CHAPTER VI

DEVELOPMENT OF SIKH PANTH: CONSTRUCTION OR DECONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN’S IDENTITY

After discussing the position of the women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Punjab, and the impact of the Sikh Gurus on issues like female infanticide, sati or widow-remarriage and so on; it is logical to study the evolution or the change in the ideological position of the Sikh Gurus in response to the changed circumstances or the changed nature of the sangat. To understand the nuances of the relation between the position of women in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Punjab and the Sikh Gurus, one has to not only appreciate the perceptions of the Sikh Gurus but try to capture the changing focus of the limelight and the reasons behind it. Sikh Gurus modified or changed drastically their position on related issues with the development of the Sikh Panth. The process of the evolution of the Panth obviously was closely related to the changed circumstances, the vision of the respective Gurus. How did individual Gurus respond to their relationship with the Mughals; how did the composition of the Sikh Panth at a particular point of time influence the policies and agenda of the Gurus. The composition aspect was very closely related to the socio-cultural understanding of the Sikh Gurus- for the sustenance and the thriving development of the Panth, to aim for its ever increasing adherents the Sikh Guru obviously needed to change their issues of concern and the focus and emphasis of their activities. To contextualize the perceptions of the Sikh Gurus with the corresponding phases of the Panth, enables one to appreciate their position and the reasons behind it more clearly. In context of the Sikh Panth, a commendable feature is that it successfully institutionalized the position of the Guru. The institution of the Guru, which lasted for nearly two hundred years, gave the Sikh Panth a remarkable opportunity to continue to grow, evolve and consolidate itself over a long period of time. This gave Sikhism a continuing opportunity for over two centuries to respond to new situations and circumstances. In its long journey under its ten Gurus, the Sikh Panth inevitably witnessed gradual changes. Its social base too underwent a transformation. J.S. Grewal discusses the
changes in the focus of the Sikh community and notes that we have to identify
and study the shift in the dominant concerns of the community with the
passage of time, looking for historical and logical connections between the
activity and ideas of the various phases. In the following few pages, an
attempt has been made to correlate the phases of the Panth, for instance,
emphasis on militarization and the corresponding marginalization of women
among the concerns and activities of the Panth or her more active
participation when she was part of the manji and peerah system.

The basic function of the dominant or even newly emerging religious tradition
of any given society, in the present case the Sikh Gurus, is to articulate a
social ideology intended to serve as sort of psychological glue that helps
preserve both harmony and privilege within the society. The messages and
the ideological perception it advocates is also meant to appeal to the masses
and enhance its popularity. Infact, many religious beliefs and practices are
employed not only to define a given community identity but also to provide a
utopian vision for the future of the community and of the society of which it
forms a greater or lesser part. In other words, these beliefs and practices are
in definitional sense and in an ideal, moral sense. Together they constitute, in
short, both the identity and the ideology of the community. At the same time
as already stated that with the evolution of any particular religious tradition, its
ideological perceptions also evolve. In context of Sikhism the evolution from
the socio-religious movement of the sixteenth century to the socio-political
Sikh Panth of the seventeenth century is another important factor when
considering the incongruity between the affirming messages of the Gurus, and
the actual derogatory attitude towards women. At a more tautological level,
the attempt to construct /trace any ideological perceptions and shift in the
focus and dominant concerns becomes more complex when one sees an
immense gap between the normative positions of the Gurus and the operative
realities in the then existing society. For instance, take the issue of female
infanticide only Guru Amardas, the third Guru was the first Guru to criticize the
practice of female infanticide in clear, categorical terms yet, at the time of

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1 J.S. Grewal, A Perspective on Early Sikh History; in Sikh Studies: Comparative
Perspectives on a Changing Tradition, p.34

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establishment of Khalsa in the last decade of seventeenth century we observe Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru to prohibit a Khalsa from having any kind of contact with a kurrimaar (killer of a female child). This clearly indicates that till then the practice of female infanticide had not stopped. This kind of social realities rather than answering the question of the level of the impact of the Gurus in the then existing position of women poses more questions than answers. One is intrigued by the question that though the initial injunctions of the first few Gurus, particularly Guru Amardas, were so positive in their perception then why we do not find the desired level of impact on the position of women. It is a complex issue which deserves to be studied thoroughly and independently. Howsoever, the first and foremost reason that appears to be evidently the main reason is that there was a clear change in the social concerns and priorities of the Gurus and thus the emphasis in their religious discourse. Thus, the kind of constant and continuous pressure, in the form of religious discourses got deviated in such a long time and, therefore, obviously the impact also got adversely affected and got diluted. As oft-repeated the relationship between religion and social change is very significant. Moreover, the hold of patriarchal psyche is very tenacious and required a much more constant, continuous and powerful intervention on part of the Sikh Gurus to actually change the position of women. Here, I do not intend to undermine their contribution, it is just the insatiable desire for more.

The distinctive features and the general outline of Sikhism are perhaps best characterized in the words of Niharranjan Ray...¹ as follows: "To be able to achieve the integration of temporal and spiritual seems to me to have been the most significant contribution of Guru Nanak to the totality of the Indian way of life of medieval India ... (where) one finds that, by and large, in thought as well as in practice, the temporal and the material were set in opposition to the eternal or perennial and the spiritual."

Guru Nanak and his successors offered a new message and a new mission, both simple, direct and straightforward. The message consisted in the recognition and acceptance of one and only one God in place of hundreds of

¹ Niharranjan Ray, op. cit., p. 32
Gods and Goddesses. He also told them that this God could be reached not through the intermediary of priests but by honest efforts, through love and devotion and through God’s grace, but following a rigorous course of discipline. The life of a householder was not only accepted but placed higher than the path of renunciation and viewed not as a hurdle but rather a contributor in the path of spiritualism. The mission consisted in rejecting all external forms and practices of religious and spiritual exercises, meaningless perfunctory rites and rituals and degrading social abuses and practices.

Most important contribution of Guru Nanak for women was that he opened the gates of the path of spiritualism for women. He proclaimed:

“Come my sisters and dear comrades!
Clasp me in thine embrace.
Meeting together, let us tell the tales of our Omnipotent Spouse (God).
In the true Lord are all merits in us all demerits.”

This move to advocate that men and women are equal in the eyes of God and the path of salvation was not prohibited for women it was very remarkable, looking at the then existing socio-cultural values. Till then, the religious arena was not only barred for women but she was not even considered worthy of it because she was considered intellectually very inferior, a creation of God just to serve the men. By the act of making the emancipator open to women, the woman is placed at par with man, just as the shudra is placed at par with the Brahman. However, the path of spiritualism was open for women by fulfilling her roles of a wife, a mother and so on. Guru Nanak’s attitude is also not exactly revolutionary outlook. He can refer to wife as a snare, yet place the house-holder above the renunciant, but in any case the Sikh Guru advocated the life of a householder with discipline and restraint. In Sri Rag, Ghar I, 14, Guru Nanak among the things which induce man to forget God are pearls, gems, diamonds, thrones, armies, political power and beautiful women. Elsewhere, Guru Nanak clubs woman with sons, gold, horses and elephant as the objects of attachment. The five potent thags are power (raj),

1 AG, Sri Rag, p. 17
2 AG, Gauri, p. 222
riches (mal), beauty (rup) caste (jat) and youth (joban).¹ Guru Nanak sees a close link between (sexual) desire and beauty (rup).

The individual perception are the culmination of personal predilections and the then existing social milieu the value system. To view Guru Nanak as unconnected to his times is in my eyes, academically little immature. More over when Guru Nanak describes woman as one of the potential temptress of maya then there is no reason to suspect. Guru Nanak viewed women as a temptress and not one of the two partners having any desires just like men. Nanak is outspoken in his denunciation of caste and his successors plainly follow him in his vehement rejection of the caste system. Very often, the scholars argue that the intention was a renunciation only of those aspects of caste which accord privilege to some and impose discriminatory penalties on others.²

However, this does not dilute the fact that the Gurus were emphatic in their rejection of caste based religious pretensions and that membership of the Panth was open for people of all castes and gender. This insistence on eradication of the caste system, gender division in the path of spiritualism should be viewed as a characteristic feature of the panthic development in its initial stages.

Even at the initial stages, there are distinctive features which deserve to be noted as factors significantly contributing to its strength and life and level of the presence of the Panth. At least three such factors can be identified. The immediate impact of Nanak’s personality and the appeal it had for the common masses was the first factor in play. Although, if we do not go by the janamsakhi tradition which is more like post-defacto presentation of knowledge, we do not come across any conclusive documentary evidence, yet, it is obviously a reasonable assumption as very often, the charismatic appeal of either initiator or one of his early successors is a feature typical of

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¹ AG, Shalok, 1288
² McLeod, W.H. The Evolution of the Sikh Community, Oxford; Clarendan Press, 1976, pp. 87-91
successful religious movements and there is no reason to suppose that the Nanak panth was in any sense an exception to this rule.\footnote{This point is convincingly made by Terry Thomas in Sikhism: The Voice of the Guru. Units 12-13 of the Open University Series “Man’s Religious Quest, Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1970, p.63}

Secondly, Nanak succeeded in communicating his ideological perception, his convictions in the forms of religious songs and hymns. In a social structure where the literacy was limited these musical compositions reached the masses, won their hearts. Music always has an appealing effect and when combined with the issues affecting the daily lives of the masses these songs turned out to be a great modus operandi to take the message of Nanak far and wide. It must have contributed significantly for the early strength and subsequent growth of the Nanak-panth. The role of Nanak Bani becomes crystal clear if we consider how Guru Amardas got attracted towards the panth when he heard Bibi Amro singing Nanak bani.

The third factor is its appeal to the Jats of rural Punjab. It would suffice here to say that the Jat response owed much to the egalitarian emphasis of the panth. During the sixteenth century period of Guru Nanak and his successors the jats had become economically well-off yet, their social status due to the caste system did not match their economic position. Irfan Habib has suggested that the jats would be strongly attracted to a panth which rejected caste as a religious institution\footnote{Irfan Habib, “Jats of Punjab and Sind”, in Harbans Singh and N. Gerald Barrier, eds., Essays in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1976 , p.99} and the caste system as a principle of social organization. This constituency of the Panth must have had great shift and the vitality with which it was able to sustain, which will be discussed later.

Niharranjan Ray’s opinion adds a new dimension to the understanding of the early phase of the Panth. According to him what held these countless number of people together was neither the message by itself nor the mission by itself, not even by the two operating together. It was the institutionalization of both, and the organization that was built up stage by stage by the Gurus....The (personal) leadership and the charisma of the Gurus served only as incentives and gave the necessary inspiration and guidance.\footnote{Ray Niharranjan, ibid, p70,86,96}
To sum up the discussion on Nanak's perception of women it would not be out of place to quote Doris R. Jakobsh who writes, “he did not re-evaluate social institutions such as marriage and marriage practices to make them more equitable for women. Moreover, his silence regarding sati is rather surprising, given that it was primarily confined to the upper echelons of society, to which he belonged. There was also no critique of female infanticide, again, a practice closely aligned to the upper caste. In the final analysis, when it came to the social status of women, Nanak seemed content to leave the prevailing system in place. In the patriarchal world view, women were indeed assigned a position of inferiority in no way detracted from their ability to attain salvation, salvation, regardless of station on gender was pronounced open to all who devoted themselves whole heartedly to the ultimate.”¹ This is a good representation of the opinions of a set of serious scholars.

While evaluating Guru Nanak's perception on women, it has to be taken into view that the establishment of the panth was in its infancy and the ideological positions as well as their responses and reactions and expressions (in the form of religious injunctions) also evolved with the time. Secondly, we need to make an assessment of Guru Nanak only in relation to his social milieu, when the patriarchal values were the norm. Admittedly, he did not touch upon quite a few social evils related to women, yet, his contribution to question the validity of the caste system; opening the gateways of spiritual attainments to women, vehemently criticizing the ‘Sutak’ pollution related to child-birth, menstruation cycle etc., and emphasizing the women's role for procreating must be appreciated. More significantly, Guru Nanak questioned the prevailing norms and raised his voice against well-entrenched practices. His tough stand provided a platform for the subsequent Gurus, especially Guru Amar Das, who very vehemently opposed the practices against women. Guru Nanak's egalitarian outlook with regard to religious life becomes still more relevant, when we notice that religious life and social life were intermingled and mutually influencing each other in medieval India. To conclude, we can safely infer that Guru Nanak was a visionary who, despite living squarely in a

patriarchal social framework, contributed significantly by questioning the prevailing norms and his appeal lay in his assertion that salvation was open to all, regardless of gender or between castes.

Guru Angad succeeded to the gaddi following the first Guru's death in 1539. He was already associated with Khadur, a village situated near the right bank of the Beas approximately 30kms, above its confluence with Satluj. There was evidently no reason why he should remain in Kartarpur and the focus of the Panth’s devotion accordingly transferred to a location very close to the point where the Majha, Malwa and Doaba areas converge. His successor, Guru Amar Das remained within the same vicinity, a choice which presumably helps accounts for the spread of the Panths influence in all three regions.

Guru Angad seems to be faithfully following the teachings of Guru Nanak. His tenure appears to have been a period of consolidation as indicated by Ramkali Ki Var. In Mahima Parkas Vartak and Mahima Parkas Kavita, Guru Angad stressed the need to strive for spiritual attainment which can be only through regular meditation. To find and follow the path of salvation one must depend upon the grace of the Guru. For Nanak, the Guru had been the inner voice of God. For Angad the supreme guide is the first master, Guru Nanak. McLeod rightly points out that the reference to Nanak in these terms confirms what we might legitimately have assumed, namely that by the end of the second Guru’s lifetime the identity of the Nanak-panth must have been clearly established.

Moreover, the central position of the Guru in the ideology of the Panth is also emphasized which clearly culminated into the tenet of the same Jot (divine light indicating Gods grace, knowledge) being transferred from one Nanak to another Nanak (all the ten Gurus). This, in fact, provided the strong ideological firmness to the Panth in its infant stage which implies a panth with a clear identity but an informal organization. It is under his successor that a more formalized structure begins to appear. Guru Amardas became the third Guru

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1 AG,pp.966-67
2 A.G.,Var Majh, 27.1., AG.,p150. Two saloks which together summarize the message of Guru Angad are Var Majh 18; 1-2, AG, p146
3 McLeod, The Development of the Sikh Panth, pp234
in 1552 and directed the affairs of the developing Panth until his death in 1574.

The *Langar* or the community dining center initiated by Guru Nanak himself, but popularized, expanded and strengthened by successive Gurus, and, the *pangat* brought down the communal barriers of the rigid control of caste system. The system of *langar* and *pangat* encouraged even successfully helped to build up a community that was far more homogeneous, unified and integrated than the vertically graded and sharply stratified Hindu *jatis*.¹ The system of *langar* also allowed the women particularly Mata Khiwi to participate in the preparations of food in the common kitchen. Thus, her contribution towards the development of the Panth becomes formidable as the institutions of *langar* and *pangat* were closely connected with its developmental institutions. Mata Khiwi is known for her dedication to the discipline and organization of the *langar*. She gave a practical shape to the mission of Guru Nanak and dispelled all disparities. She believed that all men have been created equal by the same God. The status of Mata Khiwi is unique. Only Guru Mahal mentioned in the Guru Granth Sahib is Mata Khiwi. In one of the references, it is projected that Mata Khiwi was sitting very graciously and regally with that person who was balancing the whole universe. In the second reference Balwand is telling people that Mata Khiwi is like that leaf laden tree under whose shade people come and rest. She is distributing *kheer* (A Sweet Dish prepared of milk, rice and sugar).

"Balwand Khiwi Nek-Jan, Jis Bahuti Chhav Partaali, Langar Daulat Wandiya, Rav Am Rit Kheer Ghee Wali"²

The *langar-pangat* system was upheld by the system of community singing, community prayer and sharing of common objectives, adversity and suffering, success and failure.

It is to the third Guru, Guru Amar Das, that both scriptural and popular sources attribute a shift towards the inclusion of women in the Sikh Panth. It is to him that tradition credits a definite criticism of society beyond that of

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¹ Nihar Rajan Ray, ibid, p. 21
² AG, Ram Kali Ki Var, p. 967
religious ineptitude; much of this criticism of society is directed towards the situation of women in society. Guru Amar Das forbade sati in these words:

"They are not Satis who burn themselves with their dead husbands, 
Rather, they are Satis, Nanak, who die with mere shock of separation from their husbands." 

He further clarified:

"They too are to be considered as Satis, who abide in modesty and contentment. Who wait upon their Lord and rising in the morn ever remember Him". He further emphasized the same sentiment in Suhi-Ki-Var: "Women are burnt in the fire with their husbands: if they appreciate their husbands, they undergo sufficient pain by their death. And if they appreciate not their husbands, Nanak, Why should they be burnt at all?"

Further Mahima Parkash by Swaroop Das Bhalla, written in 1776 chronicled that it was through a woman that Amar Das first became acquainted with the Sikh community. Guru Amar Das up to sixtieth year of his life had not yet become a Sikh. He was living when Guru Nanak was preaching his gospel, but he did not know him. Even when Guru Angad, the second Guru came and carried on the mission of Guru Nanak, he did not know about it. It was reserved for Bibi Amro to bring him to the Sikh fold. She was the daughter of Guru Angad and was married to the nephew of Guru Amar Das, who lived in the adjoining house. One early morning, she was churning milk and as usual reciting the Jap Jee. Tradition has it that Amar Das was so moved that he insisted that she immediately introduce him to the source of the composition, namely, Guru Angad. Amar Das eventually succeeded Guru Angad as the third Guru of the Sikh community.

Later accounts present Guru Amar Das as having denounced the custom of purdah. The later traditions note that when the queen of Haripur visited him with a veil, he spontaneously reacted that "Who is this mad lady?"

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1 Adi Granth, p. 787
The tradition also notes that Guru Amar Das condemned the practice of female infanticide. Although, few scholars like for instance, Doris Jakobsh infers that “Guru Amar Das’ condemnation of the practice may well have stemmed from a need to distance Sikh panth under his leadership from the Guru lineage that was at the forefront of the practice of female infanticide.” This does not seem to be convincing rather an incharitable argument. If we look at the perception of Guru Amar Das on the position of women, his stance appears to be pretty holistic as he addressed social evils like sati and purdah and went to the extent of appointing women as religious missionaries. Even if the condemnation of female infanticide was intended to distance the Sikh Panth from the Guru lineage yet, undeniably, the end result was positive and the contribution of Guru Amar Das does obviously becomes more significant and appealing to the modern scholars.

It was Guru Amar Das who appointed missionaries to spread the message of the Sikh Panth beyond the immediate surroundings of Goindwal. The community had obviously expanded and with the increasing number of new congregations (Sangats) with large following, contact with the Guru became increasingly difficult. The expansion of the Panth took it to new areas which made it further difficult to get in direct and regular contact of the Guru. Thus, the manji system was created, a word literally meaning “Spring Bed” and referring to the seat of authority. Manji were leaders of local gatherings, who were directly accountable to the Guru, and thus, an extension of his influence. While sources differ with regard to the actual number of manjis, there is evidence that the women were also sent out to preach the Guru’s message of emancipation. Some scholars strongly believe that Twenty Two seats of religious preaching were established and out of these two seats of preaching were allotted to Matho Murari and Sachan Sach.

In the same manner, seventy two cradles were established. These women while rocking there children in cradles used to preach the ideals of Guru in the entire neighbourhood. In sum, appointment of manji, indicates an increase in

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2 M K Gill, Women and Sikh Religion, p. 69
institutionalization of the Sikh panth as well as ever swelling adherents of the panth. Given the esteemed place held by these religious emissaries, the very possibility being included speaks a great deal about the trust and respect Guru Amar Das awarded to women. His contribution acquires still great proportions if we recollect that just a short while ago, may be, thirty-forty years, which is a short span to expect a social change of this magnitude. Guru Nanak had professed to open the path of spiritualism for women which was taken to its logical extension by Guru Amar Das. In social milieu where women was not even considered worthy of any spiritual attainments, to award her the respect and responsibility of religious emissary by Guru Amar Das, speaks a great deal about his genuine concern about women and complete trust in her capacities. It can be safely presumed that women missionaries might have been fairly effective in recruitment of other women into the Sikh fold.

When we move to the writings of the fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das, what has generally been pointed out in Sikh historical writings is an increasingly institutionalized community of followers. This included the coming up of the pilgrimage site, Goindwal. Surjit Hans points out that there is also a noticeable increase of feminine imagery in the writings of the fourth Guru "Lyricism in Guru Ram Das has a social counter part. It points to the entry of women in appreciable numbers in the sangat in particular and in the community at large......It may be reasonable to suggest that a large scale entry of women into Sikhism contributed to the lyricism of Guru Ram Das".1 While earlier Gurus had indeed addressed the divine element in the female voice as a symbol of their submission, projecting God as the Lord (husband) and the devotee as wife. However, with Guru Ram Das, the symbol taken on a more concrete shape infact, the female perspective towards the body of the Guru is conspicuously emphasized; the corpo-reality of Guru Ram Das is central in these writings; "Looking again and again at the body of the Guru has filled me with intense Joy."2 According to Hans (1988; 1995) the increased presence of

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1 Surjit Singh Hans, Reconstruction of Sikh History from Sikh Literature, Jalandhar, ABS Publication, 1988, p. 142
women in the *sangat* and their greater participation in Sikh panth is very much evinced in the compositions of Guru Ram Das. As noted by Hans the influx of women must have been a great possibility and obviously their increasing share in the composition of adherents must have had corresponding, may be little, change in the ideology as well as the expression of Gurus on issues related to women. Ironically the Fourth Guru was highly critical of women in his writings. With the influx into the young Sikh tradition of women and men with the history of egalitarianism and a lack of marital loss, the Guru commented "Sinful Men, licentious and stupid, act as their women command. Lust abounds; thus do impure Men take orders from their women and act accordingly."1 This kind of perceptions about the women in the then existing social milieu, might be related to the composition of the Sikh panth at this point of time. The implications of the composition of the Sikh adherents will be discussed in detail later. Here, it would be suffice to say that the Jats accounted for a substantial component of the Sikh following. Needless to say, this newly acquired presence of Jat constituents would have threatened the established order of the Sikh panth; it became necessary to take action to stem the tide of an unwarranted egalitarian ethos. The panth was being increasingly molded to satisfy the needs of the growing numbers of followers.

It was during the time of fourth Guru that the manji system was transformed into the order of *masands*. The word "*masand*" is the corrupt form of the Persian word "*masnad*" or "high seat". The nobles were addressed as *Masnad-i-Ali* or high dignitaries during the Afghan rule. Later, the word became corrupted to the Indian *masand*. Zulfiqur-Ardistani writes that the Guru's agents who deputized for him took the title of *masands* because they considered Guru as "Sacha Padshah".2 It brought about the appointment of class of officials who were entrusted with the responsibility of preaching the faith and looking after the members of the community but more importantly, to collect the obligatory contribution of 1/10th of the income of all the members of socio religious community, which was originally a voluntary one. As with the *manjis*, the *masands*, also had the authority to initiate the entrance to the Sikh

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1 AG, p 304
2 Makhiz-i-Tawarikh-i-Sikhism, ed. Ganda Singh, Amritsar, 1949, p. 34
panth. The masands according to Gokul Chand Narang, were chosen for their piety, integrity and devotion to the Sikh religious order and were probably honorary officials.¹ Dabistan-i-Mazahib also noted that the masands had a dual responsibility; they were to preach the message of the Gurus and collect the voluntary tribute from the followers. Thus, the new order was tailored to suit both the missionary activity and the economic interests of the Gurus.²

It must be pointed out here that the institution of manjis and piris initiated by Guru Amar Das, towards an efficient organization of the expanding Sikh society was an important administrative step germane with significant political consequences. Its reformulation and re-modulation under the aegis of the masand system along with the institution of Guru becoming hereditary by Guru Ram Das had also very important political significance.

This development of Gaddi of Guru becoming hereditary had important socio-psychological consequences for all the prospective Gurus as well as the Sikh community at large. The accession to guru gaddi became a family centric feature as the succession moved along the male lines in the family of Guru Ram Das (Sodhis). One can clearly see that the panth was moving away from the interiority of the faith. When the emotive principal of faith was continually declining, the role, participation and involvement of women was also being more compartmentalized and marginalized.

By the time Guru Arjan took over the Guru Gaddi, complete paraphernalia was attached to the house of the Gurus. Contemporary works certainly point to an augmented secularization and politicization of the Sikh panth in the late sixteenth century. Guru Arjan was installed as the Guru in the full regalia of power and authority and impressive pomp and splendour. He was declared by the Sikh community as “Saacha Padshah”, that is as their true or real ruler, spiritual and temporal. Nihar Ranjan Ray³ puts it very aptly the usage of “Saacha Padshah” as evidently in contradistinction to the false “Padshah” who sitting on the throne at Delhi and Agra! As “Saacha Padshah”, the “True King” who “led human souls to salvation as opposed to worldly kings who control

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¹ Gokul Chand Narang, Transformation of Sikhism, Lahore, 1946, pp. 70-71
² Makhiz-i-Tawarikh-i-Sikhism, p. 34
³ Nihar Ranjan Ray, ibid, p. 67
mundane deeds.” The *Dabistan* points to a leader who was increasingly viewed as not only a religious but also a political leader under whose tenure the impressive buildings were built as Amritsar, “The Guru wore rich clothes, kept fine horses procured from Central Asia and some elephants and maintained retainers as bodyguards in attendance.”

Given Guru Arjun’s elevated visibility as a regal leader, the Sikhs came to be perceived as the separate state within the Mughal dominion.

By the end of the tenure of Guru Arjan, apart from the positive institutional developments for the construction of the distinct Sikh identity like the *panth*, it possessed the line of Gurus, a growing number of holy places, distinctive rituals and its own sacred scripture *Adi Granth*. During this phase Guru Arjan was entangled into some sort of a struggle for succession. This compulsive entanglement into political affairs was a result of the whole lot of factors. The first factor was the occasional challenge to the “gaddi” offered by the rival contestants. One of the most distinguished of these was the Guru Arjan’s elder brother, Prithi Chand. Another was Dhir Mal, grand son of the sixth guru. McLeod aptly points out that although it is difficult to evaluate their influence on the *panth*, it seems reasonable to presume that successful resisting of these challenges involved a heightened loyalty on the part of those who adhered to the orthodox line. During this phase women were not entrusted with any additional responsibilities. Quite probably, at this point of time she would have continued with her routine participation in the *langar* and *sangat*.

The same effect would also have been produced by the Sikh Gurus and Mughals relations. As noted, Guru Arjan’s title of *Sacha Padshah* along with his lifestyle must aroused a sense of threat among the Mughal rulers. Official concern on the part of the Mughal administration first became evident during the period of Guru Arjan and eventually led in 1606 to his death while in custody. Relations between the *panth* and the Lahore administration deteriorated further during the time of Guru Hargobind, (1606-44), so much so that fighting actually took place on three occasions. Guru Arjan’s death came

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1 Ardistanti, Dabistan-i-Mazahib, Makhiz-i-Tawarikh-i-Sikhan, p. 39.
2 McLeod, “Development of the Sikh Panth”, P235-236
to be regarded as a martyrdom and tradition proceeds from this interpretation to the belief that it led directly to a deliberate arming of the Panth by his son Hargobind. Bhai Gurdas makes a significant comment on the situation in the days of Guru Hargobind. Bhai Gurudas writes that the critics of Guru Hargobind assert: "The former Gurus used to stay at their dharmasals but he does not stay at any one place. Kings used to visit them, but he was imprisoned in a fort by the king. The Sikh can not think of one resort now that he runs from place to place undaunted. The former Gurus used to gratify the Sikhs with discourses from their manjis, but he keeps dogs to hunt. They used to compose bani, to recite and hear it recited, but he neither composes nor recites nor hears it recited. He does not keep the Sikh sewaks with him and he has befriended the enemies and the oppressors." However, here Swaroop Das Bhalla differs. He elaborately describes the routine schedule followed by Guru Hargobind which appears to emphasize that Guru Hargobind had complete faith in "Nit Nam" (Daily Recitation of Prayers) and regularly enjoyed the "Akhand Kirtan". He further states that after due completion of "Nit Nam", then Guru Hargobind spent his time and energies in militaristic activities. Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa reports that the major reasons for unrest among few Sikhs was that they believed that Guru Ji had relations with Kaula, daughter of Qazi. However it further states that since it was not the case, Guru Ji took care of her only because of her great devotion to the faith and as a mark of respect to Miyan Mir’s request to take care of Kaula. Another episode further attests the shifting thrust of the Panth on militarism. At the time "pag di rasam" (a ritual where son of the deceased person is tied a pag, turban, indicating that he is now responsible for all the status and dignity and responsibilities of family), Guru Hargobind got the "Saheli" and "Mala" deposited in the store house and commended that in lieu of garlands, Kalangis would be used. He further elaborated that in successive times, people will give the examples of Guru Sikhs’ bravery when innumerable number of Guru Sikhs will attain martyrdom for their faith. This kind of social appeal at the time of such an

1 Vaaran Bhai Gurdas, ed. Bhai Jodh Singh, Var 26, Pauri 24, pp. 437-38
2 Swaroop Das Bhalla, Mahima Parkash, ed Gopal Singh Lamba, Khazan Singh, Languages Department, Patiala, 1971, p. 159
3 Bhai Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa, ed. K S Raju, p. 478
important life cycle rite still becomes more value loaded.¹ This emphasis on the militaristic ethos of the Panth, quite obviously made the women adherents of the Panth almost invisible. Moreover the kind of “routinization of the faith” in the form of Sikh pilgrimages, sangat, pangat, recitation of bani and so on, a modus operandi of the practice of the faith suddenly suffered a jolt. Yet, one does not claim that the number of the women adherence of the faith had declined, but certainly they had become invisible. Out of the few references we get of women followers the two are from the times of seventh Guru, Guru Har Rai: the Guru visiting an old devotee of the faith at Lakhmi Pur or an old mother appealing for the charismatic miraculous power of the Guru to cure her only son who was fatally sick.² At the time of Guru Hargobind the masands besides collecting this revenue meant for the organization and maintenance of the Sikh places of worship and pilgrimage, were also directed to collect arms and horses for the standing army.³ According to all accounts, women were excluded from this new system. With the process of institutionalization, gender differences within the Sikh panth became increasingly pronounced. The viability of a religion based on interior devotion for women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also suffered a setback with increased institutionalization, traditionally established roles for men and women became more socially and materially feasible and were thus consolidated. As the masands were not only missionaries but also administrators who travelled far and wide to collect the Guru’s dues, the window of possibilities for women which got opened briefly during the early years of Panth was thus effectively closed again.⁴

Though women would still have been a part of the wider Sikh community, they were not the part of the military retinue which formed an important constituent of the young Guru Hargobind’s vision and understanding of his mission. More precisely, the role of motherhood and other roles associated with women in the seventeenth century, she would not have been expected to accompany

¹ Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin, ed Gyani Pratap Singh Ji, Published by Bhai Buta Singh Pratap, Amritsar; Putakan Walan Bazaar, Mai Sewa, p. 278
² Guru Kian Saakhian, ed Pyara Singh Padam, Saakhi Number 4, page 42 and Saakhi Number 11, p53
³ Gurbilas Padshahi Chhevin ibid p 279
⁴ Gokul Chand Narang, Transformation of Sikhism, Lahore, 1946,p. 70-71
Guru in the skirmishes with the Mughals on a routine basis. Although, one is aware of the episode of Mai Bhago which has been so very oft- repeated as an example of women's position in Sikhism but certainly it can not be equated to be a norm. However, some scholars like Simran Kaur point out that few people are aware that when Anand pur Sahib was surrounded by enemy's army, then it was only the women, who got the water from the river Satluj at the time of scarcity. It was only the women who supplied food and water to the Sikh soldiers who were fighting in inhospitable lands.\footnote{Gurbilas Padshahi Dasvin narrates the sacrifice of Bhai Bhagat Singh and his wife who lost their daughter while contributing to this task. At the time of discussing Bhai Taru Singh's contribution, one can not be oblivious of his mother's and sister's support. The main complaint put before Zakariya Khan, Mughal Commander was

"Hain Taru Singh Di Ek Bhain Aur Mai, Pees Kut We Kare Kamai."\footnote{Ratan Singh Bhangu, Prachin Panth Parkash, ed Bhai Vir Singh, 1962, p. 269}

However, this could not have been a routine affair. Moreover, if one studies Mai Bhago's episode closely and the kind of sarcastic idiom used by Mai Bhago to appeal to the sense of male dignity, self-respect of a community is more in the nature of an appeal to their male- ego when she says, "\textit{tusi ghar baith ke chhuri paayon te bachey khidaon}". It is also a clear reflection of the position and her role in the seventeenth century. In other words, the Sikh male thus also took on a new identity sanctioned by Guru Hargobind as a protector of the faith, armed and ready for a battle. During the skirmishes with the Mughal forces, Guru Hargobind applauded the militaristic caliber of Guru Teg Bahadur when he said "\textit{Tu Tyag Mal Ta Nahin, Teg Bahadur Hain}". This role, however, was denied to women, who by a process of elimination would have been relegated to a secondary position, possibly even viewed as impediments to the true calling of the Sikh community.

What happened to this sense of Panthic identity and its implications for women of the Panth during the quarter century covered by the period of the

\footnote{Simran Kaur, Prasidh Sikh Bibiyon, Amritsar; Singh Brothers, 1991, p. 8}
seventh and eighth Gurus, Guru Har Rai and Guru Har Kishan respectively is impossible to determine. The seventh Guru remained in the Shivalik Hills where his grandfather, the sixth Guru, had retired following the outbreak of hostilities with the Lahore administration; and although he occupied the gaddi for seventeen years, nothing of any striking importance marks the period. McLeod rightly points out that we can do little more than fall back on assumptions, one of which might well be the supposition that a period of prolonged absence from the plains must have produced a measure of weakening in Panthic cohesion. Although, this would be an unsubstantiated deduction but one thing is pretty clear that nothing eventful can be noted. In this tenure apart from that episode when whole group of women dress up like the Rani Pushpa Devi, queen of Raja Jai Singh, the child Guru manages to identify the Rani and goes and sits in her lap. This episode in the traditional sources is presented as an indication of the piety of the Guru.¹ Yet, this entire quarter century is not marked by any significant utterances of the Guru on women or any other social practice per se. The Panth appears to be heading on an auto-piloted mode. Here, one must remember the state of affairs just before seventh and eighth Gurus; at the time of Guru Hargobind as already discussed in detail, it was male dominated, militaristic ethos of the Panth where women did not have much to contribute in the growth and development of the Panth. Or, the other way round, for Guru Hargobind too, the improvement of position of women or any other social reality per se was not in the purview of his concerns and activities of the panth during his time. With regard to women we do not get any evidence of charismatic leadership on the part of these two Gurus. Thus, there is no deductible inference on the position of women, or even the perception of the Gurus. The basic reality of the women being marginalized must have continued as before.

During the tenure of the ninth Guru too, we do not find any specific development or any injunctions related to women. However, in a Hukam Namah by Guru Teg Bahadur to the sangat of Patna, there is a reference to Bebe Per Bai which is in connection to the request/instruction to the sangat of Patna to take care of his family at the time of his absence. This Hukam

¹ Guru Kian Saakhian, ed Pyara Singh Padam, Saakhi Number 17, p. 62
Namah is addressed to 38, presumably heads of the sangat, out of which one is woman. It is indicative that women although accounted for major adherents of the faith, but were very marginalized and rarely held a position of eminence. Moreover, one wonders whether the name of woman appeared because the context of the Hukam Namah was to take care of women folk of the Guru’s family and not any military expedition. Quite presumably, a woman would have been able to understand their needs better.\(^1\) Hukam Namah Number 23 refers to another woman Jadoy Bai Bebe in the sangat of Patna only.\(^2\) As noted while the Guru remained in the hills, relations between the Panth and the Mughal administration were largely uneventful. It was only when the ninth Guru moved to the Plains again that serious tension returned. This, in fact, later culminated into the execution of Guru Teg Bahadur. As discussed, the impact of Guru Arjan’s martyrdom culminated into the armament undertaken by his son and successor Guru Hargobind, the same, or rather much stronger impact was caused by the execution of Guru Teg Bahadur on his successor and son, Guru Gobind Singh. His main aim was to consolidate the Sikh power and steel the entire community to enable them to offer the kind of resistance that was called for. During the tenure of Guru Teg Bahadur, on the advice of his mother, he travelled far and wide. It must also be highlighted for this period that his mother, Mata Nanaki came to exercise a formidable influence in the development of the Sikh community. There are, in fact, two Hukam Namahs edited by Ganda Singh. There is a difference of opinion among the scholars whether these Hukam Namahs were issued by Guru Teg Bahadur’s mother- Mata Nanaki or his wife Mata Gujri. However, an authority in the field and editor of the work, Ganda Singh claims that probably these Hukam Namahs were authored by Mata Gujri as he believes that at the time of Guru Teg Bahadur’s visit to eastern (purva) India, Mata Nanaki had achieved the age of seventy five years and it was Mata Gujri along with few important Sikhs, who looked after different arrangements and organizational aspects in the times of Guru’s absence.\(^3\) Yet, editor of the work did not find himself equipped enough to conclude that these two Hukam Namahs were for

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1. Ganda Singh, ed Hukam Namah, Number 13, p. 86
2. op cit, Hukam Namah Number 23, pp. 106-107
sure authored by Mata Gujri as he admits that there is no other documentary evidence to corroborate the conclusion, thus, he puts a question mark before both the Hukam Namahs.¹

The development of militancy among the Sikhs peaked with the ascendency of the tenth and last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. By the time of Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh community had been all but transformed from a purely religious group to a highly organized body of men and women within a given area, militant in spirit and oriented towards meeting any challenge to their faith and their society, a challenge that came not only from the Mughal emperors and their governors but also from the Hindu rajas of the Panjab Himalayas, perhaps more from the latter.

Before discussing the heightened militaristic concerns of Guru Gobind Singh it would not be out of context to underline that Guru Gobind Singh’s compositions included the composition on Durga and Chandi. There has been a set of scholars who read these compositions as Guru Gobind Singh’s inclination towards Puranic Brahamanical culture and read this as his perceptions on women. While it can legitimately be argued that Guru Gobind Singh had no faith in the worship of Durga or Chandi or in any other divinity of the Brahamanical pantheon and that he was using them and the myths and legends connected with them, as mere images and symbols just as Guru Nanak did those of Tantrik yogic practices for aims and purposes of his own. Guru Gobind Singh’s compositions of more than a couple of pieces on Chandi and Durga can further be explained by the fact that the need of the community in his time was indeed sakti or power and energy, which was very well represented by these devis (goddesses). He was literally trying to arouse that hidden sakti among the adherents of the faith.

The impact of the militaristic ethos on the position, status and role of women in the Panth has been discussed in detail yet something exclusive-establishment of the Khalsa- took place during the tenure of Guru Gobind Singh which had immense implications for the women adherents of the Panth. It was during the baisakhi festival of 1699 (or at least on some specific date

¹ op cit, Hukam Namah Numbers 30 and 31, pp. 122-123
late in seventeenth century) Guru Gobind Singh established the institution of Khalsa. There are aspects of the Khalsa’s establishment which remain obscure. The actual word is itself an example of this obscurity for its etymology and original purpose still remain open to some doubt. Although, tradition implies that it was first introduced in 1699 at the actual ceremony of the inauguration, it is evident that the term had already been used well before this date as a designation of the Panth.¹ This change was also made in order to consolidate the Guru’s own position in the increasingly rival claimants of those of the Guru lineage who had, by virtue of their ancestry, established themselves as Sikh Gurus in their own right. Here, the usage of the term “Khalsa” derived its relevance from the word “Khalis” meaning pure. Rather than going into the graphic description of the initiation ceremony, it would suffice here to say that charan di pahul, whereby the initiate would drink water touched by either the Guru’s foot or the foot of a respected person who was the designated representative of the guru. Charan di pahul was replaced by khande di pahul. Now, the sweetened amrit was stirred with a two-edged sword (khanda). The usage of a weapon again indicates the emphasis of the militaristic requirement of the Panth. All those who were initiated into the Khalsa were to take on the appellation “Singh”, to wear the five articles known as the panj kakke, or five K,s: kesh (long hair), kangha (comb), kirpan (sword), kachh (a type of underwear); kara, a steel bracelet. However in the initiation rite of “Khalsa”, the feminine aspect which has been overtly emphasized as the position of importance accorded to women is when Mata Jito Jee added some patashas (sweeteners) to the amrit. Koer Singh in Gurbilas Padshahi Dasvin comments that the bani was being recited along with the preparation of pahul and Mata Jee added some patashas.² However Kesar Singh Chhibar in Banswalinamah does not have any role to accord to Mata Jeeto Jee; he writes after adding the patashas the mixture was stirred with a two edged iron sword and then it was named “amrit” (nectar).³ Koer Singh elsewhere applauds that Mata Jee by the act of adding patashas to the

1 J.S. Grewal and S.S. Bal, Guru Gobind Singh, Chandigarh: Punjab University, 1967, p. 115. The term “Khalsa” was used by the Mughals for revenue collection on lands that were directly supervised by the government, op. cit. p.113-115.
2 Koer Singh, Gurbilas Padshahi Dasvin, Patiala, 1968, p296
3 Kesar Singh Chhibar, Banswalinamah Dasan Padshahian Ka, Chandigarh, 1972, p 128
already prepared *amrit*, actually enhanced the power of *amrit* immensely.\(^1\) In Mahima Parkash, Swaroop Das Bhalla states that Mata Ji commented that to bear the power of the *amrit* is not an easy task" in the capabilities of every one. Thus, she ordered to get some sweeteners (*misri* or *patashas*) and added to the *amrit*, diluting it and making it appropriate for the use of Sikhs becoming "*Singhs*".\(^2\) What is of great importance in terms of Khalsan identity construction and gender analysis is that it is solely the male devotee, reborn in order of the Khalsa as the new warrior-saint that became the focus of all ritual and symbolic construction. Exterior symbols, weaponry, steel and uncut hair became the signifiers constituting what it meant to be a "real" Sikh. The significance of the *khanda*, a military implement associated with masculine characteristics, contrasted to the *Karad*, a domestic “feminine” implement, is indicative of the process of masculinisation that was central to the new order of the Khalsa.\(^3\) The interiority of the early gurus which projected God as the Lord, Husband and devotee as a wife/bride; a metaphor which invited all to a profound relationship with the divine, simply did not fit into the masculine, soldier saint perception of Guru Gobind Singh. Whereas the initial initiation rite *charan ki pahul* had invited all to full participation in the earlier Sikh Panth, with the creation of the Khalsa, the newly mandated rite of *khande ki pahul* as normative, women were symbolically and ritually excluded from the "brotherhood" and were relegated to marginal standing. Women, excluded from the Khalsa brotherhood, were inadvertently depreciated as full-fledged followers of the Sikh tradition. An ethos developed which consistently widened the gulf between the “true” Khalsa Sikh and those who were either not invited to join, namely women or those who did not pay heed to Guru’s call. Needless to say, the gulf between males, as possible adherents of the Khalsa military order, and females, as inadvertent adherents of the older Sikh Panth, widened significantly.

Yet, we can not be oblivious of the fact that during the time of “Khalsa” initiation, Guru Gobind Singh clearly prohibits any kind of social interaction


\(^2\) Swaroop Das Bhalla, Mahima Parkash, ed Gobind Singh Lamba, Khazan Singh, Languages Department, Patiala, 1971. Saakhi 17, p826

\(^3\) Doris Jakobsh, Relocating Gender in Sikh History, p.42-43
with "Kurrimaar" (Killer of a daughter). The fact that this heinous social crime was vehemently criticized by Guru Amardas, the third Guru and yet the tenth Guru spoke against it clearly indicates that this social evil had largely gone unchecked. According to Senapati, in Sri GurShobha, the Khalsa rahit prohibited use of tobacco and company of five ill influences which included the Kurrimaar as well as the masand.\(^1\) Koer Singh in his Gurbilas Padshahi Dasvin along with any contacts with Kurimaar, masands, Prithi Chand’s family, also “prohibits the selling of daughters”. Koer Singh also lists the prohibition of gambling, visit to prostitutes as Khalsa rahit.

Our discussion on gender during the time of Guru Gobind Singh would not be complete without a reference to Charitra Pakhyan; also known as Pakhyan Charitra or Triya Charitra. Charitra Pakhyan have been incorporated into the Dasam Granth and forms the bulk of the volume. Basically, it is a collection of 404 tales of the wiles of women. The intent behind these tales in the words of Dharam Pal Ashta\(^2\) was that ‘the chief merit of these tales is moral suggestiveness. While indirectly they instruct men in good moral behaviour, they warn the unwary against womanly enticements.” Although, the collection also includes stories in which women play no part at all, as well as tales of heroic and honorable women but they account for a much—much lesser number. Even when woman is portrayed as a victim, the structure of the tale is such that she appears too powerful over man. Most of the themes are of love, sexual debauchery, women are often the seducers. The thrust of the message communicated by the bulk of the stories in the volume fits so much so well into the framework “stri svabhav”. We have the stories which relate to all the traits associated with “stri svabhav” – to name a few woman is deceitful, projected as lustful, dishonest, wicked, disloyal, want the fulfillment of her uncontrolled sexual desire by hook or crook and the list goes on. Woman is cast as the eternal temptress – the object and very form of sexual desire who can ensnare the wisest and the most ascetic of men. To make my point still clearer, one must recount a popular story in which a beautiful widow attempted to seduce Guru Gobind Singh Ji by disguising herself as a young

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\(^1\) Senapati, Sri Gur Shobha, Patiala, 1967, p241  
sadhu who would reveal the goddess Devi to him at a specific spot at midnight. The Guru, caught in an embarrassing situation, was shocked at her intrigue and managed to flee from the area. This was the famous occasion that prompted Guru Gobind Singh to collect and write down these tales on the guile of women.

The actual authorship of Charitro-Pakhyan has always been an issue of heated debate among the scholars. Many historians and theologians have downplayed the importance of the work. However, keeping in mind the strong “masculine” ethos as the main thrust of “Khalsa” order initiated by Guru Gobind Singh, it does not seem very improbable that he might have viewed women as a distraction. He might have thought that the women had the power to turn the warrior-saint away from his true calling. Women, the possessor of innumerable wiles, as constructed in the Pakhyan-Charitra was a complete antithesis of the kind of male “brotherhood” ready to face any challenge militarily as envisioned by Guru Gobind Singh.

Even if we are convinced by the proposition that he did not author this section of the Dasam-Granth, yet, one can not deny the fact that the Dasam-Granth is still held as an important Sikh scripture almost at par with the Adi Granth. Moreover, for our purpose of study, Charitro-Pakhyan is a classic reflection of the general social perceptions about women. Its nuanced study is essential in configuring the construction of gender during the time of the tenth Guru, even if we choose not to read it as his perception. Moreover, by the virtue of it being part of the Dasam Granth and being associated with the name of Guru Gobind, it must have provided it with a value and further legitimized and sanctified the general derogatory social perception about women. It must have exercised an immense influence on his seventeenth century followers. It is an attestation of the pervasive influence of a religious leader that testifies to the fact that in history at what is believed to have been the injunctions, utterances or the image created by the Guru can commonly be much more important than whether it was actually composed by them. Thus, regardless of whether its authorship can be attributed to Guru Gobind Singh or not, the work is of considerable importance in understanding gender construction in the immediate post- Guru period.
Social Composition of the Panth and its Changing Focus of Concern

As already noted, the social composition of the Panth, obviously, had an impact on the perceptions, concerns and actions of the Gurus. The circle was completed —of action and reaction— that the kind of issues the Panth addressed at different points of time or it managed to win over such people into its fold whose interests coincided with the egalitarian outlook of the Sikh Gurus. In other words, the distinctive response elicited by the early Gurus and the specific constituency thereby conferred on the Panth. All the Gurus were Khatris and the list of leading members of the early Panth provided by Bhai Gurdas in his eleventh Var indicates that during the period of early development, Khatri prominence extended beyond the Guru’s line. Other names given by Bhai Gurdas cover a sufficient range of castes to suggest that there must have been something resembling a cross-section of Punjabi society in the Panth during the period covered by its first five or six Gurus. The lowest ranks in the order of Punjabi caste society are perhaps under-represented, but they are not absent. There is enough evidence to show that large recruitments were made not only from amongst such artisan communities as weavers, carpenters and masons but also from amongst those who professed and pursued such callings as those of barbers, washer men, leather-workers, sweepers and scavengers, who were all considered low in the Brahmanical jati system. Not a few of the recruits were also from those who happened to be Muslims. Moreover, a comparatively light representation in a list of prominent members does not necessarily imply a corresponding proportion of the actual adherents.

At some point, however, the composition of the community radically changed, as a new caste grouping, the Jats emerged into prominence. From the time of Guru Ramdas and the foundation of Amritsar on a piece of land gifted by Akbar in the midst of fertile lands that had high concentration of the sturdy Jat peasants, a conscious and concerted drive was made to draw Jats into the fold of the faith. Guru Arjan added strength to this drive, this time centering around Taran-Taaran. The first clear indication of Jat strength within the
Panth actually goes back to the later years of Bhai Gurdas' own lifetime. As already stated, the author of the *Dabistan-i-Majahib*, written during the period of Guru Hargobind, indicates that by the early seventeenth century, the Jats comprised a significant section of the Panth.\(^1\)

Although some uncertainty still obscures the social foundation of the Panth, there are good grounds for supposing that a significant measure of the initial response came from the Jats of Central Punjab. The Panth certainly recruited in rural Punjab from its earliest days and it is therefore reasonable to suppose that the Jat response to Guru's teachings should be traced to its first beginnings. It is also reasonable to suppose that the Jat response owed much to the egalitarian emphasis made by Nanak and his successors. Irfan Habib contemplating the inclusion of the Jats into the Sikh folk attributes this en-masse migration to a disparity between the Jats' economic status and their caste status in the sixteenth century. If this theory is correct, it means that there would have been a widening gap separating the ascending economic status and their comparatively humble ritual status. He further suggested that the Jats would be strongly attracted to a Panth which rejected caste as a religious institution.\(^2\)

Another development clearly point to the close connection between the social composition of the Panth and its changing concerns. As noted, during the time of Guru Ramdas, and Guru Arjan the popularity of the Panth had been continuously increasing among the Jats. By the time of Guru Hargobind the transformation of caste constituency from Khatri to the Jat dominance had almost completed. The Jats were known for their resistance to authority and would not have been averse to armed resistance. Intrusion from the government would have exacerbated a militant reaction from the Jats. After the execution of Guru Arjan by the Mughals, Guru Hargobind wore arms and the military concerns of the Panth became apparent. Guru Hargobind used to carry two swords, *miri* and *piri*, one hanging from the right and another hanging from left, one representing the spiritual and another the temporal

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authority. He also fortified Amritsar and built the Akal-Takht opposite the Har Mandir, dispensing justice and temporal order from the former and spiritual guidance from the latter. It is here that the caste composition of the adherents of the Panth would have been pivotal to the change. Guru Hargobind’s military stance is likely to have originated with the armed Jat constituency, as opposed to the religious ideology of the young guru.\(^1\) In sum, the call to arms by Guru Hargobind under the banner of self defense in the seventeenth century took precedence over the transformation of minor (read major) social ills. It is tempting to postulate that the institution of Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh towards the end of the seventeenth century was as much as the result as the cause of the preponderance of the Jats among his followers.\(^2\)

Moreover, the early Gurus lived within or near the Majha area of Punjab, a region that was and is still known for a strong Jat presence. Given the egalitarian nature of the Jats, it is possible that it was women in particular who were attracted to the message of emancipation of the Sikh Gurus, as it was women who had a lot to gain from this new ideological current. A whole lot of factors point to the full participation of women in the developing Sikh community. First and foremost, the Sikh Gurus particularly the first guru, Guru Nanak's clear and insistent injunction that the doors to salvation was accessible to both women and men. It was for the first time in the tradition and religious history of the area that women were acknowledged as intellectually worthy of the path of spiritualism. It also sent strong messages that in the eyes of God both men and women are equal. Secondly, there are strains within the sources pointing to women as having been active participants in the developing community; three, Guru Amar Das' criticism of society with regard to the position of women and a whole lot of social evils inflicted on her-like sati, female infanticide and purdah. It must have managed to win over the hearts of millions of women. Four, the plausibility of the missionary activities by women also during the time of Guru Amar Das, resulting most certainly in

an active outreach towards women; and five, scriptural indications of an influx of women into the Sikh Panth during the time of the fourth Guru.¹

Although we do not get very clear indication of women’s active participation in the traditional Sikh history, the notion of women as active agents in the Sikh Panth may well appear foreign and certainly not an applauding development. Nonetheless, women would have had the most to gain from rejecting the restrictions placed upon them by an orthodox Brahmanical system and embracing the egalitarian message of the early Sikh Gurus. The third Guru’s criticism of the societal norms pertaining to women would conceivably have encouraged their movement into the Sikh fold. Their appointment as religious missionaries is a development which further corroborates it. However, this level of involvement and participation of women witnessed for a downward trend from the times of the fourth Guru, Guru Ramdas.

One is intrigued by the fact that Guru Amar Das, the third Guru very categorically criticized the practice of female infanticide and then there is an astonishing silence by all the Gurus till the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh who issued strong injunctions against it. In fact, we do not even get an incidental injunction on the issue; the silence becomes more disturbing when the inhumane aspect of the practice has already been directed at by Guru Amar Das.

One may conclude that with the transmogrification of the very character of the Panth came a shift in the priorities of the Gurus. The patriarchal value system was firmly established during the development of the Sikh community. Men furbished with the cultural and social capital traditionally associated with their gender, were already placed in a powerful hierarchical position. The Gurus were all males only and though, Bibi Bhani according to Sikh tradition won over the blessings of her father Guru Amar Das, she was not considered worthy of Guru-Gaddi. Almost all the sources refer to the unparalleled service and obedience of Bibi Bhani and narrates the episode of her bleeding palm, when she had placed under a broken bath stool, so as not to cause any inconvenience to her father, none mentions the possibility of her being

¹ Doris Jakobsh, Relocating Gender in Sikh History, p. 34
seriously for the Guru-Gaddi. However, Gyan Singh Ji Gyani's *Tawarikh-i-Guru-Khalsa* (ed. K S Raju) puts it little differently. According to his version, Guru Amar Das didn't happily concede to the wishes of Bibi Bhani, but Bibi Bhani, typical of "Triya charitra", womanly enticements and obstinate nature insisted on the grant of such a wish. Here, in fact the author writes that Guru Amar Das pointed out that the succession to "gurugaddi" is not by the logic of hereditary possession and warned her that it would just bring about the continuous rivalry, mutual jealousies, quarrels and friction with in the family.¹ He bestowed the gaddi of Guruship in the family of Sodhis only but yet, the succession was only in male lines only. Bibi Bhani, although is considered worthy of such blessings, yet, not being a guru herself because she was a woman. This trait of succession in male lines is prominent among all the religions in medieval India. It becomes still more clear if we recollect that Bibi Sharifa, daughter of Shaikh Farid-ud-din Ganji-Shakkar has been described as a pious woman. She became a widow in her early youth and did not marry again. She devoted herself to religion in such a way that her father, Shaikh Farid-ud-din Ganji-Shakkar remarked: "Had it been permitted to give Khilafatnamah (grant of diploma by a sufi saint, allowing his disciple to enroll murids in the silsillah or order) of the Shaikh and his sajjada (prayer carpet) to a woman; I would have given them to Bibi Sharifa." Further, he said: "if other women would have been like her, women would have taken precedence over men."² This anecdote can be used as a further attestation that spiritual authority is not transferred to women not only in Sikhism but in Sufism, particularly Chishti silsillah which is still known to be a more liberal form of Islam. Moreover, the position of women where women also held some seats of authority were replaced by masands resulting in that all the positions of prominence and responsibility were held by the men. Further, traditional male roles became increasingly valued and female roles devalued with the institutionalization and politicization of the Sikh Panth.

In the end, one would also like to ponder over the reasons that the positive directives of the Gurus towards women were never developed and applied in

¹ Bhai Gyan Singh Ji Gyani, Tawarikh-i-Guru Khalsa, ed K S Raju, p 364
² K.A. Nizami, The Life and Times of Shaikh Farid-ud-din Ganji-Shakkar, reprint, Delhi, 1987, p. 65
social ethos. The precepts of the Gurus, concerning the amelioration of the situation of women, remained just that: precepts. The reason for this shortcoming might be attributed to historical and cultural circumstances. The Sikhs and Mughals, although for a brief time embroiled fighting wars, which were a combination of guile, regional ambitions and later on survival. How ever, Guru Arjun onwards specifically Guru Hargobind, Guru Teg Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh, the relations with the Mughals were always occupying and important part of their concerned and activities. Or maybe it could be just that in the initial phase of the Sikh Panth many contesting claimants were existing for the gaddi of the guru. Thus, may be just to win over the adherents, something appealing, to the masses i.e. the social evils were addressed. It becomes a plausible explanation if we relate that it was only the first three Gurus, particularly the third Guru, who had much to speak in favor of women; it coincided with the same phase when women emerged as a prominent component of the adherents and thus, women's issues figure prominently. This process must have worked both ways. We observe that very often it was just the injunctions which did not produce the intended changes. But, is it reasonable to even expect the religious leaders to address the issue of social evils so majorly or, could it have been that some Gurus themselves accepted the status-quo and endorsed the patriarchal system? Another justification, for not getting the desired results, the professed reforms could be attributed to the deep-rooted traditional and cultural attitudes towards women, which proved to be too powerful for the Sikh Gurus to eradicate. In sum, unfortunately, there existed a tremendous gap between Sikh precepts and practices which has been continuously increasing with the passage of time.