

**SOCIAL VICES AMONG WOMEN IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY PUNJAB**

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***Abstract***

The Present paper deals with the social vices prevalent among the women in early 19th Century Punjab. During that period, Punjabi women became victims of many social rituals, vices and customs like female infanticide, sati, dowry, purdha, polygamy, prostitution etc. Due to these social evils and vices, the conditions of women became miserable in the society. However during that period Maharaja Ranjit Singh had regard for women. He had issued strict orders to his soldiers not to insult dishonour any woman of any caste creed and defaulters were punished heavily.

**Key Words:** Women, Punjab, Vice.

No study of a society can be completed if we do not analyse the position of women as it reflects the standard of its civilization, culture and refinement. The position of women is regarded distinctly subordinate and inferior to men from centuries. She is treated as the dregs at the society. It had become a common saying in the medieval period that man is a fool who takes the advice of women. Thus ideologically a Hindu woman was considered to be an inferior to the male and socially she was kept away in a state of subjection, denied her rights and was suppressed and oppressed. Women did not have freedom in any walk of their life. As a daughter, she lived under strict supervision of her parents and after marriage under her husband, while as a widow under the care of her eldest son. Thus a woman could never be independent. In the early nineteenth century, Punjabi women became victims of many social customs and vices like female infanticide, sati, dowry, purdha, polygamy, prostitution etc.

The birth of daughter was considered inauspicious, while that of son was an occasion for rejoicing. Theoretically she was considered Lakshmi (the Goddess of Prosperity) but her birth was not welcomed. She had no share in her father's and brother's property. If there were many daughters, they became a galling responsibility. The super aim of Hindu life was the procreation of male who alone was spiritually qualified to minister to his father's cares in the next world and saved him from hell. The practice of female infanticide was extremely sinful act. It is defined as the killing of newborn children as a social institution in some states with assent of its parents. It was accomplished mostly in North India. It also

existed in Punjab. The upper classes of both the Hindu and the Muslims practised female infanticide. The affluent families amongst the Sikhs were also no exception to it. Infanticide had created hell on the earth for the female sex. The girls were therefore, neglected, ignored and allowed to riot and many of them died prematurely. In the Hindus, it had prevailed among the Rajputs of the hills, and the Khatri of Gujranawala, Multan, Jhang, Shapur, Jhelum and Lahore. The Bedis, almost in the whole of the Punjab, practised it once at a large scale. They were generally known as Kurimars. This practised was much more prevalent among the Bedis in Punjab and Chauhans in Rajasthan. Rajputs were of great antiquity and arose from combined motives of pride.

The Muslims also committed female infanticide. Throughout Multan division female infanticide was practised by certain classes of Muslim. Some of the Muslim Jat tribes and Sayyids also committed the heinous crime of female infanticide. The common causes of this despicable practice were because of the custom of Sati, child marriage and Purdha system. Among the Hindus the idea prevailed that the marriage of a female in another family produces a sense of inferiority among the parents of female. The general belief among the Hindus was that their son could marry their equals or inferior but the custom prescribed that their daughter should marry on their superiors. The religious minded Hindus believed that if their daughter grew up to puberty in their house without getting married, many of his generations would be damned. However, the major cause was that the girl's father gave dowry in large amounts on the marriage of his

girl. Regarding expenses on marriage of girls Melville observed in his report, "It was astonishing what large sums are spent on such occasions. People live to save money to marry their daughters; others impoverish themselves for life to outbid their neighbours. This custom was prevailed all over India, but was carried to greater extent in Punjab than elsewhere."

The other main cause was that the prosperous families, who pride and honour themselves like Bedis, Rajputs and Sayyids thought that if their daughter was married to inferior, it was the matter of disgrace. Thus an early and suitable choice for a daughter presented difficulties for the parents. The only easy solution to be out of the gripping problems found by the worried parents was the killing of the poor-new born girl.

Though the female infanticide was practised secretly, it was not considered illegal or criminal either by the state or society. During 1846-47, there were about two thousand Bedi families in Jullundhur Doab and fifteen hundred in Derah Baba Nanak, but not a single girl was alive in those families.

Different methods were adopted to kill an infant girl. The girl was buried alive or starved to death, or sometimes the starvation was followed by a gulp of milk, which caused severe colic problems resulting in death. Sometimes the child was exposed to weather, hot or cold in such a way that the child died after brief illness. Many a times the child was put into a pitcher, the mouth of which was covered with a thick paste of mud and buried underground. In some other cases, when the female child was born, opium was administered to her, or a pill made out of bhang was placed on the upper jaw of the infant's mouth where it became softened with the saliva and went into the body of the child causing her death. In some cases the naval string of a new born girl was placed in its mouth which caused suffocation and the child got expired. Among the Rajputs it was a common practice that a mother's breast was smeared with a preparation of the juice of the dhatura plant or the poppy. The infant sucked the milk alongwith the poison. In Jullunder district, a big hole was dug in the ground and it was filled with milk, then the child was placed in it causing death by drowning. Sometimes the child was buried with little gur (Molasses) in her mouth

and a twisted cotton was placed in her hand. While burying her the family members recited:

*"Gur Khaeen, puni kateen,*

*Aap na aeem, bhaiya ghaleen"*

(Eat sugar, spin your cotton,  
do not come send brother instead)

The evil of child marriage was also present in Punjab in the early nineteenth century. The marriage of children was considered a very important duty of the parents. Though there was no fixed limit for the age of marriage in Hindu, Sikhs and Muslims, all favoured an early age for the same. Among the Hindus the girls were married even before the age of puberty, generally at the age of six or seven, and under all circumstances must not go beyond the age of eleven. If after seven the girl remained unmarried, it was considered inauspicious. If a son was not married at the proper age, that was also considered bad, and the neighbours taunted the boy's family for their inability to contract the marriage of their son, and it was also attributed to some social handicap of that family.

The practise of Purdah (Veil) was also prevailed among the Hindu and Muslim women. The meaning of Purdah (Veil) is to cover or hide 'face or body from outside'. In ancient times the women observed a certain veil (ghoonghat) but the present elaborated and institutionalised form of purdah dates back from the time of Muslim rule. The Hindu women belonging to the upper strata and well to do classes followed purdah system. Women of the well to do families did not move about freely in villages, but the lower or poor class women including Rajput and Brahmins went out unveiled.

Purdah was strictly observed among the Muslims. Muslim women observed purdah with greater rigidity than Hindus. Among the Mohammedan, it was a great dishonour for family when a wife was compelled to uncover her face. The Muslim women of well to do families used a long burqa, which hide herself from head to foot. She was thus able to see others through the thin layer of net, but could not be seen by them. Ladies used the burqa when they went outside their houses.

It was partially observed by the Sikh women. They had been prohibited to cover their faces by the Sikh Gurus. Sikh ladies of high social position even led troops into field and received

visitors. Sikh women covered their faces from elder people of their family.

Generally women were required to remain within their houses as all the outside duties were performed by their husbands. While staying at home women had always the preference over others. It was said,

*'Andar baithi lakh di, bahar gayi kakh di'*

(She who stays at home is worth a lakh and she was wanders out it is worth a straw).

Again,

*Tre kam kharab, mard nun chakki, sandhe nu gah, ran nun rah*

(Three things are bad, grinding for a man, threshing for a buffalo, and travelling for women).

The wives of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh, particularly Rajput wives followed this practice.

Polygamy was common in Punjab among the rich and poor alike. The polygamy was prevalent in Punjab during the medieval times. This custom was prevalent among Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, especially among the aristocratic families in Punjab and rich people. During this period Maharaja Ranjit Singh had a number of women in his harem. Hindus and the Sikhs were monogamous, but a second wife was some times kept when the first was barren or gave birth only to the female children. Though not held as an absolute necessity, it was generally thought proper to obtain the consent of the first wife to go in for a second marriage. Hindus married with one wife and never divorced her till death, except for the adultery.

This practice remained common among the lower castes like Chammar, Chuhars, Nai, and several other menial and artisan classes. It was also common among the agricultural tribes of the hills like the Gujar and Jats. Among the Jat Sikhs in all, polygamy was the result of widow remarriage, marrying by Chaddar-Paunna to keep one's brother's widow. Polygamy was practiced by Muslims of the north-west frontier. According to the Muslim tradition Sunnis and Shias could have four wives. The wealthy and influential Muslims kept several wives, many slave girls and concubines.

The practice of Sati had been widely prevalent in India from earlier times. The term of Sati means burning of a woman alongwith the dead body of her husband. This social evil was

brought into India by the earlier invaders. It was also present in medieval period.

The act of burning or Sati was performed both with the dead body and without it. To burn alongwith the dead body of the husband was one type of Sati called Sahmarna or Sahgamn. The second type of Sati was known as *annumarna* or *anugaman*, according to which the reception of information about the death of husband in district land, the wife would burn herself alongwith some symbol of her husband. The condition of widow was very unfortunate in the society and was very hard to bear. Generally a widow had to chose between the two alternatives, to remain a widow all her life or to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. She usually chose the latter alternative. When a widow made up her mind to become Sati, she shed no tears and made no lamentation. She laid aside her veil and no longer concealed her face from the public. The belief of entering heaven with her beloved husband gave her incredible energy to dedicate herself to martyrdom. The practice of Sati in Punjab in early nineteen century was not so common. There were numerous instances which indicate that it was generally confined to the royal widow and those belonging to the highest Statra of the society.

The Sikh Gurus had intensely criticised the practice of sati. The word sati has been used in the Adi Granth in different connotations. It implies truth, mortal, disciplined, virtuous generous, pure etc. It also refers to the custom of Sati considered virtuous according to the fourth chapter of Parashar- Simriti.

According to Guru Amar Das, Sati was a cruel ritual, unacceptable by any ethic. There could not be a more cruel art than to compel or lead widow to immolate herself. The following hymns refer to it.

*Satiya ehe na akahiya jo madiya lag jalan,  
Nanak matiya jayea j biraha chot maran*

(Not these are true suttees that perish on their husband's funeral pyres, Baba Nanak. Those are true suttees who suffer agony of separation, such too are known as suttees as pass life in noble conduct and content, secure their land, and rising each day, remember him).

Guru Arjan Dev also criticised the Sati. According to Prinsep, Sikh women did not burn themselves with the corpse of their husbands. Under the Brahmanical influence, sometimes

the Sikh ladies of higher families offered themselves along with their deceased husbands. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's four principal wives - Rani Kundan called Gudan Rani Hardevi, Rani Raj Kanwar and Rani Banali along with seven, slave girls (eleven all) had resolved to burn them on the funeral pyre of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Dr Martin Honigberger and Lieut. Colonel Steinbach both attended the royal funeral and cremation. Honigberger says, "The four Ranies came out of the Zenanna on foot and unveiled for the first time of their lives. They distributed their ornaments and jewels while accompanying the funeral train in open palanquins while their seven slave-girls followed them on foot. The royal body was respectfully placed in the Middle of the pyre. After that the Ranies ascended the fatal ladder one by one, and according to their ranks the slaves followed. The Ranies placed themselves at the head of the royal body and the slaves close to its feet. There they crowded, remained in silent expectation for the fatal moment. Then a thick mat of reeds was brought with which the whole pyre was covered. Oil was then poured over the mat, and the pyre was lighted at each corner in a few moments, the deplorable victims of an abominable and fantastic ceremony had ceased to exist."

After Kharak Singh's death, out of his four widows only one Ishwar Kaur was persuaded to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. Two of the widows of Raja Hira Singh along with 22 widows and slave girls of his supporters, killed by the soldiery, performed the ceremony of Sati. Four of the wives of Minister Jawahar Singh, the brother of Rani Jindan, became Sati. Thus the practice of Sati amongst the widows of the nobles and Sardars was not infrequent, but amongst the Hindus and Sikhs it was rare.

Prostitution was also considered to be a necessary social evil. It was though discouraged by some of the rulers, yet it became a social entertainment. About prostitution Jaquemont tells us that in Amritsar the prostitutes had their separate quarters. They were never exposed to insults.

The dancers were under the surveillance of the ruler and were little better than the slaves. They always move in covered vehicles drawn by oxen's, escorted by a party of armed police whom they pay for fear of being robbed of

costly, jewels with they were commonly adorned.

Trafficking in women was also existed in Punjab. Slavery was also practised among the women of Punjab. Most of the girls were bought from the hill areas in their early years by men who made a regular business from it. The sale of female children in the hills was considered a good source of income by their parents. The female child who looked pretty was sold at around the age of eight at high price.

Many of the nobles, the chiefs at the court, affluent landlords and big merchants kept concubines and female servants. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's seraglio had a large number of female slaves known as golis and bandis. The European officers at their maintained harems had bought slave girls to attend upon their wives. In the common masses, the purchasers of women were mainly Jats (both Sikh and Hindu), Aroras and in a less degree, Kambons and Khatris.

To conclude it can be said that in the early nineteenth century, women were suffering from many social vices and evil traditions in the society of Punjab. The heinous crime of female infanticide was prevalent which was followed by higher strata of Hindu, Muslims and Sikhs communities. Child marriage, dowry, Parda system, polygamy, Sati Pradha, prostitution and trafficking etc. were prevalent in our society. In spite of above mentioned social practices, norms and customs, quite a number of talented women made mark in political sphere in the early nineteenth century. Sikh ladies like Rani Sada Kaur, Rani Raj Kaur, Rani Jind Kaur, played an effective role in politics, administration and in the battlefield.

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