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Sikhism and Women: history, texts and experience

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BOOK REVIEW

Sikhism and Women: history, texts and experience
Doris R. Jakobsh (Ed.)
Oxford University Press, 2010

The issue of Sikh identity has caused much debate within Sikh studies. This topic is introduced in its relation to the identity of a ‘Sikh’ woman. In the introductory chapter, Doris Jakobsh and Eleanor Nesbitt highlight and argue the different perspectives contributing to a wider understanding of Sikh identity before they apply it to the definition of a female practising the Sikh faith. The introduction is followed by 14 chapters written by contributors from around the world. These 14 chapters are focused on three major themes: Gender in texts, the experiences of Sikh women in India, and the role and conditions of Sikh women in the diaspora.

In the Introduction ‘Contextualizing the Issues’ Jakobsh and Nesbitt, after discussing Sikh identity, explore the implications of turban-wearing Sikh women. The analysis provides a sophisticated discussion of the efforts of the Singh Sabha movement in its attempts at promoting the outward identity of a ‘Sikh’. The editors draw attention to the vast number of websites utilized by diasporic Sikhs where the appearance of turban-wearing women is becoming the norm. Increasingly, there is an awareness disseminating from such websites that merely covering the head with a chunni (the traditional Punjabi head scarf) does not constitute a female’s ‘Sikh’ identity.

There is much in the Guru Granth Sahibji to indicate that the Gurus endeavoured to put women on an equal par with men. Teachings from the Guru Granth Sahibji emphasize that all beings are equal in the eyes of God. The divine essence is present within each human heart and thus all individuals are equal: regardless of caste or gender. Guru Nanak condemned the vow of celibacy taken by the ascetic and instead he promoted the stage of the grihast – the householder. The Sikh Gurus repeatedly state that union with God is possible through one’s involvement in family life and association with females. From a philosophical basis then, Sikhism teaches the equality of men and women. In actual practice, however, this is not always the case. The 14 essays of the book explore the various aspects of gender equality from both a theoretical and practical point of view. The volume has been labelled as the ‘First anthology on women in Sikhism’.

Each of the 14 chapters is written from an academic point of view with substantial evidence from texts and empirical research. Thus, the volume provides a contemporary outlook on the issue of the position of ‘Sikh’ women from historical, textual and experiential perspectives. Robin Rinehart’s essay explores the authorship of the Dasam Granth
and analyses the prominence of the Goddess Durga through her exaltation in the Dasam Granth. She goes on to note the omission of the Charitropakhian in recent translations of the text. This is the section of the Dasam Granth that focuses on the discussion of relationships with women. Purnima Dhavan’s contribution in the volume concentrates on the position of women in the practices of the early Khalsa period. Despite the egalitarian outlook of the Gurus, the predominant patriarchal order of the Khalsa strengthened the notion of izzat and the role women have to play in the protection of a family’s honour.

The practice of female foeticide and infanticide in contemporary Punjab is shocking when one considers the ratio of males to females. There has been much coverage of this issue recently. Anshu Malhotra goes back to the practice of female infanticide in colonial Punjab. The research she uncovers is both disturbing and eye-opening as to the possible reasons for male preference, despite the egalitarian hermeneutics of the Guru Granth Sahibji. Christine Fair’s essay examines the vital role of Sikh women in the novels of Bhai Vir Singh — a prominent figure in the Singh Sabha movement. Fair’s examination of the narratives relating to Sundri, Sheel Kaur, and Satwant Kaur are indicative of the scholarly approach of this volume. The vibrant tradition of the Phulkaris (‘flower-work’) is examined by Michelle Maskiell through the traditions shared by Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim women in the Punjab of the twentieth century. Nicola Mooney’s chapter entitled ‘Lowly Shoes on Lowly Feet: Some Jat Sikh Women’s Views on Gender and Equality’ focuses on gender issues amongst Jat Sikh women. In their co-authored chapter, Preeti Kapur and Girishwar Misra study the ‘desired requirements’ of prospective spouses for sons from Sikh matrimonials in newspapers such as the Tribune and Ajit. They note that endogamy remains to be practised amongst a significant number of Sikhs. Girishwar Misra is the only male contributor to this volume. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh’s essay sheds light on the position of male dominance when performing and undertaking rites amongst Sikhs. She introduces the essay from her own experiences of ritual during her mother’s funeral. She asks for a ‘refeminization’ of ritual in Sikhism.

Jagbir Jhutti-Johal’s essay explores issues from the perspective of the extent of female participation and position in Sikh religious institutions – the Gurdwara. Her contribution draws from extensive research with women in India and the United Kingdom. The experiences of women in the diaspora are further explored by Kamala Nayar through her empirical research amongst Sikh women in Vancouver. Nayar explores the tension from women being caught between two cultures of the West and the Punjab and observes the ‘double standards’ in relation to the acceptable behaviour from a male and that of a female in the Punjabi culture. The focus of Inderpal Grewal’s essay is ‘Making Sikh Women Refugees in 1990s USA’. She poignantly discusses the ‘narratives’ for asylum as filed by Punjabi women seeking stay in the USA.

The efforts of Yogi Bhajan have resulted in masses of Americans becoming Sikhs. This has provided an interesting dimension to the predominantly Punjabi Sikh community worldwide. Constance Elsberg explores the attitudes of the 3HO and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere towards women. In the aftermath of Bhajan’s death, many accounts from female followers have indicated the unequal treatment of women through both the 3HO and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. Elsberg analyses the role of the Khalsa Women’s Training Camp in ‘shaping’ the ideal Sikh woman. The geographical links between Canada and India are discussed by
Margaret Walton-Roberts. She explores the aspirations of many Indian parents for their daughters to be married to non-resident Indians (NRIs). Walton-Roberts demonstrates that the marriage bureau network has, indeed, become globalized in the aspirations of parents residing in the Punjab that daughters will have better prospects outside of India in countries such as Canada. The final essay in the volume is by Kanwal Mand and entitled ‘Transnational Sikh Women’s Working Lives: Place and the Life Course’. Mand explores the often differing attitudes towards a Sikh woman undertaking paid employment in Punjab, Tanzania and Britain. She notes that it is the norm for Sikh women to go out to work in Britain, as opposed to notions of negativity associated with a working Sikh woman in Tanzania.

It is evident from the teachings of Guru Nanak that his experience as a captive at Sayyidpur had a great impact on his attitude towards women. This is not to suggest that prior to being held captive he was in any way derogatory in his attitude towards females. His relationship with his sister is one of love and adoration. Traditional accounts imply that Bibi Nanaki was in fact, his first follower. Overall, this book will serve as an interesting and sophisticated study of the position of females both within the texts of Sikhism and actual practice. It is a welcomed publication in its field and will be a very useful resource for both students and those with an interest in the study of gender and the hermeneutics of equality in the Sikh textual tradition.