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**REFLECTING THE LIFE EXPERIRNCE OF DR. (MRS) JANAK PALTA MCGILLIGAN AS INDIAN  
BAHAI WOMAN TO UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT OF SERVICE**

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**Abstract:** This paper tries to examine the concept of service through the life experience of one Indian Baha'i woman, a 'pioneer' Dr. (Mrs) Janak Palta McGilligan who has devoted herself to serve the Indian community, especially for empowering women and children. I relate to this research as I share the religious roots, and the aim of life that is service to humankind especially women and children that Dr. Janak has. This paper is based on my thesis which is literature based with interview method to elaborate the concept of service through interprets the case study of Dr. (Mrs) JanakPaltaMcGilligan. Dr. Janak is an Indian woman who has experienced the conflict between Hindu and Muslim. She was a Hindu woman and grew up in mixed religious - Hinduism and Sikhism- atmosphere. Dr. Janak accepted Baha'i faith, left her family/ home, and professional career as a research fellow, and moved to Indore as a pioneer for empowering rural and tribal women. She found and recognized the aim and the path of life and sprang action. The new way was full of difficulties and problems, but with the flame of love that bright in her heart, she could pass all obstacles. In this paper I seek to understand two different kinds of *seva* practiced in PPS (Patit Pavan Sangathana) and SVM (Sadhu Vaswani Mission) with comparing the concept of service with few Baha'i writings. I then focus on my understanding and finding about the concept of pioneer based on former research. I have tried to make sense of these concepts through understanding the life experience of Janak. As I understood with my studies as well as Janak's life experience, the concept of service and *seva* is similar in practice and there is no difference between them apparently. But the important difference between the two is based on its structure. The concept of service in Baha'i principle is not political but *seva* engages with political aim.

**Keywords:** Dr. (Mrs.) Janak Palta McGilligan, pioneer,service, *seva*.

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**Concept of Service in Baha'i Writings**

The criterion of human being is service to humankind and considering the public interests without deny of welfare and individual benefit. In the Baha'i writing, "A man who, today, dedicated himself to the service of the entire human race". The concept of service can be explained in four main categories as I learn from Baha'i writings: Knowledge and Service, Service as Worship, Profession as Service, and Participation in Collective Actions and Service.

**Knowledge and Service:** In Baha'i religious doctrine, all the religions assume particular theories of knowledge but for Baha'is there is no essential separation between different forms of knowledge. All true knowledge is ultimately of God or his creation. Access to this knowledge may be gained from different sources. There is no limit to the extent to which human beings can gain knowledge but at the same time all human knowledge is inherently imperfect. So, In Baha'i writings gain the knowledge is considers as service. The main aim of the knowledge is recognize the manifestation of God in each era. "This recognition is actually a first step on the path of service to the Creator and to fellow human beings."(James B. 1912)

**Service as Worship:** Service and worship are at the heart of the pattern of community life that Baha'is around the world is trying to bring into being. Abdu'l-Bahá writes that, "Success and prosperity depend upon service to and worship of God".

Baha'u'llah laid much emphasis on including prayers in the daily routine because it will help to purify the heart, enhance concentration and lead to purity in thoughts and action. From the Baha'i perspective, any work or profession carried out in a spirit of service to humanity is considered as the worship of God. This means that one's labor is elevated to the station of worship.

**Profession as Service:** Work is a universal and essential aspect of human existence. Through work, people obtain the means of sustenance and realize many of their potentialities. Baha'u'llah said (1857); "The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds. "From the Baha'i perspective man has born to make better world and dedicated him to service the brothers/humankind. Baha'u'llah said, "Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches." So, in Baha'i teaching service has universal and common aspect and is considered as part of work final aim. Despite the importance of material welfare, and with the regard to the individual right to pursue individual interests, should never ignore the public interests and welfare of whole human, but should make both together. Only such a moral principle is capable to solve the current world issue such as environment, economic downturn.

**Participation in Collective Actions and Service:** Baha'is around the world, both individually and

collectively, attempt to participate in the social and economic development of the communities, and contribute side by side with different groups in advancing the material and spiritual civilization. Baha'is believes that all human beings are born noble. Developing one's talents and capacities enables to lead a life of service to society. The generation and spread of knowledge and cognition are the basis and pillars of social development. "Consider man" Bahá'u'lláh explicitly recounts, "As a mine enshrined with inestimable treasures". He further states that the goal of the individual and society should be such as to enforce such measures that are capable of extracting the gems and "inestimable treasures" enshrined within man. Inasmuch as the human beings nourish their inherent capabilities their societies will develop further thereby expediting the way to "world reformation". As such the Baha'i Community holds hope that its current struggles in the path to social and economical prosperity is a model universally placed before the people for the nourishment of skills and abilities leading to spiritual as well as material progress. Bahá'u'lláh reiterates that man has been created to carry forward an ever advancing civilization. This is the Baha'i viewpoint concerning the future of man so that a global community may be established whose individuals and institutions may live in peace and tranquility. There is other understanding of service in Shoghi Effendi writings about service which could help to get more sense about the concept of service in Baha'i writings. Shoghi Effendi states that service can work as a fuel for completely transforming our characters: "The power of God can entirely transmute our characters and make of us beings entirely unlike our previous selves". For instance Baha'is often devote a certain amount of their time within their weeks to specific service projects – providing spiritual education for children, helping in empowering junior youth, study circles, devotionals, artistic projects praying for someone, or through social action are just a few examples. (Preethi, 2011) Based on the Baha'i writings every human being possesses an immortal, rational soul that passes through this world for a brief time and continues for eternity to advance towards God. Our life's purpose is to progress spiritually by serving our fellow human beings. In doing so, we acquire the divine qualities we will need in the life to come. "To be a Baha'i simply means to love the entire world; to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and universal brotherhood".

#### **Concept of Seva (Service) in PPS (Patit Pavan Sangathana) and SVM (Sadhu Vaswani Mission):**

In this part I try to demonstrate two different kinds of *seva* practiced in PPS (Patit Pavan Sangathana) and SVM (Sadhu Vaswani Mission). The PPS exhorts the Hindu youth to do *seva* and to bring justice to

Hindus. *Seva* in this framework emphasized an aggressive masculinity and patriotism (Patel, 2010). "Most of its leaders and activists have police records and several criminal cases are pending against them for stabbing and other forms of violence". (Patel, 2010) No wonder most commentators have argued that the PPS have started many communal riots. "*Seva* means not only doing voluntary work but also creating a volunteer force that will construct the Hindu nation. These volunteers are expected to develop Hinduism as a cultural force and ensure that it not be degenerated by foreign and Indian secular and cultural powers". (Malkani, 1980) In the case the PPS, "the notion of *seva* is more political-incorporating both militant self-articulation and communalism". Two kinds of *seva* can be discerned in their programme: *seva* to protect and promote Hinduism and its culture, and *seva* that is aimed at youth and student especially youth in slums. (Patel, 2010) "The SAM provides a platform to Hindu Sindhi women to partake in religio - nationalist activities and thereby involve themselves in the public domain, outside the confines of their homes. The mission defines *seva* as doing charity and promoting subsidized educational and medical services". "The growth of *seva* in SVM taken place in three separate stages. *Seva* was embedded with deep nationalist aspirations; it was organized to mobilize women to become part of a congregation, have *satsangs* (fellowship meetings comprised largely of women, hence called *sakhisatsang*, an *asbram* in Rajpur, a Sindhi journal, and a store that sold *swadeshi* goods". (Patel, 2010) "When the acts of violence of Hindus in Pakistan escalated, Sindhi Hindu families began to migrate to India in large numbers. The mission catered mainly to these refugees, giving solace to them and also helping them through *seva* activities. The Mission redefined its tasks to doing *seva* to create a worldwide Hindu community in 1978. The Mission today is a large and visible organization that promotes and delivers systematic and relevant religious services. The first *seva* is paid *seva* and the second is charity". (Patel, 2010) It seems the concept of *seva* was redefined during years. According Patel (2010) in 1964 "the PPS notion of *seva* represents an assertive, aggressive and violent form of masculinity. It's organized around a feeling of deprivation not as a caste but as a Hindu community and is mobilized against an imaginary threat of demonized 'other'. Muslims are thus represented as power hungry and covert usurpers of political and cultural power and public spaces." It seems the structure of membership also has been changed during years. For example, in 1925 membership was emphasis to creation of a male volunteer group. Or the SVM membership was focused among the upper-class, urban-based Hindu Sindhi community. (Patel, 2010)

As I can understand there are lots of similarities between the concepts of service and *seva* in their activities. For instance; both are concerning and conducting activities which help society to improve in different aspects but I can see how both concepts are structured in different way which obviously effected on the consequences of their activities. The concept of service is structured as the component of the nature of spiritual life of human being in Baha'i Writings but *seva* is structured as "religio- political identity" which is based on "political - incorporating both militant self-articulation and communalism". Therefore Baha'i perspective is universal, aiming at the betterment of the world for practicing and establishing unity and peace in the world free from gender, religion, race, and so on. But it seems the aim of *seva* is to "promote the political project to constitute a new community of believers of Hinduism."

**Concept of Pioneer in Baha'i Writings:** In my thesis I tried to compare two concepts of pioneer ( in Baha'i Writings) and Diaspora, migration, or refugee in order to understand which concept could be explain the act of Baha'i people like Dr. Janak who left her city, family and profession to dedicate herself to service Indian communities. But In this paper I focus on my understanding and finding about the concept of pioneer based on former research. Pioneer is a religions concept in Bahai terminology which is used for the one who arises and leaves his/ her home to travel to another country for the purpose of teaching the Cause, Baha'i principles. They leave their home and even their comfortable life to move to another country for servicing others. Becoming a pioneer is a self-decision and everyone from different gender, class, culture, level of education and so on could be a pioneer. This is a spiritual duty and responsibility of every Baha'i. They know about all of difficulties that they will face but accepting all of the problems and difficulties for the betterment of that society. It should be clear that there is a huge difference between a Baha'i pioneer and a Christian missionary, because Missionary in a religious institution considered as a job, but being a Baha'i pioneer is not a job. Service is one important concept in Baha'i Faith; so a person who chooses to become a pioneer knows that what would be her / his difficulties and being aware of all issues give him /her courage to sacrifice abilities and qualities for the betterment of the society that he/ she chooses to move there. For example Dr. Janak who went to Indore as pioneer for over 26 years believe that "Pioneering is by choice normally with the spirit of service ,involves sacrificing career, home, comforts, country, culture; but for the spiritual satisfaction with a purpose of life." The vital elements which could describe the concept of pioneer are: self-decision for

leaving the home country without being under any pressure (socially, economically or politically) with the purpose of voluntary service to people. It's interesting for me when I understood that the concept of pioneer has been transforming during the Baha'i history and experiences in giving service to the society. In the time of Abdu'l-Bahá, the concept of pioneer was used for the exchange of religious knowledge across the world. This concept at the time of Shoghi Effendi was used for teaching The Cause (teaching Baha'i Faith directly). Now the concept of pioneer is used for giving service to people. Dr. Janak whom I chose to focus has been important in the life of Indian women and girls. In my opinion Janak was pioneer because I learned from her experiences that she really involves in their society for giving service to men, women and children.

**The Life Experience of Dr. (Mrs) Janak Palta McGilligan:** Based on the Janak's life experience I could understand how some remarkable events in her childhood and her early youth shaped her approached in her future life style. For instance when Janak is remembering her experiences of encounter with a caste prejudice (scavengers), feeding Brahmans, situation of widow, and life in border area, in fact she is retelling some realities about Hindu life which she couldn't accept as justices, and she wished to reform them in a fair manner. Janak was studying in sixth class, when she was blamed from her grandmother because she exchanges her food with lady scavenger. Janak's grandmother was so angry and told her "to go and take bath with *ganga* water (holy water) and get purified." Janak said, "This was one of the biggest things against untouchability that my heart could not take it." The other Janak's experience was that of feeding Brahmans. When Janak's parents used to feed Brahmans in her grandfather's memorial service, Janak used to always feel that why should we feed Brahmans who are rich, rather than poor people? The other thing that effected in Janak's life was her youngest sister who was married just for three months, but after her husband's death, she was tortured by her in-laws. Janak's dealt with serious health problems when she was still young. That could be another matter that I can say, to have deeply affected her approach in the coming years. Indeed as Janak mentioned that she could think about her life when she came out of the hospital. Janak thought the best way for her to be grateful to God is to dedicate the rest of this new life to some good cause. Janak's serious health problem didn't make her as a victim or didn't make her a passive person but she made this challenge as a foundation which made her strong enough to formulate her life for servicing others. For instance, Janak said that she started doing activity in social service, like helping sick people, assist blind, fire

victims and tutoring poor and needy. Janak's characteristic as a social activist during her young age was a spiritual as well as material journey because she mentions how she went all over the country to the Hindu shrines and the Muslim places and all kind of missions in India to identify a place for her where she could work for some good cause and repay God. Janak was continuing her education as well in Bachelor of Art, Masters in English, and Political Science, as well as M.Phil in political science and did her PhD on 'Sustainable Community Development through Training of Tribal and Rural Women a Human Resources' and research work as a Research Fellow Centre For Research in Rural And Industrial Development, in Chandigarh, Researched patterns of voting behavior in Garhwal elections, U.G.C. Research fellow on electoral behavior in the Department of Political Science at Punjab University, and also work as Co-author, Lecturer in English, Translator, and Clerk to learn more and earn for livelihood. In fact Janak has been a practical person in her life journey that helps her to come to know about the Baha'i Faith and finally Barli project. Baha'i Faith was a response to Janak's questions about life and Barli was an opportunity to practice whatever she learned in previous years. When Janak explained about her experiences and her challenges in Barli, in fact Janak is expressing how she dealt with the challenges and never stopped her struggle when difficulties surrounded her. For instance, she said, "One of the major challenges in the early days was recruiting trainees. It was difficult to convince parents to send their daughters 200 kilometers away from their home to stay with a stranger who did not know their language". This problem at the initial stages didn't make Janak passive. Janak faced all challenges as opportunities to contribute to Barli's growth. Janak learned their language and lived with them in their homes, sometimes for days and weeks. Finally this resulted in gaining social acceptance. Another major challenge arose when Janak married with Jimmy McGilligan, and then he became the Manager of the Institute. "With an Irish man as one of the staff members in the Institute, rumors ran wild in the villages that the girls would be sent overseas". But this challenge also solved with a wise approach which "the Institute started inviting the parents to three-day meetings so that they could stay with their daughters and have first-hand information about the Institute". "Increased self-confidence and assertiveness among the graduates was sometimes perceived as a challenge to the authority of male family members. The young trainees were not the same docile girls that they had been when they left home. Now they able to read and write and earn a living, accustomed to making decisions about their lives". To address this problem, "the Institute started

short-term residential courses for husbands of the married women and parents of the unmarried, with special focus on gender sensitization". Janak always used to work and solve the problems by decision-making, finding dynamic innovative solutions, offering new ideas, spreading the solution, changing the system with ethical practices and "persuading entire societies to take new leaps where each individual has the freedom, confidence and societal support to address any social problem and drive change". Janak made her marriage a part of the institution which supported and reformed and developed her activities for Barli. For instance when Janak mentioned about their different background in terms of religion (Christian-Hindu), country (UK in Northern Ireland- Punjab in India) and culture, and how these different were very temporary things for them. Indeed her ability to ignore differences shows that she prefer to spend time for meaningful cause, instead of dealing with something that can't build positive effect. This attitude not only comes through her private life but also in her public life. For instance, when Janak talked about the common goal among them that is service to humankind. She explained, "The different backgrounds are very temporary things. The important things are values such as respect, and love to each other, or serve together, and recognize each other's qualities". Janak mentioned the common bond among them that is Baha'i Faith". And she added that their married life was "shining out for this world Institute and working together which is strengthening our relationship, and we got a lot of support from each other and we shared all our frustrations together". The interesting matter was that the marriage could enrich and develop her activities rather than limit her in life. Janak said, "We always available for 24\*7 services to all". She further added, "We both appreciate each other growing in our own fields of service. We don't try to come into each other's way. We tried to help each other. If he's got an opportunity, I would like to help him to avail of that opportunity and grow. And if I get an opportunity ... like I have a lot of freedom of movement, and I have a lot of freedom of decision making which is not a privilege of all Indian women. It's only a privilege of being a Baha'i that you can get ... you can get equality and your share in your thoughts". From the Janak life experience I can understand how the effect of her past experiences is visible in her future life style. Janak remembered her learning and experiences that she learnt from her parents or inspired from Baha'i Teaching, when she faced any challenges or problems. For example she said, her mother always emphasize to live a simple life with value. Janak implementation this principle when she was faced with economic problems in Barli. Janak explained more about her economic situation

in Barli and emotional and monetary support from her in-law family. She said, "My father-in-law, when he came to visit us for the first time in 1989, carried in his suitcase a shovel, fork, pick, a hand-operated drill, and a set of screw drivers". When Janak's father in law went back to Northern Ireland, "he told the people that his son did not have even the smallest tools that he was accustomed to and which he needed. When we went to Northern Ireland after our marriage, all the Baha'i friends and our family and neighbors gave us wedding presents—pruning secateurs, books and all sorts of tools required at that time". Janak also has been inspired by Baha'i Teaching in her life. For instance, the Baha'i Teaching on consultation is one of the fundamental principles of the Faith and has exhorted the believers to "take counsel together in all matters". Baha'u'llah describes consultation as "the lamp of guidance which led the way" and as "the bestower of understanding". Janak always adhered to the principle of consultation for decision-making in Barli. She said, "We have the regularly consultation with the staff, co-operators and parents". Consultation is important role in make argument awareness and enhancing activities. The other principle of the Baha'i Teaching that has impressed Janak is that it "categorically upholds the principle of equality of women and men in all areas of human endeavor". Janak's vision is based on the belief that women are the central pillars of the society. As the first educators of children they have a great effect and instrumental role on the cultural and social upbringing of children and therefore on shaping society, the country and the world, they ought therefore to be at the forefront of any development program associated with sustainable community development. Janak has developed the Barli training program to empower women so that they can become agents of change in their societies, and lead their communities to better lives. Service is the other Baha'i principle that is clearly visible in Janak life style. Service is an important part of Baha'i spiritual life – "that it has been elevated to the rank of worship". Janak more explained about the concept of service, "Purpose of life is to recognize God and worship Him. And worshiping means serving Him, and serving His people. When I am serving the people in this Institute, I feel I am serving God. Because Baha'u'llah says "work is worship". So apart from prayers, worship here is work. And I'm working for them. It means everything to me. My understanding about the concept of service is Duty, love, and Sacrifice. As a Baha'i service is prayer, it's the purpose of life to serve society irrespective of caste colour or creed and we are world citizens, working for the establishment of a universal human civilization based on love, spiritual virtues and the desire of all people for peace and prosperity". Janak's

approach has changed to universal approach. She motioned that earlier all her world was just family and service to family, but now Janak's approach has been changed and now the entire world at large is her family. She said, "The Earth is one country. I felt that I am working with the people now. I work with tribal women in tribal communities. I feel that everybody's mine now. So when I feel everybody's mine, I feel myself enlarged. Since the self is being enlarged, the spirit is being enlarged. And the spirit is enlarged means it's come out of that narrow self. I don't feel absolutely selfless. But still I feel that certainly I'm not so attached to my family now as I would have been". In Barli, Janak not just serviced for empowering women, but established a great place of service for other people. She said, "The needs will be more and more for people to come and serve here. It's going to be more and more needed by the people. It has a lot of scope because now they are working only for a few districts in Madhya Pradesh. Then they have to work for the women in India. They have to develop similar institutions for India". Janak mentioned that Barli should be a source of training for women of higher capacities. The women are coming here and sharing knowledge and experience and working together.

**Conclusion:** Janak is an Indian Baha'i woman who has devoted her life to service to Indian community especially rural and tribal women. Janak was a Hindu believer who learned valuable principle from parents and observed all the suffering and injustice in Indian community. She was always investigating and looking for a platform how she would thank God through her service. Janak accepted the Baha'i Faith that was a response to Janak's questions. Baha'i principles have been an overwhelming influence in Janak's life. She has experienced all the concepts in her life through studying, learning, experiencing, working, and researching which have been rooted in Baha'i principle. Janak decided to become a pioneer and left her family, city and profession and moved to Indore to establish a Baha'i inspired NGO, Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in Indore. Barli was as an opportunity to service for the emancipation of women, and the advancement of socially and economically deprived rural communities. Although Janak faced with lots of problems and challenges in her life, but the problems couldn't give up her urge to achieve her goal. She learned from the problems or difficulties that she encountered in life and she looked at problems with a positive approach for making a new platform for servicing. Janak remembered her learning and experiences when faced any challenges. Janak never acted as a passive or victimized person. She always tried to deal with the problems and find a wise solution. Interesting thing in Janak's life experience is that gender never stopped her activities either as

single or married woman. In fact Janak always tried to understand the traditions and limitation of Indian culture and find a way to achieve her goal in life. Janak did not stop in her activities in serving the people, even after she retired and also lost her husband. She shifted to Jimmy McGilligan Centre for Sustainable Development. She has educated more than 20,000 people in sustainability and pursues herself the practices of sustainable living, growing and eating organic food, and using solar technologies,

and also works for Cancer patients and continues her research and promotion of transferring of sustainable technologies. As I understood with my studies as well as Janak's life experience, the concept of service and *seva* is similar in practice and there is no difference between them apparently. But the important difference between the two is based on its structure. The concept of service in Baha'i principle is not political but *seva* engages with political aim.

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