

# GURU AMAR DAS JI AND IMPROVEMENT THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Guru Amar Das born in 1479 at Basarka village in Amritsar district. He was the eldest son of his parents, Bhai Tej Bhan and Mata Lakhmi. At the age of 24, he was married to Mansa Devi who gave birth two sons and two daughters. Guru Amar das had the longest span of life. He began his pontificate at an age which known of the other nine Gurus had attained even at the time of their passing away. Guru Amar Das removed equality among women and men in society and created an ideal society by removing social evils like Sati practices, Fetal assassination Pardah practices etc. As a result, male and female society will always be indebted to them. To create a good society, there must be equality in both men and women, because without them neither society can be developed nor an ideal society can be expected. As in today's time some missions are going on, such as "Beti Bachao, Beti Pdhao", their forerunner is also acknowledged by Guru Sahib. The Guru built an ideal society, which is why he is called as the first women reformer.*

History of India reveals that position of women remained changing in society from time to time. From history it is clear that there was a time when no oblation or religious sacrifice was considered to be completed without the contribution of women. After that men improved society taken away many rights for women. Even right to choose their broom was taken from women. Then time came when family priests fixed the marriage and in many cages such manages proved to be a wrong decision.

An eastern civilization came to India and condition of women in society became more worsened. New problems and hurdles aroused for women. Tradition of *pardah* started. There was no respect for women in society. *Sati Pratha* was also the production of some time. Sikh religion not only aroused the voice against all such malpractices but also gave a respectable position to women in society,<sup>1</sup> equal to the men. In Sikh religion women has given such a highest position that no another religion can ever give to the same. In old Indian tradition we can saw the three different places of women in society. At first women has given place of Goddess and worshiped. Secondly she was given the place of better half where she was equal to men in all aspects of life and in third place she had placed to lower land and condemned in every field. We can see all these three places of women in modern society too.

During the time of Sikh Guru we can saw various kinds of women in families of different Gurus. These include a skilled sister, daughter, sister in law, mother in law and grandmother, who presented examples of sacrifices before the whole world. It is impossible to find such an examples in any other religion that the Sikh religion. Mata Tripta, Bebe Nanki, Bibi Sulakhni, Mata Khivi, Bibi Bhaani, Bibi Veero, Mata Gujari, Mata Sahib Kaur etc. are such examples which changed the whole Sikh history. In Sikh religion the females of Guru's families played an important role in spreading the teachings of Sikh religion. In fact they were the base of Sikh empire, according to history where Guru Sahibans spend their whole time in holy lectures, the females of their family took the responsibility of maintenance of royal courts where those lectures were delivered. Sikh culture was flourishing under the beautiful management of females of Guru Families.

At the time of Guru Amar Das the condition of women was very poor and measurable. Guru took many steps to remove the bad customs and evil practices like *Sati Pratha* widow marriage, female feticide, child marriages etc. from the society. For this Guru's set example in the own families. They gave full respect and equal position to their daughters and wives. Guru Amar Das wanted the same position and respect of women in society for this he took many steps for the betterment of position of women in society. At that time women were not allowed to work outside the house. They were not allowed to sit along with men as it was considered to be disgraceful. The birth of a girl child was not welcomed. A girl child was considered to be unlucky and the girl child and her mother had to face biased behavior of the family society. While the boy child was welcomed by the family and the women who gave birth to a male child was considered to be lucky.

Guru Amar Das started tradition of first *Pangat* and then *Sangat* to give equal position to women and men. As in *Pangat* all have to sit together weather men or women, to have their food. The Aim of *Pangat* tradition was not only remove castism among people but also to remove difference between men and women. Before that men and women never sit together and ate food together, as women were considered inferior to men. But Guru Amar Das ordered to sit together both men and women in *Pangat* to have their food together and for this women got right to sit equal to men.

Secondly Guru Amar Das gave respect to women and allowed them to attend royal court. Where in royal court men were allowed to listen preaching's. Women were also allowed in the same royal court to attend preaching. Where in other religious women were not allowed to attend royal court, but Guru Amar Das book that tradition and gave open invitation to women in his royal court. Women were permitted to read holly books too. In 16<sup>th</sup> century, women were not permitted to took education and there were also no a sources for women education. Private tutors educate the women of very rich families while the common women were illiterate. In *Muslims* women were not permitted to pay prayers and not even permitted to visit. Mosques women have to remain in veil (*Burqa*), i.e. they have to cover their face and body form outsides particularly from males.

According to K.M. Ashraf is opinion even in ancient India women observed a certain veil known as *Ghunghat*. Further K.M. Ashraf writes that-

*"The present elaborated and institutionalized form of Pardah dates from the time of Muslim rule."*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Giani Bhajan Singh & Giani Pritam Kaur, *Itihask Sikh Narian*, Chandni Chowk, Delhi, 2003, P-51.

<sup>2</sup> K.M. Ashraf, *Life and Condition of the People of Hindustan*, Publisher Munishi Ram Manohar Lal, New Delhi, 1988, P-171.

A Part from Guru Amar Das we don't find any criticism of *Pardah* system by any of the Sikh Guru. It was only Guru Amar Das who strongly condemned the *Pardah* or covering of face by women. According to Sikh history, once king 'Hari Chand' along with his all Queens and maids, came at Goindwal. When they reached at Guru's place they were advised by the followers that Queens should wear the simple dresses and no one should veil her face. When King Hari Chand and Queens went inside to pay their homage to Guru Sahib, one of the Queens veiled her face. When Guru saw that, he said-

"Who is this insane, who does not know the discipline of the house of the Guru and has come covering her face. If she was reluctant to see me, why has she come here?"

When that Queen heard those words of the Guru, she lost her sense. She at once go back and ran away towards the forest.<sup>3</sup> This shows Guru's strong dislike for the *Pardah* system. Quite probably, the involvement of women in *Manji* and *Peerah* system along with the *Pangat* and *Langar* system must have contributed significantly in breaking the tradition of *Pardah*.

Apart from this there was one another famous malpractice, among women to burn themselves along with their husband funeral prey. That malpractice of burnt themselves along with their husbands funeral pyre was known as *Sati Pratha*. At that time, women were considered just as an illusion which should be finished with their husbands, otherwise they will pollute the society. To burn the women was considered as religious activity may be at one time some *Rajputana* Royal families started this tradition to save the honor of their women form enemies, but to burn a women forcibly with her husband's funeral prey was inhumane and act of barbarity and no one should have such right. Ameer Khusro wrote that –

"The life sacrifice of Indian women is greater than the Moth as moth burnt in live candle while Indian women burnt them solve in dead candle i.e. funeral prey."<sup>4</sup>

Most of the women were burnt forcibly and there was no one to bother about their pain and grief. Guru Amar Das took hard steps to stop this malpractice in society. He raised his voice against *Sati Pratha* after seeing the measurable condition of women in society.

Guru Amar Das did a lot of work to stop several malpractices against women and to stop the injustice against women. Guru said if a women truly love her husband then she would died of love sickness or separation from his husband after his death and there would be no need of burning herself with pyre of her husband. It is clear from Guru Amar Das baani -

"*Satian Eeh n akhian jo mariyan lag jalann,  
Nanak satian janian je birhe chot marann.*"<sup>5</sup> (vaar suhi mahalla 3)

According to Guru Amar Das *Saties* are not those who died with their husbands, rather *Saties* are those who live the separation from the husbands, bravely. He says that after the death of their husbands, women can live their live with patience and peace in sweet memories of their husbands and this would be signs of true *Sati*.

"*Bhee so satian janian , seel santokh rehan,  
Sewan sayin aapna, nit uth samralan.*"<sup>6</sup>

(vaar suhi mahalla 3)

Guru Amar Das says that death of husband is painful and women bear that pain already so there is no need to burn her to show her sufferings, and if she didn't love her husband then her life sacrifice will be of no use. Guru Amar Das says that life is precious and it should not be ended like this. According to Guru, death and separation of any relative is God's will one should take such happenings as God's will and live life peacefully. Who remained in God's will automatically got *Naam Daan* (Baptism) as both happiness and sorrow are God's gifts.<sup>7</sup>

Guru Amar Das delivered the orders to stop *Sati Pratha* at different parts of country. Those who will not obey the orders will be considered as inattentive and unmannerly. Guru Amar Das remained successful to stop the *Sati Pratha* to very extent. *Sati Pratha* was one of the major reasons behind, widow remarriages being not so famous. Widow remarriages were permitted in *Vedic* era by both religious and *Hindu* society but it his custom almost vanished after 200 B.C. previously widow remarriages were in custom but when *Sati Pratha* came in existence, widow remarriages custom got vanished widow women's condition was very pathetic in society. To saw a widow on the way was considered to be ill women. Although Guru Nanak Dev has stated the widow remarriages but Guru Amar Das brought it in practice Guru Amar Das also started remarriage of divorcee women. At that time widow women were not permitted to remarriage, however the younger they are Guru Amar Das took remarkable steps in this regard.

The Queen of king of *Haripur* who ran away in forest after losing her senses, was not accepted by king again and were abandoned. Guru remarried her according to Sikh history. One Sikh named Sachansach was a great devotee of the Guru Amar Das. One day he went to forest to cut the trees and there someone caught him in a strong grip. His axe fell down and a rope entangled to his legs. When he set him free from rope some house he saw a maid women laughing at him. When he moved towards her, she ran away in the forests.<sup>8</sup> Next day he met the Guru Amar Das and requested him to give him one of his wooden shoes so that he could cure the insanity of the Queen. Guru smiled and gives one of his wooden shoes to Sachansach. Taking that wooden shoe Sachansach again went to forest and began to search the Queen. After some time he found the Queen and any how managed to touch the wooden shoe to the Queen. He saw a miracle. The Queen became normal and get ashamed to saw her turned clothes.

Bhai Sachansach gave his turban to Queen and she worn it around her. Sachansach took her in front of Guru, Guru asked the lady devotes to took her for bath and gone her new cloths. When she came back in new cloths she was looking very beautiful. Guru Amar Das remarried the Queen to Sachansach and give them his second wooden shoe so that they might understand the secret of married life.<sup>9</sup>

From this the intensions of Guru were very clear. He himself remarried the abandoned Queen at royal court and set custom of remarriages of abandoned or widow women. Guru Amar Das was well aware that no society can develop unless the condition of women in that society is not improved. The reason behind the large population of widow was the child marriages of girl child. At that time custom was

<sup>3</sup> Aulakh Ajit Singh, *Life Story of Sikh Gurus*, Singh Brother, Amritsar, 2011, P-48.

<sup>4</sup> Piara Singh Padam, *Guru Granth Sanket Kosh*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1977, P-60, Also See

Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, *Mahan Kosh*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1960, P-112.

<sup>5</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, P-787.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, P-787.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, P-787.

<sup>8</sup> Aulakh Ajit Singh, *Life Story of Sikh Gurus*, Publisher Singh Brother, Amritsar, 2011, P-49.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, P-49.

to marry very little girls to the men four times elder than them. Parents who refused to do that have to be punished by the society. According to *Purashar Madhav* the age differences between bride and bridegroom should be 30/12, 28/8, 30/10, 21/7 was mostly 3:1 should be the ratio. According to the *Madan Parijazat* parents should marry their daughters in very younger age, when girls not even know how to wear cloths, to even a worthless, unemployed person.<sup>10</sup>

The very custom of child-marriage started from the foreign aggressions and it reached its peak during the time of *Muslim* attacks. Along with the widow-marriage, Guru tried to end this centuries old curse in Indian society. It is a big contribution to the Indian society by Guru that he initiated concrete steps to end the practice of child-marriage in society. First of all, by marrying both his daughters in the elder age, in a simple way without dowry, he set a precedent among his followers.<sup>11</sup>

By that act, he put a deep impact of his advice on his followers. To prove his point, one day he hinted to the congregation in his court to locate a suitable bride for an orphan boy named Murari. One of his disciples Seeha Uppal declared in Guru's court that his daughter Mukho had grown-up and he wanted to marry her off with Murari.<sup>12</sup> The father of Mukho asked her consent about the match, before marrying her to Murari. It shows that the Guru had a deep impact of his advice on his followers and most of them started marrying their daughters in the ripe age. It is a great contribution by Guru Amar Das to the society.

Guru Amar Das was the first social-reformer who initiated effective steps for the betterment of womanhood. At that time, the tradition of female infanticide was very common in society. From ancient times, the birth of a girl child was considered as a bad omen and burden on the family whereas the birth of a son ensured cheers in the household. After the birth of a son, people used to congratulate the family and perform many rituals. If a girl was born, there was an atmosphere of grief among the family members and the relatives. Among the people belonging to *Gakhar* caste in hill areas, the practice of female infanticide was known to be prevalent before the invasion of Mehmood Gaznavi. When the fighters and valorous warriors, felt unable to face the enemy, they adopted this inhuman way of saving the honor of their daughters and sisters. The practice of female infanticide was prevalent among *Rajputs* and many other self-respecting Hindu agriculturist families.<sup>13</sup> Otherwise also, the girls were not looked after well, due to which many of them lost their lives. First of all, Guru Nanak Dev vehemently opposed that practice. Thereafter Guru Angad Dev carried forward that thought. Guru Amar Das also strongly opposed this practice. One of his verses indicates this. He scolded them who established relationship with those indulging in female infanticide. Guru Amar Das also had two daughters named Dani and Bhani whom he loved very much. Both the daughters also looked after Guru Amar Das and Guru's shrine very well.<sup>14</sup> Although Guru Amar Das was elder in age but he did un-tiring struggle and made all possible efforts to raise the status of women in society, condemned those who considered women as low and inferior; he raised the status of women at par with men.

In Punjab, a new-born female infant was put in Pitchers or water-pots and buried in the ground.<sup>15</sup> There were, of course, many other methods adopted for infanticide. Following couplet was recited as she was laid down –

*"Eat jiggery, spin your cotton,  
don't come yourself, send brothers instead."*<sup>16</sup>

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, known as an important symbol of the social status. Guru Amar Das was the first Guru who spoke against the prevalent practice of female infanticide.

In *Mughal* era, prostitution dens remained open in the cities of India where the helplessness and weakness of the woman hood were exploited.<sup>17</sup> To stop that exploitation of the woman hood and improve her family life, Guru Amar Das sermonized both men and the women. There are various references to the prostitution in the contemporary sources. Guru Amar Das, for instance, had confirmed the existence of prostitution in ancient times when he wrote –

*"Ajmal who mates with prostitutes, he too was saved,  
uttering the name of God."*<sup>18</sup>

In *Adi Granth*, there are about a dozen references to prostitutes.<sup>19</sup> Quite obviously, all the references are in derogatory terms.

There are clear injunctions against the most heinous crime; a practice of female infanticide was categorically prohibited by Guru Amar Das. Guru Amar Das also denounced the tradition of *Purdah* system. In fact, he even assigned *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 Amar Das knew that no society can progress until proper status is accorded to its women, for this Guru Amar Das initiated concrete steps to free women from undignified shackles. By doing so, he had done a great act of countenance by presenting an untouched and healthy option to the women society.

Whereas Guru Amar Das initiated concrete steps to put an end to such malaise, he also made the women aware of their rightful duties and responsibilities. Guru ji advised women to remain away from un-womanly acts. According to Guru, a woman is not a woman who indulges in un-womanly acts. In fact, a real woman is one, who remains within the dictates of her husband. A woman should not indulge in acts which lower her dignity. According to Guru Amar Das, a make-up of show is worthless; it is a sign of vice. A dress of bright colors is a symbol of egoism. A wise and understanding woman, despite shedding the ego, wears the gown of forgiveness and humility so that she commands respect in the world by getting respect in her parent's as well in her in-law's home. A virtuous woman does not believe in

<sup>10</sup> Singh Bhagat, *History of the Punjab*, Punjab State University, Chandigarh, 1983, PP-296-97.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, P-61.

<sup>12</sup> Singh Balvir, *Teeji Patshahi, Shri Guru Amar Das Ji*, Language Deptt., Patiala, 1975, P-274.

<sup>13</sup> Singh Bhagat, *History of the Punjab*, Punjab State University, Chandigarh, 1983, P-297.

<sup>14</sup> Deep Dalip Singh, *Guru Amar Das*, Punjabi University Patiala, 1990, P-2.

<sup>15</sup> *Hoshiarpur District Gazetteer*, Vol-III, Lahore, 1904, P-40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, P-40.

<sup>17</sup> *Jagbani*, Jalandhar, 13 September, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> *Adi Granth*, P-1995.

<sup>19</sup> *Adi Granth*, PP-238-528.

exhibitionism.<sup>20</sup> A lamp of wisdom always glows in a virtuous lady. She can differentiate what is good or bad for her. She is capable of keeping everyone happy by acting according to the occasion and also begets happiness herself.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to this, a widow, self-willed, abandoned and ignoble woman remains entangled in the dragnet of materialism; her knowledgeable eye always remains shut.<sup>22</sup> Generally, a woman is condemned as a hypocrite and characterless; that she does not love from heart. She is often accused of having something in heart and something else on lips.

Guru Amar Das said that a charming woman is one who has all the noble qualities of woman hood that is why Guru had addressed a noble woman with adjectives such as beautiful, life-companion, virtuous, wise, tolerant, patient, moral, skilful etc. Guru had repeatedly highlighted different aspects and qualities of a woman's life. He had explained the art of living by giving varied examples of housewives.

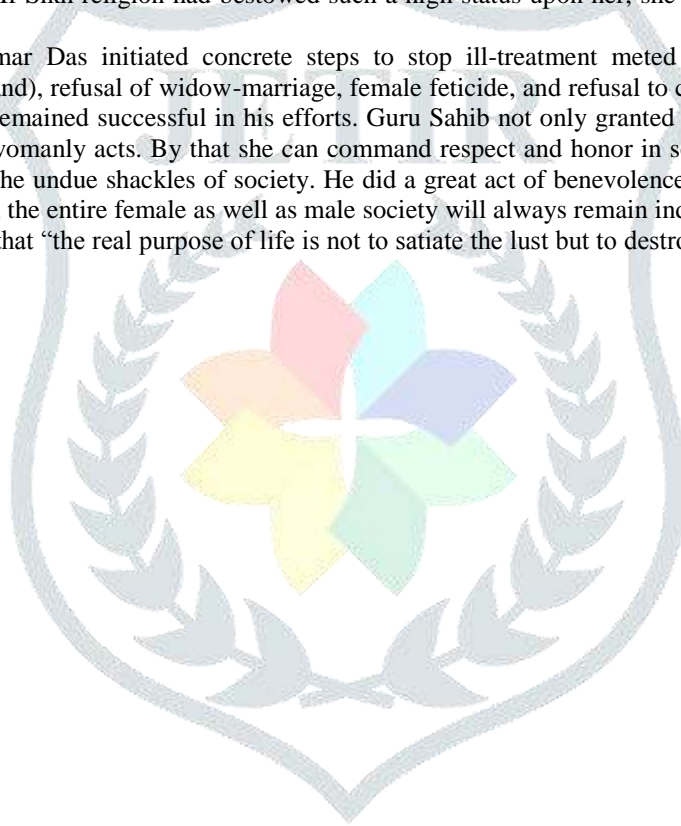
In fact, a woman deserves to be called a woman who remains within the will of her husband and serves him. Such a woman is rewarded with 'Nine Treasures.'<sup>23</sup> She is virtuous and beautiful; the one who ignores her husband is self-willed that wastes her life. The woman, who respects the will of her God-like husband, is bride in the real sense; she is the fortunate one.<sup>24</sup>

Guru Sahib, while spending the life socially, had explained the relation of a man and a woman as that of one flame and two bodies (Ek jyot dooyi murti) While living in society, the rights of both are equal; none is superior to the other. This sentiment created by Guru Sahib played an important role in changing the religious, social and official structure of society. In the contemporary society of Guru Era, it was considered a religious duty of a woman to remain caged in the four-walls of a house bearing the atrocities of a man. Guru Sahib showed a different direction, filled with self-esteem, to such women.

Guru Sahib always viewed woman as a form of merit. Firstly he lashed out at the wrong notions which were not tired of saying that a woman can never attain salvation. Those who used to say that a woman always needs a father, than a husband and later-on sons for security, they were made to understand by Guru sahib that a woman is complete in herself.

A male always either ran away from a woman or ran after her. So Guru Sahib showed a new *path* that a female was not low from any aspect, she was an equal partner. If Sikh religion had bestowed such a high status upon her, she too had not hesitated from performing her role.

Likewise, whereas Guru Amar Das initiated concrete steps to stop ill-treatment meted out to women like tradition of *Sati* (immolating self on the death of husband), refusal of widow-marriage, female feticide, and refusal to child marriage of girls and giving equal rights to women at par with men, he remained successful in his efforts. Guru Sahib not only granted due right to women in society, he also advised them to keep away from un-womanly acts. By that she can command respect and honor in society. That way Guru Amar Das took strong measures to free women from the undue shackles of society. He did a great act of benevolence for women by bringing about a novel and healthy option for them, for which the entire female as well as male society will always remain indebted to him. The time is not far when humanity will ponder over the matter that "the real purpose of life is not to satiate the lust but to destroy it by shedding wordily comforts and enjoying inner peace."



<sup>20</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, P-786.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, P-426.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, P-160.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, P-66.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, P-950.