

## Social Vices and Status of Women in Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century Punjab

Dr. (Mrs.) Savinder Pal

Associate Professor-cum-Head, PG Department of History, Khalsa College for Women, SidhwanKhurd, Ludhiana (Punjab) (India)

The women were accorded due respect in society during the ancient times. They continued enjoying the same position more or less until the Muslim period. In the Muslim period, women were affected adversely. A number of social vices like infanticide, child marriage, sati, purdah, polygamy and blind prejudices against women came to be practiced widely. These social vices reached their climax in the mid nineteenth century. The present paper will throw light on major social vices in the society and status of women in mid nineteenth century Punjab.

The practice of *Female Infanticide* is defined as, the killing of newly born children as a social institution in some states of the society with consent of his parents. Balfour has described it as a constant custom from unknown time to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that was vigorously practiced under social, economic and psychological impediments<sup>1</sup>. This highly irreligious, sinful act was widely prevalent in Punjab. The upper classes of both the Hindus and the Muslims practiced female infanticide. The affluent families amongst the Sikhs were also no exception to it. In the Hindus, it prevailed among the Rajputs of the Hills, Aroras, Bahramans and Khatri of Gujranwala, Multan, Jhang, Shahpur, Jhelum and Lahore<sup>2</sup>. In the Muslims, the Muslim Jat Tribes and Sayyids of Jhelum, Multan, Ferozpur, Khanguralso committed the heinous crime of female infanticide<sup>3</sup>. According to the report of Major Lake, Deputy Commissioner of Gurdaspur, in 1851, the Bedis of Dera Baba Nanak and Jullundur practiced female infanticide on a large scale<sup>4</sup>. It had long been associated with Jats of Multan, Gujranwala, Jhelum and SodhisSikhs of Ambala, Patiala, Nabha. Repeated proclamations were made during the period 1832 to 1845 condemning this crime in asSatluj States. But the female infanticide was practiced secretly, it was not considered illegal or criminal either by the society or state.

In 1846, after the first Anglo-Sikh War, when Jullundur Doab was annexed to the British territories, it was reported by John Lawrence that the crime was prevalent. He announced, "Bewa mat jalao; beti mat maro; kurhi mat dabbu."<sup>5</sup> and threatened the inhabitants with the severest penalties, if they continued this practice. A meeting was held on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1853 at Jullundur presided over by Mr. Mclead, which was attended by Bedis, Hindus and Muslims of the parganas of Nawashahar and Jullundur. The Punjab government issued a proclamation that the person committing this crime would incur the death penalty. The Government also announced rewards, honours and titles to deserving person who would help in suppressing this crime. Another meeting was held in October 1853 at Amritsar which was largely attended by various sections of society including delegates from the agricultural and business communities. In 1870, the Government passed a Law enabling the registration of births and deaths among the classes most suspected of infanticide<sup>6</sup>. According to census Report of 1881,

it was calculated that the number of females per 1000 males among the 0-5 age group, the Sikhs enumerated 839, Hindus 941 and Muslims 962.<sup>7</sup> Most administrative reports on female infanticide spoke of the existence of the practice in terms of the baneful effect of 'pride' and 'poverty' of the Punjabis which egged some to kill their daughters at birth. The practice of hypergamy i.e. marrying a daughter into a family of superior status, was seen as an established practice among many castes in Punjab. It was believed that the crime existed to a great extent due to heavy expenses on the celebrations of the marriage ceremony. Thus to avoid becoming poor, many parents destroyed their girls.<sup>8</sup>

Another evil practice that made the life of girls miserable was *child marriage*. They were married at a very early age between five to ten years. If not married by this age, the prestige and honour of family was lowered in the eyes of other who thought it derogatory to keep daughter unmarried beyond this age<sup>9</sup>. Among the ordinary men, the general social practice was betrothal during infancy and marriage at puberty<sup>10</sup>. Rani MehtabKaur daughter of Sada Kaur<sup>11</sup>, wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh<sup>12</sup> was married at the age three and her muklawa was sent at the age of six<sup>13</sup>. If parents delayed marriage of their daughters on any score, it became difficult to find a suitable match for her after words. The custom of child marriage led to dangerous consequences, resulting in minor girls entering into women head before attaining puberty. These girls were immature and unfit for child bearing. Many deaths took place and the girls were either crippled or paralyzed by their adult husbands. It leads to increase in number of child widows. M.B. Fuller rightly observed, "The girl child from the moment of her birth to her death undergoes a continuous life long suffering as a child wife, as a child mother and very often as a child widow."<sup>14</sup>

The custom of compulsory *widowhood* was peculiar to many Hindu women. As the relation between the husband and wife was considered sacred and indissoluble, even after death of the husband, the wife was supposed to live a life of asceticism, self-denial, unflinching devotion to her husband's memory, self-sacrifice and self-effacement.<sup>15</sup> The widow was compelled to lead a forlorn life and was deprived of the minimum comforts of life. She had on live on one meal a day, sleeps on the floor and could not wear colored clothes. She was burdened with work. She had to be a kitchen maid, menial, servant, a nurse and house keeping all in one.<sup>16</sup> However, there was no absolute prohibition of widow remarriage. It was prevalent in some classes of society. It was common among Jats, artisans and the menial classes. Generally a widow got married to the husbands elder brother, or a near relation, so that she could claim the right to her husband's property. She could marry even outside the family, but in that case she had to

forego the right to husband's property.<sup>17</sup> Widow remarriage was present in upper and ruling classes Sikh too. They performed a simple ceremony called *Kareva* or '*ChadarAndaz*' without any marry making or rejoicing.<sup>18</sup> Hari Ram Gupta refers, '*Kareva*' marriage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, with Rani MehtabKaur, GulabKaur, DayaKaur, Chand Kaur and Prince Kharak Singh married a widow name IsherKaur by this practice.<sup>19</sup> There was no religious tenets prohibiting widow remarriage among the Muslims and Christians. The marriage of a widow was known as *NikahSani* among the Muslims.<sup>20</sup>

*Polygamy* was got another social vice which visited the women folk in those days. The girls were married at a very early age and naturally the child-wife was under the domination of the husband and mother-in-law. But in case the wife showed independence of spirit, the threat of second marriage was used to cow her down<sup>21</sup>. The custom was permissible in certain cases like when the wife failed to bear an issue or a boy or an account of some differences in the two families, the husband was forced for second marriage. The Hindus and the Sikhs were as a rule monogamous and practiced this custom to a much less extent or except in the case of widow remarriages. But the practice in aristocratic families was prevalent. Maharaja Ranjit Singh had a number of wives (women) in his 'harem'.<sup>22</sup>

Polygamy was more practiced among the Muslims of North-west frontier. According to the Muslim tradition Sunnis and Shias could have four wives. The wealthy and influential Musalmans kept several wives, many slave girls and concubines.<sup>23</sup> However, polygamy existed among the lower agricultural classes (Chamars, Chuhars, Nais), menialsartisans, agricultural tribes (Gujars and Jats), especially in the hills, where a women was considered as an economic asset.<sup>24</sup>

*Veiling* of women or *Purdah* was a common social vice in the society. *Purdah* means a cover to hide 'face or body' from outsiders. '*Ghoonghat*' (cover on the face only) is other name of *Purdah*.<sup>25</sup> It had become a hallmark of respectability and importance in Punjab, it was said:

Ander baithi lakh di  
Bahargahikakh di<sup>26</sup>

If a women went out without partial veil, she was criticized by her mother-in-law and sister-in-law.<sup>27</sup> Their evil was more prevalent among the Muslims. The woman was not supposed to appear before a man to whom it was possible to be married. The women who observed *Purdah* went out in the cover palanquins. Those who could not afford this luxury had to go in *Burqa* or with a sheet covering them from top to bottom. The *zennana* system was in vogue.<sup>28</sup> P.C. Roy commented on *Zenana*, "There the women lay condemned to life long prison, a helpless, prostrate and pathetic figure with feeble health, her naturally keen senses dulled through inaction, without the light of knowledge illuminating her vision, steeped in ignorance, groping in the dark, a martyr in the conventions of the society in which she had been born."<sup>29</sup>

The Sikh women did not observe complete *purdah* restrictions. They covered their faces from elder people of their family. The Sikh women sometimes rode on horseback. The

women of high social position and royal families, especially wives of Maharaja Ranjit Singh even led troops into fields, received visitors and inspected the parade of the army.<sup>30</sup> The Hindu women, particularly belonging to the upper strata and well to do classes under the prevailing circumstances followed the veil system. But in the lower strata of society, the women of peasants and working classes did not observe it as they had to help their husbands in all 'external pursuits and internal economy'. They simply drew the lapel of 'sari and dupatta' over their face whenever they met a stranger.<sup>31</sup> But even amongst these classes an unmarried girl was not allowed to go unescorted.<sup>32</sup>

The practice of *Sati* in Punjab during the review period was uncommon. While *sati* had been common practice among the earlier Sikh rulers of Pujab and highest strata of the society, its incidence among the general populate was rare<sup>33</sup>. Though the *sati* was abolished in 1829 by the Britishers, yet some women did go for burning with their dead husbands under the Brahmanical influence among the Hindus. These burning were mostly forced one by the selfish, mean relatives of the helpless widows. But their number was very small. The Sikh Gurus had forbidden this evil.<sup>34</sup> But there are reference of four wives of Maharaja Ranjit Singh – Rani Guddan, Rani Hardevi, Rani Raj Kaur and Rani Barali along with seven slave girls had resolved to burn themselves on the funeral pyre of the Maharaja.<sup>35</sup> So the Government of Lahore Darbar was not against this practice and the widow offering her selves for *sati* was revered the people. The vice of *sati* was not prevalent among the Muslims because the Muslim law does not permit it.

*Dowry system* prevailed among all sections of the society in western Punjab during the mid-nineteenth century. It had become a great hardship to the poor section in the society. Sometimes even the suitability was disregarded by the parents at the cost of a rich dowry. Muslims adopted another method of dowry known as *Mehr* or *antenuptial*. Among the Hindus dowry was considered as *Stridhana* (women's property). However the nature of dowry varied. The variation was due to the economic standard and the social status of the parties concerned. Even the ruling families followed this practice. There are such references in *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* which threw lights on dowry system for instance Rani Chand Kaur wife of Kharak Singh brought the dowry consisting of horses, camels, fine garments, wonderful utensils of gold, silver, large amount in cash, ornaments, precious stones, some maid servants, a number of villages and towns.<sup>36</sup> Kanwar Nau Nihal, the grandson of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was said to have spent seventeen lakhs of rupees on the marriage of his daughter. The Alluwalla Raja was said to have spent eight lakhs.<sup>37</sup>

A marriage with dowry, which had all the religious connotations of being meritorious, could also spell a rising insecurity for women, for it came to be increasingly promised upon a social ethos that degraded women and measured their marriageability to the amount of material good they could bring with them.<sup>38</sup>

*Trafficking* in women also existed in the Punjab. *Slavery* was too practiced among the women of the Punjab. Most of the girls were brought from the hill areas by men who made a

regular business from it. The sale of female children, in the hills was considered a good source of income for the family. Many of the nobles, the chiefs, rich landlords and big merchants kept concubines and female servants. Maharaja Ranjit Singh had a large number of female slaves known as 'galis and bandis'<sup>39</sup>. The European officials maintained harems and brought slave girls to look after their wives.<sup>40</sup>

The pretty girl child of the age of eight was sold at high price<sup>41</sup>. There are references of *prostitute* also. The number of prostitutes and dancing girls increased in Punjab under the British rule and they generally belonged to Mohammadan religion. In fact the government issued licenses of prostitutes living within cantonment limits of Lahore, Amritsar and Ambala for the sake of European soldiers. Lahore was flourished with beautiful and professional dancing girls who got training in singing and dance. Only the lower classes and those forced to adopt this profession as a last recourse were to be found among these infortunates.<sup>42</sup>

So the orthodox life style of society imposed on the women of Punjab presented obstacles to *female education*. The social vices like early marriage and purdah curtailed the school life of the girls. Before the annexation of Punjab by the Britishers there were several indigenous schools in the Punjab - Lahore, Amritsar, Karnal districts. These schools were run by the local teachers.<sup>43</sup> But the women were not expected to earn their livelihood after being educated. So their education was considered unnecessary, unorthodox and dangerous.<sup>44</sup>

*Divorce* was not a common feature as the marriage was considered in dissolvable and sacred trust among the high

caste Hindus and the Sikhs. A person could, however severe all connection with his wife. If she did not give birth to a male child or was suffering from dangerous disease or was unchaste. This was tantamount to divorce and it was practiced in the plains. In the hills, however the marriage ties were loose and the right to divorce both the husband and the wife was recognized by custom<sup>45</sup>. For example, the divorce could be obtained at any time in Shimla and Kangra districts. The essential part of the divorce in the hills was payment of cost of marriage to the husband. If wife sought the divorce. The divorced hill women could easily get new suitors as she was an economic asset and toiled in the fields like men.<sup>46</sup> In Islam marriage was nothing more than a civil contract made by mutual consent between both men and women and hence it allowed divorced to both the parties by repeating thrice in the presence of two witnesses, "I divorce thee." The wife could dissolve her marriage by obtaining a judicial decree or with the consent of her husband.

Women were not having freedom in any walk of life during the mid-nineteenth century. As a daughter she lived under the strict supervision of her parents, after marriage under that of her husband and in laws, if she lost her life partner, then under the supervision of her eldest son as well as the society. Thus a woman never found herself independent. She was mainly confined to home. She was expected to dedicate herself spiritually and physically to her better half. His gratification was her ultimate goal. The husband was sacred for her. No knowledge, no pilgrimage, no yajnas or havens, no happiness, no devotion to God could equal the '*Patiwrata*' or the sanctity of wedlock<sup>47</sup>. Socially she was kept in a state of subjection. She was denied her rights as well as suppressed and oppressed.<sup>48</sup>

## Endnotes

1. AmritVarsha Gandhi, Suppression of female Infanticide in Punjab: Modes and Motives of the Colonial State, in *Proceedings of Punjab History Conference*, March 2006, Punjabi University, Patiala, p. 475
2. Bhagat Singh, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh and His Times*, Sehgal Publishers, New Delhi, 1990, p. 321.
3. *Government of Punjab, Selection from Correspondence*, 1853, pp. 402-03.
4. Robert Montgomery, *Minute on the Infanticide Punjab*, Lahore, 1853 (oriental and India Office collections, NAI, New Delhi).
5. *Census Report*, Punjab, 1911, part -I, p.243.
6. Dorir R. Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History; Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, p. 70.
7. *Census Report of India*, 1881.
8. AnshuMalhotra, *Gender Caste and Religious Identities: structuring Class in Colonial Punjab*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 51-52.
9. Denzillbbetson, *Punjab Castes*, Low Price Publications, Delhi 1993, p. 359.
10. *Shahpur District Gazetteer*, 1883-84, pp. 37-38.
11. b. in 1762 at Ferozpur; daughter of Dasaundha Singh Gill; wife of Gurbaksh Singh, KanhaiyaMisl; mother-in-law of Maharaja Ranjit Singh; played important role in Ranjit Singh's rise to power in Punjab; d. in 1832 at Lahore.
12. b. in 1780 at Gujranwala; belongs to SukerchakiaMisl; founder of the Sikh empire; first Sovereign ruler of Punjab (1799); successfully united the various Misls and other local kingdoms into the *Sarkar-i-Khalsa*, popularly known as Sher-i-Punjab; d. 1839 at Lahore.
13. Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikhs, Vol-V*, Mushi Ram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1982, p. 537.
14. M.B. Fuller, *The Wrongs of Indian Women heed*, Oliphan Anderson and Fenner, Edinburgh, 1900, p.33
15. ManjuVerma, *The Role of Women in the Freedom Movement in Punjab (1919-1947)*, Abhijeet Publications, Delhi, 2003, p. 8.
16. ManmohanKaur, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1985, p. 17.
17. Savinder Pal, *Role of Punjabi Women in Indian Freedom Struggle*, Unistar, Chandigarh, 2014, p. 16.
18. *Census of Punjab, 1911*, part I, p. 289.
19. Hari Ram Gupta, *op.cit.*, p. 537
20. Savinder Pal, *op.cit.*, p. 17.
21. J.N. Farquarhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, CUP, New Delhi, 1915, p. 108.
22. Bhagat Singh, *Condition of Women in Punjab- the Early Nineteenth century; The Punjab Past and Present*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1981, p. 360.
23. ParamjitKaur&NavdipKaur (eds), *Women in Colonial Punjab*, Unistar Chandigarh, 2012, p. 146.
24. Bhagat Singh, *The Punjab Past and Present,op.cit.*, p.360.

25. M.P. Srivastava, *Social life under the Great Mughals*, Chugh Publications, Allahabad, 1978, pp. 87-88.
26. *District Gazetteer*, Multan, 1902-02, p. 98.
27. s` s inxwnwdyvinqwAny,iPrdIhYGuMGtKu`ll, quoted for J.S. Sittal, *Shah Hussain; JivaniteRachna*, Punjabi University Patiala, 1976, p. 79.
28. ManmohanKaur, *op.cit.*, pp. 20-21.
29. *Ibid*, p. 21
30. Syed Muhammad Lafif, *History of the Punjab*, Central Press Calcutta, 1891, p. 501.
31. K.M. Ashraf, *Life and Condition of the People of Hindustan*, Mushi Ram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1970, p. 172.
32. *Census Report Punjab*, 1911, part I, p. 295.
33. Doris R. Jakobsh, *op.cit.*, p. 76.
34. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 787.
35. SohanLalSuri, *Umdat-ul-Tawarikh, Daftar III, Part IV*, pp. 452-454
36. VidyaSagarSuri (tr), *Umdat-ul-Tawarikh, Daftar II*, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 2002, p. 118.
37. AnshuMalhotra, *op.cit.*, p. 54.
38. *Ibid*, p. 80
39. Bhagat Singh, *The Punjab Past and Present, op.cit.*, p. 364.
40. Bhagat Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 328.
41. MohinderKaur Gill, *Secular Sovereign Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, M.P. Parkashan, Delhi, 2002, p. 130
42. B.S. Saini, *The Social and Economic History of The Punjab, 1901-1929*, ESS Publications Delhi; 1995, p. 127
43. ManmohanKaur, *op.cit.*, p. 364.
44. ManjuVerma, *op.cit.*, p. 13
45. B.S. saini, *op.cit.*, p. 73.
46. *District Gazetteer, Simla*, 1904, p. 28.
47. *District Gazetteer, Gujrat*, 1893-94, p. 60.
48. J.A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1906, p. 231.