-sanch rajai ahankari maya sath na challai piari*.<sup>3</sup> For instance, there is a general reference to 'blood sucking rajas'.<sup>4</sup> Then there is an oft-quoted more direct comment: "The rajas are lions and the muqaddams dogs; they fall upon the raiyat day and night. Their agents inflict wounds with claws (of power) and the dogs lick blood and relish the liver."<sup>5</sup>

## Social Milieu

The social situations in Punjab in particular and in Northern India in general during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was marked by significant changes due to circumstances brought about by the Turko-Afghan rule in the sphere of politics and administration, urban and rural economy, and the sphere of religious and social culture. The "Medieval

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<sup>1</sup> AG, 63

<sup>2</sup> AG, 350

<sup>3</sup> AG, 1342

<sup>4</sup> AG, 142

<sup>5</sup> AG, 1288

History” not only in India, but outside India too was an era of politico social change.<sup>1</sup> The whole of India in her medieval History was a conglomeration of different entities which led to the fragmentation of political paraphernalia and influenced the social fabric of society into many pieces of different traditions. The Punjab was no exception to it. The Punjab too passed through a socio-religious upheavals, it was an age of political disintegration.

The then Hindu Kingdoms of India were disturbed by the invasion of Muhammad bin Qasim as it opened the North West gate for the advent of the Muslims in India and thus Muslim influx started. But by the Ghaznavid invasions the impact of the Muslims began to emerge openly. The last decade of the twelfth and the first decade of the thirteenth century in India, in K.A. Nizami’s opinion were marked by the clash of two degenerating and decaying social systems Turkish and the Rajputs.<sup>2</sup> The continuities, however, remained as important as changes. Sensitive individuals responded to the changed situation according to their lights and moral fervour. This social background and social position were equally relevant for the nature and content of their response. Social change was accompanied by social tensions of various kinds. These tensions were probably the strongest in Punjab. Thus, relatively egalitarian religious movements had begun to appear in the region much before the reign of Akbar. Their protagonists felt the urge to address themselves to the common people. This could be done only by using the language they spoke. Malik Muhammad Jaisi prefaced one of his Hindi works with the remark that the *auliya* had always adopted the languages of the countries in which they settled; he specifically mentions Hindi and Punjabi.<sup>3</sup> In this context, Shaikh Farid acquires great significance who was writing Punjabi verse, in all probability he must not be alone. J.S. Grewal rightly presumes that although no conspicuous writer is known, but some of the Sufis composed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, verses in Punjabi, thus there is hardly

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<sup>1</sup> K.A. Nizami, Studies in Medieval Indian History and Culture, Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1966, p. 11-12

<sup>2</sup> K.A. Nizami ed. Politics and Society During the Early Medieval Period, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 1974, p. 152

<sup>3</sup> Maulavi Abdul Haqq, The Role of the Sufis in the Early Development of Urdu (In Urdu), Aligarh, n.d., p. 8-9.

any reason to believe that no Sufi of the fifteenth century wrote in Punjabi verses. The ongoing social situation marked by the social tensions might also explain partly the distinctive responses of Guru Nanak to the social situation in which he lived and moved.<sup>1</sup>

The extensive political changes, already discussed affected inter multa ala<sup>2</sup> the character of the population in Punjab. Yahya Sirhindi in his work "Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi" projects the sixteenth century as an extremely dark age for the people of Punjab for its mal treatment, mal administration, mal behaviour and injustice with the native people. It is projected that the social fabric of the society was spoiled by the constant invasions from the outside boundaries of the Punjab. The social fabric of the society was decaying. The kinglike behaviors of the *amirs* and *maliks* and the political distrust had weakened the political bond of the government and it fell into anarchy causing civil wars. The governors indulged into intrigues to become independent and it led to the disintegration.<sup>3</sup> Guru Nanak, too, in his compositions denounces the cruelty and the bigotry of the Kings and their officials in the following words:

*"The Kali age is Knife; kings are butchers, and righteousness has taken wings.  
Where can one find the moon of truth in this dark night of falsehood?"*

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were two main communities in Punjab. However, the third community appeared on the socio economic stage in 1699 soon after the creation of Khalsa. The dominant tribes of the region during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were an important legacy of political changes. Many Baloch and Pathan clans were dominant in the Multan province of the Mughal Empire. The Kharal and Sial tribes were dominant in the lower portions of the Bari and Rachan doabs. The Ghakkhars, Awans and Janjuas were dominant in the upper Sindh-Sagar Doab. Many Rajput clans held lands along the Shivaliks and the border along Rajasthan.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal The Sikhs of the Punjab, Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1994, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p. 4

<sup>3</sup> Yahya Sirhindi, Tarik-i-Mubarak Shahi, Tr. Elliot and Dowson, Vol. IV, p. 32

The ideal norm of the Hindu society was social differentiation. Alberuni observed in the early eleventh century that there were four varnas among the Hindus: the Brahman, the Kshatriya, the vaishya and the shudra.<sup>1</sup> But he also observed a number of “subcastes” in each *Varna*.<sup>2</sup> Obviously the varnas did not cover all the people. As is well known, these varnas were associated with specific duties, howsoever, it is highly improbable that these classified duties comprehended all the profession followed by these social groups even in Alberuni’s day. It is equally significant that the *varna* system was not acceptable to all the members of the Hindu society.

Nevertheless, the concept of varna was accepted and advocated throughout the medieval period. At the close of the seventeenth century, Sujan Rai described the ahl-i-brahmana as those who subscribed to the varna order of the Brahman, the Chhatri, the *Baish* and the *Shudra*. At the same time one must admit the possibility of absorption, upgrading or downgrading of actual social groups within the framework of the *varna*. The socio-economic position of certain social groups did not always correspond to their ritual status. This would be true, for instance of the Khatris of the Punjab.

The Hindus of the Punjab during the late fifteenth century did not fit completely into the four-varnas order. Punjab does not seem to have known and experienced the countless number of proliferation and ramification of the vertical ‘*jati*’ grades and subgrades nor the socio religious rigours of the Brahmanical ‘*jati*’ hierarchy. In Nihar Ranjan Ray’s opinion Smarta-Pauranik early medieval Brahmanism does not seem to have had a very strong hold on the people of this region even during the centuries preceding the advent of Islam and the consolidation of Muslim political authority. The reasons he ascribes for limited hold of *Brahmanism* are the prevalence of Mahayana Buddhism for long; and a more important reason may be found in the changing and challenging fortunes of history. This must have had resulted in relatively quicker changes in the socio-political life of the people, generating more social mobility amongst them than anywhere else in India. Such

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<sup>1</sup> Edward C. Sachau, tr. Alberuni’s India, London 1914, p. 100

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p. 102

mobility naturally stood in the way of consolidation of the Brahmanical system of jati.<sup>1</sup>

By the close of the fifteenth century the social situation in the Punjab had considerably changed due to the impact of the Turkish conquest and the rule of the Delhi Sultans. The Rajput ruling classes, the Kshatriyas of the Varna concept, had been dislodged from the power. Some of them might have accepted Islam or migrated to the neighbouring hills or deserts. Their significant remnant could perhaps be seen in a few zamindars called Rai. But even at this level, the chiefs of non-Rajput tribes or clans had come into prominence. To equate the Hindu *Zamindars*, *Chaudhris* and *Muqaddams* of the Lodi Punjab with the Kshatriyas of the varna concept would be the best or the worst, way of glossing over a significant social change. The occupation of the old rajput ruling classes with the vital politics of the Punjab was gone. At the close of the fifteenth century one could find individuals tilling the soil but styling themselves as rajput.<sup>2</sup>

With the loss of the rajput sovereignty, the brahmins lost their traditional patronage and thus, with few exceptions, the position and the legal and formal powers of the Brahmins had undergone a considerable change. Some of the brahmins sought refuge and honour in the neighbouring principalities in the Punjab hills. Some others were obliged to seek livelihood in alternate professions (traditionally considered inappropriate for the Brahmins). This would not be a peculiarity of the Mughal period or of only the other parts other than the Punjab. Vasudeva Upadhyay has noticed that even before A.D. 1200 some brahmins took to the profession of arms, agriculture, trade and money- lending.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, one cannot discount the probability that the brahmins as a class appear to have increased their influence over the Hindu masses. Notwithstanding the elimination of the Rajputs from power, the brahmins could consolidate

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<sup>1</sup> Nihar Ranjan Ray, op. cit., p.4

<sup>2</sup> Vasudeva Upadhyay has noted the professions of agriculture and trade among the rajputs even before A.D., 1200 C. Vasudeva, Upadhyay, Socio-Religious Condition of North India, Varanasi, p. 65

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 50

their informal authority and personal influence. Maybe it could have its reasons in the brahmans' need for finding an alternate source of patronage. The brahmans now read the scriptures to more numerous but humbler class of patrons, acted as family priests, taught in pathshalas etc. The brahmans emphasis on the meticulous observance of religious rites and ceremonies must have logically increased. In the early nineteenth century, Ganesh Das observed that the *ahl-i-dharm* among the Hindus were extremely meticulous about their food and drink being "pure": they refused to own a Hindu who associated with others.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, the brahmans as a priestly class enjoyed a status of honour and prestige which did not correspond to their economic means. For a closer correspondence between the economic means and social prestige, the Khatri of the Punjab of our period is a good example. They traced their origins to the Epic Age, they were some of the Old inhabitants of the area, probably older than the Rajputs. The profession of arms was no longer important to them besides administration, trade and shopkeeping absorbed their best energies and interests. Although Char-Bagh-i-Punjab is a source of little later period, yet, clearly reflects the inclinations per se of the Khatri. Ganesh Das, author of Char-Bagh-i-Punjab mentions service, writership, trade shop-keeping drapery and haberdashery, trade in silken goods and banking or money-changing as some of old and important pre-occupations of the Khatri of the Punjab.<sup>2</sup>

The Khatri were not, infact, averse to money-lending (*sahukars*) and acting as bankers, making use of *hundis* and *tamassuks*. Sujan Rai in his work, *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* mentions *bima* (insurance) as a commendable institutions<sup>3</sup>. In brief, much of the urban trade and shopkeeping in the towns was in their hands. Though they could be found in the country-side yet, their concentration was significant in towns and cities where they played as significant entrepreneurs. According to Romila Thapar the Khatri of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ganesh Das, *Char Bagh-i-Punjab*, ed. Kirpal Singh, Amritsar, 1965, p. 240

<sup>2</sup> Ganesh Das, *Char Bagh-i-Punjab*, p. 291

<sup>3</sup> Sujan Rai, *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh*, p. 24-25



North India had accepted vaishya status much before 1200 A.D.,<sup>1</sup> the Khattris of the Punjab were among those who showed a considerable adaptability and success. The Hindu society in the rural Punjab was marked by a preponderance of the jats, particularly in the upper *Rechna*, upper *Bari* and *Bist Jalandhar Doabs* and on the left side of the river Sutlej. Divided into numerous clans they had their *Zamindars*, *Chaudhris* and *Muqaddams*; but the bulk of the jats consisted of ordinary cultivators. The composition in light of the fact that it is they who accounted for the largest adherents of Sikhism, probably, their mindset and their perception of religion was reasonably satisfied by the focus of nascent Sikhisms at that time. They did not generally refused to pay the ordinary dues to the state, yet, they resented and refused to accept oppression. Probably this attitude to 'rebel' to counter oppressive tendencies made them appreciate the 'rebellious' heroes of Punjab folklore; also perhaps occasionally in taking up arms against their oppressors. There were gradual shifts in the relative importance of the various clans of the jats during the medieval period.

The rajputs, the brahmans, the Khattris and the jats formed, no doubt, the most important social groups of the Hindu society in the Punjab of the period under review but they did not account for its entire non-Muslim population. K.M. Ashraf observes that the popular tradition in Hindustan takes account of atleast thirty-six social groups, including the various subdivisions of the higher "castes"<sup>2</sup>. Among these social groups are included the occupations of the brewer, goldsmith, weaver, tin-worker betel-leaf seller, shepherded, milkman, carpenter, smith, bhat, dyer, flower-seller calico-printer, barber, oilman, musicians, juggler and the mountebank. There is no reason to be sceptical about the existence of these occupational groups in the Punjab, rural as well as urban Punjab. Infact, some more occupations were found in the region of Batale as those of the tailor, potter, thathiar, the mason in specific. Below them were the untouchables, the 'Chandalas' and the like who were divided into the "castes" of their own and were basically considered outside the pale of the society. The condition of the Hindu

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<sup>1</sup> Romila Thapar, A History of India, Penguin Books, 1967, p. 253

<sup>2</sup> K.M. Ashraf, Life and condition of the People of Hindustan, p. 193

craftsmen was perhaps not much different from that of the Muslim craftsmen. They all lived in poverty. "The introduction of Muslim craftsmen says K.M. Ashraf, "may have done something towards removing the social disabilities of the class as a whole, but in the long run Muslim influence succumbed to the older traditions. When Babur came to Hindustan no appreciable modification in the social character of these vocations was visible, for the finds indicate that all the craftsmen organized in rigid and exclusive castes".<sup>1</sup> The conditions of the untouchables was obviously the worst, they lived a wretched life under the shadow of contempt and extreme poverty.

In the period of my study, the last three quarters of the sixteenth century represented an era of cultural comingling. During this phase, like earlier periods, some of the low born Hindus were converted either to Islam or to the Sikh faith. In brief, the Punjab of our period witnessed the emergence of comingling which could be seen in both the communities. It must be noted that the Sufis played a significant role in the evolution of the "syncretic culture". The mutual interaction and mutual influence in manners, ceremonies owed a great deal to the Sufi influence which contributed in evolving an "assimilated culture". The history of medieval India, to a very considerable extent, in words of Aziz Ahmad is a history of Hindu Muslim religio-cultural tensions, interspersed with movements or individual efforts at understanding harmony and even composite developments.<sup>2</sup>

As often noted, none of these can be treated as a unified whole, for both formed a part of the much larger entities in the Indian subcontinent. Furthermore, in certain spheres and at certain levels of socio-economic life, a strict distinction between "Hindu" and "Muslim" may not lead to a meaningful social analysis, realizing the problem of conceptualization and the complexity of the social situation in the Punjab around A.D. 1500, yet one can not afford not to discuss in brief about the "Hindu" and "Muslim" community per se to weave the complex fabric of the then social milieu.

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<sup>1</sup> K.M. Ashraf, *ibid*, pp. 202-203; Baburnama, *ibid*, pp. 427-428

<sup>2</sup> Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in Indian Environment*, Oxford, 1964, p. 73

The Muslim society in the Punjab as in some other parts of India, was as well marked by sectarian divisions as by racial differences. The sectarian differences whether one was a sunni, a shia, an ismaili, mulhid, a batini, an ibahati or a mahdavi was an issue of consideration for social interaction. The Sunnis formed the largest proportion of Muslim population in the Punjab, but the Shias appear to have been well represented in proportion to their total number in the subcontinent.<sup>1</sup> Though the Sufis can in no sense be treated as "sect" their differences with the Ulema could not although be concealed. Differences on the bases of religious belief and practice lent a measure of diversity to the Muslim society in the Punjab.

From a sociological standpoint, the horizontal stratification was more important than the sectarian division of the Muslim society in the Punjab.<sup>2</sup> K.M. Ashraf puts it aptly when he says that an early assumption that an "Islamic" society was bound to be based on the idea of equality is refuted by the socio-economic facts:<sup>3</sup> In the Punjab, as elsewhere, a broad social stratification in the Muslim society is clearly evident. The nobles composed the "social elite" and they enjoyed greater economic advantages than any other section or group. The religious dignitaries such as *ulema*, *sayyids*, *sheikhs* etc. too enjoyed a high social status and may be considered in the upper class of the Muslim society. The middling state was formed by the peasants, soldiers, traders, scholars, writers, the sayyids, the shaikhzadas and the administrative personnel. The craftsmen, personal servants and domestic slaves, both male and female formed the lowest strata. They were poor and down-trodden. Due to their economic condition they led a wretched life.

The discussion would be incomplete if we do not refer to the composition and its associated realities to the Muslims of the Punjab. In retrospect one can easily comprehend that the influx of the Muslims into the land had become virtually inevitable after the annexation of the province to the

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<sup>1</sup> For the diversity of Islam in India, see Murray, Titus, *Islam in India and Pakistan*, Calcutta, 1959, pp. 87-115

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, P. 36

<sup>3</sup> K.M. Ashraf, *The Life and conditions of the People at Hindustan*, p. 170

dominions of Mohamad of Ghazna. For some time, the Punjab became infact the core dominion of Mahmud's successor. Then for three centuries it formed a part of the dominions of the Ilbari, Khalji, Tughlaq, Sayyed and the Afghan rulers. For nearly five hundred years, some Muslim soldiers, administrators, traders, scholars, men of letters and learned and pious men had been adopting the Punjab as their home. Some of them had been married with the indigenous girls and after a long stay in the country of their adoption, many of them had come to be "Indianized" and perceived themselves as "Indian Muslims". The dramatic immigration of the Mughals and Persians in the early sixteenth century was more conspicuous because of its rapidity. It was nonetheless a part of an old, albeit gradual process.<sup>1</sup>

However, the "immigrants" do not appear to have formed a very large proportion of the Muslim community in the Punjab of our period. The proportion of "native" Muslims was perhaps larger. Their existence may be attributed, obviously to a long process of conversion. In the first place, one cannot deny the forcible conversion and enslavement of women and children as repercussions of war. Individual Muslims, in public or private positions, thought it meritorious to convert the natives to Islam through material inducement or maybe mere persuasion. In the process of peaceful conversion the Sufi Shaikhs clearly played a very significant role. For instance Shaikh Ali-al-Hujwiri, had settled in Lahore during the Ghaznavid times. According to a later chronicler of the Punjab the Hindu Gujjars of Lahore were converted to Islam by Ali-al-Hujwiri<sup>2</sup>. It may be enough to say here that the process of gradual conversion through the Sufis continued through the medieval period. In the early sixteenth century, Shaikh Daud, for instance established his *Khanqah* at Sher Garh in the *Bari Doab* where Badayuni was to see him converting the Hindus.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, op. cit. p. 32

<sup>2</sup> Ganesh Das Char Bagh-i-Punjab, p. 279

<sup>3</sup> Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh, III, 28-39. It may also be added here that, according to Mufti Ghulam Sarwar, Sayyid Bahawal Qadiri founded his Khanqah in the 1540s at a place later included in the district of Montgomery". Tarikh-i-Makhzan-i-Punjab, Lucknow, 1877, p.238. According to Ganesh Das, both Sher Garh and Hujre Shah Muqim were situated in the bar amidst the Dogar and Gujjar tribes, p. 302.

Probably all the major towns of the Punjab had come to have a considerable proportion of Muslim population by the close of the fifteenth century. The close connection of urbanization with administrative arrangement may lead us to infer that almost all the major towns of the Punjab contained a substantial proportion of Muslim population. The proportion of Muslims in the urban population of the Punjab appears to have been much larger than their proportion in the rural population.<sup>1</sup>

In the discussion of the social milieu, it must be noted that the cities and towns served as the centres of Indo-Muslim culture in the Punjab as elsewhere. The contribution of pre-Mughal Lahore to "literature and culture" was by no means negligible. The compiler of the Gazetteer of the Lahore District, 1883-84<sup>2</sup> rightly observes that during the later Pathan and Mughal dynasties, Lahore was celebrated as "the resort of learned men". J.S. Grewal in his monumental work "Guru Nanak in History" also talks about the importance of Urban Centres in the then Punjab.<sup>3</sup> Multan was another important center of learning. *Mutakhab-ut-Tawarikh* reports that Shaikh Adbullah and Azizullah both from Tulamba, were believed to have set new standards in the pursuit of *mantiq* (logic) and *Kalam* (scholastic) theology.<sup>4</sup> *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* reports that Sikandar Lodi consulted Shaikh Salih of Sirhind at times. In sum, from the *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* and *Ain-i-Akbari* it is evident that several other towns of the Punjab enjoyed the reputation of being respectable centres of Muslim learning and scholarship: Jalandhar Sultanpur, Ajodhen, Thanesar, Samana, Narnaul, for

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed understanding of the process of conversion see Ahsan Raza Khan along with Baburnama which observes that at times of the whole of tribes like Gakkhars in the Sind Sagar Doab; Jut and Janjuhe tribes between the Nilab and Bhera, some clans of the Gujjars and Jats as well as the Rajputs. See Babur-nama, I, 380, 388, 441 j. Cf. Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh, p. 350 Ahsan Raza Khan, "The Problem of the North Western Frontier of Hindustan in the first Quarter of the Sixteenth Century", India History Congress, Mysore, 1966; Babur-nama, I, P. 380; Tabaqat-i-Akbari, III, 528-39; Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh, 293.

<sup>2</sup> Gazetteer of the Lahore District, 1883-84 p. 52-53

<sup>3</sup> Grewal, J.S., Guru Nanak in History p. 52

<sup>4</sup> Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh, p. 323-24.

example.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is highly probable that learned men of local repute were to be found in all the important towns of the Punjab.<sup>2</sup>

## Religious Milieu

The ethnic plurality in the Punjab was matched by the variety in its religious and cultural traditions. All Muslims formally subscribe to the belief that there was no other God but Allah and Muhammad was his rasul [messenger]. However, sectarian divisions had appeared among Muslims even before the advent of the Turks into the Punjab. Imported by the immigrant Muslims, ideological differences were perpetuated by those who came under its influence in India. It is easy to identify three old sects; the Sunni, the Shia, and the Ismaili. A parallel interpretation of Islam was cherished, advocated and developed by the Sufis from the very beginning of the Turkish conquest in Punjab.<sup>3</sup>

More and more people were coming under the influence of Sufis. A large number of Hindus too attended the congregation of the Sufis as their teachings were liberal and non-sectarian. Their importance is reflected in the increasing recognition given to them by the Persian chroniclers<sup>4</sup> from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century like the *Siyar-al-Auliya* and the *Siyar-al-Arifin* written between 1350-1550. The Sufi orders *Silsillahs* proliferated in India as in the rest of the Islamic world. There were important orders of *Chishtis* and *Suhrawardi* established at various places in the country. If anything, the influence of the Sufis in the Punjab was more pervasive than elsewhere in the country. Lahore was known as the abode of many sheikhs since the time of *Ali-al-Hujwiri*, who settled in Lahore during the rule of the Ghaznavids. Multan was similarly a seat of many *Sheikhs*, besides the famous Bahauddin Zakkariya. The *Khanqah* of Sheikh Farid at Pakpattan

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<sup>1</sup> Tabaqat-i-Akbari II, 460-80; Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh, III, 51-155; Ain-i-Akbari, Blochmann, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 606-17.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Grewal, Guru Nanak in History, p. 42

<sup>3</sup> J.S. Grewal op. cit. p. 14-15

For a good presentation of Islam in India on the basis of contemporary evidence, Peter Hardy, 'Islam in Medieval India', Sources of Indian Tradition ed. W.M. Theodore de Barry Islam in Medieval India Sources of Indian Predation, Columbia University Press, New York, 1958, 371-435.

<sup>4</sup> J.S. Grewal, Sikhs of Punjab, p. 16

remained an eminent centre from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. There were Sufis in Hansi, Thanesar, and Narnaul. The town of Panipat was associated with Sheikh Sharafuddin, known as Bu Ali Qalandar. Lesser luminaries adorned other towns and pockets of the countryside. The Sufi sheikhs worked as great syncretic force; their attitude towards the Hindus were sympathetic. The liberal attitude and the philanthropic activities of the Sufis converted a large number of Hindus especially from the fourth *varna* to Islam.

Punjab was marked by the existence of multiple religious faiths. As noted earlier, Hinduism and Islam were the two main religions of the Punjab during the sixteenth century. However, there were number of religious beliefs and practices in both the religions.<sup>1</sup> *Brahmanical* religion, the oldest of all the religious traditions of India, was transformed into Hinduism in the early medieval period and with this change was the emergence and evolution of various sects viz. *Shaivism*, *Vaishnavism*, *Shaktism* in Punjab, which later on in the sixteenth century developed further into various sub sects. The medieval Hinduism was not a homogeneous or a compact system of religion but a family of religious system. Moreover, it was not totally Vedic origin but it included a many fold heterogeneous sects of non Vedic origin too.<sup>2</sup> It was a combination of many systems and religious ideologies, including Vedic ritualism, *Vedantic* thought, *Vaishnavism*, *Saivism* and primeval cults.<sup>3</sup>

All non Muslim Indians were not 'Hindus' as the term is used today.<sup>4</sup> There were pockets of Tantric Buddhism in the Punjab hills. In the plains, there were the Jain monks with a lay following among traders and shop-keepers of many a town in the Punjab. Nihar Ranjan Ray contends that we have direct and indirect evidence to show that apart from the *Jain sanyasis*, the *Nathpanthi yogis*, the *Avadhutas* and the *Kapalikas* were well known in the Punjab of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and not merely Guru Nanak

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, p. 62

<sup>2</sup> Fauja Singh, *History of the Punjab*, vol. III, p.294

<sup>3</sup> P.V. Kane, *History of Dharamshastra*, vol. V, part II, Poona, 1962, p.1921

<sup>4</sup> J.S. Grewal op. cit. p. 23

but a few successive Gurus had contacts with them, either as contenders or as part collaborators in an ideological sense.<sup>1</sup>

As noted 'Hinduism' was represented by *Shaiva*, *Vaishnava*, and *Shakta* beliefs and practices. Temples, dedicated to Shiva as the supreme deity, were looked after by *Shaiva Brahmins*, who also cultivated *Shaiva* literature, the *Agamas* and *Puranas*. The *Shaiva sanyasis* were known for their hard penance and austerity. They belonged to different orders, traditionally considered to be ten, thus they were also known as *Dasnamis*. They generally wore ochre-coloured garments, though some of them went naked. Almost all of them wore tilak on their forehead. Some used three lines, representing Shiva's trident, or his third eye. Some used two horizontal lines with a dot as the phallic emblem of Shiva. The *sanyasis* wandered from place to place, but they also founded establishments called maths. The head of the math could be nominated by the predecessor or elected by his fellow disciples. Within *Shaivism* a new movement arose probably after the Ghaznavid conquest of the Punjab. In this movement, initiated by Gorakhnath, Hathyoga was adopted to be a theological system with Shiva as the supreme deity. They rejected ritualism and metaphysical speculation. In accepting disciples they disregarded the difference of caste. But they regarded women as 'the tigress of the night', a great temptation and, therefore, a great danger in the jogi's path.

Turning to *Vaishnavism* in the Punjab we notice that the Vaishnava texts were known to Alberuni in the eleventh century; the *Bhagvadgita*, the *Bhagvata Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana*. Temples dedicated to Vishnu as the supreme deity, as *Lakshmi-Narayan* or one of his incarnations, were looked after by *Vaishnava Brahmins*. The ascetics among the *Vaishnavas* were generally known as *bairagis*. They recognized merit in ceremonial ritual and pilgrimage to sacred places. Veneration for the cow and the Brahman, they shared with many other Hindus. They advocated total abstention from meat and liquor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nihar Ranjan Ray, op. cit., p. 8

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Grewal, op. cit. p.24



The Shaktas worshipped the goddess in her various forms, giving primacy to the active principle or cosmic force [shakti] which sustains the universe and various manifestations of gods. Worship of the goddess was of two kinds, generally referred to as 'the *cultus* of the right hand' and '*cultus* of the left hand'. Animal sacrifice in honour of Durga or Kali, or any other ferocious form of the Great Goddess, was an essential element of the cultus of the right. The left – handers performed 'black – rites', which, in theory, were meant only for adept, and which involved wine [*madya*], fish [*matsya*], flesh [*mansa*], parched grain [*mudra*], and coition [*maithuna*]. The purpose of this ritual was to attain to a state of complete identification with Shakti and Shiva. The practice of this rite was secretive and limited but it made the left-handers [*vamacharis*] extremely disreputable in the eyes of the majority of the people. According to Nihar Ranjan Ray the religion of the common people of the Punjab and the Punjab Himalayas seems to have been based on the Pauranik version of the Sakti cult. He further points out the vast influence of the Sakti cult in deriving the significance of such toponyms in these regions as, for instance, Ambala which is derived from Amba; Chandigarh named after *Chandi*; Panchkula, a technical term of *Tantrik* significance. *Kalka* is a distorted version of *Kalika*; Simla is again a distorted version of *Symala Devi*. Besides, throughout these regions one still finds a countless number of small shrines with all but shapeless icons of crude form placed on their altars, which worshippers, common village folks describe as *Mansa*, *Chandi*, *Kali*, *Durga*, which are all manifestations of *Sakti*, the mother Goddess par excellence of *Puranic Brahmanism*. The popularity of the Sakti cult and these goddesses is indirectly attested by the Sikh sources too when they state that Lehna, the perspective Guru Angad, was going on a pilgrimage to Kali's temple with a group of pilgrims.

This brief account of the major forms of Muslim and Hindu religious beliefs and practices does not take into account a large mass of the common people and their 'popular religion' which bordered on animism and fetishism. Godlings of nature, of disease, malevolent spirits and animal worship, heroic godlings, worship of ancestors, totems and fetishes made a conspicuous appearance in this popular religion.

As in *Shaivism* so in *Vaishnavism* arose a new movement known as the bhakti movement. The path of bhakti came to be regarded as a valid path for salvation, like the path of knowledge [*jnana or gyan*] and the path of correct observance of ritual [*karma*]. *Ramanuja* in the south in the eleventh-twelfth century made a significant contribution to the bhakti movement by giving primacy to the path of the bhakti. In the thirteenth and fourteenth century *Vaishnava* bhakti began to be addressed to the human incarnations of Vishnu, which is Rama and Krishna. The cult of Rama bhakti was popularized by *Ramanand* in northern India, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. *Vaishnav* bhakti was meant primarily for the upper or middling castes, though its protagonist made some use of the language of the people and they were more indulgent towards the lower castes.

After making a survey of the general religious milieu it would be an interesting idea to make a brief analysis of the perceptions of the Sikh Gurus, particularly Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, on the ongoing belief and practices. He held high spiritual ideas, it was his conviction that the entire universe is suffused with divine light and all creation is His creation. The only source of light in all human beings is the divine light; God alone is the bestower of life upon all living beings. Caste distinction and social differentiation did not harmonize with this conviction. None should be regarded high [*uttam*] on the basis of his birth, or caste; and none should be regarded low [*nich*]. Instead of the Brahmin and *Khatris*, Guru Nanak identifies himself with the lower castes and untouchables:

*Be there the lowest among the low, or even the lower, Nanak is with them.*<sup>1</sup>

The social reality did not conform to the ideal norm of the *varna* order. Guru Nanak invites people to come out of the shells of their castes as individuals in search of the path of truth. The idea of equality and universality of spiritual opportunity are the obverse and reverse of the same socio-religious coin. The shudra and the untouchables are placed at par with the Brahmins and khatris significantly, the woman is placed at par with man. The differences of

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<sup>1</sup> AG 15

caste and sex, and similarly the differences of country and creed, are set aside as irrelevant for salvation.

Guru Nanak's attitude towards the traditional Hindu deities and scripture is intimately linked up with his attitude towards the pandit; the attitude of Guru Nanak has in-built rejection of the traditional authority of the Hindu scriptures. With the rejection of Hindu deities and scriptures went the repudiation of traditional mode of worship and religious practices. There was no merit in pilgrimage to the sixty-eight sacred places, not even to Sangam in the Prayag where the Ganga and Jamuna mingled with a third invisible stream. There was no merit in the worship of images. Ritual reading of scripture is a waste of time. The performance of *hom* is equally useless. Ritual charities are of no use either. The protagonist of such beliefs and practices, the pandits, naturally come in for denunciation. In Guru Nanak's perception, Pandit doles out externalities and he is a 'broker' in false practices. He does it in mundane self-interest. With his intrinsic interest in worldly occupations, his pretence of knowledge increases the inner dirt which keeps on multiplying. The sacred thread of the pandits, the sacred mark on his forehead, his spotless dhoti and his rosary are useless without a genuine faith.<sup>1</sup>

Guru Nanak gives as much attention to the jogi as to the pandit. He has no appreciation for the jogi aspiration to gain supernatural powers or to attempt to attain salvation by psycho-physical or chemico-physical means. Nor does he appreciate their idea of renunciation [*udas*].

Guru Nanak's attitude towards the *Ulema* and the *Sheikhs* is similar to his attitude towards the pandit and jogi. While addressing the Muslims, Guru Nanak shows his preference for the path of the Sufis over that of the *Ulema*. They who wish to become true Musalmans should "first adopt the path of the *Auliya*, treating renunciation as the file that removes the rust" of the human soul. This relative appreciation of the *Sufi* path does not mean, however, that Guru Nanak gave the Sufis his unqualified approval.

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<sup>1</sup> AG 56, 221, 355, 358, 413, 432, 470, 471-72, 635, 1171, 1256, 1290

Guru Nanak's basic attitude towards Islam and Hinduism is explicitly stated in the line;

*Neither the Veda nor the Ketab know the mystery.*<sup>1</sup>

*In the same way the qazi, the pandit and the jogi are bracketed.*<sup>2</sup>

*The qazi utters lies and eats what is unclean; the brahaman takes life and then goes off to bathe ceremoniously; the blind jogi does not know the way; all three are desolated.*

To sum it up, as already discussed, the Punjab had to bear the brunt of frequent foreign invasions by the logic of its geographical location. Every foreign invasion initiated a cycle of 'action-reaction'; this process of interaction and assimilation of new cultures greatly affected the socio-cultural and traditional milieu of the society. There was a constant interaction and exchange between the existing social values and the newer ones which had entered the social scenario. Of course, one does not intend to view it as a homogeneous society where the level of change, impact reflected in the ideology, socio-cultural value system and traditions was of the same nature and intensity at all levels. Yet, one would like to emphasize that due to the recurrent onslaught of varied cultures and traditions, value-system the society must have, inevitably been forced by the compulsion of historical events to be more open and flexible in its acceptance of varied cultures and traditions. In other words, this must have resulted in lesser rigidity in a society as a whole, to resist the newer ideas. The acceptance or at least the non-resistant attitude of the society to the new ideological fermentation of Guru Nanak's ideas and value-system must have been a great contributing factor in preparing a conducive environment for the birth and evolution of Sikhism.

On the political front the time span of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed considerable changes in the political situation of North India, changes that could not but have affected Punjab. It coincided with the demise of the Lodhi rule and the rise and the glorious phase of the Mughal

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<sup>1</sup> AG, 021

<sup>2</sup> AG, 662,951

rule. The emergence of Guru Nanak was co terminus with the disintegration of the Sultanate of Delhi. The Lodhi Sultans and their administration do not seem to have paid proper attention to the political affairs of the Punjab during the first quarter of the sixteenth century. Sikandar Lodhi is known to have remained heavily engrossed in the affairs of Gwalior, which had an adverse impact on the political situation in Punjab. Daulat Kahn Lodhi, who had been appointed governor of Lahore in 1500 AD, had virtually declared himself the defacto ruler of his dominions that extended from Sirhind in the east to Bhira in the west. Daulat Khan Lodhi, the governor of Punjab whose relation with the Sultan were far from cordial, also sent an invitation to Babur to invade Hindustan. (Another such invitation was sent by Ibrahim Khan Lodhi's uncle)<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, Sultan Ibrahim Lodhi dispatched an army under Behar Khan to divest him of the governorship of Lahore. On his part, Daulat Khan instead of giving a fight, vacated Lahore to retire towards Multan. But in the meantime, Babar had already crossed the Indus and reached Lahore without any resistance. Unfortunately, the Afghan Army which had been sent with a limited purpose to subdue Daulat Khan had to fight the Mughals to check their advance to Lahore. In the ensuing battle in 1524 A.D., Babar having defeated the Afghans army, captured the city and set on fire some of the bazars of Lahore. Next it marched to Dipalpur, stormed and put the garrison to the sword. Although Daulat Khan and Ghazi Khan had a sizeable army at their command and even at Lahore, they were entrenched to engage the Mughals, yet they got panicky, abandoned Lahore and retreated to the fort of Milwat (Mallot). On the other hand, in April 1526 at Panipat, took place the decisive battle between Ibrahim Lodhi and Babur. It has often been suggested that after Panipat, Babar could not pay his full attention to the affairs of the Punjab. Actually, after Panipat the theatre of warfare and political activities had shifted to western and later eastern India. J.S. Grewal, on the basis of his analysis of the phenomenon of rehabilitation, resettlement and organization in the Punjab province under the Lodis believed that there were "Long spells of peace punctuated by spasmodic warfare in Punjab

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<sup>1</sup> Babarnama, op cit, p 440

during the lifetime of Guru Nanak”.<sup>1</sup> To advance his argument, he states, “After the battle of Panipat, the Punjab remained virtually free from warfare and internal disorder”.<sup>2</sup>

So long as Akbar was on the throne at Agra, Mughal policy of non-interference helped Sikh Gurus and the Sikh community, both directly and indirectly, to further their socio-religious and socio-economic interests.

The policy of Akbar spans the lives and activities of two Gurus and by far the larger part of those of Guru Arjun, i.e. of the great formative period of Sikhism and Sikh society.

It must, however, be realized that each region has its own peculiarities and an effective system of governance tended to respond to local requirements and changing situations. The Mughal administration in the Punjab was flexible enough to accommodate its regional peculiarities.

As far as the socio-religious milieu is concerned the fast changing and challenging fortunes of history of the land to which I have already made a reference, and which resulted in relatively quicker changes in the socio-political lives of the people, generating more social mobility amongst them than anywhere else in India. Such mobility naturally stood in the way of consolidation of the Brahmanical system of Jati. Punjab does not seem to have known and experienced the countless number of proliferation and ramification of vertical jati-grades and sub-grades nor the socio-religious rigours of the *Brahmanical* jati hierarchy.

In addition to the lesser rigorous control of Brahmanical system, the ethnic plurality in the Punjab was matched by the variety in its religious and cultural traditions. Apart from the other theological currents of Islam a parallel interpretation of Islam was cherished, advocated and developed by the Sufis from the very beginning of the Turkish conquest of the Punjab, more and more people were coming under the influence of Sufis. Infact, the influence of the Sufis in Punjab was more pervasive than anywhere else in the

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, Punjab University, Chandigarh, 1969, pp. 9-10

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Ibid*, p.9

country. This was the time period when the bhakti saints were able to win over the masses by an appeal to the emotive principle of faith whereby the path of Bhakti came to be regarded as the valid path for salvation, like the path of knowledge (*Jnane* or *Gyan*) and the path of correct observance of the ritual (*Karma*). In Punjab, Guru Nanak became the icon of Bhakti movement. The socio cultural environment of Punjab proved to be a fertile ground for developing the ideological position of Guru Nanak "*Ek Onkar, Nirankar, Nirgune, Nirbhey*". In other words, the entire universe is suffused with divine light; God alone is the bestower of life upon all living beings. Caste distinction and social differentiation did not harmonize with this conviction. None should be regarded "*Uttam*" or "rich" on the basis of his birth or caste. The *shudras* and the untouchables are placed at par with the Brahmins and Khatri. The women is placed at par with men and worthy of spiritual success.

### **BHAKTI SANTS ON WOMEN: A COMPARATIVE TRAJECTORY BETWEEN KABIR AND GURU NANAK**

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*The traditional view, of women, which was voiced by Ravana, was that women had eight negative qualities – foolhardiness, falsehood, waywardness, lustfulness, and cowardice, lack of discrimination, suspicion and cruelty. (Tulsi Das, Ramcharitra Manas, Gita Press, Gorakh Pur, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition, No. 6/16/2; henceforth cited as Manasa)*

*It is in the context of bhakti that the women's private and public religion intersected.....Popularity of Bhakti resulted in no small measure from its inclusion of such marginal groups as women and sudras ....being female was generally no bar to bhakti (Katherine K. Young "Hinduism", Arvind Sharma [ed.] Women in World Religions, Albany, N.Y.SUNY Press.1987. p. 76-77).*

The above quotations indicate the conventional view about the women and the contribution of bhakti movement for the betterment of her position in the society. Section one briefly talks about the role of ideology and relationship of religion and society. It briefly touches upon condition of the women so that the ideological formulations of the bhakti *sants* can be contextualized. Section two recapitulates the perceptions of important nirgun and *sagun sants* on women. Section three discusses the nuances in the usage of the term "*sant*", the connotations attached to its usage specifically in context of Punjab. It also deals with the question whether it is appropriate to use the term "*sant*" for Kabir and Guru Nanak? Section four discusses similarities and differences between Guru Nanak and Kabir and makes an attempt to find an explanation for the difference in their ideological formulations.

#### **The Social Background: A Reality**

No ideology can be properly understood without analytically locating it in its specific historical, socio- cultural, economic and political context. One of the basic functions of the dominant religious traditions of any society is to articulate a social ideology intended to serve as a sort of psychological glue that helps preserve both harmony and privilege within the religious community and within the society



as a whole (including its subordinate classes).<sup>1</sup> Certainly there is a complex interplay between religion and social change. While religious traditions have been important players in the transformation of societies, religion can also be understood as being “among the foremost institutions which conserve society, encoding stabilizing worldviews and values and transmitting these from generation to generation.....Religion has been an instrument of liberation for women. But religion has just as often become an instrument of women’s social oppression.”<sup>2</sup> Influence of Guru Nanak and Kabir becomes still more relevant in the light of Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist’s words, religion is experienced as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men.”<sup>3</sup>

A brief reference about the social inequalities of that period especially with respect to women helps to contextualize the perceptions of Guru Nanak, Kabir or for that matter other important religious figures of the time period. First and foremost, we have to remind ourselves that what we are saying about the general condition of women should be viewed as the overlapping of religious categories in the sub continent and to use Raj Kumari Shankar’s term the analysis becomes an even more complex task in case of “fusion of traditions”. For centuries, the status of women in India was being systematically downgraded. Centuries ago, Manu the Hindu Law giver, went to the extent of declaring that the service of the husband by the woman is considered to be equal to the service of God.

“Though he be destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as god by the faithful wife. No sacrifice, no vows, no fast must be performed by women apart from for their husbands; if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that reason alone be exalted in heaven.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Lorenzen, Introduction,” *The Historical Vicissitudes of Bhakti Religion in Bhakti Religion in North India, Community Identity and Political Action*”, ed. David Lorenzen, Delhi, Manohar, 1996,p13

<sup>2</sup> Falk and Gross, *Unspoken Worlds*, xv, xxi.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Religion as a Cultural System*,” in Michael Banton, ed, *An Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1966,p.4

<sup>4</sup> *Manava Dharma Shastra or MDS* tr. G.C. Haughton, ed Rev. Jones (1825, 4th edition, 1863, rept. Delhi Asian Educational Services, 1982. Henceforth in the text cited as MDS)

According to K.M. Ashraf and A.B. Pandey, woman in the medieval Indian society was regarded as inferior to man; her position at any rate, was subordinate to his. However, Alberuni noticed what he regarded as a strange custom that Indians consulted their women on all matters of importance. The practice of polygamy and child marriage according to V. Upadhyaya, was prevalent in India before A.D. 1200, and *sati* in the early centuries, according to Romila Thapar, was synonymous with "virtuous woman". Alberuni in the 11<sup>th</sup> century noted that he was familiar with the practice of Sati. The widow, who refused to become *sati* was ill-treated as long as she lived. Old women and mothers were not expected to become *sati*. More attention was given to the male child than to the female child. With reference to *sati*, Amir Khusrau expressed great appreciation for the supreme sacrifice of the Indian woman for her husband. Ibn Battuta noticed an example of *sati* near Pakpattan and several other elsewhere in India; the act was regarded as honorable and meritorious.

As widely deliberated upon by the scholars that the caste system, economic oppression, denial of right to property and inheritance, a false sense of impurity attached to menstruation and child birth, deliberate deprivation of education led to the deterioration of women's position in society. A woman was never fit for independence in any stage of life. This was further justified by religious sanctions as cited earlier and here is another quote.

"By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing, must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her Lord (husband) is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband or sons; by leaving them she would make both her own and her husband's families contemptible."<sup>1</sup>

Marriage is one of the most important social institutions among all the communities. Perhaps, after the consolidation of the institution of marriage, the women were married only when mature (after puberty) but gradually, in the succeeding centuries, especially during the period under review, they

were married before puberty. This was done to establish more effective control over the sexuality of women.<sup>1</sup> Whereas once both daughters and sons were viewed as important (even though there was some preference for sons on account of patrilineal/ patrilocal social organizations, now sons were not only highly preferred (a man could attain heaven only if his son performed his cremation) but daughters came to be viewed as serious liabilities. This occurred largely because marriage in elite circles was *Kanyadaan*- the gift of a daughter accompanied by dowry. The fact that brides accompanied by gifts were transferred to their husband's name meant that they were a poor investment<sup>2</sup>.

The segregation of sexes became more severe after the 12<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the areas of sub continent that were under the Muslim rule.... Hindu women, already carefully controlled by or segregated from men, imitated the practice of *purdah* of the Muslim women. The consequence was that many upper caste Hindu women, already bound to the home were further restricted so that they rarely left their residence".<sup>3</sup> In the late 15th century, when Guru Nanak started preaching his message, both Hindus and Muslims considered women to be inferior to men, an impediment in the way of spiritual progress, and the cause of man's moral degradation. Polygamy was common, at least in some sections of society; widows were denied re-marriage and social recognition. *Sati* was practiced although not very widespread as a general practice. Child marriage and female infanticide were widespread. Women were economically, socially and psychologically dependent on men.

In sum, the social situation in Punjab in particular and Northern India in general during the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries was marked by the continuous process of change due to circumstances brought about by the Turko-Afghan rule in the sphere of politics and administration. Significant changes in the urban and rural economy and socio-cultural life with extensive impact on the social milieu were being noticed. The continuities, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine K Young, 1987 "Hinduism", Arvind Sharma (ed.) Women in World Religions, Albany, N.Y: Suny Press, p. 9

<sup>2</sup> Young, 2002, *ibid*, p. 9

<sup>3</sup> Young, 1987, *ibid*, p. 79

remained as important as the changes. Sensitive individuals responded to the changed situation according to their lights and moral fervour. Their social background and social situation were equally relevant for the nature and character of their response. Social change was accompanied by social tension of various kinds. These tensions were probably the strongest in the Punjab.<sup>1</sup> This might explain at least partly the distinctive response of Guru Nanak to the social situation in which he lived and moved.

### **Bhakti Sants on Women: A Brief Recap**

While discussing a comparative trajectory between the perceptions of Guru Nanak and Kabir on women, their ideas and attitudes; we are viewing their perceptions in a larger framework of a major societal development known as the Bhakti Movement (800AD- 1700AD). The word Bhakti is derived from Sanskrit word “bhakti” meaning to serve, honour, revere, love and adore. In the religious idiom, it is defined as “that particular affection which is generated by the knowledge of the attributes of the Adorable One.” What was common to various regional articulations of this phenomenon was the idea of devotion to a personal god as the means of emancipation from the cycle of death-and-rebirth. Bhakti Movement spawned into several different movements all across North and South India. In North India, Bhakti movement is nonetheless not differentiable by a Sufi movement of *Chishti* fame. Among the Hindu Bhakti movement, a further distinction is made between *nirgun* and the *sagun* bhakti, and also between *Vaishnava* bhakti and *Sant* tradition. Today, it is possible to see greater affinity between the articulation known as the Sant tradition on the one hand and the Vaishnava bhakti on the other. The attributes of the sant tradition will be discussed at a later stage yet, it must be mentioned here that with in the sant tradition too, it is possible to notice important differences. It is in this context that a comparative analysis of the perception of Guru Nanak with Kabir acquires added importance. Although they share much of the vehement opposition to the caste system, idol-worship and other social evils, yet, they differ, quite apparently and significantly in their attitude towards women.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, Cambridge University Press, Delhi: 1999. p.27

However, before attempting to draw a comparative trajectory between Guru Nanak and Kabir particularly, it would be appropriate to briefly discuss the perceptions of other Bhakti Sants on Women as it forms the socio- cultural background to their ideological formulations.<sup>1</sup> First and foremost we have to remember that these sants were neither social revolutionaries nor even consistent social reformers. However, their writings do, to some extent, reflect the sentiments of the common people. The bhakti poets as a whole tried to identify themselves with the sufferings of the common man. Further, their voice of dissent and protest was not confined to the religious sphere, but extended to the existing social, economic and political spheres and to the cultural ideas and institutions as well. In this way, they continued and even broadened the traditions of dissent and protest against the prevailing ideas and institutions, which had been a feature of Indian thought and culture, and which had manifested itself time and again even when traditionalist ideas and beliefs appeared to dominate the scene.

As has been pointed out repeatedly that the political, socio- cultural as well as economic realities of the concerned time period play a crucial role in the formulation, modification and manifestation of the ideology of an individual. The life and works of Kabir are generally aligned to the fifteenth century. During the period, Kashi and Jaunpur and the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, including Kashi, were active not only in the field of traditional sciences, but also in the liberal school of sufism and bhakti. In brief, Kashi and Jaunpur were the axis around which a new cultural tradition of liberalism and of dissent and protest against the existing system was being developed. The life and works of the Kabir and his social philosophy have to be seen against this background. Looking at the society of his time as a whole, Kabir found it to be full of strife, sorrow, poverty, ignorance, avarice and hypocrisy.<sup>2</sup>

Kabir classifies women into two broad categories- first, those who were devoted to their husbands and were prepared to sacrifice everything even their lives for

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed information see Savitri Chandra Shobha's work "Medieval India and Hindi Bhakti poetry- A Socio- Cultural Study op. cit. hereafter she will be referred as S.C.S.

<sup>2</sup> Kabir, Sakhi, 12/47; Kabir Pada 323; Kabir ed. And trl. By Prabhakar Machwe, Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1968. Kabir, Parasnath Tewari, 1967 rpt. New Delhi; National Book Trust, 1981

the welfare of their husbands; and second, the prostitutes. Kabir did not only consider that a wife and family were obstacles in the path of self knowledge. He constantly used the imagery of love between husband and wife as the relationship that should subsist between the individual soul (atma) and God (*parmatma*).<sup>1</sup> Kabir contrasts the devoted wife with the prostitute who sells her wares at the market place and tries to entice the innocent and unwary. Even the sight of such women was dangerous, leave alone their touch<sup>2</sup> expressing his sentiments in strong words like "*Ek Kanak aur Kamini, dou agni ki jhal*" meaning that an attraction for gold and the woman both lead to extinguishment. Kabir specifically warns against running after other people's wives. He says that love for someone else's wife was like eating garlic, adultery was like theft which was found to lead to a bad end ultimately. Kabir considered lust to be a major factor behind the troubles and sorrows in the society, and an obstacle in the path of true devotee (*Bhakta*). He sadly concluded that there were few true devotees and that the bulk of men fall prey to temptations of various kinds. Of these, the sex urge (*Kamma*) was the most powerful from which few, not even bairagis (those who have forsaken household ties), could escape.<sup>3</sup> While making women, a symbol of sex, and, calling her sinful (*papini*), a destroyer (*dakini*) or enticer (*mohini*), Kabir upheld family ties. He was strongly opposed to the idea that a true devotee should break his family ties, and live in a jungle like a recluse. He showed by his own example that a true devotee was one who fulfilled his duty to his chosen profession and to his family. But such a person should not be misguided by maya, or afflicted by the senses.<sup>4</sup>

To bring forth the thrust of his perceptions about women, it would not be out of place to cite:

*"Naari Sawal Purushhi Khaii, Taitee Rahii Akela".*<sup>5</sup>

He also says :

*"Naari Kund Narak Kaa, Jooru Joothen Jagat Kii".*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kabir Pada, 1-3

<sup>2</sup> Kabir Sakhi, 20/21: "Ek kanak aur kamini, dou agni ki jhal"

<sup>3</sup> Kabir Sakhi, 16/3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

<sup>4</sup> Kabir, Sakhi, 16/1 "Jag Hatwara Swad Thag, Maya Baisan Lai"

<sup>5</sup> Kabir Dar, Bijak p189

<sup>6</sup> Kabir Vachamrita, pp 71-73

Kabir nowhere condemned child marriage, or advocated widow- remarriage, or denounced polygamy by the upper classes. He speaks of the practice of purdah by women as a normal feature,<sup>1</sup> and even refers to the practice of sati in laudatory<sup>2</sup> terms, possibly because he considered it symbolic of *atma* annihilating itself for the sake of union with the Supreme. His entire perception reflects that he viewed women in a negative, derogatory fervour. With his narrow outlook about women-folk, one can not even expect him to speak against the social evils which afflicted the lives of the woman alone.

Jaisi is considered one of the greatest among the sufi poets. Although Jaisi is not contemporary to Guru Nanak and Kabir, yet the reason for including him in this discussion is because of his attitude towards women. In fact, he does not place the entire onus of sex- lust on women, he comes very close to a rationalist, logical stand. He nowhere criticizes the caste system or the social inequality. Jaisi's portrait of women's position in society is based on traditional ideas and beliefs, modified to some extent by the sufi concepts which had become well-established in the country by the time he wrote, i.e. the early part of sixteenth century. In his most reputed work, *Padmavat*,<sup>3</sup> he divides the women on the basis of caste and professions. Jaisi upholds the idea that a woman should be completely loyal to her husband. Jaisi, very effectively, brings out the acute insecurity of the upper class women who had to accept and reconcile themselves to the ruler having a large number of wives and mistresses. The poet concludes "There is no difference between a rani and a servant, what matters is the master's favour".<sup>4</sup> Unlike Kabir, Jaisi does not identify lust (*kama*) exclusively with women, and on this basis denounce women as the eternal temptress. For Jaisi, *Kama* is associated with youth, which afflicts both men and women. Youth, according to Jaisi, leads both to the pangs of separation and the pleasures of union. Despite this, women who control her sex urge protect the family honour.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the man, who can control this fire (desire) is praised.<sup>6</sup> While the sex urge has to be kept under control, Jaisi does not distrust sex urge as such. In

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<sup>1</sup> Kabir, *Pada* p. 217

<sup>2</sup> Kabir, *Sakhi* 45/34-36

<sup>3</sup> Malik Muhammad Jaisi, *Padmavat*, ed. V.S. Aggarwal, Chiragaon, Jhansi, 2nd ed.

<sup>4</sup> *op cit*, Nos 84, 90-91

<sup>5</sup> *op cit*, Nos 170, 174

<sup>6</sup> *op cit*, No 205

fact, human love is compared to Divine Love. Unlike Kabir, Jaisi does not even condemn the public women, they were a fact of life and displayed their wares and enticed men for money.<sup>1</sup>

When we talk about Dadu Dayal in relation to other Bhakti saints particularly Kabir, we have to remind ourselves that the differences in their perception of the social reality may perhaps be explained by the different situations in which the two saints were placed. Kabir's period was one of the social unrest, while Dadu's period was one of growing stability and political unification under the aegis of Mughal Emperor, Akbar. Dadu was not opposed to the caste system; puts forward the view that castes were not based on birth, but on the deeds and noble ideas of individuals.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike most sants of the time, Dadu emphasizes that men and women were same i.e. equal.<sup>3</sup> However, Dadu shares with Kabir many prejudices against women and upholds, and reaffirms her essentially dependent role in society. Thus, service to husband is upheld as an essential part of her duty.<sup>4</sup>

*"Pativrata Greh Aapan Kare Khasam ki Sev,  
Jyoo Raakhe Tyohi Rehe Aghayakaari Tev"*<sup>5</sup>

As a symbol of both maya or phenomenal world, and Kama or the sex urge, women is considered a deadly danger not only to the saint, but to all those who sought unity with God.<sup>6</sup>

*Dadu Dayal ki Bani, Part I, pp 131-32 says  
"Naari Varni Purush ki, Purisha Vari Naari.  
Atti Kaali Tuunu Muua, Kathu Naa Aaaya Haath".*

Dadu advocates that saint should rise above the illusion created by *maya* in order to overcome the sense of duality.<sup>7</sup> But to fight the illusion of duality, it was also necessary to conquer the sensibilities, above all, *kama* or the sex

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<sup>1</sup> op cit, No 38

<sup>2</sup> Sri Dadu Vani, ed Narayan Das, Jaipur, v.s. 2026 henceforth cited as Dadu 17/13 App I (v)

<sup>3</sup> Dadu, 29/6, see App. I (iii)

<sup>4</sup> Dadu 8/35

<sup>5</sup> Dadu Dayal ki Bani, p. 95

<sup>6</sup> Dadu, 12/68, App i(iv)

<sup>7</sup> op cit, 12/113



urge. Hence, the saint is advised to shun contact with women in every possible way. Infact, both women and gold, i.e. worldly possession are equally bad. A woman is considered the natural enemy of man, just as man was the natural enemy of woman.<sup>1</sup> Dadu makes it clear that in making these extreme remarks, he made a distinction between woman representing maya and women in society who are divided into two categories- the unchaste women, and, on the other hand, the devoted wife who sustained the householder and is upheld as an ideal.<sup>2</sup> In practice, however, the negative attitude about women as symbol of sex was bound to get manifested in social dealings on daily basis. It is also reflected in some of the prevalent prejudices against women.

To sum up, the three leading Bhakti poets- Kabir, Dadu and Jaisi (Sufi) were more or less agreed about the dependent position of woman and her obligation to serve her husband loyally and faithfully without questioning. However, there were differences in their perceptions regarding the position accorded to women in the religious and social fields. For Kabir woman was the eternal temptress, a representative of kama or sexual lust, and a devotee was advised to keep away from her as far as possible. However, Jaisi doesn't associate women alone with kama or with sex-urge but blames it to youth, which affects both men and women, and has to be kept under control by both of them, especially by women for the sake of the family. For Dadu again women is a distraction because of her kama (sex urge), he does not give any option to women except domestic servitude.

We will now discuss the perception about women of *Sagun bhakti* saints- the two most important male poets being Surdas and Tulsidas and the third being a woman herself Mira.

Surdas lived and wrote during a period of rapid change- the fall of Afghans and rise to power by Mughals, climaxed by the establishment of a stable empire under Akbar. The close connection between political milieu and the social change has already been highlighted in "Land and People" chapter 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Dadu, 12/68

<sup>2</sup> op cit, 12/103

Surdas does not present a picture of the society as a whole, or the nature of relationship, actual or ideal, between the different constituents of society. Thus, he neither philosophizes on the nature of the caste system nor offers his observation on its working. However, Surdas gives a detailed description of rural society in the context of Braja; description of gopies, their attire, daily schedules, level of freedom – all this, shed significant light on the actual position of women. Surdas' writings also reflect some of the values and prejudices of the society which is well represented by one of his own oft-quoted saying:

*Bhamini Aur Bhujangini kari, Inke Vish hi Darayo;  
Rachaaho Virchay Sukh Naahi, Bhulit Kabhhu Paryaaye,  
Inke vas Man Parey Manohar, Bahut Jatan Kari Paaye,  
Kaami Hoyi Kaam Aatur, Tiihi Kaise kee Samujhaia!!<sup>1</sup>*

At the same time, it should also be noted that Surdas' attitude towards sex and carnal love was not based on the distrust and suspicion. For him, woman was neither a sex object nor a symbol of lust. Although she had human frailties, she was essentially the symbol of gentleness, love, devotion and compassion. Even the stupid and cruel *Ahirs*<sup>2</sup> nay, the entire mankind, could be won over by love, devotion and compassion.

Tulsidas (d. 1623) lived and composed his works in an age in which society and politics had acquired a certain degree of stability after a long period of flux and uncertainty. Tulsidas adopts a dual approach to society. On one hand, he classifies society on the basis of the essential qualities of individuals, and on the other, he appears to confirm to the traditional concept of the *Varnasharam*. However, primarily he divides society into three categories-uttam, madhayam and adham or neech.

In his attitude towards women, Tulsidas combined atleast two elements. On the one hand, he was influenced by the traditional views about women and on the other, his views on the nature of the society and his over ridding concerns

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<sup>1</sup> Sur das, Sur Sagar, ed. Nand Dulare Vajpai, Kashi Nagari Pracharini Sabha, Kashi, 4th edition Part III, P 1187

<sup>2</sup> Surdas 1507, 1525, 1541

for social stability affected considerably his attitude towards women. In Tulsi's eyes, majority of the human beings consisted of mean (adham) and wicked (khal), and needed to be controlled by social, religious and political means, which implied that the large majority of the women fell into the same category. Tulsidas divides women into two broad categories the *uttam* or the women of high qualities, and the *neech* or the women of low quality. He implies that it is latter who were to be kept under tight control. Infact, expressing the prejudices of the upper class of the period, Tulsi includes the villagers in this category and likens all of them to animals which need chastisement:

*"Dhol Gawar Shudra Pashu Naari, Teeno Tharan ke Adhikari"*<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere, Tulsi says that wherever women were made independent, they became wayward and broke the bounds just like a water channel in flood.<sup>2</sup> In a different context, however, Tulsi says that although one might keep them in one's heart, a young woman, the shastras and a ruler could not be kept under control.

*"Raakhiye naari Jadpee Urr Maahi, Jubti Saastra Nripati Bas Naahi."*<sup>3</sup>

However, there has been an attempt to steer clear Tulsi of "popular misconception" in Savitri Chandra's phrase<sup>4</sup> that he was a strong critic of women and that he implied that only women need to be kept under tight control or discipline. It has been pointed out that for Tulsi, the dominant social concept was *maryaada* or propriety implying that the social and religious norms should not be transgressed. The observance of *maryaada* was incumbent on men and women alike. But since the roles of men and women in society were not same, their norms of behaviour and conduct also had to be different. Tulsi draws up a series of ideal prototypes of women. They were to be honoured since such women were endowed with *niti* and *vivek* which could be crucial in some situations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ram Charitmanas, p 778, hereafter referred to as 'Manasa'.

<sup>2</sup> Manasa, 4/15/4

<sup>3</sup> Manasa, 3/37/5

<sup>4</sup> Savitri Chandra, op. cit. p 134

<sup>5</sup> Manasa, 6/14/4. For detailed discussion on the point see Savitri Chandra-Shobha, op. cit. pp. 130-141

As already noted Mira was an important sagun poet, devotee of Krishna.<sup>1</sup> This devotional fervour not only led to production of poetry of highly emotive, lyrical and sensual nature, it challenged many of the existing social values and traditions. Infact, there are number of aspects in Mira's life and writings which help us to understand the dichotomy in contemporary attitudes and values in relation to women. First, although Mira was a widow, she was by no means mistreated in the Rana's house before she came in conflict with him about her devotion to Krishna, and associating with Sadhus and saints. Second, although Mira left the Rana's household as a mark of protest, she nowhere advocates a similar path i. e renunciation of the worldly duties to women devotees, married or otherwise.

Thus, while Mira herself acted as a rebel, her basic attitude towards women's role in society was traditional. To some extent, it shows how powerful was the tradition about women's role and behaviour pattern in family and society. Yet Mira represents a voice of protest against it, and suggests that these values need to be modified or applied in a more humane and liberal manner. Thus, there is a dichotomy between Mira's behaviour pattern, and the ideas and values which she upheld.

Now after discussing the perceptions of the important bhakti *sants* about women, we are in a position to focus our academic discussion on Guru Nanak and Kabir; the similarities and the differences in their attitudes towards women. It would also be relevant here to discuss the nuances in the usage of the term "*sant*" and whether both Kabir and Guru Nanak could be caterogised as *sants* in the eyes of modern scholarship.

### **Usage of the Term "*Sant*" and Guru Nanak**

While it is customary to discuss the bhakti movement from an overall perspective stressing its underlying unity and the role of the poet saints as spokespersons of ongoing religious and cultural fermentation, thus one is tempted to conceive it as a cluster of individual bhakti groups, each with its

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<sup>1</sup> For songs of Mirabai see Mirabai Ki Padavali, ed. Dr. Krishna Deva Sharma, Regal Book Depot, New Delhi

particular emphasis.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, most modern academic studies on the lives of the Hindu saints have not attempted to make a systematic comparison between the lives and ideological formulations of the different saints.

The term "*Sant*" itself ignites a lively debate as it has several overlapping usages. Derived from Sanskrit word "sat" ("truth, reality"), its root meaning is "one who knows the truth" or "one who has experienced ultimate reality", i.e. a person who has achieved a state of spiritual enlightenment or mystical self-realization; by extension, it is also used to refer to all those who sincerely seek enlightenment. Thus, conceptually as well as etymologically, it differs considerably from the cognate "*saint*" – saint has also taken on the more general ethical meaning of the "good person" whose life is a spiritual and moral exemplar.<sup>2</sup> What binds the North Indian saints together is neither a historical connection nor an institutional focus, but the similarity in their teachings.

An examination of the early Punjabi usage of the term "*Sant*" will inevitably carry us back to the works of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak is conventionally ranked as a distinguished representative of the *sant parampara* of Northern India.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, we immediately encounter the first hint that Punjabi usage of the term "*sant*" may perhaps bear connotations distinguishing it from the meaning attached to it elsewhere in North India. Although Nanak may be acknowledged as a representative of the *sant parampara*, he will never be called "*Sant Nanak*".

W.H. McLeod placed Guru Nanak squarely in the *sant* tradition as a synthesis of elements drawn from *vaishnava* bhakti and the hatha- Yoga of Nath jogis, with a marginal contribution from Sufism. Among the *sants*, McLeod mentions Namdev, Ravidas and Kabir. For him, the pattern evolved by Guru Nanak is "a reworking of the "*Sant Synthesis*"; it does not depart far from the *Sant*

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<sup>1</sup> Karine Schomer, "Introduction, The Sant Tradition in Perspective" Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, eds., *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition in India*, Berkeley and Delhi: Religious Studies Series and Motilal Banarasidas, 1987, p1.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* p.3

<sup>3</sup> Parshuram Chaturvedi - "Kabir- Sahitya Ki Parakh" (Allahabad: Bharti Bhandar, 1955) p 15; and "Uttar Bharat Ki Sant Parampara", 2nd Edition. (Allahabad Bharti Bhandar, 1965), p 421. Ramkumar Verma, "Hindi sahitya ka alochanatmac itihās", 4th ed. (Allahabad: Ramnarayan Benimadhav, 1958; p. 57.

sources 'as far as its fundamental components are concerned'. Guru Nanak uses *sant* categories and *sant* terminology and affirms *sant* doctrines. However, the *sant* synthesis is amplified, clarified and integrated in considerable measure by Guru Nanak, particularly through his concepts of the Shabad, the Nam, the Guru and the Hukam. What we find in his works is an "expanded" and "re-interpreted" *sant* thought. Within the pattern of *sant* belief Guru Nanak's synthesis possess "a significant originality" and "a unique clarity". It possesses also the quality of survival.<sup>1</sup>

Grewal has summed up the position of McLeod, for further elaboration.<sup>2</sup> McLeod has been criticized for his hypothesis about Guru Nanak's relationship with the *sant* tradition. However, he has not discarded his hypothesis, arguing that, whereas for a believer it may be natural to believe his religion is a revealed religion, it is legitimate for a historian "to explore the surrounding religious landscape and the society in which a particular religion was born."<sup>3</sup> In his article "*sant*" in Sikh usage", W.H. McLeod states that along with the transformation of the Sikh Panth, there was a considerable shift in the popular understanding of piety. Changes in notions of piety are naturally accompanied by corresponding changes in the meanings of associated terminology and the term "*sant*" has thus traveled a considerable distance since the days of Guru Nanak. McLeod underlines the "unqualified emphasis" of the *sants* on the interior nature of spiritual understanding and the "the discipline" required for moksha as "an eternal equipoise". The ideas of incarnation, idol- worship, sacred scriptures and pilgrimages are discarded in favour of the World.<sup>4</sup> The essence of *sant* belief remains loving devotion to a personal deity.<sup>5</sup> McLeod examines the teachings of Guru Nanak and comes to the conclusion that : "In Guru Nanak, as in Kabir, there is the same rejection of exterior forms, the same insistence on the need for inward devotion and its sufficiency as the sole means of Liberation".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. S. Grewal, "Foundation of the Sikh Faith" in "Five Centuries of Sikh Tradition, Ideology, Society, Politics and Culture" ed. Reeta Grewal ,Sheena Pall, Delhi: Manohar, 2005 pp. 43-44.

<sup>2</sup> see McLeod, Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969 pp 152-8, 161

<sup>3</sup> McLeod, Sikhism, Penguin Books, 1997, p.88

<sup>4</sup> McLeod, Sikhism, p.p. 91-92

<sup>5</sup> ibid, p. 94

<sup>6</sup> ibid, p. 101

Furthermore, the question whether or not Guru Nanak was a *sant* is strictly a question of antecedents and influences. As Grewal rightly points out, there is much that is “profoundly original” in Guru Nanak’s verses and there is an integrated and coherent system no other *sant* has produced; there is a clarity no other *sant* has matched’. Add to this the appointment of a successor by Guru Nanak, “Nothing in the Sant experience can remotely compare to the Panth which was eventually to emerge from that decision of Guru Nanak.”<sup>1</sup>

Grewal further states that McLeod dwells on shared terminology and categories of thought and tends to think in terms of influences and borrowings, but his approach leaves out the creative response of both Kabir and Guru Nanak to their historical situation.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, McLeod does not take into account what Kabir and Guru Nanak did, quite apart from what they said. McLeod himself says that Guru Nanak’s concepts of the *Shabad* and the *Guru*, as much as the concept of the *hukum* and the *nam*, carry us beyond anything that the works of earlier Saints offer in any explicit form.<sup>3</sup> Grewal very appropriately concludes that only the entire range of ideas can enable us to see the differences as well as the similarities between Kabir and Guru Nanak.<sup>4</sup>

### **Comparative Trajectory between Kabir and Guru Nanak**

In recent scholarship, Guru Nanak’s affinity with the nirgun bhakti or the Sant tradition is underlined, and Kabir is regarded as the most important exponent of this tradition. To understand Guru Nanak’s attitude towards women and gender, thus it is considered useful to compare his theological underpinnings with those of Kabir.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, we have scholars like Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh. Singh’s primary objective in her study is to “analyse the feminine dimensions in the Sikh vision of the Transcendent One in both sacred and secular Literature.” She says that “My study, I hope will accomplish a second, albeit ancillary, objective- Modern Scholarship has posited Kabir, the Medieval

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, “Foundation of the Sikh Faith extensively quoting from McLeod’s Sikhism p. 102

<sup>2</sup> ibid p. 44

<sup>3</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969, p 161

<sup>4</sup> op. cit., p. 45

<sup>5</sup> To see a comparative trajectory see: Doris Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History, Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, Oxford University Press, Delhi: 2003; pp. 23-27; Kumkum Sangari, *Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti*, p.p. 73-89; J S Grewal, “A Gender perspective on Guru Nanak pp. 140-157

Indian devotional poet as a precursor of the Sikh faith, and many have averred that Guru Nanak was a follower of Kabir..... Do not such constructs- Kabir as master, Nanak as follower - infact undermine the divine revelation that Guru Nanak received independently .....The scriptures and the Sikh Gurus, my study claims have a *raison d'être* all their own."<sup>1</sup> However, Kabir's influence has spread throughout the northern part of India, his sayings so widespread that they are part of proverbial lore and his name virtually a household name.

It is Kabir that all later traditions look back as the fountainhead of the Sant Movement.<sup>2</sup> Though he never intended to found a panth, and there is no direct historical connection between him and later sants; all of them consider him their spiritual ancestor. Infact, Kabir lived 150 years before Guru Nanak, the similarity of their teachings is striking, and as Karine Schomer points out, it is precisely this aspect as opposed to historical connection or institutional foci that closely binds Guru Nanak and Kabir. The latter's compositions figure prominently in the sacred scriptures of the Sikhs.<sup>3</sup> About Kabir's sayings being included in the *Adi Granth*, she states that "the selection must have been made, and, made on the basis of conformity to the 'moods and motivations' of the Sikh religious community at that particular stage in its development."<sup>4</sup>

However, most significantly, there appears to be a major break in the similarities between the two with regard to Kabir and Guru Nanak's attitude towards women. Thus, it becomes still more relevant to compare the perceptions of Guru Nanak with Kabir on Women and her social position. There are some other important differences in their perceptions for instance in their understanding and presentation of concepts such as *nam*, *shabad*, *hukam*. J.S. Grewal puts it appropriately when he says "The works of Kabir and Guru Nanak present systems of inter- related ideas which are

<sup>1</sup> Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*, Cambridge University Press, 1993; pp. 6-7

<sup>2</sup> Karine Schomer, Introduction *The Sant Tradition in Perspective*, op. cit p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Karine Schomer, and W.H. McLeod, eds., *The Saints: Studies in a Devotional Tradition in India*, Berkeley and Delhi; Berkeley Religious Studies Series and Motilal Banarsidas, 1987, p.5.

<sup>4</sup> Karine Schomer, "Kabir in the *Guru Granth Sahib*: An Exploratory Essay", Mark Juergensmeyer and N.Gerald Barrier, eds. *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspective on a Changing Tradition*, Berkeley: Berkeley Religious Studies Series, 1979, p. 77



independent of all other systems of religious ideas. Their positions are similar not because they belong to the same tradition but because each had a new path to show to his contemporaries. The paths were new but not the same precisely because they were differently conceived from the very beginning.”<sup>1</sup>

Kabir denounced much of the religious belief and practice of his times. The *mulla* and the *pandit*, the guardians of Muslim and the Hindu orthodoxy, were “pots of the same clay”; the paths that they advocated only led astray. The Hindu and Muslim revelation scriptures, the Vedas and the Quran, were discarded along with their custodians. Kabir does not believe in Vishnu. All his ten incarnations [*avatars*] including Rama and Krishna, are part of the maya which is constantly subject to annihilation. In unambiguous and uncompromising terms Kabir denounced the worship of images in temples, pacificator bathing, ritual feasts and pilgrimage to places regarded sacred. His God, neither *Hari* nor *Allah* [but one may call him *hari* or *allah*] does not reside in the East or in the West; He resides in the heart of man. This and some other ideas reveal affinity with the Sufis. “When I was, Hari was not; now Hari is, and I am no more.” What led to God was the path of love cutting as the edge of the sword.” Separation [*viraha*] involves torment in which the lover bleeds silently in the depths of his soul, he suffers many deaths everyday. This torment is nevertheless a divine favor, a mark of God’s grace. Love involves sacrifice of self, and metaphorically of life. Kabir’s bhakti is an ardent quest in which he is completely involved at the peril of his life.

Kabir’s familiarity with beliefs and practices of the jogis is equally evident from his compositions. The ideas of *jiwan-mukta* [liberated in life], *sahaj- Samadhi* [the state of unison with the divinity and *shabad* [the word] are given great prominence in his verses. The terminology of the jogis is used by Kabir to convey his own message to them, otherwise their practices are ridiculed and their claim to be on the right path is treated as a self conceit. They too are in need of the name of Ram. Kabir denounces the Shaktas, who indulge in meat, liquor, and sexual intercourse as a religious ritual. Kabir does not approve of any existing system of religious beliefs and practice. He

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, Foundation of the Sikh Faith, p.50

denounces caste distinctions. Occasionally, he refers to God as the “true guide” (*satguru*). Ideas from three major sources were integrated by Kabir in a system which came to possess the originality of a new whole.<sup>1</sup> His ineffable God is both immanent and transcendent, and to Him alone Kabir offers his love and devotion.

It is true that Kabir uses the terms *nam*, *shabad*, *guru* and *hukam* in his compositions but nowhere with the kind of emphasis that we find in the compositions of Guru Nanak. For instance, the concept of *hukam* as elaborated by W.H. McLeod: “How is Truth to be attained, How the veil of falsehood torn asunder? Submit to the *hukam*; walk in its way: Nanak thus it is written.”<sup>2</sup> The idea of walking in the way of *hukam* to attain Truth is nowhere to be found in Kabir as it is in Guru Nanak. W. H. McLeod writes that “The *hukam* is beyond describing. All forms were created by the *hukam*; life was created through the *hukam*; greatness is imparted in accordance with the *hukam*. Distinctions between what is exalted and what is lowly are the result of the *hukam* and in accordance with it suffering comes to some and joy to others. Through the *hukam* one receives blessings, and another is condemned to everlasting transmigration. All are within the *hukam*; none are beyond its authority. Nanak, if anyone comprehends the *hukam*, his ‘*haumai*’ is purged.” McLeod further says that the *hukam* is “an all embracing principle, the sum total of all divinely instituted laws; and it is a revelation of the nature of God.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Guru Nanak’s use of the *hukam* carries his thought most obviously beyond the thought of Kabir.<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, Guru Nanak’s emphasis on divine grace (*nadar*) also carries him beyond Kabir.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly Guru Nanak’s emphasis on the Name (*nam*) is much more than Kabir’s, and the concept is more comprehensive as elaborated by J.S.Grewal in his work “Guru Nanak in History”; “Through the Name one can cross the ocean of existence. Through the Name one can obtain the secret of true worship and honour. The Name is one’s best ornament, intellect and

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<sup>1</sup> op. cit. Grewal, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, p.200s

<sup>3</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, p 203

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p.191

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* p.10

objective. Through the Name one gets recognition from others; without the Name there can be no honour. All other wisdom is mere pretence; there is no fulfillment without the Name. Through the Name come true honour of greatness and the mark of God's merciful grace. The state of eternal bliss is found in the Name, the proper way of adoration. The Name is nectar that purges the poison (of maya). Through the Name descends all happiness upon one's heart.<sup>1</sup> McLeod puts it in perspective when he writes: "Whatever God has made is an expression of the Name. There is no part of creation which is not an expression of God."<sup>2</sup>

For Kabir, too, there is no emancipation without *Ram-nam*. However, we do not get the impression that the Name for Kabir holds strictly the same significance as for Guru Nanak. Indeed it has been suggested that the Name in Guru Nanak's compositions is the creative and dynamic immanence of God. McLeod puts it more convincingly when he says that Guru Nanak's concept of the *shabad* and the Guru, as much as the concept of *hukam* and the *nam*, carry us beyond anything that the works of earlier Sants offer in any explicit form.<sup>3</sup> This variation in the emphasis in fact determines the entire tenor of the teachings and their impact.

There are some other important differences between Guru Nanak and Kabir. Guru Nanak rejects both asceticism and renunciation. In Kabir's opinion, a householder should either practice dharma as a householder or adopt *bairag*; if a *bairagi* adopts the life of a householder it is a misfortune.<sup>4</sup> Kabir's tolerance of mendicancy and renunciation go together; the renunciation has to depend on others for subsistence. This is something that is ridiculed by Guru Nanak in his contest with the *jogis*. Guru Nanak has no objection to meat eating but Kabir is strongly in favour of ahimsa.

Kabir's attitude towards women has already been discussed in brief. It is apparent that Kabir's attitude towards women is ambivalent: he rejects the idea of impurity associated with the woman who has given birth to a child but

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, p.237

<sup>2</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, p.196

<sup>3</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, p.161

<sup>4</sup> Bhai Jodh Singh, ed. *Kabir Bani Steek*, Patiala, Punjabi University, p212

he does not contest the idea of a woman's subordination. Outside home she can probably become a bairagan, the counterpart of the male renunciant. On the whole, Kabir's compositions contain a set of ideas which appear to suggest a system outside the system called Hindu and Muslim. However, fortunately, for our present purpose, Kabir figures rather largely in Dr. Kumkum Sangari's comparative perspective on Mirabai.<sup>1</sup> The author seeks to place Mirabai in what is called "the Spiritual economy of Bhakti" and to relate her to both the *sagun* and *nirgun* articulations, we may notice some of the basic prepositions made by her about Kabir.

In Kabir, the egalitarian concepts of body, of soul, of knowledge, of *maya* and creation, and of a *nirgun* god contest caste, sectarian differences in religious denomination and orthodox ritual, but not patriarchal value structures. The concept of an attribute less *nirguna* god allows Kabir to be a social reformer; however, the moment his god becomes *sagun*, he acquires male attributes. It is possible to enter into a relationship of love with personal god, and Kabir dwells in all emotions related to love-longing, intoxication, the pain of separation, delirium, and suffering. At the same time, he constructs a patriarchal typology of women for ascetic transcendence. The woman is an obstacle to salvation; her sexuality should be subjected to usual regulation. Kabir appears to postulate three sorts of femaleness: the "*stri svabhav*", the "*stri dharma*", and the 'higher femaleness' of bhakti. The three become interdependent; "*stri svabhav*" must be opposed both to "*stri dharma*" and the 'higher' femaleness of Bhakti. The first is to be totally subdued, and the commendable traits of the second are to be etherilized into spirituality for transmutation into the femaleness of Bhakti.

Kabir works with two notions of *maya*. At one level, *maya* is a pervasive cosmic illusion: it is everything that is false. Therefore, it is a leveling, a democratizing and an egalitarian concept which can be used to attack caste, sectarian differences and brahmanical institutions. This *maya* is un-gendered: it is neither male nor

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<sup>1</sup> Kumkum Sangari, *Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti*, Occasional Papers on History and Society Second Series Number XXVIII, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, or *Gender and Nation*; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi:2001 pp 73-89.

female. At another level, woman and maya become indistinguishable, if not virtually interchangeable. The idea is elaborated further; women are represented as impediments to male salvation. Woman is equated with maya and becomes the conceptual basis for differentiating between various kinds of woman.

The woman of the *strisvbhav* becomes the mistress of the senses and the use of patriarchal metaphors evokes the typology of *dohagin*. By contrast, the *sohagin* is the model of *stridharma*, a model in which sexual desires are well channeled: She is all fidelity, without the slightest trace of promiscuity. She surrenders her heart, body and mind to her husband; her *shringara* is to please him alone. Thus, in Kabir's perception patriarchal values centre on the family as an institution which guarantees licit righteous progeny, restrains female sexuality, and reproduces a normative notion of marriage.

Women and maya are identical obstacles to Bhakti and salvation. So Kabir advises:

*Kabir naari parayi aapni, bhugtya narkhi jaai*  
*Aagi Aagi Sab ekhai, taame haath na baahi*<sup>1</sup>

"Whether the woman is your wife or another, to have alliances with her is to go to hell; one fire is the same as another; do not put your hand in it all"<sup>2</sup>

*Kabir naari kund narak ka, birla thaame baagi*<sup>3</sup>  
*"Women is the pit of hell: few can stop themselves from falling"*

Not only is woman the off scouring of the world; she separates the good from bad:

*Kabira joru joothini jagat ki, but*<sup>4</sup>  
*Kabira naari nasai teeni such, jo nar paasai hoi*  
*Bhakti mukuti mil gyan mei, paisi na sakai koi*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kabir Granthavati, ed. Shyamsunderdas Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, vs 2034 henceforth cited as KG, G: 68).

<sup>2</sup> The English translation are from William J Dwyer, Bhakti in Kabir (Patna: Associated Book Agency), 1981, (BK: 168).

<sup>3</sup> KG, G: 68

<sup>4</sup> KG, G: 68 BK: 168

<sup>5</sup> KG, G: 67

Women and *maya* are identical obstacles to the bhakti and salvation. "Falling in love with a woman is all evil; the man loses his access to bhakti, salvation and knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

The *maya* personified by women is an obstacle to Bhakti and thus must be defeated. Kabir poses an active opposition between sexual desire (*kam*) and spiritual desire (*prem*).

Dr. Sangari finds in Kabir a sustained and complex adjustment with patriarchal values in uneasy companionship with an egalitarian bhakti which offers direct access to God, claims a single origin for all human beings, and describes the body, the heart, the soul, and the true knowledge as un-gendered. Patriarchal values are not incidental to Kabir's bhakti; they actively compose it.

Now, focusing our discussion on Guru Nanak, J.S. Grewal aptly comments that Guru Nanak's explicit statements leave no doubt about his goal of emancipation being open to women as much to men.<sup>2</sup> His god is both *nirgun* and *sagun* at the same time. In the state of attributeless-ness (*Sunn Mandal*), he is un-gendered: "neither male nor female" God has revealed himself in his creation the nirgun becoming *sagun* as the creation of vessels (*bhandey*) placed the same light (*jot*) in all this light is in every heart (*ghat*). It is his light, the same light that shines in all. He is the only giver (*data* for all living beings). More explicitly, he created both "man and woman". His light is in both "man and woman". He has female as well as male devotees (*Sewaks*). Thus in the area of life that was all-important to Guru Nanak, he upholds woman's equality with man. At a more abstract level in the concept of Sangat (holy congregation), introduced by Guru Nanak, both men and women sit together and equally participate in reciting the praises of the Divine and Pangat- sitting together, irrespective of caste or social status differences, to eat a common meal in the institution of *langar* (*common kitchen*). Women were never excluded from any specific task (*sewa*). Guru Nanak says:

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<sup>1</sup> KG, BK: 168

<sup>2</sup> J. S. Grewal, *Gender and Guru Nanak* p-147

*"Come my sisters and dear comrades! clasp me in twine embrace. Meeting together, let us tell the tales of our omnipotent spouse (God). In the True Lord are all merits, in us all demerits."*<sup>1</sup>

It is very often repeated that Guru Nanak did not advocate asceticism and renunciation. It has often been asserted that Guru Nanak's writings and those of subsequent gurus, contain a range of views on women- positive, negative and ambivalent- suggesting a tension between an inward psychological struggle and outward social decorum as stated by Rajkumari Shankar.<sup>2</sup>

Guru Nanak Dev's oft quoted verse says:

*"We are conceived in the woman's womb and we grow in it. We are engaged to women and we wed them. Through the women's cooperation, new generations are born. If one woman dies, we seek another, without the women there can be no bond. Why call her bad who gives birth to rajas? The woman herself is born of the woman, and none comes into this world without women; Nanak, the true one alone is independent of the Woman."*<sup>3</sup>

Scholars like Dorris Jakobsh and Raj Kumari Shankar feel that this oft-quoted verse, supposedly indicative of Guru Nanak's positive evaluation of womanhood, points to an appreciation of woman only vis-à-vis the procreative process. However procreation, procreation of sons specifically, was central to Nanak's vision of the ideal women.<sup>4</sup> Jakobsh draws a parallel between Guru Nanak's verse and the writer of Brahaspati, written in 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. Jakobsh further writes that "while Guru Nanak's words have been lauded as the slogan of emancipation for women in the Sikh tradition, they had more to do with the rejection of prevailing notions of ritual purity and support of the social hierarchy of the time. For women gave birth to sons, especially those of noble birth; how then could they be considered ritually impure? The birthing of sons was the most elevated of aspirations; sons were avenues to fulfillment and the fervent wish of any woman during Indo- Islamic times. Thus, Guru Nanak's

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<sup>1</sup> AG, Sri Rag, p. 17

<sup>2</sup> Raj Kumari Shankar, Women in Sikhism, Arvind Sharma ed. "Women in Indian Religions. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002 p.115

<sup>3</sup> AG, Var Asa, pg 473

<sup>4</sup> Shankar, pg 116, Jakobsch, pg 24

challenge, in referring to the contemporary hierarchical order, one which placed the rajahs at the top of that order also indicated his support of the dominant social and political order of his time.”

However, it seems anachronistic to fathom the perceptions of Guru Nanak by modern perceptions of men-women equality. In times when women was considered inferior in all respects because of her sex, Guru Nanak openly chides those who attribute pollution to women because of menstruation and asserts that pollution lies in the heart and mind of the person and not in the cosmic process of birth. This declaration definitely requires women to be placed in esteem. Guru Nanak is clearly and emphatically on the woman's side when he relates to the custom of observing *sutak* which is denounced in rather strong terms when he says:

*“If pollution attaches to birth, then pollution is everywhere [for birth is universal]. Cow-dung [used for purifying the kitchen floor by Hindus] and firewood breed maggots:*

*Not one grain of corn is without life;*

*Water itself is a living substance, imparting life to all vegetations.*

*How can we then believe in pollution inheres within staples?*

*Says Nanak, pollution is not washed away by purificatory rituals; Pollution is removed by true knowledge alone”<sup>1</sup>*

However, there is another dimension to God's creation. It is impermanent and “false” in contrast with the “truth” of God. This intoxicating *maya* is poison [*bikh*]<sup>2</sup> and because of his affiliation to *maya*, man remains attached to falsehood against truth and he remains chained to the cycle of death and birth.<sup>3</sup>

Man and woman belong to the realm of falsehood, but there are things in this realm which keep them attached to it. There are several verses of Guru Nanak in which the objects of attachment are specified. They relate to political, economic, social and moral aspects of life.

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<sup>1</sup> AG Salok, M.I. p. 472

<sup>2</sup> AG, Rag Suhi' [Chaupadai], Ghar I, 728 and Rag Majh [Ashtapadian ], Ghar I ,p. 109

<sup>3</sup> AG Rag Majh [ashtapadian ] Ghar I, p. 109



“There is pleasure in gold, pleasure in silver, pleasure in women, pleasure in scents, pleasure in horses, pleasure in the conjugal bed, pleasure in sweets, pleasure in flesh – there are so many pleasures of the body that there is no room in it for the Name.”<sup>1</sup> “Among the things which induce man to forget god are pearls, gems, diamonds, thrones, armies, political power, supernatural power, and beautiful women.”<sup>2</sup> “What has deceived the world is thirst for *maya*: sons, relations, house-wife, wealth and youth; avarice, greed and pride keep man attached to *maya* which serves as the herb with which the thugs make their victims unconscious.”<sup>3</sup> “Elsewhere Guru Nanak brackets woman with sons, gold, horses and elephants as the objects of attachment.”<sup>4</sup>

The more popular pair of folklore, gold and woman, too finds mention.<sup>5</sup> With the wife are mentioned son, daughter, mother and father at another place. The five potent *thugs* are power (*raj*), riches (*maal*), beauty (*roop*), caste (*jat*) and youth (*joban*).

By the above citations, it becomes clearly evident that Guru Nanak does not denounce women as a part of *maya* in the way in which it is done by Kabir. In the compositions of Guru Nanak, a substantial number of metaphors relating to woman refer to conjugal relationships. In these metaphors, God is the true Husband and man, as this Wife, seeks union with Him. Possibly Guru Nanak’s conception of good wife (Good Woman is *suchaji*, *gunwanti*, or *sohagan*) or the bad wife (bad woman is *Kuchajji*, *nirgun*, *dohagan*, *rand* or *pir-choddi*) can be inferred from these verses. The image of the ideal wife that emerges from these metaphors is not unconventional. Even if she is beautiful, accomplished and well connected, she is humble and modest before her lord. She is completely devoted to him and obeys his commands with pleasure. She pines for him in separation. She adorns herself with ornaments only to please her lord. She is faithful to him and expects him to be faithful to her. In contrast, the life of a *dohagan* is pointless because of her inclination towards the “other”. For countless lives such a woman suffers the misery of “separation”. When a

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<sup>1</sup> AG Sri Rag, p. 15

<sup>2</sup> AG Sri Rag, p. 15

<sup>3</sup> AG, Sri Rag. P. 61

<sup>4</sup> AG, Gauri, (Guareri), p. 222

<sup>5</sup> AG Asa, p. 416

woman abandons deceit and falsehood, and she awakens to the *shabad*, she becomes acceptable to her lover-god. The abandoned woman is totally indifferent to the lover-god; she has the demerit of lust, anger and pride; she remains deprived of the True Name. Without love of God, she remains chained to *dubidha* due to her attachment to *maya*, her family and relations. The boon of the Trust, the Name and the *Shabad* is obtained only through God's grace.

The ultimate objective for woman as for man is *sahaj*, the state of eternal bliss in union with God; the mingling of light with light. Guru Nanak advocates the regulation of sex. However, this principle applies to both men and women. To covet the wife of another person, or an unwedded woman, is immoral in his system of values. This does not necessarily ensure monogamy, but the whole tone and tenor of Guru Nanak's compositions appears to be monogamous.

The use of female voice is often taken as a yardstick to fathom the perceptions of Guru Nanak, Kabir or other *sants* about women. However, to use the female voice in bani to gauge the respective saint's attitude towards women is not only inappropriate but rather misleading. Scholars like Nikky-Guninder Singh have extensively relied on the use of female devotional voice in the Adi Granth as evidence to emphasize the "principles" of femininity in the Adi Granth. She advocates the belief that the Gurus, though male understood their words and message, to be female, in congruence with the feminine bani.<sup>1</sup>

However, is it appropriate to assume whether the male Gurus in fact intended and perceived, understood their poetic utterances to be feminine"<sup>2</sup> or whether their notation of sacred speech in the feminine gender is simply indicative of the surrounding religious milieu.<sup>3</sup> To leap from the grammatically feminine form of a word to an understanding of the Guru's inclusivity is perhaps more a reading into the term as opposed to the actual intent of the Gurus. Or it could be just adding a variety by using female voice to their sayings to break the

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<sup>1</sup> Nicky Singh, op.cit., p. 43

<sup>2</sup> Singh, ibid, p.43

<sup>3</sup> Doris Jakobsh, "Gender Issues in Sikh Studies: Hermeneutics of Affirmation or Hermeneutics of Suspicion" p 49

monotony of didactic presentation. After all, women account for more or less half of the population thus to derive the metaphors of a “bad” woman and “good” woman must have made the message more comprehensible and appealing to the common masses. We can not ignore the fact that if we study Guru Nanak or Kabir or any other religious figure then it attests their level of popularity. And this level of popularity could have been possible only if they would have touched the hearts of masses, their messages both in content and presentation would have appealed them. However, it is significant to note that Guru Nanak is seldom so immersed in femaleness as to lose his discrete identity for long. Possibly for this reason, it is easier to paraphrase his metaphors in terms of the human soul than some of the verses of Kabir.<sup>1</sup>

Guru Nanak’s concern was not exclusively with men, there are at least a few verses where the woman does figure prominently. One of these is the well known Babur-Bani verse in which the luxury of the women of the ruling class is incidentally depicted; they suffered punishment because they had forgotten god in their indulgence in the luxuries of this world, including the enjoyment of their conjugal beds.<sup>2</sup> They are the counterpart of the men who had suffered a similar fate for the same reason, including their enjoyment of beautiful women” whose sight banished sleep”.<sup>3</sup> The rape and brutalities committed against women by the Mughal army of Babar is condemned as a mark of social degradation of values. Guru Nanak says:

“Modesty and righteousness both have vanished and falsehood move about as the leader, O Lalo. The function of the Qazis is over and the Satan now reads the marriage rites (rape). The Muslim women read the Quran and in suffering call upon God, O Lalo. The Hindu women of high caste and others of low caste may also put in the same account, o Lalo”.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, J.S. Grewal in his work “Guru Nanak in History”<sup>5</sup> aptly maintains that upon examination of the hymns of Guru Nanak in particular:

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Gender and Guru Nanak* p. 152

<sup>2</sup> AG, Rag Asa (Astapadian), p. 417

<sup>3</sup> AG Rag Asa (Astapadian) p. 417

<sup>4</sup> AG, Tilang, pg 722

<sup>5</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, Chandigarh, Punjab University, 1979, pp. 195-196

"It appears that Guru Nanak has very little to say about what today are called "social evils". He disapproves of the custom of becoming sati, but almost incidentally, he appears to be familiar with the institution of slavery but he has little to say about it. He has little to say about 'child marriage' or about the disabilities of the widow..... Guru Nanak is most articulate in his social criticism when customs and institutions appear to touch upon religion"<sup>1</sup>

As evident from the above discussion there appears to be a huge difference in the attitudes of Kabir and Guru Nanak towards women. If there is a difference how can it be explained? Grewal<sup>2</sup> explains this in terms of their relative standings in the Sant tradition of northern India. The sant tradition is looked upon as a synthesis of three constituents: *bhakti*, *hathyoga* and *Sufism*, in that order of importance. It appears to us that hathyoga was much less important to Guru Nanak than to Kabir. The woman in hathyoga is the tigress of the night, the great temptress in the path of the yogi who aims at subduing sublimating all the sexual desires. She is the greatest obstacle in his path. His denunciation of the woman is in the direct proportion to the perceived threat. As noted, Kabir's attitude towards women was similar to that of the yogis in that he too viewed women as seductive, as tempting men away from their true calling. Guru Nanak, by contrast, denounces the yogis for their strict renunciation, including their ideal of subduing sexual desire. He has great appreciation for the house holder.<sup>3</sup> It may be significant therefore; that the femaleness attributed to the *stri svabhav* is not all prominent in Guru Nanak. Infact, there is hardly anything comparable with Kabir on the point.

## Conclusion

To sum up, one is inclined to agree with J.S. Grewal that Guru Nanak, with in the patriarchal framework created a large space for women much larger than what we find in Kabir or perhaps in the whole range of Indian Literature springing from devotional theism. Total equality of woman with man in the

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, Chandigarh, Punjab University, 1979, pp. 195-196

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Grewal, *A Gender Perspective of Guru Nanak*; Kiran Pawar, ed, *Women in Indian History: Social, Economic, Political and Cultural Perspectives*, Delhi; Vision & Venture, 1996 p. 150

<sup>3</sup> AG Suhi 730; Prabhati, 1329-1332

spiritual realm was a radical idea in the Indian history, especially because it was not confined to female *bikhus* or *bhaktas*. Guru Nanak's symbolic attack on discrimination against women due to physiological differences carried the idea of equality a long step forward. If he doesn't carry it into the home, giving equal share to the daughter in inheritance nor does he say anything which can be used in support of inequality of any kind. The principle of equality upheld in one area of life carries important implications for other areas as well.

When scholars like Doris Jakobsh are not able to appreciate the contributions of Guru Nanak and his spiritual successors although she writes "it is important to expand on both the positive and the negative within the scriptural canon. To know only the negative messages is disempowering; to uphold only the positive images is a naïve and superficial empowerment. To proffer both leads to a more accurate and genuine discussion of feminine dimension within the Sikh tradition".<sup>1</sup>

Although theoretically her position is appreciable but in practice it seems painful to observe that her perception is anachronistic. A society which till date is struggling for a respectable position of women as a wife, as a daughter, to consider women as equal and worthy of spiritual enlightenment as preached by Guru Nanak, was undoubtedly an idea much ahead of its times. We have to acknowledge that Guru Nanak is articulate in his social criticism when customs and institutions touch upon religion. The very fact that in the spiritual field, his injunctions of man- women equality is commendable. As religion is an important aspect of life, it directly as well as indirectly influences its many aspects. To say that Guru Nanak appreciates women only for pro-creative qualities is clearly undermining the spirit of his sayings. To view Guru Nanak's views in this narrow perspective, would be oversimplification or rather concluding out of context. When on one hand a whole gamut of restrictions and superstitions (*sutak*) were being attached to child-birth. Guru Nanak, on the contrary, highlighted this physiological trait of hers as a quality. He emphasized that without the woman the world can not exist. This thought process extended further in respecting woman as a 'mother' and went a step

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Jakobsh, *Gender Issues in Sikh Studies: Hermeneutic*, p. 55

further by advocating conjugal relationship in marriage. One is inclined to remind ourselves that gender, according to J.W. Scott,<sup>1</sup> is an ongoing fluid process whereby sexual differences acquires a socially or culturally constructed meaning. Scott, very appropriately, advocates an understanding that gender as constructed for both women and men has significant consequences: "The term 'gender' suggests that relations between the sexes are a primary aspect of social organization (rather than following from, say, economic or demographic pressures) 'that the terms of male and female identities are in large part culturally determined (not produced by individuals or collectivities entirely on their own)' and that differences between sexes constitute and constituted by hierarchical social structures."<sup>2</sup>

It seems that the perception of these scholars (Jakobsh etc) is guided by "principle of negation" in their own words for which they accuse the Sikh historiography at large. This exercise of "negation" or undermining the contribution of Guru Nanak became still more evident when we compare his sayings about women with other important Bhakti saints like Kabir, Surdas, Tulsidas etc and contextualize Guru Nanak's saying in the ethos of time. J S Grewal appropriately sums up the contribution of Guru Nanak when he says that the principle of equality upheld in one area of life that to an important area as religion all encompassing and influential, carries important implications for other areas as well. Guru Nanak's compositions do not prove a radical departure from the existing order, but a radical departure can be justified on the basis of his compositions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.W. Scott, *History of Gender and Politics*, New York University: Columbia Press: 1988

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 25

<sup>3</sup> J.S. Grewal, *A Gender Perspective of Guru Nanak*, p. 156.

## **PART-II**

### ***Stri Svabhav: Stri Dharam* and the Prevailing Realities**

#### **Chapters**

**Chapter III: Marriage**

**Chapter IV: Women's Position in Social Sphere**

**Chapter V: Discrimination Against Women: Social Evils**

**Chapter VI: Development of Sikh Panth: Construction or Deconstruction  
of Women's Identity**

## INTRODUCTION

A woman performs a number of roles in the family, community and wider social system. Her status in the society is determined by her composite status depending upon her various positions and roles. To an extent it also depends upon her consciousness of her own social status in India. The religious factor has been of utmost importance in determining the status of women since it exerts powerful influence on the thought, culture and behaviour of the people. Religion permeates their personal and family lives as nothing else and it also regulates inter-personal and inter-group relations. In short, there is hardly any aspect of social conduct which is not affected by the sanction of religion. It is almost inextricably inter-woven with social, cultural and political concerns. Infact, as has been noted, religion is often a vehicle for expressing social relations. The complex inter-play between religion and society has been very well captured by Nancy Falk and Gross.<sup>1</sup> While religious traditions have been important players in the transformation of societies, religion can also be understood as being “among the fore-most of the institutions which conserves society, encoding, stabilizing, world-views and values and transmitting these from generation to generation..... Religion has been an instrument of liberation for women. *But religion has just as often become an instrument of women’s oppression.*”<sup>2</sup> In other words, religion has been a source of power for women, or a source of subordination, or both. Religious authorities have often functioned as political powerful figures exercising immense social presence and influence. Religious beliefs may point to the equality of women as sacred beings or the importance of female life. On the other hand, religious beliefs may both reflect and reinforce the subordination of women.

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<sup>1</sup> Falk and Gross, *Unspoken Worlds*, xv, xxi

<sup>2</sup> Falk and Gross, *Unspoken Worlds*, xv, xxi



It is in this background of the over arching influence of the religion that Punjab, for a micro study of position of women, captures great academic curiosity and opportunity.

As has often been pointed out that Punjab in the sixteenth century was home to Hindu and Muslim population as well as the birth place of Sikhism. A new ideological formulation, in the form of Sikhism advocated a better position for women. Could this new ideological formulation succeeded in influencing all sections of society or was it even able to modify the dominant patriarchal formulation of the society. Apart from the home to all the three religious communities, Punjab also provided an ideal social milieu with the caste system and class playing its role in the social relations particularly in the context of position of women. The marital alliances in the women's symbolic value in terms of seclusion and chastity as "Indicators" of the high caste and class in the positioning in the social hierarchy emerged. The pervasive influence of caste as marker of status and as an organizing principle of daily life persisted. How does caste intersect with gender in rituals, narrative and prescriptive contexts? Here, one must underline that vast differences distinguished the lives of women not only in different parts of the country but with in different caste, class, religious and ethnic groups. It is, therefore, very difficult to make generalizations and put together comprehensive description of the life and struggle of the women even in the particular region at a given point of time.

Although challenging, yet encouraging, there are limitations which fetter the scope of any investigation on women in Punjab in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is severe lack of available literature on the subject. The main focus on the contemporary sources is political, administrative and economic. Even if there are few references in the sources to the society, then it is in the context of its upper echelons only. It must also be underlined, that given the fact, that women have not generally written their own histories and historical accounts are written through the lens of male gender. What was and is important to man thus becomes the focus of historical analysis. The general impression which one formulates is that women were inconsequential to any social reality in traditional historical

accounts. Women are mentioned in the annals of history, only when they deviate from the norm- i.e. exceptional women who do play a part which is projected as an exemplary conduct that should be imitated by other women. In this way, these constructs of "ideal women" play a part in what is considered to be "normative history". Thus, only upon an unmasking of the andocentric presumptions of writers and their writings including sacred scriptures and only upon a suspicious reading and entailing a thorough evaluation of the inherent sexist attitudes and practices within religious and historical works, is one enabled to understand the sources and symbols with in the tradition that sustains the subordination of women through out history. It must also be emphasised here that while reading the sources, we have to be very cautious not to make an anachronistic reading. We should be wary of ideas that flatter and homogenize experiences. Experiences are multiple and the multiplicity of reality co-exists. Stephanie Jamieson explores myths, prescriptive texts and narrative traditions. While recognizing that arriving at a "real" or even single ideal representation of women status is well very impossible, she suggests that juxtaposing multiple perspective permits us to break through the simplistic monolithic formulations.<sup>1</sup> It must be underlined that one of the principal innovations of the Bhakti movement was the central role given to telling stories about the lives of *avtars* and saints. This kind of sources emerged as a major repository of information of the history of Punjab in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, here a distinction needs to be made between stories that are basically myths, that is, have little or no historical foundation and those that are basically legends that is, involve a mixture of myth and history. Although the dividing line between these two categories is sometimes rather blurred.

The inadequacy of sources makes it necessary for scholars to employ the difficult and somewhat dangerous technique of working backwards that is studying the earliest definite data available and then proceeding to examine as to what extent it can be used to study and evaluate the earlier period. Although this methodology has got its major limitations, yet, for a subject like

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Jamieson, "Sacrificed wife, Sacrificer's wife: Women, Ritual and Hospitality in Ancient India, OUP, NY, 1996

position of women, customs and rituals, it can be effectively employed as any social change, the change in values, attitudes and behavioral patterns do not take place over a short span of time. Infact, the respectable position of women is one issue which human society or at least specifically Indian social structure is still grappling with. Along with this is the task of constructing sociological and anthropological field investigations and the collection of oral traditions and folklore before the blurred memories are completely obliterated. It must be kept in mind that the written texts assembled from oral traditions are part of a collective oeuvre. Certain parts must have been re-accentuated, certain potentials in the images actualized, others allowed to fade away over time.

Mute evidence from the past is of great importance to the historian but literary evidence is qualitatively superior. This is true more or less of all forms of the literature. However, J S Grewal appropriately points out that no form of literature has one to one equation with the society. Literature as the "mirror of life" is a good metaphor. That is precisely why it can not be taken literally. Each literary form can have its own peculiar merits and limitations. Although, the character of a literary form in itself becomes relevant to the historians, yet it has to be carefully investigated before it becomes a source.

The other social reality, very significant during the period under review, is the fusion of traditions. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' Punjab, Sikh had not emerged or had displayed any collective concern in distinguishing themselves from the predominant Hindu culture and religion. Infact, the Muslims outnumbered the Hindus and Sikhs put together.<sup>1</sup> At this point of time Sikhism had not emerged as a distinct religion, yet the adherents were continuously increasing. All the three communities as a rule lived peacefully, and in social and religious matters, they often followed the practices of cooperation. It is significant that the British administrators, in the course of their earliest studies, had observed that generally the cultural differences on ground of religion were of comparatively minor nature.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, in context of the period 1750-1850

The Gazetteer of Punjab, Provincial, 1888-89<sup>1</sup> notes that “in the border lands where the great faiths meet and especially among the ignorant- peasantry the various observances and beliefs that distinguish the followers of the several faiths in their purity and so strongly blended and intermingled that it is often, almost impossible, to say that one prevails rather than the other. Thus, the Musalman peasantry of Delhi territory is still in many ways almost as much as Hindu as their un-perverted brethren; the Sikh of Sirsa is often a Sikh only in speech and habit. (In the similar spirit D C Ibbetson notes that “the various observances and beliefs which distinguish the followers of the several faiths in their purity are so strangely blended and inter-mingled that it is often impossible to say that one prevails rather than the other, or to decide in what category the people shall be classed.”<sup>2</sup>

As the religions of India grew from a variety of cults and beliefs, the citizenry did not perceive of themselves as belonging to any “One” religion; the categories of religions extended, inter-mingled and co-existed in the region and the common masses carried on their daily chores of life without considering their association with their particular religious belief. Harjot Oberoi, although speaking of a later time period, very aptly observes that “People did not conceive of themselves as “Hindus” or “Sikhs”. These categories overlapped and it is historically more precise to speak in terms of the continuum or simultaneity of religious identities rather than of the distinct religious collectivities. An “either- or” dichotomy is often of very little value in conceptualizing Indian religious traditions”.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of an intensely intermingling blended culture one can not presume homogeneity in social behaviour patterns. One needs to be very sensitive to the nuances, the role played by caste and class and acknowledge the multiplicity of realities- in context of position of women and her social status holding true. It also must be emphasized here that while undertaking the study

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<sup>1</sup> The Gazetteer of Punjab, Provincial, 1888-89, p. 122

<sup>2</sup> D.C. Ibbetson, The Religion of the Punjab, Calcutta: Government Printing Press, 1883, p.101

<sup>3</sup> Harjot Oberoi, “From Ritual to Counter Ritual...”, J.T.O. Connell, M Israel and W G Oxtoby (eds) Sikh History and Religion in the twentieth century. Toronto: Center for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto, 1988, p.140

of the nuances and complexities of the social fabric in relation to the position of women, one cannot presume that the normative teachings of the Gurus had the universal impact. To use Clarence McMullen's phrase once again, the gap between normative and operative beliefs has to be clearly acknowledged. It's here that the need of reading the "fissures" and the "fracture lines" need to be carefully observed in the secular literature or the folk songs or the nuanced study of popular rituals and customs. Then only can we be hopeful in assessing whether the Sikh Gurus actually were able to influence the dominant patriarchal ideology or modify its formulations in the relevant time period.

Considering the religious injunctions of the Sikh Gurus on one hand and then considering the operative value system in the then Punjab, one observes innumerable deviations. Rather, the picture that emerges is that of defiance and deviance only, a wide divergence between the precept and the practice.

Family is not only an important primary institution in all civilized, human societies but in fact, the most important basic social unit where women, has a formidable role to play. It is this role and her status, in the family which emerges as an important, rather the most important yardstick to assess her position in the larger social fabric. Family needs to be studied in its relationship to caste, class, gender and religion. Joan Wallach Scott appropriately comments that the category of gender not only illuminates the un-equal relations of power between males and females but helps one understand that the un-equal relations are extended via metaphors to varied areas of social life so as to signify unequal relations of power in general. In other words, the position of women can not be studied in isolation but in relation to men. It needs to be underlined that there is a need to place social and economic institutions in their ecological and physical settings and accept the multiplicity of cultural practices which exist in the region without treating it as a homogenized space. If we decide to put aside, for a moment, the contemporary critics of patriarchal religion- whether Hindu religion and Islam at large and in Sikhism in its nascent stage, the varied expressions of subordination is striking. Sometimes, for instance, we find that male authority and power are not always found together whereas the male may represent

authority in the household; it is the female who exercises the real power in the domestic domain. Sometimes, the same religious concept may be appropriated differently by men and women, and while the male version may appear oppressive for the female, it is not always the male version which is the foremost in women's mind. Secondly, there may be difference between precept and practice. Or what may appear as a male exclusion of women from a certain aspect of the religious or socio-cultural aspect may actually be consequence of something other than misogyny or may have a parallel in the female exclusion of men from certain religious activities or some socio-cultural customs and festivals.

Indeed, it is not difficult to demonstrate how much religious traditions, or ideological formulations, perceptions of "patriarchy" or "equality" or "position" (desirable) of women may vary over time. What may be true of one period is not necessarily true of another. The variety within the existing social milieu of a specific region comes to the foreground when we examine the evidence carefully. The negative effects of patriarchy were at times like low level, at times like high level radiation. Despite realizing the reality and assessing the power to represent particular forms of marriage, family, social hierarchy as normative and others as deviant has also meant that the contemporary sources have themselves attempted to flatten out the diversity. Alternatively, such sources have created a system of gradations, a hierarchy of the types of family, an "ideal" form of marriage and different variations as compromises. Despite the fact that women were physically included, if at all, within recorded history but were often emotionally and intellectually outside it, we can and must nevertheless recover some of the complexity of the past. For this, we must be aware how the social domain and its multi levels must be approached on its own terms, rather than passing sweeping generalizations. Even within the single region, notions of sexuality, purity and their implications for caste or social identities are not uniform, monolithic or static. While it may not be easy for us to retrieve the dynamism of such notions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries historical context in its entirety, an awareness of the possibility of variation may provide for more nuanced, historical understanding.

In other words, a focus on an over-arching ideology limits the possibility of looking at inner modifications and the particular ways in which ideology is transformed. We can try to query some of these issues by looking at folk literature and folk songs. Recognizing that the power ideology does not fully domesticate women within the rigid mode; the 'ideal' women, her attributes and behavioral patterns are subject to negotiation and change. The existence of few customs which clearly attack the male dominance, suggests that women pushed to the boundaries of a particular social system (read patriarchy), still make spaces within it. Yet, it is not as-if they are continuously resisting structures of control. Transgression of boundaries can go along with acts of conformity, adaptation and renegotiation. Every idea has a variety of meanings. Notions attached to a particular idea, may be for instance "women's position" not only changes over time but at a given point in time, it has a variety of meanings. To gain from Ginzberg work "Cheese and Worms" the "reality" is what and how we filter our knowledge and it has different connotations to different people ( at different points of time in history).

*"The girl is regarded as a valuable piece of property, betrothal is a contract to transfer it, and marriage is the transfer of ownership and muklawa is the transfer of possession."* C. L. Tupper, Punjab Customary Law, Calcutta, 1881

### **The Institution of Marriage: An Overview**

The centrality of marriage in structuring gender relations is universally accepted. Marital status constitutes by far the most important element of woman's identity in most societies.

Yet, marriage is by no means unitary institution. While certain forms of marriage are fairly well-known from a range of texts (prescriptive and otherwise) others are relatively unexplored and are often perceived as problematic. The power of the ideology becomes apparent when the sources project a few particular forms of marriage as "ideal" and "normal". The diversity is either leveled out or at best projected as "deviant" or "rare" practices. Alternatively, such sources have created a system of gradations, a hierarchy of the types of marriage with the *Kanyadaan* at the top being regarded as the ideal form of marriage and then marriage with a "bride-price" or "*Satta- Vatta*" seen as inferior alternatives. It should be underlined again that whether it is the "family" or "Marriage" or any other social and economic institution, these need to be contextualised in their ecological and physical setting and accept the multiplicity of cultural practices that exist in the region without treating it as a homogenized space. In other words, different marital practices often co-existed in societies, being considered typical of distinct socio- economic strata. Moreover, as often stated, "gender is an on going fluid process"; polyandry and most other forms of marriage are as much about the relationship of man to one another as they are about women and men.

This brings us to an important aspect of ideological basis of marriage. The dominant discourse of women in Indian society has its roots in the ideology of



patriarchy; a strong social urge to control the sexuality of women. The mechanism through which her sexuality can be controlled her procreative capabilities can be channelised through the institution of marriage. It becomes still more apparent in the discussion of widow- remarriage.

Women's nature "*stri svabhav*" was perceived as deceitful and driven by the uncontrolled sexual desire and thus problematic and hence had to be controlled through the insistence on women's duty or *stri dharam*. It is seen as sinful for women to have their own desires and these are explicitly opposed to their *dharam*.<sup>1</sup> At the same time women are cast as the eternal temptress- the object and the very form of the sexual desire who can ensnare the wisest and most ascetic of men.<sup>2</sup> Methods of containment and of extracting obedience and virtue from wife are coded as "*stri dharam*" while the essentially the disruptive nature of female desire, a part of their essential wickedness is coded as *stri svabhav*. The *stri dharam* or the *pativrata dharam* was a rhetorical device to ensure social control over women, especially chastity, is now well accepted.<sup>3</sup>

It would not be out of place to mention the oft-quoted sayings of the Gurus about marriage. In the backdrop of general social perception about the position of women in marriage, this endeavour would not only enable us to appreciate the positivity in their messages, advocating a position of respect and dignity to women's role as a wife and urging men to be loyal to their spouses. In fact, it would also help us in assessing whether their ideological position could actually influence, alter or even modify the dominant patriarchal ideological current. Or again there was an immense gap between the normative and operative realities.

The first important reality is that all Sikh Gurus were married men, except the eighth Sikh Guru who died very young. They also led a normal life of a householder and regarded sex desire as a normal phenomenon. The Sikh

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<sup>1</sup> MDS: 231,234

<sup>2</sup> MDS:42

<sup>3</sup> For a typical description of *stri svabhav* see Manava Dharma, pp. 232-33. Manava Dharma Sastra or the institutes of Manu Trans. G.C. Hangton, ed. Rev P. Percival, preface by William Jones (1825, 4th ed. 1863, rpt. Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982) p 232-33 and for a suggestive discussions of dharma versus *stri swabhav* see Leslie; *The Perfect Wife*"; Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp 262-66).

religion does not make any virtue of sexual abstinence as Nath Panthis, Jogis and Bairagis vowed celibacy. Infact, Sikhism upheld the householder's life as an important adjunct to the spiritual life. According to Sikh teachings, true abstinence or renunciation is laid on the practice of ascetic virtues without any person having to renounce the family and the society. What is stressed again is the self restraint and self control. Guru Nanak observed in this context," The pepper and salt if treated in ghee dissolve not in water, so do the Lord's devotees abide in the midst of maya and yet remain detached."<sup>1</sup> Guru Nanak reiterated the importance of the institution of marriage when he says

*"Living with in family life,  
One obtains salvation"*<sup>2</sup>

The Gurus not only strongly denounced asceticism but they castigated those Yogis who left their houses and lived on the generosity of the common people. The Yogis took pride in being celibate but inwardly they were in fact raving for sexual indulgence. Expressing the same sentiments Guru Nanak said:

*"In his hands is the begging bowl and he cast like a mendicant's but within him is immense raving. And though, he abandons his own wife, he's attached to another's, lured by sex desire".*<sup>3</sup>

Bhai Gurdas notes the discussion of Guru Nanak with the Siddhs, which highlights the importance that Guru Nanak attached to the life of household as follows:

*"Khadhi Khunasi jugisard gosati karani sabhe uthi ai,  
Puche jogi bhangar nathu tuhi dadhu vichi kiu kanji pai,  
Phitia chata dudh da rirakia makhanu hathi na ai,  
Bhekhu uteri udasi da vati kiu sandari riti charai,  
Nanak ache bhangar nath teri mau kuchaji ahi,  
Bhanda dhoi na jationi bhai kuchaje phulu sarai,  
Hoi atitu grihasati taji phiri unahu ke ghari mangani jai,  
Binu dite kachu hathi na ai"*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AG, p. 877

<sup>2</sup> AG, p. 661

<sup>3</sup> AG, p. 1030

<sup>4</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Varan, tr. Bhai Jodh Singh, Var 1, Pauri 40, p. 70)

Meaning all the yogis getting irritated grouped together and came forward to have a debate. Yogi Bhangar Nath asked, 'Why have you put vinegar in milk. The spoiled (split) milk cannot be churned into butter. How have you put off yogic garb and attired yourself in a household way.' Said Nanak, 'O Bhangar Nath, your mother-teacher is unmannerly. She has not cleansed the inner-self of your body-pot and your clumsy thoughts have burnt your flower (of knowledge which was to become fruit). You, while distancing and repudiating household life, go again to those householders for begging. Except their offerings you do not get anything'. In Var 1, Pauri 38, Bhai Gurdas describes Guru Nanak in the attire of householders. In Pauri 48, Guru Nanak criticized Bhangar Nath and his like for their superficial knowledge and pointed out that you have to beg from the family of a householder only for your sustenance.

In Var 6, Pauri 18 also upholds the life of a householder. It emphasizes the importance of the act of balancing of all the pleasures of life. It sums up that the life of a householder can lead to path to salvation; a household rises above the level of the pleasures and sorrows.<sup>1</sup>

*"Pjhiri bab aia kartarpuri bhekh udasi sagal utara;  
Pahiri sansari kapare manjit baithia kia avatara".<sup>2</sup>*

Meaning, Baba (Nanak) returned to Kartarpur where he put aside his attire of a recluse. Now putting on a householder's dress, he sat splendidly on a cot (and executed his mission).

In the similar ideological spirit Guru Gobind Singh supposedly tried to convince the son of the Sikh family who had almost denounced all the worldly pleasures and thus, was not willing to marry. Here, Guru Gobind Singh tried to make him appreciate the relevance of the householder through the story of the pigeon couple.<sup>3</sup>

It is remarkable that in a social milieu where a woman has been considered the "property" of her husband, the men are constantly reminded of chastity

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Vaaran, tr. Bhai Jodh Singh, Var 1, Pauri 38 and 40, p. 68 and 70. Var 6 Pauri 18, p. 179

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Var 1, Pauri, p. 38

<sup>3</sup> Gur Rattan Mal, Sau Sakhi. Ed. Gurbachan Singh Nayyar, Sakhi No. 4&6, p. 8

and loyalty to their spouses as well. Nam Dev refers in the Ram Kali Raga the practice of offering women in charity at the places of pilgrimage. He says:

*"If man makes gifts of horses, gifts of elephants, gifts of women with their couches and land- even then all these equal not the Lord's name".<sup>1</sup>*

In sharp contrast, we have Guru Amar Das emphasizing

*"Bride and groom are not they who pose as one whole;  
Bride and groom are they who are two bodies with one soul";<sup>2</sup>*

Here, clearly Guru Amar Das advocates the marriage between two equal partners and the sacred institution of marriage aims at the fusion of two souls into one.

The Sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind called woman, *"the conscience of man"* without whom normal living was impossible.

The Gurus redefined celibacy in the framework of chastity- he is celibate, who is married to one wife- and taught the disciples, men and women alike, the value of conjugal fidelity. Bhai Gurdas recommends that a man who roams with the "other" women than his wife; *"naku kanu fari vadiya ravey par nar"*.<sup>3</sup> Meaning that the nose and ear of an adulterous man should be chopped off. The Gurus strongly recommended the monogamous ideal of marriage. Guru Amar Das in Sri Raga refers to it:

*If we enjoy myriad of women  
And rule over nine divisions of world,  
We receive not God's grace without true Guru and are cast  
Into wombs again over again."<sup>4</sup>  
Should man lust with females a million,  
And rule over the nav-khand<sup>5</sup> (entire earth)*

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<sup>1</sup> AG, p 973

<sup>2</sup> AG, p 788

<sup>3</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Vaaran, Var 36, Pauri 3, p. 337

<sup>4</sup> AG, p. 26

<sup>5</sup> Originally, nav-khand, the nine continents according to ancient Indian geography.

*Without guidance of the holy Preceptor no joy shall find,  
And again and again into transmigration be thrown.*<sup>1</sup>

There is repeated emphasis on chastity in Sikh sources. In Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, there is an instance where Guru meets the begums of Jahangir who according to the author tries to seduce him but he explains them the importance of chastity in life. Guru Hargobind instructed them that their prime objective should be to “serve” their husbands. He further stated that in our family every woman should view except her husband every other male as father, brother or son. Similarly, every man, apart from his wife, should view all other woman as mother, sister or daughter.<sup>2</sup> In the very similar spirit, Sri Guru Panth Parkash of Bhai Gyan Singh Ji Gyani narrates the episode of Anup Kaur. A rich prostitute (*randi*) of Lahore named Anup Kaur tried to seduce Guru Gobind Singh. To her inviting gestures, Guru Gobind Singh responded in a firm manner, explained her value of chastity:

*“Nijnari Ke Saath Nehu Tun Nitbathjo,  
Par Nari So Nehu Chhuri Paini Kar Janhu.”*<sup>3</sup>

Meaning that consider the other woman as the forbidden company, by mistake also never have any sexual contact with any other women; consider other women as a sharp knife who would bring your end.

In Hukum Namah 15, Guru Gobind Singh Ji states:

*“Par Stri Ma-Bhain Dhi Bhain Kar Janani  
Vilas Layi Par Stri Da Sang Nahi Karna- Par Triya Rakhi Na Hoth Anand”  
“Hukum Namah 16 states” Stri Da Muhn Nahin Phit Karna!  
Putri Da Dhan Vikh Janna!”*<sup>4</sup>

The thrust of both the Hukum Namahs is to consider all the women, other than your wife as your mother, sister and daughter. For the (sexual) pleasures never seek the company of the other woman.

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<sup>1</sup> AG, p. 26

<sup>2</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, op cit, pp 317-318

<sup>3</sup> Singh Bhai Gyan Ji Gyani, Sri Guru Panth Parkash, p. 204

<sup>4</sup> Ganda Singh ed. Hukum Namah, p 93,94, Hukum Namah 15 &16

J .S. Grewal has undertaken a nuanced analysis of few of Guru Nanak's verses in his works, particularly in his article "A Gender Perspective of Guru Nanak".<sup>1</sup> He comes to the conclusion that "Guru Nanak supposes the regulation of sex. This principle applies to both men and women. To covet the wife of another person, or an unwedded woman, is immoral in his system of values, but the whole tone and tenor of Guru Nanak's compositions appears to be monogamous."

Giving his views on chastity, Guru Gobind Singh said, "As I grew up, my Guru instructed me this: O son, as long as you live, keep up thy vow (of chastity). Let no thought of other women cross even thy dreams. And let the wedded spouse be the exclusive objective of the ever increasing love".<sup>2</sup> The loyalty to their spouses has been repeatedly emphasized as a trait of an ideal Sikh. Bhai Gurdas defines it in the framework of celibacy. According to Bhai Gurdas, a celibate is one who is married to one wife only and treats all other women as if they were their mothers, sisters and daughters.<sup>3</sup> The Sikh ought to treat beautiful women of others as his mothers, sisters and daughters. Others' wealth for him is as beef for Hindu and pork for a Muslim. Out of infatuation, for his son, wife or family, he should not betray and deceive any one. While listening to praises and slander of others, he should not talk ill of anybody. Neither should he count himself as great and glorious nor should he (out of his ego) snub anybody. Gur mukh of such a nature practices raj yog (highest yog) lives peacefully and goes to sacrifice his self unto the holy congregation.<sup>4</sup> In his another Var, Bhai Gurdas says "*Eka nari jati hoi par nari dhi bhain vakhana*"<sup>5</sup> meaning having one woman as wife, he (the Sikh) is a celibate and considers any other's wife, his daughter or a sister. "Dekhi parayeean changiya mavan, bhaina, dhiyan jaaney". In his another Var, he says "*Hau tisu gholi ghumaia par nari de neri na javai*". Meaning I love him deeply, who does not go near another's wife.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the symbol *Kachh* (an

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, A Gender Perspective of Guru Nanak, p. 156, 157

<sup>2</sup> Gopal Singh, Thus Spake The Tenth Master, Patiala, Punjabi University, 1978, p. 142

<sup>3</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Varan, Amritsar SGPC, 1977, var 29, Pauri 11

<sup>4</sup> Bhai Gurdas Varan, 29, Pauri 11, Varan Bhai Gur Das, ed Dr. Jodh Singh Delhi Vision and Venture, 1998, p. 198

<sup>5</sup> op cit, Var 6, Pauri 8, p. 169

<sup>6</sup> op cit, Var12, Pauri 12, p. 305

*important symbol among the five symbols of baptized Sikh. The other four being Kesh, Kangha, Kirpan and Karaha) signifies continence and is indicative of the Sikh's manly control over his appetite even as he commits himself to the pro-creative world. And the same thing is applicable in case of women too. Guru Nanak's ideological position fully recognizes the useful role played by women. She is not an evil or a seductress but the mother of mankind is the spirit that emerges from a very oft-quoted verse of Guru Nanak.*

*"We are conceived in women,  
We are born to women,  
It is to the women to which we get engaged,  
And then get married. Women is our life long companion,  
And pillar of our survival.  
It is through women,  
That we establish social relationships.  
Why should we denounce her.  
When even Kings and great men are born from her?"<sup>1</sup>*

The thrust of the message is that a married woman performs a very useful role in society through maintaining sexual discipline and establishing a morally healthy society. She is an embodiment of virtue and fortitude. The element of lifelong companionship between man and woman is emphasized and that both are incomplete without each other.

It would not be out of place to mention here that an ideal woman has been described by Guru Arjun having thirty two qualities- *Batisulakhni* and all these "*sulakhnn*" – virtues have been listed by Dr. Gopal Singh in his translation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. *Battisulakhni*: She who is blessed with thirty two kinds of embellishments: namely: beauty, cleanliness, modesty, humility, cheerfulness, concord, observance of religion, cleverness, knowledge, service, compassion, truth, dedicated love for the husband, purity of mind, patience, frugality, beneficence, sobriety, chivalry, active habits, house decoration, respect of elders, proficiency of music, poetry, painting, domestic science and embroidery,

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<sup>1</sup> AG, p. 473

respect attention of guests and upbringing of children.<sup>1</sup> There is also mention of sixteen embellishments of ladies by Guru Arjun, *Solah Kiya Singar Ki Anjan Payai*.<sup>2</sup>

The same virtues were valued in woman in the perception of all communities as evinced by Abul Fazl's elaboration of the following virtues which can be viewed as a representation of Muslim perception. These sixteen embellishments have been elaborately described by Abul Fazl in *Ain -i-Akbari* in the following way.

A Woman is adorned by sixteen things:

- a. Bathing; Anointing with Oil; Braiding Hair; Decking her crown head with Jewels; Anointing with sandal woods; The wearing of dresses and these are of various kinds; Sectarian marks of caste and often decked with pearl and golden ornaments; Tinting with Lamp- Black like collyrium; Wearing ear rings; Adorning with Nose rings of pearls and gold; Wearing ornaments round the neck; Decking with garlands of flowers or pearls; Staining the hands; Wearing a belt hung with small bells; Decorating the feet with gold ornaments; Eating Pan (betel leaf) Finally, blandishment and artfulness.<sup>3</sup>

The picture that emerges from these oft quoted verses of the Gurus' ideas of marriage; a place of dignity and honour attributed to women; her social role as a wife and a pro-creator of mankind is acknowledged, the ideal of loyalty towards the spouse and chastity is advocated for both men and women. Husband and wife are seen as two equal partners, complimentary to each other and sharing a bond of love, affection and mutual trust. This perception of marriage, a very basic foundation stone of any civic society; a major component which defines the identity, position and status of women in the society appears to be flawless. If most of these adjuncts of the Gurus' would have been brought into practice in the society then the entire construct of the social fabric would have been dramatically, drastically different. Then why was there such a

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<sup>1</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, translated and annotated by Gopal Singh, Delhi: Gur Das Kapoor and Sons, 1964, Vol 2, p. 362 footnote

<sup>2</sup> AG, p. 1361

<sup>3</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol iii, Calcutta 1948, p 343.



startling gap between normative ideas and operative, existing, realities. The value system as it operated in the then existing society appears to be sharply at variance with the code of conduct advocated by the Gurus (which was later laid down in the Adi Granth) with the consequence that the favourable impact which these ideas should have made, have been very largely thwarted.

As the study would reflect that there existed a wide gap between the normative and operative beliefs. What were the probable reasons for this wide divergence between the precept and the practice? First and the foremost, it is very difficult to influence or modify the value system of a society at any point of time. Thus, it is not even reasonable to expect any kind of dramatic change in the patriarchal mindset. In fact, it's very often the women who are the vehicles of this over-arching patriarchal tenor of these social relations.

Moreover, the attitudes of the Gurus towards women were by no means simple. For instance, Guru Nanak can refer to the wife as a snare and yet place the house holder above the renunciation. He has no appreciation for a widow becoming sati, and yet neither the widow nor the divorced woman appears in any commendable light in his verses.

Although, the Gurus are in the favour of monogamy, however, there seems to be one or two aberrations. Sikhism presents monogamy as an ideal form of marriage. It is in line with the principle of equality of men and women which was advocated by the Sikh Gurus. How is it then that the sixth and the tenth Gurus had more than one wives. (In the later phase Banda Bahadur, Maharaja Ranjit Singh as well as many others Sikh rulers also had many wives). Why was polygamy not rejected and discouraged by the Sikh Gurus and their followers in clear, categorical manner? Is it not negation of equality of status between man and woman?

It has also been pointed out that the women have been appreciated for her pro-creative capabilities.

*So kyon Mandaa Aakhiya  
Jit Janmahi Rajaan!!*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AG, p473

Moreover, in the Guru Granth Sahib, the relationship between God and the human soul is depicted in terms of the relationship between man and woman as in a feudal society. The relationship is not of equality but of inequality where husband is treated as Lord and the wife exists merely to serve him and yearns for his grace.

It's not that one is oblivious of the contribution of the Sikh Gurus in acknowledging the respect, dignity and honour of women as a wife, mother etc. and even if when we are not making an anachronistic reading of the then social milieu, yet, we have to admit that the ideological formulations of the Sikh Gurus strongly sanctifies the patriarchal social structure in which marriage, motherhood and service to husband becomes the most valuable attributes of women. Woman is respected for the above mentioned roles but she is generally placed in a secondary position to men.

The bulk of Guru Nanak's verses refer to conjugal relationships where God is the only true husband and human beings are His wives. The metaphors further relate to the good and the bad wife. The ideal wife is humble and modest before her Lord, even if she is beautiful and accomplished. Indeed, she adorns herself only to please her master. She is totally devoted to him and obeys his commands with pleasure. She pines for him in separation. She is faithful to him and she expects fidelity from him. The bad wife, by contrast, has no moral or physical trait to make herself pleasing to her husband. She adorns herself but not to please her Lord. She is heedless, slothful and not even faithful.

*"Gunvanti Guna Vitharai Agunvanti Jhuri"*

*The woman of good qualities makes increase of her merits;*

*One without merit pines away.*

*Beauteous female! Shouldst thou seek the bride groom.*

*Not by ill-doing is he attained,*

*Far off is the lord's abode;*

*To reach him hast thou neither boat nor raft.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> AG, Sri Rag, 17

“The women of merit (*gunvanti*) spreads merit and the one without merit (*agunvanti*) constantly her deprivation. She who seeks her “husband” (*var*) should know that he can not be met through falsehood.”<sup>1</sup>

“The ego-directed man (*manmukh*) after another’s woman goes restless;  
The ego-directed are like a widow to a stranger surrendering her body;  
For lust and money, under another’s sway, she places herself:  
Without her own spouse no fulfillment will she find”.<sup>2</sup> It further says;

“If I apply scents to my body and dress in silken ropes but do not appropriate Harnam, I can not attain to peace (*sukh*).....” The women may be beautiful and her eyes even more, and she may adorn herself with all the sixteen items of singar, she will suffer the daily insult of being rejected.<sup>3</sup> How to win over the love of her husband (*Shauh*) *Adi Granth* elaborates; “Go inquire of the happily wedded wives by what devices have they attained love of their spouses:

All his doings should one gladly accept,  
And discard cleverness and self will.  
He by whose love is attained the boom,  
At his feet should devotion be offered,  
Whatever be the spouse’s will, obey let this be the women’s applying scent to herself,  
Thus, states the happily wedded wife,  
Sister! This wise is the spouse the love attained.  
By discarding egoism is the spouse’s attained-  
No other devise avails.  
Blessed is the day when the spouse casts his glance of grace:  
Then has the woman the Nine Treasures’ attained,  
The woman winning the spouse’s love is alone happily-wedded,  
And blessed with brothers.  
One that in such love is absorbed and by poise intoxicated,  
Day and night in love involved:  
Is truly beauteous of lovely aspect.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AG, Sri Rag, 17

<sup>2</sup> AG, Rag Gauri, 225

<sup>3</sup> AG, Gauri, 225

<sup>4</sup> AG, Tilang, 722

It is further emphasized in the same rag:

“Go and ask the sohagans how to get to the Lord. What so ever he does should be welcome and his command should be obeyed. Only he whose love enables her receive the gift should be the object of her devotion. Do what he says and dedicate your body and mind to him- this is the “scent that attracts him. This is what the sohagans say should be done.”<sup>1</sup>

On the similar lines Guru Amar Das says:

*“Kamini tau singaru kari jan pahilan kantu manae”*

“Women, before decking thyself,  
Make thyself acceptable to the Lord,  
Lest He should visit not thy couch,  
Not thy make-up be gone waste,  
In the women finding acceptance with her Lord,  
Lies the beauty of her makeup.  
Should her make-up be acceptable,  
Shall she have Love (acceptability) of her Lord,  
To her couch came not her lord-  
All her preparation wasted.”<sup>2</sup>

In Sakhi number 34 also, although Guru Gobind Singh ji, strongly appreciated the urge of a woman to serve the faith; appreciated the cultural values inculcated by her parents and in-laws and practiced by her. Yet, the conclusive message is that all her actions should be in compliance with the wishes of her bharta (husband) and for a woman, the obedience of her husband is most important.<sup>3</sup>

When we talk in terms of this kind of ambivalent attitude of the Gurus at few places, one is cautious of not getting entangled into taking their injunctions advocating a much respectable position for women literally. Otherwise, we won't be able to realize gap between the normative injunctions and the then existing operative reality.

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<sup>1</sup> AG, Tilang, 772

<sup>2</sup> AG, P 788

<sup>3</sup> Gur Rattan Mal, or Sau Saakhi, Ed. Gur Bachan Singh Nayyar, Saakhi Number 34; P 46

## Caste and Marriage

This brings us to an important aspect of social institutions in the sub-continent, the caste system. The term “caste” refers to what is popularly called *zat* or *jati* which is an endogamous group. Each *zat* has a name usually associated with the traditional occupation. Most social anthropologists concerned with the Indian caste system accept Srinivas’ definition of a traditional caste as “a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group having traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of the caste”.<sup>1</sup> The caste system has imposed its imperatives on family systems. Caste as a system of graded inequality, inequality with the most “revered” placed on top “contemptible” placed at the bottom is not merely significant at the level of establishing ritual and social hierarchy. This elaborate structure of gradation in occupations, labour and property relations is reproduced through a tightly controlled marriage system, entailing also a tight control of the sexuality of all women but particularly of upper caste women. These markers of high caste- their rituals and customs, professions and occupations or their attitudes towards women- including wives, widows, daughters manifested in many forms. The caste system is inextricably linked to gender relations. An insightful essay by Nur Yalmen (1962)<sup>2</sup> on the castes of Ceylon and Malabar shows that the sexuality of women, more than that of men, is the subject of social concern. Infact, the complex relationship between the caste and gender become apparent by the effective sexual control over the women of the upper caste. The central factor for the subordination of the women is to maintain not only patrilineal succession (a pre-requisite of all patriarchal societies) but also caste purity, an important identity marker in Indian social structure. The fundamental principle of Indian social organization at large is to construct a close structure to preserve land, women and ritual purity with in it. The three are structurally linked and it is difficult, rather impossible, to maintain all three without stringently organizing the female sexuality. Indeed, neither land, nor ritual quality, that is, the purity of caste can

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<sup>1</sup> M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*; Bombay, Asia, 1962, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Nur Yalmen, ‘On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 93, pp. 25-28

be ensured without closely guarding women who formed the pivot for entire structure. Infact, the honour and respectability of men is protected and preserved through their women. The appearance of puberty thus marks a profound "dangerous" situation and is the context for major rituals which indicates the important relationship between female purity and purity of caste. As already discussed, it is in order to stringently guard the purity of castes very early on that pre-puberty marriages were recommended. The safeguarding of the caste structure is further ensured through the highly restricted movement of women or even through female seclusion. Women are regarded as gateways- literally to the points of entrance into the caste system. It must be noted that caste identities have different meanings and implications for men and women – while both may share a certain commensality in external relations, vis-à-vis other castes internally, relationships of men and women within each caste are structured along the lines of difference. However, here we would focus only on the relation of caste and marriage and not on the variation in the position of women, her rights and status in relation to caste, high or low, which will be discussed in subsequent chapter.

It may also be pointed out that Sikhs had an intellectual tradition that criticized the caste system. Guru Nanak has rejected four fold division of society as it was prevalent in the *varna* system. The *Puratan Janam Saakhis* strongly suggests that in the marriage procession of Guru Nanak Dev ji, people from all the castes and class had accompanied the Barat, it further emphasizes that all the people from different castes had their food sitting at one place. This is in contrast to the description of the marriage party of Sri Ram in the *Raamcharit Manas*, composed by another revered Bhakti Saint, Goswami Tulsi Das. In this description, although people from different caste and class had accompanied the marriage procession of Sri Ram but they were awarded the treatment according to their status in the hierarchy of caste system. Their arrangement of stay as well serving the food was on the lines of caste system. Howsoever, even if we accept this piece of information as opposed to de-facto presentation of knowledge, yet, one can not deny the fact that the latter adherents wanted to perceive Guru Nanak as one who had not strongly denounced the caste system but, infact, had practiced the idea of casteless

society in his own life. This would have certainly had the desired effect on the perception of the adherence of the faith.<sup>1</sup> Moreover it is noted in the Adi Granth that according to him, the real criterion to judge a man was his *karma* and conduct and not birth. It is stated by Sikh theologian Bhai Gurdas that Guru Nanak had reduced the four castes into one. An oft-quoted saying in Adi Granth states it still more categorically as follows:

*“Jaat Janam Naa Puchiya Sach Ghar Lohe Batiyen  
Ma Jaati Ma Pati Hai Johe Karam Kamayee”*<sup>2</sup>

The Adi Granth contains many hymns which question the practice of caste distinctions and differences. Guru Nanak declared his attitude in famous and often repeated couplet:

*Phakar Jati Phakar Nau,  
Sabhana Jia Ika Chhau.*

Worthless is caste and worthless is an exalted name. For all mankind, there is but a single refuge.<sup>3</sup> This is one of the most famous of his pronouncements of this particular subject, many more can be added.

Observe the divine light in the man and ask not his caste,  
for there is no caste in hereafter.<sup>4</sup>

Sacrifice, oblation, the reading of sacred text- all are futile.  
Only that which pleased Thee is acceptable in Thy sight.

Kingship, Possessions, Beauty and Riches, all are but transient clouds, and  
when the Sun's chariot ascends the true landscape comes into view.

In the hereafter, name and caste count for nothing.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Meharbaan, Janam Sakhi Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji, ed. Kripal Singh, Asstt ed. Sardar Shamsher Singh Ashok, pubd. By Sikh History Research Deptt, Khalsa College Amritsar, 1962 p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> AG, p. 1330

<sup>3</sup> AG, p. 83, Var Siri Ragu3:1

<sup>4</sup> AG, p349, Asa3

<sup>5</sup> AG, p1257, Malar 8 for all other examples of Guru Nanak's pronouncements see Var-Majh 10, AG, p142; Var Asa 11:3, AG p. 469; Sarang 3, AG, p. 198; Prabhati 10, AG, p. 1330

Nanak's successors repeat the same message both by precept and the institution of distinctive customs.

When you die you do not carry your caste with you.

It is your deeds (not your caste) which will determine your fate.<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Guru Amar Das.

The cardinal institutions of the Sikh faith, the *langar* and the *pangat*, not only intended to get rid of the caste divisions and distinctions but bring about a compulsory commonality. Guru Ram Das, the fourth Guru tried to instill the same message when he said;

There are four caste and four traditional stages in the holy life.

but he who mediates on God, he who is supreme.<sup>2</sup>

Guru Arjan, the fifth guru expressed his agreement by including in the Adi Granth, the works of two earlier poets, Kabir, a low caste weaver (*Jullaha*) and Ravi Das, an out caste leather worker (*Chamar*). Both had made the same point with even greater force, for instance, one of Kabir's hymns directly questions the authority of *Brahmins* over *Shudras*;

"There is no clan or caste while dwelling in the womb,

Everything is created from the seed of Brahman (God). Say, o Pandit! When were the Brahmins created?

Do not waste thy life by proclaiming thy Brahmanhood.

If thou art a Brahman, born of a Brahman woman, why hast thou not come through another way? How art thou a Brahman? How am I a shudra? How am I blood? How art thou milk? Whosoever reflects a Brahman (God), Saith Kabir. He is called a Brahman. "<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Guru Arjun indicated his agreement by retaining his pronouncements in Adi Granth, and also included the works attributed to Namdev, a low caste calico printer (Chimba).

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<sup>1</sup> AG, Asa, p. 363

<sup>2</sup> AG, p. 861

<sup>3</sup> Gauri Kabir, p. 171.



Finally, Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru brought the ideological perceptions of the Sikh Gurus into practical reality. At the time of the institution of Khalsa in the course of the ceremony of initiation it required all the candidates to drink from the common bowl, striking once again at the roots of caste purity. In Sikh tradition, the anti caste quality of Khalsa initiation is further strengthened by the belief that the first five to become "Khalsa" included a representative ranging from High Caste Khatri to a middle caste Jat to low caste barber and washer man.

In sum, the caste system was at least reconceptualised after the formation of the Khalsa, it was denied among the Sikhs. However, the idea of caste, both as a marker of social and ritual status and as an organizing principle of daily life persisted.

Now, coming to the specific question of influence of the caste system in Punjab; there are many scholars who are of the opinion that caste system in the context of Punjab is not of much relevance. As a region, that had to bear the brunt of multiple foreign invasions, it has been seen as a region where Brahminism found it difficult to survive. The Punjabis had to adjust to different ethnic people, their religion and social practices. Besides, influence of Islam and Sikhism with their egalitarian ideological formulations must have checked the growth of stringent Brahminical practices yet, to believe that caste system did not have any role to play in social relations is more like a fallacy. If that would have been the case, then we would not have had this kind of recurrent and powerful injunctions by almost all the Gurus. At the same time, it should be highlighted that the situation in the then Punjab clearly reflected the social fluidity where boundaries of both caste and religion were not rigid. The fusion of traditions and plurality of socio cultural customs has already been discussed in detail. We have to admit that the one aspect of the ritual purity and social relations within the framework of the caste system as it exists even today is the diversity of cultural practices that prevail among different castes. This diversity is most visible in terms of family forms and marriage practices including divorce and widow remarriage.

Admittedly, the caste and kinship played the most important role in marital alliances. The traditional classical hierarchy of all four varnas in context of marriage provides a most misleading starting point for any discussion of relation between caste and marital alliances. Instead, we shall begin with the two components of the "system" most meaningful to those with in it, namely the "*zat*" (Hindi *Jatti*) and the "*got*" (Hindi *Gotra*). The *zat* is the larger groupings, distinguished above else by the fact that it is endogamous. In the Punjab, the important *Zats* included *Brahmins*, *Khatris*, *Rajputs*, *Jats*, *Aroras*, *Tarkhans* (carpenters) and many more. Each *zat* is divided into several smaller groups. These are the *gots*, and the *got* (in contradistinction to the wider *zats*) is exogamous. This meant that the marital alliances were to be arranged outside a particular *got* (to whom the bride/ bridegroom) belonged. But the marital alliances had to be with in an approved range of the other *gots* in the same *zat*.

In other words, in Punjab (both Hindus and Sikhs) patrilineal and patri virilocal system seems to be followed. Marriage takes place with in one's *Jat* (caste/ sub-caste) but outside of one's *gots* (Exogamous clan). While the rule of endogamy, by and large, ensures that one does not go outside once identifiable group for marriage, the rule of exogamy takes care that one does not marry with in one's close agnatic kin group. Lewis (1958) and Mayer (1960)<sup>1</sup> among other social anthropologist have reported that a caste group at the village level in most parts of North India is essentially agnatic kin group. With in a village usually all the members of the caste belong to a single *got*, but in the case of some large castes, such as Jats Sikhs, they may belong to several exogamous groups. Even in the later case, it would be most unusual for members of a *Jat* in a same village to inter marry. This exogamy ensures that marriage takes place, not only outside the *got* but also outside the village. On the whole, for a male member of a *Jat* in a village, the most important agnatic ties are with in his village, while affinity ties are outside it. What repercussions did this custom of marrying outside the village had on women will be discussed in subsequent sections.

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India*, New York; vintage books, 1958. Mayer, AC, *Caste and Kinship in Central India*; London: Routledge and Keganpaul, 1960.

In the caste system in the context of Punjab, what emerges as the startling reality, a great evidence of gap between normative beliefs and operative realities, Sikh Gurus, beyond all doubts, appear to be vigorous and practical denunciators of castes. In fact, acknowledging the "fusion of traditions" between Hindus and Sikhs; Muslims also not to be treated, culturally at least, as a great distinct, social group- the influence of Gurus should have extended much more beyond the "Sikhs Per se". Yet in reality, the caste restrictions were the most important, if not the sole criterion of the marital alliances. In fact, even in the today's date, the Sikhs of Punjab are divided into a number of named endogamous castes and sub-castes.

Writing on the inconsistency between the Sikh ideology of equality and the presence of caste distinctions among the Sikhs, McLeod says "A reasonable conclusion appears to be that where as they (Sikh Gurus) were vigorously opposed to vertical distinctions of caste they were content to accept it in terms of its horizontal linkages."<sup>1</sup> Although McLeod does not define these terms, it would appear that he is using the term "vertical" to refer to the hierarchical status aspect of the caste system while the term "horizontal" linkages refers to the features of the endogamy and separate cultural identities of the caste group. To put it differently, McLeod seem to be arguing that while the Sikh Gurus rejected status distinctions between castes and their relevance to the salvation, they did not object to the practice of endogamy and other cultural differences between caste groups. Although, the distinction is useful in understanding the caste system (among the Sikhs), but these two aspects are closely connected. Status differences, (that is the vertical aspect), between caste can not be fully maintained if endogamy and other inter and intra-caste differences are obliterated. The latter provide identity to groups which are required for any rank-order system.

The second point that emerges is that on the one hand there are numerous pronouncements by almost all the Gurus denouncing caste advocating an egalitarian social structure. In contrast, the marital alliances of all the Gurus, without an exception, presented a totally contrasting picture. All the ten Gurus

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. McLeod, *Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Delhi; Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 83-104

were Khattris by caste, that is belonging to a mercantile caste, Khattris, as indicated by the similarity in the names, claimed their allegiance to the elevated rank of *Khastriya* and commanding a high status rating in the *Punjabi* society. All the Gurus, themselves, Khattris, married Khatri wives. Apart from their own marriages, all the Gurus arranged marriages for their children in strict accordance with traditional caste prescription. There is no instance of a Guru having contracted on behalf of his children marriages with boys or girls from lower caste. For instance, Guru Nanak, a *Khatri* by *Jat* belongs to the Bedi *got*, this meant that his parents were required to arrange for him a marriage outside the Bedi *got*, but within the approved range of other Khatri *gots*. *Gots* into which Bedi's may marry include that of the Chonas and it was to a Chona girl that his parents duly betrothed him. The second Guru Angad was a Khatri of a Trehan *Gotra* and his successor Amar Das was a Bhalla. Since the Bhalla *Got* may inter-marry with the Sodhi *Got*, it was to a young Sodhi that Amar Das married his daughter. This young man, Ram Das became the fourth Guru and thereafter the office was hereditary in the line of his male descendants. The list of the Guru's family members' marriages can be added on, but one thing that emerges very clearly that all the sons and daughters of the Gurus' families were married according to the correct *got* prescription. This kind of picture inclines one to agree with McLeod's opinion of their (the Gurus) apparent acceptance of the horizontal relationship, an acceptance unmistakably demonstrated by their willingness to observe customary marriage conventions. Yet, one would like to highlight that although the Gurus were not addressing the ills of the caste system per se, yet, categorically and repeatedly emphasized that the way to salvation was open to all, irrespective of caste. Even if, the clutches of the caste system was loosened only to the extent of reducing the discriminatory aspects of the vertical relationships, it was undoubtedly an achievement which need to be acknowledged. To comprehend that why the caste system did not lose its relevance in social relations, particularly marital alliances, it is necessary to make an obvious but a critical point. To understand the working of the caste system, the link between caste and kinship, the long history of tenuous ideological control of the caste system, the role of Sikh ideology and the

economic and political power of the different sections (region) of Punjab must be examined.

To sum up, the existing state of affairs, one can safely infer that the need to maintain group's status govern the rule of endogamy. As is indicated by the works of Warris Shah, Muqbal, Agra Sethi, Lakh Shah and Ahmed Yaar; the *Khattris*, the *Rajputs*, the *Jats*, the *Qazis*, the *Brahmins*, the *Dhobis* and the *Ghumriars*, all adhered to the rule of the caste pertaining to endogamy.<sup>1</sup> With in the endogamous group, the status of an individual was the primary concern. For example, the size of the land holding was the basis of the social status among the well off Jats. And it figured as an important criterion at the time of marital alliances.<sup>2</sup> Even among the artisan caste, people preferred nuptials at least with those equal in status.<sup>3</sup> As already noted that the system of exogamy was followed with respect to one's sub-caste village or a town locality.<sup>4</sup>

## **Varied Forms of Marriages**

In Punjab, different types of marriages were prevalent. Rituals constitute a key element in the construction of religious identity, particularly, those that fall under the rubric of the rites of passage. As has been repeatedly pointed out that the cultural practices even of an extremely important social institution like marriage, were not categorized into the set of rituals and practices followed by either Hindus, Muslims or even Sikhs. In fact, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Sikhs had not emerged as a distinct Sikh identity. Prior to the Khalsa transformation, Sikhs do not seem to have possessed a distinct set of life-cycle rituals. Given the fluid nature of the Sikh identity, there was of-course no need for such rituals. The caste played a major role in marital alliances and it was more importantly, the combined social influence of caste and class which had an over-arching influence on the marital alliances and the kind of marriage practices and the allied rituals than anything else.

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<sup>1</sup> Warris Shah, Hir, pp. 55, 206; Muqbal, Kissa Hir Ranjha, p. 19; Agra Sethi, War Haqeeqat Rai, p. 52; Ahmed Yaar, Kamrup, p333; Lakh Shah, Kissa Sasi Punan, p. 32; Sohni Fazal Shah, p145; Ahmed Yaar, Kissa Sashi Punan, pp. 19,21

<sup>2</sup> Warris Shah, Hir, p56; Muqbal, Kissa Her Ranjha, pp. 19,21

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Yaar, Kissa Sassi Punan, pp. 50-72, 75, 79

<sup>4</sup> Muqbal, Kissa Hir Ranjha, p19; Hashim Shah, Kissa Sohini Mahiwal, p. 114

To attempt to construct, the complex and inter-mingled marriage practices, three related points need to be highlighted at the outset. Although, Kissas like Hir Ranjha, Sohini Mahiwal and Mirza Sahiban have evoked the indigenous aspect of Punjabi countryside. An elaborate picture of some social institution and rituals is there in the Kissas of Warris Shah, Muqbal, Ahmed Yaar, Fazal Shah and Mohamad Baksh. Marriage as an institution not only figures in the works of these poets, but in fact emerges as a direct theme of folk songs furnishing meaningful and live evidence on some of the contemporary marriage customs. Yet, the evidence on marriage customs and rituals available in the literature does not provide any comprehensive and compact view in this regard as some of the rituals can differ from caste to caste and from region to region. In other words, it is important to see the marriage practices as a continuum of cultural practices with in the larger Punjabi society rather than sharp distinctions of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim dividing the society. Second, it is significant to note that the notions of "ideality" of customs of marriage were not new, but, in reality, a variety of marriage customs existed among the Punjabis as there were also forms of secondary marriages. Was there any attempt towards recognizing one form as honorable, and therefore, suitable for those cautious of maintaining or enhancing their prestige and social status. Third, we need to speculate upon, what these different forms of marriages and practices meant to have for women. A society where, generally speaking the girl child was seen as a great economic and social burden; what would it have meant for women, where some sections of populace practiced what came to be known as "selling" a daughter in marriage. Or a marriage with dowry or in some agricultural society, where a girl child was considered another working hand in the family. A society which was fetish with the vigilance needed to manage the sexuality of females whether as daughters or wives, how could it solve its dilemma of widow remarriage. What was the mechanism it evolved to control the sexuality of widows in a social scenario where there must have been a huge proportion of young widows as the child marriage was the norm. How did the society try to absolve the property rights of the widows, if they had any at all?

Hindu scriptures record eight forms of marriage but we come across mainly three major forms of marriage among the Hindus in Punjab:

- Class I *Dharmnata (Pun)*
- Class II *Wattasatta* (Marriage by exchange)
- Class III *Takka* (On payment of money)

To put it more clearly, the marriage form "*pun*" indicated "without price"; *takka* for a bride price; and *watta* by exchange involving a reciprocal betrothal. There was also a fourth form of marriage for widows known by different names such as "*Chaadar Andazi*" or "*Chaadar Dalna*" or "*Karewa*". The marriage by "*Chaadar Andazi*" was practiced for re-marriage of widows. It will be discussed in detail in the section of widow-remarriage and its logistics.

Evidence from ancient scriptures shows that only in one out of the eight forms of marriage, a girl was given in marriage along with the gifts. The "tradition" of marriage, the idea of an honorable meritorious as also an expensive marriage of a daughter was present among the upper castes of the Punjabis. Though the marriage of *Pun* was the ideal, however, the other forms of marriage like *Watta satta* were more popular. These forms of marriages later came to be criticized vehemently by a section of the society who styled themselves as high castes. In fact, in the nineteenth century, one sees the clear attempt to project the "*Pun*" as an "ideal" type of marriage. The marriages of exchange seemed to be especially shameful as because they often involved taking money for the hand of the daughter or a sister. It was also stressed that the *Watta* marriages led to mismatched couples and an element of disgust was aroused as the spouses through such marriages were equated with the tabooed relationships in Punjabi society. This kind of social reaction is well represented by a monograph, although of a much later period, by Mohan Lal Shamepotra written with an intention to cure such "social evils" as clearly reflected by the title "*Kuriti Nivaran*" (meaning "cure of social evils") when he writes:

"*Bhain diya jab aurat aai, aurat nahi goya veh Bhain Kahai*"<sup>1</sup> "When you get women by giving a sister, not your wife, she will be called your sister'.

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<sup>1</sup> Mohan Lal Shampotra, *Kuriti Nivaran*, Lahore, 1890, p. 7

*Watta Satta* or marriage by exchange was popular among large sections of the society. Ibbetson commenting on its wide spread practise noted that exchange betrothals were found among all sections of the society in western Punjab; "In the west of the country among all classes in the hill and sub montane districts apparently among all but the highest classes, and among Jats almost every where except in the Jamuna districts, the betrothal by exchange is the commonest form."<sup>1</sup>

Among the Muslims too, in certain cases, matrimonial alliances were settled on a mutual basis when a boy of one family married a girl of the other family and the latter's family married a former. This type of marriage was called "*Golaṭ*" or "*Golavat*" and such type of marriage was found in the imperial households also. Auranzab's daughter, Zeb-Datun- Nisa and his son Mohammad Azam were given in marriage to Darah Shikoh's son Siph Shukoh and daughter Jahan Zeb Banu.<sup>2</sup> For the common masses on the subject, howsoever we do not come across any recorded information.

As obvious, the custom of *Watta*, that is , exchange was quite prevalent in all the communities of the society as it gave a mechanism for not so well to do families to get both their daughter and son married without incurring much financial cost. However, this type of marriage added another dimension of adjustment- either as a sister or a wife- because both the families had a member of the "other" family easily available who could be humiliated. As has always been noted that it is the woman who is victimized in case of any problems in the relationships of the two families. Moreover, at times, there was the involvement of the bride price too. The repercussions of such marriages, their availability as a source "settling scores" between the two families will be discussed later.

Now, "*Taaka*" marriages in specific, the practice of accepting money from the boy's parents by the bride's parents were also quite a prevalent feature of the age. So much so that the young daughters were an asset and "according to

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<sup>1</sup> D.C.J. Ibbetson, *Census of the Punjab-1881* (henceforth COP 1881), Calcutta: 1883, p. 356

<sup>2</sup> Mutamid Khan, *Maasir-i-Alamgiri*, translation. P. 77; also see Qanungo, *Dara Shukoh*, vol I, pp. 18-19 and 330-331



the customary law of the Shah Pur district, a girl is looked upon as a valuable piece of property and betrothal is a contract, by which the girl's family binds itself, often for money considerations or an exchange for an other betrothal."

About the Customary law of Moga, Zira and Ferozepur, it is stated, "The parents on both sides have already made their enquiries and arrangements, and have settled the considerations which is accepted among those tribes and families who pretend to superior dignity. As generally paid for the girl by the boy's side."<sup>1</sup> Among the large Jat population of Punjab, marriages involving bride wealth were common and openly acknowledged.<sup>2</sup> The bride price was prevalent among higher castes too in exceptional circumstances like when the groom was older, disabled, or a widower, he could get married only through the (custom) payment of bride price. An older groom meant a bride could be procured only by paying bride price. Infact, the practice was prevalent so much so that the young daughters were married to old persons for material considerations as indicated by Warris Shah and Najabat.<sup>3</sup>

About the custom in Ambala, it is stated, "The custom of selling girls is largely on the increase among all castes, especially Khattris. In fact, in the secular literature, it is reflected that the parents with inferior economic status had difficulty in finding spouses for their sons as in "puran bhagat".<sup>4</sup> In some cases, where the boys side being poor, could not pay for the bride price, he could go and live with his in laws and serve them in fields and forests grazing flocks, and after some years could claim the hand of the girl. This practice was known as "Marriage by Service". As indicated by Ahmed Yaar, the practice for working for a bride existed among the artisan class, to earn bride, the boy could do labour for her father.<sup>5</sup> In fact, in later times, the census authorities too noted this custom even among the Khattris of Lahore where the mother of the comparative poor boy would go and serve the elderly lady of the

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<sup>1</sup> Gazetteer of the Ferozepur District- 1915 (Lahore, 1916) p 56

<sup>2</sup> Ibid ,p 65

<sup>3</sup> Najabat, Var Nadir Shah, p 89, Warris Shah, Hir, pp. 72-73.

<sup>4</sup> Kadir Yaar, Puran Bhagat, in Punjab Dian Lok Gathawan edited by Richard Temple, Punjab, Patiala 1970, ii p. 220

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Yaar, Qissa Sassi Punnun, ed by Nihal Singh Ras, Amritsar, 1963, p. 51

household and after some time would request the girl in marriage. It was known by the name of "*Chaakri*".

## Child Marriage

Marriage was considered to be the ultimate goal for the girl. It was considered improper rather disgraceful for a girl to remain unmarried. By way of conjugal union women formed the basis of human existence.<sup>1</sup> Marriage, says Waris Shah, constituted a large link between the domain of caste and kinship.<sup>2</sup> Severe social criticism was faced by fathers who failed to perform the marriage of daughters at the proper time. The traditional Hindu marriage had two components, wedding ceremony, considered binding, was performed before the girl had reached puberty, although the girl bride continued to live with her parents and the second component being *garbhdaan* or *mukalwa* when the bride finally moved to the bridegroom's home. As early as the second century AD, Manu had recommended eight years of age as the ideal age of marriage of girls.<sup>3</sup> So that the girls would already be the sexual property of their husbands at the time of their puberty. All sexual activity would then be exclusively concentrated upon the husband and there would be less possibility of woman going "astray". Immediately on the onset of puberty, referred to locally as *shanee*,<sup>4</sup> literally inauspicious, probably regarded so because women became dangerous<sup>5</sup> and need to be safeguarded thereafter; the ritual consummation of marriage was performed through the *garbh daan* ceremony. After this ceremony, the bride went to her husband's house, thus, harnessing female sexuality for the sole purpose of ensuring legitimate reproduction. In case of girl began to menstruate before she was married, her marriage could be performed only (if anyone was willing to marry her) after the prescribed ceremony of penance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Waris Shah, Hir Waris ed Shamsheer Singh Ashoke, (herein after Waris Shah, Hir, Patiala pp. 168-169; Muqbal, "Qissa Hir Ranjha" in Muqbal, ed Shamsheer Singh Ashoke, Patiala, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, pp. 177, 168. Bulleh Shah, Qafia Bulleh Shah Arhat Kullayat Bulleh Shah, edited by Faqir Mohammad Fuqir, (hereinafter Qafia Bulleh Shah) Amritsar, p. 97

<sup>3</sup> Manusmriti, ix. p. 88

<sup>4</sup> Steele, 1986, pp. 356-359

<sup>5</sup> Yalmen, 1963; pp. 25-28

<sup>6</sup> Kane, 1941, pp. 444-45

Similar concerns are evinced by the secular literature of the Punjab. Parents were required to make an earliest provision for their daughter's marriage.<sup>1</sup> A premature liaison of a girl was a social norm, somewhat compulsion.<sup>2</sup> And a grown up unmarried girl was a source of pain for parents.<sup>3</sup> Sikh history is replete with innumerable examples of child marriage. For instance, Sri-Guruditta, son of Guru Hargobind's marital alliance was fixed with a girl of seven years only (daughter of a Khatri named Rama belonging to Batala).<sup>4</sup> Bibi Veeron was also married at the age of seven only.<sup>5</sup> Banswalinamah reports the marriage of Lakhmi Das (son of Guru Nanak) at the age of eight only.<sup>6</sup> As far as Sikh Gurus are concerned we do not come across any direct or indirect injunction criticizing the child marriage. Probably, it did not even enter as something "inappropriate" or "objectionable" in their entire discourse. That's why the Gurus' families history is replete with innumerable such examples and it appears to be accepted as the norm by the gurus as well. Among the Muslims too, the young girls were regarded as unmanageable and so parents remained anxious to get their daughters married as early as possible.<sup>7</sup> Thus, among the Muslims too an early marriage was generally the norm so generally girls were married at the age of seven, eight and nine years of age.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of psyche must have contributed to the practice of child marriage. The Khatri were more cautious of their upward mobility, thus, as a marker of high caste, wanted to manage the sexuality of their females and thus married

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<sup>1</sup> Shah Hashmi, "Qissa Sohni Mahiwal da" in Hashimi Di Kav Rachna, edited by Gurdev Singh, (Ludhiana 1969), pp 114-15; Warris Shah, Hir, pp31-32; Qafian Bulleh Shah, p 97; Fazal Shah, "Sohini Fazal Shah" edited by Diwan Singh Roshan Lal Ahuja (Jalandhar, 1979) pp 136, 141)

<sup>2</sup> Muqbil, Kissa Hir Ranjha, p27; Warris Shah, Hir, pp31,32,33,46,206; and Sohini Fazal Shah, pp132, 138

<sup>3</sup> Warris Shah, Hir, p. 181

<sup>4</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, p. 375

<sup>5</sup> op cit, p. 386

<sup>6</sup> Kesar Singh Chhibbar, Banaswalinamah, ed, Pyara Singh Padam, 1(127), p. 47

<sup>7</sup> Babur on his death bed commanded to arrange the marriages of his daughters, Gulrang Begum and Gulchehra Begum, Gulbadan Begum, Humayan Namah, pers., ed., Ms. Bev. p. 23, also trans pp. 106-107

<sup>8</sup> Mendelso, The Voyages and Travels, second edition, Oxford, 1869, vol I pp51, 115. Also Lins Choten, Early Travels of India, Cal 1864, p 197

them too young. From the various indications, we find that the approximate marriageable age was round about ten.<sup>1</sup>

The rationale for the dual ceremony was strongly patriarchal in nature "*stri svabhav*", as already discussed in detail, declared the women to be deceitful, evil and prone to immoral behaviour and therefore in need to severe disciplining from the closely related male at each stage in her life.

This view of female sexuality was constituted with four closely inter-related but conceptually separable dimensions, first woman's supposedly uncontrollable sexual desire was assumed to be awakening at puberty, and had to be harnessed in advance, through marriage to a legitimate sexual activity. Second, the women's consent in the choice of spouse was immaterial. Admittedly marriages being arranged by families, this choice was denied to both the spouses. However, the husband's polygamous options and extra-marital sexual freedom remained firmly closed to the wife. It can be very safely deduced of what ever little and indirect evidence available that adulterous women of the middle and the upper castes must have been regarded as serious offenders. Adultery was regarded as offensive not merely because of the problem of ensuring legitimate reproduction but also because it was thought to represent "excessive" sexual energy and was considered deeply reprehensible in the case of women. Third, the women were the object of sexual gratification for her husband. Fourth, the women were an instrument of procreation. Thus, it becomes obvious that these reasons must have at least ensured the continuance of the system of child marriage.

## **Polygamy**

Polygamy was prevalent both among the Hindus and Muslims, as often noted among especially ruling elite. It was fairly common among kings and nobles who often found it a useful instrument in strengthening their political power by

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<sup>1</sup> Warris Shah, *Hir*, p. 81; Tulsa Singh, *Jhagra Jattii Te Khatrian da*, Ms 800, Punjab University Library, Chandigarh, p. 8; Qadir Yar; *Puran 'Bhagat'* in Qadir Yar, edited by Gurcharan Singh, (Patiala 1969), p. 26, 27; Agra Sethi, *War Haqiqat Rai*, p 34; Lakh Shah, *Qissa Sassi Punnun*, p. 32

contracting numerous but judicious matrimonial alliances.<sup>1</sup> The classic example of polygamy due to marital alliances guided by political reasons is Akbar. According to Abul Fazl, Akbar had seraglio of 5000 women supervised by a separate staff of female officers.<sup>2</sup> However, generally, common men preferred to have one wife only.<sup>3</sup> A large harem was a privilege of aristocracy, the prerogative of chieftains and was common among the Hindus and Muslims. Guru Amar Das in Sri Raga refers to it.

If we enjoy myriad of women  
And rule over nine Divisions of world,  
We receive not God's Grace  
Without true Guru and are cast  
Into womb again over again.<sup>4</sup>

The existence of **harems** clearly refers to the practice of polygamy in the society. Guru Nanak refers to the harems as well when he says:

"Those who possess horse fast as wind and harems colorfully decked,  
Have chambers, halls and bowers and in shows of these are absorbed,  
Indulge in pleasures after hearts desire."<sup>5</sup>

Another hymn of Guru Nanak refers to the harem:

"Where the betel purveyors, the chamber maids? All vanished as shadows".<sup>6</sup>

Var17 Pauri 10 of Bhai GurDas also hints at the existence of *harems* of the kings.

*Rajai De Sau Rania Sejai Avai Varo Vari,  
Sabhai Hi Patarania Raje Ikdu Ik Piari.*<sup>7</sup>

Meaning the king keeps hundreds of queens and turn by turn visits their beds. For the king, all are the principal queens and all are loved by him much and

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<sup>1</sup> Alberunis India, Vol III, p155; A.S. Altekar; op.cit., p. 104

<sup>2</sup> Abul Fazl, Ain-I-Akbari, trl .H. Blochmann, Delh :1965, pp. 45-46

<sup>3</sup> Badaoni, op.cit. vol II , p212

<sup>4</sup> AG, p.26.

<sup>5</sup> AG, Rag Asa, M1.p.472

<sup>6</sup> AG, Raga Asa, M.1.p.417

<sup>7</sup> Bhai Gurdas Varan, Tr Bhai Jodh Singh, Var 17, Pauri 10, p. 418

more. Decorating the chamber and the bed, they all enjoy coition with the king.

According to the Muslim tradition Sunnis and Shias could have four wives.<sup>1</sup> However, it was prevalent only among the rich Muslims, to keep three or four wives at a time. This practice in the aristocratic families in the Punjab was prevalent.<sup>2</sup>

The Hindus by and large, restricted themselves to monogamy. Edward Terry states that they (Hindus) married one wife and were not afraid or jealous of her. They married at a very early age, the choice being made by the parents.<sup>3</sup> They married a second time only if their wives were unable to bear a male-child or were barren or the first wife had died. Remarriage was common after the death of one's first wife. Hindus married but one wife and never divorced her till death except for the cause of adultery.<sup>4</sup> Although, a later reference but as already mentioned such social practices do not suddenly emerge.

The census of 1901<sup>5</sup> states that the religious character of the regular form of marriage was responsible among the higher castes like Khatri of the Chopra section and the Mohammedan Khojas of Bhera (in Shahpur), for a strong prejudice against a man's taking a second wife during the lifetime of the first. However, polygamy was quite prevalent amongst the lower castes such as the Chamars, Chuhars, Dagis, Nais and several other menial and artisan castes. It was also common among the lower agricultural tribes especially those of the hills Kanets, Ghirths, Gujars and Jats all practicing it some what extensively.<sup>6</sup> In all these castes the probability was that polygamy could have been practiced largely due to the practice of widow remarriage. Marrying by *Chadar Pauna* to maintain brother's widow but among the Kulu Kanets at

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<sup>1</sup> P.N. Chopra, op. cit, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> P.N. Chopra, Some Experiments in Social Reforms in Medieval India, Calcutta: 1962, p.629 S.A. Ali, Islamic History and Culture, Delhi:1978 p.8; De Laet, The Empire of the Great Mughal, Eng. Trl, I.S .Hoyland, Delhi:1975, pp. 90-91

<sup>3</sup> Foster ed. Early Travels in India, Travels of Williams Hawkins, William Finch, Thomas Coryat and Edward Terry

<sup>4</sup> Della Valla, Pictor, The Travel of a Noble Roman into East Indies and Arabian Deserta, Vol I.ed. Edward Grey, London: 1664, pp82-83

<sup>5</sup> Census of 1901 p.218

<sup>6</sup> Census 1901 pp.218-220

least, polygamy was a form of investment as most of the field work was done by the women. This also applied to Kanga Girths, but in a less degree.

In sum it emerges that the polygamy if not very wide spread, yet it was prevalent among the high class aristocracy both Hindus and Muslims as well as lower class. Thus, in net effect if not popular yet it was substantially present in the society at large. The very fact that Akbar had issued definite order that a man of ordinary means should not possess more than one wife unless the first proved to be barren<sup>1</sup> indicates the prevalence of the system. The common mundane social wisdom also considered it injurious to a man's health to keep more than one wife.

The implications of the existence of polygamy for women must have been, quite understandably, a severe sense of insecurity. As the entire social-economic status of woman depended on her husband. In case of many wives it would have directly affected by the position she held in the eyes of her husband; her entire social esteem must have been directly proportionate to the love and favours bestowed by her husband. In any case, as often noted the prime goal of a *suhagan* should be to serve her lord (husband) win his favours. In a situation where there was a constant race for such favours among a band of women called wives, it must have inevitably generated a sense of rivalry and jealousies among them. Though, we do not get any clear evidence from Punjab of such jealousies. But presumably, the manifestations of human emotions, a sense of insecurity becomes evident from the rivalries, the associated politics, a race for better clothes and ornaments to get more "favoured" position among the Mughal harems must have been existent among women who had to bear the agony of "sharing" her husband with many other woman/women.

Here, it must be noted that the sixth Sikh Guru also had three wives, however Mata Ganga Ji played pivotal role in keeping the relations of both wives, Mata Damodari and Mata Nanaki, smooth and pleasant. We get evidence of both of them visiting the elder sister of Mata Damodari along with Mata Ganga to

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<sup>1</sup> Badaoni op.cit.vol11, p. 357

Daroli.<sup>1</sup> Kesar Singh Chibber's *Banswali Namah* as well as Bhai Sheetal Singh's *Rahit Namah* reports that Guru Arjun's first marriage took place in Mongra district in a Suri Khatri family with the girl named Ramdevi. And when she could not conceive for a long time, and then he was wedded to Ganga Devi. However this piece of information is not corroborated by any other source. The same cordial relationship, sense of mutual respect and trust evinced by the wives of Guru Hargobind, marked the relations of Mata Sundari and Mata Sahib Deva., the wives of Guru Gobind Singh ji. Yet, one can not ignore the element of mutual rivalry and jealousies among the wives of Guru Hargobind. Although, we do not get any reference on day-to-day basis, but at the time of accession to *Gurugaddi*, there are very clear references to it. When *Gurugaddi* was bestowed upon Guru Har Rai, Mata Marwahi was annoyed that her son Suraj Mal was not considered worthy of accession and moved to her parent's place (*Pekke*) along with her son. Similarly Mata Nanaki also enquired about fate of her son, Teg Bahadur. To her credit although she did not manifest her concerns as mother in the form of tantrums.<sup>2</sup> Another interesting evidence comes in the form of *Hukam- Namah* issued is by Mata Sahib Deva, second wife of Guru Gobind Singh Ji<sup>3</sup>. The thrust of *Hukam-Namah* that Mata Sahib Deva almost scolds Bhai Duna, Bhai Sabha, Bhai Kabida and so on for showing favoritism towards Mata Sundari and not sending money (*Kar Bheteyan*) for *langar* to Mata Sahib Deva. She rhetorically questions them that "Are you closer to her?" (*Tusi Mata Sundari De Vakhrey (special) aaye Hon?*) and instructs them that the Guru's households should be treated at par. One can infer that probably Mata Sundari and Mata Sahib Deva maintained separate kitchens. In nine *Hukam-Namahs*, Mata Sundari and in seven *Hukam-Namahs*, Mata Sahib Deva, either instructs the Sangats, either to send the money or acknowledge the receipt of the same. One does not infer that the number or the language of the *Hukam-Namahs* indicate the proportionate power exercised by them, but

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<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshani, Chhevin, p 353

<sup>2</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, *ibid*, p555-556: *Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa*, Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, ed K S Raju, pp. 602-603

<sup>3</sup> Ganda Singh, *Hukam Namah* Number 74, p. 209



certainly it indicates a power tussle over their respective share in the resources ensuing between them.

In Var 10, Pauri 1, Bhai Gurdas too captures the emotional state of Child Dhruv and the sense of rivalry and jealousies prevalent among the co-wives. When he writes: "Boy Dhruv came smiling to his house (palace) and his father full of love put him into his lap. Seeing this, the step mother got angry and catching hold of his arm, pushed him out of lap of the father (the King). Tearful, with fear, he asked his mother whether she was a queen or a maid servant."<sup>1</sup>

### **Exogamous Marriages: Impact on Women**

As noted in the context of marriage, there is a well observed tradition among the people of Punjab of marrying off their daughters into families who live sufficiently far away. This custom had significant implications for women in their routine lives. The women, through this custom were effectively restricted from keeping day-to-day contact with their natal families. As evident in the contemporary literature, among the Jats and the lower castes the sacramental aspect of marriage was only limited to an extent of retaining and securing their wives by all means. In some cases wives were not allowed to visit their parental homes (*peke*).<sup>2</sup> Daughters were seldom married to men living in their parents villages, although, there are few exception like Bibi Bhani and Bibi Dani, daughters of Guru Amar Das not only stayed in the same village but infact stayed with their parents family only. However, the structure of this type of patriarchal family must have made it more difficult for women to resist mal treatments, since they are suddenly transferred to a completely strange environment and are expected to please a family of strangers who, the brides are told, will gradually "accept" them if they persevere in their efforts to please. This transfer is viewed in folklore and folk songs as the beginning of a new life for women.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas Vaaran, Tr Bhai Jodh Singh, Var 10, Pauri1, p. 248

<sup>2</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p. 77

We must mention the fact that many folk songs bear witness to the anguish experienced by women in leaving their natal families on marriage. This anguish is expressive of the fact that the effective needs of a woman are not fulfilled in her conjugal family. Although, one hears many kinds of voices in the folk songs sung by women, certainly a large number of them express the anguish of the daughter who has to leave her childhood and the pathos of the father destined to his daughter. Yet, many others give poetic descriptions of the mystery of the new relationship and make poetic allusions to the bride who symbolizes ecstatic union. It is beyond doubt, that the position of a new bride in her conjugal family is indeed a difficult one.

In Sikhiya, a kind of moral teachings given to the newly wed at the time of departing daughter from her natal family, also great emphasis was laid on that “you must treat your mother-in-law as mother; devars (younger brother of the husband) as your brothers and nands (sisters of the husband) as your own sisters. Serving the needs of each member of the family is the ultimate goal of your life. This kind of displacement went to the extent that in Punjab, even the first name of the woman is still changed by her in-laws to complete the idea of “newness”. Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin informs that Mata jee of Hargobind renamed his second wife as “Nanki”.<sup>1</sup> A daughter is commonly thought of in terms of *paraya dhan* (alien wealth), who is only a temporary guest in her natal home and who really belongs in her husbands house, where, in reality, very often she remained like an outsider to the family for most of her life. She had to constantly and continuously strive hard to carve out a niche for herself in the “new family”. The reality that the bride has to win over the love at her in-laws by her virtues and by serving them is acknowledged by Bhai Gurdas, when he says that unmarried daughter is loved by everyone in parental house and enjoys respect in the in-laws’ house because of virtues and good deeds.

*“Naihar Kuar(i) Kannia Ladili Kai Maniat,  
Biaha Sasurar Jae Gunan Kai Maniat.”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, op cit, p. 345

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabir Swayye, tr. Shamsher Singh Puri, Kabir Swayye, 113, p. 146.  
Hereafter referred to as K.S.;

In his 119<sup>th</sup> Kavit, Bhai Gurdas asserts same sentiments when he briefly recaptures all the traits of “good wife”, worthy of being called a “Kulwadhu” sati.

*“Naihar Kutanb Taj(i) Biahe Sasurar Jae,  
Gunan Kai Kuta-badhu Birad Kahavai.*

*Puran Patibrat(i) Au Gur Jan Seva Bhae,  
Grib Mai Gribesur(i) Sujas(u) Pragtavai.*

*Ant Kal(i) Jae Pria Sang(i) Sab-gamani Bue,  
Lok Parlok Bikhai Uch Pad Pavai.*

*Gurmukh(i) Marag(i) Bhai Bhae Nirbab(u) Karai,  
Dhann Gursikh ad(i) ant(i) Thaibravai”<sup>1</sup>*

Meaning Just as a girl leaves her parents house after getting married and earns a respectable name for herself and her husband’s family by virtue of her good traits;

Earns the honorable title of all in all and revered one, by devotedly serving her elders and remaining loyal and faithful to her partner;

Departs from this world as honorable companion of her husband from the world and earns name for herself here and in the world thereafter.

The general social expectation from a newly wedded daughter-in-law is echoed in the Kabit Swayye of Bhai Gurdas as well. It is to be noted here that same sentiments and emotional gestures form the thrust of the *Sikhiya* by the parents.

*Jaise kula Badhu Budhivant(i) Sasurar Bikhai,  
Savdhan Chetan Rabai Achar Char Kai.*

*Sasur Devar Jeth Sakal Ki Seva Karai,  
Khan Pan Gian Jan(i) Pat(i) Parvar Kai.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> K.S., 119, p. 147

<sup>2</sup> K.S., 395, p. 423

Just as an intelligent daughter-in-law of a good family deals with everybody attentively, consciously and decently in in-laws house;

Realizing that this is her husband's family, takes care of food and all other needs of her father-in-law, brother-in-law and other members of the family diligently and respectfully;

She talks with all elders of the family respectfully, politely and abashedly.

*Laja-kul Ankas(u) Au Gur-jan Sil Dil,  
Kula-Badhu Brat(i) kai patibrat kahavaii.<sup>1</sup>*

Because of the good of the family honour, displaying calm and tranquil behaviour before the elders of the house and following the right ethos expected of a married woman, a daughter-in-law of a good family is called faithful and virtuous.

From the centrality of this transfer in a woman's life springs the whole culture of adjusting to her husband's family. Even today, women are discouraged from seeking the intervention of their parental families when they are maltreated in the in-laws families. The knowledge that her parents might be available for help might deter maltreatment and thus lead to a breakdown of the marriage. Even, at present in such a case the woman could be sent back to her parents but this has always been considered such a disaster and disgrace that she was always pressed upon to keep on "adjusting". This formula of adjustment entailed a package of "adjustment" only from the side of a woman without minimal reciprocity from any of the relations at in-laws. The parting message to a daughter at the time of her marriage is meant to be literally adhered to "Daughter today we are sending your *doli* from this house to your in-laws house. May only your *arthi* (dead body) come out of that house!"

Through the reading of the primary sources the general impression that one formulates is that the strict restrictions on women's freedom of movement and

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<sup>1</sup> K.S., 164, p. 192

on their forming independent associations had become integral features of the patriarchal household in the then Punjab. As Bhai Gurdas put it:

*"Sujan Kutanh Grih(i) Gaun Karai Patibrata,  
An Dev Sathan Jaise Jal Bin(u) Min Hai".<sup>1</sup>*

Meaning that "A faithful wife live amongst the close relatives of her house and goes nowhere else."

Although the above quotation underlines this kind of social behaviour of faithful wife yet one must note here that the basic goal of women life in the then perception was to serve the "lord" i.e., (husband) and be faithful to him in all circumstances. We get similar corroborative statements else where as well such as 'Andar baithi lakh di; bahar nikli Kakh di'.

For a high caste woman to step outside the confines of the household compound for any purpose not approved by the head of the family amounted to endanger whatever tenuous status and security she was able to accrue. As noted earlier, these restrictions were almost non-existent for the women belonging to peasant, artisan and service class. The participation of women in the labour process of agricultural and artisanal production was an accepted norm. Female labour is recognized as a wage earner, as someone who contributes to the upkeep of the family by her earnings. These women earn a vital portion of the family income.

Interestingly, since these restrictions are made a mark of high social status and respectability, women themselves are made to feel that they have a stake in secluding themselves from the outside world as far as possible. Many forms of segregation – veiling the face, not going out alone, not moving freely in those sections of the house considered the terrain of men, and not speaking in front of men or elders was the normal practice among both the high caste Hindus and Muslims alike. All these customs, in sum, isolated the woman and kept her completely dependent on men for information and access to the outside world. Such exclusion from community in present day scenario ensures a woman's isolation from and ignorance of possible sources of

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabir Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, K.S. 449, p. 477

support in her struggle to make a viable, less subordinate place for herself in her husband's family and village. While, for men, marriage means extended alliance derived from alliance between male members of the immediate and extended kin group. In contrast, for women it means losing whatever little foothold they had in the natal family. The pressures to loosen ties with the parental house have the effect of denying these women crucial emotional and other support in their day-to-day lives and make them much more vulnerable.

### **Widow\* Remarriage or Patriarchal Guardianship**

*"Widowhood was read in Brahmanical traditions derived from the smritis pre-destined, Karmic product of transgression in past lives, which justified the customary treatment of the widow and helped to create hierarchy of dependence within the family. Widowhood was both a punishable crime and atonement through personal austerity, piety or domestic drudgery".*

Caste system, guiding the social relations and ritual purity among the Hindus, pronounced marriage as the sacrament and the "twice born" zealously guarded it. This, in practice, translated into that women in these castes could be married only once in a life time, neither abandonment nor the death of the husband dissolved the marriage and widows were subjected to enforced widow hood and were expected to observe ascetic practices. A widow was debarred from the use of cosmetics to beautify herself.

*Na Sugandh Lagayi, Na Daahi Banai.*

*Naa Phoolan Haar Su Payi Galanoo.<sup>1</sup>*

The general expectation that a widow should be leading a life of an ascetic becomes apparent from Udassi Bodh of Sant Rein also. Widows, thus, entered a state of social death. Compulsory Widowhood was perceived as a marker of elevated status by the high caste. Denzil Ibbetson, although for a much later period, made a sharp social observation, serving as Officiating Director of Public Instruction in Punjab in the Colonial period "it is

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<sup>1</sup> Udassi Bodh. F 113 B Sant Rein, Udassi Bodh. Also see in Dr. Balwinder Jeet, "Social Evils During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh A Contemporary Perspective " Punjab History Conference, 37th session Mar18-20 2005.

....commonly used as test, and spoken of as the mark of their superiority....".<sup>1</sup>  
Ibn Battuta clearly states that the widows who did not burn herself "dresses in coarse garments and lives with her own people in misery, despised for her lack of fidelity".<sup>2</sup>

The only clear reference we get of widow remmarirage taking place in the Sikh Gurus' families is that of Tara Bai, widow of Sahibzada Ajit Singh, at the initiative of Guru Gobind Singh. Guru Gobind Singh, father of Ajit Singh viewing the mourning of Mata Sundri and Tara Bai, adopted a young Sikh from the people present at the sangat at that point of time and got him married to Tara Bai with the consent of Mata Sundri.<sup>3</sup> The silence on the question of widow remarriage in all the contemporary sources is probably an indication of non-existence or rarity at large. The response to widow-remarriage must have been corollary to the general social attitude of female fidelity and chastity. Alberuni states that becoming *sati* was considered preferable because the widow other wise is "ill-treated as long as lives"<sup>4</sup>. The question then is that then how do we come across its significant prevalence in the nineteenth century Haryana which formed a significant component of the then Punjab. The general social attitude towards widow remarriage is further corroborated by Ganesh Das that no respectable Khatri could ever marry a widow or even a divorced woman, and still remain respectable.<sup>5</sup> But is it not perplexing that if it was so inexistent then why these reactionary statements?

In the later period, lower down the caste system, women could be forced to re-marry and were thus required to observe enforced co-habitation, especially during the years when they were capable of reproduction. The agrarian needs also sanctified the widow remarriage, thus, it was a feature which the agriculturist castes shared with the lower castes.

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<sup>1</sup> Papers relating to infant marriage and enforced widowhood in India, Home- Public 35, October 1886 (OIOC)

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa, p. 191

<sup>3</sup> Guru Kian Saakhian, ed. Piara Singh Padam, Saakhi No. 108, p.194-195

<sup>4</sup> Alberuni's India p. 155

<sup>5</sup> Ganesh Das, Char Bagh-i-Punjab p. 292. see also V. Upadhyay, 'Socio-Religious Conditions of North India, p. 152

For a better reconceptualization of the system of *Karewa* Prem Chawdhry's "Customs in a Peasant Economy: Women in Colonial Haryana" is invaluable. Here it is said that Jats led the practice of *Karewa* and other agriculturist castes (except the Rajputs) followed suit. Interestingly among the Brahmins, the reports indicate that *Karewa* was being followed (Karnal gazetter). Even in a far-flung district Muzaffargarh, the Brahmins had declared their adherence to the Jat custom. Rattingen<sup>1</sup>, states that the settlement officer of this district pointed out that there was scarcely a Brahmin there who had even the slightest knowledge of Hindu law books. The Brahmins of this province, who were not a priestly class but were mostly landowners, consequently followed the dominant social custom of this region in preference to the Sanskrit model. Among other Hindu castes the "low grade Khatris" also followed this practice but others like the Banias and the Kayasthas did not do so and among the Muslims nor did the Sayyids.<sup>2</sup>

The question of widow remarriage is closely linked to the general perception of "*Istri Swabhav*" and the need to control the sexuality of women. The other aspect which is closely interlinked is the property rights of the widow. If property rights of the widow are acknowledged, then to avoid the circumstantial need to divide the agricultural land, a form of widow remarriage is evolved. Or, in other words, in the name of widow remarriage and female guardianship, patriarchy exercised its power yet in another form. This was by the custom of "*Karewa*", or "*Chadaar dalna*" or "*Chadar andazi*". It was primarily exercised among the Jats who married their deceased brother's widow to uphold the name of the family. In "*Karewa*", the ceremony was not accompanied by any religious ritual. "*Karewa*", a white sheet coloured at the corners, was thrown by the man over the widow's head signifying his acceptance of her as his wife. There could be certain variations.<sup>3</sup> In some regions, for instance, it could be placing *churies* (glass bangles), a popular

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<sup>1</sup> Rattingen, A Digest of Civil Law, 13<sup>th</sup> edn. Revised by Om Prakash Aggarwal, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Lahore, 1880, p. XVII

<sup>2</sup> Census of India, Punjab and Delhi, 1911, Vol. 17 pt 1 p. 219; Karnal District Gazetteer, 1976, p. 85

<sup>3</sup> For details, although for a later period see C.L. Tupper, The Punjab Customary Law, Calcutta Government Printing, 1881, vol ii, pp 93, 123. See also E Joseph, Customary Law of the Rohtak District, 1910, Lahore, Government Printing, 1911, p 45



symbol of being a "*suhagin*", on the widow's wrist in full assembly and some times even a gold *nath* (nose ring) in the nose and a red sheet over her head with a rupee tied in one of the corners. This could be followed by the distribution of *Gur* (Jaggery) or sweets. This ceremony was not accompanied by any religious ceremonies and rituals. It fitted well with the religious instruction that no women could be customarily married twice, that is, could go through the custom of *biah* (religious wedding). The marriage through "*Karewa*" had a social acceptance and the children of such marriages were regarded as legal heirs. After "*Karewa*" the widow merely resumed her jewels and coloured cloths which she had abandoned after her husband's death. So much so, that sometimes, mere co-habitation was considered sufficient to legitimize the relationship and it conferred all the rights of the valid marriage. However, the patriarchal social psychology reiterated itself for instance co-habitation was socially accepted as a remarriage, if it took place, in the man's house, in contrast; any visits to the women were considered adulterous.

The practice of widow re-marriage among the Jats, followed by other agricultural castes, should be understood as closely linked up with the idea that the landed property should remain with in the family and women's productive and reproductive potential was not allowed to go waste, especially when there were adverse female/ male sex ratio. In other words, the prevalence of "*Karewa*" among the land owning classes became popular when the land became a "prized" possession. It emanated out of the need for retaining landed property with in the family. The main reason for making the marriage arrangements inside the family was to transfer the control of the deceased husband's land from the widow to his brother or to a patrilineal family member, because if a widow remarried, she lost all her rights to property even if she married her deceased husband's brother. Remarriage, therefore, deprived her even of the limited right to the land, which she came to possess after her husband's death. This practice successfully managed to pass on the property rights to her husband's male line.

With in the framework of the "*Karewa*" too, the widow's right as to whom she could marry was not only severely restricted, it could only be settled by her late husband's family. And although the widow could not be compelled to re-marry, she was not free to marry without their consent. So complete was the

control over woman and on the question of her re-marriage that it was freely admitted that the widow was often practically forced and made to yield to their wishes. The basic intention behind the system of widow re-marriage, in fact, poses a big question mark as to what an extent this system was beneficial for the widows and whether it was really in the spirit of a social reform. Although, much later, a British barrister at Law, F Cunningham, who compiled draft Gazetteer of Rohtak District between 1870-74 made an apt social observation when he wrote, : "Karewa" under these conditions may be called re-marriage with reference to reasons affecting the women; but such unions often take place for causes which have regard to men only."<sup>1</sup>

When we try to construct a picture from the available sources of the Muslim widows, it emerges to be pretty better than their Hindu sisters. Unlike Hindus, a Muslim widow was allowed to attend and enjoy the festivities of the betrothal, *Nikaah* and birth ceremonies. The only ban on her, after her husband's death, was to observe strictly the period of "*Iddat*" which was of four months and ten days.<sup>2</sup> During this period, she had to give up all physical decorations and makeup and not attire herself in new, gaudy and silk garments.<sup>3</sup> She was forbidden to wear any type of ornaments made of flowers or metals. The use of perfume, antimony (*surma*) and "missi" were also not allowed. During the period of "*Iddat*", she could not use scented oil for her hair and was forbidden to comb it smoothly. She had to be secluded in the house and was not permitted to move about except under unavoidable circumstances, that too, during the day and covering herself with the veil.<sup>4</sup>

In case of pregnancy, she had to follow the Islamic rules of *Iddat* only up to the birth of the child.<sup>5</sup> Generally, the Muslim widow strictly observed these rules. In her "*Iddat*" she was regarded more respectfully and the people had more sympathetic attitude.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Rohtak District Gazetteer, 1883-84, Calcutta, N.D., p51

<sup>2</sup> Al Mishkat, Maulana Abu Mohammad Ibrahim Madfuzah, Urdu translation, Vol III, 188, p. 53. For a detailed discussion see Muslim Women in Medieval India, Zinat Kesar, Janaki Prakashan, Delhi: 1992, p.300- 301

<sup>3</sup> ibid, Mishkat, Vol III, 189, p 53

<sup>4</sup> Behishti- Zewar, Urdu bazaar Delhi. Also English translation Mohammad Masroor Khan, Delhi: 1979, vol. IV, p34)

<sup>5</sup> The Holy Quran, Surrah, IXV 4, 11, 234

After the completion of period of "*Iddat*" a widow was free to re-marry if she so desired. Mostly all foreign travelers of the period (1526-1707AD) recorded the system of re-marriage prevalent among the Muslims, and it was not looked down upon till the reign of Aurangzeb. However, the attitude of the Muslim society too underwent a change in the acceptability of the widow remarriage and started viewing it as an undesirable social practice. (During the reign of Mohammad Shah (1719-1748 AD), widow re-marriage was considered undesirable especially among higher and respectable families).<sup>1</sup> In fact, this changing social attitude was in contradiction to the Islamic faith which considered widow re-marriage as desirable as fresh marriage. It is worth to note in this context that all the wives of Prophet Mohammad, except the youngest Aishah, were previously wedded. Due to religious sanctions and thus the wider social acceptability, widow re-marriage was widely practiced by the rich and the poor alike.

Among the Muslims too, we find a form of widow re-marriage equivalent to "*Karewa*" or "*Chadar Dalena*". The widow was married to the younger brother of the deceased and the Muslim traced the origins of this practice to a Turkish custom. Manucci also refers to this custom thus, "Since the law thus directed that the wives of the dead elder brother belonged to living younger brother."<sup>2</sup>

It must also be highlighted here that in the Muslim society the women also had some say whether she wanted to go in for a re-marriage or prefer to live in solitude with the memories of the deceased husband. Commendably, such widows did not have to bear social ostracism or even criticism; they were in fact highly respected not only in the family but in the society too. However, analyzing the then social milieu this seems to be the behavioral norm among the very high status families- like royal families. Otherwise, the reality for a common Muslim widow would not have been much different from her Hindu sisters where the social pressure and the acceptability would have been the main guiding force of her widowed life and she must have bowed down to the

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<sup>1</sup> Maulana Syeed Abul Hassan Ali Nadvi, *Hindustani Musalman Ek Nazar Mein*, Urdu, Second Edition, Lucknow; 1974, p 63

<sup>2</sup> Manucci Niccolao Venetian (1653-1708AD) *Storia Do Mogor* in four volumes, translated into English by William Irvine, Indian Text Series, Published for the Govt. of India, London: 1907-08, also reprinted, Calcutta 1965 Vol I, trans, p. 361

wishes of her family {read her deceased husband's family}. Within the family too the opinions of the male members would have been most formidable.

However, the larger picture that emerges from the Muslim society is that the position of the Muslim widow was better than her Hindu counterparts, at least in theory. A Muslim widow could enjoy property rights and had a share in the property of her late husband, however, small.<sup>1</sup> After the observation of "*idaat*", the Muslim widow was not forbidden to put on jewels and fine dresses and shoes. A Muslim widow was not deprived of social privileges and her appearance on festive occasions was not considered inauspicious as among the Hindus. A Hindu widow was constantly reminded of her misfortune when she was not allowed to participate in birth, marriage or any other auspicious ceremony. She was made stranger in her own family as she could not be present even when a child was born to her own son or during the "*namkaran*" (naming of the child). Although, it must have been an emotional soother for Muslim women that she was not debarred from social festivities, yet, in general, they were either busy in fulfilling the needs of the family or led a life of solitude and prayer.<sup>2</sup> Widows in Muslim society generally dressed themselves in white garments.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> If she had a child or son's child, her right over this property was 1/8th, One eighth but if she was childless then 1/4th, One Fourth of the property according to Islamic rule, as interpreted from "The Holy Quran, Chapter IV, Surah 4, Verse 12.

<sup>2</sup> H.G Keene, History of Hindustan, p182. Also Ms. Meer Hassan Ali, Observations, p. 46

<sup>3</sup> Mischeep's Man English Book, trans in Urdu by Illiyas Maulana, Sayyed Mohammad, 1904, p 46.

## WOMEN'S POSITION IN SOCIAL SPHERE

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*"She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her: she is incidental, inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute- she is the other".*

(Simone De Beavoir, *The Second Sex* trans H.M. Parshley, New York: Vintage 1974, p XIX)

The above statement rightly signifies the position of women not only in the medieval Punjab, our area of study, but it is also reflective of women's position in larger part of the world, even today.

### Rituals and Ceremonies<sup>\*</sup>

Coming to the ceremonial aspect of the marriage, we come across a long process of ceremonies and rituals beginning with the betrothal, the bride groom's marriage procession (*baraat* or *Janj*) going to the bride's house after sunset, the performance of numerous wedding rituals under the supervision of *Nais* and Brahmins until the co-habitation of the couple. With the exception of *Niqah* and *Vedi* ceremonies, which were essentially religious in character, most of the other ceremonies and rituals had much in common among the Hindus and the Muslims of our period. As already noted Sikhs, infact, had not emerged as a distinct social entity and the people who had even been influenced by the ideological perceptions of the Sikh Gurus followed the same practice. To make the point even more crystal clear, Gurus families' also, in fact, followed the same rituals and customs as of any other Hindu family. As has been stated earlier, the society in Punjab in the sixteenth and

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\* Apart from the specified references, the following accounts of the life cycle rituals owes a great deal to the following works which are great repositories of information. R W Falcon, *Handbook on Sikhs on Regimental Officers* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1896, PP 48-54). A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontiers Province, Based on the Census Report for the Punjab, 1892 by Sir Edward Maclagan, K.C.S.I., C.S.J.V.1, compiled by H.A. Rose (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing, Punjab, 1919); A.H.Bingley, *Sikhs* (Patiala: Department of Languages, 1970, reprint; first published Simla, 1899), pp. 93-107; *Punjabi State Gazetteers*, Phulkian states, Patiala, Jind and Nabha (Lahore: The Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1901 pp 231-237).

seventeenth centuries had a common intermingled culture of all the people which included Hindus, Muslims and people under the influence of Sikh Gurus who followed more or less the same rituals. The marriage rituals have often proven useful to express a sense of collective identity in the evolution of different religious communities. Rituals constitute a key element in the construction of religious identity particularly those that fall under the rubric of rites of passage. In all pre-Industrial societies such rites tend to express the relationship between the individuals and the society in which they live. Ritual enactments are a condensed statement of the most deeply held values of a society.<sup>1</sup>

In the evolution of different religious communities, marriage rituals have often proven useful to express a sense of collective identity. The initiation of marriage proposal, amongst the Hindus started from the side of the girl herself but amongst the Muslims, it was generally started from the boy's side.<sup>2</sup> However, there is no injunction in Islam which party should initiate the proposal. It was infact, the choice of the guardian of the girl to accept or reject the proposal. A marriage proposal from the girl's side was considered to be humiliating or indecent and with few exceptions, it was always avoided.

Among the Hindus, the girl's parents sent their *Lagis* with certain gifts and sweets called *Shagun* or *Roqna* for the chosen bridegroom.<sup>3</sup> A little oil was dropped at the door (*Tel Chona*) upon the entry of the *Lagis* in the house in the presence of all the family members, relatives and kinsmen, the boy was seated in front of the *Lagis*, who put some "*Shakkar*" (Sweets), "*Chhavaras*" (Dried Dates), "*Patashas*" (Sweets) and also some cash into the lap (*Jholi* or *Palla*) of the boy.<sup>4</sup> This was followed by the distribution of sweets among all those present on the occasion to greet the boy and his family. Meals were

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<sup>1</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Making of a Religious Paradox Sikh, Khalsa, Sehajdhari as Modes of Early Sikh Identity in Bhakti Religion in North India Community Identity and Political Action*, Ed David Lorenzen, Delhi: Manohar, 1996, pp. 47-48.

<sup>2</sup> Gulbadan, *Humayunnamah*, trs. Bev, p151; Badaoini's *Muntakhab-UI-Tawarikh*, Vol 2, trs. (Lowe), P59; also Palsaert Jahangir's *India*, P81; Abul Fazal, *Akbarnamah*, Vol I, Trans p. 575.

<sup>3</sup> Muqbal, *Qissa Hir-Ranjha*, pp 19-20; Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Muqbal, *Qissa Hir-Ranjha*, pp. 19-20; Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 34.

served to the *Lagis* by the host family.<sup>1</sup> The parents of the boy, according to their status could send gifts like sweets, chhavaras, coconuts, ornaments, cash and dresses through the *Lagis* to convey their agreement and the confirmation of the betrothal (*Kurmai*) to the latter.<sup>2</sup> Since the *Lagis* played an extremely important role, it was customary among the parents to satisfy them with gifts. At times, the *Lagis* were rewarded with rich ornaments.<sup>3</sup> Among the Muslims, atleast for the royal households, we get clear evidence that the betrothal ceremony known by different names such as “*Imam Zamim*”, “*Nisbat*”, “*Sherbat Khori*” and “*Lahri Bel*”, was preformed by the mother of the boy in the ceremony. The mother of the bridegroom on having accompanied by relatives and friends, paid a visit to the house of the girl on the appointed day.<sup>4</sup> They took with them several *Khwans* (trays) full of gifts for the bride and her parents. These consisted of costly dresses, ornaments, cosmetics, perfumes, betel leaves, fruits and sweets according to the status of the family. In the royal families, goods worth thousands and lakhs were presented to the would-be-bride on this occasion. However, this practice seems to be limited only to the royal families as we do not get any clear reference for common Muslim masses following such practices. Moreover, this kind of lavish life style, both in terms of finances as well as social freedom and mobility enjoyed by women folk is not to be expected in the social milieu that existed during the period.

Among both families of the bride and the groom, nothing further was done until the girl's parents announced their readiness for marriage. The average time span between betrothal and the marriage seems to have been two to three years; at times exceeding it.<sup>5</sup> Generally, the girl's parents opted for a suitable date which was then communicated to the groom's family and after their consent, it got finalized.<sup>6</sup> Guru Hargobind received the *lagis* with the

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<sup>1</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir-Ranjha, pp. 19-20; Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir-Ranjha, pp. 20-21

<sup>3</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir-Ranjha, pp. 19,20,21,34; Warris Shah, Hir, p. 206

<sup>4</sup> Pelsaert, Jahangir's India, p. 81; also Abdul Halim Shar Guzashta Luknow (Urdu) p. 338

<sup>5</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 34

<sup>6</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir-Ranjha, pp. 22; Warris Shah, Hir, p. 59, Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 36

proposed date for the marriage of Sri Guruditta.<sup>1</sup> Guru jee directed the *Lagis* to Mata Ganga Jee who received them with celebration, served them the food and gave them the gifts.<sup>2</sup> This date of marriage was sent by the girl's parents only with due respect and modesty as evinced by a Sikh taking the letter of "*saha*" to the in-laws of Bibi Veeron.<sup>3</sup> Similar reference is available when Diwan Purohit appeared before Mata Bassi with the letter stating the date of marriage of Har Rai ji.<sup>4</sup> Among the Muslims, the date "*ukad*" of the actual marriage was fixed at another meeting, accompanied by ceremonies and courtesies, arranged at the instance of boy's father. All the more it was equally important for both the parties to consult a Brahman astrologer who calculated suitable date (*thit*), propitious moment (*mahurat*) and day (*var*) for the marriage. This practice was called "*saha sudharna*".<sup>5</sup> It is generally observed that in selecting the *sahas* or dates, the astrologers followed the Indian calendar. Especially, the lunar days in general and the full moon days in particular, were considered auspicious for the marriage ceremony.<sup>6</sup> As indicated by Ahmad Yaar and Waris Shah, the most propitious day (i.e. night) for a *Niqah* ceremony was '*Jumeraat*' or the Thursday night.<sup>7</sup>

Fixation of the date of marriage (*saha*) was termed as *gand pauna*<sup>8</sup> Among Muslims, it was called *gand niqah*.<sup>9</sup> Bulleh Shah makes its meaning more explicit. In this observance a piece of cloth or string was given as many knots as there were the days remaining till the wedding day. In the Rawalpindi district coloured threads were presented for the same purpose and the knot is tied by the brahman or a mulla. A knot was untied everyday by the parents. Particularly it was done by the bride's parents in view of their preparatory measures.<sup>10</sup> After fixing the date, parents of both the sides dispatched a similar *gandh* which was circulated among the relatives with the presents of

<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, ibid, p. 379

<sup>2</sup> op cit, p. 379

<sup>3</sup> op cit, p. 386

<sup>4</sup> Gur Kian Saakhian, ed. Piara Singh Padam., Saakhi number 4, p. 42

<sup>5</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p. 59

<sup>6</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p. 79; Ahmad Yaar, Qissa Sassi Punnun, pp. 80-82.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Yaar, Qissa Sassi Punnun, p. 80; Waris Shah, Hir p. 59; Nihala, Sakhii "Sarwar Di Shaaadi" in Punjabi lok Ghatawan, Vol. II, p. 67

<sup>8</sup> Bulleh Shah, Gandhan in Qafian Bulleh Shah arthat Kullayat Bulleh Shah, p.183, Bulleh Shah, Qafian, 78; Sohni Fazal Shah, p. 145

<sup>9</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, p.19

<sup>10</sup> Bulleh Shah, pp. 183, 184, 187, 188, 190, 191



gur etc. by the hands of the nais, who receive small gifts at each house in the form of money or grain. It was called *gandh pherna*, which was an invitation as well as an intimation of the date of marriage. Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin indicates the invitation being sent to all the relatives at the time of marriage of Sri Gur Ditta<sup>1</sup> reference to the marriage of Suraj Mal<sup>2</sup> and similar references are made in Sri Guru Panth Parkash of Guru Gobind Singh ji's marriage<sup>3</sup> where invitations are sent to near as well as distant relatives by the *gandh pherna*.

*"It Guru ghar mein tyaari bhaari saari bhai udari  
Chaar Vansh Ke hans-ans gur saak sambandh apaari"*<sup>4</sup>

Girls (i. e. brides) were carefully prevented from going outside after this *gandh* ceremony.<sup>5</sup>

With few days, generally a week, remaining for the wedding ceremony, the *maian* or *Vatna*<sup>6</sup> was anointed to the bodies of the bride and the bridegroom respectively.<sup>7</sup> Sri Guru Panth Parkash gives a graphic description of *Vatna* at the occasion of Guru Gobind Singh's marriage when he writes:

*Batna malat dalt rati rambha manas kasi urvashi,  
Kalangi dhare sapras Koran miss batne rahe sahiroo bas!*<sup>8</sup>

The ceremony was called *maian pauna* or *tel charhauna*. At times this ceremony was performed in the morning of the day of marriage with the bathing ceremony of the bride and the groom.<sup>9</sup> The groom was seated on the basket –stool (*khara*). The women folk of the house held a piece of cloth stretched over him. Then he was bathed by the *lagis*.<sup>10</sup> Connected with this was the ritual of *chappan bhannana* as the groom was required to break

<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, *ibid*, p. 397

<sup>2</sup> *op cit*, p. 443

<sup>3</sup> Bhai Gyan Singh Jee Gyani, Sri Guru Panth Parkash, pp. 182-183

<sup>4</sup> *op cit*, p. 183

<sup>5</sup> Waris Shah, *Hir*, p. 37

<sup>6</sup> *Vatna* was a compound of oil and some fragrant ingredients making the skin glow n soft

<sup>7</sup> Bulleh Shah, *Gandhan*, pp. 190; Muqbal, *Qissa Hir Ranjha*, p. 28. Ahmad Yaar, *Kamrup*, p. 335.

<sup>8</sup> Bhai Gyan Singh Jee Gyani, Sri Guru Panth Parakash, p. 183

<sup>9</sup> Sri Guru Panth Parkash, p. 184

<sup>10</sup> Agra Sethi, *Var Haqiqat Rai*, p.36; Nihala, *Sakhi Sarwar Di Shaadi*, p.65

covers (*chappan*) of the earthen vessel by jumping the *khara*.<sup>1</sup> The same graphic description of marriage of Guru Nanak Dev is available in *Meharbaan*. It states that when it was time to give bath to Guru Nanak, he was made to sit on stool (*Chauk Puraya Par Kharay Par Baithaya*). He was given bath and a piece of red cloth was stretched over him. This was all accompanied with singing of auspicious songs by women folk who also anointed *vatana*, oil, perfume and scents on Guru Nanak. Then Guru Nanak was bathed by *Brahmins*, wore a fresh *dhoti*. Got up from the *Khara* and then broke the *chappaniya* (earthen vessels). Then Guru Nanak was dressed in an outfit, *tilak* was applied on his forehead, *mukut* was placed on his head and then *sehras* were arranged on the *mukut*, accompanied with prayers of Lord Ganesh. The entire gathering gifted him *shagun* (cash money presented on an auspicious occasion).<sup>2</sup>

In the bride's home, the girls brought water from the village well to perform the bathing ceremony, called *ghari gharoli*.<sup>3</sup> Now, in the contemporary Punjabi household this ceremony is performed in the bridegroom's family as well. The only difference is that the water is fetched by the *bhabhis* (brothers' wives). After this ceremony the hands of the bride were anointed with henna (*mehndi*). She wore *suhag chura* and *suhag nath* which was supposed to be a gift from the side of *mamas* (maternal uncles). These ornaments were considered auspicious for the longevity of husband's life. Immediately after the bathing ceremony multi coloured threads (*ganias or kangaras*) were tied to the wrists of both the bride and bridegroom. After this ceremony, the bride is carefully watched and guarded for fear of the *jinnas* may do her mischief. Following this time the women folk of both the families assemble and sing. These marriage songs are repositories of great information and expression of love and affection shared by the family members. For instance, a very popular folk song exhibits the bonding of a brother and sister in a very touchy manner when she says:

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<sup>1</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p.36

<sup>2</sup> Meharbaan Janam Saakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Published by Sikh History Research Department, Khalsa College, Amritsar, 1962, ed Kirpal Singh, Asst Ed. Sardar Shamsher Singh Ashoke, p299-300

<sup>3</sup> Waris Shah, Hir , p.64

*“Jarey Rahan Mera Vir Janj Chadiya,  
Una Rahan Da Reta khand Benayya. “*

Meaning that the ways/roads from where the marriage procession of my brother passed of, the sand of those roads tastes like sweet to me.

They give practical knowledge to bride of her life ahead, how her relationship with *saas*, *sasur* and *nand*, *jaithani* etc should be handled. In most of these songs the bride's *saas* i.e the mother of the groom is not spoken of in a positive light. At a more tautological level, these assemblies provided the women with a forum to vent out their feelings against the families' of the in-laws in form of songs ranging from sarcasm to humour to pangs of separation from the biological family; how difficult it would be to carve out a niche for oneself in a new set up where there is nobody to support her and safeguard her interests. We get repeated reference in these songs that marriage, for girls at least, is perceived as a second birth for her.

Generally in the morning on the day of wedding procession, the bridegroom dressed up in a gaudy outfit with a crown (*mukat*) over his turban and a golden lace (*sehra*) hanging on his forehead.<sup>1</sup> On the occasion of his marriage, Guru Gobing Singh:

*Kar Snaan Poshak Saji Guru Mukut Puri Mani Jartay*<sup>2</sup>

Meaning after the bath, Guru Ji dressed in a nice outfit and adorned gemmed *Mukat* on his head.

On this occasion the assembled relatives bestowed blessings on him along with some gifts in cash. It was called *tambol* or *neunda*.<sup>3</sup> After that the bridegroom was mounted on *ghori* (mare) while his younger brother or a relative called *sarbala* sat behind him.<sup>4</sup> The patriarchal ideology is emphasized in the use of mare (*ghori*) as well. The mare in the folk tradition

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<sup>1</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p.36 Waris Shah, Hir , p.63. Nihala, Sakhi Sarwar Di Shadi, p.65.

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gyan Singh Gyani, Sri Guru Panth Parkash, p184

<sup>3</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p.37, Nihala, Sakhi Sarwar di Shadi, p. 64

<sup>4</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, P.63, Nihala, Sakhi Sarwar di Shadi,p.65; Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 37

signifies the women and her physicality at a wedding ceremony is not the horse that is the mount for the bridegroom. Also it is very common in our folk lyricist idiom of the Punjab to refer to a restless young women as a *vachheri* (a young mare). The occasion of wedding procession was called *janj charhni*.<sup>1</sup> Just at the same time the sister of the bridegroom came and held the reins of his ghorī to a short distance. By doing so she received some money from the brother as a token for *Vag pharai*.<sup>2</sup>

The arrival of the wedding party in the bride's village or town was popularly known as *janj dhukni*.<sup>3</sup> We get a detailed description of *Janj* and *Janj dhukhni* in Sikh stories, *Gubilas Padshahi Chhevin*<sup>4</sup> gives a graphic description of celebration, rejoicing at the time of marriage of Sri Guru Ditta.<sup>5</sup> The wedding guests were welcomed and felicitated by the *laagis* of the brides' village.<sup>6</sup> Muqbal also informs that the close male relatives of the bride went ahead of village to receive wedding procession.<sup>7</sup> While the guests were still away from the bride's home some rituals were performed. Especially, among the Hindus some uncooked food and sweets were sent by the brides' parents for the dinner of the bridal party. At the same time, some gifts including *dhōti* was sent for bride's use by the father of the bridegroom. This rite was known as *kuar dhōti da suhagan*.<sup>8</sup> The wedding party approached bride's residence quite late in the evening. The occasion was celebrated with dance, music and fireworks.<sup>9</sup> Bride's father, brother and kinsmen stood outside and waited outside the house.<sup>10</sup> Sri Guru Panth Parkash reports that when the wedding procession of Guru Gobind Singh reached the village of bride then the in-laws (*samdhi*) came and welcomed them.<sup>11</sup> Then it was followed by the *milni* ceremony where the relatives of the two parties met their counterparts for instance the mama of both the bride and the groom will embrace each other

<sup>1</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p, 63; Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 37

<sup>2</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 37

<sup>3</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 37

<sup>4</sup> see Gur Bilas Padshahi Chhevin, p. 389-81

<sup>5</sup> Marriage of Suraj Mal Ji, op. cit., p 443; Marriage of Gur Tegh Bahadur, p. 511-512

<sup>6</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, p. 33; Waris Shah, Hir, p. 63

<sup>7</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, p. 33

<sup>8</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p.38

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed pictographic description of the kind of music and dance; the artists and the kind of fireworks see the works of Waris Shah; Agra Sethi, and Muqbal

<sup>10</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p. 62

<sup>11</sup> Sri Guru Panth Parkash, p184

and bride's mama will present gifts. Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin gives a graphic description of *milni* ceremony.<sup>1</sup> Their respective nais assisted them in this exchange of gifts.<sup>2</sup> Genealogists (*bhats*) and bards (*dums and dhadhis*) sung praises of both the guest's as well as the host families. They received their usual dues at that time.<sup>3</sup>

Generally, after the *milni* ceremony the bridegroom was brought to the women gathering where some jokes were played with him by the prospective *salis* (i.e sisters or close friends of the bride) and other women folk.<sup>4</sup> As indicated by Waris Shah, at such times quite embarrassing and suggestive remarks were made for the bridegroom. But this must have made at least both the bride and the bridegroom somewhat familiar and little free with each other.<sup>5</sup> At this point of time some rituals were also performed, for instance Muqbal informs that the bride escorted by her friends was made to pass under the *ghori* (mare) of the groom.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps, it was symbolic of her obeisance of the latter. In another ritual, the earthen lamp or *diva* was placed in a sieve (*chhanin*) which was hung in the middle of the doorway<sup>7</sup>. In order to test his workmanship the groom was required to remove the *diva* out of the *chhanin* with his sword. Also a finger ring (*challa*) was obtained from the groom by the girls and was put into the bride's finger.<sup>8</sup> One can easily trace the similarity between present day ring ceremony and it's earlier version.

The actual wedding that is, *niqaah* among the Muslims and the *lavan phera* according to Vedic rituals among the Hindus was performed on the first night after the arrival of the *baraat*. As regards the ceremony of *niqah*, some clues are provided by Muqbal and Waris Shah. The *qazi* or the learned mullah was called upon and made to sit on the carpet in the gathering of the assembled

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<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, p.379

<sup>2</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p.63

<sup>3</sup> Nihala, Sakhi Sarwar di Shadi, p.68; Waris Shah, Hir, p. 63; Agra Sethi Var Haqiqat Rai, p.38.

<sup>4</sup> Sri Guru Panth Parkash, 184

<sup>5</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p.64-66

<sup>6</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, p. 33

<sup>7</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, p.33

<sup>8</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p.64; Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, p. 33

males.<sup>1</sup> Bridegroom was brought to sit in front of the *qazi* while the bride remained in the women's chambers only.<sup>2</sup>

Two responsible males commanding social respect were chosen as the witnesses (*gawah*) and one more was chosen as *vakil* for the correspondence purpose.<sup>3</sup> The *qazi* invoked the blessings of the God, *niyat khair*, and recited the *kalma* five times along with the *sifai-i-Imam*.<sup>4</sup> After defining the rules of the *shariat*, he sought the formal consent of the bride and the groom through the *vakil* and the *gawahas*. Though in theory, Islamic law attaches great mutual consent to marriage, but according to the existing social realities, it appears to be more of a theoretical position a mere formality which was nowhere close to the reality. In fact, the choice of the groom was in the purview of the elders of the family; the will and choice of the parents was final.<sup>5</sup> Solemnization of the marriage included the joining of the gaze of the couple which was called *akad niqah*.<sup>6</sup>

Indications regarding Vedic ceremony of wedding are provided by Agra Sethi and Najabat. A wooden altar or pavilion called '*vedi*' was set in the house by the brahman.<sup>7</sup> Two basket-stools (*kharas*) were placed beneath it. The bridegroom and the bride were seated over it.<sup>8</sup> The learned brahman prepared a square place on the ground with the flour and marked them with the names of all the planets to obtain favorable omens. It was called *Chauk pauna*.<sup>9</sup> Then the brahman performed the ceremony by reading sacred verses from the Vedas. This was called *lavan pheran*. The ends of the sheets worn by the bride and the groom were tied together in a knot. This was called *gandh chitrna*.<sup>10</sup> Then they took the rounds together around the fire which was known as *phere lena*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, pp.65,69,70,199; Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, pp.34-35; Nihala, Sakhi Sarwar di Shadi, p.67, Ahmad Yaar, Qissa Sassi Punnun, p. 81

<sup>2</sup> Muqbal Qissa Hir Ranjha, p.35

<sup>3</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir Rnjha, p.35; Waris Shah, Hir, p. 69; Nihala, Sakhi Sarwar di Shadi, p. 67

<sup>4</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjaha, pp.34-35

<sup>5</sup> Fazal Shah Sohni, p.138; Waris Shah, Hir, p.68; Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, pp. 36-37

<sup>6</sup> Muqbal' Qissa Hir Ranjha, p.37; Waris Shah, Hir, p.69

<sup>7</sup> Qadir Yaar, Puran Bhagat, ed. Richard Temple, p. 203; Najabat, Var Nadir Shah, p.87

<sup>8</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 38

<sup>9</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p.38

<sup>10</sup> Najabat, Var Nadir Shah, p.87; Ahmad Yaar, Kamrup, p.335; Agra Sethi Var Haqiqat, p. 38

<sup>11</sup> Najabat, Var Nadir Shah, p.87

The last important ceremony in the bride's house was the display of her dowry, whatever was gifted depending on the nature of marriage, the social and financial status of the family. This also served the purpose of bringing it to the notice of the '*Biradari*' (clan). It becomes clear from the references of Waris Shah and Muqbal that the articles included in one's dowry (*khatt* or *daaj*) were publicly displayed and announced.<sup>1</sup> According to Muqbal, the gifts sent by the bridegroom's family (*var* or *vari*) were also displayed among the kinsmen and announced.<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, a daughter's dowry included clothes, kitchen utensils, jewels, carpets, cash, bedsteads, cattle and horses.<sup>3</sup> Generally, the clothes and other items were packed in huge wooden boxes called *sanduks*. In fact, dowry was a symbol of social and economic status. A rich Khatri might spend his life's earnings on his daughter's dowry.<sup>4</sup> The description of marriage of Guru Teg Bahadur clearly mentions the giving away of *daaj* (dowry)<sup>5</sup> Sri Guru Panth Parkash reports.

"*Ganak Ganey Ko Vastu Anek Dha Pahnay Janj saari*" clearly indicating the scale of gifts given at the time of Guru Gobind Singh's marriage.<sup>6</sup> Banswalinamah also reports "*Mata Aayi Banarsi Le Ke bahuta daaj*" meaning Mata Banarasi brought huge dowries with her.<sup>7</sup> The stark reality of *daaj* and the consequent (loss) of girl's side is put in a very crisp manner by Bhai Gurdas in his 382, Kabit Swayye.

"*Biab Samai Jaise dubun or gaiat(i) git,*  
*Ekai bue labbat ekai ban(i) jania*".<sup>8</sup>

Meaning just as in celebration of marriage, songs are sung both in the bride and bridegroom's house, the bridegroom's side stands to gain through dowry and arrival of the bride whereas the bride's family loses in wealth and their daughter.

<sup>1</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, pp.61-62;71. Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, p.39

<sup>2</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, p.33; Waris Shah, Hir, p.63

<sup>3</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, pp.60-62, 70-72; Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, pp.19,39; Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Agra Sethi, Var Haqiqat Rai, p39

<sup>5</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, ibid, p 512

<sup>6</sup> Bhai Gyani Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, Sri Guru Panth Parkash, p 185

<sup>7</sup> Kesar Singh Chhibbar, Banswalinamah, ed. Piara Singh Padam, 1(14), p46

<sup>8</sup> KS 382, p410

Waris Shah being, a sensitized social observer, rightly observed that the dowries given in the rich families must have caused a sense of deprivation and an urge to follow the example among the poor sections of the people.<sup>1</sup>

The last important ritual in the series of marriage rites was *doli* i.e departure of the bride for her in-laws place which meant a separation from her biological families. Due to the custom of not marrying the daughters within the village and whole lot of socio-cultural factors in the period under review, it practically meant the cessation of any kind of regular contacts with her natal family. It was always impressed upon the daughter by the parents that they were sending her *doli* and would like only her dead body to come out of that home, It must have been somewhat like a declaration of the social limitations of the parental side in not giving her the adequate support required to make adjustments in a new set up. The bride was seated in a *doli* and her relatives and friends came to bid farewell with tears.<sup>2</sup> In relatively more well-off families her family *nain* (a barber's wife) or a *dai* (the wet nurse) usually accompanied her.<sup>3</sup>

*Kaharas* lifted and carried her palanquin (*doli*). The father of the bridegroom showered coins over the *doli* which was picked up by the poor and the menials. Although it is reported by Ahmad Yaar, but reviewing the general social attitude towards women and the availability of cash in an agricultural economy, it would have been either among the rich sections of society or just for the name's sake. If the parents of the bride would have been rich then their menials would accompany the *doli*. For example, a cattle caretaker could be asked to escort the buffaloes given in the dowry.<sup>4</sup>

The discussion on seeing off their dear daughter in a *doli* by the parents would not be complete without a reference to *Sikhiya*. *Sikhiya* was a local colloquial word for *shiksha* (teachings). It was a last recap by the parents of the cultural values and lessons to lead a happy married life. The thrust of *Sikhiya* was that service to your husband is the ultimate goal for a wife. A new

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<sup>1</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p. 82

<sup>2</sup> Bulleh Shah, Qafian, p.39, 67; Qadir Yaar, Puran Bhagat, p.225

<sup>3</sup> Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, p43; Bulleh Shah, Gandhan, p.184

<sup>4</sup> Waris Shah, Hir, p.71, Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, pp.39,40,41



bride must consider her mother in law as her mother; must view her father in her father-in-law and must see the brothers and sisters in all *devers* and *nands*. She must win over the trust of all the members of the family by humility, modesty, courteousness, service and love and affection. The parents put it in a touching manner, when they said that "*Uss Ghar Se Teri Doli Jaey Aur Arthi Nikaley*"

They instructed her, almost begged her that her conduct in her new family should bring a good name to her parents and not complaints (*Ulahenay*) from any one.

At the time of sending of Mata Gujri's doli, her mother Mata Bishen Kaur gave her the *Sikhiya* that "Serve your husband as your Lord! There is no match to serving the Lord in the world! Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin states in these words

*"Pati Sam Ish Pachan Ke, Te Putri Kar Seva!  
Pati Parmeshwar Janeeye, aur tuch lakh aiv!!"*<sup>1</sup>

Mata Gujri's father also gave the same *Sikhiya* that she should serve her husband all her life.

At the time of seeing off Bibi Veeron's doli, Guru Hargobind is known to have said "Dear Daughter, I don't want to say anything else except that without husband nothing looks good, it is only in the company of husband that all the pleasures attract a woman. Respect all the elders and have the genuine respect and care for your mother in law. Serving the husband is the greatest goal of a woman's life."

*"Sun Bibi Mein Tujhe Sunao,  
Pati Ki Mahima Kahi Bhar Gaon  
Pati Ki Sewa Karni Safli,  
Pati Bin Aur Karey Sabh Nafli,  
Guru Jan Ki Ijbat bahukarni,  
Sas sewa ridu mahin mudharni!"*

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<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chevin, p 513

Mata Damodari also gave the same *Sikhiya* that you are the daughter of Guru Hargobind and grand daughter of Guru Arjan Dev Ji thus, never seek the bad company. Then it was followed by the mundane practical knowledge for daily life, Mata Ji explained Bibi Veeron that under all circumstances you must take your bath early in the morning before the sun rises. She reminded that Guru Nanak Dev ji had said

*"Kuchajji, oh hi hain jo sutiyaan hi suraj chaad dandiya hain!"*<sup>1</sup>

Meaning that *Kuchajji* (imperfect woman) is a woman who wastes early hours in sleep only. Then, it was followed by a very practical piece of advice that never drag the issues (*small quarrels*) in the family. She further said "Be modest and sweet to every one. Finish off the entire household chores without any one reminding you and your conduct should be such that we should not get any sort of complaints. May God Bless you."<sup>2</sup>

However, after the departure of *doli*, the atmosphere at the home of the bride was one of dullness combined with a satisfaction and relief of doing things in the expected social mannerism. On the other hand the family of the bridegroom enjoyed the jubilant mood performing another set of rituals. The bride being a new entrant in the family was given a special welcome by the mother, sister and other female relatives of the bridegroom. The feet of the new bride, daughter-in-law were annointed either in red color or turmeric paste and she had to walk in her new home with these annointed feet which was considered auspicious and that she would bring luck to the family. A small container filled up till brim with rice was kept at the entrance which she had to spill with her feet so that grain would fall in the house; this was indicative of prosperity as grain is symbolic of prosperity, particularly in an agricultural economy. She was also welcomed with folk songs which were indicative of her arrival. At times, the new bride was welcomed with a show of bursting of crackers as evinced at time of arrival of *doli* of Mata Nanki, second wife of Guru Hargobind.<sup>3</sup> Bride's mother-in-law came out of the house with a

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<sup>1</sup> AG, P 762

<sup>2</sup> Simran Kaur, Prasadh Sikh Bibiyan, pp 114,117

<sup>3</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, ibid p345

cup (*chhanna*) of water, which she drank after waving round the head of the couple. This was called *pani varna*.<sup>1</sup>

According to Waris Shah the bride was then given seven bites of *churi* (a Home made sweet dish) and *khichri*.<sup>2</sup> Upon first glance of the *nu* (daughter-in-law) *saas* kissed her and gave her some money; it was popularly known as "*Muh-Dikhai*".<sup>3</sup> The women folk of the neighborhood would be present at this auspicious moment and would congratulate them and wish for their long life of the couple.<sup>4</sup> Then the younger brother of the bridegroom (*dewar*) or some other boy in relation was made to sit in the lap of the bride with a wish that may God bless her with sons only. After a day or two the ceremony of untying of *ganās* was conducted when bride and the bridegroom joined hands in untying the *ganās* of each other. Another associated ceremony was the game of *lassi-mundari* in which a finger ring was dropped in the curd milk and the couple was supposed to find and pick it out<sup>5</sup>. Whosoever won the game was supposed to be a more dominating partner in their marital life; which seems more like a wishful thinking on the part of womenfolk. Rationally, both untying of *ganās* and *lassi-mundari* game seems to be indicating that there would be no secrets between them in future. Much attention has been focused in recent years on the ideological control upon women through the idealization of chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest duty of women reinforced through custom and ritual, and through construction of notions of womanhood which epitomize wifely fidelity. In this context, it would not be out of place to note that in the *Adi Granth* as well as other Sikh sources pleasing the husband is the prime duty of a wife. As evident from the above discussion marriage not only formed a major social institution of the society but rather the mechanism which defined and decided the pattern of life especially for women.

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<sup>1</sup> Muqbal, *Qissa Hir Ranjha*, p.42; Agra Sethi, *Var Haqiqat Rai*, p.39; Nihala, *Sakhi Sarwar di Shadi*, p.68

<sup>2</sup> Waris Shah, *Hir*, p.71

<sup>3</sup> Muqbal, *Qissa Hir Ranjha*, p.42; Nihala, *Sakhi Sarwar di Shadi*, p.68

<sup>4</sup> Bhai Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, *Shri Guru Panth Parkash*, *ibid*, p 185; Muqbil, *Qissa Hir Ranjha*, p 42.

<sup>5</sup> Bhai Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, *Shri Guru Panth Parkash*, p 185

## Other Life Cycle Rituals

After marriage, the next important stage in the life of the house holder was expecting a child. Among the Hindus, when the woman was pregnant, a ceremony called *Ritan* was performed in the fifth or seventh month. The pregnant woman received a new set of clothing for the occasion as well as the sweets from her mother, and the females from the *biradari* assembled to dress her up in the new cloths and be part of the celebrations. At this moment, folk songs blessing the would-be mother, to borne a son was the main theme. The sweets were distributed among all the assembled, on the birth of son there was much rejoicing and exchange of gifts. On the other hand, the birth of a daughter would be very often a cause of sorrow and remorse for the family. Infact, very often the parents resorted to the inhuman practice of female infanticide which will be discussed in a separate section. However, on the occasion of the birth of son, the doors of the house were decorated with leaves from the series tree and among the Jat Sikhs, the image of an outspread hand was made with a red dye on the outside walls of the house and an iron ring tied over the lintel. A lamp or a cow dung cake was left to burn outside the mother's room, night and day in order to protect the new born infant from the malevolent forces. Six days after the birth, the family priest or *purohit* was called to caste a horoscope for the new born and it was known as "*Chatthi*".

In the post natal phase, the mother, because she was considered to be polluted was kept in seclusion for a period varying from eleven to thirteen days, depending on ritual purity of the caste to which she belonged. This period of impurity was most commonly called *sutak*, but was also known as *chhut*, especially in the north west of the Punjab. On the eve of thirteenth day, the females of the household started the rites of purifications by smearing the walls and the floors of the house with the mixture of mud and cow-dung. The earthen vessels which had been used during this period were then smashed and all metal vessels thoroughly cleansed. On that day itself, the *purohit* lit a sacred fire in the house and sprinkled members of the household with holy water from the Ganges. In the case of certain castes, on the thirteenth day,

the mother gave away her old clothes to the midwife, who sometimes shared them with the *nain*. The *nain* brought with her some cow urine, green grass and nail parer. After sprinkling the cow urine with the grass, the *nain* clipped the lady's nails for the first time since her confinement. After all this had been done, the mother and the child were allowed to come out of the room in which they had been confined for a period of thirteen days. As on all auspicious occasions, oil (generally mustard oil) was sprinkled on the ground outside the threshold by the *nain*. After the ritual cleansing over, the child was named by a Brahman who used his almanac to find a name. The mother was deemed to be fully purified only after forty days of confinement, after which she was allowed to enter the domestic kitchen and tend the hearth.

As noted in the context of other rituals and ceremonies, the Muslims had so largely incorporated the customs of Hindus that it is, sometimes difficult to distinguish those which are special characteristics of Islam. It holds still more true especially for the customs those observed at the birth of children. There were few specific variations like the custom of reciting *Azaan* and *Iqamat* was observed without fail. The naming of the new born was a very important ceremony among the Muslims of India. Like the Hindus, the Muslims of India celebrated "*Chhatti*" on the sixth day of child's birth with great interest.<sup>1</sup> It was commonly observed on the sixth day, but sometimes on the seventh or the ninth day of the child's birth of where any death had occurred in the house, "*Chhatti*" was performed on the third day in order to change the infant's luck.

The *Shraddh* ceremonies were often repeated on each anniversary of the death. The objective of such mortuary rituals was to earn merit for the deceased and reduce his suffering.

The women folk of the family were always very disturbed by any death in the family partly due to their emotive being and sensitive nature and that the family has always been epicenter of her life. Yet, she realized the inevitability of the death as evident in an anecdote. When the women folk of the area came to mourn the death of Guru Arjan to Mata Ganga, she would rather

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<sup>1</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, tr. Jarrett, Vol iii, p 317

console them and reiterate the ultimate reality that who ever is borrie has to meet the fateful end of death.<sup>1</sup>

The rituals connected the husband and wife but in a clear hierarchical manner placing the wife in a subordinate position while attempting to cloak the hidden conflicts and anxieties under the garb of ritual protocol. In many instances during a given ceremony, women are traditionally excluded. In the Hindu death rituals, for example, the son alone is permitted to light the funeral pyre, upon his officiation depends the salvation of the father or the mother. The *parent's* atman can not proceed on the right route that is path of light, if there is no male offspring to perform this rite. The funeral procession also consists only of men. The wedding party again consists solely of male friends and relatives who are expected to carouse their way to the bride's home and bring the newly wedded wife to her in-laws home. The conceptual implications of rituals are first, the ritual enactments are a condensed statements of the most deeply held values of a society. As metaphors of collective consciousness they inform of cultural boundaries, communicate notions of time, space and sanctity. It establishes and re-inforces the position of men and women, their roles and the existing, largely accepted, gaps in the social order. On one hand, the rituals and ceremonies often re-inforce the social order and on the other hand, from a purely systemic viewpoint, rituals are the ceremonies of a mediating institution that shape the future of a society. They are in effect the vehicles of hope for both individuals and the social order.<sup>2</sup> The symbols, gestures, formulae and emotions that make up a ritual performance help transform the chaos and vicissitudes of human existence into an ordered and meaningful sequence. More simply, to paraphrase Meyerhoff and Moore, rituals help people overcome indeterminacy in life.<sup>3</sup> However, there is a tension between the ritual and the social order and the sociologists often insist on the distance between rituals and everyday life.<sup>4</sup> This becomes blatantly obvious in the importance, welcomed feeling at in-laws' place experienced by

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<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, *ibid*, p 278

<sup>2</sup> Richard K. Fenn, *The Sociology of Religion*, 1982, p.117

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Meyerholl and Sally Falk Moore, eds, *Secular Ritual*, Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977, pp. 3-24

<sup>4</sup> Richard K. Fenn, *The Sociology of Religion*, *ibid*, p. 117

the new bride and her position in the household affairs for years to come. It is worth noting that the meaning of the term “*Samskara*” widely used in lay parlance to denote the life cycle rituals, is to “prepare”, “refine” and to “complete”.<sup>1</sup> In other words, these rituals (Samskars) have the power to distill and complete what is un-distilled and incomplete in human life.

### **Family a Complex Web: Locus of Love or Conflict, Domination or Subordination**

Family is the basic social institution, as the basic unit of organizing reproduction and production as well as passing down the bloodline and the control of property to successive generations. It's a realm where its members are linked to each other through its mutual duties and obligations. In medieval Punjab it was more of a paternalistic dominance within the family, where members have unequal access to the family's material assets and the right to make decisions. Oppression and powerlessness of women coexist with a prevailing ethos of according social respect and honour to her in certain roles like “Mother”.

Another very important relationship in the family has always been brother-sister bonding which is more than apparent in the relationship of Guru Nanak with his sister, Nanaki and her husband. She was the first one to recognize the spiritual inclinations of her brother; had helped him immensely in his low phases. Guru Nanak, before his marriage stayed at her sister and brother-in-law's place for quite some time, when he was employed with *Modikhana*. The high and pure value attached to the virtue of relationship of brother-sister, in the eyes of Guru Nanak becomes apparent in the parallel he draws between the relation between the soul and the body where soul is synonymous to the brother and in the pangs of separation the body (sister/*behen*) meets the fatal end.

*“Veeran Veeran Kar Rahi, Veera Veera Bhaiy Bai Rai Yey!  
Veer chaley Ghar Apney Behan Virah Jal Jaye!”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> R Nicholas and R Inden, *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, p37

<sup>2</sup> AG, p935

Similarly, Guru Teg Bahadur is told to visit his elder sister Bibi Veeron at Malla village and stayed there for a month.<sup>1</sup> Although, there does not exist any conclusive evidence yet one is wishfully inclined to believe that probably staying at sister's place was not a taboo. May be, it was a later development.

The Sikh history is also replete of such instances, where the norms of behaviour are spelt out through the exemplary conduct of Gurus. The most prominent episode is the unprecedented urge to serve the father on the part of a daughter is Bibi Bhani. The popular tradition states that once when Guru Amar Das was taking bath, the leg of his bathroom seat (*pidhi*) broke. When Bibi Bhani observed this, she placed her hand underneath so that her father doesn't have to bear any inconvenience. When Guru Amar Das saw the water on the floor turning red, he realized that Bibi Bhani's palm was bleeding profusely. This episode exemplifies the unparralled devotion and urge of a daughter to serve her father. The fatherly affection reciprocates in that, Guru Amar Das bestowed the "*gaddi*" of Guruship to Bibi Bhani's husband Ramdas and then to be passed in their family among the male line. The popular tradition has different versions about the transfer of '*Guru-Gaddi*' Mahima Parkash projects that Guru Amar Das ji touched by the great urge of Bibi Bhani to serve bestowed these blessings willingly on his own.<sup>2</sup> However, few other sources project Bibi Bhani requesting for such a blessing.

The most obvious thing that emerges in the family life for a woman, is the ideology of seclusion and domesticity. As discussed, the social understanding of *strisvabhav* forced the society to control the sexuality of women. The hegemonic influence of the economically upper and middle peasant classes had established their family structure and landholding pattern as a standard which most other groups lower down the village hierarchy seem to have adopted.

The patriarchal structure of the families has come to be characterized by the ideology of hierarchical deference, with the greatest power being rested in the male head of the family, who is the sole proprietor of the chief source of family

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<sup>1</sup> Guru Kian Saakhian, ed Pyara Singh Padam, Saakhi Number 26, p. 76

<sup>2</sup> Mahima Parkash, p. 155



income--the land as well as of other related economic assets. The hierarchical relations of dominance and submission within the family are a crucial starting point of his power; keeping women of the family under strict control and at the bottom of the hierarchy is a key part of it. Admittedly, relations within the household would be shaped through a complex process involving material and ideological resources, and of course people. Yet, one is forced to agree when anthropologists<sup>1</sup> tell us that within the patriarchal set up the ability of household men to control their women is one of the many indicators of their strength; and conversely, evidence of "lack of control" indicates weakness and reveals men's vulnerability to other challenges in the public arena. The patriarchal social structure and the expected social ethos from a male become crystal clear when Adi Granth states "*Men obedient to their womenfolk are impure, filthy, stupid, Men Lustful, impure, follow their womenfolk*",<sup>2</sup>

In sharp contrast subservience and obedience are projected as "*gun*" (qualities) among women and make them better human beings.

This hierarchical structuring of relations generated another source of power which Pierre Bourdieu defines as "Symbolic relations of power" which "tend to reproduce and to reinforce the power relations that constituted the structure of social space."<sup>3</sup> For instance when one analyses the relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law and the unquestionable authority associated with a mother-in-law, it becomes a tenable observation. After marriage, the girl lived in the joint family of her husband, where the mother-in-laws exercised control over her and her commands were to be carried out. If the bride failed to come up to her expectations, her life became miserable. The words of Guru Nanak clearly reflect the social fate of a daughter-inlaw at the hands of her mother-in-law.

*"My mother-in-law is vicious; she lets me not stay in peace at home or seek the joy of my Spouse".<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> M.Z.Rosaldo and L. L. Lamphere, ed., *Women, Culture and Society*, Stanford University Press, 1974, pp.253-259

<sup>2</sup> AG, 304

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power", *Sociological Theory* 71, Spring 1989, pp.14-25

<sup>4</sup> AG, p. 355

Quite probably, it would have been the daughter-in-law who would have been at the mercy of mother-in-law; there is a different perspective, which should not be ignored as evinced by Bhai Gurdas, Var 37, Pauri 11 and 12.

*"Mata pita anand vichi putai di kurmani hai,  
Rahasi ang na mavai gavai sohilare such soi,  
Vigasi put vishiai ghorī lavan gav bhaloi,  
Sukhan sukha mavari putu nunh dam el aloi,  
Nuhu nit kant kumantu dei vihare hovah sasu vigoi,  
Lakh upkaru visari kai put kuputi chaki uthi jhoi,  
Hovai saravan virala koi".<sup>1</sup>*

Meaning Parents are happy that the betrothal ceremony of their son has been solemnized, mother becomes over-joyed and sings songs of happiness. Singing eulogies of bridegroom and praying for the welfare of the couple, she feels very happy that the son got married. For the well being and harmony of the bride and the bridegroom the mother makes vows of offerings (before the deities) now, the bride starts ill-advising the son, goading him to get separate from the parents and consequently the mother in law becomes sorrowful. Bhai Guru Das further, writes, forgetting lacs of benefactions (of mother), the son becomes disloyal and sets himself at loggerheads with his parents. Rare is any obedient son like sravan of mythology, who was most obedient to his blind parents.

*"Kamani Kamaniariari kito Kamanu kant piare,  
Jamme Sain visaria vivehian man pia visare,  
Sukhan sukhi vivehia saunu sanjogu vichari vichare,  
Putu nuhain da melu vekhi ang na mathani man piu vare,  
Nunh nit mant kamant dei man piu chhadi vade hatidare,  
Vakh havai putu ranni lai man piu de upkaru visare,*

*Lakachari hoi vade kuchre."*<sup>2</sup> Meaning the enchantress wife with her charms made the husband dote on her. He got the parents who had given him birth and got him married. Having made woos of offerings and considered many

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Varan, tr Bhai Jot Singh, Var 37, Pauri 11, p366

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Varan, tr Bhai Jodh Singh, Var 37, Pauri 12, p367

good and bad omens and auspicious combinations, his marriage had been arranged by them. Seeing at the meeting of the son and the daughter in law, the parents had felt overjoyed. The bride then started continuously advising the husband to desert her parents, instigating that they had been tyrants. Forgetting the beneficiations of the parents, the son along with his wife, got separated from them. Now, the way of the world has become grossly immoral.

Howsoever, it must be admitted beyond doubt that there must have existed a gap between the expectations and the realities of the existing relationships between two generations.

The foregoing study of the power relations that are built into the family , the first and foremost aspect that needs to be highlighted is what appears as “oppression” to us might be a difference of perception in context of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Punjab. The varied expressions of power relations in their households, whether of Muslim families or Hindu families, could not always be attributed to lack of love, care or goodness in people. All of these have always been existing in abundance in family life in India. Even while the dominant form of family structure concentrates immense unchecked power in the hands of men, every man does not necessarily abuse that power. For example the tradition of the benevolent patriarch who looks after the interest of every member of the family with care, concern and fairness remains as prevalent and real as the tradition of the self – effacing and nurturing mother figures. Even dominant and authoritarian male family members may at the same time often be loving and caring father, brothers and sons while women’s freedom and rights might have been severely restricted within the prevailing family structure, there is also a strong tradition of according certain forms of respect and veneration to women, especially as mothers. Since, till date, the family has been the only source of social and emotional support available to most women in India, it occupies a very central place in their lives and they pour all their energies into working for its well being. While doing so they some times attain considerable prestige and influence within the family. Dependence and restrictions are often found coexisting with an unusual kind of veneration and caring attitude for women.

However, the key problem of women within the family is that if they are badly treated they are unable to offer effective resistance because of their dependence and vulnerability. Till date, few effective sources of support are available to most women in India outside their family. There is nowhere else they can go for help if they suffer abuse and neglect, at the hands of family.

Moreover, in real life it is not easy to draw a neat dividing line between the oppressors. It is not always men who beat or maltreat women. Very often women suffer cruel treatment at the hands of other women, for, example a daughter-in-law at the hands of mother-in-law or sister-in-law. Yet, when a woman mistreats another woman, she enhances the total power of men as a group within the patriarchal family. Women can get power only as agents of domination and oppression within the male dominated family structure. The woman who comes to gain upper hand is usually the one who has the backing and approval of the powerful men. This tussle among women plays a crucial role in most families.

Women's placement in society is unfavorable to the extent that it leads to their exploitation, abuse and subjugation. Societal conditions have given rise to women's increasing sufferings. The exploitative societal environment towards women can be attributed to both structural and behavioral aspects.

### **Woman as Mothers: A Lifeline of a Society**

In almost all sections of Hindu and Muslim societies the mothers and other elderly women were given utmost respect and their commands were carried out with due respect and honour.

The image of mother has always commanded respect and veneration from time immemorial. In all the religions, she had been projected as the life-giver. We get innumerable references where the mother-figures exercised great influence for instance, the Mughal Kings or the Rajput rulers always paid great respect to their mothers and always sought their blessings. In Punjab too the position of mother was one of honour and command without any distinction of Hindu or Muslim or caste or class. With regard to the feminine images within Sikh sacred scripture, motherhood is indeed celebrated. In the Sikh

perspective, she exists as a person upon whom depend creation and nurturing; structure of her body is prized, she is accorded value as a woman- as a giver of life without whom the God's creation, the world cannot exist. Guru Nanak, in fact, vehemently opposed the custom of *sutak*, impurity, pollution associated with the child birth, menstruation and related biological functions.

Guru Nanak states

"We are conceived in the woman's womb and we grow in it. We are engaged to women and we wed them. Through the woman's cooperation new generations are born. If one woman dies, we seek another; without the woman there can be no bond. Why call her bad who gives birth to rajas? The woman herself is born of the woman, and none comes into this world without the woman; Nanak, the true one alone is independent of the woman."<sup>1</sup>

The Sikh scripture affirms the centrality of menstrual blood in the creative process: "*ma ki raktu pita bindu dhare*" meaning from mother's blood and father's semen is created the human form.<sup>2</sup> Same biological contribution of mother is admitted in Var Jaithri, "*raktu bindu kari nimia*" – from blood and semen is one created.<sup>3</sup> She is respected as a paragon of womanhood through her procreative functions as the bearer of children but she is also inextricably entwined with a world of children and attachment to them. However, within the "Mother" image too unfortunately the mother of sons is more valued and the woman who gives birth to daughters consecutively is a victim of social taunt and ridicule. At times, infact, she was even deserted by her husband as she was not able to give him the sons.

In the domestic affairs, they were consulted on all matters of importance. Mother held a position of confidant of her children and thus was a friend who would offer them the best advice adorned by the experiences of her life. Guru Gobind Singh shared such a relationship with his mother. In Saakhi Number 17, he not only unwinds by discussing the events of past with his mother,

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<sup>1</sup> AG, Asa Di Var-p. 473

<sup>2</sup> AG, 1022

<sup>3</sup> AG, 706

shares the bestowal of blessings of Devi and a prophecy of the extinction of the Turks is also included. Although the contents of the Saakhi can not be accepted at their face-value because of their being exaggerated as very often holds true for hagiographical sources. Yet, it is undoubtedly a great window to the kind of rapport the children shared with their mother.<sup>1</sup>

*“gyan dhian pran sut rakhi jan-ni prat(i)!*

*avgun gun mata chit main a chet hai!”*<sup>2</sup> Meaning “Just as a son leaves his understanding, perception and protection of his life in the care of his mother, she too does not think of her son’s merits and demerits”. Infact, they played a very significant role in selecting the partners for their children’s betrothal. Guru Arjun appropriately summed up her position in household when he stated:

“In all the family she is the noblest, she is the counselor of her husband’s younger brother and elder brother, Blessed is the house, where-in she has appeared, O’ Nanak she passes her time in perfect peace.”<sup>3</sup>

Nikky Singh explores the central themes of Guru Nanak’s maternal images, the “infinite matrix” mate as wisdom, beauty chastity and as the metaphor of the churning of butter. It is the central image of mother which she projects as creating, preserving and nurturing within the Sikh canon.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, all the successive Guru histories are replete with the anecdotes of Guru Matas where her image is projected again as a figure of honour and veneration. As a mother, she was known to have exerted great influence on her sons. To quote few exemplary instances which further testifies the point is like at the time when Guru Hargobind was busy garnering the arms, armanents and horses, a group of masands approached Mata Ganga to exert influence over Guru Ji to keep himself away from confrontation with Mughal authorities, particularly Chandu Shah<sup>5</sup> which they warned would prove fatal for the Sikh Panth. When Mata Ganga Ji promised Bhai Mehra of Bakala that

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<sup>1</sup> Guru Ratan Mal Sau Saakhi, ed. Gurbachan Singh Nayyar, Saakhi Number :7, pp. 29-30

<sup>2</sup> KS 358, p. 386

<sup>3</sup> AG, p. 371

<sup>4</sup> Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision or the Transcendent*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993 p. 23

<sup>5</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, p. 279

along with Guru Ji, the family would visit his new home and bless him, Guru Ji obeyed Mata Ji and fulfilled her wishes.<sup>1</sup> Although this might not hold true for the common masses in terms of the means of expression of respect and veneration yet, the basic emotional spirit towards mother figure was same in content. Ironically, in the Indian context brutal oppression and powerlessness of women co-exist with a prevailing ethos of according social respect and honour in some of her roles.

### **Wife: An Ardhangani or Burden**

*Jaise bhartar(i) bhar(i) nar(i) ur har(i) mani,  
Tan te lal(u) lalna ko man(u) man(i) let hai.*<sup>2</sup>

Meaning just as a wife filled with love of her husband bears all the load of her mind, the husband too makes loving and respectful room in his heart. It lays emphasis on the mental compatibility and reciprocity in the relationship of a husband and her wife.

The ideal wife was supposed to be “*batti gunni*” or blessed with 32 virtues:

*“Possess of thirty two merits, holy truth is her progeny.  
Obedient to noble man. To her husbands wishes.”*<sup>3</sup>

The major thrust of contemporary sources for the ideal - typical female role emphasizes humility and submissiveness on the part of the woman. She is required to control her aggressive and sexual urges. Through a systemic formulation of the norms which define the maternal role of a woman she has been accorded a place of dignity, respect and honour.

As a wife her prime duty is to “serve” her husband and all her activities should aim to win over the love of her husband. A large number of metaphors relating to women in the compositions of Adi Granth refer to conjugal relationship.<sup>4</sup> Although, the language of the Adi Granth is considered to be allegorical, it no

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<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, p. 381. Gyani Gyan Singh jee, Suraj Prakash, ed Sodhi Teja Singh Jee ,Amritsar :1997, p. 244

<sup>2</sup> KS 358, p. 386

<sup>3</sup> AG 371

<sup>4</sup> AG pp.17, 56, 225, 242, 355, 722, 762, 764, 1107, 1109, 1110, 1171 and 1232

doubt reflects social reality.<sup>1</sup> Guru Nanak's conception of a good wife or bad wife can be inferred from the usage of these value-loaded terms in his verses. To bad wife Guru Nanak calls as *Kuchaji*, *Dohagan* and *Kulakhnni*.<sup>2</sup> By which he means a bride without merit, non-virtuous woman. On the other hand *Suchajji*<sup>3</sup> *Suhagan*<sup>4</sup> and *Sulakhni*<sup>5</sup> indicating the totally opposite woman who knows how to win over the love and affection of her husband is a *Suchaji* (*good deeds*) thus always a *Suhagan* (*wedded*) and *Sulakhni* (*virtuous an 'ideal' woman*). As stated earlier the unquestioned obedience was the hallmark of husband- wife relationship. The husband is equated to the Lord "The Lord is my husband, I his wife The Lord is immensely great, I so small."<sup>6</sup>

As stated earlier, the image of wife that emerges from Adi Granth is in compliance with the social reality and at times, appears to hammer the patriarchal psyche, her intimate goal in life should be to please and serve the Lord (*pati*). Even if she is beautiful, accomplished and well mannered, she must be humble and modest before her husband. She never feels proud of her beauty rather in a very humble and submissive manner pines for her desired subordinate position and that she does not possess any charm or merit to please her husband:

"I am shorn of all merit O Lord, then how shall I attain into Thee? Neither have I Beauty nor lustrous Eyes, neither Family nor culture, nor sweet speech."<sup>7</sup>

*"I have neither intention nor intellect.*

*I am ignorant and unwise. Bless me Thou, O my Lord, that I lie in Thy feet."*<sup>8</sup>

The centrality of love of the spouse in marital life in a conjugal relationship is beyond question. "*Nari purakh piyaru premi singariyan*".<sup>9</sup> Meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Rajkumari Shankar, op. cit., p. 194

<sup>2</sup> AG, p. 762 A.G.P.72, also see pp. 363, 426,428,430 559 and 1197

<sup>3</sup> AG, p. 558

<sup>4</sup> AG, pp.363,391,400,737,933,1108

<sup>5</sup> AG, p. 89

<sup>6</sup> AG, p. 483

<sup>7</sup> AG, p. 750

<sup>8</sup> AG, p. 1171

<sup>9</sup> AG, p. 147



"True loving wives by love for their spouse are embellished. Day and night engaging in devotion, no impediment they reckon."

It is equated to be the duty of a woman when Guru Nanak counseled woman to be a devoted worshipper of Lord (Husband) to be a seeker, of good name to be virtuous and chaste and a faithful companion of her husband. Guru Nanak says that the woman is beautiful who adorns her head with jewel of love.

"O' thou Bride, Bedeck thy hair with truth;

Wear thou the robe of love.

Gather in the Chandan like (God) in thy conscious mind and live them in the temple of inner consciousness."<sup>1</sup>

Beauteous is the woman who bedecks her forehead with the jewel of love  
And this is her glory that she cherishes in her mind the love of true lord.

Bhai Gurdas expressed the general social expectation for the wife to remain loyal even if her husband is adulterous when he said "*Je piru bahu gharu handhana satu rakhi nare*".<sup>2</sup> Meaning if the husband enjoys (immorally) at many houses, the wife should preserve her chastity.

In sharp contrast, a woman who is not blessed with the love of her lord, in Sri Raga, Guru Nanak commands that all her make up is in vain.

"If a woman uses the fragrant perfumes and with saffron fills the parting of the hair and chews the Betel Leaf mixed with camphor, if she is not accepted by her Lord, all her flavoring are of no avail."<sup>3</sup>

In the role of a wife (or for any woman) to lead an adulterous lifestyle was like inviting social wrath not only ostracism. Bhai Gurdas very effectively captures the fate of an adulterous woman:

*Sahuru piharu palaria nhoi nilaj na laja dhovai,  
Ravai jaru bhataru taji khinjotani khusi kiu hovai,*

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<sup>1</sup> AG, p. 391

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Vaaran, Var 35, pauri 20, p. 331

<sup>3</sup> AG, p. 19

*Samajhai na samajhai marane parane loku vigovai,  
Dhiri dhiri milade mehane hui saramindi anjhu rovai,  
Pap kamane pakariai hani kani dibani kharovai,  
Marai na jivai dukh sahai rahai na ghari vichi par ghar jovai,  
Dubidha augun haru parovai.<sup>1</sup>*

Meaning abandoning both the families of father and father-in-law's, the shameless woman cares not for modesty and does not wish to wash away her immoral reputation. Deserting her husband, if she enjoys the company of her paramour, how can she, moving in different lustful directions, be happy? No advice prevails upon her and she is despised at all social gatherings of mourning and rejoicing. She weeps in contrition because she is disdainfully reproached at every door. For her sins, she is arrested and punished by the court where she loses every iota of honour that she had. She is miserable because now she is neither dead nor alive; she still looks for another house to ruin because she does not like to live in her home. Similarly doubt or double-mindedness weaves for it the garland of vices.

Echoing the same value attached to the sexual control of women; a deceitful woman is strongly criticized:

*Aisi naika sai kuar patra bi supatra bbali,  
As piasi mata pita ekai kah det hai.  
Aisi naika sai dinta kai dubagan(i) bbali,  
Patit pavan pria pae lae let bai.  
Aisi naika sai bhalo birba siog sog,  
Lagan sagan sodhe sardha sabet hai.  
Aisi naika mat rabbb hi gali bhali,  
Kapat saneb dubidba jio rabu ketu bai.<sup>2</sup>*

Meaning, "a virgin maid who is ever hopeful of achieving a place of superior authority in the house of a husband that her father will find for her one day is far better than a deceitful woman.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Vaaran, tr Bhai Jodh Singh, Var 33, pauri 6, p274

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 450, p478

A woman who has been disassociated with her husband by him and who regrets her actions by her humility, consequence of which her husband forgives her since is far better than a deceitful woman.

That woman separated from her husband who bearing the pangs of her separation is devotedly involved in finding auspicious time and good omens for the reunion is better than a treacherous and deceitful woman.

Such a woman of deceitful love should have perished in her mother's womb. Deceit filled love is full of such duality as the two demons *rahu* and *ketu* are who cause solar and lunar eclipse."

The wife's humble position in relation to her husband is expressed in the custom of the wife's eating their husband's left-over and polluted food. Yet, as many authors have pointed out, the sharing of pollution is also an index of love and bodily intimacy. Leaving the favorite foods of his wife uneaten on his plate so that only she eats these, is a well known means by which a man may publicly proclaim love and bodily intimacy with his wife. It is true that the family would have to share in a well tuned system of non-verbal communication for such cues to be picked up. Yet it demands a methodological commitment to explore such patterns of communication rather than to restrict oneself to adjurer prescriptions alone.

It would not be out of context to briefly recapitulate the conception of "*pativrata*" and the ideal behaviour associated with it. Apart from the Adi Granth's oft-quoted injunctions of *suhagin* and *suchhaji*, Bhai Gurdas recapitulates it brilliantly in his work *Kabit Swayye* as evident in the following quotes.

*Log bed gian updes bai patibrata kau,  
Mam bach kram svami seva adhikar hai.  
Nam isnan dan sanjam na jap tap,  
Tirath barat puja nem na na takar hai.  
Hom jag bhog naibed nabi devi dev sev,  
Rag nad bad na sanbad an duar hai<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, *Kabit Swayye*, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, *Kabit Swayye*, 482, p510

Meaning the teachings of folk traditions and Vedas laid down that a faithful and loyal wife has the sole right to serve her husband devotedly in words and actions.

Such a loyal, devoted and faithful wife does not even look at the futile rites and rituals, rites like meditations on various names, bathing at the places of pilgrimage on specific days, charity, self-imposed discipline, penances, visit to holy places, fasting etc.

For her, sacrificial fire, yag, offerings, and other rituals connected with worship of Gods and Goddesses are meaningless. She is not interested in any modes of singing, musical instruments, it does not seem logical going to any other door.

*Jaise patibrata kau pavitra ghar(i) vas nbat,  
Asan basan dhan dham lokachar hai.  
Tat mat bbrat sut sujan kutanb sakha,  
Seva gur jan sukh abharan sbingar hai.  
Kirat(i) birat(i) oarsut mal mutra-dhari,  
Sakal pavitra joi bibidh (i) achar hai.<sup>1</sup>*

Meaning just as living in her house, bathing, eating and sleeping etc and discharging worldly duties according to her husband's wishes, the social customs and traditions are all sacred for a faithful wife.

It is her natural duty, to embellish herself with ornaments for happiness of her husband besides serving and respecting parents, brothers, sisters, sons, other elders in the family, friends and other social contacts.

Attending to the household chorus, bearing children, bringing them up, keeping them neat and clean is all sacred for a faithful and loyal wife.

He further states

*Man bach kram kai patibrat karai jau nar(i),  
Tahe mam bach kram chahat bhatar hai.*

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 483, p511

*Abharan singar char sibja sanjog bhog,  
Sakal kutanb hi mai ta ko jai jaikar hai.  
Sahaj anand such mangal suhag bhag,  
Sundar mandar chhab(i) sobhat suchar hai.*<sup>1</sup>

Meaning If a wife discharges her duties faithfully and loyally and is devoted to her husband, such a wife is loved dearly by her husband.

Such a lady is blessed with the opportunity of adoring herself and meeting with her husband. Being virtuous she is praised and appreciated by the whole family.

She acquires the comforts of married life gently and gradually. Because of the beauty of her high merits she adores the beautiful mansions with her presence.

*Jaise tau patibrata patibrat mai savdhan,  
Tabi te gribesur bue naika kabavai.  
Asan basan dhan dham kamna pujavai,  
Sobbit singar char sibja samavai.*<sup>2</sup>

Meaning just as a loyal and faithful wife is ever conscious of fulfilling her wifely obligations, and that makes her the prime person of the family.

Her husband fulfills all her needs to bedding, clothing, food, wealth, house and other property and she in return embellishes herself to enjoy oneness with her husband on the nuptial bed.

He further says:

*“Jaise patibrata patibrat sat(i) savdhan,  
Sakal kutanb suprasann(i) dhann(i) soe bai”.*<sup>3</sup>

Meaning just as a faithful, truthful virtuous wife remains attentive in service of her husband, the whole family praises her, adores her very happily.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 480, p. 508

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 481, p. 509

<sup>3</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 468, p. 496

Bhai Gurdas complements:

*“Patibrat ek tek dubidha nivari hai”*.<sup>1</sup>

Meaning a faithful wife who discards desires of others and lives in the refuge of one husband is complemented.

It must also be noted that Bhai Gurdas not only spoke of the adherents and newly emerging followers of the Sikh faith but infact, his writings presented a larger social reality. His social observations were in no way confined to any particular religious community, or caste or class. They provided us with a peep into a larger social reality which, appears to be much closer to the existing reality.

Although discussed in context of widow remarriage, it would not be out of place to mention that in the light of the centrality of the Lord (husband) and every action of the wife, every emotion of hers to be revolving around the goal of pleasing the husband. Apart from this social and cultural dependence and emotional anchor, the survival of husband was a pre-requisite for the economic sustenance of the wife. In sum, the very life of a wedded woman not only revolved around her husband but was solely dependent on him in respect to name social, cultural; economic as well as emotional well being. In such a social scenario, it is not difficult to assess the situation of a woman who lost the epicenter of her life, her husband. One can easily empathize with not only a sense of emotional loss, an agony at the loss of her husband but at worse, a state of emotional trauma imagining her life without her Lord and thus opting to be a *sati*.

Another exclusive social role of a wife was her procreative abilities. The foreign travelers have noticed with appreciation, the great respect for pregnant women, not only by their husbands and relations but all the inhabitants of the place belonging to her caste prayed for her health and safety.<sup>2</sup> This becomes further apparent in Bhai Gurdas Kabit Swayye,

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 448, p. 476

<sup>2</sup> P.N. Chopra, Some Aspects of Society and Culture During the Mughal Age 1526- 1707, Agra 1955, p114.

*Jaise priya bbetat adhan nirman bot,  
Banchhat bidhan khan pan agrabhag (i) bai.*<sup>1</sup>

Meaning as a wife presents herself to her husband with humility and becomes pregnant; the husband brings her all the foods of her liking and taste. On the birth of a son, she abstains from eating all that may be harmful to the child.

The preference for a son is more than evident in the discussion on female infanticide. The Sikh history is also replete with instances of such preference of a son. There is a repeated reference to Mai Desso Jatti, who was bestowed a blessing of being a mother of seven sons<sup>2</sup> or Mata Damodari, begging Guru Ji to bestow the blessings for the birth of a son in the household of Shri Gurditta.<sup>3</sup> Adi Granth states;

*"Jiun janani garbhu palati sutki kari asa".*<sup>4</sup>

Meaning as does the mother cherish her progeny, in her son pinning her hope;

That grown up, would he give her wherewithal,  
And bring joy and pleasure.

Adi Granth further states

*"Jiun janani sutu jani palate rakhai nadari majhari"*<sup>5</sup>

As the mother rears the child after bearing it,  
And ever in her sight kept it;  
In the home and outside feeding it with morsels,  
Each moment patting it.

Here, it would be suffice to say that the birth of a daughter has been usually regarded as an unwelcome event, often an occasion for sorrow and mourning. The woman who fails to produce a male heir is seen as accursed, as one who has failed in her essential duty. A wife's worth, therefore, came to be crucially

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabir Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabir Swayye, 179, p. 207

<sup>2</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, p. 429

<sup>3</sup> op cit, p. 433

<sup>4</sup> AG, p. 165

<sup>5</sup> AG, p. 168

determined by her ability to produce male heirs. The woman who gave birth to sons was considered worthy of high social esteem and was honoured and looked after, taken proper care in her post-natal phase.<sup>1</sup> The sentiments of would be mother wishing to give birth to a son is well represented by the following couplet in Adi Granth:

“As does the mother cherish her pregnancy in her son pinning her hope; that grown up, would he give her wherewithal, and bring joy and pleasure. Even such is the love of god’s devotee to the lord.”<sup>2</sup>

While noticing this kind of preferential longing for a boy and a special treatment awarded to him in the society, Guru Nanak observes “The Father and mother like their son, the father-in-law their son-in-law”.<sup>3</sup>

A son was considered to be the binding link between the parents:

“If a piece of bronze or gold or iron breaks into bits, the smith welds them again in fire,

If the husband breaks off from the wife, the sons unite them again”<sup>4</sup>

Bhai Gurdas highlights the importance of queen, who is blessed with a son in the *harem* of the king:

*Jaise nrip dham bham ek sai adhik ek,*

*Naik anek raje sabhan ladavai.*

*Janmat ja kai sut(u) vabi kai suhag(u) bhag(u),*

*Sakal rani mai patrani so kahavai.*<sup>5</sup>

Meaning as a king has many queens in his palace, each of the remarkable beauty, he cajoles and pampers each one of them, one who bears him a son, enjoys higher status in the palace and is declared as chief among the queens.

In a social milieu, where the goal of the wife was to please her husband and to achieve the fulfillment of her female body was to bear a child (read son),

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<sup>1</sup> K.M. Ashraf, op cit .p.167

<sup>2</sup> AG, p. 165

<sup>3</sup> AG, p. 596

<sup>4</sup> AG, p. 143

<sup>5</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 120, p. 148



one can easily imagine the agony of the barren woman and the social stigma attached to her.

*"Sihja sanjog bhog nispal banj b badbu,  
Boe na adhan, dukho dubidha durav kai".<sup>1</sup>*

Meaning just as an infertile woman remains bereft of pregnancy, despite enjoying nuptial bed with her husband and she keeps hiding her distress.

It is further stated

*"Santat(i) nimit nrip anik bivah karai,  
Santat(i) bibun banita na grib(i) chhaj hai".<sup>2</sup>*

Meaning just as a king marries many women for obtaining heir of his kingdom, but the queen who does not bear him a child is not liked by anyone in the family.

One can easily relate that a barren woman always suffered from the insecurity of sharing her husband with co-wife. Very often than not, it must have been a crude reality which she would have been forced to live with all her life as evinced;

*"Jaise tan manjh banjh rog sog sanso pram,  
Saut ko Sutah(i) pekh(i) mahan dukh pava".<sup>3</sup>*

Meaning just as a distressed and fatigued woman suffering from her inability to bear a child feels much distressed and seeing a son of her co-wife curses her own self.

Woman as a wife might have suffered innumerable restrictions, yet, very often she emerges as a confidante, friend of her husband who advises in the best interest of him and the family at large. As noted in the context of choosing the marriage partners for their children, wife played a substantially significant role in the decision making. Presumably, in the then existing social scenario, she might not have been able to voice her opinion openly, but would have

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 237, p. 265

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 415, p. 443

<sup>3</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayye, tr Shamsheer Singh Puri, Kabit Swayye, 513, p. 541

exercised influence through her husband. For instance, Baba Langah bought a piece of land from the Muslim Ranghars at Taran-Taran. When their women folk got to know that their husbands had accepted the money in return of land, the women strongly disapproved of financial transaction and the acceptance of money. They pointed out that the house of Gurus is going to use the land for religious purposes. On their insistence, the men were convinced to not only return the money, but also beg for Guru's pardon of having it accepted thoughtlessly.<sup>1</sup> This anecdote reflects the role of women in decision making in a Muslim household. This positive aspect of social reality, fortunately, cuts across all the communities. Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin projects Chandu Diwan's wife (A Mughal Official, who had played an instrumental role in the death of Guru Arjan Dev) strongly criticizing him gives him a piece of her mind. Chandu Diwan, infact, pays heed to his wife's advice. On her insistence, he wrote a letter to Guru Ji, in which he claims to be innocent, that he did not incur any torture on Guru Arjan Dev. Chandu Diwan pointed out that Guru Ji had infact suffered from dysentery and claimed to do his best to save Guru Ji's life but all proved to be in vain. In the same letter, on the advice of his wife, he requested Guru Hargobind that her daughter might be accepted as a "servant" (wife).<sup>2</sup>

## **Inheritance Laws and Women's Economic Contribution**

At the very outset of this section one must be cautious of not identifying (through our present day wisdom.) a set of criteria which is then mechanically applied to historical situations. For instance, access to property may be regarded as an index of women's status. If this rests on a definition of property, which is treated as absolute and invariable without being qualified or contextualized it can lead to a faulty historical analysis.

The powerlessness of women and the devaluation of their labour on the family land and the household is in part a product of exclusive control of men over land. As land became more and more valuable a commodity, its control became an increasingly important determinant of power and wealth; power

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<sup>1</sup> Kartar Singh and Gurdial Singh Dhillon, *Stories from Sikh History*, Book II, p. 103

<sup>2</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, p. 284

within the family and in the larger society. The near total disinheritance from property-rights in land –the dominant form of income-generating property in medieval times –is perhaps the key factor in ensuring women's dependence and subordinate status in the family. Even when women are contributing substantially by way of labour, they rarely come to acquire any real power in the day –to-day crucial decisions made in the family. Several studies among peasant families in present day too, have shown that in most families a woman has little or no say in basic decisions regarding income allocation and expenditure of the family. In sum, the woman's lack of independent access to sources of income in peasant household is a salient factor in reinforcing her powerlessness. The economic status of woman as an individual is not only the deciding factor but rather the economic status of the family also has significant implications for the condition of women. The complex interconnection of economic status and condition of women as evident in the widow remarriage and sati although not universally practiced, reflects the paradox that emerges in the condition of peasant landowning class and the landless agricultural labour. Unlike the family structure among the peasant landowning castes, among the landless poor family is relatively less restrictive for women. One of the main reasons for this is that the landless agriculture labour woman, however much she is exploited, is recognized as a wage earner, as someone who contributes to the upkeep of the family by her earnings which form a vital portion of the family income.

The customs, traditions or conventions are unwritten laws governing social and economic relationships in myriad ways. It must also be noted that there is no distinction between Hindus and Muslims laws of inheritance on the basis of the religion. The process of identification of right of the inheritance is complex and multifaceted. The present attempt is to cognisate the status of rural women with regard to her rights in succession and the alienation of landed property. Although the question of inheritance is dealt with by Islamic law, most Mussalmans adhere to their tribal customs which are generally those of the Hindus races from which they were originally converted. There was no distinction among the Muslims and the non-Muslims regarding the rules regulating the devolution and disposal of property. In theory, as well as in

practice, property was recognized as involving a community of interests; because in the rural society of Punjab, the village communities or *bhaicharas* consisted of groups of families bound together by the tie of common descent. The customs regarding succession to property in land were governed by the ties of kinship as well as by the local common interests. The agnates only had the right to succeed the property,<sup>1</sup> since sisters or daughters were to be married in another caste, there was no need to give them a part of the village patrimony. To give her a share in the property would have amounted to the encroachment of an outsider in the community. Infact, C.L.Tupper aptly sums up the social psychology when he writes that a woman was considered as the “terminus of the family with whom the branch or the twig of the geneology was closed.”<sup>2</sup>

In the event of the extinction of male lineage, there were specific customs for succession. The daughters and the widows of the deceased were excluded from the rights of succession. A daughter had a right to maintenance till her marriage. A widowed daughter or a daughter who had been deserted by her husband and had returned to her father’s house to live, also had the right to maintenance for life, provided she did not remarry and remain chaste. The customs did not take into consideration whether she had any children or not, the maintenance was provided for her life and after her death, it reverted to her father’s agnates.<sup>3</sup> It was generally recognized by almost every tribe that a daughter could not inherit the landed property so long as there was any male relative on father’s side. Local customs, nevertheless, varied with regard to the degree of application in comparison of which the daughter had a preferential claim. Among the Sandhu jats, for instance, they were excluded generally up to the 7<sup>th</sup> degree of collaterals, whereas among other tribes this custom varied between the sixth and the fifth degree.<sup>4</sup> The exclusion of a daughter was so prevalent social norm that even in cases where there were no agnates at all, then also she was debarred of succession of her parental

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<sup>1</sup> F. Hugo, A Dictionary of Social Sciences, Ambica Publications, Delhi 1977, p.14

<sup>2</sup> C.L.Tupper, Punjab Customary Law, Vol II, Calcutta 1881, p. 71

<sup>3</sup> A. Charles Roe, Tribal Law in the Punjab, Civil and Military Gazette Press, Lahore 1895, p. 61

<sup>4</sup> Customary Law of the Main Tribes in the Gurdaspur District Punjab Government Press, Lahore 1913, p.3; District Gazetter of Rawalpindi, 1883-84, p. 53

property by members of the village community even if they had no relationship with the deceased. Not only daughters but also their off springs were excluded from succession by near male collaterals.

In a situation when one wished to adopt a child there were certain limits within which one could do so. In the absence of a male issue would- be father's first preference for adoption was his brothers' son and second are of his daughters or sister's child. If he failed to get one from either of these two he was allowed to adopt a child from any one of his blood relations but not beyond that. Adoption is almost unknown among Muhammadans. It was only permissible on the failure of issue, and even then must be proclaimed openly by the adopter during his life time and supported by a written deed.

In the absence of a male issue, a widow inherited the property of her deceased husband for life. But she had no right to alienate any portion of the property to sale or by gift or mortgage without the consent of the next kin. Although for a later period C.L.Tupper reports that among the Gujars and Arains of Gurdaspur, under certain circumstances like the marriage of a daughter, payment of land revenue and payment of her late husband's dues, she was allowed to sell land to collaterals first and if they refused then only to outsiders.<sup>1</sup> Such provisions for raising money for necessary expenses was also allowed to a widow in some villages of Shahpur district.<sup>2</sup> Although this evidence is of a later period but it must have been tenable for 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries too as customary laws and traditions do not change over a short span of time and that too in favour of women.

In many parts of Punjab, succession to landed property is regulated by two rules "*Pagwand*" and "*Chundawand*". *Pagwand* was a word derived from *pag*, a turban and signified that an estate was being distributed in equal shares amongst the sons. *Chundawand* was derived from *chunda* which meant the hair braided on the top of the head. It signified equal division between the groups of sons by each wife or in other words, each wife's family

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<sup>1</sup> C.L Tupper, Punjab Customary Law, Vol.I Calcutta 1881pp. 77-80.

<sup>2</sup> C.L Tupper *ibid*, Vol.II, p.215

came in for an equal share. *Pagwand* was generally a tribal custom whereas *Chudawand* was just a family custom and was exceptionally in use in Punjab.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, the social understanding of "*strisvabhav*" her lustful nature affects the widows' proprietary rights too. A widow could continue to be in possession of ancestral or self acquired property of their husband for life with the condition that they remained chaste and did not remarry. In case of her remarriage or her infidelity being proved, her property reverted to the collaterals of the deceased husband. The ideal of female chastity has always been upheld in the society as the prime virtue associated with a good wife, complete devotion and dedication to her Lord (husband) even after his death.<sup>2</sup>

When we talk about the economic contribution of women- there are references of women's participation in a range of activities including those associated with agriculture such as planting, weeding, husking, winnowing, keeping watch over the winnowing grain etc. Apart from this, women were engaged in pastoral activities and in processing. There are whole lot of references in Shah Hussain's *Kaafiyas* of women groups engaged in weaving and especially spinning. Spinning was done invariably in the afternoon when the girls of the neighbourhood gathered together, laughed and joked. This gathering was commonly called *trinjan* (a group of girls gathered for spinning). Bhai Gurdas has depicted these gatherings of *trinjan* and then their ultimate fate. "The girls spin in groups. But then spread and go away like birds from a tree".<sup>3</sup> They also made pots and baskets, the traditional embroidery of *phulkari* as a part of a large preparation of *daaj* (dowry) engaged in extracting oil, salt and making *papads*, *waddis* for the day. It must also be noted that various occupational possibilities open to and exercised by women within a single region. The geographical features and the economic requirements were basically the guiding principle for this distinction in engagement of the various parts of the province. In the hills of South Eastern districts, the Jat women and of the same or lower social position, worked in the fields. In the remaining parts of the province the *Ahirs*, *Jats*, *Arains* and *Malis women* lent a hand in

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<sup>1</sup> C.L.Tupper, *ibid*, Vol II pp.80, 195

<sup>2</sup> District Gazetteer of Rawalpindi, 1883-84 p.53

<sup>3</sup> Bhai Gurdas, *Vaaran*, Var 33, Pauri 5

agricultural work. In other words, vast differences distinguished the lives and the economic condition of women, not on the basis of their religion whether they are Hindus or Sikhs or Muslims but on their families' economic conditions and social organization of labour.

## **Weapons of the Weak**

This usage is borrowed from the title of James C. Scott's work, "Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance."<sup>1</sup> The title very appropriately captures the "weak position of women in medieval India and her ways of defiance and protests; talking in context of women of Punjab or for that matter whole of India in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries one can not even expect any violent upheavals or any concrete act of defiance per se. In the then social milieu it was not even possible for women to resist any act of domination, her "weak" position at worse is reflected by the prevalence of social evils such as female infanticide, *sati*, widow remarriage for safeguarding the vested interests of the patriarchy and the list goes on. Contrary to these highly polarized positions if our object of study is the woman of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is futile to pose the problem by simply dichotomizing lived experiences into dramatic episode of confrontation and quotidian modes of defiance. Any project that seeks to write a holistic social history of resistance by women will then have to incorporate both the dramatic and the custodian without idealizing either. Women in their day-to-day lives carved out their own apparatus - we can read in their collective behavior and rituals what James Scott would call everyday forms of resistance.<sup>2</sup> In other words, any sensitized study of varied forms of protest or mere defiance of a sixteenth and seventeenth centuries woman have to focus substantially on these small, gestural ways of venting out her accumulated unrest in the context of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries milieu. To expect such everyday forms of protests to even make a slight dent in the patriarchal structure is oblivious of realities, yet its importance for women, a mechanism to keep her sane, is to be highlighted.

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak, Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> op.cit

The social scientists have two distinct methodologies to study any forms of resistance or protests. The initial push was towards probing modes of resistance by working at proper uprisings, riots rebellions and other confrontational popular movements. More recently influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault, some scholars strongly recommend that if our goal is to recover the history of resistance, it is imperative to look at everyday forms of struggle and humbler forms of defiance, rather than studying spectacular riots and short – lived violent upheavals<sup>1</sup>.

In sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' context, we need to rethink notions of domesticity and seclusion. An Important lacunae which often underline discussion on gender is that it presumes "inner Domain" (a feature closely associated with the notion of domesticity and seclusion) as a space of compliance and subordination, a place where women played out feminine roles of mother's, wife's and home makers. Within this framework, women can play transgressive roles only outside the domestic sphere. The innumerable negotiations and contestations which permeate the everyday life of women within the home need to be observed carefully. What is an "ideal" behaviour of a woman, the virtues associated with a wife according to the social norms and the acts of defiance or at minimum, mere expressions of defiance and disobedience? Although notions of seclusion and domesticity are important, we should be wary of an excessive valorization of ideas that flatter and homogenize experiences. Experiences are multiple. This suggests that women pushed to the boundaries of patriarchy still make spaces within it .Yet it is not as if they are continuously resisting structures of control. Every day processes of negotiation, acquiescence and contestation which at least attempt to somewhat reshape these structures of power, need to be noticed and appreciated. One must remember that transgression of boundaries can go along with acts of conformity, adaptations and re-negotiation. Quite often, fortunately, the power of patriarchal ideology is not able to fully domesticate women within a rigid mould or even the patriarchal ideology is not homogeneous and most of all, its application by different sections of society,

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind o' Haulon, "Recovering the Subject Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia", *Modern Asian Studies*,22,1988,pp 213-15



by different families or individuals is very varied. This difference only provides the women with the “opportunity” of carving out a niche for herself. Even within the framework of dominant ideology of domesticity, women from lower castes (as noted earlier) create their own codes. Public affirmation of dominant codes can coexist with subversion, this process has been characterized by Nita Kumar<sup>1</sup> as finding the fault- lines in the larger patriarchal structures: the positioning of a spotlight on areas where inconsistencies or cleavages surface in general activity.

It is in this frame work that we need to perceive the latent forms of deviant behavior, or to use a strong term – protest of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries women of Punjab .As oft repeated the folk – songs are replete with the sarcasm for would be mother-in-law (*Saas*), sister-in-law (*nand*) or almost all the members of in-laws family. Infact, this is the main content of the folk songs and can be a potent subject of an exclusive study.

As repeatedly observed, the “ideal” typical female role emphasizes humility and submissiveness on the part of the woman. She is required to control her aggressive and sexual drives. Such control, as shown by many anthropological studies, might have often led to various psychological problems of which mention is made of sexual frigidity, somatisation of conflicts, propensity to hysteria, and masochist tendencies due to internalization of aggression. This excessive emphasis on the social norms of humility and submissiveness, the way these norms were internalized and understood by women must have caused a great toll on the psychological health of women. Another formidable form of deviant behavior was “ *Mata-aana*”( Possessed by spirit) or anecdotes about ghosts (*Bhoot-pret*) or the typical Spirit-possession behavior among women as witnessed by Macauliffe at the Sarvar Shrine, in large part represented an effort on the part of a powerless section of society to voice its dissent and articulate needs normally suppressed. It was somewhat like empowering world view of the disempowered. By labeling dissociative behaviour or sometimes rebellious attitudes as spirit possession, Punjabi society, like many other agrarian

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<sup>1</sup> Nita Kumar, *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*, 1994

societies, overlooked the transgression of social conventions by a possessed person and transferred the etiology of dissociative behaviour to supernatural forces, thus freeing itself of any role in an individual's psycho-social problems.<sup>1</sup>

There were varied expressions of accumulated frustration of womenfolk. There is a popular ritual of *bhabhis* (Sister-in-law) beating the *devar* (younger brother of husband) at the time of his marriage with a stick. In the garb of beating a younger brother of husband a male member of the family; she must have retaliated her oppression. The younger brother of husband who must have emerged as a replica image of her husband and other elderly men folk of the family in whose case she was supposed to have only an unquestioned respect and veneration.

Interestingly, there were few women's festivals-like *Kanagats*, *Moh Mahi*, and *Sada Talla*-which degraded male society. These customs struck deeply at the family honour (read male authority in the family) and yet, more directly at the power and privileges of the Hindu husband. Although we get the graphic description in a much later period but as often repeated, all these social customs and practices often had their roots much before. At the most some modifications and local variations could be expected. These customs were sharply criticized by the *dharm sabha*, the orthodox leader Pandit Shardha Ram described the custom with disgust and degree of apprehension. The graphic description states that "...during the period of *Kanagats*, the women of one *mohalla*, or locality, after putting on their best clothes and jewelry, according to their position and status collect together as a group and take their stand at any road, crossing or other places of importance and start hurling insults and abuses on the women of other *mohalla* or near by and start quarreling". The women did not abuse each other but taunted each other's husbands, parents or relatives. This form of public abuse expanded and one can not deny the role of these customs as the platforms to vent out the accumulated resentment of women for the male society at large. However, this form of public ridicule dishonoured the wives and daughters of such a

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<sup>1</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, p.159

family, and if by chance any women of one *mohalla* or locality happens to pass an another *mohalla*.....with in fifteen days of *Kanagats* , her clothes are torn and she is badly treated....” Very often, *Kanagats* often degenerated into hand fights and wrestling among the women. There is another way to review these rituals. The inherent patriarchal psyche to view women as objects is further exemplified by the fact that in the rituals when women is venturing out her accumulated frustration, striking back at the male members of the world; the ostensible victim of her actions is another women. It’s an epitome of the complex gender relationships in context of Indian society, where a woman is not only a victim of oppression but infact the mechanism to bring about the same oppression.

Another similar festival of *Moh-Mahi*, was celebrated during the mid-winter. On this day, little girls and even grown up adults and young women, both rich and poor put on costly dresses and ornaments as they move about the various localities and market places in groups. As soon as they came across, any miserly person or stranger, they tease and harass him to such an extent that they even tore off his clothes. Another festival, popularly known as *Sada Talla*, a fertility rite performed by the Hindu women of Amritsar, where hundreds of women, both from rich and poor families collected at the big public place and these women bare their bodies up to breast and start rolling on ground with great zest and enthusiasm, shouting “I have laid down on a wheat field, may my womb become fertile”. This custom, women believed, by this action of theirs, they become pregnant immediately after that. Ironically, *Sada Talla* does not specifically state the desire of women to be the mothers of sons alone, which is a preferred offspring even today or inferring from other evidence and contextualizing the general social values system, may be the fertility was equated to be blessed with the son only.

Another most wide spread and most popular form of social expression of women was the genre of folk songs which were sung by the women of the whole community at the time of marriage and all associated occasions and all possible moments of their lives. The subjects of folk songs revolved around their relationships at their in-laws place, especially it highlighted the constant tussle between the mother- in-law and daughter- in-law. These folk songs are

replete with the information about all the relationships around which the life of the women revolved and evolved around. They themselves form a potent subject of study; they typically represent the thrust of the woman's psyche and its immense value as a great community platform of women to vent out their anger and resentment cannot be denied. It must have added to her general understanding of all these relationships, would have made her more socially wise and must have soothed her that her life was same as other women of the society. To sum up, one would like to admit that all these rituals and festivals in which the women participated were opportunities for socializing and for emotional relief and must have gone a long way in keeping her mentally fit and vibrant.

**Girl Child and Female Infanticide**

Times of India of November 18, 2007 (Bangalore Edition) reads “It’s God and Gurudwara now for Punjab’s unwanted girl child.

*“In the urgent effort at erasing Punjab’s Darkest Gender Blot, SGPC will soon ask important Gurudwaras in Punjab to place cradles at their entrances and exhort unhappy parents obsessed with boys to leave “those innocent children at God’s door, not death’s”*

(A report filed by Balwant Garg from Bathinda).

As evident, the Punjab of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or even of today is appealing to the sensitivity and humanity of the society to protect the female infants by the representatives of the God, in the name of the God. Even in today’s Indian society, the birth of a daughter is usually regarded as an unwelcome event; often an occasion of sorrow and mourning. It is indeed tragic to see that the birth of a daughter who have been honoured in the Guru Granth Sahib as a “would be mother” is a source of sorrow. Unfortunately, as another example of stark gap between the normative and operative beliefs even in Gurus’ households the sense of rejoice, the scale of celebration varied immensely at the time of the birth of a son or a daughter. The Sikh sources are replete with such instances. For instance, when Baba Gur Ditta Ji was born to Mata Damodari, lots of charities were given to poor and destitute and continuous *langar* was started.<sup>1</sup> When Mata Ganga Ji blessed Guru Har Gobind that “*jodi-ralein*” meaning that may God this son is blessed with a sister. Then Guru Har Gobind replied

*“Sil Khan Kanya ek hove,  
Nahin ta ma putrid vingrihasta vigavey”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, ibid, p353

<sup>2</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, ibid, p353

Meaning that there should be at least one virtuous daughter, otherwise the family is like a chaotic household. Here, the Guru's wish for a daughter is quite apparent. However, this is the only source which has got this kind of sentiments projection coming from a father. We get the information about the same scale of rituals and ceremonies being followed at the births of Guru Ditta, Suraj Mal, Anni Rai and Atal Rai. However, such scale of festivities and celebrations were absent in the case of Bibi Veeron. The same rituals of charities and donations were followed at the time of birth of Guru Teg Bahadur.

The difference in the scale of celebration is evident from the detailed description of the joyous mood by Bhai Gurdas at the time of the birth of the son. We do not get any such description even in the Guru families on the occasion of birth of any of the daughters.

*"Duhu mili jammai janiai pita jati paravar sadhara,  
Jammadian ranajhunana vansi vadhai run jhunakara,  
Nanak dadak sohile viratisar bahu dan datara".<sup>1</sup>*

They are such as the son born of the union of mother and father gives happiness to the parents because the lineage and family of the father gets increased. Clarionets are played upon the birth of a child and celebrations are arranged on the further development of the family. In the homes of mother and father, songs of joy are sung and the servants are given many gifts.

The sense of rejoicing on the occasion of the birth of a son is further attested in Kabit Swayye.

*"Bhetat bhatar nari(i) sobbit singar char(u),  
Puran anand sut udit bachitra kai"<sup>2</sup>*

Meaning Just as conjugal union of a well adorned and embellished woman with her husband gives birth to a son and the wife is highly placed.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Vaaran, Var 30, Pauri 3, p211  
<sup>2</sup> KS 394, p. 422

*“Janmat sut sab kutanb anand-mai,  
Bal budh(i) ganat bitit nis(i) prat bai”<sup>1</sup>*

With the birth of a son, the whole family rejoices. The days of fun and frolic of his childhood and infancy just pass with everyone enjoying his pranks.

We get clear evidence of the female infanticide being quite prevalent among many sections of the society. It was part of the social hierarchy, or what can be, in fact called an important symbol of the social status. Guru Amardas was the first Sikh Guru who spoke against the prevalent practice of female infanticide. Further, tradition notes that on the Baisakhi day, at the time of establishment of Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh along with the clear injunction to wear the five articles, known as the *Panj Kakke*, or five Ks (*Kesh*, *Kangha*, *Kirpan*, *Kachh* and *Kara*), using the appellation of Singh and Kaur also firmly prohibited few customs which included any social interactions with *Kurri Maar* (The Killer of the female child). Guru Gobind Singh's harsh prohibition of the killing of female babies indicates that the practice had not ended with Guru Amar Das' injunctions. In spite of Guru Gobind Singh's strong criticism and prohibition of female infanticide, yet in one of the Saakhis, he is projected to have approved of popular perception of a male child being a superior being. Although, as often repeated even if we do not take the Saakhi as an authentic evidence of Guru Gobind Singh's perception, it certainly speaks a great deal about the general social preference for a male child. Here, a Sikhni narrates that her deceased father was Diwan of Agra and when he died, he had seven daughters and her mother was expecting at that time. Thus, the Padshah ordered that if the child to be born- is a male then leave the family alone and do not touch their assets. Otherwise, confiscate their whole property. Then the Sikhni goes on to say that then she realized the power of the male (*mard ki daari aur keshan ki sifath*). Guru Ji corroborated her sentiments.<sup>2</sup> The same anecdote has a different ending in Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa, where Guru Ji says:

*“Guru ghar vich aiye farman hain dhiya poot sab harke kiya”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> KS 241, p. 269

<sup>2</sup> Guru Rattan Mal, *Aur Sau Saakhi*, ed Gur Bachan Singh Nayyar, Saakhi No 43, pp. 54-55

<sup>3</sup> Bhai Gyan Singh Giani, *Tawarikh-Gur Khalsa*, ed K S Raju, p. 900

We get further clear evidence in the famous Punjabi saga of Hir Ranjha in its most famous version of Warris Shah (1978; 44). Warris Shah clearly describes various methods employed in the killing of infant daughters which included strangulation, poisoning, drowning and suffocation. We also get few references of leaving the female infant without warm cloths in the cold or pouring chilled water on the head of new born in the biting winters of Punjab.<sup>1</sup> Other methods to be widely present included like a mid-wife choke the baby or sometime the mouth was stuffed with cow dung or the infant's head was immersed in cow's milk. At times, the female infant was buried with little *Gur* (Unrefined sugar) in her mouth and a bit of cotton skein in her hands, the oft-quoted proverb:

*"Gur Khaien, Pownee Kутten  
Aap Na Aieen, Bhaiya Ghulleen".<sup>2</sup>*

Meaning:

"Eat your Gur and spin your thread;  
But go and send a boy instead."

This horrific practice of female infanticide and the methods adopted seem to generate a feeling of helplessness and disgust. This is surprising that the practice of female infanticide is still prevalent even today. The Punjab which takes pride in its clivalry and generosity, tops the list of the regions where the practice of female foeticide is still prevalent. We have not apparently moved ahead much from the medieval times. Narrating a chilling example of female infanticide, F.A. Steel notes that the Hindu women, when they lost a female child during infancy, or while it suckled milk, would take the baby into the Jungle and put it in a sitting position under a tree. The following day, they would return to the place, if the child's body had been dragged by the dogs and jackals towards the home of the mother, it was taken as a bad omen, signaling the birth of another girl. If the body had been drag away from home, it was taken to mean that the next born would be a boy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Warris Shah, Hir, pp. 44-45

<sup>2</sup> R Montgomery. Minutes of infanticide in Punjab, Lahore, 1853, OIOC, the translation of this proverb as it appears in this text.

<sup>3</sup> Punjab Notes And Queries, 1:5, Feb 1884, P51



Among the Sikhs, the practice of female infanticide was most widely practiced among the Bedis, the descendants of the Sikh Gurus. The Sodhis, the descendants of the fourth Guru onwards, who belonged to the sub division of Sarin Khatri, a ranking low in the internal Khatri hierarchy, were also closely aligned with the practice of female infanticide. Sikh Jats, accounted for major components of Sikh populace, would have adopted the same means of upward mobility. In fact, the evidence furnished by Hir Ranjha of Warris Shah already discussed, basically focuses on the Jats. The association of Jats with the practice of female infanticide can be inferred by the injunction of Guru Ram Singh, the head of the Namdhari Sect, he resolutely censored the widely prevalent practice of female infanticide. It becomes relevant to point out here that a large numbers of his followers were of the lower caste, as well as the Jat Sikhs. Ram Singh, aware of the wide prevalence of the practice, issued circulars to his devotees vehemently attacking the custom.

The practice of female infanticide may well have stemmed directly from the highly esteemed Guru lineage. According to the Punjabi Lore, Dharam Chand, a grand son of Guru Nanak was humiliated at his daughter's marriage by the groom's family in many ways. This included the insult to her brother who went to drop her off to some distance at the time of her *rukhsat* (departure) and were taken much farther than the etiquette required. Dharam Chand viewed it as the last bit in the series of unwarranted humiliations and came up with the horrific injunction. Dharam Chand then ordered that all Bedis hence forth, kill their daughters as soon as they were born rather than bear such humiliation. Dharam Chand, the story continues, took over the burden of the crime of the female infanticide; from that day on he walked stooped, as though bearing a heavy weight upon his shoulders.<sup>1</sup> The most generous rational explanation one can think for legitimizing such a heinous crime is that the Bedis occupied prominent positions within the Guru lineages. By the logic of being descendants of the Sikh Gurus they had a high social and ritual standing. Due to their extraordinary high status they found it difficult to find biradaris of higher status for their daughters. It was considered shameful to marry among

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<sup>1</sup> This story is repeated in many reports on infanticide in Punjab for instance, See Indian infanticide, p. 115-16.

biradaris of a lower status. Being exogamous, they could not marry among themselves. In other words, the main ambition of the upper castes was that of hyper gamy, with which were linked notions of marrying a daughter in the upward direction, as well as what was needed to be spent on such occasions. Thus, daughters were viewed as a “burden”.

The dislike for a girl-child at a general social level had greater implications for women at large. The woman who failed to produce a male heir is seen as accursed, as one who had failed in her essential duty. Among many communities the husband of such a woman can marry again and he will have not only the full approval even encouragement, of the community. In fact, at times, the wife in question, may be due to social pressure or her personal perceptions or combination of both, may be the one who would instigate the husband for a second marriage. One can easily gauge the insecurity and sense of loss for such a woman who is forced to accept the “*saut*”. In other words, it becomes clear that a wife's worth comes to be crucially determined by her ability to produce male heirs. The sons are needed not only to work on the land (in case of an agricultural set up) but more importantly, to keep the land within the patriarchal family and to provide support to parents in their old age.

## **Purdah**

Women were made to observe *Purdah* (veil) it means a cover to hide face or body from outsiders particularly from the view of the males .The advent of Muslims is viewed by few historians as being the reason for the introduction of the *Purdah* in Indian society. For instance Prof. R. C. Majumdar says Hindus adopted *Purdah* as a protective measure to save the honour of their women-folk and to maintain the purity of their social order. [Probably a well accepted social reality that the cultural values of the higher classes percolates down to the lower classes; viewing it as a symbol of high social status, might have contributed substantially to its wide acceptance in then elaborate and institutionalized form].

This however, does not seem correct; there are scholars like K. M. Ashraf who are of the opinion that even in ancient India women observed a certain veil (what even now goes under the name of *Ghunghat*). K. M. Ashraf further writes that “the present elaborate and institutionalized form of *Purdah* dates from the time of the Muslim rule”.<sup>1</sup>

However, it can be safely concluded that the *purdah* and child marriage were considered to be the good safeguards of women and an effective mechanism to control the sexuality of women. *Purdah* was a measure of respectability among higher classes – higher the rank, the more secluded the women. Though it might have existed in the varied form of *Ghunghat* yet as the custom of *ghunghat* was very common among the Hindus<sup>2</sup> particularly the high caste women. Among the Muslims the system of *Purdah* was still more strictly observed. The popular proverbs of the time indicate the general social perception and its wide acceptability like *Andar Baithi Lakh di, Bahar gai kakhdi* meaning if the woman is safe in the four walls of home she is worth a treasure. The moment she steps out of protected boundaries she is worth ashes.<sup>3</sup> The system, logically plausible could not have been widely prevalent among the people of lower classes such as peasants, artisans and manual labourers. However, its prevalence among the upper classes and social criticism in case of any laxity. She became an issue of social ridicule like “*Saas, ninayane daandi taaney phirdiai Ghunghat khulli*” meaning she roams about with uncovered face and her mother in law and sister in law’s passed sarcastic remarks.”<sup>4</sup>

Among the Muslims, the importance accorded to *Purdah* as a marker of social respect/ demeanor of women was pretty strict. If a Muslim lady of rank for any reason discarded *Purdah* even for a temporary period, the consequences for her were disastrous.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> K. M. Ashraf, op. cit, p.171

<sup>2</sup> Macauliffe, Sikh Religion .Vol.II, p. 347

<sup>3</sup> G.S. Chhabra, Advanced Study of Punjab, p. 129

<sup>4</sup> Y.S.Sitta ,Shah Hussian Jiwani te Rachna, Punjabi University Patiala, p-795

<sup>5</sup> P.N. Chopra Some Aspects of Society and Culture during the Mughal Age, p-116

In 1595, Akbar promulgated, "If a young woman was found running about the lanes and bazars of the town and while so doing if she did not veil herself or allow herself to be unveiled she was to go to the quarters of the prostitutes and take up the profession."<sup>1</sup>

Manucci also reports that the *Purdah* was strictly observed among the Muslims than among the Hindus.<sup>2</sup>

Among the Mohammedans, it was a great dishonor for a family when a wife was compelled to uncover herself.<sup>3</sup> They were so "extra ordinarily distrustful";<sup>4</sup> in this matter that they did not permit their wives seeing their brothers and fathers except in their own presence.<sup>5</sup> However, this seems to be an exaggerated version but certainly the *Purdah* system did not permit women to mix up freely with other members of the clan, her education was also highly restricted because of the *Purdah* system. To top it all, her minimal social interaction not only deprived her of learning through social exposure but made her immensely vulnerable in a social system where she was married off in a different village. Being confined to the four walls of the home, it also restricted her interaction among women too. In brief, the *Purdah* system was manifestation of the general social attitudes towards women and it emerged out to be a social mechanism which not only restricted but, in fact led to the social, political and intellectual stagnation of women

However as a pleasant social aberration the peasants and the working class women did not wear any shroud or veil and they were not expected to be confined to their houses. They were free from the bondage of *Purdah*.<sup>6</sup> They were just expected to bring down the *pallu* of their sari or any other head dress to cover their face when they passed a stranger. This "freedom" had genesis in that they were expected to help their husbands in all "external pursuits and

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<sup>1</sup> Badauni, Muntakhab- ul -Tawarikh, VOL.II, Eng. tr. W. H. Lowe, Delhi, 1973, p-405

<sup>2</sup> Niccolao Manucci, Storia Do Mogor on Mogol India, Vols.1, eng. tr. William Irvine, Calcutta 1965.p. 62

<sup>3</sup> ibid, Vol .II, p. 175

<sup>4</sup> ibid,p. 352, Bernier, Travels in the Mughal Empire, ed .B.A.. reprint, Delhi 1968,p-89

<sup>5</sup> ibid, p. 60

<sup>6</sup> P.N. Ojha, North India Social life during Mughal period, Delhi: 1970, p.120; K.M. Ashraf, op.cit. p.172; James Tod, Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, Vol II, ed. William Crook, Delhi:1971;p.710-11

internal economy”.<sup>1</sup> They took their bath publicly at riverside and would visit shrines travelling on foot without any restrictions. We get evidence from the Sikh Gurus’ banis where a woman carrying pitchers of water is mentioned without any *Purdah*.<sup>2</sup> The word used for water carriers used by Sikh Gurus and the Bhagats is *panihari*. In sum, the common women moved much freely than the women of the upper strata families of both the communities.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from Guru Amar Das we do not find any categorical criticism of *Purdah* System by any of the Sikh Gurus. It was only Guru Amar Das who strongly censured *Purdah* or covering of the face by women. According to a Sikh tradition, the Rani of the ruler of Haripur visited the Guru in *Purdah* despite the instruction of the Guru that the *Purdah* was not to be observed by his followers; the Guru is said to have spontaneously uttered, “Why has this mad woman come here?” This shows Guru’s strong dislike for the *Purdah* System. Quite probably, the *langar* and the *pangat* system along with the active involvement of women in the *manji* and *peerah* system must have contributed significantly in breaking away the shackles of the *Purdah* system.

The *Purdah* system is closely linked to the *ideology of Seclusion* which is considered a marker of high social status and ranking. The following hymn of bhakta Kabir shows his criticism for the system of *Purdah*; Kabir says false pride has been attached to it by people:

“This only is the merit of veiling the face,  
That for a few days the people say, how noble is the bride.”<sup>4</sup>

Guru Nanak also speaks of a woman in an applauding manner who has cast off her veil, however, the context is her strive for spiritual attainments.

“I have cast off my Veil: the values of the world haunt me no more my ignorance, the mother-in-law has lost her moorings and no more is her sway over my head.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P.N . Ojha, op .cit, p. 120;K.M. Ashraf, op.cit.p.1720

<sup>2</sup> AG, pp. 325, 335, 347

<sup>3</sup> F.W. Thomas, Mutual Influence of Mohammedans and Hindus in India, Cambridge, 1892, p. 72

<sup>4</sup> AG, p. 484,Asa Kabir

<sup>5</sup> AG, p. 931

## Prostitution

Infact, by and large historians have tended to treat prostitutes as either a scandalous or frivolous topic of research.<sup>1</sup> Academically treating the subject, if one adopts a somewhat more precise definition of the institution as “a phenomenon in which a socially identified group of women earn their living principally or exclusively from the commerce of their bodies.”<sup>2</sup> The profession of prostitution has been in vogue in India and was considered to be the necessary social evil .There were courtesans or dancing girls whose number in medieval period was considerable. There are various references to the prostitutes in the contemporary sources. Guru Amar Das, for instance, has confirmed the existence of prostitution in ancient times when he writes:

“Ajmal who mates with prostitutes, he too was saved, uttering the name of God”<sup>3</sup>

In the Adi Granth there are about a dozen references to prostitutes.<sup>4</sup> Quite obviously, all the references are in derogatory terms.

The most blatant comment is that the father of a son of a prostitute cannot be identified.

*“Jiu bahu miti vesua chhadai khasamu nikhasami hoi.*

*Putu jane je vesua nanaki dadaki naun koi.*

*Naraki savari sigaria rag rang chhali chhali chhalai chhaloi.*

*Ghandaheru aherian manas mirage vinahu sathoi.*

*Ethai marai haram hoi agai daragah milai na dhoi.”<sup>5</sup>*

Meaning “a prostitute having many lovers leaves her husband and thus becomes unclaimed master less. If she gives birth to a son, he carries no maternal or paternal name with him. She is a decorated and ornamental hell which deceives people by loving apparent charm and grace. As the hunter’s pipe attracts the deer, so do the songs of a prostitute allure men to their

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<sup>1</sup> Otis, 1987, p. 8

<sup>2</sup> ibid, 2-3

<sup>3</sup> AG, p 995 Ajmal was the ruler of Kanauj

<sup>4</sup> AG p.238, 528, 837, 1029, 1415

<sup>5</sup> Vaaran, Bhai Gurdas, tr Bhai Jodh Singh, Var33, Pauri9

destruction. Here in this world she dies an evil death and hereafter obtains no entrance into God's court."

The social attitude towards prostitutes has always been strongly negative. In the near contemporary literature, she had been viewed as a disgrace to the society. In the verses as well as *Kabit Swayye*, Bhai Gurdas make frequent comparative references to prostitute and the "*Manmukh Sikhs*" not following the right path. Howsoever, all his writing strongly demonstrates the general social attitude towards prostitutes.

Var5, Pauri 17 blamed the prostitutes for bringing disgrace to themselves, their families maternal, paternal as well as in-laws families. It goes to the extent of blaming her for spreading the poison in the society.

*"Jiu bahu miti vesua sabhi kulakhan pap kamavai.*

*Lokahi desahu bahari tihu pakhan no aulang lavai.*

*Dubi dobai horana mahura mitha hoi pachavai.*

*Ghanda hera mirage jiu dipak hoi patang jalavai.*

*Duhi sarai jaradaru pathar beri pur dubavai".<sup>1</sup>*

Meaning, a prostitute having many lovers commits every species of sin. An outcast from her people and her country, she brings disgrace on all the three sides, i.e. her father's, mother's and the family of father-in-law. Ruined herself, she ruins others and still goes on gulping and digesting poison. She is like the musical pipe which lures the deer, or lamp which burns the moth. Due to the sinful activities her face in both the worlds remain pale because she behaves like a boat of stone which drowns its passengers.

Due to the economic dependence and the wretched conditions of widows, she must have at times forced to adopt prostitution. Those who were in the habit of visiting the prostitutes did not care to realize the feelings of their spouses.

Bhai Gurdas in his *Kabit Swayye* states

*Besvarat(i) britha bhae, man main a sankha mania*

*Juari na sarbas (u) bare sai thakat bai.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, *Vaaran*, tr Bhai Jodh Singh, *ibid*, Var5, Pauri17

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, *Kabit Swayee*, KS, 323, p. 351

Meaning, knowing that his visit to the house of a whore can cause him serious disease, a licentious person still doesn't feel hesitant to go there. A gambler never feels tired of gambling even after losing all his assets and family.

Bhai Gurdas further warns in his Var36, Pauri 5

*Khari Swalio vesua jia bajha itaia*<sup>1</sup>

Meaning, prostitutes look very beautiful but she ensnares the mind (and ultimately), man stands finished. The general social attitude towards the prostitutes and that the onus of the existence of the social evil/ reality laid with the prostitutes and not with her patronisers at all is reflected in many contemporary injunctions for instance Bhai Gurdas' Kabit Swayee:

*Pragat (i) sansar bibichar karai ganika pai,  
Tahe log bed ar(u) gian kin a kan(i) hai.*<sup>2</sup>

Meaning, a whore openly commits vice with other men. She has no regard and respect for the morality and code of conduct as laid down in the social and religious books.

Guru Nanak has portrayed in the following hymns the feeling of a young lady whose husband visits prostitutes.

*"Break thy cozy bed and thy ivory Bracelets, O woman,  
And thy Arms, and the arms of thy Bed,  
Even though the bedeckest thyself so.  
The spouse enjoyed with others".*<sup>3</sup>

Another hymn also refers to the practice and quite expectedly that the people who visited the prostitutes had to bear with social disapproval as evident from the hymn of Guru Nanak.

"Thieves, illicit lovers, prostitutes and touts, Keep company together,  
As do men of irreligion, who eat out of the same bowl  
They know not the Lords Praise, for, within them abides Evil."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Vaaran, Var 36, Pauri 5, p. P339

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayee, KS, 490, p. 518

<sup>3</sup> AG, Rag Wadhans, p. 557

<sup>4</sup> AG, Raga Suhi, p. 790



Akbar too viewed it as a social evil and tried to curtail its prevalence. A separate quarter was constructed outside the city and all public women were asked to reside there. Special state officers were appointed to look after them.<sup>1</sup>

Guru Arjan, contemporary of Akbar writes that people have no shame in visiting the prostitutes:

“Man in contemplating evil no sloth feels.

In enjoying harlot no shame he has.”<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the widowhood and its associated problems women may have been drawn into prostitution in a variety of situations owing to marital problems especially in a polygamous situation, and /or as victims of sexual violence. Instances of frequent elopements of women in those days are available in literature.<sup>3</sup> The genesis of these problems, infact, laid in the general social attitude to treat women as objects, who were part of a range of gift exchange. It's ironical that women whose social status was legitimate (along with social acceptability) did not have equivalent legitimate access to an independent economic status whereas women whose socio-sexual status was ambivalent at best, were more easily recognized as economically independent individuals.

The entire discussion reflects the general social attitude for prostitutes in a larger context. A social evil which sustains and thrives because of the facilitator i.e. the prostitute as well as her patron is viewed only as a “social crime” of the prostitutes. A social evil, which has sustained from times immemorial in different forms, is due to substantially, if not solely, due to the perversion of men who take the advantage of the economic compulsion of widowed or deserted women. And yet, the society at large retains the right to transfer the entire blame, the entire onus of a perverted sexual desire on

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<sup>1</sup> Badaoni op cit. Vol II, p. 311 and P. N. Chopra, Aspects of Society and Culture during the Mughal Age, pp. 123, 170.

<sup>2</sup> AG, p. 1143

<sup>3</sup> Ahmad Yar, Ahsan-ul-Kasis, ed. Piara Singh, Languages Department Punjab, Patiala, 1962, p. 134, Warris Shah Hir, pp. 46, 47, 48, 56, 193, 198, 199, 200, 204, Muqbal, Qissa Hir Ranjha, pp. 26, 69.

prostitutes only. Is it not ironical that a society which had such a clear understanding of “*stri svabhav*” had evolved mechanisms like child-marriage, purdah system or *Karewa* (varied forms of widow remarriage) to control the uncontrolled sexual desire of women, did not even attempt to curtail the practice of prostitution and yet blame them alone.

## Sati

The word “*sati*” has been used in the Adi Granth in different connotations. It implies truthful, moral, disciplined, virtuous, generous etc. It also refers to the custom of “*sati*” by which a widow used to burn herself on the pyre of her dead husband. It was considered virtuous according to the general social ethos. The practice of *sati* is a question closely linked to widow remarriage. Both seem to be basically a mechanism to deprive the women of her, however, small property rights she had got in the property of her husband. Both the social institutions seem to be prevalent and had social acceptability as they ensured the transfer of the interests of widows in the landed property back to the male line of the family of her deceased husband. Adi Granth also testifies that the custom of *sati* was quite a common practice in the Punjab of those times.<sup>1</sup>

Bhai Gurdas in 70<sup>th</sup> poem of his work Kabit Swaiyye speaks applaudingly for *Sati* when he says that “If a woman reflects strong-will and bears through the pain in last few moments of her life, sits on the pyre of her dead husband, then the whole world praises her and calls her “*Sati*”.

*“Ant kale k bhari nigrab kai sati hoe,  
Dhann(i) dhann(i) kahat hai sakai sansar ji.”*<sup>2</sup>

Meaning, controlling her mind and with utmost determination, when a woman jumps into the pyre of her husband and self immolates herself, the whole world applauds her effort of being a loving and devoted wife.

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<sup>1</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Shabdarth, trld. by Lakshman Chelaram, vol. I, p. 158

<sup>2</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swaiyye, KS 70, p. 98

The practice of *sati* was a common practice among the Hindus; originally restricted to high castes like Brahmans and Kshatriyas. It was very popular with the Rajputs. Ibn Battuta who visited India during the Sultanate period and Niccolao Manucci, the Venetian traveller who visited India during the Mughal period have described this custom in detail. Ibn Battuta states that in the Sultan's dominions, the Hindus had to get the state's permission which was easily granted to them.<sup>1</sup> Manucci writes "when the ceremonies are finished....(widows) mounts to the top of the pyre and lying down on her side closely embraces her husband and the relations bind her feet strongly by two ropes to two posts driven into ground for this purpose. Next they throw some more wood and cow dung on the two bodies.....they apply light."<sup>2</sup> Isami refers to the tradition of Jauhar (a varied form of burning of women and children, popular among the Rajput rulers) after the Hindu ruler lost the hope to hold out against the besieging army) in his account of the conquest of Ranthambore by Sultan Ala-ud-din Khalji. Isami writes that Rai Hamir Deo burnt alive the ladies along with the precious things and then came out to fight to the last.<sup>3</sup>

While looking for the earliest available reference to this custom, we cannot afford to ignore much quoted references of the classical writers like Strabo and Diodorus Siculus, as historical instances of sati in India as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Strabo refers to the practice of sati at Taxila and among the Kathians (Madra) in ancient Punjab of their time.<sup>4</sup> Diodorus Siculus cites the story of the younger wife of a general named Keteus, committing sati in 316 B.C., when her husband died fighting against the Greeks.<sup>5</sup>

Describing the "cause" of widow-burning, Diodorus says that in the olden days, depraved women, through incontinence, fell in love with other men and got rid of their husbands by poison. When this nefarious practice had become quite prevalent and many lives had been sacrificed and when it was found

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<sup>1</sup> Travels of Ibn Battuta, vol. III, pp. 613-14

<sup>2</sup> Niccolao Manucci, Storia Do Mogar or Mughal India, Vol. III, trld. William Irvine, London, 1907, p. 60

<sup>3</sup> Isami, pp.275-6

<sup>4</sup> Mc Crindle, The Invasion of India by Alexander the Great, Cosmo Publications, 1983, pp. 69, 202

<sup>5</sup> R.C. Majumdar, Classical Accounts of India, pp. 240-41

that the punishment of the guilty had no effect on deterring other wives, they passed a law ordaining that a wife, unless she was pregnant or had already borne children, should be burnt along with her deceased husband and that, if she did not choose to obey the law, she should be compelled to remain a widow to the end of her life and be forever excommunicated from the sacrifices and solemnities as an impious person.<sup>1</sup> The great geographer himself doubts the existence of such a law, and necessarily, of the reason assigned for the enactment).repeats the same story that sati was introduced by law in order to put a stop to the widespread crime of husband-poisoning. The element of coercion that Diodorus underlines in his description of *sati* makes it quite certain that if the system existed, it was a violent imposition. The same picture is corroborated by Manucci.

It must be underlined here that both Diodorus and Strabo wrote around the beginning of the Christian era drawing their information from the writings of the two generals who had accompanied Alexander to India for the purpose of conquest more than three centuries earlier. In sharp contrast, writers like Megasthenes who spent many years in the Mauryan court and was a keen observer of Indian life is absolutely silent on this issue. Thus, the description of Strabo and Diodorus, indicating wide prevalence of *Sati* should be viewed with suspicion. At best, they can be accredited of noting a custom which was prevalent amongst certain tribes on the extreme north-western frontiers of India.

It needs to be pondered over as to what were the factors that allowed the custom of *Sati* to continue.<sup>2</sup> Apart from somewhat absurd explanation of Diodorus for the prevalence of the practice of *Sati*, many centrifugal and centripetal forces were responsible to decide the fates of the thousands of unfortunate widows in our society. The causes which probably helped to encourage and perpetuate this system are very aptly and briefly stated by Sir A C Lyall in the following words:

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<sup>1</sup> Strabo, bk. XV chap 30

<sup>2</sup> See Ashwani Aggarwal's paper, "Sati- How old? How Indian?" in HSAJIS, III, 1991-97 for a discussion on the foreign origin of Sati

"Perhaps the best example of the selfish device obtaining vogue under the cloak of a necessary rite is afforded by the famous practice of a widow becoming Sati or burning herself alive with her dead husband, which is undoubtedly, as Sir H Maine has pointed out connected with the desire to get rid of her right, if she is childless, to a tenancy for life upon her husband's lands. It is also connected, among the great families as may be easily observed still in certain parts of India, with the wish of heir to free himself by this simple plan from many inconveniences and encumbrances entailed upon him by the bequest of a number of step mothers who can not marry again."<sup>1</sup>

Disheartening to see the irony, when there were no property rights for widows, there was neither an eagerness nor the mechanism of getting rid of them. However, with the gradual development of the idea of widow right to property, the emphasis on the custom of *Sati* also enhanced till it was given the status of the "only dharm" for the widow. In fact, the figure of *Sati* came to be closely associated with the virtue of "*Pati Vrata*". The role played by the male relatives of the widow guided by their ulterior economic motives was crucial. The ostensible justification of widows themselves offering for self-immolation does not seem to be plausible. It not only seems to be against the basic human instinct of survival but we also have irrefutable evidence of the use of force by Manucci. Nicolo Conti, Bernier and others have also recorded similar instances of the use of force. Abul Fazl, too, has recorded numerous instances where the reluctant women, were forced to perform *Sati* due to pressure from relatives or public opinion. Use of force, fear of social ostracism such as if the women ran away from the pyre, she became an out-caste and was not acceptable either to the society or to the family of her late husband. Adding to the agonies, of course, the degradation of the widow who chose to survive her husband was the extreme social disapproval and the issue of survival under such adverse circumstances. The circumstances were so cruel that *Sati* would be chosen by the hapless widow as the lesser of the two evils. P V Kane has rightly summed up the social scenario that the "greed of

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Alfred Lyall, Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social, John Murray, Published by Kessinger, London, 1882, 1889.

property frequently induced the surviving members get rid of the widow by appealing at most distressing hour to her devotion and love for her husband".<sup>1</sup>

It is an irony that when women had right to live after the death of her husband, she was denied property rights and when the latter was provided for, she was induced to die.

Now, in this background of prevalence of custom of Sati among different sections of society (which obviously included followers of Sikh Gurus), it would be appropriate injunction of Sikh Gurus on Sati. Could it actually modify or reformulate the psyche of society at large. Guru Amar Das, the third Sikh Guru, condemned the custom of Sati much before Akbar's promulgation prohibiting it, in strong allegorical terms when he said:

*"Sati is nor She, who burns herself on pyre of the spouse.*

*Nanak: A Sati is She who die with the sheer shock of separation.*

*Yes the Sati is one, who lives contended and embellish herself with good conduct;*

*and cherish her lord ever and call on him each morn.*

*Women burn themselves on the pyres of their lords,*

*But if they love their spouses well,*

*They suffer the pangs of separation even otherwise."*

He further said:

*"She who loves not her spouse,*

*Why burn herself in the fire?*

*For, be he alive or dead, she own him not."*<sup>2</sup>

Though Guru's thought clearly spoke against "Sati", yet, such a denigrating custom continued to be prevelant among the Sikhs. One such incident which received a good deal of attention was the cremation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The oft-quoted description of the incident states "At ten O'clock, nearly the time fixed by the Brahmins, Kunwar Kharak Singh set fire to the pyre and ruler of the Punjab with four of ranis and seven slave girls was reduced to ashes;

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<sup>1</sup> P.V. Kane, History of Dharm Shastras, Vol 2, Part 1, p.365

<sup>2</sup> AG, Var Suhi, P 787

(June, 1839). "It must be noted that "*Sati*" being performed at the cremation of an icon like figure of Sikh history, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, not only legitimized, but rather glorified the custom of sati, although, we do not get references of it being prevalent in common masses, but this episode certainly emphasized the relation between the "virtuous" wife, the "*pativrata*" wife performing sati. The disheartening reality is that all descriptions of ranis trying to escape their in-avoidable fate by bribing the officials and so on, fell on deaf ears and what emerges is that loud proclamation of gap between the normative and operative realities.

Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa reports Guru Gobind Singh ji stating "*Atanghati Mahapapi Honda hai*" meaning "Self-Killing is the biggest crime. It is in the context of sati when Sahib Deva ji insisted that rather than being separated from him and staying in Delhi, she would prefer to commit sati in his presence. Guru Ji further states the oft-quoted saying of Guru Amar Das.<sup>1</sup>

### **Guru's Perception on Women's Condition**

It would not be out of context to recapitulate briefly the perception of the Sikh Gurus on different facets of women's life. Admittedly, there are many elements within the Sikh scriptural tradition which are emancipators, yet, there are many facets which legitimises many forms of patriarchy. First and foremost, the Sikh Gurus emphasized that both men and women are equal before God and both can enjoy spiritual attainments through *nam-simran*. Although Guru Nanak's attitude towards women was by no means simple, there are ambiguous statements like when woman is compared to "*maya*" snare, symbol of lust and so on. Yet, he advocates the life of householder. Apart from the oft-quoted hymns relating to *suchajji*, *suhagan*, *sulakhni* he is able to address the agony of a woman at the hands of Babur's army. Although Guru Nanak has no appreciation for the widow becoming sati, but neither the divorced woman nor the widow appears to have been dealt with sympathetically. He disapproves of the custom of becoming *sati* but almost

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gyani Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa, ed, K S Raju, p 1135

incidentally. Guru Nanak does not explicitly criticize child –marriage” or disabilities suffered by a widow.

Yet, Guru Nanak's emphasis on conjugal relationship –fidelity and chastity to be a virtue both for men and women is emphasized again and again. This contribution cannot be under estimated because if marital life –a prime social institution-is advocated and practiced in an ethical moral way for both the partners then obviously it could have gone a long way in improving the position of women. Guru Nanak appreciated the woman for her procreative capabilities and that all of us are born of her and the world cannot exist without her. A woman was considered impure for a certain number of days after delivering a baby and even during the menstrual period referred to as “*sutak*.” Guru Nanak categorically criticized this social ritual of *sutak*.

*“Jekari sutaku manniyai sabhtai sutaku hoe”.<sup>1</sup>*

To elaborate it further, should *sutak* (Sutak: impurity believed by orthodox Hindus to stick to a home for a number of days, after a birth has occurred) impurity be believed in then no,

*Such impurity occurs every where.*

*Inside cow dung and wood are found worms.*

*No single grain of cereals is without life in it.*

*The first of living things is water, whereby is each object sustained.*

*How many sutak impurities be believed, when even in the kitchen it is occurring?*

*Guru Nanak further says that sutak impurity is washed by enlightenment alone.*

The Sikh Scripture, at large, does not debase the female body and does not place taboos around menstruation, childbirth or any other female body/ physiological functions. There is nothing inferior or abhorrent about feminine sexuality. Female activities and accoutrements are assigned a high value, even a transcend value. The Sikh affirmation of the feminine as a category of being with essential values and strength is expressed through the symbol of

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<sup>1</sup> AG, p 472



the bride. There are clear injunctions against the most heinous social crime; a practice of female infanticide was categorically prohibited by Guru Amar Das as well as by Guru Gobind Singh. The Sikh code of conduct at the time of initiation of Khalsa prohibited any social contact with the “*kurrimaar*” (the killers of daughters). Guru Amar Das categorically denounced the practice of the *Purdah* system. Infact, he even assigned five *manjis*, a sort of religious emissaries to women which indicated his complete trust in the intellect of women and her caliber as propagators of a faith. Guru Amar Das vehemently spoke against the practice of *sati*. And the Guru could clearly empathize with the disabilities suffered by widows. All the Gurus emphatically emphasized the need of chastity and fidelity both for men and women and advocated monogamy. Guru Hargobind called women as the “conscience of men”.

It must be acknowledged that the Gurus contributed positively to the status of women. In the then social ethos to view the role of women as a mother, as a wife endowed with varied virtues able to hold the family together as a great social contribution was also remarkable. The equality of men and women in the spiritual arena acknowledged the intellect of women in contrast to the popular perception that women are stupid and worthy of beating with shoes (*Khaley*). In Var5, Pauri 16, Bhai Gurdas describes the life of love and affection of an unmarried girl and then the blissfully happy life of a *suhagin*. This projection might not be a reality, yet, one has to applaud the positivity in the message in the life of a woman- which may be wishful only.

*“Pevakarai ghari iaduli mau piu khari pidri,  
Vichi bhirawan bhainari nanak dadak saparavari,  
Lakh kharach viahiai gahanw daju saju ati ati bhari,  
Sahurarai ghari manniai sanakhati paravar sadhari,  
Sukh manai piru sejari chhatih bhojan sada sigari,  
Lok ved gunu gian vichi aradh sariri mokh duari  
Gurmukhi such phal nihachau nari”.*<sup>1</sup>

Meaning, in her parents’ home, the girl is fondled and dearly loved by the parents. Among the brothers she is a sister and lives (joyfully) in the full

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gurdas Vaaran, Var 5, Pauri 16, p. 156

fledged families of the maternal and the paternal grand fathers. Then offering ornaments and dowry etc., and by spending lacs of rupees she is married. In her father-in-law's house she is accepted as the married wife. She enjoys with her husband, eats variety of foods and always remains bedecked. From a temporal and spiritual point of view, woman is half man's body and assists to the door of deliverance. She assuredly brings happiness to the virtuous.

However, it becomes evident that negative attitudes towards women have been the norm as opposed to the exception. While certain practices were frowned upon by the Gurus, many denigrating custom with regard to women continued, the most prominent being the custom of *sati* and female infanticide.

However, to become aware of this paradoxical aspect of religion –the gap between the injunction and utterances of the Gurus and actual impact they are able to impart on the social ethos-it is important to expound on both the positive and the negative with the scriptural canon. To know only the negative message is disempowering, to uphold only the positive images is a naïve and superficial empowerment. To analyze both leads to a more accurate and genuine discussion of the feminine dimension of the Sikh tradition and appreciate the contribution of the Sikh Gurus. Driven by an urge to be rational, one would not like to agree with scholars like Rita Gross when they claim “patriarchy has always valued the feminine traits, for women and as values regulating private life.”<sup>1</sup> They claim that while it is important to valorize these images especially that of motherhood, it is equally important to be aware of the problematic in invoking these images as well. For it is precisely these images which have led to essentialist notions of womanhood and women's role in society and they can be viewed as tools of control for what the ideal woman is to be and to do. Essentialist understandings of “ideal womanhood” or what has been labeled as doing “gender”<sup>2</sup> is viewed as having inherent problems. Understandably, then images utilized within the scriptures generally focus on important functions within the household, the *Adi Granth* is replete

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Gross, “Studying Women and Religion Conclusions: Twenty Five years later”, in *Today's Woman in World Religions*, p. 348

<sup>2</sup> Doris R. Jakobsh, *Gender Issues in Sikh Studies: Hermeneutics of Affirmation or Hermeneutics of Suspicion*, op. cit p.48.

with images of mother, of the bride, of “feminine roles”. To me, this kind of opinion is anachronistic to blame, or not to appreciate, the Gurus which are distant by a mere time span of 400 odd years plus. It appears that if human civilization has not changed its perceptions with the changing times then the onus of our failure is passed on to them. If these scholars would have reflected the same level of concern for the widening gap between the normative beliefs and operative realities for instance, the still prevalent practice of female infanticides then, it would have certainly been an academic contribution and might have led to some self-introspection as a society. Keeping the social milieu in mind the Sikh tradition at least acknowledged the significance of the feminine component within the human existence.<sup>1</sup> One cannot ignore or undermine the importance of the Sikh Gurus’ perception; the respect and value accorded to women as a wife, as a mother especially for her procreative capabilities. In the then social milieu when “*sutak*” (Pollution) was attached to the process of child birth and many such restrictions imposed on women due to her physiology. In the then social milieu to award respect to woman in her roles of wife and a mother, applaud her contribution in the smooth functioning of the society- the family life and to advocate the ideal of chastity for both men and women in their marital life was actually a remarkable perception.

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<sup>1</sup> Nikky Gurinder Singh, *The Feminine Principles* op.cit.p.14

### DEVELOPMENT OF SIKH PANTH: CONSTRUCTION OR DECONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY

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After discussing the position of the women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Punjab, and the impact of the Sikh Gurus on issues like female infanticide, *sati* or widow-remarriage and so on; it is logical to study the evolution or the change in the ideological position of the Sikh Gurus in response to the changed circumstances or the changed nature of the *sangat*. To understand the nuances of the relation between the position of women in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Punjab and the Sikh Gurus, one has to not only appreciate the perceptions of the Sikh Gurus but try to capture the changing focus of the limelight and the reasons behind it. Sikh Gurus modified or changed drastically their position on related issues with the development of the Sikh Panth. The process of the evolution of the Panth obviously was closely related to the changed circumstances, the vision of the respective Gurus. How did individual Gurus respond to their relationship with the Mughals; how did the composition of the Sikh Panth at a particular point of time influence the policies and agenda of the Gurus. The composition aspect was very closely related to the socio- cultural understanding of the Sikh Gurus- for the sustenance and the thriving development of the Panth, to aim for its ever increasing adherents the Sikh Guru obviously needed to change their issues of concern and the focus and emphasis of their activities. To contextualize the perceptions of the Sikh Gurus with the corresponding phases of the Panth, enables one to appreciate their position and the reasons behind it more clearly. In context of the Sikh Panth, a commendable feature is that it successfully institutionalized the position of the Guru. The institution of the Guru, which lasted for nearly two hundred years, gave the Sikh Panth a remarkable opportunity to continue to grow, evolve and consolidate itself over a long period of time. This gave Sikhism a continuing opportunity for over two centuries to respond to new situations and circumstances. In its long journey under its ten Gurus, the Sikh Panth inevitably witnessed gradual changes. Its social base too underwent a transformation. J.S. Grewal discusses the

changes in the focus of the Sikh community and notes that we have to identify and study the shift in the dominant concerns of the community with the passage of time, looking for historical and logical connections between the activity and ideas of the various phases.<sup>1</sup> In the following few pages, an attempt has been made to correlate the phases of the Panth, for instance, emphasis on militarization and the corresponding marginalization of women among the concerns and activities of the Panth or her more active participation when she was part of the *manji* and *peerah* system.

The basic function of the dominant or even newly emerging religious tradition of any given society, in the present case the Sikh Gurus, is to articulate a social ideology intended to serve as sort of psychological glue that helps preserve both harmony and privilege within the society. The messages and the ideological perception it advocates is also meant to appeal to the masses and enhance its popularity. Infact, many religious beliefs and practices are employed not only to define a given community identity but also to provide a utopian vision for the future of the community and of the society of which it forms a greater or lesser part .In other words ,these beliefs and practices are in definitional sense and in an ideal, moral sense. Together they constitute, in short, both the identity and the ideology of the community. At the same time as already stated that with the evolution of any particular religious tradition, its ideological perceptions also evolve. In context of Sikhism the evolution from the socio-religious movement of the sixteenth century to the socio-political Sikh Panth of the seventeenth century is another important factor when considering the incongruity between the affirming messages of the Gurus, and the actual derogatory attitude towards women. At a more tautological level, the attempt to construct /trace any ideological perceptions and shift in the focus and dominant concerns becomes more complex when one sees an immense gap between the normative positions of the Gurus and the operative realities in the then existing society. For instance, take the issue of female infanticide only Guru Amardas, the third Guru was the first Guru to criticize the practice of female infanticide in clear, categorical terms yet, at the time of

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal, A Perspective on Early Sikh History; in Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition. p.34

establishment of Khalsa in the last decade of seventeenth century we observe Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru to prohibit a Khalsa from having any kind of contact with a *kurrimaar* (killer of a female child). This clearly indicates that till then the practice of female infanticide had not stopped. This kind of social realities rather than answering the question of the level of the impact of the Gurus in the then existing position of women poses more questions than answers. One is intrigued by the question that though the initial injunctions of the first few Gurus, particularly Guru Amardas, were so positive in their perception then why we do not find the desired level of impact on the position of women. It is a complex issue which deserves to be studied thoroughly and independently. Howsoever, the first and foremost reason that appears to be evidently the main reason is that there was a clear change in the social concerns and priorities of the Gurus and thus the emphasis in their religious discourse. Thus, the kind of constant and continuous pressure, in the form of religious discourses got deviated in such a long time and, therefore, obviously the impact also got adversely affected and got diluted. As oft-repeated the relationship between religion and social –change is very significant. Moreover, the hold of patriarchal psyche is very tenacious and required a much more constant, continuous and powerful intervention on part of the Sikh Gurus to actually change the position of women. Here, I do not intend to undermine their contribution, it is just the insatiable desire for more.

The distinctive features and the general outline of Sikhism are perhaps best characterized in the words of Niharranjan Ray....<sup>1</sup> as follows: "To be able to achieve the integration of temporal and spiritual seems to me to have been the most significant contribution of Guru Nanak to the totality of the Indian way of life of medieval India ...(where) one finds that, by and large, in thought as well as in practice, the temporal and the material were set in opposition to the eternal or perennial and the spiritual."

Guru Nanak and his successors offered a new message and a new mission, both simple, direct and straight forward. The message consisted in the recognition and acceptance of one and only one God in place of hundreds of

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<sup>1</sup> Niharranjan Ray, op. cit., p. 32

Gods and Goddesses. He also told them that this God could be reached not through the intermediary of priests but by honest efforts, through love and devotion and through God's grace, but following a rigorous course of discipline. The life of a householder was not only accepted but placed higher than the path of renunciation and viewed not as a hurdle but rather a contributor in the path of spiritualism. The mission consisted in rejecting all external forms and practices of religious and spiritual exercises, meaningless perfunctory rites and rituals and degrading social abuses and practices.

Most important contribution of Guru Nanak for women was that he opened the gates of the path of spiritualism for women. He proclaimed:

*"Come my sisters and dear comrades!*

*Clasp me in thine embrace.*

*Meeting together, let us tell the tales of our Omnipotent Spouse (God).*

*In the true Lord are all merits in us all demerits."*<sup>1</sup>

This move to advocate that men and women are equal in the eyes of God and the path of salvation was not prohibited for women it was very remarkable, looking at the then existing socio-cultural values. Till then, the religious arena was not only barred for women but she was not even considered worthy of it because she was considered intellectually very inferior, a creation of God just to serve the men. By the act of making the emancipator goals open to women, the woman is placed at par with man, just as the *shudra* is placed at par with the Brahman. However, the path of spiritualism was open for women by fulfilling her roles of a wife, a mother and so on. Guru Nanak's attitude is also not exactly revolutionary outlook. He can refer to wife as a snare, yet place the house-holder above the renunciant, but in any case the Sikh Guru advocated the life of a householder with discipline and restraint. In Sri Rag, Ghar I, 14, Guru Nanak among the things which induce man to forget God are pearls, gems, diamonds, thrones, armies, political power and beautiful women. Elsewhere, Guru Nanak clubs woman with sons, gold, horses and elephant as the objects of attachment.<sup>2</sup> The five potent *thags* are power (*raj*),

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<sup>1</sup> AG, Sri Rag, p. 17

<sup>2</sup> AG, Gauri, p. 222

riches (*mal*), beauty (*rup*) caste (*jat*) and youth (*joban*).<sup>1</sup> Guru Nanak sees a close link between (sexual) desire and beauty (*rup*).

The individual perception are the culmination of personal predilections and the then existing social milieu the value system. To view Guru Nanak as unconnected to his times is in my eyes, academically little immature. More over when Guru Nanak describes woman as one of the potential temptress of *maya* then there is no reason to suspect. Guru Nanak viewed women as a temptress and not one of the two partners having any desires just like men. Nanak is outspoken in his denunciation of caste and his successors plainly follow him in his vehement rejection of the caste system, Very often, the scholars argue that the intention was a renunciation only of those aspects of caste which accord privilege to some and impose discriminatory penalties on others.<sup>2</sup>

However, this does not dilute the fact that the Gurus were emphatic in their rejection of caste based religious pretensions and that membership of the Panth was open for people of all castes and gender. This insistence on eradication of the caste system, gender division in the path of spiritualism should be viewed as a characteristic feature of the panthic development in its initial stages.

Even at the initial stages, there are distinctive features which deserve to be noted as factors significantly contributing to its strength and life and level of the presence of the Panth. At least three such factors can be identified. The immediate impact of Nanak's personality and the appeal it had for the common masses was the first factor in play. Although, if we do not go by the *janamsakhi* tradition which is more like post-defacto presentation of knowledge, we do not come across any conclusive documentary evidence, yet, it is obviously a reasonable assumption as very often, the charismatic appeal of either initiator or one of his early successors is a feature typical of

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<sup>1</sup> AG, Shalok, 1288

<sup>2</sup> McLeod, W.H. The Evolution of the Sikh Community, Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1976, pp. 87-91



successful religious movements and there is no reason to suppose that the Nanak panth was in any sense an exception to this rule.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, Nanak succeeded in communicating his ideological perception, his convictions in the forms of religious songs and hymns. In a social structure where the literacy was limited these musical compositions reached the masses, won their hearts. Music always has an appealing effect and when combined with the issues affecting the daily lives of the masses these songs turned out to be a great *modus operandi* to take the message of Nanak far and wide. It must have contributed significantly for the early strength and subsequent growth of the Nanak-panth. The role of *Nanak Bani* becomes crystal clear if we consider how Guru Amardas got attracted towards the panth when he heard Bibi Amro singing *Nanak bani*.

The third factor is its appeal to the Jats of rural Punjab. It would suffice here to say that the Jat response owed much to the egalitarian emphasis of the panth. During the sixteenth century period of Guru Nanak and his successors the jats had become economically well-off yet, their social status due to the caste system did not match their economic position. Irfan Habib has suggested that the jats would be strongly attracted to a panth which rejected caste as a religious institution<sup>2</sup> and the caste system as a principle of social organization. This constituency of the Panth must have had great shift and the vitality with which it was able to sustain, which will be discussed later.

Niharranjan Ray's opinion adds a new dimension to the understanding of the early phase of the Panth. According to him what held these countless number of people together was neither the message by itself nor the mission by itself, not even by the two operating together. It was the institutionalization of both, and the organization that was built up stage by stage by the Gurus....The (personal) leadership and the charisma of the Gurus served only as incentives and gave the necessary inspiration and guidance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This point is convincingly made by Terry Thomas in *Sikhism: The Voice of the Guru*. Units 12-13 of the Open University Series "Man's Religious Quest, Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1970, p.63

<sup>2</sup> Irfan Habib, "Jats of Punjab and Sind", in Harbans Singh and N. Gerald Barrier ,eds., *Essays in Honour of Dr.Ganda Singh* , Patiala :Punjabi University ,1976 ,p.99

<sup>3</sup> Ray Niharranjan, *ibid*, p70,86,96

To sum up the discussion on Nanak's perception of women it would not be out of place to quote Doris R. Jakobsh who writes, "he did not re-evaluate social institutions such as marriage and marriage practices to make them more equitable for women. Moreover, his silence regarding sati is rather surprising, given that it was primarily confined to the upper echelons of society, to which he belonged. There was also no critique of female infanticide, again, a practice closely aligned to the upper caste. In the final analysis, when it came to the social status of women, Nanak seemed content to leave the prevailing system in place. In the patriarchal world view, women were indeed assigned a position of inferiority in no way detracted from their ability to attain salvation, salvation, regardless of station on gender was pronounced open to all who devoted themselves whole heartedly to the ultimate."<sup>1</sup> This is a good representation of the opinions of a set of serious scholars.

While evaluating Guru Nanak's perception on women, it has to be taken into view that the establishment of the panth was in its infancy and the ideological positions as well as their responses and reactions and expressions (in the form of religious injunctions) also evolved with the time. Secondly, we need to make an assessment of Guru Nanak only in relation to his social milieu, when the patriarchal values were the norm. Admittedly, he did not touch upon quite a few social evils related to women, yet, his contribution to question the validity of the caste system; opening the gateways of spiritual attainments to women, vehemently criticizing the '*Sutak*' pollution related to child-birth, menstruation cycle etc., and emphasizing the women's role for procreating must be appreciated. More significantly, Guru Nanak questioned the prevailing norms and raised his voice against well-entrenched practices. His tough stand provided a platform for the subsequent Gurus, especially Guru Amar Das, who very vehemently opposed the practices against women. Guru Nanak's egalitarian outlook with regard to religious life becomes still more relevant, when we notice that religious life and social life were intermingled and mutually influencing each other in medieval India. To conclude, we can safely infer that Guru Nanak was a visionary who, despite living squarely in a

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<sup>1</sup> Doris R. Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, Oxford 2003, p. 26.

patriarchal social framework, contributed significantly by questioning the prevailing norms and his appeal lay in his assertion that salvation was open to all, regardless of gender or between castes.

Guru Angad succeeded to the *gaddi* following the first Guru's death in 1539. He was already associated with Khadur, a village situated near the right bank of the Beas approximately 30kms, above its confluence with *Satluj*. There was evidently no reason why he should remain in Kartarpur and the focus of the Panth's devotion accordingly transferred to a location very close to the point where the Majha, Malwa and Doaba areas converge. His successor, Guru Amar Das remained within the same vicinity, a choice which presumably helps accounts for the spread of the Panths influence in all three regions.

Guru Angad seems to be faithfully following the teachings of Guru Nanak. His tenure appears to have been a period of consolidation as indicated by Ramkali Ki Var.<sup>1</sup> In Mahima Parkas Vartak and Mahima Parkas Kavita, Guru Angad stressed the need to strive for spiritual attainment which can be only through regular meditation. To find and follow the path of salvation one must depend upon the grace of the Guru. For Nanak, the Guru had been the inner voice of God. For Angad the supreme guide is the first master, Guru Nanak.<sup>2</sup> McLeod rightly points out that the reference to Nanak in these terms confirms what we might legitimately have assumed, namely that by the end of the second Guru's lifetime the identity of the Nanak-panth must have been clearly established.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the central position of the Guru in the ideology of the Panth is also emphasized which clearly culminated into the tenet of the same *Jot* (divine light indicating Gods grace, knowledge) being transferred from one Nanak to another Nanak (all the ten Gurus). This, infact, provided the strong ideological firmness to the Panth in its infant stage which implies a panth with a clear identity but an informal organization. It is under his successor that a more formalized structure begins to appear. Guru Amardas became the third Guru

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<sup>1</sup> AG,pp.966-67

<sup>2</sup> A.G.,Var Majh, 27.1., AG.,p150. Two *saloks* which together summarize the message of Guru Angad are Var Majh 18; 1-2, AG, p146

<sup>3</sup> McLeod, The Development of the Sikh Panth, pp234

in 1552 and directed the affairs of the developing Panth until his death in 1574.

The *Langar* or the community dining center initiated by Guru Nanak himself, but popularized, expanded and strengthened by successive Gurus, and, the *pangat* brought down the communal barriers of the rigid control of caste system. The system of *langar* and *pangat* encouraged even successfully helped to build up a community that was far more homogeneous, unified and integrated than the vertically graded and sharply stratified Hindu *jatis*.<sup>1</sup> The system of *langar* also allowed the women particularly Mata Khiwi to participate in the preparations of food in the common kitchen. Thus, her contribution towards the development of the panth becomes formidable as the institutions of *langar* and *pangat* were closely connected with its developmental institutions. Mata Khiwi is known for her dedication to the discipline and organization of the *langar*. She gave a practical shape to the mission of Guru Nanak and dispelled all disparities. She believed that all men have been created equal by the same God. The status of Mata Khiwi is unique. Only Guru Mahal mentioned in the Guru Granth Sahib is Mata Khiwi. In one of the references, it is projected that Mata Khiwi was sitting very graciously and regally with that person who was balancing the whole universe. In the second reference Balwand is telling people that Mata Khiwi is like that leaf laden tree under whose shade people come and rest. She is distributing *kheer* (A Sweet Dish prepared of milk, rice and sugar).

*"Balwand Khiwi Nek-Jan, Jis Bahuti Chhav Partaali,  
Langar Daulat Wandiya, Rav Am Rit Kheer Ghee Wali!"*<sup>2</sup>

The *langar-pangat* system was upheld by the system of community singing, community prayer and sharing of common objectives, adversity and suffering, success and failure.

It is to the third Guru, Guru Amar Das, that both scriptural and popular sources attribute a shift towards the inclusion of women in the Sikh panth. It is to him that tradition credits a definite criticism of society beyond that of

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<sup>1</sup> Nihar Rajan Ray, *ibid*, p. 21

<sup>2</sup> AG, Ram Kali Ki Var, p. 967

religious ineptitude; much of this criticism of society is directed towards the situation of women in society. Guru Amar Das forbade sati in these words:

*"They are not Satis who burn themselves with their dead husbands, Rather, they are Satis, Nanak, who die with mere shock of separation from their husbands."*<sup>1</sup>

He further clarified:

*"They too are to be considered as Satis, who abide in modesty and contentment. Who wait upon their Lord and rising in the morn ever remember Him". He further emphasized the same sentiment in Suhi-Ki-Var: "Women are burnt in the fire with their husbands: if they appreciate their husbands, they undergo sufficient pain by their death. And if they appreciate not their husbands, Nanak, Why should they be burnt at all?"*

Further Mahima Parkash by Swaroop Das Bhalla, written in 1776 chronicled that it was through a woman that Amar Das first became acquainted with the Sikh community. Guru Amar Das up to sixtieth year of his life had not yet become a Sikh. He was living when Guru Nanak was preaching his gospel, but he did not know him. Even when Guru Angad, the second Guru came and carried on the mission of Guru Nanak, he did not know about it. It was reserved for Bibi Amro to bring him to the Sikh fold. She was the daughter of Guru Angad and was married to the nephew of Guru Amar Das, who lived in the adjoining house. One early morning, she was churning milk and as usual reciting the *Jap Jee*. Tradition has it that Amar Das was so moved that he insisted that she immediately introduce him to the source of the composition, namely, Guru Angad. Amar Das eventually succeeded Guru Angad as the third Guru of the Sikh community.

Later accounts present Guru Amar Das as having denounced the custom of *purdah*. The later traditions note that when the queen of Haripur visited him with a veil, he spontaneously reacted that "Who is this mad lady?"

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<sup>1</sup> Adi Granth, p. 787

The tradition also notes that Guru Amar Das condemned the practice of female infanticide. Although, few scholars like for instance, Doris Jakobsh infers that "Guru Amar Das' condemnation of the practice may well have stemmed from a need to distance Sikh panth under his leadership from the Guru lineage that was at the forefront of the practice of female infanticide." This does not seem to be convincing rather an incharitable argument. If we look at the perception of Guru Amar Das on the position of women, his stance appears to be pretty holistic as he addressed social evils like *sati* and *purdah* and went to the extent of appointing women as religious missionaries. Even if the condemnation of female infanticide was intended to distance the *Sikh Panth* from the Guru lineage yet, undeniably, the end result was positive and the contribution of Guru Amar Das does obviously becomes more significant and appealing to the modern scholars.

It was Guru Amar Das who appointed missionaries to spread the message of the Sikh Panth beyond the immediate surroundings of Goindwal. The community had obviously expanded and with the increasing number of new congregations (*Sangats*) with large following, contact with the Guru became increasingly difficult. The expansion of the Panth took it to new areas which made it further difficult to get in direct and regular contact of the Guru. Thus, the *manji* system was created, a word literally meaning "Spring Bed" and referring to the seat of authority. *Manji* were leaders of local gatherings, who were directly accountable to the Guru, and thus, an extension of his influence<sup>1</sup>. While sources differ with regard to the actual number of *manjis*, there is evidence that the women were also sent out to preach the Guru's message of emancipation. Some scholars strongly believe that Twenty Two seats of religious preaching were established and out of these two seats of preaching were allotted to Matho Murari and Sachan Sach.<sup>2</sup>

In the same manner, seventy two cradles were established. These women while rocking there children in cradles used to preach the ideals of Guru in the entire neighbourhood. In sum, appointment of *manji*, indicates an increase in

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<sup>1</sup> Fauja Singh, "Guru Amar Das; Life and Thought", The Punjab, Past and Present, Vol VIII, No. 2, pp. 300-333, 1979 and Fauja Singh, Guru Amar Das; Life and Teachings, New Delhi; Sterling Publishers, 1979, pp. 116-129.

<sup>2</sup> M K Gill, Women and Sikh Religion, p. 69

institutionalization of the Sikh panth as well as ever swelling adherents of the panth. Given the esteemed place held by these religious emissaries, the very possibility being included speaks a great deal about the trust and respect Guru Amar Das awarded to women. His contribution acquires still great proportions if we recollect that just a short while ago, may be, thirty-forty years, which is a short span to expect a social change of this magnitude. Guru Nanak had professed to open the path of spiritualism for women which was taken to its logical extension by Guru Amar Das. In social milieu where women was not even considered worthy of any spiritual attainments, to award her the respect and responsibility of religious emissary by Guru Amar Das, speaks a great deal about his genuine concern about women and complete trust in her capacities. It can be safely presumed that women missionaries might have been fairly effective in recruitment of other women into the Sikh fold.

When we move to the writings of the fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das, what has generally been pointed out in Sikh historical writings is an increasingly institutionalized community of followers. This included the coming up of the pilgrimage site, Goindwal. Surjit Hans points out that there is also a noticeable increase of feminine imagery in the writings of the fourth Guru "Lyricism in Guru Ram Das has a social counter part. It points to the entry of women in appreciable numbers in the *sangat* in particular and in the community at large.....It may be reasonable to suggest that a large scale entry of women into Sikhism contributed to the lyricism of Guru Ram Das".<sup>1</sup> While earlier Gurus had indeed addressed the divine element in the female voice as a symbol of their submission, projecting God as the Lord (husband) and the devotee as wife. However, with Guru Ram Das, the symbol taken on a more concrete shape infact, the female perspective towards the body of the Guru is conspicuously emphasized; the corpo-reality of Guru Ram Das is central in these writings; "Looking again and again at the body of the Guru has filled me with intense Joy."<sup>2</sup> According to Hans (1988; 1995) the increased presence of

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<sup>1</sup> Surjit Singh Hans, *Reconstruction of Sikh History from Sikh Literature*, Jalandhar, ABS Publication, 1988, p. 142

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* and, "How can I meet my handsome Man? God accepts even wayward and squat women." According to Hans (1988; 1995),

women in the *sangat* and their greater participation in Sikh panth is very much evinced in the compositions of Guru Ram Das. As noted by Hans the influx of women must have been a great possibility and obviously their increasing share in the composition of adherents must have had corresponding, may be little, change in the ideology as well as the expression of Gurus on issues related to women. Ironically the Fourth Guru was highly critical of women in his writings. With the influx into the young Sikh tradition of women and men with the history of egalitarianism and a lack of marital loss, the Guru commented "Sinful Men, licentious and stupid, act as their women command. Lust abounds; thus do impure Men take orders from their women and act accordingly."<sup>1</sup> This kind of perceptions about the women in the then existing social milieu, might be related to the composition of the Sikh panth at this point of time. The implications of the composition of the Sikh adherents will be discussed in detail later. Here, it would suffice to say that the Jats accounted for a substantial component of the Sikh following. Needless to say, this newly acquired presence of Jat constituents would have threatened the established order of the Sikh panth; it became necessary to take action to stem the tide of an unwarranted egalitarian ethos. The panth was being increasingly molded to satisfy the needs of the growing numbers of followers.

It was during the time of fourth Guru that the *manji* system was transformed into the order of *masands*. The word "*masand*" is the corrupt form of the Persian word "*masnad*" or "high seat". The nobles were addressed as *Masnad-i-Ali* or high dignitaries during the Afghan rule. Later, the word became corrupted to the Indian *masand*. Zulfikur-Ardistani writes that the Guru's agents who deputized for him took the title of *masands* because they considered Guru as "*Sacha Padshah*".<sup>2</sup> It brought about the appointment of class of officials who were entrusted with the responsibility of preaching the faith and looking after the members of the community but more importantly, to collect the obligatory contribution of 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the income of all the members of socio religious community, which was originally a voluntary one. As with the *manjis*, the *masands*, also had the authority to initiate the entrance to the Sikh

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<sup>1</sup> AG, p 304

<sup>2</sup> Makhiz-i-Tawarikh-i-Sikhism, ed. Ganda Singh, Amritsar, 1949, p. 34



panth. The masands according to Gokul Chand Narang, were chosen for their piety, integrity and devotion to the Sikh religious order and were probably honorary officials.<sup>1</sup> *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* also noted that the masands had a dual responsibility; they were to preach the message of the Gurus and collect the voluntary tribute from the followers. Thus, the new order was tailored to suit both the missionary activity and the economic interests of the Gurus.<sup>2</sup>

It must be pointed out here that the institution of *manjis* and *piris* initiated by Guru Amar Das, towards an efficient organization of the expanding Sikh society was an important administrative step germane with significant political consequences. Its reformulation and re-modulation under the aegis of the *masand* system along with the institution of Guru becoming hereditary by Guru Ram Das had also very important political significance.

This development of *Gaddi* of Guru becoming hereditary had important socio-psychological consequences for all the prospective Gurus as well as the Sikh community at large. The accession to guru gaddi became a family centric feature as the succession moved along the male lines in the family of Guru Ram Das (Sodhis). One can clearly see that the panth was moving away from the interiority of the faith. When the emotive principal of faith was continually declining, the role, participation and involvement of women was also being more compartmentalized and marginalized.

By the time Guru Arjan took over the *Guru Gaddi*, complete paraphernalia was attached to the house of the Gurus. Contemporary works certainly point to an augmented secularization and politicization of the Sikh panth in the late sixteenth century. Guru Arjan was installed as the Guru in the full regalia of power and authority and impressive pomp and splendour. He was declared by the Sikh community as "*Saacha Padshah*", that is as their true or real ruler, spiritual and temporal. Nihar Ranjan Ray<sup>3</sup> puts it very aptly the usage of "*Saacha Padshah*" as evidently in contradistinction to the false "*Padshah*" who sitting on the throne at Delhi and Agra! As "*Saacha Padshah*", the "True King" who "led human souls to salvation as opposed to worldly kings who control

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<sup>1</sup> Gokul Chand Narang, *Transformation of Sikhism*, Lahore, 1946, pp. 70-71

<sup>2</sup> *Makhiz-i-Tawarikh-i-Sikhism*, p. 34

<sup>3</sup> Nihar Ranjan Ray, *ibid*, p. 67

mundane deeds.” The *Dabistan* points to a leader who was increasingly viewed as not only a religious but also a political leader under whose tenure the impressive buildings were built at Amritsar, “The Guru wore rich clothes, kept fine horses procured from Central Asia and some elephants and maintained retainers as bodyguards in attendance.”<sup>1</sup>

Given Guru Arjan’s elevated visibility as a regal leader, the Sikhs came to be perceived as the separate state within the Mughal dominion.

By the end of the tenure of Guru Arjan, apart from the positive institutional developments for the construction of the distinct Sikh identity like the panth, it possessed the line of Gurus, a growing number of holy places, distinctive rituals and its own sacred scripture *Adi Granth*. During this phase Guru Arjan was entangled into some sort of a struggle for succession. This compulsive entanglement into political affairs was a result of the whole lot of factors. The first factor was the occasional challenge to the “*gaddi*” offered by the rival contestants. One of the most distinguished of these was the Guru Arjan’s elder brother, Prithi Chand. Another was Dhir Mal, grand son of the sixth guru. McLeod aptly points out that although it is difficult to evaluate their influence on the panth, it seems reasonable to presume that successful resisting of these challenges involved a heightened loyalty on the part of those who adhered to the orthodox line.<sup>2</sup> During this phase women were not entrusted with any additional responsibilities. Quite probably, at this point of time she would have continued with her routine participation in the *langar* and *sangat*.

The same effect would also have been produced by the Sikh Gurus and Mughals relations. As noted, Guru Arjan’s title of *Sacha Padshah* along with his lifestyle must have aroused a sense of threat among the Mughal rulers. Official concern on the part of the Mughal administration first became evident during the period of Guru Arjan and eventually led in 1606 to his death while in custody. Relations between the Panth and the Lahore administration deteriorated further during the time of Guru Hargobind, (1606-44), so much so that fighting actually took place on three occasions. Guru Arjan’s death came

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<sup>1</sup> Ardistani, *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*, *Makhiz-i-Tawarikh-i-Sikhan*, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> McLeod, “Development of the Sikh Panth”, P235-236

to be regarded as a martyrdom and tradition proceeds from this interpretation to the belief that it led directly to a deliberate arming of the Panth by his son Hargobind. Bhai Gurdas makes a significant comment on the situation in the days of Guru Hargobind. Bhai Gurudas writes that the critics of Guru Hargobind assert: "The former Gurus used to stay at their *dharmasals* but he does not stay at any one place. Kings used to visit them, but he was imprisoned in a fort by the king. The Sikh can not think of one resort now that he runs from place to place undaunted. The former Gurus used to gratify the Sikhs with discourses from their *manjis*, but he keeps dogs to hunt. They used to compose *bani*, to recite and hear it recited, but he neither composes nor recites nor hears it recited. He does not keep the Sikh sewaks with him and he has befriended the enemies and the oppressors."<sup>1</sup> However, here Swaroop Das Bhalla differs. He elaborately describes the routine schedule followed by Guru Hargobind which appears to emphasize that Guru Hargobind had complete faith in "*Nit Nam*" (Daily Recitation of Prayers) and regularly enjoyed the "*Akhand Kirtan*". He further states that after due completion of "*Nit Nam*", then Guru Hargobind spent his time and energies in militaristic activities.<sup>2</sup> Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa reports that the major reasons for unrest among few Sikhs was that they believed that Guru Ji had relations with Kaula, daughter of Qazi. However it further states that since it was not the case, Guru Ji took care of her only because of her great devotion to the faith and as a mark of respect to Miyan Mir's request to take care of Kaula.<sup>3</sup> Another episode further attests the shifting thrust of the Panth on militarism. At the time "*pag di rasam*" (a ritual where son of the deceased person is tied a *pag*, turban, indicating that he is now responsible for all the status and dignity and responsibilities of family), Guru Hargobind got the "*Saheli*" and "*Mala*" deposited in the store house and commended that in lieu of garlands, *Kalangis* would be used. He further elaborated that in successive times, people will give the examples of Guru Sikhs' bravery when innumerable number of Guru Sikhs will attain martyrdom for their faith. This kind of social appeal at the time of such an

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<sup>1</sup> Vaaran Bhai Gurdas, ed. Bhai Jodh Singh, Var 26, Pauri 24, pp. 437-38

<sup>2</sup> Swaroop Das Bhalla, Mahima Parkash, ed Gopal Singh Lamba, Khazan Singh, Languages Department, Patiala, 1971, p. 159

<sup>3</sup> Bhai Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa, ed. K S Raju, p. 478

important life cycle rite still becomes more value loaded.<sup>1</sup> This emphasis on the militaristic ethos of the Panth, quite obviously made the women adherents of the Panth almost invisible. Moreover the kind of "routinization of the faith" in the form of Sikh pilgrimages, *sangat*, *pangat*, recitation of *bani* and so on, a *modus operandi* of the practice of the faith suddenly suffered a jolt. Yet, one does not claim that the number of the women adherence of the faith had declined, but certainly they had become invisible. Out of the few references we get of women followers the two are from the times of seventh Guru, Guru Har Rai: the Guru visiting an old devotee of the faith at Lakhmi Pur or an old mother appealing for the charismatic miraculous power of the Guru to cure her only son who was fatally sick.<sup>2</sup> At the time of Guru Hargobind the *masands* besides collecting this revenue meant for the organization and maintenance of the Sikh places of worship and pilgrimage, were also directed to collect arms and horses for the standing army.<sup>3</sup> According to all accounts, women were excluded from this new system. With the process of institutionalization, gender differences within the Sikh panth became increasingly pronounced. The viability of a religion based on interior devotion for women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also suffered a setback with increased institutionalization, traditionally established roles for men and women became more socially and materially feasible and were thus consolidated. As the *masands* were not only missionaries but also administrators who travelled far and wide to collect the Guru's dues, the window of possibilities for women which got opened briefly during the early years of Panth was thus effectively closed again.<sup>4</sup>

Though women would still have been a part of the wider Sikh community, they were not the part of the military retinue which formed an important constituent of the young Guru Hargobind's vision and understanding of his mission. More precisely, the role of motherhood and other roles associated with women in the seventeenth century, she would not have been expected to accompany

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<sup>1</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, ed Gyani Pratap Singh Ji, Published by Bhai Buta Singh Pratap, Amritsar; Putakan Walan Bazaar, Mai Sewa, p. 278

<sup>2</sup> Guru Kian Saakhian, ed Pyara Singh Padam, Saakhi Number 4, page 42 and Saakhi Number 11, p53

<sup>3</sup> Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin ibid p 279

<sup>4</sup> Gokul Chand Narang, Transformation of Sikhism, Lahore, 1946, p. 70-71

Guru in the skirmishes with the Mughals on a routine basis. Although, one is aware of the episode of Mai Bhago which has been so very oft- repeated as an example of women's position in Sikhism but certainly it can not be equated to be a norm. However, some scholars like Simran Kaur point out that few people are aware that when Anand pur Sahib was surrounded by enemy's army, then it was only the women, who got the water from the river Satluj at the time of scarcity. It was only the women who supplied food and water to the Sikh soldiers who were fighting in inhospitable lands.<sup>1</sup> *Gurbilas Padshahi Dasvin* narrates the sacrifice of Bhai Bhagat Singh and his wife who lost their daughter while contributing to this task. At the time of discussing Bhai Taru Singh's contribution, one can not be oblivious of his mother's and sister's support. The main complaint put before Zakariya Khan, Mughal Commander was

*"Hain Taru Singh Di Ek Bhain Aur Mai,  
Pees Kut We Kare Kamai."*<sup>2</sup>

However, this could not have been a routine affair. Moreover, if one studies Mai Bhago's episode closely and the kind of sarcastic idiom used by Mai Bhago to appeal to the sense of male dignity, self-respect of a community is more in the nature of an appeal to their male- ego when she says, "*tusi ghar baith ke chhuri paayon te bachey khidaon*". It is also a clear reflection of the position and her role in the seventeenth century. In other words, the Sikh male thus also took on a new identity sanctioned by Guru Hargobind as a protector of the faith, armed and ready for a battle. During the skirmishes with the Mughal forces, Guru Hargobind applauded the militaristic caliber of Guru Teg Bahadur when he said "*Tu Tyag Mal Ta Nahin, Teg Bahadur Hain*". This role, however, was denied to women, who by a process of elimination would have been relegated to a secondary position, possibly even viewed as impediments to the true calling of the Sikh community.

What happened to this sense of Panthic identity and its implications for women of the Panth during the quarter century covered by the period of the

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<sup>1</sup> Simran Kaur, *Prasidh Sikh Bibiyan*, Amritsar; Singh Brothers, 1991, p. 8

<sup>2</sup> Ratan Singh Bhangu, *Prachin Panth Parkash*, ed Bhai Vir Singh, 1962, p. 269

seventh and eighth Gurus, Guru Har Rai and Guru Har Kishan respectively is impossible to determine. The seventh Guru remained in the Shivalik Hills where his grandfather, the sixth Guru, had retired following the outbreak of hostilities with the Lahore administration; and although he occupied the gaddi for seventeen years, nothing of any striking importance marks the period. McLeod rightly points out that we can do little more than fall back on assumptions, one of which might well be the supposition that a period of prolonged absence from the plains must have produced a measure of weakening in Panthic cohesion. Although, this would be an unsubstantiated deduction but one thing is pretty clear that nothing eventful can be noted. In this tenure apart from that episode when whole group of women dress up like the Rani Pushpa Devi, queen of Raja Jai Singh, the child Guru manages to identify the Rani and goes and sits in her lap. This episode in the traditional sources is presented as an indication of the piety of the Guru.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this entire quarter century is not marked by any significant utterances of the Guru on women or any other social practice per se. The Panth appears to be heading on an auto-piloted mode. Here, one must remember the state of affairs just before seventh and eighth Gurus; at the time of Guru Hargobind as already discussed in detail, it was male dominated, militaristic ethos of the Panth where women did not have much to contribute in the growth and development of the Panth. Or, the other way round, for Guru Hargobind too, the improvement of position of women or any other social reality per se was not in the purview of his concerns and activities of the panth during his time. With regard to women we do not get any evidence of charismatic leadership on the part of these two Gurus. Thus, there is no deductible inference on the position of women, or even the perception of the Gurus. The basic reality of the women being marginalized must have continued as before.

During the tenure of the ninth Guru too, we do not find any specific development or any injunctions related to women. However, in a *Hukam Namah* by Guru Teg Bahadur to the *sangat* of Patna, there is a reference to Bebe Per Bai which is in connection to the request/ instruction to the *sangat* of Patna to take care of his family at the time of his absence. This *Hukam*

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<sup>1</sup> Guru Kian Saakhian, ed Pyara Singh Padam, Saakhi Number 17, p. 62

*Namah* is addressed to 38, presumably heads of the *sangat*, out of which one is woman. It is indicative that women although accounted for major adherents of the faith, but were very marginalized and rarely held a position of eminence. Moreover, one wonders whether the name of woman appeared because the context of the *Hukam Namah* was to take care of women folk of the Guru's family and not any military expedition. Quite presumably, a woman would have been able to understand their needs better.<sup>1</sup> *Hukam Namah* Number 23 refers to another woman *Jadoy Bai Bebe* in the *sangat* of Patna only.<sup>2</sup> As noted while the Guru remained in the hills, relations between the Panth and the Mughal administration were largely uneventful. It was only when the ninth Guru moved to the Plains again that serious tension returned. This, infact, later culminated into the execution of Guru Teg Bahadur. As discussed, the impact of Guru Arjan's martyrdom culminated into the armament undertaken by his son and successor Guru Hargobind, the same, or rather much stronger impact was caused by the execution of Guru Teg Bahadur on his successor and son, Guru Gobind Singh. His main aim was to consolidate the Sikh power and steel the entire community to enable them to offer the kind of resistance that was called for. During the tenure of Guru Teg Bahadur, on the advice of his mother, he travelled far and wide. It must also be highlighted for this period that his mother, Mata Nanaki came to exercise a formidable influence in the development of the Sikh community. There are, infact, two *Hukam Namahs* edited by Ganda Singh. There is a difference of opinion among the scholars whether these *Hukam Namahs* were issued by Guru Teg Bahadur's mother- Mata Nanaki or his wife Mata Gujri. However, an authority in the field and editor of the work, Ganda Singh claims that probably these *Hukam Namahs* were authored by Mata Gujri as he believes that at the time of Guru Teg Bahadur's visit to eastern (purva) India, Mata Nanaki had achieved the age of seventy five years and it was Mata Gujri along with few important Sikhs, who looked after different arrangements and organizational aspects in the times of Guru's absence.<sup>3</sup> Yet, editor of the work did not find himself equipped enough to conclude that these two *Hukam Namahs* were for

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<sup>1</sup> Ganda Singh, ed *Hukam Namah*, Number 13, p. 86

<sup>2</sup> op cit, *Hukam Namah* Number 23, pp. 106-107

<sup>3</sup> *Hukam Namah*, ed Ganda Singh, p. 12

sure authored by Mata Gujri as he admits that there is no other documentary evidence to corroborate the conclusion, thus, he puts a question mark before both the Hukam Namahs.<sup>1</sup>

The development of militancy among the Sikhs peaked with the ascendancy of the tenth and last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. By the time of Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh community had been all but transformed from a purely religious group to a highly organized body of men and women within a given area, militant in spirit and oriented towards meeting any challenge to their faith and their society, a challenge that came not only from the Mughal emperors and their governors but also from the Hindu rajas of the Panjab Himalayas, perhaps more from the latter.

Before discussing the heightened militaristic concerns of Guru Gobind Singh it would not be out of context to underline that Guru Gobind Singh's compositions included the composition on *Durga* and *Chandi*. There has been a set of scholars who read these compositions as Guru Gobind Singh's inclination towards *Puranic* Brahmanical culture and read this as his perceptions on women. While it can legitimately be argued that Guru Gobind Singh had no faith in the worship of *Durga* or *Chandi* or in any other divinity of the Brahmanical pantheon and that he was using them and the myths and legends connected with them, as mere images and symbols just as Guru Nanak did those of *Tantrik yogic* practices for aims and purposes of his own. Guru Gobind Singh's compositions of more than a couple of pieces on *Chandi* and *Durga* can further be explained by the fact that the need of the community in his time was indeed *sakti* or power and energy, which was very well represented by these *devis* (goddesses). He was literally trying to arouse that hidden *sakti* among the adherents of the faith.

The impact of the militaristic ethos on the position, status and role of women in the Panth has been discussed in detail yet something exclusive-establishment of the Khalsa- took place during the tenure of Guru Gobind Singh which had immense implications for the women adherents of the Panth. It was during the *baisakhi* festival of 1699 (or at least on some specific date

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<sup>1</sup> op cit, Hukam Namah Numbers 30 and 31, pp. 122-123



late in seventeenth century) Guru Gobind Singh established the institution of Khalsa. There are aspects of the Khalsa's establishment which remain obscure. The actual word is itself an example of this obscurity for its etymology and original purpose still remain open to some doubt. Although, tradition implies that it was first introduced in 1699 at the actual ceremony of the inauguration, it is evident that the term had already been used well before this date as a designation of the Panth.<sup>1</sup> This change was also made in order to consolidate the Guru's own position in the increasingly rival claimants of those of the Guru lineage who had, by virtue of their ancestry, established themselves as Sikh Gurus in their own right. Here, the usage of the term "Khalsa" derived its relevance from the word "*Khalis*" meaning pure. Rather than going into the graphic description of the initiation ceremony, it would suffice here to say that *charan di pahul*, whereby the initiate would drink water touched by either the Guru's foot or the foot of a respected person who was the designated representative of the guru. *Charan di pahul* was replaced by *khande di pahul*. Now, the sweetened *amrit* was stirred with a two-edged sword (*khand*). The usage of a weapon again indicates the emphasis of the militaristic requirement of the Panth. All those who were initiated into the Khalsa were to take on the appellation "Singh", to wear the five articles known as the *panj kakke*, or five K,s: *kesh* (long hair), *kangha* (comb), *kirpan* (sword), *kachh* (a type of underwear); *kara*, a steel bracelet. However in the initiation rite of "Khalsa", the feminine aspect which has been overtly emphasized as the position of importance accorded to women is when Mata Jito Jee added some *patashas* (sweeteners) to the *amrit*. Koer Singh in *Gurbilas Padshahi Dasvin* comments that the *bani* was being recited along with the preparation of *pahul* and Mata Jee added some *patashas*.<sup>2</sup> However Kesar Singh Chhibar in *Banswalinamah* does not have any role to accord to Mata Jeeto Jee; he writes after adding the *patashas* the mixture was stirred with a two edged iron sword and then it was named "*amrit*" (nectar).<sup>3</sup> Koer Singh elsewhere applauds that Mata Jee by the act of adding *patashas* to the

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Grewal and S.S. Bal, *Guru Gobind Singh*, Chandigarh: Punjab University, 1967, p. 115. The term "Khalsa" was used by the Mughals for revenue collection on lands that were directly supervised by the government, op. cit. p.113-115.

<sup>2</sup> Koer Singh, *Gurbilas Padshahi Dasvin*, Patiala, 1968, p296

<sup>3</sup> Kesar Singh Chhibar, *Banswalinamah Dasan Padshahian Ka*, Chandigarh, 1972, p 128

already prepared *amrit*, actually enhanced the power of *amrit* immensely.<sup>1</sup> In Mahima Parkash, Swaroop Das Bhalla states that Mata Ji commented that to bear the power of the *amrit* is not an easy task” in the capabilities of every one. Thus, she ordered to get some sweeteners (*misri* or *patashas*) and added to the *amrit*, diluting it and making it appropriate for the use of Sikhs becoming “*Singhs*”.<sup>2</sup> What is of great importance in terms of Khalsa identity construction and gender analysis is that it is solely the male devotee, reborn in order of the Khalsa as the new warrior-saint that became the focus of all ritual and symbolic construction. Exterior symbols, weaponry, steel and uncut hair became the signifiers constituting what it meant to be a “real” Sikh. The significance of the *khanda*, a military implement associated with masculine characteristics, contrasted to the *Karad*, a domestic “feminine” implement, is indicative of the process of masculinisation that was central to the new order of the Khalsa.<sup>3</sup> The interiority of the early gurus which projected God as the Lord, Husband and devotee as a wife/ bride; a metaphor which invited all to a profound relationship with the divine, simply did not fit into the masculine, soldier saint perception of Guru Gobind Singh. Whereas the initial initiation rite *charan ki pahul* had invited all to full participation in the earlier Sikh Panth, with the creation of the Khalsa, the newly mandated rite of *khanda ki pahul* as normative, women were symbolically and ritually excluded from the “brotherhood” and were relegated to marginal standing. Women, excluded from the Khalsa brotherhood, were inadvertently depreciated as full-fledged followers of the Sikh tradition. An ethos developed which consistently widened the gulf between the “true” Khalsa Sikh and those who were either not invited to join, namely women or those who did not pay heed to Guru’s call. Needless to say, the gulf between males, as possible adherents of the Khalsa military order, and females, as inadvertent adherents of the older Sikh Panth, widened significantly.

Yet, we can not be oblivious of the fact that during the time of “Khalsa” initiation, Guru Gobind Singh clearly prohibits any kind of social interaction

<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p 129-131. See Surjit Hans, “A Construction of Sikh History from Sikh Literature”, Jalandhar, 1988

<sup>2</sup> Swaroop Das Bhalla, Mahima Parkash, ed Gobind Singh Lamba, Khazan Singh, Languages Department, Patiala, 1971. Saakhi 17, p826

<sup>3</sup> Doris Jakobsh, Relocating Gender in Sikh History, p.42-43

with “*Kurrimaar*” (Killer of a daughter). The fact that this heinous social crime was vehemently criticized by Guru Amardas, the third Guru and yet the tenth Guru spoke against it clearly indicates that this social evil had largely gone unchecked. According to Senapat, in Sri GurShobha, the *Khalsa rahit* prohibited use of tobacco and company of five ill influences which included the *Kurrimaar* as well as the *masand*.<sup>1</sup> Koer Singh in his Gurbilas Padshahi Dasvin along with any contacts with *Kurimaar*, *masands*, Prithi Chand's family, also “prohibits the selling of daughters”. Koer Singh also lists the prohibition of gambling, visit to prostitutes as *Khalsa rahit*.

Our discussion on gender during the time of Guru Gobind Singh would not be complete without a reference to *Charitra Pakhyan*; also known as *Pakhyan Charitra* or *Triya Charitra*. *Charitra Pakhyan* have been incorporated into the *Dasam Granth* and forms the bulk of the volume. Basically, it is a collection of 404 tales of the wiles of women. The intent behind these tales in the words of Dharam Pal Ashta<sup>2</sup> was that ‘the chief merit of these tales is moral suggestiveness. While indirectly they instruct men in good moral behaviour, they warn the unwary against womanly enticements.’ Although, the collection also includes stories in which women play no part at all, as well as tales of heroic and honorable women but they account for a much –much lesser number. Even when woman is portrayed as a victim, the structure of the tale is such that she appears too powerful over man. Most of the themes are of love, sexual debauchery, women are often the seducers. The thrust of the message communicated by the bulk of the stories in the volume fits so much so well into the framework “*stri svabhav*”. We have the stories which relate to all the traits associated with “*stri svabhav*” – to name a few woman is deceitful, projected as lustful, dishonest, wicked, disloyal, want the fulfillment of her uncontrolled sexual desire by hook or crook and the list goes on. Woman is cast as the eternal temptress – the object and very form of sexual desire who can ensnare the wisest and the most ascetic of men. To make my point still clearer, one must recount a popular story in which a beautiful widow attempted to seduce Guru Gobind Singh Ji by disguising herself as a young

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<sup>1</sup> Senapat, Sri Gur Shobha, Patiala, 1967, p241

<sup>2</sup> Dharam Pal Ashta, Poetry of the Dasam Granth, New Delhi: Arun Prakashan, 1959, p.156

sadhu who would reveal the goddess Devi to him at a specific spot at midnight. The Guru, caught in an embarrassing situation, was shocked at her intrigue and managed to flee from the area. This was the famous occasion that prompted Guru Gobind Singh to collect and write down these tales on the guile of women.

The actual authorship of *Charitro-Pakhyan* has always been an issue of heated debate among the scholars. Many historians and theologians have downplayed the importance of the work. However, keeping in mind the strong “masculine” ethos as the main thrust of “Khalsa” order initiated by Guru Gobind Singh, it does not seem very improbable that he might have viewed women as a distraction. He might have thought that the women had the power to turn the warrior-saint away from his true calling. Women, the possessor of innumerable wiles, as constructed in the *Pakhyan-Charitra* was a complete antithesis of the kind of male “brotherhood” ready to face any challenge militarily as envisioned by Guru Gobind Singh.

Even if we are convinced by the proposition that he did not author this section of the *Dasam-Granth*, yet, one can not deny the fact that the *Dasam-Granth* is still held as an important Sikh scripture almost at par with the *Adi Granth*. Moreover, for our purpose of study, *Charitro-Pakhyan* is a classic reflection of the general social perceptions about women. Its nuanced study is essential in configuring the construction of gender during the time of the tenth Guru, even if we choose not to read it as his perception. Moreover, by the virtue of it being part of the *Dasam Granth* and being associated with the name of Guru Gobind, it must have provided it with a value and further legitimized and sanctified the general derogatory social perception about women. It must have exercised an immense influence on his seventeenth century followers. It is an attestation of the pervasive influence of a religious leader that testifies to the fact that in history at what is believed to have been the injunctions, utterances or the image created by the Guru can commonly be much more important than whether it was actually composed by them. Thus, regardless of whether its authorship can be attributed to Guru Gobind Singh or not, the work is of considerable importance in understanding gender construction in the immediate post- Guru period.

## **Social Composition of the Panth and its Changing Focus of Concern**

As already noted, the social composition of the Panth, obviously, had an impact on the perceptions, concerns and actions of the Gurus. The circle was completed – of action and reaction- that the kind of issues the Panth addressed at different points of time or it managed to win over such people into its fold whose interests coincided with the egalitarian outlook of the Sikh Gurus. In other words, the distinctive response elicited by the early Gurus and the specific constituency thereby conferred on the Panth. All the Gurus were Khatri and the list of leading members of the early Panth provided by Bhai Gurdas in his eleventh Var indicates that during the period of early development, Khatri prominence extended beyond the Guru's line. Other names given by Bhai Gurdas cover a sufficient range of castes to suggest that there must have been something resembling a cross-section of Punjabi society in the Panth during the period covered by its first five or six Gurus. The lowest ranks in the order of Punjabi caste society are perhaps under-represented, but they are not absent. There is enough evidence to show that large recruitments were made not only from amongst such artisan communities as weavers, carpenters and masons but also from amongst those who professed and pursued such callings as those of barbers, washer men, leather- workers, sweepers and scavengers, who were all considered low in the Brahmanical *jati* system. Not a few of the recruits were also from those who happened to be Muslims. Moreover, a comparatively light representation in a list of prominent members does not necessarily imply a corresponding proportion of the actual adherents.

At some point, however, the composition of the community radically changed, as a new caste grouping, the Jats emerged into prominence. From the time of Guru Ramdas and the foundation of Amritsar on a piece of land gifted by Akbar in the midst of fertile lands that had high concentration of the sturdy Jat peasants, a conscious and concerted drive was made to draw Jats into the fold of the faith. Guru Arjan added strength to this drive, this time centering around Taran-Taaran. The first clear indication of Jat strength within the

Panth actually goes back to the later years of Bhai Gurdas' own lifetime. As already stated, the author of the *Dabistan-i-Majahib*, written during the period of Guru Hargobind, indicates that by the early seventeenth century, the Jats comprised a significant section of the Panth.<sup>1</sup>

Although some uncertainty still obscures the social foundation of the Panth, there are good grounds for supposing that a significant measure of the initial response came from the Jats of Central Punjab. The Panth certainly recruited in rural Punjab from its earliest days and it is therefore reasonable to suppose that the Jat response to Guru's teachings should be traced to its first beginnings. It is also reasonable to suppose that the Jat response owed much to the egalitarian emphasis made by Nanak and his successors. Irfan Habib contemplating the inclusion of the Jats into the Sikh fold attributes this en-masse migration to a disparity between the Jats' economic status and their caste status in the sixteenth century. If this theory is correct, it means that there would have been a widening gap separating the ascending economic status and their comparatively humble ritual status. He further suggested that the Jats would be strongly attracted to a Panth which rejected caste as a religious institution.<sup>2</sup>

Another development clearly point to the close connection between the social composition of the Panth and its changing concerns. As noted, during the time of Guru Ramdas, and Guru Arjan the popularity of the Panth had been continuously increasing among the Jats. By the time of Guru Hargobind the transformation of caste constituency from Khatri to the Jat dominance had almost completed. The Jats were known for their resistance to authority and would not have been averse to armed resistance. Intrusion from the government would have exacerbated a militant reaction from the Jats. After the execution of Guru Arjan by the Mughals, Guru Hargobind wore arms and the military concerns of the Panth became apparent. Guru Hargobind used to carry two swords, *miri* and *piri*, one hanging from the right and another hanging from left, one representing the spiritual and another the temporal

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<sup>1</sup> Ganda Singh, eng. transl. of relevant portions of the *Dabistan-i-Majahib* in *The Panjab Past and Present* 1-1(1967), p. 57

<sup>2</sup> Habib Irfan, "Jats of Punjab and Sindh" in Harbans Singh and Gerald Barrier, eds., *Essays in honour of Dr. Ganda Singh*, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1976, p. 99

authority. He also fortified Amritsar and built the Akal- Takht opposite the *Har Mandir*, dispensing justice and temporal order from the former and spiritual guidance from the latter. It is here that the caste composition of the adherents of the Panth would have been pivotal to the change. Guru Hargobind's military stance is likely to have originated with the armed Jat constituency, as opposed to the religious ideology of the young guru.<sup>1</sup> In sum, the call to arms by Guru Hargobind under the banner of self defense in the seventeenth century took precedence over the transformation of minor (read major) social ills. It is tempting to postulate that the institution of Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh towards the end of the seventeenth century was as much as the result as the cause of the preponderance of the Jats among his followers.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the early Gurus lived within or near the Majha area of Punjab, a region that was and is still known for a strong Jat presence. Given the egalitarian nature of the Jats, it is possible that it was women in particular who were attracted to the message of emancipation of the Sikh Gurus, as it was women who had a lot to gain from this new ideological current. A whole lot of factors point to the full participation of women in the developing Sikh community. First and foremost, the Sikh Gurus particularly the first guru, Guru Nanak's clear and insistent injunction that the doors to salvation was accessible to both women and men. It was for the first time in the tradition and religious history of the area that women were acknowledged as intellectually worthy of the path of spiritualism. It also sent strong messages that in the eyes of God both men and women are equal. Secondly, there are strains within the sources pointing to women as having been active participants in the developing community; three, Guru Amar Das' criticism of society with regard to the position of women and a whole lot of social evils inflicted on her-like sati, female infanticide and purdah. It must have managed to win over the hearts of millions of women. Four, the plausibility of the missionary activities by women also during the time of Guru Amar Das, resulting most certainly in

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<sup>1</sup> McLeod, *The Sikhs, History, Religion, and Society*, New York.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Grewal, "A Perspective on Early Sikh History" in *Sikh Studies, Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer and N.Gerald Barrier, 1979, p.37

an active outreach towards women; and five, scriptural indications of an influx of women into the Sikh Panth during the time of the fourth Guru.<sup>1</sup>

Although we do not get very clear indication of women's active participation in the traditional Sikh history, the notion of women as active agents in the Sikh Panth may well appear foreign and certainly not an applauding development. Nonetheless, women would have had the most to gain from rejecting the restrictions placed upon them by an orthodox Brahmanical system and embracing the egalitarian message of the early Sikh Gurus. The third Guru's criticism of the societal norms pertaining to women would conceivably have encouraged their movement into the Sikh fold. Their appointment as religious missionaries is a development which further corroborates it. However, this level of involvement and participation of women witnessed for a downward trend from the times of the fourth Guru, Guru Ramdas.

One is intrigued by the fact that Guru Amar Das, the third Guru very categorically criticized the practice of female infanticide and then there is an astonishing silence by all the Gurus till the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh who issued strong injunctions against it. Infact, we do not even get an incidental injunction on the issue; the silence becomes more disturbing when the inhumane aspect of the practice has already been directed at by Guru Amar Das.

One may conclude that with the transmogrification of the very character of the Panth came a shift in the priorities of the Gurus. The patriarchal value system was firmly established during the development of the Sikh community. Men furbished with the cultural and social capital traditionally associated with their gender, were already placed in a powerful hierarchical position. The Gurus were all males only and though, Bibi Bhani according to Sikh tradition won over the blessings of her father Guru Amar Das, she was not considered worthy of *Guru-Gaddi*. Almost all the sources refer to the unparalleled service and obedience of Bibi Bhani and narrates the episode of her bleeding palm, when she had placed under a broken bath stool, so as not to cause any inconvenience to her father, none mentions the possibility of her being

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History*, p. 34



seriously for the *Guru-Gaddi*. However, Gyan Singh Ji Gyani's *Tawarikh-i-Guru-Khalsa* (ed. K S Raju) puts it little differently. According to his version, Guru Amar Das didn't happily concede to the wishes of Bibi Bhani, but Bibi Bhani, typical of "*Triya charitra*", womanly enticements and obstinate nature insisted on the grant of such a wish. Here, infact the author writes that Guru Amar Das pointed out that the succession to "gurugaddi" is not by the logic of hereditary possession and warned her that it would just bring about the continuous rivalry, mutual jealousies, quarrels and friction with in the family.<sup>1</sup> He bestowed the *gaddi* of Guruship in the family of *Sodhis* only but yet, the succession was only in male lines only. Bibi Bhani, although is considered worthy of such blessings, yet, not being a guru herself because she was a woman. This trait of succession in male lines is prominent among all the religions in medieval India. It becomes still more clear if we recollect that Bibi Sharifa, daughter of Shaikh Farid-ud-din Ganj-i-Shakkar has been described as a pious woman. She became a widow in her early youth and did not marry again. She devoted herself to religion in such a way that her father, Shaikh Farid-ud-din Ganj-i-Shakar remarked: "Had it been permitted to give *Khilafatnamah* (grant of diploma by a *sufi* saint, allowing his disciple to enroll *murids* in the *silsillah* or order) of the Shaikh and his *sajjada* (prayer carpet) to a woman; I would have given them to Bibi Sharifa." Further, he said: "if other women would have been like her, women would have taken precedence over men."<sup>2</sup> This anecdote can be used as a further attestation that spiritual authority is not transferred to women not only in Sikhism but in Sufism, particularly *Chishti silsillah* which is still known to be a more liberal form of Islam. Moreover, the position of women where women also held some seats of authority were replaced by *masands* resulting in that all the positions of prominence and responsibility were held by the men. Further, traditional male roles became increasingly valued and female roles devalued with the institutionalization and politicization of the Sikh Panth.

In the end, one would also like to ponder over the reasons that the positive directives of the Gurus towards women were never developed and applied in

<sup>1</sup> Bhai Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, *Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa*, ed K S Raju, p 364

<sup>2</sup> K.A. Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Farid-ud-din Ganj-i-Shakar*, reprint, Delhi, 1987, p. 65

social ethos. The precepts of the Gurus, concerning the amelioration of the situation of women, remained just that: precepts. The reason for this shortcoming might be attributed to historical and cultural circumstances. The Sikhs and Mughals, although for a brief time embroiled fighting wars, which were a combination of guile, regional ambitions and later on survival. How so ever, Guru Arjun onwards specifically Guru Hargobind, Guru Teg Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh, the relations with the Mughals were always occupying an important part of their concerns and activities. Or maybe it could be just that in the initial phase of the Sikh Panth many contesting claimants were existing for the *gaddi* of the guru. Thus, may be just to win over the adherents, something appealing, to the masses i.e. the social evils were addressed. It becomes a plausible explanation if we relate that it was only the first three Gurus, particularly the third Guru, who had much to speak in favor of women; it coincided with the same phase when women emerged as a prominent component of the adherents and thus, women's issues figure prominently. This process must have worked both ways. We observe that very often it was just the injunctions which did not produce the intended changes. But, is it reasonable to even expect the religious leaders to address the issue of social evils so majorly or, could it have been that some Gurus themselves accepted the status-quo and endorsed the patriarchal system? Another justification, for not getting the desired results, the professed reforms could be attributed to the deep-rooted traditional and cultural attitudes towards women, which proved to be too powerful for the Sikh Gurus to eradicate. In sum, unfortunately, there existed a tremendous gap between Sikh precepts and practices which has been continuously increasing with the passage of time.

The preceding chapters have been conceptualized upon the notion that gender is an on-going fluid construct which is always evolving and transforming. The perceptions of a society – the social ethos and norms find their way in varied metaphors and expressions. The notions of gender and its allied questions like position of women, her role and valuation of her role continuously evolve, they emerge and develop with the shifting needs of the region/community within which they unfold. Undeniably, this process is influenced by the political, economic, social or cultural factors surrounding them; very often the ideological fermentation of few individuals or the society at large accompany these changes in the social understanding. Now, it is a well accepted conceptual assumption that gender relations cannot be studied in isolation. The issue of gender relations has to be looked at in the context of structures and processes in which such relations are embedded. There is a complex interplay between religion and social change. Religious traditions have been important players in the transformation of societies and have always been of utmost importance in determining the status of women, since such factors exert powerful influence on the thought, culture and behaviour of the people. The religious ideology very often plays a crucial role in legitimizing and sustaining the subordination of women. Or, in contrast, it can advocate a more egalitarian society as is the case with Sikhism. For Guru Nanak, men and women were equal not only before God, but also before one another. Women are considered as an integral part of society who must not be excluded by a ritual or doctrinal consideration.

The entire study reinstates a basic historical reality that in Punjab there did not exist significant cultural differences, values and notions of celebration and perceptions of life on the basis of religion. There existed a fusion of tradition, a commingled culture. In context of Punjab, multiculturalism is not just a statement of fact, it is also a value. The society of Punjab at that point of time, is marked by the fusion of traditions where Hindus, Muslims and adherents of the nascent Sikh faith shared the aspirations of their lives, the social values

and ethos and their social expressions in the form of rituals and rites performed by the society. The patriarchal psyche of both the religious communities – Hindus and Muslims alike recommended the child marriage on the same ideological grounds and both were equally stringent in following it. For any study focusing on social history, coming to the conclusive, judgmental generalizations would be oblivious of the co-existence of multiplicity of traditions and customs. For instance, even if we look at the varied forms of marriages and the underlying logistics behind them, a whole gamut of practices co-existed. It is not only difficult but rather misleading to dub any particular form of marriage as “ideal”. The commingled culture is evident in the vast similarities between the rituals and customs followed by the Hindus and Muslims alike.

The survey of the socio-religious and political milieu (thrust of chapter 1) clearly reflected the factors and institutions which facilitated and contributed in the emergence of the Sikhism and its popularity over a substantial section of the society. A detailed study of the geographical features reinstated the close connection between the geographical features and the socio-cultural life of a region. To give it a more concrete grounding an ideological framework has been developed where the perceptions of the important bhakti *sants* of the period; both *sagun* and *nirgun*, have been studied. Quite obviously, their injunctions were the main area of focus and the baseline for the comparative trajectory. It was actually a pleasure to observe that when Guru Nanak's perceptions were compared with that of other bhakti sants particularly Kabir who was the most vehement and strong critique of women, it turned out to be much more egalitarian. Guru Nanak's ideological outpourings considered women worthy of spiritual attainments and thus invited her to join the *sangat* (congregation). She was considered at par with men in the path of spiritual quest. In Guru Nanak's eyes woman is appreciated for her various traits and of her procreative capabilities; he acknowledged her social contribution as mothers and wives. In sharp contrast to the *bhakti sants*, she is not viewed only as a source of distraction, of her maddening sexual lust bringing about the downfall of men. It is only Guru Nanak during those times who spoke vehemently against *sutak* (the physical pollution related to the biological

functions of a female body). It is Guru Nanak only who viewed the life of a householder as a virtue and recommended the ethos of chastity for both men and women in their marital lives. The Gurus redefined the celibacy as marriage to one wife and taught that male and female alike need to practice conjugal fidelity. They advocated marriage of the two equal partners. Guru Amar Das, the third Guru insisted; "Only they are truly wedded who have one spirit in two bodies." Guru Amar Das also strongly condemned *purdah* and indeed refused to have an audience with women that kept *purdah*. He spoke against the custom of *sati* and female infanticide. He established religious centers and women alongside men were recruited to lead and teach through *manji* and *peerah* system. Women worked alongside the men in maintaining the system of *langar*, performing duties and sitting along with the men in the *pangat*. Admittedly, the Gurus' teachings of equality have never been fully realized, which is clearly evident in the treatment of women in today's Punjab or even in the Sikh society. Yet, the contributions of the Gurus, their categorical injunctions condemning the whole gamut of customs and practices against the women cannot be negated.

One is inclined to review the critique of few modern scholars when they write that Guru Nanak did not speak against *sati* or polygamy or conditions of widows. It appears unreasonable to an academic mind not to appreciate Guru Nanak's contribution for his positive messages which were much ahead than the existing socio-cultural milieu, his speaking against the many limitations suffered by the women. One is inclined to point out that if the contributions or the positive thrust in Guru Nanak's messages is diluted and he is discredited for using words like *kuchajji*, *kulakhni*, *dohagan* for women then one should remind oneself of the supposition that all women are "good" by the virtue of being women is equally misleading. It is like falling into the same trap of seeing only the "black" and the "white" and turning blind to "grey" component of the larger reality, which is very often the major component of any society. If in the medieval times the general perception (well represented by bhakti saints like Kabir, Tulsidas, Surdas) viewed women as "black" i.e. negative light as a snare, a distraction, a distrustful, dishonest, malicious being led by her sexual lust then we are choosing to see only the "white" and attempt to turn the

“black” into “white”. Whereas, the reality is that at any point of time both “good” and “bad” people co-exist whether it is men or women.

The successive section of the thesis (Part II) comprised of chapters: Marriage; Women’s Position in Social Sphere; Discrimination against Women; Social Evils and the Development of Sikh Panth; Construction or Deconstruction of Women’s Identity. It underlines the system of marriage was one of the, rather most, important social institution around which the life of the women revolved. In this context, the social milieu of the period provided rich material for instance, the factors behind the social institution of marriage and caste, underlying logistics of ritual purity behind the varied forms of widow remarriage – ‘*Karewa*’ and ‘*Chadar Pauna*’ or still prevalent, if not predominant, the ideology of domesticity and seclusion. In spite of intensely intermingling culture one cannot presume homogeneity in social behaviour patterns. In this endeavour one needed to be very sensitive to the nuances, the role played by caste and class and acknowledge the multiplicity of realities – in context of position of women and her social status holding true. Another major reality one confronts in the study of the institution of “marriage” is that the whole institution of exogamous marriage had deep and over-arching impact on the life of women. It was rightly called the ‘Second Birth’ in a woman’s life when she was given a new name to complete this feeling of newness. Cessation of all contacts with her biological family was the general social expectation. One can easily relate to her sense of loss and insecurity when she was almost dropped in a new setup at the mercy of the unknown “family” without much hope of emotional or any other kind of support. One must acknowledge that in sharp contrast to the general social ethos, Guru Amar Das’ injunction emphasizing the compatibility in a marriage must have worked (or atleast should have) as a balm to the bruised heart when he said:

“Bride and groom are not they who pose as one whole;  
Bride and groom are they who are two bodies with one soul.”<sup>1</sup>

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AG, p. 788.

Here, clearly Guru Amar Das advocates the marriage between two equal partners and the sacred institution of marriage aims at the fusion of two souls into one.

The study would have been incomplete without the study of the family. Family is not only an important primary institution in all civilized, human societies but infact, the most important basic social unit where women, has a formidable role to play. It is this role which emerges as an important rather the most important yardstick to assess her position in the larger social fabric. Family needs to be studied in its relationship to caste, class, gender and religion. In medieval Punjab it was more of a paternalistic dominance within the family where members have unequal access to the family's material assets and the right to make decisions. Oppression and powerlessness of women coexist with a prevailing ethos of according social respect and honour to her in certain roles like 'Mother'.

The study of rituals and ceremonies under the aegis of 'Women's Position in Social Sphere' clearly brought out the secondary status of women as reflected by her role and participation in the social engagements. The rituals connected the husband and wife but in a clear hierarchical manner placing the wife in a subordinate position. If these rituals and ceremonies are expected to be clear identity markers of any community then they are also a concrete tangible reflection of the power equation of different components of that society. It establishes and reinforces the position of men and women, their roles and the existing, largely accepted, gaps in the social order. On one hand, the rituals and ceremonies often reinforce the social order and on the other hand, from a purely systemic viewpoint, rituals are the ceremonies of a mediating institution that shape the future of a society. They are in effect the vehicles of hope for both individuals and the social order; rituals help people overcome indeterminacy in life. Within this conceptual framework one observed that there is a tension between the ritual and the social order. The secondary (read marginal) status of women is evinced by other life cycle rituals and insignificant role played by women, at times being totally excluded from.

The Gurus emphatically advocated an egalitarian society where woman was awarded the position of equality, respect and dignity. In spite of the Gurus' strong condemnation of social customs and practices which discriminated against women, social evils did not cease to exist. Very often, the egalitarian social ethics, values and norms preached by the Gurus, religious leaders, *sants* have always been very difficult to implement and put into practice. To expect the normative preachings to become the operative beliefs and ethos of society in regard to women is still more difficult. The women were not only relegated to their households but they were married at a very tender age of eight-nine years so that she would not sexually go astray. They were compelled to observe *purdah*. She was expected to be a *sati* at the death of her husband in some castes or observe permanent widowhood in others, even in case of young widows. Widowhood meant destitution at best, social rejection and lifelong loneliness. The birth of a daughter was viewed with disdain and sorrow. The birth of the boy was celebrated lavishly but that of a girl meant scorn and blame by the in-laws.

The dislike for a girl-child at a general social level had greater implications for women at large. The women who failed to produce a male heir is seen as accursed, as one who had failed in her essential duty. In other words, it becomes clear that a wife's worth comes to be crucially determined by her ability to produce male heirs. In the larger social perception the sons were and are still needed, not only to work on the land (in case of an agricultural set up) but more importantly, to keep the land within the patriarchal family and to provide support to parents in their old age. Unfortunately, the weakness for only the sons as the desired progeny went to the extent that in medieval Punjab the practice of female infanticide was practised on a significant scale, if not widely. Commendably, Guru Amar Das vehemently spoke against it and Guru Gobind Singh prohibited any kind of social contact with the '*Kurrimaar*' (the killer of female infant).

The Sikh Gurus also categorically spoke against the practice of *sati*. The word '*sati*' has been used in the Adi Granth in different connotations. It implies truthful, moral, disciplined, virtuous, generous etc. It also refers to the custom of '*sati*' by which a widow used to burn herself on the pyre of her dead



husband. The practise of *sati* is a question closely linked to widow remarriage. The study of social reform movements in eighteenth century India always impressed upon the fact that the widow remarriage was with intent for the betterment of widows. However, one is forced to confront the other side of the reality that widow remarriage among the agriculturist and artisinal classes of the society was prevalent so that her procreative capabilities and her physical labour output do not go waste. Although we do not get categorical evidence in the contemporary sources for sixteenth and seventeenth centuries however, it's prevalence in the later period is recorded. Generally, such social practices do not suddenly evolve, they have their genesis in remote past. Among the Jats the practice of widow remarriage was quite prevalent with minor variations under the names of "*karewa*", "*chadar dalna*" or "*chadar pauna*". The underlying logic was to transfer whatever little share the widow had inherited in the landed property of her deceased husband. This widow remarriage was to be performed only with the brother, preferably younger, so that the landed property was to be retained among the male lines only. It is such an eye-wash that in case a woman decided against marrying any of her brothers-in-law then till the time of her last breath she had to remain chaste, then only she could exercise whatever little control over her share of land. First of all it is very difficult to assume that she would be able to resist her remarriage against her wishes. Moreover, this precondition attached to chastity and looking at the general disempowering mechanism it would not be far from the reality that then the family of in-laws and society might have resorted to the level of questioning the chastity of a woman.

Admittedly, it is difficult to clearly assess the extent of the impact of the Sikh Gurus in changing the larger social perception or partially modifying the dominant patriarchal ideology. One thing is for certain that the final product of their constructive intervention in the larger social dealing was a result of the complex interplay of the changing focus and emphasis of the Sikh Gurus which was closely related to the development of the Sikh Panth and its existing as well as aspired social base at a point of time.

Most important contribution of Guru Nanak for women was that he opened the gates of the path of spiritualism for women. This move to advocate that men

and women are equal in the eyes of God and the path of salvation was not prohibited for women it was very remarkable, looking at the then existing socio-cultural values. Till then, the religious arena was not only barred for women but she was not even considered worthy of it because she was considered intellectually very inferior, a creation of God just to serve the man by the act of making the emancipator goals open to women, the woman is placed at par with man, just as the *shudra* is placed at par with the *Brahman*. However, the path of spiritualism was open for women by fulfilling her roles of a wife, a mother and so on. Guru Nanak's attitude is also not exactly revolutionary outlook. He can refer to wife as a snare, yet place the householder above the renunciant, but in any case the Sikh Guru advocated the life of a householder with discipline and restraint. To sum up on this aspect, one is inclined to agree with J.S. Grewal that Guru Nanak, within the patriarchal framework created a large space for women much larger than what we find in Kabir or perhaps the whole range of Indian Literature springing from devotional theism. Total equality of woman with man in the spiritual realm was a radical idea in Indian history, especially because it was not confined to female *bikhus* or *bhaktas*. Guru Nanak's symbolic attack on discrimination against women due to physiological differences carried the idea of equality a long step forward. If he does not carry into the home, giving equal share to the daughter in inheritance nor does he say anything which can be used in support of inequality of any kind. The principle of equality upheld in one area of life carried important implications for other areas as well. Especially, in a social set-up where religion is an important aspect of life, it directly as well as indirectly influences its many aspects.

A whole gamut of restrictions and superstitions were being attached to child-birth. A woman was considered impure for a certain number of days after delivering a baby and even during the menstrual period referred to as "*sutak*". Guru Nanak categorically criticized the social ritual of *sutak* when he said "*Jekari Sutaku Manniyai Sabhtai Sutaku Hoe*". Guru Nanak, on the contrary, highlighted the physiological feminine trait of hers as a quality. He emphasized that without the woman the world cannot exist. The Sikh scripture, at large, does not debase the female body and does not place

taboos around menstruation, childbirth or any other female body/physiological functions. There is nothing inferior or abhorrent about feminine sexuality. Female activities and accoutrements are assigned a high value, even a transcend value. The Sikh affirmation of the feminine as a category of being with essential values and strength is expressed through the symbol of the bride. This thought process extended further in respecting woman as a “mother” and went a step further by advocating conjugal relationship in marriage. All the Gurus emphatically emphasized the need of chastity and fidelity both for men and women and advocated monogamy. Guru Hargobind called women as the “conscience of men”.

It must be acknowledged that the Gurus contributed positively to the status of women. In the then social ethos to view the role of women as a mother, as a wife endowed with varied virtues able to hold the family together as a great social contribution was also remarkable. The equality of men and women in the spiritual arena acknowledged the intellect of women in contrast to the popular perception that women are stupid and worthy of beating with shoes (*Khaley*). There are clear injunctions against the most heinous social crime – the practice of female infanticide was categorically prohibited by Guru Amar Das as well as Guru Gobind Singh. The Sikh code of conduct at the time of initiation of Khalsa prohibited any social contact with the ‘*Kurrimaar*’ (the killer of daughters). Guru Amar Das categorically denounced the practice of the *Purdah* system. Infact, he even assigned five *manjis*, a sort of religious emissaries to women which indicated his complete trust in the intellect of women and her caliber as propagators of the faith. Guru Amar Das vehemently spoke against the practice of *sati*. And the Guru could clearly empathize with the disabilities suffered by women.

The *langar* or the community dining center initiated by Guru Nanak himself, but popularized, expanded and strengthened by successive Gurus, and, the *pangat* brought down the communal barriers of the rigid control of caste system. In regard to women, the system of *langar* and *pangat* along with her active role in the *manji* and the *peerah* system would have successfully brought down the disabilities suffered by her general social positioning and in specific due to the prevalence of the *purdah* system. Thus, the contributions

of women towards the developments of the panth become formidable as the institutions of *langar* and *pangat* as well as *manji* and *peerah* system were closely connected with its developmental institutions.

Last but not the least, Guru Nanak is outspoken in his denunciation of caste and his successors plainly follow him in his rejection of the caste system. Very often, the scholars argue that the intention was a denunciation only of those aspects of caste which accord privilege to some and impose discriminatory penalties on others. It is little perplexing that although the validity of the caste system was categorically questioned yet, all the marriages of Gurus' children were in strict adherence to the dictates of the caste system.

However, this does not dilute the fact the Gurus were emphatic in their rejection of caste based religious pretensions and that membership of the Panth was open for people of all the castes and gender. We have to acknowledge that Guru Nanak is articulate in his social criticism when customs and institutions touch upon religion. This insistence on eradication of the caste system, gender division in the path of spiritualism should be viewed as a characteristic feature of the panthic development in its initial stages or still more significant, the Sikh Gurus particularly Guru Nanak strongly opposed the caste system and its disempowering impact on the society at large.

In sum, one would like to conclude that the Sikh Gurus had lots of positive messages for the society which could have gone a long way in awarding decent treatment to women. Yet one must admit that their level of effectiveness and influence on the dominant social ethos was limited; it could not bring a sort of radical change in the dominant patriarchal ideology. In the end, one would also like to ponder over the reasons that the positive directives of the Gurus towards women were never developed and applied completely. The precepts of the Gurus, concerning the amelioration of the situation of women, remained just the precepts. The reasons for this shortcoming might be attributed to historical and cultural circumstances. Another justification, for not getting the desired results, the professed reforms could be attributed to the deep rooted traditional and cultural attitudes towards women, which proved to be too powerful for the Sikh Gurus to eradicate. Or

on a positive note, it takes much longer for any kind of tangible change in the social outlook, perceptions and conduct to take place. Moreover, while evaluating Guru Nanak's perception on women, it has to be taken into view that the establishment of the panth was in its infancy and the ideological positions as well as their responses and reactions and expressions (in the form of religious injunctions) also evolved with the time. We need to make an assessment of the Sikh Gurus only in relation to their social milieu, when the patriarchal values were the norm. More significantly, the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak questioned the prevailing norms and raised his voice against well-entrenched practices. His contribution to question the validity of the caste-system; opening the gateways of spiritual attainments to women, vehemently criticizing the "*Sutak*" (pollution related to child-birth, menstruation cycle etc.) and emphasizing the women's role for procreating must be appreciated. Guru Nanak's tough stance provided a platform for the subsequent Gurus, especially Guru Amar Das, who very vehemently opposed the practices against women. To conclude, we can safely infer that Guru Nanak was a visionary who, despite living squarely in a patriarchal social framework, contributed significantly by questioning the prevailing norms and his appeal lay in his assertion that salvation was open to all, regardless of gender or between castes. Guru Nanak provided a direction to the perceptions of the Sikh Gurus which they effectively followed and extended. In J.S. Grewal's words Guru Nanak's compositions do not prove a radical departure from the existing order, but a radical departure can be justified on the basis of his compositions.

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