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Religion, Society and Women's Subversion

–Tarushikha Sarvesh*

Abstract

Religion as an institution strongly influences the ordering of a society. It cuts across the dichotomy of private and public life. Private and public lives are believed to be connected through three media channels – language, institutions and narratives; and religion binds all the three. The religion moves out of the private realm and spreads deeply into the public sphere. It creates two kinds of struggles; one between private and public and the other between culture and higher spiritual attainment. To understand the disparity or scope of individual choice within a society, it is imperative to analyse the cultural component of religion, which falls at the margin of public and private sphere. This brings us to the question of disparity in a society in terms of its gender-based population. Religion is believed to be a common possession with collective ownership in terms of its beliefs, customs, traditions, stories, emotions, etc. With this backdrop, this paper primarily attempts to examine the position of women in terms of the collective ownership of religion and culture, and the scope of subverting the rules of this collective ownership. This paper addresses the above issues through the analysis of lived experiences of the women from the Khap regions of western Uttar Pradesh, as well as certain religious scriptures.

INTRODUCTION

A society has three major components, namely population, institution and formations. Religion is an institution that strongly influences the ordering of a society; it cuts across the dichotomy of private and public life. Private and public lives are believed to be connected through three media – language, institutions and narratives; religion binds all three. In this regard, religion

* Assistant Professor (Sociology), Centre for Women's Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India. Email: tarushikha009@gmail.com

moves out of the private realm and spreads deeply into the public sphere. Religion creates two kinds of struggles; one between private and public and the other between culture and higher spiritual attainment (Vanaik, 1997). To understand the disparity or scope of individual choice within a society, it is imperative to analyse the cultural component of religion, which falls at the margin of public and private sphere. This brings us to the question of disparity in a society in terms of its gender-based population. Religion is believed to be a common possession with collective ownership in terms of its beliefs, customs, traditions, stories, emotions, etc. With this backdrop, this paper primarily attempts to examine the position of women in terms of the collective ownership of religion and culture, and the scope of subverting the rules of this collective ownership. This paper addresses the above issues through the analysis of lived experiences of the women from the Khap regions of western Uttar Pradesh, as well as certain religious scriptures. The aim of the paper is to bring out subversive attempts by women within the religio-cultural establishments and draw parallels from religious texts and scriptures.

Religion is considered as naturally existing, having obvious meanings in life. Subordination through religion blends well with everyday life pattern. The society has placed women in a precarious position through religion and culture, as we get to see through most of the religious texts and scriptures. The obvious looking pattern and meaning has been assisting in keeping women's subordination largely invisible. In theology, we are told, the obvious meaning is that which presents itself quite naturally to the mind, taken from a common general lexicon of symbols (Barthes, 1982, 319).

When we celebrate religious festivals and cultural symbols, we often unconsciously end up celebrating the very stereotypes surrounding women existing in the society, even if we might be against them. For example, at Christmas even though we may not believe in the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ, we still indirectly end up celebrating the idea of virginity of a woman. "Usually we do not even care to consider such things intellectually" (Jung, 1964, 99).

SUBVERSION IN SCRIPTURAL HISTORIES

Marriage in Hinduism is seen as the only salvation for women. Religious texts give the rules for marriage. When women show reluctance to marriage, they risk being negatively labelled. In the reluctance of an

unmarried woman from a Khap region, there is a subtle confrontation; on one hand, there is an attempt to subvert by remaining unmarried, while on the other there is a tussle to remain counted in her own family (as her socially supposed position is some other house where she would have gone, had she married). In her opposition to marriage, there is a resistance (to her family's wishes) and, at the same time, there is also the desire to gain equality with other members of the family.

Sexual independence does not necessarily mean sexual license as assumed in the Dharmashastras; rather it is primarily related to independence from male control of female sexuality exercised within the context of marriage and family. The refusal to get married by entering female voluntary institutions, such as Bhuddists and Jain monasticism, was one way in which ancient women exercised such independence (Olivelle, 2012, 257).

Manu code of law gives two categories of women, the guarded (gupta) and the unguarded (agupta). The dual category of women also exists in the context of criminal justice in manusmriti. In the case both rape and consensual sex, the penalties imposed on the man is dependent on whether the women was guarded or unguarded. The punishment meted to the man is more severe in the case of guarded women (Olivelle, 2012, 257).

The experiences that women go through are both complex and nuanced in these circumstances. These experiences show that there is resistance for gaining equality on the part of the women of these social set-ups. While these steps may be hailed as progressive and lead to positive role of gender construction in such societies, those within such societies see such resistance by women through the crude characterisation of "abuse excuse" (Schneider, 2000, 147) and in return, pose resistance to equality by the construction of sexist stereotypes.

In spite of being a male-dominated society, India has had historical and textual parallels of subversion by its women. Kamasutra, a famous text, which deals with the issue of sexuality has also in many ways depicted how women from the position of subaltern go on to subvert the male impositions. Though Kamasutra portrays women as objects for extracting maximum sensual pleasures, it also gives some scope for women to subvert in whatever limited way possible. For example, a woman can retaliate if a man, despite being warded off, wounds her body to the extent which she cannot bear. She mocks and rebukes the man even in daytime, secretly though (Vatsyayana, 2011, 50–51). There are other private spaces where women can have role reversals vis-à-vis men, which comes across through the text (Vatsyayana, 2011, 63–66).

In the analysis of Buddhist texts, we see two different versions related to the attainment of enlightenment by women (Tsomo, 1999). One version of the story of the sea dragon's daughter, as mentioned in Saddharmapundarika Sutra, gives the account about how women cannot attain enlightenment in a female body and need sexual transformation into a male body for the same. Another version of story, as mentioned in Sagaranagaraja Sutra, shows that the sea dragon's daughter, Ratnadatta, claims that a woman in a female body without sexual transformation can attain enlightenment. In this historic–textual parallel, we see how within an overall mega textual account there are two takes on female body. The version that dismisses the possibility of the attainment of enlightenment in a female body is believed to have come from the sect of Devadatta in confluence with the Mahayana sects. The idea of sexual transformation as necessary for enlightenment that is found in the Saddharmapundarika Sutra is seen as "coming not from authentic Buddhist tradition, but from the tradition of Devadatta's sect, which was under the influence of traditional, discriminatory Indian views of women" (Tsomo, 1999, 128).

Talking of historical biases against women, even the sects that glorified female energy did not stand for women. The images of women in sects like Nãthpanth, which came about as the sect practising Shakti Puja (worship of the female principle of divine energy as the supreme deity), also do not seem to be supporting women, rather warn against them and portray them as dangerous temptresses who have the potential of sucking life out of males (Barathwal, 2004, 157–164).

SUBVERSION IN THE KHAP CULTURAL SET-UP IN MUZAFFARNAGAR

Religion is played out in public as a larger consensus on patriarchy and women's subordination. Sexuality is squarely in the public gaze – through tracking a woman's actions, moments, labour and reproduction. The policing and prevention of inter-religious marriage has become an established practice of communal organisations. In the rescue and restoration of women in inter-religious marriages and the de-facto termination and dissolution of such marriages, communal organisations are seen in fact to be combining the role of family and caste panchayat in their regulation of female sexuality (Sangari, 2002, 92).

Khap region, which majorly spreads over western Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan, has special set-up and cultural control through

the inter-religious and intra-religious societal codes. Despite these strict cultural codes, some women in these regions are playing courageous roles in bringing about change from within. A number of young men and women have started subverting the religio-cultural patriarchal 'mores' of the Khap region. For example, in 2008, a girl called Komal belonging to Gathwala gotra, from Jagaheri village in Muzaffarnagar, had eloped with a boy from a neighbouring village Pinna. Her family went to the police and found out where she was. Her family tried to convince her to come back and put the blame on the boy of kidnapping her by concocting false stories. This is a regular feature and tactic of the families of the girls who go against the family to choose a partner in marriage for themselves.

When I went to meet the girls' family in Jagaheri village, in 2013, I saw that girl's brother Monu was still furious about her marriage by elopement; he talked about the 'grief and embarrassment' his family had to face because of his sister's 'deeds.' He said the village community did not ostracise his family because he himself disowned her sister for knowingly making 'wrong' choices in life.

Later, when I went to meet Komal in her husband's village, which was nearby, I saw she was living happily with her husband and two children. Komal said she was aware of the tactics some families of young girls employ to manipulate them and weaken them psychologically. She admitted that she was almost on the verge of falling prey to her family's manipulation against her own husband. Eventually, she thanked her wisdom and discretion that saved her, as well as her husband's life.

Evident in this episode are some of the subtle tactics used to instil suspicion and fear in the minds of the women of the region. The Khap area is replete with such stories. But some women, despite such socially and personally testing environment where it becomes extremely difficult to invest emotions and faith in someone, have held their ground to fight for what they believed in.

The above example shows how the women are expected to be dependent on their family and not take the liberty of choosing their own path in life. The subliminal fantasies and desires of patriarchy get fulfilled in exercising social control over the female gender. Tactics of suffusing the minds of women with fear is the first step towards the kind of mental harassment the families and socio-cultural co-habitants compel women to go through. If they are unable to succeed in their first tactic, the alternative step is to send the girl away from the village to some relative's village to

keep her away from the person she likes. This further restricts her mobility and interaction, as she is displaced from her familiar surroundings. When neither of these tactics work, the last resort is killing – in the name of 'honour'. It must be noted here that the higher the prestige of the family in the village, the more likely it is that the families will resort to violence.

Very often the local administration and the police, technically obliged by law to give protection to women who make an effort to break away from the clutches of coercive cultural norms, contribute to their agony by colluding with the Khaps. Instead of offering help to the grieving families, police in fact demeans and tortures the families for the conduct of their daughter. Despite such threats of deprivation of belongingness and identity both in terms of culture and citizenship, there are women who risk their lives to live life on their own terms. Such incidents still occur only sporadically, not on a large scale. That is why these subversions by women do not appear as posing impending threats to the cultural authorities in the region; but they do have great potential of bringing about long-term structural and institutional changes from within.

I came across a case from 2003 from Purbaliyan and Bhanera villages of Muzaffarnagar, where Ajay Saroha and Poonam Baliyan's marriage was annulled by the chaudhary of the Baliyan Khap on the ground that their marriage was a same-gotra marriage. Later, the couple had given the proof that their marriage was not a same-gotra marriage (they belonged to different gotras). But this was also not accepted as evidence and the argument against the marriage was that the girl and the boy were from the villages falling under the jurisdiction of same gotra Khap; the logic was that within a Khap, a girl cannot be accepted both as daughter as well as daughter-in-law. The couple was ordered to leave that area and settle somewhere else for the rest of their lives. When I went to locate their house in 2013, to my surprise, I found out they were living in the village itself. In response to the diktats of the Khap heads, the couple had decided on the contrary to courageously stay in the same village. Though they could easily have migrated – they said that they had their business elsewhere, and that it would have been convenient for them to leave the village – due to the threats the couple received from the clan's headmen, they deliberately wanted to flout the order and decided to answer them back by winding up their business elsewhere and settle down in the village from where they had been expelled. Ajay Saroha said, "One has to be courageous like us to survive here. Here people believe in fighting, not loving."

The more the younger generation is pushed on the edge of their lives, the more subversive they become. The community later accepted the girl and her marriage. This is another success story against the tough diktats of the Khap panchayat.

ISSUES OF PROXY EMPOWERMENT

Delegation of power through Hindu nationalist organisations, such as Durga Vahini and Rashtra Sevika Samiti, leads to a misplaced understanding of women's empowerment. Some such parallels could also be drawn from the Khap region of Muzaffarnagar. It is said that the delegation of power to those who would not otherwise have it (such as the delegation of patriarchal power to women), and the creation of sites of relayed or compensatory power is a classic patriarchal and communal strategy (Sangari, 2002, 90).

In the case of Rashtra Sevikas, the homebound women have been seen as reclaiming public spaces and religious leadership through religious projects, such as the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement. When women are coming out of the private sphere to participate in the public sphere on religious grounds, it becomes easy to fill them with 'blind hatred' for the other religious communities, which eases the process of 'othering' of the communities in the eyes of women; women from one community are not able to empathise with, or understand hardships of, women from other religious communities. They are not able to see religion and culture as an umbrella structure, used for subordinating women, in general. Women are made to believe that their religion is better for women than the other religions. This point could be understood through the karsevikas' reply at Ayodhya to the question as to how their status would improve within Hindu Rashtra. One of the karsevikas replied that once Hindu Rashtra is created, Muslims would not be allowed to have four wives that alone would ensure greater respect for women (Sarkar, 1991, 2062).

Sometimes, it is seen that women's representation and their visibility in terms of numbers is enough to counter the bias and oppression but in reality many a times, the higher visibility of women in religious and cultural set-up is used to shield the existing bias and oppression. For example, the increased number of female clergies in Protestant denominations is not considered enough if they are not able to bring about fundamental reformulations of an understanding of human spirituality in a more sensitive and inclusive way (Hunter & Sargent, 1993, 545–571).

Let me cite the example of an elderly woman from Khap region, Sohan Biri, who is known for her courage in the region, and is seen as the woman who could teach men a lesson. Once she burnt nine liquor shops to bring the problem of alcoholism among men to a halt. On seeing her courage and zeal, Mahendra Singh Tikait, the leader of Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU), formed a women's wing of the union and appointed Biri as its head. Biri was also gifted a hookah – the smoking pipe, gifting of which is a sign of high respect – by Tikait. The hookah is a symbol around which all the cultural and patriarchal norms hinge and are passed on to the next generation. When someone like Sohan Biri gets the hookah from the head of BKU, she takes pride in it as it marks her presence in the male world. One could possibility see Sohan Biri as the female patriarch, as many of her views are same as that of the male patriarchs. Her takes on the moral code for women is in tandem with the rules prescribed by the men folk of the region. This is an outright example of a proxy for real empowerment and freedom of women.

EVIDENCE OF PATRIARCHY IN LIBERAL TEXTS AND SCRIPTURES

The social biases against women by Khaps and other social institutions are a part of historical narratives that have been peddled through patriarchal institutions, cultural prejudices and established community shibboleths. They might appear as exclusively social, but many a times they find their moorings in historical texts. For instance, 'Tantra' is seen as a subverting and highly inclusive text, which is believed to ferociously challenge the dominating Brahmanical texts and rituals. "The argument for historical development begins by asserting that Tantra began as a non-Brahmin (sometimes even anti-Brahmin) anti-householder movement. (Doniger, 2009, 396)." This text is seen as more liberal towards women and more inclusive, but even in this subverting text the elements of exploitation of women are believed to be present. The strong emphasis on body and bodily fluids is seen as a big challenge to the Vedic texts. Here, we can see the room for the exploitation of women as ingrained. Hence, even narratives coming out of acutely subverting texts keep women at the margins and show them only as source of liberation for the male practitioners by being their sexual partners.

Sexuality as an exclusive domain of the female body has been a thought that has permeated the history of Indian society. This emanated from the

emphasis of dominant male psyche on women's body and bodily fluids. For instance, many Tantric rituals involve women both as sexual partners and as symbolic of the goddess, therefore objects of ritual worship. "The centrality of women to Tantric ritual may have had a positive influence on more general altitudes to women during this period…But it is by no means clear that Tantra benefited rather than exploited the women involved (Doniger 2009, 401) ." Doniger also brings out that:

> "The centrality of semen in this ritual suggests that it was designed for men, though some Indian texts (including medical texts) do assume that women, like men, have semen and can draw it up through the spine to the brain. Some texts go so far as to assume that the male Tantric is able to draw the female's fluid back into his own sexual organ and up his spine, the so-called fountain pen technique" (Doniger 2009, 402). "Yet though Tantric ritual performance may construct rigid gender roles, it also allows possibilities for the subversions of those roles. Some women found a kind of autonomy, freedom from their families, in the Tantric community, but for the most part the rituals were designed to benefit people who had lingas, not yonis" (402).

The liberal sect of Warkari Panth looks like a subversive move against to the more rigid forms of brahminical patriarchy. Women in another liberal sect like that of Warkari Panth appear to be having equal status and opportunities, but the nuanced form of patriarchal approach comes across through certain rituals and custom of fasting. The movement was a spiritual confluence in which all binary oppositions – man-woman, Brahmin-outcaste, wealthy-poor etc. – were submerged (Ramaswamy, 1999, 241). The real situation in fact of women could be understood through the section called 'Vratakhanda', which declared it meritorious to keep 2,000 different kinds of fast in 365 days and giving out 365 varieties of sweetmeats to Brahmins on these occasions of fasting. The Brahminical males along with upper-class males were the obvious beneficiaries of this system. The sufferers under the system were the disempowered and the dispossessed, i.e. women (irrespective of the class they belonged to) and the lower castes/ untouchables (Ramaswamy, 1999, 243).

All these narratives, projecting notions against female body and its subtle subversions, on one level provide the required legitimacy for brazen gender-specific biases and crimes to be carried out against women in areas with rigid cultures mores – such as those administered by khap panchayats;

on the other hand, they also give hope and scope that subversions have been possible in the most ill-disposed situations and times.

REGRESSIVE TOOLS OF SUBVERSION

During my field trip in the Khap region, I came across another way of resistance and subversion of the dominant groups by the marginal groups like Dalits. This is a subversion posed by the low-caste category against the upper castes through the portrayal of their women as the purest through the subverted concept of Sati. The word Sati has been used in several contexts for women, which gives it multiple meanings and most of such interpretations of Sati could be seen in the analyses of Puranas like Srimad Bhagwat Mahapurana (Vyas, 1940). Sati is a dated practice in India; the standard practice was that a married woman burnt herself by sitting on the pyre of her dead husband. Sati is also understood to be a very chaste and virtuous woman who performs all the duty, especially in capacity of a wife, with immense honesty and loyalty[1].

Contrary to the popular images of Sati, I came across a completely different definition of Sati among the Dalit communities of the referred region. In my conversations, people from these communities claimed that their women were the real Satis, i.e. epitome of chastity. They said their Satis were categorically unmarried and virgin, which make them the purest. Raju, a young man from village Narottampur Mazara said,"Humari sati asli sati hai. Jo shaadi karke pati ke sath mar jaye wo kaise ho gayi sati? Humari sati ganga jal jaisi hoti thi aur samaj ke liye kaam karti thi" (Our Sati is the real Sati. The woman who marries and dies with her husband, how can you call her Sati? Our Sati was like holy Ganges water who worked for the society). Raju belonged to Karaundhiya gotra. He had recently gone to worship the place of his Sati, which was located in another village named Dhansani. These women did all the good social deeds and healed people by the power of their purity and goodness. They claim to trace their identity from these holy women and accordingly they have named their gotras. The marginal groups, through their conceptual construct of a parallel but different Sati, have not only tried to resist the socio-cultural

[1] Discussion on *Sati* with Swami Parmananda of Shri Krishna Pranami Mandir, Ekadil in Uttar Pradesh, India. *Sati* as per Swami Parmananda's study and understanding is that woman who has the following seven qualities – *Satya* (truthful), *Dharma* (dutiful), *Lajja* (shame and modesty), *Madhur Vani* (soft and sweet voice),(*Dharya* (patience), *kul ki maryada* (maintains dignity of the clan), *Pati* (husband).

notions to be passed on to them through the dominant ideology, but have negotiated a conceptual-cum-social space for themselves. In this process, they have also subverted part of the established view about Sati. In doing so, they have inadvertently indulged in the propagation of stereotypes in so far as the concepts of Sati, chastity and purity are concerned. In other words, the tool used to subvert the dominant castes' perception is the same that is being used by the latter for years.

Here, Patrick Olivelle's translation of the Dharmasutras needs a special mention. In this, a radical take on women's issues by Dharmasutra of Ãpastamba is brought to light. Ãpastamba presents a divergent take on the tradition of Dharma and contrary to the common assumption that the ancient Indian society was uniform and stifling under orthodoxy imposed by Brahmins (Olivelle, 1999, xiii). Ãpastamba's Dharmasutra is considered to be in the favour of women to an extent as it talks about property rights of daughters (A 2.14.4) (Olivelle, 1999, 57) and joint custody of property after marriage (A 2.29.3) (Olivelle, 1999, 72), but here too the women are described as upholders of traditional lore, and Ãpastamba tells his audience that they should learn some customs from women (A 2.15.9; 2.29.11)(Olivelle, 1999). Such forms of defence further hinder the mobility of women and affect the psyche of the society at large.

Kumkum Sangari brings out a close parallel between the ideology and techniques of widow immolation/Sati and communal violence. Communal violence and Sati were historically constructed in defence of endangered Hindu women. "Sati" is used as a central custom to the production of "other" women, i.e. these who belong to other religions, do not believe in the ideology of Sati, unhinduised dalits, westernised or feminists (Sangari, 2002, 94).

The two are believed to have an intertwined history especially from the 19th century when Sati moved from being largely an upper-caste practice to a "nationalist" construct that could be ideologically claimed by other "Hindus". "Both still produce masculinity through the identification of women with community and through a definition of the 'manhood' of a caste/religious group by the degree of control its men exercise over women" (Sangari, 2002, 93).

Women's chastity has been most religions' primary focus for maintaining the hierarchical order and status quo in the society. A reading of religious texts brings out the purpose behind the overemphasis on women's chastity. A. K. Ramanujan calls 'texts' as "magical" and "instrumental". Their reading has a purpose outside themselves because

they are efficacious (Ramanujan, 1999, 440). Ramanujan brings out subversion to the mainstream epics and texts through the narration of women's tales. He says that women's tales also tell you that those tales also have to be told because they have an existence of their own, a secondary objectivity like other cultural artifacts. Religion constructs both subjects and objects through myth making and in this sense "myths think themselves through humans" (Levi-Strauss, 1969, 12) and start shaping lives on a larger scale.

The religious scriptures, epics and puranas give many examples of chaste wives, pativratas, who were devoted to their husbands. Any transgression of chastity is surely punished. As was the case of Ahalya who was seduced by Indra who had come to her in the shape of her husband; when her husband Gautam came home, he cursed Indra to lose his testicles and Ahalya to wander bodiless. In the Tamil Ramayan by Kampan, Ahalya is cursed to become stone. In the Ramayana, Sita is seen as coming through the ordeal of fire due to her chastity and faithfulness. In contrast to these examples regarding chastity has portrayed in mainstream epics and scriptures, Ramanujan brings out other folk tales which mocked the classic chastity test of a woman. The story of young woman named Kamakshi, who gets everything – a husband as well as her lover and a child from a lover – is cited. In this story, Kamakshi comes through the ordeal of handling a venomous snake only because she has a lover – "it is her very infidelity that is used to prove that she is a pativrata, a faithful wife" (Ramanujan, 1999, 444).

CONCLUSION

It is said that now the different religions are not competing with each other, but rather all the religions are competing with the ideas of liberalism, secularism, feminism and social justice. Achin Vanaik calls this effort of all religions as a process of competitive de-secularisation (Vanaik, 1997, 198). In this process of competitive de-secularisation, regaining control over women becomes a religious imperative.

The feminist challenge does not only concern itself with the role and status of women in religions but should call into question the very concepts, images and symbols embedded in religious language, thought and culture. It is believed that since the symbol systems cannot simply be rejected, they must be replaced and the source of the new symbol system

should primarily come from the experiences of women. Since it is easy to camouflage patriarchy with religious and cultural logic, there is a need for deeper analysis and reinterpretation of cultural symbols and religious language. It is important to make women realise for themselves the subtle language and elements of patriarchy within the cultural and religious establishments in the society.

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