

## Malaysian Sikhs and Gender Issues

SARJIT S. GILL

### ABSTRAK

*Agama Sikh memberi penekanan kepada kesamaan gender antara lelaki dan wanita setiap aspek kehidupan sosial. Status dan peranan golongan wanita memang menjadi fokus utama agama Sikh, iaitu kesamaan kemanusiaan. Berdasarkan pemerhatian di Malaysia, penulis mendapati secara praktisnya kedudukan golongan wanita Sikh masih rendah berbanding kaum lelaki. Hakikatnya, ajaran sepuluh orang Guru Sikh mengenai kesamaan gender tidak diamalkan secara menyeluruh. Mengapa perkara tersebut berlaku akan dikaji dalam artikel ini. Ketidaksamaan gender mungkin berlaku kerana pengaruh majoriti golongan lelaki Sikh yang lebih tinggi serta mereka merupakan komuniti minoriti dalam konteks masyarakat Malaysia. Oleh sebab itu, ketidakmampuan kaum lelaki untuk melepaskan peranan dominan mereka terus menerus menyebabkan kaum wanita mengalami kesan prejudis. Isu mengenai ideologi kaum lelaki yang bersifat dominan dalam masyarakat Sikh bukan sahaja berlaku di Malaysia, tetapi seluruh negara diaspora termasuk tanah air mereka di India.*

### ABSTRACT

*Sikhism advocates gender equality between men and women in all aspects of their social life. The role and status of women has always been the concern of Sikhism, which asserts the equality of humankind. Based on my observation in Malaysia, I found that, in practice, Sikh women's status is lower than men. Therefore, the ten Guru's teachings of equality between men and women have never been fully practiced. Why this is so shall be explored in this paper. It could be suggested that this inequality exist because of the influence of the male majority in the Sikh community, which is a minority in the larger Malaysian context. Therefore, the Sikh male's unwillingness to give up this dominant role and hence, the women continues to suffer prejudices. It is seems that the male-dominant ideology in the Sikh society is not only found in Malaysia, but throughout the diaspora, and even in their homeland in India.*

### INTRODUCTION

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Sikhism, which asserts the equality of humankind. Based on my observation in Malaysia, I found that, in practice, Sikh women's status is lower than men. Therefore, the ten Guru's teachings of equality between men and women have never been fully practiced. Why this is so shall be explored in this article. It could be suggested that this inequality exist because of the influence of the male majority in the Sikh community, which is a minority in the larger Malaysian context. Therefore, the Sikh male's unwillingness to give up this dominant role and hence the women continues to suffer prejudices. It seems that the male-dominant ideology in the Sikh society is not only found in Malaysia, but throughout the diaspora, and even back in their homeland in India.

In my research, I am interested in the theme, which focuses on the Sikh diaspora and their identity problems particularly in Malaysia (Sarjit Singh 1998, 1999a, 1999b, Sarjit S. Gill 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d, 2002a, 2003). While reviewing literature on Sikhism, I found that some of the major ethical issues, such as abortion, homosexuality, masculinity and feminism, have not been publicly debated or discussed by scholars on Sikhism. Other matters of central concern to Sikh identity, such as the cutting of one's hair or smoking, have received a great deal of attention.

This paper is a modest attempt to discuss and research the idea of gender equality and inequality among the Malaysian Sikhs. Firstly, an attempt is made to discuss briefly the notion of gender equality in Sikhism. Later, the paper traces, describes and analyses the ideas of gender inequality, which are being practiced by the Malaysian Sikhs. The main research method used is participant-observation. Informal interviews are also conducted with the Sikhs in the *gurdwara*.<sup>1</sup>

## GENDER EQUALITY IN SIKHISM

The study of Sikh history from a feminist perspective has not been given a great deal of attention in Sikh studies. While Sikh apologetics repeatedly insist that women and men are inherently equal in the Sikh world view, in reality, historical writings contain virtually nothing about women, apart from minimal asides referring to the occasional exceptional woman who has been deemed worthy enough to have made the pages of history. The exceptional women are then typically held up as the standard by which to measure the gender-egalitarian ethos of the Sikh tradition (Doris 2003: 7).

The position of women in the society in India has not been always the same. While at times she had been accorded a very high status, there are also historical and scriptural instances when under some influences, she has been relegated to an inferior position (Sikh Missionary Center 1990: 278). The doctrine of social equality as proclaimed in Sikhism is partially related to the historical conditions prevalent in India at the time of its emergence (Avtar Singh 1991: 148).

At the start of Sikhism the status of women was very low in Indian society. The birth of a female child was regarded as a bad omen and was looked upon with disfavour. Among Rajputs, female infanticide was freely practised. The women did not get equal status with men. They were not allowed to move freely. They went out of their houses wrapped up in enormous sheets of cloth and women of high classes moved about in closed fetters accompanied by some male and female attendants. Early marriage of women was the most common feature. Polygamy was in vogue among the rich people. *Satti* was the order of the day as Hindus of that time thought that a widow's chastity and faithfulness to her husband lay in her burning herself on the pyre of her dead husband. The widow was looked upon with contempt and was regarded as the symbol of ill fate. Widow remarriage was not allowed (Surinder Singh 1982: 56).

Sikh Gurus made a frontal attack on all these evils and gave equal status to women with men.<sup>2</sup> They were uplifted in society and rose to the level of men, who enjoyed honourable position in society (Surinder Singh 1982: 56). According to Kohli (1974: 54):

She gives birth to kings and divines. As a mother, she receives respect of the whole society, as wife she is the better half and as a daughter, she is a trainee for becoming a healthy constituent of the society. Ordinarily, women are considered the weaker section of the society, but in Sikh society her physical weakness is not considered an impediment in the way of her spiritual progress. She is not considered a seducer, responsible for the fall of man, but instead she is strength for man and helps him in character building and in the attainment of spiritual heights.

According to Guru Nanak:

It is through woman, the despised one, that we are conceived and from her that we are born. It is to woman that we get engaged and then married. She is our lifelong friend and the survival of our race depends on her. On her death a man seeks another wife. Through women we establish our social ties. Why denounce her, the one from who even kings are born? (Adi Granth: 473).

In these much-quoted lines, esteem for women are linked to the dependency of men on them. From these teachings were evolved the freedom of education and freedom of worship (Pritam Singh 1975: 93). She could study the scriptures; she could work along with men in the fields without any kind of veil on her face, which had become hard custom in India. She enjoys an equal status with man in Sikh temples. She is not considered as inferior to man or as something impure. She can go to the congregation without any restriction. She has the equal right to grow spiritually and to attend religious congregations and recite divine hymns in the *gurdwara*. She is also eligible to participate and perform all religious ceremonies including baptism. She can lead the service in the *gurdwara*; there is no bar on her. She can do service in the community kitchen (*guru ka langgar*<sup>3</sup>).

In the Sikh scripture, the idea of marriage has been sublimated by devotion to God who has been described as the Spouse of all human beings longing to meet the Lord (Kirpal Singh 1996: 9). Guru Amar Das Ji writes, ... In this world there is but One Spouse, the rest all others are His brides (Adi Granth: 591). Sikhism is against polygamy. 'One man and one woman' is the golden rule. A woman is to remain faithful to the man she marries; the man has also to remain faithful to his spouse. The sexual urge for another man or woman is a great sin. All such talk or actions, which lead us to immorality, should be avoided. Prostitution is a curse for the society. One should not defile his sight and mind by having vicious thoughts about the beauty of other women. The elderly women are to be considered as mothers, the equals as sisters and the younger as daughters. In this way the society can be saved from several physical and moral diseases.

In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh's wife added sugar sweets to the first *amrit*.<sup>4</sup> Women are as eligible as men for initiation. In the *gurdwara*, acts of *seva* (service) and ceremony participation are open to men and women equally. Women's noblest role is seen as that of loving wife and mother. The five K's<sup>5</sup> are worn by both sexes. Women cover their hair with a turban (called *keski*). Here we have a visual demonstration of sexual equality in Sikhism (Nesbitt 1996: 122). Essential to Sikh spirituality is the image, in the *lavan* (circumbulation) marriage hymn of Guru Ram Das, of the human soul's relation to God as that of a devoted wife submitting in joy to her husband. Different readers will react in various ways to the implications of this image, with regard to the women's status.

### MALAYSIAN SIKHS AND GENDER INEQUALITY

With the passage of time, social pressures, male chauvinistic attitudes, and the forgetting of the essence of the teachings of Sikhism, the position of Sikh women in today's society has suffered a set back. Thus, while attempting research on Malaysian Sikhs,<sup>6</sup> five important elements of gender inequality in the socio-cultural aspects were found. The ideas mentioned here are in conflict with the fundamental teachings in the Sikh religion. It is acknowledged that Sikhism preaches gender equality in all aspects of their social life. But to what extent the gender equality is practiced is a debatable question.

Firstly, men are highly regarded in importance than women. It is frequently heard Sikhs claiming that the Gurus revolutionised the status of women. Women were often ritually unclean through menstruation or childbirth. Girls were a liability whose marriages drained the family's financial resources. Widows were regarded as the bearers of bad luck. Such prejudices and stereotyping contributed to the practice of female infanticide, the ban on widow remarriages and the ideal of *satti* – the loyal wife immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The Gurus' condemnation of these customs is reiterated in successive

*rahitnamas* (code of practice). Sikh women did not even need to veil their faces (Nesbitt 1996: 121).

Unfortunately, convention has not always tallied with the Gurus' teachings. Female babies were often smothered at birth until this century (Nesbitt 1996: 116). There is a great difference in the social values attached to the birth of a son as compared to that of a daughter. Sons are often more prized than daughters as they carry on the family name, look after the parents and do not require dowries. As a result, in the past many female babies were suffocated at birth. This is contrary to Sikh teaching. Indeed, Sikh Codes of Conduct (*Sikh Rehat Maryada*) instructs that: ... The newly baptised Sikhs are told not to associate with those who practice infanticide... Nowadays, tests can be carried out to enable parents to know the sex of their unborn child. Some families, influenced by cultural pressure, may wish to abort a female fetus. This needs to be examined in the light of Sikhism's condemnation of infanticide.

Secondly, I observed some Malaysian Sikhs celebrate the *Lohri* People from Northern India especially Punjab and Haryana celebrate *lohri* to mark the end of winter and to signify the harvesting of the Rapi crops in the gurdwara compound. This is a popular North Indian festival that occurs in the month of January. The Sikh Gurus rejected the notion of auspicious days but some Sikhs do observe the festival or enjoy the bonfires lit by their Hindu neighbours (Cole & Sambhi 1990: 100). Thus, this festival actually focused on the new male baby born in a family. However, for Punjabis this is more than just a festival, it is also an example of their love for celebrations. *Lohri* celebrates fertility and joy of life. Many still believe that first *lohri* for a new bride/newborn baby is considered extremely important. A few days before the actual celebration of the festival, some Sikhs ladies start collecting money to buy sweets, fuel for the bonfires and fireworks. On that day, people especially women gather around bonfires, throw sweets, puffed rice and popcorn into the flames and sing popular and folk songs and dance around the fire. They also exchange greetings.

It is sad to mention that even the Sikh women knew that this festival is contrary with the Sikh teachings but they still celebrate it every year. They believed that this is their culture that has been inherited for many years and cannot be abolished. Most of their family's members are also happy and proud with the new male born baby. In short, even though the Sikh religion focused on gender equality but in practice it is a totally different situation. These are the scenarios, which have fixed in the mind of many people that to get a male baby is very important compared to a female baby. This is another example, which has led the Sikh community to focus on the dominance of the masculine identity rather than gender equality as the doctrine in Sikhism. The question now is what has been the role of *gurdwaras* in educating the Sikhs on this urgent matter thus focuses on gender equality?

I observed that the Sikh women's status is similar to the women of other communities. Many are not treated equally even by parents; so what more to

expect from the in-laws? The whole story of a male and a female is so different – starting from the day they are born into Sikhism. While everyone is overjoyed at the birth of a son, an atmosphere of melancholy prevails at the birth of a daughter. This is understandable, keeping in mind the implications that follow later. After bringing up the girl and educating her, she is given away in marriage with a *daaj* (or dowry which is contrary to Sikh teaching) that is usually beyond the parents' financial capacity. In September 18, 1940, The *Khalsa Malaya Darpan*<sup>7</sup> reported:

The dowry system, which was still practised by the Sikhs, also came under bitter attack of the *Khalsa Malaya Darpan*. The editor deplored that without a dowry of \$2,000 or even more it was virtually impossible for a Sikh girl to be wedded. He also viewed with concern that the great majority of the Sikhs were unable to raise such large sum of money and that many marriagable girls were sitting at home. The editor thus appealed to the Sikhs to eradicate this old practice of dowry. He also urged the Sikhs not to spend lavishly on marriages but rather save money for the future use of their children. In this way, the Sikhs could progress.

This is not the end of the story. Her parents also have to bear the expenses or give gifts (clothes and/or gold, etc.) to different relations on certain occasions, such as death of her father-in-law/ mother-in-law/ husband/ herself; birth of first child/son etc. Further, if the wife is earning an income that too is an added advantage to her husband alone. Her status remains unchanged. I also noticed that the advice given to the bride and groom at the wedding ceremony is very often lop-sided. The girl is encouraged to be subordinate to the man and treat him as her lord and master, etc. This should be toned down to a moderate degree and the advice should be balanced, both to the bride and the groom.

In the education aspect men are given more opportunities compared to women (Pavittar Kaur 1979: 121). Very often a female has to forgo college or university education because a choice has to be made and inevitably a male is given preference. There should be equal educational opportunities, irrespective of sex. Another scenario related to this low education motivation is the poor participation of Sikh women in Sikh seminars and conferences in Malaysia. Since year 2000, I had attended five Sikh seminars and conferences organised by various Sikhs organisations in Malaysia. I observed that only a small number of Sikh women participated in the seminars. Even when they attended the seminars, they tended to be silent during the discussions. As usual men continue to dominate the agenda and women are often left behind. Why there is less Sikh women participation in the Sikhs seminars? Some women that I interacted with personally mentioned ... we women are always unheard by men in the seminars. I think that the Sikh organisations in Malaysia should organise seminars solely to discuss women's issues. Surveys should also be conducted to collect the views from people of different backgrounds before making any final decisions affecting the fair sex.

Also in the social contexts, in modern social gatherings such as at parties, the male Sikhs usually enjoy themselves drinking and merry-making, while the women are often neglected (Sarjit Singh 1999b: 191). In this matter, I think men should be more considerate and make attempts to either include the women in their groups or arrange for an equally interesting programs for them. Such male-oriented (masculine) parties have become the cause of many arguments between partners.

Lastly, the political scenario in the *gurdwara* is also based on the masculine ideology. The males dominate the majority of the committee's members. Women are left in the *guru ka langgar* (community kitchen) to cook and prepare meals.<sup>8</sup> I think that the politics in the *gurdwara* and Sikh organizations in Malaysia is also very interesting to be highlighted here. I had attended few Annual General Meetings (AGM) held in the Malaysian Sikh *gurdwaras* and organisations, and I observed that many arguments, frustrations and misunderstanding took place just because there were those who wanted to seek better position in the board of committee members. Such misunderstanding often lead to disharmonious interaction between one family and the other party involved in the conflict. None would discuss the strategy of organising the community development program. For example, how to motivate and enhance the Sikh youths in the social programs such as education, sports, and religious activities in the *gurdwara*. This is what is lacking among the Sikh politicians in Malaysian *gurdwaras*.

In fact we also rarely hear of women being elected into the *Gurdwara* Committees. For instance, out of 21 seats of the committee members in the *gurdwara*, women only get two or three seats. They are also seldom presented in the Committees of Sikh Associations or Clubs. This discrepancy should be overcome by inaugurating active ladies' sections in all associations, clubs and *gurdwaras*. Men always control most of the high positions in *gurdwaras* and associations. I observed that most of the committee members were not concerned about the ways to improve the welfare of the association or focus on unity among the Sikhs but are more concerned on maintaining their position.<sup>9</sup> Majority of them also have little knowledge on the fundamentals of Sikhism. However, due to their high status and wealth they were elected into the *gurdwara* committee.

## CONCLUSION

The big question now is how do we educate the Sikhs to focus on gender equality in their social life? According to Birendra Kaur (2001: 112), gender equality in the real sense can only be said to be achieved if we can formulate laws that will make the parents rejoice over the birth of a daughter as much as that of a son. If this can be achieved, problems related with the gender issues, such as, sex-determination tests, abortions, dowry, etc., would automatically

vanish. Thus, identification of and working on the root-cause of gender discrimination alone will ensure gender equality.

The *Granthi Sahib* (reader of the scripture) and religious preacher (*Ragi Jathas*) play important roles in educating the Sikhs on gender issues. They should emphasise this theme in their sermons and lectures in *gurdwara* and also relate this matter with the present situation in Malaysia. There are not many “religious specialists” in the *gurdwara* who would like to debate and share their views on gender equality. There is an urgent need for this so called “religious specialists” to be more liberal and rational on the current issues. This is essential because many Sikhs especially the younger generation has little knowledge on the basic tenets of Sikhism. The Sikh organisations too need to focus their activities based on gender equality rather than male-oriented. They should also organise more seminars and conferences on issues of gender equality to educate the Malaysian in general and the Sikhs in particular.

The newly formed Sikh Women Awareness Team (SWAT)<sup>10</sup> wing in 2003 under the banner of Sikh Naujawan Sabha Malaysia (Malaysian Sikh Youth Organisation) was a good move to uplift the status of Sikh women in Malaysia. Besides focusing on gender equality, the SWAT team also focuses on health awareness (including free health screening), to raise awareness of entrepreneurial skills, women’s legal rights, and also to provide a platform to explore avenues for running small businesses. The first activity focuses on health and self development camps, which included free tests for Pap smear, blood glucose test, breast examination demos and blood pressure check up<sup>11</sup> I believe that this newly created team will provide a better understanding to the Sikh community on many aspects of gender issues which has been “neglected” for many years here. The *gurdwara* should also take this as a yardstick and play their roles to support the SWAT team, thus marking a “new revivalism” to disseminate awareness among the community about the importance of gender equality, health and self-development in their everyday life.

I believe many Sikhs in Punjab, India and the Diaspora country are experiencing the same issues and challenges. We have observed and narrated how masculine ideology and identity is being focused in the Sikh society. The Sikh religion advocates the gender equality in all aspects but in real life it is not fully applied and practiced by Sikhs. Thus, scholars in various perspectives can continue to debate this issue of gender inequality in Sikh society.

#### NOTES

1. Gurdwara is a place of worship for the Sikhs. Wherever there has been sizeable population of Sikhs, a gurdwara has been built. All Sikh ceremonies, collective as well as individual, are generally performed in gurdwara. These include naming a child (*janam sanskar*), initiation (*amrit sanskar*), marriage (*anand sanskar*) and death (*antam sanskar*). The source of reference for all these ceremonies is *Sri Guru*



- Granth Sahib Ji*, the Sikh Holy Scripture. In short, gurdwara act as the centre of community activities.
2. For a brief account of life, challenges and contributions of the Gurus wife's (*mahals*) please see, M.K Gill (eds). 1996. *Eminent Sikh women*. New Delhi: Himalaya Publishers. The articles in this book mainly discuss the contribution on Sikh women whole-heartedly in the practical implementations of the Gurus' mission. They co-operated fully in completing the various tasks initiated by the Gurus from time to time. They suffered and struggled but never questioned their Guru. In case of any protest, or contradiction, they supported the Guru and not their own progeny.
  3. Guru Nanak institutionalized the practice of a common kitchen (*langgar*) in Sikhism. Here, all are welcome to sit together and share a common meal. There is no distinction made between race, creed, gender or caste.
  4. *Amrit* is the nectar made from water and sugar crystals, prepared in an iron bowl and stirred, with a double-edged sword. This process called *amrit sanchaar* or initiation. Those baptized became part of the *Khalsa* (army of saint-soldiers). They were to discard caste restrictions, occupational restraints, superstitions and the burden of previous incarnations.
  5. The five K's are the symbols begin with the alphabet 'K': *Kes* (unshorn hair) is a symbol of saintliness. Keeping hair in its natural state is regarded as living in harmony with the will of God; *Kangha* (comb) is necessary to keep the hair clean and tidy. Turbans protect the hair and promote a common social identity; *Kara* (steel bracelet) symbolizes restraint from evil deeds. It is worn on the right wrist and reminds Sikhs of their vows and dedication to the religion; *Kirpan* (sword) is the emblem of courage and self-defence. It symbolizes dignity, self-reliance, and the capacity and readiness to always defend the weak and the oppressed and *Kachh* (breeches) must be worn at all times and remind Sikhs of the need for self-restraint over passion.
  6. For a detailed reference on Sikh Bibliography in Malaysia see Sarjit S. Gill, 2002b. Bibliografi Komuniti Sikh di Malaysia (1937-2002). *Sari* 20: 169-179. This article documents past work on the minority Sikh community in Malaysia. It is the result of seven years of travel and research. Among others, the writer went through various materials in libraries, museums and archives nationwide, including in Sabah and Sarawak. Hopefully, this small endeavor will be of assistance on-going and future research into minority communities, especially the Sikhs in Malaysia.
  7. *Khalsa Malaya Darpan* was one of the Punjabi newspapers established in 1932 at Kuala Lumpur. For further details see, Ranjit Singh Malhi (1977: 41).
  8. For a brief account of roles of women in Malaysian Gurdwaras, see Manjit Kaur. 1998. Status dan peranan wanita dalam masyarakat minoriti Sikh di Malaysia: satu kajian etnografi di institusi gurdwara. Unpublished graduation exercise, University Kebangsaan Malaysia.
  9. I also observed some Sikhs would "fight" to hold the key position in the gurdwaras. And later this so called "committee members" would apply to get awards and recognition from the Government such as J.P. PJK, Datuk and so on. But unfortunately, this group always identified themselves as a *Sevadar* (servant, to serve others) in the Gurdwaras. The big question is, why do we need such titles when we are the servant of God? Literally, the concept of service (*seva*) has changed its meanings in the Sikh community perspective.

10. This newly wing was formed in response to the call of the Minister of Women and Family Development, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil and part of a larger community project of the Caucus of Malaysian Indian Women Leaders.
11. The first camp was organized on September 6 at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Desa Perdana, Taman Desa, Kuala Lumpur and the second on December 19 at Sekolah Menengah Teknik Klang, Klang, Selangor. The upcoming events in 2004, focuses on health and self development will be organize in Kajang, Selangor and Batu Gajah, Perak.

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Sarjit S. Gill  
Faculty of Human Ecology  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
Serdang  
Selangor Darul Ehsan  
Malaysia

