



SIKH WOMEN IN SIKH DIASPORA & HOMELAND: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the status of Sikh women in Sikh Diaspora and Homeland. This comparative study is to examine social, economic, and cultural dimensions and try to find out the current status of Sikh women in the Sikh community. The study notes that Sikh women are more assertive in Sikh Diaspora than the Homeland. The findings of this study argue that Sikh women have to be liberated from the shackles of Sikh religious institutions to enhance social and economic capacity.

Keywords: Sikh, Women, Migration, Diaspora, Identity, Homeland

Introduction

Migration of people from a country of origin to a host country is not a new phenomenon. People had migrated to the British, Dutch and French colonies to work on sugar plantations and subsequently, for tea and rubber plantations in Southeast Asia (Tinker 1974:15). Pieces of evidence from history show that the migration of Punjabis from Punjab has colonial linkages. During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a Sikh ruler (1780-1839) in the northwest Indian subcontinent, the British government recruited Sikh Jats, a landowning community in the British Army. Some

scholars of diaspora studies endorsed that Sikh remained in the African colonies thereby forming East Africa Sikh society (Melvin Ember, 2004:290). Earlier, the migration of women was restricted by the colonial authorities but it was opened in the 1890s and hundreds of women joined their husbands. The migration of a male member is considered to be a matter of pride and is valorized as a sacrifice on his behalf, whereas a similar step taken by a female is considered to be nothing more than carrying out of one's basic duty (Nair 2007a: 3). Dhar explains that women migration to the developed countries explicitly dominates the family reunification category among immigrants. (Dhar, 2007:3).

People from Punjab has been migrating to UK, Canada, USA, Italy, and Spain thereby forming a "Punjabi Diaspora" in those countries. Punjabi Diaspora is quite vibrant preserving Punjabi culture and heritage in the host societies. Today, in many western countries, the Punjabi Diaspora demonstrates its political strength and play its vital role in the decision-making process and lobbying for foreign policies. At the same time, the Punjabi Diaspora is found actively participating in union, state and local body elections in the state of Punjab. The ethnic group consciousness diasporic communities allow them to remain tied to the homeland, and can often be an incentive to engage in homeland politics. (Cohen 1997:185). The Punjabi Diaspora philanthropic activities in financing development projects in the homeland are quite remarkable. Researchers show that Punjabi Diaspora made major strides in a number of important areas such as education, employment, business and public life in the western countries. Sikh remain, in every location, a well-defined community in the host society. By establishing religions, cultural & linguistic markers, they have contested their position within the society & gained some measure of legitimacy (Barrier & Dusenbery, 1989).

The Sikh scriptures allowed Sikh women freedom and liberty in matters of regulation of their life but later the Sikh institutions devised their own codes to suppress women. According to Mann, the *Prem Sumarag*, from the eighteen-century, stressed women's full participation in religious life: women were expected to be the best-informed members of the household, able to instruct their husbands and children in matters of belief and practices; widow marriage was encouraged; and women partook in the *Khande de pahul* ceremony.

In the twentieth century, the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*¹, ethical code, was emphatic that no distinction be made on the basis of gender and laid out specific rules to combat female oppression; female veiling, female infanticide, and dowry were forbidden, and widow remarriage was sanctioned (Mann, 2001:103).

According to Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, the Sikh religion, as envisioned by Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and institutionalized through the *Rahit Maryada*, “grants full equality to men and women in all spheres-religious, political, domestic, and economic” (Singh, 2008:333). Sikhism espouses a radical equality by placing the Untouchable on par with the Brahman and the woman on par with a man (Grewal, 1990:30). My contribution to the debate regarding gender & religion lies in my approach to religious identities in the context of Sikh diasporic women. The host society has opened a new vista for diasporic women to exercise their social and economic power.

Identity of Sikh Women in Sikhism

Sikh is a homogenous identity but there are multiple identities existing in Sikhism. *Sahajdhari*, *Keshdhari* and *Amritdhari* are the multiple identities. In religious context, baptized women as well as men pledged to observe five symbols of the faith known as the “*Five Ks*”: unshorn hair & beard (*kas*), a comb (*kangha*) worn in the hair to keep it tidy, a steel band or bracelet (*kara*) worn in the wrist, a dagger or sword (*kirpan*), and a pair of shorts (*kach*) designed to allow free movement. Guru Gobind Singh called upon all Sikhs to drop their Hindu caste names and in their place, for men to adapt the name Singh (Lion) and women the name Kaur (Princess).

A Punjabi unmarried woman has to follow certain customs and norms in religious life. Before solemnization of marriage in a Sikh family a Sikh girl remains on dal & rice with ghee. She should not eat bread (*roti*). Customs decrees that she should be given only soft foods. She should be clothed in red garments & for five days (her skin) should be rubbed with fragrant ointment (*batana*). Before sleeping & when she awakes she should recite the following (prayer): Sri Akal Purakh grant me your protection. This marriage is in your hands. Grant that it may be duly celebrated. She should make this petition (regularly). During this period of five days, she should

¹The *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (code of conduct) was created in 1952 by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee.

not worship any god or goddess. For a widow there are separate ritual commandments: Do not wear dirty clothes, or those which are made from fine spun cloth. Give no encouragement to your appetite (for food). The encouragement to the appetite stimulates sexual desire as ghee poured on a fire makes it burn more fiercely. Traditionally, women are expected to fulfill the roles of a daughter to her parents, a wife to her husband & daughter-in-law to her husband`s parents & a mother to her son & daughter (Seymour, 1999).

For the most part, daughters are still less important than are sons as far as inheritance is concerned (Chadney,1984:71).Kapur argues that the institution of patriarchy segregates Sikh women off from men in such a way that capabilities remain hidden.Ending a relationship is stressful for women because divorce carries a stigma in Indian society. (Kapur, 1970). Sikh people usually do not tolerate inter-caste marriage. Ironically, this persistence of caste distinction has not been wiped out even with inter-caste marriages between Dalits and non-Dalits (Vivek Kumar, 2004).

According to a report, Sikh women marrying a Christian husband in Swindon, United Kingdom were hounded by 40 Sikh protesters (*The Independent*, 2015).The dowry system is still prevalent among the Sikhs, both in India & Abroad.(Bhachu, 1986:112). Arguments placed by these scholars reflects that social evils such as dowry and divorce stigmatization are still prevalent in the Sikh community. Dusenbery states that “Sikh identity” “and the transmission of heritage” has been especially pronounced in the diaspora, where Sikhs in various countries attempts to fashion images of what it is to be a Sikh and to practice the Sikh religion that they can comfortably live with and pass on to their children(Dusenbery,1997).

Sikh Women in Sikh Diaspora

Sikh women in Sikh diaspora has a dominant position in social and economic life. In a multicultural society of a host country, Sikh women are influenced by the dominant culture of the host society. Sikh women in Sikh diaspora has been exposed to western culture. Kurian study demonstrates that in the process of cultural adaptation women in the diaspora particularly in the second generation emulate western dominant culture and participate in the western festivals such as Halloween, Thanks giving, Sunday School, Valentine`s Day, Christmas and Easter(Kurian,1979). Learning the language of the host society is very important to participate effectively. Bourdieu states that:

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I have known cases of women, hailing from rural parts of India, migrating after marriage to Australia and picking up English spoken in the Australian accent. I attribute this shift to their desire of being able to communicate in the language of their new homeland. The desire to communicate is an outcome of their aspirations to establish new relationships. Aspirations or the capacity to aspire for a better future. (Bourdieu, 1977 and 2001).

Dancing is a mode of entertainment of the western countries. It is assumed that Sikh women can be recognized from her attire & style of living. They often wear *Salwar, Kameez,* and a *Dupatta*. Significantly, phulkaris (and other head coverings such as the dupatta or chunni) played a similar role to turbans within formal and informal female rites of passage within family structures. Completing a phulkari was an important step toward adulthood for an unmarried girl in her natal home (Jakobsh, 2015).

Cultural dances like Bhangra and Giddha etc are not forbidden but these should not be performed in the presence of *Guru Granth Sahib*². The fashion among the Punjabi women is quite ostentatious. Wearing of Gaudy outfits by Punjabi women reflects their high spiritedness and conspicuous consumption. Punjabi men and women celebrate social functions such as marriage, deaths, birth of sons on a large scale showing status (*izzat*) in the homeland and abroad. Sikh women while defying religious diktats in the western countries cut their hairs and eyebrows which are prohibited by Sikh scriptures.

There are several instances available where Sikh women wearing turban took part in the fashion show in the western society. Style queen Karan Kaur in Sydney, Australia is fast becoming a household name in the international Sikh community. She has also launched her fashion blog. (*The Telegraph*, 2014). Jakobsh examined Sikh women`s identity formation on the World Wide Web (www) and explains:

²The Holy book of Sikhism

These carefully constructed images are not only available within the online context, yet clearly, the boundless of the internet is an accelerated catalyst in the active construction of Sikh identity taking place. In the process, the image of the turbaned Sikh woman, for instance, despite the fact that it incontrovertibly does not mirror the realities of Sikh women worldwide, is cast instead as normative (Jakobsh, 2010:14-15).

Sikh women in Sikh diaspora feel emancipated in performing religious duties and responsibilities. They feel independent and social freedom in Swedish society. When visiting Punjab they need to readjust to gender roles, duties, & expectations they no longer feel comfortable with and for this reason they do not wish to move back (Jacobsen& Myrovld, 2016:78). Sikh women do not like restrictions. They want to live life freely and have fun. They want to explore the world and want work-life integration.

Sikh women are permitted to perform Seva in Sikh temples but when it comes to the ceremonial part they are denied entry. Seva or service to others is a major aspect of Punjabi Sikh culture & for overseas migrants Seva includes providing help not only family members & others fellow Sikhs but to members of the larger community where one has settled(Helweg,1979:13). However, Sikh women are allowed to perform various duties and responsibilities within the precinct of Gurdwara but their entry is restricted to sanctorum.

Jakobsh observed in many Gurdwaras, a married Sikh woman is not allowed to partake in the Amrit (initiation) ceremony, unless she is accompanied by her husband. Further, while women are encouraged to cook, clean, and wash dishes for the Sikh communal meal (langar), in many cases they are not permitted to enter the sanctorum of the temple, the special chambers where the copies of the Guru Granth Sahib are placed, known as the Sach Khand(Jakobsh,2006).

The Swedish Sikh congregations, women have obtained a larger space within religious services & sometimes taken over ritual roles that have been traditionally ascribed to men. Since many women have higher education & better skills in the Gurumukhi script than their husbands, they are reciters of the Guru Granth Sahib. Sikh women feel liberated from shackles of tradition upon their arrival

in the Western world. (Jacobsend & Myrovld, 2016:78). The emergence of several religious sects³ in Punjab and their branches in the host countries have created religious divisions and social segregations in Sikhism.

Diaspora scholars show that Sikh women`s participation in the labour market is quite visible as compared to Sikh women in Homeland. Jacobsend & Myrovld study shows that Sikh women who migrated to Finland as adults work as pre- school teachers, nurses, or shop assistants, the great majority labour in the restaurant sector. Sikh women work behind the bar in businesses owned by their families. Similarly, in Ireland, Sikh women usually worked in factories especially factories making shirts(Collars, cuffs, & so on) & trousers-were ones who had lost their husbands & needed money to survive(Jacobsend & Myrovld,2016:109&312).In France and Italy, over 50 percent of migrant women are believed to be engaged in domestic work (ILO, 2003:11) and in Spain domestic service is the main route for 63 percent of non-community foreign women (Collective Loe, 2003).

In comparison, the status of Sikh women in the host country has been enhanced. In the host country they earn and have financial security. They feel liberated from the shackles of ancient customs and traditions. Freedom and liberty in life has brought positive changes in their outlook.

Sikh families around the world established their names by setting up businesses. Families settled in most countries, women are almost equal earners. In the host countries, women`s economic participation assist in building up family financial assets. Sikh women lend a helping hand to the family business. A few example of millionaire Sikh families in different of the world shows their economic power. The Wohuras of East Foods in the United Kingdom; the Bains family of peach growers in Yuba city, California; the Kulraj of Singapore; the Bindras of New York, & Narinder Singh Kapany , a California scientist are successful entrepreneurs(Melvin Ember,2004:227).

Sikh Women in Homeland

The Sikh population in Punjab 59.9%. There were only 893 females for every 1,000 males in Punjab (Census, 2011). In marital homes, Sikh women are subjected to harassment and exclusion at the hands of in-laws. The data by National Crime Record Bureau and National Commission for

³RadhaSoami, Narankari, Ram Rahim, Dera Sachkhand Balla.

women justifies the low status of women. Villages of Punjab are predominantly inhabited by the Sikh Community the data reflects that a girl is not welcome in the Sikh community.

The socio-economic conditions of Sikh women, particularly in rural villages of Punjab is quite challenging. Due to the prevalence of patriarchal system, Sikh women remain subjugated and are perceived as a liability in the Sikh community. There is a deep gap between rural and urban Sikh women labour market participation. Rural Sikh women are still engaged in agricultural work whereas Sikh women residing in the urban areas join the labour market. The Work Participation Rate (WPR) of females among Sikhs is extremely low at just 15.2 percent (Census, 2011).

Jakobsh observes that despite Sikh Guru`s egalitarian teachings, discrimination against women in the Sikh institutions still prevails. She further argues that the idea of gender equality is best understood as a myth because Sikh history is largely silent when it comes to gender equality(Jakobsh,2000:270) Similarly, Rajkumari Shanker finds that the Granth emphasises female subservience, obedience, docility, and dedication while these same attributes are discouraged in men, thus undermining notions of gender equality(Shanker, 2002:118-120).

More significantly, at the most sacred of Sikh shrines, the Harimandir Sahib, otherwise known as the Golden Temple, women are not included when prasad (*sanctified pudding*) is distributed to the panj piare, the first five individuals who are given prasad before it is distributed to the remaining participants. Women were not allowed anywhere near the Palki; instead, they were made to stand away from the walkway. While a Sikh woman watched the Palki from afar, she noted that non-Sikh men were allowed to carry the Palki, while she was barred from even coming near the palanquin (“Women’s Seva Sinks Lower”)(Jakobsh,2006). Around 120 Sikh youths from USA, Canada have raised the question of why Sikh women are not performing kirtan at Darbar Sahib(Golden Temple). They advocated that women should be allowed to sing *Shabad* or *Hymns* at the Golden temple to recognise the important role played by them in strengthening the Sikh faith (*Allow women to sing*, 2017).

In Homeland, Sikh women usually work in the four walls of the house. Sikh men or families do not allow happily Sikh women to go outside and work. Consequently, Sikh women remain

dependent financially on husbands and parents. They are not economically empowered hence remains subservient.

Conclusion

Sikh women's subordination and gender disparity are prevalent in the Sikh community. Sikh men legitimate & reinforce the social & economic domination over Sikh women. In the host country, Sikh women are economically independent in comparison to Sikh women in the Homeland. It is stressed that Sikh women in the Homeland need to be economically empowered. Rigid Sikh religious structure bars Sikh women in articulating their religious and spiritual aspirations. Religious rigidity maintains Sikh women's inequality and devalues Sikh women. Guninder argues that Sikh women in a predicament because the scripture itself was written and amalgamated over centuries by male Gurus, during a time period when women were not included in the formation of the faith. Historically, women within the Sikh faith have been on the margins and ignored, and their visual identity has been predicated on the male amritdhari body. Sikh women are expected to transmit a religious identity and participate in upholding the status quo for Sikh men. She further argues that marginalized women's positions within the scriptures, the Gurus supported women's liberation, not overtly but covertly within their text (Guninder Kaur Singh, 2012). While there are certainly similarities across diasporic Sikh women and similarities across homeland Sikh women, it is emphasized that Sikh religious bodies, the Sikh community, the Sikh Diaspora and Sikh leadership need to address challenges in order to open up social and economic opportunities for Sikh women. Religious reformers and rationalists associations must come forward to end the traditional social order existing in Sikhism. Fundamental changes to the Sikh religious institutions are recommended. The social and economic disparities existing at Sikh institutional level demonstrates that Sikh women in Sikh diaspora feel more liberated than Sikh women in Homeland.

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