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The Place and Role of Women in Hinduism

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Abstract: Hinduism is a way of life. In the true sense one is born a Hindu and cannot be made one by conversion or by an 'institution.' The way of life is today called a 'religion.' The rules and regulations, norms and structure utilized for peaceful happy living patterns have been adopted into rites and rituals. Today the ossification of customs into religious explanations has made the way of life into a rigid pattern. Yet Hinduism is one religion that has had several socio-religious reform movements and there have been drastic changes in life and worship to accommodate time and tide. This paper traces the path of the Hindu woman from ancient to modern times. It establishes the fact that liberative attitudes have transcended religious oppression not limiting educational and social advancement of the Hindu woman. The forward march in the secular fields and the attitude of liberal values is more evident amongst the Hindu woman than among the women of other monolithic institutionalized religions in India. Today women have received their equal status in Hinduism by being accepted as priests and Gurus. The paper has three distinctive areas of discussion, 1.Hinduism, 2.The place of women in Hinduism and her role as interpreted in society. 3. The Hindu women in context to the process of liberalization and her ability to change the social attitude with the help of law and education. A brief introduction at the beginning helps to draw meaningful conclusions. The author has stuck to the exclusive discussion of the Hindu women and the religion.

Keywords: Anubhava, women in Hinduism, women as priests, liberative force of women.

Introduction

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan writes..."At the outset, one is confronted by the difficulty of defining what Hinduism is. To many it seems to be a name without content. Is it a museum of beliefs, a medley of

rites, or a mere map, a geographical expression? Its content, if it has any, has altered from age to age, from community to community. The ease with which Hinduism has steadily absorbed the customs and ideas of people with whom it has come into contact is as great as the difficulty we feel in finding a common feature binding together its different forms.”(1974:11) The historical records date back to five thousand years and confirm that India had reached a stage of civilization and had a proper system of socio-religious governance which continues until the present age. Even though people of different races and cultures have invaded India from the dawn of history, Hinduism has been able to survive and maintain its supremacy and stood the test of stress and strain for over five millenniums. In spite of the proselytizing creeds with political power, it could not do away with spiritual thoughts and experience. As the civilization extended over the whole of India from the territory drained by the river Indus, in its southward march, this civilization flowed over the basin of Ganga and mingled with the Dravidian culture. It underwent many changes, but it retained its continuity with the Vedic patterns. The ‘Kurma Purana’ cites the fact that India belonged to different communities, worshipped different gods, and practised different rites. This liberative attitude of the religion still exists in every Hindu home wherein some worship Lord Ganesh, others Lord Shiva, still others a female deity Shri Jagadamba or Lord Shrikrishna. Throughout the forward march to the southern tip of India, the term Hindu that had originally a territorial rather than a credal significance, became more or less the identity of all the women and men from different tribes, cultures, savages, half civilized, Dravidians and Aryans, as they belonged to this land and had the ‘same mother’. The Hindu society was therefore built out of material so diverse, so little, susceptible in many cases to assimilation, yet in a few centuries the spirit of cultural unity spread through a large part of the land. Racial stock of different cultures became steeped in a common atmosphere. “The differences among the sects of Hindus are more or less on the surface, and the Hindu as such remains a distinct cultural unit, with a common history, a common literature and a common civilization” (Radhakrishnan 1974:13) Thus in the Oxford History of India we find Vincent Smith declare: “India beyond all doubt possesses a deep underlying fundamental unity, far more profound than that produced

either by geographical isolation or political superiority. That unity transcends the innumerable diversities of blood, colour, language, dress, manners and sect.”

Hindu Religion

Hinduism is the outcome of a way of life. Most religions of this world are marked off with institutionalized teachings and intellectual obedience to these teachings. Hinduism on the contrary gives credence to dogmas through experience. The outer experience is turned into inward realization. Religion is accepted as a kind of life or experience of reality or ‘anubhava’. This experience is the response of the whole personality. Religious experience in itself is of a self-certifying character. Unlike other mechanical faiths which rest on authority, Hinduism has roots in experience. Hindu thought therefore fosters belief and promotes the spiritual life of the soul in accordance with nature and the laws of world reality. In a nutshell we can say “Hinduism is a human phenomenon of immense magnitude and is overpowering not only by reason of that, but also owing to its bewildering diversity.”(Chaudhari 1979:1) The chief sacred scriptures of the Hindus, the Vedas, register the intuition of the perfect souls. They record the spiritual experience of souls strongly endowed with a sense of reality. They are held to be authoritative on the grounds that they express the experience of the experts in the field of religion. The truths revealed in the Vedas are capable of being re-experienced on compliance with a certain condition. We can discriminate between the genuine and the spurious in religious experience, not only by means of logic but also through life. The Vedas bring together the different ways in which the religious minded of the age experienced reality. They can be described in the general principles of religious knowledge and growth. It is essential to every religion that its heritage should be treated as sacred. The Vedic tradition is considered sacred and helps to transmit culture and ensures the continuity of civilization. The Hindu attitude to the Vedas is one of trust tempered by criticism. Trust because the belief has helped our forefathers and fathers, and criticism because however valuable the testimony of past ages may be, the present generation has the right to sift the information and adapt it as per the times. This is the greatest force of liberalization of the Hindu religion, not found in any other-world re-

ligion. Hinduism is the religion not only of the Vedas, but of the Epics and the Puranas. Hinduism has become a religion with most varied issues and has endless diversities and hues. Puranas to a great extent is based on imaginative and weird stories and do not have a regular chronology. Yet they have a sacred tradition and have helped humans to lift their soul to God. Hinduism is therefore not a definite dogmatic creed, but a vast, complex but subtly unified mass of spiritual thought and realization. Its tradition of the Godward endeavor of the human spirit has been continuously enlarged through the ages (Radhakrishnan 1974:17). The elasticity of Hinduism or the dialectic of religious advance through tradition, logic and life, is by providing scope for change. Tradition is something which is forever worked out anew and recreated by the free activity of Hinduism. Throughout the history of Hinduism, the thinkers and leaders practising this religion have continuously experimented with new forms and developed new ideas to suit new conditions. Though Hindu religious thought has undergone revolutions and conquests, yet the essential ideas have continued in a logical form and pattern in daily life for over five millenniums. The three prasthanas or divisions of the Vedanta – the Upanishads, the Bramha Sutras and the Bhagavatgita answer to three stages of discipline, knowledge and faith. All sects of Hindus attempt to interpret the Vedanta text in accordance to their own religious view. In reality then, all sects of Hinduism are reconciled with a common standard and could be regarded as expressions of one true Canon. The Hindus never doubted the reality of one supreme universal spirit. When asked to define the nature of God, the Upanishadic sages sat silently and declared “Absolute is Silence”. But the human mind finds it extremely difficult to resign itself to absolute silence. Humans insist on interpreting religious mystery in terms of their own experience. The human mind craves for something definite and limited. As a result, God is perfect personality. Personality includes cognition, emotion and will. In this light God is viewed as the ‘Supreme Knower’, the one who is all pervasive. In the context of the Hindu method of reform, every group retains its past associations and preserves its individuality and interest in the tenets of the basic concept of the religion. Hinduism does not mistake tolerance for indifference.

The Place of Women In Hinduism

‘Where women are worshipped there the Gods rejoice’ (Roy 1995). Mother-love of Ramakrishna Paramahansa represents some aspect of the relationship of the human to divine spirit. Hinduism affirms that some of the highest and richest manifestation which religion has produced requires a personal God. Kali in her various shapes is a non-Aryan Goddess, but gradually identified with the supreme Godhead. The woman’s identity in the past is basically entwined with two elements – one with the Vedic age and the second with Manusmriti. The Vedic literature consists of hymns and chants, to be used on ritual occasions. The Rg Veda consists of over a thousand hymns of which those attributed partly or wholly to women seers do not number more than twelve to fifteen, that is approximately 1%. The representation of women seers is thus obviously marginal. If this is an indication of the access women had to the construction of prestigious, sacred traditions, it is not particularly inspiring. Though we do have references to women philosophers such as Gargi, women rarely figure as teachers in formal situations of transmitting learning.”... Such women were probably interlopers rather than participants in routine scholarly activities” (Roy 1995: 14) The Manusmriti is a tangible text and its focus is broad. The Smriti suggests that “ Women were not to be left independent and were to be protected by men, it is possible that they were considered a liability and not an asset and thus were not respected by them.”(Gulati 1985:18). Women were therefore protected and at that time greater sin was assigned to the killing of women. Yet a wife was superseded if she was barren or gave birth to daughters, (Lakshmidhara: kṛty - Grahastha 104). In a patriarchal society, a son was always the priority. A man was allowed to marry more than one woman, probably because of his status or childlessness or because there were only daughters born to the couple. On the other hand, the wife had a different set of rules. Chastity among women was important and to save and protect her she required a man. *I wish to comment that a woman had to be saved from the lust and desire of one man, by another man. So in fact it was a combat among men and the woman became a pawn in this game of men.* Women were implicitly secluded, especially as widows. These were not allowed to adorn themselves and in some parts of India their hair was shorn off to make

them ugly and thus undesirable. Remarriage for widows was not allowed. Smritikars like Devanabhatta recommended the burning of a widow with the body of her husband, the justification being that this would ensure her eternal happiness and the company of her husband. *I would like to comment that inspite of this dictum, Sati was not a universal phenomenon and therefore the question is, which were the castes that observed the custom more frequently and why?* The Hindu woman had no religious rights. She was allowed to help her husband in carrying out religious obligations but not allowed to perform any rituals alone. The Hindu male was expected to follow the four *Purusharthas*. The second phase was to marry and carry out the obligation of *grihashthashram*. The Hindu male required an andhargini/wife to carry out the obligations of Artha, Kama and Moksha by having progeny and through the performance of kanyadan, that is gifting a daughter to a suitable man in marriage. He was also obliged to carry on the tradition of the religion through pujas homa/havana (the ritual fire sacrifice) and ancestral worship to be done by a couple. Since the Hindu woman was not allowed the initiation ceremony of upanayana or the thread ceremony, marriage was the only ritual that sanctified her. Women were allowed some pujas, the Vatasavitri, Satyanarayan, Hartalika, to be performed alone as they were all connected to receive good fortune for themselves through a good husband or by the long life of the husband. Women were always entwined with the life of the man and his welfare. Tradition considered a widow inauspicious and wished never to encounter them when setting out for work or for any important task. Due to such superstitions, women were even looked upon as witches and ghosts. With such beliefs creeping into religious ritualism, the status and place of the Hindu woman had reached its lowest level in the 17th century.

Role of Women In Hinduism

The role of women depends largely on the position of women in the society. As India remains a patriarchal society, a woman's role is generally relegated to that of a child bearer, child minder and homemaker. Altekar (1956) examines texts from 400 BC to 1200 AD and feels that several reasons have contributed to the deterioration of the woman's position in the society. Foreign invasions of India affected

the status of women adversely, discontinuance of upanayana, lack of educational facilities for women and the role of caste system, joint family system, feudalism and other such social institutions were the causes of women's status reaching a rock bottom level. Women were implicitly excluded from participating in a variety of material transactions which were acquiring significance from the giving and receiving **dakshina** and **dana** on most ritual occasions and from giving and receiving tribute or taxes and from directly offering and demanding hospitality. Apart from their tangible context, such exchanges symbolized extra-domestic bonds which were forged among men (Sarkar & Butalia 1995:18). Actually this was the time when women were regarded as equal to the Sudras. This was the lowest caste in the hierarchy of the caste system followed by the Hindus. The marriage age was further reduced and age at marriage was prescribed to be just before puberty, at the stage when the girl was called a **nagnika**. The further downfall of women's status was the popularizing of the custom of Sati. The Muslim rule in India from the 12th century till the 18th century saw to it that the woman was banished from public life. Men-power was emphasized through atrocities against women. Rape and abduction of women were popular means of registering victory over an enemy. The Indian subcontinent has seen this mode of triumph expressed during the partition of India, the riots in Surat, Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Women were raped to prove the strength and superiority of man. Her role even today is that of a doll, a pleasure-giver and the under dog! This, inspite of the achievements of women post independence, is the cruel attitude of society. Even though a woman earns an equal wage, is well educated, is aware of her right, the Adam syndrome persists. The Eve image of the woman remains dominant. Myths are woven especially to retain the role of women in its lower position. Religious control of a woman's life amongst Hindus begins only after the only sacrament she receives at marriage. There is a change even in that today after the introduction of the Hindu Code Bill. The freedom to marry and seek matrimonial remedy has to a great extent released women from the tyranny of men-dominated and men-convenient religious rules which in essence are not God made but man-made.

Liberative Forces In Hinduism

In the ancient period of Indian history, the birth of a daughter was not welcomed, but it certainly did not frighten the parents (Billington 1973:1). Early marriage was not a rule, and girls in ruling families received administrative and military training and were entitled to the same education as boys and no limitations were put on their ambitions in this direction. In the choice of a spouse, both enjoyed equal freedom and equal opportunities (Rai 1923: 70). The joint family system of the Hindu society is a survival of time when social ties were based on consanguinity in the male, and not the female line (Manohar 1975: 64). The father was the head in a joint Hindu family but could not alienate property without the consent of the male members, who acquired rights in the family property as soon as they were born. Daughters had no rights and were entitled only to maintenance, but a widow without a son had a share in the property until her remarriage or death (Chaudhry 1961). The social institution of the joint family on the whole discouraged the independence and initiative of its members. It has limited the freedom of action even of its male members. Naturally the freedom given to women was even lesser. The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India said in 1975 that their investigation concerning the total interactions in a woman's life revealed that large masses of women remained unaffected by the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution and the laws enacted since Independence. The committee recommended that the rights be made more real and meaningful. However in the following year Tara Ali Baig's *India's Woman Power* did not completely agree with this report. She felt "...that Vedic women were probably comparable to modern Indian women — the upper strata or the gifted being permitted every advantage of education, with the capacity to rise to the highest status and authority, while injustice and other impediments hamper the life of women at lower levels." Unfortunately much damage has been done to the Hindu woman's image due to imported criteria and value judgment without understanding the Hindu social structure or taking into consideration Hindu religion, which is a distinctive, strong and almost inalterable "way of life." Education was the key to all things ailing women, was how the Government interpreted the status of women. As a remedial measure every Five-Year plan of the Government laid

stress upon the education and emancipation of women. Jawaharlal Nehru had said at the All India Women's Conference in 1954, that no country would prosper when its women remained backward. Apart from receiving school and college education, women are required to develop courage and self-confidence. Nehru asked women to come forward in large numbers to take up the responsibility of building a new India. Once again the politicians of India were changing the status of women! In the British period these subjects were essentially left to be governed by the customary religious laws. Very few women in 1850s received education. Literacy reached such a low ebb after 1857 that there was hardly one woman in a hundred who could read and write (Altekar 1956: 67). Hindu women suffered because of their ignorance, early marriage, their infant motherhood, enforced widowhood and abject dependence on men. The plight of women engaged the attention of almost all social reformers. The Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and other socio-religious reform movements worked against this social evil. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar did pioneering work on the issue of child marriage. Thus the Child Marriage and the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 came into existence. Unfortunately, even today in rural areas child marriages take place. In these areas even the Sarda Act of 1929 which legally raised the marriageable age of girls to 14 years is not known. Sati was the forced burning of a young or old widow on her husbands' funeral pyre. Nowhere is this practice cited in Vedic India. Women are not believed to have practised sati before 300 B.C (Altekar 1956:82). She could either pass the rest of her life as a widow, and if childless she could have one through NIYOGA (Practice of levirate. The childless widow met her husband's brother for conception. Niyoga is a sexual relationship without marriage). The liberty given by religion was snatched away by men through social encouragement of Sati. Nowhere else in the world did religion dominate and determine the life of a woman as Hinduism in India. "Her economic activity, her social life, her marriage, birth and death, her physical movements, were strictly and minutely controlled by religion" (Choudhry 1978). In actuality, women had no religious rights as had the men and yet in a patriarchal fold of society there were only restrictions. The socio-religious structure of India made the British hesitate to interfere in matters they considered to be dictates of reli-

gion and did not wish to hurt the sentiments of the people. It was Lord Bentinck who decided to abolish Sati and did so in 1829. He was supported by enlightened Indians like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore. Ram Mohan Roy proved that Sati was not sanctioned in the Smritis and no other Hindu scripture supported it. Other irrational socio-religious customs such as purdah system, widow remarriage, dowry system, were all derogatory to the women. In various parts of the country agitation for the segregation of religious rules and social customs passed on as religious tenets were questioned. In western India Ranade and Karve were engaged in improving the position of widows. In south India Veresalingam started an association for widow remarriage. Yet the stronghold of religion was acutely felt through the system of arranged marriage. All the religious and caste controls came into its own when a new woman was to be recruited in the family. Marriage was not merely the bonding of a man and a woman, but was for the whole family to decide who would enter the joint Hindu home. Today inspite of the disintegration of the joint Hindu family and the prevalent nuclear patterns of family, the social concept has been turned into a religious need. The explanation is that the Hindu marriage is a sacrament and all the rules of matching horoscopes, keeping the religious rules of sagotra, sapinda and sapravra have to be followed because who can marry whom has been prescribed in the Dharma Shashtras. The choice of the woman is therefore confined to caste rules, along with the endogamy/exogamy rules. Dowry is another social evil attached to religious norms. In the eight forms of Hindu marriage patterns, four are prescribed and the other four such as the Rakshasa and Pishacha forms are considered undesirable and yet accepted so that the marriage will be regularized and the woman has a legitimate husband and a family to go to. Gifts given to the bride have now turned to demands for gifts and have become a rigid custom of asking and giving a dowry. Marriage has now become a market, with the highest bidder being able to get the daughter married. Unfortunately, education has not been able to curb this menace and the Hindu woman is under this pressure. The Anti-Dowry Act was passed way back in 1961 without any significant results. Polygamy was a major cause of lowering the status of women. In 1942 the Government of Baroda passed an act prohibiting polygamy. Hindu marriage Act of 1955 by

the Indian Government abolished polygamy and declared monogamy as the norm in the country. These were social reforms to curb some of the religious sanctions. The greatest boon to the Hindu woman came through the Nationalistic movement. Gandhiji believed that if women did not join the movement for independence, India's march towards Swaraj would be delayed (Chaudhury 1973: 31). Gandhiji loomed large on the Indian horizon; he wanted women to be a part of the Indian National Congress and favoured major reforms to raise the status of Indian women. The growth of socio-political consciousness among women made them come out of their seclusion and also gave them a secular attitude. A band of emancipated women emerged under the influence of Gandhiji. Thus pre-independence days set a sound foundation for women's increased participation in public life and to move out of the shadow of caste and religious control. Undoubtedly in the period before 1947 there was a considerable change in the thinking, outlook and values of Hindu women who suffered from social abuses. Subsequently there was a change in their attitude towards society, which created a milieu for emancipation among Hindu women. When India attained freedom it also paved the way for the emancipation of the Hindu from socio-religious taboos. In this period women felt the need to stand on their own feet and sought education, which could give them employment and make them economically independent. Hindu women were nurtured in the socio-cultural milieu of continuous change. In India women had agitated for the right to vote, the reforms of 1919 enfranchised about 1 million women. In 1926 women were given the right of membership of provincial legislatures. At the first round table conference, the main points of the memorandum asked for equal rights for women. In 1932 a deputation met the Viceroy and demanded self-government, women's suffrage, education and a medical college for girls. Thus in the political sphere, the Hindu woman in particular stood in the forefront of every movement. The overall impact of the partition on the Hindu woman was very different. The pain and trauma, rape and migration taught her to be more independent socially, economically and in matters of religion. To a very great extent the tradition-bound social evils, superstition, ignorance, irrational beliefs and orthodoxy which ruled the Hindu society, were questioned by educated women. Women were aided by the radicalism of the Constitution and its de-

liberate departure from the inherent social systems. In its view every adult female, whatever her social position or accomplishment, will function as a citizen and as an individual partner in the task of nation building. The transformation of the Hindu woman has been brought about through the legal system and the ability to question certain religious norms that have found the right answers and freed her from the burden of ritualism and rites.

Conclusion

The position of women reflects the socio-cultural and religious progress of a society. In India religion has been a way of life, enmeshing religion with day-to-day customs, rituals and rites. The Vedic texts such as the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, IV, 4, 18 are replete with references to rituals recommended for ensuring the birth of a learned daughter. Women were initiated into Vedic studies, were married at mature age, and had freedom in the choice of their husband. When Manu codified Hindu life, obliterated the practice of Upanayan for women and propounded the theory of tutelage of women, they became subservient to men. Men thought that it was their prerogative to interpret religion, and as a result they have kept the power and decision-making in their hands. That the Hindu religion was conceptualized 5000 years ago is not disputed. What is of utmost importance is that with passage of time it underwent drastic change and women had to submit to patriarchal, patrilocal, patrilineal structure of society. They were considered inferior and were kept away from learning, married off young and terrorized into submission under the garb of religion. Since the Hindu religious books are mostly in Sanskrit, the learned men interpreted them as it suited them. The forces that have helped the Hindu woman have been the number of laws that enabled her to be more independent. Yet a lot remains to be done to save women from superstition and stigmas, from myths about women and cruelty. The adoption of the Hindu Code Bill was a major step to remove the legal disabilities from which women suffered before 1956. The Bill gave women the right to inherit, legal permission to adopt, guardianship of a child, right to divorce, cutting across the social sanctions of religion. Thus separated the core religious practice from the customs of religion, which was in reality a power game of men. Access to higher education and

professional education for women, employment and ability to compete with men, self-choice marriages were helpful in raising the status of women and extracting them from the clutches of religious dichotomy. Medical termination of pregnancy was another milestone in the life of women who had no control over their bodies and thus could not control parenthood single-handedly. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 has been a miserable failure as atrocities against women by their in-laws still continue. Even today women carry out the core religious rites, rituals, and feasts, as they are the custodians of ritualistic Hinduism. A group of Hindu women have learnt the Vedic text and carry out priestly duties.

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