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RESEARCH ARTICLE

INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON WOMEN'S SOCIAL FREEDOM

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ABSTRACT

The prime objective of the study was to evaluate the influence of religion on the desire for women's social freedom among the young adults. Religious participation and devotion are often linked to life course events such as marriage, childbirth, childrearing, and death. The formation of a family through procreation is sacralized through religious rituals of marriage, and religiously sanctioned marriage is an aspect and indicator of religiosity and it is widely accepted in society (Sherkat, 2015). Questionnaire method was used to collect data from 327 participants including Females (N=251) and Males (N=76) in the age group of 18-40 from southern Kerala. Convenient sampling method was used by the researcher to select participants. The study revealed that, religion has an influence on the perspective of desire for women's social freedom. The sample not interested to reveal their religion shows more desire for women's social freedom than sample belonged to Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities.

INTRODUCTION

Women in India are still subjected to discrimination, ill treatment and enjoy lower status as compared with men. As a result of which there is a growing concern and resentment particularly among educated women and educated working women against all such customs and rituals, which lower down their status in society. Women in India carry a strong desire for freedom (Singh & Sandhya, 2013). Women Social freedom refers to women's desire to be free from social taboos, conventions, rituals, and roles which provide them with lower status in society (Bhusan, 1987). Religion influenced a lot in the life of humans from ancient times. Historical studies and the scriptures indicate that Indian women enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period, surpassing contemporary civilizations in ancient Greece and Rome. In Vedic society, women were participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. In spiritual field, wife enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. Religious ceremonies and sacrifices were performed jointly by husband and wife. Women even participated actively in religious discourses. There was no bar for women to read or study of any sacred literature. So, in the area of spirituality women were not inferior to men (Mahapatra, 2018). But today those practices were not reflected in most of the religious customs and in society. These customs restricted social freedom for women such as freedom to worship, freedom for following dress code according to their passion, participation in various customaries etc.

Atharva Veda stated that women should be valiant, scholarly, prosperous, intelligent, and knowledgeable; they should take part in the legislative chambers and be the protectors of family and society. At the time passed the position of women is underwent changes in all spheres of life. The status of women fell in the later Vedic and Epic period. In this period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriage also came into existence. According to Aitreyya Brahman, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. Atharva Veda also deploras the birth of daughters. Though the women participated in each family ceremony with men, but they only played a role as silent observer, not an active person. Women started being discriminated on the ground of education and others' rights. The marriage emphasized on physical chastity of women and their unquestioned obedience to husband leads to progressive deterioration of their position (Mahapatra, 2018). The language, symbols and culturally conditioned interpretation of religious scriptures have evolved a practice that alienates women and even influences exploitation and violence towards them (Saldanha, 2016). Women had undergone to the social evils like sati, widowhood, devadasi system and child marriage, they curtailed the social freedom of women. All such social evils introduced by patriarchy and Sati was widely practised in Indian subcontinent. This custom refers to a woman who burns herself willingly on the funeral pyre of her husband because a husband needed all the worldly belongings like wives, also after his death. According to another notion, the fighting tribes of earlier times were proud of their women, thus they did not like to leave women astray after the death of their husband; rather

they preferred to kill those (Das, 2018). In ancient India, several people died and women or even a girl child who lost her husband, were forbidden to remarry and forced to live a life of austerity, as an alternative to sati. It meant wearing a plain white saree with no ornaments or decorations (widowhood). It was touted to preserve the honour of the husband's family and prevent loss of any wealth (Koushik, 2021). Devadasi system is a tradition that dates to the sixth century where young girls were married to the deity, after which they would act as the temple caretakers and perform all rituals, including dance and music in the honour of the deity. The causes for the extent of devadasi system are that it is a religious belief that if a family devotes their daughter, it would make the deity happy and bless the family also. Devadasis were given a higher status in the society, many economically weak families believe that devoting their daughters will improve their social status (Deane & Tameshnic, 2022). Child marriage practised mainly in Hindu and Muslim religions. In a certain community, puberty is considered as the age of marriage. According to Hindu belief system, women were not allowed to enter most of the temples during their menstrual period, whereas in Adi Parasakti Siddhar Peetam, Melmaruvathur, Tamil Nadu, women can practice *Pooja* even if they were menstruating. They were denied to touch the holy books and practice a normal daily routine during their menstrual period. In homes, people do not allow them to even enter the kitchen, using their bed etc. Entry of women is restricted in Sabarimala (Kerala) pilgrim during their reproductive age, whereas in Lord Karthikeya temple (Haryana), the entry of women is completely banned. All these customs and rituals were created by religious administrators. Irony is that the core teachings of the religion uphold unity, peace, wellbeing, and equality among individuals but its administrators manipulated them subjectively. In other words, attitudes developed around patriarchal interpretations of religious belief have defined and shaped the social and cultural contexts of Indian women. Catholics governed by the Code of Canon Law, and females were excluded from ordination and all the offices contained therein as part of the administration of rituals. The maleness of Christ rather than his humanity is emphasized, putting women on a plane lower than men (Saldanha, 2016). There were communal taboos for women in the Christian community, who said that even in the first half of the 20th century girls in the Catholic community did not have the right to wear sandals, wear sarees, speak loudly or laugh. The biographical book *Akkamma Cheriyan* by Parvathi Devi (2015) reveals that there are also some strange things on the list of meanings for Christian girls. Do not take bath every morning. For example, rules such as not reading stories and novels and not engaged in artistic activities. They said that because it is a sin to see one's own naked body every day, boarding has been restricted even to take bath (Subrahmanian & Maya, 2019). The property rights of the daughters were denied in the Christian community earlier.

The conditions of women belong to the Islamic community in Kerala is not different. It was not their education was confined to the Madrasa, and they lived without interacting with the world outside the home. Even today in some areas of Kerala, child marriage continues to cost their education. The educational backwardness among Muslim women was very evident. Jamal Kochangadi's (1998) study of Muslim social life in Malayalam novel describes the backwardness of mappilapenn, who is born with ignorance, superstitions. Like Namboothiri's in Kerala, Muslims also accepted polygamy. As a result, the demand for girls in the marriage market and the pressure to consent to marriage had increased. It can be understood that all this has adversely affected the education of girls in the Muslim community (Subrahmanian, & Maya, 2019). Women's movements in Islamic countries, despite having a long history, have not achieved much progress in their quest for gender equality (Bakhshizadeh, 2018). According to Hassan (1995), the tragic irony of Islam is that its sacred text, the Qur'an, is particularly solicitous of women's well-being and development, yet Islamic traditions discriminate against girls from the moment of their lamented births. The Qur'anic description of marriage suggests closeness, mutuality, and equality, but tradition defines a husband as his wife's god in earthly form (despite the Qur'an prohibition against human deification as the one unpardonable sin), her gateway to heaven, and the arbiter of her final destiny.

The Qur'an permits divorce without fault, but Muslim societies have made divorce both legally and socially very difficult for women. Muslim traditions have misinterpreted the Qur'an's spirit and intentions in the matters of polygamy, inheritance rights, purdah (keeping women isolated and at home), and veiling. These customs were originally intended to protect women and even guarantee women autonomy; they have become instead instruments of oppression. According to so-called Indian culture, women were to be taken care of by their men. The ancient Indian *Manu-Smriti* (Laws of Manu) says that the father protects women in her childhood, the husband in her youth, and the son in her old age. The Sanskrit text has been interpreted in such a way as to indirectly deny the autonomy of the female, saying that she does not have to do anything, since everything is taken care of by the men in her family. This is frequently quoted throughout India as a proof text for controlling a female by categorizing her as just a 'family-woman', an example of how cultural and religious concepts have long denied the autonomy of Indian women (Subrahmanian, 2015). In India, women were restricted by various religious and social norms. Traditional practices were deep-rooted in the cognitive world of the individuals and they became biased to such norms. Those norms and restrictions were practicing today also. Women or males who try to break those customs, labelled as activist. An activist is a person who works to achieve political or social change and take part in activities such as public protests to try to make this happen (Oxford dictionary, 2010), but another group of people were gathered very silently as opponents of religion. They realized the restrictions imposed by the society or religion. Many of such people were ignored the religion and its practices deliberately. Now a day, due to various reasons the number of people who did not like to revealed their religion considerably increased. They may bring a change in social order and religion compelled to make relaxation in their rigid nature. Under the above circumstances it is relevant to study the influence of religion in the desire for women's social freedom as curtailed.

Objective

To find out whether there is any significant difference in perspectives on desire of women's social freedom based on religion.

Hypothesis: There will be significant difference in perspectives on desire of women's social freedom based on religion

Sample: The sample consists of 327 adults from southern Kerala through convenient sampling. The researcher used questionnaire method for collecting data.

Tools

- A self-prepared demographic data sheet was used to collect personal details such as age, gender, religion, marital status etc.
- Women social freedom scale developed by Bhusan (2017) was used to assess social freedom. The scale possesses high reliability (0.75). The scale is significantly correlated with Eysenck's Radicalism Scale and ensuring construct validity.

Procedure: The data was collected through direct approach and by using Google forms. The doubts if any clarified during the administration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The table shows that the calculated value is higher than table value; hence the religion has significant effect on the perspectives on desire of women's social freedom. While considering the holy books and mythologies it is found that women were treated as goddess. But the misinterpretations of holy books and highly institutionalized religious system makes women as a secondary citizen and make restrictions on their freedom. In the name of customs, women were restricted from entering to the temples, mosque etc.

Table No 1. ANOVA of Women's Social Freedom with respect to Religion

Variable		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F
Women's social freedom	Between Groups	371.38	3	123.79	4.09**
	Within Groups	9766.61	323	30.23	
	Total	10138.00	326		

**significant at 0.01 level

Table No 2. Post Hoc Test of religion

Religion	N	1	2	3
Muslim	19	31.68		
Christian	122		34.91	
Hindu	169		35.12	
Not interested to reveal	17			38.05
Sig.		1.000	0.881	1.00

Hence the hypothesis, there will be significant difference in the perspectives on desire of women's social freedom based on religion is accepted at 0.01 level.

The result of group mean analysis given below

The table clearly shows the impact of religion on the perspectives on desire of women's social freedom. The samples not interested to reveal their religion shows higher value on the perspectives of desire for women's social freedom. The Muslim religion kept a difference between other three groups. Hindu religion did not differ with Christian religion. The sample not interested to reveal their religion kept a difference between other three groups. There are various factors can be found in low level of social freedom among Muslims. In the study of Akyol (2020), countries with secular legal systems are recognizably more free for women compared to those that apply Islamic law. Women's freedoms seem as high as those in Western liberal democracies. Problem caused by a diverse set of factors, such as authoritarian governments, foreign interventions, ethnic or sectarian conflicts, oppressive interpretations of religion, and illiberal cultural codes.

Muslim personal law may restrict them to enjoy social freedom. According to Hashimi (1998), one of the most important ways in which the Muslim woman obeys her husband is by respecting his wishes with regard to the permissible pleasures of daily life, such as social visits, food, dress, speech, etc. The more she responds to his wishes in such matters, the happier and more enjoyable the couple's life becomes, and the closer it is to the spirit and teachings of Islam. She does not complain about her housework, because she remembers that many of the virtuous women in Islamic history set an example of patience, goodness, and a positive attitude in serving their husbands and taking care of their homes despite the poverty and hardships they faced. Desire for social freedom higher among sample not interested to reveal their religion. It is an emerging trend among people say no to religion and is an indicator for social change. People relieved from the hands of religion, after a long period of time. As per the study of Mohseni and Bighash (2020) inadequate presentation of religion, incompatibility of religion with reason and science, poverty, environment, epistemic weakness, and so on were the corner stone for the deviation of individuals from religion.

Hindu women's encounter with modernity started in the time of British colonial period. The Hindu reform movement which has started in the colonial period had larger implication for the women community. The male leaders of that time taking the approach of redefining Hinduism and Hindu text for the greater good of the female community (Mazumder, 2018). The perspectives on desire for women social freedom in Hindu and Christian community were more or less similar in present study. It may be due to the flexible personal laws practiced by religion and higher levels of social interaction opportunities they get.

CONCLUSION

Indian Constitution provides equal rights and freedom for all citizen and there is no disparity among gender whereas religion's norms and practices make restrictions to women. Reformation in religious practices and customs which are irrelevant to the time period are inevitable for the development of society and the very existence of religion. These will reflect in the social structure, economy, and development of the nation. Inclusiveness makes difference...

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