

Women's Condition In Past, Present, and future period

Manpreet Kaur

India is a nation full of diversities. People from different religions, languages and races live in this country.¹ This refers collectively to the thousands of distinct and unique cultures of all religions and communities that are present in the country. Women are an important part of the society. Nature has given an important role to women. Due to the differences between the men and the women, the society has been divided into two parts from centuries. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. Women have played an important role in the society since the beginning.² Women fulfil their duties as daughters, mothers and wives throughout her life. During some periods women were known as '*devis*' in the community.³ Other than this, it has been proven throughout history that women have many different qualities.⁴

In the ancient periods, people were known to live in the jungles. At that time humans were highly dependent on nature for their survival. The roles of the men and women were defined and definite, so as to fulfil the responsibilities of the family and society at large. Women were an important part of the society. The status of women in the society in Punjab has been highly dynamic i.e. during some periods women were considered as an important part of the family and society to such an extent that they were also worshipped as *devis* in some eras while at times they had no say neither in the households nor in the society.

In the ancient times, the major role of the women in the society was to give birth to children and take care of them. With passage of time, the social, political, economic and religious development of the society began.⁵

During this period, there was no major difference between the status of men and women within the society. However, during the slave era, some people emerged to be rich and landlords. These landlords normally violated the women who worked in their lands.⁶ During the Indus civilization in India, both the genders of the society were equal. Both the men and the women

¹ Dr. M.K. Gill, women and religion, Vijay Publication, New Delhi, 1997, pp-98.

² Pardeep Kaur, Nari Narivad and Budh dharam, Gracious Books, Patiala, 2017, pp- 92.

³ Punjab History Conference (45th session), March, 15-17, 2013, pp-729.

⁴ Bhai Seva Singh, Bahadur Singhnia, Khalsa Samachar, Vazir Hind Press, 1925, pp-5.

⁵ M. Haralambos, Sociology, Thomas and Perspe, ctives Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1980, pp-371.

⁶ Women, Peace and Security (4th International Conference), Organised by Women Studies Centre, pp-3.

had equal rights. There were no restrictions on the lifestyle, food and clothing of women. It is also believed that during that period. Women used to bath with milk. The women also participated in the discussions regarding the major decisions of the society. Therefore, it can be said that women had an equal say in the community. However, in the Mahendjaro and Harrappa civilizations of this period, the status of women was greater than that of their counterparts. During this era, the name of the family was related to the name woman in the family i.e. it did not rest on the name of the father. Archeologists have discovered that the people of the Indus civilization worshipped Pasupati Dev and Mat Devi.

Cultures are said to have been started during the Aryan period in India.⁷ During the Vedic period many invaders attacked on India. Due to which the status of women in the society kept on changing frequently.⁸ However, during this period the conditions of the society were favorable for the women i.e. the birth of the girl child was not considered unholy. Women had a say in their marriage and were given the authority to marry who they chose. During this era, the Kings and Queens sat on the thrones together. Women also participated in religious events. Moreover, some Rishi women, also wrote some *Mantars* and *Vedas*. The women of this period were proficient in art.⁹ However, the widows were not allowed to remarry during this period. According to the law, the women were not completely independent but the status of women in the households was appreciable. Women played an important part in the religious activities. During this era, the jewelers of women were taken special care.

The clothes worn by the people in the Vedic period are majorly divided into three parts. The first was the inner garments which was known as *neviha*, the lower garment called *paridhana* which was pleated in front and these were of various colours and an upper garment called *uttariya*. The clothes of the rich were decorated with gold. Gold jewellery and flower garlands were a common sight in the fares. Both the women and men of this era wore turbans. The common foods eaten in the household of this civilisation included milk, curd, vegetables, fruits, peas etc. Meat was eaten during festivals and important events. However, salt was not used in this era. The sources of water included the waterfalls and the rivers. Other than this, wells were also dug to provide water to the locals.

The other two important drinks of this period included the *soma* and *surah*. *Soma* was a tree sap which was extracted from the trees of the top of the Himalayan Mountains while *Surah* was an intoxicating drink. Women also performed in singing and dancing during occasions. Therefore, it can be said that women played an important role in the development of this

⁷ Muhammad Latif, Tareekh-E-Punjab, Sampatrishi Publication, Delhi, 1994, pp-4.

⁸ Giani Atma Singh, Rani Sahib Kaur, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1996, pp-3,4.

⁹ Women, Peace and Security (4th International Conference), Organised by Women Studies Centre, pp-3,4.

civilization.¹⁰ Hence, women held a high and important position in the Aryan civilization of the Vedic era.¹¹

In the later Vedic period, women went to and participated in fares and there is no evidence of *pardha* in this period.¹² However, the status of women had now been related to the males according to the Brahmin *granths* of this period.

During this period, wives were considered as partners, daughter were considered unholy while the sons were considered to be of utmost importance. Female foeticide was for the first time mentioned in the Brahmin *granths*. Men were allowed to marry on multiple occasions while women were not allowed to marry more than once.¹³ The status of women in the society plummeted during the Vedic period.¹⁴ During this era women were allowed to eat food after their husbands had eaten. Women would not anything without the permission of their husbands. With the advent of the Mahabharata period, the custom of *sati* had begun. Until the advent of the Upanishads, women were allowed to study the Vedic *granths*. They discussed with the males about the traditional and spiritual facts. After observing the *Thori Gatha granth* we can conclude that there some scholars who had deep knowledge about religion in the Mourya period.¹⁵

The Buddhist religion did not have great views regarding the women in the society. The custom of *pardha* had not started by that time. The widows were allowed to remarry and divorces were also allowed during this period. However, the Buddhist religion was against multiple marriage. They considered women to be the ones who were responsible for one to go to hell. Women were considered lesser powerful and intelligent than the males. They were not given equal status as that of the men in the spiritual and religious aspects.¹⁶

The status of women was favourable during the Mourya period. Women were independent during this era. They were employed as servants to the Kings. However, multiple marriages were permitted for example Ashoka had four wives. There were limited observations of the *sathi pratha*. The crimes against the women were severely punished. Female artists, actors and dramatists were promoted during this period. The *das pratha* was famous during this era. The people of this society in that era believed in superstitions. Multiple marriages were allowed in this community. There is some evidence that the *sati pratha* was prevalent towards the North

¹⁰ Ramesh Chandar Hemchandar Rai Chaudhary, Bharat Da Bhetar Ihtihis, Mechmeleon Publishers, India Limited, Haryana Punjab, 1954, pp-121.

¹¹ Dr. P.L. Bhargava, India in the Vedic Age, Lucknow, 1971, pp-245.

¹² Ramesh Chandar Hemchandar Rai Chaudhary, Bharat Da Bhetar Ihtihis, Mechmeleon Publishers, India Limited, Haryana Punjab, 1954, pp-200.

¹³ B.P. Saha and K.S. Behera, Ancient History of India, Delhi, 1998, pp-86.

¹⁴ Ibid-86.

¹⁵ Pardeep Kaur, Narivad and Budh Dharm, Gracious Books, Patiala, 2017, pp-49.

¹⁶ Harbans singh, The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism, Patiala Punjab University, 1999.

West of this community i.e. amongst the society of the army personnel.¹⁷ Therefore, the custom of sati was prevalent amongst the soldiers. The first evidence of the *sati pratha* was given in the *eran* archive of the 510 A.D. The event of the *sati* performed by the wife of the army commander of Bhanu Gupta, Gopraj of was mentioned. Other than this Harshvardhan saved his sister who was just about to perform *sati* in the jungles. During this period the pregnant women were allowed to live until the birth of their children. After the birth of their children, the women had to hand over the children to someone else and themselves had to perform *sati* i.e. had to give up their lives in fire.¹⁸ During this era, the women were given the rights of the property of their husbands upon his death of the couple did not have any son. Women were also allowed to sell their *istari dhan*.

However, the Hindu women had no right over their father's property. Therefore, they were completely dependent upon their husbands financially. However, the women had rights over the dowry and jewellery received from their parents. This was known as '*istari dhan*'.¹⁹

The men had the responsibility of fulfilling the wishes of their wives. The husbands of the Hindu women had to take care of the basic needs of their wives before leaving for long trips.

However, the status of the widow was poor. The rich, landlords and the upper classes were allowed to have multiple wives because of their wealth. This led to the promotion of the notion of women as a treasure. The women of the *sudhar* caste had more freedom. While the women of the upper classes did not have the freedom to work or have financial independence.²⁰ The women of the poor households worked in shops to increase the earnings off their respective households. The women of the farmer in the village helped their husbands in the fields. The women normally had the responsibility to take care of the animals.

The women indulged in singing. There were scarcely any women who undertook for higher studies and if so they were mostly the women of the upper classes. They were educated in Sanskrit. The custom of *sawavmber* i.e. the tradition where a woman chooses her husband also prevailed in the community during this period.²¹

The medieval period of the Indian community witnessed the rise of different cultures. These included the Rajputs, Sultanate, Mughals and the Sikhs. There are many evils in the society during the reign of the Rajputs, but during this period the status of women was

¹⁷ B.K Aganhotri, Bharitiye Ihtihās and Sanskrit, Sunil Sachdev duara parkashan, Ravi Sachdev, Delhi, May 1996, pp-78.

¹⁸ Dr. P.L. Bhargava, India in the Vedic Age, Lucknow, 1971, pp-245.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp-246.

²⁰ Dr. Prem Parkash Ola, Nirmal Kumar Aria, Bhartiye Ihtihās Pram Se Lekhar 1947 A.D., Arya CompetitionTimes,2018,pp-98.

²¹ Ramesh Chandar Hemchandrarai Chaudhary, Bharat Da Bhetar Ihtihās, Mechmeleon Publishers, India Limited, Haryana Punjab,1954.,pp-98.

favourable. The *pardha partha* was not present in the society. There was no restriction on the education of the children. Some women were eminent scholars and were capable in indulging in debates with other scholars. Some of the famous female scholars of that period include Indulekha, Morika, Silah, Supadhra, Padamshree Vijeka, Madalsa and Lakshmi. Women were free to choose their husbands. The Hindu Rajputs were not only brave but were also honest and stubborn.²²

The women of this period were educated and had the knowledge of the Sanskrit language. Other than this, they were also trained in painting, singing, dancing and other arts. The women of the upper classes were highly skilled in various arts. They had the knowledge of horse riding, swordsmanship and use of other weapons. The *Johar pratha* existed in the community during this period. Just as the sati pratha was a symbol of the affection showed by the women towards their husbands in the medieval period, *Johar pratha* was one such custom of the Rajput society. When the Rajputs were defeated in the battles, than women of their families burnt themselves in fire, so as not to be caught alive by the enemies. The *Johar* performed by the queens of the Kampila and Chander after the defeat of Raja Hamir Den at the hands of Muhammad Tuglak is quite famous in the history of the country.²³ The women died upon the death of their husbands during this period. The men who would desert the battle fields for the fear of the loss of their lives were not well received by their wives. The women also performed in the occasions by singing and dancing. These occasions acted as a source of entertainment. Both the Rajput men and women wore jewellery. The Rajput were known for their bravery. The women themselves sent their husbands to the battle fields. The only problem that presided in the Rajput community was that they had internal conflicts. Hence, there was no unity amongst the Rajputs. Some of the evils that presided in the Rajput were female foeticide and early marriages.²⁴ Other than this, the conditions of the widows was very poor and they were considered as the bearers of misfortune.

The Hindus were majority during the Sultanate period. Many battle took place in this era. Many women and children were killed in these battles. The ones who survived were imprisoned and sold as slaves. The Turkish Sultans had an interest for Hindu women. They detached these women their religion and forced them to accept Islam. These Turkish Sultans were known for kidnapping and forcefully taking these Hindu women. It was due the fear of these Turks that the Hindus began marry their daughters at an early age. The women were not educated in the Hindu community. However, according to some views, the conditions of the Hindus was decent during the reign of the Turkish rulers.²⁵ However, according to the rules of these Sultans,

²² Fauja Singh, Punjab Da Ihtihās, Jilat-3 (A.D.1000-1526), Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2014,pp-39.

²³Babar, Tajak-Eh-Babri, Sang-E-Meel,Lahore,2006, pp-73.

²⁴ Alveruni, Tehkik-Ull-Hind,Osmaina Oriental Publication Bureau,Hyderabad,1958 pp-29.

²⁵ Ibid, pp-36.

sometimes, the whole family of the person would be killed upon the mistake of one person. The rights of the women were the same as the servants of the house to which she had been married to. The Sultans in Delhi also had a separate place for the women in their castles which was known as '*Haram*'. However, during this period, *Jajiya* was not levied upon the women, children and the mentally disabled.²⁶

The women were dependent on men on most aspect and for majority of their lives. During the early periods of their lives, women were dependent on the will of their fathers. After marriage this authority was given to their husband. Hence, after marriage women had to obey their husbands. Normally, they would be highly oppressed by their mother-in-laws. It was considered her responsibility to keep her in-laws pleased. Upon being unable to do so, their lives would become miserable. While in the Muslim families such women were divorced. Other than this, women had the responsibility to take care of the household chores which included cleaning, washing utensils and preparing food. Moreover, in the villages women also had to take care of the feeding and milking the animals. Upon getting old, women would become dependent on their children.

Although the custom of divorces existed in the Muslim society, it was one sided i.e. it was very easy for a Muslim man to divorce his wife while the wife had not such provisions. The life of the divorced Muslim woman would become very miserable. The main reasons for this being that she neither had a place in her father's house nor in her husband's house. Hence, most of these women would end up as prostitutes.²⁷

During that era, women were not allowed to live with any other man except their husband. However, women were not prompted to stay away from men because most of the women of the upper classes were kept busy in the kitchen and other household works. While the women of the lower classes i.e. the *sudhars* worked in the fields and took care of the animals. The widows would be given two choices; the first being to die by throwing herself in the fire of the cremation of her husband i.e. to perform *sati* and the second being to live the rest of her life alone. These women were forced to do so, so as not to disgrace the names of their dead husbands. Only the elder women. Only the elder women were exempted from this custom because they were protected by their sons. According to the *sati pratha*, the women who gave their lives in the fire burning the bodies of their dead husbands were called *sahmarna*. While the women whose husbands died abroad, died holding an item belonging to their husband, upon receiving the message of the death of their husband. Such women were called *anumarn*. The women of the

²⁶ Fauja Singh, *Punjab Da Ihtihās*, Jilat-3 (A.D.1000-1526), Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2014,pp-98.

²⁷ Ibid,pp-38.

veshva caste performed by singing and dancing in the society. They performed during important occasions like those of marriages, fares, gatherings etc.²⁸

The Hindus were more literate than the Muslims during this era. Due to the lack of education the society was engulfed with superstitions. The Hindus mostly believed in fallacies and delusions.²⁹

During the era of the Mughals, the society was mainly divided in to two parts; the Muslims and the Hindus. As the rulers were Muslims themselves during this period, the Muslim community was given priority. The conditions of the Hindus during this period was deprived. They had to pay the religious tax known as *Jajiya* and some other taxes. However, there were many social evils in the Hindu society. Some of which included the caste system, the *pardha pratha*, *sati pratha* and early marriages etc.³⁰

Many tribes accepted Islam during the medieval period. Many changes occurred upon the emergence of the Muslim rule in the country. However, the majority of the people in the country were from the Hindu community. The women, men and children lived together. After marriage, the females were supposed to join her in-laws home. Upon the death of the husband of the woman, the children would be raised by the common members of the family.

The Muslim rulers had slaves and servants to serve them. They were constituted of both men and women. Slaves were sold and bought to take care of the women residing in the '*harams*'. The women slaves were divided in to two parts. One was given the responsibility to take care of the household works while the other served the women of the '*janankhana*'. The Hindu and Muslim communities were united during the reign of Akbar. Badshah Akbar not only married Hindu women but also gave many Hindus important positions in his administration and *darbar*. Both the men and women of this era wore pieces of jewellery. Most of the women wore jewellery. The clothes of this era were mostly made of cotton, wool and other fabrics. Education was not given much importance during the Delhi Sultanate reign. While in the Mughal period, education was imparted through the *madrasia*. Himayu created a library in Delhi which had books of the Farsi language. Both the Hindus and Muslims were given education during this period.³¹

²⁸ Fauja Singh, Punjab Da Ihtihās, Jilat-3 (A.D.1000-1526), Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2014, pp-244.

²⁹ Bhagat Singh, Madhkalin Bharat Dia Sansthavah, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1997, pp-5.

³⁰ Professor Fauja Singh, Principal Teja Singh, Punjab Da Ihtihās (1469-1799), Bagh Pehla, SBD, pp-79.

³¹ Dr. Muhammad Idres, Mughal Bharat, 1526-1717 A.D., Lokh Geet Parkashan, Chandigarh, 1989, pp-3,4,6,7,10,24,35.

Women were considered to be the property of their father and husbands in Arab. During this period, the Kings kept many women with them.³² However, some women also had political power for example the daughter of Shah Jahan had a say in the administration during the reign of her father. Women indirectly played a part in the social, tradition and cultural aspects of the society. Women also participated in singing and dancing. All the decision in the court of Agra regarding *sati* were taken by Jahangir himself during his rule.³³

Shah Jahan was a stern *Suni* Muslims. He did not marry with Rajput women as his father did. During his reign, only Muslim women were allowed to stay in the *haram*. Shah Jahan had imposed restrictions on the entry of Hindu and Christian women in the *haram*. They married the Hindu women of Badhodi and Bhimbar after converting them to Islam. The Hindu women who refused to perform *sati* were fined. However, to dodge the fines, these women were allowed to convert to Islam. About four thousand women were forced to do so. The women that came to the *janankhana* would be converted to Islam and were then married off to the Muslims.

There were many social evils that existed in the society during the rule of the Rajputs. These social evils were ended by Akbar during his reign. First of all, he began his efforts to end the *sati pratha*. Other than this, he gave an order to stop child marriages. He also imposed restrictions on female foeticide. Badshah Akbar passed the orders to prohibit the marriages of boys less than 16 years and girls less than 14 years.³⁴

The rights of the Hindu women were taken away after the *Rig Ved* period. After this, the situation of the women fluctuated with time and was mostly miserable. The freedom of women was taken away. Other than this, their influence on the religious, social and political aspects of the society kept on diminishing. During this period, many members of the Hindu community joined Islam to safeguard themselves from the caste system. The Hindu gave preferences to Idol worship during this period. The conditional status of the women in the society had highly deteriorated during this period. Many Hindu women were kidnapped and forcefully taken by the Muslims throughout this period. It was due to this fear that parents started marrying their children at early ages. However, some people married their young daughters to older men in the greed of money. The women of this period normally wore *saries*, *cholies* and *lenghas*. While the poor people covered their bodies with a pieces of cloth (*chadhar*).³⁵

³² Bhagat Singh, Madhkalin Bharat Dia Sansthava, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1997, pp-4.

³³ Satish Chandar, Madhkalin Bharat, (Sultanate Se Mughal Kal Tak), Ravi Majumdar dvara Delhi, 2001, pp-85.

³⁴ Latif, Sayeed Muhammad, Madhkalin Bharat Da Ihtias, 1000-1750 A.D., , Madhan, Patiala, 2016, pp-290.

³⁵ K.M Ashraf, Life and conditions of the people of Hindustan, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharial, 1967, pp-97.

As the Hindus and the Muslims lived together, they influenced each other. The connection and conflicts between the Hindu and the Muslim societies led to the birth of a new community named the Sikhs. This new community did not follow the erroneous customs and tradition that presided in both these societies. The main aim of this new community was to form a new society which was free of superstitions, social evils, hypocrisy etc.

This newly formed community, ended the injustice towards the women and elevated the status of the women. Women were treated equal to the men in this society. Other than this, multiple marriages were promoted. Women were encouraged to marry men with qualities and moral values. However, this society was against adultery and lust.³⁶ With time, the Sikh religion gained an important position amongst the other religions of the world. This religion was started by Guru Nanak Dev and promoted by his successors. Other than this, various *masands* and *manjidhars* were appointed to preach about the religion to the masses. The beginning of the Sikh religion took place in the medieval period. It gained a lot of support and followers from the Eastern and Western parts of the society. This religion acted as an awakening for the masses. However, during this period, Christianity had a lot of influence in the society but the preachers of this religion had become corrupt. On the other side, the Hindus started emphasising on superstitions. This religion began as an efforts to eliminate these superstitions from the society.³⁷

The Sikh religion was established by Guru Nanak Dev. It is due to this reason he is known as the founder of the Sikh religion. He spent a majority of his life in the service of the people. From Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh, this religion played an important role in promoting brotherhood in the community.³⁸ Guru Nanak Dev showed the people the righteous path. Women had no respect for centuries due to the ancient customs prevalent in the society. The status of women was deteriorated to such an extent in that male dominated society that she had to be dependent on the mercy of the men. Therefore, women were not considered equal to men, Even during Guru Nanak Dev's time, women were not allowed to go outside and neither were they treated properly.³⁹ Women had to cover their whole bodies while going outside. Girls were mostly married at younger ages. Other than this, women were bought and sold just as animals during that period. Men were allowed to have multiple marriages. During that era, the women that performed sati were appreciated and on the other side widows were considered wretched. While the Muslims treated the women like objects. These women spent most of their time inside the houses away from the sight of the society. Other than this, the *burkha* custom was

³⁶ Dr. Karam Singh, Madhkalin Punjab Di Dharm Chetna, 300 Khalsa Sajna, Tijhi Shtabdi, 1999, pp-34,35.

³⁷ Bhai Santokh Singh, Gurpartap Suraj Granth, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, 1990.

³⁸ Principal Teja Singh, Dr. Ganda Singh, Sikh Ihtihis (1465-1765), Punjabi University Patiala, 2013, pp-1.

³⁹ Ibid, pp-1,2.

also prevalent in the society. Although, the Quran had prohibited female foeticide, this practice still continued in the society at that time.⁴⁰

Guru Nanak Dev emphasised on the importance of respecting women by saying that she not only gives birth to common people but also to Kings, Gurus, *Pirs* and other important people. He first of all laid emphasis on the respect of women, he promoted the equality of women in the society. Guru Nanak Dev gave women the same status the men had in the *sangat*. He also ended the *pardha pratha*. He also raised the status of the widow women asking the society why the women had to suffer after the death of her husband.⁴¹ Hence, Guru Nanak Dev Ji supported the remarriage of widows. It was due to this reason that the custom of remarrying of widow women became prominent amongst the Jatts of Punjab. The widows were normally married to the elder or younger brother of the deceased husband. This custom was known as *Chadar Pauna* or *Kaleva*.

Guru Nanak Dev said that established of a community could not be possible without the women, However, ironically the same society had no respect for women. Guru Nanak Dev accentuated on up lifting every sector of the society because he knew that the development of the all the classes, groups and genders of the society was necessary for the growth of the community. Hence, women are an important part of the society. Guru Nanak Dev attached the respect of women as the morals of the religion.⁴² Guru Nanak Dev said that it was not right to disrespect those who give birth to kings, Guru, *pirs*, warriors etc. In order to end the status of women as 'sudhars', Guru Nanak Dev said the following:

'So kyo mandha akiye
Jitt jame rajan//,
Bhand jamiye bandh nimiye
Bhand mangan vehah//
Bhande hove dosti bhando chale rah//
Jitt jame rajan//
Bhand muah bhand bhaliye bhand hova bhadan//
Bandho hi bhand upjhe bhande bhaj nah koye//
Nanak bhande bahra iko sach soye//

⁴⁰ M.G Gupta, Shri Guru Nanak Dev (Bhagti and Atmak Santi De Punj), Sahit Sadhan, New Delhi, 1997, pp-22,23.

⁴¹ Dr. Mahinder Kaur Gill, Guru Ghar Dia Neehan, National Book Shop Delhi, 1998, pp-25,26.

⁴² Dr. Paramvir Singh, Dr. Parduman Shah Singh, Bharat De Parmukh Dharam, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1992, pp-191.

The following stanza states that the whole world is born through women i.e. Rajas and Maharajas are born through her. Hence, it would not be right to disrespect her.⁴³ Guru Nanak Dev raised the voice against the discrimination against women. During this period the status of Hindu women poor.⁴⁴ Guru Nanak Dev taught the member of the Sikh community to stay away from lust and greed. He urges them to focus on praying and undertaking benevolent works. Hence, Guru Nanak Dev not only showed the righteous path to the people but also played a part in the development of the society.⁴⁵ Therefore, the status of women improved with the elimination of the social evils from the community. They were treated as equal to the males. To give a practical display of this equality, Guru Nanak Dev started the *langar* and *panghat pratha* in every *Dharamshala*, where both the genders of the society sat together to eat *langar*.⁴⁶ The customs and traditions started by Guru Nanak Dev proved to be more effective than those started by Kabir and Ramanand. Hence, it can be said that Guru Nanak Dev played an important role in the establishment of respect for women in the society.⁴⁷

Guru Nanak Dev not only thought women to be equal to men but also thought that in some aspects she was superior to her counterpart. It is women who give birth and raise children. Hence, the development of the society is impossible without the contribution of women. Therefore, it can be said relationships cannot be established without the support of women. Guru Nanak Dev started the *langar* and *pangat pratha*. The main aim of this customs was to eliminate the discrimination that prevailed in the society on the grounds of gender, wealth, castes, religion etc. This was achieved as the sudhars, poor, Hindus, Muslims, rich and upper classes all sat together to eat *langar*. This played an important part not only in giving women the respect they deserved in the society but also in the up lifting of the weaker sections of the society. The status of women raised as in *langar* both the genders sat together to eat food. This led to the development of respect for women in the society. Guru Nanak Dev considered all the different classes and religions in the society to be equal. Guru Nanak Dev used the notion “*nah koi Hindu nah koi Musalman*”, to promote equality and brotherhood amongst the two sections of the community. According to him all members of the society were equal. Therefore, it can be said that Guru Nanak Dev played a vital role in the transformation of the society.⁴⁸

⁴³ Das Vishaka Singh, Sant Sepoy Janetpur, Malwa Sikh Ihtihis Bhag Pehla, Parkash Dr. Chatur Singh Jivan Singh, Amritsar, 1983, pp-453.

⁴⁴ Kushwant Singh, Sikh History (1469-1988), Punjabi University, Patiala, 2003, pp-29,30.

⁴⁵ Jasvir Singh Savro, Sikh Dharam, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 1940, pp-28.

⁴⁶ Giani Gian Singh, Rani Sahib Kaur, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1880, pp-28.

⁴⁷ Professor Bram Jagdish Singh, Guru Nanak Dev, Jivan, Darshan and Bani, Raj Kamal, 1890, pp-161.

⁴⁸ www.sikhbookclub.com

However, some people denoted women as '*nari narak dvari*'. Even Bhai Gurdas referred to women as '*ardh shiriri*' and '*mokh divari*'. Nevertheless, women have always been given complete respect in the Sikh religion and have never been discriminated against.⁴⁹ During the previous periods, women mostly stayed indoors. The situation of women was as such that she would enter her husband's house after marriage and would leave upon death. Women were not given any education. However, the Sikh Gurus emphasised on the importance of the participation of women in various aspects of the society.

The true form and qualities of a women can only be noticed upon giving her a say and an important position. Women play an important role in the conservation of the customs and tradition by passing them on to their children.⁵⁰

However, some of the social evils that Guru Nanak Dev raised a voice against are still present in today's society. The initiative started by Guru Nanak Dev to give respect to women, has not completely been fulfilled even today.⁵¹

In the Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak Dev expressed the philosophical form of women. Guru Nanak Dev promoted the equality of women. Women have been expressed in various forms in the *Gurbani* i.e. as *nimani*, *augunhar*, *suchaji*, *kuchaji* and *karooop*. While in other parts women have been expressed as '*gunvanti*' by serving her husband and fulfilling other responsibilities throughout her life.

Before Guru Nanak Dev, women were not given respect in the society. The birth of a girl child was considered unholy. Hence, women were not considered to be equal to men.⁵²

During this period the custom of sati was prevalent in the society to a great extent. The main reason of this was that in order to maintain the purity and respect of the husband, it was necessary for the woman to give up her life upon the death of her husband. Hence, the widows had no respect in the society and were considered to be wretched. Widows were neither allowed to remarry nor were they allowed to put on anything glamorous. Hence, their situation in the society was very miserable. It was due to this reason that Guru Nanak Dev raised a voice against the *sati pratha*. According to Guru, the *sati pratha* was the most unjust custom in the society. Guru supported the remarriage of widows. According to Guru Nanak Dev, widow women had the right to remarry and live their lives happily and with respect and dignity. Guru Nanak Dev denoted women as '*pursh di janni*', i.e. the one who gave birth to men.⁵³

⁴⁹ Professor Achru Singh, Sikh Dharam and Jivan Darshan, Johra Publication Patiala, 2005, pp-223,224.

⁵⁰ Dileep Kaur Brar, Role of women in the Sikh society, Seminar, 1985, pp-30,34.

⁵¹ Guru Nanak Dev Ji dia sikhia di adunik sandrab vich parshang kartak, 23rd seminar, 22, 23 November, 2008, Guru Nanak Adhian Vibhag, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, pp-9.

⁵² Ibid, pp-1,4.

⁵³ Ibid, pp-5.

Guru Nanak Dev taunted those who considered women as machines for household work and cooking food. Eliminating this misconception from the mind of the people, Guru Nanak Dev said that women were not the servant of men but were instead even more superior to them. He added on saying that she should be considered to be unholy and instead should be referred to as 'devi'.⁵⁴

Guru Amar Das was the third guru of the Sikhs. He not only established a unique image to the Sikh religion but also under took many works for the betterment of the society. He also worked for the up-lifting of women. Other than this, he parted the members of the Sikh religion from superstitions and also ended the *sati pratha*. Guru Amar Das also saved the people from being exploited by the counterfeit preachers. He also promoted the *langar pratha*.⁵⁵ During this period, there was no support for the Hindu widow women. They were forced to perform sati and give up their lives for the respect of their husbands. Hence, it can be said that women were not independent and did not have a say in the society.⁵⁶ Regarding to the women that performed sati, Guru Amar Das Ji wrote the following lines:

*Satiye eh nah akian Jo madhia lag jalan/
Nanak satia janiyan je birhe chon maran*⁵⁷

According to Guru Amar Das, *sati* meant living the rest of her life in the memory of her husband rather than dying with him. Akbar was influenced by these views of Guru Amar Das. So, he acted to end the *sati pratha*.

*Kantah nal mehelia seti aag jalayeh/
Je jave pir apna tah tan dukh sahar/
Nanak Kant nah Jan Ni se kyo aag jalaye/
Bhave jivo keh maro duro peh bhaj jae*

The women that were not accepted by their husbands, had to face adverse situations. Hence, either they would perform sati or ran away, it would not have much difference. Therefore, those women who lived their lives in the memory of their husbands had better lives. Promoting the rights of widow women was one of the most important works undertaken by Guru Amar Das.⁵⁸ However, the *pardha* system was still prevalent in the society i.e. women spent most of their lives indoors and while going out they were required to cover themselves. Guru

⁵⁴ Dr. Major Singh, Panj Pyare and Sikh Bibia, Parkashak Virsa Sambhal Publication, Ludhiana, 2006, pp-34.

⁵⁵ Principal Teja Singh, Dr. Ganda Singh, Sikh Ihtihis, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2013, pp-20,21,24,83.

⁵⁶ Gurdev Singh, Guru Amar Das Jivan Te Bani, Sangam Publication, Patiala, 2005, PP-51.

⁵⁷ Adh Guru Granth Sahib, PP-787.

⁵⁸ Gurdev Singh, Guru Amar Das Jivan Te Bani, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2005, pp-51,52.

Amar Das considered the *pardha pratha* to be an obstruction to the mental, physiological, and social development of women. In order to eliminate this system, Guru Amar Das gave the orders to allow women to come to *langar* without wearing *pardha*. So, in this way Guru Amar Das prohibited the *pardha pratha* in the Sikh community.⁵⁹

After this order given by Guru Amar Das, the custom of *pardha* declined amongst the women of the Sikh community. Guru Amar Das also started the custom of '*anandkarj*'. This custom is followed amongst the members of the Sikh community during the time of marriages. This is compulsory for the Sikh i.e. those who do not marry according to this custom are not considered as the Sikhs of the Guru. This custom as put to action for the first time in the marriage between Bibi Bhani and Bhai Jeta. Hence, this custom became an important part of the religion.⁶⁰ Upon this, two Brahmins came to Guru with their grievances regarding this custom. However, the final decision was taken in the favour of the Gurughar. Along with this *Lavah* are also read out during marriages in the Sikh religion.⁶¹

According to Guru, no society can progress without giving a prominent position to the women in the community. It was due to this reason Guru Amar Das promoted the marriages of widows. Therefore, he raised a voice to promote the marriage of widows. Guru Amar Das was strictly against the sati pratha. He promoted the rights of the widow women.

Guru Amar Das not only promoted the religious education of women but also appointed some women as *manjidhar*, so as to preach about *gurmata*.⁶²

The *Laavan* (hymns which take place during the ceremony) were composed by Guru Ram Das. The core of the *Anandkaraj* (the blissful ceremony) is the '*laavan*', wherein *shabads* are sung with the bride and groom circumnating the Guru Granth Sahib. The ceremony serves to provide the foundation principles towards a successful marriage and also places the marriage within the context of the unity with God. Guru Ram Das composed the four stanzas of the *laavan* to be sung and recited as the core of the Anandkaraj. The *laavan* are sung by woman during the marriage. Guru Amar Das also abolished the caste system. Guru lifted the status of woman and gave them equality with men. He strictly prohibited the practice of *sati* (the dying of the wife on her husband's funeral pyre), and the *pardha* practice (veil to cover the face) etc. Guru also helped in uplifting the status of woman and helped them live their life according to themselves.⁶³

⁵⁹ Baljit Kaur Tulsi, Jivan Shree Guru Amar Das Ji, Publication Bureau, Patiala, 2016, pp-18.

⁶⁰ Gurdev Singh, Guru Amar Das Jivan Te Bani, Sangum, Patiala, 2005, pp-32.

⁶¹ Ibid, pp-52,53.

⁶² Dr. Balvir Singh Dil, Tiji Pathshahi Shree Guru Amar Das Ji, Parkashak Shree Guru Amar Das Foundation, Ferozpur, 1987, pp-275.

⁶³ Professor Achar Singh, Sikh Dharam and Jivan Darshan, Johra Publication, Patiala, 2007, pp-64,65.

Guru Hargobind said that no man can be successful without the help of a woman. A Woman is the one who takes care of a man. Women have the responsibility to take care and impart moral in the children. It is women who transcend on the traditions and customs to the new generations. Guru Hargobind Singh took initiative to ensure equal rights to both the men and women amongst the members of the Sikh community.

Guru Gobind Singh laid the foundation of the *Khalsa Panth*. Guru Gobind Singh prepared the holy water (*amrit*) and then baptized the five volunteers. These five men were called as the '*Panj Pyare*' or the five beloved ones. These five men were - Daya Singh, Dharam Singh, Mohkam Singh, Himmat Singh and Sahib Singh. The Guru then also got baptized by the *Panj Pyare* by taking the *amrit*. Mata Sahib was also present during the creation of the *Khalsa Panth*. Mata Sahib Kaur participated in the *seva* of *amrit-sanchaar* by adding *pataasey* (sugar wafers) to the *amrit*, and was bestowed the honor of the eternal motherhood of *Khalsa Panth*. This also proves that woman should not be considered lower in status when compared to man. Both Women and men should be considered as equal in the society without which the development of any community is not possible. At that time, women were considered equal to men in only in the Sikh religion. The status of women was still considered to be lower than that of the men in other religions.⁶⁴

The tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh introduced the Singh and Kaur system. All the male Sikhs were to use the name Singh after their forenames and all Sikh woman were to use the name Kaur after their forenames. Since the meaning of the word 'Kaur' means "princess", the name acts as a symbol of equality among both man and woman. The use of the name Kaur is one of the several practices that implement the Sikh religion's commitment to equality of gender, a core tenet of the faith, Kaur symbolizes that a woman is as cherished, politically meaningful, and worthy of the respect as a male.

If there is a person who don't use these words, then he was considered as a scamp. The meaning of the word Singh is *sher* (Lion) and the meaning of the word Kaur is Princess. After some period of time, the Rajput also started to use the word *singhu* before their name. After then they replaced the word *sinhu* with 'Singh', so that there can be a misconception on who is a Sikh and who's a Hindu.⁶⁵ In 1699, Anup Kaur became a baptized Sikh.⁶⁶ After taking the *amrit*, both man and woman are considered equal. With which women can even participate and help their brothers to fight in the war. In the Sikh religion prayers can be initiated and led by both men and women either in the societies or in the Gurdwaras. Many

⁶⁴ Professor Teja Singh and Professor Ganda Singh, Punjab Da Ihtihās, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2013, pp-224.

⁶⁵ Dr. Harjinder Singh Dilgir, Sikh Kon Hann? Sikh University Press, 1999, pp-30.

⁶⁶ Dr. Jasbir Singh Sabar, Sikh Dharam Adhian (Mudhli Jankari), Bagh Pehla, Unchitviya kehar, 1984, pp-34,35.

Sikh women have sacrificed their life for their religion. So the sacrifices of women also hold an important position in the Sikh religion which is depicted in the *Ardhas*. These are the words that have been written in the *Ardas*:-

'Jinhaan singhaan singhaniaan nae dharam haet sees deettae'.

These words state that women hold a very unique place in Sikhism and it reminds the present generations of the sacrifices made by both men and women for the religion.⁶⁷

The Sikh woman are considered to be the backbone of the *Khalsa Panth*. At the time of Guru Nanak Dev, women were severely degraded and oppressed by the society. They were given no education or freedom to make decisions, their presence in the religious, political, social, cultural and economic affairs were non-existent. Woman were considered lower in status. Guru Nanak Dev played an important role in uplifting the status of woman. Guru Nanak Dev proclaimed that both man and woman are equal. Guru Nanak Dev also said that it is a woman who keeps the race going on and woman should not be considered cursed and condemned. It is a woman who gives birth to leaders, Kings, warriors, Gurus, *pirs* etc. In the same way, Guru Gobind Singh also played an equally important role by uplifting the ranks of women in the community.⁶⁸

The Muslim customs and traditions, promoted the caging of women in the houses. The traditional customs such as *pradha pratha*, *Bal viah* (early marriages) and *sati pratha* made the lives of the women of that period miserable. The customs that were in the favor of women were started by Guru Nanak Dev. The religion (Sikhism) started by Guru Nanak De had become widely followed by the time of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. Along with the encouragement of the respect of women, Guru Gobind Singh expressed women as brave, courageous and warriors. In this way, while creating the '*Chandi Charit*', Shri Guru Gobind Singh expressed his faith in the bravery and power of women in the form of *Devi*. Therefore it is evident that Guru Gobind Singh not only promoted the equality of women in the society but also acknowledged their superiority in certain fields.⁶⁹

The praise for woman has also been mentioned in the holy book of the Sikhs, Shri Guru Granth Sahib. A special place of honour for woman is bestowed in the Gurbani. Social life is completely incomplete without a woman. Guru Sahib considers that there is a relation between soul and God. Guru Sahib states that the soul of a woman is that of God.

Iss jagg main purkh ek hai

Hor sagli naar sabayee

⁶⁷Ibid, pp-34,35.

⁶⁸Dr. Rajinder Kaur, Dr. Kamaljit Kaur, Guru Gobind Singh Ji: Dharam, Sahit and Ihtihis Vich Yogdan, Saptrishi Publication, Chandigarh,1975, pp-349.

⁶⁹ Ibid, pp-353.

All the social relations are incomplete without the involvement of a woman.⁷⁰ There are many examples of woman who are considered models of service and sacrifice throughout Sikh religion. The Sikh tradition record the names of several of these woman, such as Mata Sundri, Bibi Nanki, Bibi Bhani, Mai Bhago etc. These women have contributed a lot for the Sikh religion.



⁷⁰ Jan Sahit Gurbani, Is Jug Meh Chanan, Basha Vibag, Punjab University Chandigarh, 2008s, pp-125.