



### Role and status of women in Sikh society

In Sikhism men and women are equal.

In fourteenth century, before the time Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Indian women were severely degraded and oppressed by their society. Given no education or freedom to make decisions, their presence in religious, political, social, cultural, and economic affairs was virtually non-existent. Woman was referred to as the root of all evil, snare, and temptress. Her function was only to perpetuate the race, do household work, and serve the male members of society. Female infanticide was common, and the practice of sati was encouraged, sometimes even forced. In Sati system, if the husband of any women dies then the women was to cremate alive with his husband's body. Guru Amar Das Ji, the third Guru of Sikhs, raised his voice and

denounced the Sati system. He made every possible attempt to eliminate the Sati system and achieve equality for women.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji condemned this man-made notion of the inferiority of women, and protested against their long subjugation. The Ultimate Truth was revealed to Guru Nanak Dev Ji through a mystic experience, in direct communion with God. Guru Nanak Dev Ji conveys this Truth through his scripture as follows:

"Man is born from a woman; within woman, man is conceived; to a woman he is engaged and married. Man is friends with woman; through woman, the future generations exist. When his woman passes away, he seeks another woman; to a woman a man is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From a woman, woman is born; without woman there would be no one at all" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 473).

The human body is transitory; the difference between man and woman is only transitory, and as such superficial. Thus, according to Sikh ideology, all men and women possess equal status. All human beings, regardless of gender, caste, race, or birth, are judged only by their deeds. With this assertion, the Sikh Gurus invited women to join the holy congregation, work with men in the Langar (common kitchen), and participate in all other religious, social, and cultural activities of the Gurdwara Sahib (Sikh Church). Sikh Gurus redefined marriage as wedded to one wife only and taught that male and female alike need to practice conjugal fidelity. The Gurus spoke against the practice of polygamy and preached to have only one wife. Guru Amar Das Ji, the third Guru, wrote:

"Only they are truly wedded who have one spirit in two bodies."

Guru Amar Das Ji also condemned the wearing of the veil, and female infanticide. The steps Sikh Gurus took to advocate the equality of women revolutionized the tradition of Indian society. As women began to partake in social, religious, and political affairs, their contribution and worth as equal partners of men became more obvious. The Gurus taught that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, so are equal in rights on the Earth.

## **Views of the Gurus**

### **Guru Nanak**

Guru Nanak broke the shackles of women by admitting them into the sangat (congregation) without any restrictions or reservations. Guru Nanak felt that his message was meant as much for women as for men.

### **Guru Angad**

Guru Angad encouraged the education of all Sikhs, men and women.

### **Guru Amar Das**

Guru Amar Das condemned the cruel custom of sati, female infanticide and advocated widow remarriage. Guru Amar Das also believed that women wearing veils (purdah) was demeaning. The Guru refused to meet the queen of Haripur or to allow any women into the congregation wearing a veil.

### **Guru Hargobind**

Guru Hargobind respected women and declared, "women is the conscience of man".

### **Guru Gobind Singh**

Guru Gobind Singh made the Khalsa initiation ceremony open to men and women alike, a woman being just as worthy. At the time of Amrit a man is given the name Singh meaning lion, the woman is given the name Kaur, meaning Princess. A Sikh woman is an individual in her own right, she does not have to take her husband's name and is Kaur till her death. Guru Gobind Singh did not see any distinction between the Khalsa, men or women could keep the 5 K's. Guru Gobind Singh issued orders forbidding the Khalsa having any association with those that practiced female infanticide. Guru Gobind Singh also forbade Sikhs to exercise any proprietary rights over women captured in battle, they could not be kept as slaves or wives but were to be treated with the utmost respect.