

## **Status of Woman in the medieval Sikh Society and Guru Nanak**

**Dharmjit Singh M.Ph.D ( History)\***

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**Abstract:** This empirical research paper attempts to study the status of woman in the medieval Sikh society. Development in any society can be gauged from the position woman occupies in that social order. In the course of the medieval times woman was in the degradation position. Guru Nanak, first Sikh Guru and founder of Sikh religion, however, put woman in an elevated position and treated men and women alike. In the religious and social affairs her involvement and standing was recognized. She was not allowed by the Sikh Gurus to be recognized as subjection of man and their saintly sayings protected her honour. She was documented as structure of society.

**Key words:** Saintly sayings, perpetual subjection (*pishlag*), gender discrimination, patriarchal system, *Manusamriti*, gender equality, Guru Granth Sahib, the evils of *Purdah* (seclusion)

**Introduction:** In principle, in every society and religion woman is given a high pedestal location but in reality she is deprived of her actual rights and being looked down upon as a reflection of seductive commodity. Everybody knows that she is the creator of the whole humanity. She has given birth to all those gods and goddesses, *rishis* and *munis*, *gurus*, *pirs* and *pagambars*, *nabis* and *rasuls* who endeavoured to give woman a proper place in the society through their godly sermons. But these saintly sayings remained confined only to the Holy Scriptures as principles, readings of which were made only to disclose the importance of one religion. However practically there was ever instinct in the male dominated society to keep the woman as perpetual subjection (*pishlag*) of man. The status of a woman can best be measured by the extent of control that she has over her own life, derived from access to knowledge, economic resources and political power and the degree of autonomy enjoyed by her in the process of decision making and choice at crucial points in the life circle. Accordingly, a woman's status in society is also to be analyzed in terms of her admittance to opportunities in tutoring, training, employment and income as well as her ability to control the number and spacing of her children. The role a society assigns to woman in real life determines the extent and level of her participation in the social, economic, cultural and political processes which in turn shapes the demographic portrait of a country and edifice of the society.<sup>1</sup> In the final analysis, the status is "the conjunction of positions a woman occupies as a worker, employer, student, teacher, daughter, wife, mother, ordinary person and executive authority along with the power and prestige attached to these positions and rights and duties she is expected to exercise".<sup>2</sup> Religion based gender discrimination has been discernible. Sikh religion and Guru Nanak however provided egalitarian society having no

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\* Principal, Guru Nanak Dev University, College, Verka-Amritsar (Punjab)

discrimination on the basis of gender. He had castigated the prevailing social and religious ills which had downgraded woman's reflection in the society.

**Objective of Study:** The main purpose of study is to diagnose the pathetic position of woman in the medieval society and how the first Sikh Guru Nanak elevated her and brought her at par with man in the Sikh society. Attempt has also been made to compare her position with the status he had undergone in the ancient period.

**Research Methodology:** Religious Scriptures such as *Rig-Veda*, *Manusamrity*, *Guru Granth Sahib*, *Sakhis* and *Rahitnamas* were utilized in order to give the theme an objective look. Primary and secondary sources located at different archives and universities were consulted to have the comprehensive study of the chore in hand.

**Discussion:** Woman engaged an imposing setting in the ancient Indian society. Negative discrimination against women, however, goes to the immemorial times in words and in deeds. Women have usually been considered less intelligent, less decisive, less creative, less powerfully muscled, smaller fickle minded, and emotional. The western thinking has been deeply influenced by the wisdom of Socrates and the eastern by the Vedic and post Vedic sages. The most frequent argument has been that women are of low-grade because of natural biological differences which Socrates (420-299BC) stated: "The courage of a man and that of a woman are not the same. The courage of a man and that of woman are not the same. The courage of a man is shown in commanding and that of a woman in obeying. In antagonism to Socrates, Plato however believed that women are as good quality administrators as their male counter parts. He also held that women can be philosophers. It was for this rationale that Plato is said to have admitted women in his academy. Aristotle (died 347 BC) was another great philosopher who thought that women were less complete, less daring and impetuous. He has left a significant imprint on the world philosophy. Another great Greek philosopher Hippocrates termed woman "a damp, soggy creature".<sup>3</sup> In France the position of women in society was debated in 1586 AD and the conclusion was that woman was created to serve men. But even in ancient India, socialist look of woman had undergone a change in different centuries. Especially in the Vedic period the family became increasingly patriarchal. Within the confines of a patriarchal system, the status of women veered, according occasion, from being relatively free to being restricted. Women as depicted in the Vedas have been much romantized and a realistic view suggests on the norms of the caste. The basic unit of Aryan tribal society was the patriarchal family called the Kula. The elder male of the family was known as the Kula (protector of the Family). The people seem to have been keen on having brave sons (suvirah) who could fight their wars. The birth of a son was more welcome than that of daughter who was often considered a source of misery. The birth of a son was especially welcome, for the son's presence was increasingly important in various ceremonies. Girls normally married after puberty. Some of them may have grown up, and stayed for long as spinsters in their parental homes, albeit in unusual circumstances. Such was the case of Ghosha, for example, who was suffering from a skin disease and could get a husband only when the Ashvis befriended her. In some cases a woman could freely mix with young men and have love affairs. She could take part in sacrifices with her husband. Some unmarried women like *Visvavara* and *Apala*, however performed rituals all by themselves, though often with purpose of finding husbands. Princes could take several wives, though polyandry was also prevalent. Dr Upinderjit

Kaur in her article titled *Role and Status of Women in Sikhism* has stated that in India, woman was reduced to the status of slave ever since the establishment of Brahman's dominance and enforcement of Manu's code. The position of women in Hinduism was made pathetic by Manu (Manu is the title or name of mystical sage- rulers of earth) through his treatise *Manusamriti*, an ancient legal text among the many *dharmasastras* of Hinduism. Their fortune has been hanging in between that of *Durga* and *Devdasi*, rather closer to *Devdasi* than to *Durga*. Manu measured women tainted and excluded them from listening to the Vedas. He required women to ruminant their husbands as Lords.<sup>4</sup> Women had the right to education and knowledge. Boys and girls used to get their education together. But limited number of women was learned. Even among the authors of the Rig-Veda hymns there were said to be only twenty two women. Women like *Gargi* and it is true that during the Vedic period, women commanded respect, and no religious or social work was considered to be completed without the active support of one's wife. *Gargi Vachaknavi* is said to have attended a discussion with the sage *Yajnavalkya* and even to have embarrassed him by her searching questions. However, since the number of such passages composed by these author women is only a dozen or so out of more than a thousand, this fact in itself should not be exaggerated to claim that women enjoyed a very high status in society. Education of a limited kind was permitted to upper-caste women as a marginal qualification. But was certainly not intended to encourage their participation in discussion or provide professional expertise. In Rig Veda there was some aspersion on the traits of women at some places as well. In Rig Veda's mandal eighth, it has been observed in one hymn that "the mind of woman brooks no discipline and hath little weight".<sup>5</sup> At another place in Rig Veda's mandal tenth it has been stated, "With women there can be no lasting friendship; hearts of hyenas are the hearts of women." Women are compared with hyenas". In the early period it was thought that a widow had to perform a symbolic self immolation at the death of her husband and this may have been a sign of status. A childless widow could cohabit with her brother in law until the birth of a son; the practice was known as *niyaga*. That ritual was symbolic in the early period seems evident from the remarriage of widows, generally to the husband's brother. Monogamy was common, although polygamy was known among the *rajas* and polyandry was not unfamiliar.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the patriarchal character of the family, the position of women by and large seems to have been better, in some respects; in the Rig Vedic period than in the subsequent times.<sup>7</sup> Both dowry and bride price were recognized as distinctive systems. The participation of wives was required in many rituals but it carried little authority. In contrast to the presence of Harappan figurines, some of which have represented deities, the Vedic texts did not attribute much power to their goddesses, who remained figures in the wings. Daughters were not given any share in father's property.<sup>8</sup>

But during the later Vedic period position of woman had gone down. During the Vardhan times, women were idealized in literature and art and some of the images thus created are attractive to the reader or the viewer. But they conformed to the male ideals of the perfect woman and such ideals placed certainly women in a subordinate position.<sup>9</sup> male ideals gave woman a secondary position. Woman's access to property or inheritance was limited and varied according to caste, custom and region. Characteristic status of upper caste women in later centuries of ancient India was that early marriages were advocated often even pre-puberty marriages. A widow was expected to live in austerity, but if she is of the *Kashatrya* caste she would preferably immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband especially if he had died a hero's death. This would make her *Sati*. In later centuries this was cited as the

origin of the practice becoming sati to insist that a widow actually burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The earliest historical evidence for this practice dates from AD 510, when it was commemorated in an inscription at Iran. Subsequently incidents of sati increased. A smaller number of women with some measure of freedom chose to opt out of the normal household activities required of a woman, and became nuns, or trained to be courtesans or joined troupes of performers.<sup>10</sup>

A known fact in history is that woman is repository of culture but during the medieval Indian period they suffered a lot. Women were not looked upon as equal citizens. A society in which half the citizens were in a degraded condition could not hope to survive long in peace.<sup>11</sup> Young girls were carried off by the members of the ruling class. The evil became so widely prevalent that the parents thought of three devices to save themselves from this ignominy. First rich people murdered their daughters at birth. Thus infanticide became a well-established institution in the country. Secondly, early marriage was adopted by almost all. Girls at the age of 5 or 6 were invariably married. This ruined their health. They seldom experienced any period of youth and beauty. Due to the frequency of child birth they never enjoyed good health. Thirdly young women, both married and unmarried were neglected. They wore coarse clothes. Even toilet was ignored. The idea was not toilet them appear attractive. Male child was expected to become a help mate to their parents. Hence the birth of son was welcomed and that daughter was looked down upon as a misfortune.<sup>12</sup> In the medieval society, not only were the Shudras denied the reading (or even the hearing) of the Hindu Scripture, but even women were denied this privilege. They were innocent playthings of man, fit only for a hunt by man, the eternal hunter. They were to keep their faces covered even before their spouses and burn themselves alive when their husbands die. "One wife one man" applies only to the woman and not to the man who may enjoy whomsoever he chooses if he has the means and the capacity to. A widower will certainly remarry but the widow never. "She will bear black, keep her hair disheveled, and appear not in public or on auspicious occasion even before the family, like the one whom her husband deserted. An acceptable bride must have sons as her off-spring, should be of an unblemished character, of fine chiseled features...."<sup>13</sup> Cardinal preacher of medieval Hindu society, Tulsi Dass Gussai, in her treatise *Ram Charit Manas* had also degraded the standing of woman when he gave his discourse stating woman requires to be castigated:

*Dhol gawar shudar pashu aur musai nari*

*Panco tarhan ke adhikari*<sup>14</sup>

Before the introduction of Islam in Arabia, the locus of women was more pitiable. They were treated not better than animal creatures. They could be bought and used as slaves. There was no limit on the number of wives a man could have. Polyandry and polygamy were also common and so was prostitution. Women's behavior and movements were strictly controlled and killing for chastity or fidelity was rampant. With the advent of Prophet Muhammad the status of women in Arabia was improved to the extent that they were permitted to read scriptures and were given the right to hold property but complete social parity still escaped them. Even now women are not allowed to drive cars and they would have to remain in veil while talking with their counterparts in Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> Position of woman in the Jewish community is equally secondary. Jewish women are not permitted to wear *Tallit* (prayer shawl) and *Kippah* (special head covering). Jewish women are not permitted to interpret the

*Torah*, their religious book. They cannot serve as their spiritual leaders- *Rabbis*, cantors or seminary presidents. When a Jew dies women were not permitted to go out for funerals. Male, not female polygamy is allowable. Second marriage of a woman is permissible only if she can generate unquestionable testimony of her first husband's passing away (difficulties crop up when a person is lost at sea or runs away without a trace) or produces a *Get* (certificate of divorce from a synagogue). Divorce dealings can only be initiated by husband. According to the Jewish scriptures men and women were created by God in a different way. Various *Rabbis* have described women as envious, lethargic, conceited, insatiable, talkative and prone to occult and witchcraft. Men are advised to be very cautious while associating with women.<sup>16</sup>

We have seen that the structure of Indian society was masculine (male head of family) in the medieval Indian society and to a considerable extent even in ancient Indian society and male supremacy was reinforced and perpetuated in the name of religion. Not only in Hinduism but also in Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Jainism, woman is not recognized equal to man. Mahatma Buddha was not in favour of allowing women entering monasteries and finally agreed to admit women into the Order on the condition that they must accept eight rules and one of them was that nuns must solute a monk and never abuse or disobey him. They must not visit a place where there are no monks. Henry VIII forbade the reading of Bible by women ( a consultation was conducted by high theologians in France in 587AD to determine whether women could truthfully be considered human beings or not). In the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford male and female students were not were not specified the same rights until 1964. In *Digambra* sect of Jainism ,woman as woman could not get salvation (*mokash*) and she would have to take rebirth as man in case she is to get salvation.<sup>17</sup> Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh has pointed out to the overpowering Hindu and Islamic attendance has over the centuries reinforced and even today continues to reinforce the patriarchal values which are not easy to rupture.<sup>18</sup> She has painted the humiliating condition of woman . In general, the condition of women was mortifying. They were considered to be inferior and property of their fathers, husbands' and sons. Their function was only to perpetuate the race, to do housework and to serve the male members of their families. They were considered to be seducers and distractions from man's spiritual path. Men were allowed to practice polygamy but widows were not allowed to remarry. In some parts of India , sometimes they were even forced to commit sati. Child marriage, female infanticide and *pardah* were common among women in Northern India. Women were rarely allowed to inherit property. They did not participate in public affairs but generally remained secluded in the home .<sup>19</sup>The golden age of Sikh women during the Sikh Guru period is iterated and reiterated. Scriptural passages highlighting women rights, equal access to liberation, along with injunctions against women's impurity, are consistently upheld. <sup>20</sup>The paving of a road on which both men and women could walk as equals had its genesis in the community of Sikhs (disciples) initiated at Kartarpur started by Gurus Nanak Dev, founder of the Sikh religion. In her introduction to "Woman in the Sacred Scriptures of Hinduism" Mildreth Pinkham also noted that" In Sikhism the Hindu degradation of woman was repudiated as she was held in higher regard. From the very beginning of the tradition, Guru Nanak took special care to give women a position of equality with men in matters religious as well mundane. <sup>21</sup>Equality of woman was plank in the social ideology of Guru Nanak Dev. Sikh Gurus adopted two fold approaches to gender issues. They adopted positive attitude towards women in order to enhance their status and prestige. They condemned the social and religious

practices then prevalent in Indian society which undermined the status of women and they argued for women's liberation. Guru Nanak declared that women must be respected, as they were the source of humanity's physical existence and of entire social structure. Sikh teachings lay emphasis on all kinds of equality, placing a high value on human dignity. The Sikh Gurus emphasized gender equality in particular, giving full and equal status to women. The Vision of the Gurus on this matter was far ahead of their time. The authority on this subject of *Guru Granth Saahib*, supported by the words and practices of the Sikh Gurus and the *Rahitnama* (Sikh code of conduct) In the fifteen century, at the time of first Sikh Guru Nanak Dev, two religions, Hinduism and Islam, were dominant. The position and status of women was influenced by Hindu and Islamic values, as interpreted by scholars and theologians of the time and also by the social values.<sup>22</sup> Guru Nanak Dev upheld the social status of women. Striking was his (Guru Nanak) was his advocacy of women rights, though women in his days were regarded as mere chattels. His hymn reflects that woman folk must be given due respect as equal members of their society.<sup>23</sup> Guru Nanak Dev, showering praise on the dignity of women and remonstrance to a man who reviled the female sex, said in the *Asa Di Var* :

*Bhand Jammai bhand nimmiai, bhand mangan viah, bhandu hovie dosti bhandu chalaie rah.*

*Bhand mua bhand bhaliacie bhand hovai bhandan, so kia manda akhiai jit jammeih rajan.*

*Bhandahu hi bhand upjai bhandaibajh na koi, Nanak bhandai bahara ako sach a soi.*

In a vessel man is conceived, from a vessel he is born, with a vessel he is betrothed and married.

With a vessel he contracteth friendship; with a vessel he goeth through the world. When one vessel dieth, another is sought for; to a vessel he is bound.

Why call her bad from whom are born kings?

From vessel a vessel is born; none may exist without a vessel.

Nanak, only one True God is independent of a vessel.

Guru Nanak chooses the term *bhandu* for woman, which literally means "a vessel". He sees her as a cornucopia from which all creation pours forth. His was a new positive attitude towards woman, who had long been relegated to a low place in social life and mythicized as the agent of sin and evil.<sup>25</sup> Guru Nanak unequivocally rejected the prevalent Hindu view of child birth superstition that a woman who gave birth to child remained polluted for a number of days- forty as commonly believed – and that the home in which the birth took place was similarly polluted. Even in Japan and China, pollution was associated with child birth. Guru Nanak in one of his hymn said:

*Jai kar sutak mannieh sabte sutak hoi, Gohe atai lakari andar kira hoi.*

(If notion of impurity be linked with birth, everything being would be found impure)

Women subjugation and oppression were the central concerns in the message ensuing from Guru Nanak's revelatory experience in the river *Bein* and they confirm his theological vision. His insights had a practical effect on women in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Punjab.<sup>26</sup> Guru Nanak Dev said that woman cannot be



defiled for menstrual flow every month ( as was being alleged) , otherwise a similar impurity abides in the mouth of liar for which he suffers disgrace ever, being reflected from the given hymn:

*Jio joru sirnavani avai varo var, juthe jutha much vasai nit nit hoi khuar .*<sup>27</sup>

Guru Nanak also explained the duty of woman:

If women adorn themselves with love and affection for their Spouse ,

They shall not be restrained from their devotion to Him day or night .....<sup>28</sup>

It is mentioned in the Guru Granth Sahib that Mata Khivi was entrusted the task as in charge of community kitchen at the time of Guru Angad and it further raised of woman. It was piece of her splendid personality to be always ready for service. Holy Sikh Scripture says that Guru Angad's consort , Khivi gives dense leafy shade of solace to all. She distributes the Guru's wealth in his kitchen , nectar-sweet rice pudding mixed with clarified butter, being reflected from the composition of a bard named Balwand ji at the Sikh Court:

Balwand khivi nek jan jis bohuti chhaou patrali.

Langar doult wandiai ras amrit khir ghiali.

Mata Khivi sohu soi jinni goi uthali

Mata Khivi is fondly remembered for her liberal direction of langar. With Mata Khivi's generous supervision and her plentiful supply of *kheer* ( rice pudding), the tradition became a real feast rather than just a symbolic meal. She continued to serve the community kitchen for another thirty years even after melancholy demise of Guru Angad.<sup>29</sup>

A Sikh woman has equivalent privileges to Sikh man. Unlike Christianity, no placement in Sikhism is reserved exclusively for men. Unlike Islam , a woman is not measured secondary to a man . Sikh initiation is open to both sexes. Guru Nanak insisted on the life of household and glorified womanhood and painted sensitive accounts of woman's physical charm and beauty, indentifying her with the awakened human soul. His love for his sister " Nanaki" is referred to inmost touching terms in some of the *Sakhis*, and equally so for his mother. When Nanak met his mother on his return from his very first tour 1500-1506AD, and she wailed, " *Sacrifice , O Son , to thee; sacrifice a million times. Blessed is the earth thou walkest upon, blessed the people thou meetest,*" Guru Nanak Dev could not restrain himself and wept.<sup>30</sup>

Guru Nanak himself led a complete life and combined his spiritual mission with the domestic obligations of a father and a husband. <sup>31</sup>With the emergence of renunciation cult, woman was denounced by the yogis as creator of sin ( *pap ki janani*), greatly impure ( *mahaa pvirita*), poisonous serpent ( *jahrilli sapani*) , reflection of illiteracy and symbol of *maya*. Jogis concept was in this illogical utterance:

*Baghani upaya baghni nipaya baghani pali kaya*

*Baghani dakre jorieypakharey, anbhue gorkh rayabha*<sup>32</sup>

The idea of *sanyasa* (abstaining) from worldly comforts and pleasures in the medieval period had influenced attitude towards women in India. The inherent attraction of the female had been considered to be temptation; something against which the *sanyasi* must be warned and to which he must not be attracted. The Gurus, however, did not consider women as hurdles or obstruction on the path to salvation. They rejected the idea of taking *sanyas* (asceticism or renunciation) and regarded family life, if it was led in a righteous manner, as superior to that of ascetic.<sup>33</sup> Guru Nanak did not believe in renunciation. The Sikh religion upholds the dignity of the householder. Guru Nanak denounced the escapist *yogis* and *siddhas* ( who had taken shelter in the hills away from the worldly affairs in order to attain salvation) as parasites and runaways from responsibilities. In the (*goshti*) interaction took place with the *yogis* earlier at Achal Batala, then at summer mountain, Guru Nanak decried their act of renouncing the world. The Guru rejected the idea of celibacy as being necessary for religious progress and promoted householder's way of life. The foundation of householder's life is woman. Guru Nanak viewed that as spiritual elevation could be achieved in family life there was no need to renounce the world. In the Guru Granth Sahib it has been mentioned:

*Ghar ki nar tiage andha, par nari sio ghale dhandha*<sup>34</sup>

In order to emphasize the superiority of the house-holder's life, the Sikh Gurus placed great emphasis on marriage two equal partners. Even in the modern period when we claim we have been civilized considerably, one of the world's oldest and best known medical journal *Lancet* (London) in its observation has reported on the basis of its survey of 640 districts of India that almost 2.39 girls die every year due to gender discrimination and heir problems are overlooked due to gender discrimination. Deaths due to female foeticide are not included in this figure.<sup>35</sup> Renowned Bollywood songstress Sona Mohapatra has urged the society to celebrate gender equality and empowerment. She said, "..... we are conditioned to park women into stereotypes. I'm simply saying applaud both of them (the genders). People's achievements should not be connected to a gender."<sup>36</sup>

**Conclusion:** From the above cited narration it can be seen that position of woman remained by and large relatively good in the early Vedic period but in the later part of ancient India her position was in doldrums and having different status under different regimes. Hindu religion, Jainism and Islam could not provide her required sanctified status in the medieval period. Sikhism put her platform equivalent to man in all walks of life. Guru Nanak brushed aside all obstacles that were in the way putting her in the subordinate position. Other Sikh Gurus through their gospel also leveled the status of woman at par with man. Even today woman in society continue to hang in the secondary position though law protective agencies provide her legitimate equality. Technological advancement and removal of illiteracy has certainly raised the status of women but their proportion continues to hang over near the earlier sufferers' ratio. Despite the legal protection, domesticated violence is still in vogue and woman is the main target. In the civilized society man must think for the betterment and empowerment of his better half. She is still hovering in the transitional stage and how many years midway stage will take nobody knows. But certainly her position will be transformed from medieval to modern in times to come.



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17 Kirpal Singh Badungar , *Mada Bharun Hatia Ghor Ate Sangin Juram* , SGPC, Sri Amritsar, 2015, pp.2-3. See also: GS Sidhu, *Sikh Religion and Women*, p.37,52. Buddhist Studies: Buddhism and Women : Position of Woman Buddha net. Women in Jainism \_www. idian scriptures . com In the *Digambara* sect, one of the essential elements to the path of liberation is lack of clothing or nudity. Since this cannot be applied to women as a mark of woman's dignity , respect and civilized world. According to *Digamber* they can attain liberation if they are reborn as men.

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