

## Tradition and Modernity — Experiences of Rural Sikh Girls in Ferozpur, Punjab

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### Abstract

*This paper presents a linkage between tradition and modernity with reference to the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya at Ferozpur, Punjab. The school was established in 1892 in old Ferozpur city as an all-girls' school. It is now a co-ed school till Class VIII and an all-girls' school till the senior secondary stage. Based on ethnographic research, the paper brings together experiences and reflections of girls in this border region of India. It discusses aspects related to gurmat education and the way it propagates religious identities. Education that is transacted inculcates both traditional, as well as, modern values among girls. They either learn to play their traditional roles better or develop skills required for modern professions. Often, tradition and modernity coexist shaping up the identity of girls in varied ways, thereby, enabling them to often resolve inner and outer conflicts with strength and fortitude. The paper aims to highlight the complex interface among the forces of education, religion and gender.*

### INTRODUCTION

Ferozpur city, popularly known as 'shahidon ka shahar' (city of martyrs), is the place where Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were cremated. It is located in Ferozpur, the largest district in Punjab, occupying 9.58 per cent of the State area. Ferozpur shares its border with Pakistan and is

just 11 km away from the Hussainiwala border. The Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya is one of the first girls' schools set up in the district. It started as a middle school and became a high school in 1911 (Sharma, 1983). Initially, a gurdwara school, it expanded to become an acclaimed institution during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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This paper throws an insight into the contemporary milieu of the school and its students. The school is affiliated to the Punjab School Education Board (PSEB). Alongside, the Satnam Sarab Kalyan Trust (SSKT) offers *gurmat* education to the students.

Though modernity and tradition appear contradictory, they are complementary in relation to the experiences of rural Sikh girls in Ferozepur, Punjab.

The Indian society, under the influence of social, political and economic forces, encourages imbibing modern practices without renouncing traditional processes. Sometimes, the forces of modernity overtake tradition, whereas, at others, traditional practices hold their ground strongly. Amidst this tension, what is observed is the emergence of a space that is created out of the synergy of tradition and modernity. In the book, *Modernisation of Indian Tradition*, Singh (1973) argues that modernity like tradition is a complex process. What is modern or referred to as modernity or the process of modernisation is a distinct and unique feature of society. Modernisation does not imply rupture from tradition but as Singh states, "it is another novel feature of tradition".

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The paper aims to explore tradition and modernity continuum with reference to the experiences of rural Sikh girls, who lead a strenuous life as they struggle

to gain education, in Ferozepur district of Punjab.

### **ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY**

Being the ethnography of one school, i.e., Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya at Ferozepur, the paper tries to provide a description of the school, pedagogical processes being followed there, and cultural and historical context within which the school is located. Besides, it aims to understand the transmission of values through the process of schooling.

Ethnography is the art and science of describing human groups, its institutions, interpersonal behaviours, material products and beliefs.

A number of methods were used to collectively understand the school context and classroom processes. The researcher conducted non-participant observation of the classrooms to understand the socialisation processes of girls and boys, examining the values being imparted to them not only within the four walls of the classrooms but also through extracurricular activities, and cultural and social expectations from girls vis-à-vis boys. The teachers, alumnae and parents of the students studying in the school were interviewed to gather their perceptions as regards to the socialisation of Sikh girls and boys.

### **TRADITION AND MODERNITY**

In the context of gender studies, a connection between tradition and

modernity becomes all the more poignant. Women and girls are expected to hold on to traditional beliefs despite living in technology-driven changing times. As women seem to be connected to nature and men to culture (Ortner, 1973), tradition seems intrinsically feminine, and modernity, in the garb of providing new dimensions to culture, masculine.

In Ferozpur, traces of tradition can often be seen as most girl students of the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya are engaged in routine household and farm chores. Performing these chores is the topmost priority for the girls as they have been conditioned to do these works from an early age. Hence, performing these household chores is constitutive of their identity. Most girls across social and economic backgrounds are burdened with domestic works. A majority of the girls surveyed shared that they started working in the fields and home from an early age, and squeezed studies in the remaining time, negotiating their educational aspirations in the patriarchal setup.

What appears in a microcosm also can be suggestive of the larger reality. Modern ideas often face intense resistance from traditionalists. Likewise, modern education when introduced for girls here found slow acceptance as many believed that it would not be of much use to them as their main duty was to do household chores. In the early nineteenth century, religious education with rudimentary mathematics, vital for

household budgeting, was introduced so that girls could become 'efficient' wives and mothers when they grow up. Secular education and access to disciplines like science and mathematics were introduced much later.

### EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

In the context of Ferozpur, Sikh girls mostly live in border villages or working class settlements, where household is at the centre of affairs and school is placed somewhere near the periphery. Drawing from this field study, it is found that for families living here religious beliefs and practices come foremost. Girls coming from these families are nurtured to weave the tapestry of their lives around the household and farm, local gurdwara, and at last, school. Almost all respondents shared how efficiently they managed household chores like lighting the *chulha* (earthen stove), preparing cow dung cakes, milking the cows, sweeping and mopping the floor (*bokardena*), cooking, washing clothes, taking care of younger siblings and paying early morning visits to the gurdwara daily.

*Gurmat* education defines the core values of school in many ways, wherein, education is not expected to question the established traditional norms but reinforce the traditional values in students. Therefore, religion emerges as the master signifier to which all other instrumental orders of the school correspond.

The respondents shared they learnt to ascribe to the identity of a Sikh early in life by memorising religious texts, keeping their hair uncut, and maintaining *sabut surat*, i.e., not resorting to trimming, threading and waxing. Some Sikh girls also wore *keskhi* (small turban like Sikh men). It was observed that *amrit chakna* or initiation was uncommon among Sikh girls. While families and school taught girls to be religious and well-versed with the *Guru Granth Sahib*, they also introduced a number of restrictions on them. Some students had gone through the custom of *chulha chakna* or baptism. In *chulha chakna*, one's head and eyes are sprayed with holy water.

Tradition promotes learning of religious texts but only to the extent that it does not hinder interests associated with other significant social institutions like marriage. Mostly, girls were not encouraged to go through the process of *amrit chakna* as it may adversely affect their marriage prospects.

It was observed that *naitik sikhya*, i.e., moral education was an essential component of religious education in the school. Moreover, *gurmat* education, which includes moral education, aimed to ensure that girls adhered to the three main principles of Sikhism, i.e., spread the word of the 10 gurus and *Guru Granth Sahib*, chant the holy name and share food.

However, modernity and its influence on the lives of girls is

noticeable. A growing assertion of identity and personhood has introduced girls to new spheres of rationality and freedom. It was found that most of the girls surveyed were aware of the Sikh precepts and keen to follow the same, whereas, there were some who had a modern outlook and underlined their dislike for some of the orthodox practices they were being taught to follow in the name of religion.

Some Sikh girls in the school were termed 'fashionable' and treated differently as they cut their hair, and did threading and waxing in defiance of Sikh principles. These were disapproved by the *gurmat* teacher and other students, who maintained *sabut surat*. The prevailing social order in this Ferozepur school as dictated by religious practices determined how one must maintain one's physical appearance. The study further revealed that the personal choices of students were not encouraged. Peer pressure played a significant role in regulating student behaviour and most resisted deviating from the propounded religious practices.

## CONCLUSION

Religious doctrines with their propaganda mould young minds to the extent that they are unable to think differently, and even if they do, fear overtakes them and acts as a hurdle in their path to emancipation. The girl students were expected to gain education, including that of religious

texts, and maintain a traditional outlook and appearance. However, they must not be taught to detest their peers who have a different outlook towards life, including physical appearance and aspirations to put education above everything else. They should be able to embrace modernity without being reprimanded and discouraged by family and school.

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