Role, Rank, Dignity And Unity Of Women In Contemporary India

Abstract

Dignity to each created being and the creation of the creator is the utmost respect and prospect to the creator and the protector of the universe. Woman and the man is the epitome of the creation of the creator. The image and the likeness of the God are to be experienced and expounded by saluting one another and living in unity and diversity. God has never ceased or eased to speak, God speaks ever anew in every event and moment with content, in every change and in every age without any damage. Every man or woman in need is God's urgent word, deed and bread. There is much confusion and fusion today about the modern concept and precept of Indian womanhood. The injustice and discrimination against women cover every area of social living and every stage and page of life. Emancipation of women from discriminative attitudes, unjust systems and structures of exploitation created by a male-dominated society is a crying need today, especially in India where, as is well known, they are denied even the right to be born, let alone the other forms of injustice. Objective of the study is to enhance the dignity of women and to explore the unity is the possibility in the emancipation of women.

1. INTRODUCTION

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or woman in need is God's urgent word, deed and bread. There is much confusion and fusion today about the modern concept and precept of Indian womanhood. The world over, the image of Indian women is that they are dynamic, educated, dedicated, committed and liberated. The injustice and discrimination against women cover every area of social living and every stage and page of life. Traditional cultures, institutions, customs and myths go to reinforce the stereotyped images and roles of women and legitimize the unjust treatment meted out to them. Emancipation of women from discriminative attitudes, unjust systems and structures of exploitation created by a male-dominated society is a crying need today, especially in India where, as is well known, they are denied even the right to be born, let alone the other forms of injustice.

If God created woman so graceful and beauty full why does modern man with all the modern inventions and sophisticated ideas hesitate: to accept her as his true self? what made man to destroy and betray the goodness of God by battering and shattering the image and immense love of God? What are the modern problems and difficulties which instigate to pulverize the very existence of women?

2. INDIAN WOMAN IN A MAN'S WORLD.

In this age of mass communications and high pressure advertising, none of us can escape the impact of images. Images smile, stare, grin or grimace at us from the pages of books, magazines and newspapers and from video, Television and movie screens. There are also those more subtle and perhaps faceless images which are projected and promoted by our families, culture, traditions, and other image-builders and image batterers.

2.1 Some traditional Indian Images of women:- Whether we are Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists or Janis, most of our "Indian's" stems from our common Hindu past; so, in discussing anything Indian, we are forced' to go back to our ancient Hindu roots.

2.1.1. The "Mother Maharani" Image:- Mothers are not just loved and respected, but they are placed on a pedestal and made maharanis. (cf. Jeevadhara 1987, p.61) The two best examples of the Virtuous wife are sita (1) and Shankuntala (2)

2.1.2. The "Virtuous wife and Happy House wife" image:- A women when gets married, she is wedded not only to her husband, but also to his house and all the work in it.

2.1.3. The "Weak creature needing Male protection" image:- From their childhood onwards, women are told they should not go out of the house alone, should be accompanied by a male protector at all times etc. This protection is the perfect means of controlling women (3).

2.1.4. The "Temptress" image:- Ample publicity has been given to this image: Menaka (4) and Shurpanaka (5) are two of the mythological temptress who come to mind.
2.1.5. The ‘Property of Men’:- In this image a woman is considered to be the property of her father before her marriage. Since wives are believed to be the property of their husbands, a man who bullies, beats or even burns his wife does not regard himself as a wrong doer, for he is only exercising his property rights (6).

2.1.6. The "Sex object" Image:- Women are looked upon primarily as physical bodies created to satisfy the lusts and look of men. As a result, men feel free to use women's bodies as they please; for sexual pleasures and procreation, or to sell merchandise by depicting women's bodies in a vulgar and suggestive seductive manner. Prostitution and rape are all evidences of the tenacious influence of this image on society.

2.1.7. The "Unclean Creature" Image:- During menstruation and after childbirth, both of which are natural bodily functions, women are treated as unclean creatures and are barred from participating in social and religious activities. (cf. Roles and Rituals for Hindu women Julia Leslie p.165). In very orthodox Hindu families, women are segregated from the rest of the family in a special room during their period of "uncleanness" (Roles and Rituals for Hindu women, p.165). This is another way to control women and limit their freedom while, at the time, making them feel inferior and loath-some to others.

3. STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

3.1. Hinduism:- In order to get an idea of the "image of women" projected by Hinduism one has to study what the Hindu scriptures it has to say about the personality, potential and character of women. According to the Hindu scripture like Manu Smriti the male and the female of the human species represents the two halves of the creator himself. These the Manu Smriti says:

Brahma divided himself into two,
Man with one half and woman with
the other..................(Marm.1,32) (7).

3.2. Buddhism:- In the pre-Buddhist days the status of women in India was on the whole law and without honor. A daughter was nothing but a source of anxiety to her parents; for it was a disgrace to them and inauspicious as well if they could not marry her, yet if they could, they were often nearly ruined by their lavish expenditure on the wedding festivities. Wife simply as a child-bearer; her life was spent in complete subservience to her husband and her parents.

3.3. Jainism: As a way of life Jainism lays stress on self-denial restraint of renunciation, for both men and women. Woman has a unique position as Jina matha. The woman who gave birth to the Thirthankara, a Jain deity.

3.4. Zoroastrianism: Parsees who practice their religion give women a position of honor in the family and society. They have a right to property, education, divorce and remarriage.
3.5. Tribal Religions: In the religion activities of the house and the group women have a role but it is denied to them in the special worship of tribal duties.

4. PROBLEMS OF WOMEN IN THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY

4.1. Cultural pressure that condition the upbringing of a girl:
Today, the birth of a son is welcomed, and that of a daughter tolerated and even resented. Girls take care of younger siblings yet the attitude towards them is "you need to be protected. (8)" Restrictions are enforced on her movements especially after the onset of puberty.

4.2. Economic effects: The condition of women in developing countries like India is more miserable than the rest of the world in almost every field of social life. The percentage of workers in the female population of the country indicated they constitute nearly 20 percent of the age-group 15 to 59 years. However 73.91 percent of the total working populations of women in India were in agriculture, 46% as agricultural laborers’ and 28% as cultivators.

4.3. Political Pressure:- Political participation, of necessity means participation in power, in decision-making and it means either partaking in the coercive powers of the state or being confronted by them. It means participation in public life as opposed to domestic seclusion.

4.4. Educational Environment:- There is a direct link between education, employment and social status enjoyed by a woman in society. The National committee on women's education (1958-1959) had been disturbed by the widening gap in the education of boys and girls.

4.5. Marriage and Marginalization:- Early marriage is prescribed by the elders as a solution to get of her 'burden'. (cf. Jeevadhara Jan.k 987,p.23). Child marriages are frequent even today in several parts of India. The girl-child is married off early without any serious efforts being made to prepare her for the future, mentally and physically she remains handicapped. She becomes a mother before her body is physically ready to create-, nurture and deliver into the world-the next generation! - too small a body gives birth to a low-weight, unhealthy baby- and, another cycle begins.

4.6. Widow-hood:- In India, a married Hindu woman is most commonly blessed with the words “sada suhagin raho”, meaning may you never be snatched of your wifehood. The death of the husband is considered as an extremely unfortunate event for women, because the women's lives and status are completely dependent on the husbands.

4.7. Dowry System, bride burning and wife beating:- The dowry system originally harmless in a feudal society, has become a social lever. Families go up and down the social ladder depending on the amount of money that can be negotiated when settling marriages.

4.8. Rape:- Crimes against women are increasing at an alarming rate in India today. It seems rape is becoming high fashion and news for media men. It is perhaps the only crime where guilt and shame are attached to the victim. The victim is "tainted" for the rest of
her life. Her relationships with friends, relatives and particularly males may be permanently marred.

4.9 Devadasi Development:- This social institution gravely affects the life and social status of women. It is called 'Devadasi' in the south and 'Murali' in Maharashtra. Devadasi are gods' slaves and on becoming mature they are given in marriage to a deity. Every year on festivals namely on the full moon of chaitra (April, May) and of Magashira (November, December) thousands flock to fairs at soundatti Hill. Many girls are married to the brass faced god. The priest ties tali 'Mangala Sutra' the auspicious thread to their necks and the girls are pronounced as married. Thus every year 3000 to 4000 girls are married to 'Yellamma' at Soundatti Hill (10). In the olden days 'Devadasis' did chores like fanning the idol and carrying the light called 'kumbarathi' but their most important duty was singing and dancing before the idols. The priest also used them as mistresses. The handmaidens of god gradually turned out to be temple harlots meant for the priests. In course of time they became common prostitutes serving anyone who can ply. Some of the Maharashtra parents offered their girls were called as 'Murali.' These girls sang, danced and per-formed at night worship so long as they were young and beautiful. But when they became old they had a very miserable life.

4.10 Prostitution Promotion:- Prostitution is the act of a female or male, payment offering he/his body for indiscriminate sexual union, for payment in cash or kind, with a man/woman who is not the husband or wife. Kathleen Barry defines prostitution as "the provision of sexual services in exchange for material gains. This provision may be induced by one or more of a variety of conditions: Physical coercion (abduction, seduction socio-economic coercion, sexual abuse, poverty); acquisition by purchases; individual decision." Barnett, C. Harold says that "the prostitute is the shared property of several men. She is denied chastity and exclusivity and she has to sell her sexual services. Gandhi has the following to say on prostitution "It was a matter of "bitter shame and sorrow of deep humiliation." He considered prostitution "Moral Leprosy." but it is a clearly known fact that in prostitution both men and women are equally involved in the crime. Yet the word is more associated and applicable to women. Prostitution of women takes various forms such as call-girls, Cabaret artistic (who make money by stripping themselves in public) and rituals and religious practices (11).

5. TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION OF WOMEN IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

5.1 Education to critical consciousness:- In our analysis as the low status and exploitation of Indian women, massive illiteracy was one of the glaring facts, Illiteracy breeds passivity, fatalism, uncritical attitude leading to the acceptance of one's oppressive inhuman conditions as God's will.

5.2 Justice to the poor:- The poor women are all around us. Their number is increasing and their situation is getting worse. Our society is such that some can enjoy affluence and luxuries if others are deprived of what they need for a decent life (12).
5.3 Income generation for women:- The self-employed women's association of Ahmedabad, referred to as SEWA, is an example of how women from the lower socio-economic class can join together to be viable force.

5.4 Participation in Politics:- The Gandhian contribution to women's mobilization was no doubt a very significant one during the independence struggle. Gandhi succeeded in mobilizing women in large numbers for satyagraha, civil disobedience, fasts and spinning. He called women for civil rebellion against unworthy and undesirable restraints (13).

5.5 Marriage based on love:- God has made woman and man to share life. Marriage has to be born out of a relationship of love and not-out of compulsion and dowry.

5.6 Inculcation of moral values:- We may be optimistic in thinking that the problem of devadasi and prostitution would disappear from the society if women have the necessities of life and certain degree of comforts and economic security. Through the formal and non-formal education women have to be conscientized to assimilate certain values in life and practice them in their daily life; the immoral and not becoming things, movies, and practices should be banned from the root itself. More recreation facilities and job opportunities may help men to direct their energy in building up of the humanity and not destroying it.

6. CONCLUSION

There is a long road ahead. At times the going will be difficult and dangerous. Hearts and structures cannot be changed overnight. Down the centuries women were denied such new life. This is an aberration. It is the misinterpretation of the creator. Man arrogated to himself the prerogative of God so that the former could call the world "man's-world." Both man and women are in God's world on an equal footing. Hence women's liberation is ultimately a human liberation. The plight of Indian women as a whole is probably not as bad as that of Jewish women in the first century, Palestine. In particular areas, however, her lot may have been far worse. Too often do we hear about wife-beating and wife-burning, dowry deaths, forced suicides, flesh trade and other sexual crimes against women? Women are still inferior, second-class citizens, suffering from many disabilities. They are thoroughly exploited as a source of cheap labor.

Man cannot live in an island and men cannot live as normal person without the complementary sex. The creation of the creator is so beautiful and bountiful; it should be enriched and enhanced at all time and all the moment. Respect to each other and acceptance to one and all is to be the hall mark and the trade mark of human being. Women and men make one creation, one globe, one nation and one humanity. This is our destiny and forward march to the unity.

7. END NOTES

Menaka-tempted Vishwamitra while he was meditating.

Shurpanakshita-tempted Lakshmana to marry her.

Stella Faria and CO; The Emerging Christian Woman, 78.


Jessie B. Tellis Nayak, Indian Womanhood then and now, 12.

Jessie B. Tellis Nayak, Indian Womanhood then and now, 47.

Sushila Mehta, Revolution and Status of Women in India, 52.

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8. BIBLIOGRAPHY


