



RELIGIONS AND WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Religious scriptures have great influence on the psche of the people. In the sacred text of almost all religion, the place of woman is inferior to man, language itself is written by man. So he has interpreted that in his favour. In Hinduism , the feminine power without the control of male is malevolent. ‘Purdaah’ and ‘Talaq’ are two great hurdle in the development of Muslim women while ‘the Holy Quran’ makes no difference between man and woman. In Christianity , there are many examples of Christ helping women and he does miracles at the request of Mother Mary. Jainism divides jains into four classes -Rishi, Azikas , Sravaka , Sravika – and all are considered equal . same in the case of Buddhism. Man and woman are equal. But there is a great discrimination with women in reality in every religion

KEYWORDS: Religion, Women , Equality, Discrimination, Domination, Monogamy, Bigamy, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism.

Religion is a set of beliefs which a person or a particular community strongly believes . It is considered to be sacred and many social and cultural traditions flow from these belief systems

In Indian society ,there are various communities professing various religions .The religion of a particular community provides the ideological and moral basis for the status and role of women in society.The people’s notion about the role of women in home and outside is greatly determined by their religious conceptions regarding women . Each religion has its own myths and legends which emphasize the role and position of women in society.

It is an undeniable fact that religious scriptures and holy texts have great influence on the psyche of the people in deciding the status of women.we can see the sacred texts of Hinduism or Christianity or Muslim,the place of women has always been inferior to man.For example in Hindu scriptures also we find texts where a woman has been considered a female principle complementing the male principle only when in union with the male. She becomes a

destructive force which is to be controlled and subjugated as a child, as a wife and as a mother. In Islam, the same bias is visible. The recent Shah Bano case in which Supreme Court granted this 70 + woman maintenance allowance, which led to protests by various muslim groups on the ground that Shariat prohibits muslim women from demanding maintenance.

In Christianity also the story of creation in Genesis - 2 is often used to justify the low status of women and this bias is still prevalent in Church and in the community. Actually the language of all the scriptures is written by man himself, so he has interpreted it for his own benefits. Somebody has rightly said that no language can express a woman's feeling because language itself has been created by man himself. In Indian society, there are various communities professing various religions. The religion of a particular community provides the ideological and moral basis for the status and role of women in society. The people's notion about the role of women in home and outside is greatly determined by their religious conceptions regarding women. Each religion has its own myths and legends which emphasize the role and position of women in society.

HINDUISM AND WOMEN

In Hinduism, the concept of femaleness presents a duality. On the one hand, she is considered to be divine life giving and nurturing force. On the other, she is the symbol of what is evil, dangerous and carnal and is in constant need of control by man. She is both elevated and devalued.

If we take the story of creation, Brahma caused his body to separate into two parts; Purusha and Prakriti, where the earlier stands for male and the later for female. [Manu-32]. It is the union of the two which led to the creation. This union is again represented by Shiva and Parvati. Shiva is Purush and Parvati is Prakriti. They together are the reason of creation. So she has the power of creation only when she is in union with the male. In this form, she is considered to be a benevolent force. Separate from the male, her power is seen as dangerous and malevolent. In Hindu mythology, feminine power without male control is represented as Kali, the symbol of chaotic power, which may be dangerous. According to Watts, "Kali is embodiment of the terrible mother but eternal Womanhood".

The victory dance of goddess Kali is famous after killing a demon. She kills and destroys each and everything that comes her husband. Shiva controls her. He transmits her into a benevolent being so male becomes the dominant member of the pair. So male becomes supreme by subordinating his female shakti in marriage.

As, Parvati, Lakshmi, Sita or Savitri, she becomes the benevolent goddess giver of wealth and progress. She becomes an example of passive devotion to her husband. But any religion is a growing phenomenon, so is Hinduism. It has a history of more than 5000 years. The

Hinduism of vedic period was different from the Hinduism of Puranic era .These both types of Hinduism were different from the Hinduism of today .Modern India has given equal right and status to the women , still the picture is still grim and dark.

ISLAM AND WOMEN

The status of Pre-Islamic woman was very low. There were many abominable customs and usages in respect of women in the period of ignorance. The Quran greatly improved the status of women and laid down definite norms against mere customs and usages. They could no longer be treated as chattals to be traded or objects of sexual lust. The married women were described as *Muhsanat*, meaning chaste and secured.

During the period of ignorance , there were no norms and laws as far as divorce and marriage, inheritance and properly rights etc. The Quran however did away with all the arbitrary but set definite norms and gave women a definite status though not strictly equal to that of man. Quran says, ''And they (women) have rights similar those(of men) over them in kindness and men are a degree above them.[The Quran;2;228.]

Prophet was extremely kind to women but the constraints of the male dominated environment influenced his decisions also. According to him ,those men who beat their wives donot behave well. He is not of my way who teaches a woman to go astray. (Quoted by Prof. S.T.Lokhandwala), the position of women under Islam in *Islamic Prespective Vol. 1 Jan . 1984*) . If we take the case of polygamy, it was not a general permission. It was started to do justice to orphan girl or woman. If one does not have any such problem of looking after orphan girls, the question of taking more than one wife does not arise at all. Holy Quran's insistence was on justice only. But later was people started misusing this law and it became a social evil in Islamic society. Many Muslims donot want to change any personal law of Shariat because they think that Shariat is totally divine and there can be no change in the laws given by it.

Then the '*Purdah*'.and '*Talaaq*'—both these practices have become a great hurdle in the development of Muslim women. By saying *Talaaq* thrice consecutively is enough to separate a married couple. Even if in anger a husband says these words thrice to his wife ,it dissolves their marriage. If *talaaq* is easy for a man, it is equally difficult to marry a Muslim woman without her consent and she has to be given a certain amount of money as *Mehar*.

In India , divorce is considered to be a social stigma and sometimes it becomes difficult for a divorcee to get remarried. Then, there is no provision of maintenance allowance to a divorced woman beyond *Iddah*, that is, three months after the divorce. Though Supreme Court gave orders of maintenance beyond '*Iddah*' in the recent Shah Bano case. But many Muslims held

demonstrations to protests throughout the country. Such psychology is greatly detrimental to the progress of Muslim women in India.

Gender discrimination can be seen if we have a look at the *Right to Property*. A Muslim woman gets only the one third of the property of her husband if she has no children. If she has children, she will get only one eighth of the total property of her husband. If the father of her husband is alive, she and her children have no right over the property of her husband. In the same way, a daughter gets only one third of her father's property while two third goes to sons.

Child marriage is another obstacle in the progress of Muslim women. Some orthodox families contend that this custom of child marriage is sanctioned by the practice of Mohammad who himself married a child wife. [Mohammad Ali; 1936; 618]. But in India it is prohibited under Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, it is punishable.

Education can play a very vital role in uprooting all these evils. In fact, many educated families are monogamous and they give equal status to their women. In today's world there is no space for discrimination on the basis of gender.

CHRISTIANITY AND WOMEN

God created man in the image of himself,

In the image of God he created him ,

Male and female he created them

God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it.' [Genesis-1:26-27]. This text shows equal rights or status of man and woman. Here man is not one but two, male and female. According to other story of creation, woman was made out of the rib of Adam when he was sleeping. So she is made out of him and she is his companion.

If we see the status of nomadic woman, she was given a lot of respect only if she bore a male child. A barren woman was considered a curse and she was ridiculed and insulted. Monogamy was prevalent but if the wife was barren, then bigamy was allowed. A woman did not inherit her husband's property or a daughter her father's property unless there was no male child in the family. Slavery was common among Hebrews and a father could sell his daughter to another man as a slave.

Coming to New - Testament, the first woman we meet is the Mother Mary who is a simple girl from an unknown village of Nazareth; betrothed to a simple carpenter named Joseph. She is the incarnation of piety and spirituality. She is the mother of all living who believe in Jesus Christ. Apart from this, we find different situations where Christ interacts with various women giving them definite roles showing them respect and great honour. In public life he employed the services of women as helpers and close associates namely-Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Susanna

and several others. It was Mary Magdalene who first saw the risen Christ and she was asked to announce the Ressurrection to the disciples.

Christ performs miracles at the request of mother. Christ raises the son of a widow at Nain. The incident is replete with Christ's concern for the widow. The cure of the woman with haemorrhage [Luke 8;40-48], the raising of Jairus's daughter [LK-849-56] and curing of the crippled woman on the Sabbath [LK13;10-17]. Jesus breaks the Sabbath to heal the woman and a controversy is raised. This shows his attitude to poor woman. So we can say that a woman is given equal status and respect in New Testament.

But practically ,she is still considered to be inferior to man. In Christian marriage ritual the man is called the head of the physical body and the woman is asked to obey her husband. It was reported that in her wedding ceremony Princess Diana stayed silent over the word 'obey' while asking her marriage vows with Prince Charles. Again if we see the divorce law , adultery is not the sufficient ground for a Christian woman to seek divorce though for a husband , it is sufficient ground for divorcing his wife. Further, women can not be appointed as Bishops in the Church. Though, in 1980. Dr Mrs Marjorie Mathews made a history when she was elected as Ist woman Bishop'

A very few woman are coming out of their traditional and subordinate role .They should not be disheartened at all.

JAINISM AND WOMEN

Jainism like other religions helps to attain spiritual attainments , eternal peace and happiness during one's life time .

Jainism divides jains into four classes - Rishi, Azikas , Sravaka ,Sravika ,that is , the monk ,nun, householder and housewife . Equal treatment is given to the women in the sense that they need not necessarily be housewives but have the freedom to renounce the world to attain salvation.

Woman in particular has a unique position of Jana Matha, the woman who gave birth to the Thirthnkara, a Jain Deity. She has the highest position as the mother of nature and as mother Thirthnkara.

Jainism gives women a place of prominence and respect. Whenever there are cases of fire ,accident, robbery or any such calamities , lives of women must be protected first. Mothers of Jain priests (Thirthankaras) are shown utmost reverence .The practice of worshipping the idols of such great mothers also exists. The Mhapurana is the accepted sacred work of jains . It clearly says that woman has the same right as man . Vrishbha Deva , the first Thirankara , is said to have

imparted knowledge of mathematics and language to his daughters first and then to his sons .He taught the Jain alphabets to his daughter Brahmi, thus the famous Brahmilipi is named after her

There have been many jain nuns like Kamalasree , Brahmilee, Gunamathi, Sudarsana and Yakini Mahatara . Many Jain women have made great sacrifices for their religion . Many of them were social workers. Smt. Sonubaishah of Sholapur in Maharashtra started an ashram giving shelter to females of any age . The women are educated and given vocational training here. Govt. of India conferred on her the title ‘‘ Padma Shree ‘‘

The greastest virtue that is found in Jain women is sacrifice. They fast and lead a simple life . They are still responsible for continuation of religious activities . Women have brought fame to the community. They have been wise guides to men and thus preventing them from committing sins . The old saying perhaps befits the Jainwomen that behind every great man is a woman.

SIKHISM AND WOMEN

Sikhism the most modern religion not only in age but also in its outlook .The institution of ‘Sangat’ and Pangat’-mixed congregation and inter-dining –started by Guru Nanak received support and strength during the time of all succeeding Gurus . Guru Nanak was very much disappointed to see that woman was considered inferior to man .He says in Vara Assa;

From the woman is our birth and in

The woman’s womb we are shaped

To the woman we are engaged

And to her we are wedded

The woman is our friend and

From woman is our family

She gives birth to Kings and Prophets.

Guru Amardas strongly condemned the practice of Sati and advocated widow re-marriage. He eradicated ‘ veil system ’. It will be interesting to note that when Guru Gobind Singh was preparing Amrit for baptizing first ‘ five sikhs’ the Panj Piyaras, his religious consort Mata Sahib Kaur was present and she added sugar Patashas [sugar puffs] to the Amrit being prepared and remarked that these would impart sweetness to Khalsa. So Sikh scriptures and tradition played an important role in upliftment of women’s status .

BUDDHISM AND WOMEN

In Buddhism , an entire book the Therigatha [The Psalm of the Sisters]refers to those women who made the inspired utterances after their enlightenment. Bikkhuni Sanghs were established to uplift the status of women and to give them spiritual equality. She was considered

inferior to man. So, many unmarried women became nuns. According to Buddha an effort to improve the status of women should not degenerate into a fight for equality with men, for it will only lead to confrontation, rivalry and competition. Buddha laid great emphasis on the complementary nature of their personalities. All women are not equally amenable to upliftment. Decay is the law of nature. Everything decays including the success in the upliftment of women. Unless what is gained is consolidated and maintained by constant vigilance, the gain will soon be lost.

CONCLUSION

From the above study, it can be said that though no religion or scriptures have devalued the woman yet she has suffered great humiliation in every society. It is high time that she should be given her due. And Indian woman irrespective of religion and caste is doing miracles in every field.

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