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ORTHODOXY vs WOMEN'S LIBERATION – A STUDY



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ABSTRACT :

This paper explores the meaning of gender-role difference by comparing and contrasting the attitudes, practices, and beliefs of women who have "returned" to Orthodox Judaism (baalot teshuva) to some of the current theoretical perspectives in feminist scholarship. Preliminary findings of in-depth interviews with 50 baalot teshuva suggest that, while the affirmation of gender difference clearly leads to a focus on femininity, mothering, and domesticity, it does not necessarily result in a reaffirmation of patriarchal values and practices.

KEYWORDS : beliefs of women, mothering and domesticity, Position of Women.

POSITION OF WOMEN

The task of tracing the status of women in India in a historical perspective is difficult, complex and cumbersome due to diversity of civilization. The subordination of women preceded the formation of class society and class oppression. It is difficult to ascertain women's situation in pre-agricultural period because historians haven't been able to tap the traces of happenings and operations during that period. This much is evident that women played a leading role in economic life. But the bondage imposed on women was terrible and had a devastating impact on them. Menstruation, pregnancy and child birth reduce their capacity to work for money and at times make them fully dependent upon men for protection and food. In contrast to a woman, the man's position was quite different. From the beginning man had been an inventor. There has been clear-cut demarcation between women and men's world of work. Men's activities are always appreciated while women are undermined. Women's physical weakness constitutes to a glaring inferiority situation.¹ Philosophers, religious preachers, political leaders, social reformers and scientists all justified the inferior status of women in society.

For instance, the Greek philosopher Aristotle decreed that "the relation of the male to female is by nature such that one is superior and the other is dominated. This is because they do not possess a naturally dominating element."² The writers of the literary classics prejudiced against women. Despite their genius, they treated women sordidly in their works by depicting women as pretty, ornamental, idle, mindless and vicious creatures.³ And, ever since the Bible fixed the blame on Eve, women are held responsible for having led men on to their downfall.⁴ Indian society is probably one of the few where the women's position in 2000 B.C. was in an enviable one.⁵ She was given education and wanted she could select her life partner and in domestic life she was an equal partner to male. She had equal rights to property with her husband. With the marriage a wife became co-owner of her husband's property. Her rights were fully recognized which is proved by the fact that after marriage a husband could not give away any property without his wife's consent, for she was co-owner of it

Further there are some references in the classical literature regarding the position of women in Hindu society as follows: "The wife should even treat her husband as God, though he is characterless, sensual and devoid of good qualities" "Women should follow the word of their husbands. This is their highest duty".⁶

She who fasts and perform rituals while the husband lives, cuts off the life of the husbands. She goes to hell. A women who is after sacred waters should wash the feet or the whole body of the husband and drink the water; and she attains the highest place.⁷ Religions haven't created the conditions in which women can become aware of her. Neither have they provided her with enough space for fulfillment. On the contrary, they have actively promoted her subordination through injunctions devaluing her status.⁸ In the ancient Tamil Society, the women were placed in higher position as seen in the Sangam Literature. Some of them served as guides in the King's courts some others served as warriors who were called as "Moothin Mahalir" (bravery women). They gave importance to their country than their sons. Further in social life they were called as "Thalaiv'C (Head) along with men who were called as "Thalaivan\u During Sangam Age i.e. commencing from 3rd century B.C. the literature depicted the women as the main character as in Chivaka Chinthamani, Kundalakesi, Manimekalai, Valiyapcithi, etc. Further those literature also revealed that all the high avenues of learning were open to women. The traditions of highly educated women in early times are conserved in classical literature.⁹ Barring the Vedic age the women were placed in a low status through all ages. In most cases they were even prescribed which food to eat, when and with whom, and which rituals and festivals to celebrate. Women under menstruation are treated as untouchables. They are considered as a property of man, to be disposed of as the master pleases.¹⁰ The deterioration in the status women started from the post Sangam period (i.e.) 3rd AD. While the women of the Sangam Age were / treated as equal to men and were given a position of respectability, later she was looked upon with contempt. Even during the subsequent period from 5th AD to 12th AD, the condition of women became pitiable due to the imposition of certain social customs. Bakthi movement still relegated them to the secondary position and even some of the castes were segregated from the main body of the society.¹¹ Their position was defined to clearly be subordination to men. Women were placed under restriction in life and activities, though modesty was considered the highest among their graces.

It was believed that women were fit only for household work and they were destined to live in kitchen and that is why she is called "Manaiyal" (residing within house). During medieval times their position deteriorated further due to more seclusion and a closed life by the custom of 'Purdah' Since a woman was always treated as a dependent minor, her right to property was generally denied. However, a woman was allowed some personal property (Sridhana) in the form of jewellery and clothing. In a joint Hindu family father was the head of the family. Sons acquired rights in the family property as soon as they are born. Daughters had none and were entitled only for maintenance but a widow without a son had a share in the property until her remarriage or death. Women always remained a property of their male masters and therefore came to be considered a liability instead of an asset to the family. The constant subordination, ignorance and illiteracy of them had given birth to innumerable social evils like sati (bright burning), child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, dowry, devadasi system etc. As a result of child marriage, and enforced widowhood of women education didn't receive encouragement either from the government or the public. The conservative attitude of parents greatly hindered the progress of girl's education¹². Strong opposition and apathy existed among people towards it.¹³ It was a deep rooted belief for several years that women shouldn't be educated. Tamil proverb says "What is the necessity of education to women who are confined to kitchen", They felt that it would bring misfortune to families whose girls were educated. Also a feeling was prevalent that female education was meant only for devadasi who had to learn the fine arts in order to dance in temples and on public occasions. Women's education was also not very clearly defined during this period. The mutts of Tamil Nadu, centre of Higher Education, permitted only men. Hence the women were deprived of higher learning.¹⁴ The eighteenth century also witnessed a miserable condition of women. Women lost their separate entity and their very existence was merely a bare necessity and indispensable appendage to the male population. Thus till the beginning of the nineteenth century women were forcefully subjugated to male superiority in all respects. The birth of a female child was not welcomed. Infanticide was very common in many villages of India. Except the higher caste women, no woman was permitted to cover her upper portion of her body.¹⁵

EXPERIENCING ORTHODOXY

Despite age and some demographic differences, content analyses of the interview material reveal certain persistent themes. In retelling their stories of return, women reported a common experience: that their lives had been spiritually empty and without meaning before their return. The meaninglessness of modern living became a euphemism for specific issues, most commonly expressed in what these women saw as a cultural ambivalence and confusion toward women, toward women's sexuality, and toward family and gender roles. All women expressed some concern about the loss of boundaries in marital, familial, and sexual relations. Older women spoke freely about their poor heterosexual relationships prior to their return and especially about their relationships to men unwilling to make lasting commitments.

MOVEMENT FOR EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

In the 19th century the problems of women in India invited the attention of Western humanitarian thinkers, Christian missionaries and Indian socio-religious philosophers. Women's participation in the work assignments as well as in other activities increased during this century due to the technological changes of the Industrial Revolution which transformed the processes of production. Along with this the spread of Western humanitarian idea in India made its impact on the clumsy social traditions. The socio-religious philosophers protested those evil practices such as sati, child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, polygamy, dowry and devadasi system. Their views were strengthened when Christian missionaries exposed evils of such social customs when these customs stood as the stumbling block in their missionary activities. Further, some of the enlightened British officials in India and England also initiated measures to remove those social evils. They mobilized the public opinion in support of the abolition of it against the stiff opposition from the reactionary section of the Hindu Society.

Educated women also came forward to liberate the rest of women. The Government expressed deep regret and asked the District Collectors to prevent the practice of sati and punish all attempts to induce or compel the unwilling women, to submit to it. It received the support of social reformers like Raja Ramjvohan Roy. He published three major pamphlets described sati as nothing but murder against the orthodox Hindus' protest. The practice of sati was prohibited officially by the "Regulation XVII" of 4th December 1829 in Bengal and then in Madras on 2nd February 1830. Though this Act increased the wealth of a small section of orthodox Hindus, the overall response was given.¹⁶ The Hindu Literary Society, Triplicane Literary Society, Progressive Citizen Society of Madras, etc., welcomed it. The HLS's journal the Crescent in its publication on 15th May 1833. praised the Government for passing this Act, as it was a blessing to the Indian Women folk and hoped that it would relieve hundreds of young women from the painful social evils. The Triplicane Literary Society welcomed this as "a saviour to the women folk of India since it would remove the social stigma perpetuated on women from the ancient period".¹⁷

ECONOMIC WELFARE MEASURES

It is felt that the miserable economic position of women was due to the denial of property right to women. Hence the progressives thought of getting property right to women would alleviate the sufferings of women. The Married Women's Property Act was enacted in 1874. Under the Act, the separate property of the women was included as follows:¹⁸

1. Wages and earnings of married women in any employment, occupation or trade earned on by law.
2. Money acquired through literacy, artistic and scientific skill.
3. All savings from and investment of such wages and
4. A policy of insurance affected on her own behalf should be deemed to her separate property over which she should have absolute right. This was against the Hindu custom since the girls were not permitted to acquire wealth by getting education or by working.

The missionaries utilized this Act to weaken the joint family system and get relief to a good number of girls. After conversion, the girls were permitted to work either in schools or in mission stations, or in hospitals and earn money. The influence of the elders on the Christian girls began to decline and the development of

individualism reduced the influence of the joint family system.¹⁹ This enhanced the empowerment of Christian women but on the other hand the women of other section continued their traditional life. Dowry is the economic based social stigma that daunted the society. It has been fairly prevalent among all the castes and communities in Tamil country in the past two centuries. The amount of dowry is depended mainly on the social status, education, occupation and wealth of the proposed bridegroom.

The amount is paid either in cash or in the form of gold jewellery or property. The missionaries condemned the dowry system also. They forced the Christians to refrain from this practice. Since the Christians failed to accept the advice of missionaries for dowry practice, they modified it and gifted house hold articles couple. The Anti Dowry League was started in the first session of the Madras Students Convention. Many unmarried members took pledge not to accept dowry.¹⁹ Similar leagues were formed in northern India in 1914. Veerasalingam condemned the evil in his *Vivekavcirdhani* and also in his satires and in public lectures. His lectures on *Kanyasidkam* (Dowry) were based on the *Shastras* which according to him never sanctioned this practice.²⁰

Though the reformers and associations took effort to remove this custom, it is invigorated with the spread of education. Another social evil is 'deva-dasi' system (Institutionalized prostitution). Abbe Dubois stated, "Next to sacrifices the most important persons in the temples are the dancing girls, who call themselves 'devadasi servants or slaves of the Gods; their profession requires of them to be open to the embraces of persons of all castes. They are taken from any caste and are frequently of respectable birth. It is nothing uncommon to hear of pregnant women, in the belief that it will tend to their happy delivery, making a vow, with the consent of their husbands, to devote the child then in the womb, if it should turn out a girl to the service of God. And, in doing so, they imagine they are performing a meritorious duty. According to the Census of Madras State 1881, the number of female dancers in the Madras Presidency was 11,573."²¹

WOMEN CLAIMING EQUAL RIGHTS

As seen earlier the western liberal ideas affected a fringe of Indian society that too the upper layer of the Indian society. The women already enjoyed the benefit of wealth got education and liberal ideas. They raised their voice for the liberty of the rest of women. They came forward to serve for the welfare of the society. Associations such as All India Women Association (1907) and All India Women conference (1917) were started. Entry of Mrs. Margaret Cousins, Ms. Annie Besant, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Ms. Vijayalakshmi Pandit activated the organizations and conducted conferences in support of women's liberation. They represented their rights to the South Borough Committee which came to India in 1932 in connection with the Royal Commission to consider for addition of new elements in the future constitution of India.²²

They also took part in the freedom movement. They used this forum to work for the liberation and rehabilitation of the depressed women. Gandhiji support the programmes for employment of the worst hit women through cotta, industries. Rajaji, the Chief lieutenant of Gandhiji also worked for the liberation of women through his "Gandhi Ashram" of Thiruchengodu (near Salem) where he trained the destitute women soap making, candle making, weaving, spinning etc. Ci The most notable women organisation the Bharata Mahila parishad was formed at the third meeting of the Indian National Congress in 1887 to provide a forum for the discussion on women social issues. One of the earliest general associations for women known as Sakthi Samithy was established in Bengal by Swarna Kumari Devi in 1886. In 1903 Hindu Tri Mandar was started by Jannabai Sakki and Kalavatiben Motiwala. This organisation took great interest in spreading education amongst the Gujarat women. In 1920 Women's India Association and the All India Women's conference came into existence to spread education among women. In 1932, All Bengal Women's Union was formed to prevent the prostitution. The National Federations of Indian Women and hundreds of other regional women's organisations rendered excellent service for the uplift of women. In 1917, an All India Women's deputation demanded Mr. Montague, the Secretary of state for India, when he visited India, the word The Indian People in the memorandum should include the Indian women also. The Deputation said, "thus the voice of India approve of its women being considered responsible and acknowledged citizens; and we urgently claim that, in drawing up of all provisions regarding representation, our sex shall not be made a disqualification for the exercise of the franchise or for

service in public life. This Association claimed that women should not be put on par with children, foreigners and lunatics in any scheme of reforms to be given to the country²³

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