

Women, Patriarchy and Hinduism: From Vedic to Post- Independence Times

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ABSTRACT-

India always remained a subject of admiration and astonishment, for people analyzing its saga of political, social, economic and cultural advancement. The diversification found in the geographical and religious dimension of Indian landmass, made people thunderstruck for its quality of unification. Though this country tried to continue with the basic traditional pattern of its socio- political structure, the passage of time witnessed several major changes in the fundamental functioning of its basic structure. The major concern of this paper to scrutinize one such change found in the status and role of women due to the including of multiple extraneous factors in the Hindu society, which made horrendously fall the role of women from status of deity to the status of sexual object and finally to the status of mere a burden on her male counterpart (which to a certain extent recovered again to the status of a human entity only in India after its independence in 1947 because of the enactment of country's constitution).

Keywords- India, Womanhood, Hinduism, Decline, Patriarchy

India is an acreage of diversity which unfolds the antiquity of varying forms of cultural consolidations, traditional amalgamations and political beliefs for humanity residing in it since the time immemorial. The archaeological evidences of Indian subcontinent illustrates the remarkable tale of its growth and progression from the arrival of first modern humans on its landmass by 55,000 years ago from Africa to its present fast earned reputation as a realm gaining belongingness to an extraterrestrial existence, which in consequence promises the possibilities of multidimensional magnification of this land in its near future as well. The pluralistic, multicultural and mega diversified Indian society remains a subject of awe for people witnessing the fast growing repute and role of this land in global culture- from its hunter gatherer uncivilized status

to the status of a land accepting democratic parliamentary system, which surely is a mark of its constructiveness and progression. During the same time this land's diversity was seen extending in spiritual arena as well, making this country a hub of spiritual alliances of multiple transcendental ideas including Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and many others, which in amalgamated status came to be known as philosophy of Hinduism.

But among these constructive socio-cultural changes in Indian society, there appeared multiple destructive changes too in pious land of Indian subcontinent and the social structure of Indian society transformed a lot with reference to an individual's role, duties and status in the multiethnic frame of tribal, rural and even urban India. The advent of foreign invaders and rulers in India ascertained itself an affair of assortments (with possibilities of exposure and atrocities both working in parallel dimension); and the advent of foreigners in 'Hindustan' not only laid down the foundation of amalgamated culture and political advancement, but also created a rift among 'Hindustanis' in the matters related to power and politics. Their lethal impact was seen almost in all the arenas of social, political, economic and religious life of indigenous people and hindered the evolution and advancement of theirs to a great extent. The social dynamics changed horridly as an impact of sovereignty expansion of Arabs, Turkish, Persian, Ghaznavid, Mongol, Persian, Greek, Mughal, British and such other invasions on Indian landmass and had disastrous influence on the lives of the indigenous people.

The most disastrous impact was seen on the condition of women, which suffered a major deterioration by its transformation from an auspicious image of 'Shakti' to a dismal image of mere 'Bhukti' object (believed to be formed to satisfy the carnal yearnings of men). Their position in society, which started abating from the patriarchal structure of ancient Indo- Aryan

civilization of Indian antiquity, continued to be reified well into India's early modern period as well (Stein 90). On the surface level she was revered for her femininity as, "the queen, the gatherer- up of treasures, most thoughtful, first of those who merit worship" (McDaniel 90) and eternal infinite consciousness of the entire universe; but elsewhere in other spiritual texts such as Manusmriti, it was declared that, "a woman must never seek to live independently" (Patrick 146). The floating of such ideas in certain arenas of Dharma and Indian aesthetics as, "Man provides the seed, the essence for the creation of the offspring; the seed determines the kind; the child's identity is derived from the father for the group placement. The role of the mother is just to receive the seed and through her own blood provide warmth and nourishment and help is to grow" (Desai 29), accorded a fairly low status to women in socio- cultural structure of Indian landmass and gradually they were taken down to the status of mere 'Sudras' in the orthodox functioning of Hindu patriarchal system.

Undoubtedly the gendered trapping of Indian women is one of the most disconcerting area of confab that divulges the low pathological mentality of our traditional Indian society, but the confab can be considered the need of the time, to find out a solution to get the individual self of a woman recognized again. The disparity between the idealized picture of a woman as 'Devi' and her reality in the traditional framework of Indian society is a real concern, which surely needs an attentive eye from our constitutional bodies as well as by the inner conscience of our social fabricators. This study is an attempt to understand this troubling phenomenon of Indian antiquity, which surely is a disturbing one to undertake but deserves an attention from the society if there is a desire to bring women back to her initial state of equality and respect, in which she had right to decide for her own self. Without probing into this terrain it is impossible to suggest any remedy for the betterment and empowerment of Indian womanhood, and challenge the patriarchal notion of female subjugation to men.

Authentic study of status and role of women in Indian society starts with recorded facts found in Vedic literature, in which women shared equal rights and opportunities as men and was allowed to perform significant rituals of religious life. She was revered immensely for the femininity of her and asseverated as the defining factor behind the creation of the cosmos. Though even in Vedic society birth of a son was considered a more auspicious moment than the birth of a daughter,

and certain 'Mantras' were chanted by parents to get the opportunity to have the birth of a son. But evidences suggest this fact as well that parents in higher section of society performed certain 'Yagyas' to get blessed with the birth of a daughter with high intellectual caliber and permitted maidens to attain scholastic life through the entry of theirs in 'AashramVyavastha'. Women scholars in Vedic age were called 'Brahmavadinis and Sadyovadhus' and were permitted to opt the teaching career. They were well versed in several other art forms including singing and dancing as well and some of them even earned their bread by performing these artistic forms. Their religious life was also a satisfactory one, in which they performed religious rituals along with their men. In nuptial bond also a woman had her share of equality and was given the entire freedom to select the partner of her own choice.

However the situation changed moderately in the age of 'Brahmanas, Upanishads and later Samhitas', as there was seen a gradual decline in the arena of female literateness. The tradition of sending out maidens to 'Aashram' through the performing of 'UpanayanaSamskar' was regarded as an unwanted ritual with the passage of time and only informal classes were arranged for them imparted only by close relatives. The deprivation suffered by maidens in educational matter had its impact on the matters related to secular life as well, as now the women were hindered from performing the sacrificial ritual in absence of her husband like it was performed in the previous age. Their lack of training in secular matters deprived them of their religious rights and gradually were seen snatched away entirely from them.

Situation became worse in the age of 'Dhramasastra, Dhramasutra and the Epics', in which equal status and respect savored by women in the previous ages suffered a rapid lethal deterioration. The honorable image relished by women in Vedic and later Vedic ages was gradually seen transforming into an image of mere a burden in the age under consideration, because the air of authority women had in earlier ages because of incorporating their labor in smooth functioning of normal activities of familial, social and economic life was no longer enjoyed by them with the introduction of slavery system in social structure of contemporary society. Impact of religion became another cause of their misfortune, as the period of Sutra and Sastra declared it totally unnecessary to have association of wife with the husband for the performance of religious rituals (which in earlier ages was taken as a necessity). Now in the age under consideration women were

taken as an apparatus fit only for the sensuous pleasures of a man, which resulted in making parents scared of the birth of a daughter in their household. Upanayana Sanskar of a girl in this age became a mere formality, which in most of the cases was discouraged by parents. The marriageable age of a girl was lowered down in this age to the age of 9 or 10, which in previous ages used to take place at the age of 16 or 17. During the long stretch of time under consideration, even the marital bond became much of a calamity for women. She was deprived of even her basic rights of selection of a partner of her own choice and settlement done under such circumstances mostly resulted in making the bride and groom an ill-matched pair.

Next came the period of 'Buddhism and Jainism', which presented women altogether in a very different light than they were taken in the philosophy of Hinduism. These religious sects confirmed the authenticity of women on the path of salvation and never declared them less ascetic than men for the achievement of the same. In contrast to Hinduism, these religious ideas celebrated the birth of a daughter as an event of auspiciousness and considered women an essential asset for training the mind of a man in order to lead him on the path of redemption. These sects glorified the idea of motherhood and regarded it as a thought parallel to divine virtue. It was acclaimed by these as a great source of divinity on earth, as mothers were seen by them working not for self-redemption but in the direction of deliverance of their progeny.

Subsequently, Hinduism shifted towards 'Early Medieval Period' and witnessed functioning of the female identity only around the identity of their male counterparts (which ultimately resulted in making them fall in the status of mere of a sex object designed for the satisfaction of men). The cause of female literateness also suffered to a great extent in this period which commenced from the fall of Gupta Empire by about 5th or 6th century AD and continued witnessing further deterioration in the percentage of female literacy till the widening of the reign of Delhi Sultanate from about 11th or 12th century AD. This was an age of pre-puberty marriages of girls, which was one of the major reasons for the decline in the cause of female literacy. By about 500 AD scholars and ascetics like Yama stopped minding even, "a girl being chained to an unsuitable and undeserving husband for the whole life, if there was the least danger of the fatal line of the age of puberty being crossed before marriage" (Altekar 57). Pre-puberty marriages resulted in increase in the number of child widows, which subsequently made them scared of their

future because of having no propriety rights. There was seen double standard in matter of widow remarriages as well, who were not permitted to rearrange their life as it was permitted in the case of widowers. The lethal impact that awaited on account of ban of remarriages was witnessed in the revival of the 'Sati Pratha', which was preferred even by women to the tiresome and isolated life of the widow. The only positivity that was witnessed in the case of the widows during this period was seen in the restriction on the custom of 'Niyoga', which was banned by reformers with sheer antipathy.

However, this period has 'Bhakti Movement' too in the folds of its saga, which tried to challenge the domination of Brahmanical patriarchal ideology prevalent in Hinduism during the time. The leaders of Bhakti including Ravidas, Namdev, Ramanada, Mirabai, Tukaram, Tulsidas and others tried to allow to seek salvation to everyone regardless of their gender and society, which definitely created a positive environment for the attainment and encouragement of gendered equality. Womenfolk in Bhakti refuted their surrender to the stereotypical rules set for them by society and carved a niche for themselves in the literary world by expressing their cherished desire of equality in the songs and prayers composed by them. These women and leaders never surrendered their inner peace and contentment for the satisfaction of the ego of their male acquaintances, and thus set an example for other women too to defy the orthodoxy of societal patriarchy.

But a major hindrance on the path of gendered equality was getting its strong hold in Hindustan during the 13th century, which was seen in the arrival of reign of Muslim invaders and the founding of Delhi Sultanate. Their arrival didn't let the Bhakti to establish the egalitarian society in completion and brought such a massive deterioration in life of women from which they continued to suffer for the next succeeding 500 years. With the advent of Muslims began the 'Later Medieval Period' in India, which was the darkest time of the servitude of Hindu women. During the time women suffered all the forms of tyranny such as child marriages, Sati custom, early pregnancy, girl infanticide, dowry custom and what not, and their insecurities reached to such a level that desire for emancipation became just a day dream for them to achieve. The honor of maidens was always at stake during the medieval time because of the robustness of the Muslim soldiers. Thus the birth of daughter was started taken as a calamity by Hindu parents and they for the very first time overtly engaged themselves in the sin of girl infanticide.

The cause of female literateness during the time totally became a thing of the past and if they were seen to be ignorant, it entirely was an effect of them being, “kept illiterate and provided with no facility of education” (Habib 4). Her subservience was regarded as a destiny of hers and no relief came to them in the form of their knowledge of letters.

The discussion about Muslim India would be thoroughly disorganized without throwing lights on the custom of Purdah, which hindered the flexibility and mobility in the life of women. This actually was taken as an extension of practice of ‘Ghoonghat’ by Hindus, and by the 19th century, “was the customary practice of high- caste Hindus and elite communities throughout India” (Walsh 88). This along with polygamy became a practice which was performed on a larger scale among Hindus as an influence of Muslim rulers, which gradually was taken as a symbol of pride and honor among the Hindus belonging to lower as well as affluent class. Harem kept by Hindu chieftains in the manner of Muslim invaders too enforced a life of seclusion and degradation for Hindu wives, but had its share of destruction in their lives, “in a country where little danger was apprehended from foreign intrusions, affords a belief, that the concealment of the higher ranks of women had been an established custom of the Hindus, previously to the date of the Muslim conquest of India” (Foster 309-310).

Thus it can be stated that Muslim era had its own entangled ways of gendered discrimination, which made patronizing attitude of men towards women a new norm of the time. But this state of metamorphosis came to a halt to some extent in the next era of consideration called ‘British rule’, in which a decentralization of power was witnessed in politics as well as in societal structure of Hindustan. The social evils like female infanticide, sati custom, purdah, pre- puberty marriages, restrictions on education and such other evils were reformed in the era under consideration, in which British administrators worked along with Hindu reformers. Urbanization and industrialization also performed its share in the uplifting of degraded condition of Indian womanhood and tried to provide women a chance to explore the world existing outside the four walls of their house.

The company initially followed the policy of non- interference in the religious and social matters of the indigenous people, but gradually decided to champion the cause of social welfare by considering it the ‘White man’s burden’ to reform the unreformed evils of the society. The first wave of reforms started with the campaigning of Raja

Ram Mohan Roy and Lord William Bentinck against the custom of Sati in 1828, which resulted, “in the suppression of the horrible custom by which so many lives are cruelly sacrificed” (Dodwell 142). The question of female illiteracy became a major concern for reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar, Joti Rao Phule and many more like in the mid half of the 19th century and the efforts of theirs effectuated the much needed change in the direction of female literateness with founding of the all- girls school in Bengal, Madras and Bombay region. ‘The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act’ of 1856, ‘The Child Marriage Restraint Act’ of 1929 and ‘The Hindu Woman’s Right to Property Act’ of 1937 were some other legalized achievements of the British colonial rule, which made the journey of women’s elevating an interesting and satisfying one in comparison to its status in the former ages.

The British colonial rule came to an end on 15th of august 1947 and a new era called ‘Post- Independence’ commenced with the end of the reign of foreign sovereignty. So far the question of gendered equality in the matter of women was traced in this era, the conditions surely improved in the structural, constitutional and cultural pattern of Indian society for them. Article 14 of Indian constitution guaranteed equal status to women in the manner of men and they were given further constitutional rights in the form of passing of the legislative acts and provisions like ‘Special Marriage Act’ of 1954, ‘Hindu Marriage Act’ of 1955, ‘The Hindu Succession Act’ of 1956, ‘The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act’ of 1956 and ‘Dowry Prohibition Act’ of 1961. Educational rights of women were also improved in the era under contemplation and the percentage of women pursuing higher education was seen improving rapidly during the time. The number of women working in economic sector also increased in the period under consideration and women were seen recruited even into the 3 wings of armed forces called military, air force and naval force since the year of 1991. Women were allowed to have greater participation even in the constituent bodies with the 33% reserved seats for them, which subsequently widened opportunities for them in field of politics as well.

Thus it be stated that the journey of women from Vedic times to modern times proven a kind of roller coaster ride for them, in which sometimes they were taken to the heights of sky and sometimes suffered the falling to the ground. Their expedition sometimes had broken their self- confidence entirely into zero, sometimes they thoroughly refused to surrender to the will of their male persecutor. Social and religious rights of

theirs changed from time to time, sometimes in the favor of theirs and sometimes totally against the individuality of theirs. But they never lost hope for the betterment of their condition, which fortunately was done to a great extent with the passing of constitutional rights in their favor.

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