

HINDU WOMEN IN THE MIRROR OF TIME: AT ONCE A GODDESS AND A SLAVE?

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ABSTRACT

Hindu women's role and status in India has been subject to frequent change. In Vedic religion which is often considered as the bedrock of present Hindu dharma, women were given the status of goddess, and from their shakti (force), it was said, emanated the male strength. Indian annals hail women as dutiful wives and benevolent mothers but we have numerous instances where they stood up for themselves against predetermined discriminatory law and customs, whether that be Sita, Satyawati, Kunti and Draupadi of epic age or Durgavati, Jijabai, Kittur Chennamma or Laxmibai from more recent times. While on certain levels Hindu women seem to have gained equality with men, severe handicaps and restrictions blight their progress, otherwise. In modern India, women have held highest offices of the land including that of the President and the Prime Minister. But a pertinent question lingers regarding the paradox in India- Does our country of Devi worshippers really worship their women or is it just religious symbolism which often defies the actual picture? The present paper aims at discovering women's true space in Hindu society by taking into account Hindu religious texts, social customs and moral codes of conduct.

Keywords: Hinduism, Vedic pantheon, Shakti, Tokenism, Women Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

“Man takes birth from woman. Within woman does the creature's body grow. Through her are established blood relations. The cycle of births in this world is sustained by women. Therefore, why call that woman inferior, from whom great emperors are born?”

- Guru Nanak

The evolution of Hindu women's condition in India is based on huge body of empirical research available to us. Two approaches seem valid: classical text view and empirical view. Hinduism is based on a large number of ancient texts varying in authority, authenticity, content

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and theme. The most dependable and oldest scripture being the Vedas which tell us that the women enjoyed a reasonably high if not equal status during the vedic period. Two great Hindu epics, *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, show women in a positive light, while other texts such as the *Manusmriti*, the oldest text pertaining to religion and legal duty seem to curtail women's rights and freedom that they enjoyed earlier. Word for strength and power in Hindu culture is feminine -"Shakti" meaning 'strength' and 'power' All male power is derived from the feminine. Literary evidence suggests that empires and towns were ruined because a single woman was wronged by the state whether that was Sita, Draupadi or Kannagi.

POSITION OF WOMEN IN HINDUISM

Around 2000 years ago, Classical Hinduism, or present day Hindu Dharma started crystallizing. Worship of the Supreme Being through icons and sacred symbols was started and different religious cults developed out of which the *Shakta* tradition specifically worships the Divine as the Mother of the Universe, (Londhe, 2008). Women were accorded the status of goddess in textual Hinduism.

Like other religions, Hinduism is not restricted to "a set of beliefs or propositional truths or practices". In practice, Hinduism can not credit itself of being fair to its women. Injunctions on morality, social codes, political maxims etc. find mention in the non-revealed texts called the *Smritis*. These *Smritis* often reveal some teachings that are derogatory to women in various ways. However the real position of women in the Hindu society has been better than what is ordained by these texts, and vice versa as well most of the time. (Narayanan, 1999).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Adherents of Hindu religion believe their Gods to possess both male and female elements that are integral to their origin. God is shown as 'ardhanarishvara' or 'God who is half woman'. The mother is considered a thousand times more venerable than the father. There was no restriction in the ancient Hindu society that sons must always be named after their father. Numerous heroes of Hindu tradition are frequently addressed as sons of their mother. For instance, Arjuna is referred as 'Kaunteya', Lord Krishna is addressed as 'Devakiputra' while the greatest Sanskrit grammarian Panini is also called 'Daakshiputra'. Though The Vedic texts indicate that widow remarriage was allowed, in general however, the status of widows declined steeply when the texts of classical Hinduism were formulated. As a result, remarriage of widows was highly frowned upon and the ideal widow was expected to live a life of piety, austerity and self-restraint.

The custom of Sati is nowhere mentioned in the Vedic texts. Even *Manusmriti* is silent about it, but later texts such as several Puranas and law-digests glorify it (Chaube, 1969). Despite the overall preference for male issues, Hindu texts do contain several teachings which equate a son with a daughter. The Tantras accord a very high place to the daughter. Even one of the prominent royal dynasties of the Hindus namely *Chandravamsha* (Lunar Dynasty), owes its origin to Ila, the daughter of Manu (Chaudhry, 1938).

The *Harita Dharmasutra* states that there are two kinds of women: *sadhyavadhu* who marry, and the *brahmavaadini* who are religious, wear the sacred thread, perform rituals like

the agnihotra and read the vedas. Women may graduate from the schools as Vedic priests. Thus women were allowed to choose between a life of domestic bliss through marriage or that of intellectual and philosophical attainment through vedic studies (Chaudhari,1941)

Feminine spirituality

Hindu tradition is blessed to have had Meera, Akka Mahadevi, Lalleshvari, Andal and other saintly women of medieval India as sages. Their writings are treated as scripture, and chanted with great regard to this day. The *Shaiva Siddhanta* tradition has several women saints too. Likewise, the Sant tradition of Maharashtra has several feminine voices from Muktabai (13th century CE) to Bahina Bai. Several authors of poetry in the Sangam literature in Tamil are women. The Sanskrit epic '*Madhuraavijaya*' is attributed to Gangadevi (Dutt,1938).

Contradictions

Being male oriented, Hindu texts often make judgemental remarks about women. Smriti writers like ancient Hindu lawgiver Manu confuse us with his contradictory remarks on them. While women have been put on a high pedestal at some places at others they have been summarily dismissed as immature, untrustworthy, sinful and incapable. On one hand Manu says "Women must always be honored and respected by the father, brother, husband and brothers-in-law who desire their own welfare." On the other he quips "It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world, for that reason the wise never remain unguarded in the company of female. Thus, we can safely say that while women are hailed as mothers and wives in our scriptures, they have been caricatured otherwise. However as mother, women are talked about reverently (Chaudhari,1938). Tantra texts often invert the patriarchal archetype, and declare the women to be superior to men.

POSITION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

A thorough perusal of ancient texts makes it clear that the position of women was not stagnant during the ancient period. But in general they had a restricted existence and women had to live under the tutelage of their male relations (Majumdar & Pusalkar,1951) In one of his dictums, ancient lawgiver Manu says- a woman should be subservient in all stages of her life- "*in childhood to the father, in youth to the husband and his elderly kins and to the son when widowed*" while at another place the same author says that '*gods dwell where women are worshipped*'. Ancient sage Varahamihira devotes the 72nd chapter towards praising women in his monumental work *Brihatsamhita*. He finds women to be superior to men as all men are born from women, because women are more faithful to their spouses than men, and that the women are more faithful in following Dharma. It becomes abundantly clear that women who were revered as mothers and wives, had very limited role otherwise. Scriptures such as the Rig Veda and Upanishads do mention several women sages and seers, notably Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Apala, Ghosha etc. but the condition of women in general was far from satisfactory.

The position of women in ancient India itself was subject to constant change. Though it is difficult to specify the exact chronological time as to when the deterioration in woman's status started, one can state that gradual changes appeared during the age of Brahmanas.

Generally speaking mothers had a free hand in administering home and family affairs. Some women from high class were not only highly educated but took active part in intellectual discourses (Singh,2009). In fact, both girls as well as boys were initiated into the Vedic studies and were entitled for a rite of passage called *upanayan* ceremony. Though in general practice the Hindu family did not offer much of authority to their daughters. She was taught to be modest and special attention was paid to nurture her feminine aspects. Frequent mention of the word “*Amajur*”, makes it clear that though marriage held great social and religious importance, yet it was not mandatory.

It is commonly agreed upon that sufficiently high, if not equal status of women of the early vedic period deteriorated during the later vedic period (Jayapalan, 2001).

SOCIAL LIFE OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

During the ancient period of Indian history, the Hindu women actively participated in religious activities, though they were not entitled to become officiating priests. In the literary field also women made valuable contribution (Leslie,1995). They were encouraged to learn fine arts like singing, dancing, painting etc. Dancing was not confined to low castes and prostitutes, but ladies from affluent families took to learning it.

It is clearly mentioned in the *Rigveda* that young men and women mixed freely and married women were not caged within the confines of their home. The sculptures from Sanchi depict wealthy ladies leaning from their balconies to watch processions. Likewise women are seen worshipping the Bodhi Tree in the company of men. Thus we can conclude that though women's freedom was constrained, yet it was not fully denied to them. However one of the chief duties of women remained to bear children and to bring them up.

The women were allowed to own personal property in the form of jewelry and clothing. The *Arthashastra* permits them to have money of their own. After a woman's death the property went to daughters and not to the husband or the sons. If there were no son(s), the property was inherited by the widower of the deceased.

Arthashastra and *Manusmriti* mention about a woman's right to property called *Stridhana* and its sources. It is of two types: maintenance in the form of money or land and secondly, gifts like ornaments given to her by her relations from time to time. This was wife's exclusive property and according to Manu if the family had no sons, the daughter was to be the legal inheritor of that property (Dubois, Antoine, Beauchamp & King, 1897)

One can conclude that the position of women in ancient India was not that bad as is depicted in the *Smritis*. Strangely she was at once both-a goddess and a slave. However in common practice the women were looked after, cared for and suitably provided by their husbands. Wives were not to be physically abused or ill-treated as it was mentioned. The Gods refuse sacrifice of a wife-beater.

POSITION OF HINDU WOMEN DURING THE MUGHAL PERIOD

Primarily this period marked a low watermark in women's condition in India. The deterioration in their condition which began during the later vedic period reached its climax. Though women still commanded respect in their family, participated in religious ceremonies

with many receiving education and participating in scholarly pursuits, by and large, they remained subservient to men and suffered from social evils. In short women were treated as meager articles of pleasure. However one thing is very clear that it was not just the medieval period that is to be blamed for low status of women, the downfall which began in about 1500 B.C. became more and more pronounced throughout the succeeding ages. The Muslim invasion during the medieval age only aggravated the already rotten situation, but it can not be summarily blamed for the low status of women.

SOCIAL STATUS OF HINDU WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL AGE

While monogamy was the general norm of the society, in practice the rich could keep much wives. With strict restriction on widow remarriage and sad plight of widows, the practice of sati (self-immolation on funeral pyre of husband) became more prevalent. Due to the fear of abduction and molestation by Muslim invaders; child marriages, purdah system, restriction on free movement of women and their education became an inherent part of medieval Hindu society. At the height of Muslim power in India, women of the wealthy merchant class and aristocrats used to go out totally covered, head to toe in blankets. Poorer women had no choice but to go out and work. The women of the low class remained unaffected by most of the handicaps. In fact there was no purdah among them, they were free to divorce and remarry.

The Devadasi system led to exploitation of women in the name of religion. The medieval age was about wars and conquests. As per the norm, women could not participate in wars (barring a few exceptions), hence birth of a daughter was considered bad omen while birth of male children meant rejoicing. In spite of all these handicaps we know of many Hindu as well as Muslim women of outstanding ability during this period, who became prominent in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. The Gond Queen Durgavati, Shivaji's mother Jijabai, Ahilya Bai Holkar were able warrior and administrators. In South India, many women administered villages and towns. The Bhakti movement tried to restore women's status by providing them equal footing with men thus questioning their subservient status and openly advocating equality among men and women. The purdah system became a rigid institution among Hindus and Muslims in Northern India, where Muslim rule was most extensive and lasted longest.

STATUS OF HINDU WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL DECCAN

Strangely enough women's position in the south of India was much better as compared to their sisters in the north during the medieval period. There are numerous inscriptional, literary and sculptural evidence to posit that while northern India suffered from absence of female administrators during this period, in Deccan (Karnataka) women were at the helm of affairs. Lakkadevi was a village headman. Mailaladevi, Queen of Someshvara I ruled an important province called Banasvi. Piriya Ketal Devi, wife of Chalukya Vikramaditya XI ruled over three villages among others.

The Devadasi system was a distinct feature of South Indian society. It was the ancient practice of dedicating girls to temple. These women had high artistic talent and held high position in the society. Temple grants were given to manage their expenses. Women were not just housewives but worked in the fields and as nurses as well. While polygamy was practiced

by the kshatriyas, all girls were bound to get married except those opting for asceticism. The practice of Sati or *sahagamana* was not compulsory in the Deccan though many women opted for it. Mahasati stones were built in the memory of those ladies who committed Sati. However practice of widow remarriage was not prevalent in medieval south India. Going by foreign traveller's accounts of this period, widows had a miserable existence (Kamat, 2006)

POSITION OF HINDU WOMEN IN MODERN INDIA

It was the social reform movement of the 19th century that gave birth to both feminism and nationalism in India. The westernized and English educated young men of Bengal initiated social reform movement which spread to sections of middle class. This movement which stressed on upliftment of women included education, widow remarriage, abolition of purdah and opposition of child marriage. During the British rule, many reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotiba Phule fought for the betterment of women (Talwar, 1990).

STATUS OF WOMEN DURING THE BRITISH RAJ

Promotion of schooling for girls by missionaries led to spread of education among women. But education was still about cultivating domestic qualities in them, so that they could become good wives, mothers and housewives in the future. Still they faced resistance from more orthodox Hindus. 'When Gandhiji assumed India's leadership the average life span of an Indian woman was only 27 years. Babies and the pregnant women ran a high risk of dying young. Child marriage was very common and widows were in very large number. Only 2% of the women had any kind of education and women did not have an identity of their own. In North India, they practiced the Purda (veil) system. Women could not go out of the house unless accompanied by men and the face covered with cloth. The fortunate ones who could go to school had to commute in covered carts (tangas)' (Kamat, 2006).

NATIONALIST MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

In 1886, Swarna Kumari Devi started the Ladies Association and with that was opened a new chapter in Indian women's life. Women became more visible in the public sphere since the 1890s. Many women participated in non-cooperation, salt satyagraha and civil disobedience movement. INC committed itself to the political equality of women (Kumar, 1993).

Subhash Chandra Bose initiated the formation of the Rani Jhansi Regiment as the women's wing of the Indian National Army. Many women participated in militant nationalism - Pritilata Waddadar, Kalpana Dutt, Santi Ghosh, Suniti Chowdhury, Bina Das shook the consciousness of an entire generation.

The great struggle of our independence which gained momentum in the early 20th century, threw up stalwarts like Gandhi, Azad, Tilak, Gokhale, Nehru and Bose. Their number and stature often makes us believe that it was only a man's movement. But it was not so. Many illustrious women provided it with fresh vigour through their unrelenting efforts.

Early phase of the 19th century saw emergence of female heroes like Kittur Chennamma, Bhima Bai Holkar and Rani Laxmi Bai whose chivalry and patriotic zeal are remembered to this date. Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Sucheta Kriplani, Vijay Lakshmi

Pundit, Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta etc. are the names which are etched in our national memory for their singular contribution during the freedom struggle in varying capacities. 'Such a mass participation under Gandhiji's leadership gave women a sense of equality with men, an equality which was unheard of in the tradition-bound Indian society'(Menon, 1975).

GANDHIJI'S CONTRIBUTION FOR BETTERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Gandhiji was a great advocate of women's emancipation and believed in them attaining equality with men. It was his influence which led to the participation of women in freedom struggle from all walks of life. For Gandhiji, the freedom fight was not political alone, it meant economic and social reform at the national level. He said men and women are equal, but not identical. For him, women are *intellectually, mentally, and spiritually equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity.*"

The women's condition underwent great change after Gandhi. Today, in spite of all shortcomings, there is a fundamental agreement in our society that both men and women are equal, the credit for this belief system unanimously goes to the Mahatma and his cohorts (Kishwar, 1986).

POSITION OF HINDU WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

The Indian Constitution guarantees equality to all women (Article 14), there shall be no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16) and guarantees equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). Many initiatives have been taken by our succeeding governments for the upliftment of women. Year 2001 was declared as the Year of Women's Empowerment (*Swashakti*). The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was passed in 2001. On 9th March 2010, Rajya Sabha passed the Women's Reservation Bill requiring that 33% of seats in Indian Parliament and state legislative bodies be reserved for women. While on one hand, the Hindu women are active participants in diverse fields ranging from politics, arts and culture, science, sports, media (Sen & Shivakumar, 2001), yet there are innumerable instances of discrimination, humiliation, unjust behavior and exploitation.

Education and property rights

Though it is gradually increasing, the female literacy rate in India is less than the male literacy rate. Far fewer girls than boys are enrolled in school, and many girls drop out of schools without completing their education. Indian states of Kerala and Mizoram have achieved 100% female literacy which has gone a long way in improving the socio-economic status of women there.

In most Indian families, women do not own any property in their own names, and do not get a share of parental property. The Hindu Personal Law of 1956 gave women rights to inheritance. However, these are still tilted in men's favour. Some amendments have now been incorporated in the Hindu Personal Law in 2005, providing women the same status as men.

Crimes against women

In India, there is a high rate of crimes against women. Earlier, many crimes against women went unreported because of the social stigma attached to rape and molestation. But due to

spread of education, evolving media and growing public awareness, the number of reported crimes against women has increased manifold. Nearly 40% of the world's child marriages occur in India. Another major culprit in this domain is domestic violence which has become endemic. As per The National Crime Records Bureau, every three minutes a crime against a woman is committed.

In 1961, Indian government passed the Dowry Prohibition Act, making dowry demands in marriages illegal. However, many cases of dowry-related domestic violence, suicides and murders are still reported. The undying desire for male progeny in India fuels crimes like female infanticides and sex-selective abortions which are a typical feature of our patriarchal society. UN's human-rights chief has declared rape as a "national problem" in India. (Schmallegger, Humphrey & Frank, 2012). Erosion of social values has turned this crime into a dreadful monster and a cause of national shame. Continuous trafficking of young girls and women is another major crime perpetrated against women.

LOOKING BACK AT DISCRIMINATORY HISTORICAL PRACTICES AGAINST HINDU WOMEN

Practices like Sati, Devadasi and Jauhar have not just become redundant but they have been banned by law in modern India as well. Still, every now and then one comes across instances of these practices in remote parts of India. Purdah is still prevalent in some Hindu communities. Instances of child marriages and female foeticide are frequent.

SATI

Sati is an old, almost completely extinct custom among Hindus, in which the widow was immolated alive on her husband's funeral pyre. The act was supposed to be voluntary on the widow's part. It was abolished by the British in 1829. The Roop Kanwar case in Rajasthan (1987) led to The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987. Except the Puranas (Hindu Smriti) no other religious scripture hails it. Only a few examples of *sati* are recorded in the Hindu epics, which are, otherwise, replete with influential widows like Kunti. Ahilya Bai Holkar, Rani Laxmibai are valiant widows from recent past.

JAUHAR

Jauhar was a medieval Rajput practice of voluntary self-immolation by wives and daughters of defeated warriors, in order to avoid infringement of their honour by the enemy, as the Rajputs attached great importance to honour. This practice is defunct today (Jain & Sarma, 1994).

PURDAH

Purdah is basically a Muslim practice requiring women to cover themselves so as to conceal themselves from men. It restricts the mobility of women and curtails their right to interact freely. This practice was adopted by high caste Hindu women of North India during medieval period and continues to be practiced by some sections of Hindu community even today.

DEVADASI SYSTEM

It was practised in southern India, in which women were "married" to a deity or temple. The

ritual was well-established by the 10th century A.D. This practice led to exploitation of women in the name of religion. By 1988, the practice was outlawed in the country (Fowler,1996).

CHILD MARRIAGES

Child marriage has been traditionally prevalent in India and continues to this day. In the past, child widows were condemned to a life of great agony, living in isolation and being shunned by the society. Although child marriage was proscribed in 1860, it is still a common practice.

FEMALE INFANTICIDE & SEX-SELECTIVE ABORTION

In India, the male-female sex ratio is tilted radically in favour of men, the chief reason being the avid desire for male progeny. It is believed that the higher number of males in India is due to female infanticides and sex-selective abortions. Female infanticide (killing of girl infants) is still practiced in some rural areas. Abuse of dowry system is the main cause of sex-selective abortions and female infanticides in the country.

DOWRY

The modern Hindi word for dowry is *dahej*, which comes from the Arabic word *jihayz*, literally meaning *furnishings* or *equipment*, that is, assets brought by a wife for her husband's family post- marriage. Orthodox Hinduism does not sanction the practice of giving dowry in marriage and it "may be a departure from original Sanskritik marriage rituals."

CONCLUSION

A careful perusal of Hindu religious texts, social customs and laws make it abundantly clear that our *Dharma* grants a very high status to women. She and her male partner actually form a pair together, or rather, the husband and wife form one whole. It is convention rather than religion that has halted Hindu women's growth on many accounts. Though it can not be denied that over the centuries, many vices have crept into the Hindu society which have negatively impacted women's condition, these can only be altered through internal reforms. Evil customs such as dowry, female infanticide /sex-selective abortions, child marriage etc. are not only regressive but also malign Hindu religion and culture. In Hinduism, god is called *Ardhanaarishvara* i.e. half-feminine. It becomes duty of Hindu husband to treat his better half on equal footing. Indian women also desire modicum of respect and just treatment at the hands of the society that they are very much a part of.

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