

RECONSTRUCTING THE CONTRIBUTION OF MATA GUJRI IN PRESERVING SIKH CULTURE

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Abstract

'Culture' and 'Jeevan' are the basis on which the Indian knowledge system has been built. 'Culture' and 'Religion' are close relatives that define 'Jeevan' or a way of living for a sect that develops over time and transmits from one generation to the other. Sikhism is a 'Culture' and 'Jeevan' that exemplifies a spirit of courage, valour, and equality. The spirit of equality is not restricted to a group or dimension but has been to humanity in general. Sikhi or Sikhism pertains to practicing equality and justice as 'Jeevan' and considers sacrificing lives, to uphold the dignity of mankind, above the subjugation of spirits, which the numerous sacrifices of lives from members of the Sikhi sect have validated. Further, these sacrifices and tales of valour and bravery are not restricted to the male lineage but inclusive of sacrifices from Sikh women who have walked shoulder to shoulder with men in bringing glory to Sikhism. The name that stands out as a testament to the contribution of women in preserving the Sikh cultural ethos is that of 'Mata Gujri', the first woman martyr in Sikhism. This research reconstructs the contribution of Mata Gujri in preserving the Sikhi culture and that of other faiths.

Keywords: Equality, Culture, Mata Gujri, Sikhism, Women

INTRODUCTION

The Article 21 of the Indian Constitution gives every Indian the 'right to a dignified life'. This fundamental right guarantees a right to life and personal liberty without discrimination. This right is an outcome of India attaining political freedom in 1947 and framing its Constitution. Even so, the position of women in society has been based on cultural and religious practices that are centuries old. These practices are an insight into the principles and the foundation on which the present-day community rests. Every culture and religion has ideologies towards men and women that determine their living and behaviour.

The spirit of equality and a dignified life has been ingrained in the Sikh culture since its inception around 1500 CE. The sect has not needed a constitutional endorsement or doctrines to live with pride and valour. And these doctrines are universal for every member of the Sikhi sect irrespective of gender- men or women. The unforgettable role of Mata Gujri in establishing these doctrines defines the present way of living of Sikh men and women. The Sikh women pray, work hard, participate in community service, and live a courageous and liberated life alongside their men.

MATA GUJRI

Mata Gujri was the wife of a martyr, mother of a martyr, grandmother of martyrs, and the first woman martyr in Sikhism. Mata Gujri was born in 1624 to Bhai Lal Chand Subulikka and Bishan Kaur in Kapurthala district of Punjab. On 4 February 1633, Mata Gujri was married to Guru Tegh Bahadur, who was installed as the 9th Sikh Guru in 1664. At Patna, on 22nd December 1666, Mata Gujari gave birth to the illustrious Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th Sikh Guru of later day. She was a grandmother to four grandsons, Sahibzada Ajit Singh, Sahibzada Jujhar Singh, Sahibzada Zorawar Singh, and Sahibzada Fateh Singh.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SIKH FAITH

Egalitarianism is the epitome of Sikhism. Sikhism does not discriminate against any human on grounds of religion, caste, creed, race, or gender. The ancient scriptures and religious texts are a reflection of a culture. These texts that were written centuries ago are the basis on which groups practice their culture today.

Civilizations have seen gory incidences to reinforce the superiority of one group over the other. An example from the past of men brutally reinforcing their superiority over women is 'witch hunting' where single women, widows, women philosophers, preachers, and other women from the margins of society were targeted, and between the years 1500 to 1660, around 80,000 women were put to death in Europe (History, 2017). The Sikhi

culture is an antithesis to this and the historical unfairness prevalent in many ancient cultural practices was the reason for Guru Nanak Dev to form the Sikhi sect on the principles of equality and justice. Sikh faith was started around 1500 CE by Guru Nanak Dev based on the following pillars:

- 'Naam Japo' (Meditating on the name of God and feeling his divine presence in everything and everyone)
- 'Kirat Karna' (Leading an honest and truthful life and earning a livelihood by doing hard work)
- 'Vand Chhakna' (Sharing the fruits of labour with everyone and helping the needy by doing selfless service for humanity)
- 'Sarbat da Bhalla' (Praying to God to seek the well of all mankind)
- 'Bina Dare Sach Bol' (Always speaking the truth without fear whether we win or lose a battle).

All ten Gurus have contributed to establishing the Sikh culture and faith, as it is today. The last and the 10th Guru, Guru Gobind Singh initiated Khalsa in 1699 on the day of Baisakhi festival. It was set up to safeguard and protect the Sikh values and faith. The sacrifices and contribution of Mata Gujri in preserving these Sikh values and culture stand out as a part of the illustrious Sikh heritage.

OBJECTIVES

- To reconstruct the sacrifices of Mata Gujri in her personal life and the display of unparalleled strength during adversities
- To examine Mata Gujri's contribution in preserving the Sikhi culture and in shaping the life of Sikh women today

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology in this paper is 'historical' based on religious scripts and texts on Sikhism and the writings of experts and followers of Sikhi culture and history.

Excerpts & interpretations from Mata Gujri's life to illustrate her courage and contribution in Sikhism

In reconstructing Mata Gujri's contribution in preserving Sikhi culture, this research highlights and interprets some significant events from her life to understand her determination in preserving the principles and commandments of Sikhi culture.

(4.1) Execution in 1675 of the Guru Teg Bahadur, husband of Mata Gujri

Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life for the protection of the Hindu religion. Some Kashmiri Pandits, who were being forced to convert to Islam, sought refuge with Guru Teg Bahadur. He traveled to Delhi to deter Aurangzeb from this religious compulsion and was beheaded under Aurangzeb's imperial warrant in November 1675 on declining to perform miracles and volunteering himself for sacrifice when Aurangzeb asked the Hindus to bring forth someone who agreed to sacrifice himself for their religion. Guruji sacrificed his life for righteousness and freedom of mankind to follow religious convictions as laid down in Sikhi.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji (SGGS) unambiguously denounces the use of force to convert others as illustrated below:

"Do not frighten anyone, nor be afraid of anyone" (Salok M: 9, 1427) (SGGS)

"Kabeer, the use of force is tyranny, even if you call it legal. When your account is called for in the Court of the Lord, what will your condition be then? ||187 || (Salok Kabeer Jee, 1374) (SGGS)

"O Nanak! Listen O mind! Understand that person to be spiritually wise who does not frighten anyone, and who is not afraid of anyone else (or who is not shaken by threats.) || 16 ||" (Salok M: 9, Ang 1427) (SGGS)

When Guru Teg Bahadur left for Delhi for the supreme sacrifice, Mata Gujri showed immense courage while parting and after the execution of Guruji (Damdami Taksal, Undated). The gruesome execution, in Delhi's Chandani Chowk, was carried out in full public view to instill fear in those who opposed the religious conversions. It was to break the will of the Sikhi sect for easy submission to tyranny and religious conversion. But, Mata Gujri showed exceptional strength during this time. When Guru Tegh Bahadur's head was secretly brought to Anantpur Saheb, Mata Gujri kept calm and treated it as the 'Will of God' (Discover Sikhism, Undated) showing her faith in the principles of Sikhism, one of which is 'Naam Japo' i.e. to pray and have faith in God at all times. After the execution of her husband, she continued with the mission of Guru Teg Bahadur of liberating mankind from oppression.

(4.2) Upbringing of her son Guru Gobind Singh after the execution of her husband Guru Teg Bahadur

After the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur, Mata Gujri was instrumental in guiding the 'Pant' (Group) since Guru Gobind Singh was very young to take responsibility for the 'Pant'. Guru Gobind Singh became the 10th Guru on 29th March 1676, when he was only nine years of age. She was assisted in this by her brother Kirpal Chand. She managed the 'Pant' and organized the 'langar seva' (community service) in continuation with the principles and ideals of the Sikhi sect. Most importantly, she administered and inspired the army during battles fought.

During this period she ensured that the upbringing of her son was that of a future father of the Khalsa. She endowed the best of qualities in her son, whom she had given birth to when she was 42 years of age. She ensured that Guru Gobind Singh emerged as a wise and strong leader bestowed with bravery, a discerning conscious, and an evolved leader. Gururji was well-educated, and well trained in martial arts, horse riding, and archery. Gururjee was a poet and a philosopher besides being a highly accomplished warrior (Gateway to Sikhism, Undated). Mata Gujri could have saved herself and her only son from all the tribulations by moving the young Guru Gobind away from a life of struggles, battles, and sacrifices. But, she preferred for him to follow a righteous, dignified, and courageous path.

Guru Gobind Singh had high respect for women which is reflected in his writings. In Dasam Bani- Pannaa 1428, Gururji praises the female Hindu deities for their strength as the destroyer of evil and the one who is the enlightener.

He writes,

“Salutation to the All-Supreme and pure Mother - destroyer of deadly sins with Her mighty teeth.
Salutation to the Supreme Mother who bestows strength to the Ascetics (Jogis) to meditate.
Salutation to the rider of the Lion and killer of the demons.
Salutation to Mother Saraswati who enlightens Her disciples.
Salutation to the one that gives magical powers and wisdom to Her devotees”.

The upbringing of Mata Gujri played a role in the respect that Guru Gobind Singh showed towards women. In 1699, 'Khalsa' was established by Guru Gobind Singh who gave a new identity to the members of 'Khalsa' - men and women. The members renounced their surnames for a common surname of 'Singh' (for men) and 'Kaur' (for women). The common new surnames are a reflection of establishing a sect where equality is paramount. The title of 'Kaur' given to a Sikh woman regarded a woman as 'Princess' or 'Royalty'. Further, one of the marks of observing Khalsa is the carrying of a 'kirpan' (sword) by a Sikh which Guru Gobind Singh bestowed to women along with men (Sikhism Guide, Undated). This empowered a Sikh woman by giving her a weapon to protect herself. Further, Guru Gobind Singh instructed the Khalsa not to associate with 'kanyapapi' (those who sin against women) (Singh, 2012). These incidences are a reflection of the high esteem that Guru Gobind Singh had for women.

A definitive equality for women in Sikhi is seen when they are allowed to offer prayers even during menstruation. Today, many different cultures talk about gender equality but Sikhism practices it. Sikhism does not discriminate against men and women and women are not restricted in Gurdwara when menstruating. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji (Ang 473) says, “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”.

The present generation of Sikhs is taking the application of gender equality forward from their predecessors. On February 10th, 2019, a charity organisation Binti International launched a Period Policy at the Khalsa Jatha Sikh Gurdwara, London, United Kingdom (Mann, 2019). The event held talks on periods and endeavors to eradicate the disgrace around menstruation.

(4.3) Mata Gujri Arrested with Two Sahibzaade in 1705

In 1705, Mata Gujri was arrested with the younger two Sahibzaade Zorawar Singh (aged 9) and Sahibzada Fateh Singh (aged 5). In the captivity of Nawab Wazir Khan, the two Sahibzaade were tortured in an attempt to convert them to Islam. Mata Gujri knew the end of her grandchildren if they defied the oppressor. Despite that, she narrated stories of bravery to them of their grandfather and father and their mission and sacrifices. By doing so, she strengthened their belief in standing up to oppression to preserve their identity against a life of privileges and luxury that they were promised upon conversion to Islam. As a last attempt to convert them to Islam, the two were bricked alive in a wall. As the wall kept falling, they were finally executed by slitting off their throats. On hearing the death of her grandsons, Mata Gujri died the same day (Sandhu, 2021) (Singh

Station, 2017). Mata Gujri has left a life of legacy behind her. Her sacrifices are the reason for the existence of Sikhism today along with the ideals of other Sikh Gurus.

AN EXEMPLAR FOR TODAY'S WOMEN

Mata Gujri lived her life on the fundamentals and foundation of Sikhi i.e. to respect every culture and religion. Her life and beliefs are an inspiration not only for Sikh women but also for today's modern women who despite the conviction of knowing their rights in personal and professional lives are often unable to take a stand during challenging times. The fear of popular social opinions and backlash holds them back from voicing out the injustices. Mata Gujri's life educates us to stand for what is right and against injustices for a life of dignity and well-being.

CONCLUSION

When Guru Gobind Singh's followers shed tears on the sacrifice of Guruji's sons, Guruji responded, "In putran ke sis per var diye sut char, char muye to kya hua jeevat kai hazar"(Gurusikhi Jivan,2012) (For the family of my Khalsa, I have sacrificed my four sons, so what if four are dead when thousands more are alive). The sacrifices of Mata Gujri and the Sikh Gurus are the reason why the Sikhi culture not only exists today but is prospering worldwide. Today, 25 to 30 million Sikhs live worldwide (World Population Review, Undated) spreading the Sikhi culture. They pray, work hard, serve mankind, and live a liberated life of courage and bravery by fearing no one and instilling fear in nobody.

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