

## REFLECTIONS ON INDIAN HINDU WOMEN AND RELIGION

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**Abstract:** The day March 8 is observed globally as International Women's Day. It is the day to celebrate the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. But unfortunately women folk are victims of gender inequalities and deep-rooted gender biases prevalent in our society. From time immemorial they have always been suppressed and dominated all over the world especially in India. It is, of course, true that through constant protests, struggles and campaigns for years women have become successful, to some extent, to compel the government to make laws for gender justice and gender equality. Article 15(1) of the Constitution of India clearly states that no discrimination would be made against any citizen "on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them". But the fact remains that in India women are facing discriminations in every sphere of life, be it social, economic, political or religious. They are still denied entry into certain temples. Not only this. Women are not also allowed to chant many Vedic mantras. In spite of the fact that the Constitution of India makes provision for religious freedom and gender equality, many temple authorities ban women's Right to Pray. The present paper will focus on the discriminations made to Hindu women of India through ages from religious point of view. For this purpose, I will concentrate on the injunctions of Manusmṛiti and the impact of these injunctions on the lives of Hindu women in India till the day. In the first part of my paper, I will discuss that only with the notable exception of early Vedic age, inequalities existed between the two genders almost in all ages. In the second part I shall cite some instances of women's movements for "Right To Pray" and "Right To Priesthood" and their iron determination for bringing about religious parity in Indian context. In the concluding part I shall put forward some suggestions for removing disparities between the two genders.

**Keywords:** Gender-Equality, Gender – Justice, Indian Hindu Women, Religion, Right.

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**Introduction:** The day March 8 is observed globally as International Women's Day. It is the day to express the joy of being a woman – the day to celebrate and to bring into limelight the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. It is the day to call for action to remove gender inequalities. But the fact remains that from time immemorial women have always been suppressed and dominated all over the world especially in India. They are facing discriminations in every sphere of life, be it social, economic, political or religious.

Human civilization which is more than 5,000 years old has reached the 21<sup>st</sup> century through numerous natural, social, economic and environmental changes. But the condition of women has not really improved as much as it should have been in keeping with the giant strides made by human civilization. It is, of course, true that in all spheres of life, through protests, struggles and campaigns for years women have become successful, to some extent, to compel the government to make laws for gender justice and gender equality. But it is peculiarly ironical that in a country like India where images of goddess like Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati are worshipped with great solemnity, women are still denied entry into certain temples. Not only this. Women are not also allowed to chant many Vedic mantras. In spite of the fact that the Constitution of India makes provision for religious freedom and gender equality, many temple authorities ban women's Right to Pray. The present paper will focus on the discriminations made to Hindu women of India through ages from religious point of view. For this purpose, we will concentrate on the injunctions of Manusmṛiti and the impact of these injunctions on the lives of Hindu women in India till the day. In section-1 we will discuss that only with the exception of early Vedic age, inequalities existed between the two genders almost in all ages. In Section2 we will

cite some instances of women's movements for "Right To Pray" and "Right To Priesthood" and their iron determination for bringing about religious parity in Indian context. In the concluding part we will put forward some suggestions for removing disparities between the two genders.

### Section-1:

**Early Vedic Age (1500 to 1100 B.C.E. Not certain):** In the early Vedic age women were held in high esteem and no discrimination was made between men and women in any sphere of life. During this period, women wore sacred thread like their male counterparts and were taught the holy mantras of the Vedas. Some women who spent their life in search of knowledge without getting married were known as Brahnavādins. Some of the women who were scholars, teachers and priestesses participated in the philosophical debates of the Upanisads. The Sanskrit words "āchāryā" meaning a female teacher and "āchāryini", a teacher's wife clearly indicate that women were engaged in the noble profession of "Gurus" or teachers. Women like Gārgi, Maitreyee, Biswabārā, Ātreyye, Lopāmudrā, Śraddhyā, Medhā, Suryā were profound scholars of this age. Gārgi and Maitreyee also distinguished themselves in Brahnavidyā, the highest form of knowledge. Atri's daughter Apālā (8/91/1) and Kakhibān's daughter Ghosā (1/117/7) were also renowned scholars of this age.<sup>(1)</sup> During this period, women enjoyed equal rights with men and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with their husbands.

**Later Vedic Age: (1100 to 500 B.C.E. Not certain):** The position of women deteriorated during the later Vedic age. They no more enjoyed equal status with men. They were totally denied all kinds of rights. Though different dharmasastras, epics, Puranas were written during this period, women did not take part in the composition of any of these books either singly or jointly. Manusmṛitī which is regarded as the most authoritative and distinguished dharmasastra contains different codes of conduct for women.<sup>(2)</sup> From the injunctions prescribed by Manu in the fifth chapter of Manusmṛitī, we get a clear idea of what Manu thinks about the dharma or religion of women. Marriage was regarded as the only saṃskāra for girls. Upanayan became forbidden for them. In consequence, they had no right to chant Vedic mantras. Since marriage was considered very sacred and was given the same status as that of UpanayanSaṃskāra, Manu announced that paying respect to husband was of the same value as paying homage to 'guru' or teacher. Women were deprived of the right to education. Pre-puberty marriage came in vogue. Early marriage made it impossible for girl children to express their own opinion on their own marriage. The entire system of marriage was dominated by the single motive of giving the daughter by a father to the groom and taking the bride from the father by the groom as if a girl-child was nothing but a property to be bought and sold in the market. Manu asserted that women would be under the protective wings of her father in her childhood, of her husband in youth and of her sons after the death of her husband.<sup>(3)</sup> No woman, under any circumstance, should live independently—"Na śtreeswatantramahati". She should always live with her husband after her marriage.<sup>(4)</sup> Wife should always worship her husband as Parameshwar or God even if the husband is a dullard, a debauch or absolutely devoid of any sterling virtue.<sup>(5)</sup> She also could not perform any ritual, could not fast or observe any code of conduct without her husband's permission. So from the above discussion it becomes quite evident that in the age of dharmasastras, women were deprived of many rights which they enjoyed in the early Vedic age.

It should be noted that some verses of Manusmṛitī are contradictory. While some verses of Manusmṛitī glorify the position of women, some other verses degrade them. Manu advocates self-protection of women.<sup>(6)</sup> Manu also firmly asserts that gods favour the families where women are revered and honoured while all rites and rituals performed to propitiate and please gods become completely fruitless in families where women are disrespected or dishonoured. So women should always be honoured and adored by every member of the family.<sup>(7)</sup>

**Medieval Period (8<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Century) :** The medieval period witnessing many ups and downs in the fates and fortunes of Kings and monarchs of the Turko-Afghan and the Mughal dynasties did not hold out any prospect of hope for women. The fate of women appeared rather dark and dismal. This was the time when India fell prey to foreign invaders. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century Muslims invaded India and then in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Mohd. Gazanvi invaded and conquered India. During this period, India witnessed a total

turmoil in the social, political, religious and economic spheres. "Polygamy" and "Harem System" were prevalent in Muslim Society. The necessity of protecting women from the vicious grip of Muslims led to the introduction of "Purdah" system in Indian society. The girl children came to be treated as a burden by family members, because instead of being of any help to the family like a boy child who could stand by the family as an earning member, they came to be regarded as a source of misery to the family. Unfortunately, the necessity for protecting girl children created new evils like child-marriage, Sati-Pratha and DevadashiPratha.

**British Period (18<sup>th</sup> Century to Mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century):** After the dark age of medieval period, came the British period. The position of women was elevated during the British rule to some extent. Education became the sole means of women emancipation and Christian missionaries laid emphasis on educating women of Indian Society. Several schools, colleges and universities were set up to educate girls. Social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, PanditIsvar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen, Annie Besant, DayanandSaraswati fought for the abolition of Sati, Child-marriage, Polygamy, Purdah System and raised voice against the ban on widow remarriage, denial of the women's right to property inheritance. They strongly advocated women's right to education. Their constant efforts and the movements launched by them for the upliftment of women compelled the British government to enact several laws like Sati Prohibition Act, 1829, Widow Remarriage Act, 1856, Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, Hindu Women's Right To Property Act, 1939.

In short, in pre-independence period, the need to educate girl-children, to uplift the socio-economic status of women, to change socio-religious attitude towards women was, at least, felt in Indian Society. Efforts were made to eliminate inequalities or invidious distinctions existing between the two genders.

**Post-Independence Period (Mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century to Till day):** In the Post-Independence period the government of India took special care and made sincere efforts to remove all sorts of discriminations against women. Several laws were passed to ensure equality between the two genders. The Articles in the Constitution that are relevant to this discussion are:

**Article 14 :**Equality before Law – "The state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.

**Article 15 :**Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, caste, sex or place of birth.

(1) "The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them."<sup>(8)</sup>

#### **Section-2:**

Despite the fact that the Constitution of India makes provision for gender equality, women of India will have to traverse a long path to get gender-justice and "equality" in the true sense of the words. Strong movements, constant protests by women belonging to every strata of society are essential to get gender equality. And hopefully enough, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is witnessing mass protests and movements by women activists to achieve religious freedom. In this section we will concentrate on women's movements for "Right To Pray" and "Right To Priesthood".

Several instances can be cited in support of women's "Right To Pray" movement. One such instance of the clash between women's fundamental right to pray and age-old tradition is found in the attempt of over 500 women to make a forcible entry into the inner sanctum of Shani temple at Shingnapur in the State of Maharashtra. The orthodox Hindu priests of Shani temple have restricted the entry of women in the inner sanctum of this temple over centuries.

On 26 January, 2016, more than 500 women, under the leadership of Trupti Desai, dared to march to the temple with a demand of entry into the inner sanctum of the temple for offering prayer before God Shani completely defying the restrictions imposed by the priests upon their entry into the said sanctum. The police, however, prevented them from entering the temple. But their cause was upheld by the Maharashtra Chief Minister DevendraFadnavis who lent his unequivocal support to women's 'Right To Pray' movement. In a historic judgement delivered on 30 March, 2016, the Bombay High Court asked

Maharashtra Government to do away with all the bans on the entry of women to the temple. April 8, 2016 is a red-letter day in the history of the struggle of women for gender equality in the sense that it was on this day that the Shani Shingnapur temple authorities ended the age-old discrimination against the women by allowing them to enter the inner sanctum of the temple.

Another instance of impediments created by the orthodox priests to women's Right To Pray movement is found in the religious taboo imposed on the menstruating women. Most of the religions with the notable exception of Sikhism consider such women unclean. The ancient Ayyappan temple at Sabarimala, however, does not make any discrimination against any caste, religion or sex. Wearing black or blue dress pilgrims spent as many as 40 days living like ascetics. But discrimination is made against the menstruating women because they are treated as impure and unclean. In 1991 the Kerala High Court imposed a ban upon the entry of women above the age of 10 and below the age of 50 to Sabarimala Shrine during any period of the year. The activists of gender-equality, however, argue that such bans are discriminatory. When these activists or advocates of gender-equality demanded scriptural proof in support of the ban, the Hindu priests of the temple pleaded that Hinduism is based on various traditions and that proof cannot be provided. While reviewing a petition submitted to it, the Hon'ble Supreme Court asked the Sabarimala temple authorities in a tone of admonition, "why can you not let a woman enter? On what basis are you prohibiting women entry...? What is your logic? Women may or may not want to go (to worship at Sabarimala), but that is their personal choice."<sup>(9)</sup> However, the temple authorities, true to their tradition, remained unmoved and did not budge a single inch from their rigid stand of maintaining the ban of no-entry for women to the temple on the ground that the temple god, Lord Ayyappa, attracting millions of devotees each year, is Himself an avowed celibate. The Supreme Court hearings are in progress and no decision has yet been taken.

Another revolution towards the goal of achieving religious freedom has been ushered in with the 'Right To Priesthood' being conferred on the women in the present century. We can cite instances where women, after receiving the training of priesthood, are performing puja at temples. Mention can be made of the institutions which impart training of priesthood to women. At Pune, Thatte's Shankar SevaSamiti and Jnana Probhodini are the two leading training institutions of priesthood for women. Here women, learn by heart, the Sanskrit verses of ancient scriptures so that they can conduct all religious rites and ceremonies just like their male counterparts. At Kudroli of Mangalore in Karnataka, two widows, Indira Shanti of Bannur in Puttur taluk and Lakshmi Shanti of Mooda, after receiving training of priesthood conducted all religious rituals and offered puja at the Shrine of Gokarnanatheswara temple on October 06, 2013. Wearing light yellow sarees, they worshipped the idols of Shani, Ganapati, Shiva, Annapoorneshwari, Nava Grahas, Krishna and Hanuman. They also distributed "Prasad" to devotees.<sup>(10)</sup>

Another drastic step towards the goal of attaining religious freedom for women was taken by the managing committee of the Vittobha temple in the pilgrim city of Pandharpur of Maharashtra. According to orthodox Hindu tradition, only male Brahmin priests have the absolute right to conduct religious rituals and ceremonies. But the renowned 900 year old Vitthoba temple created history by appointing female priests and that too from among the backward classes in May 2014. In the words of Anna Dange, Chairman of the Vitthal Rukmini Temple Trust (VRTT), "This is the first initiative in the country by any temple trust to break the centuries, old monopoly of the Brahmins over the temple puja and other rituals. We are keen that puja and rituals should be thrown open to all castes, especially non-Brahmins." This historic move by VRTT was made in accordance with the verdict of Supreme Court of India. The Apex Court dismissed the claims of local Badve and Utpat Brahmin families of inheriting the ancestral rights to the earnings and rituals at the temple. Formerly, all the earnings of the temple were kept by the members of Badve and Utpat families but now the earnings come to fill the coffer of VRTT and the most notable point is that all the rituals of the temple are also determined by VRTT.

In May 2014, VRTT selected eight Hindu women priests all belonging to the category of OBCs, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Many were even ready to work without remuneration regarding it as a "divine service". This is undoubtedly a landmark in the history of women's struggle for gender-equality and religious freedom. Although the orthodox Hindus strongly opposed the decision of

appointing female priests at temples, such women priests as MeghaGokhale of Navi Mumbai's Belapur township and Sindhu Dhadve of KoparKhairana township, welcomed the decision. MeghaGokhale imparts training of priesthood to some 50 students, both male and female. She says, "Women are the torch bearers of religion and play a pivotal role in preserving religion and culture."<sup>(11)</sup>

Now-a-days in many places in India, people prefer female priests to their male counterparts for conducting religious rites and rituals. In Pune PradnyaPatil invited ChitraLele, a female priest, to conduct the traditional ceremony of house-warming. Patil is of the opinion that female priests are better than their male counterparts, because they are very sincere, dedicated and explain the meanings of the "mantras" and rituals in the local language. In the words of ChitraLele, "We women priests explain the gist of the ritual in just one hour. We try and involve the people watching. So we're popular among the young generation."<sup>(12)</sup>

According to V.L. Manjul, a research scholar and chief librarian of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute of Pune, the number of women priests in India is around 1600. In his words, "In Maharashtra alone, some 600 women have been trained as Purohits (priests)."<sup>(13)</sup>

**Some Suggestions for Removing Disparities between The Two Genders:** What holds out hope for society as a whole is that women are fighting for their rights not only in the sphere of religion but in all other spheres of life. They are demanding equal pay, equal opportunities in administration, in education, in armed forces and in many other fields. However, religious freedom of women can be achieved only if they can acquire support from each and every person of the society. But the most important factor in this regard is to bring about a change in the psyche of each and every human being. Every individual has to realize that women are equal in their human demands and hence equal opportunities in social, cultural, religious, economic and political spheres should be made available to them. Parents should overcome the deep-seated social and religious prejudices and gender-biases, and provide their girl-children with opportunities of life at par with their sons. They should not neglect or exhibit apathy to their daughters.

However, one point worth mentioning is that not all women support the activists' movements for religious freedom and gender-justice. Some women are atheists. Many pious women are haunted by the apprehension of inviting divine wrath to themselves if they defy tradition. They criticize activists for taking initiatives in changing centuries-old tradition.

We cannot but conclude that in order to end gender-discrimination, it is imperative to bring about a change in the psyche not only of men but also of women themselves. And a change in psyche can come only through proper and functional education. Education alone enables one to be free from all sorts of prejudices and biases. An educated and enlightened woman can be empowered, self-reliant and can fight against any sort of discrimination.

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