

Women, Religion and Spirituality in South Asia “One does not have to be a Man in the Quest of Truth”

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South Asia is a home to many ancient religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. People in this region are undoubtedly rooted at the core of religion to carry their livelihood. Starting from the ancient era of Vedic civilization, people have inhibited their faith on the supernatural power, and practiced the rituals such as worshipping the nature. However, in the recent era, the rituals have become more self-centered than focusing on the community and the material culture has dominantly influenced the religious institutions. There has been a quite shift in practicing the religion and spirituality particularly in relation to the gender norms, and with the categorization of class and the castes.

Women were often secluded from the public arena throughout the history regardless of their active engagement in both public and private space. The seclusion of women has been more prominent in the modern era with rising cosmopolitanism all around the world, which has reinforced gender rhetoric in every arena. The religion and spirituality is not an exception as this is often considered as a public domain, although each religion strives for actualizing the self by uniting with the Supreme (God). The question arises if it is men's domain than women's for realizing the self or seeking the ultimate reality (the Truth) by uniting with Brahma since Brahma represents the infinity of masculinity who created the infinite universe.

This can be examined briefly through observing the history of Vedic civilization and the Vedic science. Vedas stand for the knowledge, and this knowledge was transcription of the direct hearing with the celestial ears by the great sages during 3rd & 4th century [1]. They for instance, included intuition, consciousness and the

ultimate truth about the nature and its reality. Based on this perceived reality by the sheers, their disciples established the traditions of worshipping the nature for keeping the peace and order in the society. During early Vedic period of Indian civilization, when the Brahmins would worship the nature performing different rituals with different kind of sacrifices, they did not see themselves as superior to women, but to keep the social order for the well being of the whole family and the community [2].

During this period, women were not segregated, nor restrained inside the household, but used to live in equal society performing their important roles and duties to maintain the peace and harmony inside and outside the family. There are evidences that women wrote the hymns for performing the rituals for worshipping the nature. There were women Rishis such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Urvashi and Apala, who wrote the Vedic hymns and gained the knowledge of immortality challenging the male sheers [3]. Similarly, married women were also recognized as the authorities of Vedas. In this sense, it can be inferred that women were granted equal rights to men in during early Vedic period [4].

The significance of feminine power was rooted at the creation of universe as the central tenet of the Hinduism. For instance, the major Hindu Gods known as Trimurti such as Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver) and Shiva (destroyer) have their respective consorts as Sarswoti (the goddess of knowledge), Laxmi (Goddess of wealth) and Parvati (Goddess of fertility, love and devotion) representing the feminine power to complete the power of divinity [5]. Hence women were not treated with least respect, but to share the equal space to complete the

universe. The higher respect granted to women in the Indian tradition was evident in the original scripture of Hinduism known as Manusmriti: "Women are worthy of worship. They are the fate of the household, the lamp of enlightenment for all in the household. They bring solace to the family and are an integral part of Dharmic life. Even heaven is under the control of women. The gods reside in house households where women are worshipped in households where women are slighted all efforts at improvement go in vain [6].

The practices such as widow remarriage, inheritance and ownership of property by women were allowed in the Vedic period [7]. And equally significant on the subtle divine power of women were highlighted in the old Indian scriptures such as Mahabharata and Ramayana. For instance, when Draupadi (daughter-in-law of Royal family of Bharat) was mistreated by her brother-in-laws after winning her in the dice game, her mother-in-law (Gandhari) was outraged with the silence of the whole family mentioning that if Draupadi curse, the whole lineage of the family will be vanished. Gandhari then has to request Draupadi not to curse but to forgive them just to save the generations of Royals [8]. Similarly, In the Ramayana, Sita (wife of prince Rama) was proven pure after making her walk on the piles of fire (Agni Pariksha) tasting her purity and loyalty to her husband, when she was abducted by demon king Ravan.

In Mahabharata, it also mentions that "there is no great guru than the mother" [8]. Signifying the role of knowledge and wisdom of women.

The Child marriage and Sati were non-existent during the Vedic period, when the social order and peace was kept with the natural law and the virtue of humanity. But with the progression of society, such natural laws were broken, while there were no laws to criminalize the guilt in the middle-ages. The child marriage then became more common to protect the girls from being kidnapped during that period, which later became institutionalized as a ritual merit especially among the high caste Hindu families [4]. Similarly, no Indian scriptures have any records of widow's immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband. Perhaps the sati tradition can be justified on the ground of the patriarchy as women were less secured after the death of her husband, and choose to die with her husband than to be murdered by other enemies. However, such traditions became institutionalized as a criminal practice in the middle ages.

Women's rights and freedom have also been highlighted in Quran as a source of divinity in Islam. A

verse in the Quran (4:34) interprets on allowing full control of women on their income and property. Veiling of women is justified by prophet of Islam to preserve the Muslim identity as being modest that to restrict their freedom [9]. Also the Bible presents Mary as an impossible ideal of women as virgin and the mother reclaiming her strong female face of faith and proclaiming to establish the reversal order [10]. Similarly, early Christian women held the leadership positions, and lived in an egalitarian community.

Nevertheless, as the society evolved as complex and hierarchical with the new label of identity during the progressive era, the pundits of religion have rewritten the scriptures to standardize the religious code assigning the different roles to men and women as well as to different class and caste people. For instance, in several Dharmashastras at later stage, women's independency is denied: "As a child, she must remain under her father's control, as a young woman, under her husband's control and when her husband is dead, under her son's control" [11]. Similarly, women's economic independency is often denied in the modern era despite the provision of women's owning the property in original scriptures [12]. For instance, Stridhan (women's wealth) in the form of dowry, and other assets that women receive in the form of gift from maternal family was solely owned by women, and such wealth was not a part of common family estate during early Vedic period. If women provided the loans to other family members from her property (Stridhan), they were liable to pay her back. Similarly, in the early Vedic era, women were able to make independent choices regarding her marriage as she would choose her spouse among the men sitting in the row of the wedding hall without any pressure from the parents [12]. This is evident in Ramayana (one of the oldest scripture of Hinduism) when Sita (daughter of king Janak) choose Ram (prince of Ayodhya and son of King Dasharath) as her spouse in the wedding hall after seeing his divine power to break the divine bow placed in the middle of the wedding hall.

Despite the reinforcement of gender rhetoric in modern era for limiting women's capacities in public and private domain, women are seeking for their original power that is awakened with their devotion on spirituality. They have a right to be aware of self and are longing for the knowledge that enables them to be confident and to realize the peace within themselves. As mentioned earlier the femininity of women was worshipped since the origin of the Universe, however, the development of modern religion has excluded women from different practices. Women are not only

discriminated in socio-economic, and political arenas but also in attending the level of consciousness that every individual inherited by birth. Nevertheless, the different institutions (e.g. Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga) have been created lately with the aim of expanding the scope of spirituality and teaching all humanity the importance of knowing self and finding the ultimate truth by uniting with Brahma (the highest being).

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