

SAME SEX MARRIAGES & LGBT ISSUES

A SIKH PERSPECTIVE

Prof. Nirmal Singh, USA



TRIGGER

Having grown up and spent most of my active working years in India, I was conscious of the existence of sexual liaisons out of wedlock between men and women, prostitution, rape et al. Existence of male homosexuality was mentioned but as a deviant behavior. One met people known to be seducers, philanderers or chronic bachelors but I do not recall any one who may have been a declared or self professed homosexual man or woman. May be the times were different in addition to the pervasive influence of traditional Indian hesitation to talk of sexual matters that tended to mask a lot of what may have been happening around us by innuendos, exchange of furtive glances or just switching conversation.

Later on as I got involved with interfaith activities in the US, it was only about a decade or so earlier that issues about discrimination suffered by the gay community started finding their way into our discussions. I must admit that I neither had a feel for the extent and depth of the problems nor any real understanding of the intertwining of their history with religion. I joined on a few occasions in meets where perspectives on the issues were presented and even though my involvement was limited mostly to listening, I did begin to recognize that unseemly as it might have seemed till a few years earlier, the subject was now coming out in the open and it would need to be addressed sooner than later.

I therefore was not surprised when the day the vote on the subject of **Gay Marriage** was to be held in the British Parliament, I got the following email with from Dr Rajwant Singh: ‘Dear I J Singh ji and Nirmal Singh ji, What are your thoughts on this matter [Gay Marriage]? What does Sikhi say on this issue? It is matter of time before this issue comes up in Gurdwaras. Ours already had a request by a Sikh to have a gay marriage. We ought to have discussion on this. Thanks. Rajwant Singh’

I responded a couple of days later saying ‘Thank you for sharing your concern on the Gay Marriage issue. The vote has gone the expected way confirming the increasing vulnerabilities of several core convictions and values that had sustained societies over the centuries. I will revert shortly on my thoughts on a Sikh perspective on this subject.’

The vote on the 5/2/13 in the British Parliament was 400 to 175 for the bill. Prime Minister Cameron in a televised speech before the vote said that while he strongly believed in the institution of marriage, he wanted to make society stronger by letting the gays too to be able to get married. The bill was to enable gays to marry in a civil or religious ceremony, the latter if and where the religious institution consents.¹

¹ Times of India while reporting this vote said that there are 6.94 million PIO’s in the UK and gays among them may now be able to tie knots in the UK rather than go to Canada or South Africa to do so as heretofore. See TOI, Delhi, 6/2/13, p. 24 & TOI, 7/2/13, p.20.

This paper is an attempt at trying to develop answers from Sikh perspective to the variety of questions inherent in this debate. Given the locus of the contemporary discussions, contextual frame of the discussion is mainly located in the West, more particularly the U S.

A QUICK PEEP INTO HISTORY

The literature on sexuality generally recognizes three categories of sexual orientation. These are: heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality. In this paper our main concern is look at the various aspects relating to homosexual relations and their emerging social issues, as they affect or intersect with Sikhs and Sikhi.

Historical evidence suggests that male homosexuality has existed from very early times. It is believed that young males were the object of sexual attention from older men and same-sex unions did take place in some parts of the ancient world including Rome, Greece, China and Europe. During the Renaissance period homosexuality was practiced by many of the male population in wealthy cities like Venice and Florence.

Societal attitudes have varied over time and place. In cultures influenced by Semitic faiths, the male homosexuality was viewed as sin and a crime against nature. The Church enforced its strong positions on the issue variously - over the centuries in different locations.

The term lesbian came to be used for female homosexuals in 19th century. It is believed to be derived from the name of Greek island Lesbos, where poet Sappho wrote about her emotional relationships with young women. The term used for male homosexuals is gay, though it has now come to be also used to refer to the homosexual community.

Though most of homosexual encounters may have taken place in the private, some men and women lived in committed same-sex relationships through history, admired and condemned depending upon their particular circumstances and the culture in which they occurred. Since the end of the 19th century, however, there has been a movement to seek increased visibility, recognition and legal rights for homosexual people.

Legal civil unions were allowed to same-sex couples in Denmark in 1989 with the intent to provide them rights, benefits, and responsibilities similar to opposite-sex civil marriages. In the course of last couple of decades many other countries have permitted such unions. Some couples living together may choose not to be recognized as married because of the advantage their single status might offer regarding pension, alimony, taxation, immigration etc.

Over time the opposition from the Churches also has weakened. Some denominations such as Unitarian Universalist, Metropolitan Community Church, Quaker, United Church of Canada, United Church of Christ and Reform Jewish congregations currently perform same-sex marriages.

The homosexual behavior has been viewed as nurtured by social influences or a trait that is personal or natural to the person – the former labeled as constructionist and the latter as essentialist approach. These two positions have been and continue to be used as the clinching arguments by protagonists on either side. A 2006 study showed that 2-3% of the respondents identified themselves as homosexual. The universe of this group now includes Bisexuals and Trans Gender persons, referred to as LGBT or GLBT.

Homosexual behavior has been observed in many animal species though a predisposition to engage in homosexuality to the exclusion of heterosexual activities is uncommon.

GENDER/HOMOSEXUALITY IN SOUTH ASIA/INDIA²

References in texts like **Manusmriti** point to the existence of same-sex relations between both males and females but suggest that sexual acts between older and young women were viewed more severely than among same age group women or between males. Examples are:

- An older woman who had sexual relations with a virgin was to ‘instantly have her head shaved or two fingers cut off, and made to ride in the town on a donkey.’
- If a virgin had sexual relation with another virgin, she was to be fined, pay the double of her nuptial fee and receive ten lashes with a rod.
- No penalty was prescribed for sex between two non-virgins.
- The punishment for a man forcing a woman to have sex was to instantly cut off two of his fingers and pay a fine of six hundred panas.
- Man who committed an unnatural offence with a male was punished to bathe dressed in his clothes or declared to lose his caste (Gatibhramsa)
- Adultery and rape were punished with extreme torture, and even death.

There are descriptions of homosexual acts in Kamasutra and Tantric rituals point to evidence of sodomy. Harems of young boys were kept by Muslim Nawabs, Maharaja Ranjit Singh³ and Hindu Aristocrats.

The third sex/other individuals are those who are neither men nor women. References to third sex can be found in the texts of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Shiva is worshipped as an Ardhnarishwara, i.e. half-male and half-female. Vedas and Kama Sutra describe individuals as *purs-prakrti* (male-nature), *stri-prakrti* (female-nature), and *tritiya-prakrti* (third-nature). Various texts suggest that third sex individuals could often be recognized from childhood. In the epic **Mahabhart**a Draupadi’s elder brother Shikhandi was neither male nor female. He was born with a woman’s body but later in life acquired male organs. Bhisma insisted that since Shikhandi was born with body of a woman, he remained a woman and refused to fight him in the battle. Using the opportunity, Arjuna shot an arrow from behind Shikhandi that killed Bishima.

South Asian countries have had a visible presence of people known as *hijras* who may not be men or women or may be effeminate homosexuals, male to female transgender persons and males who had been accidentally or ritualistically castrated. The word *nipounsak* of Sanskrit origin has also been used for some such persons. *Nipounsak* and *hijra* can be naturally born, contrived by intervention, human behavior or even personal choice. Explanations given in the

² Homosexuality http://lgbt.wikia.com/wiki/Homosexuality_in_India provides a good bibliography: Narrain, Arvind; Gautam Bhan (2006). *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press. ISBN 819022722X; Merchant, Hoshang (1999). *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India*. New Delhi: Penguin. ISBN 0140278397; Thadani, Giti (1996). *Sakhiani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*. London: Cassell. ISBN 0304334510; Vanita, Ruth (2005). *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 1403970386; Joseph, Sherry (2005). *Social Work Practice and Men Who Have Sex With Men*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications. ISBN 0761933522; Nanda, Serena (1998). *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. USA: Wadsworth Publishing. ISBN 0534509037.

³ He is said to have fondness for Gulab Singh who later became Raja of Kashmir. *Queers in History: The Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Historical Gays ...* By Keith Stern lists Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Mahankosh, written in the 19th century, seem to support the propositions about contrived or personal behavior as factors in development of this condition.

While **nipounsak** is not in common usage, the word **Hijra** continues to be used. Some are born hijras though there is mention of abduction of kids for their ritual initiation into the close knit hijra order. They usually dress in women's attires, use heavy make-up and make living by singing, dancing at births etc. They are credited to have supernatural powers and traditional Indians still invite them to seek their blessings on occasions like weddings. They are said to worship Bahuchara Mata and participate in theatrical blessings of male children and newly-weds.

Mumbai based Humsafar Trust estimates hijras in India at 5 to 6 million with only eight % of those visiting Humsafar clinics being nirwaan or castrated. Indian passport application forms were updated with gender options of male, female, and eunuch in 2005 due to the demand by Hijras for recognition as a third sex. India also agreed in 2009 to list eunuchs and transgender people as others in voting rolls and voter identity cards.

In Pakistan Hijras number between 80,000 and 300,000. Pakistan Supreme Court had ordered in December 2009 that national identity cards showing their distinct gender should be issued to hijras. Bindiya Rana, head of the Gender Interactive Alliance, an NGO acting for Khwaja Sira transgender/hijra community and Sanam Fakir, president of Sanam Welfare Association in Sukkur, will be the first transgender people to be running for provincial assembly elections in Pakistan. [Sonya Fatah, Delhi based Pakistani journalist: TOI, Apr 16, 2013]

12 Noon entertainment with its CEO, trans-activist Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi organized the first transgender pageant at Mumbai with Zeenat Aman and LGBT activist Celina Jaitley as judges in Feb. 2010. Salman Khan and Pratibha Patil, the then President of India extended support. Occasional splashes like this point to existence of an active hijra network.

Another word **Khusra** is used throughout South Asia. According to a Pakistani survey many men accidently become khusra while getting circumcised. Khusras used to be harem guards in olden days but now most of them are said to make a living working as male prostitutes. They are basically males but use female mannerisms.⁴

A national survey of urban areas by the CNN-IBN news service found that 70% of Indian adults believe that homosexual behavior should be illegal and 90% would not rent their houses to a gay or lesbian couple <<http://www.religioustolerance.org/hommarrind.htm>>.

Unnatural sexual were prohibited under Section 377, IPC, a law put in place by the British in mid 19th century. The act continues to be on the statute book. Amartya Sen and Vikram Seth made a joint demand for change in the legal regime in September 2006.⁵ Several voluntary organizations have also been demanding decriminalization of homosexuality and equality for LGBT people. A recent study of sexual practices in rural India by the United Nations Population Fund found that `male-to-male sex is not uncommon. Close to 10 per cent of the

⁴ See Wikipaedia and web discussion page on Urban Dictionary.

⁵ In fact the law is expected to get renewed attention since the GOI is reported to have decided to make the new rape law gender specific applicable only to sexual offences by men against women and use the existing IPC 377 for crimes involving unnatural sex, abuse by the same sex and pedophilia [Hindustan Times, 3/6/13]. This has been decided to accommodate demands from women's groups.

single men and 3 per cent of married men were reported to have had sex with other men in the preceding 12 months.⁶

The activists supporting **LGBT** groups include Naz Foundation [1994] that has linkages with several foreign activist groups. A group of journalists, The Queer Media Collective, has been active since 2008 conducting Queer Media Collective Awards event. The Internet gay sites include dating sites such as GayDia and IndusGay; online communities like GayBombay, Queer and Trans Desis community. Blogs like Queeristan highlight Desi gay stories. We will explore this part in some detail later.

While there is no legal recognition of same-sex couples, Indian courts have not been critical of adults living with whom they wish. In recent years the press has reported many Hindu same-sex marriages mostly between young women from lower middle class strata in small towns and rural areas. Family reactions were supportive in some cases, disapproving in others and some prosecutorial or violent against the couple. The works of Giti Thadani and Ruth Vanita provide testimony to this effect.⁷

In 1987, two policewomen got married by Hindu rites in central India. In Nov, 2006, in village Narayanpatna, district Koraput, Orissa, two Kondh women, Bateka Palang 30 and her bride 25 years-old Maleka Nilsa became husband and wife when their marriage was solemnized in the presence of family. The village elders had given approval to the marriage reluctantly and wanted it kept under the wraps to avoid bringing shame and disgrace to the village. <<http://voices.yahoo.com/same-sex-marriage-tribal-community-india-110658.html?cat=49>>

Baljit Kaur and Rajwinder Kaur got married at Vaishnodevi temple on 14 June 2007 and answered questions from the media in Amritsar on 19 June 2007, during a press meet. Their picture can be seen at <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/the-rice-bowl/indian-court-rule-legality-same-sex-marriage>. Their marriage ran into rough waters soon. See video at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-Z8MQbRKM>>.

Savita a 25 year old student at Choudhary Charan Singh University claimed she was forced into a marriage. Five months later she left her husband telling him of her relationship with Veena and approached the district court in Gurgaon that effectively granted her a divorce and gave its approval for her to marry Veena, 20. Savita was designated 'husband' and Veena 'wife' and were married by the court on Jul. 22, 2011. The court also ordered that the couple be provided police protection. http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-07-30/man-woman/29829775_1_gay-marriages-legal-status-gay-rights-activist The news report gives a picture of the couple.

Two men, Sandeep Soibam as bridegroom and Nikhil Sharma Hidangmayum as bride, got married on March 25, 2010 in Imphal. Nikhil is a successful beautician and the bridegroom Sandeep assists Nikhil. They will live in the beauty parlor that Nikhil runs. Their picture is at

⁶ <<http://www.legalserviceindia.com/articles/semar.htm>> Vidhan Maheshwari, Same Sex Marriage: Is It The Time For Legal Recognition,

⁷ Ruth Vanita & Salim Kidwai in their book Same-Sex Love in India : Readings from Literature and History [Palgrave, ISBN 0-312-22169-x] have documented numerous such marriages over the last three decades. They argue that since under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, any marriage between two Hindus performed according to the customs in the community of one of the partners is legally valid, these relations are not deemed illegal.

<<http://samaw.com/pictures-first-same-sex-gay-marriage-held-in-manipur-india/2982>>. Their families called Police and in two hours they ended the relationship.

A civil union between designer Wendell Rodricks with his French partner Jerome Marrel was conducted under French law in Goa.

Many lesbians and gays live with their parents and refer to their partners as friends out of fear of being disowned by their families. Ruth Vanita has also analyzed numerous joint suicides by same-sex couples, mostly females. Same-sex couples who live together often pretend to be roommates to avoid being evicted by their landlords or of being blackmailed by the police. Some lesbians and gays marching in gay pride parades wear masks to hide their identity.

Christian denominations in India are not known to have allowed any same-sex marriage. Akal Takht, has issued an edict banning same sex marriages to be performed in Gurdwaras. Two women, who had asked an Islamic court in Hyderabad in 2005 to be allowed to marry, were denied permission. Hindu Code Bill defines marriage as union between two persons with no mention of the gender.

The above short recapitulation points to some of the important factors relating to the culture of sexual relationships in the Indian setting. There is enough evidence about existence of homosexual relations though it seems to have been explored more among the poor, rural communities and the elite segments of society. Indians also recognize that some humans may not fit the male-female binary. Indian experience suggests that homosexuality among women has been known to exist from early times and prejudice notwithstanding hijras/khusras do not live their lives in a closet.

THE SIKH POSITION

The Way of Grihast

The part of Sikh teachings that is germane to our search is that the Gurus commended their followers to pursue their spiritual quest while still living their lives engaged in the day to day commitments of being a householder. The Sikh theology and Sikh living both extolled and exemplified that *grihasti jeevan* – the life as a householder – if virtuous, could be the best and natural way to connect with the divine.

Guru Nanak did amplify that ‘such a one alone is a householder, who restrains his passions and begs for meditation, austerity and self-discipline. He gives donations to charity with his body; such a householder is as pure as the water of the Ganges.’⁸ Guru Arjan says ‘The meditatives practice meditation, and the wise practice spiritual wisdom, but how rare are those who know God! The worshipper of Bhagaauti practices self-discipline, the Yogi speaks of liberation, and the ascetic is absorbed in asceticism. The men of silence observe silence, the Sanyaasees observe celibacy, and the Udaasees abide in detachment. There are nine forms of devotional worship. Pandits recite the Vedas. The *grihastee* assert their faith in family life.’⁹ **The path of *grihasti mein udasee* – achieving detachment while living a family life - was commended over all others.**

⁸ - *so girehee jo nigrahu karai jap thap sa(n)jam bheekhiaa karai pu(n)n dhaan kaa karae sareer so girehee ga(n)gaa kaa neer* – Ramkali M I, p. 952

⁹ - *dhhiaanee dhhiaan laavehi giaanee giaan kamaavehi prabh kin hee jaathaa bhagouthee rehath jugathaa jogee kehath mukathaa thapasee thapehi raathaa monee monidhhaaree saniaasee brehamachaaree oudhaasee*

The word *grih* means home and the concepts of family were built around the house. Husband was known as *pir*, *kanth* and wife as *dhann*, *ghar kee naar*.¹⁰ Family as a unit included man as husband and woman as wife plus their children and elders, living together. Family units and individual members had their circle of friends and other associates forming extended groups of communities. Grihast encompassed the totality of their roles as householders.

The Vulnerability of Humans

The Guru says in Sri Rag, Pehrai, that as we grow up to be men, our consciousness tends to get intoxicated with the wine of youth and beauty and is always engrossed in sexual desire - blind to Naam.¹¹ And with the fullness of youth rising like waves within and mind subsumed by ego, my friend, we are not able to distinguish between good and evil.¹²

There was recognition that while there will be efforts by the seekers at staying the course of righteousness, still 'forbidden works will be performed and the saints abandoning the path of dharma will look for the path of prostitutes. The friendship of a queer type will wash and destroy the sanctity of this relationship. Friends and enemies will go together for their self-interest.'¹³ Disquieting but on reflection, true!

The Gurus saw this happening even among many of the sanyasis of various schools. Their observations are unambiguous: 'You split your ears, became a sanyasi and now you steal crumbs. You beg from door to door, but you fail to be satisfied. Having abandoned your own wife, you sneak glances at other women.'¹⁴ 'You left your wife and took to patched coat and bowl in hand, but surging desires continue to well up in your mind and you stay engrossed in sexual desire thinking of wives of others.'¹⁵ 'You have affair with other women'¹⁶ and hidden by many screens, behind closed doors, take pleasure with another man's wife.'¹⁷ 'Others' wealth, others' wives, and the slander of others – renounce thou, your craving for these.'¹⁸

Kabir labels those who enjoy wine and are tempted by taste of sensual pleasures and sexual delights as corrupt.¹⁹ The Guru seems to be more understanding and says that the tongue and sex organs seek to sample, taste [variety]²⁰ and that in spite of best efforts one may falter in

oudhaas raathaa bhagath navai parakaaraa pa(n)ddith vaedh pukaaraa girasathee girasath dharamaathaa– Sri Raag M V, p. 71

¹⁰ - *ghar ki naar bohat hit ja sion sada reht sang lagi, jab hee hans taji eh kaeya pret pret kar bhagi* - Sorath M IX, p. 634

¹¹ - *Dhoojai Peharai Rain Kai Vanajaariaa Mithraa Bhar Joban Mai Math Ahinis Kaam Viaapiaa Vanajaariaa Mithraa Andhhulae Naam N Chith* - M I, P. 75/2.

¹² - *Dhoojai Peharai Rain Kai Vanajaariaa Mithraa Bhar Juaanee Leharee Dhaee Burae Bhalaa N Pashhaanee Vanajaariaa Mithraa Man Mathaa Ahanmaee* – M V, P. 77

¹³ - *Akrith Kaarano Anitt Nitt Hohenge Tiaag Dharmano Treean Kudaar(i) Saadh Johenge Pavitra Chittra Chittratan Bachittra Mitra Dhoheng Amittra Mittra Bhaavano Su Mittra Amittra Sohenge* – Dasam Granth, p. 1138

¹⁴ - *Kaan Faraae Hiraeeae Ttookaa Ghar Ghar Maangai Thripathaavan Thae Chookaa Banithaa Shhodd Badh Nadhar Par Naaree* - Parbhati M V, p. 1348

¹⁵ *Haathh Kamanddal Kaaparreeaa Man Thrisanaa Oupajee Bhaaree Eisathree Thaj Kar Kaam Viaapiaa Chith Laaeiaa Par Naaree* – Maru M I, p. 1013

¹⁶ - *Par Naaree Sio Ghaalai Dhandhhaa* – Bhairon Namdev, p. 1165

¹⁷ - *Dhaee Kivaarr Anik Parradhae Mehi par dhaaraa Sang Faakai* – Sorath M V, p. 616

¹⁸ - *Par Dhan par dhaaraa Par Nindhaa Ein Sio Preeth Nivaar* – Asa M V, p. 379

¹⁹ - *Suaadh Lubhath eindhree Ras Praeriou Madh Ras Laith Bikaariou Rae* – Gauri Kabir, p. 335

²⁰ - *Jihavaa eindhree Eaek Suaao* – Gauri M I, p. 153

controlling semen and seed.²¹ He wonders from where these strong and compelling sexual desires have come. The answer is along expected lines: rare are those who realize it, but all that we witness and experience is play of the Creator.²²

Significantly the Gurus consistently used the metaphor of a women's loving adoration for her lover to express their own deep love and devotion for the Divine. Guru explains that 'there is one husband Lord while all other beings in this world are his brides. He enjoys the love of all - remains detached, unseen and cannot be described.'²³ The Guru envisions that all of human beings, men and women alike, seek spiritual union with the divine but the wise and beautiful divine entity is not a male, female or any other being like a bird.²⁴

While the opposite sex *sexual* relations are foundational to continuity of the created world, *grihasti* is not complete or possible if same sex *social* relations did not exist. Such relations abound as between family members, friends, enemies, supporters, detractors and various other forms of societal bonds and transactions. We will look at a couple of examples.

Yaar Metaphor

The word *yaar* of Persian origin has been used profusely to address the divine as a loving and loved friend. In Urdu literature the word has the connotation of a partner in love and has been used mostly for male friends though its use for females is also not uncommon. In Punjabi usage, the word has been immortalized by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan by his famous composition '*kise da yaar na vichre*' - pray none are separated from their love. Hoshang Merchant has titled his collection of gay writings in India as *Yaraana*, pointing to the word *yaar* being linked to gays in the contemporary usage.

In Sikh scriptural literature, the word *yaar* has been used to convey a sense of intimate friendship, a dependable support, a constant companion etc often in conjunction with words like *meeth*, *saajan*, *saathi*, *sanghi*, *sakhaa*, *sahayee* that have similar meanings. In a verse, Guru Arjan addresses *yaar*, *meeth* and *saajan* together - witness: 'listen, my *yaars*, friends and companions: there is no salvation without the Lord. O Nanak, one who falls at the feet of the Guru, his bonds are cut away'.²⁵ Sharing intimacies with a friend: 'O *yaar*, my husband, not dependent on anyone, does what he pleases. You have enjoyed your beloved, *yaar*; please, tell me about him --- pay heed *yaar*, my beloved has all these loving companions; I cannot compare to any of them. Each of them is of surpassing beauty; why would he consider me? Beholding his countless lovers enjoying bliss with him constantly, desire wells up in me. When will I unite with him ---?'²⁶

²¹ - *Jathan Karai Bindh Kivai N Rehaaee* – Ramkali M I, p. 906

²² - *eindhree Dhhaath Sabal Keheeth Hai eindhree Kis Thae Hooe Aapae Khael Karai Sabh Karathaa Aisaa Boojhai Kooe* – Maru M III, p. 993

²³ - *Eis Jag Mehi Purakh Eaek Hai Hor Sagalee Naar Sabaaee Sabh Ghatt Bhogavai Alipath Rehai Alakh N Lakhanaa Jaaee* – Wadhans ki Vaar, M III, p. 591-2

²⁴ *Naar neh purakh neh pankhnoo saacho chatur saroop* – Maru M I, p. 1010

²⁵ - *yaar meeth sun saajanahu bin har shhoottan naahi naanak thih ba(n)dhan kattae gur kee charanee paahi* – Slok Gauri M V, p. 259

²⁶ - *yaar vae pir aapan bhaanaa kishh neese shha(n)dhaa yaar vae thai raaviaa laalan moo dhas dhasa(n)dhaa --- yaar vae pria habhae sakheea moo kehee n jaeheea yaar vae hik ddoo(n) hik chaarrai ho kis chithaeheea hik dhoo(n) hik chaarrae anik piaarae nith karadhae bhog bilaasaa thinaa dhaekh man chaaout(h)a(n)dhaa ho kadh paaee gunathaasaa jinee maidaal reejhaaeiaa ho this aagai man ddae(n)eheea naanak kehai sun bino suhaagan moo dhas ddikhaa pir kaeheea - - - - Jaitsri M V, p. 703*

Guru Gobind Singh praises the cold feel of bare floor of the abode of *yaararrae* – the beloved friend - living in the warm glittering towns [away from the *yaar*] is like being cooped up in a furnace.²⁷ Bhai Nand Lal is said to have written verses like the following two samples in the praise and adulation of Guru Gobind Singh: ‘Both the domains [here and hereafter] do not even equal the worth of my friend’s one hair.’²⁸ I take the glowing semblance of my *yaar* matching the divine halo and celestial illumination.’²⁹

We notice that the *yaar* metaphor in Sikh scriptural literature is expressive of love and adulation for the *yaar* but there is no evidence of any intended sexual innuendo.

Sakhi Saheli Metaphor

The *Sakhee Saheli* [companion, friend] is popular metaphor for female friends, the same way as *yaar* is for male friends. As mentioned in an earlier footnote, the title of Giti Thadani’s book chronicling sexual relations between females is: *Sakhiyain – Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*.

The *sakhee saheli* metaphor has also been used extensively in Gurbani. The relation is one of sharing intimate confidences and joining together in celebratory singing and enjoyment by women. Witness: Come join me, my sister friends, and sing songs of joy and delight; my lover friend has come to me at my home.³⁰ Listen to me, my sister friend I have been enticed by the enticer, drenching my body and mind with nectar of love.³¹ Listen sister friends, my beloved, he loves me in so many various ways.³² My companions and sister friends, let's together sing songs of joy.³³ That bride, who is attuned to Truth, sleeps with the Lord, along with her companions and sister friends.³⁴

In none of the verses is there any hint of mutual sexual attraction between *sakhi-sahelis* – even the expression of adulation witnessed in the *yaar* metaphor is missing. Their relation is of sharing intimacies, heart aches and sense of yearning, confidences about the object of their love – an openness known to characterize women-talk.

Laavaan

The Sikh marriage ceremony envisions a path of spiritual union with the divine. The union is characterized by giving up on ego, awakening of love within and a sense of tranquil peace descending to the resounding of *naam*. **This is joining of soul with supreme soul - bodies or gender are not emphasized.** Witness:

In the first round of the marriage ceremony [laav], Har sets out instructions for the routines of married life --- embrace thou and enshrine the contemplative remembrance of Naam --- In the

²⁷ - *yaararrae dhaa saana(n)oo saathhar cha(n)gaa bhaat(h) khaerriaaa(n) dhaa rehinaa* – Dasam Granth, p. 1542

²⁸ - *Do Vayn Jahaan Saaday yaar Day Ik Vaal Day Mul Baraabar Han* – Bhai Nandlal, DiwaneGoya, Ghazal 2.

²⁹ - *Kiuun Jo Asaan Apanay yaar Day Mukharhay Noon Rab Daa Noor Samajhiaa Hai* – Bhai Nanadlal, Diwan-i-Goya, Ghazal 54

³⁰ - *Sakhee Milahu Ras Mangal Gaavahu Ham Ghar Saajan Aaeiaa* – Suhi M I, p. 764

³¹ - *Sunahu Sakhee Man Mohan Mohiaa Than Man Anmrith Bheena* – Suhi M I, p. 764

³² - *Aapae Bahu Bidhh Rangulaa Sakheeeae Maeraa Laal* – Sri Raag M I, p. 23

³³ - *Sun Sakheea Sehaelarreeho Mil Mangal Gaaveh Raam* – Bilawal M V, p. 846

³⁴ - *Dhhan Saach Sangooshee Har Sang Sooshee Sang Sakhee Sehaeleeaa* – Bilawal M I, p. 843

second laav - -- the filth of egotism is eradicated --- and *anehadd sabd* resounds --- In the third laav, the mind is filled with divine love --- In the fourth laav, mind has become peaceful --- Har seems so sweet to mind and body --- prabh pleased with me, mind lovingly attuned to har night and day, I have been blessed with the fruit that my mind desired. Naam resounds and resonates as Swami blends with His bride.³⁵

Nari-Purkh

While the laav ceremony imparts the sublime message of the supreme bliss that love for the divine brings to each of us, there are a number of verses that reflect on worldly relationships, their inherent tensions and transient nature. The composition that follows captures the sense of loss at separation due to death of her husband lover by the woman bride: ‘You created the universe and are the giver of pain and pleasure. You created nari and purkh and their love and attachment for the poisonous maya --- When the call comes, one knows it is the command from the true Creator and the nari gets separated from the purkh. [O bride] Akal Purkh is the re-uniter of the separated ones. Not caring for your beauty, my pretty love, the messenger of death does not distinguish between young or old; he tears apart love and affection for he is bound only by command that he is given. So cry, you who have come to mourn; this world is false and fraudulent. Chasing worldly entanglements I too have been defrauded and my husband Lord has forsaken me. In each and every home, are the brides; they gaze upon their handsome husband with love and affection.’³⁶

Though deeper meaning in the above verse is interpreted pertaining to love divine, its gender specific, man-woman– *nari and purkh* – **metaphor, unmistakably conveys the message that in Gurbani, the marriage is between man and woman. It is not yaraanaa. It is not sakhi saheli. It is grihast created by coming together of man and woman, their children and elders.**

That the marriage is between man and woman is clearly reinforced by the Guru when he says that ‘man is conceived within woman; man is born from woman; woman becomes his friend; to woman man is engaged and married; the future generations come through woman. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound.’³⁷ **Men can bond with one another and there can be intimate friendships between women but marital binding can only be between man and woman.**

Human Sexual Variants

³⁵ - har pehilarree laav paravirathee karam dhrirraaeiaa bal raam jeeo --- dharam dhrirrahu har naam dhhaavahu--- har dhoojarree laav sathigur purakh milaeiaa bal raam jeeo--- houmai mail gavaaeiaa bal raam jeeo --- ane hadh sabadh vajaeae --- har theejarree laav man chao bhaeiaa bairaageeaa bal raam jeeo --- har chouthharree laav man sehaj bhaeiaa har paaeiaa bal raam jeeo --- har man thar meet(h)aa laaeiaa--- maerae prabh bhaeiaa anadhin har liv laee man chi(n)dhiaa fal paaeiaa suaamee har naam vajee vaadhhaae – Suhi M IV, p. 773

³⁶ - thudhh sirajee maedhane dhukh sukh dhaevanehaaro naaree purakh sirajiai bikh maaeiaa mohu piaaro -- - sadharrae aaeae thinaa jaaneeaa hukam sachae karathaaro naaree purakh vishhu(n)niaa vishhurriaa maelanehaaro roop n jaanai sohaneeai hukam badhhee sir kaaro baalak biradhh n jaanane thorran haeth piaaro thusee rovahu rovan aae ho jhoot(h) mut(h)ee sa(n)saarae ho mut(h)arree dhha(n)dhhai dhhaavaneaa pir shhoddiarree vidhanakaarae ghar ghar ka(n)th mehaeleeaa roorrai haeth piaarae - Vadhans M I Dakhani, p. 580

³⁷ - Bhandd Janmeeai Bhandd Ninmeeai Bhandd Mangan Veeahu Bhanddahu Hovai Dhosathee Bhanddahu Chalai Raahu Bhandd Muaa Bhandd Bhaaleeai Bhandd Hovai Bandhhaan – Asa M I, p. 473

In the Sikh scriptural literature we find use of six words - *nipounsak*, *kaapurakh*, *baanjh*, *sanddhi*, *hijra* and *khusra* - that reflect on the abnormalities in sexual state of the individual. The words *baanjh* and *sanddhi* are used in relation to females, and the other four mainly for males and sometimes for both sexes. The word *nipounsak* has been used in Akal Ustat and by Bhai Gurdas and the word *kaapurakh* has been used by Guru Arjan. The word *hijra* has been used by Bhai Gurdas. The word *khusra* has been used by Guru Nanak, Bhagat Kabir and Bhai Gurdas.

Let us now look at some quotes that may help us grasp the drift of Sikh view and provide any clues regarding societal attitudes towards or about persons who would have been labeled *nipounsak*, *kaapurakh*, *baanjh*, *sanddhi*, *hijra* or *khusra*.

Dasam Granth says in Akal Ustat that men, women and *nipounsak*, all have been created by God the same way as he has created several other living and sentient beings.³⁸ The verse does **identify *nipounsak* humans created by divine will as separate from and in addition to men and women**, suggesting recognition of existence of a third sex other than male/female binary.

Bhai Gurdas has used the word *purakh nipounsak* for males in conjunction with *baanjh* and *baanjh badhoo* in two separate compositions. This suggests that *purakh nipounsak* [and not *nipounsak* alone] is the equivalent of *baanjh* among females, leaving the word *nipounsak* as an asexual expression for a third sex/gender. Witness the quotes: a *purakh nipounsak* does not know the joy of having progeny nor is a *baanjh* able to envision the peace that love of children brings.³⁹ In a kabit he writes that neither *baanjh badhoo* [barren wife] nor *purakh nipounsak* can have children, asking how you can produce butter by churning water;⁴⁰ both indicating that only *purakh nipounsak* corresponds to *baanjh* or *baanjh* wife i.e. word *baanjh* is for females but *nipounsak* needs to be qualified to be applied to the male gender.

The interpretation of the word *kaapurakh* presents relatively little complexity. It essentially is a word used for a male seen as being low, worthless, timid, impotent or inadequate man. It has been used only once in gurbani in a verse that says: ‘The servant of har does not associate with faithless cynic. One is in the clutches of vice, while the other is in love with Raam. It would be like the illusion of a rider riding a decked up horse, or a *kaapurakh* caressing a woman or tying an ox by the noose and trying to milk it or riding a cow to chase a tiger’⁴¹ - all futile exercises.

Let us now look at the sense that the word *hijra* has been used to convey. We find that *hijra* has only been used by Bhai Gurdas twice in his vaars. In one instance the word comes in the title of pauri 11, vaar 36 which says: *guru heen hijra hai* - hijras are they who have no Guru or in obverse one who does not have the guidance of a guru is as bad as a hijra – such a man is just spinning wheels.

³⁸ - *Nar Naar(i) Nipounsak Jaah(i) Kooe Gann Kinnar Jachchh Bhujang Dooe* – Dasam Granth, Akal Ustat, p. 63. *gann*, demigods protecting Shiva; *jachchh* - a benign or ghostly spirit that may come upon unwary and devour them; *bhujang* - serpent.

³⁹ - *Purakh Nipounsak N Jaanay Banitaa Bilaasa , Baanjh Kahaa Jaanay Soukh Santat Sanayh Kau* – Bhai Gurdas, Kabit 443

⁴⁰ - *Baanjh Badhoo Purakhu Nipounsak N Santat Hui , Salal Biloi Kat Maakhan Pragaas Hai* – Bhai Gurdas, Kabit 445

⁴¹ - *har kae dhaas sio saakath nehee sa(n)g mouhu bikhee ous raam ko ra(n)g man asavaar jaisae thuree seegaaree jio kaapurakh puchaarai naaree bail ko naethraa pae dhuhaavai goo char si(n)gh paashhai paavai* – Gauri M V, p. 198

Then in another pauni he says: ‘**Many are blind and many one-eyed. Many are small eyed and many suffer from night-blindness. Many are with clipped noses, many deaf and many are earless. Many are suffering from goiter, and many have tumors in their organs. Many are maimed ones, bald, without hands and stricken with leprosy. Many are suffering for being disabled, cripple and hunchback. Many *khusray*, many *heejray*, many are dumb and many stammer**, - - away from the perfect Guru they will all remain in the cycle of transmigration.’⁴² In this verse by Bhai Gurdas has mentioned *khusras* and *hijras* with those human beings who had either congenital defects or who otherwise suffered from an incurable or difficult to cure condition. In other words these people were seen as suffering from some manifest or internal malady or inadequacy. His concluding line may imply that many of these people in those times may have been drifting to various gods and goddesses and suggests that absent the true Guru, none of them could achieve liberation.

Guru Nanak has used the word *khusra*, when he asks: what can deep water do to a fish or the vast sky do to a bird or cold do to a stone or married life [ghar vaas, grihast] to a *khusra*? He goes on to give many more examples in verses that follow and concludes that a fool similarly has a nature that does not discern wisdom and everything that he speaks is useless and a waste.⁴³ This suggests that the Guru has likened state of *grihasti* in the life of a *khusra* as of no consequence the same way as the depth of water is to fish or expanse of sky is to a bird or cold weather is to stone.

A verse by Kabir that ‘if celibacy could have saved, why have *khusras* not obtained the state of supreme dignity’⁴⁴ also leaves the position of *khusras* in the realm of speculation. It seems that *khusras* as a group were bereft of any exemplars. Even the accounts of harem guards are more about the illicit liaisons of the rich rather than about the deeds of *khusras* as committed protectors of the virtues of harem ladies.

For women the words – *baanjh* and *sanddhi* – have been used to reflect either their inability to bear children or physical or psychological abhorrence to sex. An example of a verse using *baanjh* has been cited earlier. Witness some verses using the word *sanddhi*: ‘A *sanddhi* woman cannot have a son, nor can women enjoy sex with *khusras*.’⁴⁵ In another verse Bhai Gurdas is empathetic about infertility of *sanddhi*: ‘All the queens conceive and **one or two come out to be barren. For this, no king or queen is to be blamed**; all this is due to the writ of previous births.’⁴⁶ In yet another composition he has included *sanddhi* along with several others who have demerits; witness: ‘Millions of frogs, cranes, conches, desert cacti plants, camel, thorns (javalas) black snakes; silk cotton trees, owls, ruddy sheldrakes, ladles, elephants, barren women; stones, crows, patients, donkeys, black blankets; seedless sesame

⁴² - Kitarhay Annhay Aakheeani Kaytarhiaan Hee Disani Kaanay. Kaytarhiaan Chounhay Dhirani Kitarhay Rateeanay Oukataanay. Kitarhay Nakatay Gounagounay Kitarhay Bolay Bouchay Laanay. Kaytarhiaan Gilharh Galee Angi Rasaulee Vayni Vihaanay. Tounday Baanday Kaytarhay Ganjay Lujay Korhhee Jaanay. Kitarhay Loolay Pingulay Kitarhay Koubay Hoi Kurhaanay. Kitarhay Khousaray Heejarhay Kaytarhiaa Goungay Toutalaanay Gur Pooray Vinu Aavan Jaanay – Vaar 8, Pauri 18

⁴³ - *mashhee thaaroo kiaa karae pa(n)khee kiaa aakaas pathhar paalaa kiaa karae *khusarae* kiaa ghar vaas---* naanak moorakh eaehi gun bolae sadhaa vinaas – Majh M I, p. 143

⁴⁴ - Bindh Raakh Ja Thareeai Bhaae Khusarai Kio N Param Gath Paaee - Gauri Kabir, p. 324

⁴⁵ - Sanddhi Soupoutee N Deesai Khousaray Naali N Raleean Maanai – Bhai Gurdas, Vaar 28, Pauri 21

⁴⁶ - Santati Sabhanaa Raaneeaan Ik Adhakaas Sanddhi Vicharee hai Dosu N Raajay Raaneeai Poorab Likhatu N Mitai Likhaaree - Gurdas, Var 17, Pauri 10

plants, castor, colocynths; buds, oleanders are there (in the world). I have vices/inadequacies of all these in me.⁴⁷

Bhai Gurdas also says: ‘Wearing five garments one may assume the garb of a male person. He may have beautiful beard and moustaches and a slim body. Wielder of a hundred weapons he may be counted among prominent knights. He may be an adept courtier and widely known throughout the country. But without masculinity, of what use is he to a woman?’⁴⁸

From the above broad presentation we can deduce that in Sikhi grihast is created only by the union of man and woman. There is no suggestion that some people were created homosexual abhorring heterosexual relations. Even celibate sanyasi secretly pined for women. There were persons who were born other than man and woman, and there were men and women who suffered from sexual inadequacies or malfunctions but impotence and infertility were seen as a writ of past deeds. Same sex adulation was not an expression of sexual desire for the person of the same sex – it embellished friendship.

We know very little if at all about hijras and khusras and their existence in early Sikh social and religious life. **Hijras and khusras among Sikhs could have been living in the same kind of anonymity then as they do today.** The tenor of these verses therefore should not be read as condemnatory or demeaning but possibly the quotes say the way things were then – these people were stigmatized and the hijras or their gurus obviously could not hold favor with the Sikhs subsumed in devotion of their Gurus and life of grihasti.

GLOBAL TREND

The issue has been actively pursued in several countries in recent years. Same-sex marriages are legal in Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Brazil, Mexico and parts of United States. France has drafted a bill to legalize marriage for gay couples. The British law is expected to allow religious organizations to opt out of performing same-sex marriages if their doctrines do not allow it. Around twenty other countries recognize civil unions and partnerships between same-sex couples with a variety of allowed rights.

There also are a number of countries where same-sex relations are legally prohibited and the penalties awarded range from 2 years to life in prison, deportation or even death penalties for tourists caught engaging in same-sex activity. Examples are: UAE - deportation or death penalty; Barbados, Guyana - Life in prison; Trinidad & Tobago - 25 years; Malaysia - 20 years; Antiqua and Barbuda - 15 years; Kenya, Seychelles, Solomon Islands - 14 years; Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts, St. Vincent - 10 years; Mauritius - 5 years; Morocco, Tunisia - 3 years; Singapore - 2 years. In India unnatural sexual acts continue to be a crime though no prosecutions have taken place in recent years.

U S SITUATION

⁴⁷ - *Dadoo Bagalay Sankh Lakh Ak Javaahay Biseeri Kaalay. Sinbal Ghoughoo Chakaveean Karhachh Hasati Lakh Sanddhee Naalay. Pathar Kaanv Rogee Ghanay Gadahu Kaalay Kanbal Bhaalay. Kaihai Til Booarhi Lakh Akatid Arand Toumay Chitaraalay. Kalee Kanayr Vakhaaneeai Sabh Avagoun Mai Tani Bheehaalay* – Bhai Gurdas, Var 17, Pauri 20

⁴⁸ - *Pahilai Panjay Kaparhay Purasaavaan Vaysu. Mouchhaan Daarhhee Sohanee Bahu Durabal Vaysu. Sai Hadiaaree Sooramaa Pancheen Paravaysu. Maaharu Darh Deebaani Vichi Jaanai Sabhu Daysu. Purakhu N Gani Purakhatu Vinu Kaamani Ki Karaysu* – Bhai Gurdas, Vaar 36, Pauri 11.

We will now look at the American scene in some detail to grasp the nitty-gritty of the issues inherent in this debate. There are no precise statistics on the LGBT population in America. Nevertheless based on an earlier study on sexual behavior of men and women updated in 2005, the National Survey of Family Growth came to conclude that 4.1% of the American population aged 18-44 years was homosexual or bisexual. This would place the current population of the LGBT people at about 12.7 million in the US.⁴⁹ That clearly is not a negligible number.⁵⁰

In 1993 the Hawaii Supreme Court declared the state's prohibition to same-sex couples to be unconstitutional. This gave a fillip to the movement to obtain marriage rights and benefits for such couples. Defenders of the sanctity of heterosexual marriage moved with alacrity and in 1996 the Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA] that explicitly defined marriage in federal law as a union of one man and one woman, was passed. This foreclosed recognition of the same sex unions as marriage by the Federal Government, leaving it to be contested at the state level.

This right was first extended in Massachusetts when the state Supreme Court issued a ruling in November 2003. As of January 2013, same-sex marriage has been recognized in the states of New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Maryland, Iowa and Washington. In addition California, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Rhode Island, Nevada, Oregon and Wisconsin have created legal unions for same-sex couples with varying packages of rights and responsibilities.⁵¹

The situation is fast developing with new complexities being reported as new cases emerge. A Florida judge approved on February 8, 2013 the adoption of a 22-month-old baby girl with three persons, a married lesbian couple and a gay man, listed as parents on birth certificate. The two women have been granted the sole parental rights and the man has been allowed to visit the child though he will not be expected to provide child support. The US Senate has renewed the Violence Against Women Act on February 12, 2013 by a strong 78-22 vote in favor. The reports suggest that gays and lesbians will have equal access to the anti-domestic violence programs of the act. The House has to consider the Act yet.

U S Public Opinion

Public support for legalizing same-sex marriage has grown considerably in about two decades or so. Two polling organizations concluded in June 2011 that majority of Americans had now turned supportive of full marriage rights for all Americans [from 25% in 1996], support being identical among whites and non-whites. President Barack Obama, uncanny in his prescience, declared support for legalization of the same-sex marriage on May 9, 2012.

There are a number of groups lobbying for both sides. For example Family Research Council, a conservative Christian lobbying organization is of the view that attempts to 'join two men

⁴⁹ <http://www.numberof.net/number-of-lgbt-people-in-the-us/>

⁵⁰ Heterosexual sexual identity for 18-44 year age group was 93.6% for women and 95.6% for men. Homosexuals were 1.2% among women and 1.8% men. Women bisexuals were 3.9%, men 1.2%. Source: Special tabulation by NCHS <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/abc_list_s.htm#sexualfemales>

⁵¹ Rights and protections sought are in line with those conferred to U.S. citizens upon marriage by the federal government and include Social Security benefits, veterans' benefits, health insurance, Medicaid, hospital visitation, estate taxes, retirement savings, pensions, family leave, and immigration. Wikipedia & several web sources can be consulted for detail. Also see <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/human-services/same-sex-marriage-overview.aspx>

or two women in 'marriage' constitute a radical redefinition and falsification of institution' of marriage. The Human Rights Campaign supports same-sex marriage because many of these couples 'want to honor their relationship by making a public commitment to stand together in good times and bad'.

The drift of arguments in favor of same-sex marriage runs like this:

- It extends a civil right to a minority group.
- There is nothing that is like marriage except marriage.
- Claims that same-sex couples harm children is inconsistent with scientific evidence which supports conclusions that gay and lesbian people form relationships equivalent to heterosexual relationships; that same-sex parents are no less capable than opposite-sex parents to raise children; and that the children of same-sex parents are no less psychologically healthy and well-adjusted than children of opposite-sex parents.
- Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, Dick Cheney, Al Gore, Joe Biden and Barack Obama have voiced support for legal recognition.

Opposition to the grant of marriage to same-sex couples from sources like the following:

- Southern Baptist Convention says that extending marriage rights to same-sex couples would undercut the conventional purpose of marriage.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Southern Baptist Convention, and National Organization for Marriage argue that children do best when raised by a mother and father, and that legalizing same-sex marriage is, therefore, contrary to the best interests of children.
- Maggie Gallagher of the National Organization for Marriage has raised concerns about the impact of same-sex marriage upon religious liberty and upon faith-based charities in the United States.
- Stanley Kurtz of the Weekly Standard has written that same-sex marriage would eventually lead to the legalization of polygamy and polyamory, or group marriage, in the United States.

Since the debate whether same-sex couples should be entitled to marriage had moved to State legislatures, most states opted to define marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman only as husband and wife as in the DOMA. State Constitutional amendments have been the most successful tactic to prevent legalization of the same sex unions as marriages in those jurisdictions. Twenty-nine states have language that prohibits same sex marriages in their state constitutions.

Nine states and the District of Columbia currently allow same-sex marriages. In case of three - Connecticut, Massachusetts and Iowa - the high courts ruled that the same marriage rights had to be accorded to same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples as per state constitutions. In Vermont, New Hampshire, New York and the District of Columbia legislative bodies passed statutory measures to bring about the changes. Several states have, while limiting a marriage to opposite-sex couples only, expanded the legal rights of spouses in same-sex civil unions and domestic partnerships.

Political Factors at Play in the U S

Societies all over the world are or have entered the era of coalition politics because over time majorities of old have been fractured by splinter groups. Bringing people out of shadows has become a political necessity to win elections with the extreme polarization in the electorate.

The victories are with narrow margins that give an increased leverage to any small, but well organized group. This development could spell some relief from the tyranny of the majority that has bedeviled the ability of democracies to deliver upon the promised protections to the various minorities, so far neglected, mostly quietly suffering in shadows of the glitter that the majority enjoys.

LGBT and those who consider their equal rights as critical to their choice, happen to be one such group. Another example now rocking the American scene is the Hispanics who have been rooting for immigration reform for decades without getting anywhere. Two consecutive losses in the Presidential races have brought the message home. Republican Senator John McCain, who is involved in that effort, said his group aims to provide a path to citizenship for all of those who are in the United States illegally, not just children, as long as border security is tightened. ‘There are 11 million people living in the shadows. I believe that they deserve to come out of the shadows,’ McCain said on Fox News Sunday while Cantor said on NBC's Meet the Press that ‘The best place to begin, I think, is with the children. Let's go ahead and get that under our belt, put a win on the board’ – both on Feb. 10, 2013.

Elizabeth Bernstein and Janet Jakobsen argue that in recent decades the U S politics has been dominated by a political coalition of conservative evangelical Protestants with the Republican Party leading to pronounced conservatism on issues of gender and sexuality. The election of President Obama opened the door to alliance on gender and sexuality between the Democrats and politically moderate evangelical Christians - fraying relations between Republicans and Protestant evangelicals. The primarily libertarian Tea Party has further complicated the role of Christianity in US political alliances.⁵²

In the 2008 Presidential election, Barack Obama found it to be politically imperative to voice his own opposition to gay marriage on religious grounds despite the United Church of Christ, parent church of his denomination, officially supporting gay rights including marriage. In the tight 2012 election scenario, embracing the LGBT demands positioned him favorably with the LGBT groups and moderate social conservatives.

In 2008 California voters overturned a state Supreme Court decision allowing gay marriage by approving Proposition 8 ballot initiative. The U.S. Supreme Court is to take up Proposition 8 on March 26, 2013. An underlying question is whether bans on gay marriage violate the Constitutional guarantee of equal protection under the law. Nearly two dozen states have filed briefs asking the Justices to uphold the measure.

The Supreme Court will also hear arguments on gay marriage provisions of **DOMA** on 27 March, 2013. The Justice Department has issued an amicus brief on 2/23/13 urging Supreme Court to repeal Section 3 of DOMA that bars the federal government from recognizing same sex marriages for health benefits, income tax purposes, and other issues. They also want laws affecting gay people to face increased scrutiny. Congress Republicans, on the other hand, oppose heightened scrutiny for laws affecting gays.⁵³

EMERGING SIKH ACTIVISM ON LGBT ISSUES

⁵² <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/elizabeth-bernstein-janet-r-jakobsen/sex-secularism-and-religious-influence-in-us-politics> 25/8/2010

⁵³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/17/us-usa-court-gaymarriage-idUSBRE91G0BA20130217>

I have seen the demonstrating LGBT groups in India and also read the gushing confessions on the Facebook by young Indian girls and men about their being in relationship with a college girl friend or another man. I am told that **many of the youth think it is just so cool to feel free about their sexuality**. Even though emergence of the LGBT defenders is rather new among Sikhs, a web search shows that activity among some of the newly formed gay Sikh groups in the Western Diasporas has been increasing in the last few years. We will look at the situation in brief.

Sarbat.net

Sarbat, established in 2007, is a UK based Sikh LGBT group. Sarbat takes ‘its name from the final line of the Ardas, Prayer of Supplication, and refers to the Sikh concept of happiness and well-being for all mankind.’ It claims to be a ‘one-stop resource for LGBT Sikhs around the world via our website. We are first and foremost Sikh and our sexuality is secondary to our Sikh identity, just as the sexuality of heterosexual Sikhs is secondary to their Sikh identity.’⁵⁴

An introduction to ‘Being Gay and Sikh in the UK - a personal perspective’ by J. Singh posted on 3 Oct. 2007, on Sarbat.net <<http://sarbat.net/testimonies4.htm>> says that to give an insight into what it means to be Gay, British and Sikh in the early 21st Century, Sarbat.Net has collected the testimonies of a number of LGBT Sikhs in the UK and posted 5 testimonies, 2 from females [ages 44,31] and 3 from males [ages 35,29,26].

Their post on 21 October, 2012 saying ‘our reach is global and we try to reflect that in our online resources and information. We also run regular social meetings (Sarbat Socials) in London and other parts of Britain....’ received 121 likes. This is pretty high.

Their posting dated October 23, 2012 states: ‘Thanks for joining us for a lunch social in Reading, Berkshire --- Please refrain from posting anything offensive, inflammatory and irrelevant on this page. For those who weren’t able to join in, one topic discussed was – “The role of LGBT Sikhs in Britain – now and in the future”. Why don’t you leave your opinion(s) here?’

LGBT Sikh

LGBT SIKH is a Yahoo Group, founded in June 2007 and has 43 members. Their site shows little activity – there are some trash messages, some postings of essays by Anant Singh and a couple of messages concerning gays.

A sample of comments showed three Sikhs [Amarpreet Singh, Ishar Singh Narang · New Delhi and Kamalpreet Singh · Administrative Manager at Preet properties] pleading that homosexuality is unnatural and forbidden in Sikhs.

Three Singh named persons were supportive [Robert Singh Emery - School of Hard Knocks, Danka Singh - Dublin, Ireland and Jaskooner Singh, University of the West of Scotland] with comments like: Two people of the same sex on a committed relationship should be allowed to

⁵⁴ In a letter addressed to Lord Singh on March 29, 2012 protesting that the Sikh faith is not how Lord Singh of the Network of Sikh Organizations has sought to portray it in his comments on Radio 4.

get married in the religious term. Love is between 2 people or 2 beings.. and is not a majority rules deal.

Canadian LGBT group reacts

Balwant Singh Gill the spokesperson for 39 Sikh temples in BC was reported to have made a comment in Vancouver Sun's Dec 15, 2007 story, "Canada's Changing Moral Landscape," that http://www.xtra.ca/public/Vancouver/Sikh_leaders_antigay_remarks_ignite_furore_4136.aspx: "I hate homosexuality. Most Sikhs believe homosexuality is unnatural and you can't produce kids through it. And, secondarily, no major religion allows it."

These remarks unleashed a firestorm within the Canadian queer community who accused the Sikhs as a community to be homophobic. In the uproar following publication of his remarks, the South Asian media Channel M Punjabi News, Radio India and Bulland Awaaz program on Co-op Radio wrote editorials condemning his comment.

Caught in the eye of the storm Gill issued an apology on Dec 17. Trikone Vancouver's Fatima Jaffer however said that while the hurt felt by the queer community is understood, advocating across-the-board generalization and painting of another minority community or religion as homophobic by them is shortsighted and dangerous.

Blogspot - Queeristan

Why Sikhism Is Naturally Amenable to Gay Marriage (Sikhism and Homosexuality, Part I) http://queeristan.blogspot.in/2008/12/why-sikhism-is-naturally-amenable-to_09.html posted 12.09.2008 on Queeristan Blogspot makes the case that while Sikhism is explicit that all sentient beings are equal --- will not bar a specific group (LGBT's) from certain rights --- a gay Sikh can either pretend to be straight and get married, or come out and get married to someone of the same sex --- Denying LGBT's the right to marry, adopt, and participate in the community doesn't seem to fit quite right.

It received 15 comments. Some interesting extracts were as follows:

- The west has used religious practice as a method of and justification to colonial rule and now queers want to use 'othered' religious practices as a method of and justification to queerness. It feels slightly imperial, especially since these seem to be western-based attempts to justify western queer identities.
- .. perhaps an interesting place to explore is Sikh Masculinity and how homosexuality might threaten it...
- --- this blog --- is disturbing and has a malicious undertone --- I myself am a Queer Sikh and after vast amounts of research and consultation with different members in the community. I have realized that this battle of marriage rights is one of which takes away from the larger and forever on-going battle of the existence and authenticity of Sikhi in its entirety.
- ... i cant picture a gay singh -- because singhs are supposed to be the fighters...strong manly..with shastras.. but i dont think sikhi principles are against the gays!
- im straight, im sikh, im male, and im for LBGT rights.
- I am a 35yr old Sikh man who is Proud to be GAY. --- If u were living in India or Punjab, going out on a date with a girl was a no go, so what did the guys do for pleasure, used each other --- I came out 2 my family 16yrs ago. They married me off. I have lived a lie since then. I told my wife -- She chose to stay married for names

sake(isat). -- I was born GAY, my earliest memory of fancying a dude was when i started primary school, 7yrs old.

- I am Sikh, gay and proud. --From what I know about Sikhism, Guru Gobinda believed that one must stand of his or her rights. I am sure he will proud if a gay person fought for his rights, even if he died for it. That would be a real Sikh according to me.
- --- I am tired of being who I am, tired of living this stupid life, trying 2 fit in.
- Sorry, sikhism is not amenable to homosexuality --- most religions tolerate homosexuality, but few are "amenable" to it, sorry
- I'm gonna insult your very core because you seem to attempt to insult the very core of the Panth and Punjab.
- I have been in the armed forces. I have fought for my country. I also had NO CHOICE about being gay.

With the reality of gays being a very small minority among the miniscule and dispersed Sikh Diaspora, one Jasvinder <<http://gayblackcanada.com/2009/11/04/interesting-gay-sikh-website/>> asked on Interesting Gay Sikh Website: ‘Anyone know where I might be able to meet a gay sikh man. Even a sikh gay dating website in Australia.’ A similar request to ‘shed some light on how to ask a gay guy out, there are many gay Sikhs around, our life is a hell!’ was responded to by PenduPrincess & MizKaurista. <<http://www.sikhnet.com/news/finding-love-lgbt-sikh>>.

The gist of their response sums up possibly the truth about the status of LGBT among Sikhs: ‘If you’re gay and Punjabi --- How will you even find out where the other available men are? Amidst the Humvees and testosterone filled bhangra competitions? --- If you haven’t come out, things are going to be even harder for you --- But if your friends know you’re gay and it’s not a secret, people will eventually trickle your way --- it’s possible that you’ll get rejected a lot- even though you’re 100% sure the dude you just asked out likes dudes --- if Waheguru made you, then your counterpart exists too. If it’s a gay Sikh you want, he’s out there’.

An article Gay Sikh <<http://www.wahegurunet.com/gay-sikh>> makes the arguments that:

- Homosexuality not being mentioned in the Guru Granth Sahib suggests that Gurus considered it to be inconsequential.
- Homosexual behavior is common within nature and among animals.
- Individual soul is genderless and supreme soul is also genderless.
- Lavan are non-gender specific, and so same-sex marriage is possible within Sikhism.
- Sikh philosophy is a liberal and all encompassing. Punjabi and Indian culture is extremely conservative and homophobic.
- Gristhi Jeevan applies equally to same-sex relationships by adopting children.

Experiences of a Gay Sikh

A blogger Gaysikhin has written a series of Blogs on his experiences as a gay Sikh. He lives in the UK and some of his comments relate to his experiences when visiting family in India. Extracts from his blogs are given below:

What’s the word for gay? 03 Aug 2010

One clear memory that I have is of a discussion between two of my many cousins, one who had always lived in India and the other who had always lived in the U.K. My British cousin asked the Indian one what the word for gay was in Punjabi. He either did not understand what she meant or feigned stupidity. Homosexuality is a taboo topic for Sikhs. As a gay sikh I feel that is time that me and others like me made our voices heard.

My experiences as a gay teenager at school 04 Aug 2010 [2 Comments]

I was thirteen. I had just about to start at a new school. I was nervous but I knew some the pupils there and had a very kind mentor in his last year of school. Then the unthinkable happened, my mentor came out as gay.

When did you first realize that you were gay? 06 Aug 2010 [3 Comments]

I was going to turn 19 in 2 days time. I finally came to terms with the fact that I am gay. At the age of 13 I had my first real crush and I loved a guy. He was a handsome musician friend of mine. I found my feelings incompatible with both my faith and culture. I prayed for God to take away what I saw as a curse.

What was my first experience coming out? 18 Aug 2010 [2 Comments]

A few months after I came to terms with my sexuality I felt that I couldn't live a lie with one of my good friends any longer. I told her that I was gay. I was so scared. Her reaction was to say 'if you think that this means that you're not still my friend, then you're wrong.'

My experience coming out to my brother 20 Aug 2010 [6 Comments]

After going to an LGBT youth group once I decided that I would not come out to my family until I had financial independence --- Finally, I just told him: 'Things are different for you because you're not gay.' He later told me that he knew a great many gay people and I didn't have to tell our parents until I was ready.

'That's so gay!!' 24 Aug 2010

I did not want to be gay. I just wanted to be a normal kid. What I came to realize is that when you are the only Indian, let alone Sikh, at school you are always going to be different --- Gay people identified themselves as gay saying that 'I'm gay' means 'I'm as Good As You.'

Gay adoption and Sikhism 29 Aug 2010 1

Contradiction within Sikh community is that most accept the gay community but would not accept LGBT Sikhs nor would they accept the notion of a gay couple raising a child.

Gay Sikhs and straight marriage 04 Sep 2010

The Forced Marriage Unit in the UK which is a part of the Foreign Office reported a sharp rise in the number of gay men being forced to marry to cover up the family's feelings of shame. Let me make it clear that forced marriage is illegal. As a religious Sikh I feel that it is wrong to lie to oneself about one's sexuality but more dangerous still is the possibility of hurting the innocent husband or wife.

Sikh Feminist Research Institute

The Sikh Feminist Research Institute [SAFAR] was set up in Canada in 2011. They root for 'A world where the Sikh Gurus' principles of egalitarianism and empowerment are realized for all, regardless of ability, caste, class, ethnicity, gender, race, sex, and **sexual orientation**, by bringing expansive revival, attention, voice and praxis to the feminist values and egalitarian politics inherent within Sikhi'.

The Institute is in the process of refining their approaches to set the boundaries of searches to serve their objectives. Since they are the only Sikh organization whose canvass includes the study of intersection of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation with Sikhism, it would be interesting to watch how this translates into their work and if it helps shed more light on these relatively unexplored areas in Sikh studies. It may be mentioned here that while some work has been done on the status of women among Sikhs, the subject of sexual orientation has not been within the domain of such writings.

Sher Vancouver

Founded by Alex Sangha in 2012 to offer support service to Sikh gays and their friends and families, it wants Sikh community to be more accepting and tolerant. Sher Vancouver along with Trikone, the South-Asian Gay group and Namaste, a Hindu Gay group was the first Sikh-specific gay group to march at Vancouver's Pri Parade on June 14, 2012. Lukewarm interest from the South-Asian community has meant that the group ran about \$300 short of the \$1,800 needed for their float.

SIKH WRITINGS SUPPORTING GAY RELATIONS

Some sense of lay Sikh response to Gay issues would be evident from the sampling of posted comments in the preceding narrative. In addition, there have been a number of writings in support of gays by Gay Sikhs and those Sikhs who support their causes. The writers generally display a good grasp of Sikhi, even if their interpretations seem colored to serve their cause. They are vocal about their protestations about fidelity to Sikhi and seem to be well motivated advocates of their views. We give below a few examples:

We Are One: LGBT Rights and Guru Nanak's Legacy of Inclusion - SONNY SINGH⁵⁵
<http://www.sikhnet.com/news/we-are-one-lgbt-rights-and-guru-nanaks-legacy-inclusion> [an op-ed published in Huffington Post on Nov. 10, 2011]

Guru Nanak saw --- a society brimming with hypocrisy, intolerance, caste oppression and sexism, all in the name of God --- We Sikhs pride ourselves on being champions of equality and justice, inspired by the legacy of Guru Nanak --- I was quite disappointed when the World Sikh Council --- lobbied President Obama to uphold the so-called "Defense of Marriage Act" (DOMA), a federal law that defines marriage as only between a man and woman. After the Obama Administration took a principled stance against DOMA in February, the World Sikh Council went so far as to co-sign a letter of protest to House Speaker John Boehner denouncing his decision --- it is nevertheless disheartening to see a

⁵⁵ Sonny Singh is a musician and writer based in Brooklyn, NYC. His blogs appear frequently on Huffington Post and The Langar Hall.

Sikh institution -- representing the legacy of Guru Nanak -- aligning itself with such reactionary and anti-gay ideology, when Sikhism itself is a freedom-seeking, loving, open-minded philosophy and way of life --- I find myself frustrated by the discriminatory actions of some who claim to speak for my community --- as if to imply that all Sikhs are heterosexual or that we're only concerned about some people's oppression and suffering, but not all --- we have sometimes forced LGBT Sikhs to choose between their religion and their hearts- -- Sarbat da Bhala means working for the welfare and well-being of all people. This is a spiritual obligation for us Sikhs --- Just as Guru Nanak said hundreds of years ago, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim," perhaps today we can also say, "There is no straight, there is no gay." Indeed, his message was ultimately that we are all One.

The post was received favorably - some comments being:

We know wise words when we see them! [Kanwaljit Singh · Waterloo]

What drew me to Sikhism is the inclusion, the rejection of caste, the recognition of the one light in all --- It makes me very sad to read that the World Sikh Council has sided with rejection, exclusionism, and hatefulness. They do not speak for me. They do not speak for many Sikhs that I know either. As Sikhs we spend much of our time educating others about Sikhs in order to combat hatred and misunderstanding. How can we be a part of that which we fight against? [Parvati Kaur Covarrubias · Oklahoma State University · 6 · Like]

bravo! wahe guru! [Sirgun Kaur Khalsa · Phoenix, Arizona]

Why LGBT Sikhs should come out - Sukhdeep Singh⁵⁶

Posted 7/5/ 2012 < <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/blogs/why-lgbt-sikhs-should-come-out> >

Makes a persuasive one argument case and has received a number of comments by Sikhs and Hindus. See the extracts below:

Sikhism as a religion is very tolerant and advocates equality. However, Punjabi culture is often not so tolerant --- To be precise, Sikh religion and Punjabi culture are not always the same --- Now, when a LGBT Sikh fears coming out, fears the society and hides his identity, he is going against the very things that the Gurus taught. Guru Gobind Singh Ji never wanted his followers to hide their identity, yet, when you live in the closet, that is the exact thing that you do- hide your true identity --- If anything, Sikh religion is not against alternate sexuality, neither does it preach a person to live in fear or hide his identity. It is when you, as a Sikh, are living in closet, living in fear that you are going against the religion, against the preaching of the Gurus. [Responses: supporting – 5Hindu, 3Sikh; opposing – 1Hindu, 2Sikh]

SIKH WRITINGS OPPOSING SAME SEX RELATIONS

Understandably Sikhs have been engaged in the ongoing debate in societies where legislative measures to sanction same sex relations have been on the anvil. Most Sikh organizations and Sikh writers have spoken against performing of same sex weddings in Gurdwaras. Those of the Sikhs who are engaged in electoral politics have been divided between the compulsions of ground realities and the Akal Takht directive. Here is a sampling:

⁵⁶ Sukhdeep Singh is from Queens and lives in Manhattan, NYC. His posts mostly on gay issues appear on the Gaylaxy Magazine.

Sikh View About Homosexuality & Same Sex Marriages - Gurmukh Singh⁵⁷

In a comprehensive though brief review [Sikh Chic, 2012] he makes the points that 'It is not surprising that UK Prime Minister David Cameron's adviser on family issues, Reg Bailey is reported to have said that "the proposed reforms would risk polygamy and marriage between siblings." This is a wake-up call to the human society.' He also emphasizes that:

- It is the religious and traditional Sikh view that only the heterosexual family-unit can provide all the basic needs of growing up children.
- Sikh teachings caution men and women against over indulgence in sex oriented thought and activity (kaam).
- --- it would be against the spirit of Sikh religion to discriminate against anyone for having homosexual bias, by barring him or her from the Gurdwara --- congregation or-- (langar).

Concerns over the Sanctity of Marriage in a Gurdwara - Lord Singh⁵⁸

Extracts are below:

Marriages with people of other religions

It would clearly be against Sikh teachings to shun them. It would be equally wrong for the lavan ceremony to be debased by pretence. A short-term solution, put forward for possible consideration by gurdwara committees, is for the couple to have a civil marriage followed by a reception with friends and relatives at a suitable venue, which could be preceded with a short blessing for the future health and happiness of the couple.

Same sex Relationship

--- the use of the word 'marriage' in same sex relationships is clearly inappropriate as would be any celebration of such a relationship in a gurdwara. Gurdwara management could in the spirit of 'sarbat ka bhalla' however, consider giving those who enter into such a partnership some sort of blessing for their health and wellbeing at a reception following a civil ceremony.

Other writings

Another thoughtful short exposition is presented in Homosexual Unions by Charnjit Singh Bal on sikh Sundesh.net.

An Article titled 'Same Sex Unions' by I J Singh was posted on Sikhnet on March 2, 2011. It made the following important arguments/points:

- The question of "gay marriages" will neither go away, nor should it.
- While the global trend is to allow same sex unions, the Akal Takht jathedar - egged on by other members of the Canadian Parliament - quickly censured the Canadian law and exhorted Sikhs to reject it.
- Marriages are now increasingly driven by love or become mergers dictated by other considerations, where the roles of the individuals are negotiable and flexible.
- There is no basis for denying gays and lesbians civil licenses.

⁵⁷ Gurmukh Singh is closely associated with British Sikh Consultative Forum and is the Convenor of The Sikh Missionary Society UK Advisory Panel. He writes frequently on issues affecting Sikhs.

⁵⁸ Indarjit, Lord Singh of Wimbledon, is a British journalist and broadcaster, editor of the Sikh Messenger and a frequent presenter of the "Thought for the Day" on BBC Radio 4's Today program.

- Most people absolutely want the imprimatur of their religion before they feel decently married. A religion may deny a religious wedding ceremony for same sex couples in a church or a gurdwara while at the same time insisting on equal rights for them in society.
- Gay Sikhs should not be discriminated against in the gurdwara or outside of it from any activity in the gurdwara in any capacity – managerial; preparing and serving of the parshad or langar; reading from Guru Granth or in leading the ardaas.
- Homosexuality should be accepted and tolerated, but not necessarily held as a laudatory model lifestyle.

SUMMING UP THUS FAR

Overall

The main points emerging from the above narration are that in the overall:

- Over the last several decades the West has seen movements for gender equality that have led to major reforms for women's rights and other minority groups that had been the subject of discrimination in the past. This has triggered demands from the LGBT community for de-criminalization of homosexuality and equal rights for the same sex unions. This movement has gained momentum in the last couple of decades.
- The percentage of homosexuals/LGBT in the Western societies could be around 4 % based on American experience. This gives them strong political muscle in countries where politics has become highly competitive and even small voting blocs have come to acquire disproportionate clout.
- The availability of instant communication and the social media has helped in enabling such groups to reach out and leverage their influence through creating coalitions with other groups dedicated to alleviation of discrimination and defense of civil rights.
- Consequently several countries have in recent years passed legislations to recognize the same sex unions as partnerships, eligible for benefits close to married couples, and some have recognized these relationships as marriages.
- Indian tradition recognizes existence of the third sex and India now has a growing gay community. There is, however, not enough direct evidence relating to the practice of committed long lasting gay relationships.
- Most religious groups have always preached marriage to be a relation between a man and a woman to create and nurture a family as intended by the divine. This position is now changing and some churches have started to allow marriage of same sex couples. Other religious groups, including Sikhs in the Diaspora are beginning to feel the need to explore this question in view of the trend or specific experiences.

The Sikh Situation

- **No study has been done on prevalence of homosexuality among Sikhs in Punjab or in the military nor is there any information about the *hijra* and trans-sexual Sikhs: what happens to them – do they stay with families or end up with *hijra* communities and are thus seen as non Sikhs?**
- It is likely that most of the homosexuals among Sikhs are in fact those who have had homosexual liaisons before getting married. Some may continue with such liaisons in their married life too as bi-sexuals. **It is not known if there are any serious issues with such bi-sexual individuals or their marriages.**
- Sikhs can be expected to have their share of gays. Even though their numbers seem to be very small, their presence is becoming more open in the West among the youth.

- Gay Sikh activists seem well informed on their faith and represent their positions as possible of acceptance through interpretations of gurbani that differ from traditionally accepted versions to those supportive of their views. They have maintained that they are Sikhs first, like the heterosexual Sikhs.
- Comments on the web indicate that the **gay Sikhs who have come out in the open are more likely homosexuals and not those who may belong to third sex variants.**
- A couple of gay Sikhs in the West have tried the web to locate gay Sikh partners for dating. There was no response.
- Web search turned up only one male same sex union between a white and a desi Sikh <<http://princeofpunjab.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/same-sex-anand-karaj-sikh-marriage.html?m=1>>. The search so far has also turned up only one instance of Sikh female same sex union. Their union is reported to have split in days.⁵⁹
- In spite of the internet buzz, **same sex marriage option does not seem to have any real momentum at this point among Sikh gays. Its ability however to cause media ripples should not be underestimated.**
- Akal Takht has declared same sex unions as against Sikh ethos, Sikh code and nature and has ruled out its recognition as marriage. Sikh organizations in the UK, Canada and the US have lobbied against the legislation to permit such unions.

WHAT CAN WE DO GOING FORWARD

Sikhs in India that I have talked to express surprise that same sex marriage could be an issue that needs attending to among Sikhs. In the Diaspora the situation is different. Firstly the gay rights movement in those societies is pursuing their causes very aggressively and the public opinion as well as political support is turning in their favor. With many legislative measures on the anvil, Sikhs need to articulate their position as a faith group in interfaith discussions, civil rights meetings and the like. In addition **the community has to manage the effects of the increasing activism by gay rights supporters on the youth and take care of issues that may get raised by gay Sikhs and their Sikh supporters.**

One of the visible impacts of the gay activism is the evidence of increasing numbers of Sikhs coming out into the open about their sexual orientation. In time it can give rise to requests for the same sex unions with one Sikh partner being performed in the Gurdwaras. In fact it has been known for some time that such requests have been received by some Gurdwaras.

Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti, Jathedar Akal Takht issued a directive under the seal of Akal Takht urging the Sikh sangat not to allow the holding of same-sex marriage ceremonies in any gurdwara of the world. He said Sikh code of conduct did not allow such marriages. The directive described the move of Government of Canada to introduce same-sex marriage bill as ‘anti-Gurmat’ trend that had no place in Sikhism. SGPC general secretary Sukhdev Singh Bhaur had earlier urged the Sikh MPs in Canada to take stand as per the Sikh maryada.⁶⁰

The direction by Jathedar Akal Takht came in connection with legislation being considered in Canada. The news report <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2005/03/28/sikhguy->

⁵⁹ While reading the comments on News Report ‘Senior Jew and Sikh fight gay marriage’ dated 20 March, 2013, I flipped over to the Facebook page of a commentator, Ranveer Singh from Mumbai and found that he had posted having got married to one Sabb Singh on March 29, 2013. An undated entry on page of Sabb Singh confirmed the relationship to be per the choice of Sabb Singh.

⁶⁰ Extracted from report filed by Varinder Walia, Tribune News Service, January 16, 2005

<050328.html>> dated 29 March, 2008, said that Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti had admonished Sikh-Canadian MPs to block the gay marriage bill in the Parliament.

Our preceding broad based discussion is leading into conclusions that are in conformity with the directions issued by the Akal Takht regarding not allowing gay union ceremonies to be performed in the Gurdwaras. We however **feel that measures intended for amelioration of the situation that the gays have been placed in for centuries and are not in conflict with Sikh religious ethos could be supported on merits by the resident Sikh representatives.**

We should clearly understand that our deliberation is only about those persons who are men or women as normally understood, notwithstanding any curable or incurable sex malfunction or orientation that they may suffer from. We should also remember that Sikhi is a faith that commends devotees to be joined in grihast relationship through marriage.

A married Sikh couple may not be able to beget a child for reasons associated with husband or wife. In earlier times usually the men took another wife. There now are various remedies that advances in science have made possible. The wife can be artificially impregnated with the semen from her husband or if wife is not able to conceive, it is possible to get a surrogate woman play the mother using the egg from the wife impregnated artificially by the semen from the husband. In practice these choices should not pose a problem because taking help of medication, prayer, seeking blessing et al. is not prohibited in Sikhi. In case these measures do not succeed or cannot be implemented, the married couple can adopt a child. Adoption can also be an option if either of the spouses dies leaving the other spouse childless.

Continuity can come even if the marriage paradigm is not followed. Consummation of casual sexual relations between unmarried men and women can lead to conception and cause a child to be born. On the other hand the couples can belong to the same sex, making any continuity by way of their biological union impossible even with medical assistance or prayer et al. **If they desire to create a feel of continuity, their options are only for one of them to use a third person as a donor for a female couple or surrogate plus donor for a male couple, creating a web of secret or open but complex relationships. Thus the possibilities can be many but they do not fit into the Sikh way of life because a marriage is clearly between a man and a woman.** Adoption is a legal process and its religious significance is limited. It is always a possibility for any person, individually or as a couple or even a group.

SGGS and other Sikh scriptural literature does mention nipounsak, hijra and khusra - some of whom may be born as neither male nor female. Even though I have not come across a Sikh hijra in my entire life, I am hard put to believe that no children with such characteristics have ever been born to Sikh parents. **If such cases now come to light my suggestion would be that we take those born in the third sex category as part of divine dispensation and help them to live their lives in Sikhi.**

I would suggest that we keep an eye at the direction of changes that other faith groups may be contemplating regarding this subject. There is a broad recognition that change is coming. It is evidenced even in Evangelical congregations where devoted gay couples are seen standing at the communion table, participating in church leadership, and being responsible parents. On the other hand “the heterosexual life style” in many manifestations is trashing the institution of marriage. Many Evangelicals are now placing stewardship and love before law and beyond

convention.⁶¹ It is difficult to say how much the Sikh marriages of the future will continue to hold up to the examples of their forbears. The signs are they may not.

Let us therefore at least try and think the likely problems through. Here is then a catchall list of some likely ‘what if’ questions that come to mind with suggested answers. Let me add that the suggestions made flow from preceding discussions and any constructive comments would be welcome:

- **Should we join this debate? - We should.** At the same time, we do not have to overly worry about the legislative measures being pushed in the Western societies as long as religious groups are left free to take their own decisions for their faith group.
- What do we do if a request is received for **same sex wedding** to be performed from a Sikh couple **in a Gurdwara**? How about if one of the couple is non Sikh? **Refusal** in both cases **would be a perfectly valid response.**
- If the request is for reception for the same sex couple within the Gurdwara premises to celebrate their civil union [if facilities for such celebrations are offered], refusal again would be in order.
- If the request is for *akhand paathh* or *langar* or *ardas* to seek blessing of the Guru for their same sex union, what do we do? Yes, except that **ardas by sangat seeking Guru’s blessing is offered only in cases where the object is not in conflict with Sikhi.** In this case **ardas to bless their sexual union will not be in order.** Do we ask for *summat* for them? Yes, to guide them to understand *hukam* and deal with their notions of not conforming in words that inspire introspection and not cause hurt.
- If a known homosexual person requests for conversion to become a Sikh – accept and persuade to live per *reht*.
- Do we socialize with them? – Yes, if we like. Gurdwaras must not treat them different than any others who are not living per the *reht*.
- Do we lobby for them? Yes for civil rights, justice and civic non discrimination.
- Do we give them time to speak in the Gurdwara? On gurbani, yes; defending their life style or promoting it, no.
- How about *seva*, *kirtan*, *paathh* – see no issue except that their choice as a *panj pyara* could be problematic.
- Leadership roles in Gurdwaras and Sikh institutions – no harm, if *sangat* thinks they are fit for the task.
- Participation in **interfaith work, conferences on Sikh issues, joining in Jathas – yes, as ordinary Sikhs, not as gay Sikh or any other group not representative of mainstream**, unless the meet is about looking at internal diversity etc and disclosure of such identity is required.
- Should we try to reform them? – no, it is a matter best dealt between them and their families and friends; *sangat* or Gurdwaras should come in if asked and that too in an empathetic and helpful manner.
- Is unnatural sex a sin in Sikhi? – it is not mentioned. In any case, **in Sikhi the stress is more on recognizing failure to live per hukam and reht on one’s own and to try and mend choices going forward. We should acknowledge our weaknesses and seek/accept guidance to improve, where possible.**
- Should we help gays to connect with other gay Sikhs? – that may be better than their being shunned or shut off.

⁶¹ Martin Marty, Evangelicals Change and Make Changes, Sightings, April 15, 2013

CONCLUDING

This subject is a difficult call. We can take an inflexible position that same sex unions are not in keeping with Sikh ethos and not expect any serious protests. There is no evidence that this subject had ever come up as an issue in the entire Sikh history. It has now – otherwise Akal Takht Jathedar would not have intervened.

Since then there has been no organized attempt to discuss, debate, critique or oppose the Akal Takht directive, nor has the issue come up as yet in a Gurdwara in India or Abroad. Yet many voices from the Diaspora like Sonny Singh, Gurmukh Singh, Lord Singh, Rajwant Singh, I J Singh and yours truly have spoken. They could be over-reacting or they could have their ears to the ground or may be the issue is not quite clearly understood and settled.

Sikhs in India are quiet though things seem to have happened in Amritsar and Mumbai. Part of the reason for the seeming apathy could be the very nature of this subject – it is distasteful.

It is however difficult to accept that Sikhs have been free of this deviant behavior or births of such persons in their history. Granted, we do not see them –that does not mean they did not or do not exist. Our search shows they are there but we cannot create a complete profile of their population demographics, spread and attitudes based on this sketchy work.

Perhaps we should do well to try and think ahead a bit. The bullet list presented above, as is as or as modified, could be a useful guide. We may also keep in mind that the Guru has said that ‘within this body are two siblings, vice and virtue. Joining the two together, the universe was produced. Subduing both, and entering into the home of the One, through the Guru's teachings, we are absorbed in intuitive peace.’⁶² We all have our share of *guns* and *avguns* – merits & demerits – the latter mostly hidden from public view but not from us only if we are willing to look within.

We have to handle this developing situation in a manner that encourages us and our fellow Sikhs to renounce *avgun* and seek *gun* knowing that committing *avguns* would only lead us to regret and repentance. Unless we know the difference between good and evil we will keep on sinking into dirt, again and again.⁶³ That again is Guru-speak. I am only paraphrasing it.

Let us therefore ponder together and collectively chart the course going forward. What has been suggested is one view and can be improved. That however will happen only if we get involved and talk about it in an empathetic manner, restraining our judgmental instincts. That said, it is now up to you all.

ooooo0ooooo

Prof. Nirmal Singh, USA
11 March, 2013
Edited: 16 April, 2013

⁶² - *kaaeiaa a(n) dhar paap pu(n) dhue bhaae dhue mil kai srisatt oupaaee dhovai maar jae eikath ghar aavai guramath sehaj samaavaniaa* – Majh M III, p. 126

⁶³ - *avagun shhodd gunaa ko dhhaavahu kar avagun pashhuthaahee jeeo sar apasar kee saar n jaanehi fir fir keech buddaahee jeeo* – Sorath M I, p. 598