



## **SIKHISM AND FEMALE INFANTICIDE**

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*In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the issue of the female infanticide in the Sikhism. The rationale of this paper is to identify the extent of the practice of the female infanticide among the Sikhs as it is generally assumed that the Sikh girls were more vulnerable to female infanticide/foeticide as compared to other religious groups. The objective of this paper is to identify the Sikhs position where they stands in the killing of the girls as this is a practice which was strongly condemn by the tenth Sikh Guru Gobind Singh. The paper is divided into two parts; the first part covers the views of the Sikh Gurus on the issue. In the second part a comparative analysis is made on the religious group's sex ratio, where the Sikhs always have lowest sex ratio but interestingly they are continuously showing remarkable improvement in their sex ratio patterns as compared to Hindu and Muslims since the first census of the Punjab in 1868.*

It is always assumed that the practice of *Kurimaar* (girl child killing) is most prevalent among the Sikhs.<sup>i</sup> There is no doubt Sikh people do kill their daughters as Sikh Gurus has to come forward to condemn the practice of the female infanticide among their followers. The extent of the practice was not high as Guru Nanak Dev Ji does not critique female infanticide in his writings though the practice was closely aligned to the upper castes of his times.<sup>ii</sup> Guru Nanak silence regarding female infanticide is evidence, that it was primarily not wide spread or followed by many caste groups or areas, as Guru Nanak condemns all major issues related to women except female infanticide of his time. In the patriarchal world women were indeed assigned a position of inferiority, however that inferiority in no way detracted from

their ability to attain salvation.

In the colonial times the British do quote the reference from the Guru Nanak family for the prevalence of the practice among the Sikhs. As after Guru Nanak Dev is reference of Dharam Chand<sup>iii</sup>, grandson of Guru Nanak the founder of the Sikh faith, that he had to bear the insults made by groom's party in many ways at the time of the marriage of his daughter resulting later in female infanticide to avoid such 'misery'. The origin of the practice was thus described:-

'The practice was first enjoined on their tribe by Dharam Chand Bedi, grandson of Baba Nanak. He had two sons, named Mehar Chand and Manik Chand and one girl. Who at the proper age was espoused to the son of a Khatri, as was then the custom of the Bedis. When the bridegroom's procession reached the house of Dharam Chand, the door was found too narrow to admit the litter on which the boy was carried and the riotous attendants with more than the usual license of the occasion proceeded to widen it by force. The incensed Bedis prayed, 'that the threshold of the Khatri tribe might in like manner, come to ruin and nuptial rites were celebrated amidst mutual ill-feeling. When the bridegroom and his party were departing the two sons of Dharam Chand, as duty bound accompanied them to give them 'Rooksut'. The weather was hot the party out of temper and they took a malicious pleasure in taking the young Bedis further than etiquette required. They returned home with footsore. Dharam Chand asked. 'If the Khatri had not bid them turn back sooner? The boy said, 'No', and it was then that the old man indignant at all the insults which the bridal of his daughter had drown down upon him from an inferior class, laid the inhuman injunction on his descendants that in future no Bedi should let a daughter live. The boys were horror-stricken at such an unnatural law and with clasped hands represented to their future that to take the life of a child was one of the greatest sins of the *shastras*. But Dharam Chand replied, 'that if the Bedis remained true to their faith and abstained from lies and strong drinks. Providence would reward them with none but male children. But at any rate, let the burden of the crime

be upon his neck and no one else and from that time forth Dharam Chand's head fell forward upon his chest and he evermore walked like one who bore an awful weight upon his shoulders.<sup>iv</sup>

Dharam Chand, the story goes, took the burden of the crime of female infanticide upon himself, and it was said that from that day on, his head literally fell on his chest and he walked about as one bearing heavy weight upon his shoulders.<sup>v</sup> With consciences thus relieved the caste of the Bedis continued for 300 years to murder their infant daughters and if any Bedi out of natural feeling preserved a girl, he was excommunicated by the rest and treated as a common sweeper.<sup>vi</sup> This excuse of the Bedis was continued till the colonial period when the British reports refer to the Bedis who justified their killing of the girl child as it was permitted by their ancestors.

The second instance related to female infanticide in Sikhism came from the third Sikh Guru, Amar Das who condemned the practice of female infanticide among his followers which directly indicates the existence of the practice among the Sikh, therefore the need to condemn it by the Guru. According to Anshu Malhotra, the Sodhis, the descendants of the Gurus from the fourth Guru onwards, belonging to the sub-division of Sarin Khatri, low in the internal ranking of the Khatri, were also said to be following the practice of female infanticide.<sup>vii</sup> Sikh Jats, who had overtaken the Khatri in terms of actual numbers within the Sikh community, would have adopted the same means of upward mobility. This showed the spread of the practice of female infanticide from the Khatri to Jat group among the Sikhs. As the ensuing association between Jats and female infanticide can be clearly seen in the famous Punjabi saga of Hir and Ranja. In its most illustrious version associated with the bard of the Waris Shah, the various methods utilized in the killing of infant daughters were spelled out.<sup>viii</sup>

Other instance of Sikh history records that when Guru Har Rai, the seventh Guru, found an abandoned baby girl, he brought her home, adopted her and brought her up

like his own daughter. The girl named Roop Kaur grew up to be an academician, a writer, the first Sikh woman historian who put on record everything the Guru said. It was Guru Gobind Singh who prohibited the practice of 'kurimar' among the Khalsa, and in the *Rehet Nameh* said that "... with the slayers of daughters, whoever has intercourse, him do I curse" and again "whoever takes food from the slayers of daughters, shall die un-absolved.<sup>ix</sup> It is clearly evident that the practice of killing the girl child was prevalent in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Guru Gobind Singh's harsh prohibition of the killing of female infants pointed to a practice which had most likely gone on largely unchecked. Guru Gobind Singh strong condemnation of the killing of girls to a practice which had mostly likely gone on largely unchecked since the guruship of Amar Das, the first Sikh guru known to have proscribed female infanticide.<sup>x</sup> Existence of female infanticide amongst the Sikhs is provided adequate support by Rahitnama and the fact that the Rahitnamas denounced it strongly indicates the stand taken by the religion against gender discrimination.<sup>xi</sup> Sikh code of conduct clearly states the Sikh position on the issue: "A Sikh shall not kill his daughter, nor shall he maintain any relationship with the killer of a daughter."<sup>xii</sup> Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, the noted author of Sikh encyclopedia, puts on record: "In Sikhism a daughter enjoys equal status with a son. A killer of a daughter is to be excommunicated from the community."<sup>xiii</sup> There was another reference of Maharaja Dalip Singh, son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, mention that 'he had actually seen when he was a child at Lahore, his sisters put into a sack and thrown into the river.'<sup>xiv</sup> How far this is true one cannot verify but the existence of such a practice in society is definitely confirmed. The extent of the same is however, debatable.

The next come the socio-religious reform movements of the Sikhs those came in front to put stop on the practice of female infanticide among the Sikhs. The first reference came from the head of the Namdhari sect, Guru Ram Singh, resolutely censured the widely prevalent practices of female infanticide. Ram Singh, well aware of the extent of the practice, issued circulars to his devotees harshly attacking

the custom. In a letter to Daya Singh, he said, 'Teach your children and do not kill infant girls as infanticide is a great sin.'<sup>xv</sup> So he condemns the practice of female infanticide among his followers.

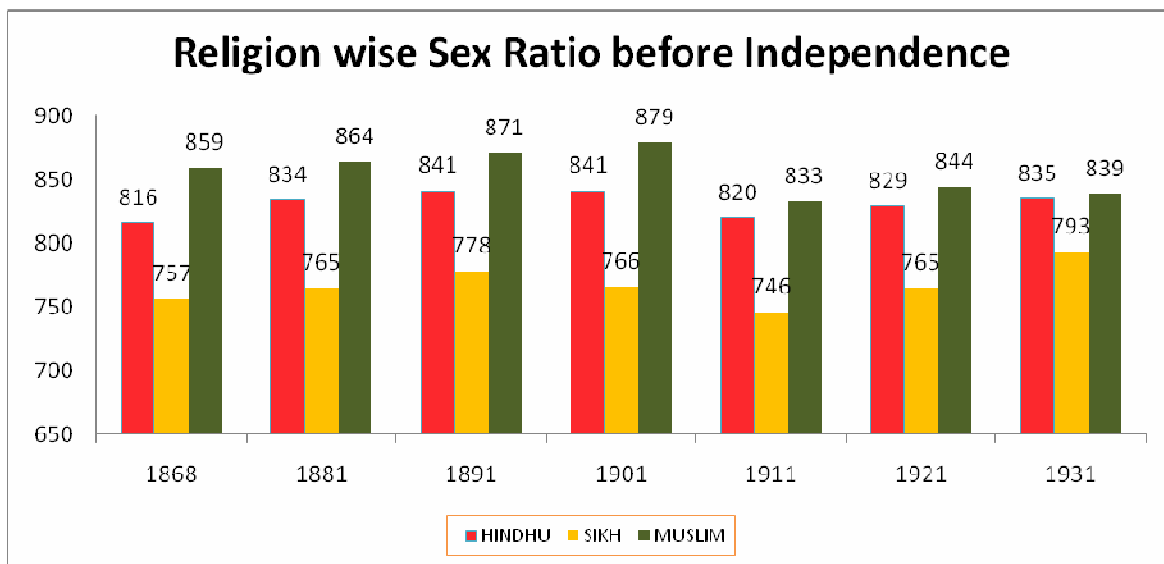
The next came the Singh Sabha leaders those worked tirelessly for the removal of caste prejudices, the emancipation of women, the eradication of non-Sikh practices like polygamy, child marriage and female infanticide and promoted simplification of social ceremonies from birth to death.<sup>xvi</sup>

In recent times taking notice of this unhealthy trend, *Akal Takhat*, the highest socio-religious authority of the Sikhs, issued a stricture against this evil practice vide memo no 998, dated 18th April, 2001, declaring female foeticide/infanticide to be a practice that has no place in the Sikh socio-religious milieu, and anybody indulging in the practice should be socially boycotted. Even with an aim to discourage female foeticide, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee has announced to hand over a 'shagun' of 1,000 to every girl child born at SGPC-run Ram Das Charitable Hospital at the time of birth. The amount - to be handed over to the mother of the child soon after delivery - will be paid from the funds of the Sri Guru Ram Das Charitable Hospital Trust, which runs the hospital on the behalf of SGPC. The announcement was made here on Monday by SGPC president Avtar Singh Makkar in his capacity as the chairman of the trust. "The sole motive behind the decision is to encourage parents to discard the practice of female foeticide. We hope that our effort will bear a positive result on the sex ratio in the state."<sup>xvii</sup>

In the second section of the paper a comparative study is made of the sex ratio pattern of the religious groups. In comparison of the religion based census data, we find that the Hindus and Muslims have more females as compared to the Sikhs. The Sikhs were at the lower end in the proportion of females since the first census of the Punjab. In the census of 1868 Sikhs had 757 females per 1000 males, Hindus 816 and Muslims 859. In the census of 1931 Sikhs do have lowest sex ratio of 793, as compare to Hindus 835 and Muslims 839.<sup>xviii</sup> In the overall picture the Sikhs

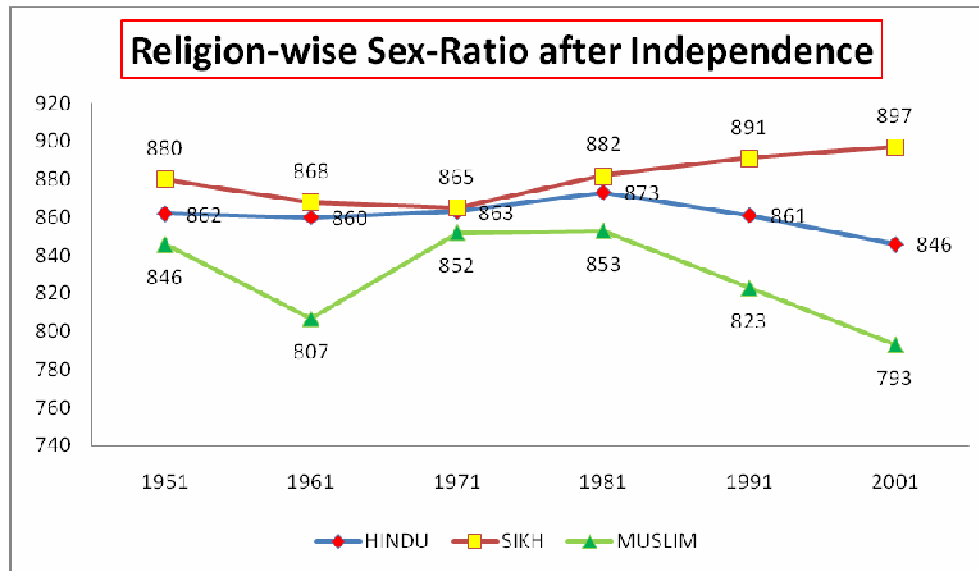
continuously recorded the lowest sex ratio from first Census of 1868 and till to 1931, on other hand the Hindus sex ratio showed gradual increase in their females' number except for the 1911 census enumerations as in 1907-08 plague badly affected the proportion of females and the Muslims showed decrease in female numbers. At same time important fact is that the Sikh proportion showed maximum improvement of 36 points against the 19 points increase of the Hindus in their overall sex ratio and Muslims were showing decrease of 20 points in their sex ratio figures in 1931 as compared to the census of 1868.(See Graph-1)

Graph-1



Source: Data computed from *Census of Punjab 1868*, Report,,*Census of Punjab 1881*, Report, Part-III, The Proportion of the Sexes, 367, *Census of Punjab 1891*, Report, 216-218, *Census of Punjab 1931*, Report, Part-I, Vol.XVII, Subsidiary Table-II, 164.

Graph-2



Source: Data computed from Census of Punjab from 1951 to 2001.

After independence in the census of 1951 the Sikhs had 880 females, after which it declined by -12 points to 868 and later to 865 in two conjunctive censuses of 1961 and 1971. After the Census of 1971 the Sikhs record an upward movement in the sex ratio patterns at 882 (+17) in 1981, 891 (+9) in 1991 and 897 (+6) in the 2001 per 1000 males, the highest all among all major religious groups of the Punjab. In fact, the Sikhs are the only community that shows a continued improvement in the sex ratios from 1981 onwards, they also had the highest sex ratio compared to other religious categories in the Census of 2011.

A comparison of all religions reflects that the Sikhs have a higher proportion of females per 1000 males than other religious groups by 2001. The Sikhs trend line in a comparative graph shows a continuous increase in its sex ratio pattern since the Census of 1971, much in contradiction to their pre-independence position where they had the lowest sex ratio as compared to Hindus and Muslims. The Hindus retained their position of pre-independence time but their graph shows a slow and gradual decline since the Census of 1981. Among the Muslims, the sex ratio tally

hovered around 850, below the state average. The Muslim sex ratio pattern after independence showed a sharp declining and shifting trend as before independence they always had a 900 plus sex ratio. After independence, the Muslim sex ratio never crossed the 853 mark. Among all the three religious groups the Muslims showed the most fluctuating trend line in graph.(See Graph-2)

In recent times according to the census of 2011 the child sex ratio(0 to 6 years) of the Sikh is 828, Hindu 913 and Muslim 943. There is no doubt the Sikhs have lesser girls as compares to Hindus and Muslim community. But the important fact is that the only Sikhs are showing an increase of 42 point as compared to declining child sex ratio of the Hindus and Muslims both showed decrease of 12 and 7 points respectively. As per 2001 census, the child sex ratio among Hindu was 925, Muslims 950 and Sikhs 786 against 1,000 boys. This clearly showed that in both overall and child sex ratio the Sikhs consistently showing an increasing trends.

At the end we can conclude that there is continuous increase in the Sikhs sex ratio trends. It is clear that the practice of female infanticide was not much prevalent at the time of Guru Nanak, it was only at the time of third Guru Amar Das, the practice of female infanticide might spread among his followers and a need of condemnation is felt. The extent of the practice was very large among the Sikhs, as Guru Gobind Singh strictly condemned it. Further the Namdharis and Singh Sabha came forward to protect the right to life of the girl child shows its presence among the Sikhs. In recent times SGPC and Akal Thakat do issued notifications against the slayers of the daughter identify its presence among the Sikh community.

And to know the extent of the practice when we analyze the census data a different picture emerged among the Sikhs. The Sikhs were continuously showing improvement in their sex ratio patterns from the beginning of the twenty first century. But this does not mean that the Sikhs do not kill their daughters as still they have lowest sex ratio as compared to other religious groups. But the extent of the practice is definitely decreasing with passing of every decade in comparison to other religious groups.



<sup>i</sup>As the state's power of collation, enumeration, and categorization of its Punjabi populace grew, it was forced to recognize widespread prevalence of infanticide among not only those whom they recognized as social elites, but also the agricultural Jats of Punjab, and among them too the Jat Sikhs whom the state tended to lionize as agriculturist and as Khalsa Sikhs. Doris R. Jakobsh (ed.), *Sikhism and Women History, Texts and Experience*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010, p.85.

<sup>ii</sup> Doris R. Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003, p.26.

<sup>iii</sup> Baba Dharam Chand Ji(1524-1618) <http://bedifoundation.org/family-tree-of-a-meherchandia-line-of-guru-nanak-dev-ji/> (assessed on 20 March, 2017)

<sup>iv</sup> *Indian News and Chronicles of Eastern Affairs*, Female Infanticide in the Punjab, 13<sup>th</sup> Jan.1854, London, p.173-74.

<sup>v</sup>This story is repeated in many reports on female infanticide in Punjab.

<sup>vi</sup> *Indian News and Chronicles of Eastern Affairs*, p.173-74.

<sup>vii</sup> Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, 56 and also in Jakobsh Doris R, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History*, p. 40.

<sup>viii</sup> Jakobsh Doris R, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History*, p.40.

<sup>ix</sup> Shiromini Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee, *Sikh Rehat Maryada*, p.22. <http://sgpc.net/sikh-rehat-maryada-in-punjabi/> (assessed on 20 March, 2017) & J.D. Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*, New Delhi, 2002, p.385.

<sup>x</sup> J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p.51.

<sup>xi</sup> [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/23442/8/08\\_chapter%203.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/23442/8/08_chapter%203.pdf) (assessed on 20 March, 2017)

<sup>xii</sup> Shiromini Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee, *Sikh Rehat Maryada*, p. 22. <http://sgpc.net/sikh-rehat-maryada-in-punjabi/> (assessed on 20 March, 2017)

<sup>xiii</sup> ਸਿਖ ਮਤ ਵਿਚ ਬੇਟੀ ਪੁਤਰ ਤੁਲ ਹੈ। ਕੁੜੀ ਮਾਰ ਨਾਲ ਵਰਤੋਂ ਕਰਨ ਦਾ ਹੁਕਮ ਨਹੀਂ ਹੈ॥ Bhai.

Kahan Singh Nabha, *Gurmat Martand Part I*, p.

308. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/160188622/Gurmat-Martand-Part-1-Bhai-Kahan-Singh-Ji-Nabha> (assessed on 20 March, 2017)

<sup>xiv</sup> B. L. Grover & Alka Mehta, *A New Look at Modern Indian History From 1707 to the Modern Times*, S. Chand & Company Ltd., New Delhi, 2009 (Reprinted), p.283.

<sup>xv</sup> Jakobsh Doris R, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History*, p.111.

<sup>xvi</sup> [https://archive.org/stream/TheSinghSabhaMovement/TheSinghSabhaMovement\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TheSinghSabhaMovement/TheSinghSabhaMovement_djvu.txt) (assessed on 20 March, 2017)

<sup>xvii</sup> <http://www.hindustantimes.com/punjab/girl-child-born-at-sgpc-hospital-will-be-given-rs-1-000-as-shagun/story-I96AFQq9DXW8olkuh23JAM.html> (assessed on 20 March, 2017)

<sup>xviii</sup> Figures computed from the *Census of Punjab 1868*, Report, *Census of Punjab 1881*, Report, Part-III, The Proportion of the Sexes, 367, *Census of Punjab 1891*, Report, 216-218, *Census of Punjab 1931*, Report, Part-I, Vol.XVII, Subsidiary Table-II, 164.