

POSITION OF WOMEN AS DEPICTED IN *PREM SUMARAG*

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The peaceful *Sikh* movement that was enunciated by Guru Nanak Dev Ji in late 15th century had become a distinct socio-religious entity in 16th century and politically activated after the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 A.D. Subsequently, the Sikhs launched a continuous life and death struggle in which they succeeded to occupy Lahore in 1765 replacing the Mughals and the Mughal province of Lahore was divided by the *Sikh Sardars* of different *misl*s among themselves as hereditary sovereign rulers. During early part of 19th century, *Sikh Sardar* of Sukarchakia *misl*, Ranjit Singh established a unified singular and very powerful *Sikh* state known to the Punjab in its entire history. Unfortunately, a decade after his death in 1839 A.D., the Sikh kingdom came to an end by its annexation into British Empire in 1849 A.D.

Literature plays an important role to form history. Such literature is also available in Sikh history, but it is not a simple and easy task to use literary evidences to know the past. Before and after annexation, a large number of religious and secular literary works on the Sikhs and Sikhism were produced in Gurmukhi script apart from other languages by different writers with different angles and motives. Rahitnamas are one of these literary works.

Rahitnama is a book in which elaborate code of conduct of the Sikhism is mentioned and which all members of the Khalsa are required to obey.¹ There are many rahitnamas written by different Sikhs time to time. The *Prem Sumarag* is one of them on which my present paper is based. It is a rahitnama edited by Randhir Singh in 1953. I have used second edition of *Prem Sumarag*, which is published in 1965 by New Book Company, Mai Hira Gate, Jalandhar (Punjab). The author of *Prem sumarag* is an unknown; even the time-period in which it has been written is still controversial. So it is, of course, serious discrepancy that needs in-depth study to clinch the issue.

Prem Sumarag is a rich source to know about the political, social, economic and religious evidences of the time in which it is written. My present paper deals with the position of women as depicted in *Prem Sumarag*.

Prem Sumarag deals in detail with gender issues. The author has tried to describe every aspect of women's life though it is related to birth, marriage or death. Even he has described property rights of

women. The author gives contradictory views about women. Sometimes it seems that he wants to uplift the status of women and sometimes he despises the women.

First reference to woman comes in the *Prem Sumarag* when the author advises her to recite compositions of Gurus and other banis. If a person discharges this percept, whether a man or woman, shall achieve deliverance.²

Then the author tells the procedure about initiation for woman into the Khalsa. If a married woman wishes to enroll herself in the *Khalsa*, she should put on neat and clean black clothes and read the Holy Scripture in the company of other *Sikh* women and then the *Gursikh* should administer her *pahul*. If woman happens to be a widow, she should also be given *pahul* but saffron should not be sprinkled on her clothes.³ The author gives his argument regarding the learning of *Gurumukhi* language for the Sikh women and they should recite Holy Scripture in congregations.

Next the author tells about the birth rituals. If a woman gives birth to a son, then both should be bathed on the bed on seventh day, where the birth took place.⁴ In case daughter is born then her birth ceremonies should be performed as that of the boy. The mother and daughter should be bathed on the bed on the ninth day of the delivery.⁵ The female baby should be clothed in a *jhagga* (a loosed dress), *topi* (hat), *chunni* (scarf), *saalu* (red embroidered cloth). She should be administered initiation of the two edged sword and suffixed 'devi' to her chosen name. Pierce her nose and ear.⁶

Regarding the institution of marriage the author advises that the parents of girl should endeavor to arrange the marriage of their daughter while she reaches a suitable age of marriage. In the eyes of the author, seventeen is the preferable age for the girl to be married off.⁷ The parents of girl should not determine the wealth of the bridegroom, (*larra*) but the family of the boy should be follower of the *Sri Akal Purakh*. Let it be a *khalsa* whether poor or successful. Put the trust in the Guru and arrange the marriage. The girl will find much happiness in her in-laws house and bring joy to her parents with the grace of the Guru. Further adds that during the age of *Kalyuga* (in author's time), it is preferable for the girls to be married at quite early age.⁸

The author says that if two couples take pledge at the time of conception that if a son is born to one while daughter to the other, they would fulfill their pledge and ceremonize their children marriage in all circumstances.⁹ If a father marries off his daughter to other than the boy with whom he has already betrothed without informing his father then the girl is said to must have separated from the boy off and she should be remarried to the initially betrothed boy.¹⁰ If the father of the boy terminates a betrothal agreement due to some defects then he should pay rupees 1000 to the king as punishment and rupees 1000 to his caste people for *prasad*. The author opines that it is necessary as no one else can imitate this type of social misbehavior.¹¹ It shows that society was more rigid in the case of girls at the time in which *Prem Sumarag* has been written.

The distinction should not be made while arranging marriage whether he or she is born from the mother belonging to the other caste or even the girl is the daughter of slave girl. But she must have been brought up in good family means a *khalsa* family.¹² In the case of a girl, preference should be given to a Khalsa boy irrespective of his caste association. The author only advises not to marry with the children of *phoophi* (paternal aunt) and if the girl happens to be from maternal grandfather's caste then previous three generations of maternal grandfather should be avoided for the purpose, but he does not give any reason for it. The author puts up his view to arrange the marriage ceremony on *pancham sudi* (fifth day of the light half of a month) by sending money *mishri*, (sugar candy), a set of clothes, weapons and sword belt of gold to the bridegroom before half and a month. If the parents of bride cannot afford sword belt of gold and then they should arrange of steel gilded of gold. In addition to it, the author writes to send clothes, a coconut and a set of bangles for the mother of the bridegroom according to the financial condition of bride's father.¹³ The author warns the people of his times to remain within the reasonable limit so that society can be saved from the limitless expenditure on the marriage. It seems that then people spent on marriages out of their limit.

According to author the bride should be given to eat in small quantity of *pulse*, *rice* and clarified butter while only five days remain to ceremonize the marriage and *karah prasad* (the consecrated food) and a small meal on the wedding day.¹⁴ The bride should wear new clothes, apply *heena* on her hands and feet and wrap her with *saalu*, (red colored embroidered cloth usually worn on marriage by the bride). The bride's hair should be tied into knot with *mauli* (untwisted multi strand red yarn used on the ceremonial occasion), sprinkle *kesar* (saffron) on her and then be seated on new *tulai* (light quilt) spread on the stool,

opposite to bridegroom facing north.¹⁵ The author of *Prem Sumarag* seems to put emphasis to be clear about bridegroom and bride's name, their parents and grandparents, their caste, *jati*, *varan* and age at the time of the wedding ceremony. After the circumambulations, the bride should be seated on the left stool of the bridegroom and then the both should initiate in the Khalsa fold by taking *pahul* of double-edged sword.¹⁶ The parents of the bride should put *karah prasad* on her daughter's hand and should take her hand and link it with the bridegroom's, who would take *karah prasad* from her hand and consume it.¹⁷ The father of the bride should serve sweets, fruits, and different kinds of food to the marriage party while in the evening, meat, fish and other varieties of food should be served. If he has capacity to serve the others, then he should invite his own brotherhood (*biradari*) and friends.¹⁸ Whenever the parents of the bride happens to visit their daughter's home, they should not hesitate to take meals there which according to orthodox tradition is considered a curse. The author condemns such type of traditions that are ruthless and baseless.¹⁹

The author of *Prem Sumarag* has very low opinion about the young woman and considers her devoid of wisdom and also treats her as volatile (*chupal*) as well as extremely sexually as compared to man. The author confidently refers that if young woman does not has her spouse at home and has by chance to stay with her young son then it is not believable that they have not consorted with each other. Being senseless, she is unable to distinguish between good or bad.²⁰ It seems that the author of *Prem Sumarag* was very versed with inherent characteristics of the woman therefore he discusses in detail the procedure of marriage a widow women and favors widow re-marriage. A widow should not have sexual relation with other person if she happens to have her living children. If she commits such mistake then the society should boycott both of them socially and her children should not remain in her custody; she is advised to remarry in the prescribed manner.²¹

Apart from the widow re-marriage, the marriage of a slave girl and Muslim girl is also described in the *Prem Sumarag*. If the caste (*Varna*) of the woman is lower than the person with whom she is going to marry or she is bought slave. In that case the author recommends that she should live in the house of the person of his caste. They should treat her as their own daughter and baptize her.²² If unmarried girl, belongs to the different *Varna* or is a slave then she should be placed to live in a family of the man and

follow the rest of the process of the marriage. If the daughter of *malechh* (Muslim) opts to marry with the Khalsa. First; her body should be dumped neck deep in the earth thereafter dragged her out and washed her body. She should be followed the procedure of plastering with *aragaja* and follow the process of passing through the fire. Before baptizing her, the meat of pig (pork) should be given to eat for fifty-one days and then be allowed her to prepare *karah prasad* with her own hands and distributed amongst the person assembled there. Only after that she should be administered *khande ki pahul* to bring her in Khalsa fold.²³ The author also expresses his view regarding remarriage of a man with a woman belonging to higher caste (*Varna*). She should be asked to recite five stanzas of *Anand Sahib* in well decorated place then take *khande ki pahul*.²⁴

The author of *Prem Sumarag* believes that a man should marry once in his life. However, he approves the remarriage in case if his wife is not worthy for him or he has no male child. Nevertheless, the man is satisfied with his wife then he is worthy and great husband in the eyes of society and will get blessings of God. Simultaneously, the author puts up his views regarding the virtue of the women and emphasizes that she should serve her husband and be loyal to him. On the other hand, if a wife for any reason gets separation then her children would stay with her husband and wife cannot claim to keep them.²⁵ According to the author, the man can have extra-marital relations with a slave girl if he do not has a wife and unable to control his sexual desire. Ultimately, he has to accept her as his wife and has to pass through all wedding ceremonies. The author argues in favor of retaining sexual relations with a slave girl if he has no wife. But he should not have such relations with the wife of another person.²⁶

The Social evils were also prevalent in the society at the times when *Prem Sumarag* was written. The author explains about rape and punishment awarded in lieu thereof. If a person detains a woman whose husband is alive for the sexual purpose and let her go thereafter. While the crime becomes public, the aggrieved husband has a right to keep the wife of the criminal with him for as many days as his wife was kept. It will send a strong message to the public not to commit such heinous crime in future.²⁷ The woman who has sexual relation with the other person while her husband is alive then she should be sent to concentration camp (*bandikhane*) on her expenses for her limited diet for the period of one year. Her husband should not go to her for two years and then she can get back home. If she commits her misdeed again then she should be turned out of the house to set up an example for such types of social crime in the

society.²⁸ If a person has no wife and he has sexual contact with a woman then the author of *Prem Sumarag* recommends that his hair should be cut and he should be roamed round the village with blackened face and hundred shoes should be strike on his back. Thereafter, he will pay a fine of rupees five hundred to the king who will keep the offender in jail for one year, only then he can become a free man. In case, he commits such crime subsequently then noses of both man and women should be chopped.²⁹ If a woman who has no husband and has sexual relation with other person, she should be handed over to that person whether he is a musalmaan male, Hindu or Muslim lady as the case may be. Both should be treated in the same manner as explained by the author above and they should be allowed to live together.³⁰ If the man and woman who do not have spouse and cannot control their lust for sex, they can remarry irrespective of their caste affiliation including that of the slaves. The author further adds that such marriage is not an evil in the eyes of society but the adultery is a crime indeed. The proper marriage is of course, a pious institution of the society.³¹

The author of *Prem Sumarag* seems to be equally interested to give description of physical hygiene of Sikh female too. He recommends for woman to bathe daily and she should massage her body alternatively after four or eight days before bathing and also wash her hair thoroughly then apply perfumed oil and bundle them. In addition to it, she should wear clothes on which fragrance should be sprinkled. She also do make up and adorns herself with garland of flowers, jewelry then chew betel wad (*paan*) and keep engaged in reciting the name of almighty (*Sri Akal Purakh*). The author also advises that if possible, the woman should massage her body daily and should not be hasty for taking bath.³²

Death rituals for women were slightly different from the men. It is mentioned in the *Prem Sumarag* that the women should not beat their breasts at the death of any relative and mother or close female relative of the deceased should wear new sewn clothes.³³ The mother or wife of the deceased should eat little clarified butter and very little salt, preferably meal without salt. The widow should read *pothi shabad baani* (Sikh sacred scripture) and endeavour to discharge her normal responsibilities. She should remain in veil (*purdah*) and never to speak to any strange person and should wear course white clothes and never be worn dirty clothes.³⁴ The author also throws light on the procedure of the last ceremony in case of a girl dies. He recommends to follow the same procedure as conducted in case of a male child except that red cloth (*salu*) should be spread over her corpse and a thread (*mauli*) of untwisted yarn of red and saffron colour should be

placed on her hair. In all other respect, follow the system set down for a male child.³⁵ Further, the author writes about the deceased married woman if she has no children either surviving or deceased. Her dead body should be washed and apply fragrant oil in her hair and plait it and cloth in the garment that she ordinarily wore while alive. A saffron colour shawl (*asawari*) should be spread over her dead body. If her husband cannot afford it then the writer suggests that a shawl of saffron coloured (*masru or dariai*) should be thrown over her dead body. Even this too expensive to afford then he should use ordinary white cotton cloth dyed saffron coloured.³⁶ If the deceased is widow but has children, should put on her body a long skirt (*lahenga*) and spread white mantle (*chaadar*) over her corpse, and lastly sprinkle saffron all over it.³⁷ The author adds that in case of a widow, no ring should be put in her nose.³⁸ On the other hand, she can eat unsalted meal consists of whole grain food (*ogra*) once that is in the night, if she cannot help eating meal without salt then she can mix salt in little quantity in her prescribed meal.³⁹

The author also discusses the property rights of females. In the matter of inheritance, the author is sympathetic to women. If a man has a second wife, also having children from her, he should consider her equal to his first wife and has to provide separate house and expenditure and he has to maintain sexual relation with her.⁴⁰ Everything of the husband should be divided between first and second wife in the ratio of three to two out of five portions.⁴¹ When the both of wives belong to same caste (*Varna*) or slaves then equal portions should be given to them. Even, the son born from wife belonging to good caste (*Varna*) and the son born from the maid servant should get equal share of person's property and the same laws applies to the daughters regardless of the castes of their mothers.⁴² If the second wife belongs to the other caste (*Varna*) or a slave then one portion of property should be given to her while two portions of the property should be given to first wife.⁴³

He tells that no portion of the property should go to the daughters if their mother is still alive but their mother may give to them with her husband's consent. If their father and mother both are not alive then they can get the equal portion of property. If any of the daughters is unmarried then her share in property should be kept separately for their marriage and rest of the assests can be divided among the other

daughters, and the same law would apply if her brothers divide the property after the death of their father. If one of the daughters happens to be a widow then she should be given double portion of property of her father as compared to other daughters.⁴⁴ Despite being fatherless, it is his duty of a son to take care of providing food and clothing to his mother, step-mother and sisters whether married or unmarried and should be more careful for the widow sister in all circumstances.⁴⁵

The author tells further that if the deceased person has only a daughter, she is liable to inherit everything of her father's property. According to the author, everything that is given to daughter's son equally belongs to daughter's daughter.⁴⁶ If the property goes to his brother, then his sister is also entitled to get her share. Further the author describes that if any direct descendents (*puttar, potra, natta*) of the person, up to fourth generation happen to survive, they are entitled to inherit the property of the deceased, In case, these descendents are not alive then the property should pass to the fourth generation of female descendents like *beti, potri, natti*. He comments that there should be no discrimination among female descendents. The author reminds that it is better for a person to divide his property amongst daughters, daughter's sons, daughter's daughters, sisters, sister's daughters, sister's sons and brothers while he is alive.⁴⁷

The *Prem Sumarag* contains description regarding distribution of the property of a person among the progeny of his second marriage. He informs that if a man has a second wife with living children, he should consider her equal with first wife in all respect.⁴⁸ The second wife (*par-sanjog*) should receive two portions of everything out of five portions and remaining three portions should belong to the first wife.⁴⁹ When the both wives belong to same caste (*varan*) or slaves, equal share should be given to them. Even, the son born from wife belonging to good caste (*varan*) and the son born from the maid servant should get equal share of father's property and the same law also applies to the daughters regardless their caste affiliations.⁵⁰ If the second wife belongs to the other caste or be a slave girl then one portion of property should be given to her and two portions of the property should be given to the first wife.⁵¹

The author argues that no portion of the property should go to the daughters if their mother is still alive but their mother may give them with her consent. If their father and mother both are not alive then

they can get the equal portion of property. If any of the daughters is unmarried, then her share in property for her marriage should be kept separately and remaining portion can be divided among the other daughters. According to the author, the same law also applies if her brothers divide the property after the death of their father. If one of the daughters happens to be widow, she should be given double share of the property for her subsistence.⁵²

The author explains the epithets by which the royal women should be addressed. She who belongs to the palace of the Raja (*zanana mahal*), should be addressed as (*maharani rajeshwari*). If she belongs to Prince' palace, she should be called the prince's queen (*kumar-rani*) while wife of brother of king as (*bhrant-rani*) and palaces of the Prime Minister (*wazir*) and the commanders (*balwantkarris*) should be titled as the *Singh-mahal*. The mother of the Maharaja should be addressed as the royal mother Maharani (*rajmata maharani*).⁵³ It is noteworthy that the word Mahal⁵⁴ has also been used in relation to the wives of the Sikh Gurus, but the author of *Prem Sumarag* uses this word here particularly for the royal women.

The author also gives instructions for woman who had to ride animals during travel. He advises that a woman should side saddle when riding a camel or a mule. Otherwise she was to ride in chandol, palki, doli or a rath. But the woman of higher rank should ride a camel or an elephant.⁵⁵

It is incumbent upon the king that he should not keep the company of any other woman except with whom he was actually and initially married.⁵⁶ This will be the sign of greatness. The king should marry only one woman. He can remarry if his first wife produces no children or no son. If he has a living wife, he should not marry a maid. The author emphasizes that the king should not keep a woman in the *zanana mahal* without her husband. If any unmarried woman is retained in the *zanana* palace then she should be chaste.⁵⁷ The author also defines what is illegal sexual relationship if someone is involved in it. The king should never go to a prostitute and a woman should never go to another man. Any woman and man should not remain unmarried. The author tells that the life of a woman without her husband is hell. She should lead a life of chastity even she has not married. The king should maintain this kind of standard perpetuating in his kingdom.⁵⁸

Therefore it is clear that *Prem Sumarag* deals with many gender issues like initiation into *Khalsa*, birth, marriage, widow remarriage, property rights and moral values for women. Institution of marriage, procedure of widow remarriage, birth and death rituals and property rights are described in detail. We can see that some restrictions were imposed on women and the author upholds patriarchy, but we should not forget that when the *Prem Sumarag* was written, it was the time of social and political disruption. The author has favored women's property rights, widow remarriage even advocated *Khande ki Pahul* to be administered to women.

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