



RESEARCH ARTICLE

RELIGION, CULTURE AND GENDER IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to do a feminist analysis on religion and culture in India, to explore the reasons of gender issues in Indian society. It is trying to point out the scriptural influences that create and propagate the gender concepts in the society. This is basically done by analyzing verses from the text Manu-smrti, which was considered as the handbook for making social order, legislation and constitution in India. There is an effort to understand the overlapping ideas of religion and culture conceptualizations in India. The upshot would explicate the textual reasons which also caused immense subjugation for women in India.

INTRODUCTION

The newly emerged stage of social transformation in India brings forth the discussion on religion, culture and gender. Religion and culture have ever been concepts of extensive exigency in India and in all the phases of change in any society. In India, clubbing the two concepts of religion and culture is an unavoidable task as they form the main strategies of social organization infused through scriptures. Malory Nye has written about the approach that could be labeled as the study of 'religion and culture'.¹ According to her, religion is not something abstract and God-given, but it is integral to other cultural activities and is the fundamental aspect of culture. The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz also has defined 'religion as a cultural system'.² The points posed by Malory Nye are crucial in the Indian context because the usage of the term 'religion' becomes a noun, adjective, adverb or even verb as she said. Interesting is her explanation that, this issue sounded with the explanation on religion of Hinduism that as *sanatana dharma*, making religion as a verb.

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The beginnings of such Indian problematic can only be constructed through reflections on the ancient texts.³ Vedas and the texts created thereafter by claiming the Vedic ideas as their roots are quintessential to understand religion and culture in India. This paper is an analysis of such texts, specifically *Manu-smrti*, to see the linkage between concepts of gender and cultural/religious concepts in India.

Religions and Textual Representation of Women

The importance of religious texts are not yet denied much by any politics in India though there had been a few instances such as burning *Manu-Smrti*. Scholars including Malory Nye also maintain the magnitude of religious texts though trying to put aside Max Muller's preferential suggestion for the reference that the Sacred Texts could produce.⁴ Although they think it is vital to read other forms of texts than the religious ones, the relevance of analyzing such texts of Hinduism is not denied by them as these texts exercise as the main outlet of culture and religion in India. Especially the *Smrti* codes which are believed to 'be written out of Vedic inspiration'⁵ to make a social order has enormously propagated the amended concepts of Hinduism so as to make it a dominant religion in the contemporary condition. And the well-known text *Manu-Smrti*, that is considered as the law-book of Hindus could be found as the

¹ Nye, Malory. *Religion: The Basics*, Routledge, London, 2003, p.2- 21

² Ibid., p.37. Also see, Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of cultures*, Westview, Basic Books, 1973

³ Krishna, Daya. *Classical Indian Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p.8

⁴ Nye, Malory., 2003, p.157,149

⁵ Krishna, Daya. *Classical Indian Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p.17

most anti-woman Sanskrit core of Hinduism, according to Pandita Ramabai, who refused to remain Hindu and converted to Christianity because of the androcentric nature of Hinduism.⁶ But there are arguments that religions always provided subordinate position to women no matter whether that is Hinduism, Islam, Christianity or any other.⁷ The most vocal example of such a view is Mary Daly, who argues that the concept of belief in a male deity leads to profound sexual inequalities.⁸ Similar forms of androcentricism of religion and culture has been of great discussion among feminist theorists. Accordingly, the lies about the nature and function of woman that are intrinsic to patriarchal religion have informed the legal, educational, political, economic, and medical/psychiatric systems of our society and are accepted as 'natural truths' by even the most modern and atheistic citizens.⁹ This stream of feminist theorizing put forward the relevance of female Goddesses and female spirituality while it upset 'God's natural laws'¹⁰ on 'natural roles of the sexes'¹¹. There are opinions that women's spirituality would help the reestablishing of collective female consciousness to develop a way of life which doesn't need hierarchy.¹² This might change the status of women as anomalies in many cultures which have male-biased ideological foundations. There were Buddhist nuns in India during BC600 such as Soma, Sumangalamata, Nandutara and Vimala who addressed women's spirituality and their status in religious matters. Their rhetorical self-deprecation echoed by many women activists and writers later on. Sumangalamata celebrated the life by becoming a homeless world-renunciation and escaping the pestle and cooking pots of the 'householder'.¹³ Soma also fought against conceptions such as the domestication of women and her cooking skill, by attacking the ideas about the 'two-finger intelligence of women'.¹⁴ This proves how deep is the historical root of the women's subordination inside the basic social institution named family in any religious structure.

Hinduism, Culture and Gender: *Manu-smrti*

The emergence of the text *Manu-Smrti* prescribed inferior role assigned to women, at the foyer of *brahmanical* revivalism after *budhist* period. The modern Indian culture also takes the

⁶ See, Omvedt, Gail. *Dalit Visions : The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*, Reprint. New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2006. Chakravarti, Uma. *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998. In 1882 Ramabai founded Arya Mahila Samaj (undoubtedly the first autonomous women's organization in India) and then shortly after departed for England where she converted to Christianity. For this, she was condemned by even the moderate Brahmins who had originally sponsored her efforts. Anyhow, Ramabai's activities are the empirical evidence for the feminist move proving the anti-woman elements of Indian scriptures.

⁷ There are discussions on Qur'an and Bible showing that they are basically women friendly, but it was the later interpretations made them male-centric. The issues of translating Qur'an and the language of interpretation being anti-woman inflicting such ideas in the real life situations etc. have been discussed by various writers. See for eg., Al-Faruqi, "Towards a New Theology for Quranic Exigesis", *Islamic Studies*, March 1962. For some discussions on Bible and Women, see, *Jeevadhara*, XXI No.122 March 1991

⁸ Nye, Malory. *Religion: The Basics*, Routledge, London, 2003, p.74-75

⁹ Spretnak, Charlene (ed). *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement*. Anchor Press, U.S.A, 1982, p.xi

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p.385

¹³ De Lamotte, Eugenia., Meeker, Natania., O'Barr, Jean. (eds.) *Women Imagine Change: A Global Anthology of Women's Resistance; From 600 BC to Present*, Routledge, New York, 1997

¹⁴ Ibid.

text *Manu-Smrti* to construct and preserve more rigid form of the family.¹⁵ The cultural construction of the concept of 'woman' and 'her space as family' could be observed as gullied by the codes of Manu which is celebrated as a banner of Hinduism and Indian culture even in the contemporary India. Scholars have explained the cooperative mission of culture and religion to form the gendered identities, to make statements such as 'women tend to be more religious, but men make effective religious leaders or men should be the religious leaders'.¹⁶ This idea is reflected in *Manu-Smrti*, as it clearly states that the women have no right for doing religious rituals and only men are supposed to do that. It is clear from the verse saying:

*Nasti streenam kriya mantrairiti dharme vyavasthitih
Nirindriya hyamantrascha striyo/nrtamiti sthitih* (Chapter IX: Verse 18)

The translation of this verse has been done as follows, by M.N. Dutt (Sharma, 1998:394):- 'The purificatory rites of women are (i.e. must be performed) without the Vedic mantras; this is the decision of the law code. And for this disqualification of *Mantra*-less-ness, women are like unto inorganic things. This is the conclusion.' The low status given to the women's existence as inorganic things, is clearly drawing the religious reason as having no right to chant *mantras*. Thus the verse itself ensnares not only the religious reasons of women's stumpy status but even the very existence of women as mere objects of men. It is contradictory to the scientific evidence of African origins of humans and the oldest divinity of the 'dark mother'.¹⁷ The disgruntlement on the religious conditions with which women were objectified and deemed to be inorganic was visible in feminist studies. Judith Butler has explained about the powerful discourse of gender that is created by religion and culture, and the way in which behavior is shaped through culture and religion.¹⁸ And the texts that claim to be the authority of religion or culture doubtlessly become the tools or agents to propagate the gendered concepts to form the behaviour or mind-set of the people inhabiting in any particular area. The hermeneutical attempts on the religious/cultural texts could see the gender disparities involved. The cultural complexity of India, because of its population including people from various religions encompasses a massive amount of research enterprises in the country. Anyhow Hinduism is known and accepted as the primordial form of religion in India by various scholars as well as the general public. But the discourse on Hinduism as the core religion has grown into the critical issue, if it is a religion at all.

Sister Nivedita says, Hinduism as a religion, is coupled with its resistance power as a civilization and this furnishes one of the most startling paradoxes in the history of human.¹⁹ She explains Hinduism as originally derived from veritable network

¹⁵ Doniger, Wendy and Smith, Brian K. Trans. *The Laws of Manu*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1991, see, p. xvii

¹⁶ Ibid., p.77

¹⁷ Birnbaum, Lucia Chiavola. *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers*, Author's choice press, USA, 2001, see p.3. African and African American scholarship and the popular understanding about the African origins of humans is dealt within this section of the book. Proceeding from the fact it elaborates on the oldest divinity known as 'dark mother'.

¹⁸ Doniger, Wendy and Smith, Brian K. Trans. *The Laws of Manu*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1991, p.77

¹⁹ Sister Nivedita (Margaret E. Noble), *Religion and Dharma*, Longman, Green and Co. London, 1915, p.1

of religions in which the co-ordinating element was the philosophy now known as *Vedanta*.²⁰ Nevertheless, noteworthy is the blindness of the orthodox school of *Vedanta* about the existence of female-self while it assigns every phenomenon in the world as the manifestations of *Brahman* which is evidently masculine being explained as pure consciousness. Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty says, Hinduism has always been noted for its ability to absorb potentiality schismatic developments.²¹ But it doesn't seem to be much absorbing the gender issues while it had the gendered mode of *purusha* and *prakrti* concepts in the *Sankhya* philosophy. While *purusha* is the conscious self, *prakrti* is explained as unintelligent and unconscious, but uncaused all-pervading principle which is the cause of the production of objective world. This could be found as a basis of gendering in the history of Indian philosophizing. There are references showing the tendency of *Sankhya* thought to pervade all the literature of ancient India including the *Smritis*, *Srutis* and *Puranas*.²² Anyhow, the philosophical background of India and its religions are renowned, in spite of the various counter arguments for Hinduism being conceived as the ideology of Hindu religion. Hinduism was just meaning the way of life of the people who lived on the Indus valley, according to Persians who used the term in the beginning. These points facilitate to view Hinduism not just as a religion for the so-called Hindus and to subvert the meanings of the usages of the term as well. The gendered structures of the religion and culture in the present form of Hinduism nowadays could be reflexively traced in the increasing religious fundamentalism as a political agenda visible in the social life in India. Foucault describes religion as a political force, in the discussion about religion and politics in the West,²³ which may seem to be true for the present religious situations in India as well.

Hinduism in India is said to be aiming at the heights of *Vairagya* (non-attachment) and *Moksha* (liberation). *Atmalabha* (self-realization) is the summum bonum of Hinduism as per some interpretation.²⁴ The main feature of Hinduism is the ideology of *sanatana dharma* which means eternal order.²⁵ There are opinions that it is not fundamentalist or sectarian to keep an order and it is the only way to eliminate chaos in the life.²⁶ Even though it doesn't promote any religious fundamentalism, there are unaddressed questions about the *sanatana dharma* the Hinduism put forward. Who are the people supposed to maintain the order in the world and life, by following the doctrine of *santana dharma*, is a problem to be deeply analyzed. This also tags on the issue how the order is destroyed so that there should be some people to make it up and maintain. All such issues are ostensive to women, putting that they are by nature chaotic, and men are supposed to order the women's lives and thus fulfill the great duty of retaining the eternal order. Almost all social theorists considered 'woman as permanently subversive force within the order', as Rousseau said. Woman has been considered as a threat for social and political order throughout the mainstream socio-political

history. Both Eastern and Western thinkers propagated the idea that women are 'in opposition to civilization' as Freud said in his book 'Civilization and its Discontents'. There are enough evidences to argue that the civilization promoted by Hinduism, no matter in any of its varied versions, conceptualized women as some creatures to be controlled by men who are the authority to sustain the ordered civilizations. Some verses from *Manu-Smriti* that was also a main reference book for preparing Indian Constitution, are the best referential in this occasion. For example, the eleventh verse of ninth chapter speaks of the way in which the life of the woman should be ordered by their men.

*Arthasya samgraha chainam vyaye chaiva niyojayeth
Sauche dharme/napanktyam cha parinahasya vekshane (IX:
11)*

That means the women 'should be (may be) employed' (*niyojayeth*) in taking care of the wealth of her husband and the expenditure of it. And she should be employed in the activities such as keeping cleanliness of the people at home, cooking for them and looking after the furniture. This is really provocative for any gender sensitive study, as it is strictly regulating the woman's life and ordering her activities in the day-to-day life. Though the usage *niyojayeth* leaves the semantic freedom to see the meaning as 'should be' or 'may be' employed, the idea that 'someone else would employ her' is the surplus meaning derived from this, and that would be the men according to other related verses. Moreover this has the broad meaning that the woman could be transgressing if their life is not ordered in this way. This fact is literally advocated in a following verse. The fifteenth verse of the same chapter talks about the innate fickleness of women to transgress against their husbands out of erotic fancies, though they are well protected (IX: 15). According to Pandita Ramabai, *Manu-Smriti* is one of the best examples for scriptural attempt to make women hateful beings in the eyes of the world. Her conversion testimony stressed that 'there were only two things on which all the *Dharmasastras*, the sacred epics, the *Puranas*, and the modern poets, the popular preachers of the present day and orthodox high-caste men, were agreed. That is, women of high and low caste were bad, worse than demons, unholy that they could not get *Moksha* as men could'.²⁷ In spite of her initial acceptance of most assumptions of Hindu nationalism,²⁸ she finds the core of Hinduism as fundamentally patriarchal. It is evidential from the eighteenth verse of ninth chapter in *Manu-Smriti* that authenticates the point saying that the women are deprived of *mantras* (*nasti streenam kriya mantrairiti dharma vyavasthithi*) and so that they are not supposed to do religious duties. They are apparently appeared in the textual reference such as they can attain *moksha* by fulfilling the duties to the husband as suggested in the following verse.

*Nasti streenam prthagyajno na vratam napyuposhanam
Patim susrooshate yena tena svasarge maheeyate (V: 155)*

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty, 'The origin of Heresy in Hindu Mythology', *History of Religions*, Vol.10, 1970, p.271

²² Kapoor, Subodh (Ed). *The Systems of Indian Philosophy*, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 2004, p.277

²³ Carrette, Jeremy R. (Ed.) *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault*, Manchester University Press, UK, 199, p.107

²⁴ Naganathan, G. *Spirituality: Hindu Scriptural Perspectives*, New Age Books, New Delhi, 2004, p.29

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., see back cover.

²⁷ Omvedt, Gail. *Dalit Visions, Tracts or the Times/8*, p.27. See, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*, Reprint. New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2006

²⁸ Ibid. Ramabai and Tarabai who were living in the nineteenth century had raised their voices against what Partha Chatterjee has described as the 'nationalist resolution of women's question'.

Also see,

De Lamotte, Eugenia., Meeker, Natania., O'Barr, Jean. (eds.) *Women Imagine Change: A Global Anthology of Women's Resistance; From 600 BC to Present*, Routledge, New York, 1997

[A wife has no other religious rite of vow of her own than an unflinching devotion to her lord, whereby she will be glorified in heaven (Sharma, ed., 1998:254)] Verse 146 of fifth chapter uses the term 'streedharmam' (woman's duty) to preach about the duties of women. But the duties described in the verses from 146-166 are just the duties at home and towards her husband (V: 146-166). Tarabai Shinde who wrote 'stri-purusha Tulana' (comparison of women and men) in 1882 attacked the whole pattern of life laid out for women by Hinduism and its scriptures.²⁹ She raised the question in public what is the *stri-dharma*. She thought the *dharma* which is mere devotion to a single husband behaving according to his whims is nonsense and she screamed out various reasons for breaking the model of 'pativrata'. Although 'Stri-purusha Tulana' is not a reasoned critique of the Hindu scriptures, it is a satirical attack on them in a language of familiarity.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata were also a part of the lives of the majority but according to some views this did not necessarily make them part of a religion, as was made out by religious spokesmen.³⁰ When Hindu nationalists began to turn such texts into 'scriptures', women like Tarabai and Ramabai had to show aggression, to find a different direction for the discussions on woman based on ancient texts. Although the recent scholar Meera Kosambi thinks it is hard to deal with that feminism,³¹ Tarabai and Ramabai could be considered as the powerful critics of early feminism in India who fought against the concepts of *pativrata* (loyal wife) which standardizes the role, identity and sexuality of a woman by legitimizing the misogynist family structure. Segmentation is the basis of patriarchal socialism or capitalism- separation of women and men, of theory and practice, of learning and working, of experience and belief, of production and product, of means and ends, of mind and body, of race, of class, of age, and, interestingly enough of religion and government.³² The integration and recognition of relationship between all these could be the basis for the sanity and power of feminism.³³ Integration of self-change and institutional change is the revolutionary practice to tackle with the hierarchies within the religion, caste, class and gender paradigms. Some recent feminists suggest that the task of our age is to draw on our spiritual heritage and through re-establishing our collective female consciousness, to develop a way of life which doesn't need hierarchy at its base. According to them, this kind of a politics of feminist spirituality assumes to free our minds and our bodies from our cultural restrictions as well as legal restrictions.³⁴

Concluding Comments

The overlapping issues of religion, culture and gender have made the life of women in India subjugated even at the

threshold of postmodern era. The social sway of scriptures that continues to be a tool of controlling women, remains as a challenge for the inception of gender equality in India. One can see the migration of Pandita Ramabai during the colonial period as one strategy to rebel against the religion that subordinated and tortured women in India. The advent of Buddhism had caused some position for women in religion and that declined again after the brahminical revivalism that had produced texts such as *Smritis*. Even in the present context the enormous influence of brahminical patriarchy on social stratification in India, is a noticeable background for the socio-political moves against gendered oppressions. The emergence of feminist versions of spirituality gave a new space to position women in religion. Since religion intersecting with culture in Indian life is a stringent fact, feminist spirituality could be a distinctive way of doing feminism in India. As far as the idea of religion exists in the society as an unavoidable institution of social organization, the feminist agenda would remain relevant to make the religion gender friendly.

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²⁹ Ibid. Tarabai was concerned about the atrocities against women and she raised voice against widows being blamed for trying to dispose their babies etc. Also see, Susie Taru and K.Latha, 'Tarabai Shinde', De Lamotte, Eugenia., Meeker, Natania., O'Barr, Jean. (eds.) *Women Imagine Change: A Global Anthology of Women's Resistance; From 600 BC to Present*, Vol.I, 221-223, Routledge, New York, 1997

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See, Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. Ed. *Feminism in India*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2004, p.xiii, xiv

Also see, Kosambi, 2000, p.27

³² Spretnak, Charlene, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement*, Anchor Press, USA, 1982, p.382

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See Ibid., p.385 for this idea.