Concept of women priesthood in Hindu religion

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Abstract

Introduction: Women Priesthood is a unique concept from especially Hindu religion and culture. From last many centuries, women were playing important role regarding priesthood. From Vedic period women are performing their role as priestess and guiding people for their religious activities.

Problem Identification: In modern era, women are achieving different type of success in various fields. But still many people have hesitation in their mind regarding priesthood by women. Now a days in Maharashtra – especially in Pune - a cultural and educational capital of Maharashtra, women are performing their job as priestess also. They are achieving excellent experiences from their work. People are happily accepting their homely approach and also appreciating their efforts. But still in rest of Maharashtra, only few people have this idea about the concept of women priesthood.

Through this paper, I want to preach this idea and try to develop awareness about the same with my research.

Keywords: Women, Hindu religion and tradition

Introduction

धारणात् धमर्: धमेर्ण िवधृता: प्रजा: |
य: स्वाद्यं धरणसंयुक्त: स धमं इति निष्ठयः: || (Mahabharat Shantiparva 109)

Activity by which social life becomes cohesivre is religion. Creators of Mahabharat have given this definition of Dharma (Religion). In Indian tradition Hinduism reflects that all the social activities be regulated in right manner and run smoothly.

Hinduism’s prominent feature is Samskaras (sacraments). In Hindu tradition various samskaras (sacraments) are performed from prebirth and up to post death and they have origin from vedic period and in order to guide common people in the activities of samskaras (how to perform these sacraments) [1]. Purohit’s (Priest’s) presence is required. In Hindu tradition from the period of Vedas, both male and female purohits have taken this responsibility [2]. Purohit means one who stands in front of the group of people (or one division of the people) and guides them who has achieved this eligibility with his knowledge is called Purohit (or priest) [3]. In sacred hymns of Rigveda; Agni (Holy fire) has been venerated with this name – Purohit. [4, 5]. During wartimes, Purohit used to stand up in front of the division of army and used to pray for their victory. Also in King’s daily administrative work Purohit’s opinion was considered very valuable. In activities like Yajna – oblations and sacrifice before holy fire and chanting holy mantras Purohit’s used to guide in this righteous works. “We activate people abilities and inspire the nation” was the slogan of the Purohit - वर्मं रण्त्रं जागृयाम पुरोिहतः ||

संिशतं मे ब्रह्म संिशतं वीयं बलम् |
संिशतं क्षत्रं जिञ्ञु यस्याहमरिम पुरोिहतः: || (Shukla Yajurveda 2.81)

With pious, sharp and pure behaviour I have maintained my Brahmatej and observing this very strictly. I have maintained my physic and regulated my activities of organs of senses efficiently. I have enlightened and multiplied my kings warspirit.
It is seen that in other religions and traditions only males have been allotted this right. But in Hindu Tradition both the men and women have this right of priesthood craft. Vedic literature is the concreto base of Hindu Tradition. Twenty seven hymns of Rigveda composed by females named as rishikas and this is very importnat point to be noted [8]. In vedic period importance was given to both boys and girls education. Their beginning of educational phase (studentship) used to be with Upanayna Samskar (Thread Ceremony) i.e. taking near the preceptor. They were given Holy Gayatri Mantra deeksha. After the thread ceremony girls also used to stay at the house of the preceptor and used to study discourses. Atharvaveda says, "after observing strict disciplines of studentship (virginity, proper food and exercise, controlling organs of senses and activities, self study and giving discourses, respecting teachers and elderly people and daily prayers) because of this achievement i.e. Brahmacharya; girls used to get able and proper life partners. It is said in Atharvaveda:" Rishiha Jhuh who was wife of Brihatspati, because of his overpride and irresponsible act he left her; but with detemind efforts and studies she completed her studies of Vedas and she live her life with full contentment [9].

There is another example of Vishwavaras Atreyi. She did priestship in sacrament of oblation to the holy fire and she also gave deeksha means lessons to her other female colleagues also. Becuse of her efficiency in Yajna samskaras and her tendancy of respecting learned purohitas she was also venerated with the degree as Yadnykarter (यज्ञकत्री) [7].

During Brahman period Yajna was considered as a main pillar of the vedic activities. In kaushitaki Brahman text, reference of pathyasaawasti (पथ्यसावस्ति) who travelled from the north after overcoming obstacles in her travel and studied vedas and she became full knowledgeable [8]. In reognition of her studies and her knowledge she was honoured with the degree Vaach (वाच्). (Now a days Vachaspati degree is given to those who have done Doctorate in some kind of work).

Also there are references in panini’s Ashtadhyaya (Text related with Sanskrit grammer) and in Mahabhashya also that of some women purohits used to be preceptor [9].

In Brihat Aranyak Upanishad there are stories of Gargi and Maitreyi. Katayani and Maitreyi were both wives of Sage yajnavalkya katayani was more interested in household activities and Maitreyi pursuing Brahmanmarga (path of self realiztion) Before entering Sanyas ‘Yajnavalkya gave lessons’f pursuing eternal truth and self realization to Maitreyi because she wishes so. In Maitreyi’s consideration this path of eternal truth was more importnat that this worldly affairs [10].

Videh king janaka organised Bahudakshin yajna and declared that one who is most knowlegdeable should come farward and prove himself so and then he can take away one thousand cows along with the gold tied to their horns. Many scholars had dialogue with Yajnavalkya but their arguments never become fruitful. Then Gargi Vachaknavi came farward and started dialogue with Yajnavalkya. But he considered this act of Gargi as crossing her limits and uttered that Gargi may lose her head because of her this act but Gargi did not get frightened. Though yajnavalkya intimidated her and did not behave with her properly Gargi venerated Yajnavalkya as a most knowlegeable person who have knowledge of Moksha-path of eternal truth.

In vedic period women were also observing tapa (practice of penance), self studies (Swadhyay) and Yogas in order to obtain Brahmaayjna along with men.

In Ramayan period also, women were given ‘Dharma Shikshan’ (lessons and education of righteous path i.e. Dharma). Scholars like Sita, Kausalya, Tara, Vedvati, Swayamprabha were all very well learned in Vedic literature. Sita’s Upanayan Samskar was performed and she used to do sandhya (daily prayers) is noted in ramayan. Before sedhing Ram and Lakshman with sage Vishwamitra, their mother Kausalya had sought blessings of the elderly people i.e. samskar called Swastayayana. (स्वास्त्यायन). Vali’s wife tara was recognised as Mantrvid (मन्त्रविद्) i.e.one who has full knowledge of auspicious mantras [11]. There is reference of Shabari in ramayan who used to live in sage maatangs Ashram in order to get knowledge of Vedas [12].

In Mahabharat, dialogur beyween sulabha and Janaka is famous. Sulabha was sanyasini and she was daughter of King named Pradhan. By observing righteous path and yogas, learned Sulabha had dialogue with King Janaka regarding Kramayoga and Gruhatshahamas [13]. In Mahabharat period it is declared that well behaved women in the society should do Vedadhyayan (studies of Vedas) like ‘Draupadi’, wife of Pandvas did.

So far we have seen references of women education and it will be proper know their status in the society. Because of their to learn and get knowledge, women used to achieve Brahmmapad but in post Vedic period, their social status started descending. Now let us see how it happened.

From ancient times, during the menstrual phase; woman is considered as impure and untouchable. During these 4-5 days; they were not supposed to participate in any household duties, religious ceremonies etc. [14] But some scholars suggested to give respect to women and also respect their menstrual phase [15].

First referece of Chaturvarnas (four divisions or steps of the society) found in Rigvedic Hymn named Purushsukta. (पुरुषसूक्त) According to this hymn Brahmins are originated from the Purush’s (the ultimate mouth) Kashatriyas (warriors) from his arms, Vaishyas (trader community) from his navel, and Shudras (serving community) from his feet. This idea come into existence from the Purushsukta period and these four divisions of the society were recognised according to the activities people were carrying out in the society and their skills. Shudras were given last step (place) in this four divisional social arrangement [16].

Many foreign powers were attracted towards India’s wealth, richness and development in all the field and because of their aggression Indian society and culture suffered and got set back and it created major problem of protection of women and particularly girls. Because of the pressure of this social problem Manu, the great sage had to note in his text Manusmrti (Smruti means code of conduct for social life) that Upanayn Samskar of girls should be clubbed with their marriage samskar and there is no need of seperate Upanayan Samskar at the age of 8th year i.e. starting of the studentship phase of life and he declared that serving to the preceptor means serving to her husband and householdship is her Yadnykarma [17]. For women, shudras and other uncultured people Puranas were prepeared and written to decide the laws and conduct regularly their religious activities. They were deprived off their right to study Vedas. It became customary for the girls to arrange their marriages in early ages before they become mature and this situation ultimately resuled in girls were deprived off their right to learn and they suffered.
from education chances. All this situation ultimately led to
male dominance in social life in religious field. Widows were
ruined respect in social life and pollution menstruation was
put forth as main cause to declare women as non eligible for
the religious activities. It became compulsory for women in
religious performances to be present with their husbands only.
Manusmrutti denies women’s right and independence in any
social and righteous work but behind this Manu’s main
intention was to protect women from evil and unsocial
elements [19]. But important point is to be noted that insult of
all this situation Bhagwadgeeta has already granted right to
pursue path of real truth to achieve ultimate knowledge to
women, vaishyas and shudras [19].

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, in his lecture of annihilation of
caste; pointed out that creators of Chaturvanyama (four division
system in social life) have not considered women’s place in
this social arrangement of chaturvanyama and if their status is to
be decided by the deeds they are doing then the society has to
accept women priests and women soliders. He further stated
Hindu samaj has accepted female teachers and barristers. In
actual in Independent period, new generation was impressed
women soliders and Indian society has also accepted women
purohits. 

Dr. Ambedkar’s above thoughts started to take root in the
society and before society started to assimilate those around
Dahkarma Samskar (last

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