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Understanding Gender Identity in Sikhism**

Abstract: This paper discusses the gender identity in Sikhism with regard to the status of Sikh women in society. The Gender role and its record is always a neglected part in Sikh history. In order to examine gender and its identity within Sikh literature and culture and to understand the construction of gender and its status in Punjabi society, I use references from proverbs and from collective consciousness of the society as well as the sacred Sikh scripture. I will critique status of women in Sikhism to bear witness and to uncover the silence and neglect toward the Sikh women.

The shaping and reshaping of identities through gender is a widely accepted phenomenon. In fact, identities are often created under the umbrella of religious boundaries, gender construction, racial and sexual subordination, and national conflicts.¹

According to Doris R. Jakobsh, there are four major principles guiding writings on Sikh women and these principles are of silence, negation, accommodation, and idealization in regards to the secondary sources. Although, it has been widely argued that in Sikhism, women and men are equal in all spheres of life but Sikh history offers virtually nothing related to women. So, the question here arises that if women and men are considered equal in the society offered by Sikhism then why women are not being discussed similarly as men in the secondary sources of history. Harjot Oberoi has posited that “the principle of silence and negation are paramount in addressing issues that could be conceived as ambiguous within the tradition”.²

Sikh women were generally neglected during history writing so it seems that they did not have any contribution towards business, war or politics. This was not the case only with Sikh history but in general, history has been written through the viewpoint of male gender. One reason could be that most of the historians were from male gender so they ignored the role of women and tried to glorify only male species in history. According to some feminist historians, history is not as objective as believed and the will of writer and his choice of events have an important role in the history writing process.

According to Oberoi, the second principle towards Sikh gender history is of negation. For example, by and large, the Sikh histories are silent about the wives of the Gurus. If someone discussed it, it's only the behavior of the Gurus towards their wives was focused, not the wives as individuals. The example of the Mata Sundri is subsequent, who was the third wife of the last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh and ruled Khalsa Panth for thirty-five years but she never got as much importance or attention of the historians as she should get. According to Prof. Nikkey Gurinder Kaur Singh, Sikh sacred literature has broken down all the paradigms of the patriarchal idols and is feminine in its tone and form.³ The thing there needs attention is that human beings are represented in Granth Sahib as a bride who is devoted to her divine husbands so it also gives a lower status to women and dominant status to the men. On the other hand, Doris R. Jakobsh disagreed with Prof. Singh and points out many humiliating couplets in Granth Sahib regarding women which associated women with Maya.

*Attachment to progeny,
wife is poison None of these at the end is of any avail.⁴*

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¹ Pauline Kollontai, “Transplanting Religion: Defining Community and Expressing Identity,” in *Community Identity: Dynamics of Religion in Context*, eds. Sebastian C.H. Kim, 162.

² Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 30-31.

³ Nikkey Guninder Kaur Singh, *The feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4.

⁴ *Guru Granth Sahib*, 41.

(Adi Granth, Pannah 41)

*Maya attachment is like a loose woman,
A bad woman, given to casting spells.⁵*
(AG, Pannah 796)

*Men obedient to their womenfolk
Are impure, filthy and stupid,
Men lustful, impure, their womenfolk counsel follow.⁶*
(AG, Pannah 304)

The third principle regarding gender history in Sikhs described by Doris is the principle of accommodation. This principle was utilized by the reforms of Singh Sabha because they have rightly realized that they need to reinterpret the traditional role of women due to the modern feminist movements and colonial impacts on the social structure. This class of the reformers who basically belonged to the elite section had the western education but did not want to reject the Sikh traditions so they tried to find out the way between the two. As a result, these reformers tried to recreate the role and status of women out of the Sikh tradition and history and it became the central focus of their reforms. These reformers were also alarmed due to the missionary activities in Punjab by Christian Missionaries. The focus of these activities was low castes and women so Singh Sabha reformers tried to protect Sikh women from it through education. The reformers started producing the literature in which not only the role of the Sikh women was glorified but as well as they tried to separate Sikh women from the dominated influence of Hindu tradition. These reformers tried to search out positives regarding women from the Holy Scripture and tried to accommodate women in this manner. These reformers interpreted passages from Granth Sahib to highlight women role and status.

The fourth principle is the ‘principle of Idealization’ which is really similar to the principle of accommodation. Typically, in Sikh history, the wives or relatives of the Gurus and Rajas are idealized as the role model as they do not lead their lives like their contemporaries. They are glorified in history and become the model for the rest. These elite conjure up false images of the role and status of women in Sikh history in so many ways. This principle of idealization also encouraged historians or reformers to exaggerate the character of these women. There is important to note that these reformers or historians tried to portray the female as obedient and supporting to their male counterpart.

On the very first place, it’s really important to understand the place of women in Punjabi society. The role and status of women in Punjabi society have always been uncertain. Punjabi society was an agrarian society and its economy dominantly depended upon agriculture. As a result, the socio-cultural ethos was dominantly influenced by landowning castes and agriculture-related activities and festivities. Jats were the dominant caste both economically and numerically in central and South- Eastern Punjab. Landowning and cultivation were considered the reason to enjoy the superior status in the society. In this type of society, the status or condition of women can be seen through the popular proverbs or folklores which are considered an important source to investigate and understand a society and its norms. In Punjabi society, the wish to have more than one son was common as it was considered a symbol of strength which alternatively minimized the importance of female in the family. The following are popular proverbs regarding the Romeo of Punjab, Mirza, and Robinhood of Punjab, Jagga, who were killed by his enemies, is

Mirza Bhajh Bharawan Marya
(Mirza was killed as he does not have any brothers)

Jy mei jandi Jaggy mar jana mei ik thaan do jamdi.
(if I knew that they are going to kill him, I would prefer to give birth to two sons
instead of the one)

Practically speaking, the agriculture was dependent upon manpower so it was always considered the blessing to have more sons and fewer daughters. On the one hand, son was perceived as strength and bread earner,

⁵ *Ibid.*, 796.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

on the other hand, daughter was always considerably less helpful in the economy and more burden to the family because once she has to get married and it required a handful dowry. The following proverb show how patriarchal biases existed in society.

*Chohra mare nirbhag ka
Chohri mare bhagwan ki*⁷
(the one whose son dies is unlucky, and the one whose daughter dies is lucky)

The system of hypergamy and dowry are the utmost reasons for the degradation of the social status of female in Punjab. Girls are considered a burden on the family. It also encouraged the infanticide of the female kids. This value system of son-preference prevailed the discriminatory behaviors towards girls in domestic life. Even the girls are used to have poor nutrition diet as compare to boys. It becomes the norm to save the best proportion of the meal for the male members of the house and female are habitual to take the rest. Later on, it also becomes the reason for the survival of the females during famines, droughts, and epidemics which unfortunately attached more importance to have a baby boy.⁸ A saying was;

*Choti roti khave, ty Vadi boti khave.
(While in her childhood, daughters eat less bread but as a marriageable girl,
she bites into larger flesh of her parents)*

The obsession with the sons can also be shown through this wish given by elders to the younger bride

*Budd Suhagin, Sat puttari ho
(May you enjoy married status till your old age and be blessed with seven sons)*

Another saying in the importance of having a son was;

*Meehin aur bettya tu kon dhapya sae*⁹
(Who can be satisfied without rain and son; for cultivation both are
indispensable)

On one side, the behavior towards the female in Punjabi society in domestic affairs was biased and on the other hand, the standards set for a good female were based largely on two things one is her obedience, faithfulness towards the male members of the society specially her husband and the other is how hard working and sturdy she is. However, Jat women were associated to the agriculture and household. A jatti was considered as the best wife as following proverb proves;

*Ran Jatti, haur sab chatti.*¹⁰
(Only a Jatti makes the best wife. All others are drain on one's resources)

The image of the Punjabi wife especially of Jatti was constructed in the society was of the women who is more helpful in the domestic chores as well as in animal-husbandry work like tending, feeding, milking the animals. Along with it, she also played her invisible role in economy by picking cotton, peeling sugarcane, weeding and cutting of the crops and weaving the cotton to make threads. Yet she is scolded for her laxity and called as *Kupatti* (bad and careless woman) e.g.,

*Mein koli nahin dupatta, Kya chuggegi kupatti.*¹¹
*Kappah guddina dupatta, Tun chuggan ki ayi kupatti.*¹²

In the Punjabi society, those women were considered as good wives or mothers who sacrifices their

⁷ Jai Narayan Verma, *Hariyanvi Lokokitiyan: Shastriya Vishleshan* (Dehli: Adarsh Sahitya Prakashan, 1972), 30.

⁸ Kamlesh Mohan, "Clamping Shutters and Valorizing Women: Tensions in Sculpting Gender- Identities in the Colonial Punjab," in *Punjabi Identity in a Global Context*, eds. Pritam Singh & Shinder Singh Thandi (New Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170.

⁹ Jai Narayan Verma, *Hariyanvi Lokokitiyan*. 123.

¹⁰ Kishan Singh Bedi, (trans.) *Agricultural Proverbs of the Punjab* (Chandigarh: Public Relations Department, Punjab), 23.

¹¹ R. Maconachie, ed. *Selected Agricultural Proverbs of Punjab* (Dehli: Imperial Medical Hall Press, 1870), 210.

¹² Kishan Singh Bedi, *Agricultural Proverbs of the Punjab*, 55.

rights, opt submissive roles, suffer, do hard work and maintain the honor of the male family members in the society by being not involved with anyone and as high character lady. It is a very common perception in the society, that female is born to sacrifice as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. It becomes a common norm that female members of the house do not eat their meals until male members are done with it and the leftover is for the females. The agricultural proverbs promote these kinds of norms;

*Duman bhala jo bolna Nuan bhali jo
chup Sawan bhala jo barsana Jeth
bhalei dhup.*¹³

(For the bards, it is good to speak and sing; for the daughter in law, it is proper to be silent. Rains during the monsoon month of sawan (mid-July to mid-August) are good and normal and the bright and hot sunshine is unnecessary during the month of jeth (mid-May to mid-June) to mature rabi crops)

*Paik ne sohrian, vatter na vahian Sawan ne tarel pai,
tenain autar gyian.*¹⁴

(All these things bear no fruit; the life of a girl who did not cultivate the habit of working in her father's home while unmarried and also not after marriage in her husband's home; the labor spent on a field which was not ploughed when in vatter (the right state of soil-moisture), and the advent of the monsoon month of Sawan, if it passes away rainless).

There are some proverbs which have shown the advices from women side related to the choice of crops etc. but without harming the ego or self-esteem of the male gender and without any influence on decision making, for example;

*Chole vadh ke beej de narma Ae chunan nu
main takri.*¹⁵

(my husband sows American cotton after harvesting gram. I am one he found to picking it)

*Na beej nikhatua cheena
Moongla le ke charan lagi
Chittar ho gaya hina.*¹⁶

(O my bad and unsuccessful husband! Don't sow the inferior millet (cheena); I began to pound it in the mortar with a large pestle. As a result, my buttocks became sore. So arduous is the job of pounding it).

It shows the slight resentment of women to their husbands. It also shows the tension between the gender-relations but the only way to express emotions for the female members of the society left was through woven songs. Some other notions of the society related to the gender identity were to judge a woman through the status of her father which illustrated in following proverb;

*Janani so jo pakion rani Zamin so jis de ser
te pani.*¹⁷

(The actual woman is the one whose father is wealthy, important land is which does have easy water access)

Another very important notion related to female was about beauty to get social approval specially for marriage;

¹³ *Ibid*, 77.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 38.

¹⁵ Kishan Singh Bedi, *Agricultural Proverbs of the Punjab*, 68.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 72.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 110.

*Dhi kani, Naun randani, Khu di vingi lath, Raste ute Kheti, Chare Chaur
Chaupat.*¹⁸
(a half blind daughter, a widowed daughter in law, the curved shaft of the well
wheel, a crop in the field on the road side, all these four are of no benefit)

One thing which was distinguish in the Punjabi society from the rest of the Sub-continent that widow re-marriage was very common and it was known as *Karewaor Chahhar Andezi*. It was practiced among all the castes in Punjab including Brahmans as they were also land owners and follows the common social customs. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it was due to some kind of liberal or progressive attitude towards women but it was mainly to hold the family property and to control widow's sexuality. However, strong patriarchal urge to control the women was achieved through glorification of secluded women who stays at home. To understand see following proverbs;

*Beerbani ghar ki bani*¹⁹
(A woman who remains at home adorns it). *Ander baithi lakh di*

*Bahr nikli kakh di.*²⁰
(She worths ten million when stays at home, but become of zero value if she goes outside home)

Another very important aspect which could be highlighted through the proverbs was about the faithfulness of the women. The faithfulness was highly doubted in regards to the women which could be shown through these proverbs

*Janani marn lagya v munh paike pind wall kr ke mardiy.*²¹
(Woman turns her face towards her parental house even on death bed)

*Ran, Ghora, Talwar Tho kisy dy yar
nahin.*²²
(woman, horse, sword..all three are not anyone's friend)

*Buri rannan di dosti,
Khuren jina di mat.*²³
(The friendship of women is bad as they are idiots)

*Pyhlun hass hass laundian yarian,
Fyr ro k dyndian dass.*²⁴
(Firstly, they will love you with joy than they will disclose it while wiping)

*Chor uchaka chaudhri Ty ghundi ran
pardhan.*²⁵
(theif is honorable, and the one who have no morals she is the authority)

The women in Punjabi society were regarded less intelligent and were highly discriminated in this way. There are many famous proverbs regarding it like wise

*Budhi di matt gutt wich hundi ay.*²⁶

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 98.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 28.

²⁰ Jai Narayan Verma, *Hariyanvi Lokokitiyan*, 127.

²¹ *Multan District Gazetteer 1901-2*, 98.

²² Snawar Chadhar, *Akhana Rahin Tvareekh* (Kasur: Punjabi Khoj Garh, 2003), 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

(wife's brain is in its tail)

*Ankhun annhi ty naa chiragh bibi.*²⁷

(Blind from eyes and named as the light)

*Jysi koko wysy bachy.*²⁸

(Like mother, like children)

*Buri rannan di dosti, khurren jina di matt.*²⁹ *(friendship of women is bad as their brain is in theirankles)*

Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh religion and the first of a succession of ten Sikh Gurus or Prophet-teachers, became the source of social renewal of the Punjabi society. If we talk about the very initial literature of the Sikhism, women almost do not have any significant representation. Before Guru Nanak's period in Sufi or Sanatan tradition which was coming from Northern India, women were considered obstacle between achieving the aim of a desireless life and were considered as seductive distraction towards their true calling. But Guru Nanak emphasized equally on spiritual enlightenment of the women as well. Guru Nanak also talked about the equal inheritance rights of the women which was a very hard to accept revolutionary ideal for Punjabi society in which son is always considered the actual heir of the property of the father.

*"A daughter is born from (the same) human bodies as does a son. Why then should the father's wealth be taken by another person."*³⁰

However, women enjoyed a high status in Guru Nanak's proposed society, as an equal partner of men in all walks of life.³¹ At Guru Nanak's time, childbirth was considered polluted in Hindu society and women were deemed impure due to menstruation and postnatal conditions.³² In some other images, women appeared as part of *maya* (illusion: concept associated with worldly things), to be a distraction from *mukti* (salvation). Guru Nanak challenged concepts of non-purification about women and childbirth. His following verses are often quoted:

Our birth is from a woman and in a woman we grow. We are engaged to and wed a woman.

Woman is our friend and from woman comes the family. If one woman dies, we seek another;

Without woman there can be no bond.

Why call woman bad when she gives birth to rajas? Woman herself is born of a woman,

And none comes into this world without her.

*Nanak, only the True One alone is independent of woman.*³³

(Raag Aasa, Muhalla Pyhla)

Guru Nanak also condemned the brutalities against women in the hands of the invaders and their army. Mughal King Babur attacked India during Guru Nanak's era and his army raped women and imprisoned them as war booty. Guru Nanak strongly stood against all these atrocities. In a very distressed way, he spoke about it;

Modesty and righteousness both have vanished and falsehood moves about as the leader, O Lalo. The function of the Qazis and the Brahmins is over And the Satan now reads the marriage rites (rape). The Muslim women read the Quran

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁰ Doris R. Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 25.

³¹ Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *Sikhism: An Introduction* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011), 22.

³² Childbirth was considered impure due to postnatal bleeding. The period of forty days after childbirth was known as '*Sutak*' and in Indian tradition, women were separated from rest of the family and were not allowed to enter in kitchen or to touch pickle.

³³ *Guru Granth Sahib*, 473.

*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.*³⁴
(Tilang, Pannah, 722)

The two most influential women in Guru Nanak's life were Bebe Nanaki and Mata Sulakhni. Bebe Nanaki was the elder sister of the Guru Nanak, even Guru's name was on the name of his sister, from Nanaki to Nanak. Bebe Nanaki is considered as the first Sikh disciple as she was the first one who recognized divine light in Guru Nanak. She was very close to his brother and used to babysit him in his early age. Bebe Nanaki has been personified as the role model for the Sikh women.

According to the Janam Sakhis³⁵ which is an important historical source, Bebe Nanaki did have power, authority and respect in her society. Bebe Nanaki was more powerful and influential in her family³⁶. She proved to be the driving force for Guru Nanak as well in his journey of Guruship. She was the one who was controlling family affairs and making big decisions likewise calling Guru Nanak to Sultanpur, finding job for him and choosing his life partner. Although, Doris Jakobsh challenges this and states that the belief regarding role of Bebe Nanaki and considering her as role model for Sikh women is a normative belief and is not an operative belief. This belief is not held by the Sikh community practically.³⁷

In his childhood, Guru Nanak started meditating on the name of God and ignored the worldly affairs which made his family worried but Bebe Nanaki stood on his side. She defended him on many occasions even in front of her husband when he doubted Guru Nanak's intentions, she said;

*"You do not know the truth yet. You know that I will take my brother's side.
World's entire wealth is in Nanak's hand and it goes through Nanak's
hand."*³⁸

Moreover, Bebe Nanaki played the role of caretaker of Guru Nanak. She even confronted her father for Guru Nanak. She moved Guru Nanak to her in-laws which does not fit to the Punjabi society in general as it is considered shame or degradation to live in one's sister's in-laws. It also shows her decisive power of decision making and influence on her natal³⁹ family's affairs. It was also an exception as Punjabi society was a patriarchal society and married daughters usually do not have much involvement in her natal household. This role model of the Sikh woman was not even achieved in twentieth century. Nikki Guninder Kaur Singh's following statement shows that Sikh women were unable to had opportunity to experience power and authority even in twentieth century;

*"The Sikh household into which I was born was part of Punjabi society that
brought together diverse traditions in which the status of women was as
dubious as it was crucial. I saw them exalted and I saw them downgraded."*⁴⁰

Guru Nanak does support the women as equal to the men in society and tried to give them a high place by removing the taboos existed in the society.

After the first Guru, Guru Nanak, the third Guru of the Sikhism Guru Amar Das is prominent regarding his struggle towards freedom of women and gender equality. He did prohibit the common practice of Sati in which women were used to burn themselves along with their husband's dead body. Guru Amar Das spoke against

³⁴ *Guru Granth Sahib, 722.*

³⁵ The Janam Sakhis, literally means birth evidence, are the collection of tales which recount the life stories of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. The term life story refers to the traditional narratives of the life of the Guru Nanak. The importance of the Janam Sakhi tradition as historical source is very crucial because they provide information regarding the period and the sociological framework of that society.

³⁶ Surjit Hans, *A Reconstruction of Sikh History from Sikh Literature* (Jalandhar: ABS Publications, 1988), 204.

³⁷ Doris R. Jakobsh, "The Construction of Gender in History and Religion: Sikh Case". In *The Captive Subject: A Social and Cultural Casebook for Women of India*. Ed. Mandakranta Bose, Forthcoming, essay no. 20.

³⁸ Kirpal Singh, ed. *Janam Sakhi Parmpara* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1969), 232.

³⁹ Natal clan generally refers to the clan into which one is born.

⁴⁰ Nikki Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Feminism Principle*, 1.

this tradition and called it a total cruel act. He tried to explain the meaning of true love between husband and wife which is not necessary to express through such tradition. He advocated that;

*“Do not call them Sati, who burn themselves along with their husbands,
O Nanak! They alone are known as Satis, who die from the
shock of separation.
They are also known as sati,
who abide in modesty and contentment?
They serve their Lord, and rise in the early hours to contemplate Him.
The widows burn themselves in the fire, along with their
husbands’ corpses
If they truly knew their husbands, then they suffer terrible
body pain
O Nanak! If they did not truly know their husbands, why should they burn
themselves in the fire?
Whether their husbands are alive or dead, those wives remain
far away from them”⁴¹*
(Var Suhi ki-Slok Mohalla 3, Pannah 787)

On another place in Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Amar Das emphasized on the same by saying;

*In the dark age of Kali Yuga, they come together through destiny,
As long as the Lord commands, they enjoy their pleasures,
By burning oneself, the Beloved Lord is not obtained, imitating what she
sees, with her stubborn mind-set, she goes into the fire.
She does not obtain the company of her Beloved Lord, and she wanders
through countless incarnations,
I chant the Ambrosial Bani, the Glorious Praises of God,
That woman shall not suffer pain at the hands of the Messenger of Death,
Says Nanak, she who looks upon
the Transcendent Lord as her Husband,
Within my home, and outside as well, there is peace and
poise all around.⁴²*
(Gourree Guaaraeree, Mohalla 5, Pannah 185)

Guru Amar Das was the first person in Sikhism who also stood against the female infanticide, and make it strictly prohibited for the Sikhs. He also condemned wearing of the veil and ask women to not veil as it’s a discriminatory thing. It happened on the first place when the princess of Haripur visited Guru Amar Das and she was wearing a veil, Guru asked her to remove the veil and prohibited it for all the women. It has been described in Guru Granth Sahib in these words;

*Stay, stay, O daughter-in-law, do not cover your face with a veil,
In the end, this shall not bring you even half a shell. The one before you
used to veil her face,
Do not follow her footsteps.
The only merit in veiling your face is
That for a few days, people will say,
“what a noble bride has come”.
Your veil shall be true only if
You skip, dance and sing the Glorious Praises of the Lord.
Says Kabir, the soul-bride shall win,
Only if she passes her life singing the Lord’s Praises.⁴³*
(Asa, Bhai Kabir, Guru Granth Sahib Anag, Pannah 484)

⁴¹ *Guru Granth Sahib, 787.*

⁴² *Ibid., 185.*

⁴³ *Ibid., 484.*

This prohibition of *purdah* or veil was a revolutionary thing at that time as the Punjabi society was divided into different classes and veil was considered a status symbol, a symbol of nobility. The women from lower classes did not veil their faces as it was only for the higher classes of the society. So, through this, Guru Amar Das not only challenged the existing notion of the nobility and the equality of the women of all classes but also stood for the discriminatory behavior regarding women. Another big contribution of Guru Amar Das towards the rights of women was that he appointed the Bibi Amro as the head of the Manji. The post of the Manji was an important post and not only had symbolic significance but practical worth, as the head of the Manji had to collect the revenue from his/her area. Bibi Amro was the daughter of Mata Khivi, who was the wife of the second Guru, Guru Angad. Mata Khivi was profoundly known because of her generosity and her famous act of starting tradition of Langar of Guru. She was the first person in Sikhs who started a proper Langar system and she used to run this Langar with help of other devotees. She holds a high place among the Sikh women. Mata Khivi does have her name in Guru Granth Sahib as well with a high stature;

*Balwand says that Khivi, the Guru's wife
Is a noble woman, who gives soothing, leafy shade to all.
She distributes the bounty of the Guru's Langar;
The kheer-the rice pudding and ghee, is like sweetambrosia.⁴⁴
(Raamkalee ki Vaar, Pannah 967)*

Guru Amar Das also spoke for the equal rights of both the partners, husband and wife, which was a bit unusual at that time in the society as women were considered inferior to the men in Indian tradition. It was a strong practice to consider that women are born to obey men and reason of their creation is give pleasure to men. Women were practically on the mercy of the men; they were confined to the household. Guru Amar Das tried to empower women by giving them equal status with their men counterparts.

*They are not said to be husband and wife,
Who merely sit together.
Rather they alone are called husband and wife,
Who have one soul in two bodies.⁴⁵*

(Suhi ki Vaar, Mohallah 3, Pannah 788)

The Forth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Ram Das also took a very revolutionary step towards empowerment of women. He strongly commended the custom of dowry which was an established norm in Punjabi society, even today it is still been practiced in Punjab. He emphasized that the actual thing which should be given to a daughter is gift of holiness, righteousness and connection with the God. Following are the *Shabads* from Guru Granth Sahib;

*Any other dowry, which the self-willed manmukhs offer for show, Is only false
egotism and a worthless display,
O my father, please give me the Name of the Lord God As my wedding gift and
dowry.⁴⁶
(Sri Raag, Pannah 79)*

The sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind, called women the conscience of men. The equal status of women which Gurus were trying to provide was completed through the Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru. He gave equal rights of baptism to women on the day Khalsa was announced in 1699. The same rules which were applied on men through Khalsa establishment were applied on women. Women were also blessed with the five Ks as men. Mata Sahib Devi, wife of tenth Guru, is known as mother of Khalsa, she participated in the *Amrit* ceremony and add sugar into the holy water for baptism. Guru Gobind Singh provided the military training to the women as well. There were many female fighters in his army. His wife, Mata Sundri is another example of the worriers; she fought against Mughal armies even after the death of Guru Gobind Singh and led Panth for several years under her command. In Guru Granth Sahib, there are some *shabads* or verses regarding equal rights of women as not only the political leaders but also to lead religious congregation;

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 967.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 788.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

*Come my sisters and dear comrades! Clasp me in thine
embrace.
Meeting together, let us tell
The tales of our Omnipotent Spouse (God). In the True Lord are
all merits,
In us all demerits.*⁴⁷

(Sri Raag, Pannah 17)

Faithfulness to one's spouse is also emphasized in Guru Granth Sahib, and it is worthy to note that instead of female, the men are called upon to be faithful to their women folk;

*The blind-man abandons the wife of his home,
And has an affair with another's woman.
He is like the parrot, who is pleased to see the simbal tree,
But at last dies clinging to it.*⁴⁸

(Bhairo, Pannah 1165)

Concluding Remarks:

The development of gender identity in Sikhism was an effort to reconstruct the image, role, and status of women within Sikhism as well as in Punjabi society. It is repeatedly claimed that the Sikh sacred literature does have feminine tone and consciousness. Although Sikhism gave a prominent position to women in its scripture but practically their role confined to the four walls of the household. Guru Gobind Singh ordered Sikhs to use the surname, Singh. On contrary, Sikh women were simply labelled as 'Sikhni' or 'Gursikhni'. Although generally the name *kaur* associated to the Sikh women is referred to the Guru Gobind Singh and the oral tradition supports this argument but there is no recorded evidence of it in primary sources. On the other hand, the name given to the Sikh men Singh is evident in all the Rahitnamas. Despite of all the efforts of Sikh Gurus to give a proper place to women, the culture of Punjab remained homogenously male-dominated which made modern Sikh women the victims of hyper-masculine attitudes and practices; men either disregard women's contributions or did not think their contributions worthy of note. Thus, the guiding principle in Sikh history regarding women is silence.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1165.