CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study endeavours to examine the inter-relation between religion and woman under the backdrop of Indian society. The position of woman has emerged as a major concern in the modern world. Intense social actions and intellectual exercises on gender equality have been noticed in last several decades. In the context of modern perception of social justice, there have been many academic pursuits to examine status of woman in the society from the viewpoint of different disciplines including history, anthropology, psychology, philosophy and religion.

Religion, being a powerful source of collective identity, plays a central role in human civilization. As a particular system of faith and worship it generates the sense of sacredness and provides the normative basis to the society. Every religion manifests in the society through its system of beliefs and practices according to which the stakeholders organize their lives, individually and collectively.

The Indian society has undergone considerable changes in the modern times. However, the position accorded to women in Indian society is far from the spirit of modern perception of equality. Diverse issues like impurity, child marriage, restriction on widow remarriage and exclusion of women from many social positions still continue to be an uphill task for the Indian society. Often, these discriminative attitudes towards woman are seen to be legitimized by religious sanctions. As a result, it is often argued that religious beliefs and practices are the core of regressive ideologies in society, especially on issues pertaining to the status of woman.

For an in-depth analysis of the subject, it is important to have a proper understanding of the terms like religion and woman which have been used in
this study. Therefore, this chapter attempts to offer some working definitions of
the said terms. Further, in order to provide a proper thematic base for the
present study, this chapter also gives a brief outline of the predominant
religions of India.

1.1 Religion – An Introduction

Religion is one of the great sustaining forces, which pervades major areas of
people’s lives and deeds. It is primarily concerned with people and society and
hence naturally plays an all-embracing role in the human life and thought. It
reflects the values, norms and cultural ethos of a society. Ninian Smart
postulates that to understand human history and human life it is necessary to
understand religion.\textsuperscript{1} The manifestations of religious behaviour are intricately
related to various aspects of human life. In fact, it is woven into the fabric of
social life even in the modern world.

The etymology of “religion” is indeed disputed and there is no universally
accepted origin of the word. Cicero derived it from ‘\textit{re-legere},’ “to gather up
again, to take up, to consider, to ponder”. Agreeing to Cicero’s etymology,
Indologist Max Müller however notes that “if ‘\textit{religio}’ meant originally attention,
regard, reverence, it is quite clear that it did not continue long to retain that
simple meaning”.\textsuperscript{2} According to Max Müller, the Latin root \textit{religio} of ‘religion’
was “more and more exclusively applied to the inward feeling of reverence for
the gods and to the outward manifestation of that reverence in worship and
sacrifice”.\textsuperscript{3}

Many other scholars believe that the word religion was derived from ‘re-ligare’,
which means “to bind up” or “to hold people back”. This view was supported by
some high authorities of religion such as Servicus, Lactantius and St. Augustin.

The Oxford English Dictionary caters a number of distinct definitions of the
term ‘religion’ as follows:

‘Action or conduct indicating a belief in, reverence for and desire to
please a divine ruling power, the exercise or practice of rites or
observances implying this.’
Or,

‘Recognition on the part of man higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship; the general mental and moral attitude resulting from this belief, with reference to its effect upon the individual or the community; personal or general acceptance of this feeling as a standard of spiritual or practical life.’

The Encyclopedia of Religion, on the other hand, describes religion as “a system of beliefs and practices involving a god or some other higher power beyond the everyday reality of life on Earth. Religious beliefs are expressed both in the form of rituals and in the way believers lead their lives. There are many different religions,.., they all offer explanations of the meaning and purpose of life and provide moral advice and instruction for their believers.”

In Indian philosophy, there is no distinctive synonym for religion. The word ‘religion’ is many times considered equivalent to the Sanskrit word ‘dharma’. Etymologically, the word ‘dharma’ is derived from ‘dhṛ’ which means to sustain, to hold, to support, to maintain, etc. Thus, dharma is the generic term for anything that has the sense of supporting or sustaining.

All through in the Indian scriptures, and therefore in Indian philosophy, the word dharma has been used in many different senses. Dharma is regarded as an all-encompassing ideology which stands for religion, duty, norms and justice, custom, morality, virtue, etc. Thus dharma comprises the whole context of religious and moral duties.Regarding the multivalent character of dharma Bhagavan Das observes, “Dharma is not mere other world-religion, but is also every duty, every law, every proper and specific function of everything or being in this and in all other worlds.” The concept is frequently encountered in any examination of the Hindu tradition in which the life and thought are considerably structured around dharma.

In the widest sense of the term, dharma not only sustains the individuals, but also upholds the society as a whole. However, the nature of dharma is that it is not static, rather the concept and content of dharma change in accordance with changing circumstances and social context.
The ongoing discussion enlightens us about the fact that religion is a holistic idea with multi-layered meanings. In the history of the study of religion, different thinkers offered different definitions of religion. However, scholars proposed their definitions suitable for their respective contexts of discussion. There has never been a universally acceptable definition; sometimes religion was equated with the sacred, while at other times it was thought of as a social institution or a particular social and cultural system. As James Frazer had pointed out, there was probably no subject in the world about which opinions differed so much and to arrive at a definition that would satisfy everyone would be nearly impossible. Max Weber never offered a definition of religion. He began his work *The Sociology of Religion* with this statement, “To define religion, to say what it is, is not possible at the start of presentation such as this”. Nevertheless, in order to bring more precision to our study, it is necessary to briefly discuss the prime notions of religion put forward by the thinkers from their varied viewpoints.

According to the famous theologian Paul Tillich, “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other, concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life”. He described religion as a system of beliefs and practices directed towards the two aspects of ultimate concern of a society: (a) ‘meaning’ in the sense of ultimate meaning of the central values of a society, and (b) ‘power’ in the sense of the ultimate, sacred or supernatural power, which upheld those values.

For James Frazer religion is propitiation or a conciliation of powers superior to man, which are believed to direct and controlled course of nature and human life. Here, religion consists of two aspects: the theoretical, which included a belief in powers higher than human, and the practical, which is aimed at attempting to propitiate them.

Max Müller made intensive study of many cultures around the world, especially India. According to Max Müller, “Religion is something which has passed and a still passing through a historical evolution, and all we can do is to follow it up to its origin, and then to try to comprehend it in its later historical developments”.
He argues that what religion was in ancient times, today would have been only called ‘law’.

One cannot have comprehensive study of religion without considering its social context, because the relation between society and religion is fundamental to the nature of religion. In the words of W.H. Capps, “societies are characterized by the values they embody, the individual and collective motivations they encourage, the inceptives they inspire and sanction, and the ideals by which belief, attitude and behaviour are established and secured. Accordingly, religion can hardly be identified or defined except in terms of human social relations”. Thus, religion cannot be seen in isolation from the society. In fact, religion evolves from the society either by confirming or as reaction to the prevailing social norms.

Marx and Engels observe religion as a social product, emerging out of social relations, which could be historically traced. For Marx, religion did not exist by itself, independent of the forces of society and history. The natural manifestation of social forces and movements expressed themselves in religious terms because religion had been the dominant form of ideology throughout most of the recorded history. Marx, in his economic deterministic approach, saw religion as nothing but the reflection of external forces that controlled the daily lives of humans. In his work The Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (1844), Marx remarks, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world. It is the opium of the people,” because the faith in a better life beyond the grave pacifies the oppressed and desists them from struggle against the oppressor.

According to the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, religion is an expression of social cohesion, and an expression of collective consciousness, which is the fusion of all of our individual consciousnesses, which then creates a reality of its own. In his pioneering work “Elementary Forms of Religious Life” Durkheim’s venture was not only to find out the origins of religion, but also to understand its social function. He held the view that no society was known to have existed without a religion and that there were always some group that was
sacred to its members in every society. Durkheim saw that by giving an absolute and sacred authority to the groups existing rules and values, religion powerfully reinforced a given social structure, restrained deviance and limited change.

Durkheim endeavours to define religion in a way that would encompass all the varieties of religious expressions. He observes that “all known religions, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic; they presuppose a classification of all things real and ideal, of which man think, two classes of opposed groups... designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred”.16 He then proposes a definition of religion as follows: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices, relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”.17

Joachim Wach holds that to be a complete religion rather than just religious elements or tendencies, one must have three characteristic universal expressions: theoretical, i.e., a system of beliefs, practical, i.e., a system of worship, and sociological, i.e., a system of social relationships.18

Whether it is based on or includes a belief in the supernatural, every religion supports a belief system, a cultural system and a worldview that establishes symbols that relate humanity to either spirituality or moral values. A major function of every religion is, thus, to offer its followers a sense that they could comprehend the forces that affected their lives and that by properly applying this understanding, they could control in some measure the effect of such forces on their lives. This leads to participation of religion with other institutions of the society in formulating social norms and practices and in enforcing them. Thus, religion not only provides beliefs and religious observances, but also prescribes social behaviour through norms, prescriptions, injunctions and laws. In this sense, religion has been taking almost a central role in the society in most part of the human history.
1.2 Predominant Religions of India

India is a predominantly religious country. Max Müller is perfectly right in declaring that the study of religion is incomplete, unless it is also studied by reference to India. The Indian society is a shared home for a host of religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and many others. Several of them originated and evolved in the Indian subcontinent, whereas some others, though formed elsewhere, flourished in this region. Each of these religions managed to retain its identity within India’s multi-religious spectrum and survived for millennia. It is not that there had never been inter-religious conflicts in India; rather several religions evolved as a result of conflicts in socio-religious thoughts. Nevertheless, all major world religions coexisted in Indian society amid tolerance and with a lot of assimilations. Almost at every point of its long history, India, whatever it represented at that point of time, was a multi-religious country making room for many different faiths and beliefs.

Hinduism, known to be the eternal (Sanātan) religion, is the oldest living religion in the world. It grew gradually over a period of several millennia, absorbing and assimilating all the religious and cultural diversities of ancient India. “Hinduism” is more appropriately thought of as a family name that encompasses an astounding variety of philosophical viewpoints, religious doctrine, and practice.

The Vedas, which dates back at least to the middle of the second millennium BC, paved the way to the system of beliefs and practices what is now called Hinduism. Vedas, the roots of Hinduism, are regarded as revealed texts and a veritable storehouse of knowledge. Acceptance of the authority of the Vedas is an essential feature of Hinduism. The Brāhmanas are another group of literature which contain extensive prose treaties on religion. They contain different directions for elaborate ceremonies and sacrifices, and highlight domination of priests.

The Upanishads contain the philosophical speculation about the origin of the universe and have a great deal of influence in Hindu thoughts. In the
Upaniṣadic age of Hinduism, a vast course of philosophic thoughts was formulated and illustrated through scholarly discourses. The Rāmāyana, the Mahābhārata, the Bhāgavat Gītā and the eighteen Purāṇas are examples of great literary documents depicting religio-philosophical history of Hinduism.

Hinduism is the unique religion which has embodied the spirit of diversity throughout its existence. It has been open to variety of religious thoughts and beliefs. It is necessary to recognize this fact to appreciate the complexity of Hinduism. In the words of K.M. Sen “The number of paths to the one infinite is necessarily infinite. It is this recognition of ‘many paths’ each valid in itself but none alone complete, that gives to Hinduism its immense variety. The religious beliefs of different schools of Hindu thought vary and their religious practices also differ; there is in it monism, dualism, monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, and indeed Hinduism is a great storehouse of all kinds of religious experiments.”

In Indian society, Hinduism has continued to be an effective force in lives of its followers. Not only as a religion, but also as a social institution it has manifested many prescriptions and restrictions for day to day life of people. Dharmaśāstras, which are considered to constitute an integral part of India’s intellectual tradition, are concerned with right, duty, law, religion, customs and uses with reference to the individuals (Dharma), apart from matters related to Vedic rituals (Śrauta) and ceremonies of domestic life (Gṛhya). Among the Dharmasastras, Manusmṛti (the lawbook of Manu) is the most influential codes of Hindu law.

The religious traditions, Buddhism and Jainism, have a long and complex history. Both of them emerged in India by the sixth century BC. The founders of the two religions, Mahāvira and Buddha, were near contemporaries, were noblemen from kshatriya dynasties and there were certain similarities in their teachings. Both denounced the authority of Vedas as well as the Brāhmaṇical domination and rejected the caste oriented social system.

Buddhism as a religious tradition has a long and complex history. It was opposed to Vedic orthodoxy, sacrifice and ceremonialism. Authority of the Vedas, as revealed knowledge, was also not accepted by Buddhism. Buddha,
the founder of Buddhism, appealed his disciples not to depend on authority, but on reason. Thus, the ethics of Buddhism is based on self-reliance. In the ‘Mahāparinibbāna Sutta’, he asked his disciples not to take external refuge and be the light of their self. For him, one should take the refuge of truth only, because this is the highest authority which is in us.

The central concepts of philosophy of Buddhism are Dukkha (suffering), Anatta (no soul) and Anitya (momentariness). The four noble truths of Buddha provide the world-view and the basic character of human existence and the eightfold path of Buddhism is its code of practical ethics and the way to the end of suffering.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan aptly observes that “the vital problem for the Buddha was not how the world spirit, if any, manifests itself in the superhuman realm, but in the individual man and in the empirical world. What controls the universe is Dharma, the moral law. The world is made not by gods and angels, but by the voluntary choices of men. The history of man is the total sequence of human lives, their decisions and experiences”.

Jainism, the oldest personally founded religion in India, evolved through the teachings of twenty four Jinas or Tirthānkaras, the last being Mahāvira. Jinas are considered to be spiritually advanced human beings who rediscovered the dharma, became fully liberated from the bondages of karma by conquering attachments and aversions, and taught the spiritual path to benefit all living beings.

Jainism started by denouncing any supreme being in the world. Mahāvira rejected the contemporary Hindu polytheistic belief and condemned the practice of praying to, even talking about any deity. The usual cosmological argument for a creator God is denounced in the Jaina scriptures, Tripitaka, as an indication of sheer ignorance.

Jainism encourages spiritual development through cultivation of one’s own personal wisdom and reliance on self control through vows (vrata). Like Buddhism, Jainism also aims at escaping from the cycle of births. The three jewels of Jainism - right vision or view (Samyak Darśana), right knowledge

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(Samyak Gyana) and right conduct (Samyak Caritra) - provide the path for attaining liberation from the cycles of birth and death. The Jaina code of conduct includes five vows – not to kill, not to speak untruth, not to steal, continence and the renunciation of pleasure in external objects.

The Jainism contributed to Hindu thought and practice to a very considerable extent. The well-known austerity of Jaina ascetics had its impact on Hindu traditions. Another contribution of Jainism which is not often recognized, is its part in the growth of medieval mysticism.22

Buddhism, the practice of which is now rather sparse in India, was the dominant religion of the country for nearly a thousand years. Jainism, on the other hand, born at the same time as Buddhism, has survived as a powerful Indian religion over two and a half millennia.

Christianity, a monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, began as a Jewish sect in the mid-1st century. Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible, referred to as the "Old Testament". The foundation of Christian theology professes that Jesus suffered, died, was buried, and was resurrected from the dead in order to grant eternal life to those who believe in him and trust him for the remission of their sins (salvation).

The Trinity is an essential doctrine of mainstream Christianity. It refers to the teaching that the one God comprises three distinct, eternally co-existing persons; the Father, the Son (incarnate in Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Trinity represents both the immanence and transcendence of God; God is believed to be infinite and God's presence may be perceived through the actions of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Christianity came to India as early as the first century A.D. St. Judas Thomas, a disciple of Jesus, arrived in Kerala, in south India in 52 AD. The missionary work of St. Thomas paved the way for Christianity to lay its foundation in Indian. The second upsurge in growth of Christianity in India was through the European missionary activities which started in early sixteenth century.
The Portuguese, under the leadership of Vasco da Gama, arrived in south India in 1498, and were the first among the European powers to arrive in India. The Portuguese, inspired by the Pope’s order, established Catholic Churches and started to baptize people around them. The English missionaries started acting in India at a much later period, only in the early nineteenth century when the British rulers allowed different churches to establish missionaries in their territory. In India, Christianity has the third largest number of followers, after Hinduism and Islam.

**Islam** means surrender of the soul to God, and the core of Islamic philosophy is the belief that “There is but one God (that is Allah), and Muhammad is His prophet”. The fundamental scripture of Islam is the Qur’ān, which is believed to be revealed to Prophet Muhammad. The holy Qur’ān preaches, “Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. Allah knows all things. There is no other God beside Him. He is sovereign, holy one, the preserver, the exalted, mighty, irresistible and the supreme. He is the creator, the evolver, who possesses all good attributes”.

In Islam, it is believed that one’s behaviour in this world has a direct impact on one’s fate in the next world. Religious rituals play a central role in Islamic practices and are considered as the God’s commands. The rituals in Islam fall under the category of ‘ibada (submissive obedience to God), the most basic among them, called the five pillars (arkan), are socio-ethical duties of every true Muslim. The five pillars consist of faith (shahada), prayers (salat), almsgiving or charity (zakat), fasting (sawm or siyam), and pilgrimage (hajj). They form the foundation of Muslim religious life and the backbone of their faith.

Apart from the Qur’ān, the guiding authority in Islam is ‘sunna’ (tradition) which consists of the deeds and sayings of Prophet Muhammad. The traditions were painstakingly noted in voluminous texts called ‘Hadith’. In Islamic terminology, the term hadith refers to reports of statements or actions of Muhammad, or of his tacit approval or criticism of something said or done in his presence.

Besides containing doctrinal and creedal material, the Qur’ān and Hadiths deal with social, penal, commercial, ritualistic and ceremonial matters. The Islamic Law (Shari’a), is based on the ideals of these scriptures and is considered to be
the totality of God’s commands that regulate all aspects of life of a pious Muslim.

The advent of Islam in India has a long history. The settlement of Muslim Arab traders began on India’s western coast in the eighth century A.D. “Over the centuries, Muslim traders settled along the southern and eastern coasts of India as well as the western Indian territories ... developing contacts for trade, intermarrying with local women, and adapting to some degree to local customs.”

The second wave of Muslims to India started with the invasion that came from other Muslim countries via the more warlike north-western routes. In addition, there were a large number of conversions, through which Islam became the religion with the second largest number of followers in India.

Sikhism was comparably a later addition to the multi-religious scenario of India. It was founded in the fifteenth century by Guru Nanak. Sikhism emerged amongst the Indian sant tradition as a Universalist conviction that drew on both the Hindu and Islamic traditions and developed as a new religious understanding.

The word Sikh is derived from the Sanskrit word Śiṣya, meaning disciple or learner, and thereby the followers of Guru Nanak are known to be Sikhs. In Sikhism, reverence for the Guru (preceptors) is the cardinal quality and devotion to their teachings is a sacred duty. Great emphasis is laid in Sikhism upon practising moral and spiritual values, which are mainly related to faith, honesty, sharing and doing away with the distinction for high and low and rich and poor.

Evolved through the personal conviction of its founder Guru Nanak, Sikhism preaches strict monotheism, without scope for the worship of any deity or human teacher, and describes the Creator as Ikk (one), without a second. Sikhism does not denounce the world for spiritual elevation and believes that the world is worth living in. Guru Nanak believed that it was possible to live pure among the impurities of life. Guru Nanak is generally depicted as a reconciler of the two conflicting traditions and Sikhism is seen as one evolved as a process of religious reform.
Guru Nanak was followed by nine successive Gurus who made contributions evolving different institutions for Sikhism. The Sikh holy book Adi Granth, compiled by the fifth Guru, Arjun Dev, contains 5,894 hymns, out of which 2,216 were written by the fifth Guru himself. It is an interesting fact that apart from the hymns of the Sikh Gurus, the Guru Granth also contains several compositions of Hindu and Muslim saints. The tenth and last Guru, Gobind Singh, declared the Adi Granth (Guru Granth Sahib) as the eternal for the Sikhs.

India has a sizable section of its people who are adherents of Sikhism. Though most of the Sikhs live in the state of Punjab, about one fourth of Sikh population is spread across the world.

1.3 Scriptures

Most of the prominent religions have their sacred scriptures which encapsulate their fundamental beliefs. In many cases these texts are considered to contain divine commands. The Vedas in Hinduism, the Bible in Christianity and the Qur’ân in Islam are believed to be revealed texts. Scriptures of some religions, e.g., Islam, Christianity and Sikhism, are limited to one or a few texts, whereas some others, e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, include diverse texts of many periods.

Religious texts or scriptures play an extremely important role in every religion. They are the storehouse of religious beliefs and practices, and considered to contain sacred commands. The words of the scriptures are not to be doubted or questioned, and therefore they have powerful effects on human mind. It is through the scriptures that core teachings of a religion, different original beliefs and practices, norms and code of conduct are passed on from generation to generation. Thus, no understanding of a religion is possible without studying its scriptures.

1.4 Norms and Practices

Each religion has a doctrinal as well as a practical aspect. Eventually, doctrines of a religion are translated to norms and practices. Religion affects individuals
in a society by prescribing norms on various aspects related to religious, social as well as individual life. These norms include religious rites, different rituals, prescriptions and restrictions, and the rights and privileges permitted to an individual. The privileges accorded or denied to a person by religion influence her or his position in the society.

Rituals are essential elements of a religion which play its functional roles. Rituals often express common beliefs, norms and values on which the functioning of the society depends. According to Durkheim, it is only through rituals that the fundamental objective of religion of bringing people together is fulfilled. Religion prescribes rituals surrounding birth, puberty or initiation, marriage and death. Besides them there are many calendrical rites, rites of fasting, votive rites or vrata and different celebrations and festivals related to religion. The diverse ritual patterns are passed from one generation to another.

Religions exert many prohibitive rules on individuals in the society, both men and women, which form social norms. Any prohibited action when performed causes a person contamination of sin and social degradation. The adherence to the rules prescribed by religion becomes integral part in the social and family life.

Religion not only prescribes rules and norms for religious activities and social behaviour of individuals, but also plays a decisive role in formulation of laws for maintaining social order. Even the modern personal laws related to marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody of children and inheritance are based on different religious and traditional practices of a community. The laws prescribed by religions traditionally played an important role in the social order and the statecraft in India. For example, Manusmriti, the ancient lawbook, was strictly adhered to for centuries by the Brähmanical society, and it is influential even in present times.

1.5 Woman

The Encyclopedia of Religion describes woman as the “wyf-man” or ‘mate of man’ derived from the Aryan root ‘wabh’, meaning to join. According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary the word ‘woman’ means an adult female
human being or female human beings in general. However, it may be noted that the words male and female usually refer to the sex of living beings, where females of a given species are understood to be those having inbuilt reproductive capability unlike the males in many of the species in nature.

In case of human beings, the words man and woman do not just refer to the sexes, which are purely based on the physical characteristics. Mankind being a social entity, the two words also indicate the two genders which are based on social rather than physical attributes.

*Gender* is the socially constructed component of human sexuality distinguished from *sex* which is the biological or genetic component of a human being. Gender consciousness of a human being is understood as a process of social presentation, though for most persons gender identity and biological characteristics are the same.

Because gender roles are outlined by behavioural expectations and norms, once individuals know those expectations and norms, the individual adopts behaviours that project the gender he/she is supposed to portray. Usually the gender enforcement is based on the sexuality; the gender attributes are influenced by culture, and society, and the gender consciousness develops in a human being as she/he grows.

Usually when one refers to woman in intellectual, social or psychological contexts, she is referred as a being of feminine gender. Thus, together with a biological being, man and woman are recognized together with various attributes and characters, depending on the social perception of their gender roles. In most of the patriarchal societies woman is viewed as submissive, dependent and timid, whereas man is dominant, independent and brave. Accordingly, their attributes are termed as feminine and masculine characteristics. Thus one can see that the gender consciousness is mostly social.

In this way, the status of woman in a given society refers to the attributes attached to her by the social attitude and their manifestations. Because of her gender identity, the expectations of the society on her behaviour are outlined
and she is prescribed specific roles to play in social and individual lives. This clearly affects her life immensely, either positively or negatively. The gender perception of the society is manifested in its prescription of her role in different social institutions, namely, family, marriage, religion, state, etc.

1.6 Factors Influencing Woman’s Status in Society

In every religion there are different factors which have direct or indirect bearing on the status of woman. Religious texts, various socio-religious practices, religious restrictions and injunctions and laws and reforms etc are some of such factors that influence the status of woman in a given society.

Religious texts often define the nature of woman’s essential characteristics and her acceptable behaviour in public and private sphere. The image of women as depicted in religious texts has correlation with her position in the society. Thus, the status of woman accorded by a religion can be inferred from the references extracted from its scriptures.

The socio-religious practices in the form of rituals concerning a woman from birth to death reflect her position in society. For example, though birth is a cheerful occasion in every society, the birth of a boy child is celebrated differently than that of a girl child. The nature of celebration reflects the attitude and acceptability of the newborn in a particular society.

The religious restrictions and injunctions play a vital role in determining the position of women in the society. Traditions that have deep rooted religious overtones impact more heavily on women than men. For example, women are not allowed to participate in most of the significant religious performances.

Throughout the history of every religion, the image and position of women are seen to undergo many changes and transformations. Though, most of the time the changes are inclined towards downgrading of women’s status, there are many occasions in Indian history when efforts are made to reverse the process.

A socio-religious reform movement attempts to reorder the society in the areas of social behaviour, custom, structure or control. At times such a movement is an endeavour of some defensive orthodox groups for relatively
limited modifications, and at other times this is an articulated sweeping condemnation of the status quo of the radicals. In the context of Indian Religions, socio-religious reform movements for changes in religious belief or social practices goes far back, though India witnessed the emergence of many such movements in the nineteenth century, coinciding with the consolidation of British power.

Besides socio-religious reform movements, another important social movement which tries to address the issues regarding position of women in society is feminism. In the broadest sense, feminism is the consciousness of the existence of women’s discriminatory status in society in terms of gender inequality and the advocacy and pursuance of women’s rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. It is a fact that the term ‘feminism’ has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. For example, some use the term ‘feminism’ to refer to a historically specific political movements of the West, whereas many others use it to refer just to the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices. However, the common characteristics of the convictions and actions of those to whom the word ‘feminist’ is used can be outlined as follows:

- The belief that women and men are, and have been, treated differently by our society, and that women have frequently and systematically been unable to participate fully in different social arenas and institutions.

- A desire to change that situation.

- That this gives a “new” point-of-view on society, when eliminating old assumptions about why things are the way they are, and looking at it from the perspective that women are not inferior and men are not “the norm”.

From its very inception, feminism endeavored for gender equality by empowering women in the form of equal opportunities in education, economic and other social fields.

Feminist movements were seen as ones initiated by Western activists, and therefore feminism is seen to be predominantly Western philosophy by many.
However, many movements related to the socio-religious status of women in Indian society satisfy the basic characteristics of feminist philosophy. Feminist critiques of religion challenge the disempowerment of woman that has been sanctioned by traditional religious beliefs.

The present discussion shows us how the key focuses of this study i.e., religion and woman have varied manifestations. However, this is only an introductory approach. Precise discussions on different aspects of religion and woman in the context of Indian society are carried on in specific chapters of this thesis.

1.7 Motivations, Objectives and Approach of the Study

Religion has been one of the most powerful driving forces in human history. Though the core of religion is a system of belief, in practice, religion also becomes a practical system of belief according to which human beings organize their lives individually and collectively. Religion has been woven into the fabric of social life so intricately that even the secular modern world is based on the religious ethos of its past.

The study of status and position of woman in different societies has increasingly become prominent in the recent times. In particular, the position of woman accorded by different religions has drawn attention of many scholars and activists. Many times, scholars are seen to differ, in fact, take diametrically opposite stands at times, in their opinions on the position of woman in a given religion. Moreover, the opinions vary considerably across the religions. To understand the role of religion on status of woman, we feel that one needs of have a unified approach, considering several religions in a comparable socio-religious scenario. Though diverse ideological and methodical analysis has penetrated into the study of position of woman in religions, it is a fact that a lot of issues in the area are unexplored. The extent to which religion is accountable in determination of gender roles in society is far from being understood.

There have been efforts by many scholars to understand the characteristics and functions of religion from different angles of study, namely, philosophical, historical, sociological and anthropological, to name a few. So far as the
interplay between religion and society is concerned, one asks, whether religion acts as a conservative force resisting social change, or acts as a catalyst and initiator for social change. Whereas Durkheim and Marx consider religion as a conservative force, Weber and many others believe that religion brings social change, sometime revolutionary, and some other time in a subtle manner. It can be seen that the answer to this question is highly on the contexts as well as the standpoint. It would be pertinent to ask this question in the matter of gender relations and roles.

The fundamental aim of this dissertation is to study “the role of religion in determining and maintaining the image of woman and her position in society”. To be more specific, the objective of the study is to critically examine whether or not

- religion determines the image and position of women in the society or reflects those created by other forces of the society.
- religion formalizes or legalizes the image and position of women.
- religion initiates change in the position of woman or her role in the society.
- religion acts as a conservative force in the matter of position of women.
- religion resists efforts of change in position of women in society, internal or external.

Keeping these objectives in mind, we have studied the predominant religions of India. The study is carried out by examining the sacred texts and the pioneering works on religion and woman. Besides these, collection of information, observations and analysis are made. The whole study is based on rational and objective approach.

1.8 Outline of the Chapters

The thesis contains six chapters including this introduction and that of the summary and conclusion. In Chapter II, the prime focus of our discussion is the image of woman depicted in religious texts of the predominant religions in India. The study will cover some salient features of the textual representation of women to stimulate our thought regarding the position of woman in different
religions. Our discussion is based on the prominent texts and scriptures which are considered to be the source on which the belief and practices—of the respective religions are determined.

**Chapter III** is an attempt to explore the position of woman through examining religious rituals and religious prescriptions and injunctions accorded to woman in the socio-religious field. We will also examine status of woman under religious laws of the predominant religions of India.

In **Chapter IV**, we will briefly discuss the attempts known as the socio-religious reform movements and discourses. Moreover, through this chapter we intend to examine the feminist perspectives on religion which may throw a valuable light upon the challenges against the established beliefs and practices. Though the social-movements and the feminist critiques address social issues, it is often seen that the issues are closely linked to religion. The purpose of the discussion in this chapter is to examine the attitude of the religion towards the efforts for social change. This also gives us the idea of the status of woman in the contemporary societies.

In **Chapter V**, we will analyse our observations on the basis of the previous three chapters to understand the role of the predominant religions of India regarding their relation to the status of woman. We will make an effort to ponder on the questions which form the objectives of our study and try to obtain possible answers based on our observations.

Finally, in **Chapter VI**, we will present a brief summary of our study along with a few concluding remarks.

The upsurge in the study of women’s history across the religions in recent times is comprehensible. Since religion had been a driving force for the society, it invariably reflects woman’s status in the contemporary society. We may conclude with the words of A.S. Altekar, who rightly observes, “One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realise its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it.” 26
References


