

# EGALITARIAN HERMENEUTICS FROM THE *BANI* OF GURU NANAK: HIS ATTITUDES TOWARDS CASTE AND FEMALES

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## ABSTRACT

*Attitudes towards the lower castes and women in the society in which Guru Nanak lived were often quite demeaning. Guru Nanak's Bani (philosophy) offers a profound insight into his revolutionary uniqueness of mind in which he endeavoured to promote an egalitarian society. In his ideology, all human beings were on a par with one another, regardless of caste, religion or gender. Women in the period of Guru Nanak were very often seen as a source of pollution, and the ascetic, in particular, viewed them as evil seductresses. Women were denied an education and refused permission to read the Vedas. Guru Nanak condemned views that led to the justification of celibacy amongst ascetics. He emphasized the grihast stage in which the householder had an equal opportunity to achieve mukti as compared to the sannyasin who had renounced the world in search of spirituality. Guru Nanak emphatically voiced that females could not possibly be inferior to men, since it is from woman that man takes birth (AGGS, M 1, p 473). In his stance towards an egalitarian society, Guru Nanak also rejected the notion of ritual pollution (and conversely ritual purity) associated with the caste of one's birth. This paper will explore and discuss the uniqueness of Guru Nanak's philosophy with regard to the social and religious betterment of women and the lower castes in Fifteen- and Sixteen-century Punjab.*

## INTRODUCTION

Repeatedly, in his teachings, Guru Nanak emphasized that the essence of the Divine is imminent in the hearts of all human beings, this in turn entailed that all human beings are equal. Thus, Guru Nanak rejected the discrimination towards the lower castes and women, which had been so vehemently expressed through *Manusmriti* (the religious law books which sanctioned such prejudice towards women and the lower castes). In standing by his beliefs, Guru Nanak himself refused to undergo the *Upanayam* (sacred thread rite) ceremony which would result in his privileged 'spiritual rebirth' as a member of the *dvija* classes. The Bani of the succeeding Gurus supports the uniqueness portrayed by Guru Nanak in elevating the position of the lower castes and women by encouraging institutions such as *langar* (free kitchen), widow remarriage and the education of females. Although, scholars have argued that Guru Nanak may have been an heir of the Northern Sant tradition, I will explore the originality of his egalitarian teachings in an endeavour to attempt to provide some considerations as to why Guru Nanak attempted to reform the society of his day in such a revolutionary way. I will attempt to address the challenges that Guru Nanak may have faced in putting his insurgent ideas into practice as a social reformer.



## THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MILIEU OF SOCIETY IN FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURY PUNJAB

In order to assess the egalitarian nature of the Bani of Guru Nanak, it is necessary to gain an insight of the society in which he was a contemporary. This will lead to some important considerations in the present discussion about the originality of his thought in relation to the egalitarian hermeneutics of his hymns as found in the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS). In terms of the

major religious traditions, one must take into account that, as a Hindu of the *dvija* classes, Guru Nanak would have been educated in the scriptures of the Hindu faith and would thus be aware of the major concepts contained within its many belief systems from the monistic Upanishads to the emphasis on *bhakti* in religious texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. There were many other traditions prevalent in the Punjab of Guru Nanak's time. In addition to the many *bhakti*, *Sant* and yogic movements (such as the *Naths*), Hinduism and Islam were the two dominant religious traditions in India. Guru Nanak's approach was different to the leaders of the many *bhakti* cults since they remained Hindu in their outlook without crossing the borders of their faith [4, p 26]. This prevented such movements from attracting and retaining the followers that Guru Nanak managed to reach out to.

Additionally, the Jains were not represented in any significant numbers in the Punjab and were thus equated within the wider following of the many facets of Hinduism. Buddhism, again, was merely present visibly at this time in the Punjab [29, p 3].

Islam had been present for many centuries in the Punjab by the fifteenth century. Wazir Singh is of the opinion that the Mughul Empire was firmly established in India during the lifetime of Guru Nanak [35, p 2]. Thus, Islam was not, by the fifteenth century, necessarily viewed as the faith of the foreigner but rather a way of life for many non-Hindus. Guru Nanak's close companion Mardana was of the Muslim *mirasi zat*. The persecution of non-Muslims was widely practised in Guru Nanak's lifetime; he had witnessed for himself, in 1521 CE, the harsh treatment of non-Muslims by the Mughal invaders [11, p 31]. This is evidenced through the emotional lament that Guru Nanak illustrates in his following hymn:

ਖੁਰਾਸਾਨ ਖਸਮਾਨਾ ਕੀਆ ਹਿੰਦੁਸਤਾਨੁ ਡਰਾਇਆ ॥

ਆਪੈ ਦੇਸੁ ਨ ਦੇਈ ਕਰਤਾ ਜਮੁ ਕਰਿ ਮੁਗਲੁ ਚੜਾਇਆ ॥

ਏਤੀ ਮਾਰ ਪਈ ਕਰਲਾਣੇ ਤੈ ਕੀ ਦਰਦੁ ਨ ਆਇਆ ॥੧॥ [1]

*Having conquered Khurasan, Babar has terrified Hindustan.*

*The Creator takes not the blame on Himself and has sent the Mughal as Death's myrmidon.*

*So much beating was inflicted that people shrieked.*

*Didst not Thou, O God, feel compassion?*

(AGGS, M1, p 360)

The mental effect of having been taken as a captive at Sayyidpur left a significant mark on a number of Guru Nanak's compositions [11, p 32]. Guru Nanak witnessed the harsh treatment of women as slaves under Babar's commands, according to Gupta:

*"The town was looted and then destroyed by fire. Nanak and Lalo were forced to carry heavy loads of looted property on their heads to the camp and then compelled to grind corn... The barbarous treatment of prisoners in the camp, particularly of women, broke the tender heart of Nanak."*

In light of the experiences of Guru Nanak at Sayyidpur, his attitude towards the position of women in the society of his day can be empathised with. Having seen this harsh treatment Guru Nanak, in his hymns, accentuated the equality of women with men. His revolutionary attitudes towards elevating the position of women was unique in the sense that he endeavoured to improve the plight of women both *spiritually* and *socially* on an everyday level. The political tensions that were prevailing between the followers of Hinduism and Islam in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were occupying the psyche of many reformers in India. This was particularly true of the influential reformers who associated with the *bhakti* movement [11, p 35]. Punjabi society displayed vibrancy in its variety of Hindu and Muslim ways of life, in addition new systems of belief were "adding to the richness of that variety which, at any rate, had antecedents in a near or distant past" [10, p 62]. Guru Nanak was not a reformer, but the founder of what subsequently formalized new philosophy (Sikhi) for the humanity, which developed as a Sikh faith (Sikhism). This is because he did not attempt a reconciliation of present society but sought new ways and taught new ideals of an egalitarian society.

The importance attached to *bhakti* in the teachings of Guru Nanak needs to be considered in order to assess the originality of his thought. In line with the religious renaissance taking place in Europe, India too was having its own revival with the *bhakti* movement being emphatically heightened, it "was an epoch-making period during which Guru Nanak was born and lived" [11, p 26]. The influence of the *bhakti* movement on the Sikh Gurus, and in turn, their own contribution to the *bhakti* tradition has been discussed at length by Darshan Singh [26] and Taran Singh [33]. It is particularly relevant that in line with the *bhakti* tradition, Guru Nanak emphasized that God was available for all to worship – regardless of caste or gender. Thus, both the lower castes and women were encouraged to work towards their salvation through a personal relationship with God as expressed through the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and the teachings of the *Bhagat Bani* as contained in the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib*. It has been suggested by a number of scholars that the influence of *bhakti* as expressed through the Northern *Sant* tradition made a pronounced impression on the thought of Guru Nanak. The *bhakti* of the Northern Sants was directed towards the *nirguna* aspect of the Divine, this being in sharp

contrast to the *saguna bhakti* of the Vaishnavite *Sants*. For a further discussion of the possible influence of the Northern *Sant* tradition on the thought of Guru Nanak see Takhar [37, p 38 & 111-12]; also Schomer, K. and McLeod, W. H. [25, pp 229 – 263].

This, however, brings into question the uniqueness of the philosophy of Guru Nanak in respect to *bhakti* as a vehicle for the salvation of *all* human beings. If Guru Nanak's philosophy was a mere rehash of the Northern *bhakti* tradition then why did *bhagats* fail to gain the significant audiences and subsequent 'followers'? Guru Nanak's message of social reform through simplicity touched the sentiments of his followers. His emphasis on the practical (in addition to spiritual) equality on the basis of gender and class, indicate the *sui generis* of his thought. Principal Gurbachan Singh Talib aptly remarks that:

*“What Guru Nanak did was to bring into operation the eclectic process and leaving aside the welter of creeds and sub-creeds prevalent in India, give voice to the pure essence of man's urge for the realisation of the Infinite, the Absolute, for the guidance of the vast Indian humanity which was enveloped in the darkness of illusion, strife and superstition.”* [38, p 67].

Before discussing the egalitarian hermeneutics of Guru Nanak's *Bani* in relation to his attitude towards females and caste distinctions, it is necessary to cite the dictionary definition of 'egalitarian' as '*relating to (person) holding, the principle of equal rights etc. for all persons*' (The Concise Oxford Dictionary). It is the principle of equal rights and spiritual opportunities for each and every human being that makes Guru Nanak's philosophy revolutionary, solitary and unique in its all-encompassing outlook. The *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* is testimony to the egalitarian outlook of the Sikh Gurus due to the inclusion of the teachings of lower caste Hindu and Muslim *bhagats* alongside those of the Sikh Gurus. It is clear that Guru Nanak had collected the *Bhagat Bani* due to its similar approach of the metaphysical sphere to that of his own. This does not mean however, that the originality of his thought is compromised, rather "the religion of Guru Nanak is neither a one-dimensional continuation nor a complete break with the past. In its metaphysical aspects, it is not derivative or syncretism but original" [14, p 12]. Guru Nanak, fittingly, challenged many of the evils of inequality in the society in which he lived. In this sense, he can be viewed as a social reformer on the basis of his philosophy towards women and the lower castes [35, p 185]. What Guru Nanak wanted was a radical change in one's attitude to the vulnerable groups in society. Through the *Bani* of Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus, caste and gender parity entail the ultimate recognition of the divine light, *jot*, in all human beings:

ਸਭ ਮਹਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਹੈ ਸੋਇ ॥

ਤਿਸ ਦੈ ਚਾਨਣਿ ਸਭ ਮਹਿ ਚਾਨਣੁ ਹੋਇ ॥

ਗੁਰ ਸਾਖੀ ਜੋਤਿ ਪਰਗਟੁ ਹੋਇ ॥

*Amongst all there is light and that light (art Thou).*

*By His light, the light shines within all the souls.*

*By the Guru's teaching the Divine light becomes manifest.*

(AGGS, M 1, p 13).

The practical application of this philosophy was expressed through the practice of the *langar*. Thus, Guru Nanak "revolutionized Indian social and religious thought" [30, p 260]. Although, the eating together of food through the *langar* ideal was already being practiced by the Yogis, Guru Nanak put his own stance on it by abolishing the criterion of caste hierarchy whereby the proportion of food was indicative of one's social standing [30, p 248].

The stage of the householder, that of the *grihast*, further enabled Guru Nanak to express his philosophical ideals on the practical level. He discouraged the *sanyaasi* stage whereby the male would break all family relationship bonds, leaving behind his wife to fend for herself in her role as the 'temptress' in his path towards salvation. Guru Nanak's philosophy, in this respect, encouraged the continuation of the relationship between man and wife in their joined pursuit towards *their* salvation. The practice of *Naam Simran* through the life of a householder further promoted the family life and further denounced the elevated position of the *Brahmin* amongst the followers of the Sikh Gurus. The practice of *Naam Simran* refuted the need for the Sanskritic Hindu scriptures to be translated to the common human being. Each individual took responsibility for their own salvation: without the need of intermediaries. This is where the uniqueness of Guru Nanak's way of life excelled. Dr Bhai Jodh Singh indicates:

*“Guru Nanak was not a recluse who minded his own salvation only. He wanted common men to lead a real spiritual life and combine themselves in a social pattern which will give rise to toleration for the views of others and a general desire to work for the welfare of the whole human kind.”* [31, p 4].

### Teachings Relating To Caste in the Hymns of Guru Nanak

There is a pronounced clamour against caste based discrimination in the teachings of the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib*. Therefore, in principle, Sikhism is, indeed, an egalitarian faith. The question of whether caste based discrimination is practised amongst Sikhs today is an area that has caused much debate and has been covered elsewhere through a detailed study of the Valmiki and

Ravidasi communities [37, pp 89-157]. Although on a spiritual level, the *Bani* of Guru Nanak and all succeeding Gurus is very much against the notion of ritual purity and conversely ritual pollution through one's birth, the eradication of the caste system, *per se*, from society, is open to many interpretations and scholarly opinions. Banerjee considers that the "complete elimination of a system which had been the basis of Hindu social organization for many centuries was extremely difficult, if not impossible; but orthodoxy could hardly resist a breach in the citadel" [4, p 83]. Talib highlights Guru Nanak's emphasis on the practical application of the ideal egalitarian society:

*"He denounced the injustice and inhumanity of caste which had given divine sanction to the degradation and humiliation irretrievably of vast sections of mankind; and which furthermore conferred the status of sanctity and superiority on others through a sheer accident of birth."* [38, p 67].

Repeatedly, Guru Nanak is out rightly emphatic in his teachings that caste differences have no bearing on an individual's right to be able to worship God, he teaches:

ਜਾਤੀ ਦੈ ਕਿਆ ਹਥਿ ਸਚੁ ਪਰਖੀਐ ॥

ਮਹੁਰਾ ਹੋਵੈ ਹਥਿ ਮਰੀਐ ਚਖੀਐ ॥

*What is in the power of caste?*

*Righteousness is to be assayed.*

*High caste pride is like poison by holding in hand and eating which, the man dies.*

(AGGS, M 1, p 142).

Guru Nanak's rejection of caste on a spiritual level is highlighted further in his following words:

ਜਾਣਹੁ ਜੋਤਿ ਨ ਪੁਛਹੁ ਜਾਤੀ ਆਗੈ ਜਾਤਿ ਨ ਹੇ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

*Recognise Lord's light within all and inquire not the caste, as there is no caste in the next world.* (AGGS, M 1, p 349).

The uniqueness of Guru Nanak's approach in tackling caste distinctions went beyond just the spiritual domain, as was the case with regard to the anti-caste attitudes of the *Bhagats*. For the *Bhagats*, their teachings related more so to equal access to the afterlife for all castes, whereas, Guru Nanak openly mingled with the lower castes and promoted the ideals of the *langar* system, thus, a rejection of caste distinctions on the practical level too.

There are abundant narratives in popular Sikh tradition illustrating how Guru Nanak openly associated and ate with the lower classes (for example, the story of Lalo and Malik Bhago). As a *dvija* Hindu himself, this would have caused great anxiety to onlookers. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the origins and practice of the caste system in India, as well as the plight of 'untouchables' in India [7, 9 & 19]. Flood examines a

number of theories relating to the origin of the *Candala* caste (lower or scheduled/untouchable castes) as a product of mixed caste marriages [8, pp 58-61]. Lynch [18] has undertaken a detailed study into the plight of the Scheduled Classes in India. Weber's theories relating to the origins of the former 'untouchables' can be found in Bendix [6]. It is clear, therefore, that there are many contrasting theories put forward by scholars as to the origins of the 'untouchable' strata of society. Some stipulate the possibility of inter-caste marriages, while others put forward theories of tribal origin prior to Aryan invasion [5 & 18]. Religious sanction for the harsh treatment towards the lower castes is vehemently voiced in the *Laws of Manu*, this ancient Hindu text is regarded the authority and justification for caste based discrimination [22, p 28] and has perpetrated into Indian society as a whole, the Punjab being no exception.

Guru Nanak's rejection of caste based discrimination was not confined to his philosophical outlook alone: it was expressed on the everyday practical level. One such important account relates to his reaching the age of eleven [27, p 76] where he was required, as a member of the top three classes, to undergo the sacred thread (*janeu*) ceremony: his *Upanayam*. This would symbolize his spiritual birth as an advantaged member of the *dvija*, the 'twice-born' classes. The family priest, Pandit Hardy, was unexpectedly faced by Nanak's rejection of wearing the *janeu* and is questioned about the relevance of a thread around the body that was symbolically intended to indicate superiority over the non-*dvija* castes. Upon this occasion, Harbans Singh quotes the following words of the child Nanak:

*"How can you differentiate between men by such badges? It is their actions that should categorize them. I will not take a badge like this. Besides this thread will get soiled and break."* said Nanak. [27, p 77].

This very important occasion in the life of Guru Nanak early life has also been highlighted by Anand:

*"Pandit Hardy stood up and, addressing Nanak, said, 'It is a great day for you. I am investing you with the sacred thread, so you may join the company of twice-born people.' 'I am sorry I cannot accept it Panditji, I do not understand how a few strings of cotton thread can make me twice-born?'...Nanak remained unperturbed. He looked straight at Hardy and spoke in a sharp, clear voice, 'What I need is a janaeu for the soul... If you permit me, sir, I will recite a poem which I composed while I was sitting on the roof ruminating over the Janaeu ceremony'"* [2, p 20].

The *Bani* of Guru Nanak is further evidence that he challenged the attitude towards caste superiority which went hand-in-hand with the *janeu*:

ਦਇਆ ਕਪਾਹ ਸੰਤੋਖੁ ਸੂਤੁ ਜਤੁ ਗੰਢੀ ਸਤੁ ਵਟੁ ॥

ਏਹੁ ਜਨੇਉ ਜੀਅ ਕਾ ਹਈ ਤ ਪਾਡੇ ਘਤੁ ॥

*Make compassion the cotton, contentment the thread, continence the knot and truth the twist.*

*This is the sacred thread of the soul and if thou hast it, O Brahman, then put it on me.*

(AGGS, M 1, p 471).

Guru Nanak's outcry against the ill treatment of individuals, based on their birth into a particular caste, was disparate from the social reformers whom preceded him and those of whom were his contemporaries. Social reform for the lower castes had been initiated by individuals long before Guru Nanak's birth. The influence of these reforms suggests that Guru Nanak was aware of such attempts if one takes into account his rejection of wearing the *janeu*. This could have stimulated his courageous attitude as a child to confront caste distinctions in his own actions. Banerjee makes the point that:

*"In studying Guru Nanak's attitude to the caste system we cannot ignore the background created by the teachings of reformers like Ramananda and Kabir, nor can we overlook the influence of Islam which had been an active force in the socio-religious set-up in the Punjab for several centuries. Possibly, the teachings of Ramananda and Kabir had little direct effect on the development of his ideas; but they had released forces of liberalism which must have penetrated into the Punjab"*

[4, p 48].

Whether or not Banerjee's words are to be taken as speculative assumptions, what is clear is that Guru Nanak, from a very early age, was much aware of the hardships faced by the lower castes as a consequence of their social immobility. His aim was unique in the sense that he endeavoured both practically and spiritually to remove the obstacles associated with the stigma of untouchability. His open association with the lower castes illustrates very well that he challenged the practical level of ritual pollution, rather than merely on a spiritual tangent. His following composition illustrates that his approach to the social system of Indian society was, indeed revolutionary when one bears in mind the likely opposition he would have faced from the higher caste insistence on 'purity preserving' boundaries:

ਅਗੈ ਜਾਤਿ ਨ ਜੋਰੁ ਹੈ ਅਗੈ ਜੀਉ ਨਵੈ ॥

*In the next world, caste and power count not; hereafter, the mortal has to deal with the new beings.*

(AGGS, M 1, p 469).

Guru Nanak emphasised good deeds and the realization of the Divine within. This alone determined one's condition at the end of this life, the soul's journey in the hereafter is reliant on *karam* and not *jati*:

ਜਾਤਿ ਜਨਮੁ ਨਹ ਪੁਛੀਐ ਸਚ ਘਰੁ ਲੇਹੁ ਬਤਾਇ ॥

ਸਾ ਜਾਤਿ ਸਾ ਪਤਿ ਹੈ ਜੇਹੇ ਕਰਮ ਕਮਾਇ ॥

The Lord asks not mortals caste and birth, so, find thou out the Lord's True Home.

That alone is man's caste and that his glory, as are the deeds, which he does.

(AGGS, M 1, p 1330).

Within Guru Nanak's philosophy, is embedded the notion of the immanence of the Divine in all human hearts. This meant that for Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus all individuals have the potential to work towards their liberation, ultimately however, the result rests with God. This disposition, as expressed on both a spiritual and practical level, is evident through the inclusion of the Bhagat Bani in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib. Thus the teachings of the Gurus are accessible by all, regardless of their caste, gender or religious affiliation. The egalitarian outlook of Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus was markedly unique to the prevalent attitude in Hindu society that resulted in the lower classes not being able to publically worship the Divine and were barred from entry to religious places of worship, "tyranny was let loose on the lower classes and social inequality became a fiercely felt phenomenon" [30, p 244]. According to Flood [8, p 58] the dvija classes alone, in accordance with Manusmriti were entitled to hear the Vedas. The punishment, according to Manusmriti, for having heard the sacred words of scripture was to have molten lead poured into the ears of the Shudra [23, p 186]. Thus, Guru Nanak rejected the attitude of caste supremacy and emphasized that all individuals, regardless of caste or gender, were entitled to listen to the Bani and make use of the 'golden opportunity' of birth into the human realm in order to reach God. Guru Nanak portrayed the all-embracing nature of his Bani:

ਨਾਨਕੁ ਤਿਨ ਕੈ ਸੰਗਿ ਸਾਥਿ ਵਡਿਆ ਸਿਉ ਕਿਆ ਰੀਸ ॥

*Nanak seeks the company of those who are of low caste among the lowly, nay rather the lowest of the low. Why should he (he has no desire to) rival the lofty.*

(AGGS, M 1, p 15).

Guru Arjan further continued Guru Nanak's vision of a society in which one's caste had no bearing on one's eligibility for worshipping God. According to the teachings of Guru Nanak, good actions and not birth determines a good person. He writes:

ਜਾਤਿ ਜਨਮ ਕੁਲ ਖੇਈਐ ਹਉ ਗਾਵਉ ਹਰਿ ਹਰੀ ॥੧॥

I have lost my caste, birth and lineage and sing the praise of my Lord God.

(AGGS, M 5, p 1230).

The replacement of unnecessary rituals, pertaining to one's caste, prevalent in society by the practice of Nam Simran was emphasized by all Sikh Gurus:

ਵਰਨ ਚਿਹਨ ਸਗਲਹ ਤੇ ਰਹਤਾ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਹਰਿ ਹਰਿ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਜੋ ਕਹਤਾ ॥੪੬॥

He rises above all caste and caste-marks.

O Nanak, who under Guru's instruction, utters God's Name.

(AGGS, M 5, p 259-60).

ਦੇਹੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਨ ਆਗੈ ਜਾਏ ॥

ਜਿਥੈ ਲੇਖਾ ਮੰਗੀਐ ਤਿਥੈ ਛੁਟੈ ਸਚੁ ਕਮਾਏ ॥

ਸਤਿਗੁਰੁ ਸੇਵਨਿ ਸੇ ਧਨਵੰਤੋ ਐਥੈ ਓਥੈ ਨਾਮਿ ਸਮਾਵਣਿਆ ॥੩॥

Man's body and caste shall not go to the next world.

Where the account is called, there shall he be delivered by the practice of Truth.

They, who serve the True Guru, are wealthy.

Here and hereafter they remain absorbed in the God's Name.

(AGGS, M 3, p 112).

In his endeavour to eradicate the supremacy which resulted in the Brahmin being placed on a pedestal, Guru Nanak and his successors taught in the vernacular. Thus, this made the intermediary role of the Brahmin as the translator and officiator unnecessary. Guru Nanak's language of communication was meant for the social uplift of the common man [14, p 21].

The Hindu and Muslim Sants too, were concerned about the plight of the lower castes and emphasized Naam Simran on the essence of the Divine within all beings – this was within the reach of every individual and required no intermediaries such as the Brahmin to perform rituals on one's behalf.

Although the revolutionary words of the Bhagats, as contained in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, were revolutionary for their times, they did not achieve the practical applications of their teachings by way of followers to the same level as Guru Nanak. This could be due to the fact that:

“Many of them had come from the so-called lower castes. These revered Bhaktas inspired many to shatter the dogmas of worship and practical life yet they almost failed to bring about any fruitful change in the caste system...Guru Nanak's voice was not a voice from without for society. Unmindful of the fact that he himself belonged to a higher caste (Khatra), he chose from the very beginning of his life, his life-long companion Mardana

who not only belonged to a lower caste (Mirasi) but was also a Muslim” [30, p 247].

Guru Nanak's unique hallmark on the already present practice of langar ensured that his philosophy of parity was put into practice in everyday behaviour amongst those who followed his teachings. Rules of commensality went hand in hand with the promotion of caste distinctions in Hindu society where different castes were not allowed to eat together. Thus the langar, which today is a visible feature of the egalitarian ideals of the Gurus' Bani, deliberately set out to challenge the ill treatment of lower castes meted out by the stigma of untouchability. Banerjee views the langar as an indication of the extent of Guru Nanak's endeavour to reform the inequalities of caste-based society:

“All those who came to take their food in the Langar had to take it together, irrespective of caste or creed. It was a direct blow at the caste system. It was also a direct incentive to the promotion of fraternity and social solidarity. Here we see how ideas propounded of Guru Nanak primarily from the spiritual point of view contributed to social reform” [4, p 51].

Thus, for Guru Nanak the “spiritual experience transforms man into an ideal man viz., Gurmukh or Brahmgyani. In this way spiritual orientation leads to social orientation” [3, p 87]. Guru Nanak rejected the notion that one's social status and indeed, position in society, depended on the caste of their birth. It is this notion that was also expressed practically in the creation of the Khalsa. Masses of lower castes, at that period referred to as the chamars and chuhars converted to Sikhism. Today these two castes have their own identity as Valmiki and Ravidasis respectfully – they are neither Hindus nor Sikhs. Jhutti-Johal makes it very clear that Gurbani emphasizes the spiritual enlightenment for all, regardless of caste, creed or gender [13, p 235].

Dr Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, in his endeavour towards improving the plight of the Dalits in Indian society, also looked at Sikhism as a possible means of improving the social status of the former 'untouchables'. To his disappointment however, there was a huge discrepancy in the philosophy and the actual practices of the Sikhs. Ambedkar found that as a Dalit, he could never shake-off the stigma attached to untouchability even in the apparently 'caste-free' Sikh society. He eventually urged the Dalits to adopt Buddhism as the one true way of life where an individual's caste had no bearing on their social status. To what extent this is successful however, is debatable. The Punjab Buddhist Society in the UK is indeed thriving currently due to its emphasis on equality for all. A recent conference on caste in Southall, London, urged

the importance of recognizing that caste discrimination is taking place amongst Sikhs. Accepting it is a problem is the first step in providing solutions.

Had the Sikhs maintained the function of *Langar* in its real perspective to eliminate the caste system then alienation of low caste Sikhs could have been prevented. Had the lower caste Sikhs not been labeled as ‘Mazhabi Sikhs’ ‘Adivasi Sikhs’, then also the stigma of untouchability could have been removed from the apparently egalitarian *Panth*. Unfortunately, one cannot escape the fact that a significant proportion of Gurdwaras, both in India and the diaspora, have become associated with particular caste membership. Had *Gurbani* been stringently followed, then there would not exist any Ravidasia Gurdwaras or Ramgarhia Gurdwara or any other sectarian type of Gurdwara (like a Gurdwara for non-kesadhari Sikhs). Importantly however, *Gurdwaras* in the United Kingdom such as the Singh Sabha in Southall, are actively promoting marriages amongst Sikhs in which caste has no relevance. This is a remarkable attempt of going against the ‘norms’ amongst the Contemporary *Panth* where an inter-caste marriage is often seen as a defilement of one’s family honour (*izzat*).

#### Attitudes towards Gender Equality in the Teachings of Guru Nanak

Guru Nanak’s vision of an egalitarian society was considerate in its emphasis on the position of women as equal to men. The *Bani* of the Gurus is replete with teachings that aimed to put females on a par with males in the truly revolutionary attitude that *all* human beings have the immanence of the Divine essence. Predominant Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Muslim attitudes in the socio-religious milieu of Guru Nanak very often devalued the contribution that a woman made to society at large. Conversely, in many Hindu, Buddhist and Jain strands of thinking, she was viewed as a seductress. The male, in order to have a better chance of his salvation and enlightenment at the end of this life needed to be free of the temptations that being in the company of a woman could present. However, for Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus, the male, instead of renouncing the world for the *sannyasi* stage of life, “could progress spiritually [as a *grihasti*/householder] even when engaged in worldly activities” [31, p 24]. The importance of the *grihast* stage, in the *Bani* of all the Sikh Gurus gave the female a function in the ideal society. In the words of Banerjee “*The degraded position of women among both Hindus and Muslims of Guru Nanak’s day weakened family life and sapped the vitality of society as a whole*” [4, p 85]. Thus Guru Nanak, in his all-encompassing attitude of every human being, repeatedly emphasised the importance of the *grihast* stage of life. Guru Ramdas, in continuing the ideals sought by Guru Nanak, taught that God was available to all those who sought union with the Divine:

ਗੁਰਮਤੀ ਕਾਲੁ ਨ ਆਵੈ ਨੇੜੈ ਜਾ ਹੋਵੈ ਦਾਸਨਿ ਦਾਸਾ ॥

ਸਚਾ ਸਬਦੁ ਸਚੁ ਮਨਿ ਘਰ ਹੀ ਮਾਹਿ ਉਦਾਸਾ ॥

The translation of the above *Shabd* could be:

“according to *Gurmat-teachings of the Guru*, neither worldly entrapments entice the human nor one has to become a slave of slaves (*Yogic-Sidhanta*).

*Realizing the True Shabd and internalising it as the Truth, one can be stoic at home*”.

AGGS, M 1, p 140.

The importance of the *grihast* stage challenged the ascetic and monastic traditions in which women are viewed harshly [14, p 8]. It is pertinent to note that, although there existed in the socio-religious milieu of Guru Nanak very often the attitude towards a degrading position of women in society, this is not to be taken as indicative of Indian society as a whole. There were many other beliefs and practices where the position of the female as a Divine power, not to be contended with, was heralded. Thus, woman was not viewed as ‘evil’ in the psyche of *all* Indian thought. Within the Indian narrative, women like Gargi and Maitreyi were, and continue to be, revered as seers [30, p 259]. Furthermore, Singh[*ibid*] highlights that periods of Indian tradition, including the period of the Epics, illustrate the importance of ritual being performed with the co-operation on one’s wife, and “any aphoristic sayings which praise women may be found scattered here and there in ancient Indian religious literature” nevertheless, on a social scale, women generally tended to be regarded as inferior to men. For example, it is again in the Epics, that Darupati was lost to the Kaurovs in a bet by the Pandhuvas. The narratives relating to Lakshman in the *Ramayana* depict the suffering of Ravan’s sister who had her nose cut off by Lakshman. Later in the *Ramayana* is the ordeal faced by Sita, as ordered by her husband Rama, due to accusations on her chastity by a subject of the kingdom of Ayodhya. This does not indicate that the revering of women was as an outstanding ideal from the Epics.

Notions of ritual pollution associated with a menstruating woman, in both Hindu and Muslim thought, further indicated regular intervals when she was to be socially and religiously isolated from society. If a *Brahmin* male be touched by a menstruating woman, then according to *Manusmriti*, he must purify himself with a bath [8, p 61]. Although, it is clear that Guru Nanak endeavoured to improve the plight of women in Indian society, the Sikh Gurus’ attitude towards a menstruating woman’s participation in the religious sphere is not markedly apparent. However, the following hymn of Guru Nanak may shed some important light on

speaking out against any confinement period associated with the natural process of menstruation:

ਜੇ ਰਤੁ ਲਗੈ ਕਪੜੈ ਜਾਮਾ ਹੋਇ ਪਲੀਤੁ ॥

ਜੇ ਰਤੁ ਪੀਵਹਿ ਮਾਣਸਾ ਤਿਨ ਕਿਉ ਨਿਰਮਲੁ ਚੀਤੁ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਨਾਉ ਖੁਦਾਇ ਕਾ ਦਿਲਿ ਹਛੈ ਮੁਖਿ ਲੇਹੁ ॥

ਅਵਰਿ ਦਿਵਾਜੇ ਦੁਨੀ ਕੇ ਝੂਠੇ ਅਮਲ ਕਰੇਹੁ ॥੧॥

*If clothes be stained with blood, the garment gets polluted.  
Who suck the blood of human beings; how can their mind  
be pure?*

*Nanak, utter thou the Name of God, from your mouth with  
sincere heart.*

*Else are worldly ostentations, Man practises false deeds.  
(AGGS, M 1, p 140).*

In his metaphysical concept of the immanence of the Divine, Guru Nanak emphasized the total equality of male and female:

ਸੇ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨ ॥

ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੀ ਭੰਡੁ ਉਪਜੈ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਝੁ ਨ ਕੇਇ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਹਰਾ ਏਕੈ ਸਚਾ ਸੋਇ ॥

*Why call her bad, from whom are born the Kings?*

*From a woman, a woman is born.*

*Without a woman, there can be none.*

*Nanak, only the one True Lord, is without a woman.  
(AGGS, M 1, p 473).*

According to *Manusmriti*, a woman could not exert her freedom at any point in her life. It was Manu who stipulated the presence of a dominating male in all stages of a female's life in the role of the father (*pitah*), husband (*patti*) and son (*putra*), [8, p 66]. The ideals of the Sikh Gurus elevated the position of the female as one who is loved and cherished by her parents, her husband and her in-laws.

In his rejection of being invested with the *janeu*, was Guru Nanak's intention dual fold in the sense that he viewed the *Upanayam* ceremony as prejudice towards both the non-*dvija* classes and females? In the predominant Hindu attitude, a female from the top three Hindu classes (*Varna*) does not have a *janeu* to symbolize her spiritual rebirth. The implications of this suggest that only *dvija* males who were given their *janeu* were worthy of an opportunity to work towards their liberation. Again, consistent with his teachings about the immanence of the Divine in all human beings, Guru Nanak could not possibly undergo a ritual, in which inequalities associated with birth and gender were so determining in relation to social (and religious) status. The Gurus openly declare that the path towards liberation is open for all. Indeed, birth into the human realm is the 'golden opportunity' by which each and every human

being, no matter their neither caste nor gender, can work towards becoming a *Gurmukh*. The final release from transmigration is dependent on the *Hukm* alone. Thus, Guru Nanak's teachings placed woman on a par with man, "just as the *Sudra* was placed at par with the *Brahman*" [10, p 192].

The equality for both the sexes leads on to the notion within Sikhism that any individual, who can explain the philosophy of the Gurus, can lead the Sikh service. There is no 'priesthood' as such culminating from the teachings of Guru Nanak. In this respect, his 'social comment' was unique in that it removed the necessity of the *Brahmin* male as the intermediary between God and the individual. The *Bani* of Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus contains a vast number of metaphors in which the bride (depicted as humanity) seeks union with the Divine (often depicted as the groom) this signifies clearly that all are equal in their search for union with the Divine. The path is not open to males of the *dvija* classes alone. Thus Guru Nanak's ethereal approach was unique in his egalitarian outlook that entailed liberation for all. It is unfortunate however that the egalitarian ideals of Guru Nanak's philosophy have not always been expressed on the practical level by the Sikh community at large, and has opened the way for hypocrisy in terms of philosophy and actual practice within the *Panth*.

The time spent by Guru Nanak in captivity by Babar may have given rise to many of his efforts towards raising the position of woman on both a spiritual and practical level. His composition in AGGS poignantly expresses his heartache at the treatment of women in Sayyidpur following the invasion by Babar:

ਮੁਸਲਮਾਨੀਆ ਪੜਹਿ ਕਤੇਬਾ ਕਸਟ ਮਹਿ ਕਰਹਿ ਖੁਦਾਇ ਵੇ ਲਾਲੇ ॥

ਜਾਤਿ ਸਨਾਤੀ ਹੋਰਿ ਹਿਦਵਾਈਆ ਏਹਿ ਭੀ ਲੇਖੈ ਲਾਇ ਵੇ ਲਾਲੇ ॥

ਖੂਨ ਕੇ ਸੋਹਿਲੇ ਗਾਵੀਅਹਿ ਨਾਨਕ ਰਤੁ ਕਾ ਕੁੰਗੁ ਪਾਇ ਵੇ ਲਾਲੇ ॥੧॥

ਸਾਹਿਬ ਕੇ ਗੁਣ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਗਾਵੈ ਮਾਸ ਪੁਰੀ ਵਿਚਿ ਆਖੁ ਮਸੋਲਾ ॥

*The Muslim women read the Quran and in suffering call upon God, O Lalo.*

*The Hindu women of high caste and others of low caste, may also be put in the same account, O Lalo.*

*Nanak! The eulogies of murder are sung, and the saffron of blood is sprinkled, O Lalo.*

*Nanak sings the glories of the Lord in the city of corpses and mentions this affair.*

*(AGGS, M1, p 722-3).*

The above composition clearly demonstrates that the experiences from Sayyidpur left an ever-lasting effect on the psyche of Guru Nanak. This was, in turn, channelled through his teachings about the equality of females with



males. Furthermore, Guru Nanak's close relationship with his mother, sister and wife "must have raised his awareness about the tragic situation of women in his cultural milieu" [15, p 210]. The Siddhas and Naths in the socio-religious milieu of Guru Nanak "though they could not completely detach themselves from women, openly preached to abhor the woman as she was considered to be the source of many evils" [30, p 257]. For Guru Nanak, however, women were equally as important as men for the survival of humanity.

### **A Comparison of the Egalitarian Ideals of *Gurbani* and the Praxis amongst the *Panth***

Guru Nanak's teachings in relation to the position of the lower castes and women were unique in his repeated ideals of an egalitarian society. His attitude developed from the concept of the immanence of the Divine in *all* human beings, regardless of caste or gender. Unfortunately however, the contradictions between *Bani* and practices amongst the *Panth* cannot be overlooked. Incongruity between scriptural and practical notions of equality, are perhaps nowhere more evident than with the prejudice towards caste distinctions and women prevalent amongst the wider *Panth* in contemporary society. Caste based *Gurdwaras* are not following the *Bani* of Guru Nanak. *Gurdwaras* are to be open to all, regardless of one's caste. This is illustrated in the design of *Harmandir Sahib* which has four doors of entry.

Additionally, despite the egalitarian outlook of the Sikh Gurus, Sikh women today do not revel in the equality sought for them in philosophy. Attitudes towards the equality of females with males is not, unfortunately, a dominant feature within the *Panth*. In the words of Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh:

*What happened to the course of feminization begun by the Gurus? Five centuries after Guru Nanak, a clear reversal has taken place. The rituals that exist now are rituals of patriarchy, which have created a false consciousness* [15, p 214].

The *Panth* at large needs to adhere to and follow the principles of Guru Nanak's philosophy so that the Sikhs cannot be criticized for its discrepancies in terms of the dichotomy between philosophical ideals of *Gurbani* and practice. Although Guru Nanak emphasised gender equality, the alarming rate of female infanticide and foeticide practised by Sikhs is alarming. Son-preference amongst Sikhs cannot be ignored. The lyrics "*puttar mitte mevi, rabh sabh nu deveh*" devalues the status of a female baby. Sikhs are not to associate with those who murder their daughters. Despite the gift of *Gurbani*, female babies do not warrant the celebrations that a son brings. The rise in popularity, amongst many Sikhs, of gender-selection clinics further demonstrates that sons are preferred to

daughters, despite the teachings of Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus.

Anshu Malhotra has discussed the attitude that some daughters may be valued if they are the sister of many brothers. However, others are devalued if they are the third or fourth daughter for a family without sons [20, p 87]. Malhotra goes on to indicate that:

*The revelations of Sikh sex ratios have led intellectuals and journalists to highlight the contrast between the supposedly 'egalitarian' ideals of the Sikh community in relation to women and the degradation of their condition as indicated by the statistics.*

The inevitable clash between the Punjabi culture and the teachings of the Sikh Gurus may be responsible for many of the contradictions between faith and practice amongst the Sikhs. Although the ideals of Guru Nanak, as highlighted earlier, removed the necessity of a male priesthood in Sikhism, the very fact that women are debarred from performing *seva* at *Harmandir Sahib* indicates that there is a harsh contradiction of philosophy taking place in the very heart of *Sikhi*. The reasoning that the refusal is to keep with 'tradition' is not a satisfactory response. Guru Nanak himself spoke out against accepted norms of practice, for example, in his refusal to wear the *janeu*. Nevertheless, it is important to make the point that many Sikh women themselves prefer not to touch the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* or indeed, prepare *langar* when they are menstruating. They themselves are endorsing notions of ritual pollution associated with such natural processes. This may be an inevitable aspect of the Punjabi culture. The solitary nature of Guru Nanak's teachings aimed to challenge unequal social praxis. *Asa di Var* clearly illustrates that Guru Nanak placed no worth on rituals and the degrading position of women that was a feature of the society in which he lived. Thus, the *Panth* needs to readdress its goals by tuning in to the principles stipulated by its Gurus. The approach of Guru Nanak and that of his successors was the result of their revelation "in the light of their fresh and unique experiences and realistic knowledge of social, ethical, spiritual and political problems of humanity" [34, p 77].

Guru Nanak proclaimed that 'truth' or salvation is not contained within any religion. Guru Nanak's viewpoint is that all individuals belonged to the one race: the Human Race. It is incorrect to say that Guru Nanak attempted a synthesis of the 'best' of Islam and Hinduism; this would not give originality to his thought. His aspiration was for each individual to be a good human being: basing one's moral conduct on the essence of truth contained in their faith. Sikhism is thus a philosophy and a way of life. Guru Nanak wanted *all* human beings to be treated equally, regardless of the social status of one's birth or gender. Hence Guru

Gobind Singh's proclamation of '*manas ki jat sabh ik jane*' is as important today as it was during his lifetime and that of his predecessors. The ideal of egalitarianism in the teachings of the Gurus' (as beneficiaries of the *jot*) are firmly embedded in the notion that the Divine is manifest in the hearts of *all* individuals, and thus *all* individuals have the right to worship and seek God in their efforts to become *gurmukhs*. Thus, for Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus, *Naam Simran* is available for all to realize the immanence of God one's heart:

ਹਰਿ ਸਿਮਰਿ ਏਕੰਕਾਰੁ ਸਾਚਾ ਸਭੁ ਜਗਤੁ ਜਿੰਨਿ ਉਪਾਇਆ ॥

ਆਚਾਰਿ ਤੂ ਵੀਚਾਰਿ ਆਪੇ ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਸੰਜਮ ਜਪ ਤਪੇ ॥

*Meditate thou on the One True Lord, who has created the whole universe...*

*If thou meditate on the Lord's Name, thou shalt of thyself, have good conduct, self-discipline, worship and penance.*

(AGGS, M 1, 1113).

### CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from the *Bani* of Guru Nanak that in his endeavours to promote an egalitarian society, he aspired to raise the social and religious position of females and the lower castes. His endeavours however, were not confined to metaphysical concepts such as the afterlife. Rather, he practiced what he preached by overthrowing notions of inequality through his open association with the lower castes and his social comment and concern for females. Commentators have sometimes remarked that the efforts of Guru Nanak were to overthrow the discrimination of the caste system and not the social structure *per se*. The retention of endogamous rules amongst the Gurus and their offsprings as well as the *Panth* at large have also been criticized by scholars who have difficulty in perceiving the egalitarian nature of Sikhi. One has to bear in mind here that the mindset of the period was encountered with prejudice towards the lower castes and women; this was accompanied further by hostile relations between the Hindus and non-Hindus. The thinking of the Gurus aimed to balance these inequalities and notions in the societies of which they were contemporaries. It is unfortunate, that a significant number of Sikhs have, at times, failed to adhere to the principles of Sikhi by retaining the notions of ritual purity and pollution that the Gurus spoke out against so vehemently. Thus, it is emphasized that Sikhi is egalitarian in its outlook through the *Bani* of the Sikh Gurus. This leads to feelings of despair when Sikhi itself (rather than those Sikhs who retain the stigma attached to ritual pollution) is accused by such actions as the removal of the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* from the places of worship of the lower castes who converted to Sikhism in their masses following the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur. Similar paradoxes are taking place between philosophy and practice in light of the appalling ratios of male and female babies surviving in

the Punjab due to the evil practices of female foeticide and infanticide.

### Notes

1. There is an abundance of academically written material which discusses the socio-religious milieu of both the Punjab and India generally in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. See Kaur, Madanjit (ed) 1989; Grewal, J.S. 1998: 132 – 148; Oberoi, H. S. 1994: 39 – 42; McLeod, W. H. (1996 edn of 1968).
2. Translations into English have been taken from Manmohan Singh's eight Volumes on the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (1995 edn).
3. The following of Guru Ravidass is a recent phenomena and can be traced to the efforts of the *Ad Dharm* in the 1920's.
4. It is important to consider that although Guru Nanak rejected his *janeu*, Guru Hargobind was imprisoned for the religious liberty of the Hindu's rite to be able to wear his *janeu* and *tilak*.
5. See particularly Mooney's paper "Lowly Shoes on Lowly Feet" in Jakobsh (ed) 2010.
6. "Within a woman, the man is conceived and from a woman he is born. With a woman he is betrothed and married. With a woman, man contracts friendship and with a woman the system of propagation keeps on going." (AGGS, M1, p. 473).
7. Tradition holds that Bibi Nanaki became the first female follower of Guru Nanak.
8. The production of the Punjabi short film *Rooh da Dard* (2010) by Sovi Entertainments Kharar, highlights that female foeticide is a serious problem in Punjab, Haryana and other parts of India. This is a story of the soul of a female foetus that was aborted and returns to meet her brother. The soul wishes to confront the injustice inflicted on her as a female.
9. In a conversation with a male *giani* from the UK, I was told that in order for the *gianis* to be able to concentrate on religious matters, it is better for women not to be present in the early hours of the morning to perform *seva* at Harmandir Sahib. The female presence might necessitate the need to see to social matters relating to the protection of the women in the early hours of the morning. And besides, women tend not to be educated enough in the Punjab to be able to read *Gurmukhi* (as expressed by the *giani*).

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