
EXAMINING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND IMPACT IN THE SIKH IMPERIAL DYNASTY

HABIBA KHURSHAID¹, PROF. DR. FALEEHA ZAHRA KAZMI², DR. MARIA UMER³, SYEDA SANA GILANI⁴, DR. SYEDA SARA BHUKHARI⁵, DR. SHAHIDA ALAM⁶, RUBINA AKHTAR⁷

¹PHD SCHOLAR LCWU LAHORE, PAKISTAN (habibakhurshid80@gmail.com)

²CHAIRPERSON DEPARTMENT OF PERSIAN LCWU LAHORE, PAKISTAN. (faleeha.zahra@lcwu.edu.pk)

³ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, LCWU LAHORE. PAKISTAN.(mariaumer23@gmail.com)

⁴PHD SCHOLAR, LCWU LAHORE, PAKISTAN. (gilanisana17@gmail.com)

⁵ASSISTANT PROFESSOR LCWU LAHORE. PAKISTAN. (dr.sarabukhari786@gmail.com)

⁶ASSISTANT PROFESSOR LCWU LAHORE. PAKISTAN. (drshahidaghazi@gmail.com)

⁷PHD SCHOLAR LCWU LAHORE. PAKISTAN. (robinaakhtar166@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

This article examines the status, leadership, and multifaceted contributions of women within the Sikh Imperial Dynasty against the broader historical backdrop of the Indian Subcontinent. Tracing women's position from the Indus Valley Civilization through the Vedic, Mauryan, Rajput, Sultanate, and Mughal eras periods marked by oppressive practices such as sati, purdah, child marriage, and female infanticide the study demonstrates how the emergence of Sikhism under Guru Nanak Dev and subsequent Gurus brought a revolutionary shift toward gender equality. Through institutions such as langar and the Khalsa Panth, Sikh women were empowered as religious educators, battlefield warriors, political administrators, and spiritual leaders. Drawing on the lives of notable figures including Bebe Nanaki, Mata Kheevi, Mai Bhago, Rani Jindan, and Rani Sada Kaur, the article highlights how Sikh women transcended patriarchal barriers and became enduring agents of social and religious change.

KEYWORDS: Sikh women, gender equality, empowerment, leadership, Sikh Dynasty

1. INTRODUCTION

The subcontinent is a socially diverse region where people from diverse religions, languages, and ethnicities coexist. Women are an integral part of this society, fulfilling roles as daughters, mothers, and wives throughout their lives. The status of women in the Subcontinent has undergone great changes over the past few millennia. In ancient times during the Indus civilization, women were considered as important as men in the functioning and development of society both genders had equal rights with no restrictions on lifestyle, food, or clothing. Women participated in major decisions of the society. During the Harappan civilization, the status of women was even higher, with family names derived from the woman's name.

During the Vedic period, conditions were relatively favorable for women girl children were not considered unholy, women had a say in their marriages, and queens sat on thrones alongside kings. Women were proficient in the arts, though widows were not allowed to remarry. During the Mauryan period, women enjoyed independence and were involved in trade and arts, though sati pratha was prevalent and women had no rights to their fathers' property. Men were allowed multiple marriages and women were considered their property, though the swayamvar custom where a woman chose her husband also existed during this era.

The medieval period saw the rise of Rajput, Sultanate, and Mughal cultures, each bringing its own social norms. Among Rajputs, the Johar pratha existed alongside child marriage, female foeticide, and the poor treatment of widows. Under the Turkish Sultans, many women and children were killed or enslaved. The Mughal era continued the oppressive customs of purdah, child marriages, and sati pratha. The distance of women from political, religious, and social life increased steadily with time. It was within this deeply unequal social framework that Sikhism emerged as a transformative force.(Harbans Singh, 2002: pp. 184)

2. Women as Educators and Spiritual Guides

A significant yet often understated contribution of Sikh women was their role as educators both of Gurbani and of the values of the Sikh faith. In a society where women's access to religious knowledge was severely restricted in other communities, Sikh women were encouraged to read, recite, and teach the Gurbani from the very beginning of the faith.

Women like Bibi Amro and Bebe Nanaki were among the earliest to memorize and recite sacred scripture, sharing it with those around them. Mata Sundri's daily kirtan drew sangat from far and wide, establishing her as a spiritual authority in her own right after the passing of Guru Gobind Singh. Mata Gujri imparted profound moral courage and religious knowledge to the Chhote Sahibzaade, enabling them to face martyrdom with serenity. Sikh women served as the primary transmitters of religious knowledge within the household, raising the next generation of Sikhs with a firm grounding in Gurbani, seva, and simran. This role as spiritual educators gave women a position of quiet but powerful authority within the family and community (W.H. McLeod, 1989).

3. Women and the Administration of Langar

The institution of langar the Guru's free communal kitchen holds a central place in Sikh theology and practice. It was conceived by Guru Nanak as a radical act of social equality, dissolving the barriers of caste, gender, religion, and wealth. What is less acknowledged is the central and indispensable role that women played in building and sustaining this institution.

Mata Kheevi, wife of Guru Angad Dev, is the most celebrated example. She is the only woman explicitly mentioned by name in the Guru Granth Sahib (Ramkali ki Var, Pana 967), honored for distributing the bounty of the langar kheer and ghee like sweet ambrosia. She reformed and professionalized the langar, ensuring it ran with consistency, dignity, and warmth. By serving in the langar without covering her face, she also challenged the purdah pratha, modeling a new norm of public female participation.

Bibi Bhani headed the langar administration in the Gurudwara during her time, overseeing its preparation, serving, and overall management. Mata Ganga walked barefoot to offer langar to Baba Budha, an act of humility that was spiritually rewarded. Across generations, Sikh women ensured that no one left the Gurudwara hungry a practical expression of the Sikh value of seva (selfless service). Their work in the langar was not subordinate or invisible; it was an act of spiritual leadership recognized by the Gurus themselves.

4. Women in the Battlefield

The contribution of Sikh women was not limited to religious and domestic spheres many participated actively in armed resistance alongside men. The Sikh tradition of saint-soldiers (Sant-Sipahi) was not exclusively male. Women were trained in warfare, archery, and horsemanship, reflecting the Sikh belief in the equality of all souls before God regardless of gender.

From the time of Guru Hargobind, who introduced the concept of Miri-Piri (temporal and spiritual authority), women understood that defending the faith and community was a shared responsibility. Women like Mai Bhago not only participated in battles but led men into combat. During the siege of Anandpur Sahib and the subsequent campaigns, Sikh women provided logistical support, carried arms, tended to the wounded, and in many cases fought on the front lines. Historical accounts also mention women who defended their villages against Mughal raids, keeping alive the spirit of the Khalsa in the absence of their male relatives. The martial tradition among Sikh women was thus not an exception but an expression of the egalitarian ideals enshrined in Sikh teachings (Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, 1993).

5. Sikhism and the Elevation of Women

A new religion emerged in society with the objective of uplifting the status of human beings Sikhism. The Sikh Gurus took concrete steps to end injustice towards women and elevate their status. Guru Nanak Dev emphasized that women are the pillars of society, granting them the same standing as men in the sangat and promoting equality through the langar pratha, where women sat alongside men regardless of gender, wealth, caste, or religion. He stated that she who gives birth not only to common people but to kings, gurus, and peers cannot be considered inferior to men.

Guru Amar Das redefined sati as living in the memory of one's husband rather than dying with him, thereby saving women from giving up their lives (Giani Bhajan Singh, 2003: 51). Guru Ram Das formally ended the sati pratha within the Sikh community. Guru Hargobind Sahib stated that women were the saviours of all mankind (Harbans Singh, 2002: pp. 170). Guru Gobind Singh established the Khalsa Panth and baptized women equally with men, granting them an important position in the ardas. Women in Sikhism have been described as brave, courageous warriors in the Guru Granth Sahib, and it is through women that a society is formed.

6. Women and Property Rights in Sikh Tradition

One of the most progressive aspects of Sikh social reform was the improvement in women's rights over property and inheritance a stark contrast to the norms prevailing in contemporaneous Hindu and Muslim communities. In pre-Sikh traditions, women had virtually no right to their father's property, and widows were especially vulnerable, often stripped of all assets upon the death of their husbands.

Sikhism challenged this framework by affirming the spiritual equality of men and women, which carried implications for social and economic rights as well. Sikh women like Mata Kheevi and Rani Sada Kaur took over the administration of religious and political affairs after the deaths of their husband's acts that would have been unthinkable in the prevailing social order. Rani Sada Kaur, as head of the Kanhaiya misl, commanded armies, negotiated with the British,

and administered territories exercising property and governance rights that no woman in a non-Sikh political structure of that era enjoyed.

The Sikh Rehat Maryada (code of conduct) historically discouraged practices like female infanticide and the denial of inheritance to daughters. While full legal equality was not codified in the early period, the moral and theological framework laid by the Gurus provided the basis for women's economic agency, as seen in the lives of the women who managed Gurudwara resources, langar funds, and political estates (Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, 1993).

7. Notable Women of the Sikh Dynasty

7.1. Mata Tripta (The First Sikh Mother)

Mata Tripta was the mother of Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism, and one of the earliest figures to recognize the extraordinary nature of her son. Born in the village of Chahal near Lahore, she was a devout and deeply spiritual woman. Mata Tripta nurtured Guru Nanak's contemplative and compassionate nature from childhood, recognizing his spiritual inclinations even when others misunderstood them. She was among the first to hear the message of Guru Nanak and to accept it wholeheartedly. Her patience, love, and deep faith created the environment in which the founder of the Sikh faith could develop his spiritual vision. Mata Tripta is revered as the first mother of Sikhism the woman who gave the world its most egalitarian prophet of the medieval age.

7.2. Mata Sulakhni (The Companion of Guru Nanak)

Mata Sulakhni was the wife of Guru Nanak Dev, married to him in 1487 A.D. in Batala, Punjab. She was the daughter of Mool Chand and Chando Rani. She was a woman of great patience, faith, and resilience, who supported Guru Nanak's spiritual mission even through long periods of separation as he undertook his udasia (religious journeys) across the subcontinent, Arabia, and beyond. She raised their two sons, Baba Sri Chand and Baba Lakhmi Das, largely on her own, imbuing them with the values of the Sikh faith. Mata Sulakhni represents the quiet strength of women who anchor a family and a mission through steadfast devotion, and she is honored in the Sikh tradition as a woman of deep character and faith.

7.3. Bebe Nanaki (1464–1518)

Bebe Nanaki was born in 1464 A.D. in Chahal village, Lahore. Five years elder to Guru Nanak, she understood her brother deeply and acted as an unconventional support system throughout his life. She was the first person to recognize the divine presence in Guru Nanak and thus the first woman to join the Sikh religion. She recited the Bani and the path of Japji Sahib, and when Guru Nanak embarked on his religious journeys, she managed all his affairs. She is credited with laying the foundation of women's importance in Sikhism. She passed away in 1518 A.D. in Sultanpur. (Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, 1993).

7.4. Mata Kheevi (1506)

Mata Kheevi was born in 1506 to Bhai Devi Chand Khatri and Mata Karan Devi. Married to Guru Angad Dev, her most important contribution was her administration of the langar pratha, ensuring food was served freely to all regardless of religion, caste, color, or gender. She is uniquely honored in the Guru Granth Sahib for distributing the bounty of the Guru's langar. She also played an important role in opposing the pardha pratha and sati pratha. After the death of her husband, she took over all responsibilities with strength and dedication.

7.5. Bibi Amro (b. 1522)

Bibi Amro was the daughter of Guru Angad Dev and Mata Kheevi, born in 1522 A.D. at Khadoor Sahib. She had the Bani memorized and continued her religious practice even after marriage. It was her recitation of Bani that moved Guru Amar Das and led him to meet Guru Angad Dev a pivotal moment in Sikh history. She later administered the Manjia established by Guru Amar Das and played a key role in spreading Gurbani among the women of the Sikh community. (Harbans Singh, 2002: pp. 177)

7.6. Bibi Bhani (b. 1534)

Bibi Bhani was the daughter of Guru Amar Das, born on 2nd February 1534. She holds a unique place in Sikh history as the only woman whose father, husband (Guru Ram Das), and son (Guru Arjan Dev) were all Gurus. She devoted her life to the seva of the Sikh community and headed the administration of langar in the Gurudwara. After the death of her husband, she assisted Guru Arjan Dev in managing religious affairs, proving herself equal to men in all spheres of life.

7.7. Bibi Veero (b. 1615)

Bibi Veero was the daughter of Guru Hargobind, sister of Guru Tegh Bahadur, and paternal aunt of Guru Gobind Singh, born in Amritsar in 1615 A.D. She urged women to form groups and join the sangat, engaged Sikh women and children in Gurbani, and encouraged people toward social work. Known for her composure and determination, she promoted unity and brotherhood throughout the Sikh community. (login, lady 1869: pp175)

7.8. Mata Ganga

Mata Ganga was the wife of Guru Arjan Dev and mother of Guru Hargobind Sahib. She established a well named Gangsar in Kartarpur in 1657 A.D. She walked barefoot to offer langar to Baba Budha, who blessed her with the prophecy that she would give birth to the owner of Miri-Piri — fulfilled with the birth of Guru Hargobind Sahib. Even

after the martyrdom of her husband, she continued humanitarian activities and encouraged Guru Sahib to unite political and religious responsibilities for the protection of the Sikh community. (Harbans Singh, 2002: pp. 170)

7.9. Mata Gujri (1629)

Mata Gujri was born in 1629 A.D. and was married to the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur. She gave birth to Guru Gobind Singh and instilled in him strong moral values. When she and the Chhote Sahibzaade were imprisoned in the Thanda Burj of Sirhind by the Mughals, she strengthened their religious resolve such that they refused to convert and sacrificed their lives. She is honored as the wife, mother, and grandmother of those who gave their lives for the Sikh faith.

1.10 . Mata Sundri (b. 1667)

Mata Sundri was born on 23rd December 1667 in Lahore, and was the second wife of Guru Gobind Singh. After his passing, she took over the responsibilities of the Sikh religion, sent Bhai Mani Singh for the seva of the Akal Takht, and appointed him as head Granthi of Harimandar Sahib. Despite losing her son in battle, she showed remarkable strength and continued performing Kirtan, drawing sangat from far away.

7.11. Mata Sahib Kaur

Mata Sahib Kaur was the third wife of Guru Gobind Singh and the only Sikh woman to be honored with the title Mother of the Khalsa Panth. Guru Gobind Singh announced to the entire sangat that the Khalsa whose members would live forever was like a son to her. She fulfilled these responsibilities with great dedication and played an important role in shaping the history of the Sikh religion.

7.12. Mai Bhago (b. 1645)

Mai Bhago, born Bhag Bhari in 1645 A.D. in village Jhabal Kalan near Amritsar, grew up in a devout Sikh household steeped in valor. Baptized on Vaisakhi 1699, she took the name Bhag Kaur. In December 1705, when forty Sikhs deserted Guru Gobind Singh, Mai Bhago confronted them, shamed them for their cowardice, dressed in warrior attire, and led them back to the Guru at Khidrana (Muktsar). All forty attained martyrdom; Mai Bhago survived and became one of the Guru's bodyguards. After Guru Gobind Singh's passing at Nanded in 1708, she settled in Jinvara, Karnataka, where she meditated and spread Sikhism until her death. Her home is now Gurdwara Tap Asthan Mai Bhago. (ganga aneja 2007:pp117)

7.13. Rani Jindan (1817–1863) The Lioness of Punjab

Rani Jindan, also known as Rani Jind Kaur, was the youngest and most influential wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the mother of the last Sikh ruler, Maharaja Duleep Singh. Born in 1817 in Gujranwala to Manna Singh, a kennel-keeper in the royal court, her rise from humble origins to the regency of the Sikh Empire is a testament to her extraordinary intelligence and political acumen.

After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839, the Sikh Empire entered a period of political instability. Following a succession of rulers who died in rapid succession, Rani Jindan became the regent of the empire in 1843, ruling on behalf of her young son Duleep Singh. She proved to be a fierce and capable ruler. She rallied the Sikh army, the Khalsa, and attempted to resist British encroachment into Punjab. British officials recognized her as the most dangerous opponent of British expansion in the northwest a woman who inspired loyalty through her personal courage and her passionate advocacy for Sikh sovereignty.

The British ultimately defeated the Sikh forces in the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845–46 and 1848–49) and moved swiftly to neutralize Rani Jindan, whom they considered the chief instigator of Sikh resistance. She was separated from her son Duleep Singh in 1849, a separation she described as more painful than death. She was imprisoned, first at Sheikhpura, then at Chunar Fort, and later exiled to Nepal. She escaped from prison in 1848, disguised as a servant, and made her way to Nepal an act of extraordinary daring that further cemented her legendary status.

In Nepal, she lived in exile for over a decade before being reunited with her son Duleep Singh in 1861, in Speke Hall, England. She died in London in 1863, just one year after the reunion. Rani Jindan represents the last great defender of the Sikh Empire a woman who confronted the most powerful colonial empire in the world with courage, strategy, and an unwavering commitment to her people. British historian Login described her as possessing remarkable political ability and an iron will. She is one of the most significant and yet often overlooked figures in both Sikh history and the history of resistance to British colonialism in South Asia.

7.14. Rani Sada Kaur (1762–1832)

Rani Sada Kaur, daughter of Dasaundha Singh Gill, was married to Gurbaksh Singh of the Kanhaiya misl. After her husband's death in battle in 1785, she took charge as head of the Kanhaiya misl. She arranged the marriage of her daughter Mehtab Kaur to the young Ranjit Singh and played a central role in his regency. She led armies alongside Ranjit Singh in campaigns at Amritsar, Chiniot, Kasur, Kangra, Hazara, and Attock. When her relationship with Ranjit Singh soured over succession disputes, she sought British protection for her independence. Ranjit Singh lured her to Lahore, confined her, and confiscated her estates. She died in confinement in 1832, but her legacy as a stateswoman and military leader endures. (Harbans Singh, 2002: pp. 158)

8. Impact of British Colonialism on Sikh Women

The annexation of the Punjab by the British East India Company in 1849 following the Second Anglo-Sikh War had profound consequences for the status of women within the Sikh community. The political and social structures that had, under Sikh rule, provided spaces for women's leadership, property rights, and public participation were dismantled and replaced by British colonial administrative frameworks that were often less progressive in their treatment of women.

Under British rule, Sikh political institutions were dissolved, and the autonomous governance of Sikh misls and the Sikh Empire within which women like Rani Sada Kaur and Rani Jindan had exercised real power was ended. The colonial administration introduced legal frameworks derived from British law and codified versions of Hindu and Muslim personal law that frequently disadvantaged women in matters of property, marriage, and inheritance.

The British policy of divide and rule, combined with the social disruptions of colonialism, led to a gradual erosion of some of the more egalitarian practices that had characterized Sikh society. However, the colonial period also brought new educational opportunities. Missionary schools and later government institutions provided Sikh women with access to Western-style education, which some used to become teachers, nurses, and community leaders. The Singh Sabha Movement of the late 19th century, which sought to reform and revitalize Sikhism, also championed women's education and opposed practices like female infanticide and child marriage, reaffirming the original Sikh commitment to gender equality in the changed colonial context (W.H. McLeod, 1989).

9. CONCLUSION

The history of women's empowerment in the Sikh dynasty stands as a beacon of progressive reform amid the patriarchal constraints of the Subcontinent's past. From the relative equality of the Indus Valley Civilization to the oppressive medieval eras marked by sati, purdah, and female infanticide, the status of women fluctuated dramatically across different empires. The advent of Sikhism under Guru Nanak Dev and subsequent Gurus revolutionized this narrative by advocating gender equality, abolishing discriminatory customs, and integrating women into religious, social, and martial spheres through institutions like langar and the Khalsa Panth.

When compared with the status of women in contemporaneous Hindu and Muslim societies, the position of Sikh women was strikingly advanced. They participated in religious congregations, managed institutions, commanded armies, administered territories, and transmitted the faith to future generations all within a theological framework that recognized their intrinsic spiritual equality with men.

The inspiring legacies of Mata Tripta, Bebe Nanaki, Mata Kheevi, Mata Gujri, Mai Bhago, Rani Jindan, Rani Sada Kaur, and many others exemplify how Sikh women transcended societal barriers to become agents of change. Their contributions in the battlefield, in the langar, in the Gurudwara, in the home, and in the courts of power were not peripheral but central to the survival and flourishing of the Sikh faith. The Sikh era's commitment to gender equity not only liberated women from centuries of subjugation but also laid a timeless foundation for Sikhism's egalitarian ethos. In a world still grappling with inequality, these historical strides remind us that empowering women strengthens communities, fosters justice, and honors the divine equality inherent in all. As Guru Nanak proclaimed without women, there is no life.

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