

# **Sikh Womens Rights**

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## Rights of Sikh Women

### 1. What rights do I have as a Sikh woman?

A Sikh woman has equal rights to a Sikh man. Unlike Christianity, no post in Sikhism is reserved solely for men. Unlike Islam, a woman is not considered subordinate to a man. Sikh baptism (Amrit ceremony) is open to both sexes. The Khalsa nation is made up equally of men and women. A Sikh woman has the right to become a Granthi, Ragi, one of the Panj Pyare (5 beloved), etc.

### 2. Is God considered a Male or Female?

The Guru Granth Sahib contains many Names for God, both masculine and feminine. These are all used to describe God. Ultimately, the Gurus do not consider God to be male or female. The Mul Mantra states that God is 'Ajuni' - Unborn. Thus stating that God belongs to neither sex.

### 3. What does the Guru Granth Sahib say about Women?

The Guru Granth Sahib is unique in religious history. It is the only religious text that was compiled and authenticated by the founders of its faith. It consists of beautiful hymns which teach you about your spirituality and purpose in life. Guru Arjan states that the Guru Granth Sahib will give you 'Truth, Contentment and Contemplation'. Concerning women, Guru Nanak has said,

'It is through woman that order is maintained.

Then why call her inferior from whom all great ones are born.'

*Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 473.*

The Gurus went further. They used the Woman symbolically in the Bani to represent the disciple.

### 4. What restrictions are there on what I can wear?

When Sikhs take Amrit they must all, regardless of sex, keep the same 5 k's. Guru Nanak has stated that one should only wear those clothes which do not distress the mind or the body.

'Friend, all other wear ruins bliss,  
That which to the limbs is torment, and

with foul thinking fills the mind.

*Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 16.*

The Gurus had also made a firm stand against the wearing of the veil, which is so popular amongst Muslims and Hindus. Even Christian nuns are made to cover themselves more than Christian priests. Guru Amar Das refused to allow a Hindustani Queen from entering the sangat until she had removed her veil. In the Guru Granth Sahib, the veil is compared to suppression.

'False modesty that suppressed is ended.

Now with veil cast off am I started on the way of devotion.'

*Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 931.*

### 5. Can I read the Guru Granth Sahib?

Yes. The reading of the Guru Granth Sahib is open to all. In Hinduism, a woman is not considered capable of reading the Vedas in a Mandir. This is not so in Sikhism. Guru Amar Das was brought to the fold of Sikhism after hearing Bibi Amro reciting the Gurbani.

### 6. Can I be forced into an arranged Marriage?

Sikhs are forbidden from forcibly marrying off their children without their prior consent. Both Sons and Daughters are required to reach a mature age, both physically and mentally, before they marry. Thus, parents must ensure their children are allowed to grow and be educated to the fullest. Arranged marriages are the norm for Sikhs. Sikhs are forbidden from marrying outside their faith and are not allowed to keep sexual relationships outside of marriage. The Gurus considered marriage an equal partnership. Guru Amar Das has stated,

'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.'

*Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 788.*

This is in contrast to other faiths. In Islam the Husband is permanently the dominant partner.

'If your wives are over-bearing, advise them against it.

If they do not care, refuse them sexual intercourse.

If they still persist, then give them a thrashing.'

*Holy Quran, Al-Nissa 4-34.*

### **7. What about a Dowry?**

Sikhs are forbidden from marrying off their children for monetary benefit. Concerning the Dowry, Guru Ram Das says,

'Any other Dowry, which the perverse place for show, is false pride and worthless gilding.'

*Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 79.*

### **8. Who is considered more spiritual, Men or Women?**

Unlike other faiths, Sikhism states both men and women are considered capable of reaching the highest levels of spirituality. A particular hymn in the Guru Granth Sahib states,

'In all beings is he himself pervasive, Himself pervades all forms Male and Female.'

*Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 605.*

### **9. Why are we then not treated equally at birth?**

If this is the case, then this is against Sikhism. The Birth of a daughter or son is equally joyous for Sikhs. The practise of giving sweets and celebrating Lohri only on the birth of a boy is not Sikhism.

### **10. I may have religious rights, what about Independence?**

No Sikh is taught to be subservient to someone else. Thus, independence is open to both sexes.

However, this does not mean that you merely know your rights and not your responsibilities. There is no priesthood in Sikhism, so every Sikh must lead a devotional life. The path of love which Guru Nanak initiated is open to all,

'Should you seek to engage in the game of love, step into my street with your head placed on thy palm, while onto this stepping, ungrudgingly sacrifice your head.'

*Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 1412.*

The Khalsa nation started by Guru Gobind Singh is open to men and women. Guru Nanak had observed how defenceless women had been when Babar, the first Mughal Emperor of Hindustan, had invaded Punjab.

'Babar with wedding party of Sin from Kabul rushed down, and forcibly demanded surrender of Indian womanhood'

'Set aside were Kazis and Brahmins, and Satan went about solemnising marriages.

Muslim women, reciting the Quran, in their affliction called on Khuda.

Other women of lower castes and of the Hindus in this suffering too include in your account.

Says Nanak: Sung are paeans of blood and sprinkled is blood for Saffron'

*Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 722.*

Guru Gobind Singh ensured that such an event would never occur again. By taking Amrit every Sikh man and woman would be able to protect themselves with their Kirpan. Thus, ensuring they would not need to be dependent on anyone. Further, Rakhri Bandan is a tradition implying that women are dependent for protection on their brothers.

### **11. Asian Women are subservient to their Husbands. Does Sikhism state that I must be also?**

Hinduism does state that women are under the control of men. The laws of Manu state,

'In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord

is dead to her sons;

A woman must never be independent.'

*Law 148, Chapter V.*

Sikhism is totally opposed to this view. Christian women must change their names after marriage. The concept of maiden and married names is alien to Sikh philosophy. Sikhs practising it now do so out of ignorance. A Sikh woman is born with the surname Kaur and dies with the same surname. Thus, allowing her to keep her identity throughout her life. Further, Ms is preferable to Miss or Mrs.

### **12. Are there any important Sikh Women in our History?**

Sikh history is one which has been made by both men and women. There are many, many outstanding Sikh women. The Gurus' wives led highly spiritual and independent lives. Mata Sundri ji led the Sikhs for a long period after Guru Gobind Singh returned to his heavenly home. Sada Kaur was a famous Sikh Jathedar and ally of Ranjit Singh who made possible the Sikh empire of the 19th Century. The list of important Sikh women is endless.

## The Importance of Kaur

Have you ever thought why Guru Ji, Guru Gobind Singh, gave the Kaur surname to Sikh women? Why did he not accept the status quo and keep the tradition of the woman's surname being determined by her family's name? What was Guru Ji trying to achieve by calling the Sikh woman "A Princess" (literal meaning of Kaur)?

To try to understand the possible reasons behind Guru Ji's decision, we need to look at the situation at the time in different cultures. In Indian society, the brides first and last name was often changed after her marriage. This still happens today. However, this tradition of name changing does not occur just in India. It is a phenomenon which occurs across the whole world today. Why are women's surnames changed? The reason is family linkage. Surnames allow others to identify you and your family. In some cases the surname can tell others much more about you, such as your caste. For women the linkage to family is different in comparison to men. Their identity changes with marriage. They are no longer associated with their parents, but with their Husband's family. Unsurprisingly, the man's name never changes. Some cultures go as far as considering the woman to be the property of others. This was so for the Hindu Law giver, Manu, who claimed that no woman should ever be independent. Christianity considered woman to be a product of man as Eve had come from "the rib" of Adam.

Psychologically, women have accepted these unjust rules. They have resigned to male dominance and allowed themselves to become second class citizens. Guru Ji changed all this with the revelation of the Khalsa. He gave women the opportunity to live life free of the chains of a dogmatic society. It was God's Hukam (will).

Once initiated into the Khalsa, Sikh women obtain the surname Kaur. The surname Singh (Lion) is given to men, but Kaur (princess) is reserved solely for women. This difference in names is not about inequality. Rather, Guru Ji recognises the difference between men and women. As individuals we are all different from each other, but this difference does not imply inequality. Women and men are different but remain equals. Guru Ji considered women and

men to be unique. He respected the genders and, therefore, made the distinction in respectfully. When you take Amarat you are told to consider Guru Gobind Singh as your father and Mata Sahib Kaur as your mother. By joining the Khalsa you abandon all previous chains of linkage. You become the direct descendants of Guru Gobind Singh and Mata Sahib Kaur. You become their daughters. The Khalsa becomes your family. Thus, from the day you are born to the day you die your name remains the same. You do not have to change it due to marriage.

Unfortunately, the tradition of using the "Kaur" surname has all but disappeared amongst Sikh women. It is either dropped, in favour of caste surnames, or misused as a middle name. Guru Ji never designed it as such. Have we not belittled his concepts? Have we lost so much faith and self-esteem that we must copy the bigoted traditions of others ?

Sikh women are today demanding equal rights. Rightly so. However, they fail to realise that they themselves create inequality by not considering themselves princesses. They no longer consider themselves as daughters of the Khalsa. Why should Sikh women feel that they must change their names after marriage ? This is not part of the Sikh tradition. It belongs to others. Leave it to them. It has nothing to do with the Sikhism. Waheguru gave us these names. Real freedom can only be found in Sikhi. Real freedom is the freedom ones feels from within, and not the show of freedom we pretend to have in the outside world and to others.

By keeping your unique and beautiful Sikh identity you are maintaining the freedom given to you by Guru Ji Ultimately, by keep and being content with the "Kaur" surname can you truly understand its importance. Others will make excuses about the difficulty of having such a surname. Why make such excuses?

The importance of "Kaur" is truly inexpressible. It is something very unique in the history of the world.

## Sikh Women in State Affairs

In Indian history, we find only a few women actively participating in government affairs. In the early medieval Muslim period Razia was a solitary woman who conducted the affairs of government for a short time but she suffered early death mainly because of the weakness of her sex. During the Mughal period the inmates of the Emperor's harem lived in seclusion excepting Nur Jahan. And in later times, Rani of Jhansi flashed into prominence for a while, during the uprising of 1857. But, strange enough, the short span of Sikh history is replete with the remarkable role of Sikh women of princely families. Guru Nanak had preached equality and respect for womenfolk and the Guru's observations in favour of women went a long way in getting them an honourable status and share in the various fields of life.

The Sikh ranis (queens) as and when an occasion arose, actively participated in state affairs. They occasionally took charge of state administration and their contribution to the Sikh polity as rulers, regents, administrators and advisers has been creditable indeed. "The Sikh ladies ruled with vigour and diplomacy," says General Gordon

In the words of William Francklin, "Instances indeed, have not unfrequently occurred, in which they (women) have actually taken up arms to defend their habitations, from the desultory attacks of the enemy, and throughout the contest, behaved themselves with an intrepidity of spirit, highly praiseworthy

To quote Griffin, the Sikh women "have on occasions shown themselves the equals of men in wisdom and administrative ability." Usually the dowager ranis were up to commendable works. A passing reference of the role of some of them towards the end of the eighteenth century and in the first half of the nineteenth century may not be out of place here. Rani Sada Kaur, widow of Sardar Gurbakhsh Singh Kanaihya and mother-in-law of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was well versed in the affairs of the state and commanded her soldiers in the battle-field. She was a very shrewd lady with a thorough grasp of statecraft. Mai Desan, the widow of Charhat Singh Sukarchakia, was a great administrator, an experienced and a wise diplomat

who conducted the civil and military affairs dexterously. Rattan Kaur, the widow of Tara Singh Ghaiba, was a brave and an able lady who kept the Lahore Durbar forces at bay for a sufficient time till the gate-keepers were bribed by the Lahore army. Mai Sukhan, the widow of Gulab Singh Bhangi, strongly defended the town of Amritsar against Ranjit Singh for some time. Dharam Kaur, wife of Dal Singh of Akalgarh, after her husband's imprisonment by Ranjit Singh, mounted guns on the walls of her fort and fought against the Durbar forces. She was a brave and a wise lady who was able, for some time, to foil the designs of the Lahore ruler on her territory.

After Sardar Baghel Singh's death in 1802, his two widows, Ram Kaur and Rattan Kaur, looked after their territories very well. Ram Kaur, the elder Sardarni, maintained her control over the district of Hoshiarpur which provided her a revenue of two lakh rupees and Sardarni Rattan Kaur kept Chhalondi in her possession, fetching her an annual revenue of three lakh rupees. She administered her territory efficiently. Similarly, Rani Chand Kaur, widow of Maharaja Kharak Singh, and Rani Jindan, widow of Ranjit Singh, played important roles in the Lahore Durbar polity.

From the Patiala house also many names like that of Rani Fato, wife of Baba Ala Singh, Rani Ranjinder Kaur, Rani Aus Kaur and Rani Sahib Kaur may be mentioned. In the words of Lepel Griffin. "Rani Rajinder (Kaur) was one of the most remarkable women of her age. she possessed all the virtues which men pretend are their own—courage perseverance and sagacity—without mixture of weakness which men attribute to women."<sup>9</sup> Sahib Kaur was proclaimed as Prime Minister of Patiala at the age of 18. She managed the affairs, both in office and in the battle-field, wonderfully well. Later, when her husband, Jaimal Singh Kanaihya, was imprisoned by his cousin, Fateh Singh, she hastened to Fatehgarh at the head of a strong force and got her husband released. In 1794, when the commander of the Maratha forces coming northwards sent a message to Sahib Kaur of Patiala house for submission, she preferred to settle the issue in the field of battle. Hurriedly she formed a league of the neighbouring chiefs, Bhag Singh of Jind, Bhangra Singh and Mehtab Singh of Thanesar, and rushed forth to check the advance of the Marathas- The two armies came to Frips near

Ambala She infused new spirit in her disheartened soldiers, led a surprise night attack on the Marathas. In the words of John J. Pool, "With mingled feelings of fear and respect they (Marathas) turned their forces homeward and gave up the expedition. Thus, Patiala was saved by the skill and daring of Rani Sahib Kaur." Rani Desa of Nabha and Daya Kaur of Ambala's role, in shaping the destinies of their territories was no less noteworthy. Daya Kaur, wife of Gurbakhsh Singh, ruler of Ambala, succeeded to her husband after his death. In the words of Lepel Griffin, "She was an excellent ruler and her estate was one of the best managed in the protected territory." These ladies were well known for their administrative acumen, grasp of political situations, and dexterity in handling arms and organising defence.

Article-excerpts taken from:

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"History of Sikh Misals" by Bhagat Singh ji.  
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### **Women strive for success in the future**

Equality has been an issue for the last decade. Injustices against women were not going unnoticed leading to female movements. Finally, women have taken a stand against these grave injustices to claim their innate rights as a human beings. This was to stop the dominance of males to create an equal base for women to be comfortable within. Despite this active move female negligence has occurred and continues to occur in present day.

As I recall growing up as a child the birth of an Indian girl was seldom welcome. They were seen as an economical strain on their families and unable to continue the family name. Males on the other hand were regarded with such love and respect. The females that survived were either fortunate enough to find a loving husband or unfortunate to have to spend a life-time with mates who had them on a constant beck and call.

Domestic violence soon became an issue, to the male what seemed, an innocent slap was enough to

hurt her. This act was to state his superiority and keep her under control. What action could women take? None whatsoever, they took it never realizing the impact this would have on their children. At an early age, children found this act of violence as 'normal' and just accepted it. Psychologists have shown that later on this led to the abused mothers' male children abusing their wives just as the fathers did. What could lead to this hatred? Why were women the targets of such hatred?

Looking at it through a religious and cultural view, it is ironic to see how religion and culture contrast. People that follow their religion, yet abuse their wives are actually disobeying the religion. In pertaining to Sikhism, many people have felt that the Sikh religion discriminated against women. However this is an influence from society. From the beginning of the Sikh religion, women have played central roles in the religion that has helped shape the Sikh faith. Sikh women are truly a part of the backbone of history in educating, fighting etc.

In the time of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of the Sikh religion, women were of inferior status. Societal pressures had dictated this stance, but this did not fit the Guru's vision. Guru Ji was appalled by the notion of female infanticide, thereby abolishing any negativity towards women. He preached that both men and women are of equal rank and should therefore treat one another equally.

Nowadays, when a baby girl is born, tears are seldom shed as they used to before. Instead they are replaced with gifts of joy. Women have taken a new and brighter step, violence may not have ended in communities, but simply women have stopped taking it. This change is seen due to increased levels of education and an increased awareness of their civil rights. They realize neither they have to follow the paths their mothers took nor any other female predecessors for that matter. They do not have to put others ahead of their well-deserved happiness. Shelters, hotlines, women's group and more understanding from the community notice women and only time will tell when we see prominent Sikh women in high places.

RAMANDEEP KAUR GILL

## Sikhism & the Status of Women

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We as human beings belong to a social group at birth and our development and growth is influenced largely by that group's philosophy. Being a Sikh woman by birth and part of Panjabi society, I have seen women being glorified as goddesses as well as downgraded. Over the years this observation has developed into a search for an explanation, and recently I have turned to the Sikh Scriptures (Sri Guru Granth Sahib) for an answer.

The Sikh Religion was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539 AD) who was born in Panjab, Pakistan. A brief reference about the social inequalities of that period, especially with respect to women, helps to appreciate the progressive doctrine adopted by the Sikh Gurus. For centuries, the status of women in India was being systematically downgraded. 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. This was further justified by religious sanctions as was done by Manu, the Hindu law giver:

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.

Code of Manu 5:147-49

Woman was referred to as a 'seducer', 'unclean', and a 'temptress'. She was denied the right to preach or to participate in other religious rites. Manu went to the point 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 a faithful wife.

No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart from their husbands; if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that reason alone be exalted in heaven.

Code of Manu 5:155

Per Manu's laws only a male could perform the last rites and death anniversaries (saradhas) for the dead. Inheritance of the family's property was also limited to males and dowry was prevalent. Men could be polygamous whereas women were supposed to burn themselves alive on the pyre of their dead husbands (Sati). A male child was preferred since he alone could carry his father's name whereas women's names (both first and last) were often changed at her marriage. Education of women was looked down upon. They were supposed to do household work only so that they became economically dependent on men. Women were considered to be the property of men. The value on this property was assigned based on the type of service women could render to men. Women were mainly considered seducers and distractions from man's spiritual path. Another system whereby some young women in their late teens (called Dev Dasi's - God's slave) are supposed to be married to stone idols and are to remain celibates, is adopted in temples in parts of India. Such women are occasionally sexually abused by the priests of these temples.

This article examines the philosophy of the Sikh Gurus in regards to the Status of women and the Sikh doctrine regarding women as enshrined in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The article ends with a brief reference to Sikh women in history. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib is replete with feminine symbolism. When we explore the causes of women's degradation one by one we find the hollowness of the various theories advanced by Manu and his followers to enslave women. Also, it is only the Sikh Gurus who have advocated and promoted social equality between the sexes and different castes. Guru Ji not only suggests remedial measures for rectification of the situation but also orders their adoption in our day to day conduct. The first step in this direction is taken by writing in respect of women.

## Advocation of Womens Rights in Sri Guru Granth Sahib In Praise of Women

Guru Nanak writes.

"from the woman is our birth, in the woman's womb are we shaped;

To the woman we are engaged, to the woman we are wedded;

The woman is our friend and from woman is the family;

Through the woman are the bonds of the world;

Why call woman evil who gives birth to the leaders of the World?

From the woman is the woman, without woman there is none".

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 473)

The Guru reprimands those who consider women as inferior to men. He sees them as active partners in advancing goodwill, general happiness and the collective moral values of society. This declaration definitively requires women to be placed in high esteem. 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.

"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 vegetation.

How can we then believe in pollution, when pollution inheres within staples?

Says Nanak, pollution is not washed away by purificatory rituals;

Pollution is removed by true knowledge alone".

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 472).

In many religions God has been addressed as father. However, it was Sikhism which introduced the concept of God as mother and father. The fifth Guru (Guru Arjan Dev) reinforces the high status given to women by the first Guru by placing the feminine name given to God (mother) before the name of father. God is our Mother as well as our Father.

"Thou O Lord, art my Mother and Thou my Father.

Thou art the Giver of peace to my soul and very life".

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 1144).

## Gender Equality

In Sikhism widespread and practical steps are advised to be taken for the socio-religious equality of woman. Guru Nanak introduced the Concept of Sangat (holy congregation) - where both men and women can 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. Both men and women took equal part in essential tasks, i.e., drawing water from wells, reaping and grounding corn, cooking in the kitchen, and cleaning of the dishes. The Guru says:

"Come my sisters and dear comrades! Clasp me in your embrace.

Meeting together, let us tell the tales of our Omnipotent God.

In the True Lord are all merits, in us all demerits".

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 17).  
There are no priests or commentators, no rituals or philosophical doctrines that stand between a person and the Guru's Bani (teachings). There is a direct relationship with God for every man, woman and child. Only the veil of ignorance or one's ego stands in the way between the human and the Divine Being.

## Chastity.

Sikhism stresses family values and faithfulness to one's spouse.

"The blind-man abandons his own, and has an affair with another's woman. He is like the parrot, who is pleased to see the simbal tree, but at last dies clinging to it".

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 1165).

Sikh Gurus declared that marriage is an equal partnership of love and sharing between husband and wife. Married life is celebrated to restore to woman her due place and status as an 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".

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 788).

## **Status of women in general elevated**

Sikhism:

A) condemns the practice of women burning themselves on their husband's funeral pyre (sati).

"A 'Sati' is not she who burns herself on the pyre of her spouse. A 'Sati' is one who lives contented and embellishes herself with Good conduct".

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 787).

B) condemns prevalence of female Infanticide and the ritual of dowry in Indian society.

"O' my Father! give me the Name of Lord God as a gift and dowry. Let the Lord be my wear, His Glory my Beauty, that my Task be accomplished. Blessed is the Lord's worship; the True Guru has blessed me with it. In all lands, nay, in all Universe Pervades the Glory of the Lord; the gift of the Lord's (Name) is matchless; All other Dowry displayed by the self-willed is false egoism and a vain show."

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 78/79).

C) condemns the wearing of veils by women. One of the simplest but most effective instruments for the subjugation of women in society has been the invention of the veil. It hampered free movement and restricted their activities. It made them stay within the four walls of the home. One of the reasons advanced for the veil was that women were 'temptresses' for the celibate priests and sages. If that be so, perhaps the priests and sages should have the veils and not the women. Guru Nanak abolished the system of veils by introducing the system of sangat (Sikh congregation) where no veil was allowed. Both men and women are required to cover their head in remembrance of Waheguru. Jews, Muslims and others cover their hair in places of worship, but for Sikhs the whole world is a place for Waheguru's remembrance and holy living. Women are also expected to participate in Keertan as equal partners and even to lead the prayers.

D) condemned the rape and brutalities committed against women by the Mughal invader Babar.

"Modesty and righteousness both have vanished and falsehood moves about as the leader, O Lalo. The function of the Qazis and the Brahmins is over and Satan now reads the marriage rites (rape). The Muslim women read the Quran in suffering and call

upon God, O Lalo. The Hindu women of high caste and others of low caste, may also be put in the same account, O Lalo."

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 722).

A novel method applied by the Sikh Gurus for the uplifting of women was the abundant use of feminine symbols in Sikh Scriptures and in day to day life. The Sikh Gurus have used poetry as the medium of communication. The poetic utterances of the Gurus were not called "Guru Vak" which is masculine but 'Guru Bani" which is feminine. Thus the fourth Guru (Guru Ram Das) says:

Bani guru guru hai bani, vich bani amrit sare  
Bani is the Guru, the Guru Bani, Within Bani are contained all nectars.

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 982).

Similarly, the Divine light was frequently referred to as Joti (a feminine symbol) and not chanana (which is masculine). Among the other steps taken in Sikhism to enhance the status of women were:

- (1) Guru Amar Das (the third Guru) trained and appointed a large number of women as missionaries in charge of areas in which they had complete religious jurisdiction. All men and women gave them respect. Guru Ji established these "Perheas".
- (2) Women Religious Leaders and Warriors: Sikh women were also cast into the role of saints and soldiers just like Sikh men. They could organise men and lead them in the battles for the freedom of people and their human rights.
- (3) Education and Economic empowerment to women. Sikhism places a great emphasis on the education of women. Since they are considered as equal partners and are permitted to lead prayers and perform all religious ceremonies, their education is considered an asset for them. In the areas of Panjab and New Delhi, we have a large number of schools for Sikh children which are funded by the donations to Sikh Gurdwaras (temples). Free education is provided not only to Sikh girls and boys but also to any other person without distinction of colour, creed, or religion.
- (4) Widow remarriage is allowed in Sikhism. Earlier it was considered only as a right for men.

## Sikh Women in History

This article would not be complete without a brief mention of the names of some of the great Sikh women who played an important part in Sikh history. Mention can be made of:

1. Bebe Nanaki - Guru Nanak's sister and Mata Tripta - Guru Nanak's Mother. They played very important roles in encouraging young Guru Nanak to pursue his life long mission. They were the first to recognise Guru Nanak's saintliness.
2. Mata Khivi, wife of Guru Angad Dev (the second Guru), was in charge of Langar (the common kitchen). She was an unlimited resource of bountiful food and helped to create a new social consciousness in Sikh women. In Gurbani she is mentioned as an example for how to serve.
3. Bibi Bhani has a unique position in Sikh history. She was the daughter of the third Guru (Guru Amar Das), wife of the fourth Guru (Guru Ram Das), and mother of the fifth Guru (Guru Arjan Dev). Bibi Bhani was an inspiration during the formative period of Sikh history and symbolises responsibility, dedication, humility and fortitude.
4. Mata Gujari was an illuminating force behind her husband Guru Tegh Bahadur (the ninth Guru) and her son Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth Guru). After the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, Mata Gujari guided and inspired her son Guru Gobind Singh. She was responsible for the training of the Sahibzadas (the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh) who gave up their lives for Sikhism while they were still very young. Mata Gujri was an inspiring force during one of the most difficult times in Sikh history.
5. Mata Sundri helped provide leadership for the Sikhs in a very difficult and tumultuous time following the passing away of Gur Gobind Singh. She helped maintain the sanctity of the Guru Granth Sahib as the successor of Guru Gobind Singh and dealt strictly with pretenders and other aspirants of Guruship.
6. Mata Sahib Kaur - the spiritual mother of the Khalsa. During the first Amrit ceremony of the Khalsa on Baisakhi 1699, Mata Sahib

Kaur added sugar cakes in the preparation of the amrit (Holy nectar) which was administered to the Khalsa on that day for initiation into the Guru Khalsa Panth.

7. Sikh Missionaries - Guru Amar Das trained missionaries to spread Sikhism throughout the country. According to one account, of the 146 missionaries Guru Amar Das trained and sent out, 52 were women. At one time the religious seats in the country of Afghanistan and Kashmir were under the jurisdiction of women. These women had complete jurisdiction in decision making as well as preaching to congregations.
8. Mai Bhago Kaur was the brave woman who led a battalion of 40 men in the battle of Muktsar. All of them achieved martyrdom and were blessed by Guru Gobind Singh. Mai Bhago kaur survived to remain a member of the Khalsa army.

Women continued to play important roles even in politics after the passing away of the tenth Guru. Notable among them were Sardarni Sada Kaur, mother-in-law of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sardarni Sharnagat Kaur, and Mata Kishan Kaur. What is the situation today? Not an ideal one. With the passage of time, social pressures, male chauvinistic attitudes, and the forgetting of the essence of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, the position of Sikh women in today's society has suffered a set back. Some of the Sikh men have adopted chauvinistic attitudes of the existing Hindu and Islamic society of the Indian sub-continent. The recent materialistic attitude of some Sikhs living in India have added to the deterioration in the status of women. Many of the progressive teachings of the Sikh Gurus which were 500 years ahead of their time have been forgotten. Some Sikhs have become disciples of Manu concerning women's rights rather than of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikh Gurus. This is a deplorable situation. But aided by the spread of education, economic empowerment and an analytical look back at the teachings and lives of the Gurus, the study of Sikh Scriptures has reawakened Sikh women as well as Sikh men. They are now conscious of rights of women as equal partners in human progress, and citing the Holy Scriptures, they are fighting back for these rights and to uphold their responsibility to Waheguru, the Guru Khalsa Panth, their family, and themselves as daughters of the Guru and a pillar of Sikh Society.

Our Gurdwaras, Sikh organisations and Sikh societies should take an active interest in rectifying this evil situation so that Sikhs can again go with their heads held high in the western society. The Gurdwaras should also provide marital counselling as is done in Christian Churches and Synagogues. I am an optimist and believe the day is not far off when all women irrespective of their education and economic station in life will enjoy the same rights and privileges as were provided to them by the Sikh Gurus.

## To All The Beautiful Sikh Women...

"Why are you crying?" a young naujawan asked his mom.

"Because I'm a woman" she told him.

"I don't understand," he said.

His mom just hugged him and said,

"And you never will".....

Later the little boy asked his daddy,

"Why does mother seem to cry for no reason?"

"All women cry for no reason" was all his dad could say.....

The little boy grew up and became a man, still wondering why women cry.

Finally he put in a call to WAHEGURU JI;

when He got on the phone, the man asked

"O WAHEGURU JI, why do women cry so easily?"

WAHEGURU said.....

"When I made women she had to be special. I made her shoulders strong enough to carry the weight of the world; yet, gentle enough to give comfort....

I gave her an inner strength to endure childbirth and the rejection that many times comes from her children.....

I gave her a hardness that allows her to keep going when everyone gives up and take care of her family through sickness and fatigue without complaining.....

I gave her the sensitivity to love her children under any and all circumstances, even when her child has hurt them very badly.....

This same sensitivity helps her make a child's boo-boo feel better and shares in their teenagers anxieties and fears.....

I gave her strength to carry her husband through his faults and fashioned her to protect his heart.

I gave her wisdom to know that a good husband never hurts his wife, but sometimes tests her strengths and her resolve to stand beside him unfalteringly.

I also gave her a tear to shed, It's hers exclusively to use whenever it is needed.

It's not her weakness, it is her strength....

It's a tear for mankind....."

The beauty of a woman is not in the clothes she wears, the figure that she carries, or the way she combs her hair.

The beauty of a woman must be seen in her eyes, because that is the doorway to her heart, the place where love resides.

The beauty of a woman is not in a facial mole, but true beauty in a woman is reflected in her soul. It is the caring that she lovingly gives, the passion that she shows and the beauty of a woman, with passing years, only grows!

Womanhood is the strength of the Panth. She bears our future generations. She nurtures them because she spends more time with the young. She can help Sikhi to flourish or she can bring about its demise. Sikhi is the future for mankind and 'she' is its most important tool for the future. Nanak said so over 500 years ago. Let us now practice giving women their rightful place in Sikhi. Power to Sikh Womanhood into the next millenium.

By Dya Singh (Australia)

