

Women Empowerment and Hinduism- Sites of Change and Places of Continuity

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Abstract- Women empowerment is often associated with the political and economical aspect of development of women. Religion is something that is ignored by the secularist feminist approach. However Hinduism has many proof that subjugated women through their textual interpretation and there is also proof which voices for women empowerment. This paper attempts to reveal the portion of Hinduism which we need to correct, reinterpret and which one we will continue to open up a new path for women empowerment in the context of Hindu community.

Key words- Hinduism, faith based feminism, Religion, women empowerment

Introduction- Women empowerment is a more concerned with the social factors rather than the legal one. Women empowerment is the very need of this moment. Due to the natural human rights and justice is an integral part of our constitution, women empowerment needs an urgent discussion. In our country nature of women rights and empowerment is multi dimensional and complex. Religion defined the way of life in this country from the very past, so when there is question of women empowerment we cannot really overlook religion. Religious scriptures like vedas, upanishads and manu smriti controlled the way of life in our society. Some time it advocates women's freedom and some time it became a tool of women oppression. A country like India where religion is given utmost importance cannot really stay apart from its religious ground and discourses related to women and their empowerment. In this present century we cannot state that "religion is dead" rather it still acting as a power source in societies. Though theories in religion is very helpful for studying religious life in society this secularist theory of sociology of religion does not really sufficient for understanding the current situation. Secularist theory of religion is limited in the contradiction between reason and faith, tradition and modernity. According to many thinkers if we examine the change of the nature of religion with the changing time then it will be helpful to understand our social and religious life accordingly. One of those is treating the women and their rights.

Almost every major religion in this world does not see the women with an equal eye with that of their male counter parts. So the major religions across the globe need to get transformed, they need to get addressed gender inequality that prevails in our society and also they need to transform their religious teachings so that they can ensure the gender equality in the near future. Though the nature of equality and social justice is very much secular in nature and most of the time they affected by the political, economical scenario but but religious authorities and teachings need to reinterpret their ideology and teaching. To redefining the authority they need to reinterpret the religious text because it is the religious text based on which authorities are established. The reinterpretation of women's role in the society is the need at this moment. In many societies we are seeing that women themselves come forward for the process of reinterpretation. This opening up a avenue for the faith based feminism to be emerge. Women of many religious communities are reinterpreting their religious authoritative texts some time they came forward for the religious leadership. Feminist theologians writing several books and articles that raised up the issue of women leadership in many religious sects. The faith based feminism mainly addresses the historical suffering and oppression that women got from the historical time with in their religious communities itself. Feminism is something which is considered as an artifact of the west. The faith based feminism in current time found to be in contradiction with the secular feminism. As religion is the source of oppression from the historical time period so the feminist of the secular denominations is not really interested in taking religion within the fold of their feminist thinking.

Hindu literature and women- In a recent study it is found that the economic development in this country , especially in the rural area actually trying to confine the women in the domestic sphere. The advocates of traditional thinking assume that it is better for women to stay apart from the working force thus home and domestic life is much better choice for them. This situation is something that indicating that some part of the society want traditional role and status of women that they have in the very past. This is not very desirable in today's scenario as women have travelled a long way and faces so much difficulty for achieving this status which they have right now. Some Hindu gurus advocates women's life should be concern with the household they should keep them apart from the job market as according to traditional religious text women are weak, more prone to tears and rarely tolerate any physical and mental pressure that the job market demands. So it will be better for them to stay in home in the shelter of male figures who are , according to traditional religious thinking is brave and can tolerate severe pain, can fight in the outer world.

Manusmriti is one of the ancient book and very famous in Hindu culture. In its every fold Manu literally subjugated women, portrays women's nature as weak and vulnerable. Manu stated that women are weak and they always need. Ramcharitamanas

which is written by Tulsi Das an ancient poet shows stereotypical nature of women in his writing. For example Dasaratha was regretted because he trusted a woman. In significance to this it is also evident that Hindu textual tradition considered women and their existence in relation to male. For women the role of mother and the role of wife is most important. Women should be a dutiful wife, remain faithful to her husband and service that she gave to her husband is became purpose of her life and way to salvation for a women. It was told that what ascetic attained by many years of strict discipline women can earn it by giving services to their husband. Hindu texts are literally biased when it comes to men. Hindu women have several obligations related to their marriage. We can clearly see that women found importance in terms of men with the attitude which women used to get. The widows are considered inauspicious in past times even in this generation the picture is not very different. Widows blamed themselves and many time they blamed by others that she was the one who is responsible for her husbands death. She is not pure or faithful wife like Savitri so she is suffering from widowhood. In past times women need to shave their head and they kept them apart from all sorts of pleasure. With the death of the husband Hindu women loses three main aspect of their life which is Artha, Kama and Dharma. From very early age girls are taught to pray for the longevity of their husband but in opposite site men do not pray for the longevity of the wife. There is a stigma that is attached with the widowhood. They considered Inauspicious where married women considered auspicious. Widows are kept them apart from all types of festivals and ceremonies. The desire of male child is also deep rooted, very deep religious essence is connected with the fact. Desire of male child is connected with the fact that male continue the lineage of the family as well as a male is entitled to give Pinda for his deceased father and ancestors in which girls barely have any right. It is believed that by giving pinda a boy free his father and ancestors from the bitter suffering of the hell. Some time it is thought because girl leave their family after marriage but boys stay with their family. Now a days family structure is changing. Families becoming nuclear, girls are staying close to their family, so it is high time if all this religious rules can be reevaluate and make a little room for change.

In orthodox Hindu thought women are kept apart from participation in politics and leadership that is because of the nature of their body. They considered women polluted because of the menstrual cycle of women's body. Even in this 21st century we can see a temple which does not permit women to enter in the temple. Stay apart from auspicious ritual in the time of menstrual cycle is still practiced almost every house hold. This discriminating nature that defines women body is created to maintain patriarchal hegemony and it is actually created to make women stay apart from the male dominated sphere. There are some liberal Hindu sects which is coming for the women even some of them started to make women becoming female priest.

The notion of Karma which Hindu religion has is also used some time to dominate women. In fact if women get suffering or get tortured by her husband it is assumed that she is getting the result of bad action that she has done in her previous life. Orthodox religious leader of Hinduism is also advocating them, So, we need to think for a change in this regard rather than blaming the victim and women themselves can initiate the change.

The traditional, classical Hindu text always emphasize on equality of human beings. Hindu texts talked about the divine i.e brahman and individual self i.e atman. According to classical Hindu text every individual have divine attribute and classical texts saw equality between the brahman and atman but classical text give importance on equality as a whole but never speak about gender equality.

Hindu texts like Upanishada and Bhagavat Gita always gave importance to spiritual renunciation and through the passage of time it became a book of spirituality separated from social reality and unequal gender relationship. The idea of spirituality and renunciation very deeply rooted in Hinduism that we can therefore use this idea to guide us and fight for gender equality. Unlike other many religion Hinduism has the existence of many female gods. Some of them are worshipped as Shakti. Though in manier times it is found that importance was mainly given in their traditional roles. Even if they are warrior goddess they still play their role as dutifull wife, mother. Thus Hinduism sometimes leave very little room for the approval of non-traditional role of women.

Alteration and redefinition of Hindu Religion-In many parts of the world women are increasingly participating in religious leadership. Women are translating major religious texts. Women are protesting that they have suffered a lot into their own religious denomination. They are not detaching them from the religion but they try to reinterpret from their stand point. So, interpretation of religion from the feminist stand point is increasing.

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. This movement though had a patriotic sense; our Indian leaders were working collectively with the westerners. They reinterpreted Hinduism and mentioned and described our ancient texts which did not support superstition and talked about equal rights of women. For example when Ram mohan Roy fought to abolish sati he mention moral code of Manu, he said that man never directly advocated the practice of sati. Sati never assured the liberation of soul hence this practice never supported by Hinduism. Gandhi was also among those leader who was continuously advocating women's participation in Indian freedom movement. By brought out the example of many female figures of Hinduism, who had fought for their right, he encouraged women to participate in public lie and leadership. So, basically the male leaders of that time taking the approach of redefining Hinduism and Hindu text for the greater good of the female community.

Women and Religion in the present context-After independence women get opportunity for education. They are now advancing in their own field they are right now working and helping their husband financially. They life and life styles are very different from the past. They are not part of an extended family they are member of nuclear family. Their religious life is naturally changing. Though religious practice is not followed like past days but it still affecting the life of common people. Now a days religion is a matter of individual choice, it's no like community based practices that followed in the past. Therefore it is weakening the social network that used to form in the time of religious gathering. Urban educated women forming their network compatible with their class and status structure. The broad network that provided by religion is now fading. Hence the current scenario is creating gap between urban educated women and rural women. So, the larger voice of feminist movement is fading. The NGO and other communities which are currently working on mainly focusing on the political and economical site of women empowerment, they are not including religion in their working area as they see it as a mode of oppression for women. Though this religious ritual is actually formed by patriarchal notions but it has implication for women. By following various religious rites and rituals women tend to express their needs in a more informal way, religion used to brought together women from different strata of society. So, therefore it can be used as a mode of communication for the larger female community.

Conclusion-

To be religious or stay away from religion is a matter of individual choice but for those people for whom religion is an essential part of their existence, reinterpreting the same can be an empowering experience. Therefore including faith in their quest for equality will open one of the many avenues available for the traditional Hindu women. However we cannot tell with assurance that this will bring women empowerment but religion can be a medium for women through which they can demand equal right with the men in societies.

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