
A FRAMEWORK OF GENDER EQUALITY IN SIKHISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the scriptural and philosophical foundations of gender equality in Sikhism, arguing that equality between men and women is not a modern reinterpretation but an intrinsic component of Sikh theology and political thought. Drawing from the teachings of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the institutional practices introduced by the Gurus, such as *sangat* and *langar*, the paper demonstrates how spiritual equality was translated into social and political practice. The Gurus actively challenged patriarchal customs prevalent in medieval Indian society, condemning practices such as sati, female infanticide, purdah, and dowry, while encouraging women's education, leadership, and participation in religious and public life. The establishment of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh further institutionalized gender parity by granting women the honorific "Kaur" and equal initiation rights. Sikh history provides numerous examples of women's leadership, service, and sacrifice, reinforcing the doctrinal commitment to equality. It concludes that the Sikh conception of human dignity offers a comprehensive moral and political framework that inherently supports gender equality and provides a significant non-Western resource for contemporary human rights discourse and democratic theory.

Keywords: sikhism, gender equality, khalsa, sri guru granth sahib, ik onkar, miri-piri

1. INTRODUCTION

Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak in the fifteenth century, presents a powerful scriptural foundation for gender equality rooted in the principle of divine unity and human dignity. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib affirms that the same divine essence pervades both men and women, rejecting all forms of discrimination. Through doctrinal teachings and institutional reforms, the Sikh Gurus challenged oppressive social customs and promoted women's equal participation in religious and social life. This paper explores how Sikh theology and practice together establish an enduring framework for gender equality.

II. SIKHISM: SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF GENDER EQUALITY

Sikhism is the world's fifth-largest religion. It was founded during the late 15th century in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent. Its adherents are known as Sikhs. Currently, there are about 30 million Sikhs worldwide. Most of them live in the Indian state of Punjab. As per Sikh tradition, Sikhism was established by Guru Nanak (1469–1539) and subsequently led by a succession of nine other Gurus. Before his death, the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708), bestowed the status of Guru to the sacred scripture of Sikhs, Adi Granth, which is presently known as Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS).

Guru Granth Sahib is the central religious text of Sikhism and is considered by Sikhs to be the sovereign guru of the religion. It is an extensive text compiled and composed during the period of Sikh gurus from 1469 to 1708. It is, however, more than just a scripture since the Sikhs treat the Granth

(holy book) as their living Guru. Guru Nanak, who is often described as a humanist, taught a message of love. It has been said that he saw God in humanism and that, in a true sense, his religion was humanism. His view was of a universal God common to all humankind, not limited to any religion, nation, race, creed, color, or gender. The Institute of Sikh Studies has stated that “a Sikh is pious in his religiosity, active in social life, aware of justice, and is responsive to any injustice done to anyone. It is this supreme ideal, which the Sikh Gurus in all their humanist zeal have given to their Sikhs.” Human rights and social justice form a cornerstone of Sikh belief, and Sikh history features many examples of Sikh Gurus and their followers making countless sacrifices for the cause of religious freedom and justice.

Sikh thought, emerging in fifteenth-century Punjab under Guru Nanak and developed by the ten Gurus, offers a distinctive model of dignity grounded in divine unity, moral equality, and collective responsibility. Importantly, Sikhism articulated gender equality centuries before modern feminist movements. This paper advances the argument that: The Sikh conception of human dignity provides a comprehensive moral political framework that inherently supports gender equality.

III. SIKHISM AND GENDER EQUALITY

Women represent half of all humanity, yet they continue to face discrimination in various parts of the world. The feminist movement has done much to lessen gender discrimination in western societies. However, women in much of the world still face severe difficulties, such as violence, illiteracy, economic and social deprivation. Having noted several rituals and traditions of his time, Guru Nanak comprehended that men frequently degraded women. Women were thought of as property and considered as lowly and unworthy. He condemned these practices. Guru Nanak spoke against gender discrimination in India's highly male-dominated environment.

He opposed established orthodoxy with the radical assertion that women were worthy of praise and equal to men. Besides, God is gender neutral. It is both man and woman, and its creative aspect is portrayed as that of a mother:

ਆਪੇ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਆਪੇ ਹੀ ਨਾਰੀ ॥

Ape purakh Ape hi nari.

God is both man and woman. (M. 1, SGGS, p 1020)

Guru Nanak proclaimed that the same divine essence pervades through both men and women.

ਨਾਰੀ ਪੁਰਖ ਸਬਾਈ ਲੇਇ ॥

Nari purakh sabai loe.

Among all the men and women, God's essence is pervading. (M. 1, SGGS, p. 223)

Bhagat Kabir articulates that man and women are all forms of the Creator (God).

ਏਤੇ ਅਉਰਤ ਮਰਦਾ ਸਾਜੇ ਏ ਸਭ ਰੂਪ ਤੁਮ੍ਹਾਰੇ ॥

Ète aurat marda saje e sabh rup tumhare.

You have fashioned all these men and women, O Lord! All these are Your Forms. (Bhagat Kabir, SGGS, p. 1349)

Guru Nanak emphasized that rather than being denigrated and mistreated, women should be cherished and respected. Guru Nanak proclaimed:

ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵਿਆਹੁ ॥
ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਦੇਸਤੀ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਰਾਹੁ ॥
ਭੰਡੁ ਮੁਆ ਭੰਡੁ ਭਾਲੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਬੰਧਾਨੁ ॥
ਸੇ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨ ॥
ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੀ ਭੰਡੁ ਉਪਜੈ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਝੁ ਨ ਕੋਇ ॥
ਨਾਨਕ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਹਰਾ ਏਕੋ ਸਚਾ ਸੋਇ ॥

Bḥand jammī^{ai} bḥand nimmī^{ai} bḥand mangan vī^āhū. Bḥandahu hovai dōṣṭī bḥandahu ḥalāi rāhu. Bḥand mu^ā bḥand bhālī^{ai} bḥand hovai bandhān. So ki^o mandā akhī^{ai} jīt jamēh rājān. Bḥandahu hī bḥand ūpjai bḥandai bājh na ko^e. Nānak bḥandai bāhrā eko sachā so^e.

We all are born of women; we are conceived in a woman's womb. To a woman, one is engaged and married. One makes friendship with a woman; future generations are born through women. When a woman (wife) dies, a person marries another one; we are bound with the world through woman. So why should we talk ill of her? From her, kings are born. From a woman, a woman is born; without women, there would be no one at all. O Nanak, God alone is without a woman. (M. 1, SGGS, p 473)

Guru Nanak and his successor Gurus ardently advocated women's participation in worship, society, and the battleground, as equals. They promoted freedom of speech, and women were urged to participate in all religious activities, including the SGGS's reading. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, allowed equality to women by admitting them into the *Sangat* (congregation) without any reservations or restrictions. He declared that his message is as much for women as for men. His successor, Guru Angad, the second Sikh Guru, encouraged the education of all Sikhs, both men and women. The third Sikh Guru, Guru Amar Das, disapproved of the use of the veil by women. He inspired women to take up a leadership role in society. As a practical measure, he entrusted women with overseeing some communities of disciples. Furthermore, he forbade the practices of Sati (custom of widow burning) and female infanticide and encouraged remarriage of widows. Guru Amar Das proclaimed:

ਸਤੀਆ ਏਹਿ ਨ ਆਖੀਅਨਿ ਜੇ ਮੜਿਆ ਲਗਿਜਲੰਨ੍ਹਿ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਤੀਆ ਜਾਣੀਅਨ੍ਹਿ ਜਿ ਬਿਰਹੋਚੈਟ ਮਰੰਨ੍ਹਿ ॥

Satī^ā ehi na akhīan jo maṛia lag jalannih. Nanak satī aṇi anih jē birhe chot marannih.

Do not call them '*sati*' (means: truly faithful), who burn alive on their husband's funeral pyre. Nanak says: They alone be called '*sati*', who die from the shock of separation. (M. 3, SGGS, p. 787)

Noting that the custom of dowry, which led to various social evils, was highly prevalent in the strong patrilineal culture of India, the Sikh Gurus strongly condemned it. The fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das, proclaims it as:

ਹੋਰਿ ਮਨਮੁਖ ਦਾਜੁ ਜਿ ਰਖਿ ਦਿਖਾਲਹਿ ਸੁ ਕੁੜੁ ਅਹੰਕਾਰੁ ਕਚੁ ਪਾਜੇ ॥

Hor manmukh daj jē rakh dikhālēh so kuṛ ahaṅkar kach pajo.

An arrogant person, who offers dowry and makes a show of it, indulges in only false egotism and a worthless exhibition. (M. 4, SGGS, p. 79) The sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind, bestowed great

respect upon women by declaring, "woman is the conscience of man." The tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh made the Khalsa initiation ceremony open, both to men and women, proclaiming a woman being just as worthy. He bestowed the honorific "Kaur" (meaning princess) to all the baptized women. Furthermore, he accorded parity among the Khalsa, men or women, by allowing them all to keep the 5 K's. He directed the Khalsa fraternity to avoid the company of *kanyapapi* (a person who sins against a woman). He also interdicted Sikhs to exercise any proprietary rights over women captured in battle; they could not be kept as enslaved people or wives but were to be treated with the utmost respect. Sikh doctrines also assert that both women and men carry the same divine spirit. So, they both have an equal right to cultivate their spirituality and attain salvation. Women can participate in all social, cultural, secular, and religious activities. I Even during the Sikh revival movement that started in the 1870s, the Singh Sabha raised its voice against the purdah system, female infanticide, child marriage, *sati*, bad conditions of widows, the practice of dowry and extravagant expenditure during marriage ceremonies. Remember all this was happening in India's male-dominated Muslim and Hindu societies hundreds of years before the feminist movement.

IV. WOMEN IN SIKH HISTORY: LEADERSHIP AND AGENCY

Gender equality has always been one of the hallmarks of Sikhism. Several women have made important contributions in the past. Sikh history is replete with such instances which portray women as equal to men in devotion, service, bravery, and sacrifice. A few examples are the extraordinary contributions made by Bibi Nanaki Ji, Bibi Bhani Ji, Mata Khivi Ji, Mata Gujari Ji, Mata Sahib Kaur, Mai Bhago, Rani Sada Kaur, Rani Sahib Kaur, and Maharani Jind Kaur in various domains of life. And this progress is continuing even today. Now days, Sikh women are playing leadership roles not only in leading congregations but in several diverse fields. They join the *Sangat* (congregation), work with men in *Langar* (community kitchen), and participate in other religious and social activities in the gurdwaras. Furthermore, they enjoy the same voting rights as men to elect the members of the Gurdwara Managing Committees, which administers Sikhs' places of worship. Thus, Sikhism strongly supports the human right to equality for all irrespective of one's class, status, caste, race, religion, or gender.

Unfortunately, Sikh society has not been able to fully overcome old cultural traditions and live up to the ideals of gender equality taught by Sikh Gurus. Women make up less than 20% of the SGPC members. Most of the Gurdwara managements and the profession of *Granthis* are primarily male dominated [3]. Ritual services like *chaur seva* (a ceremonial whisk waving over the Guru Granth Sahib) and *Sukh-aasan* (protocol followed at the end of the day to "retire" the holy Scripture to a special bedroom called *Sachkhand*) at Harmandir Sahib are still mostly male-dominated. Besides, Women are still not allowed to assist in carrying the palanquin carrying the holy Sikh Scriptures to and from the Harmandir Sahib. Even though the Sikh religion discards the notion that a menstruating woman is impure, the above situation prevails as patriarchy in Sikh society still holds the same as taboo. It is heartening to note that the Sikh diaspora is taking the lead in opening many aspects of this ritual life for women. Another concern is that sex-selective abortions, driven by a desire for male children, are driving down the sex ratio in Punjab. It is encouraging to note that most Sikh religious organizations, including the Akal Takhat, have spoken up against this practice [6].

In the light of the Sikh doctrines proclaiming the equality of men and women, let us pledge to make this world free from prejudice, irrational traditions, and gender discrimination. Let us strive together to create a world where each woman has easy access to the opportunities to reach her desired

potential in life.

CONCLUSION

Sikhism offers a profound and scripturally grounded vision of gender equality rooted in the principle of divine unity and the inherent dignity of all human beings. Through the teachings of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the reforms introduced by the Sikh Gurus, spiritual equality was transformed into social and institutional practice. Although contemporary challenges remain, the Sikh tradition provides a comprehensive moral framework that upholds women's equal status and continues to serve as a valuable resource for advancing justice and human rights.

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