

Sikh Women **Introduction**

"From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all. O Nanak, only the True Lord is without a woman."¹

These words were spoken from the very first Guru `Nanak`, the one who was the founder of Sikhism.

It is unbelievable, that there still should be violence and discrimination against women all over the world. But there still is. Especially in countries like China or India.

But what about the immigrant women from India who live with us right here in Europe? Are they treated like women in India or are there any differences between traditional Indian women and e.g. a Sikh woman living in England?

I will try to contrast these two points of life and, if there should be any differences, I will explain how diverse they are. I want to find out the real life circumstances as well of Indian women as of Sikh women in England, if the circumstances are like I imagine or not and if there are any variations within the two groups.

I have already known some facts about Sikhism before I dealt with this subject. It is a very strict and traditional religion, so the main problem I want to solve is how strict the rules are for the women in England compared to women in India, and if they are more independent or more treated like equal human beings.

Sikhism in general

In 1469 Guru `Nanak`, the very first Guru and the founder of Sikhism, was born. Already throughout his adolescence he questioned critically things like religion, the cast system and religious rituals. He was a great believer in God, and called himself a very devoted servant of the Creator.

He believed in the one and only God, the same God for all people of all religions. He was neither Hindu nor a Muslim, he criticised all these typical things like the fast, the worship of temples or figures and paid priests.

He taught that the earth is not the centre of the universe but that it is just one little planet surrounded by lots of other little worlds in the big galaxy which was created by God. He was for equality of every human being, and only the well-being of every person was important. Although the religious part in his life was very important for him, the

¹ <http://www.searchsikhism.com/women.html>

most important thing for him was the teaching of self thinking and questioning everything around yourself. He and the following nine Gurus taught that every creature has to be equal, whatever its social background, religion or sex is, which also means the full equality of men and women. They criticised discrimination against women, the widow-burning and tried to stop the killing of female babies. Everybody should be honest, deal justly and morally and has to remember that no person is more worth than another. Guru Nanak also talked about the '5 thieves': desire, anger, avarice, pride and dependence on the world.

The word 'Sikh' is another word for student or follower. The Gurus were only teachers who wanted to help mankind to get their own view of life and peace.

The Gurus never called themselves as Gurus, they got their name from their followers who wanted to give them respect by calling them 'Guru'.

Sikhism is not a religion as e.g. Christianity with its customs and rituals for only one intended folk, it is more an attitude of life, meant for every person who identifies with this kind of thinking.

But in the very past it was not easy to live these things. Equality for every person was nearly impossible and to respect other religions than the own was an absolutely scandal. So it was not astonishing that some of the Gurus had to give their lives because of their behaviour against the Hindus and the Muslims.

The fifth and the ninth Guru were executed by the Muslims who did not want any rebels under their 'government'. They died for fighting against racism and inequity and not even torture stopped their believing in everything they lived for.

Role of Sikh women in India/Punjab

Very traditional women

At the time before Sikhism women were considered very low in society, both Hindus and Muslims regarded women as inferior and a man's property. Women were treated only as property whose only value was as a servant or for entertainment. They were considered seducers and distractions from man's spiritual path. Men were allowed to have several wives but widows were not allowed to remarry but encouraged to burn themselves on their husbands funeral pyre. Child marriage and female infanticide were prevalent and veils were popular for women. Women were also not allowed to inherit any property. Many Hindu women were captured and sold as slaves in foreign Islamic countries.

In such a climate Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism shocked the entire society by preaching that women were worthy of praise and equal to men. The following Gurus joined him. Guru Angad encouraged the education of all Sikhs, men and women. Guru Amar condemned the cruel custom of widow-burning and the wearing of a veil because it

was kind of demeaning. Other Gurus called women as the conscience of men. Five hundred years later, the rest of mankind is only now waking up to this fundamental truth. The Gurus actively encouraged the participation of women as equals in worship, in society, and on the battlefield. They encouraged freedom of speech and women were allowed to participate in all religious activities.

But in fact the follower of Sikhism did not really conform to the Guru's advices. Although the life standard in the Punjab is much higher than in other parts of India, women are not as equal as the Gurus wanted them to be. But they are more treated like equals than Indian women of other religions like Hindus or Muslims. They do not have to wear a veil and they are not forbidden to leave the house without their husbands. On the other hand they are not allowed to smoke or to drink alcohol. They never have any male friends, neither in the childhood nor as a married woman. And although boys should not have any girlfriends before marriage, too, this failing will be forgiven them quite often, while the honour of the daughter would be terminally destroyed. They keep the house, raise the children, feed the family and are in charge with the household finances. They mostly live in peace with their family and especially with their husbands. They do not argue and never refuse the order of a man. The man has to work for the food and the woman has to prepare it.

Sikh marriages are mostly arranged by the father of the woman. It is not unusual that she marries a man of her neighbourhood or of her village. The majority of Sikh women in the Punjab have never left their home village. And most of them, who have left their home village, left it forever because their fathers sent them to Europe or America for marriage. But irrespective of the country they live in, the women always have to live at the man's family. Daughters are considered to be 'second class children'². Most of the families wish for a son who is able to keep the inheritance and the family's name. Daughters are kind of an economic burden because they leave home and the costs of the marriage and the dowry can ruin a whole family.

In most instances Sikh women live in peace with their husbands. They learn right from their childhood their roles of being housewives, mothers and lovers for their husbands. But Sikh women in India are mostly uneducated. They are neither able to read nor to write and because many of them did never leave their home village, they do not know anything about thing happening in the world outside their own. They would never dare to rebel against their husbands, because they never imagined that something could be wrong with their way of life.

² taz vom 10.1.2006, S. 3, Z.30 (TAZ-Bericht), SVEN HANSEN / REGINE HAFFSTEDT

Famous women in Sikhism

In the very past there were a few women, who are worth to be mentioned. They mostly had the role to inspire and encourage the Gurus to reach their aims.

First of all there is 'Bibi Nanaki'. She was the first person to recognize Guru Nanak as a prophet and missionary early in his life. Bibi Nanaki (Guru Nanak's sister) and 'Mata Tripta' (Guru Nanak's mother) played very important roles in encouraging young Nanak to pursue his lifelong mission.

'Mata Khivi' was the wife of Guru Angad and was in charge of the 'langar' (community kitchen). She was an unlimited source of bounty and helped create a new social consciousness for women.

Because of her purity, Guru Gobind Singh declared that Sikhs should consider Mata Sahib Kaur as the spiritual mother of Sikhism.

Role of Sikh women in England

Problems with social adjustment

There are more than 400,000 Sikhs living in England. 400,000 of 20 million Sikhs worldwide.³ So most of the emigrated Sikhs live in England, mostly in big cities like London, Birmingham and Manchester.

Under these Sikhs there are almost 200,000 women. Some of them were born in England, some of them were sent from India to marry an 'English' Sikh. At first view you would think that they live as normal as every other woman. Most of them visit(ed) regular schools, have good education, wear normal clothes, apart from special days like wedding, where they have to wear the traditional robes, and have friends of other religions than their own.

But if you look deeper you will find many differences to most of the white people.

Sikh girls are very often under considerable strain. They live in the western world and live in developed and modern societies but also have to live and keep up to their old and strict traditions.

For elder Sikhs it is not as difficult to retain their old customs and traditions.

But for the younger ones it can sometimes be very complicated to combine the two

worlds they live in. Sometimes it works, but in some cases it does not work, so that

these Sikhs have to decide whether they want to stay in their traditional world or not.

If they decide to leave the traditions, they do not only leave the traditions behind, they

have to leave their whole old life complete with their family. In most cases the family

does not accept a break out of their religion and if somebody tries to do this, it is more

than a shame for the whole family.

³ www.sikhs.org.uk

Although there are some exceptions, most of the Sikh girls have hardly a chance to resist against their traditions. They have to marry a Sikh man (or boy) and if they do not find a qualified one early enough, they will get an arranged marriage. Unarranged marriages are seldom but they exist. If a Sikh girl falls in love with a Sikh boy they are often allowed to marry, because already Guru Amar said : "They are not said to be husband and wife, who merely sit together. Rather they alone are called husband and wife, who have one soul in two bodies."⁴

But like their relatives in India, Sikhs have to marry very early, most of the girls are spoken for a Sikh boy at the latest with 14 years and are married with 16 or 17. They are also not allowed to have any boyfriends, but if they have, it has to be a Sikh boy, who will later marry her. A boyfriend from another religion is absolutely impossible.

But these girls are not only disadvantaged with their restricted choice of men. In many cases they are discriminated and unprivileged in connection with jobs because of their descent and their sex. Women in general are often disadvantaged because of their sex. For many employers it is a risk to hire a woman with children and if she does not have any children, it is possible that she will get some at some point in the future.

Then there is still the problem with racism. Although nobody would ever admit that he/she is a racist, it is quite a racist behaviour to hire a man rather than a woman and to hire a 'white' woman rather than a foreign woman.

But there are exceptions. There are Sikhs who are completely integrated in the new modern world of the West. They have lost some of their strictness and had the heart to dare something new. They educate their children to be free-thinking people who make their own decisions. But they are rare. Most of the Sikhs do not have the courage or do not long for giving up their old traditions.

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⁴ www.sikhs.org/women_q.htm