CHAPTER-III

GENDER ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN HUKAMNAMAS AND RAHITNAMAS

Hukamnamas:

*Hukamnama*, is a compound of two Persian words *Hukm*, meaning *Command* or *Order* and *Namah* meaning *Letter*.¹ McLeod’s *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism* defines the *Hukamnama* as a ‘Letter of command’. Literally, these were documents sent from the time of Guru Hargobind to Sangats or individuals, giving instructions or requesting assistance.² The Hukamnamas are an important source of Sikh history. Most scholars consider them a valuable source of evidence on the life and mission of the Sikh Gurus. They throw light on the organization of the Sikh congregations and also provide invaluable insights on a number of issues related to the Sikh Panth.³ The first Hukamnama from the Akal Takht was issued by Guru Hargobind himself. This Hukamnama directed the Sikhs to wear arms for self defence. Since then, many Hukamnamas have been issued. In 1998, a very important Hukamnama was issued regarding the respect that should be shown to Sri Guru Granth Sahib.⁴ Currently, the word also applies to edicts issued from time to time from the five takhats or seats of high religious authorities for the Sikhs.⁵

From the very beginning, tremendous amount of religious importance has been attached to the *Hukamnamas* issued by the Sikh Gurus. These *Hukamnamas* were both received and obeyed by with great religious fervour and respect by the Sikh congregations assembled in the Gurudwaras to whom they were addressed and read out aloud. Sikhs considered adherence to these *Hukamnamas* as their religious duty. The *Hukamnamas* were issued for a variety of reasons from time to time, such as those relating to the Guru’s kitchen, donation to run religious centres, in order to cater to the

⁴ http://satkar.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=34

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needs of the Sikh congregation, for the purchase of arms and ammunition, instructions about preaching, reconciliation between dissident factions, communication between the Guru and his Sangat, or in happier times, invitations to meet the Guru and warnings to the Masands, etc. Over a period of time, these **Hukamnamas** acquired historical value alongwith religious significance. 6

Many of the **Hukamnamas** which were lost during the period of Sikh struggle could have been useful in the writing of Sikh history. 7 During the times of the Sikh Gurus, many faithful Sikhs would get copies of the Guru Granth Sahib handwritten and carry them along while coming to meet the Sikh Guru. They would then humbly request the Guru to leave their hand-written impression on a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib. The Gurus did not write their names on it but obliged their followers by writing either “Ik Omkar Gursat”, “Ik Omkar Satguru Prasad”, “Ik Omkar Gursat”, etc. These came to be known as ‘Nisans’ (memoirs of the Gurus). 8

All **Hukamnamas** were originally written in Punjabi, in Gurmukhi characters. Those of Guru Hargobind and also most of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s are believed to have been written in their own hand. 9 The **Nisans** and **Hukamnamas** of the ninth Guru constitute a fresh source of evidence regarding his life and work. The **Nisan** is primarily a special piece of writing in the Gurus own hand carrying the authority of the Master and on that account is a sort of a seal on epistles. The **Nisan** thus helps in authentication of epistles. 10 The **Hukamnamas** of the ninth Guru are found to be useful in many respects. 11

**Hukamnamas** also provide specimens of Punjabi prose of the 17th C. 12 On the one hand these **Hukamnamas** largely and strongly exposed corruption amongst the **Masands** and on the other hand, urged the people to make direct offerings to the Guru. Further these **Hukamnamas** also throw light on the economic conditions of the different

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7 Ibid, p. 6.
10 Fauja Singh (ed.), *Hukamnamas, Shri Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib*, (Punjabi, Hindi, English), Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1996, p. 34.
11 Ibid, p. 35.
parts of the region. *Hukamnamas* also reflect upon the close relationship that existed between the Guru and his Sikhs, as the Guru calls them by name.\(^\text{13}\)

Regarding the *Hukamnamas*, they do not in any way reflect gender biases and at the same time also do not tackle the issue of gender. However, in one of his *Hukamnamas* issued to the Sikh sangat at Patna (*Hukamnama no. 15*), Guru Tegh Bahadur instruct them to take good care of his family and lodge them in a big and decent mansion.\(^\text{14}\)

*Hukamnamas* were also issued by Mata Sundri and Mata Sahib Devi, after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. They were the first women to wield religious authority and this authority was placed in their hands by the Sikh sangat. Their instructions were followed with equal zest and fervour by the Sikhs as they had obeyed the instructions of their Gurus. This is also the first instance of formal delegation of power to its female members by a religious community. Although Sikh women had been associated with the institution of *Langar* since the age of Guru Nanak, issuance of *Hukamnamas* by Mata sundri and Mata Sahib Devi, brought them into the stream of decision-making.

**Rahitnamas:**

*RAHITNAME* plural of Rahitnama (Rahit = conduct, stipulated conduct or way of life; *Name*: letters, writings, manuals) is a term used in Punjabi in reference to a genre of writings specifying authentic way of life for a Sikh. These writings, enunciating conduct and behaviour in accordance with the principles of the Sikh religion contain instructions regarding personal and social behaviour, applicable especially to those who have been admitted to the Khalsa brotherhood through baptism. Sikhism laid as much stress on correct personal conduct as on the purity of mind. Guru Nanak for whom truth is synonymous with God recognizes the sovereignty of conduct (*SGGS*, 62). “His conduct will alone be pure who cherishes Him in his heart,” says Guru Nanak in another of his hymns (*SGGS*, 831). And “rahini, i.e. conduct moulded in accordance with shabad, is the truest conduct” (*SGGS*, 56). Rahit as right thinking and right action is also distinguished

\(^{13}\) http://www.info-sikh.com/PageG8.html.

from rahit as outward formal appearance by Guru Arjan, Nanak V: “(The misguided one) acts differently from the rahit he proclaims; he pretends love (for God) without devotion in his heart; (but) the Omniscient Lord knows all and is not beguiled by external form” (SGGS, 169). Besides these general statements, more specific instructions for the moral guidance of a believer are found throughout the Sikh scriptures.  

The *Rahitnamas* are manuals of Rahit principles, spelling out what a Sikh may do and what he should avoid. They are, in other words, works which claim to record the *Rahit* as it was delivered by Guru Gobind Singh at the founding of the Khalsa order. Several *Rahitnamas* exist, out of which six deserve close analysis, says McLeod. Two are attributed to Nand Lal, and one each to Prahilad Rai (or Prahilad Singh), Chaupa Singh, Desa Singh and Daya Singh. In addition to these there are later *Rahitnamas* such as the *Prem Sumarg* and two *Rahitnamas* set in the *Sau Sakhian*. The *Rahit*, according to McLeod, is the code of belief and conduct which all members of the Khalsa are required to obey.

The literature containing the rahit can broadly be divided into three categories; the textual source which includes Sikh scriptures, other approved Sikh canon, and hukamnamas; the traditional Sikh history including janamsakhis, gurbilases and Guru Gobind Singh’s own announcement not to have a personal successor and to pass on the guruship jointly and permanently to the Guru Granth Sahib and the Panth (Khalsa Brotherhood). The textual sources with such precepts as can be extrapolated from them are accepted as general constituents of the Sikh rahit. Among the sources of traditional Sikh history, the most important are the utterances traced directly to the Gurus, especially Guru Gobind Singh who laid down, at the time of the inauguration of the Khalsa in 1699, rules of conduct and introduced regulations to confer upon his followers a distinct identity. However, these sources do not, strictly speaking, belong to the genre known as *Rahitnamas*.

Bhai Nand Lal and some other Sikhs contemporary or near-contemporary with Guru Gobind Singh compiled the first *Rahitnamas*. The chief Khalsa Diwan’s Gurmat Prakash Bhag Sanskar (Amritsar, 1915), Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee’s

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Sikh Rahit Maryada (Amritsar, 1950) and the English translation Rahit Maryada : A Guide to the Sikh Way of Life (London, 1971) are the modern versions of Rahitnamas. The authorship and dates of composition of some of the latter-day Rahitnamas are disputary, interpolations are not ruled out, either. Most of these works are ascribed to Sikhs closely connected with Guru Gobind Singh; they are in some instances described as dictated or authenticated by the Guru himself.  

Three of Bhai Nand Lal’s works fall in the category of Rahitnamas. Rahitnama Bhai Nand Lal, in Sadhukari verse, is in the form of a dialogue between the poet and Guru Gobind Singh during which the latter expounds the rules of conduct laid down for a Gursikh or true follower of the faith. The penultimate verse (22) of the Rahitnama indicates that this dialogue took place at Anandpur on 5 December 1695, i.e. before the creation of the Khalsa. This Rahitnama is of two stanzas and is written in Punjabi. Also known as Sakhi Rahit Ki, was possibly written in the mid 1730s. It gives an impression of peaceful times, which are not easily reconciled with the middle years of the eighteenth century.  

Sakhi Rahit Ki clearly talks about the treatment of women, wherein there are contradictory views, on the one hand, it says, “never trust a woman”, and on the other, asks not to cast lecherous eyes on the women of another man’s family. In addition the Rahitnama provides general instructions to be followed by the Khalsa Sikhs and deals in detail with the daily discipline expected of all Sikhs. The Rahitnama stresses upon the importance of the performance of the daily prayers (Nitnem) by the Sikhs.  

The Tanakhanh-nama of Bhai Nand Lal consisting of 62 couplets, was composed after the creation of the Khalsa and is in question-answer form. It deals directly with rules and injunctions, especially those breach of which attracts a religious penalty, tankhah in Sikh terminology. Punishment prescribed in this Tankhahnama is neither corporeal nor pecuniary, but consists in Guru’s displeasure or

19 LoC cit.  
22 Ibid, p. 92.  
23 Ibid, p. 93.  
imprecation. Besides religious and moral practices of a general nature, it alludes to rules of personal and social etiquette, even of personal hygiene. The last verse of Tankhahnama, which the Sikhs usually recite in unison after Ardaas, contains the well-familiar litany, Raj karega khalsa.²⁵ The Tanakhanama lays down rules of conduct to be religiously followed by a Sikh of the Khalsa, relating to the duties and privileges of the Khalsa, doctrine and devotion, dress and outward appearance, bathing and personal hygiene, crimes and misdemeanours, social relationships, charity, Sangat, Guru Granth Sahib, rituals, preparation of Karah Prasad, preparation and consumption of food, weapons and warfare, dangers of being in the company of false teachers, attitude towards Hindus, attitude towards Muslims, and some sundry prohibitions.²⁶ Regarding gender issues and concerns, the Rahitnamas very openly, though briefly, discuss the attitudes to be developed towards women by a member of the Khalsa.

In McLeod’s view, the issue of the sexual morality of the Khalsa is strongly emphasized and an equally strict message regarding the same appears in this rahitnama.²⁷ “Do not look with lustful eyes on women who enter the sangat. A Khalsa must not have sexual relations with any woman other than his wife. Do not visit a prostitute, nor show affection for another’s wife.”²⁸ A Sikh is further warned against marrying off one’s daughter to a non-Khalsa Sikh. “Accept no price for your daughter’s or sister’s hand.”²⁹

The Prahlad Rai Rahitnama, was written by Prahlad Rai, a contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh. He was a renowned scholar who translated 50 Upanishads into vernacular

²⁷ Ibid, p. 87.
²⁸ Ibid, p. 84; See also, Sukhbir Singh Kapoor and Mohinder Kaur, The Making of the Sikh Rehatnamas, 2008, pp. 20-21 :

²⁹ Ibid, p. 85; See also, Sukhbir Singh Kapoor and Mohinder Kaur, Op.cit, p. 18 :
language on the instructions of Guru Gobind Singh. This *Rahitnama* is believed to have been written after the birth of the Khalsa at Nanded.\(^\text{30}\)

The *Prahilad Rai Rahitnama*, describes the nature of the Khalsa, while simultaneously laying down the rules of behaviour for a Khalsa Sikh. A strict instruction given here is to never visit a prostitute. Sikhs of the Khalsa are further restrained from dealing with the Minas, followers of the Masands, those who cut their hair or those who kill their daughters.\(^\text{31}\)

Female infanticide is introduced for the first time and Khalsa Sikhs should have no dealings with those who practice it, writes McLeod.\(^\text{32}\) Existence of female infanticide amongst the Sikhs is provided adequate support by this *Rahitnama* and the fact that the *Rahitnamas* denounced it strongly indicates the stand taken by the religion against gender discrimination. Status of a woman is upheld in Sikhism by outright condemnation of the practice of female infanticide.

*Rahitnama Bhai Daya* Singh presents in prose, to begin with, the rules of conduct as coming from the lips of Guru Gobind Singh himself; in this case the author is the first among the Panj Piare.\(^\text{33}\) According to McLeod, amongst all the *Rahitnamas* this is perhaps the most difficult one to analyse.\(^\text{34}\) Issues relating to marriage, are discussed here and the Sikhs are instructed not to marry their daughter’s and sister’s outside the Khalsa Panth. Polygamy, adultery and prostitution are strictly denounced.\(^\text{35}\)

*Rahitnama Hazuri*, also called *Rahitnama Bhai Chaupa Singh*, is the most elaborate statement of rules of conduct for the Sikhs. Its authorship is traditionally ascribed to Bhai Chaupa Singh Chhibbar, who had been in attendance upon Guru Gobind Singh since his (the Guru’s) childhood. The work was, according to internal evidence,


\(^{35}\) Ibid, pp.126-127; See also, Sukhbir Singh Kapoor and Mohinder Kaur, *Op.cit*, pp. 54, 56 :
authenticated by Guru Gobind Singh on 7 Jeth 1757 Bk/5 May 1700. Of the 1800 injunctions contained in the *Rahitnama* the main ones are: A Sikh should regularly say his Nitnem, and be always alert in attending to his duty and earn his living by the labour of his hands; he should have no dealing with Minas, Masands, Ramraias, the shaven ones, and with those who practise female infanticide; he should not drink liquor; he should never be parted from the five, viz. *Kachchh* (shorts), *Kes* (hair), *Kirpan* (sword), *Bani* and *Sangat*, he should not use nor deal in tobacco and should not give his daughter in marriage to one who smokes; he should regularly set aside *Dasvandh* or tithe, and he should not trade in *Pothis* or manuscript copies of Gurbani. A special feature of *Rahitnama Hazuri* is a section devoted to Sikh women. The *Rahitnama* contains a classic catalogue of Sikh characteristics and virtues. However, the extant texts of the *Rahitnama* are adulterated and contain injunctions which are in conflict with approved Sikh teaching.36 The *Chaupa Singh Rahitnama* favours a wider Sikh understanding rather than the distinctively Khalsa mode. It addresses the injunctions to the loyal Gursikh rather than to a specifically Khalsa Sikh.37 Female infanticide is not only condemned once again, but others are instructed not to have any dealings with anyone who has committed this unpardonable offence. Various aspects of sexual morality are also discussed.38

Regarding the treatment of women, it is said, “A Gursikh should never trust a woman, neither his own nor another’s. Never entrust a secret to them. Regard them as the embodiment of deceit. Never keep company of women belonging to another man’s family. Never touch the feet of any woman other than one’s own mother. Never eat food left by a woman. Never curse a respectable woman nor use weapons against any of

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them.\footnote{Ibid, p. 102.} Marriage rites similar to those listed by the other \textit{Rahitnamas} are also given in the \textit{Chaupa Singh Rahitnama}. The \textit{Rahitnama} goes on to discuss in detail the duties of women, her role in cooking and serving food, their role in religious matters and their social relationships. These in turn are given in a detailed form by W.H. McLeod in his \textit{Sikhs of the Khalsa : A History of the Khalsa Rahit}. Infidelity is severely condemned.

A Gursikhni is to imbibe high moral and social character, not indulging in the ordinary vices which generally mar the personality of women. She is not to be abusive, obscene or violent at any cost. Complete hygiene both personal and of the surroundings is to be maintained by a Gursikhni while cooking and serving food. She should have bathed properly before saying her daily prayers. Regarding her social behaviour, a Gursikhni is not to interact with men who are not a part of her own family. She is not to intermingle with malicious women and stay away from gossiping. Social contacts with the Five Reprobate Groups (\textit{Panj Mel}) are also to be avoided.\footnote{W.H. McLeod, \textit{Op.cit}, pp. 108-109; See also, Gurpreet, \textit{The Historical Analysis of Sikh Rehat Namases}, Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1989.}\footnote{Ibid, p. 113.}

In McLeod’s view, although the \textit{Chaupa Singh Rahitnama} is unique in allocating a lengthy section to the duties of female members of the Khalsa, the author staunchly upholds patriarchy. Initiation can never be conferred on women.\footnote{http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Rahitname.} However, the extant texts of the \textit{Rahitnama} are adulterated and contain injunctions which are in conflict with approved Sikh teaching. The presence of strong Puranic element and the influence of the Devi cult are some of the other possible corruptions in the extant texts.

\textit{Rahitnama Bhai Desa Singh} is admittedly a late-18th-century work. It is in the form of a long poem of 146 couplets and short four-line stanzas. The poet states that he had lived in Bunga Maralivala at Amritsar where Sardar Jassa Singh (Ahluvalia) has also lived for a long time. From there, in old age, he visited Patna. During his travels after that, he once in a dream was ordered by Guru Gobind Singh to write down a code of conduct for the Sikhs. Bhai Desa Singh lays particular stress on the following points: a Sikh must receive the rites of the Khalsa by ceremony of the double-edged sword; should devote himself to \textit{Bani} and refrain from backbiting and slander; should use \textit{Waheguruji Ki Fateh} as the form of
salutation and greeting, should recite regularly ordered texts; should treat all women other than his wife as daughters or mothers; must maintain the five symbols of the Sikhs. It is in poetry form and has 146 couplets. This **Rahitnama** underlines the significance of the **Rahit**. Once again issues of female infanticide, prostitution, adultery, and sexual morality are discussed. Respect is to be shown towards treatment of women.

Doris in her *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, analyses only the Chaupa Singh Rahit Nama, with regard to the issue of gender. In general, her observation on the six **Rahitnamas** is that they consist of an extensive amount of information pointing to an increased differentiation between women and men in the Sikh community. She further observes that the rules outlined for the Guru’s Sikhs make it increasingly clear that women simply were not included in the ‘regular’ discipline outlined for the Khalsa. Notions of impurity, which the earliest Guru had strictly censured, were here also associated with women, as was scepticism with regard to the credibility of women. Penance was also required by a man who ate food left over by a woman. According to her, the **Rahitnamas** give the impression of widening the gulf between male and female Sikhs through subtle ways.

Among Sikhs, Rahit means a discipline which they are required to follow in their daily life. It represents their life-style and is an index of their world-view. *Nama* means a writing or a manual. **Rahitnama** is, therefore, a codified statement of Sikhs' conduct in life. It is supposed to be a comprehensive list of do's and don'ts, prescribing how a follower should respond or behave in particular situations. While all the Gurus had

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stressed virtuous conduct in religious life, Guru Gobind Singh is credited with having said, "He alone is my Sikh who follows the Rahit. In fact he is the Master and I am his disciple." Extensive references to man's conduct in Gurbani and the Vars of Bhai Gurdas show that a distinct Sikh way of life had emerged by the end of the 17th century, with emphasis on internal as well as external Rahit. According to Guru Gobind Singh, "He who sports Kes without the Rahit of Pahul, Is a fool and an imposter; I will not see him. He is a sinner, And he should drop his `garb'." The guidelines were perhaps not put together in a systematic manner. In 1699, however, when Guru Gobind Singh launched the Khalsa Order, promulgation of detailed injunctions for the initiates to follow was an imperative need. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that some kind of Rahitnama was drafted. This was all the more necessary, since large numbers of disciples had to be initiated through the Amrit ceremony by several teams or Jathas of Panj Piaras, and uniformity of injunctions had to be ensured. This assumption is shared by all scholars including Piara Singh Padam and W.H. McLeod. Unfortunately, no such record is traceable. All the extant manuscripts of Rahitnamas date back to a later period, although most of them claim to have been commissioned or approved by Guru Gobind Singh himself. Chaupa Singh's Rahitnama is no exception. Its extant versions have been dated between 1740 and 1765 CE.\footnote{http://www.sikhism.us/hard-talk/76-the-chaupa-singh-rahitnama.html.}

The Rahit involves both a belief as well as a perspective as for more than three centuries most Sikhs have regarded the Rahit as absolutely central to their faith.\footnote{W.H. McLeod, Sikhs of The Khalsa : A History of the Khalsa Rahit, New Delhi, 2005, p. 3.}

The Rahit thus becomes an integral part of the daily life of a devout Khalsa Sikh. In McLeod’s view, the Rahitnamas represent the normative standard of Sikh belief and behaviour. They do not project the beliefs of an ordinary Sikh, nor do they describe the ordinary Sikh’s way of life. The Rahitnamas however supply what their authors regarded as the ideal standard for a Khalsa Sikh.\footnote{Ibid, p. 7.}

Regarding gender issues and concerns in the Rahitnamas, it is to be remembered that since the Rahitnamas were a by-product of the creation of the Khalsa Panth in the eighteenth century, they do reflect the generally held social views of the time, one being that the men must fight and women should stay at home. In the late nineteenth century,
with the development of the Singh Sabha movement, women’s claims to be regarded as fellow-members of the Khalsa largely fell on deaf years.\textsuperscript{49}

J.S. Grewal’s article “Sikhism and Gender” is written mainly in response to the allegations made by Doris R.Jakobsh in her book, “Relocating Gender in Sikh History; Transformation, Meaning and Identity”, regarding Gender issues within the Sikh Panth. In the context of the Sikh Rahitnamas, Grewal is of the opinion that the view taken by Jakobsh is partial and therefore, misleading.\textsuperscript{50} Regarding the negative images of women portrayed in certain places, Grewal says that the images of outcaste women are used only contextually for a moral message; to regard evil-mindedness, cruelty, slander and wrath as untouchable.\textsuperscript{51}

Referring to Doris’s analysis of the \textit{Chaupa Singh Rahitnama}, as being a reflection of the attitudes in the tales of ‘wiles of women’ and that women were not included in the ‘regular’ discipline outlined for the Khalsa; Grewal goes on to say that this injunction does not imply that religious life was not open to Sikh women.\textsuperscript{52} Spiritual life was open to women.\textsuperscript{53} Doris further goes on to label women as ‘secondary’ Sikhs, which is only due to lack of proper analysis of the \textit{Rahitnama} as a whole for gender relations. An indepth analysis would lead to the argument that women remained respectable members of the Khalsa social order as much as of the earlier Sikh social order.\textsuperscript{54}

For an investigation of the attitudes and behaviour of Sikh chiefs in the eighteenth century, Purnima Dhavan argues that despite the egalitarian emphasis descernible in the creation of the Khalsa, in fact 'the eighteenth century Khalsa chiefs were no more egalitarian than the other new warrior groups of the period'. Dhavan discusses the masculine norms exemplified within eighteenth century texts, such as \textit{Rahitanamas} (Codes of Conduct). The code of masculine honour (\textit{Izzat}), which was at potential risk from women, grew stronger and the proportion of Sikhs from the Jat caste also grew. In Dhavan words, 'notions of caste and honour were tightly woven together and the honour of a Sikh

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid}, p. 212.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid}, p. 213.
\textsuperscript{54} Loc.cit.
ruler 'was particularly symbolized by the protection and exchange of two repositories of his family's honour-women, and the turbans worn by its men'.

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