

UGC MINOR RESEARCH PROJECT

FILE NO: 23-515/08

**SPIRITUAL WARRIORS: THE EVOLUTION OF THE
ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SIKH RELIGION**

SUBMITTED BY

DR. MEENAKSHI RAJAN

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

**S.K SOMAIYA COLLEGE OF ARTS, SCIENCE AND
COMMERCE,**

VIDYAVIHAR, MUMBAI 400077

MARCH 2010

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Acknowledgement

I acknowledge my obligation to the University Grants Commission for the financial assistance of this Minor Research Project on Spiritual Warriors: The Evolution of the Role of Women in the Sikh Religion.

I extend my thanks to Principal K.Venkataramani and Prof. Parvathi Venkatesh for their constant encouragement.

I am indebted to the college and library staff for their support.

My endeavour could not have been realised without the love, support and encouragement from my husband, Mr.Murli Rajan and my daughter Radhika.

I am grateful to my father, Dr. G.S Chauhan for sharing his deep knowledge of Sikhism and being my guiding light.

CHAPTER - 1

INTRODUCTION

Sikhism is one of the youngest among world religions. It centers on the Guru –Sikh [teacher -disciple] relationship, which is considered to be sacred. The development of Sikhism is a remarkable story of a socio-religious movement which under the leadership of ten human Gurus' developed into a well organized force in Punjab.¹Conceived in northern India, this belief system preached and propagated values of universalism, liberalism, humanism and pluralism within the context of a “medieval age.” Its teachings were “revealed’ by Guru Nanak (1469-1539 AD) who was, in turn, succeeded by nine other Gurus’. His teachings are embodied in the *Adi Granth* compiled by Sri Guru Arjan Dev the 5th Guru. The last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708 AD)added the compositions of Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur and bestowed '*Guruship*' on this sacred text, which now known as the *Guru Granth Sahib* and is revered as the eternal "living" *Guru*. Comprised of 5894 holy hymns in 31 *ragas* and representing the writings of Sikh Gurus, Hindu Saints, and Muslim divines from the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent, the *Guru Granth* embodies the spiritual

¹ Sewa Singh Kalsi, Kristen Haar, Ann Marie B. Bahr , *Religions of the World*, Chelsea House Publications 2005 p 16 ISBN: 0791080986

enlightenment and religious consciousness of four centuries of medieval India. Its significance and relevance for the liberation of man and amelioration of society continues till today.

History as conventionally written has been literally the story of men. But if we re-examine our past, taking into account the whole of our history, a very different picture emerges.²

The great Hindu epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, reveal heroines who are imbued with idealized virtues, stoic resolve, and fervent spirituality and religious devotion; inscriptions and chronicles relate that women of royalty expressed their religious piety through the patronage of Hindu temples and mosques; and classical treatises, suggest the level of artistry, education, and skills to which many could aspire. However, references to these women are sketchy and we rarely learn about them in any detail. Nor are we truly privy to what motivated these personages— particularly as women—to undertake acts of great spiritual and physical endurance.

The research project *Spiritual Warriors: The Evolution of the Role of Women in the Sikh Religion*, aims to understand the role of Sikh women in medieval India; to comprehend their position in society, their dreams, visions, hopes and spiritual aspirations. It additionally explores how women,

² Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade- Our History, Our Future*. New York: HarperCollins Books, 1987.

when offered relative equality within a system of religious beliefs, perceived themselves and the special societal roles they undertook, making Sikhism a women's religion.

The research project recognizes that women were natural leaders in the *bhakti* movement because of their innate and intimate links to devotional and faith aspects of their religion. Women for ages have been marginalized and speaking out their truth. The Sikh woman in the period 1469-1708 AD was no exception. However, she stood her truth and was accepted, acknowledged, and won accolades by the new Sikh faith and society that she helped create. It is noteworthy that it was Sikh women— not men— who broke the old ways of race, caste, class that ran deep in the Indian psyche by opening their kitchens to all irrespective of caste.³

The short span of Sikh history is replete with remarkable women whose characters shone with wisdom. Sikh women have played a glorious part in the history and have proven themselves as equal in service, devotion, sacrifice and bravery. Guru Nanak has described women as a friend, companion and the originator of civilization.

As mentioned earlier there are very sketchy references or direct representation of women in the Sikh scriptures. This has been accurately

³ Mata Khivi wife of the second Guru ,Guru Angad Dev Ji

explained by Dr. Baldev Singh who feels that one needs to understand the social condition at the time of the development of the Sikh movement. He gives the following points to highlight his view...

“Sikhs are descendants of Hindus, Muslims and Sultani-Hindus, the latter being the predominant component.

The Sikh movement developed in a very corrosive patriarchal culture, as a product of Hindu patriarchal values, super-imposed by Muslim patriarchal values.

The impact of oppression of bigoted Muslim rulers coupled with equally oppressive and dehumanizing impact of the caste system on the Sikh movement. So it is not difficult to imagine what would have been the reaction of Indian society towards “open involvement of women in the Sikh movement.”

Due to the notion of “woman as the family honor” and the heightened concern for their safety, women sought the safety of their homes or places where their men folks were around.

In the 500 years of Sikh history, there is less than 100 years of Sikh rule when the Sikhs did not face religious persecution.

If the Sikh Gurus thought that recording history was that important, they could have written it themselves or had it written by someone else, just as

the compilation of AGGS by Guru Arjan who employed Bhai Gurdas as amanuensis! Further if they thought that additional manuals were needed as moral instructions for the Sikhs, they would have written those too. The authentic teachings of Gurus are enshrined in AGGS, but other than their teachings (*Gurmat*) there is scant personal reference to them and their activities. However, there is a laudatory mention of Guru Angad's wife, *Mata* (mother) Khivi for her excellent management of *Langar* (community kitchen) and dedicated service to the Sangat (Sikh congregation)⁴

Dr. Baldev Singh further reiterates that notwithstanding the absence of their names in Sikh history, it is amply clear that Gurus' mothers, wives, sisters and daughters were active participants in the Sikh movement.⁵

There were many Sikh women who fought side by side with men, against the Mughal armies and foreign invaders. Hundreds of women fighters were killed during the small and big *Ghaloogharas* (holocausts) in 1746 C.E. and 1762 C.E., respectively. It is true that not much is known about them like most of the men who laid down their lives fighting against the forces of

⁴ Baldev Singh, PH.D. , *A Critical Analysis of Relocating Gender In Sikh History :Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, (Author: Doris R. Jakobsh) p 14

⁵ Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh were very young when they assumed Guruship after the execution of their respective fathers by the Muslim rulers and Guru Har Krishan was a mere child of five when he took over as Guru after the death of his father. What was the major influence on these Gurus at that very critical period in Sikh history when the Sikh movement was under attack not only from the Muslim rulers, but more so from other dangerous foes, the schismatic groups and the defenders of the caste ideology? The answer, of course, is the influence of their mothers: Mata Ganga, Mata Gujri and Mata Krishan Kaur, respectively.

tyranny: Mughal rule, foreign invaders and the proponents of caste ideology. It was not only the lonely “Mai Bhago,” many other Sikh women also joined the Khalsa ranks: ⁶

Guru Gobind Singh gave the privilege of the *kirpan* to both women and men. Women quickly demonstrated that they were equal to men in spirituality and in wielding the sword.

These Sikh mothers, wives and sisters sent their sons, husbands and brothers to join the *Khalsa* forces when it meant sure death to become a *Khalsa*. Many suffered innumerable hardships, and torture in jails and saw their own little ones being cut into pieces before their very own eyes by the enemy who wanted to frighten them to relinquish the budding faith and convert to Islam! The Sikhs remember these brave women of unsurpassed fortitude, collectively in the daily prayer: *Ardaas*.

And those women who remained steadfast in upholding their faith, while their children were cut into small pieces and made into necklaces to put around their necks.

⁶ Ibid p 14

In the period of guerrilla warfare, Sikh women were imprisoned and subjected to hard labour, but they did not forsake their faith.⁷ Ahmed Shah Batalvi has given more instances where women took a leading part in political and military activities of the *Misals*. Rani Rajinder Kaur was one of the most remarkable women of age. She possessed all the virtues which men pretend their own-courage, perseverance and sagacity. Sahib Kaur was made the Chief Minister of Patiala in 1793. She refused to leave the battle when pressed by the Marathas near Ambala and with a drawn sword rallied troops to repulse the enemy. Similarly, Aus Kaur was placed at the head of the administration of Patiala and she conducted the affairs of that state with conspicuous success. George Thomas writes in his memoirs ‘Instances indeed have not infrequently occurred in which they (Sikh women) had actually taken up arms to defend their habitation, from the desultory attacks of the enemy, and throughout the contest behaved themselves with an intrepidity of spirit, highly praiseworthy.’⁸

Thus, the examples of their moral dignity, service and self sacrifice are and will remain a source of inspiration. This research project contains life stories

⁷ Ibid p 15

⁸ Jagjit Singh, *The Sikh Revolution: A Perspective View*. New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 4th reprint, 1998, pp. 134-35.

of a few women from Sikh history namely Mata Tripta, Bibi Nanaki, Mata Khivi, Bibi Bhani, Mata Sundari, Mai Bhago and Sardarni Sada Kaur.

The first woman to be remembered in Sikhism is **Mata Tripta**, the mother of Guru Nanak Dev. Blessed with a spiritual nature she meditated while carrying the child Nanak in her womb, and brought him up with love and tender care always trying to protect him from those who could not fathom his true nature.

Bibi Nanki, the elder sister of Guru Nanak Dev, was highly intelligent, perceptive and pious. It was she who recognized the divine light in her brother and envisaged his mission of life before anyone else could perceive it. She didn't treat him just as a brother; she respected him like a Guru. She supported Guru Nanak's revolutionary ideals as she was the first to realize that he had come to redeem people from misconception and superstitions.

The next prominent woman in Sikhism is **Mata Khivi**, the wife of the second Guru, Guru Angad Dev. She toiled lovingly in the *langar* (community kitchen) day and night and enjoyed serving food with her own hands. Many people were inspired to accept Guru's way because of her selfless service. Her name comes up in the Adi Granth on page 967 where Rai Balwand writes;

“Hey Balvand, Khivi was a great lady who provided comfort to the congregation like a dense shady tree. She served sumptuous food in the *Langar* pudding made with butter that tasted like nectar. Like her husband (Guru Angad), who succeeded to the house of Guru Nanak as his successor, she too worked very hard with great dedication. *Mata* (mother) Khivi and her husband were praised for taking upon their shoulders the enormous responsibility of Guru Nanak’s mission”.

AGGS, Balvand and Satta, p. 967.

[Rai Balwand and Satta were musicians in Guru Arjun’s court. Between them they composed eight stanzas or *pauris* which is recorded in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib from page 996 to 968 under the heading, *Ramkali ki vaar Rai Balwand tatha Satte doom akhi.*]⁹

Bibi Bhani, the daughter of Guru Amar Das served her father with dedication and was a pillar of strength for her husband Guru Ram Das. She gave her blessings to her son the fifth Guru, Guru Arjun Dev in beautiful words that are recorded in the Adi Granth on page 496.

⁹ Dr.G.S Chauhan, *Bani of Bhagats* ,Hemkunt Publishers [P] Ltd. 2006 ISBN 81-7010-356-6

“O son! Your mother blesses you that you may never forget
the Dear Almighty God *Wahe-Guru* even for a moment
and you may always live in His presence”.

Mata Sundari the Great Mother of Khalsa, as she is popularly known among the Sikh masses, was the consort of Guru Gobind Singh.

Her conduct was always bold, principled, affectionate, and impartial and almost half of her life of 80 years was devoted to the welfare of the Sikh masses.

Mai Bhago was a symbol of bravery and courage, who stood and fought by Guru Gobind’s side after many male soldiers had deserted him. Her life story and skill in organization against odds will always be a milestone in Sikh history. Her example inspired many brave Sikh women to face death with honor.

Sardarni Sada Kaur was the actual builder of the Sikh Empire in Punjab. She is better known as Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s mother-in-law, mother of Mehtab Kaur. She was a brave woman equipped with intelligence and wisdom. She was the brain and power behind Maharaja Ranjit Singh who

was only eleven years old when he became the king. It is right to say that her support was the ladder by which Ranjit Singh reached the summit of power.

CHAPTER - 2

ROLE OF WOMEN IN SIKH HISTORY

Re-evaluation of the *Adi-Granth*: reviewing this sacred book through a contemporary “feminist lens”

The long and expansive history of India abounds with enlightened women who were cultured and educated and radiated their brilliance in a range of activities. Each time we pray to them or think about them they bring us many gifts of the spirit they inspire us with their creativity, joy, hope and diplomacy.

It is a well known saying that behind every successful man there is a woman, supporting him doggedly and patiently

This research work speaks of a few women from Sikh history, Mata Tripta, Bibi Nanaki, Mata Khivi, Bibi Bhani, Mata Sundari, Mai Bhago and Sardarni Sada Kaur who are women of substance and not mere footnotes in history. Their voices teach us several profound truths about human life. While undertaking this research on women in Sikhism one comes to realize that Sikhism has gender equality as an ideal; as opposed to other faiths which have anti-women precepts as both ideals and as practice. Thus the

precepts of Sikhism pierced the social fabric with the needle of feminism, to give forth a quilt of many colors.

Sikhism played a revolutionary role in restructuring society on an egalitarian basis. One of the important rights central to Guru Nanak's philosophy is the freedom of the individual. This ushered in a new socio economic order based on the principles of equality, justice and intrinsic worth.¹⁰ In terms of world religions, it is already an oddity that Sikhism so emphatically embraces a gender-free monotheism. In many religions God has been addressed as father. However it is fairly surprising, keeping in mind, the medieval period that Sikhism introduced the concept of God as mother and father. The fifth Guru (Guru Arjan Dev) reinforces the high status given to women by the first Guru by placing the feminine name given to God (mother) before the name of father. God is our Mother as well as our Father.

"Thou O Lord, art my Mother and Thou my Father.

Thou art the Giver of peace to my soul and very life".

Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 1144

¹⁰ Ed.R.N Singh, *Social Philosophy and Social Transformation of Sikhs*, Commonwealth Publishers, New Delhi 2003 ISBN 81-7169-705-4 p 3

To understand the role of women we need to first look at the basic rights, which the tenets of Sikhism bestow on women. It gives women the right to achieve salvation, the realization of God which is the highest spiritual goal.

The Shri Guru Granth Sahib states “In all beings is the Lord pervasive, the Lord pervades all forms male and female”¹¹ . This clearly denotes that the light of God rests equally with both sexes and the woman is not considered as inferior or a hindrance to man’s spirituality.

Sikhism speaks about equality; women have same rights as men and can lead the congregation. The holy book which is in *Gurmukhi* is accessible to all and can be read by anyone. There is no belief in the caste system and anyone can become one with God by following the teaching of a true Guru. Guru Nanak challenged the idea of inferiority and evil associated with women and freed them from slavery and taboos of the society. In one of his hymns, he said:

“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?

¹¹*Shri Guru Granth Sahib* p 605

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.

That mouth which praises the Lord continually is blessed and beautiful.

O Nanak, those faces shall be radiant in the Court of the True Lord.”¹²

Sikh women are free to visit the *Gurdwara*, say their prayers and worship accordingly. The only restriction placed is that the woman should not enter the *Gurdwara* wearing a veil over her face. The Sikh *Rehat Maryada* clearly states that women should not cover their faces with veils, ‘It is not proper for a Sikh woman to wear a veil or keep her face hidden by veil or cover’ (Sikh *Rehat Maryada*, Article XVI). Women can also take the role of a priest or can serve at the *Gurudwara* in any other capacity.

The basis for Guru Nanak’s revolutionary concept of gender equality was the recognition that physical life is transitory, and that the difference between men and women is likewise ephemeral and of no spiritual significance. With this view of reality, widely divergent from that of the surrounding Muslims and Hindus, Sikh men and women work together in

¹² Ibid p 473

the congregation, the *langar* and participate equally in worship and cultural activities.

Marriage was redefined by the Sikhs to be monogamous in form and practice for both parties. Guru Amar Das Ji was vociferous in opposition to common practices of women wearing veils and female infanticide. Like all the gurus, he reasoned that since men and women were equal in God's sight, the same should hold true on earth.¹³ They can lead the congregation and are encouraged more to participate in congregations. Hence education was also encouraged. Of the Sikh missionaries sent out by the third Guru many were women. In "The Role and Status of Sikh Women", Dr Mohinder Kaur Gill states 'Guru Amar Das was convinced that no teachings can take roots until and unless they are accepted by women folk'.¹⁴

The Gurus gave Sikh men and women the same dress. Five symbols *Kes* (hair), *Kara* (an iron bracelet), *Kirpan* (sword), *Kangha* (wooden comb) and *Kacherra* (an under short) are give to both men and women. Both are

¹³ Ibid p 485

¹⁴ Dr Mohinder Kaur Gill, *The Role and Status of Sikh Women*, Publisher: National Bookshop 1998
ISBN-13: 978-8171161751

required to say the same prayers, live same way of life and wear the same dress. Everything is exactly the same.¹⁵

"Stay, stay, O daughter-in-law - do not cover your face with a veil. In the end, this shall not bring you even half a shell."¹⁶

In fact the third Guru, Guru Amar Das did not allow visiting queens to remain veiled in his presence. Kanwaljit Kaur- Singh writes 'the *purdah* (veil) system suppressed the personality of women and reflected an inferior status'. Of course, Sikh men cannot wear veils either.¹⁷

“False modesty that suppressed is ended,

Now with the veil cast off am,

I started on the way of devotion”.¹⁸

Sikhism takes a different view concerning the relationship between a husband and wife. The Gurus regarded marriage a spiritual state of life and this institution is highly respected by the Gurus. It is considered a part of the

¹⁵ Editors, S.R Bakshi , *Encyclopedia of Saints of India Guru Gobind Singh*, Published by Criterion Publications, New Delhi 2002 ISBN 81-7938-013-0, p 113

¹⁶ *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* p 484

¹⁷ Kanwaljit Kaur-Singh, *My Sikh Life (Looking at Religion)*, Publisher: Hodder Wayland, ISBN: 0750249579

¹⁸ *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* p 931

spiritual journey towards realization of God within and is not at all a hindrance. In Sikhism, the marriage ceremony is referred to as the *Anand Karaj*. *Anand* means bliss and *Karaj* is an act: undertaking. As marriage is the uniting of two souls it is an important step towards spirituality. The responsibility of the householder is considered spiritual. The Guru rejects the idea of renunciation and celibacy as being necessary for religious progress. The Guru promotes the householder's way of life. As everything can be achieved in family life there is no need to renounce the world. The Guru reveals:

“They are not said to be husband and wife, who merely sit together.

They alone are called husband and wife, who have one light in two bodies”.¹⁹

Concerning her standing with man, Bhai Gurdas, a Sikh scholar who was the scribe of the original holy book as dictated by Guru Arjan Dev during the 16th Century, reveals:

“Woman is one half of the complete personality of man, and is entitled to share secular and spiritual knowledge equally”

(*Varan Bhai Gurdas 5, Pauri 16:59*)

¹⁹ Ibid p 788

Thus, there is no notion of the woman being considered inferior to her husband. Concerning their fidelity towards each other, Bhai Kahan Singh in his famous monograph *Gurmat Martand*, states that at the time of marriage the virtues of *Patti Brata* (absolute fidelity to husband) are to be impressed upon the bride and, equally, the same virtue of *Istri Brata* (absolute fidelity to wife) is to be emphatically emphasized upon the bridegroom. These oaths are to be made by the couple in the *sangat* (holy congregation).²⁰ The Guru acknowledges that a marriage can run into problems. However, there is a positive approach to such situations. Through their children the couple can find love again. Through love can they overcome difficulties, and not through harsh or violent means. Concerning marital problems, the Guru reveals:

‘If a piece of bronze or gold or iron breaks,
into bits the smith welds them again in fire.

If the husband breaks off from the wife the sons unite the two again.

If the monarch makes a demand, he is satisfied if the demand be met.

The hungry stomach is sated only if it is filled with food.

The famine goes if it rains well and the streams are full.

²⁰ Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, *Gurmatt Martand*, S.G.P.C., Second Edition 1978

And the lovers are united with sweet words.

And the Vedas are learnt through true speech

And the dead are united with the living through truth and

Beneficence. Such are the things that unite and mend.

But the fool is mended only on being struck in the face.

Nanak reveals this truth after great thought that

through the Lord's praise are we united with the Lord's court.'

21

Further, a man and woman can have only one partner at a time. The only way for someone to remarry is if his/her marriage partner has died or he/she is divorced. In Sikhism, the marriage ceremony is very simple; it rejects the idea of dowry as can be seen from the following couplets in the Guru Granth Sahib.

“Any dowry which the perverse offer for show is only false egotism and a worthless display. O my father, please give me the Name of the Lord God as my wedding gift and dowry”.²²

²¹ *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* p 143

²² *Ibid* p 79

“You have lost your self-discipline, you fool, and you have accepted an offering under false pretences. The daughter of the alms-giver is just like your own; by accepting this payment for performing the wedding ceremony, you have cursed your own life.”²³

Hereditary rights have never been an issue in Sikhism. Sikh women have full rights to contest any hereditary claim. No restrictions can be found in the Sikh *Rehat Maryada* (Code of Sikh Conduct). There is nothing to state otherwise. In “Women’s Property Rights - A Sikh Perspective”, Prof. Dalip Singh states, ‘since all Children, both male and female are equal in all respects, the property of the father is equally divisible amongst the children; women married and unmarried, have equal share along with the male progeny’. Thus, all claimants are entitled to an equal share regardless of their gender. Further, concerning identity, the Guru considers the woman to be a Princess, giving her the surname Kaur. This is reserved solely for women and frees them from having to take their husband’s name when marrying.

The question of considering the woman as inadequate in taking the role of a witness equally with any man has never been in question in Sikhism. When

²³ Ibid p 435

a matter requires addressing, a Sikh can approach the *Panj Pyaras* for a decision. Any member of the *Panj Pyaras* can be a woman. Thus, her ability to perform her duties as a Sikh, regardless of her menstruation, is not doubted as a woman has been created by God and cannot be considered inferior.

‘Women and men, all by God are created; all this is God’s play.
Says Nanak, All thy creation is good, Holy’.²⁴

As God’s creation is considered holy, there is no suggestion of inferiority in the role women can play and neither is their intelligence doubted. This is further clarified by Dr Gurnam Kaur in her work “Current Thoughts in Sikhism”, who says that, ‘all human beings are equal from birth. There are only two classes, *manmukh* and *gurmukh*. Those who follow the path of the Guru, obey the will of God, the divine ordinance are called *gurmukhs*, and those who follow the path of their own mind’.²⁵

In Sikhism, the woman is not considered a temptation or a weakness for men. As the aim is to realize God from within, by strengthening the inner character helped by the Guru’s guidance. Thus, it is not the woman who is to

²⁴ Ibid p 304

²⁵ Edited by Dr. Kharak Singh, *Current Thoughts in Sikhism*, by Dr Gurnam Kaur, Published by Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh, 1998 ISBN 81-85815-07-0

be blamed for any sinful thoughts that occur in men, if they see her with lustful eyes.

‘Vain are the eyes which behold the beauty of another’s wife’²⁶.

A spiritual journey is that of the mind and not of the body thus meditating on Gods’ name is of importance, it is of no spiritual consequence whether ones clothes are blood stained or not. Thus, there are no restrictions placed on a woman during her menstruation. She is free to visit the *Gurudwara*, take part in prayers and do *seva* or service. In “The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent”, Nikky Guninder Kaur-Singh writes “The denigration of the female body expressed in many cultural and religious taboos surrounding menstruation and child-birth is absent in the Sikhism”.²⁷

Guru Nanak openly chides those who attribute pollution to women because of menstruation and asserts that pollution lies in the heart and mind of the person and not in the cosmic process of birth.

"If pollution attaches to birth, then pollution is everywhere (for birth is universal).Cow-dung (used for purifying the kitchen floor by

²⁶ *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* p269

²⁷ Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*, Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions, Publisher: Cambridge University Press 1993, ISBN-10: 0521432871

Hindus) and firewood breed maggots; Not one grain of corn is without life; Water itself is a living substance, imparting life to all vegetation. How can we then believe in pollution, when pollution inheres within staple grains? Says Nanak, pollution is not washed away by rituals of purification; Pollution is removed by true knowledge alone".

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 472).

He criticized the yogis for their solitary, ascetic, spiritual search. Contrary to the yogic apprehension of sexuality, Guru Nanak furthered the ideal of householder as he believed that enlightenment was not to be found within the realm of austerity. The householders, who contributed concretely to society, who offered their services to their religious community, who brought forth children and provided for them, were for Guru Nanak, ideal devotees.²⁸

Guru Nanak insisted that salvation was won in this world itself. He supported marriage and family stating that in the home alone could man

²⁸ Doris R Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, Oxford University Press New Delhi 2003 ISBN 978-0-19-567919-9 p 24

fully realize his destiny and in the midst of wife and children one would gain emancipation.²⁹

It was during Guru Amar Das's time that missionaries were appointed to extend the message of the Sikh *panth* beyond the immediate surroundings of Goindwal, the seat of his leadership. The community had obviously expanded, and with new congregations [*sangats*] and the swelling numbers, immediate contact with the guru became increasingly difficult. The *manji* system was created by Guru Amar Das, the word literally meaning "string bed" and referring to the seat of spiritual authority. *Manji's* were leaders of local gatherings who were directly accountable to the Guru, and thus an extension of his influence. While sources conflict with the regard to the actual number of *manjis* as well as their gender, there is evidence that there may have been women sent out to preach the Guru's message of emancipation.

The appointment of *manjis* indicates an increasing institutionalization of the Sikh *panth* an expansion in the actual number of the Guru's followers. Given the esteemed place held by these emissaries, the very possibility of women being included in their numbers speaks to a growing reliance on them.

²⁹ Ed. Dr. S.R Bakshi, Dr. Sangh Mitra, *Encyclopedia of Saints of India, Guru Nanak*, Criterion Publication New Delhi 2002 ISBN 81-7938-013-0 p 14

Considering their resilient nature women emissaries would have proven most effective in the recruitment of other women into the Sikh fold.³⁰

Hence this is truly a unique representation of women during those times.

Though Sikhism considers there to be a difference between men and women, it rejects any notion that this difference entails men being superior. Women, both spiritually and secularly, are equal to men. Thus they have an equal opportunity to realize God.

Though this research consists of women who were mostly members of the Guru's family, it is pertinent to note that these women were active agents in the wider sphere of society.

³⁰ Ibid p 30,34

CHAPTER – 3

MATA TRIPTA

The first woman to be remembered in Sikhism is Mata Tripta; her greatness deserves to be celebrated as she was the mother of Guru Nanak Dev. She along with her husband Mehta Kalyan Chand lived in Talwandi, Punjab, which is now part of Pakistan. She was a warm and kind hearted person as she gladly welcomed weary saints and '*fakirs*' into her home to take rest.

Tales about the ethereal beauty attained by Mata Tripta when she was expecting Guru Nanak Dev have come down the ages. It is said that Mata Tripta was happy and peaceful throughout her pregnancy as she meditated constantly.

As she watched her son grow, Mata Tripta Ji soon realized how unlike other children he was. Seeing the different facets of his personality develop, fascinated her; when he laughed and played, like other children, she was full of joy; however when he became quiet and contemplative, she felt anxious; when he left his meals unfinished to go and listen to the sermons of the holy men, she would be the one to bring him back home; when he fell into deep, meditative sleeps, she would be the one who would worry. She did not lose

heart but showed deep understanding when Nanak began to withdraw into solitude and silence and would often leave home and walk away into the fields and woods around the village to associate with wandering holy men.³¹ This worried his father who often became angry at Nanak for his detachment and aloofness from worldly matters. In such instances Mata Tripta would request her daughter Nanaki, who was very close to Guru Nanak Dev, to try not to encourage him towards spiritual pursuits and try to keep him from upsetting his father. On the other hand when his father became angry and scolded Nanak, she would pacify him, and explain to him that they had been blessed with Guru Nanak Dev, who was a messenger from God. Thus is her own gentle way she tried to maintain a balance to ensure harmony.

When his father gave him money to buy some bargains from the nearest town, Nanak used that money to buy food for some starving *sadhus* he met. His father was furious, but Mata Tripta realized the greatness of her son's action, and she let him off after a gentle chiding requesting him to leave his meditations for a few days, put on his normal clothes and go about his daily duties so that people don't doubt his normalcy.³² When Guru Nanak Dev got

³¹ Navtej Sarna, *The Book of Nanak*, Penguin Viking India 2003 p13

³² Bhai Vir Singh, *Puratan Janamsakhi*, Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan New Delhi 1992 p 33

married and his wife Mata Sulakhni came to their home, the magnanimous Mata Tripta was happy and was overjoyed on the birth of her grandsons, Sri Chand and Lakhmi Chand.

During many travels of Guru Nanak Dev, though she herself desperately missed her beloved son, Mata Tripta selflessly, always comforted and guided Mata Sulakhni. On Guru Nanak Dev's return to Talwandi, she knew her end was near so she implored him to stay. As Guru Nanak Dev touched her feet to receive her blessings, she pulled him instead into one last loving embrace. It was in 1522 that she passed away. Guru Nanak Dev performed her last rites, and instructed everyone that there was no need for any rituals to be performed and everyone should meditate on God's name instead, as meditation and prayer is the only solace and reward for this life.

Tradition has it that as Mata Tripta had a very high spiritual standing, the great honor of being the mother of the great savior Guru Nanak Dev was bestowed upon her. On the other hand, it is said great souls too have to wait for an appropriately exalted mother to take birth in this world.

CHAPTER – 4

BIBI NANAKI

Bibi Nanaki was born to Mehta Kalyan Chand and Mata Tripta in 1464 at her mother's village Chahal, now in the Lahore district of Pakistan, which is why she was called Nanaki.³³ She was five years elder to her brother Guru Nanak who was born on 15th April 1469 in Talwandi.³⁴ It is likely that Nanak like his elder sister Nanaki was born in the home of his mother Tripta and like her, named after the maternal grandparent's home, *nanake* in Punjabi.

Bibi Nanaki was the first to recognize that Guru Nanak was no ordinary man. While his parents and others would not be patient with many of his actions which they could not understand, she stood by him. It was she who prevailed upon her father to treat Nanak as distinct from the ordinary.³⁵ Her kind words of encouragement were pillars of support to him and there is no doubt that she was Guru Nanak's first follower. All through their life, the brother and sister shared a close relationship. She did not treat Guru Nanak

³³ Rosetta William, *Sikh Gurus*, Har Anand Publications 2002 p5

³⁴ The guru's birthday is celebrated on the full moon night of the month on November. This is based on the *Janamsakhi* [biography] by Bala Sandhu, which is considered by most scholars to be spurious. But for the sake of continuity of a tradition, no change has been made in the date of the celebration. There is no doubt that the correct date is 15th April 1469.

³⁵ Navtej Sarna, *The Book of Nanak*, Penguin Viking India 2003 p40

as her brother; instead she looked upon him as her Guru. Right from the beginning she had a deep faith in her brother's purpose in life. Once when he remained lost in thought and contemplation for a long time his parents became quite alarmed and asked Nanaki to speak to him. When she spoke to him he told her that “whatever is visible is an illusion the reality is different” and he continued to talk about God with a lot of love and devotion. When she told him that their parents were unhappy with his behavior his eyes became wet and he said “O sister the world is a very unhappy place”.³⁶

Thus owing to her open mindedness and intelligence she could grasp the deep philosophical essence of his words and help the others around them see light.

Bibi Nanaki got married in 1475 when she was eleven years old to Jai Ram, who was the revenue official from Sultanpur Lodhi, which is in the present-day district of Kapurthala. Nanak was only six years old when she moved away to live with her husband.

With no one to stand up for him or to explain his actions his parents soon became quite alarmed by Nanak's unusual bent of mind. They could not fathom the need of their six year old to spend his time in meditation or in

³⁶ Bhai Sahib Bhai Veer Singh, *Shri Guru Nanak Chamatkar*, Bhai Sahib Bhai Veer Singh Sadan Publication 1928 p 57

visiting saints.

One day Guru Nanak angered his father by giving away a brass jug and some gold to a poor saint. After this incident, it was suggested by Rai Bular, the village Chief that Guru Nanak should be sent to Sultanpur and live with his sister. Hence Guru Nanak moved to Sultanpur during his teenage years, to live with his sister.

When he came to Sultanpur, Bibi Nanaki was so overjoyed to see her brother that she bowed to him even though he was younger to her as she recognized his elevated spiritual state.

Bhai Jai Ram his brother in law also had great respect for Guru Nanak. He considered himself blessed for being related to him, he too was happy with Guru Nanak moving into his house.

So Bibi Nanaki not only brought him over to her home in Sultanpur, but through her husband's influence got him a job as an accountant with the Nawab Daulat Khan Lodhi. Although Nanak took over the post with reluctance, he discharged his duties diligently and won the affection of his employer.³⁷ Bibi Nanaki and Bhai Jai Ram Ji then arranged Guru Nanak's marriage to Sulakhni Ji, daughter of Baba Mool Chand and Mata Chando

³⁷ Khushwant Singh, *History of the Sikhs* Volume I, Oxford University Press ISBN 13:978-0-19-567308-1
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Rani from Gurdaspur. This clearly points to the tender and compassionate nature of Bibi Nanaki.

Once when Guru Nanak went missing in the Beas River, everyone gave up hope as they all thought that the Guru had drowned in the River.³⁸ Bhai Jai Ram was even contemplating writing a letter to Guru Nanak's parents telling them that their son had drowned. However, Bibi Nanaki kept faith, she told him not to write the letter and she told everyone else, "my brother came to this world on a mission and he will not leave until the mission is completed. There is no river deep enough to drown him and that his divine light spreads light everywhere".³⁹

It is important to note here that she was the only one who had faith while all of the others had given up hope.

Soon Nanak lost all interest in his job at the *modi khana* and leaving everything behind he set out as a *fakir*. Bibi Nanaki found him to be immersed in meditation in a deep state of divine love reciting couplets from the *gurbani* accompanied by Mardana playing on his *rebab* a stringed instrument designed by Guru Nanak⁴⁰. As the heavenly music accompanied

³⁸ Bhai Vir Singh, *Puratan Janamsakhi*, Published by Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan

³⁹ Khushwant Singh, *History of the Sikhs* Volume I, Oxford University Press ISBN 13:978-0-19-567308-4 p 9

⁴⁰ Dr. Bhai Vir Singh, ed. *Janamsakhi*, published by Khalsa Sama Car in 1948. It is a compendium of all the other janamsakhis. pp18,19

by the holy words reached Bibi Nanaki's ears she realized that Nanak was too far gone in his love for the divine to be called back. So with great courage she told her brother to go forth and find the answers to his divine calling. She supported him by treating his sons as her own, while Guru Nanak undertook his various journeys. Mata Sulakhni took her younger son, Baba Lakhmi Das to her parent's home while the older son Baba Sri Chand stayed on in Sultanpur and was looked after by Bibi Nanaki.

Once Guru Nanak's in laws complained to her that Guru Nanak was distributing all his wealth to the poor and needy and that if this goes on then soon there would be nothing left for his family. They prevailed upon her to convince him to change his ways. At this time Bibi Nanaki remaining loyal to Guru Nanak replied that Nanak gave alms from what he earned and that the family had enough to spare.⁴¹

Guru Nanak visited his sister many times during the years to come. When Guru Nanak was going away on one of the Udasis, [missionary travels] he promised her that he would come when ever she thought about him. Thus whenever Bibi Nanaki remembered her brother; he came to meet her right away. Her loving remembrance was enough for instant response by her

⁴¹ Dr. Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition* , Publishers: Singh Brothers, Amritsar , 2004 p 73

brother as true love cuts across all the barriers and limitations of time and space. Once when Bibi Nanaki was making *roti's* one night, she remembered how Guru Nanak loved the fluffed *roti's*. She just thought “how I wish my brother would come to eat these *rotis* that I am making. Right at that very moment Guru Nanak Sahib ji walked in and said “I'm so hungry”. Hence Guruji graced her with his presence and kept his promise.⁴²

It is said that the last time Guru Nanak met his sister was in 1518 just a couple of days before she passed away. After two days she suddenly fell ill and breathed her last as the Guru's sacred hymn, Japji Sahib, was being recited to her. Bhai Jai Ram himself did not live much longer. Three days later he too passed away. For Guru Nanak this was his last visit to Sultanpur. Thus as promised he visited her whenever her heart had called out for him and was with her when she passed away. This speaks volumes of the deep bond they shared and of the deep reverence and unconditional love Bibi Nanaki had for her brother and the new faith he had propounded.

⁴² Ratan Singh Bharigu, *Prachin Panth Prakash* , a chronicle in homely Punjabi verse relating to the history of the Sikhs from the time of the founder, Guru Nanak (AD 1469-1539)

CHAPTER - 5

MATA KHIVI

Mata Khivi with her good humor and pleasant personality is credited for the spirit of hospitality, which is now considered an essential trait of Sikh culture. She is quite possibly the first woman of her era who ever worked outside her immediate family home and obligations at a time when her children were very young. She handled both roles admirably well. It is time that Sikhs acknowledge her very important contribution.

Khivi was born in 1506 to Karan Devi and Bhai Devi Chand Khatri. Her father a shopkeeper and moneylender, was popular in the neighborhood. She is said to have inherited all his finest attributes of generosity and congenial spirit. In 1519, at thirteen she was married to Bhai Lehna who was to become the second Guru of the Sikhs. There is historical evidence that they had four children. Dasu, the eldest was born in 1524. Bibi Amro was born in 1532, followed by Bibi Anokhi in 1535 and son Datu in 1537.

Her life was one of luxury as her husband was a man of means and no doubt it would have continued in this vein, had it not been for her coming under the influence of Mai Bhirai, who told her about Guru Nanak's teachings. At approximately the same time, Bhai Lehna also heard of the Guru through

Bhai Jodha, one of Guru Nanak's earliest disciples. Bhai Lehna being a seeker of truth, was curious and in 1532, shortly after the birth of his first daughter Amro, set out for his annual pilgrimage. On the way, he stopped at Kartarpur [Pakistan] to meet the Guru. On listening to Nanak he was spellbound and begged to become his disciple. He had found the truth he had been seeking and served his master with the greatest devotion. As he busied himself, sweeping the visitor's quarters, washing their clothes and helping with the most menial work in fields, his knowledge and understanding of the new teachings grew, so did the Guru's affection and approval of his disciple. Guru's sons did not look at these developments kindly. This led to a lot of jealousy. Without a doubt, the disharmony created by this kind of stress and strain would have been very difficult for Mata Khivi to deal with. Though there are no records of her thoughts or feelings or how she handled the situation it is obvious that she must have stoically stood by her husband, as had she behaved in any other manner it would have got recorded. This speaks of an unconditional support of her husband.

After serving the Guru for some time, Bhai Lehna was sent back to Khadur to live with his family where he was to spread the word of the new faith to all he met. He did this well, and Guru Nanak was pleased with the reports he

heard of him. The reports were so good that Guru Nanak came to his village twice to visit him and to re-enforce his work with his own preaching. Bhai Lehna spent six or seven years in the service of Guru Nanak Dev at Kartarpur before he was made the second Guru. Guru Nanak Dev had touched him and renamed him Angad (part of the body) or the second Nanak on September 7th 1539.

At Khadur Sahib (near Goindwal Sahib) he carried forward the principles of Guru Nanak Dev Ji both in letter and spirit. *Yogis* and saints of different sects visited him and held detailed discussions about Sikhism with him. In all these significant changes and upheavals he was steadfastly supported by his wife.

On her husband becoming the Guru, life became very busy for Mata Khivi. There was a constant influx of people to her house to see their Guru and to seek his guidance and blessings. She remained unfazed and now her social life became purposeful.⁴³ Mata Khivi in keeping with her receptive nature embraced the new faith wholeheartedly. She was unconcerned when the women in the village taunted her, saying that her husband was becoming an important holy man, and would, therefore, soon forsake her. She knew she

⁴³ Editor Dr. Mrs M.K Gill, *Eminent Sikh Women*, Himala Publishers India, 1996 ISBN:81-900291-7-7

had nothing to worry about, as Guru Nanak spoke of the equality of women and advocated a normal family life as the best way to attain salvation.

Sikh teachings about how one must earn one's living through one's own labor impacted her very deeply and she took these teachings very seriously. She took upon herself the onerous task of managing every detail of the *langar*. Only the best possible ingredients were used, and everyone was treated with utmost courtesy. Her hospitality has been emulated over the centuries and has become the first cultural identity of the Sikhs. She helped the Guru in establishing the infant Sikh community on a stronger footing she has been described as good-natured, efficient, beautiful and perfect Khivi. She has the distinction of being the only one of the Guru's wives to be mentioned by name in the Guru Granth Sahib. There she is described as a "good person", "an affectionate mother" and as "one who provides shelter and protection to others" in her devotion and service there was strength and determination like that of a man".Ramkeli Ki Vaar Balwand and Satta:

“Balwand Khivi nek jan, Jis bouthi chhao patrali,

Langar daulat vandiey, ras amrit kheer ghiali,

Gur Sikhan de man ujale, manmukh thiey parali,

Pae kabool khasam naal, Jan ghal mardi ghali

Mata Khivi Soh soi jin gae uthali"⁴⁴

Mata Khivi did much more than work in the kitchen. She created a loving atmosphere for all whom she came in contact with. Today in every *Gurudwara* there is food for the hungry free of charge. No one gets paid to make the food or has to show his or her religious membership to eat. It seems to be so ingrained into the system that there are no questions about it. Everyone knows that they are merely parts to a whole that benefit from the same institution that they contribute to. There is a spirit of service at the *Gurudwara* as opposed to resentful duty. While at the *Gurudwara* eating, the sense of community is furthered and the food contributes to the effectiveness of the spirit of equality, efficiency and inclusion while allowing the individual a platform to help the community.⁴⁵

Today the Sikhs believe they must make people feel welcome by feeding. It is a known fact that anybody who comes to a Sikh's house must be provided food and shelter and this has become a moral duty of every Sikh. It is

⁴⁴ Balvand and Satta, *Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 967

⁴⁵ Dogra, R. C., *Langar- Free Kitchen. Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, New Delhi: Vikas Pub. House, 1996.

through their handling of food that they fulfill their tenants of equality, efficiency, and inclusion

She and Guru Angad were very fond of children. They lavished their love and affection on not only their own, but on any child in the community. Their commitment was so strong that it gave a beautiful example to all who witnessed it. The Guru took great delight in spending time with the children, teaching them a modified version of the Punjabi script, which was easier to learn by the illiterate masses. This new script, which was his invention, soon became known as *Gurmukhi* script. He is credited in popularizing this alphabet, in which the Guru Granth Sahib is written. Each day there was special time set aside first to teach the children and delight in their clever ways. He took great interest in the education of children by opening many schools for their instruction and thus increased the number of literate people.

While Guruji taught the children Mata Khivi prepared the *langar*. This led to the development of equality in Sikhism and dealt a deathblow to the practice of untouchability. This is a very significant development at that time. She also encouraged the women to work outside their homes while they worked to cook food for the *langar*.

Mata Khivi lived for thirty years after her husband's death. She continued to serve the community and remained associated with the Guru's house in all that time. When Guru Angad passed the succession to Guru Amar Das, his son Datu was very disappointed. Encouraged by some of his friends, he tried to declare himself the rightful heir. Mata Khivi was quite upset by this declaration. When Datu developed headaches, she was able to persuade him that his responsibility was too much for him. The only way to cure the headache is to go back to the rightful Guru and beg his forgiveness. She took her son back to Guru Amar Das, who on hearing that she was coming, came out to meet her half way. All was forgiven. Datu's headaches disappeared and Sikhism was spared another schism, thanks to Mata Khivi's sensible intervention.

Mata Khivi continued to manage Guru Amar Das's kitchen and maintained her single-minded devotion to her duty till the day she died. She instilled the same sterling qualities of service in her daughter who lived up to the faith her mother put in her. Her daughter Amro had married Bhai Jasoo of Basarke village. He was the son of Bhai Manak Chand and nephew of Guru Amar Das. Bibi Amro had become a preacher of Sikhism, and it is she who transformed the life of Guru Amar Das by introducing him to the teachings

she had learnt from her father Guru Angad. Later, when Guru Amar Das organized the teaching of Sikhism into specific districts and jurisdictions, he gave her a *Manji*, that is, he appointed her head of a diocese. Being appointed to head a *Manji* would be the equivalent of being a bishop in the Christian Church. She was responsible not only for the quality of the preaching, but also for collecting offerings and making decisions for the welfare of her diocese. Her diocese or *Manji* included Basarke, her husband's village. Today, close to the modern village of Basarke an old tank bears the name of Bibi Amro Da Talab (Tank of Bibi Amro) in her memory.

Mata Khivi had the distinction of meeting five Gurus. She lived to the age of 75 and died in the year 1582. Guru Arjun Dev Ji attended her funeral. Her contributions to the Sikh cause can easily be divided into three parts. The first period was the twenty years of marriage before Guru Angad succeeded Guru Nanak. This period was a test not only for Guru Angad, but for her as well. Any decisions he made affected her very much. Her response would also have affected his actions. But Mata Khivi never complained, nor did anything to deter him from his objectives.

The second period of her life as wife of the Guru was extraordinary in its devotion and dedication to the cause. The third and last period would be

after her husband died. She continued to nourish the Sikh community and to work tirelessly for that which she now believed in with all her heart.

As we look at choices she took throughout her life her selfless instinctive nature can be clearly discerned. The modern woman can take many guiding lessons from her life as she passes her life in a blur of activity easily pressured to be all things to all people.

The first striking quality was her compassionate nature; it can even be called hard compassion when she persuaded her son Datu to give up his misguided claim to the seat of the guru. Soon after she became the wife of a Guru she shifted her position from being a mother to just her children to being a mother to all thus the world became her forte rather than her family. This shift shows her magnanimity, which so befitted her new role. Her conscientious nature is brought out by the care she took while preparing *langar* i.e. the sincerity with which she chose the ingredients and the love she poured into her work was so profound that till today all who give their services for the *langar* feel it.

Her consistent service demonstrated her values, which she followed with throughout her life, and everything that she did was in line with them. She

saw meaning in everything, and was on a continuous quest to adapt her life and values to achieve inner peace.

Her success in getting people motivated for *langar seva* shows that she was genuinely warm and interested in people, and placed great importance on their inter-personal relationships. This also proves her exceptional ability to understand and to use her intuition and flexibility to relate to others on their own level. This is proof of her humble nature.

She was intelligent enough to carve out a place for herself and women of her time into an acceptable form as defined by the prevailing culture. She led the women deeper and opened pathways for them to unfold their creativity and to find fruitful alternatives in the conformity of the Guru's teachings. Thus in spite of her strength and natural power, she did not become an outsider in her own culture.

She possessed extra ordinary powers of coping and was dexterous in creating, slipping into and balancing roles thus indicating great resilience. Her dislike of dependence and suppression extended to others as well as to herself and went a long way in giving identity meaning and hope in the lives of women at a time in history when their standing was very low.

Irrespective of whichever turn her life took she remained warm, proactive, enthusiastic passionate and excited about things. Her world was bright and full of possibilities. Her enthusiasm lent her the ability to inspire and motivate others. She viewed her life as a special gift, and strove to make the most out of it.

CHAPTER - 6

BIBI BHANI

Bibi Bhani has a very special place in history as she was the daughter of a Guru (Guru Amar Das), wife of a Guru (Guru Ram Das), mother of a Guru (Guru Arjan Dev), grandmother of a Guru (Guru Hargobind), great grandmother of a Guru (Guru Tegh Bahadar) and great, great grandmother of a Guru (Guru Gobind Singh).

She was born in 1533 at Basarke a village near Amritsar. The youngest daughter of Guru Amar Das she was cheerful, innocent, and calm and was lovingly called Mohni which means one who wins over hearts. Right from childhood, she spent a lot of time meditating and in the service of her father. She preferred solitude and simplicity.

In fact in Sikh history, she is also known as an embodiment of service as she served her father with a lot of reverence. It is said that she took special care that her father was not disturbed in his meditation and she devotedly served him sometimes even at the cost of her own health.

A popular anecdote mentioned in old chronicles describes how devotedly Bibi Bhani served her father. One morning, it is said, as Guru Amar Das was

absorbed in meditation, Bibi Bhani noticed that one of the legs of the low wooden seat on which the Guru sat was about to give way. She at once put forward her hand to support the stool. As the Guru ended his meditations, he discovered that her hand was bleeding. He blessed her saying that her progeny would inherit the seat of the guru. Another way of looking at it is that she requested her father to give her family the honor of being martyred for a cause. Bhai Gurdas specifically mentions that at the time of Guru Ram Das's succession, Bibi Bhani had made the firm resolve to not allow the gift of the office of the Guru to leave the Sodhi clan because no one else could endure the unendurable burden of responsibility. Thus it is important to note the role a woman played in determining the succession and the significant role Bibi Bhani played in the life of her son in a patriarchal society in late 16th century Punjab.⁴⁶ So great was her strength that she wanted to spare any one else the pain of martyrdom.

Guru Amar Das' daughter, Bibi Bhani, according to Sikh tradition, was the one who selected her groom Guru Ram Das herself. She was very active in the affairs of the community during her father and her husband's Guruship.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, Oxford University Press 2006 ISBN 13:978-0-19-567921-2 p 69

⁴⁷ Dr. Baldev Singh, PH.D. *A Critical Analysis of Relocating Gender In Sikh History :Transformation, Meaning and Identity* (Author: Doris R. Jakobsh) p 14

Macauliff writes that when a disciple of Guru Amar Das brought some jewelry and precious clothes for Bibi Bhani for her marriage, she refused and said that this money should be spent for the common kitchen.⁴⁸ This shows her simplicity and how she put others before herself.

On her marriage in 1545 she was so content that she never complained about the poverty of her in-laws. Both she and her husband continued serving her father and the common kitchen even after their marriage. The couple was happy and had three sons Prithi Chand (1547 A.D), Mahadev (1551) and Arjan Dev (1553).

Bibi Bhani served Bhai Jetha not merely as her husband but also as a saint as he went on to become Guru Ram Das, the fourth Guru in 1574.

She demonstrated her sense of justice when her eldest son Prithi Chand who was arrogant, lazy, and dishonest, wanted her to recommend him as the next Guru. She refused to do so and Prithi Chand, was justly ignored due to his nature and her youngest son, Arjan Dev, was chosen as the fifth Guru. Thus Bibi Bhani always stood for truth.

Prithi Chand however claimed that he was the fifth Guru and through his agents collected the offerings of the devotees before they could see Guru Arjan Dev. Though he tried to stop the common kitchen run by Guru Arjan

⁴⁸ Macauliffe, Max Arthur, *The Sikh Religion - Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, India: Low Price Publications, [1909] (2004). ISBN 81-86142-31-2.

Dev and Bibi Bhani he was unsuccessful and the common kitchen continued as usual.

After the death of Guru Ram Das, Bibi Bhani advised and helped her son, Guru Arjan Dev, in every activity undertaken by him. He inherited his capacity for selfless service, loving kindness and humility from his mother.⁴⁹

Guru Arjan Dev has mentioned her blessings and advice in one of his hymns given on page 496 of Guru Granth Sahib.

O son, thy mother blesses thee, Your mother's hope and prayer that you may never forget the Lord, even for an instant.

May you ever remember the Lord of the Universe!

That thou may not forget thy Lord even for a moment, and contemplate Him ever,

May the true Guru be merciful to thee and thy love

be for the Saints: May thou be robed by God with honour and thy food be the constant praise of the Lord!

May thou drink the Lord's nectar and live eternally:

Contemplating Him be thou ever in immense bliss!

May thou ever be in joy, thy desire be fulfilled

and thou be never be worn by Care!

⁴⁹ G.S Sidhu, *Guru Arjun Dev Ji : The Apostle of Peace*, Published by The Sikh Missionary Society U.K Regd. 2004

Be thou the black bee, hugging the Lotus Feet of
 the Lord.Nanak: be thou pleased with the Lord
 as is *Chatrik* in bloom on receiving the *swanti* drop.⁵⁰

When Emperor Jahangir summoned Guru Arjan Dev, she encouraged him to face the difficulties boldly. When he was tortured and the news of his martyrdom reached the family, she maintained her composure and did not let her daughter-in-law, and eleven year-old grandson, Hargobind, lose heart. She advised them to abide by God's will. She encouraged her grandson to face the new situation bravely. She left this world in 1598 at the age of 65 at Tarn Taran where she was serving the lepers. Till date there is a well constructed by Guru Arjan Dev in her memory at Tarn Taran. It is known as the well of Bibi Bhani.⁵¹

We can call her the embodiment of service, truth, endurance, obedience, and humility. She will always be remembered for the unique service rendered by her to her father. She has the distinction of being the mother of the first Sikh martyr, Guru Arjan Dev, great-grandmother of the second Sikh martyr, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and great-great-grandmother of Guru Gobind Singh, who

⁵⁰ Dr.Gopal Singh, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* [English Version]Vol. II Allied Publishers 1960, ISBN 81-7764-304-5 p 490

⁵¹ Dr. Harjinder Singh Dilgeer, *Who are the Sikhs?*, Published by the Sikh University Press ,2007, ISBN 2-930 247-20-7 p172

sacrificed himself and his four sons for the sake of justice. Thus she belongs to a family whose seven members were martyred.

Bibi Bhani proved by the way she cared for her father that there was no difference between a son and a daughter. We can learn from her way of serving that one can continue doing worldly duties along with daily religious service and that domestic circumstances need not become obstacles in ones spiritual journey.⁵²

⁵² Harbans Singh, *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Vol III. pp 1 - 4

CHAPTER - 7

MATA SUNDARI

The Great Mother of *Khalsa*, as she is popularly known among the Sikh masses, was the consort of Guru Gobind Singh. She was the daughter of Bhai Ram Saran, a Khatri, in present-day Hoshiarpur district of Punjab.

Born on 23rd Dec. 1667, she was married to the Guru in 1686. Hers was a remarkable personality that blended the diverse roles of a devoted wife, a spiritual mother and a confident and far-sighted guide of the masses. After the death of Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh masses found themselves in a state of disarray, primarily because of state terror, in addition to other hardships.

It was Mata Sundari who guided the Sikh community through a very difficult period of external repression and internal divisions after her husband's death -- about forty years (1708-1747 C.E.), longer than any of the nine Gurus subsequent to Guru Nanak.⁵³ In this difficult situation, she served as their guide, raised their flagging spirits, and virtually breathing new life into them by means of her sagacity, erudition and spiritual power.

She was wise enough to pick an able ally in her mission, namely, Bhai Mani Singh a scholar a tactful and devout Sikh who had unflinching faith in the

⁵³ Dr. Baldev Singh, PH.D. , *A Critical Analysis of Relocating Gender In Sikh History :Transformation, Meaning and Identity* (Author: Doris R. Jakobsh) p 14

late Guru's ideology. She commissioned him to collect the writings of Guru Gobind Singh ji. She also issued under her own seal and authority *hukamnamas* to *sangats*. The *hukamnamas* since discovered and published bear dates between 12 October 1717 and 10 August 1730.⁵⁴

Besides guiding the Sikh masses deftly in an absolutely critical situation, Mataji established a Training Academy at Amritsar, headed by Bhai Mani Singh, known as Bhai Mani Singh Taksal [literally meaning mint] and thereby, in starting the teaching of Sikh scriptures, she played a commendable role in giving a new lease of life to Sikh religious values.

It was she who got the writings of Guru Gobind Singh collected and compiled as "*Dasam Granth*". What is more, she persuaded the devout Sikhs to prepare copies of the holy hymns of the Great *Adi Granth Sahib*. Further, Mata Sundari took care to ensure that the tradition of "*langar*" (free community kitchen) continued to flourish. Her reputation was such that devotees would come to seek her blessings from such distance places as Kabul and Kandahar. She always treated every Sikh as her own child. Yet she was not only a kind mother but a confident and fearless leader, a virtual embodiment of the ideal enshrined in the following words of the great Ninth

⁵⁴ Harbans Singh, *The encyclopedia of Sikhism*

Guru “*Bhai Kahu Ko Det Neh, Neh Bhai Manat Aan*” i.e. 'Neither frighten nor fear any one'

When some differences arose between two groups of Sikhs, i.e. Tat Khalsa and Bandai Khalsa, she used her wisdom and power of loving persuasion to settle the dispute to the satisfaction, of both the groups. Her conduct was always bold, principled, affectionate, and impartial and almost half of her life of 80 years was devoted to the welfare of the Sikh masses. Nothing ruffled her equanimity and it was this, coupled with her missionary commitment, which enabled her to complete the Guru's half -done tasks admirably.

This, indeed, is why she is regarded as a front rank personality in Sikh history. Her whole life was dedicated to the spiritual advancement and general welfare of the masses. Today, when moral values have declined, her lofty personality shines all the more, by virtue of sheer contrast.

For about forty years Mata stayed at the place which the present Gurudwara Mata Sundari ji occupies. Mata Sundari returned to live in Delhi where she died in 1747. A memorial in her honor stands in the compound of *Gurudwara Bala Sahib, New Delhi*.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Harbans Singh, *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Publisher, Punjabi University ,1995 ISBN-13:9788173801006
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CHAPTER - 8

MAI BHAGO

In her childhood, Mai Bhag Kaur was called Bhag Bhari, which means fortunate or one who is full of good fortune. On being baptized, she was named Bhag Kaur. In Sikh history, she is known as Mai Bhago. The name itself is remarkable as it shows that the girl child too was considered lucky in the Sikh society of those times. She was born in a village near Amritsar. Her grandfather Bhai Langaha, had served under the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev and the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind. He had helped Guru Arjan Dev in the construction of Harmandir Sahib and was one of the five Sikhs who accompanied Guru Arjan Dev when he went to Lahore for martyrdom.

Mai Bhago grew up in an intensely devout Sikh household where the Sikh tradition of valor was inculcated in her right from childhood. As a young girl she had heard about the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev, the wars of Guru Hargobind, injustice done to the Sikhs and their harassment by the Mughal army. These left a deep impression on her tender mind. The sad news of the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur and his companions —Bhai Dayala, Bhai Mati Das, and Bhai Sati Das – their courage and fortitude touched her heart. She made up her mind to stop such injustice and violence against the Sikhs.

She had inherited the ideals of bravery and courage from her family. She visited Guru Tegh Bahadur twice along with her family.⁵⁶ She also visited Anandpur with her father in 1699 when Guru Gobind Singh created the *Khalsa* and was baptized along with other members of her family. She wanted to stay there to learn the martial arts and become a soldier, but her father brought her back because women did not take part in the Sikh army in those days. However, she longed to join the Sikh army and in preparation started learning the art of warfare and horse riding from her father. She made a top knot of her head hair and covered it with a small turban. With quiet dedication she learnt the art of warfare all by herself and soon became a strong soldier while retaining her saintly outlook. Though details of her education are not known, according to historians like Bhai Vir Singh, it is believed that she always carried a long *sang* on her person. *Sang* is a sort of spear which is used to cut trees and shrubs.⁵⁷

She was married to Bhai Nidhan Singh of village Patti near Amritsar. Mughals and hilly chiefs had surrounded Anandpur and were demanding it be evacuated. They called that any Sikh who says that "he/she is not anymore a Sikh of Guru Gobind" will be left untouched. A group of 40

⁵⁶ Sawan Singh Principal [Retd], *Noble and Brave Sikh Women*, Publisher: B. Chattar Singh Jiwan Singh

⁵⁷ Shingara Singh, *Itihasik Virtant Pind Jhabal Te Mai Bhago*, Pub. Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Mai Bhago, Jhabal, District Amritsar, 1990 p 40

Sikhs, led by Mahan Singh Brar told Guru Gobind Singh that they are not his Sikhs anymore. Guru told them that they have to write it in a document that "they are not his Sikhs anymore" and sign it. All forty Sikhs signed this document *Bedava* [desertion] and left Guru Gobind Singh. Mai Bhago was distressed to hear that some of the Sikhs of her neighborhood who had gone to Anandpur to fight for Guru Gobind Singh had deserted him under adverse conditions. The Mughals had betrayed Guru Gobind Singh and the governor of Sirhind was planning a big attack on Guru Gobind Singh at village Dina where he was staying after the Battle of Chamkaur. She could not hold herself, as she was zealous to serve the Guru. Bhai Vir Singh in his *Kalgidhar Chamatkar* writes that when the Sikhs had turned their backs to the tenth Guru she told her husband "Singhji let us go and lay down our lives for the Guru". Her husband also a follower of the Guru, agreed with her wholeheartedly. Bhai Vir Singh describes her as a tall and well built woman and gives her the credit of being the source of inspiration for her brethren in the rough terrain of the battlefield.⁵⁸ Thus moved by love for the Guru, she, the great heroine, single handedly motivated her people, to get ready to lay down their lives for the Guru who has sacrificed his father, mother and four sons for the Sikh faith. She was so moved by all that was happening around

⁵⁸ Bhai Vir Singh, *Kalgidhar Chamatkar*, p 200-201

her that she could no longer sit idle. She was determined to wipe out all opposition to her Guru. This clearly indicates the strength of both body and spirit.

She, along with her husband, went from village to village and told the people about the deserters. She exhorted the villagers and family members of the deserters not to support and accept them when they came back. Hence on their return the deserters had to face the taunts and curses of their families. When the women from the families of these deserters dressed themselves as soldiers and wanted to proceed with Mai Bhago, she spoke to the deserters, “Guru Ji has sacrificed his family and comforts for our freedom. We must stand up and protect our rights and faith. We should not hide ourselves like cowards. Everybody has to die. Why not die like a brave person? If you don’t join me, I shall take a party of women and die for the Guru.” Her sharp and frank words pricked the conscience of the deserters and awakened their souls and made them regret their actions. Thus convinced they along with their leader, Mahan Singh, marched to help the Guru and sought his forgiveness. They took the oath to die fighting and not to retreat from the battlefield. Thus her timely and confident display of spirit and courage changed the course of things.

Guru Gobind Singh reached village of Khidrana, when Mai Bhago and the men, she was leading stopped near the pool of Khidrana where an imperial army in pursuit of Guru Gobind Singh had almost overtaken him. They challenged the pursuing host and fought furiously forcing it to retreat. All forty Sikhs attained martyrdom in this pitched battle, in which Guru himself was supporting them with a shower of arrows from a nearby high ground, found all the men except one Mahan Singh, killed when he visited the battlefield. Mai Bhago was the sole survivor of this fiercely fought battle and she was honored for her bravery by being made a bodyguard of the Guru.⁵⁹

Mahan Singh, who had been seriously wounded, also died as the Guru took him into his lap. Guru Gobind Singh blessed those forty dead as the Forty Liberated Ones. He took into his care Mai Bhago who had also suffered injury in the battle.

The British historian Macauliffe has written the following regarding the Majha Sikhs: “They were joined by a heroine named Bhago who through zeal for the Sikh cause, had donned men’s attire and vowed to suffer death if necessary on the blood stained field of danger on behalf of the Guru”. The woman Bhago fought heroically in their ranks disposed of several of her

⁵⁹ Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, 1990 Volume V p 220

Muhammadan opponents and transmitted her name as an Indian heroine for the admiration of future generations.⁶⁰

While the Guru was blessing the slain Sikhs, he was informed about an injured woman soldier. She was carried to the camp site [*Dera*] where her wounds were treated. On regaining consciousness she revealed to the Guru about how she had collected and united the Sikhs at Khidrana.⁶¹

It is note worthy that this incident led by Mai Bhago is remembered daily by all who perform the *Ardaas*. It is performed at the culmination of the morning and evening prayer and at the start or end of any religious function or program in the *Gurdwara*, house or anywhere else and at every occasion of joy or sorrow in a family every congregational invocation and one after completing a *Paath* (Prayer) out of *Nitnem* (Daily routine) and before starting or after completing recitation of Guru Granth Sahib. Such is its significance.

The Muktas universally celebrated in the Sikh tradition are the forty martyrs of Muktsar who earned this title by sacrificing their lives for the Guru led by Mai Bhago and Mahan Singh.

The martyrs are not remembered by name, but by the tortures they suffered and the bravery they showed in sticking to the principles of their religion.

⁶⁰ Ibid p 212

⁶¹ Bhai Vir Singh, *Kalgidhar Chamatkar*, Pub.Khalsa Samachar p 200-201

They became an example for the generations to follow. The contents of *Ardaas* and its final format were approved by the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee.⁶²

According to *Sakhi Pothi* she stayed on with Guru Gobind Singh as one of his bodyguard in male attire and was greatly respected⁶³. After the death of Guru Gobind Singh at Nanded in 1708, she retired further south. She settled down at Jinvara, eleven kms from Bidar in Karnataka where, immersed in meditation, she lived to attain a ripe old age. At Nanded, a hall within the compound of Takht Sachkhand, Sri Hazur Sahib marks the site of her residence and is known as Bunga Mai Bhago.

Mai Bhago preached mostly in Bidar where she contributed to the spread of Sikhism. She died at Janwada in the house of Rustam Rao and Bala Rao. A beautiful *Gurudwara Tap Asthan* stands there today in her memory in the village Janwada⁶⁴. Some years back a *Gurudwara* in the name of Mai Bhago was built in Prabhat road, Karol Bagh, Delhi. This *Gurudwara* is run by women, who keep her memory alive by holding regular *satsangs* there.

Her life story and skill in organization against odds will always be a milestone in Sikh history. Her example inspired many brave Sikh women to

⁶² Jaswant Singh Neki , *Ardaas* , Published by M/S Singh Bros., Mai Sewa, Amritsar, India

⁶³ Ed. Dr M.K Gill, *Eminent Sikh Women*, Himala Publishers New Delhi 1996 ISBN: 81-900291-7-7 p 62

⁶⁴ Shingara Singh, *Itihasik Virtant Pind Jhabal Te Mai Bhago*, Pub. Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee, Mai Bhago, Jhabal, District Amritsar, 1990 p 50

face death with honor. She has been likened to the Joan of Arc of Sikh history.

Hence Mai Bhago's name features amongst the great Sikh women, whose selfless sacrifice during the time of the tenth Guru is noteworthy, as it was her initiative which became a bridge between the Guru and his disciples. Her single-minded devotion made her renounce all her worldly attachments and she remained in service of the Guru till her death. Hers is a life worthy of emulation.

CHAPTER – 9

SARDARNI SADA KAUR

Sardarni Sada Kaur is one of the eminent women in Sikh history. She was the wife of Gurbakhash Singh ruled the area, which was under the control of Kannahya *Misal*. She led her armies in battle and Ranjit Singh owed his success, in his initial struggle for supremacy against the rival *Misals*, in no small measure to her political acumen and military help.⁶⁵

Her daughter Mehtab Kaur was married to Maharaja Ranjit Singh and she is better known as his mother-in-law. She was intelligent and wise and brave. Ranjit Singh was twelve when he lost his father. A virulent attack of small pox had deprived of vision in his left eye and deeply pitted his face. He did not receive any education save what he learned from life; and life in his early teens meant chase and the companionship of the sons of *zamindars*. He became an inveterate hunter, and love for horses became an absolute passion. He learned to drink hard and enjoy the good things of life. A sudden change came over him when he reached the age of fifteen, when he assumed the control of the Sukerchakia estates and married. The marriage brought him under the positive influence of his mother- in- law Sada Kaur, who was

⁶⁵ Jagjit Singh, *The Sikh Revolution: A Perspective View*, New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 4th reprint, 1998, pp. 134-35.

the head of the Kannahya. Thus it was she more than anyone else who directed his unbound energy towards unifying the Punjab⁶⁶. Hence it was her timely guidance and leadership qualities that helped Maharaja Ranjit Singh capture the province of Lahore. Thus her contribution in establishing the Sikh kingdom is notable.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the illustrious ruler of Punjab, was invited by the Emperor Jamaan of Kabul and the residents of Lahore to take control of the city, which was plagued by a lack of constant rule. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was however in a predicament since he did not have enough soldiers required for the campaign. To seek help he visited Batala, which was ruled by his mother-in-law. She offered him her soldiers, which unfortunately did not add up to the required numbers. She pacified the dismayed king and thought up of a strategy to capture Lahore. The strategy involved approaching Lahore secretly, so as to avoid any hostility on the way, and contacting the residents of the city for their assistance. The strategy succeeded and the Sikh army entered the city. This army however faced resistance from the general controlling the fort inside the city. This problem was also tackled in a very intelligent manner by Sada Kaur. Thus, Ranjit

⁶⁶ Khushwant Singh, *History of the Sikhs*, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, ISBN 13:978-0-19-567308-1 p 181

Singh was chosen to command the defending army at the young age of nineteen at the bidding of Sada Kaur. He laid the siege of Lahore fort, rode upto Samman Burj and challenged Shah Zaman to single combat. Demoralised and defeated Shah Zaman returned to Kabul and Ranjit Singh became the acknowledged leader of the Sikhs.

Even when faced with a formidable enemy possessing large amounts of ammunition, Sada Kaur did not lose heart. She always relied on her wisdom and intelligence. Because of her presence of mind and military acumen a great ruler like Maharaja Ranjit Singh sought her advice in times of adversity. Her guidance proved beneficial in the many battles he fought for the establishment of the Sikh kingdom. She is aptly described as a first woman Commander-in-Chief. She became a young widow when her husband was killed in battle. She did not crumble with grief, but used this crisis to transform herself into a woman-warrior, donning a high turban and battlefield garb with full weaponry. This is indicative of her positive and proactive nature. She commanded numerous battles and eventually laid the

foundation for the Sikh empire. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's later successes were primarily due to Sada Kaur's military and political strategies.⁶⁷

Thus Sada Kaur was not only a mother-in-law of Ranjit Singh but she also guided his destiny and helped him to acquire the Sikh Empire in Punjab.

⁶⁷ H.S. Virk, *The Real Ranjit Singh: An Account based on the Archive of Fakir Family* Department of Physics, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar-143005

CHAPTER - 10

CONCLUSION

The Gurus of the Sikh religion preached about living a life of piety simplicity, fearlessness and constant dedication to noble causes. Women contributed in an equal measure to make the principles of this faith a reality, enabled by an environment which accorded them equal opportunities for intellectual and spiritual development. Their strength and resilience brought into play a binding force that kept together the bricks that the gurus were layering one by one. Often possessing perceptive political acumen they wielded authority thereby influencing many situations. This influence may have varied but it was never inconsequential.

The divine spark of the Gurus touched them taking them to the forefront in their fight for peace and justice, full of hope, enthusiasm and courage. It gave them the gritty perseverance to not flinch while witnessing the slaughter of their children.

This unbending endurance, this courage and stoicism came from the respect accorded to them in the new order, and these women embodied the change by breaking through the prejudices operating strongly in their worlds.

Though their lives were governed by the society, the cultural dos and don'ts, these women were dependable and took responsibility for their actions. Here was a group of women doing their work, leading the way and facing the confusions and giving the needed confidence and succor to the weary. In those troubled times they were able to break through the wall of fear and tenaciously lived out the truth.

Today we can thank them for their vision and allow it to surface in us so that whatever we do gains meaning and depth. As mentors their power of devotion led to other forms of empowerment for women, which till date can guide and be the force behind us to enable us to achieve or reclaim the powers that are natural to the feminine.

These notable Sikh women undertook the “heroine's journey” in its entirety, from seeking to finding their deepest spiritual wealth and moving in equal partnership with the Sikh Gurus’ in spreading spiritual truths. They were the pioneers as they broke out of the given mould, emerging as feminine leaders at a time when women’s voices were relatively inaudible.

Thus the Sikh women embody the feminine aspect of the power of the Gurus teachings.

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