

The Khalsa March— Sri Ganganagar Combats Female Foeticide Meeta SINGH (India)

Sri Ganganagar is a border town of Rajasthan famous for its prosperity and fertile lands. It is called the granary of Rajasthan, the largest state in India. Sadly it is also infamous for the worst girl child sex ratio in Rajasthan; a dismal 850 girls to a thousand boys in the 0-6 year age group. The majority of the town's population is comprised of Sikhs who have the worst girl child sex ratio at 786 girls to a thousand boys. But the Sikh community in Sri Ganganagar has vowed to turn the tide.

Under the leadership of Sardarni Kuldeep Kaur, the seventy four year young woman community leader of Jaipur, several steps towards combating female sex selective abortions have been taken up by the community. Following a workshop to sensitize community leaders, organized by Rajasthan University Women's Association (RUWA) and a non profit international organization IFES with support from USAID in October 2005, Kuldeep Kaur has become achieve concerning this issue. Since then she has moved from strength to strength. It all started with forming women's community groups for worship in each of the 20 *gurudwaras* (Sikh temples of worship) of the city of Jaipur, the state capital. Each month these women's groups meet in one of the 20 *gurudwaras*, discuss the issue and get people to pledge against sex selection and female sex selective abortions. Kaur took this initiative further and liaised with the Sikh *sangat* (congregation) in Sri Ganganagar, where in November 2006 the community organized a mass wedding. At this function, nearly 1000 guests and the 20 newly wed couples were administered an oath against sex selection and sex selective abortions.

Taking this another step forward, the Sikh community of Sri Ganganagar organised a Khalsa March on February 25, 2007 and dedicated it to combating pre birth elimination of females and erasing this evil from society. It was a unique opportunity to witness community mobilization at the grassroots level and on such a massive scale.

Huge crowds gathered at the Baba Deep Singh Gurudwara, the holy temple of the Sikhs and the starting point for the March. The March was led by the head priests who, at the behest of the community, travelled from Nanaksar Gurudwara in the Punjab and the Patna Sahib Gurudwara in Bihar several hundreds of kilometers away.

The cavalcade was lead by a huge flower bedecked, transparent glass walled coach, called the *Palki* (pronounced paa-l-ki) on its platform covered in orange satin rested the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs. A young priest sat beside this platform and gently swayed "*chor sahib*", a sort of wand with a white candy floss like tuft at one end, side to side over the holy book as a mark of reverence. A group of singers "*raagis*" sang hymns from the holy book to the accompaniment of soft lilting music.

As the hymns softly faded, a strong confident voice was heard on the public address system. This was Tejinder Singh Timma, a young community leader, entreating the crowds to wipe away the shame of the community and stop killing unborn girls in the wombs. The clerics too addressed their flock and quoted from the Holy Book, the Commands of the Gurus, stating that anyone committing the killing of girls is a criminal and should be ostracized from society.

The cavalcade halted at several villages from Paanch ji Saharanwali to Dhalewada to Tatarsar to Rattewala to Padampur and so on covering nearly 25 villages in all, across a stretch of a little more than 120 kilometers. In each of these villages, there was the same impassioned plea against pre birth elimination of females by the community leaders and the holy priests; the same warm welcome by the village dwellers and the signing of oath papers to never commit or support female sex selective abortions. The March lasted through the entire day. The procession finally reached full circle once again before dispersing off. At the end of the day, an astounding 52,300 people had signed pledges committing never to indulge in sex selection themselves nor allowing it to happen.

This huge public commitment augurs well for the unborn girl child. Of course the real test of this commitment will only be reflected four years later in the 2011 census. However, for the present scenario to change, the community will have to pull its act together urgently and effectively to stop sex selection as well as to enhance the value of the girl child.