

GENDER INEQUALITY AND GURU BABA NANAK

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Abstract

Sex and gender-based prejudice and discrimination, called sexism, are major contributing factors to social inequality. Most societies, even agricultural ones, have some sexual division of labor and gender-based division of labor tends to increase during industrialization. The emphasis on gender inequality is born out of the deepening division in the roles assigned to men and women, particularly in the economic, political and educational spheres. Women are underrepresented in political activities and decision making processes in most states in both the Global North and Global South.

Gender discrimination, especially concerning the lower social status of women, has been a topic of serious discussion not only within academic and activist communities but also by governmental agencies and international bodies such as the United Nations. These discussions seek to identify and remedy widespread, institutionalized barriers to access for women in their societies. By making use of gender analysis, researchers try to understand the social expectations, responsibilities, resources and priorities of women and men within a specific context, examining the social, economic and environmental factors which influence their roles and decision-making capacity. By enforcing artificial separations between the social and economic roles of men and women, the lives of women and girls are negatively impacted and this can have the effect of limiting social and economic development. In this paper we will discuss the befitting reply by Guru Nanak and how Guru Nanak conferred dignity on the woman folk and raised their status in the society. Thus Guru Nanak was the first Saint who made a serious attempt to uplift the status of women in the social setup of the world.

{Key words: Feminine, Woman Folk, Subordination, Punjabi Society, Dowry, HIV/AIDS, Female Foeticide, Unfaithfulness, Pangat, Sangat, Dignity of Women}

INTRODUCTION

Cultural ideals about women's work can also affect men whose outward gender expression is considered "feminine" within a given society. Transgender and gender-variant persons may express their gender through their appearance, the statements they make, or official documents they present. In this context, gender normativity, which is understood as the social expectations placed on us when we present particular bodies, produces widespread cultural/institutional devaluations of trans identities, homosexuality and femininity. Trans persons, in particular, have been defined as socially unproductive and disruptive.

A variety of global issues like HIV/AIDS, illiteracy, and poverty are often seen as "women's issues" since women are disproportionately affected. In many countries, women and girls face problems such as lack of access to education, which limit their opportunities to succeed, and further limits their ability to contribute economically to their society. Women are underrepresented in political activities and decision making processes throughout most of the world. As of 2007, around 20 percent of women were below the \$1.25/day international poverty line and 40 percent below the \$2/day. More than one-quarter of females under the age of 25 were below the \$1.25/day international poverty line and about half on less than \$2/day.

Women's participation in work has been increasing globally, but women are still faced with wage discrepancies and differences compared to what men earn. This is true globally even in the agricultural and rural sector in developed as well as developing countries. Structural

impediments to women's ability to pursue and advance in their chosen professions often result in a phenomenon known as the glass ceiling, which refers to unseen - and often unacknowledged barriers that prevent minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements. This effect can be seen in the corporate and bureaucratic environments of many countries, lowering the chances of women to excel. It prevents women from succeeding and making the maximum use of their potential, which is at a cost for women as well as the society's development. Ensuring that women's rights are protected and endorsed can promote a sense of belonging that motivates women to contribute to their society. Once able to work, women should be titled to the same job security and safe working environments as men. Until such safeguards are in place, women and girls will continue to experience not only barriers to work and opportunities to earn, but will continue to be the primary victims of discrimination, oppression, and gender-based violence.

Women and persons whose gender identity does not conform to patriarchal beliefs about sex (only male and female) continue to face violence on global domestic, interpersonal, institutional and administrative scales. While first-wave Liberal Feminist initiatives raised awareness about the lack of fundamental rights and freedoms that women have access to, second-wave feminism (see also Radical Feminism) highlighted the structural forces that underlie gender-based violence. Masculinities are generally constructed so as to subordinate femininities and other expressions of gender that are not heterosexual, assertive and dominant. Gender sociologist and author, Raewyn Connell, discusses in her 2009 book, *Gender*, how masculinity is dangerous, heterosexual, violent and authoritative. These structures of masculinity ultimately contribute to the vast amounts of gendered violence, marginalization and suppression that women, queer, transgender, gender variant and gender non-conforming persons face. Some scholars suggest that women's underrepresentation in political systems speaks the idea that "formal citizenship does not always imply full social membership". Men, male bodies and expressions of masculinity are linked to ideas about work and citizenship. Others point out that patriarchal states tend to scale and claw back their social policies relative to the disadvantage of women. This process ensures that women encounter resistance into meaningful positions of power in institutions, administrations, and political systems and communities.

GURU BABA NANAK CONFERRED DIGNITY ON THE WOMAN FOLK

Guru Nanak conferred dignity on the woman folk and raised their status in the society. This is one of his remarkable contributions to the social philosophy. If we analyse the pre-Guru Nanak period, the position of women was very dolorous. But with the advent of Sikhism where man became more precious in the sight of man, woman, too, gained a dignity and respect in the socio-religious set up.

Hinduism had denied woman practically all shares in immortality. She had no personal religion, no spiritual responsibility, no claim or role in the law of God. She was denied all access to the Holy Scriptures. She was to remain content with the mere performance of domestic, social and individual duties. Manu the law giver declared- "Day and night woman must be kept in subordination to the males of family; in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons. So in Hinduism notorious subordination of woman seems to be primarily due to such 'law-givers'. According to Manu, woman has no right to study the Vedas.

Literacy among women in older times was very rare because it was regarded even disreputable for them to go to pathshalas. Learning was considered a qualification of ill-famed women.

Among Christians it is generally believed that woman is the devil's gateway and she destroys God's image in man. Dr. Radhakrishnan in his book 'Religion and Society' writes, "Jesus did not marry; and the whole idea of Immaculate Conception indicates that there is something unclean about the normal sex life."

In Islam woman has right of inheritance and has also right to be well maintained by her husband. But in general, husband is considered superior to his wife. During her courses, she is considered unclean, then she can't be engaged in the prayers or observe the fasts. In many countries Ulemas still look with disfavor on her praying in mosques.

Like in other parts of India, Punjabi society consists of hierarchies based on caste, class and community. Within hierarchies there is yet another hierarchy of gender that is woman being at the lowest rung. Although Sikhism, the dominant religion in Punjab emphasizes on egalitarian society, yet discrimination against girls and woman seems to be woven into the very socio-cultural fabric of the society. The Punjabi society continues to place a premium on the male child. The birth of a son is an occasion to rejoice while the birth of a girl is a time for disappointment. Even Punjabi folk songs reflect such a disturbing values and beliefs. For instance the following two verses express clear preference for a male child:

*The Moon appears in the courtyard of brother's house,
Because a son has born in brother's house.*

And

*When a daughter takes birth in your house, O, father,
All members of the family are burdened with worries, O, father.*

No wonder then that female foeticide and infanticide are practised in Punjab on large scale and seven districts of Punjab figure in the ten districts of the country with the lowest child sex rates in Indian as per Census 2001. These districts are Amritsar, Bathinda, Fatehgarh Sahib, Gurdaspur, Kapurthala, Mansa and Patiala. Incidentally the other three are from Haryana i.e. Ambala, Kurukshetra and Sonapat with large Punjabi population.

The Lowest sex among child population (0-6) is found among the Sikhs i.e. 786, followed in increasing order among Jains (870), Hindus (925), Muslims (925), Buddhists (942), Christians (964) and others (976).

The preference for the male child is strongly tooted in economics, particularly scarcity of agricultural resources such as land. Since women have been largely left out of the agricultural process, land and its use have become a typically male domain. Any woman trying to get her share of the ancestral property is accused of vicious and vile. Women in Punjabi society are thus discouraged from claiming any right to land or assets of value.

Customs of dowry or giving of gifts to girls at the time of her marriage gained ground because it was seen as assets given in lieu of her share in the parental property. This however further reinforced the existing preferences. for son and rates of foeticide and infanticide began to rise. A survey conducted by Institute of Development and Communication, Chandigarh in 2001 shows that 80% respondents mentioned the necessity of male child. In this females constituted 84% and male 78%. Thirty three percent respondents acknowledged having undergone sex determination tests, Those who resorted to female foeticide 53% were from upper income groups. Middle income and lower income mention 39% and 19% respectively. To change this mindset is a major challenge before the Punjabi Society. There must be a public effort to demonstrate that the prosperity of Punjab is built on the shoulders of men as well as women.

The increase of HIV/AIDS amongst women is just another example of women's unequal status in society. Sonali Khan, Director of communications of Breakthrough says, "Women suffer various forms of violence all through their lives. HIV/AIDS has now been added to their problems because women find it very difficult to negotiate for sex or condom use. The consequences of contracting HIV/AIDS is severe- women face homelessness, increased violence loss of jobs and families and lack of access to treatment and care."

UNFAITHFULNESS AND ADVICE BY GURU BABA NANAK

Most people know that serious even life threatening infections, like HIV, Hepatitis and other STD's (Sexually-Transmitted Diseases) can be passed from one person to another through sex. India have been battling an HIV/AIDS epidemic since the first case was identified in Chennai, Tamil Nadu in 1986. Since then the number of HIV- infected persons has increased to an estimated 5.7 million, second only to South Africa. Over 44 million people around the globe are living with HIV and estimated 12,32,131 are AIDS orphans are there around us. If we talk about the Holy City of Amritsar over 2000 families are documented to be affected by HIV, though there most likely are thousand throughout the Amritsar district who haven't been diagnosed or who think that treatment is out of their reach.

The epidemic in India is considered to be a concentrated epidemic with high risk groups including persons with Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), Female Sex Workers (FSW), Truckers and Injecting Drug Users (IDU). Sexual Transmission accounts for over 85% of HIV infections in India and that too because of unfair or wrongful relations.

Guru Nanak categorically warns the persons who are spending their life in copulation as they are decaying their bodies. In Rag Maru he clearly informs of a possible danger of lust: Sexual pleasure entails disease and man is ultimately wasted away.

In Rag Malhar he again emphasizes:

Attached to another's woman and other's wealth and slander, they eat poison and suffer pain.

In Rag Ramkali he again warns:

*As borax melts the gold,
So lust and wrath rot the body away.*

Headvises against wrong conduct when he says in Rag Gauri:

*An apostate mind covets another's women
He is entangled in worldly strives and around his neck is the halter.*

In VarAsa Guru Nanak stresses the same:

*The mind's impurity is avarice and the tongue's impurity falsehood.
The defilement of the eyes is to behold another's woman, another's beauty and wealth.
The impurity of the ears is to hear the calumnies.
Nanak, mortal's soul goes bound to the city of death.*

In Rag Gauri he alerts, in this way:

Thou, O, mind beholdest another's vine (women) and committest theft and evil deeds.

... ..

So you have no honour in this world and shall have no shelter in the world beyond.

You have lost your human life in vain.

And now NACO is also giving the same clear-cut massage:

Be faithful to your life partner/spouse.

Consider the Statistics: Nearly 40% of the 5.2 million HIV positive people in India are women and nearly 80% of them have contracted this infection from their husbands or partners.

Almost 90% of these positive women are thrown out of their homes after their husbands die of AIDS.

While the general public continues to believe that most women with HIV/AIDS are sex workers, official numbers indicate that they make less than one percent of the 2 millions female infections.

BEFITTING REPLY BY GURU BABA NANAK

When we study the life and teachings of Guru Nanak, we can easily observe that he has bestowed on woman full equality in every sphere of life. In Social, religious, political or in any other field she can enjoy all the privileges which the men have. The Guru gave a befitting reply to the condemners of women in the following words:

From woman is man born inside her is he conceived;

To woman is man engaged and woman he marries.

With woman is man's companionship.

From woman originate new generations.

Should woman die, is another sought;

By woman's help man is kept in restraint.

Why revile her of whom are born great one of the earth?

From woman is born woman, no human being without woman is born.

Saith Nanak ! The holy Eternal alone is without a woman

So, woman received great consideration from Guru Nanak, She was given equal status with men. The Guru took the women folk the four walls of home to the holy place of worship. They were allowed to attend sermons with men, they could join in any religious service and they helped men when they cooked food in the Langer (Community Kitchen). And men and women could take meals together in the Pangat. (Common mess). The Guru also welcomed women to the Sangat (religious congregation) and offered them seats along with men. Purdah (the Veil) system was discouraged of Guru Nanak and later on by his successors. He condemned the sati system, which was strictly enforced by the third in succession. i.e. Guru Amar Das. Thus Guru Nanak was the first Saint who made a serious attempt to uplift the status of women in the social setup of the world.

SUM UP IN BRIEF

If we want to reduce the gender inequality in our society, we have to reflect upon the discourses enunciated by Guru Baba Nanak. Bani of Guru Nanak must be a part of present day curriculum. It will surely give right direction to the teachers to the students and at large to the society. Let's take a step forward for gender equality.

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