

and reflected their inferior status". Of course Sikh men cannot wear veils either.

RESTRICTIONS ON CLOTHES

Apart from commanding women not to wear a veil, Sikhism makes a simple yet very important statement regarding dress code. This applies to all Sikhs regardless of gender. The Guru Granth Sahib states, *"Friend, all other wear ruins happiness, the wear that to the limbs is torment, and with foul thinking fills the mind"* (Guru Granth Sahib, p.16).

Thus, the individual Sikh knows what types of clothes fill the mind with evil thoughts and are commanded not to wear them. Apart from this all Sikhs (men and women) are to wear the 5 K's. This is unique for women because it is the first time in history when women were expected to defend themselves and others with their Kirpans (swords). They are not expected to be dependent on men for physical protection.

MENSTRUATION

A faith's view on menstruation is a good indicator of its tolerance towards women. Many faith's regard a menstruating woman to be unclean. But in Sikhism this is not the case. Certainly this cycle may have a physical and psychological effect on a woman, but this is not considered to be a hindrance to her wanting to pray or accomplish her religious duties fully. The Guru makes it clear that the menstruation cycle is a God given process and that the blood of a woman is required for the creation of any human being. The Guru Granth Sahib (p.1013) states, *"By coming together of mother and father are we created, by union of the mother's blood and the father's semen is the body made. To the Lord is the creature devoted, when hanging head downwards in the womb; He whom he contemplates, for him provides."*

Hence, the menstruation cycle is an essential, God given biological process. In some religions blood is also considered a pollutant. However the Guru rejects such superstitious ideas and says that those who are impure from within are the truly impure ones. The only item of Importance is meditating on the Name of God. Whether your clothes are blood stained or not (including clothes stained from men-

strual blood) is not of spiritual significance. Thus, there are no restrictions placed on a woman during her menstruation cycle. In the book, 'The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent', Nicky Guninder Kaur-Singh writes, *"The denigration of the female body expressed in many cultural and religious taboos surrounding menstruation and child birth is absent in the Sikh worldview...Guru Nanak openly chides those who attribute pollution to women because of menstruation"*.

SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIPS

Any married couple will have their ups and downs. Different religions and cultural traditions provide different solutions. The Guru Granth Sahib (p.143) states, *"Should brass, gold or iron be broken, the smith fuses it back together in the fire. Should the husband and wife have a break of relations. Through children are their bonds forged again. The ruler when making a demand, by a tax is calmed. The hungry, by food are satisfied. With rain and inundating rivers is famine lifted. In love through sweet speech comes reunion"*.

The Guru acknowledges that a relationship can become broken. However through their children, it is possible for a couple to find love again, and it is through love that they can overcome their difficulties.

CONCLUSION

The quotations given from the Guru Granth Sahib show without a doubt that the role of women in Sikhism is equal to that of men in all respects.

Role of Women in Sikhism

INTRODUCTION TO ROLE OF WOMEN IN SIKH-ISM

Women from all religions are increasingly enquiring about their role, position and importance as outlined by their religious scriptures. Here is a review of the beliefs held within the Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji (Guru Granth Sahib), the Sikh Holy Scripture.

SALVATION

An important point to raise is whether a religion considers women capable of achieving salvation, a realisation of God or the highest spiritual realm. The Guru Granth Sahib states, *"In all beings is the Lord pervasive, the Lord pervades all forms male and female"* (Guru Granth Sahib, p.605).

From the above it is clear that the light of God rests equally within both sexes. Both men and women can therefore attain salvation by obeying the Guru. In many religions, a woman is considered a hindrance to man's spirituality. The Guru rejects this. In 'Current Thoughts on Sikhism', Alice Basarke states, *"the first Guru put woman on a par with man... woman was not a hindrance to man, but a partner in serving God and seeking salvation"*.

EDUCATION

Education is considered very important in Sikhism. It is the key to anyone's success. It is personal development and it is the reason why the 3rd Guru set up many schools. The Guru Granth Sahib states, *"All divine knowledge and contemplation is obtained through the Guru"* (Guru Granth Sahib, p.831).

Education for all is essential and everyone must aim to be the best they can be. Fifty two of the Sikh missionaries sent out by the 3rd Guru were women. In, 'The Role and Status of Sikh Women', Dr Mohinder Kaur Gill writes, *"Guru Amar Das was convinced that no teachings can take root until and unless they are accepted by women folk"*.

HEREDITARY RIGHTS

Hereditary rights have never been an issue in Sikhism. Sikh women have full rights to contest any hereditary claim. No restrictions can be found in the Sikh Rehat Maryada (Sikh Code of Conduct) and there is nothing to state otherwise. In, 'Women's

Property Rights - A Sikh Perspective', Prof Dalip Singh writes, *"Since all children both male and female are equal in all respects, the property of the father is equally divisible amongst the children; women married and unmarried, have equal share along with the male progeny"*.

Thus all claimants are entitled to an equal share regardless of their gender.

GENDER EQUALITY

Sikhism does consider men and women to be different by virtue of their gender. However this does not imply superiority of one sex over the other. Men and women are equal under the eyes of God and should therefore be given equal opportunity. No position in Sikhism is reserved solely for men. Women can take part in prayers and serve as Granthi. Sikh women can also take part in any political role they feel fit to accommodate.

Concerning the condemnation of women, the Guru Granth Sahib states, *"from the woman is our birth, and in the woman's womb are we shaped. To the woman we are engaged and to the woman are we wedded. The woman is our friend and from woman is the family. Through the woman are the bonds of the world. Why then call her evil, who gives birth to the world's leaders? From the woman is born woman, without the woman there is none"* (Guru Granth Sahib, p.473).

The question posed by the Guru to mankind is, 'why call her evil?'. The Guru calls the woman a vessel through which all life comes to this world. This is a unique role given to her by God. In addition to this, with regards to identity, the Guru considers the woman to be a Princess, by giving her the surname Kaur. This is reserved solely for women and frees them from having to take their husband's name when marrying.

IMPORTANCE OF THE WOMAN'S VIEW

Some religions regard the women as inferior when providing, for example, a testimony in a court. However this issue has never been in question in Sikhism. The Guru Granth Sahib states, *"Women and men, all by God are created. All this is Gods play. Says Nanak, all thy creation is good, Holy"* (Guru

Granth Sahib, p.304).

Gods creation is considered holy. There is no suggestion of inferiority amongst the role women can play and neither is a woman's intelligence doubted. Between human beings there are only two distinctions made. In 'Current Thoughts in Sikhism', Dr Gurnam Kaur writes, *"All human beings are equal from birth. There are only two classes of human beings (man or woman) viz., manmukh and gurmukh. Those who follow the path of the Guru, obey the will of God, the divine ordinance are called gurmukhs, and those who follow the path of their own mind, act according to their ego running away from the Guru, the Shabad (the Word), are manmukhs (egoists)"*.

OPPORTUNITY TO PRAY

Many religions blame the woman for the inability of a man to become God enlightened. This has in some cases led to rules, which define the locations where women folk can pray and what they must wear.

However in Sikhism, the aim is to rid the soul of sins and realise God by the Guru's guidance. Once this is achieved the inner character becomes absorbed and strengthened by God. Thus, it is not women who are blamed for any sinful thoughts that occur within men, when they see a woman, but the men who allow lust to dominate their mind.

The Guru Granth Sahib states, *"vain are the eyes which behold the beauty of another's wife"* (Guru Granth Sahib, p.269).

Any woman is permitted to enter a Gurdwara (Sikh Temple) and is accepted in all prayers and recitations of the Guru Granth Sahib. No area is made exempt and women are always an integral part of the congregation. The only restriction placed on a woman is that she must not wear a veil.

The Sikh Code of Conduct (Article XVI, s) states, *"It is not proper for a Sikh woman to wear a veil or keep her face hidden by veil or cover"*.

Guru Amar Das Ji had refused to talk with a Hindu queen until she had removed her veil. In, 'Women in Religion', Kanwaljit Kaur Singh writes, *"the purdah (veil) system suppressed the personality of women"*.