CHAPTER-VIII
CONCLUSION

Writings on Sikh women are a plenty, all dealing with various issues concerning them, some raising new issues, while others attempt at sympathizing with their plight, while some glorify them and place them on a platonic pedestal. Emotions and subjectivity largely rule the writings of Sikh scholars and historians when it comes to penning down the contributions of Sikh women in Sikh history. These writings can broadly be divided into two categories: those which glorify and thereby elevate the status of the female members of the Sikh community and those which paint the actual picture, the truth behind their portrayal. Exaggerations are a common feature regarding the status of the Sikh women within their religion. Again there is a vast difference in the writings of Indian scholars and western scholars of Sikh historiography. One such recent study titled, *Relocating Gender In Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, by a western scholar, Doris R. Jakobsh, attempts at charting the gender history of the Sikhs, largely influenced by western ideals rather than ideals of the Sikh religion. It is more a critique of the Sikh customs, traditions and culture. On the other hand, Mohinder Kaur Gill’s, *Role and Status of Sikh Women*, projects a one-sided perspective on gender relations of the Sikhs, largely exaggerating and glorifying Sikh women.

Writings by western scholars reflect the ideology of the West influenced by the new thought process which emerged in the late nineteenth century due to the socio-religious reformation which in turn became a global phenomenon. Writings on the Sikhs by Indian writers, especially the historians of the Sikhs are based largely on matters of faith. It is this faith and religious fervour, even loyalty towards one’s religion that becomes the ruling factor behind the end-products in the form of religious histories being penned down. This does not imply that reason and argument are amiss from these writings. As a result, many new researches are being undertaken on the hitherto not tread upon paths of Sikh history. One such arena is the field of gender and the Sikh approach towards it. Apart from direct and indirect references found in the annals of Sikh historical writings, many articles have also been written on the issues relating to Sikh women. Over the past few years, recasting of gender history within Sikhism has created quite a flutter and attracted great deal of attention from scholars and historians writing on Sikh history. Coupled with the study of these historical writings, a thorough analysis and review of the
sources of Sikh history in the form of sacred, secular and popular forms of the literature of the Sikhs, helps us to package a logical and rational construction of the gender history of the Sikhs. Sikh literature provides us with the required parameters to measure the degree of empowerment attained by the Sikh women over a history of 500 glorious years.

During the course of this study, many interesting revelations, facts and findings have come to light. An effort has been made to re-define the role, status and place that the Sikh women occupy within their religion. A number of issues concerning them have come to the forefront majority of which do not have any sanction from the Sikh scriptures and yet are being religiously and blindly followed till date. An overall review of the literature of the Sikhs helps in identifying various issues concerning Sikh women over the period of the rise and growth of the Sikh community, attitude of the Sikh Gurus towards the female members of the community, role of Sikh reformers and the general rules and idealistic standards set by the Sikhs for their female counterparts. A historical analysis of all kinds of Sikh literature written during the fifteenth century to the early twentieth century, helps us peep into the gender ideology of the Sikhs.

The Guru Granth Sahib, does not support both the practice and profession of inequality of any kind both in theory and practice. Even during the process of the compilation of this Holy Book by the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, contributions received for inclusion in the Guru Granth Sahib were scrutinized. Contributions which were biased or reflected women in a poor way were outrightly rejected by the fifth Guru. By way of their writings included in the Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur, project their respective views stressing on the qualities and values to be inculcated by women. Guru Nanak’s attitude towards women was shaped by his personal observances and experiences, through what he saw was happening around him. Guru Nanak simply reacted to the injustice inflicted by the society and the world upon its members, both male and female. His writings do reflect his gender perspective. The highest goal for man was achieving salvation for which one had to forego all kinds of bondages. Therefore Guru Nanak himself lived and preached a detached life. Detachment here is to be seen in the context of detachment from worldly and materialistic entanglements surrounding man. Guru Guru Nanak refers to women as part of this entanglement. One of the issues condemned by Guru Nanak, is the notion of female impurity again on account of the superstition involved behind such irrational thinking. Guru Nanak also reinforces the fact that both men and women suffer as a result of their misdeeds.
Guru Amar Das through his writings emerges more as a social reformer. While Guru Nanak focuses on spirituality, Guru Amar Das takes a firm stand on transforming the society. Amar Das speaks outrightly against discrimination and social injustice. Gender issues are addressed directly by the third Guru. The woman who utter’s the name of God with her mind, body and mouth is pleasing to the Lord. A woman who devotes her energies on the path of God is truly liberated and uplifted by the Lord himself. Only single-minded devotion to the Lord is stressed upon. The egalitarian status of the Sikhs within the Sikh religion is further reinforced by Guru Amar Das, when he writes that the Guru (the Lord) equally loves all the Gursikhs, like his friends, sons and brothers. On the other hand, the third Guru also brings out the not so desirable qualities that women generally possess, via the use of adjectives like ‘wicked woman’, ‘evil woman’, ‘an impure woman’ and ‘a woman of ill conduct’. Here the qualities are highlighted and not gender. The third Guru writes that a woman who lives a virtuous life in her parent’s home attains an abode in the home of her in-laws. Guru Amar Das launched a vigorous campaign against Sati, probably one of the reasons why this practice could not become widely prevalent in Punjab. The third Guru was also the first one to lobby for the inclusion of women as active members of the Panth and recruited women as missionaries for the preaching of the Sikh faith. He outlined an ideal form of relationship between a husband and wife and prohibited adultery.

Five Sikh Gurus have outrightly spoken on gender issues, clarifying their perspective towards gender in their own literary style. Guru Nanak being predominantly a socio-religious reformer, not surprisingly attempts to uplift the status of women through his Bani. The third, fourth, fifth and ninth Gurus follow him in this endeavour. Sikh literature progresses alongwith the developments in the Sikh religion. Beginning with the earliest writings of the Sikhs as contained in the Guru Granth Sahib, a definite pattern is found in the writings of the Sikh Gurus. While Guru Nanak exposes the caste and class follies, also making a note of the generally pitiable state of the women, Guru Amar Das adopts a reformist attitude, the fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das brings out the not so desirable qualities that women are generally known to possess and Guru Arjan Dev in his Bani addresses the Lord as his protector, and parent. For the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, love for a woman other than one’s own is one of the greatest sins. Any other form of love except that of the Lord is insincere, an illusion. From the saints who have merely touched upon the issue of gender, we find Namdev, Kabir and Trilochan voicing their thoughts on the role of the ideal woman, her qualities and virtues and the fact that she is an equal in
the eyes of Lord. Many a time in these writings one comes across conflicting ideas regarding the nature of women as portrayed by these writers. Guru Nanak and Guru Amar Das both adopt a reformist attitude towards women and do accept them as an integral part of the society, religion and culture, whereas Guru Ram Das and Guru Tegh Bahadur bring out the vices of women in particular but at the same time advocate equality before the Lord. Guru Arjan Dev accords a parental and brotherly status to the Lord. The saints too somewhere voice nearly the same emotions, shifting their approach from the non-virtuous to stressing more on virtues and idealism to be imbibed by women. In short one can safely infer that there is a definite indication in the Guru Granth Sahib that women ought to be virtuous, ideal and chaste with single-minded devotion and love in order to make a place for themselves in God’s abode. The same is also advocated for the men. Loyalty towards one life partner has been recurrently advocated through the Guru Granth Sahib.

The Varan of Bhai Gurdas, refer to women as being as ‘gateway to salvation’. Gender issues addressed by Bhai Gurdas are condemnation of the custom of dowry, prostitution, superstitions related to women, infidelity and the sorry plight of widows in society. Monogamy is advocated and women are considered equal to men in both virtue and wisdom.

Seventeenth Century accounts in the form of Janamsakhis, the Dasam Granth and the Gurbilas literature on the whole remain silent on gender issues. The Dasam Granth contains controversial writings on women, which are almost unanimously refuted by Sikh scholars and writers. ‘Akal Ustat’ a poem from the Dasam Granth rejects the view that salvation can be attained through the practice of Sati. The Janamsakhis and the Gurbilas literature merely provide the names of some of the female members of the Guru families.

Late 17th Century accounts, such as the Hukamnamas and Rahitnamas also provide information on gender relations of the Sikhs. The Hukamnamas do not reflect any kind of gender biases. Rahitnamas condemn adultery, prostitution, dowry, female foeticide and infanticide, polygamy, and violence against women. On the whole the Rahitnamas deal with the issue of sexual morality and marriage-related issues.

Eighteenth and early nineteenth Century accounts are the Bansavalinama and Mahima Parkash. The Bansavalinama provides us with the names of the women belonging to Guru families, but gender issues are not discussed. The Mahima Parkash is wholly silent on issues concerning the role and status of women. The Nanak Prakash mentions the existence of female slaves, selling of girls and gifting of women as part of
dowry. Other early nineteenth Century accounts like the writings of Giani Gian Singh and Rattan Singh Bhangu’s *Panth Prakash*, also do not refer to gender issues.

Popular Sikh literature and Journalism which developed during the period, 1890-1920, took up the cause of women’s empowerment foremost on their agenda of social reform. The Press took up the cause of female education and also highlighted the general plight of women in society. The Singh Sabha effectively carried out the task of focusing on the education of Sikh women in order to emancipate them. Other issues like son preference, considering a girl child as a liability, payment of bride money and selling of daughters, wide age differences between marriage partners, female infanticide, domestic violence, child-marriage, Sati and widow remarriages have also been raised. Newspapers of the period lobbied for the participation of women in social service, urging the local women against imitating foreign women and their culture, urged women to nurture a questioning attitude, encouraged the organization of religious gatherings by Sikh women and upheld the concept of an Ideal woman.

The *Rahit Maryada* of the Sikhs, provides an equal access to the Holy scripture of the Sikhs, the *Guru Granth Sahib* to both Sikh men and women. Wearing of a turban is a matter of voluntary choice for Sikh women. Equal participation rights are accorded to Sikh women in religious affairs and performance of religious ceremonies. Practice of female foeticide/infanticide, adultery, Purdah, dowry, child-marriage, polygamy, infidelity are prohibited. The *Rahit Maryada* advocates monogamy and the remarriage of widows.

An overall historical analysis of the literature of the Sikhs shows that gender issues highlighted by the various forms of Sikh literature generally remain the same, with the exception of the 19th Century accounts insisting on the need of formal education for the empowerment of Sikh women. Very few gender biases are reflected in the Sikh accounts and again these biases hardly change over the period of our study. An inherent urge for the need of a male child is an issue that does not change over the period of the 500 year old history of the Sikhs. Son-preference remains an issue greatly reflecting the existence of gender bias among the Sikhs. Women are to live a virtuous life following high standards of morality and idealism. The literary accounts of the Sikhs no doubt attempt at regulating the behaviour and character of the female members of the *Panth* in accordance with the dictats of the Sikh community. Sacred accounts of the Sikhs consider women as part of worldly attachment, materialism and entanglements. Although the Sikh scriptures do not promote inequality of any kind between men and women, yet followers of the Sikh faith continue to
recognize these differences instead of adopting an egalitarian approach. Gender bias exists among the Sikhs, only the degree to which it is practised may vary.

The literature of the Sikhs, all through the various stages of its development exposes the impotency of the blind observance of the socio-religious evils handed down from one-generation to another. And since women are the ones facing injustice, Sikh scriptures do recognize and condemn the oppression of women at the hands of society. The Guru Granth Sahib reflects a universal outlook and frames guidelines for both men and women to follow. Therefore idealism rules supreme in all forms of Sikh literature. Women in order to be worthy of the Lord’s mercy and love are instructed to live a virtuous life. In the chapter on Prominent Sikh Women in History and Tradition, it is found that these women led their lives piously, putting into practice the ideals and tenets of Sikhism. One thought clearly emerging from all forms of the religious literature of the Sikhs is that even a modern and progressive religious sect of the Sikhs is not free of social taboos and dogmas. Oppression of women stems up from the insecurities of men and this oppression assumes barbaric proportions from the tightening of this patriarchal control. Religious writings of the Sikhs strongly advocate the inculcation of moral and spiritual values among its members, irrespective of gender. Good actions invite positive re-enforcement while undesirable actions lead to sorrow and suffering, is the underlying element of the teachings of Sikhism. Consequently the importance of good actions and abstainence from evil deeds and vices are discussed and gender is only used as a medium of expression. The role and status of Sikh women, like their counterparts in other religion, were conditioned by multiple factors such as identity, socio-economic status and the political context.

In the wake of the present controversies surrounding the practice of Sikh faith, wherein women are not being involved in the mainstream religious affairs, it may be stated that these taboos imposed are a result of the excessive and recent politicization of the Sikh faith and that the religious literature of the Sikhs does not reflect any such bias to be adopted. It is with deep regret that one may duly infer that Sikh women are found missing from the political, administrative and religious affairs of the Sikhs. It is therefore imperative on our part to revert back to the pages of our sacred, secular and popular literature and embark upon a process of self-discovery to reconstruct the position of the Sikh women within their community and faith, and abreast them of their role and responsibilities as active members of the Sikh Panth. It may also be inferred that although Sikh women are theoretically at par with their male counterparts, in practice they end up becoming mere followers and seldom as members.