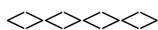


WOMAN - THE SIKH PERSPECTIVE

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...So why call her bad?... without woman, there would be no one at all (sggs 473).



The Sanskrit word for woman is "*Stree*". Its modified form in Punjabi is "*Istree*". To understand the significance and the importance of the role woman plays in the human society, it is essential to understand the underlying meaning of this Sanskrit word. In nutshell, "*Stree*" simply means "expansion".

In truth, woman never stops from expanding throughout her entire life! First, when a woman is born, she expands her parents' family. Upon becoming an adult, she gets married into another family; thus expanding her husband's family. Further, by bearing children, she expands her own family. In turn, her children repeat the same process. She, thus, keeps the family or human flame going. In her humility, she establishes the honor and dignity of the house and the society.

Looking at it from a different angle, by bodily union of the man and woman their qualities are expanded. For example, children born of parents are expansions of the parents' personal qualities and qualifications, good or otherwise (genes, DNA, habit patterns, etc.).

As alluded to in the Gurbani, without woman both the husband's family and the parents' family are zero. The practical implication is that without woman, there would be no one at all. She is the source of man's physical existence. Hence, she is sometimes called the mother of the universe. The name "*Stree*" thus signifies her empowerment, courage, patience, devotion, dignity, and strength. Baabaa Nanak glorifies her in the Gurbani as follows:

- ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵੀਆਹੁ ॥ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਦੋਸਤੀ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਰਾਹੁ ॥ ਭੰਡੁ ਮੁਆ ਭੰਡੁ ਭਾਲੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਬੰਧਾਨੁ ॥ ਸੋ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨ ॥ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੀ ਭੰਡੁ ਊਪਜੈ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਝੁ ਨ ਕੋਇ:
Bhand janmeeeai bhand ninmeeeai bhand mangan veeaaahu. Bhandahu hovai dosatee bhandahu chalai raahu. Bhand muua bhand bhaaleeai bhand hovai bandhaan. So kio mandaa aakheeai jit jammahi raajaan. Bhandahu hee bhand oopajai bhndai baajh na koi:

From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all (sggs 473).

In addition to many noble qualities such as selfless love, humility, gentleness, kindness, shyness, simplicity, calmness, compassion, generosity and coyness, name "*Stree*" denotes the sacrifices she makes throughout her life. There can be no parallel to woman's sacrifice and patience. For example, during pregnancy she has to suffer for several months. As she bears the

child, it gives her pain and discomfort while growing in her womb. She not only undergoes pain and trouble, but she also sacrifices everything including her blood for the child. At the time of delivery there is also sometimes severe danger and complications. After birth, she pays her entire attention to see the child's comfort and progress.

Therefore, a woman as a mother indeed is more precious than the universe. This noble quality of sacrifice in her makes her sweet-natured. No wonder in the Gurbani even God is depicted as the embodiment of woman — "Sweet". Not only that, time and again, each soul is limned as woman (i.e., *Stree-Ling*) in the Gurbani.

- ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰਾ ਪਿਤਾ ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰਾ ਮਾਤਾ: Toon meraa pitaa toon hai meraa maataa:
O Lord, You are my Father, and You are my Mother (sggs 103).
- ਆਪੇ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਆਪੇ ਹੀ ਨਾਰੀ: Aapay purakh aapay hee naaree:
You Yourself are the male, and You Yourself are the female (sggs 1020).
- ਠਾਕੁਰੁ ਏਕੁ ਸਬਾਈ ਨਾਰਿ: Thakur ek sabaee Naar:
There is one Lord ("Akaal Purakh"), and all are His brides (sggs 933).

Many might be unaware of the fact that woman also has been praised throughout the ancient Vedic scriptures as *Satyavati*, *Angavati*, *Anyavati* and *Nidanavati*. In fact the well known *Gayatri Mantra* of Vedas — which is considered the very source of Vedas — is said to be the embodiment of woman. *Satyavati* means the same One God is present in every particle of the universe as the unseen butter in milk. *Angavati* represents the five elements (earth, water, fire, air and sky) as an aspect of God. *Anyavati* symbolizes different types of service and worship (*Araadhanaa*). *Nidanavati* represents the nine different forms of devotion. Woman is exalted as *Aadi Shakti* in the Vedic texts — different names given to her in this context include *Sabada Brahmamayi*, *Charaacharamayi*, *Jyotirmayi*, *Vaangmayi*, *Nithyanandamayi*, *Paraatparamayi*, *Maayaamayi*, *Sreemayi*, and so on. Mentioned in the Vedic texts are several godly qualities having feminine attributes — fame or glory (*Keertee*), prosperity (*Sree*), illuminating fine speech (*Vach*), remembrance or memory (*Smriti*), discriminating intelligence (*Medhaa*), intuition or fixity of the mind (*Dhriti*), steadfastness of patience or forbearance (*Kshamaa*), and so on. Some of the other godly qualities having feminine attributes are *Sathya* (truth), *Dharma* (truthfulness-righteousness), *Shaanti* (peace), *Prema* (love), *Ahimsa* (nonviolence), *Dayiaa* (mercy or compassion), etc.

Thus, woman is a fountain of human values and godly qualities. In fact, all souls (man and woman alike) are bestowed with these spiritual qualities. Therefore, all of us have the ability to negate or enhance their positive effects in our lives. For example, if someone is famous as a righteous man, that makes him glorious. Sweet speech is derived from the vibratory sound of the Shabad. Memory is the power of continuity of awareness. Through the power of discriminating intelligence, the ignorant man gains intuitive wisdom. Intuition is the fixity of the mind in Truth or its "*Joti Svaroop*". The ability to overcome unsteadiness is steadfastness, and the ability to remain intuitively balanced amidst the feelings of "likes" and "dislikes" is patience. Whatever we do from a heart filled with selfless love is Truth, *Dharma*, peace, wisdom and compassions.

- ਧੀਰਜੁ ਜਸੁ ਸੋਭਾ ਤਿਹ ਬਨਿਆ॥ਹਰਿ ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਸ੍ਰਵਨ ਜਿਹ ਸੁਨਿਆ: Dheeraj jas sobhaa tih baniaa.
Har har naam sravan jih suniaa:
Patience, glory and honor come to those who listen to the Divine Name (sggs 257).

- ਜੋ ਹਰਿ ਸੇਵਹਿ ਸੇ ਸਦਾ ਸੋਹਹਿ ਸੋਭਾ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਸੁਹਾਵਣਿਆ: Jo har sevahi say sadaa sohahi sobhaa surat suhaavaniaa:
Those who serve God are always beautiful. The glory of their intuitive awareness is beautiful (sggs 122).
- ਨਿਵਣੁ ਸੁ ਅਖਰੁ ਖਵਣੁ ਗੁਣੁ ਜਿਹਬਾ ਮਣੀਆ ਮੰਤੁ: Nivan su akhar khavan gun jibabaa maneeaa mant:
Humility is the word, forgiveness is the virtue, and sweet speech is the magic mantra (sggs 1384).

These glorious feminine attributes can be tapped in meditation (*Japa* or *Naam-Simran*). Once they are awakened in the bosom from their dormant condition, the life must become glorious. When their mystery is so unlocked within, the light of these attributes must illumine the entire body-mind-intellect apparatus.

Ironically, in one hand the man wants to awaken these spiritual ideals and virtues in his bosom so that he can link with God, his Pure Self. But the same time he wants to denigrate the woman by calling her "the doorway leading to the most rigorous hell" ("*Narak ghor kaa dwaraa*"), "*Pair kee jootee*" (equal to footwear), "slave", and so on! The Gurbani condemns such hypocrisy.

- ਰਾਬ ਕਮੰਡਲੁ ਕਾਪੜੀਆ ਮਨਿ ਤ੍ਰਿਸਨਾ ਉਪਜੀ ਭਾਰੀ॥ਇਸਤ੍ਰੀ ਤਜਿ ਕਰਿ ਕਾਮਿ ਵਿਆਪਿਆ ਚਿਤੁ ਲਾਇਆ ਪਰ ਨਾਰੀ:
In his (Sannyaasi) hands is the begging bowl and he wears a patched coat like a mendicant's but with him is immense craving. And though he abandons his own wife, he's attached to another's, lured by sex-desire (sggs 1013).

In India, in addition to dowry system, woman for centuries have been systematically downgraded by many ways by the religion and priest class (*Pujaaree* Group). For example, they were falsely labeled by the priest class as spiritually "impure" due to menstruation; they were forced to burn in the pyre of their husbands (*Satee*); they were deprived of education (material and spiritual) and equal rights for property and inheritance; they were considered unfit for spiritual advancement or salvation; they were subjected to economic, social, and cultural oppression; they were regarded as a source of sin, vice or dishonor to man and thus labeled as bad influence on him; they were considered hurdle to man's spiritual journey; they were declared as not very intelligent and trustworthy; some went to the extent to suggest women being alike animals in meaning or significance; and so on. This sort of attitude towards woman has promoted social degradation of the status of women as well as social inequality between man and woman. As a result, the attitude towards women as subordinate remains not only in India but throughout the world. In some cultures and religions it's worse than others. In the western cultures, the woman is generally looked at as a sex symbol — she is praised only if she has good looks. In the middle eastern cultures, the woman is virtually treated as a slave, accentuating social, economic and cultural inequalities.

Thus, the woman who is full of so many wonderful spiritual qualities is today considered something very small, insignificant, unintelligent, weak, lowly and is relegated a backward place and neglected. Not only discriminated against, women are also denied the freedom and opportunity to develop their full potentials. They are considered inferior to man in all respects. This is nothing but ignorance. On account of this ignorance, it is unfortunate today that respecting woman is considered a shame and unmanly.

Organized or institutionalized religion is a powerful thing in that it can mold and shape the psyche, thinking, mindset, attitudes, conduct and behavior of its people. Misunderstanding, misinterpretation or misuse of the scriptural statements by the selfish and crafty priest class has been the main factor responsible for many ills in the human society including the woman's sorry plight.

The Gurbani's (Sri Guru Granth Sahib) perspective is the Sikh perspective. In the Gurbani, the both man and woman are considered equal; one is incomplete without the other. They both are but a complementary force. Accordingly, the Gurbani regards the woman as "*Ardhaagane*": man's other half, to the doorway to spiritual liberation (*Mukti*). All Sikh Masters were the great reformers. They worked to reform and redefine the social and religious fabric of the human society. They made men and women equal partners and showed them the path on which both could walk to meet their material needs, and then advance to achieve the spiritual prosperity. The social evil of dowry, *Satee Praatha*, suppression of woman, etc., are condemned in the Gurbani. To reawaken women and uplift their status in the society, plenty of feminine symbols have been used in the Gurbani in this context.

- ਅਰਧ ਸਰੀਰੀ ਨਾਰਿ ਨ ਛੋਡੈ...: Aradh sareere naari na shodai...:
Woman is the other half of a man's body, and she never leaves him... (sggs 477).
- ਲੋਕ ਵੇਦ ਗੁਣ ਗਿਆਨ ਵਿਚ ਅਰਧ ਸਰੀਰੀ ਮੋਖ ਦੁਆਰੀ: Lok ved gun giaan vich aradh sareere mokh duaaree:
From a temporal and spiritual point of view, woman is half man's body and assists to the door to final liberation (Bhai Gurdaas, Vaar 5, Pauri 16).
- ਬਿਨੁ ਸਤ ਸਤੀ ਹੋਇ ਕੈਸੇ ਨਾਰਿ॥ਪੰਡਿਤ ਦੇਖੁ ਰਿਦੈ ਬੀਚਾਰਿ: Bin sat satee kaiase hoi naar. Pandit dekho ridai bechaar:
Without Truth, how can the woman be a true Satee — a widow who burns herself on her husband's funeral pyre? O Pandit, O religious scholar, see this and contemplate it within your heart (sggs 328).
- ਹਰਿ ਪ੍ਰਭੁ ਮੇਰੇ ਬਾਬੁਲਾ ਹਰਿ ਦੇਵਹੁ ਦਾਨੁ ਮੈ ਦਾਜੋ॥...ਹੋਰਿ ਮਨਮੁਖ ਦਾਜੁ ਜਿ ਰਖਿ ਦਿਖਾਲਹਿ ਸੁ ਕੂੜੁ ਅਹੰਕਾਰੁ ਕਚੁ ਪਾਜੋ: Hari prabh mere Baabulaa Hari devahu daan mai daajo... Hor manmukh daaj ji rakh dikhaalahi su koor ahankaar kach paajo:
O my father, please give me the Name of the Lord as my wedding gift and dowry.... Any other dowry, which the Manmukhs offer for show, is only false egotism and a worthless display (sggs 78).

In Sikh thought, thus, man and woman do not enter into matrimony for bestial reasons, but rather for spiritual advancement. Therefore, in Sikh thought marriage based on true love, mutual respect, understanding, trust, fidelity, chastity, loyalty and friendship is considered an essential part of physical life. With the example of a worldly marriage performed on a material plane between a man and a woman, the Gurbani explains in the four "*Laavaan*" as to how we can join (marry or link) the Higher Consciousness Within. Thus, marriage in the Sikh Way of life is supposed to be an unbreakable spiritual union of two souls into one. It is a mean to learn helping each other and attain together a balanced life, self-fulfillment, spiritual unfoldment and Self-knowledge leading to spiritual perfection in life ("*Jeevan Padavee*").

- ਧਨ ਪਿਰੁ ਏਹਿ ਨ ਆਖੀਅਨਿ ਬਹਨਿ ਇਕਠੇ ਹੋਇ॥ਏਕ ਜੋਤਿ ਦੁਇ ਮੂਰਤੀ ਧਨ ਪਿਰੁ ਕਹੀਐ ਸੋਇ: Dhan pir ayhi na aakheean bahan ikthay hoyi. Ayk jot dui mooratee dhan pir kaheei soyi: Bride

and groom are not they who pose as one whole; bride and groom are they who are two bodies with one soul (sggs 788).

As we can see, the Sikh Masters condemn practices and restrictions which serve to keep woman in a state of backwardness and in a position of inferiority. It is shame that the practice of sex prejudices as preference for a male child exist not only amongst Sikhs and Hindus, but also in many other countries; making people bent on sex preselection techniques and female infanticide.

If mankind as a whole wants to bring harmony, prosperity and peace to the world, then, as indicated in the Gurbani, man and woman must walk together on the path of Truth with selfless love, faith, mutual respect, determination and courage. For this to prevail, both man and woman have to live fully in his or her own unique nature or respective realm, in uplifting and positive spiritual vibration. In other words, to improve, both man and woman need conducting and behaving virtuously, respecting each other's sentiments, avoiding areas of conflict, ruthlessly shunning all their differences, and treating each other with honor and dignity.

If the both man and woman are deluded, then both forget their True Nature (Pure Consciousness) and thus drown in the shoreless ocean of worldliness. But if one of them is endowed with spiritual attributes, he or she will lead the other toward Higher Consciousness.

In the final analysis, as one ascends towards Higher Consciousness, one must transcend all labels including the one of "man" or "woman". Because — from the standpoint of Higher Consciousness — as indicated in the Gurbani there is no male or female (or duality)! It's just One mass of homogeneous Consciousness there. Distinctions, differences, conflicts, divisions, and duality exist only so long the mind's conditioning persists (*Haume* or false ego-sense, attachments, self-limitation etc.). The Gurbani asks us to abandon the mind's defects and seek that Higher Consciousness (the Source) Within, where there is no differences — no wife or husband, no man or woman, no lover or beloved, no this or that. In the following verses, Baabaa Nanak points to this state of Higher Consciousness that we must realize Within by becoming *Gurmukh* or *Brahm-Giaanee*. Because, before the rise of the phantom called mind, that's what we all were!

- ਪੁਰਖ ਮਹਿ ਨਾਰਿ ਨਾਰਿ ਮਹਿ ਪੁਰਖਾ ਬੂਝਹੁ ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਗਿਆਨੀ॥ਧੁਨਿ ਮਹਿ ਧਿਆਨੁ ਧਿਆਨ ਮਹਿ ਜਾਨਿਆ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਅਕਥ ਕਹਾਨੀ: Purakh mahi naar naar mahi purkhaa boojhau barahm giaanee...:
The female is in the male, and the male is in the female. Understand this, O God-realized being! The meditation is in God's love, and God Knowledge is in meditation. Become Gurmukh (Self-realized), and speak the Unspoken Speech (sggs 879).
- ਨਾਰਿ ਨ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਕਹਹੁ ਕੋਊ ਕੈਸੇ: Naar na purakh kahhu ko-oo kaisay:
He is not male, and He is not female; how can anyone describe Him? (sggs 685).
- ਨਾਰਿ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਹੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਨ ਜਨਮਾ ਨਾ ਕੋ ਦੁਖੁ ਸੁਖੁ ਪਾਇਦਾ: Naar purakh nahee jaat na janmaa naa ko dukh sukh paaidaa:
(Before the rise of material consciousness) neither there was female, nor male, nor caste, nor birth nor did any one suffer pain or pleasure (sggs 1035).
- ਸਰਬ ਭੂਤ ਏਕੈ ਕਰਿ ਜਾਨਿਆ ਚੁਕੇ ਬਾਦ ਬਿਬਾਦਾ: Sarab bhoot ekai kar jaaniaa chooke baad bibaadaa:
I look upon all beings alike, and my conflict and strife are ended (sggs 483).