CHAPTER II

BHAKTI SANTS ON WOMEN: A COMPARATIVE TRAJECTORY BETWEEN KABIR AND GURU NANAK

The traditional view, of women, which was voiced by Ravana, was that women had eight negative qualities—foolhardiness, falsehood, waywardness, lustfulness, and cowardice, lack of discrimination, suspicion and cruelty. (Tulsi Das, Ramcharitra Manas, Gita Press, Gorakh Pur, 8th Edition, No. 6/16/2; henceforth cited as Manasa)

It is in the context of bhakti that the women’s private and public religion intersected.....Popularity of Bhakti resulted in no small measure from its inclusion of such marginal groups as women and sudras ....being female was generally no bar to bhakti (Katherine K. Young “Hinduism”, Arvind Sharma [ed.] Women in World Religions, Albany, N.Y.SUNY Press.1987. p. 76-77).

The above quotations indicate the conventional view about the women and the contribution of bhakti movement for the betterment of her position in the society. Section one briefly talks about the role of ideology and relationship of religion and society. It briefly touches upon condition of the women so that the ideological formulations of the bhakti sants can be contextualized. Section two recapitulates the perceptions of important nirgun and sagun sants on women. Section three discusses the nuances in the usage of the term “sant”, the connotations attached to its usage specifically in context of Punjab. It also deals with the question whether it is appropriate to use the term “sant” for Kabir and Guru Nanak? Section four discusses similarities and differences between Guru Nanak and Kabir and makes an attempt to find an explanation for the difference in their ideological formulations.

The Social Background: A Reality

No ideology can be properly understood without analytically locating it in its specific historical, socio-cultural, economic and political context. One of the basic functions of the dominant religious traditions of any society is to articulate a social ideology intended to serve as a sort of psychological glue that helps preserve both harmony and privilege within the religious community and within the society.
as a whole (including its subordinate classes).\textsuperscript{1} Certainly there is a complex interplay between religion and social change. While religious traditions have been important players in the transformation of societies, religion can also be understood as being "among the foremost institutions which conserve society, encoding stabilizing worldviews and values and transmitting these from generation to generation.....Religion has been an instrument of liberation for women. But religion has just as often become an instrument of women's social oppression."\textsuperscript{2} Influence of Guru Nanak and Kabir becomes still more relevant in the light of Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist's words, religion is experienced as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men.\textsuperscript{3}

A brief reference about the social inequalities of that period especially with respect to women helps to contextualize the perceptions of Guru Nanak, Kabir or for that matter other important religious figures of the time period. First and foremost, we have to remind ourselves that what we are saying about the general condition of women should be viewed as the overlapping of religious categories in the sub continent and to use Raj Kumari Shankar's term the analysis becomes an even more complex task in case of "fusion of traditions". For centuries, the status of women in India was being systematically downgraded. Centuries ago, Manu the Hindu Law giver, went to the extent of declaring that the service of the husband by the woman is considered to be equal to the service of God.

"Though he be destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as god by the faithful wife. No sacrifice, no vows, no fast must be performed by women apart from for their husbands; if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that reason alone be exalted in heaven."\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{1} David Lorenzen, Introduction," The Historical Vicissitudes of Bhakti Religion in Bhakti Religion in North India, Community Identity and Political Action", ed. David Lorenzen, Delhi, Manohar, 1996,p13
\textsuperscript{2} Falk and Gross, Unspoken Worlds, xv, xxi.
According to K.M. Ashraf and A.B. Pandey, woman in the medieval Indian society was regarded as inferior to man; her position at any rate, was subordinate to his. However, Alberuni noticed what he regarded as a strange custom that Indians consulted their women on all matters of importance. The practice of polygamy and child marriage according to V. Upadhyaya, was prevalent in India before A.D. 1200, and sati in the early centuries, according to Romila Thapar, was synonymous with “virtuous woman”. Alberuni in the 11th century noted that he was familiar with the practice of Sati. The widow, who refused to become sati was ill-treated as long as she lived. Old women and mothers were not expected to become sati. More attention was given to the male child than to the female child. With reference to sati, Amir Khusrau expressed great appreciation for the supreme sacrifice of the Indian woman for her husband. Ibn Battuta noticed an example of sati near Pakpattan and several other elsewhere in India; the act was regarded as honorable and meritorious.

As widely deliberated upon by the scholars that the caste system, economic oppression, denial of right to property and inheritance, a false sense of impurity attached to menstruation and child birth, deliberate deprivation of education led to the deterioration of women’s position in society. A woman was never fit for independence in any stage of life. This was further justified by religious sanctions as cited earlier and here is another quote.

"By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing, must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her Lord (husband) is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband or sons; by leaving them she would make both her own and her husband’s families contemptible."

Marriage is one of the most important social institutions among all the communities. Perhaps, after the consolidation of the institution of marriage, the women were married only when mature (after puberty) but gradually, in the succeeding centuries, especially during the period under review, they

MDS 5: 147-49
were married before puberty. This was done to establish more effective control over the sexuality of women.¹ Whereas once both daughters and sons were viewed as important (even though there was some preference for sons on account of patrilineal/patrilocai social organizations, now sons were not only highly preferred (a man could attain heaven only if his son performed his cremation) but daughters came to be viewed as serious liabilities. This occurred largely because marriage in elite circles was Kanyadaan- the gift of a daughter accompanied by dowry. The fact that brides accompanied by gifts were transferred to their husband’s name meant that they were a poor investment².

The segregation of sexes became more severe after the 12th century, especially in the areas of subcontinent that were under the Muslim rule.... Hindu women, already carefully controlled by or segregated from men, imitated the practice of purdah of the Muslim women. The consequence was that many upper caste Hindu women, already bound to the home were further restricted so that they rarely left their residence"³. In the late 15th century, when Guru Nanak started preaching his message, both Hindus and Muslims considered women to be inferior to men, an impediment in the way of spiritual progress, and the cause of man’s moral degradation. Polygamy was common, at least in some sections of society; widows were denied re-marriage and social recognition. Sati was practiced although not very widespread as a general practice. Child marriage and female infanticide were widespread. Women were economically, socially and psychologically dependent on men.

In sum, the social situation in Punjab in particular and Northern India in general during the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries was marked by the continuous process of change due to circumstances brought about by the Turko-Afghan rule in the sphere of politics and administration. Significant changes in the urban and rural economy and socio-cultural life with extensive impact on the social milieu were being noticed. The continuities, however,

² Young, 2002, ibid, p. 9
³ Young, 1987, ibid, p. 79
remained as important as the changes. Sensitive individuals responded to the changed situation according to their lights and moral fervour. Their social background and social situation were equally relevant for the nature and character of their response. Social change was accompanied by social tension of various kinds. These tensions were probably the strongest in the Punjab.¹ This might explain at least partly the distinctive response of Guru Nanak to the social situation in which he lived and moved.

**Bhakti Sants on Women: A Brief Recap**

While discussing a comparative trajectory between the perceptions of Guru Nanak and Kabir on women, their ideas and attitudes; we are viewing their perceptions in a larger framework of a major societal development known as the Bhakti Movement (800AD- 1700AD). The word Bhakti is derived from Sanskrit word “bhakti” meaning to serve, honour, revere, love and adore. In the religious idiom, it is defined as “that particular affection which is generated by the knowledge of the attributes of the Adorable One.” What was common to various regional articulations of this phenomenon was the idea of devotion to a personal god as the means of emancipation from the cycle of death-and-rebirth. Bhakti Movement spawned into several different movements all across North and South India. In North India, Bhakti movement is nonetheless not differentiable by a Sufi movement of Chishti fame. Among the Hindu Bhakti movement, a further distinction is made between nirgun and the sagun bhakti, and also between Vaishnava bhakti and Sant tradition. Today, it is possible to see greater affinity between the articulation known as the Sant tradition on the one hand and the Vaishnava bhakti on the other. The attributes of the sant tradition will be discussed at a later stage yet, it must be mentioned here that with in the sant tradition too, it is possible to notice important differences. It is in this context that a comparative analysis of the perception of Guru Nanak with Kabir acquires added importance. Although they share much of the vehement opposition to the caste system, idol-worship and other social evils, yet, they differ, quite apparently and significantly in their attitude towards women.

¹ J.S. Grewal, The Sikhs of the Punjab, Cambridge University Press, Delhi: 1999 p.27
However, before attempting to draw a comparative trajectory between Guru Nanak and Kabir particularly, it would be appropriate to briefly discuss the perceptions of other Bhakti Sants on Women as it forms the socio-cultural background to their ideological formulations. First and foremost we have to remember that these sants were neither social revolutionaries nor even consistent social reformers. However, their writings do, to some extent, reflect the sentiments of the common people. The bhakti poets as a whole tried to identify themselves with the sufferings of the common man. Further, their voice of dissent and protest was not confined to the religious sphere, but extended to the existing social, economic and political spheres and to the cultural ideas and institutions as well. In this way, they continued and even broadened the traditions of dissent and protest against the prevailing ideas and institutions, which had been a feature of Indian thought and culture, and which had manifested itself time and again even when traditionalist ideas and beliefs appeared to dominate the scene.

As has been pointed out repeatedly that the political, socio-cultural as well as economic realities of the concerned time period play a crucial role in the formulation, modification and manifestation of the ideology of an individual. The life and works of Kabir are generally aligned to the fifteenth century. During the period, Kashi and Jaunpur and the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, including Kashi, were active not only in the field of traditional sciences, but also in the liberal school of sufism and bhakti. In brief, Kashi and Jaunpur were the axis around which a new cultural tradition of liberalism and of dissent and protest against the existing system was being developed. The life and works of the Kabir and his social philosophy have to be seen against this background. Looking at the society of his time as a whole, Kabir found it to be full of strife, sorrow, poverty, ignorance, avarice and hypocrisy.

Kabir classifies women into two broad categories—for first, those who were devoted to their husbands and were prepared to sacrifice everything even their lives for

---


the welfare of their husbands; and second, the prostitutes. Kabir did not only consider that a wife and family were obstacles in the path of self knowledge. He constantly used the imagery of love between husband and wife as the relationship that should subsist between the individual soul (atma) and God (parmatma). Kabir contrasts the devoted wife with the prostitute who sells her wares at the market place and tries to entice the innocent and unwary. Even the sight of such women was dangerous, leave alone their touch expressing his sentiments in strong words like “Ek Kanak aur Kamini, dou agni ki jhal” meaning that an attraction for gold and the woman both lead to extinguishment. Kabir specifically warns against running after other people’s wives. He says that love for someone else’s wife was like eating garlic, adultery was like theft which was found to lead to a bad end ultimately. Kabir considered lust to be a major factor behind the troubles and sorrows in the society, and an obstacle in the path of true devotee (Bhakta). He sadly concluded that there were few true devotees and that the bulk of men fall prey to temptations of various kinds. Of these, the sex urge (Kamma) was the most powerful from which few, not even bairagis (those who have forsaken household ties), could escape. While making women, a symbol of sex, and, calling her sinful (papini), a destroyer (dakini) or enticer (mohini), Kabir upheld family ties. He was strongly opposed to the idea that a true devotee should break his family ties, and live in a jungle like a recluse. He showed by his own example that a true devotee was one who fulfilled his duty to his chosen profession and to his family. But such a person should not be misguided by maya, or afflicted by the senses.

To bring forth the thrust of his perceptions about women, it would not be out of place to cite:

“Naari Sawal Purushhi Khaii, Taitee Rahii Akela”.

He also says:

“Naari Kund Narak Kaa, Jooru Joothen Jagat Kii”.

---

1 Kabir Pada, 1-3
2 Kabir Sakhi, 20/21: “Ek kanak aur kamini, dou agni ki jhal”
3 Kabir Sakhi, 16/3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
4 Kabir, Sakhi, 16/1 "Jag Hatwara Swad Thag, Maya Baisan Lai"
5 Kabir Dar, Bijak p189
6 Kabir Vachamrita, pp 71-73
Kabir no where condemned child marriage, or advocated widow-re remarriage, or denounced polygamy by the upper classes. He speaks of the practice of purdah by women as a normal feature, and even refers to the practice of sati in laudatory terms, possibly because he considered it symbolic of atma annihilating itself for the sake of union with the Supreme. His entire perception reflects that he viewed women in a negative, derogatory fervour. With his narrow outlook about women-folk, one can not even expect him to speak against the social evils which afflicted the lives of the woman alone.

Jaisi is considered one of the greatest among the sufi poets. Although Jaisi is not contemporary to Guru Nanak and Kabir, yet the reason for including him in this discussion is because of his attitude towards women. In fact, he does not place the entire onus of sex-lust on women, he comes very close to a rationalist, logical stand. He nowhere criticizes the caste system or the social inequality. Jaisi’s portrait of women’s position in society is based on traditional ideas and beliefs, modified to some extent by the sufi concepts which had become well-established in the country by the time he wrote, i.e. the early part of sixteenth century. In his most reputed work, Padmavat, he divides the women on the basis of caste and professions. Jaisi upholds the idea that a woman should be completely loyal to her husband. Jaisi, very effectively, brings out the acute insecurity of the upper class women who had to accept and reconcile themselves to the ruler having a large number of wives and mistresses. The poet concludes “There is no difference between a rani and a servant, what matters is the master’s favour.” Unlike Kabir, Jaisi does not identify lust (kama) exclusively with women, and on this basis denounce women as the eternal temptress. For Jaisi, Kama is associated with youth, which afflicts both men and women. Youth, according to Jaisi, leads both to the pangs of separation and the pleasures of union. Despite this, women who control her sex urge protect the family honour. Likewise, the man, who can control this fire (desire) is praised. While the sex urge has to be kept under control, Jaisi does not distrust sex urge as such. In

---

1 Kabir, Pada p. 217
2 Kabir, Sakhi 45/34-36
3 Malik Muhammad Jaisi, Padmavat, ed. V.S.Aggarwal, Chiragaon, Jhansi, 2nd ed.
4 Op cit, Nos 84, 90-91
5 Op cit, Nos170, 174
6 Op cit, No 205
fact, human love is compared to Divine Love. Unlike Kabir, Jaisi does not even condemn the public women, they were a fact of life and displayed their wares and enticed men for money.¹

When we talk about Dadu Dayal in relation to other Bhakti saints particularly Kabir, we have to remind ourselves that the differences in their perception of the social reality may perhaps be explained by the different situations in which the two saints were placed. Kabir’s period was one of the social unrest, while Dadu’s period was one of growing stability and political unification under the aegis of Mughal Emperor, Akbar. Dadu was not opposed to the caste system; puts forward the view that castes were not based on birth, but on the deeds and noble ideas of individuals.²

Unlike most sants of the time, Dadu emphasizes that men and women were same i.e. equal.³ However, Dadu shares with Kabir many prejudices against women and upholds, and reaffirms her essentially dependent role in society. Thus, service to husband is upheld as an essential part of her duty.⁴

"Pativrata Greh Aapan Kare Khasam ki Sev, Jyoo Raakhe Tyohi Rehe Aghayakaari Tev."⁵

As a symbol of both maya or phenomenal world, and Kama or the sex urge, women is considered a deadly danger not only to the saint, but to all those who sought unity with God.⁶

_Dadu Dayal ki Bani, Part I, pp 131-32 says
"Naari Varni Purush ki, Purisha Vari Naari. Atti Kaali Tuunu Muua, Kathu Naa Aaaya Haath"._

Dadu advocates that saint should rise above the illusion created by maya in order to overcome the sense of duality.⁷ But to fight the illusion of duality, it was also necessary to conquer the sensibilities, above all, kama or the sex

---
¹ op cit, No 38
² Sri Dadu Vani, ed Narayan Das, Jaipur, v.s. 2026 henceforth cited as Dadu 17/13 App I (v)
³ Dadu, 29/6, see App. I (iii)
⁴ Dadu 8/35
⁵ Dadu Dayal ki Bani, p. 95
⁶ Dadu, 12/68, App i(iii)
⁷ op cit, 12/113
urge. Hence, the saint is advised to shun contact with women in every possible way. Infact, both women and gold, i.e. worldly possession are equally bad. A woman is considered the natural enemy of man, just as man was the natural enemy of woman.\(^1\) Dadu makes it clear that in making these extreme remarks, he made a distinction between woman representing maya and women in society who are divided into two categories- the unchaste women, and, on the other hand, the devoted wife who sustained the householder and is upheld as an ideal.\(^2\) In practice, however, the negative attitude about women as symbol of sex was bound to get manifested in social dealings on daily basis. It is also reflected in some of the prevalent prejudices against women.

To sum up, the three leading Bhakti poets- Kabir, Dadu and Jaisi (Sufi) were more or less agreed about the dependent position of woman and her obligation to serve her husband loyally and faithfully without questioning. However, there were differences in their perceptions regarding the position accorded to women in the religious and social fields. For Kabir woman was the eternal temptress, a representative of kama or sexual lust, and a devotee was advised to keep away from her as far as possible. However, Jaisi doesn’t associate women alone with kama or with sex-urge but blames it to youth, which affects both men and women, and has to be kept under control by both of them, especially by women for the sake of the family. For Dadu again women is a distraction because of her kama (sex urge), he does not give any option to women except domestic servitude.

We will now discuss the perception about women of Sagun bhakti saints- the two most important male poets being Surdas and Tulsidas and the third being a woman herself Mira. Surdas lived and wrote during a period of rapid change- the fall of Afghans and rise to power by Mughals, climaxed by the establishment of a stable empire under Akbar. The close connection between political milieu and the social change has already been highlighted in “Land and People” chapter 1.

\(^1\) Dadu, 12/68
\(^2\) op cit, 12/103
Surdas does not present a picture of the society as a whole, or the nature of relationship, actual or ideal, between the different constituents of society. Thus, he neither philosophizes on the nature of the caste system nor offers his observation on its working. However, Surdas gives a detailed description of rural society in the context of Braja; description of gopies, their attire, daily schedules, level of freedom – all this, shed significant light on the actual position of women. Surdas' writings also reflect some of the values and prejudices of the society which is well represented by one of his own oft-quoted saying:

_Bhamini Aur Bhujangini kari, Inke Vish hi Darayo;_  
_Rachaaho Virchay Sukh Naahi, Bhulit Kabhhu Paryaaaye,_  
_Inke vas Man Parey Manohar, Bahut Jatan Kari Paaye,_  
_Kaami Hoyi Kaam Aatur, Tiihi Kaise kee Samujhaia!!_ 

At the same time, it should also be noted that Surdas' attitude towards sex and carnal love was not based on the distrust and suspicion. For him, woman was neither a sex object nor a symbol of lust. Although she had human frailties, she was essentially the symbol of gentleness, love, devotion and compassion. Even the stupid and cruel _Ahirs_ nay, the entire mankind, could be won over by love, devotion and compassion.

Tulsidas (d. 1623) lived and composed his works in an age in which society and politics had acquired a certain degree of stability after a long period of flux and uncertainty. Tulsidas adopts a dual approach to society. On one hand, he classifies society on the basis of the essential qualities of individuals, and on the other, he appears to confirm to the traditional concept of the _Varnasharam_. However, primarily he divides society into three categories—uttam, madhayam and adham or neech.

In his attitude towards women, Tulsidas combined at least two elements. On the one hand, he was influenced by the traditional views about women and on the other, his views on the nature of the society and his over riding concerns

---

1 Surdas, Sur Sagar, ed. Nand Dulare Vajpai, Kashi Nagari Pracharini Sabha, Kashi, 4th edition Part III, P.1187  
2 Surdas 1507, 1525, 1541
for social stability affected considerably his attitude towards women. In Tulsi’s 
eyes, majority of the human beings consisted of mean (adham) and wicked (khal), and needed to be controlled by social, religious and political means, which implied that the large majority of the women fell into the same category. Tulsidas divides women into two broad categories the uttam or the women of high qualities, and the neech or the women of low quality. He implies that it is latter who were to be kept under tight control. Infact, expressing the prejudices of the upper class of the period, Tulsi includes the villagers in this category and likens all of them to animals which need chastisement:

"Dhol Gawar Shudra Pashu Naari, Teeno Tharan ke Adhikari"¹

Elsewhere, Tulsi says that wherever women were made independent, they became wayward and broke the bounds just like a water channel in flood.² In a different context, however, Tulsi says that although one might keep them in one’s heart, a young woman, the shastras and a ruler could not be kept under control.

"Raakhiye naari Jadpee Urr Maahi, Jubti Saastra Nripati Bas Naahi."³

However, there has been an attempt to steer clear Tulsi of “popular misconception” in Savitri Chandra’s phrase⁴ that he was a strong critic of women and that he implied that only women need to be kept under tight control or discipline. It has been pointed out that for Tulsi, the dominant social concept was maryaada or propriety implying that the social and religious norms should not be transgressed. The observance of maryaada was incumbent on men and women alike. But since the roles of men and women in society were not same, their norms of behaviour and conduct also had to be different. Tulsi draws up a series of ideal prototypes of women. They were to be honoured since such women were endowed with niti and vivek which could be crucial in some situations.⁵

---

¹ Ram Charitmanas, p 778, hereafter referred to as ‘Manasa’.
² Manasa, 4/15/4
³ Manasa, 3/37/5
⁴ Savitri Chandra, op. cit, p 134
⁵ Manasa, 6/14/4. For detailed discussion on the point see Savitri Chandra Shobha, op. cit. pp. 130-141
As already noted Mira was an important sagun poet, devotee of Krishna. This devotional fervour not only led to production of poetry of highly emotive, lyrical and sensual nature, it challenged many of the existing social values and traditions. Infact, there are number of aspects in Mira’s life and writings which help us to understand the dichotomy in contemporary attitudes and values in relation to women. First, although Mira was a widow, she was by no means mistreated in the Rana’s house before she came in conflict with him about her devotion to Krishna, and associating with Sadhus and sants. Second, although Mira left the Rana’s household as a mark of protest, she nowhere advocates a similar path i.e renunciation of the worldly duties to women devotees, married or otherwise.

Thus, while Mira herself acted as a rebel, her basic attitude towards women’s role in society was traditional. To some extent, it shows how powerful was the tradition about women’s role and behaviour pattern in family and society. Yet Mira represents a voice of protest against it, and suggests that these values need to be modified or applied in a more humane and liberal manner. Thus, there is a dichotomy between Mira’s behaviour pattern, and the ideas and values which she upheld.

Now after discussing the perceptions of the important bhakti sants about women, we are in a position to focus our academic discussion on Guru Nanak and Kabir; the similarities and the differences in their attitudes towards women. It would also be relevant here to discuss the nuances in the usage of the term “sant” and whether both Kabir and Guru Nanak could be caterogised as sants in the eyes of modern scholarship.

Usage of the Term “Sant” and Guru Nanak

While it is customary to discuss the bhakti movement from an overall perspective stressing its underlying unity and the role of the poet saints as spokespersons of ongoing religious and cultural fermentation, thus one is tempted to conceive it as a cluster of individual bhakti groups, each with its

---

¹ For songs of Mirabai see Mirabai Ki Padavali, ed. Dr. Krishna Deva Sharma, Regal Book Depot, New Delhi
particular emphasis. Moreover, most modern academic studies on the lives of the Hindu saints have not attempted to make a systematic comparison between the lives and ideological formulations of the different saints.

The term "Sant" itself ignites a lively debate as it has several overlapping usages. Derived from Sanskrit word "sat" ("truth, reality"), its root meaning is "one who knows the truth" or "one who has experienced ultimate reality", i.e. a person who has achieved a state of spiritual enlightenment or mystical self-realization; by extension, it is also used to refer to all those who sincerely seek enlightenment. Thus, conceptually as well as etymologically, it differs considerably from the cognate "saint" – saint has also taken on the more general ethical meaning of the "good person" whose life is a spiritual and moral exemplar. What binds the North Indian saints together is neither a historical connection nor an institutional focus, but the similarity in their teachings.

An examination of the early Punjabi usage of the term "Sant" will inevitably carry us back to the works of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak is conventionally ranked as a distinguished representative of the sant parampara of Northern India. In so doing, we immediately encounter the first hint that Punjabi usage of the term "sant" may perhaps bear connotations distinguishing it from the meaning attached to it elsewhere in North India. Although Nanak may be acknowledged as a representative of the sant parampara, he will never be called "Sant Nanak".

W.H. McLeod placed Guru Nanak squarely in the sant tradition as a synthesis of elements drawn from vaishnava bhakti and the hatha-Yoga of Nath jogis, with a marginal contribution from Sufism. Among the sants, McLeod mentions Namdev, Ravidas and Kabir. For him, the pattern evolved by Guru Nanak is "a reworking of the "Sant Synthesis"; it does not depart far from the Sant

2 ibid p.3
sources ‘as far as its fundamental components are concerned’. Guru Nanak uses *sant* categories and *sant* terminology and affirms *sant* doctrines. However, the *sant* synthesis is amplified, clarified and integrated in considerable measure by Guru Nanak, particularly through his concepts of the Shabad, the Nam, the Guru and the Hukam. What we find in his works is an “expanded” and “re-interpreted” *sant* thought. Within the pattern of *sant* belief Guru Nanak’s synthesis possess “a significant originality” and “a unique clarity”. It possesses also the quality of survival.¹

Grewal has summed up the position of McLeod, for further elaboration.² McLeod has been criticized for his hypothesis about Guru Nanak’s relationship with the *sant* tradition. However, he has not discarded his hypothesis, arguing that, whereas for a believer it may be natural to believe his religion is a revealed religion, it is legitimate for a historian “to explore the surrounding religious landscape and the society in which a particular religion was born.”³ In his article “*sant*” in Sikh usage”, W.H. McLeod states that along with the transformation of the Sikh Panth, there was a considerable shift in the popular understanding of piety. Changes in notions of piety are naturally accompanied by corresponding changes in the meanings of associated terminology and the term “*sant*” has thus traveled a considerable distance since the days of Guru Nanak. McLeod underlines the “unqualified emphasis” of the *sants* on the interior nature of spiritual understanding and the “the discipline” required for moksha as “an eternal equipoise”. The ideas of incarnation, idol- worship, sacred scriptures and pilgrimages are discarded in favour of the World.⁴ The essence of *sant* belief remains loving devotion to a personal deity.⁵ McLeod examines the teachings of Guru Nanak and comes to the conclusion that : “In Guru Nanak, as in Kabir, there is the same rejection of exterior forms, the same insistence on the need for inward devotion and its sufficiency as the sole means of Liberation”.⁶

---

⁴ McLeod, Sikhism, p.p. 91-92
⁵ ibid, p. 94
⁶ ibid, p. 101
Furthermore, the question whether or not Guru Nanak was a sant is strictly a question of antecedents and influences. As Grewal rightly points out, there is much that is "profoundly original" in Guru Nanak's verses and there is an integrated and coherent system no other sant has produced; there is a clarity no other sant has matched'. Add to this the appointment of a successor by Guru Nanak, "Nothing in the Sant experience can remotely compare to the Panth which was eventually to emerge from that decision of Guru Nanak."¹

Grewal further states that McLeod dwells on shared terminology and categories of thought and tends to think in terms of influences and borrowings, but his approach leaves out the creative response of both Kabir and Guru Nanak to their historical situation.² Moreover, McLeod does not take into account what Kabir and Guru Nanak did, quite apart from what they said. McLeod himself says that Guru Nanak's concepts of the Shabad and the Guru, as much as the concept of the hukum and the nam, carry us beyond anything that the works of earlier Saints offer in any explicit form.³ Grewal very appropriately concludes that only the entire range of ideas can enable us to see the differences as well as the similarities between Kabir and Guru Nanak.⁴

**Comparative Trajectory between Kabir and Guru Nanak**

In recent scholarship, Guru Nanak's affinity with the nirgun bhakti or the Sant tradition is underlined, and Kabir is regarded as the most important exponent of this tradition. To understand Guru Nanak's attitude towards women and gender, thus it is considered useful to compare his theological underpinnings with those of Kabir.⁵ On the other hand, we have scholars like Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh. Singh's primary objective in her study is to "analyse the feminine dimensions in the Sikh vision of the Transcendent One in both sacred and secular Literature." She says that "My study, I hope will accomplish a second, albeit ancillary, objective- Modern Scholarship has posited Kabir, the Medieval

---

¹ J.S. Grewal, "Foundation of the Sikh Faith extensively quoting from McLeod's Sikhism p. 102
² ibid p. 44
⁴ op. cit., p. 45
Indian devotional poet as a precursor of the Sikh faith, and many have averred that Guru Nanak was a follower of Kabir.... Do not such constructs-Kabir as master, Nanak as follower - infact undermine the divine revelation that Guru Nanak received independently .....The scriptures and the Sikh Gurus, my study claims have a raison d’etre all their own.” However, Kabir’s influence has spread throughout the northern part of India, his sayings so widespread that they are part of proverbial lore and his name virtually a household name.

It is Kabir that all later traditions look back as the fountainhead of the Sant Movement. Though he never intended to found a panth, and there is no direct historical connection between him and later sants; all of them consider him their spiritual ancestor. Infact, Kabir lived 150 years before Guru Nanak, the similarity of their teachings is striking, and as Karine Schomer points out, it is precisely this aspect as opposed to historical connection or institutional foci that closely binds Guru Nanak and Kabir. The latter’s compositions figure prominently in the sacred scriptures of the Sikhs. About Kabir’s sayings being included in the Adi Granth, she states that “the selection must have been made, and, made on the basis of conformity to the ‘moods and motivations’ of the Sikh religious community at that particular stage in its development.”

However, most significantly, there appears to be a major break in the similarities between the two with regard to Kabir and Guru Nanak’s attitude towards women. Thus, it becomes still more relevant to compare the perceptions of Guru Nanak with Kabir on Women and her social position. There are some other important differences in their perceptions for instance in their understanding and presentation of concepts such as nam, shabad, hukam. J.S. Grewal puts it appropriately when he says “The works of Kabir and Guru Nanak present systems of inter-related ideas which are

2 Karine Schomer, Introduction The Sant Tradition in Perspective, op. cit p. 5
independent of all other systems of religious ideas. Their positions are similar not because they belong to the same tradition but because each had a new path to show to his contemporaries. The paths were new but not the same precisely because they were differently conceived from the very beginning."

Kabir denounced much of the religious belief and practice of his times. The mulla and the pandit, the guardians of Muslim and the Hindu orthodoxy, were "pots of the same clay"; the paths that they advocated only led astray. The Hindu and Muslim revelation scriptures, the Vedas and the Quran, were discarded along with their custodians. Kabir does not believe in Vishnu. All his ten incarnations [avatars] including Rama and Krishna, are part of the maya which is constantly subject to annihilation. In unambiguous and uncompromising terms Kabir denounced the worship of images in temples, pacificator bathing, ritual feasts and pilgrimage to places regarded sacred. His God, neither Hari nor Allah [but one may call him hari or allah] does not reside in the East or in the West; He resides in the heart of man. This and some other ideas reveal affinity with the Sufis. "When I was, Hari was not; now Hari is, and I am no more." What led to God was the path of love cutting as the edge of the sword." Separation [viraha] involves torment in which the lover bleeds silently in the depths of his soul, he suffers many deaths everyday. This torment is nevertheless a divine favor, a mark of God's grace. Love involves sacrifice of self, and metaphorically of life. Kabir's bhakti is an ardent quest in which he is completely involved at the peril of his life.

Kabir's familiarity with beliefs and practices of the jogis is equally evident from his compositions. The ideas of jiwan-mukta [liberated in life], sahaj- Samadhi [the state of unison with the divinity and shabad [the word] are given great prominence in his verses. The terminology of the jogis is used by Kabir to convey his own message to them, otherwise their practices are ridiculed and their claim to be on the right path is treated as a self conceit. They too are in need of the name of Ram. Kabir denounces the Shaktas, who indulge in meat, liquor, and sexual intercourse as a religious ritual. Kabir does not approve of any existing system of religious beliefs and practice. He

---

1 J.S. Grewal, Foundation of the Sikh Faith, p.50
denounces caste distinctions. Occasionally, he refers to God as the “true
guide” (satguru). Ideas from three major sources were integrated by Kabir in a
system which came to possess the originality of a new whole. His ineffable
God is both immanent and transcendent, and to Him alone Kabir offers his
love and devotion.

It is true that Kabir uses the terms nam, shabad, guru and hukam in his
compositions but nowhere with the kind of emphasis that we find in the
compositions of Guru Nanak. For instance, the concept of hukam as
elaborated by W.H. McLeod: “How is Truth to be attained, How the veil of
falsehood torn asunder? Submit to the hukam; walk in its way: Nanak thus it is
written.” The idea of walking in the way of hukam to attain Truth is nowhere
to be found in Kabir as it is in Guru Nanak. W. H. McLeod writes that “The
hukam is beyond describing. All forms were created by the hukam; life was
created through the hukam; greatness is imparted in accordance with the
hukam. Distinctions between what is exalted and what is lowly are the result
of the hukam and in accordance with it suffering comes to some and joy to
others. Through the hukam one receives blessings, and another is
condemned to everlasting transmigration. All are within the hukam; none are
beyond its authority. Nanak, if anyone comprehends the hukam, his 'haumai'
is purged.” McLeod further says that the hukam is “an all embracing principle,
the sum total of all divinely instituted laws; and it is a revelation of the nature
of God.” Indeed, Guru Nanak’s use of the hukam carries his thought most
obviously beyond the thought of Kabir. Incidentally, Guru Nanak’s emphasis
on divine grace (nadar) also carries him beyond Kabir.

Similarly Guru Nanak’s emphasis on the Name (nam) is much more than
Kabir’s, and the concept is more comprehensive as elaborated by J.S.Grewal
in his work “Guru Nanak in History”; “Through the Name one can cross the
ocean of existence. Through the Name one can obtain the secret of true
worship and honour. The Name is one’s best ornament, intellect and

1 op. cit. Grewal, p. 27
3 ibid. p.191
4 ibid p.10
objective. Through the Name one gets recognition from others; without the Name there can be no honour. All other wisdom is mere pretence; there is no fulfillment without the Name. Through the Name come true honour of greatness and the mark of God’s merciful grace. The state of eternal bliss is found in the Name, the proper way of adoration. The Name is nectar that purges the poison (of maya). Through the Name descends all happiness upon one’s heart. McLeod puts it in perspective when he writes: “Whatever God has made is an expression of the Name. There is no part of creation which is not an expression of God.”

For Kabir, too, there is no emancipation without Ram-nam. However, we do not get the impression that the Name for Kabir holds strictly the same significance as for Guru Nanak. Indeed it has been suggested that the Name in Guru Nanak’s compositions is the creative and dynamic immanence of God. McLeod puts it more convincingly when he says that Guru Nanak’s concept of the shabad and the Guru, as much as the concept of hukam and the nam, carry us beyond anything that the works of earlier Sants offer in any explicit form. This variation in the emphasis in fact determines the entire tenor of the teachings and their impact.

There are some other important differences between Guru Nanak and Kabir. Guru Nanak rejects both asceticism and renunciation. In Kabir’s opinion, a householder should either practice dharma as a householder or adopt bairag; if a bairagi adopts the life of a householder it is a misfortune. Kabir’s tolerance of mendicancy and renunciation go together; the renunciation has to depend on others for subsistence. This is something that is ridiculed by Guru Nanak in his contest with the jogis. Guru Nanak has no objection to meat eating but Kabir is strongly in favour of ahimsa.

Kabir’s attitude towards women has already been discussed in brief. It is apparent that Kabir’s attitude towards women is ambivalent: he rejects the idea of impurity associated with the woman who has given birth to a child but

---

1 J.S. Grewal, Guru Nanak in History, p.237
2 McLeod, Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion, p.196
3 McLeod, Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion, p.161
4 Bhai Jodh Singh, ed. Kabir Bani Steek, Patiala, Punjabi University, p212
he does not contest the idea of a woman's subordination. Outside home she can probably become a bairagan, the counterpart of the male renunciant. On the whole, Kabir’s compositions contain a set of ideas which appear to suggest a system outside the system called Hindu and Muslim. However, fortunately, for our present purpose, Kabir figures rather largely in Dr. Kumkum Sangari’s comparative perspective on Mirabai. The author seeks to place Mirabai in what is called "the Spiritual economy of Bhakti" and to relate her to both the sagun and nirgun articulations, we may notice some of the basic prepositions made by her about Kabir.

In Kabir, the egalitarian concepts of body, of soul, of knowledge, of maya and creation, and of a nirgun god contest caste, sectarian differences in religious denomination and orthodox ritual, but not patriarchal value structures. The concept of an attribute less nirguna god allows Kabir to be a social reformer; however, the moment his god becomes sagun, he acquires male attributes. It is possible to enter into a relationship of love with personal god, and Kabir dwells in all emotions related to love-longing, intoxication, the pain of separation, delirium, and suffering. At the same time, he constructs a patriarchal typology of women for ascetic transcendence. The woman is an obstacle to salvation; her sexuality should be subjected to usual regulation. Kabir appears to postulate three sorts of femaleness: the "stri svabhav", the "stri dharma", and the ‘higher femaleness’ of bhakti. The three become interdependent; "stri svabhav" must be opposed both to "stri dharma" and the ‘higher’ femaleness of Bhakti. The first is to be totally subdued, and the commendable traits of the second are to be etherilized into spirituality for transmutation into the femaleness of Bhakti.

Kabir works with two notions of maya. At one level, maya is a pervasive cosmic illusion: it is everything that is false. Therefore, it is a leveling, a democratizing and an egalitarian concept which can be used to attack caste, sectarian differences and brahmanical institutions. This maya is un-gendered: it is neither male nor

---

1 Kumkum Sangari, Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti, Occasional Papers on History and Society Second Series Number XXVIII, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, or Gender and Nation; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi:2001 pp 73-89.
female. At another level, woman and maya become indistinguishable, if not virtually interchangeable. The idea is elaborated further; women are represented as impediments to male salvation. Woman is equated with maya and becomes the conceptual basis for differentiating between various kinds of woman.

The woman of the *strisvbhav* becomes the mistress of the senses and the use of patriarchal metaphors evokes the typology of *dohagin*. By contrast, the *sohagin* is the model of *stridharma*, a model in which sexual desires are well channeled: She is all fidelity, without the slightest trace of promiscuity. She surrenders her heart, body and mind to her husband; her *shringara* is to please him alone. Thus, in Kabir's perception patriarchal values centre on the family as an institution which guarantees licit righteous progeny, restrains female sexuality, and reproduces a normative notion of marriage.

Women and maya are identical obstacles to Bhakti and salvation. So Kabir advises:

*Kabir naari parayi aapni, bhugtya narkhi jaai
Aagi Aagi Sab ekhai, taame haath na baahi*¹

"Whether the woman is your wife or another, to have alliances with her is to go to hell; one fire is the same as another; do not put your hand in it all"²

*Kabir naari kund narak ka, birla thaame baagi*³

"Women is the pit of hell: few can stop themselves from falling"

Not only is woman the off scouring of the world; she separates the good from bad:

*Kabira joru joothini jagat ki, but*⁴
*Kabira naari nasai teeni such, jo nar paasai hoi
Bhakti mukuti mil gyan mei, paisi na sakai kor*⁵

---

³ KG, G: 68
⁴ KG, G: 68 BK: 168
⁵ KG, G: 67
Women and *maya* are identical obstacles to the bhakti and salvation. "Falling in love with a woman is all evil; the man loses his access to bhakti, salvation and knowledge."¹

The *maya* personified by women is an obstacle to Bhakti and thus must be defeated. Kabir poses an active opposition between sexual desire (*kam*) and spiritual desire (*prem*).

Dr. Sangari finds in Kabir a sustained and complex adjustment with patriarchal values in uneasy companionship with an egalitarian bhakti which offers direct access to God, claims a single origin for all human beings, and describes the body, the heart, the soul, and the true knowledge as un-gendered. Patriarchal values are not incidental to Kabir’s bhakti; they actively compose it.

Now, focusing our discussion on Guru Nanak, J.S. Grewal aptly comments that Guru Nanak’s explicit statements leave no doubt about his goal of emancipation being open to women as much to men.² His god is both *nirgun* and *sagun* at the same time. In the state of attributeless-ness (*Sunn Mandal*), he is un-gendered: “neither male nor female” God has revealed himself in his creation the nirgun becoming *sagun* as the creation of vessels (*bhandey*) placed the same light (*jot*) in all this light is in every heart (*ghat*). It is his light, the same light that shines in all. He is the only giver (*data* for all living beings). More explicitly, he created both “man and woman”. His light is in both “man and woman”. He has female as well as male devotees (*Sewaks*). Thus in the area of life that was all-important to Guru Nanak, he upholds woman’s equality with man. At a more abstract level in the concept of Sangat (*holy congregation*), introduced by Guru Nanak, both men and women sit together and equally participate in reciting the praises of the Divine and Pangat- sitting together, irrespective of caste or social status differences, to eat a common meal in the institution of *langar* (*common kitchen*). Women were never excluded from any specific task (*sewa*). Guru Nanak says:

---

¹ KG, BK: 168
² J. S. Grewal, Gender and Guru Nanak p-147
"Come my sisters and dear commodes! clasp me in twine embrace. Meeting together, let us tell the tales of our omnipotent spouse (God). In the True Lord are all merits, in us all demerits."  

It is very often repeated that Guru Nanak did not advocate asceticism and renunciation. It has often been asserted that Guru Nanak's writings and those of subsequent gurus, contain a range of views on women- positive, negative and ambivalent- suggesting a tension between an inward psychological struggle and outward social decorum as stated by Rajkumari Shankar.2  

Guru Nanak Dev's oft quoted verse says:  

"We are conceived in the woman's womb and we grow in it. We are engaged to women and we wed them. Through the women's cooperation, new generations are born. If one woman dies, we seek another; without the women there can be no bond. Why call her bad who gives birth to rajas? The woman herself is born of the woman, and none comes into this world without women; Nanak, the true one alone is independent of the Woman." 3  

Scholars like Dorris Jakobsh and Raj Kumari Shankar feel that this oft-quoted verse, supposedly indicative of Guru Nanak's positive evaluation of womanhood, points to an appreciation of woman only vis-à-vis the procreative process. However procreation, procreation of sons specifically, was central to Nanak's vision of the ideal women.4 Jakobsh draws a parallel between Guru Nanak's verse and the writer of Brahaspati, written in 4th century CE. Jakobsh further writes that "while Guru Nanak's words have been lauded as the slogan of emancipation for women in the Sikh tradition, they had more to do with the rejection of prevailing notions of ritual purity and support of the social hierarchy of the time. For women gave birth to sons, especially those of noble birth; how then could they be considered ritually impure? The birthing of sons was the most elevated of aspirations; sons were avenues to fulfillment and the fervent wish of any woman during Indo- Islamic times. Thus, Guru Nanak's  

---  

1 AG, Sri Rag, p. 17  
3 AG, Var Asa, pg 473  
4 Shankar, pg 116, Jakobsch, pg 24
challenge, in referring to the contemporary hierarchical order, one which placed the rajahs at the top of that order also indicated his support of the dominant social and political order of his time."

However, it seems anachronistic to fathom the perceptions of Guru Nanak by modern perceptions of men-women equality. In times when women was considered inferior in all respects because of her sex, Guru Nanak openly chides those who attribute pollution to women because of menstruation and asserts that pollution lies in the heart and mind of the person and not in the cosmic process of birth. This declaration definitely requires women to be placed in esteem. Guru Nanak is clearly and emphatically on the woman's side when he relates to the custom of observing sutak which is denounced in rather strong terms when he says:

"If pollution attaches to birth, then pollution is everywhere [for birth is universal]. Cow-dung [used for purifying the kitchen floor by Hindus] and firewood breed maggots:
Not one grain of corn is without life;
Water itself is a living substance, imparting life to all vegetations.
How can we then believe in pollution inheres within staples?
Says Nanak, pollution is not washed away by purificatory rituals; Pollution is removed by true knowledge alone"

However, there is another dimension to God's creation. It is impermanent and "false" in contrast with the "truth" of God. This intoxicating maya is poison [bikh] and because of his affiliation to maya, man remains attached to falsehood against truth and he remains chained to the cycle of death and birth.

Man and woman belong to the realm of falsehood, but there are things in this realm which keep them attached to it. There are several verses of Guru Nanak in which the objects of attachment are specified. They relate to political, economic, social and moral aspects of life.

---

1  AG Salok, M.I. p. 472
2  AG, Rag Suhi [Chaupadai], Ghar I, 728 and Rag Majh [Ashtapadian], Ghar I, p. 109
3  AG Rag Majh [ashtapadian ] Ghar I, p. 109
“There is pleasure in gold, pleasure in silver, pleasure in women, pleasure in scents, pleasure in horses, pleasure in the conjugal bed, pleasure in sweets, pleasure in flesh – there are so many pleasures of the body that there is no room in it for the Name.”¹ “Among the things which induce man to forget god are pearls, gems, diamonds, thrones, armies, political power, supernatural power, and beautiful women.”² “What has deceived the world is thirst for maya: sons, relations, house-wife, wealth and youth; avarice, greed and pride keep man attached to maya which serves as the herb with which the thugs make their victims unconscious.”³ “Elsewhere Guru Nanak brackets woman with sons, gold, horses and elephants as the objects of attachment.”⁴

The more popular pair of folklore, gold and woman, too finds mention.⁵ With the wife are mentioned son, daughter, mother and father at another place. The five potent thugs are power (raj), riches (maal), beauty (roop), caste (jat) and youth (joban).

By the above citations, it becomes clearly evident that Guru Nanak does not denounce women as a part of maya in the way in which it is done by Kabir. In the compositions of Guru Nanak, a substantial number of metaphors relating to woman refer to conjugal relationships. In these metaphors, God is the true Husband and man, as this Wife, seeks union with Him. Possibly Guru Nanak’s conception of good wife (Good Woman is suchaji, gunwanti, or sohagan) or the bad wife (bad woman is Kuchajji, nirgun, dohagan, rand or pir-choddi) can be inferred from these verses. The image of the ideal wife that emerges from these metaphors is not unconventional. Even if she is beautiful, accomplished and well connected, she is humble and modest before her lord. She is completely devoted to him and obeys his commands with pleasure. She pines for him in separation. She adorns herself with ornaments only to please her lord. She is faithful to him and expects him to be faithful to her. In contrast, the life of a dohagun is pointless because of her inclination towards the “other”. For countless lives such a woman suffers the misery of “separation”. When a

¹ AG Sri Rag, p. 15
² AG Sri Rag, p. 15
³ AG, Sri Rag. P. 61
⁴ AG, Gauri, (Guareri), p. 222
⁵ AG Asa, p. 416
woman abandons deceit and falsehood, and she awakens to the shabad, she becomes acceptable to her lover-god. The abandoned woman is totally indifferent to the lover-god; she has the demerit of lust, anger and pride; she remains deprived of the True Name. Without love of God, she remains chained to dubidha due to her attachment to maya, her family and relations. The boon of the Trust, the Name and the Shabad is obtained only through God’s grace.

The ultimate objective for woman as for man is sahaj, the state of eternal bliss in union with God; the mingling of light with light. Guru Nanak advocates the regulation of sex. However, this principle applies to both men and women. To covet the wife of another person, or an unwedded woman, is immoral in his system of values. This does not necessarily ensure monogamy, but the whole tone and tenor of Guru Nanak’s compositions appears to be monogamous.

The use of female voice is often taken as a yardstick to fathom the perceptions of Guru Nanak, Kabir or other sants about women. However, to use the female voice in bani to gauge the respective saint’s attitude towards women is not only inappropriate but rather misleading. Scholars like Nikky-Guninder Singh have extensively relied on the use of female devotional voice in the Adi Granth as evidence to emphasize the “principles” of feminity in the Adi Granth. She advocates the belief that the Gurus, though male understood their words and message, to be female, in congruence with the feminine bani.1

However, is it appropriate to assume whether the male Gurus infact intended and perceived, understood their poetic utterances to be feminine2 or whether their notation of sacred speech in the feminine gender is simply indicative of the surrounding religious milieu.3 To leap from the grammatically feminine form of a word to an understanding of the Guru’s inclusivity is perhaps more a reading into the term as opposed to the actual intent of the Gurus. Or it could be just adding a variety by using female voice to their sayings to break the

1 Nicky Singh, op. cit., p. 43
2 Singh, ibid, p.43
3 Doris Jakobsh, “Gender Issues in Sikh Studies: Hermeneutics of Affirmation or Hermeneutics of Suspicion” p 49
monotony of didactic presentation. After all, women account for more or less half of the population thus to derive the metaphors of a “bad” woman and “good” woman must have made the message more comprehensible and appealing to the common masses. We can not ignore the fact that if we study Guru Nanak or Kabir or any other religious figure then it attests their level of popularity. And this level of popularity could have been possible only if they would have touched the hearts of masses, their messages both in content and presentation would have appealed them. However, it is significant to note that Guru Nanak is seldom so immersed in femaleness as to lose his discrete identity for long. Possibly for this reason, it is easier to paraphrase his metaphors in terms of the human soul than some of the verses of Kabir.1

Guru Nanak’s concern was not exclusively with men, there are at least a few verses where the woman does figure prominently. One of these is the well known Babur-Bani verse in which the luxury of the women of the ruling class is incidentally depicted; they suffered punishment because they had forgotten god in their indulgence in the luxuries of this world, including the enjoyment of their conjugal beds.2 They are the counterpart of the men who had suffered a similar fate for the same reason, including their enjoyment of beautiful women” whose sight banished sleep”.3 The rape and brutalities committed against women by the Mughal army of Babar is condemned as a mark of social degradation of values. Guru Nanak says:

"Modesty and righteousness both have vanished and falsehood move about as the leader, O Lalo. The function of the Qazis is over and the Satan now reads the marriage rites (rape). The Muslim women read the Quran and in suffering call upon God, O Lalo. The Hindu women of high caste and others of low caste may also put in the same account, o Lalo”.4

Yet, J.S. Grewal in his work “Guru Nanak in History”5 aptly maintains that upon examination of the hymns of Guru Nanak in particular:

1 J.S. Grewal, Gender and Guru Nanak p. 152
2 AG, Rag Asa (Astapadian), p. 417
3 AG Rag Asa (Astapadian) p. 417
4 AG, Tilang, pg 722
5 J.S. Grewal, Guru Nanak in History, Chandigarh, Punjab University, 1979, pp. 195-196
"It appears that Guru Nanak has very little to say about what today are called "social evils". He disapproves of the custom of becoming sati, but almost incidentally, he appears to be familiar with the institution of slavery but he has little to say about it. He has little to say about 'child marriage' or about the disabilities of the widow......... Guru Nanak is most articulate in his social criticism when customs and institutions appear to touch upon religion"1

As evident from the above discussion there appears to be a huge difference in the attitudes of Kabir and Guru Nanak towards women. If there is a difference how can it be explained? Grewal2 explains this in terms of their relative standings in the Sant tradition of northern India. The sant tradition is looked upon as a synthesis of three constituents: bhakti, hathyoga and Sufism, in that order of importance. It appears to us that hathyoga was much less important to Guru Nanak than to Kabir. The woman in hathyoga is the tigress of the night, the great temptress in the path of the yogi who aims at subduing sublimating all the sexual desires. She is the greatest obstacle in his path. His denunciation of the woman is in the direct proportion to the perceived threat. As noted, Kabir's attitude towards women was similar to that of the yogis in that he too viewed women as seductive, as tempting men away from their true calling. Guru Nanak, by contrast, denounces the yogis for their strict renunciation, including their ideal of subduing sexual desire. He has great appreciation for the house holder.3 It may be significant therefore; that the femaleness attributed to the stri svabhav is not all prominent in Guru Nanak. Infact, there is hardly anything comparable with Kabir on the point.

Conclusion

To sum up, one is inclined to agree with J.S. Grewal that Guru Nanak, with in the patriarchal framework created a large space for women much larger than what we find in Kabir or perhaps in the whole range of Indian Literature springing from devotional theism. Total equality of woman with man in the

---

1 J.S. Grewal, Guru Nanak in History, Chandigarh, Punjab University, 1979, pp. 195-196
2 J.S. Grewal, A Gender Perspective of Guru Nanak; Kiran Pawar, ed, Women in Indian History: Social, Economic, Political and Cultural Perspectives, Delhi; Vision & Venture, 1996 p. 150
3 AG Suhi 730; Prabhati, 1329-1332
spiritual realm was a radical idea in the 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 doesn't carry it 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 carries important implications for other areas as well.

When scholars like Doris Jakobsh are not able to appreciate the contributions of Guru Nanak and his spiritual successors although she writes "it is important to expand on both the positive and the negative with in the scriptural canon. To know only the negative messages is disempowering; to uphold only the positive images is a naïve and superficial empowerment. To proffer both leads to a more accurate and genuine discussion of feminine dimension with in the Sikh tradition".¹

Although theoretically her position is appreciable but in practice it seems painful to observe that her perception is anachronistic. A society which till date is struggling for a respectable position of women as a wife, as a daughter, to consider women as equal and worthy of spiritual enlightenment as preached by Guru Nanak, was undoubtedly an idea much ahead of its times. We have to acknowledge that Guru Nanak is articulate in his social criticism when customs and institutions touch upon religion. The very fact that in the spiritual field, his injunctions of man- women equality is commendable. As religion is an important aspect of life, it directly as well as indirectly influences its many aspects. To say that Guru Nanak appreciates women only for pro-creative qualities is clearly undermining the spirit of his sayings. To view Guru Nanak's views in this narrow perspective, would be oversimplification or rather concluding out of context. When on one hand a whole gamut of restrictions and superstitions (sutak) were being attached to child-birth. Guru Nanak, on the contrary, highlighted this physiological trait of hers as a quality. He emphasized that without the woman the world can not exist. This thought process extended further in respecting woman as a 'mother' and went a step

¹ Doris Jakobsh, Gender Issues in Sikh Studies: Hermeneutic, p. 55
further by advocating conjugal relationship in marriage. One is inclined to remind ourselves that gender, according to J.W. Scott, is an ongoing fluid process whereby sexual differences acquires a socially or culturally constructed meaning. Scott, very appropriately, advocates an understanding that gender as constructed for both women and men has significant consequences: “The term ‘gender’ suggests that relations between the sexes are a primary aspect of social organization (rather than following from, say, economic or demographic pressures) ‘that the terms of male and female identities are in large part culturally determined (not produced by individuals or collectivities entirely on their own)’ and that differences between sexes constitute and constituted by hierarchical social structures.”

It seems that the perception of these scholars (Jakobsh etc) is guided by “principle of negation” in their own words for which they accuse the Sikh historiography at large. This exercise of “negation” or undermining the contribution of Guru Nanak became still more evident when we compare his sayings about women with other important Bhakti sants like Kabir, Surdas, Tulsidas etc and contextualize Guru Nanak’s saying in the ethos of time. J S Grewal appropriately sums up the contribution of Guru Nanak when he says that the principle of equality upheld in one area of life that to an important area as religion all encompassing and influential, carries important implications for other areas as well. 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.

---

2 ibid, p. 25
3 J.S. Grewal, A Gender Perspective of Guru Nanak, p. 156.