



Exploring Women and Priesthood through the Lens of 'New Woman'

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Abstract: As the name itself suggests, the purpose of this paper would be to analyze women and priesthood through the lens of 'new woman'. 'New woman' was initially applied to women seeking radical change. Change in social roles and particularly independent career choices of women were the main objectives of these women. Women were often not allowed to take up priesthood as their profession as this was considered to be primarily a male dominated sphere. However, with time, apart from taking other jobs, women have also started taking priesthood as their profession. This has not only enabled women to widen their occupational choices but have also enabled them to break certain age-old stereotypes related to social constructs. This paper would also focus on some of the recent developments in the field of women priesthood and how it has laid a profound impact on our society.

Keywords: - Women, Priesthood, New Woman, Social Construct

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1894, Sarah Grand used the term, 'new woman' in one of her influential articles to refer to independent women seeking radical change. The term 'new woman' basically dealt with the change in social roles. It also describes the growth in independent career choices of women in Europe and United States. This term stresses upon the fact that independence is not simply a matter of mind, it also involves change in physical activities and dress as physical activities enable us to engage with the outer world. ("New Woman", 2023) For the past few centuries, women are pursuing different kinds of jobs that not only enables them to get exposure, but also enables them to broaden their mindset. Significant change can be seen in the occupational choices. Apart from teaching, women are also seen taking up jobs in the defence sector, Indian Army, media, administrative sector and also as priests. This act of taking priesthood as profession by women has laid a profound impact on the society. In the Vedic period, scholars like Gargi, Maitreyi were allowed to perform the role of priest. However, as time passed by, women were not allowed to be priests owing to various reasons constructed by the society itself. These 'socially constructed reasons' not only hindered the growth of a woman's mind but also of the society as a whole. This paper would mainly analyze the emergence of woman priesthood. The preliminary literature review shows that past studies have focused on the concept of 'New Woman'. They have focused on different types of professions pursued by women. Studies have shown how women have finally managed to become successful in their fields breaking all taboos. But what I would like to primarily focus on in my study is 'How far the idea of Female priest has been relevant in the recent times against social constructs'. For the successful completion of this paper, I would mainly rely on some of the incidents seeking radical changes through independent career choices of women.

II. DELINEATION OF THE POSITION OF WOMEN THROUGH THE AGES

While talking about the position of women, one is reminded of the social barriers or the social disabilities that women were subjected to. The term, disability is not only associated with physical disabilities, it also involves the social barriers and the institutionalized rules and regulations that stop a particular person from doing a particular work. It is a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses or activities. Disability can also be articulated in the forms of various kinds of subjugation meted out to people particularly women. Taking the social disabilities into consideration, mention can be made of *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, an influential treatise that provided intellectual impetus to 'second -wave feminism'. It heralded a new attitude towards rethinking women's position in society. The background against which Beauvoir wrote the book was of inequality and oppression. Women were compelled to yield to the gender stereotypes of being nurturers and homemakers; they were denied financial, political and sexual autonomy and were discriminated against in the labour market (Mukhopadhyay, 2016, p.30). Men have always assumed the position of 'universal subject', denying women autonomy and agency. When a man otherizes a woman he expects her to manifest deep-seated tendencies and remain subjugated. Lack of definite resources does not allow a woman to upgrade herself to the status of a subject. This is what makes her feel pleased with her role as the 'other'. Simone de Beauvoir was of the view that women internalize certain basic assumptions from an early age. Women's reproductive abilities have been glorified over their intellectual autonomy. 'Maternal instinct' has been imposed on women to suppress them and hence they are relegated to the position of 'other'. This is exactly the point where one can be reminded of the physical and social barriers that a woman was supposed to overcome in order to emancipate herself. Beauvoir had also argued that economic independence is also important as it can help them achieve emancipation from the bonds of norms and fixed socio-cultural roles. This is the point where I would like to draw attention towards social disabilities and the physical disabilities as well. Disability does not confine itself within physical impairment only. It is also a social construct. Women were not allowed to do certain activities like hunting, gathering, defending the tribe as these were considered to be physically strenuous. Women were only involved in the domestic space as nurturers of men and children. Even writing and publishing have always been considered as male sphere of experience. But with time, the scenario has completely changed. Women are seen evolving as literary

practitioners, weight lifters etc. They are even engaging in defence. This is where the concept of breaking the barrier of 'so called social disability' comes in.

III. EXPLORING WOMEN AND PRIESTHOOD THROUGH THE LENS OF NEW WOMAN

The importance of giving autonomy to women has been recognized in the recent times. Women are seen pursuing professions that were not pursued by them earlier. Ancient and medieval era Hindu texts present a diverse picture of duties and rights of women in Hinduism. Throughout history, Hindu society has seen many female rulers, such as Rudrama Devi, religious figures and saints, such as Andal, philosophers, such as Maitreyi, and female practitioners/ conductors of Vedic Hindu rituals. But since performing rituals was considered to be a male sphere of experience, women were not readily allowed to pursue this profession. However, in the recent times, women are breaking taboos and pursuing this profession. ("Women in Hinduism", 2023)

To challenge the notion, that only brahmin particularly men can only perform religious rites, a group of women priestesses from Kolkata have triumphed over traditional Vedic wedding. This group was mainly formed by Indologist and priestess Nandini Bhowmik who emerged as a woman whose modern cultural beliefs have changed the preconceived notions which states that only brahmins can perform religious rites. Nandini Bhowmik along with three other women formed their own like-minded group, "Shubhamastu" which means "let there be well-being for all". In an age when people are fighting over discrimination and disharmony this would be an appropriate name said Bhowmik in one her interviews.

The most significant aspect of these women priests is that in order to establish a state of complete harmony and peaceful coexistence they incorporate songs of Rabindranath Tagore in their wedding rituals. They even translate the songs and the hymns written in Sanskrit so that a peaceful relationship is established among the newly-weds.

Bhowmik, in one of her interviews with a leading daily, said that it was her teacher named Professor Gauri Dharma Pal who inspired her to pursue her work as a priestess. Bhowmik in one of her interviews had said;

Me and Ruma, both of us were students in college, studying Sanskrit Honours and so, Gauri Di asked us to learn this procedure from her. It was so nice that she had selected us amongst her old students.

(Das, 2021)

These types of instances have been taking place in many parts of India. Pune-based Thatte's Shankar Seva Samiti and Jnana Prabhodini are two leading schools that seven years ago formally began to train women to conduct rituals, prayers for initiation, engagement, marriage, conversion, house warming, ancestor worship and last rites. Women here undergo the grind of studying Sanskrit, learning by heart all the verses from ancient texts that are necessary to conduct ceremonies. Some of the female critics are of the view that education and urbanization have laid a profound impact on the career choices of women. This has given rise to feminism which in turn has affected the religious status of women too. (Lobo, 2014)

While talking about the concept of 'New Woman' in recent times one is reminded of the radical feminists who argued that radical measures should be adopted in order to achieve political, social and personal equality and justice. They were also of the view that the entire gender system must be transformed in order to eradicate gender oppression. (Mukhopadhyay, 2016, p.36). The concept of 'New Woman' was previously applied to women who seek radical change especially in terms of independent career choices. Choosing a profession like priesthood at a time when men are usually seen taking this as a profession is actually seen as a radical change. Women are still being questioned on various grounds especially menstruation as it is still considered to be a taboo in our society. The 2020 film *Brahma Janen Gopon Kommoti* stresses on gender bending roles. The film shows a progressive young lady who tries to break social taboos through her work and beliefs. The film deals with Shabari, a professor in Sanskrit who hides her priesthood from her in-laws. However, when her in-laws came to know about it, they did not take it well. Shabari had to face various oppositions when other priests came to know about her priesthood. Some of them had also said that "*nari deho kokhono i suchi hote pare na*" (a woman's body can never be pure). They were of the view that since a woman experiences menstruation, she is not pure. Here menstruation is seen as a symbol of impurity. But as we all know; menstruation has got nothing to do with impurity it is simply a biological phenomenon which a woman experiences once a month. These were actually some of the reasons put up by the male priests to prevent female priests from carrying out priestly rites. Similar situations can be observed in other religions as well. Another significant aspect that deserves special mention is that women priests in the recent times have completely removed the concept of 'kanya daan' i. e, giving away of a woman to another man. They pointed out that women are not something to be given away. They have their own dignity and they should be capable enough of sustaining themselves. This notion again takes recourse to a radical change in the society.

Ordination was traditionally a male dominated profession. However in Ancient Egyptian religion, God's Wife of Amun was the highest ranking priestess. In ancient Greek religion, some important observances, such as the Thesmophoria, were made by women. In Buddhism we have the fully ordained Buddhist nuns called Bhikkhunis. In Hinduism we have several instances of female priests. For example, Bhairavi Brahmani is a guru of Sri Ramakrishna. She initiated Ramakrishna into Tantra. Under her guidance, Ramakrishna went through sixty-four major tantric sadhanas which were completed in 1863. In Sikhism, a Sikh woman has the right to become a *Granthi*, *Ragi*, and one of the *Panj Piare* (5 beloved) and both men and women are considered capable of reaching the highest levels of spirituality. So, we can see that there has been a radical change in the way women priesthood has been viewed over the years. ("Ordination of women", 2023)

IV. CONCLUSION

Female priests in the recent times have made a kind of revolution in the society. They have not only broken the age-old stereotypes but also opened new spheres of profession. Women from different parts of the world have taken priesthood as their profession. They are performing religious rites including marriages, pujas, house warming ceremonies and even obituaries. Durga Puja which is considered to be one of the biggest festivals of Bengalis is also performed by women priests. The concept of 'new woman' can rightly be applied to the

emergence of women priesthood as it has opened a new era of career choice for women. In spite of experiencing oppositions from various sections of the society, the women priests have been performing their duties in a vehement manner, thereby ushering in a new era of feminism.

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