

The Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya: A Socio-Historical Study

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Unlike other traditions, the indigenous education systems of the Sikhs did not disapprove of women's literacy. Consequently, the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya became a landmark institution of late nineteenth-century Punjab. With the efforts of its founder, Takht Singh, and support coming from his wife, Harnam Kaur, what started in the local *gurdwara* of Ferozepur grew into an acclaimed girls' school in subsequent decades. Women were educated to actively contribute to the religious sphere and serve as an important link between the family and larger society. In the process, Sikh women consciously or unconsciously nurtured their own aspirations of contributing beyond the domestic to the reach the public realm. This paper throws light on some of these hitherto unexplored dimensions related to Sikh women's education.

Introduction

The Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya ("Sikh Girls College," hereafter SKM) situated in Ferozepur city was a renowned educational institution in the early 20th century. Based on historical records and interviews with key figures associated with this institution, the paper begins with the socio-educational context of the origins of SKM, and then goes on to focus on its phases of establishment (1892-1920) and expansion (1921-1947). In a brief conclusion, I discuss how its alumnae explored the interrelations between gender, education and the process of social reform (for the model of discussion, see Maskiell, 1984).

The Context

In the nineteenth century, several girls' schools were established by organizations

such as Christian missions, Dev Samaj, Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharm Sabha. The Arya Samaj orphanage (1878) in Ferozepur included a middle school for girls along with a boarding house (Kaur 1969: 14). Established in 1892, the SKM was among the first girls' school of the district. It started as a *gurdwara* school, turned into a middle school, a high school, and expanded to become an acclaimed institution in the early twentieth century (Sharma 1983: 358).

The SKM emerged as a consequence of the changes that came to the Punjab after the coming of the British. Sikh women were seen as crucial in propagating a true or pure Sikh identity. Takht Singh (1870-1937), the founder, was acutely aware of how women as role models could act as catalysts in moral amelioration of the Sikh community. Started on November 4, 1892 under the aegis of Ferozepur Singh Sabha, it was initially referred to as Kanya Pathshala (Girls' School, [Panaich 1931: 72]). The institution aimed to nurture its students to become good wives (*achchi supatniyan*) and well-mannered mothers (*nek ate uttam svabhav vali maavan*) (*Khalsa Advocate* 1907: 5).

In September 1900, Takht Singh separated the school from the Singh Sabha and became the caretaker and manager of this school. Separation of the school from Singh Sabha was an important event in its history (Karam Singh, 1907). Another landmark was the decision to open a boarding house for girls in 1904 (Singh 1907: 40). Harnam Kaur (1882-1906), Takhat Singh's wife, felt the need of a boarding house to accommodate girl students from distant places within Indian sub-continent and from foreign countries (*SKM* 1911: 2; Singh 2003: 62). She advertised in *Khalsa Samachar* to publicize this boarding house, where the boarders and warden "lived like a family," and learned religious education, household tasks and handicrafts (Singh 1908: 49-50).

In 1901, Takht Singh established a library in the name of Ditt Singh (d. 1901), a Sikh polemicist of that period. It eventually developed a large collection of books related to Sikh history (*SKM Admission prospectus*, 5; Singh 1936: 7). Kahan Singh Nabha, a Sikh scholar, also made use of this library for writing books on Sikh history (Kang 1996: 51). He used to donate the royalty earned from books to this school (Singh 2003: 138-139). Takht Singh wanted this library to expand to serve Sikhs keen to write on Sikh history, especially on Sikh culture, religion and philosophy. He accorded importance to the documentation of the Sikh community's history (Kang 1996: 9-10). In 1937, this library had 4000 books related to Sikh history. The number of books in this library subsequently arose to 5000 (Kang 1996: 9-10).

Takht Singh was born in Ferozepur in a Kuka Sikh family around 1870. He was the son of Deva Singh, a Nihang, who had fought in both the Anglo-Sikh wars (1845-46 and 1848-49) (Singh 2004: 302). He believed that educating girls was beneficial for the family and the larger community while boys' education influenced only an individual life (Caveeshar 1997: 109; Kang 1996: 8).

This inspiration came to Takht Singh while he was studying at the Oriental College, Lahore. In 1888, he qualified for *Vidvanti* course acquiring second position in Punjab, and decided to dedicate his life to educating girls and transforming them from *abla* to *sabla* (Kang 1996: 18-19). He served SKM for forty-five years until his death in 1937. Though it propagated Sikh religious education, the school was open to girls from all communities. The British Harnam Kaur was born in a Siddhu Jat family of Chand Purana, a village in Ferozepur district (Singh 2001: 257). Daughter of an Udasi (detached) Saint Bhagwan Das and Ram Dei, she came to Ferozepur along with her father. Government in 1916 conferred the title of "living martyr" (*zinda shahid*) on Takht Singh for his dedication to female education.

Harnam Kaur, was also acknowledged for her contribution in promoting girls' education (Singh 1936: 1). She was literate in both Gurmukhi and Devanagari (Singh 2003: 53). She was well-versed in *Panj Granthi*, *Das Granthi*, and *Hanuman Natak* before turning six years old. In the village of Daudhar (Faridkot District), she received instruction from Bhai Dula Singh (Singh 2001: 257). Her alliance with Takht Singh helped in further strengthening the foundation of girls' education and brought a new lease of life to the school. A popular song then was girls are pampered, wilful and to be protected, nevertheless girls should be educated! (*Ladiyan, dithiyan, bhaliyan re, kurhiyan parhan valiyan re* [Singh 1907: 37]). Harnam Kaur served the SKM till her death in 1906 (Kang 1996: 26).

Harnam Kaur realized that compared to other communities, Sikh girls had not progressed in education (PB: April 1909). Her ideas on girls' education seem radical when compared to her times. In 1906, Harnam Kaur, in a letter to Uttam Kaur, whose parents discontinued her schooling, asserted, "if you were my daughter, I would not have hesitated to send you even to America for studies" (Sandhu 2014: 95). Harnam Kaur had wanted to bring out a newspaper dedicated to women's education which those in remote areas could also access (Singh 1907: 39-40). However, Ditt Singh suggested that it would be a difficult endeavor since women did not even realize the importance of reading a newspaper. He was facing financial problems in publishing the *Khalsa Akhbar* from Lahore so he discouraged it. Thus, the proposal was discarded and the founders focused on the

development of the school instead (Singh 1907: 40). In 1907, the school started a magazine *Panjabi Bhain* (Punjabi sister), published in Gurmukhi, which dealt with issues related to reform of women. Various articles on the significance of women's education in this journal played an important role in motivating parents to allow girls to study (PB: April 1914).

The Students

The SKM began in early 1892 with just five girls, but the number reached thirty by March 1893 (Singh 1907: 33). In the subsequent decade and half, its area of influence expanded and some girls from Burma also joined it. Students included Sikhs, Hindu, and Muslim girls. In 1909, the school had one hundred and thirty-eight girls, of which twenty-five were married (PB, April 1909).

The SKM managed by Takht Singh is very popular and has been doing a lot of useful work in spreading the women's education. The number of boarders amounts to 300. It is practically a boarding school. It has an excellent school building that is not complete as yet and on it about 0.15 million rupees have already been spent. The Boarding house also has a nice building. (1911: 254-255, cited in Kaur 1969: 15).

The Punjabi correspondent of the *Bengalee* reported "among the institutions which have risen to the public attention and success, the Sikh Girls' school of Ferozepore stands perhaps the highest. It has no less than five hundred girl boarders, drawn from all parts of India" (*The Khalsa Advocate*, September 9, 1916). The staff of the SKM was so dedicated that it made this institution comparable to the Khalsa College, Amritsar, the premier institution of the Sikhs (Singh 1907: 65).

Takht Singh was the manager of the school, with 45 staff members. Of these, 19 were teachers, including 11 male and 8 female teachers. There were 3 clerks, 4 musicians, 7 preachers, and a doctor. Eleven other staff members did unskilled tasks. The school property then was "valued at about rupees two lakhs" (Kang 1996: 8; PB: January 1933).

By 1916, the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya was a prominent institution imparting girls' education to students from various parts of India (Singh, 1943). The SKM grew in popularity and those living in distant lands sent their daughters to gain education (SKM 1911: 9). The boarders belonged to various regions of Punjab, Kashmir, United Provinces, Sindh, Central Provinces, Itawah, Gujrat and North-Western Frontier Province (Malakand). Some came from Sikh families that lived in Nepal, Burma, Africa, Kabul, Canton, Malaya, Thailand, China, Hong

Kong, Gilgit, among others (*PB*, April 1909; June-July 1910; June 1913). Nearly seventy percent of the students were boarders. In 1907, the school strength was 162 students, which included 115 boarders. There were 27 Hindus and 135 Sikh students (Shivdayal, *SKM Prashansa Patra*, 25).

The boarding house of the school was unique in terms of student composition. It had four categories of students:

- those whose expenditure was borne by their parents
- orphans and child widows whose expenditure was borne by the school
- poor and deprived girls whose parents were unable to bear such expenditure
- some middle class girls part of whose expenditure was given by their parents and the remaining amount was raised by the School.

In the January 1933 issue of *Panjabi Bhain* an appeal was made to subscribers to send woolen clothes for orphan and poor girls of the boarding house (Kang 1996: 8; *PB* January 1933). The table 1 below shows 34.7 per cent girls were fully dependent and 21.4 per cent were partially dependent on the school administration for their subsistence. Only one-third of the boarders deposited money for mess and other expenditures. Some orphanages admitted girls at the SKM to enable them to pursue education. Students from Patiala came from Rajinder Pratap's orphanage, which provided expenses for subsistence (*SKM Prashansa Patra*: 23, 24; Panaich: 66-67). A few girls from the Chief Khalsa Diwan's orphanage were admitted and the School took responsibility of maintaining them (Interview, Alumna, 2010).

Table 1: Distribution of Boarders According to the Four Categories

Year	Total	Category I	Categories II and III	Category IV
1907	121	53 (43.8 percent)	42 (34.7 percent)	26 (21.4 percent)

Source: School Documents

Various case studies were frequently mentioned in the *Panjabi Bhain* to encourage the Sikh community to promote girls' education. It was highlighted that the progress of Europe began with the growth of women's education. These articles cited exemplars of successful boarding houses (*ashrams*) across the world. In England, Barnardo Home was treated as an ideal to emulate.

The SKM was often referred to as "Ferozepore ashram" in the newspaper articles of the *Khalsa Akhbar* and in the school journal *Panjabi Bhain*. Another

popular phrase used for the school was “Barnardo’s Home.” The Barnardo Home of London had two thousand four hundred and twelve students, mostly orphans (<http://infed.org>). It was not just a school but also a home to many neglected girls. Many girls rescued from the streets were provided a home along with a learning environment (Kang 1996: 85). Vaid (1910) drew similarities between the SKM and the Barnardo Home of London. The Sikh community was encouraged to generously fund institutions of common welfare by citing instances of Barnardo Home. In 1910, when it required funds, people immediately responded (*PB*, December 1912).

According to Bhatia, an alumna (1942), ten to fifteen orphan girls of Chief Khalsa Diwan’s Amritsar orphanage studied and resided free of cost in the boarding house (Interview, 2010). Nearly more than half of boarders were from deprived backgrounds. These included women with children, girls over twenty, widows of more than forty years and infants below three. No fee for school or boarding was taken from them (SKM 1911:6). Student enrolment increased with the intake of orphans (Singh 1937: 102; SKM 1911: 3-4). If Takht Singh and Harnam Kaur got to know about any orphan girl in need of support, they brought her to this School (boarding house). They also adopted quite a few orphan girls. For instance, they read about a neglected four and a half months old orphan girl in Bareilly in a magazine, and Harnam Kaur adopted her (Singh 1908: 50-54). Thus, this institution took responsibility of orphan girls in the pre-independence period and tried to sponsor their education (manager SKM 1913).

Various sections of the society admitted daughters to study in the SKM. They included modern professionals like civil surgeons, engineers, doctors, contractor, schoolmasters, railway officials, superintendent jail, editors, police inspector, sub-registrar, lawyers, tutors of princes, forest rangers, among others. Additionally, landlords, moneylenders and shopkeepers also sent daughters to this school. The caste of students then was quite a sensitive issue. On being asked about that, the founder refused to share any details since he believed that it would adversely affect the Sikh community. Sweeper as a category appeared amongst occupations of parents. The founders were social reformers who were anti-caste and admitted girls from across different sections of the society (*PB*: April 1909).

The activities of the SKM expanded over the years. English education was seen as crucial to pursue higher education. In 1902, English classes for girls were begun at the primary stage and in 1906 at the middle stage. A male teacher Kahn Singh was found with great difficulty to teach English. All girls were asked to seek written permission from their parents to learn English to avoid any sort of

resistance to the learning of a foreign language (Singh 1907). Conscientious teachers of ideal and chaste character (*uchche ate suchche achrn vale*) were chosen for its transaction so that girls could gain fluency in this language without becoming “fashionable” (PB: April 1917; SKM 1911: 2). The Government Report of 1906 and 1907 applauded Takht Singh for dissemination of education among women in Punjab (Panaich: 64-65).

In 1908, the school got affiliated to the Punjab University (SKM Admission Prospectus, 1950). Teacher training classes were also started. The beginning year of teacher training classes could not be ascertained in the documents. These classes facilitated basic literacy skills among girls in tandem with a religious orientation. They became skillful in *Gurmat* education (Singh 1931: 79-80). Special Gurmukhi classes provided adult education to average girls. Those girls sought admission in junior training classes who had qualified standard V. In middle training classes were those who had passed VIII standard. This course was for two years. Some students also received scholarships. The Department of Education held examinations and students got certificates. Teacher-education was viewed as a welcome initiative to train female teachers and reduce their deficit in the schools. As school teachers, they were able to earn a good remuneration (Editorial, “Training class,” PB: February 1920). The SKM was a High school and alongside focused on teacher-training.

The original site of the school was inadequate to address requirements of the students. In order to construct a new building, the founders travelled abroad to gather funds. In 1911, a team from the SKM, led by Takht Singh and Agya Kaur, (an alumna of the school, who married Takht Singh four years after Harnam Kaur’s death), left for thirteen-month long visit to the South-East Asian countries like Burma, Malaya, China, Singapore and Japan on 16 February to collect funds for the new school building (Singh 1936: 3; SKM 1943: 1-2). They recited holy hymns, did *kirtan* (congregational singing) and made fervent appeals for donations at Sikh gatherings and *divans* (religious meetings) in the Gurdwaras of the countries mentioned above (Singh 2002: 18; telephone interview with Amarjit Singh, the family of Takht Singh, 2010). This team returned on March 3, 1912 and soon the new building was erected outside Amritsari gate.

However, not everyone was convinced of the new location for the school. Bhagat Lakshman Singh (1863-1944) criticized the location of the SKM, which he visited sometime around 1916 and 1918. He asserted how surrounding filth adversely affected the health of the students.

.... the building of the Vidyala looked like a small isle in a sea of sewage waters. The vain and pallid look of the scholars startled me.... I wonder if the attention of my esteemed friend Bhai Takht Singh, the founder of the Vidyala has ever been drawn towards his wrong choice of the site on which the building of his great institution stands...It is impossible to suppose that he ever imagined that the nauseating sewage vapours would work havoc on the health of poor scholars from day-to-day. (Singh 1965: 223-225)

In 1920, the impetus for girls' education increased and girls' schools opened at various places. The SKM was "central point" in strengthening of the Sikh community ("Louis Dane's address," *PB*: January 1911). The school not only educated girls, trained teachers but also played an important role in the maintenance of Sikh girls' schools in the region. It celebrated news of establishment of girls' schools (*PB*: August 1908). Harnam Kaur indirectly assisted the setting up of Guru Nanak Kanya Pathshala at Quetta. This girls' school encouraged education among Sikhs settled in Baluchistan. However, resistance to send girls to schools was then a major hurdle. To overcome this, the manager of the school suggested the introduction of stipends for girls, which would act as a motivating factor for parents to enroll girls. This also, it suggested, would curtail girls going to madrasa to gain education (*PB*: August 1908).

According to the editorial team of the *Panjabi Bhain* "of the stream called the SKM, various rivulets flowed which were like its branches. Its students illuminated the light of education in various regions of the Indian sub-continent." The Sikh Kanya Pathshala at Chuniya (Lahore) hailed its association with this School (*PB*: August 1908). The SKM often had scarce financial resources yet continued to extend monetary assistance to various girls' schools. For instance, the Sikh Kanya Pathshala at Batala was about to be closed down due to shortage of funds until it was assisted by the SKM. The Ditt Singh Kanya Pathshala at Ropar also received assistance in many ways (*PB*: September 1910).

The financial position of the SKM was dependent on grants from the royal families, non-resident Sikhs staying abroad, sale of books from the School counter and on other contributions from the larger Sikh community (*PB*: October 1913). The school was functioning because of the philanthropy shown by various sections of the community. Various Sikh princely states like Patiala, Jind, Nabha, Kapurthala, Faridkot and Kalsia were generous in extending donations (*PB*: December 1916).

Scarcity of funds however remained a perpetual problem. Caveeshar (1973) notes that according to Takht Singh, the expenditure was often beyond receipts

and it became difficult to pay salaries to the staff, which often got delayed. Two main reasons for underfunding was lack of a fixed grant and absence of fees levied on students. Most Sikh students belonged to economically weak backgrounds and were not able to afford education. Thus, the school avoided introducing fee fearing that it might hinder enrolment of students. Takht Singh struggled hard to sustain this school. He and his wife faced various challenges yet were caring towards students. To illustrate, it is believed that 'Takht Singh washed clothes and his wife mended the ragged clothes of the students' (Singh 1915: 55-56). The Government grant imposed various restrictions on the School. The appointment of special staff along with other infrastructural requirements proved burdensome hence was not accepted. Help extended by the princely states reduced public subscriptions because of public perception that what was provided was enough though that was not always the case (Caveeshar 1973: 104).

Appeals were made to the Sikh community to contribute by either bearing the cost of education and residence of orphan students; or through sale of published booklets of the SKM; by contributing for a day's *langar* which was thirty-five rupees or in kind through grains; by donating money to the school on any family occasion like marriage; getting a memorial stone inlaid in the classrooms for rupees five hundred; taking a resolution that one would collect rupees hundred or thousand for the institution and then on the fulfilment of it get a stone laid in the School to remind the community of one's work (Caveeshar 1973).

Many articles were published motivating the Sikh community to donate generously for the school and the boarding house, as mentioned already. Various contributions of this school were highlighted like training of teachers, quality of education transacted and socialization of ideal Sikh girls (SKM: *PB Samachar*). Agya Kaur, encouraged students to get funds for the school. Many students responded positively (*PB*: April 1914). In 1912, a reference is made to how students collected rupees five thousand for the school (*PB*: July 1912).

Harnam Kaur had dedicated her life to the school. The *Khalsa Advocate* stated that she along with her husband and three children lived on a basic subsistence of rupees fourteen a month. It is mentioned that "the girls of boarding house disliked going back to their native villages, which for them was more like living in a cage" (Singh 1907 and Singh 1908; *Khalsa Samachar* 1906, October 6, Saturday: 3). In an article entitled "Bibi please don't go" (*Bibi Tussi na jao*) (*Khalsa Samachar* 1906 October 6, p. 3), the SKM students expressed grief over the death of Harnam Kaur. They realized her importance since she lived with them, read out books to them

and took their examinations, stitched their bags, taught them how to cook and play musical instruments, gave discourses on religion and also reaffirmed their faith in God. Harnam Kaur conducted “religious ladies’ associations” (*satsang*). The Guru Granth Sahib was discussed along with similar instructive tracts and books (Singh 1936: 2). The *Khalsa Samchar* (1906) reported on the gloom that surrounded the SKM after her demise. In an article, “Our shattered hopes” (*Sadhi Umedan par paani*), her contribution in the field of girls’ education was highlighted. It said “...cherish that life which provided education to many girls...that is called *Sikhi* (Sikh faith) in which followers of other religions and beliefs appreciate life as well as death of an individual.” Agya Kaur then nurtured the School for eight years but she passed away in 1918. On her death, the *Khalsa Advocate* (1918 October 29: 1) said that “Agya Kaur’s death was a community loss to be mourned.” The *Khalsa Samachar* recollected how “she showed enthusiasm in uplifting downtrodden women folk.” She delivered lectures in various Sikh conferences encouraging the Sikh community to promote girls’ education thus favoring women’s welfare (1918 October 31: 2).

SKM Curriculum 1916

In the early years, education was transacted in an informal mode. The focus was on nurturing girls to learn aspects essential to the religious domain as well as those that were crucial to efficiently lead daily lives. Singh notes that Harnam Kaur chalked out the curriculum suitable for girls and “of a nature calculated to fit the pupil to be a good housewife in addition to being a cultured companion to her husband and a useful member of the Church as well as society in general” (Singh 1912: 20).

A scheme of studies was prepared on the guidelines suggested by Takht Singh. It was altered several times before being accepted. All students took examinations on the basis of which they were divided into five standards (SKM 1911: 5-6). The 1916 curriculum tried to combine tradition and modernity (Manchanda 2014: 136, 129). Texts like *Sundri* by Vir Singh *Nakli Sikh Parbodh* by Ditt Singh, *Saruktawali* by Pratap Singh (which discussed the relevance of religion in leading a pious Sikh life), *Sundran Puran* by Bhagat Bakshi ji etc. were a part of the syllabus. From the third standard books were on themes like on how to become a perfect wife, acquire good conduct, and stay healthy (*Sushila*, *Ghor Sowar*, *Arogay Namwali*, *Sughar Bibi*). Aspects related to women’s medicine,

nursing of people with ill health and administration of first aid to the wounded, among others were also taught. Science was taught through innovative methods using concrete material. Geography was introduced early at the second lower primary stage. History was taught from middle standard onwards upto the Mughal period later till Warren Hastings, and finally history of India. Domestic economy comprising needle-work was taught in 1st standard itself (SKM curriculum 1916). During the First World War, the SKM students stitched seven thousand clothes for the Lady O' Dwyer's Punjab Comforts' Fund (SKM 1943: 5). They also participated in a national exhibition of handicrafts held at Lahore in 1909 and won first prize (PB: 1909). Physical exercises like swinging and rope-skipping, dumbles (standard IV), tug of war (standard V) were also included in the curriculum.

Simultaneously, English was taught from IV standard onwards (PB: April 1917). Reading and writing skills, spelling and dictation, easy written composition, conversation, recitation and grammar were taught at the primary stage. Translation skills from English to vernacular and vice-versa were developed at the middle stage. The course was designed to prepare students to pursue English at the University level later.

According to the Government scheme of studies, at the primary level only one local language was to be taught. However, at the SKM, Gurmukhi, Hindi and English were taught (Shivdayal, SKM: 26). Punjabi was the medium of instruction. It was taught from first standard onwards honing both reading and writing skills. Dictation, letter-writing, grammar, paraphrasing and composition, essay-writing in Punjabi was done. Hindi was taught third lower primary onwards till the middle stage while Arithmetic was taught first standard onwards (SKM 26).

Thus, in the early years, both religious and secular education was taught at this School. However, in 1909 when Attar Singh, a Sikh social reformer, interacted with the students and realized that in the religious sphere they knew much more than what he expected (Singh 2002: 212-214). They knew the *Nitnem* (*Japuji*, *Jap*, *Tav-prasad Savaiyye*, *Chaupai* and *Anand*) and recited *Rahiras* in their daily schedule in the evening. Before sleeping, they recited *Kirtan Sohila* and five *Shabads*. He highlighted that, like Sikh men, Sikh women also could undergo the nectar of the double-edged sword (*khande di pahul*), imbibe *Rahit Maryada* to the full, and propagate the religion and its doctrines amongst the larger community. Sikh women and men could become partners in this mission of expanding the Guru's family. Not only this, the institution was expected to continue its contribution in modelling such women who could further such enterprise. The mission of *khande*

di pahul was to be promoted with vitality. The woman author of this article in *Panjabi Bhain* laments that till then the Sikh community had ignored women's participation in this exercise (*PB*, July 1909). In 1907, the Director of Public Instruction critiqued the emphasis assigned to religious education since at times it led to the neglect of other academic disciplines. According to him, "religious education is mostly given orally... the transacted scheme of studies is extensive and lengthy such that if it is followed then fulfilling requirements for other subjects appears to become difficult" (*SKM, Prashansa Patra*: 26).

A few alumnae of the school reported that some Hindu and Muslim girls also gained education in SKM. It seems all had freedom to study their own religious texts. Muslim girls recited the Holy *Quran*, Hindus read the *Ramayana* and Sikhs the *Guru Granth*. Many Muslims who lived in areas adjacent to the school from Kasuri gate to Balochan Basti near Amritsari gate sent daughters to gain education here. Some Muslim students in reverence embroidered new scarves (*rumala*) for the holy book *Guru Granth* (Interview, Kaur, 2010).

The ideal of "moral woman" was underlined for the community to gain a superior position within Indian society (Mohan 2007: 79). The purpose of education was to serve myriad goals. Education was also to assist in acquiring qualities that would be admired after her marriage. It was like "an ornament that even parents wanted to see their daughter adorned with" (*PB*, May 1912). The Punjabi proverb "girls with good qualities reside happily at their in-laws' place" (*jo gun hove pale vasan sauhre*) was quoted (*PB*: April 1914). "Like a pious wife, girls were expected to educate children and advice relatives" (*PB*, March 1912). Notes from the log-book of the School recorded the visit of Mohan Singh Vaid in 1910. On seeing photographs of famous men displayed in the School hall, he appears to have commented that pictures of "cultured, chaste and *pativrata* women" also be displayed to inspire girls.

...in front of girl students photographs of good natured and pious women look better... photographs of women who are chaste, well-natured, pious like Saraswati, Savitri, Draupadi, Mata Gujri should be displayed. Mohan Singh Vaid appreciated students' progress in English. He suggested that students be given books related to women's education to read. He committed to regularly mail literature related to women's education, including monthly magazines like *Stri dharam Sikhyak*, *Grah Laxmi*, *Laxmi Bhandar*, *Stri Prabodhini*, *Stri Subodh*, *Grah Dharam*, *Grahni Kartavya Dipka*, *Stri Bharta*, *Grah Sikhiya*, *Grah Prabandh*, *Bhojan Prakash*, *Nariratan*, *Anandi Bai*, among others. (Kang 1996: 86)

Educated Mothers

This vision that informed the aims of women's education informed the curriculum that was taught in the SKM. "Female education is the foundation stone of male education" (PB: 1911). Takht Singh reiterated that the goal of Sikh women was to attain ideal motherhood (Mohan 2007: 79). The school curricula transacted such education that primarily made "women capable of reading and writing to upbringing children well and was not oriented to help them gain employment." It is likely that the SKM had to address popular perceptions that were against women's employment. A paragraph given for translation from English into vernacular drawn from a question paper of the Middle standard examination held in 1912 for girls brings together these concerns and the SKM's considered response:

The objection is made that women, though taught to read and write, cannot obtain employment. But ability to read and write is not the sole benefit of education. Woman may profit much by it, although she may not gain even a pice. One of the greatest blessings a man can possess is to have children properly brought up. ...Now, it is upon mothers that the training of children depends...an ignorant mother cannot impart knowledge to her children fitted to awaken their minds. An educated mother would take an interest in their lessons and encourage them in their studies (In Middle standard examination, a paragraph given for translation from English into vernacular on March 30th, 1912 (10 am to 12 noon).

Educated mothers, as discussed earlier, were expected to play pivotal roles at home and in the community. In 1911, in an address to Louis Dane, Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, a student wrote how women's education was the foundation of men's education. It was observed that girls as daughters would soon become mothers and would take forward education of their sons.

In the articles of the *Panjabi Bhain*, it was reiterated that mother's role in upbringing of children was seen as important and that educated mothers made a difference. Agya Kaur's speech quoted anecdotes to highlight the contribution of educated mothers to children's upbringing. She expressed how Napoleon Bonaparte on becoming emperor of France announced that women in each household be educated since efficient mothers reared wise sons which thus strengthened the foundation of a community. References were also made to George Herbert Spencer who stated "a mother is equivalent to hundred schoolmasters." The famous proverb, "as is the mother, so are her children" (*jehi koko uhho jehi bachche*) was very often repeated in the pages of the journal (PB: April 1914).

Some articles published in the *Panjabi Bhain* asked men to ensure that girls were able to access schools. Singh (1915) motivated the Sikhs to support endeavor of promoting girls' education. It was heroic to ensure and guarantee education of girls. According to this perspective, being a "man" meant providing education for more women. The Sikh men were expected to take forward the task begun by the Takht Singh of opening the portals of education to Sikh girls.

... It would reflect no great credit on a race which in some other fields have won such world-wide admiration for their manliness and heroism; and it would reflect lack of some general Indian patriotism if this institution is not carried to the consummation intended for it by an Indian patriot who is rightly called by the Sikh nation "living martyr." (Singh 1915: 57)

Education was considered as imperative for women to become rightful companions of men. Women in many cases were presented to have fought shoulder to shoulder with men in the face of the enemy showcasing sacrifice and valor. It was said that despite such a past how could women become a cause of men's weakness rather than their strength? Main factors identified that led to this situation were "illiteracy and lack of love for own religion." Women in order to be equal companions of men were expected to acquire education. In some articles of the *Panjabi Bhain*, women were implored to gain education for the sake of community welfare. This was because women were considered as precursors to the community's honor so by acquiring literacy they could become deserving companions of men (*PB*: April 1909).

New Spaces and New Roles

The school system, processes and practices including its curricula, formal as well as informal or hidden curriculum believed primarily in socializing women to fulfil domestic roles as well as those related to the domain of religion. Yet, women were able to unleash agency and weave new roles and responsibilities in the early twentieth century. Despite the conservative expectations from education, in practice it also played an important role in challenging patriarchal structures. For instance, according to an alumna, education opened vistas allowing girls/women to gain equal status and also supplement the household income. Not simply literacy but education was perceived to be the true *talisman*. Similarly, another alumna believed that education is important since it enables economic empowerment securing future life (Interviews, 2010). Thus, education, which was to rear them in patriarchal values, also at the same time provided various kinds of

agency which helped them to diversify in various fields such as in teaching and medicine.

As stated above, the SKM imparted teacher education to girls. Its alumnae served as teachers/Head-mistress in the schools like at Jadwala, Amargarh and Ferozepur Hindu School, Rawalpindi Sikh High School, among others. In 1912, eighteen students qualified middle examination and teaching examination of the school (*PB*, April 1912). By 1920, around thirty alumnae became teachers. Almost hundred alumnae were teaching in the schools, both as trained and untrained teachers (*PB*: February 1920). Many alumnae also recalled to me that medicine as a profession was not encouraged for girls. Because of many social prejudices, parents hardly allowed daughters to practice medicine. They hesitated also because it was difficult to find a suitable match in marriage. Thus, girls usually faced resistance if they wanted to become doctors or nurses (Interview, Bhatia, 2010).

Given the context, the SKM played an important role in encouraging students to pursue medical education. Lack of female doctors was presented to be a major obstacle in ensuring the well-being of women. A few alumnae sought admission at the Lady Hardinge College in Delhi to pursue medical education. In 1916, when J.C Halifax, Punjab Commissioner, went to visit the SKM and he was impressed to find that a student from there was about to join this College (*PB*: September 1916). By 1919, eleven Sikh girls pursued medical education. Six Sikh girls were at the Lady Hardinge College, two were in the Medical College at Ludhiana and three more were about to join other medical colleges (*PB*: February 1920).

Written communication between the school authorities and alumnae tell us how this institution not only catered to the basic needs of the alumnae but also ensured all possible cooperation in their pursuit of higher education. Many alumnae of this school studied in the Kinnaird College at Lahore and wrote letters to the founder seeking guidance in both career and life. The School extended all possible help to its alumnae like providing books, some essential items, and even monetary assistance even after they had passed out of the School (Singh 2003: 313-314).

Enjoying the Fame (1921-1947)

This period saw rapid development of the school. In 1915, when Caveeshar visited the SKM he referred to it as a monument articulating the glory of Sikhs in the civil

life not unlike the Saragarhi memorial that showcased their courageous acts in the battleground. The simple brick-red walls of the school which “gird like a belt the whole of the compound” were designed to keep girls safe (Caveeshar 1915: 7-8).

Even now, the magnificent building of the SKM displays Sikh architecture with the use of arches, ornamental *jallis* and brick-surface. Like the Khalsa College, use of domes and *chattris* is striking (Vandal and Vandal 2006: 37, 210), and that is the reason that Ram Singh, the designer of the Khalsa College, is thought to be the architect of SKM.

Alumnae recollect the past glory of the school. A respondent who had shared multifarious relationships with the School was Bhatia. An alumna and retired principal of this school, born on December 10th, 1936 at Pavan Chakval (Peshawar), reported that her father, a stationmaster with the railways, shifted from Peshawar to Ferozepur because he wanted to educate his daughters at SKM (Interview, 2010). Another alumna, Devinder Kaur did F.A. from the SKM in the late 1920s. In 2010, at the age of 102 years, she remembered names of a few of her classmates like her friend Harnam Kaur (mother of Nargis Panchpakesan). Devinder specifically remembered wearing thick clothes made out of *khadi* stitched by her grandmother (Interview, Kaur, 2010).

Ms. Bhatia said that she was a witness to this “glorious phase” of the SKM. It began when educating girls was perceived to be unwelcome, but the Sikh community appreciated the sort of education that was made available in this school. In fact, “none refused an alliance in marriage with girls educated here since they were considered to be of pure character who knew how to lead a righteous life” (Interview, Bhatia, 2010).

In the mid 1930’s, the aim of the school in the words of the then Principal Gurbaksh Kaur was to ensure “a perfect fusion of cultures of the East and West” among all students. Girls were expected to turn modern without relinquishing their traditional roles. The school wanted to “produce women who would make happy homes and serve their country and not adorn the drawing rooms alone”. The institution promoted “plain living, early rising, regular prayers, cleanliness of person and clothing, vocal and instrumental music” (SKM 1943: 6).

The Punjab University Enquiry Committee 1932-33 (1933) notes the contribution of SKM in imparting secondary education to the girls of Punjab as follows:

The schools under private management which they have visited, the Kanya Mahavidyalaya and the Madrasa-tul-Benat, Jullundur, and the Sikh Kanya

Mahavidyalaya, Ferozepore, and the Mathra Das School at Moga, are good illustrations of the laudable efforts which private agencies are making towards the better education of girls. The University foundation of girls' education in the Punjab can therefore be said to have been well and truly laid, though much still remains to be done for the building of superstructure. (Punjab University Enquiry Committee *Report* 1932-33 (1933): 225)

Sikh schools were seen as bastions for propagating Sikhism, and Sikhs were motivated to send their children there. Around the 1930s, these schools as sites of reform played an important role in shaping up the Sikh identity. The community was encouraged to admit girls in the Sikh schools (*Panthak Vidyale*). Unlike the government and mission schools, here they received religious education along with practical knowledge (Panaich 1931: 80). Singh (1997) observes that schools were viewed not only as "...dispensers of education but they also served as strongholds of Sikhism" (Singh 1997: 41). Students there were learning to lead life "the Sikh way" was reported as early as 1911-12 in the Department of Education Report. Students carried out daily rituals along with cooking without any help (Panaich: 66). Service to the nation was also considered important given the larger context as can be seen in the words of an alumna:

Dear God,

Bless me that I may get up early morning to take a bath,

First I should take your name then think of other things,

I may bring happiness in the lives of my brothers and sisters, and to those who are in need,

I may be able to become educated, earn goodwill and bring honour to my community,

In the service of nation, I may sacrifice my body, soul and wealth...

(Singh 2003: 317)

The school made provision for the transaction of Compulsory Science at the Entrance stage in April 1934 under the supervision of Gopal Singh, M.Sc. It was an important initiative for those who wanted to pursue medical stream subsequently but found lack of science education a big hurdle. In the whole of Punjab, except the SKM, there was barely any school, which had such classes, claimed the editors of the SKM magazine. The IX standard students were inducted in these medical classes (SKM 1934). The School prepared students for Matriculation and the Intermediate Examinations. Science was taught at the Matriculation level and all art subjects were taught at the Intermediate stage. In 1936, twelve poor orphan

girls and in 1943 seven orphan girls were educated free of cost (Singh 1936: 7; SKM 1943:5). During the period 1939-43, nineteen students secured scholarships- 2 students were at the intermediate stage, 2 at the matriculation stage, 13 at the middle stage and 2 at the primary stage (SKM 1943).

SKM Curriculum 1929

Even during this phase, the SKM followed its own curriculum and prepared students to appear for the Punjab University examinations in standards IX and X. In Geography, innovations like moving from concepts situated in the local context onto the global ones was introduced. For instance, in standard III, map of the Ferozepore district was discussed. In the successive grades, Punjab and the North-Western Frontier Province were learnt along with the land and water distribution in the globe (SKM Curriculum 1929).

Ethics (*sadachar*) became a crucial element of the 1929 curriculum (see annexure Table on 1916 and 1929 curriculum). In each standard, certain aspects of moral ethic were discussed which students then had to abide. Efforts were made to abide by the principles of the Sikh Gurus. Guru Gobind Singh's belief that humanity had a single identity (*manas ki jaat sabhe ek hi pahichan bo*) was practiced. Students were expected to purify thoughts and adopt right practices becoming followers of *Gursikhi*. They were to restrain from stealing and speaking lies and were expected to serve congregations. Second was to foster love amongst school peers as well as the community. Third dimension was to cultivate ideal feminine qualities like showing respect, obedience to parents and elders, thinking about welfare of all and maintaining order and discipline. Finally, fulfilling a woman's duty (*stri dharm*) as a daughter, sister, wife and mother were held primary.

Many alumnae who studied in this period stated that religion was earlier an important feature of women's education. In fact, they recollect that competence in reciting *gurbani* was a precious gift from the School. The diaries of Singh, a school alumna, revealed that she resorted to *gurbani* for solace in all times, be it sorrow or joy. She felt that being embedded in the religious practices offered her strength in life. In her diary, she also expressed that Guru Nanak's way of happy life includes singing *kirtan*, reciting God's name (*nam japna*) and sharing food (*vand chakna*) which all should imbibe in life (Interview, Kaur, 2010). In a letter, an alumna in the Delhi College expressed her gratitude towards the school for the gift of *Gurbani*. "I feel proud to be a Sikh. The beauty that I see in the Sikh religion is not

visible in any religion" (Singh 2003: 309-310). Like her, many students followed almost all religious practices like reciting *Sukhmani*, *Japuji* and *Shabad Hazare*. Bhatia recollected how all memorized *gurbani*. Even at the age of seventy-four years, Bhatia was actively engaged with some local Gurdwaras teaching *Gurmat* education to the school children (Interviews, Alumnae, 2010).

Alumnae Achievements

Many of the School's alumnae were in distinguished positions as teachers, school inspectors and doctors in the mid-nineteenth century, states Singh (1936). The school encouraged many girls from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain education and join certain professions. Around ninety per cent girls became teachers. After finishing the higher secondary stage, many girls pursued Junior Basic Training (JBT) course (two years) from the Ram Sukh Das (R.S.D) College to get a government job in teaching. Around ten percent pursued graduation along with a B.Ed. degree from the Dev Samaj College for Women (Singh 1936).

Some girls pursued higher education. As mentioned earlier, the school acted as a source of strength for students even after they qualified. Davinder Kaur Grewal was first among Sikh women to qualify Master's level. In 1929, she came first in M.A. (Psychology) in the whole of Punjab. In 1930, the Government of India gave her scholarship to pursue Doctoral degree at the London University (Panaich: 67). The first woman minister in independent Punjab, Dr. Parkash Kaur, was an alumna of this school. Born in 1914 at Khara village, after schooling at SKM she studied at the Medical College, Amritsar in 1937. Later, she joined the Lady Emerson Red Cross Hospital, Amritsar. In 1949, she introduced the resolution to make Punjabi as the provincial language of Punjab. On December 29m 1967, in a formal declaration Punjabi became an official language of Punjab.

Challenging barriers, some girls pursued Science from the R.S.D College and later took admission at the Amritsar Government Medical College. In 1916, an alumna joined the Lady Hardinge Medical College. Thirty alumnae were School Inspectress who later attended the Lady Hardinge's Medical College, Delhi and the Brown's Medical College, Ludhiana (Singh 1936: 6). In an issue of *Panjabi Bhain*, the school applauded an untouchable girl for becoming a doctor. In 1934, Basant Kaur, daughter of a sweeper Dan Singh, qualified to become a doctor from the Ludhiana Medical College and gained appreciation (SKM: 1934). After Takht Singh's demise in 1937, a Governing Body of nine members was set up for the management of the school. It was duly registered on February 4, 1939, under

Societies Registration Act XXI of 1860. The dream of the founders was to upgrade this institution into the first Women's University in Punjab (SKM 1943: 6).

Conclusion

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Ferozepur started addressing education-related needs of its population. The establishment of various denominational schools was geared to spread education among the disadvantaged groups, especially girls. As a pioneering women's institution, the SKM, strengthened the discourse on women's education and empowered women not only to become independent in thinking but also bear responsibility of the family, neighborhood and society. Takhat Singh's vision of nurturing Sikh religious-minded women led to the establishment of this school. Aimed to achieve traditional ideas like to spread teaching of the gurus among Sikh women so that they would positively influence their families, it reached new milestones. Although secular education was an essential component of the curriculum as discussed above, the religious studies were part of both curricular and extra-curricular activities.

According to many alumnae, *gurnat* education helped them in life to face adversity with resolve. Education did not remain restricted to narrow conceptions. Women through education reached new heights, gained the capacity to intervene and bring changes. They not only chartered pre-determined paths as housewives and mothers but also carved new roles elevating women's position in both the Sikh and Punjabi society. As role models, they paved way for future generations to progress and write a new chapter in the history of Sikh women's education in Punjab.

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