

Mother's Day and Sikh Women

The month of May 2008 marks the centennial year of the Mothers' day celebrations in USA. Nature renews itself in May; the trees put forth new leaves, flowers bloom, there is an uplifting optimism in the air and the drabness of winters is left behind. Typically a mother receives flowers, thank-you notes, and is feted to a sumptuous dinner at a restaurant of her choice by her near and dear ones. The ensuing commercial implications are immense too.

Mothers' day is increasingly evolving into an occasion for honoring woman rights all over the world; this year a woman is running to be elected the President of USA. It may seem that we are witnessing the dawn of a golden age for womanhood. However, one is reminded that things were not this rosy not too long ago. For example, the women did not have the basic right to vote in the local and national elections in USA until 26 August 1920. In fact, the women have been treated unfairly by nearly all the principal religions, in most of the countries of the world, for a very long time. The United Nations Convention on the Political Rights of Women, adopted in 1952, provides that "women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any discrimination." Here, I wish to discuss how Sikh women acquired respect and status in the society nearly five centuries ago. For this purpose, I review the history of India over the last millennium. It is an extraordinary story!

The Muslim conquest of India began in earnest in the eleventh century from the northwest (now a part of Pakistan). India was a very prosperous country then. It was known as the 'Golden Bird' in the East. However, it was a divided country. There were several petty kingdoms engaged in a perpetual warfare against each other. Naturally they could not unite to resist the foreign invasions. The country was conquered, one kingdom at a time, in repeated invasions over the next 500 years.

The invaders plundered this vast country and took hundreds of thousands of men, women and children as slaves to be sold for pennies a piece in their home countries. The conquerors were fanatic Muslims. They brought with them the doctrine of Islam and embarked on the brutal process of forced conversions. Many natives were given a choice between embracing Islam or dying by the sword. The demoralization of the native population (mostly Hindus) was total. Not only were they deprived of the political power in their home country but they also found themselves at a great disadvantage so far as their religious beliefs and culture were concerned. The practice of Hinduism had been reduced to meaningless rites. Idol worship was rampant. Caste system was enforced mercilessly. The priestly class, the Brahmins were accountable to no one. They conspired to keep the bulk of the population ignorant and illiterate. As a result the common persons were susceptible to all types of superstition.

One reads about education being denied to all but Brahmins by birth. The religious rites were conducted in Sanskrit; it had long since become a dead language. One reads about the inferior position of women in the society. They depended upon their parents in their childhood, on their husbands in youth, and on their sons in old age. Widows were encouraged to burn themselves alive on the funeral pyre of their dead husbands, often by the greedy relatives. The rite was known as SATEE. An opinion existed that women could not attain salvation nor enter heaven until they had been reborn as men. They were considered sensual beings, tempters and spoilers of the spiritual lives of men. Thus those who yearned for spirituality shunned the society and took to ascetic life style.

The life of the 'Chandalas' was the worst. They were at the bottom of the caste system totem pole. They were supposed to perform the most menial tasks for the society. They could not drink water at the well used by the upper castes. They could not visit temples nor hear religious

sermons. They could not sit with the higher castes nor even come anywhere near them since it was believed that they would pollute the high caste persons by merely casting shadows on them. In fact, the whole Indian society had ground to a halt and people yearned for a liberator.

The encounter between Hinduism and Islam turned into a route for the former. It was realized that far-reaching reforms were necessary in Hindu belief system and social customs. This gave rise to 'BHAKTI' movement aimed at reforming Hinduism. Several thinkers were involved over a period of centuries but there was no coordination of their efforts. No progress was discernible when Guru Nanak (1469-1539) started his ministry in the fifteenth century. He realized the challenging nature of the task ahead of him. Nevertheless, he set about trying to find an answer to the tyranny of Islam. Thereby, he set in motion a process leading to a very effective response to Muslim tyranny, nearly two centuries later, with the establishment of the Khalsa Panth, described by me in a separate essay.

Guru Nanak's approach was empirical. He rejected all religious rites and notions that failed the test of common sense. He enjoyed sophisticated discussions with the scholars and philosophers but he could also communicate with the common people. He would confront people with the absurdity of their wrong beliefs and advise them how they could lead happier lives. There are several anecdotes that one may quote from. However, this is not the place to relate them; the reader may refer to my essay on Guru Nanak's life to read about some of them.

I outline below the role played by the Sikh Gurus in espousing respect for the rights of women. It started with Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh faith. I quote from his hymn (an Ode to Women) highlighting important contributions made to the family and the society by women.

“ Of women we are born, of women conceived, to women engaged, to women married.
Women we befriend, by women the civilization is sustained.
When a women dies, another women is sought.
It is by women that order is maintained.
Then, why call women evil by whom great men are born?
From one women another women is born, without woman none would exist.
Nanak says, only the Immortal One does not depend on Women.”

Guru Amar Das (1479 - 1574), the third Sikh Guru, continued to empower women during his ministry. He greatly simplified the marriage ceremony for the Sikh couples. The Sikhs call the marriage 'Anand (bliss)' and the marriage ceremony 'Anand Kaaraj (blissful function)'. Sikh faith forbids the practice of bigamy, polygamy, or child-marriage. Sikh girls enjoy equal rights with their brothers. Guru Amar Das forbade the practices of Purdah (women wearing veils) as well as SATEE for Sikh women. He allowed widows to remarry and encouraged inter-caste marriages. Women could act as priests, perform religious ceremonies as well as do missionary work for the Sikhs. This requires that women be educated on par with men, leading to gender equality. By insisting on these reforms, Guru Amar Das strengthened the social structure of the Sikhs and turned them into a very progressive community. Later on, there are instances in Sikh history when women fought alongside men on the battlefields. Thus Sikh women were emancipated from trivial and meaningless restrictions long before their sisters in the rest of the world won recognition and respect for their rights. However, there are still very many countries in the world today where women are still struggling to obtain rights on par with men.

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