CHAPTER V

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN: SOCIAL EVILS

Girl Child and Female Infanticide

Times of India of November 18, 2007 (Bangalore Edition) reads “It’s God and Gurudwara now for Punjab’s unwanted girl child.

“In the urgent effort at erasing Punjab’s Darkest Gender Blot, SGPC will soon ask important Gurudwaras in Punjab to place cradles at their entrances and exhort unhappy parents obsessed with boys to leave “those innocent children at God’s door, not death’s”

(A report filed by Balwant Garg from Bathinda).

As evident, the Punjab of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or even of today is appealing to the sensitivity and humanity of the society to protect the female infants by the representatives of the God, in the name of the God.

Even in today’s Indian society, the birth of a daughter is usually regarded as an unwelcome event; often an occasion of sorrow and mourning. It is indeed tragic to see that the birth of a daughter who have been honoured in the Guru Granth Sahib as a “would be mother” is a source of sorrow. Unfortunately, as another example of stark gap between the normative and operative beliefs even in Gurus’ households the sense of rejoice, the scale of celebration varied immensely at the time of the birth of a son or a daughter. The Sikh sources are replete with such instances. For instance, when Baba Gur Ditta Ji was born to Mata Damodari, lots of charities were given to poor and destitute and continuous langar was started.¹ When Mata Ganga Ji blessed Guru Har Gobind that “jodi-ralein” meaning that may God this son is blessed with a sister. Then Guru Har Gobind replied

“Sil Khan Kanya ek hove,
Nahin ta ma putrid vingrihasta vigavey”²

¹ Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, ibid, p353
² Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, ibid, p353
Meaning that there should be at least one virtuous daughter, otherwise the family is like a chaotic household. Here, the Guru’s wish for a daughter is quite apparent. However, this is the only source which has got this kind of sentiments projection coming from a father. We get the information about the same scale of rituals and ceremonies being followed at the births of Guru Ditta, Suraj Mal, Anni Rai and Atal Rai. However, such scale of festivities and celebrations were absent in the case of Bibi Veeron. The same rituals of charities and donations were followed at the time of birth of Guru Teg Bahadur.

The difference in the scale of celebration is evident from the detailed description of the joyous mood by Bhai Gurdas at the time of the birth of the son. We do not get any such description even in the Guru families on the occasion of birth of any of the daughters.

“Dhu mili jammajanial pitajati paravarsadhara,
Jammadian ranajunana vansivadhairunjunakara,
Nanak dadak sohile viratisar bahu dan datara”.1

They are such as the son born of the union of mother and father gives happiness to the parents because the lineage and family of the father gets increased. Clarionets are played upon the birth of a child and celebrations are arranged on the further development of the family. In the homes of mother and father, songs of joy are sung and the servants are given many gifts.

The sense of rejoicing on the occasion of the birth of a son is further attested in Kabit Swayye.

“Bhetat bhatarnari sobbit singarchar(u),
Puran anand sutuditbachitra kai”2

Meaning Just as conjugal union of a well adorned and embellished woman with her husband gives birth to a son and the wife is highly placed.

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1 Bhai Gurdas, Vaaran, Var 30, Pauri 3, p211
2 KS 394, p. 422
With the birth of a son, the whole family rejoices. The days of fun and frolic of his childhood and infancy just pass with everyone enjoying his pranks.

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 called an important symbol of the social status. Guru Amardas was the first Sikh Guru who spoke against the prevalent practice of female infanticide. Further, tradition notes that on the Baisakhi day, at the time of establishment of Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh along with the clear injunction to wear the five articles, known as the Panj Kakke, or five Ks (Kesh, Kangha, Kirpan, Kachh and Kara), using the appellation of Singh and Kaur also firmly prohibited few customs which included any social interactions with Kurri Maar (The Killer of the female child). Guru Gobind Singh’s harsh prohibition of the killing of female babies indicates that the practice had not ended with Guru Amar Das’ injunctions. In spite of Guru Gobind Singh’s strong criticism and prohibition of female infanticide, yet in one of the Saakhis, he is projected to have approved of popular perception of a male child being a superior being. Although, as often repeated even if we do not take the Saakhi as an authentic evidence of Guru Gobind Singh’s perception, it certainly speaks a great deal about the general social preference for a male child. Here, a Sikhni narrates that her deceased father was Diwan of Agra and when he died, he had seven daughters and her mother was expecting at that time. Thus, the Padshah ordered that if the child to be born- is a male then leave the family alone and do not touch their assets. Otherwise, confiscate their whole property. Then the Sikhni goes on to say that then she realized the power of the male (mard ki daari aur keshaoon ki sifath). Guru Ji corroborated her sentiments. The same anecdote has a different ending in Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa, where Guru Ji says:

“Guru ghar vich aiye farman hain dhiya poot sab harke kiya”

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1 KS 241, p. 269
2 Guru Rattan Mal, Aur Sau Saakhi, ed Gur Bachan Singh Nayyar, Saakhi No 43, pp. 54-55
3 Bhai Gyan Singh Giani, Tawarikh-Gur Khalsa, ed K S Raju, p. 900
We get further clear evidence in the famous Punjabi saga of Hir Ranjha in its most famous version of Warris Shah (1978; 44). Warris Shah clearly describes various methods employed in the killing of infant daughters which included strangulation, poisoning, drowning and suffocation. We also get few references of leaving the female infant without warm cloths in the cold or pouring chilled water on the head of new born in the biting winters of Punjab. Other methods to be widely present included like a mid-wife choke the baby or sometime the mouth was stuffed with cow dung or the infant's head was immersed in cow's milk. At times, the female infant was buried with little Gur (Unrefined sugar) in her mouth and a bit of cotton skein in her hands, the oft-quoted proverb:

"Gur Khaien, Pownee Kutten
Aap Na Aieen, Bhaiya Ghulleen.".

Meaning:
"Eat your Gur and spin your thread;
But go and send a boy instead."

This horrific practice of female infanticide and the methods adopted seem to generate a feeling of helplessness and disgust. This is surprising that the practice of female infanticide is still prevalent even today. The Punjab which takes pride in its clivalry and generosity, tops the list of the regions where the practice of female foeticide is still prevalent. We have not apparently moved ahead much from the medieval times. Narrating a chilling example of female infanticide, F.A. Steel notes that the Hindu women, when they lost a female child during infancy, or while it suckled milk, would take the baby into the Jungle and put it in a sitting position under a tree. The following day, they would return to the place, if the child's body had been dragged by the dogs and jackals towards the home of the mother, it was taken as a bad omen, signaling the birth of another girl. If the body had been drag away from home, it was taken to mean that the next born would be a boy.

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1 Warris Shah, Hir, pp. 44-45
2 R Montgomery. Minutes of infanticide in Punjab, Lahore, 1853, OIOC, the translation of this proverb as it appears in this text.
3 Punjab Notes And Queries, 1:5, Feb 1884, P51
Among the Sikhs, the practice of female infanticide was most widely practiced among the Bedis, the descendants of the Sikh Gurus. The Sodhis, the descendants of the fourth Guru onwards, who belonged to the sub division of Sarin Khatris, a ranking low in the internal Khatri hierarchy, were also closely aligned with the practice of female infanticide. Sikh Jats, accounted for major components of Sikh populace, would have adopted the same means of upward mobility. In fact, the evidence furnished by Hir Ranjha of Warris Shah already discussed, basically focuses on the Jats. The association of Jats with the practice of female infanticide can be inferred by the injunction of Guru Ram Singh, the head of the Namdhari Sect, he resolutely censored the widely prevalent practice of female infanticide. It becomes relevant to point out here that a large numbers of his followers were of the lower caste, as well as the Jat Sikhs. Ram Singh, aware of the wide prevalence of the practice, issued circulars to his devotees vehemently attacking the custom.

The practice of female infanticide may well have stemmed directly from the highly esteemed Guru lineage. According to the Punjabi Lore, Dharam Chand, a grand son of Guru Nanak was humiliated at his daughter’s marriage by the groom’s family in many ways. This included the insult to her brother who went to drop her off to some distance at the time of her rukhsat (departure) and were taken much farther than the etiquette required. Dharam Chand viewed it as the last bit in the series of unwarranted humiliations and came up with the horrific injunction. Dharam Chand then ordered that all Bedis hence forth, kill their daughters as soon as they were born rather than bear such humiliation. Dharam Chand, the story continues, took over the burden of the crime of the female infanticide; from that day on he walked stooped, as though bearing a heavy weight upon his shoulders. The most generous rational explanation one can think for legitimizing such a heinous crime is that the Bedis occupied prominent positions within the Guru lineages. By the logic of being descendants of the Sikh Gurus they had a high social and ritual standing. Due to their extraordinary high status they found it difficult to find biradaris of higher status for their daughters. It was considered shameful to marry among

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1 This story is repeated in many reports on infanticide in Punjab for instance, See Indian infanticide, p. 115-16.
biradaris of a lower status. Being exogamous, they could not marry among themselves. In other words, the main ambition of the upper castes was that of hyper gamy, with which were linked notions of marrying a daughter in the upward direction, as well as what was needed to be spent on such occasions. Thus, daughters were viewed as a “burden”.

The dislike for a girl-child at a general social level had greater implications for women at large. The woman who failed to produce a male heir is seen as accursed, as one who had failed in her essential duty. Among many communities the husband of such a woman can marry again and he will have not only the full approval even encouragement, of the community. In fact, at times, the wife in question, may be due to social pressure or her personal perceptions or combination of both, may be the one who would instigate the husband for a second marriage. One can easily gauge the insecurity and sense of loss for such a woman who is forced to accept the “saut”. In other words, it becomes clear that a wife’s worth comes to be crucially determined by her ability to produce male heirs. The sons are needed not only to work on the land (in case of an agricultural set up) but more importantly, to keep the land within the patriarchal family and to provide support to parents in their old age.

**Purdah**

Women were made to observe Purdah (veil) it means a cover to hide face or body from outsiders particularly from the view of the males. The advent of Muslims is viewed by few historians as being the reason for the introduction of the Purdah in Indian society. For instance Prof. R. C. Majumdar says Hindus adopted Purdah as a protective measure to save the honour of their women-folk and to maintain the purity of their social order. [Probably a well accepted social reality that the cultural values of the higher classes percolates down to the lower classes; viewing it as a symbol of high social status, might have contributed substantially to its wide acceptance in then elaborate and institutionalized form].

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This however, does not seem correct; there are scholars like K. M. Ashraf who are of the opinion that even in ancient India women observed a certain veil (what even now goes under the name of Ghunghat). K. M. Ashraf further writes that “the present elaborate and institutionalized form of Purdah dates from the time of the Muslim rule”.

However, it can be safely concluded that the purdah and child marriage were considered to be the good safeguards of women and an effective mechanism to control the sexuality of women. Purdah was a measure of respectability among higher classes – higher the rank, the more secluded the women. Though it might have existed in the varied form of Ghunghat yet as the custom of ghunghat was very common among the Hindus particularly the high caste women. Among the Muslims the system of Purdah was still more strictly observed. The popular proverbs of the time indicate the general social perception and it’s wide acceptability like Andar Baithi Lakh di, Bahar gai kakhdi meaning if the women is safe in the four walls of home she is worth a treasure. The moment she steps out of protected boundaries she is worth ashes. The system, logically plausible could not have been widely prevalent among the people of lower classes such as peasants, artisans and manual labourers. However, its prevalence among the upper classes and social criticism in case of any laxity. She became an issue of social ridicule like “Saas, ninayane daandi taaney phirdiai Ghunghat khulli” meaning she roams about with uncovered face and her mother in law and sister in law’s passed sarcastic remarks.

Among the Muslims, the importance accorded to Purdah as a marker of social respect/ demeanor of women was pretty strict. If a Muslim lady of rank for any reason discarded Purdah even for a temporary period, the consequences for her were disastrous.

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1 K. M. Ashraf, op. cit, p.171
3 G.S. Chabbra, Advanced Study of Punjab, p. 129
4 Y.S.Sitta ,Shah Hussian Jiwan te Rachna, Punjabi University Patiala, p-795
5 P.N. Chopra Some Aspects of Society and Culture during the Mughal Age, p-116
In 1595, Akbar promulgated, "If a young woman was found running about the lanes and bazaars of the town and while so doing if she did not veil herself or allow herself to be unveiled she was to go to the quarters of the prostitutes and take up the profession."\(^1\)

Manucci also reports that the Purdah was strictly observed among the Muslims than among the Hindus.\(^2\)

Among the Mohammedans, it was a great dishonor for a family when a wife was compelled to uncover herself.\(^3\) They were so "extra ordinarily distrustful";\(^4\) in this matter that they did not permit their wives seeing their brothers and fathers except in their own presence.\(^5\) However, this seems to be an exaggerated version but certainly the *Purdah* system did not permit women to mix up freely with other members of the clan, her education was also highly restricted because of the *Purdah* system. To top it all, her minimal social interaction not only deprived her of learning through social exposure but made her immensely vulnerable in a social system where she was married off in a different village. Being confined to the four walls of the home, it also restricted her interaction among women too. In brief, the *Purdah* system was manifestation of the general social attitudes towards women and it emerged out to be a social mechanism which not only restricted but, in fact led to the social, political and intellectual stagnation of women.

However as a pleasant social aberration the peasants and the working class women did not wear any shroud or veil and they were not expected to be confined to their houses. They were free from the bondage of *Purdah*.\(^6\) They were just expected to bring down the *pallu* of their sari or any other head dress to cover their face when they passed a stranger. This "freedom" had genesis in that they were expected to help their husbands in all "external pursuits and

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3. ibid, Vol. II, p. 175
4. ibid, p. 352, Bernier, Travels in the Mughal Empire, ed. B.A., reprint, Delhi 1968, p-89
5. ibid, p. 60

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internal economy”.

They took their bath publicly at riverside and would visit shrines travelling on foot without any restrictions. We get evidence from the Sikh Gurus' banis where a woman carrying pitchers of water is mentioned without any Purdah. The word used for water carriers used by Sikh Gurus and the Bhagats is *panihari*. In sum, the common women moved much freely than the women of the upper strata families of both the communities.

Apart from Guru Amar Das we do not find any categorical criticism of *Purdah* System by any of the Sikh Gurus. It was only Guru Amar Das who strongly censured *Purdah* or covering of the face by women. According to a Sikh tradition, the Rani of the ruler of Haripur visited the Guru in *Purdah* despite the instruction of the Guru that the *Purdah* was not to be observed by his followers; the Guru is said to have spontaneously uttered, “Why has this mad woman come here?” This shows Guru's strong dislike for the *Purdah* System. Quite probably, the *langar* and the *pangat* system along with the active involvement of women in the *manji* and *peerah* system must have contributed significantly in breaking away the shackles of the *Purdah* system.

The *Purdah* system is closely linked to the ideology of Seclusion which is considered a marker of high social status and ranking. The following hymn of bhakta Kabir shows his criticism for the system of *Purdah*; Kabir says false pride has been attached to it by people:

“This only is the merit of veiling the face,
That for a few days the people say, how noble is the bride.”

Guru Nanak also speaks of a woman in an applauding manner who has cast off her veil, however, the context is her strive for spiritual attainments.

“I have cast off my Veil: the values of the world haunt me no more my ignorance, the mother-in-law has lost her moorings and no more is her sway over my head.”

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1 P.N. Ojha, op. cit, p. 120; K.M. Ashraf, op.cit.p.1720
2 AG, pp. 325, 335, 347
3 F.W. Thomas, Mutual Influence of Mohammedans and Hindus in India, Cambridge, 1892, p. 72
4 AG, p. 484, Asa Kabir
5 AG, p. 931
Prostitution

Infact, by and large historians have tended to treat prostitutes as either a scandalous or frivolous topic of research.\(^1\) Academically treating the subject, if one adopts a somewhat more precise definition of the institution as “a phenomenon in which a socially identified group of women earn their living principally or exclusively from the commerce of their bodies.”\(^2\) The profession of prostitution has been in vogue in India and was considered to be the necessary social evil. There were courtesans or dancing girls whose number in medieval period was considerable. There are various references to the prostitutes in the contemporary sources. Guru Amar Das, for instance, has confirmed the existence of prostitution in ancient times when he writes:

“Ajmal who mates with prostitutes, he too was saved, uttering the name of God”\(^3\)

In the Adi Granth there are about a dozen references to prostitutes.\(^4\) Quite obviously, all the references are in derogatory terms.

The most blatant comment is that the father of a son of a prostitute cannot be identified.

“Jiu bahu miti vesua chhadai khasamu nikhasami hoi.
Putu jane je vesua nanaki dadaki naun koi.
Narak savari sigaria rag rang chhali chhalai chhalai chhaloi.
Ghandheru aherian manas mirage vinahu sathoi.
Ethai marai haram hoi agai daragah milai na dhoi.”\(^5\)

Meaning “a prostitute having many lovers leaves her husband and thus becomes unclaimed master less. If she gives birth to a son, he carries no maternal or paternal name with him. She is a decorated and ornamental hell which deceives people by loving apparent charm and grace. As the hunter’s pipe attracts the deer, so do the songs of a prostitute allure men to their

\(^1\) Otis, 1987, p. 8
\(^2\) ibid, 2-3
\(^3\) AG, p 995 Ajmal was the ruler of Kanauj
\(^4\) AG p.238, 528, 837, 1029, 1415
\(^5\) Vaaran, Bhai Gurdas, tr Bhai Jodh Singh, Var33, Pauri9
destruction. Here in this world she dies an evil death and hereafter obtains no entrance into God’s court.”

The social attitude towards prostitutes has always been strongly negative. In the near contemporary literature, she had been viewed as a disgrace to the society. In the verses as well as Kabit Swayye, Bhai Gurdas make frequent comparative references to prostitute and the “Manmukh Sikhs” not following the right path. Howsoever, all his writing strongly demonstrates the general social attitude towards prostitutes.

Var5, Pauri 17 blamed the prostitutes for bringing disgrace to themselves, their families maternal, paternal as well as in-laws families. It goes to the extent of blaming her for spreading the poison in the society.

“Jiu bahu miti vesua sabhi kulakhan pap kamavai.
Lokahi desahu bahari tihu pakhan no aulang lavai.
Dubi dobai horana mahura mitha hoi pachavai.
Ghanda hera mirage jiu dipak hoi patang jalavai.
Duhi sarai jaradaru pathar beri pur dubavai”.¹

Meaning, a prostitute having many lovers commits every species of sin. An outcast from her people and her country, she brings disgrace on all the three sides, i.e. her father’s, mother’s and the family of father-in-law. Ruined herself, she ruins others and still goes on gulping and digesting poison. She is like the musical pipe which lures the deer, or lamp which burns the moth. Due to the sinful activities her face in both the worlds remain pale because she behaves like a boat of stone which drowns its passengers.

Due to the economic dependence and the wretched conditions of widows, she must have at times forced to adopt prostitution. Those who were in the habit of visiting the prostitutes did not care to realize the feelings of their spouses.

Bhai Gurdas in his Kabit Swayye states

Besvarat(i) britha bhae, man main a sanka mania
Juari na sarbas (u) bare sai thakat bai.²

¹ Bhai Gurdas, Vaaran, tr Bhai Jodh Singh, ibid, Var5, Pauri17
² Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayee, KS, 323, p. 351
Meaning, knowing that his visit to the house of a whore can cause him serious disease, a licentious person still doesn't feel hesitant to go there. A gambler never feels tired of gambling even after loosing all his assets and family.

Bhai Gurdas further warns in his Var36, Pauri 5

Khari Swallo vesua jia bajha itaia¹

Meaning, prostitutes look very beautiful but she ensnares the mind (and ultimately), man stands finished. The general social attitude towards the prostitutes and that the onus of the existence of the social evil/ reality laid with the prostitutes and not with her patronisers at all is reflected in many contemporary injunctions for instance Bhai Gurdas' Kabit Swayye:

Pragat (i) sansar bibichar karai ganika pai,
Tahe log bed ar(u) gian kin a kan(i) hai.²

Meaning, a whore openly commits voice with other men. She has no regard and respect for the morality and code of conduct as laid down in the social and religious books.

Guru Nanak has portrayed in the following hymns the feeling of a young lady whose husband visits prostitutes.

"Break thy cozy bed and thy ivory Bracelets, O woman,
And thy Arms, and the arms of thy Bed,
Even though the bedeckest thyself so.
The spouse enjoyed with others".³

Another hymn also refers to the practice and quite expectedly that the people who visited the prostitutes had to bear with social disapproval as evident from the hymn of Guru Nanak.

"Thieves, illicit lovers, prostitutes and touts, Keep company together,
As do men of irreligion, who eat out of the same bowl
They know not the Lords Praise, for, within them abides Evil."⁴

¹ Bhai Gurdas, Vaaran, Var 36, Pauri 5, p. P339
² Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swayee, KS, 490, p. 518
³ AG, Rag Wadhans, p. 557
⁴ AG, Raga Suhi, p. 790
Akbar too viewed it as a social evil and tried to curtail its prevalence. A separate quarter was constructed outside the city and all public women were asked to reside there. Special state officers were appointed to look after them.¹

Guru Arjan, contemporary of Akbar writes that people have no shame in visiting the prostitutes:

"Man in contemplating evil no sloth feels. In enjoying harlot no shame he has."²

Apart from the widowhood and its associated problems women may have been drawn into prostitution in a variety of situations owing to marital problems especially in a polygamous situation, and /or as victims of sexual violence. Instances of frequent elopements of women in those days are available in literature.³ The genesis of these problems, infact, laid in the general social attitude to treat women as objects, who were part of a range of gift exchange. It's ironical that women whose social status was legitimate (along with social acceptability) did not have equivalent legitimate access to an independent economic status whereas women whose socio-sexual status was ambivalent at best, were more easily recognized as economically independent individuals.

The entire discussion reflects the general social attitude for prostitutes in a larger context. A social evil which sustains and thrives because of the facilitator i.e. the prostitute as well as her patron is viewed only as a "social crime" of the prostitutes. A social evil, which has sustained from times immemorial in different forms, is due to substantially, if not solely, due to the perversion of men who take the advantage of the economic compulsion of widowed or deserted women. And yet, the society at large retains the right to transfer the entire blame, the entire onus of a perverted sexual desire on

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² AG, p.1143.
prostitutes only. Is it not ironical that a society which had such a clear understanding of "stri svabhav" had evolved mechanisms like child-marriage, purdah system or Karewa (varied forms of widow remarriage) to control the uncontrolled sexual desire of women, did not even attempt to curtail the practice of prostitution and yet blame them alone.

**Sati**

The word “sati” has been used in the Adi Granth in different connotations. It implies truthful, moral, disciplined, virtuous, generous etc. It also refers to the custom of “sati” by which a widow used to burn herself on the pyre of her dead husband. It was considered virtuous according to the general social ethos. The practice of sati is a question closely linked to widow remarriage. Both seem to be basically a mechanism to deprive the women of her, however, small property rights she had got in the property of her husband. Both the social institutions seem to be prevalent and had social acceptability as they ensured the transfer of the interests of widows in the landed property back to the male line of the family of her deceased husband. Adi Granth also testifies that the custom of sati was quite a common practice in the Punjab of those times.¹

Bhai Gurdas in 70th poem of his work Kabit Swaiyye speaks applaudingly for Sati when he says that “If a woman reflects strong-will and bears through the pain in last few moments of her life, sits on the pyre of her dead husband, then the whole world praises her and calls her “Sati”.

“Ant kale k bhari nigrab kai sati hoe,
Dhann(i) dhann(i) kahat hai sakai sansar ji.”²

Meaning, controlling her mind and with utmost determination, when a woman jumps into the pyre of her husband and self immolates herself, the whole world applauds her effort of being a loving and devoted wife.

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¹ Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Shabdarth, trld. by Lakshman Chelaram, vol. I, p. 158
² Bhai Gurdas, Kabit Swaiyye, KS 70, p. 98
The practice of sati was a common practice among the Hindus; originally restricted to high castes like Brahmins and Kshatriyas. It was very popular with the Rajputs. Ibn Battuta who visited India during the Sultanate period and Niccolas Manucci, the Venetian traveller who visited India during the Mughal period have described this custom in detail. Ibn Batutta states that in the Sultan’s dominions, the Hindus had to get the state’s permission which was easily granted to them.\(^1\) Manucci writes “when the ceremonies are finished….(widows) mounts to the top of the pyre and lying down on her side closely embraces her husband and the relations bind her feet strongly by two ropes to two posts driven into ground for this purpose. Next they throw some more wood and cow dung on the two bodies…..they apply light.”\(^2\) Isami refers to the tradition of Jauhar (a varied form of burning of women and children, popular among the Rajput rulers) after the Hindu ruler lost the hope to hold out against the besieging army) in his account of the conquest of Ranthambore by Sultan Ala-ud-din Khalji. Isami writes that Rai Hamir Deo burnt alive the ladies along with the precious things and then came out to fight to the last.\(^3\)

While looking for the earliest available reference to this custom, we cannot afford to ignore much quoted references of the classical writers like Strabo and Diodorus Siculus, as historical instances of sati in India as early as the 4\(^{th}\) century B.C. Strabo refers to the practice of sati at Taxila and among the Kathians (Madra) in ancient Punjab of their time.\(^4\) Diodorus Siculus cites the story of the younger wife of a general named Keteus, committing sati in 316 B.C., when her husband died fighting against the Greeks.\(^5\)

Describing the “cause” of widow-burning, Diodorus says that in the olden days, depraved women, through incontinence, fell in love with other men and got rid of their husbands by poison. When this nefarious practice had become quite prevalent and many lives had been sacrificed and when it was found

\(^1\) Travels of Ibn Batutta, vol. III, pp. 613-14
\(^2\) Niccolas Manucci, Storia Do Mogar or Mughal India, Vol. III, trld. William Irvine, London, 1907, p. 60
\(^3\) Isami, pp.275-6
\(^4\) Mc Crindle, The Invasion of India by Alexander the Great, Cosmo Publications, 1983, pp. 69, 202
\(^5\) R.C. Majumdar, Classical Accounts of India, pp. 240-41
that the punishment of the guilty had no effect on deterring other wives, they passed a law ordaining that a wife, unless she was pregnant or had already borne children, should be burnt along with her deceased husband and that, if she did not choose to obey the law, she should be compelled to remain a widow to the end of her life and be forever excommunicated from the sacrifices and solemnities as an impious person.¹ The great geographer himself doubts the existence of such a law, and necessarily, of the reason assigned for the enactment. He repeats the same story that sati was introduced by law in order to put a stop to the widespread crime of husband-poisoning. The element of coercion that Diodorus underlines in his description of sati makes it quite certain that if the system existed, it was a violent imposition. The same picture is corroborated by Manucci.

It must be underlined here that both Diodorus and Strabo wrote around the beginning of the Christian era drawing their information from the writings of the two generals who had accompanied Alexander to India for the purpose of conquest more than three centuries earlier. In sharp contrast, writers like Megasthnes who spent many years in the Mauryan court and was a keen observer of Indian life is absolutely silent on this issue. Thus, the description of Strabo and Diodorus, indicating wide prevalence of Sati should be viewed with suspicion. At best, they can be accredited of noting a custom which was prevalent amongst certain tribes on the extreme north-western frontiers of India.

It needs to be pondered over as to what were the factors that allowed the custom of Sati to continue.² Apart from somewhat absurd explanation of Diodorus for the prevalence of the practice of Sati, many centrifugal and centripetal forces were responsible to decide the fates of the thousands of unfortunate widows in our society. The causes which probably helped to encourage and perpetuate this system are very aptly and briefly stated by Sir A C Lyall in the following words:

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¹ Strabo, bk. XV chap 30
“Perhaps the best example of the selfish device obtaining vogue under the cloak of a necessary rite is afforded by the famous practice of a widow becoming Sati or burning herself alive with her dead husband, which is undoubtedly, as Sir H Maine has pointed out connected with the desire to get rid of her right, if she is childless, to a tenancy for life upon her husband’s lands. It is also connected, among the great families as may be easily observed still in certain parts of India, with the wish of heir to free himself by this simple plan from many inconveniences and encumbrances entailed upon him by the bequest of a number of step mothers who can not marry again.”

Disheartening to see the irony, when there were no property rights for widows, there was neither an eagerness nor the mechanism of getting rid of them. However, with the gradual development of the idea of widow right to property, the emphasis on the custom of Sati also enhanced till it was given the status of the “only dharm” for the widow. In fact, the figure of Sati came to be closely associated with the virtue of “Pati Vrata”. The role played by the male relatives of the widow guided by their ulterior economic motives was crucial. The ostensible justification of widows themselves offering for self-immolation does not seem to be plausible. It not only seems to be against the basic human instinct of survival but we also have irrefutable evidence of the use of force by Manucci. Nicolo Conti, Bernier and others have also recorded similar instances of the use of force. Abul Fazl, too, has recorded numerous instances where the reluctant women, were forced to perform Sati due to pressure from relatives or public opinion. Use of force, fear of social ostracism such as if the women ran away from the pyre, she became an out-caste and was not acceptable either to the society or to the family of her late husband. Adding to the agonies, of course, the degradation of the widow who chose to survive her husband was the extreme social disapproval and the issue of survival under such adverse circumstances. The circumstances were so cruel that Sati would be chosen by the hapless widow as the lesser of the two evils. P V Kane has rightly summed up the social scenario that the “greed of

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1 Sir Alfred Lyall, Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social, John Murray, Published by Kessinger, London, 1882, 1889.
property frequently induced the surviving members get rid of the widow by appealing at most distressing hour to her devotion and love for her husband".¹

It is an irony that when women had right to live after the death of her husband, she was denied property rights and when the latter was provided for, she was induced to die.

Now, in this background of prevalence of custom of Sati among different sections of society (which obviously included followers of Sikh Gurus), it would be appropriate injunction of Sikh Gurus on Sati. Could it actually modify or reformulate the psyche of society at large. Guru Amar Das, the third Sikh Guru, condemned the custom of Sati much before Akbar’s promulgation prohibiting it, in strong allegorical terms when he said:

"Sati is nor She, who burns herself on pyre of the spouse.
Nanak: A Sati is She who die with the sheer shock of separation.
Yes the Sati is one, who lives contended and embellish herself with good conduct;
and cherish her lord ever and call on him each morn.
Women burn themselves on the pyres of their lords,
But if they love their spouses well,
They suffer the pangs of separation even otherwise."

He further said:

"She who loves not her spouse,
Why burn herself in the fire?
For, be he alive or dead, she own him not.²

Though Guru’s thought clearly spoke against “Sati”, yet, such a denigrating custom continued to be prevalent among the Sikhs. One such incident which received a good deal of attention was the cremation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The oft-quoted description of the incident states “At ten O’clock, nearly the time fixed by the Brahmins, Kunwar Kharak Singh set fire to the pyre and ruler of the Punjab with four of ranis and seven slave girls was reduced to ashes;

¹ P.V. Kane, History of Dharm Shastras, Vol 2, Part 1, p.365
² AG, Var Suhi, P 787
(June, 1839). “It must be noted that “Sati” being performed at the cremation of an icon like figure of Sikh history, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, not only legitimized, but rather glorified the custom of sati, although, we do not get references of it being prevalent in common masses, but this episode certainly emphasized the relation between the “virtuous” wife, the “pativrata” wife performing sati. The disheartening reality is that all descriptions of ranis trying to escape their in-evitable fate by bribing the officials and so on, fell on deaf ears and what emerges is that loud proclamation of gap between the normative and operative realities.

Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa reports Guru Gobind Singh ji stating “Atamghati Mahapapi Honda hai” meaning “Self-Killing is the biggest crime. It is in the context of sati when Sahib Deva ji insisted that rather than being separated from him and staying in Delhi, she would prefer to commit sati in his presence. Guru Ji further states the oft-quoted saying of Guru Amar Das.¹

**Guru’s Perception on Women’s Condition**

It would not be out of context to recapitulate briefly the perception of the Sikh Gurus on different facets of women’s life. Admittedly, there are many elements within the Sikh scriptural tradition which are emancipators, yet, there are many facets which legitimises many forms of patriarchy. Firstly and foremost, the Sikh Gurus emphasized that both men and women are equal before God and both can enjoy spiritual attainments through nam-simran. Although Guru Nanak’s attitude towards women was by no means simple, there are ambiguous statements like when woman is compared to “maya” snare, symbol of lust and so on. Yet, he advocates the life of householder. Apart from the oft-quoted hymns relating to suchajji, suhagan, sulakhni he is able to address the agony of a woman at the hands of Babur’s army. Although Guru Nanak has no appreciation for the widow becoming sati, but neither the divorced woman nor the widow appears to have been dealt with sympathetically. He disapproves of the custom of becoming sati but almost

¹ Bhai Gyani Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa, ed, K S Raju, p 1135
incidentally. Guru Nanak does not explicitly criticize child-marriage or disabilities suffered by a widow.

Yet, Guru Nanak’s emphasis on conjugal relationship—fidelity and chastity to be a virtue both for men and women is emphasized again and again. This contribution cannot be under estimated because if marital life—a prime social institution—is advocated and practiced in an ethical moral way for both the partners then obviously it could have gone a long way in improving the position of women. Guru Nanak appreciated the woman for her procreative capabilities and that all of us are born of her and the world cannot exist without her. A woman was considered impure for a certain number of days after delivering a baby and even during the menstrual period referred to as “sutak.” Guru Nanak categorically criticized this social ritual of sutak.

“Jekari sutaku manniyai sabhtai sutaku hoe”. ¹

To elaborate it further, should sutak (Sutak: impurity believed by orthodox Hindus to stick to a home for a number of days, after a birth has occurred) impurity be believed in then no,

Such impurity occurs everywhere.  
Inside cow dung and wood are found worms.  
No single grain of cereals is without life in it.  
The first of living things is water, whereby is each object sustained.  
How many sutak impurities be believed, when even in the kitchen it is occurring?  
Guru Nanak further says that sutak impurity is washed by enlightenment alone.

The Sikh Scripture, at large, does not debase the female body and does not place taboos around menstruation, childbirth or any other female body/physiological functions. There is nothing inferior or abhorrent about feminine sexuality. Female activities and accoutrements are assigned a high value, even a transcend value. The Sikh affirmation of the feminine as a category of being with essential values and strength is expressed through the symbol of

¹ AG, p 472
the bride. There are clear injunctions against the most heinous social crime; a practice of female infanticide was categorically prohibited by Guru Amar Das as well as by Guru Gobind Singh. The Sikh code of conduct at the time of initiation of Khalsa prohibited any social contact with the “kurrimaar” (the killers of daughters). Guru Amar Das categorically denounced the practice of the Purdah system. Infact, he even assigned five 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 Hargobind called women as the “conscience of men”.

It must be acknowledged that the Gurus contributed positively to the status of women. In the then social ethos to view the role of women as a mother, as a wife endowed with varied virtues able to hold the family together as a great social contribution was also remarkable. The equality of men and women in the spiritual arena acknowledged the intellect of women in contrast to the popular perception that women are stupid and worthy of beating with shoes (Khaley). In Var5, Pauri 16, Bhai Gurdas describes the life of love and affection of an unmarried girl and then the blissfully happy life of a suhagin. This projection might not be a reality, yet, one has to applaud the positivity in the message in the life of a woman- which may be wishful only.

“Pevakarai ghari iaduli mau piu khari pidri,
Vichi bhirawan bhainari nanak dadak saparavari,
Lakh kharach viahiai gahanw daju saju ati ati bhari,
Sahurarai ghari manniai sanakhati paravar sadhari,
Sukh manai piri sejari chhatih bhojan sada sigari,
Lok ved gunu gian vichi aradh sariri mokh duari
Gurmukhi such phal nihachau nari”.

Meaning, in her parents’ home, the girl is fondled and dearly loved by the parents. Among the brothers she is a sister and lives (joyfully) in the full

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1 Bhai Gurdas Vaaran, Var 5, Pauri 16, p. 156
fledged families of the maternal and the paternal grand fathers. Then offering ornaments and dowry etc., and by spending lacs of rupees she is married. In her father-in-law's house she is accepted as the married wife. She enjoys with her husband, eats variety of foods and always remains bedecked. From a temporal and spiritual point of view, woman is half man's body and assists to the door of deliverance. She assuredly brings happiness to the virtuous.

However, it becomes evident that negative attitudes towards women have been the norm as opposed to the exception. While certain practices were frowned upon by the Gurus, many denigrating custom with regard to women continued, the most prominent being the custom of sati and female infanticide.

However, to become aware of this paradoxical aspect of religion—the gap between the injunction and utterances of the Gurus and actual impact they are able to impart on the social ethos—it is important to expound on both the positive and the negative with the scriptural canon. To know only the negative message is disempowering, to uphold only the positive images is a naïve and superficial empowerment. To analyze both leads to a more accurate and genuine discussion of the feminine dimension of the Sikh tradition and appreciate the contribution of the Sikh Gurus. Driven by an urge to be rational, one would not like to agree with scholars like Rita Gross when they claim “patriarchy has always valued the feminine traits, for women and as values regulating private life.” They claim that while it is important to valorize these images especially that of motherhood, it is equally important to be aware of the problematic in invoking these images as well. For it is precisely these images which have led to essentialist notions of womanhood and women’s role in society and they can be viewed as tools of control for what the ideal woman is to be and to do. Essentialist understandings of “ideal womanhood” or what has been labeled as doing “gender” is viewed as having inherent problems. Understandably, then images utilized within the scriptures generally focus on important functions within the household, the Adi Granth is replete

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2 Doris R. Jakobsh, Gender Issues in Sikh Studies: Hermeneutics of Affirmation or Hermeneutics of Suspicion, op. cit p.48.
with images of mother, of the bride, of "feminine roles". To me, this kind of opinion is anachronistic to blame, or not to appreciate, the Gurus which are distant by a mere time span of 400 odd years plus. It appears that if human civilization has not changed its perceptions with the changing times then the onus of our failure is passed on to them. If these scholars would have reflected the same level of concern for the widening gap between the normative beliefs and operative realities for instance, the still prevalent practice of female infanticides then, it would have certainly been an academic contribution and might have led to some self-introspection as a society. Keeping the social milieu in mind the Sikh tradition at least acknowledged the significance of the feminine component within the human existence.\(^1\) One cannot ignore or undermine the importance of the Sikh Gurus' perception; the respect and value accorded to women as a wife, as a mother especially for her procreative capabilities. In the then social milieu when "sutak" (Pollution) was attached to the process of child birth and many such restrictions imposed on women due to her physiology. In the then social milieu to award respect to woman in her roles of wife and a mother, applaud her contribution in the smooth functioning of the society- the family life and to advocate the ideal of chastity for both men and women in their marital life was actually a remarkable perception.

\(^{1}\) Nikky Gurinder Singh, The Feminine Principles op.cit.p.14