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GRT

THE IDEA OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN SIKHISM

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Abstract:-In the fifteenth century, Guru Nanak laid the foundation of Sikhism based on liberal, humanistic and democratic principles. In Sikhism, there is no place for any kind of social injustice and gender inequalities. Sikh Gurus gave unique idea of women liberation and envisaged a new way of life which has provided equal rights to woman and restored her dignity and old glory. Sikhism elevated the status of women in the Indian society and played a significant role in the elimination of age-old gender bias against women.

Keywords:Liberation, society, democratic principles, Social justice.

INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND:

Woman is an indispensable component of a society. Despite her tremendous significance for the family and society, she has been victim of gender inequalities over the centuries. The history of gender bias is as old as history of the humankind. In order to improve her deplorable conditions, the emphasis is laid on protection of women's rights. Gender equality is an essential component of human rights and a pre condition for social justice, peace and prosperity. Gender equality, women's empowerment and the elimination of discrimination and inequalities based on sex are the core issues of women liberation movement in the twentieth century. It aims at providing equal opportunities to both men and women. It also includes all those attempts to provide equal rights to women in the male dominated society and elimination of gender bias.

In the Medieval India, Guru Nanak was the first person, who took the notice of plight of helpless women in India and advocated the cause of women' rights and gender equality forcefully and single handedly. Guru Nanak is credited of being forerunner of women liberation in the darkest phase of medieval history of India. In His Divine hymns, women got emancipation, equal status and equal rights. Social justice, according to Guru Nanak, lies in equal rights for both men and women. Guru Nanak's views on gender equality are revolutionary in letter and spirit. Guru Nanak's ideas on women liberation paved a way for women to develop their ability to organize and influence the direction of social and economic order. He was a champion of freedom and equality. He upgraded the role of woman in the society. He had vehemently opposed the child-marriage, female infanticide and immolation of widows. He gave her the right of education and reading of scriptures and attending religious congregations.

Guru Nanak's contribution to religious thought and social change cannot be ignored. He roused and stimulated the elite of His time to address the national problems and shook the national conscience through His powerful message. The present day India, especially the Punjab, bears the unmistakable impress of Guru Nanak's personality and philosophy. Emancipation of women and the breaking of demeaning distinctions of caste system were two main areas He vehemently addressed. He was a guardian and angel of the women's rights. Guru Nanak and His successors had elevated the status of women in a society, which treated them as door-mats and raised them to the male's level. Now according to UN Charter also, their status has been brought at par with men. They had the foresight five centuries back. Almost half of the world's adult population is made up of women. Their equal status and integration in the mainstream of life is not only economically, ethically, religiously desirable but essential for societal peace.

Historically speaking, the problem of social injustice against women dates back to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, according to which Eve is responsible for all the problems which humankind is facing today. It was she who tempted Adam into that original sin, which led to his being thrown out of paradise into this hellish existence, and as a result, his life is beset with all kinds of problems. In the early Indian tradition, woman had been looked upon as a temptress and an impediment in the spiritual life of man. In the course of time, the emphasis on monasticism and celibacy increased in *Vaisnavism*. Accordingly, the position of women worsened in the social and religious fields. In the Vedic period, the woman had both freedom and respect in society. She had equal opportunities with men in educational attainments and work. But there were

times when she was considered much inferior to man. Some people gave her the status of the shoe of the foot of man. One of the periods of the downfall of the status of woman was the period of Muslim administration in India. Like the Muslim women, the Indian (Hindu) women were confined to four walls of her home. She was considered as the object of man's sexual satisfaction. The men of religion called her enchantress and thus condemned her. The yogis considered her a 'she wolf' Tulsidas, the celebrated author of Ramacharit Manas dubbed her as worthy of warning and thus decried her. Peelu, an old Punjabi poet, said that it is a sin to look towards a woman even if she is made of paper.

Shankara calls woman, "the gateway to hell." For Ramanuja, woman is sin-born. The position of women in other religious systems of the world, including that of radical bhagats, as mentioned earlier, is certainly not of equality with men. It ranges between her being considered a temptress and being regarded as second rate. Kabir was a householder like Guru Nanak; but it is paradoxical that he hated woman. There is almost a tirade against women in his hymns. Woman is characterized as 'a black cobra', 'the pit of Hell' and the 'refuse of the world'. He spoke 'woman ruins everything when she comes near a man; devotion, salvation and divine 'knowledge' no longer enter his soul'. During the foreign invasions from the North West and those days of oppression and tyranny, it was the women, who suffered most. It is very sad that the Indian men failed to protect the honor of their own women folk. But with the advent of Sikhism the dignity and respect of the noble Indian women were restored.

SIKH VISION OF WOMEN LIBERATION:

At the time of Guru Nanak's birth, the condition of women was undoubtedly depressed in India. The birth of a female child was considered as a bad omen in Hindu society and was looked upon with disfavor. Their parents killed infants mercilessly. Women did not enjoy equal social status with men and were not allowed to move freely in their society, especially in high society. They were forced to veil their faces, and to perform household chores and labor duties. They were, in essence, slaves. He realized that the revolution could not succeed if 50% of the population remained bound in chains. He spoke strongly against condemning the women. Gautam Buddha had revolted against Brahmanism but had ignored the women. Guru Nanak was the first revolutionary who took up the cause of women.

From the beginning of Sikh tradition, women have held an important place. Sikh history holds stories of the many women who helped in many ways to shape the faith. Women have been active and central subjects in Sikh history and they are remembered in prayer and song along with their male counterparts. Until Guru Nanak's time, women in Indian society had long played a subordinate role. The inferior status of women, however, did not fit into the Guru Nanak's vision of total equality for all people under the Universal Reality.

Guru Nanak criticized the spirit and philosophy of the Vedic tradition that the humans could be classified according to the *varan* or *jatis*. In His soci-spiritual philosophy, all the humans are equals irrespective of their birth. God has created men and women as equals, being immanent in them in equal proportion. Consequently, Guru Nanak discards any religion as illegitimate if it supports inequality by religious means. Against life negation and withdrawal from life, He recommended life-affirmation and complete social participation. Against monasticism and asceticism, He accepted a householder's life and full social responsibility. Against celibacy and a woman being sin-born, He gave religious sanctity to married life and equality to women. Against the rigidity of the Varnashrama Dharma and the institution of caste and pollution, He, from the very first day of His mission, accepted and practiced social equality and the brother-hood of man.

He changed radically almost every religious doctrine that stood accepted in the earlier three thousand years of Indian history. Against the world being illusory, delusive (Mithya, Maya) or a place of suffering or misery, He called it real and meaningful; against asceticism, monasticism and Sanyasa. He accepted the householder's life and full social participation and responsibility; against celibacy and woman being sin-born, He gave religious sanctity to marriage and equality to women; against the rigidity of Varna Ashram.

Sikhism not only liberated the female section from discriminatory and unjust traditions but also opened the path of progress for them on equal footing with the males. Sikhism stressed that all human beings were born equal, and were free, without any distinction of sex. All have equal dignity and equal right in the eyes of God. Women are as much endowed with reason and conscience as men are. They should, therefore, be respected as much as men are. Equality, liberty and justice are the hallmarks of social ethics of Shri Guru Granth Sahib (The Holy Scripture of Sikhs). Regarding the social degeneration of women, which had reached at great heights in the Indian society under the overbearing influence of Islamic culture, Shri Guru Granth Sahib does not accept the thesis of Manu and Islam that woman is the source of all evils. Divine compositions as enshrine in Shri Guru Granth Sahib goes to the extent of glorification the womanhood by calling a divine-devoted soul as the female-spouse of the Supreme Soul. The Sikh Gurus, seeing the ill-treatment of women, made a frontal attack on this system, and elevated the position of women to equal that of men in the society.

Sikh Gurus advocated the equal status for women with men in all spheres of life. They condemned the then prevalent customs, which perpetuated the inferiority of women. The Sikh Gurus felt the need to rehabilitate women to place of honor if Indian society as a whole was to be saved. As renunciation and asceticism is not the ideal in Sikhism. Asceticism is the root cause, which perhaps partly led to the woman being considered seducers or temptresses, is removed. The restoration of the ideal of the life of the householder as superior, morally and spiritually by Sikhism, led to the restoration of the decent and equal status to women.

In Sikhism, women have equal religious and social status. The Sikh concept of equality of sex is not formal. It is

practical and all-inclusive. A Sikh woman can perform religious services of any kind and every type. A woman can perform all the services in a Gurdwara (Sikh Temple). A woman can be one of the *Panj Piaray* (Five Beloved) also (Mata Sahib Kaur participated in preparation of Amrit when the first five Khalsa were initiated on March 29, 1699). Sikh Gurus have forbidden giving disrespect to women folk; they forged infanticide, Sati, divorce, dowry etc. According to Sikhism, women are the mothers of the kings, mothers of divine souls and no human being can be born without a woman (the mother) hence woman holds very high esteem in Sikh ideology. From historical perspective too, the Sikh women have played leading role on several crucial occasions from battlefield to state administration, from statesmanship to martyrdom from teaching to missionary activities.

In Sikhism, there is complete equality between sexes. Women can visit a Gurdwara, conduct services, read the Holy Sikh Scripture i.e. Shri Guru Granth Sahib, lead the Sikh armies; vote in elections and enjoy all other rights enjoyed by the Sikh men. They are not required to observe Parda (veil) or commit sati (burning alive on the funeral pyre of the dead husband). The Sikhs call a wife *Ardhangni* (better-half). There is no restriction on their education or movements as long as they follow the Guru's instructions. "Eve" in Sikhism is not regarded as temptation-incarnate but as "the conscience of men." Perhaps, for the first time in the history of the world, the trained missionaries included women, who held independent dioceses or areas of spiritual jurisdiction.

Guru Nanak enabled women folk to win recognition as independent social entity and laid the foundation for their educational and social development. At Kartarpur, doors of His Dharmsal were opened for all men and women. Women not only listened to the hymns of the Gurus but they could also sing the hymns and participated in the preparation of Langar. For the first time in India men and women of all faiths, castes and creeds could sit together and eat in the common kitchen of the Guru.

Guru Nanak not only worked for the betterment and uplift of women but also added a spiritual dimension to their personality. He was of the firm opinion that woman must be respected and cared for. It is because of the upbringing by the woman that the personality of the offspring is shaped. It is just as the proverb goes, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." The whole world and its population ultimately depend upon woman. It is God alone who is unborn. She wore the cross of the whole family as did Jesus, but started no Christianity. Every woman is the Messiah. Her daily life in the service of man gave the songs of her beautiful soul as the shifting colors of the sky and the changing lines of Nature tell us of Nature's inner Person. Women were thus the inspiration for all the heroic efforts of man to make himself man. Women are responsible for his best longings for immortality, for all his religions, for all his arts, and for all his noble winging above earth and sky.

In Sikhism, effective widespread and practical steps are taken for socio-religious equality of woman. There is no separate code for women in Sikhism, they are at par with men in all respects and can become the priest and empowered to administer *Amrit* (Sikh way of baptism). Widow Remarriage is permitted whereby the widow can be rehabilitated, if so desired. Both man and woman should regard adultery as immoral. A Sikh ought not to marry when his first wife is alive. Divorce is not desirable. It has prohibited 1- The custom of *Satti* (immolation of the widow with the deceased husband either voluntary or forcible). 2- Wearing of veils by women. 3- Dowry system. 4- Female infanticide (killing of new-born females).

CONCLUSION:

From the above discussion, it can be inferred that the Sikhism has contributed lot to uplift the status of women in the society. Sikh Gurus played a significant role in liberating the womankind from the age-old socio-religious prejudices. In the present era, there is an immense need to recite and practice the message of Sikh Gurus in relation to the gender equality. For the sake of promising future, society is required to reinvigorate her social norms and behavior patterns in the light of teachings of Shri Guru Granth Sahib. The future of coming generations is primarily depends upon the wellbeing, security and dignity of women in the society.

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