CHAPTER - VI

RELIGION AND STATUS OF WOMEN

Religion has had its encounter with secularism in India. However, if modernity has eaten into some of the religious beliefs and forms, it also brings forth what has been viewed as having a negative impact on the status of women. Our observations about religion as a factor in determining the status of women has proved to be paradoxical in nature. When religion is merely internalised and lived ritualistically (i.e., according to the specific practices of the religious adherents) or ideologically, it probably becomes oppressive. Whereas, if religion is experienced as a spiritual evolution, in terms of developing consciousness and the powers of the mind, it can lead to liberation. Feminists are introducing, thus, the spiritual dimension in the realization of the powers of women.

Religion

Durkheim defines religion in terms of its social functions, i.e. religion as a system of beliefs and
rituals with reference to the "sacred" which forms the crucial basis of solidarity in traditional societies. The character of the 'sacred' beliefs is, however, different in the modern societies from those typical of traditional forms. Moreover, society particularly as manifest in the collective enthusiasm generated in periodic ceremonies, is the source of new beliefs and representations. Religious ceremonies do not simply reinforce existing beliefs; it is a situation of both creation and re-creation. Thus, any belief which forms part of the 'collective conscience' tends to assume a religious character. However, the declining importance of religion in contemporary societies is seen as a necessary consequence of the diminishing significance of mechanical solidarity. He emphasizes that there is not an absolute break between mechanical and organic solidarity: the latter type presupposes moral regulation as much as the first, although this regulation cannot be of traditional sort. Hence, Durkheim defines 'religion' in a broad sense which identifies it with the 'sacred' and with moral regulation, that enables him to emphasize the continuity in symbols and values while at the same time stressing the important elements of discontinuity
between past and present. Therefore, the morality of the future, based on the 'cult of the personality' is the transformation of religion into secular humanism.

Weber defines religion as any set of coherent answers to human existential dilemmas - birth, sickness or death - which makes the world meaningful. Analysing the doctrine of predestination he deduced that an unfathomable divine decision concerning the fate of men in the hereafter would produce great anxiety among the people intensely concerned with the salvation of their souls. Only the pastoral interpretations of the theological doctrines could allay this anxiety. Calvin taught that everyone must face the ultimate uncertainty of his fate; nevertheless, the ministers encouraged their congregations to engage in a zealous and self-denying round of daily activities, mindful that God had put the resources of his created world at the disposal of men who on the day of judgement would be responsible to him for the single-minded, work-oriented use of all their powers in his service. True believers, as Weber called it, responded with an "inner-worldly asceticism, which
enabled them to quiet their consciences by rationally transforming the world.

He also emphasized on the relationship between religion and social organizations, e.g. first, social groups with particular economic interests often show themselves to be more receptive to some religious ideas than to others. Second, religious ideas lead to the formation of certain groups, such as monastic orders, guilds of magicians, or a clergy and these groups may develop quite extensive economic activities. Third, the distinction between elite and the masses is very pertinent, i.e. there is a minority which originates ideas and is usually perceptive, and a majority with ordinary interests and average capabilities.

Marx, however, viewed religion as 'false consciousness' (False consciousness describes a situation where an individual or a group fails to perceive the true nature of reality). If people projected upon hypothetical beings their own powers and submitted to them, this was a manifestation of their alienation. Therefore, the 'illusory' character of religion is measured against the historical development
of alienation. Primitive man is alienated from nature, and this alienation is expressed in the form of 'natural religion'. With the expansion of the division of labour, yielding increased mastery of nature, religious beliefs become elaborated into more clearly 'rationalised' systems of ideas which express the self-alienation of man.

Growth, for Freud, implied turning away from religion. He saw it as the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity, like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the Father.

Jung, however, viewed liberation in religion as not as escape from the reality of life. It rather discovered the symbolic life which released man from the banal existence. Moreover, it grew out of the projection into celestial regions of certain archetypal patterns originating in the depths of the unconscious, e.g., the 'trinity archetype' points to the dialectic of development. It is the trinity archetype which structures the dynamic, temporal events of human life in contrast to the static, eternal concepts. There is
a feminine triad which is connected with instinctual events in their natural development and growth, i.e. birth, maturation and death. Whereas, the masculine triad is based on the dynamic opposition between thesis and anti-thesis finding its reconciliation in synthesis.

The nature of religion, thus, includes a broad range of experiences, rituals, and from emotional ecstasy to highly rational speculation, from private contemplation to collective craze.

Our study makes us see our subjects not just as one or two dimensional but multi-dimensional. Probing their religion of everyday life casts some significant light on the inconsistencies in their status perception.

Aspects of Religion

There are five aspects of religion to be kept in mind. These are the experiential, ritualistic, ideological, intellectual, and finally, consequential. Experiential aspect takes care of the subjective or
emotional side. Ritualistic aspect deals with the specific practices expected by the adherents. Ideological aspect is the actual beliefs held by adherents. Intellectual aspect covers the knowledge of the basic tenets of the faith. Finally, the consequential aspect deals with the secular affects of religious beliefs, practice and experience. Numerous features are developing on the social, economic and political landscape today, e.g., which act upon traditional and religious structures. Not that significant change was absent earlier but simply that the extent, pace and nature of change today is of a different order.

Aspect of identity is crucially highlighted. People are undergoing self-examination with regard to their roots, their history and religious make up. Besides this, conflicts result from the legal changes and power shifts that leads to the intensification of inter-communal rivalries and antagonism and some-times to the further deterioration of circumstances, especially for women. Within all this religious phenomena emerges as ambiguous and complex.
Central to the renewed quests for identity of women is the need to cope with traditional and modern definitions of their roles side by side. Tradition and modernity made conflicting appeals for the definition of their self, family and community. In Delhi, we found, women having a strong religious and caste consciousness, which will be elaborated later in the chapter.

Regarding social consciousness, Richard Centers points out that class consciousness and class divisions raise important and difficult psychological problems as to the conditions and consequences of membership in social classes and the antecedent socio-economic conditions that may be responsible for a given individuals adherence to one or another of them. Thus he uses class in a dual sense. First, of "objectivists", who identify classes with strata as defined by some objective criterion such as income or occupation. Second, of the "subjectivists" who stress common interests and consciousness of kind as basic and essential factors.
In Centers' viewpoint, much significance has been given to the attitudinization aspect of class consciousness in relation to religion, role of women, occupational stratification etc. However, for our case, religion becomes an ascriptive category of analysis.

In our sample, 7 per cent of the WEHS are Hindus; 1.5 per cent Muslims, 1 per cent Sikhs and 0.5 per cent are Christians. 60.5 per cent of the WEIS consisted of Hindus; 13.5 per cent Muslims; 6.5 per cent Sikhs; 5 per cent Jains and 4.5 per cent Christians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>WEHS</th>
<th>WELS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>7 percent</td>
<td>60.5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>1.5 percent</td>
<td>13.5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhs</td>
<td>1 percent</td>
<td>6.5 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jains</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.0 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>0.5 percent</td>
<td>4.5 percent</td>
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Caste

According to Louis Dumont, castes refer to the social principle of hierarchy. Hierarchy is viewed in the sense of the residual or inevitable inequalities of aptitude and function.

The caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: separation in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); division of labour, each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only within certain limits, and finally, hierarchy, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another.

According to Senart, it was not the caste but the sub-caste which in reality bore some of the most important characteristics ordinarily attributed to caste: you do not marry just anywhere within your caste but usually only within your sub-caste, and it is also the sub-caste which has judicial institutions: it meets as an
assembly covering a definite locality, and can excommunicate its members.

Thus, Dumont concludes that on being asked about one's caste (jati), he may indicate either which of the four vamas he belongs to, or a caste title, or his caste, or his sub-caste or even the exogamous section (class) to which he belongs. But caste (jati) connotes above all birth, the hereditary group, and while it corresponds mostly to endogamy and to bilateral transmission it in no way excludes unilateral transmission and exogamy. It is what is called a reference group.

Table 2: Caste Composition

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<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>WEHS</th>
<th>WELS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmins</td>
<td>3.5 percent</td>
<td>18.5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kshatriyas</td>
<td>2.5 percent</td>
<td>22.5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaishyas</td>
<td>1.0 percent</td>
<td>7.5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shudras</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12.0 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In cities particularly when they migrate for work or subsistence, women from different castes are brought into relation with one another as house-mistresses and maid-servants. On the one hand, women chat and create their own support linkages across caste barriers and, on the other, take a lot of humiliation and insult meted out to them. The house-maids in our study expressed that they had to keep a suitable distance in their inter-caste interactions.

Caste and religious consciousness was manifested in interpersonal relationships between the upper caste, middle class house mistresses and lower caste domestic maid-servants. For instance,

**Case No. 118:** She is forty three years old, living in a flat in Usha Niketan. She is a Brahmin, graduate and a housewife. The family income is Rs. 2000 per month. She lives in a nuclear family with two children. A maid comes for washing, cleaning and sweeping. However, she does not accept any help from her in the kitchen premises. These women are not clean she said.
Case No. 11 also expressed something similar. She is forty-two years old, Brahmin, educated up to matric and is a housewife. She belongs to a nuclear family residing at R.K. Puram and has four children. The family income is Rs. 1200 per month. She is a very traditional woman who never moves out of her house and does all the domestic work herself. She doesn't keep any maid-servants because she said that they are lower caste, unclean women. They will pollute her kitchen by entering it. She was suffering from a lot of health problems and economic constraints. She was a very nervous person and panicky as she had to marry off two daughters plus her mother-in-law had been troubling her by creating misunderstandings between she and her husband.

Then, we came across Case No. 155, who is a Muslim woman, aged forty years. She lives in Madangir and comes to a posh colony to work in various houses as a sweeper. She is an illiterate person and married. She comes from a joint family and is a mother of three children. Her family income is Rs. 200 per month as her husband is a sick and weak man who is unemployed. She expressed anger while point out the bad language
used by her house-mistresses. She was not allowed to enter the kitchen or touch any utensils. She felt that her different religion was causing this behavioural pattern.

Case No.157 is sixty years old. She is a Jat, married, illiterate and living in Madangir. She has a nuclear family and is a mother of two children. Even at this age, she has to earn a living, commuting by bus to her work place, i.e. S.D. Area. Her husband is blind. Long ago he met with an accident and lost his eyes. About the inhuman treatment of the house-mistresses, she was abused badly and many a times fights occured between her and the younger domestic servants, who would snatch away her work. Above all, the house-mistresses paid her less since she was an old woman.

Some lower caste working women mentioned about their bosses seeking sexual favours from them. The domestic maid servants also expressed how they had to succumb to the pressure from their masters. On the contrary, upper caste and upper class women reported of
sexual linkages with either the domestic male-servants or drivers.

Caste still remains a factor in determining the status of women as it affects the values relating to their marriage, dowry, divorce and widow re-marriage, though not in principle but in practice. The work and educational opportunities do get affected by the caste status as, still, lower caste women in urban areas live only at a subsistence level.

Srinivas and Betelle suggest that among the poor and low caste the relationship between men and women is more egalitarian than among their higher castes, and hence, with Sanskritization, the status of women is lowered. This makes them subordinate to men in moral, economic and ritual terms. This probably needs to be looked into. In fact, women in our sample don't seem to have a low ritual status. They participate more in the worship of gods compared to men. It is only on social occasions that men take care of situations like marriage, death etc. Birth situations are exclusively female domains.
Religious Consciousness

We found that middle aged and old women tended to be more religious, especially the widows. Religion, however, was consciously rejected by a few odd cases, who also happened to be highly politically conscious women and came from the upper class and castes, e.g., Case-136, over fifty years, she was an atheist. She has been a housewife throughout her life and is educated up to graduation. A mother of two children who are highly educated and have had inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. She claims to be a modern and a progressive woman. Highly religious women, thus, tended to be conservative in values and attitudes towards socialization of children, marriage and sexual behaviour. Some of the educated working women emphasized the intellectual and ideological aspect of religion, viz. they discussed about their beliefs and the knowledge derived from their respective faiths. Whereas, most of the temple-goers didn't seem to have a very strong belief system. Rather, they had a devotional involvement with religion. This could be so because firstly, at an external level, the difference of approach to religion could well be a symbol of
status or it might be strengthening their associational network. Whereas, at an internal level, such religious tendencies were compatible with their personal psyche.

**Religion and Sexuality**

Muslim women tended to have larger families compared to women in other religions. Sikh women enjoyed a relatively greater freedom of movement. Whereas, Jain women had to face a lot of restrictions in terms of freedom of movement and appeared to be the most conservative in our sample. Hindu women were passing through a "mixed" situation. Muslim and Sikh women generally reported about marital disharmony because of the shortcomings of their sexual and reproductive status. WELS showed an uneven pattern. The Brahmin and Kshatriya WELS mostly complained about problems in the area of sexuality and reproduction, as they complained of being beaten up, marital disharmony and health problems related to abortions, but not so much the Vaishyas. For example,
Case No. 41:

She is forty years old, married and is working as a school teacher. She has a nuclear family with three children and lives in Kathwaria Sarai. She belongs to the Brahmin caste and the family income is Rs. 1100 per month. She does all the household work by herself, whereas, the decisions regarding the household expenditure are taken by both the husband and her together. She is a traditional woman and does not have the freedom of movement. Her major complaints are that she is over-worked and on top of it she is beaten up by her husband. Her health has been adversely affected as she has undergone an abortion. There exists a marital discord in her relationship with her husband.

Case No. 164:

She is a twenty seven years old housewife living in a joint family at R.K. Puram. A mother of three children, belonging to the Kshatriya caste, her family income is Rs. 500 per month. She is educated upto the secondary. There are ten members in their family including father and mother-in-law, brothers-in-law and sister-in-law. She does all the household work
whereas, the decisions regarding the household expenditure are taken by her father-in-law solely. We had to seek permission from the father-in-law to interview her. Anyhow, she constantly got beatings from her husband. She was going through an acute problem in her relationship with the father-in-law. He demanded sexual access whenever the other women members were away in the village.

Case No. 158:

She is thirty years old, illiterate, belonging to lower caste. She lives in a nuclear family in Madangir and is a mother of three children. Her family income is Rs. 250 per months as her husband remains unwell and doesn't have a regular source of income. She works as a washer-woman and makes a meagre amount. She was going through marital disharmony in her relationship with her husband. She did not mind if her husband went to other woman as he proved to be irresponsible as far as her family was concerned. She also felt that he was being harsh to his children by making them work at a very young age. Thus, she did not respect him.
However, all the Shudra WELS were undergoing marital disharmony because of economic, sexual and reproductive problems. One probably needs to study the linkages between religion and sexual behaviour deeply in order to see and understand the patterns that might emerge. Our study, nonetheless, indicates that correlations and patterns might exist which reveal how religion shapes up the behavioural and attitudinal realm of women.

Religious Activity of Women:

Some women were attracted to various religious cults and sects which promised them, they reported, of instantaneous transformation of their suffering into happiness. Moreover, we found that such involvement of women in religious groups created private networks of power, influence and authority in a non-domestic setting. Such women were mostly housewives and from well to do background, for example, Case No. 63.

She is thirty seven years old, a graduate from the upper caste, upper class, nuclear family. She lives
in Hauz Khas and is a mother of two children. She is not allowed to work but has freedom to go out on her own. She is a member of her colony's religious association and she attends the weekly meetings regularly. They offer prayers plus have discussions regarding their personal religious experiences. She has her own 'guru' whose discourses she never misses. This may, therefore, be of particular value to women who need to balance the power and authority of men either in the domestic domain or in such non-domestic spheres. In some cases women told us about the spirit-possession experiences. These women seemed to be exercising power and influence over their family members and relatives by relinquishing their identities to male or female spirits through whom they act. E.g. Case No. 153. She is thirty two years old, married, educated upto intermediate and is a housewife. She comes from the upper class and is a Kshatriya. She has two children, lives in a nuclear family in Hauz Khas. She feels that she commands a lot of respect from everyone as a spirit visits her. Her servants were there as witnesses to what she reported. However, we think that such mechanisms may offer compensations for social-inferiority, viz. she felt she was not highly
educated or it could mean giving spiritual legitimacy to her sexuality.

By and large, women in our sample were found to exercise their devotions primarily on a private basis but also in group participation either in or out of the temples, mosques or churches. Religious shrines formed a stable focus in their lives. Migrants were found to travel to their native places for ceremonial occasions. Women, nevertheless, spoke about the strains invoked by religion and tensions between the old practices and the new, the old content and the new, especially in joint families.

Society, Sexuality and Spirituality

Levi-Strauss observes that women have the unique status of duality. They are part of culture for they have a social value and are the subject of rules, but they are also part of nature in that they give birth to those who exchange them. Marriage hence, elevates women from biological stimulant to a cultural sign.
Levi-Strauss's analysis of marriage forms as modes of exchange encompasses women as objects of exchange. He distinguished between the "restricted exchange" of women that goes on between moiety pairs implying bilateral cross-cousin marriage and the "generalized exchange" that takes place between three or more kin groups having an asymmetrical marriage rule (i.e. marriage to the mother's brother's daughter as opposed to the father's sister's daughter or vice-versa). Here the marriage can take place between an unspecified number of partners. Thus, these two models of exchange gave direct reciprocity, egalitarianism and relational enclosure as the criteria of restricted exchange and indirect reciprocity, hierarchy and relational openness as the qualities of generalized exchange.  

J. Leslie points out that women are not given more prestige and importance in religious roles because of the tension between asceticism and eroticism in religion. Asceticism is possible for men because they can give up the world after being involved in procreative purposes. A man can practise seminal retention whilst a woman cannot control her bodily
secretions. Thus, men have greater spiritual or religious potential. It is at this point that this misunderstanding needs to be clarified.

It is in the very fact of the biological difference that a woman's spiritual potential lies. As we are trying to understand the spiritual dimension of women, it becomes necessary to refer to the traditional knowledge about women (this has been dealt with in the earlier chapters). Feminists also point out to the experience of the divine in themselves. This is seen as a sacred power within women and nature, suggesting the connectedness between women's cycles of menstruation, birth, menopause and the life and death cycles of the universe. Hence, religion is seen to fulfil deep psychic needs by providing symbols and rituals that enable women to cope with the 'limit' situations in human life (death, evil, suffering) and to pass through life's important transitions (birth, sexuality, death). Even secular people participate in such activities. Hence, this spiritual phenomenon at a personal level probably gives rise to conditions for the religious phenomena at the social level. Through the religious phenomena, women mediate between the
contradictory forces of continuing and threatening the social level. Through the religious phenomena, women mediate between the contradictory forces of continuing and threatening the social structure by socializing their sexuality. In religion, the dark side of a woman's nature was lustful, heartless, disloyal and malicious but she could overcome this by the performance of the idealized female roles.

Finally, through the religious experience, women feel they are on the threshold of the ultimate experience that breaks through the barriers of being, to produce oneness in which no alienation occurs. Alienation is seen to occur when an individual perceives an absence of meaningful relationship between his status, his identifications, his social relationships, his style of life and his work. As life involves a continual process of differentiation, such situations often arise.

Thus, if religion is to relieve guilt feelings, then women seem to have more guilt feelings than men. Hence, they are more religious. This so so because women also react to normative systems and their
behaviour becomes non-congruent with the norms as activity is sequential in time, continuous, multifaceted and non-repetitive, whereas norms are timeless, discontinuous, repetitive and one-dimensional. Therefore, the perpetual contradiction between the norm and activity. However, this does not also mean that the behavioural reality is unrelated to the normative ideas.

To conclude, religion even though an amorphous variable, is nonetheless, an important source which shapes up the status of women by giving them identity and a notion of activity. If at one level, it constrains, at another level it frees women. It helps them to communicate, to commune and to connect.