

WOMEN AMONG THE SIKHS

Before Sikhism came on the scene, the womenfolk in India were considered to be almost on the same level as the low castes. Sometimes they were even called *chandals*. They were generally treated as robots to serve the males, cook food, wash clothes, sweep the house, and do other household jobs. Besides, in many parts of the country, males are seen comfortably sitting in groups smoking *hukah* or playing cards or just basking in the sunshine, while the females are working in the fields and doing all sorts of odd jobs and still carrying their little ones on their hips. The males used them for satisfying their passions and to breed, nourish, and nurse their offsprings. Women had not been considered to be fit to perform any religious or social ceremonies. A man could have as many wives and mistresses as he liked but a woman having connections with more than one man was not tolerated. We have been reading of women being burnt alive on their husbands' pyres and called *satis*; but no man having been so burnt has ever been heard of. Even now in some form or another, the system of offering Hindu girls to the deity in the temples persists. They are called *Dev-Dasis*. One is astonished to see the male *Devatas*, when routed by demons, rushing, crying and bewailing to the female *Devi*, Durga, for help and protection which was readily extended and *Devatas* restored their territory. Yet the males still decried the females and denied them a proper status.

Even amongst the Mohammedans, it is observed that females cannot stand in the same line with men when the prayer, *Namaz*, is offered at the mosque. It is the male only who is entitled to give divorce to the female. Individual females had shown a very high

standard of character sometimes, but they had been denied any honourable status as a class.

It was Guru Nanak, who first took up seriously and effectively the cause of the female folk. In *Asa di Var*, Guru Nanak Dev has devoted a full stave to express his views against those who always run down the female class. The stave in the 19th stanza runs :

It is by woman, the condemned one, that we are conceived, and from her that we are born; it is with her that we are betrothed and married.

ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵੀਆਹੁ ॥

It is woman we befriend, and she who keeps the race going.

ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਦੋਸਤੀ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਰਾਹੁ ॥

When one woman dies, another is sought for; and it is with her that we get established in society.

ਭੰਡੁ ਮੁਆ ਭੰਡੁ ਭਾਲੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਬੰਧਾਨੁ ॥

Why should we decry her from whom great men are born.

ਸੇ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨ ॥

It is also from woman that women are born; there is nobody who is not born of woman.

ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੀ ਭੰਡੁ ਉਪਜੈ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਝੁ ਨ ਕੋਇ ॥

Nanak, it is only the One Unborn God Who is independent of a woman.

ਨਾਨਕ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਹਰਾ ਏਕੋ ਸਚਾ ਸੋਇ ॥

In Sikhism, women as a whole, are given equal status with the menfolk. They are entitled to perform all the social and religious ceremonies and rituals. They can lead in the prayers and enter freely the innermost sanctuaries of the Sikh places of worship and take part in social gatherings and religious congregations. They are regarded as the second wheel of the chariot of life which can be taken to its destiny if both the wheels are functioning together. Sikh history tells us that after Guru Gobind Singh, the writ was being issued to the *Panth* by Mata Sundar Kaur from Delhi for several years. Even in the guerilla warfare which the Sikhs fought with the Mughal rulers and their Hindu stooges for more than 50 years, Sikh women took a very active and important part. They have even been leading the Sikh armies in the battlefield.