CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have been conceptualized upon the notion that gender is an on-going fluid construct which is always evolving and transforming. The perceptions of a society – the social ethos and norms find their way in varied metaphors and expressions. The notions of gender and it’s allied questions like position of women, her role and valuation of her role continuously evolve, they emerge and develop with the shifting needs of the region/community within which they unfold. Undeniably, this process is influenced by the political, economic, social or cultural factors surrounding them; very often the ideological fermentation of few individuals or the society at large accompany these changes in the social understanding. Now, it is a well accepted conceptual assumption that gender relations cannot be studied in isolation. The issue of gender relations has to be looked at in the context of structures and processes in which such relations are embedded. There is a complex interplay between religion and social change. Religious traditions have been important players in the transformation of societies and have always been of utmost importance in determining the status of women, since such factors exert powerful influence on the thought, culture and behaviour of the people. The religious ideology very often plays a crucial role in legitimizing and sustaining the subordination of women. Or, in contrast, it can advocate a more egalitarian society as is the case with Sikhism. For Guru Nanak, men and women were equal not only before God, but also before one another. Women are considered as an integral part of society who must not be excluded by a ritual or doctrinal consideration.

The entire study reinstates a basic historical reality that in Punjab there did not exist significant cultural differences, values and notions of celebration and perceptions of life on the basis of religion. There existed a fusion of tradition, a commingled culture. In context of Punjab, multiculturalism is not just a statement of fact, it is also a value. The society of Punjab at that point of time, is marked by the fusion of traditions where Hindus, Muslims and adherents of the nascent Sikh faith shared the aspirations of their lives, the social values
and ethos and their social expressions in the form of rituals and rites performed by the society. The patriarchal psyche of both the religious communities – Hindus and Muslims alike recommended the child marriage on the same ideological grounds and both were equally stringent in following it. For any study focusing on social history, coming to the conclusive, judgmental generalizations would be oblivious of the co-existence of multiplicity of traditions and customs. For instance, even if we look at the varied forms of marriages and the underlying logistics behind them, a whole gamut of practices co-existed. It is not only difficult but rather misleading to dub any particular form of marriage as “ideal”. The commingled culture is evident in the vast similarities between the rituals and customs followed by the Hindus and Muslims alike.

The survey of the socio-religious and political milieu (thrust of chapter 1) clearly reflected the factors and institutions which facilitated and contributed in the emergence of the Sikhism and its popularity over a substantial section of the society. A detailed study of the geographical features reinstated the close connection between the geographical features and the socio-cultural life of a region. To give it a more concrete grounding an ideological framework has been developed where the perceptions of the important bhakti sants of the period; both sagun and nirgun, have been studied. Quite obviously, their injunctions were the main area of focus and the baseline for the comparative trajectory. It was actually a pleasure to observe that when Guru Nanak’s perceptions were compared with that of other bhakti sants particularly Kabir who was the most vehement and strong critique of women, it turned out to be much more egalitarian. Guru Nanak’s ideological outpourings considered women worthy of spiritual attainments and thus invited her to joint the sangat (congregation). She was considered at par with men in the path of spiritual quest. In Guru Nanak’s eyes woman is appreciated for her various traits and of her procreative capabilities; he acknowledged her social contribution as mothers and wives. In sharp contrast to the bhakti sants, she is not viewed only as a source of distraction, of her maddening sexual lust bringing about the downfall of men. It is only Guru Nanak during those times who spoke vehemently against sutak (the physical pollution related to the biological
functions of a female body). It is Guru Nanak only who viewed the life of a householder as a virtue and recommended the ethos of chastity for both men and women in their marital lives. The Gurus redefined the celibacy as marriage to one wife and taught that male and female alike need to practice conjugal fidelity. They advocated marriage of the two equal partners. Guru Amar Das, the third Guru insisted; “Only they are truly wedded who have one spirit in two bodies.” Guru Amar Das also strongly condemned purdah and indeed refused to have an audience with women that kept purdah. He spoke against the custom of sati and female infanticide. He established religious centers and women alongside men were recruited to lead and teach through manji and peerah system. Women worked alongside the men in maintaining the system of langar, performing duties and sitting along with the men in the pangat. Admittedly, the Gurus’ teachings of equality have never been fully realized, which is clearly evident in the treatment of women in today’s Punjab or even in the Sikh society. Yet, the contributions of the Gurus, their categorical injunctions condemning the whole gamut of customs and practices against the women cannot be negated.

One is inclined to review the critique of few modern scholars when they write that Guru Nanak did not speak against sati or polygamy or conditions of widows. It appears unreasonable to an academic mind not to appreciate Guru Nanak’s contribution for his positive messages which were much ahead than the existing socio-cultural milieu, his speaking against the many limitations suffered by the women. One is inclined to point out that if the contributions or the positive thrust in Guru Nanak’s messages is diluted and he is discredited for using words like kuchajji, kulakhni dohagan for women then one should remind oneself of the supposition that all women are “good” by the virtue of being women is equally misleading. It is like falling into the same trap of seeing only the “black” and the “white” and turning blind to “grey” component of the larger reality, which is very often the major component of any society. If in the medieval times the general perception (well represented by bhakti sants like Kabir, Tulsidas, Surdas) viewed women as “black” i.e. negative light as a snare, a distraction, a distrustful, dishonest, malicious being led by her sexual lust then we are choosing to see only the “white’ and attempt to turn the
“black” into “white”. Whereas, the reality is that at any point of time both “good” and “bad” people co-exist whether it is men or women.

The successive section of the thesis (Part II) comprised of chapters: Marriage; Women’s Position in Social Sphere; Discrimination against Women; Social Evils and the Development of Sikh Panth; Construction or Deconstruction of Women’s Identity. It underlines the system of marriage was one of the, rather most, important social institution around which the life of the women revolved. In this context, the social milieu of the period provided rich material for instance, the factors behind the social institution of marriage and caste, underlying logistics of ritual purity behind the varied forms of widow remarriage – ‘Karewa’ and ‘Chadar Pauna’ or still prevalent, if not predominant, the ideology of domesticity and seclusion. Inspite of intensely intermingling culture one cannot presume homogeneity in social behaviour patterns. In this endeavour one needed to be very sensitive to the nuances, the role played by caste and class and acknowledge the multiplicity of realities – in context of position of women and her social status holding true. Another major reality one confronts in the study of the institution of “marriage” is that the whole institution of exogamous marriage had deep and over-arching impact on the life of women. It was rightly called the ‘Second Birth’ in a woman’s life when she was given a new name to complete this feeling of newness. Cessation of all contacts with her biological family was the general social expectation. One can easily relate to her sense of loss and insecurity when she was almost dropped in a new setup at the mercy of the unknown “family” without much hope of emotional or any other kind of support. One must acknowledge that in sharp contrast to the general social ethos, Guru Amar Das’ injunction emphasizing the compatibility in a marriage must have worked (or atleast should have) as a balm to the bruised heart when he said:

"Bride and groom are not they who pose as one whole;
Bride and groom are they who are two bodies with one soul."\(^1\)

\(^1\) AG, p. 788.
Here, clearly Guru Amar Das advocates the marriage between two equal partners and the sacred institution of marriage aims at the fusion of two souls into one.

The study would have been incomplete without the study of the family. Family is not only an important primary institution in all civilized, human societies but in fact, the most important basic social unit where women, has a formidable role to play. It is this role which emerges as an important rather the most important yardstick to assess her position in the larger social fabric. Family needs to be studied in its relationship to caste, class, gender and religion. In medieval Punjab it was more of a paternalistic dominance within the family where members have unequal access to the family's material assets and the right to make decisions. Oppression and powerlessness of women coexist with a prevailing ethos of according social respect and honour to her in certain roles like 'Mother'.

The study of rituals and ceremonies under the aegis of 'Women's Position in Social Sphere' clearly brought out the secondary status of women as reflected by her role and participation in the social engagements. The rituals connected the husband and wife but in a clear hierarchical manner placing the wife in a subordinate position. If these rituals and ceremonies are expected to be clear identity markers of any community then they are also a concrete tangible reflection of the power equation of different components of that society. It establishes and reinforces the position of men and women, their roles and the existing, largely accepted, gaps in the social order. On one hand, the rituals and ceremonies often reinforce the social order and on the other hand, from a purely systemic viewpoint, rituals are the ceremonies of a mediating institution that shape the future of a society. They are in effect the vehicles of hope for both individuals and the social order; rituals help people overcome indeterminacy in life. Within this conceptual framework one observed that there is a tension between the ritual and the social order. The secondary (read marginal) status of women is evinced by other life cycle rituals and insignificant role played by women, at times being totally excluded from.
The Gurus emphatically advocated an egalitarian society where woman was awarded the position of equality, respect and dignity. Inspite of the Gurus’ strong condemnation of social customs and practices which discriminated against women, social evils did not cease to exist. Very often, the egalitarian social ethics, values and norms preached by the Gurus, religious leaders, sants have always been very difficult to implement and put into practise. To expect the normative preachings to become the operative beliefs and ethos of society in regard to women is still more difficult. The women were not only relegated to their households but they were married at a very tender age of eight-nine years so that she would not sexually go fray. They were compelled to observe purdah. She was expected to be a sati at the death of her husband in some castes or observe permanent widowhood in others, even in case of young widows. Widowhood meant destitution at best, social rejection and lifelong loneliness. The birth of a daughter was viewed with disdain and sorrow. The birth of the boy was celebrated lavishly but that of a girl meant scorn and blame by the in-laws.

The dislike for a girl-child at a general social level had greater implications for women at large. The women who failed to produce a male heir is seen as accursed, as one who had failed in her essential duty. In other words, it becomes clear that a wife's worth comes to be crucially determined by her ability to produce male heirs. In the larger social perception the sons were and are still 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. Unfortunately, the weakness for only the sons as the desired progeny went to the extent that in medieval Punjab the practise of female infanticide was practised on a significant scale, if not widely. Commendably, Guru Amar Das vehemently spoke against it and Guru Gobind Singh prohibited any kind of social contact with the 'Kurrimaar' (the killer of female infant).

The Sikh Gurus also categorically spoke against the practise of 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. The practise of sati is a question closely linked to widow remarriage. The study of social reform movements in eighteenth century India always impressed upon the fact that the widow remarriage was with intent for the betterment of widows. However, one is forced to confront the other side of the reality that widow remarriage among the agriculturist and artisinal classes of the society was prevalent so that her procreative capabilities and her physical labour output do not go waste. Although we do not get categorical evidence in the contemporary sources for sixteenth and seventeenth centuries however, it's prevalence in the later period is recorded. Generally, such social practices do not suddenly evolve, they have their genesis in remote past. Among the Jats the practice of widow remarriage was quite prevalent with minor variations under the names of “karewa”, “chadar dalna” or “chadar pauna”. The underlying logic was to transfer whatever little share the widow had inherited in the landed property of her deceased husband. This widow remarriage was to be performed only with the brother, preferably younger, so that the landed property was to be retained among the male lines only. It is such an eye-wash that in case a woman decided against marrying any of her brothers-in-law then till the time of her last breath she had to remain chaste, then only she could exercise whatever little control over her share of land. First of all it is very difficult to assume that she would be able to resist her remarriage against her wishes. Moreover, this precondition attached to chastity and looking at the general disempowering mechanism it would not be far from the reality that then the family of in-laws and society might have resorted to the level of questioning the chastity of a woman.

Admittedly, it is difficult to clearly assess the extent of the impact of the Sikh Gurus in changing the larger social perception or partially modifying the dominant patriarchal ideology. One thing is for certain that the final product of their constructive intervention in the larger social dealing was a result of the complex interplay of the changing focus and emphasis of the Sikh Gurus which was closely related to the development of the Sikh Panth and its existing as well as aspired social base at a point of time.

Most important contribution of Guru Nanak for women was that he opened the gates of the path of spiritualism for women. 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 man by the act of making the emancipator goals 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 householder above the renunciant, but in any case the Sikh Guru advocated the life of a householder with discipline and restraint. To sum up on this aspect, one is inclined to agree with J.S. Grewal that Guru Nanak, within the patriarchal framework created a large space for women much larger than what we find in Kabir or perhaps the whole range of Indian Literature springing from devotional theism. Total equality of woman with man in the spiritual realm was a radical idea in Indian history, especially because it was not confined to female *bikhus* or *bhaktas*. Guru Nanak’s symbolic attack on discrimination against women due to physiological differences carried the idea of equality a long step forward. If he does not carry into the home, giving equal share to the daughter in inheritance nor does he say anything which can be used in support of inequality of any kind. The principle of equality upheld in one area of life carried important implications for other areas as well. Especially, in a social set-up where religion is an important aspect of life, it directly as well as indirectly influences its many aspects.

A whole gamut of restrictions and superstitions were being attached to childbirth. 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 the social ritual of sutak when he said “*Jekari Sutaku Manniyai Sabhtai Sutaku Hoe*”. Guru Nanak, on the contrary, highlighted the physiological feminine trait of hers as a quality. He emphasized that without the woman the world cannot exist. 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 the bride. This thought process extended further in respecting woman as a "mother" and went a step further by advocating conjugal relationship in marriage. 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). There are clear injunctions against the most heinous social crime – the practice of female infanticide was categorically prohibited by Guru Amar Das as well as Guru Gobind Singh. The Sikh code of conduct at the time of initiation of Khalsa prohibited any social contact with the 'Kurrimaar' (the killer 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 the faith. Guru Amar Das vehemently spoke against the practice of sati. And the Guru could clearly empathize with the disabilities suffered by women.

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. In regard to women, the system of langar and pangat along with her active role in the manji and the peerah system would have successfully brought down the disabilities suffered by her general social positioning and in specific due to the prevalence of the purdah system. Thus, the contributions
of women towards the developments of the panth become formidable as the institutions of langar and pangat as well as manji and peerah system were closely connected with its developmental institutions.

Last but not the least, Guru Nanak is outspoken in his denunciation of caste and his successors plainly follow him in his rejection of the caste system. Very often, the scholars argue that the intention was a denunciation only of those aspects of caste which accord privilege to some and impose discriminatory penalties on others. It is little perplexing that although the validity of the caste system was categorically questioned yet, all the marriages of Gurus' children were in strict adherence to the dictates of the caste system.

However, this does not dilute the fact the Gurus were emphatic in their rejection of caste based religious pretensions and that membership of the Panth was open for people of all the castes and gender. We have to acknowledge that Guru Nanak is articulate in his social criticism when customs and institutions touch upon religion. 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 or still more significant, the Sikh Gurus particularly Guru Nanak strongly opposed the caste system and its disempowering impact on the society at large.

In sum, one would like to conclude that the Sikh Gurus had lots of positive messages for the society which could have gone a long way in awarding decent treatment to women. Yet one must admit that their level of effectiveness and influence on the dominant social ethos was limited; it could not bring a sort of radical change in the dominant patriarchal ideology. 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 completely. The precepts of the Gurus, concerning the amelioration of the situation of women, remained just the precepts. The reasons for this shortcoming might be attributed to historical and cultural circumstances. 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. Or
on a positive note, it takes much longer for any kind of tangible change in the
social outlook, perceptions and conduct to take place. Moreover, 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. We need to make an
assessment of the Sikh Gurus only in relation to their social milieu, when the
patriarchal values were the norm. More significantly, the founder of Sikhism,
Guru Nanak questioned the prevailing norms and raised his voice against
well-entrenched practices. 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. Guru Nanak’s tough stance provided a platform for the
subsequent Gurus, especially Guru Amar Das, who very vehemently opposed
the practices against women. 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 Nanak provided a direction to the
perceptions of the Sikh Gurus which they effectively followed and extended.
In J.S. Grewal’s words Guru Nanak’s compositions do not prove a radical
departure from the existing order, but a radical departure can be justified on
the basis of his compositions.