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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 धर्म इत्याहुः धर्मेण विधृताः प्रजाः |

यः स्यात् धारणसंयुक्तः स धर्म इति निश्चयः || (Mahabharat Shantiparva 109)

Activity by which social life becomes cohesive 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 upto 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 purohitis 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 one 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 - वचं राष्ट्रे जागृयाम पुरोहिताः |

संशितं मे ब्रह्म संशितं वीर्यं बलम् |

संशितं क्षत्रं जिष्णु यस्याहमस्मि पुरोहितः || (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.

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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 concrete base of Hindu Tradition. Twenty seven hymns of Rigveda composed by females named as rishikas and this is very important pointed to be noted [5]. 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, selfstudy 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- "Rishika Juhu who was wife of Brihaspati, because of his overpride and irresponsible act he left her; but with determined efforts and studies she completed her studies of Vedas and she live her life with full contentment [6].

There is another example of Vishwavara Atreyi. She did priesthood in sacrament of oblation to the holy fire and she also gave deeksha means lessons to her other female colleagues also. Because of her efficiency in Yajna samskaras and her tendency of respecting learned purohitas she was also venerated with the degree as Yadnyakartree (यज्ञकर्त्री) [7].

During Brahman period Yajna was considered as a main pillar of the vedic activities. In kaushitaki Brahman text, reference of pathyaswasti (पथ्यास्वस्ति) who travelled from the north after overcoming obstacles in her travel and studied vedas and she became full knowledgeable [8]. In recognition of her studies and her knowledge she was honoured with the degree Vaach (वाच). (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 Ashtadhyayi (Text related with Sanskrit grammar) and in Mahabhashya also that of some women purohitas used to be preceptor [9].

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

Videh king Janaka organised Bahudakshin yajna and declared that one who is most knowledgeable should come forward 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 forward 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 knowledgeable 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 Brahmayajna 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 sending Ram and Lakshman with sage Vishwamitra, their mother Kausalya had sought blessings of the elderly people i.e. samskar called Swastyayana. (स्वस्त्ययनं). 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, dialogue between 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 Gruhasthashram [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 to know their status in the society. Because of their to learn and get knowledge, women used to achieve Brahmavidya 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 reference 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 truth) mouth, Kashatriyas (warriors) from his arms, Vaishyas (trader community) from his navel, and Shudras (serving community) from his feet. This idea came 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 fields 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 Manusmriti (Smriti means code of conduct for social life) that Upanayan Samskar of girls should be clubbed with their marriage samskar and there is no need of separate 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 householdership is her Yadnyakarma [17]. For women, Shudras and other uncultured people Puranas were prepared and written to decide the laws and conduct regularly their religious activities. They were deprived of 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 resulted in girls were deprived of 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 denied respect in social life and women's 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. Manusmriti 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 [18]. But important point is to be noted that in spite of all this situation Bhagwadgita 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 Chaturvarnya (four division system in social life) have not considered women's place in this social arrangement of chaturvarnya 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 time to come Hindu Samaj will accept female buther and distillatory but he feared whether this Hindu society will accept female purohiths and soliders [20].

(Now a days Indian army, Indian Air-force have accepted female soliders and Indian society has also accepted women purohiths.

Dr. Ambedkar's above thoughts started to take root in the society and before society started to assimilate those around 1934 in Maharashtra state. 'Tavanishtha Parivartanvadi Parishad' (तत्त्वनिष्ठ परिवर्तनवादी परिषद) (reformists congress in the field of social and religious activities) was formed by the learned scholars in Hindu Samaj. This parishad put forth new perspective in the domain of religious activities. Actually in this pre Independence period, new generation was impressed with the English language and culture and they started to criticise old and perpetual Hindu religion, but learned scholars in the society insisted that, this Hindu religion which has tradition from Vedic period has to be continued. In these turbulence of thoughts Tatvnishtha Parivartanvadi Parishad attempted to draw conclusion that basic main theme of this Hindu religion should be maintained by scoping out unwanted and unethical customs adhered to it. Bharatratna Dr. P.V. Kane, Kevalanand Saraswati, Tarkasaankhyateerth (तर्कसांख्यतीर्थ) Raghunathshastri Kokje, Mahadevshastri Divekar, Tarkateerth (तर्कतीर्थ) Lakshmanshastri Joshi all these learned scholars of Hindu Religion who were members of the Tatvnishtha Praivartanvadi Parishad founded DharmaNiray Mandal (धर्मनिर्णय मंडळ) in 1938. They conducted annual general meetings and took some important decisions related to the time- Those conclusions are – 1. In religious matters, traditional system need not be binding and decision should be taken considering historical experience and the activities should be reformed w.r.t. time.

2. Every Hindu person has right of Upanayan Samskar i.e. to become Dvij (द्विज) (Upanayan Samskar is considered as second birth)

3. Women have equal status as men in religious and social fields.

In order to spread these reformed thoughts in the society initially Dharmaniray Mandal published booklets of Vivah samskar (marriage), Upanayan samskar (thread ceremony), Dahkarma Samskar (last cremation – funeral) etc.

In every annual meetings, discussions and dialogues were held regarding religious matters and conclusions were put

forth before common people of the society. As this process of reformation continued in 1962, Jnana Prabodhini was founded in Pune by Late Dr. Vinayak Vishwanath alis Appa Pendse who was the scholar in the field of education, social reformer, great visionary and active thinker. He used to held dialogues and discussions with the secretary of Dharmaniray Mandal-Pandit raghunathshastri Kokje and from all these discussions, conclusion was drawn that without knowing the meanings of the samskaras and without considering place and time factors and without considering what is right and wrong religious rituals which are carried out should be reformed. In 1975, Sanskrit Samshodhika (संस्कृत संस्कृति संशोधिका) was established in Jnana Prabodhini. With the guidelines and regulations set by Dharmaniray Mandal 'Santrika' started publishing booklets of various Samskaras also started conducting classes to train Purohiths and made available Purohiths whenever people require those. In this activity persons from all the castes and creed and gender are accommodated. All these trained Purohiths go among the people upto the bottom of the society and fulfill their requirements as a social responsibility.

Conclusion

At the end, we can conclude that Hindu Society has respected women's position in the domain of religious and social activities right from the vedic period. During the darkdays of foregin aggressions and in order to protect women evolved Chaturvarnya. In the process women deprived off their rights but great works done by reformists like Mahavdev Govind Ranade, Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve, R.D. Karve, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Savitibai Phule; women have been reallocated their rights again. Founder of the Arya Samaj Swami Dayanand Saraswati has also declared that women have equal rights to do priestship.

In modern days in every field of life women are equally active as men. Women Purohiths have achieved respectful place in the society. Though this is seen in Maharashtra's urban areas still there is need to awaken people in rural areas particularly among those are illiterate and this is need of the time.

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3. संशितं मे ब्रह्म संशितं वीर्यं बलम्।
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