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SIKHISM AND THE MENACE OF FEMALE FETICIDE IN SIKH COMMUNITY

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Abstract:-Guru Nanak's system is a whole-life system like Islam and Judaism, and takes an integrated view of the spiritual and empirical aspects of life. Consequently, it categorically rejects monasticism, asceticism and withdraws from life. It sanctions a householder's life with full social participation and social responsibility. Brotherhood of mankind and equality of men and women and of all castes are repeatedly emphasized in the divine hymns and the lives of the Sikh Gurus. It is a radical departure from the Hindu social ideology of Varna Ashram Dharma. 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 His vision of total equality for all people.

Keywords:Sikh Community , empirical aspects , categorically , asceticism.

INTRODUCTION:

In Hindu society, the birth of a girl in a family was considered inauspicious which resulted in the heinous crime of infanticide out of the fear of lustful Muslim chiefs, the parda system (seclusion of woman) and child marriage came into vogue. The woman depended on her husband or his relatives and was not allowed to participate in all the social functions, rites and ceremonies. In order to protect her honor the customs of Jauhar and Sati were prevalent. The Sikh Gurus who brought in a reformation of society rejected all these inhuman practices. The killing of infants, particularly females, was very common in India during the medieval period. The Sikh Gurus commanded their followers to desist from this evil and cruel practice. Infanticide was specially prohibited by Guru Amar Das. Guru Gobind Singh told the baptized Sikhs to have no connection with families practicing female infanticide- "Kuri-Mar" (those who kill their daughters). A few Sikhs who were found guilty of this crime were excommunicated by the Khalsa Panth.

To elevate the status of women, the Sikh Gurus, through their holy compositions and through the examples of their practical life, have taken steps for the socio-religious equality of women. They condemned the custom of sati, female infanticide, forced widowhood, adultery and seclusion of women by being in veils. On the other hand, they commended married life by giving it religious sanctity and allowed the remarriage of widows. Guru Nanak rejected the prevailing notions regarding the women and gave her due respect and uplifts her position in the society. Guru Nanak had a comprehensive view of equality of women. He said, "Amongst all there is light and that light (art Thou). By His light, the light shines within all the souls". He had breakdown the masculine image of God. He highlighted the feminine attributes of God also and said, "Thou thyself art the male and Thy self the female". He offered a generous tribute to womanhood and said, "Within a woman, the man is conceived and from a woman he is born. With a woman he is betrothed and married. With the woman man contracts friendship and with a woman the system of propagation keeps on going. When one's wife dies, another woman is sought for. It is through a woman that man restraints his passions. Why call her bad, from whom are born the king. From a woman, a woman is born, without a woman, there, can be none. Nanak, only the one True Lord, is without a woman".

Guru Amar Das, third Sikh Guru, condemned the age-old tradition of Sati. He gave a unique meaning to sati and said, "They are not called Satis, who burn themselves with their husbands' corpses. Nanak they are known as Satis, who die with the sheer shock of separation". Guru Arjan Dev, fifth Sikh Guru said, "By burning thyself the Loved Lord is not obtained. Through wrought deeds, she arises and gets burned with her dead husband. Pause. Imitating and through mind's obstinacy, she gets burnt

up. She obtains not the company of her Spouse, and is made to wander through many existences". Guru Amar Das said, "They are not said to be husband and wife, who merely sit together. Rather they alone are called husband and wife, who have one soul in two bodies". The Sikh Gurus declared a woman to be the pivot of a joint family where her advice is crucial to the betterment of the whole family. Sikh Gurus also categorically stated that the society can become a composite and well balanced whole only if men and women live and work together. They are complementary to each other and one member of society should not view the other as a threat. The Gurus shifted the emphasis from celibacy to fidelity.

The Sikh ethics recognized the right to life of everyone, regardless of sex of a person. Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism, fought against the blind dogmas and traditional beliefs including female infanticide. In Sikhism, the woman has a right to life like a man. Many ethical injunctions favor this right of woman. The Sikh Gurus have laid down that nobody will kill his daughter as both man and woman have equal right to live. In Rehatnama (code of conduct) by Prahlaad Singh it is stated "He who is a Sikh and deals with one indulging in female infanticide would be led to disaster ultimately".

According to Sikh thought, as all things are created and inhabited by God, there is no scope for discrimination based on sex of an individual in the practice of religion in life. The Sikh Gurus condemned the notion of inferiority of women and respected women for she gave life to all humans. Sikh Gurus did not approve of any inferior treatment to one-half of the humanity but rather encouraged the women who had become very meek and submissive by the sixteenth century to become courageous and independent. Sikhism not only liberated the women from these customs but also opened the path of socio-spiritual development 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.

The Sikh Gurus admitted women into the Sangat (congregation) without any restriction or reservation and their message was meant as much for women as for men. Now, Sikh women not only attend services but they also lead and conduct services on equal terms with men. They work side by side with men in the Langar (common kitchen) and all other religious, social and cultural activities of the Gurdwaras. In a way, the Guru advocated and allowed much more equality for women in the 15th century than the freedom and equality which has existed for women in the twentieth century. The Guru wanted to build a nation of self-respecting men and women with equal dignity.

In the post Sikh Guru Period (1469-1708), one finds that gender discriminations, social injustice, oppression of women began to resurface. In spite of the eternal teaching of Sikh Gurus the gender bias, gender inequality and crimes against women are widespread in India and manifests it in numerous ways, including gender-based sex selection. The severe decline in the child sex ratio is the outcome of the practice of sex selection. Recent data indicate a worrying trend of growing lack of safety and security for women. The data from the National Crime Records Bureau shows that between 1953 and 2011, the incidence of rape rose by 873 per cent, or three times faster than all cognizable crimes put together, and three-and-a-half times faster than murder. In India, a woman is raped every 22 minutes, and a bride burnt for dowry every 58 minutes. Further, the gender discrimination is exacerbated by the adverse child sex ratio indicative of a clear bias against the girl child.

Sex selective abortions and increase in the number of female infanticide cases have become a significant social phenomenon in several parts of India. It transcends all castes, class and communities and even the North South dichotomy. The girl children become target of attack even before they are born. Female feticide is a symptom of an underlying malady. Its incidence is increasing as families perceive that bearing daughters does not make economic sense and does not provide any social advantages. Added to that is generations of bias that favors bearing a male child. Consequently, efforts directed selectively towards curbing the practice of prenatal sex determination are unlikely to provide rich dividends.

Daughter is an unwanted lot virtually, especially in Indian Society. The arrival of son in the family is greeted with jubilation. The daughters on the other hand are considered a burden. This blatant bias cannot only be attributed to poverty, illiteracy, superstition, or rural neighborhoods. After the invention of ultrasound scan, the girls are not allowed to take birth and infanticide has been converted into female feticide. Killing female child in the womb is also a sort of terrorism. The womb of the mother becomes the tomb for girl child. Scientifically female feticide is a process in which the sex of the infant in the mother's womb is detected.

The technology revolution, which fueled the decline in birth rate, has also been responsible for ushering in the era of technology of prenatal sex determination tests (SDTs) since 1970s. Initially, it was through amniocentesis, which soon gave way to the relatively safer non-invasive technique viz. ultrasonography. People at large lapped this up so enthusiastically that it seemed that this fulfilled a long felt need of people. Very soon, ultrasound clinics mushroomed all over India, particularly in north India. The medical profession has been quick to make money from the use of ultra sound machines at the cost of female children affecting the national gender ratio as well as yielding to the demand of a family to have a male child. The physicians and technicians went to villages and towns with portable machines, thus undermining the root of a nation, disregarding respect for religious family values. The physicians are there to save lives. However, in this case of feticide, they did not follow their oath.

In the most developed countries like Russian Federation (1165), France (1056), Japan (1054), USA (1026), the sex ratio is much higher than at the international level (984). Sex ratio in India is just 940 whereas in Punjab, sex ratio is merely 846. The inhabitants of Punjab, who pioneered the green revolution in the last century, are now heading for a devastating economic and social fall out in the near future due to sharply declining (882 in 1991; 874 in 2001) sex ratio. The reason of 'son-mania' appears to be the socio-cultural, economic and political ones. Among others, the predominant cause is the agrarian set-up associated with the ownership of land and the social infrastructure sustained by Punjabi's that accords a low status to women.

A serious imbalance in the gender ratio is a disturbing phenomenon. It is an indication that the practices of female feticide and infanticide is still prevailing in Punjab in general and among the Sikhs in particular in spite of the fact that it is against the Sikh religious philosophy and ethics. Sex ratio is the lowest in Sikhs among various religious communities in India. Sex ratio among Sikhs is 893 as compared to sex ratio 933 at the national level in 2001 census.

Punjab has the lowest female sex ratio in the country, which keeps dipping each year. A growing shortage of marriageable girls has forced men here to scout for partners in different cultures and places as diverse and distant as Assam, Orissa and Jharkhand. It is known that around 60% of young boys in the state have become drug addicts and are a liability for their parents. Yet the desire for 'boy only' refuses to wane. Evidence is also mounting that skewed sex ratios, combined with the traditional low status of Indian women, is beginning to have an effect on traditional concepts of the family. Marriage patterns themselves may undergo a change as cultural practices such as polyandry and exchange marriages reappear in some states. For example, there is anecdotal evidence that in rural Punjab and Haryana, polyandrous unions are occurring where one woman, often 'purchased' from poorer regions or from lower castes, is forced to be 'wife' not only to her husband, but also to his brothers. These women inhabit the very lowest rungs of the family hierarchy and are at the risk of emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

In the present day scenario, Sikh vision of women liberation and gender equality is extremely relevant. Five hundred years ago, Sikhism gave a new, revolutionary and dynamic vision of gender equality. The Sikh Gurus envisioned a just social order in which women get social equality, equal opportunities and dignity. Sikh Gurus in their Divine hymns elevated the status of women in the society. They repudiated the long-standing misogynistic and parochial social mindsets and value patterns, which had caused serious harm to the position of women in all spheres of life. Sikhism emerged as a liberator and emancipator of women in the Medieval Indian society. Sikh Gurus provided her equal rights in socio-religious and politico-economic spheres and made every possible attempt to empower her to face every threat to her self-esteem. Soon after the end of Guru Period, the Sikhs in gradual process failed to remember the teachings of their Gurus. It is the collective failure of Sikh community that instead of enlightening the humankind with their way of living based on Sikh socio-spiritual doctrines, they contributed in emergence of social crisis in form of declining sex ratio. The sharp decline in sex ratio at the international, national and state level indicates that the people either have deviated from the righteous path as shown to them by Guru Nanak and His successors Sikh Gurus or they had not understand the eternal message of gender equality as enshrined in Shri Guru Granth Sahib.

In this direction, Sikhism has important role to play. In Sikhism, there are glorious traditions of gender justice. Sikh Gurus are the guardian of women rights. Their ideology is a beacon light for those who strive for women liberation and protection of girl child. Sikh Gurus enabled the women to excel and prove her capability, talent and worth in the society. Sikh religious institutions can play pivotal role in ameliorating the conditions of women. The institution of Sangat-Pangat, Gurudawara and Dasvandh can be helpful in improving the status of women. In religious gatherings the socio-religious leaders can avail opportunity to highlight the problem of declining gender ratio. Sikhs are required to contribute (Dasvandh) generously at the time of marriage of girls belonging to economically deprived sections to lessen the economic burden of marriages in the present scenario. In order to check the declining gender ratio there is immense need to restrain the growing criminal tendencies towards women, to protect her dignity and speedy trial in cases involving dowry deaths, rape and sexual harassment etc. Crime free society can ensure reasonable sex ratio because when parent are confident and positive regarding married life of their daughters, future and security of their girls at work places, they will never think of female feticide.

To conclude, we can say that to protect the rights and dignity of women there is need to reshape the social behavior and value pattern in the light of teachings of Sikh Gurus to enable womenfolk to play her role as co-equal partner of man. Any transgression of women rights must be considered as illegal as well as immoral, unethical and irreligious also. Sikh socio-spiritual and ethical values have significant role to play in times to come in order to protect and promote the cause of Women.

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