

The Contemporary Hindu Women of India: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Hinduism is one of the provoking and widespread religions of the world. It raises a lot of questions in the minds of the believers of another religion. I have the same quest to gain more knowledge about it, apart from gaining through books I luckily got the opportunity of visiting India and analyzing the trends amongst the people. Nevertheless, it was the female community of India that aroused curiosity and inclined me to share an overview of them. Hinduism as a religion opposes the role of women and gives them no respect at all. In addition to that, the Holy Scripture, *Vedas*, also negates their significance all the more. In olden times, people being quite conventional, thoroughly practiced the injunctions laid by the religion such as *sati*, being subordinate to males and no access to education, etc. However, with changing trends, a new horizon has dawned upon India and its women have earned much liberty. Today, many women in India have opted liberal professions and are fighting for civil rights, owing much to their perseverant leader Indhra Gandhi. At present, Indian women have gained social, economic, educational, professional and political freedom of some sort and their status has thus elevated in society. However, in an attempt to redefine and reform India, some fundamentalists are trying to bring back conventionalism amongst women, thus shadowing them once again in the darkness of ignorance. Nevertheless, such an impediment is fightable and as compared to the old era, contemporary Hindu women of India have traveled a long way and gradually approaching near their destination of complete independence from the male domineering society.

KEY WORDS: Laws of Manu, Vedic Scriptures, Caste System, Dharma, Sati, Hinduism, Indian Women, Conventionalism, Bharat, Subcontinent, Fundamental rights, Conservatives, Hindu Society, Ancient Hinduism, Path of liberation, Feminity, Feminist movement, Mahadevi.

Introduction

Womanhood began with the birth of Eve and ever since this category of human clan has faced several criticisms, support and reforms. Every religion strives to

draw parallels between its women and traditions so as to provide them the desired status and rights. With the advent of each religion, all its women were under the authority of the male clan but now, with the passage of time, in the universe of all religions, womanhood has managed to scrape respect, honor, status and rights.

Historically speaking, whether it was ancient India/Bharat or the medieval India, the status and respect of woman was always at stake and dismantled. Talking about subcontinent, mixture of Muslim and Hindu women, socially, women have faced infinite atrocities in the hands of the men. However, if compared, Muslim women were much better off for their religion as it had set special injunctions for the maintenance of their virtue, rights and status. Whereas, the Hindu women of those times were worthless in front of all, owing much to their own religion and holy scripture.

Hinduism is amongst the most followed religions of the world, prevailing predominantly in the subcontinent area. The Hindu women have long since been striving to achieve socio-cultural grading and still are in progress. I have had the sheer pleasure of spending time in India with Hindu women (2007) and analyzing their current lifestyle, respect and social ranking. Thus, it is that scrutiny that drove me to come up with an article highlighting the limelight aspects of the contemporary Hindu women.

Hinduism, as a religion opposes the fundamental rights of the female clan. The *Vedas*, Scripture of Hindus is quite hostile to its women no matter what. According to it, women happen to be inhuman and are subject to no primary civil liberties. The society, thus, ignored all kinds of rights owned by the women and thus, in ancient era all led a hopeless life.

Young states, "Their stages of life revolved around maidenhood (eligible for marriage); wifhood (the married life), and widowhood (having been married) (Young, 1994: 69).

Moreover, the Laws of Manu dictated the standards that were to govern many Hindu women's lives for nearly two millennia.

The famous book, *The Laws of Manu* quotes, "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons: a woman must never be independent....Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife...."⁽²⁾

Furthermore, it is affirmed in the 'Laws of Manu', "Day and night, women must be kept in dependency by the males of their (families), and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control....Through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they are guarded in this world. Knowing their disposition, which the Lord of creatures laid in them at the creation, to be such, (every) man should most strenuously exert him to guard them"⁽³⁾.

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Hence, according to the Vedic scripture, a Hindu woman was no less than a property and asset that could be discarded whenever the feeling arose, regardless of the fact of her being a sister, daughter or mother. Thus, a Hindu woman was pre-ordained to be ruled by the male and was subjected to all kinds of atrocities for these were the standards of being an ideal Hindu woman.

Today, in the 21st century, the scenario has been different. With changing times, the traditions are facing varied shifts in the Hindu society. Therefore, to promise a much better development rate and to walk out of the third world category, India is trying to reestablish the rank of women as it has realized the need of men and women being equal in class. Therefore, great efforts are being made by the Hindu society to redefine the old conventions and reclassify its women.

Gabrielle in his book, *Reflections of the Women's Movement in India* expounds on the current situation, "At present, we find the Indians struggling to achieve the much deserved social liberty and status as done by the Negro community, back in the 1960s. The Liberals and Conservatives of Hinduism at the moment are busy debating over the rule of modernism or traditionalism. Many claim to outlaw the religious norms whereas; others are of the firm belief of religion being routed to success. Majority happens to be of the conventional view and thus approves the intervention of religion in their daily life and matters, thus influencing the existence and life of a Hindu woman" (Gabriella, 1992: 88-90).

Michael Allen writes, "The fundamentalists, today, desire to protect the idea of the 'Hindu family' and go back to such a life when women were mere animals without tongue. In order to achieve so, return to the old disdainful and barbarian customs is a must. The most common of which being 'sati', i.e. the wife jumping into the funeral of her deceased husband so as to finish off the family name with respect. Other returns to old customs, include the conventional idea of Hindu divorce, remarriage, banishment from life, etc" (Allen, 1982:16-17).

Ramabai Sarasvati, a renowned social activist of India writes in her book, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Education is one of the most basic rights of any human be it male or female. In ancient Hinduism, just as other rights, women were also deprived of education since enlightenment amongst women was considered to be quite notorious and undignified. However, with changing times, the field of education has also faced many reforms. Many renowned women have arisen in the community to enlighten the mind of the laymen regarding the importance of education and thus, several schools, colleges and universities have been established. Hindu women, at the moment are attaining higher education not only in India but all over the world. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, some fundamentalists in their futile attempt to bring about a traditional economic development in India are trying to stick to the old customs and build in the contemporary Hindu women the sense of 'purdah' and thus object the access to complete education" (Sarasvati, 1984: 109).

Robert S. Ellwood quotes, “There are also cultural-economic inclinations that are resulting in a return to tradition. For example, because it is legally abolished, the caste system is breaking down, although it nevertheless continues to affect the attitudes of the people. As India develops economically, those who once had little opportunity are finding themselves upwardly mobile. In order to elevate their status, they are adopting practices with respect to women that were traditionally associated with status, such as *purdah* and limiting a women’s access to education” (Ellwood & A, 2004: 110).

Moving on to the political line, Hindu women today have access to high positions of governance as opposed to the ancient times when women were considered epidemic rather than human. However, analyzing the present scenario, many female politicians have arisen in India; most renowned are Indhra Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi. Both of them have strived hard to restore the respect and honor of the women by all means and have gained much appreciation. As far as opposition is concerned, fundamentalists likewise have tried to oppose so but nevertheless, the politicians’ powers and zeal have never been extinguished.

While some fundamentalist women dispute for a return to such traditions as *sati*, the fact is not dispensable that some are still working for betterment of the female community of the Indian society. In discussing her work to improve the conditions of women in her native village, Uma Bharati, a member of a political party generally characterized as fundamentalist, said:

“Women are inherently superior as a created species. Men are not such noble beings that women should fight for equality. Instead they should fight to be treated with respect.... If Indian women combine the madhury (sweetness), their femininity, with self-pride and political awareness, they can teach the whole world the path of liberation” (Vohra, 1989: 19).

At present, Hindu women are struggling to achieve social liberty and civil rights in all dimensions. Many of their rights have been curbed, which makes them more rebellious. Some of them have even happened to give up since their male community and religion, being the majority power is still in opposition. Therefore, it is this contrast between the willingness and negation of the efforts to bring about a vast change in the concept of feminism that brings about the varying tendency in revival of civil rights of the female community.

Narayan illustrates, “In this regard, it is important to understand that what has been termed the “feminist movement” in the West is not readily transported into contemporary Hindu religio-cultural context. The label “feminist” has been rejected even by reform-minded women as being too Western and irrelevant to Hindu women’s experience. First, the struggle is not viewed as one primarily against men. Hindu men have been leaders in the reforms for women, often having “commandeered” women into taking leading roles”. In other words, the conflict is not seen as being one pitting women’s empowerment against a countervailing subjugation by men per second, “feminism” tends to focus on issues for women as

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a class, whereas in India, the subordination of women in views as being integrally related to the overall systemic oppression of the majority of the population. This is due in large part to the historically hierarchical stratification of society as a whole. As a result; the subjugation of women has had parallels in the subjugation of men in most circumstances” (Narayan, 1999: 29).

It is cited in Narayan book, “As one militant feminist organization in India has stated:

We women are crores [280,000,000] of slaves and along with Dalits and Advasis “scheduled tribal populations” or “untouchables” we make up 70-80 percent of the people... We are battling for equality with the men in the war for human liberation.”

As a result, the women’s movement in India focuses on many fronts: gender, class, caste, economic status, and the like” (*Ibid*: 131).

Despite the low standing of women throughout India over the past two centuries, and despite the supremacy of authoritative holy Scripture emphasizing the significance of women’s submissiveness, women have a considerable historical legacy of empowerment in the Hindu tradition. Nevertheless, exceptional Hindu women and men have unbolted the doors to education, enlightenment and reformation for women. And most importantly, women have plucked up courage to step forward and have taken prominent positions in the professions, business, and government. Moreover, most of them are now working to broaden the horizons even more so as to facilitate the ordinary community of the society. Indira Gandhi (1917-1984), who was prime minister of independent India (1966-1977; 1980-1984), has served and worked tirelessly to restore the sacredness a woman actually possesses.

‘Contemporary Indian Women and Hindu Culture’ clarifies and explains, “With changing times, perception and attitudes towards women have diverged. Likewise, women’s roles in religious societies have changed too. During the nineteenth century, Ramakrishna (1836-1886), authorized his wife, Sarada Devi, to administer mantras during his life time. She then took over the order after his death and today is considered to be a saint. Further, many monasteries in India now acclaim women ascetics into their community, and many women have become spiritual teachers in their own right. Mate Mahadevi (“The Great Mother Goddess”) (1946) is a prominent example. She is perhaps the first woman in history who has ascended [in 1980] the pontifical seat of Jagadguru (world teacher’ ...) so far reserved for men...” (Mitter, 1991: 111-113).

Mukharjee diverts attention to a seemingly new pattern of thought regarding women in his book, “Moreover, the reverence of the Divine Mother or Great Goddess is a growing trend. Many Hindus believe that the Divine Mother is present to them in Hindu’s women saints. For example, Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982) is thought to have been an incarnation of the Goddess Kali, and Mata Amritanandamayi (“Mother of Bliss”) (1953), also known by her followers as

Ammachi (“Beloved Mother”) and dubbed by the media as the “hugging saint,” is revered today as the Divine Mother by her numerous followers around the world” (Mukherjee, 1994: 10-11).

Falk comments in his book, *Shakti Ascending: Hindu Women, Politics, and Religions*, “Further, many respected Hindu masters have worked for gender parity and several have hand picked women successors for their movements, such as Gurumayi Chidvilasandanda, successor to Swami Muktananda, and Mathru Sri Sarada, successor to Swami Lakshamana. The book ‘Brimming...Women of Power in the Hindu Tradition’ adds, “Moreover, women are finding new avenues of religious devotional expression in other places as well. For example, women are now bhakti poets, composers, singers, choreographers, and dancers-all roles traditionally denied to all but the most exceptional women in history, such as Andal, mentioned previously” (Falk, 1995: 289-334).

Conclusion

It is my analysis over the time which I spent amongst the Hindu women that despite the fact of *Vedas*, the holy scripture of Hindus, (being quite anti-feminism and thus instituting in males superiority), females of Hindu community have travelled a long way. From the old conventions of sati, *pardah*, illiteracy and being an asset of the males, the women have made a huge come back. They have not only earned social and economic development but also the political liberty. In this age, many women have renounced their orthodox views about their religion and thus joined the more modern mainstream. This has therefore led people of India to realize the importance of their women and the role they actually play in the life of the entire family and society. It is this feeling that eventually has ousted the conventionalism from the hearts of the people and especially the women themselves.

In addition to that, over my stay, I scrutinized the trends amongst the women of India and have concluded that many women have now managed to resist opposition of the male dominated society and are towards the completion of path of development. Moreover, there were even women who have not only managed to achieve liberty but also stuck to traditionalism, values and conventionalism.

As far as the fundamentalist approach is concerned, it can be theorized that all religions and paths to development have great impediments and fundamentalists are one of them. Thus, one should not take a stereo-typical outlook of the Hindu women and classify their reformation as a futile attempt to meager development because they have traveled a long way to such development despite the unbeatable obstacles such as religious vows, male domination, etc in their way.

All in all, with these developments and controversial society in mind, it can be said that people now believe that Hindu women will be an even greater political

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and religious force in the years to come, not only in India but also around the world.

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