PART-II

Stri Svabhav: Stri Dharam and the Prevailing Realities

Chapters

Chapter III: Marriage

Chapter IV: Women's Position in Social Sphere

Chapter V: Discrimination Against Women: Social Evils

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INTRODUCTION

A woman performs a number of roles in the family, community and wider social system. Her status in the society is determined by her composite status depending upon her various positions and roles. To an extent it also depends upon her consciousness of her own social status in India. The religious factor has been of utmost importance in determining the status of women since it exerts powerful influence on the thought, culture and behaviour of the people. Religion permeates their personal and family lives as nothing else and it also regulates inter-personal and inter-group relations. In short, there is hardly any aspect of social conduct which is not affected by the sanction of religion. It is almost inextricably inter-woven with social, cultural and political concerns. Infact, as has been noted, religion is often a vehicle for expressing social relations. The complex interplay between religion and society has been very well captured by Nancy Falk and Gross.\(^1\) While religious traditions have been important players in the transformation of societies, religion can also be understood as being "among the fore-most of the institutions which conserves society, encoding, stabilizing, world-views 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 oppression."\(^2\) In other words, religion has been a source of power for women, or a source of subordination, or both. Religious authorities have often functioned as political powerful figures exercising immense social presence and influence. Religious beliefs may point to the equality of women as sacred beings or the importance of female life. On the other hand, religious beliefs may both reflect and reinforce the subordination of women.

\(^1\) Falk and Gross, Unspoken Worlds, xv, xxi
\(^2\) Falk and Gross, Unspoken Worlds, xv, xxi
It is in this background of the overarching influence of the religion that Punjab, for a micro study of position of women, captures great academic curiosity and opportunity.

As has often been pointed out that Punjab in the sixteenth century was home to Hindu and Muslim population as well as the birthplace of Sikhism. A new ideological formulation, in the form of Sikhism advocated a better position for women. Could this new ideological formulation succeeded in influencing all sections of society or was it even able to modify the dominant patriarchal formulation of the society. Apart from the home to all the three religious communities, Punjab also provided an ideal social milieu with the caste system and class playing its role in the social relations particularly in the context of position of women. The marital alliances in the women’s symbolic value in terms of seclusion and chastity as “Indicators” of the high caste and class in the positioning in the social hierarchy emerged. The pervasive influence of caste as marker of status and as an organizing principle of daily life persisted. How does caste intersect with gender in rituals, narrative and prescriptive contexts? Here, one must underline that vast differences distinguished the lives of women not only in different parts of the country but with in different caste, class, religious and ethnic groups. It is, therefore, very difficult to make generalizations and put together comprehensive description of the life and struggle of the women even in the particular region at a given point of time.

Although challenging, yet encouraging, there are limitations which fetter the scope of any investigation on women in Punjab in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is severe lack of available literature on the subject. The main focus on the contemporary sources is political, administrative and economic. Even if there are few references in the sources to the society, then it is in the context of its upper echelons only. It must also be underlined, that given the fact, that women have not generally written their own histories and historical accounts are written through the lens of male gender. What was and is important to man thus becomes the focus of historical analysis. The general impression which one formulates is that women were inconsequential to any social reality in traditional historical
accounts. Women are mentioned in the annals of history, only when they deviate from the norm—i.e. exceptional women who do play a part which is projected as an exemplary conduct that should be imitated by other women. In this way, these constructs of “ideal women” play a part in what is considered to be “normative history”. Thus, only upon an unmasking of the andocentric presumptions of writers and their writings including sacred scriptures and only upon a suspicious reading and entailing a thorough evaluation of the inherent sexist attitudes and practices within religious and historical works, is one enabled to understand the sources and symbols with in the tradition that sustains the subordination of women throughout history. It must also be emphasised here that while reading the sources, we have to be very cautious not to make an anachronistic reading. We should be wary of ideas that flatter and homogenize experiences. Experiences are multiple and the multiplicity of reality co-exists. Stephanie Jamieson explores myths, prescriptive texts and narrative traditions. While recognizing that arriving at a “real” or even single ideal representation of women status is well very impossible, she suggests that juxtaposing multiple perspective permits us to break through the simplistic monolithic formulations.\(^1\) It must be underlined that one of the principal innovations of the Bhakti movement was the central role given to telling stories about the lives of avatars and saints. This kind of sources emerged as a major repository of information of the history of Punjab in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, here a distinction needs to be made between stories that are basically myths, that is, have little or no historical foundation and those that are basically legends that is, involve a mixture of myth and history. Although the dividing line between these two categories is sometimes rather blurred.

The inadequacy of sources makes it necessary for scholars to employ the difficult and somewhat dangerous technique of working backwards that is studying the earliest definite data available and then proceeding to examine as to what extent it can be used to study and evaluate the earlier period. Although this methodology has got its major limitations, yet, for a subject like

\(^1\) Stephanie Jamieson, “Sacrificed wife, Sacrificer’s wife: Women, Ritual and Hospitality in Ancient India, OUP, NY, 1996
position of women, customs and rituals, it can be effectively employed as any social change, the change in values, attitudes and behavioral patterns do not take place over a short span of time. Infact, the respectable position of women is one issue which human society or at least specifically Indian social structure is still grappling with. Along with this is the task of constructing sociological and anthropological field investigations and the collection of oral traditions and folklore before the blurred memories are completely obliterated. It must be kept in mind that the written texts assembled from oral traditions are part of a collective oeuvre. Certain parts must have been re-accentuated, certain potentials in the images actualized, others allowed to fade away over time.

Mute evidence from the past is of great importance to the historian but literary evidence is qualitatively superior. This is true more or less of all forms of the literature. However, J S Grewal appropriately points out that no form of literature has one to one equation with the society. Literature as the “mirror of life” is a good metaphor. That is precisely why it can not be taken literally. Each literary form can have its own peculiar merits and limitations. Although, the character of a literary form in itself becomes relevant to the historians, yet it has to be carefully investigated before it becomes a source.

The other social reality, very significant during the period under review, is the fusion of traditions. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’ Punjab, Sikh had not emerged or had displayed any collective concern in distinguishing themselves from the predominant Hindu culture and religion. Infact, the Muslims outnumbered the Hindus and Sikhs put together. At this point of time Sikhism had not emerged as a distinct religion, yet the adherents were continuously increasing. All the three communities as a rule lived peacefully, and in social and religious matters, they often followed the practices of cooperation. It is significant that the British administrators, in the course of their earliest studies, had observed that generally the cultural differences on ground of religion were of comparatively minor nature.

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1 J.S. Grewal, in context of the period 1750-1850
The Gazetteer of Punjab, Provincial, 1888-89 notes that "in the border lands where the great faiths meet and especially among the ignorant- peasantry the various observances and beliefs that distinguish the followers of the several faiths in their purity and so strongly blended and intermingled that it is often, almost impossible, to say that one prevails rather than the other. Thus, the Musalman peasantry of Delhi territory is still in many ways almost as much as Hindu as their un-perverted brethren; the Sikh of Sirsa is often a Sikh only in speech and habit. (In the similar spirit D C Ibbetson notes that "the various observances and beliefs which distinguish the followers of the several faiths in their purity are so strangely blended and inter-mingled that it is often impossible to say that one prevails rather than the other, or to decide in what category the people shall be classed."

As the religions of India grew from a variety of cults and beliefs, the citizenry did not perceive of themselves as belonging to any "One" religion; the categories of religions extended, inter-mingled and co-existed in the region and the common masses carried on their daily chores of life without considering their association with their particular religious belief. Harjot Oberoi, although speaking of a later time period, very aptly observes that "People did not conceive of themselves as "Hindus" or "Sikhs". These categories over lapped and it is historically more precise to speak in terms of the continuum or simultaneity or religious identities rather than of the distinct religious collectivities. An "either- or" dichotomy is often of very little value in conceptualizing Indian religious traditions.".

In spite of an intensely intermingling blended culture one can not presume homogeneity in social behaviour patterns. One needs to be very sensitive to the nuances, the role played by caste and class and acknowledge the multiplicity of realities- in context of position of women and her social status holding true. It also must be emphasized here that while undertaking the study

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1 The Gazetteer of Punjab, Provincial, 1888-89, p. 122
of the nuances and complexities of the social fabric in relation to the position of women, one cannot presume that the normative teachings of the Gurus had the universal impact. To use Clarence McMullen's phrase once again, the gap between normative and operative beliefs has to be clearly acknowledged. It's here that the need of reading the "fissures" and the "fracture lines" need to be carefully observed in the secular literature or the folk songs or the nuanced study of popular rituals and customs. Then only can we be hopeful in assessing whether the Sikh Gurus actually were able to influence the dominant patriarchal ideology or modify its formulations in the relevant time period.

Considering the religious injunctions of the Sikh Gurus on one hand and then considering the operative value system in the then Punjab, one observes innumerable deviations. Rather, the picture that emerges is that of defiance and deviance only, a wide divergence between the precept and the practice.

Family is not only an important primary institution in all civilized, human societies but in fact, the most important basic social unit where women, has a formidable role to play. It is this role and her status, in the family which emerges as an important, rather the most important yardstick to assess her position in the larger social fabric. Family needs to be studied in its relationship to caste, class, gender and religion. Joan Wallach Scott appropriately comments that the category of gender not only illuminates the un-equal relations of power between males and females but helps one understand that the un-equal relations are extended via metaphors to varied areas of social life so as to signify unequal relations of power in general. In other words, the position of women can not be studied in isolation but in relation to men. It needs to be underlined that there is a need to place social and economic institutions in their ecological and physical settings and accept the multiplicity of cultural practices which exist in the region without treating it as a homogenized space. If we decide to put aside, for a moment, the contemporary critics of patriarchal religion- whether Hindu religion and Islam at large and in Sikhism in its nascent stage, the varied expressions of subordination is striking. Sometimes, for instance, we find that male authority and power are not always found together whereas the male may represent
authority in the household; it is the female who exercises the real power in the domestic domain. Sometimes, the same religious concept may be appropriated differently by men and women, and while the male version may appear oppressive for the female, it is not always the male version which is the foremost in women’s mind. Secondly, there may be difference between precept and practice. Or what may appear as a male exclusion of women from a certain aspect of the religious or socio-cultural aspect may actually be consequence of something other than misogyny or may have a parallel in the female exclusion of men from certain religious activities or some socio-cultural customs and festivals.

Indeed, it is not difficult to demonstrate how much religious traditions, or ideological formulations, perceptions of "patriarchy" or "equality" or "position" (desirable) of women may vary over time. What may be true of one period is not necessarily true of another. The variety within the existing social milieu of a specific region comes to the foreground when we examine the evidence carefully. The negative effects of patriarchy were at times like low level, at times like high level radiation. Despite realizing the reality and assessing the power to represent particular forms of marriage, family, social hierarchy as normative and others as deviant has also meant that the contemporary sources have themselves attempted to flatten out the diversity. Alternatively, such sources have created a system of gradations, a hierarchy of the types of family, an “ideal” form of marriage and different variations as compromises. Despite the fact that women were physically included, if at all, within recorded history but were often emotionally and intellectually outside it, we can and must nevertheless recover some of the complexity of the past. For this, we must be aware how the social domain and its multi levels must be approached on its own terms, rather than passing sweeping generalizations. Even within the single region, notions of sexuality, purity and their implications for caste or social identities are not uniform, monolithic or static. While it may not be easy for us to retrieve the dynamism of such notions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries historical context in its entirety, an awareness of the possibility of variation may provide for more nuanced, historical understanding.
In other words, a focus on an over-arching ideology limits the possibility of looking at inner modifications and the particular ways in which ideology is transformed. We can try to query some of these issues by looking at folk literature and folk songs. Recognizing that the power ideology does not fully domesticate women within the rigid mode; the "ideal" women, her attributes and behavioral patterns are subject to negotiation and change. The existence of few customs which clearly attack the male dominance, suggests that women pushed to the boundaries of a particular social system (read patriarchy), still make spaces within it. Yet, it is not as if they are continuously resisting structures of control. Transgression of boundaries can go along with acts of conformity, adaptation and renegotiation. Every idea has a variety of meanings. Notions attached to a particular idea, may be for instance "women's position" not only changes over time but at a given point in time, it has a variety of meanings. To gain from Ginzberg work "Cheese and Worms" the "reality" is what and how we filter our knowledge and it has different connotations to different people (at different points of time in history).