Sikhism, Interfaith Dialogue, and Women: Transformation and Identity

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ABSTRACT This article locates the study of Sikhism and gender within the wider milieu of ‘women and religion’; in this context, the question of interfaith dialogue, women, and Sikhism is examined. Further, this article focuses on a recent controversy at the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs. Two British amritdhari (initiated) women were refused the right to participate in the Sukhasan procession, a ritual in which Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, is formally taken from its public platform and carried to its nightly resting place. The incident prompted a media uproar, particularly in India; it also became a hotly debated issue on the Internet. Given that the women at the centre of the controversy were ‘Western’ Sikhs of Punjabi origin, the incident led to a widespread petition within the diaspora. This article addresses the question of Sikh women’s religious and ritual rights within the context of the apparent divide between the concerns of Sikhs in diaspora and Sikhs in the Punjab as well as interfaith concerns. It questions whether this incident is perhaps a watershed in terms of Sikh women’s active engagement and resistance to discrimination within Sikh institutions and the community at large.

Introduction

If the question of religion and women is contextualized within the pan-Indian historical milieu, particularly during the heady days of reform movements in colonial India, it becomes quickly apparent that it was not women that led the fight for equality within their respective traditions. Although the question of women’s reform was central to all the various reform movements—Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim, they were led by men. The Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Singh Sabha movements all insisted that the position of women in India was indicative of a time of degeneration in their respective traditions. The Indian reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries thought that women and the status of women could be transformed through a return to their respective ‘golden ages’, ages that were increasingly legitimated through a rewriting of history, myth, and ritual. By and large, women themselves did not collaborate in these designs. Moreover, they were often portrayed as being opposed to their own liberation (Jakobsh). Male reformers were unwilling to relinquish their position in their respective patriarchal systems that they endeavoured to change. Instead, they “dreamed of a world where women would be educated and free from some of the worst customs of the society—child marriage, sati, polygamy. But at the same time, these new women would be devoted to home and family” (Forbes 20–1).
Moreover, Indian reform and the ‘women’s question’ must also be viewed as a distinct rebuttal to British and Christian missionary activities intent on converting Indians as well as the stinging criticism of the British establishment regarding the position of women in the newly colonized dominion. In seeking to improve this position, reformers were reacting to the implication of their moral inferiority and depravity put in place by colonial rule. According to Farquhar who wrote in 1924 (433–4),

> While the shaping forces at work in the movements have been many, it is quite clear that Christianity has ruled the development throughout. Christianity has been, as it were, a great searchlight flung across the expanse of the religions, and in its blaze all the coarse, unclean and superstitious elements of the old faiths stood out, quite early, in painful vividness. India shuddered, and the earlier movements were the response to the revelation . . .

By and large, reform movements that had their genesis within the larger Hindu framework pointed fingers at alien Muslim practices which had crept into the otherwise pristine Vedic position of women. Muslim reform movements chastised anti-women tendencies within Hinduism, the oft-cited Code of Manu in particular. Sikhs on the other hand pointed both to Hindu and Muslim influences having corrupted the superior position of women as evident in the Guru period of Sikh history. Each vied with the other to protect their communal interests through close collaboration with their colonial masters. What became increasingly vital for these groups, particularly for minority populations such as Muslims and Sikhs, was the creation of religious distinctions, separate identities, and distance between themselves and the wider Hindu population.

For Singh Sabha reformers, great pains were taken to present Sikh women as having a distinctly superior position vis-à-vis their Hindu and Muslim counterparts. Given the Sikh minority position amidst the Hindu and Muslim milieu that surrounded them, it was important to present Sikhism as offering Punjab’s womenfolk more than the larger traditions that surrounded them. Bhai Vir Singh’s writings offer evidence in this regard. In his famous novel Sundri, the protagonist’s message to her fellow sisters and to Bhai Vir Singh’s larger audience stresses the unparalleled position of Sikh women: women within Sikhism confined to the harem and are also not women who are not treated as Shudras.

If one turns to contemporary writings on women and Sikhism, little has changed in this regard. While women writers are increasingly addressing the issue of gender and women in Sikhism, this task has until recently been fulfilled by men (Kohli). The need to present Sikhism as superior to other religious traditions with regard to the position of women has also continued. This is particularly the case on the Internet: a search on Sikhism and women displays a great deal of information on the subject. What becomes quickly evident in perusing the various web sites is a continued need to present Sikhism as strikingly different in the wider spectrum of religions vis-à-vis the status of women. Other traditions are largely presented as oppressive in this respect, while Sikhism stands unique in its message of liberation for women.

Writings by Sikhs pertaining to women and Sikhism have largely remained in the realm of apologetics. This appears to stem from a seemingly fearful minority mentality, one that is needful of protection and therefore in need of fortification.
A concrete recent example has been a concern that Sikh women in the diaspora, particularly in the UK, are converting to Islam *en masse* through their romantic liaisons with Muslim men. This issue is being addressed through extensive dialogue on discussion boards and essays on the subject, warning young women to be aware of the ever encroaching threat (J. Singh).

**Women in the World Religions: An Overview**

While it has long been said that Sikhism is the “forgotten tradition” (Juergensmeyer 190–201) in the study of religion, an overview of the commonly used and recently published introductory texts in World Religions will attest to a change. Most university textbooks on the subject will either give a brief overview or devote a chapter to the study of Sikhism. The situation is markedly different when one attempts to find introductory texts on women and religion that include Sikhism. An overview indicates an almost complete lack of this topic in important texts published within a 30-year span. Simply put, there is a dearth of scholars of Sikhism and women and an apparent lack of interest in the study of Sikhism and women. The situation is even more problematic when one attempts to find information on women, inter-religious dialogue, and Sikhism. Here too, the apparent lack of interest and few textual sources have translated into a dearth of pertinent analysis of a closely related topic: Sikhism, women, and interfaith dialogue. A recent volume largely dedicated to the topic of Sikhism and religious pluralism, which resulted from a conference jointly organized by the World Congress of Faiths and Punjabi University, attests to this: while papers on Sikhism, women, and interfaith matters were presented at the conference, the published volume, *Interfaith Dialogue—Different Perspectives* (D. Singh), does not include any of these presentations. However, as the editors (Jung et al.) of the recent volume *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World’s Religions* note, this “pattern mirrors global power and accounts for the disproportionate influence or hegemony of Western sources. It is the unjust legacy of colonialism.” Certainly, this caveat must be taken seriously when I, a Western, Caucasian scholar, lament the lack of pertinent analysis on the subject at hand. The editors continue that a similar problem arises when Christian or Jewish scholars have abundant resources for their areas of research, while colleagues from non-Western traditions play the role of pioneers in their work (Jung et al. xvi–xviii). Needless to say, given the paucity of textual resources on the topic of women, Sikhism, and interfaith conversation, Sikh women who take part in the process of interfaith dialogue must be understood as precisely that—pioneers in the field. Nonetheless, I believe that there is more at play regarding the lack of resources on this topic than simply and only cultural hegemonic impulses and disproportionate power dynamics.

**Contextualizing the Interfaith Movement**

Before delving into the particular subject matter of women and the interfaith movement, it is important to state how the term ‘interfaith dialogue’ is used in this article. It is used here in the broadest sense of co-operation and engagement between individuals who are adherents of differing religious traditions. The terms
‘interfaith’ and ‘inter-religious’ are used synonymously, in line with a great number of interfaith practitioners and centres dedicated to interfaith work. There are also various streams within the interfaith movement or types of interfaith activities and dialogue. The scope of this article does not allow for an in-depth analysis of the varied meanings of inter-religious dialogue or the many forms that interfaith dialogue or engagement may take, but it is of immense importance to understand that interfaith dialogue, while historically limited to the rather elitist activity of ivory-tower academics as well as ‘official’ representatives of religious traditions, has rapidly moved beyond those echelons of society to become far more mainstream and inclusive of ‘ordinary’ citizens. Further, participants in inter-religious dialogue have until recently attempted to find points of similarity between and within the great religions as a basis for dialogue, in an attempt to erode traditional stances of competition and suspicion between adherents of the various religions. However, as Marcus Braybrooke (ch. 2) has noted, “with greater trust and knowledge, equal emphasis is given to appreciating the distinctive contribution of each faith—and the various traditions within each faith—make to human awareness of the Divine’’. Yet others have called for an approach that moves beyond simply addressing issues of similarity and difference between religions, insisting that “theologians engaged in dialogue are realizing that religion that does not address, as a primary concern, the poverty and oppression that infest our world is not authentic religion ...”(Knitter 180). Certainly, much of the interfaith movement today includes a call to action, given a litany of social problems, and in particular a realization that a global ethic is needed which includes the ecological challenge facing the whole of humanity today. In other ways, interfaith activity has come to be understood as fundamentally working for and toward peace and is thus closely linked to political and social phenomena of our time (Fowles 6–11). The bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York and the more recent bombings in the UK have opened numerous doors to increased activity in dialogue and interfaith action. Invited to give the 2003 Swathmore Lecture, Eleanor Nesbitt, Reader in Religions and Education at the University of Warwick, noted that post-9/11, “we all realized that interfaith relations had an even more urgent topicality than in previous years ... [m]ore than ever before, people all over the world now known that they are caught up in a single web” (Nesbitt 16–7).

Women, too, are taking this call to heart, insisting that the oppression of women must be viewed as part and parcel of the issues which proponents of dialogue are encountering. According to Ursula King (‘Feminism’ 48), however, while there is indeed a recent surge of interfaith writings, projects, and interventions, these end up harboring a ‘narrowness’ of actual practice when it comes to women’s inclusion:

Such narrowness is evident with regard to the marginalization, invisibility and exclusion of women, for wherever interreligious dialogue has developed, women seem to have had little part in it, at least at the official level. Proof for this is found in every single book on interfaith dialogue, religious pluralism, the theology of religions, or the ‘wider ecumenism’ of global interreligious encounter.

The reason for this is that the inclusion of women’s issues in inter-religious dialogue poses an interesting dilemma. As Maura O’Neill notes (66), “the issues
of women’s oppression and feminism have introduced the problem of the critique of religions from those within its borders. Women, in past dialogues, often come together with a common interest in liberation and in critiquing the androcentrism of their religions.” A common theme for women and dialogue is the centrality of oppression in women’s experiences within religious traditions; these traditions are therefore themselves in need of reform. As Carol Christ, co-editor of one of the earliest feminist collaborations with a focus on religion has noted (“Roundtable Discussion” 79), “I vividly remember the days when the women and religion section was a place where feminists in religion engaged in dialogue across religious boundaries. I believed that we were working together to transform and recreate religious traditions” (see also Christ and Plaskow, WomanSpirit; Weaving). For many women, this has not and does not necessarily translate into overt rejection of their religious traditions; it does however mean that women, while upholding their respective traditions, do not hesitate to name oppressive structures, attitudes, and approaches within them. This perspective entails a novel ‘way of doing’ interfaith: in interfaith conversation, women tend to focus on their lived experiences within largely patriarchal religious traditions rather than on the more traditional aspects of dogma, theology, historical development of tradition and scripture common within the wider interfaith movement. The women’s inter-religious movement has found its strength in sharing personal experiences and information; the starting point for dialogue is women’s own lives and experiences within their traditions. Because “each participant knows what it means for woman to be silenced or rendered insignificant in her own tradition, a special kind of hearing and openness in listening takes place” (Powers 5–6). In women’s shared experiences is a unique ability to engage in interfaith dialogue.

The Sikh Case

As noted earlier, there is a dearth of writings on Sikhism, women, and interfaith (Cullinane). Moreover, even when one removes the ‘interfaith’ aspect, there appears to be an impasse. By and large, writings on women in Sikhism have tended to remain in the realm of apologetics, scripture, and history. The ‘golden age’ of Sikh women during the Guru period is iterated and reiterated and scriptural passages highlighting women’s equal access to liberation along with injunctions against women’s impurity are consistently upheld. When the issue of inequality is raised, the raison d’être for such inequalities is quickly deflected to the religious milieu surrounding Sikhism. Upinder Jit Kaur notes that the discrepancies between the Sikh ideal and lived reality have everything to do with the detrimental influence of Hinduism: “The right of Sikh woman to equality with man was foreclosed by the Hindu society ... She is still a lesser person ... though her lot is comparatively better than that of women belonging to other major Indian religions” (314–5). Others continue this approach in noting that “the overwhelming Hindu and Islamic presence has over the centuries reinforced and even today continues to reinforce the patriarchal values which are difficult to break” (Kaur Singh, Feminine Principle 51).

These examples serve to show that there is an understanding of Sikhism as ultimately liberating, that equality is generally understood as being the root
experience of the religion through the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, but that the fault of the tradition’s decline into patriarchy lies with other traditions. Thus it is ‘the other’ that is the oppressor. From the perspective of interfaith dialogue, this approach is problematic. O’Neill notes that at interfaith gatherings, when the attitude of ‘blaming the other’ comes into play, dialogue has tended to break down into accusation and reproach, with participants who are and represent ‘the other’ being denigrated (80–3). It would appear then that a move from apologetics and blaming other traditions for misogynistic attitudes towards dialogical approaches has not yet taken place among Sikh scholars and writers. This attitude is also abundantly represented on the Internet. A common approach is to show the Sikh tradition as unique in the history of religions with regard to the position of women. According to one popular Sikh site,

A Sikh woman has equal rights to a Sikh man. Unlike Christianity, no post in Sikhism is reserved solely for men. Unlike Islam, a woman is not considered subordinate to a man. Sikh baptism (Amrit ceremony) is open to both sexes. The Khalsa nation is made up equally of men and women. A Sikh woman has the right to become a Granthi, Ragi, one of the Panj Pyare (5 beloved)… Christian women must change their names after marriage. The concept of maiden and married names is alien to Sikh philosophy. (Institute of Sikh Studies)

While the article makes clear its intent to present the position of women in Sikhism as superior to other traditions—in this case, Christianity, another important and equally common approach becomes evident. The article notes unequivocally that women have the right to become granthis (custodians of gurdwaras who also act as caretakers of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs), ragis (professional musicians of kirtan), and panj piares (the five beloved who administer the initiation rite), but there is no mention of the fact that women rarely, if ever, become granthis or panj piares. Moreover, in many gurdwaras, a married Sikh woman is not allowed to partake in the Amrit (initiation) ceremony, unless she is accompanied by her husband. Further, while women are encouraged to cook, clean, and wash dishes for the Sikh communal meal (langar), in many cases they are not permitted to enter the sanctorum of the temple, the special chambers where the copies of the Guru Granth Sahib are placed, known as the Sach Khand (G. Kaur). While the occasional woman may break cultural barriers and become one of the ‘beloved five’ in the local Sikh gurdwara, she will generally do so only in the company of an all-woman panj piare within the confines of the istri sabha or all-women’s gathering. However, there are sects outside mainstream Sikhism that regularly permit women to perform the duties of the panj piare and assume the role of granthi, particularly the Akhand Kirtani Jatha and the 3HO, also known as the Sikh Dharma. Perhaps more significantly, at the most sacred of Sikh shrines, the Harimandir Sahib, otherwise known as the Golden Temple, women are not included when prasad (sanctified pudding) is distributed to the panj piare, the first five individuals who are given prasad before it is distributed to the remaining participants.

The ‘Sikh Women’s Awareness Network’ (SWAN) in the UK also enthusiastically portrays the position of Sikh women as superior to that of their co-religionists, but with an interesting twist. It notes that “no area is made exempt [for any woman]. She is an integral part of the Sadh Sangat and is capable
of joining anyone in praising God, whether it be in Gurbani recitation, Naam Simran, or Kirtan (devotional singing).” (J. Singh) With regard to menstruation and notions of pollution, the author states: “Meditating on God’s name is of importance. Whether your clothes are blood stained or not (including clothes stained from menstrual blood) is not of spiritual importance. Thus, there are no restrictions placed on women during her menstruation. She is free to visit the Gurdwara, take part in prayers and do Seva” (ibid).

What is fascinating about this perspective is that recently, a highly contentious and public debate is taking place, both on-line and through the worldwide circulation of petitions, which is dealing precisely with the lack of women’s access to service in that most revered of Sikh holy space, the Harimandir Sahib (the Golden Temple). One of the issues raised by those opposed to women’s seva is women’s impurity during her menses (M. Kaur, “Remembered”). Contrary to scriptural assertions, impurities associated with menstruating women are not considered justifiable, but the lived realities of women tell them otherwise (Adi Granth 140). Yet, by and large, this is not acknowledged in writings on women and Sikhism. Instead, assertions are made that in Sikhism, as opposed to other religious traditions, menstruation is in no way tied to a lower status for women (Kaur Singh, “Refeminization” 73).

The issue of service at the Darbar Sahib in Amritsar is highly significant and is in my estimation a turning point in the history of women’s roles and status in Sikhism. A brief summary of the events is presented here. On 13th February 2003, two British amritdhari (initiated) Sikh women, law student Mejindarpal Kaur and Lakhbir Kaur, were refused the right to participate in the Sukhasan procession (the laying to rest of the Guru Granth for the night) at the Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar. They were forcefully prevented from participating by two employees of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). Mejinderpal later noted that “I had always taken my equality for granted, because my religion promised me that ...” (Pushkarna). The two women immediately lodged a complaint with the Akal Takht Jathedar and the SGPC (the institution responsible for the management of most gurdwaras in Punjab) insisting that it was their right to be part of all aspects of worship and service (seva) at the holy shrine.

On 16th February 2003, two other Sikh women, Tersem Kaur from the UK and Dr Harjit Hothi from Canada, were forcibly refused participation in the Sukhasan procession at the Harimandir Sahib. At this point, two women employees of the SGPC pushed the Sikh women visitors out of the line which was awaiting the Palki (palanquin upon which the Guru Granth is carried, covered by a canopy), thus also preventing them from participating in the Sukhasan procession. By July 2003, a new development had occurred in that women were not allowed anywhere near the Palki; instead, they were made to stand away from the walkway. While a Sikh woman watched the Palki from afar, she noted that non-Sikh men were allowed to carry the Palki, while she was barred from even coming near the palanquin (“Women’s Seva Sinks Lower”).

What has taken place in the meantime is truly remarkable. Sponsored by a number of groups, including the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere and the American Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (AGPC) as well as ‘Voices for Freedom’, a Sikh human rights organization based in Baltimore, a far-reaching mobilization effort was gaining momentum. A petition was circulated, requesting the Jathedar of the Akal Takhat, the highest seat of authority in Sikhism, to allow
women’s untrammeled access to all forms of seva at the Darbar Sahib (“Please Support”).18 ‘Voices for Freedom’ also sponsored a seminar on Sikh women’s roles and rights and many of the Sikh organizations which attended it supported the idea of forming an ‘International Sikh Women’s Forum’ to deal with the discriminatory challenges facing Sikh women (“Sikh Organizations Worldwide”).19 The topic has spurred an intense debate, position papers, rebuttals, and on-going discussions, largely on the Internet. In response, a committee was created by the Shiromani Parbandhak Gurdwara Committee (SGPC) to attend to this issue; this committee, which is mainly composed of men, could not reach a consensus on the controversial issue (Bahia). What many consider the most crucial decision-making body of the Sikhs, the Akal Takhat led by Jathedar Vedanti, remained silent on the issue of women’s seva at the Darbar Sahib.20 Vedanti then referred the complaint to the SGPC, which—he claimed—had the authority to decide on the issue (Dhaliwal; Dutt).

The issue of women’s full participation at the Golden Temple is complex. For many Sikhs in India and the diaspora, the fight for equality must be contextualized within those most central of Punjabi Sikh values: modesty and honour. Lawyer Kartar Singh Goshti stated in his representation to the SGPC that “it would be immodest for a girl and disparaging for her father, brother, or husband if she subjects herself to being pushed by men in a crowd; even if it is to shoulder the palanquin at the Golden Temple . . .” (Dutt) He added that “although there is no stricture for women to sit separately in the sanctuary sanctorum of the Golden Temple, the women do so out of modesty” (ibid). The contentious issue which was initiated by Mejinderpal Kaur and Lakhbir Kaur “presents an arrogant fight for a right and expresses motivated desire to become a pioneer of a movement by playing the media” (ibid). This view is not confined to Sikh men. Paramjit Kaur Tiwana, the principal of Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa College for Women in Amritsar, echoed Goshti’s views when she made her deposition to the SGPC:

To ask for seva rights inside the Sri Darbar Sahib is just an attempt to create chaos internationally . . . Even at home, for maintaining a healthy atmosphere, we maintain a respectable distance between father and daughter, brother and sister, mother and son, and the human instinct, known as libido in Freudian terms, is kept under control. So, when we maintain it at home, how can we violate it at a religious place? (Chandra)

Certainly, the perspectives of Goshti and Tiwana are not representative of all Sikh views in India. In a press release, the Sikh Women’s Association (SWA), an organization based in Delhi, gave its full support to the two women at the forefront of the contentious debate and promised to mobilize women to undertake seva at the Golden Temple (“SWA Press Release”). Others, however, even in the diaspora, have taken completely opposite stances to the designs of the petition, insisting that even the consideration of women joining the panj piare, a traditionally male institution, can only be understood as an absurdity, given that the original five beloveds had been men:

Do people wish to dishonour the memories of the panj piare, who heeded the call of the Guru Gobind Singh Ji? Are these people prepared
to change Bhai Sahib Daya Singh’s name to Bibi Daya Kaur? . . . I have no problem with Sikh women performing seva at the Darbar Sahib. But don’t ask us to change our religion to satisfy all your desires. Recognize what’s right and wrong. Do not make absurd demands. Will the next step be to demand that the Gurus were all women? (M. Kaur, “Myths”) 21

The Times of India also reported that respected Sikh scholars were presenting the issue as a conspiracy of non-Sikhs and political parties attempting to gain momentum and dividing the Sikh community through the heated issue. By way of proof they argued that “no local Sikh woman or organisation of Sikh women has raised the issue in recent times. In fact, they had favoured not allowing women to perform seva due to certain considerations” (Rana).

Interestingly, Mejinderpal Kaur, Lakhbir Kaur, Tersem Kaur, and Dr Harjit Hothi were not the first women to raise the apparent inequalities within the central rituals at the Harmandir Sahib. In 1996, a group of mostly women converts from the US, including Inderjit Kaur, the wife of Yogi Bhajan, arrived at the Darbar Sahib to take part in seva during Amrit Vela (pre-dawn). Although the women faced an angry mob under the watchful eye of the then Jathedar, Manjit Singh, they were allowed to wash the floors in the Golden Temple; women have traditionally been allowed to perform seva in the Temple complex, but not within the Harimandir Sahib itself (Kaur Khalsa). An edict or hukamnama was apparently issued, which included the signatures of the Jathedars of Damdama Takhat and Akal Takhat (“Original Copy”). 22 Yet according to the SGPC’s manager at the time, the SGPC had never received a hukamnama directing women’s seva at the Darbar Sahib (Walia, “Bhai Manjit”). If a hukamnama was issued, it has been ignored. Since that incident in 1996, women have never again been allowed to partake in the early morning seva within the Harimandir Sahib.

Again, it must be pointed out that those women raising the issue were largely American converts to Sikhism or at least part of the leadership of the Sikh Dharma or 3HO.

Another, separate, but in my view closely related issue was raised by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh: Sikh women’s participation in life-cycle rituals. In a moving account, Kaur Singh (“Refeminization”) recalls the events following the death of her mother: the son of the family, to whom the honour of lighting the pyre is traditionally accorded, was not present. The task was instead conferred to a man who was not a family member. Kaur Singh questions both the lack of assertion on her part in allowing a distant male to usurp the right to light the fire and the very presence of a “male-defined and male-controlled web of actions”. She points out (64–70) that the rituals that exist now are rituals of patriarchy, which have created a false consciousness. Sikh women have come to lean on male figures in their communication with the divine and to depend on father figures for their strength, instead of searching within. They do not publicly question women’s omission from Sikh rites of passage, nor do they celebrate women’s affirmation in their sacred literature.

These issues are central to the question of women’s religious rights, particularly given the apparent divide between Sikhs, especially Sikh women of the diaspora.
and Sikhs in the Punjab. Such questions are largely raised by women in the West and have been given impetus by Western Sikhs, both by the variety of converts and by those whose families originated in India. This adds considerable complexity to what appears, to advocates of Sikh religious reform in the diaspora, to be a straightforward issue of human and women’s rights. However, these and other issues about women’s rights in Sikhism clearly do not seem nearly as important to Sikh women in India (Walia, “Women’s Jatha”).

As is so often the case within the women’s movement at large, organization tends to be an issue for educated, Western-oriented, urban women. It is significant that millions of Sikh women who are not deemed worthy of seva in the Darbar Sahib have not raised their voices in protest. However, a handful of Sikh women in the West have raised this issue as unjust treatment; the fact that they are converts to Sikhism adds considerable ambiguity to the debate. There is also the question whether cultural hegemony, an issue raised earlier, may also play a role in this situation. The influences of the ‘West’ are often maligned, particularly by diaspora Sikhs attempting to uphold Punjabi Sikh values, practices, and customs in raising their children. Yet it would appear that it is precisely the Western values of equality, feminism, and postmodern responses to authority, combined with a distinctly minority-based interpretation of Sikh egalitarianism, that are driving the momentum in creating a new resistance movement and ethos within Sikhism—at least within Sikhism in the diaspora.

Moreover, it is women, although a small minority of educated, urban, Western or Westernized women, who are representing, mobilizing, and leading the movement; this is momentous, given that any attempts at reform in Sikh history were initiated and sustained by Sikh males. It does, however, raise the question of who speaks for Sikh women. While Sikh men have been the spokespersons for Sikh women in the past, is this right now being usurped by Western Sikhs who are suffused by ideologies, training, education, a mindset, and rights, which are radically different from their Sikh sisters in India? Certainly, some members of the Sikh Dharma are convinced that their increasingly close ties with Punjabi Sikhs will lead to raising the status of women among Sikhs (Singh Khalsa). Further, Gurdev Kaur, founder of the Sikh Nari Manch in the UK, insists that “today Sikh is not limited to Punjab only but the Sikhs live in all corners of the world and it is an international Qaum. When the women of Punjab have not done anything about these rights, no wonder that the women from western countries had to do something.” This development may well present a cause for concern for the millions of Sikh women who either are indifferent or reject outright the demands which this small, but powerful and highly vocal minority of Sikhs makes.

To return once again to the issue of interfaith dialogue, Sikhism, and women: significant about this issue is that the contentious refusal to allow women to partake of seva in the Golden Temple and the retelling of this issue fit squarely into the modus operandi of women’s lived realities—oppressed realities—that are at the forefront of the women’s interfaith movement. Instead of simply invoking the exalted position of Sikh women in society, as recorded in scripture and theological doctrines, these incidents attest to the strength and persistence of misogynistic attitudes towards Sikh women, especially within the most sacred place for Sikhs, the Harimandir Sahib. As a result of these occurrences, women appear to have become emboldened to question and question other instances of
patriarchal attitude and practice. The low birth rate for girls in Punjab, translated by a Sikh woman writer as blatant evidence for males being more highly valued than females and "hatred against women", has become a central issue, as has the fact that no female granthis are employed at major Sikh shrines; further, no females are to be seen offering seva through kirtan at the Harimandir Sahib (Kaar Kaur Khalsa 25). According to Carol Christ, this progression is very natural. Most criticisms "originated in an often inarticulate sense of exclusion from traditional religious practice of theology" ("Introduction" 3). Once awakened to these injustices, women "turn private pain into a systematic feminist critique of religion" (ibid). Women can then begin to examine the arguments which are given for their subordination and reject teachings that deny their full personhood.

At least a small minority of women within the Sikh community appear to have found a voice through the debilitating events at the Darbar Sahib, which for many translate far beyond the specific incident to a much larger indication of oppression within Sikh institutions. If the amount of publicity surrounding this issue is anything to go by, the movement for egalitarianism in all facets of Sikh ritual life is growing. As the realization of women's oppression in Sikh institutions and the community at large continues to grow, Sikh women may turn to their counterparts in other religious traditions and thus acknowledge their bond with those who face similar inequalities in their respective religions. From the perspective of interfaith dialogue, this process can take place while women are fully rooted and engaged in their traditions.

According to David Tracy, interfaith dialogue requires "both rootedness in a tradition and the self-transcendence of critical reflection ... all our best critical reflections are needed if the conversation is to prove a genuine conversation" (19). Self-transcendent critical reflection implies knowing where one stands within a tradition, who one is as an engaged religious individual, and also the identification of oppressive structures that stand in the way of full personhood within the tradition. Women are then enabled to criticize these repressive structures, for religions, dogmas, and ideologies cannot only be explanations of the meaning of life, but also ways ... to live according to that explanation" (ibid). The goal and purpose of dialogue with other religions are, according to Leonard Swidler, "joint action on ... concrete problems" (16–7). These 'problems' must include any aspect of religion and its practices that are oppressive to women.

O'Neill suggests that two important questions need to be asked of women in interfaith dialogue: how has a participant's religion aided in the development of women's identity and how has that religion hindered or constrained women's growth and personhood? (98–9). Given that most religious traditions contain elements that sustain women, nurture women, and move women into greater and deeper spiritual truths and actions, it is important to give voice to these positive elements and share them with others. Sharing experiences of oppression by patriarchal structures or practices can bring women together with others who have also struggled to bring about change within their traditions. At the same time, dialogue within this framework also allows for knowledge about, inspiration from, and face-to-face engagement with 'the other'. Asking these questions in dialogue with other women leads to an understanding that their traditions as well as other religions can act both as emancipatory and oppressive forces (ibid).
Post-script: The ‘Seva, Panj Piare, Sukhasan Ceremony’ Controversy

Since the submission of this article, fascinating developments have occurred: on 8th August 2005, following the decision of the SGPC’s advisory committee (the Dharma Parchar Committee), SGPC’s President Jagir Kaur announced that women would now be permitted to do Kirtan and Sukhasan seva at the Darbar Sahib (“SGPC Permits”). A report notes that “unofficial reports say that the SGPC rules and regulations for women hazuri ragis may be finalized as early as next month. Arrangements are also in the works for women’s Sukhasan seva” (Byala). Opinions and reactions to the announcement were swift. Perhaps most indicative of the arising difficulties in implementing these changes was the protest which erupted from the Damdami Taksal, by both its current and former Jathedars, particularly with regard to women becoming panj piare at the Darbar Sahib. Bhai Ranjit Singh, the former Jathedar of Damdami Taksal, vowed that “Panthic organizations would physically remove” Joginder Singh Vedanti from his position of Jathedar of the Akal Takhat, if these changes were carried out. Further, Ranjit Singh insisted that “the decision to allow Sikh women to perform ‘kirtan’ from the sanctum sanctorum of Harmandar Sahib should be taken only after taking entire Sikh Panth into confidence’.” Another former Jathedar of the Akal Takhat insisted that there was no historical precedence of women performing kirtan from the Darbar Sahib (Walia, “SGPC Move”). In light of the controversy it would appear that the Jathedar of the Akal Takhat is also back-peddling on the issue. Jathedar Vedanti recently insisted that more discussions were needed before a final decision could be made (ibid).

The controversy is thus far from being resolved. The current debate has as much to say about deeply held beliefs, practices, and ritual development surrounding Sikh women as it has about the notion of authority in Sikhism. This issue revolves around a contest for authority between representatives of the Akal Takhat, the SGPC, and the Damdami Taksal. Clearly, the debate warrants a good deal of analysis as it continues to unfold.

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NOTES


2. The most substantial web site on women in Sikhism is SikhWomen.com. See also Gateway to Sikhism (www.allabout sikhs.com). Recent women-focused web sites from the UK include ‘Sovereign Khalsa’ (http://www.sovereign-khalsa.org.uk/) and Bibi Gurdev Kaur’s Sikh Narimanch site (http://www.sikhnarimanch.com/). The major Sikh Dharma web site is SikhNet.com (http://www.sikhnet.com/) which also has a substantial focus on Sikhism and women.

4. The following volumes include women and Sikhism: Sharma, *Women in Indian Religions*; Bose, *Faces of the Feminine*; Thottakara, *Women and Worship*; Sharma, *Religion and Women*; Holm and Bowker, *Women in Religion*; Chatterji, *The Authority of the Religions*. Both volumes edited by Sharma include the same essay on Sikhism by Rajkumari Shankar. While the above list is by no means exhaustive, it does give an insight into the paucity of sources on popular texts on women and religion.

5. The following volumes focus on religious dialogue and women. Sikhism as subject matter is not included in these texts. Cooey et al., *After Patriarchy*; O'Neill, *Women Speaking, Women Listening*; Mollenkott, *Women of Faith in Dialogue*. Again, this list is by not exhaustive, but offers a glimpse into the position of studies on women, Sikhism, and interreligious dialogue.

6. In 1998, the National Film Board of Canada filmed a ground-breaking two-part series of interfaith encounters between women of all the major religious traditions, particularly academics from a variety of religious backgrounds in Canada and the US. While a number of identifiable religious collectivities, including Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist women and/or scholars of these traditions, took part in the round-table discussions, Sikh women did not. See *The Faithful Women Series: Gathering Together*, National Film Board of Canada, 1991.

7. One such organization is the Multi-Faith Centre in Derby, UK (see Weller, especially the chapter on “Inter-Faith Activity in the UK”). I do not use the term ‘multi-faith’, given that various groups define ‘faith’ in different ways. The Religious Tolerance web site is also in agreement with using interfaith and inter-religious synonymously (see http://www.religioustolerance.org/gl_i.htm). The term ‘intra-faith’ is used to distinguish a variety of perspectives within specific religious traditions.

8. According to a well developed interfaith site based in the UK (http://www.multifaithnet.org/), motives for interfaith activity include:
   - a means towards social harmony of friendship
   - a means to secure greater social and religious acceptance
   - an obligation to one’s own religion
   - a desire to share the riches of one’s own tradition with others
   - the importance of better understanding of other religious traditions
   - a hope for closer growth together of the religions

   Interfaith activity or dialogue includes:
   - individual or ‘representative’ of traditions that are participating
   - activity that is specifically oriented toward social and political issues
   - activity that is focused on meditation or prayer
   - bi-lateral, tri-lateral, multi-lateral
   - at local levels, organizations that are known specifically as ‘councils’ or ‘groups’ devoted to interfaith

   This list is not exhaustive, but it points to the variations in what may be defined as ‘interfaith’ activity or dialogue. See introduction at http://www.multifaithnet.org/religions/interfaith/index.asp

9. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, a non-partisan ‘fact tank’ that provides information on attitudes and ideas and changes shaping primarily the US, but also countries across the world insists that “the weeks and months after September 11th saw understanding and generosity growing through interfaith services and shared dialogue …” (see http://pewforum.org/religion-9-11/). With regard to the recent bombings in the UK, the Pluralism Project at Harvard University has set up a data base tracking the variety of groups, including those involved in interfaith dialogue that have come together in united condemnation.

10. As noted earlier, the notion of interfaith dialogue goes beyond its theoretical components. It includes praxis, an aspect many would consider pivotal to the interfaith movement. The Sikh women’s group Sikh Nari Manch, which is based in Birmingham, UK, is actively involved in interfaith activities. It has, alongside its primary focus of providing services for Sikh women and Sikh families, made considerable headway into providing social services—through donations—to the wider Birmingham population. It also attempts to create a centre for women of all faiths. In its focus and praxis, the Sikh Nari Manch is very much in line with the notion of ‘peace-building’.

11. Kaur Singh’s work on Sikh scripture and the feminine remains the most important work in the rewriting of patriarchal interpretations and translation of scripture (see also Kaur Singh, Name of my Beloved).

12. For an alternative reading of the message of the Sikh gurus pertaining to women and the status of women throughout the development of the Sikh tradition, see Jakobsh, (especially ch. 2, “The Development of the Early Sikh Tradition”).

13. The term granthi is used here as delineated in the Historical Dictionary of Sikhism (McLeod 89).

14. According to another interesting on-line discussion on the issue of women and seva at the Golden Temple, one participant noted: “If this problem only occurred at the Darbar Sahib it could be explained as you do, but the truth is that it is pervasive in Gurdwaras. Women do not normally read the hukam, or recite Ardas in most all [sic] of the Gurdwaras that I have attended in the larger Sikh communities in the US and Canada. I cannot personally speak for communities elsewhere, but the acceptance of this by the punjabi communities that I have witnessed leads me to believe that it is the norm world wide.” (SikhNet Discussion Forum)

15. In the past decade, at the opening ceremony of a gurdwara in London, UK, five male and five female panj piare were appointed to lead the procession into the main congregational hall. This led to a serious controversy over the appointment of women in this revered position; many Sikhs taking part in the celebrations questioned women’s inclusion in the appointment of the panj piare. As noted by Seva Singh Kalsi of the University of Leeds, commenting on the lack of a universally accepted authoritative voice and institution in the Sikh diaspora, the move toward a more egalitarian praxis simply led to more confusion within the Sikh community in London.

16. See Gurdev Kaur, “Role of Sikh Women in the 21st Century.” A posting on the discussion of women and seva at the Harimandir Sahib noted: “I remember during my last visit to the Harmandir Sahib in 1999 (for the Anandpur celebrations) … myself and my wife were in Darbar Sahib for Asa Di Var. They started to give out the ‘Panj Piare’ parshad which they give to the first five people. Me, my wife and a few others were at the front so we raised our hands to receive parshad. They gave me … but would not give parshad to my wife because she is a woman. I then took half of my parshad and gave [it] to my wife. The sevadhar and person next to me starting getting angry saying that ‘you can’t do this …’. The person next to me argued that ‘only men were panj … so my wife could not get the parshad’. I argued further that there is no gender in Khalsa … and that this practice was wrong. They didn’t seem to understand.” (SikhNet Discussion Forum)

17. See also “A Dutch Tourist at Amritsar” which recounts the experiences of a non-Sikh tourist who was allowed to carry the Palki at the Darbar Sahib. Interestingly, while non-Sikhs can join the procession, it is increasingly stipulated that only amritdhari Sikh women be allowed to perform the same seva, thus effectively barring non-amritdhari women from these privileges. It would appear that men are not subject to the these stipulations.

18. There is some variance in the way Sikhs view the authority of the Akal Takhat. There are five takhuts or ‘thrones of authority’ in Sikhism. Historically, the Akal Takhat moved to a place of pre-eminence, due to its location as the meeting place of the Sarbat Khalsa since the eighteenth century.
19. The seminar was entitled “Role and Advocacy of Women in Sikhi: Challenges Ahead and the Solutions to those Challenges in the 21st Century” and was held on 3rd May 2003 in Baltimore, Maryland.

20. See previous footnote regarding the issue of pre-eminence of the Akal Takhat, which thus includes the pre-eminence of the Jathedar of the Akal Takhat.


22. Issuing hukamnamas (edicts) is a matter of intense debate within Sikh circles. The premier spokesperson for the Akal Takhat, the Jathedar of the Akal Takhat, holds that hukamnamas can only be issued from the Akal Takhat. Jathedars of other Takhats have, however, also issued such edicts.

23. Jagir Kaur, SGPC’s President 1999–2000 and again from 2004, has noted that, while she had encouraged women to perform kirtan inside the Golden Temple, none had come forward to do so.

24. This includes the Singh Sabha movement as well as Nirankari and Namdhari reform movements.

25. Ek Ong Kaar Kaur Khalsa is the SikhNet Communications Director.

REFERENCES


