

# Religion in the Lives of Women

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What does religion mean to most of us? Is it our faith and belief – system? Is it our sacred text book? Are rituals and customs the defining borders of our religion? Or the philosophical, metaphysical and spiritual content form the inner core of it? Is it inexorably intertwined with the complex and layered self within each human being? Does it give me a sense of belonging and rootedness? Is it an important aspect of my identity and social standing? Does it define my relationship with my Maker? Does it define my culture and values of life? Religion might mean all of this and much more the cosmic proportions of religion invite multiple interpretations and multiple perceptions. Some aspects may be more important to some, whereas other aspects may be crucial to others. This does not mean that religion can exist in outer paraphernalia all by itself. Simultaneously, different dimensions acquire different priorities in various phases of life. Many a time religion becomes important when least expected. When our child falls critically ill or a life and death crisis faces us, most of us do turn to Powers greater than us for strength, solace and guidance. Then there are questions like what happens to my body after I am dead, is it cremated or buried? What and who decides? Even if I do not profess any religion ostensibly, such dilemmas may confront me (or those near and dear ones who happen to be with me) at different moments of life and death. Religion has been perceived and experienced in its multifarious hues by each one of us in the context of our situation in life and society, of birth and upbringing, of our bent of mind and value systems and through our developed reasoning and wisdom. Atheists or agnostics who do not believe in any religion may still find themselves at a loss to explain many phenomenon of the universe.

For many modern day thinkers, religion means hatred and wars, cruelty and bloodshed. History does tell us of crusades and battles in the name of religion. But religion, true religion, is beyond these. One needs to explore what is religion, what are the driving forces behind it, how or whether it has helped humanity, what

have been its negative and positive impacts in history, etc.?

It is important to understand the origins of religion if we are to make any sense of this crucial aspect of life. Historical interpretations have been made and theories evolved on the basis of cave drawings and sculptures made by very early homo sapien, [that is men and women] of prehistoric age, stone age, Neolithic age and other gone by eras and through folk lore and scriptures from different parts of the world. All of them point towards the initial worship of nature in its different forms. Sweeping away the dust of thousands of years, one can easily discern the feelings of awe and wonderment women and men must have experienced – and continue to experience – at the magnificent unfolding of the beauty and power of nature. The mystery and splendour plus the wrath and munificence of rain and thunder, wind and lightening, forests and rivers, sunshine and moonlight, birds and beasts must have filled them with fear and gratitude. The revelation of Islam came to Mohammed in the deserts of Arabia, through the cycle of day and night, the movement of stars and moon, the unending horizon of the desert, all of which moved him to such an extent that he cried all night at the marvel of Nature. The birth of Christ was symbolized in the march of the stars. The three great Maggies (saints) followed the stars to reach the baby Christ. Great religious teachers- Nanak, Buddha, Mahavir were born on a full moon day. Nature has always heralded the coming of a seer. Skies had rained copious blessings on the infant Krishna and the river Yamuna rose to touch his little feet. Prince Siddharth was born to Queen Maya in the forests of Lumbini and he attained Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. As Tariq Ramadan [in his book The Messenger-The Meanings of the Life of Muhammad] says, "Nature is the primary guide and the intimate companion of faith." And "being close to nature, respecting what it is, and observing and meditating on what it shows us, offers us, immense opportunities to search for truth." Divinity gets revealed through

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nature. Nature has always been with great religious teachers. In today's time of heightened discovery of various natural phenomenon and so-called progress of science and technology, the immense power and beauty of Creation transcends our understanding and analysis. One can star-gaze through ultra-modern instruments, or sail on space shuttles and get over-excited at the discovery of a new moon or a new sun. But can we *create* that sun or moon or even a single blade of grass or a single feather of the peacock, or the melodious song of the cuckoo or the mighty roar of the lion? Can anyone dream of painting the azures and lilacs, the emeralds and crimsons and a host of colours which do not even have names which drench the horizon of a sunset on a Norwegian fjord? Where does the *Pran Vayu* (breath) come from and where does it evaporate? What is breath and how does it decide the usefulness or uselessness of the body? Life and creation continue to hold us in awe and wonderment. Divinity is all around us, if we care to search for it. That is where true religion is born – in the mystery surrounding Nature.

All cultures abound with myths woven around the mysterious glory of Nature's dance and music. In pre-historic times, every phenomenon was turned into a god or goddess, each one personified to make her or him more tangible, to bring her or him nearer into an existential space and yet placed on a pedestal to be venerated and worshipped with love, humility and devotion. The celebrations consisted of fire and shower, songs and dances, flowers and offerings. The folk lures of different lands are rich in myths and tales pertaining to these primal gods and goddesses. Whether it is the Red Indians of North America, or Aztecs and Mayans of South America, the makers of the Pyramids on the banks of the Nile, or the Mesopotamians on the banks of Tigris, or the Greeks and Romans of Europe, or the sage-writers /poets of our *Upanishads* and *Puranas* – each group of people from different civilizations wove colourful stories around them. The Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the Wind, the Earth, the Lightning the Rains, the Rivers, the Trees, the animals - each element of Creation's mystery was worthy of worship. It is reflected in the Cosmic Dance of Shiva, in the drum Dance of New Zealanders, in the Sun – temples of Mexico and Konark, in the poetry of Chief Seattle of America (where he says 'how can I sell my land, Earth is my Mother, can one sell one's mother?'). In these primal interpretations of Nature's bounty lie the seeds of religion. The super/supra powers of the universe that

generated awe and veneration needed an exploratory space, a 'home' so to speak, to give some tangible form and meaning to them, to relate them to human. The Hindu pantheon dazzles with the colourful array of hundreds/thousands of deities – male and female – each one symbolizing some element of nature, each one developed to 'suit' different personality-traits. The concept of the *Ishta*, of 'choosing' one's deity/god, peculiar to Hinduism, evolved around the multiplicity and complexity of the divine and the human phenomenon.

The formal codification and institutionalization of these methods of worship occurred gradually over long stretches of time in different parts of the world in myriad hues and forms, trying to retain the universality of the original respectful instincts for the forces of Nature. Founders of all great religions had that rapport with nature. They learnt from and venerated nature. Religions moved away from their original instinctive base gradually when followers tried to codify and interpret the teachings in their own way, to suit different times and needs, leading to many distortions and misinterpretations. No religion was originally fundamentalist. Christ and Buddha asked their followers not to believe in anything without examining for yourself.

Anthropologically speaking religions as institutions followed the invention and evolution of agriculture and thence of permanent settlements. The need to structure through a moral code became essential for an orderly society, a code that could have a primal hold over people. Instincts and emotions from the deepest core of the self could be easily harnessed to bring about control and structure for an 'orderly' social organization. With the birth of private property and control and ownership by men, patriarchy reared its head and religion-codified and institutionalized religion - became its handmaiden. Men in positions of power used religion and the fear of God to keep people-the disadvantaged and the women under control. Strict rules and regulations were formulated and enforced to hold the structure. It is significant that all formal religions were founded by men and their most ardent followers are women, not that there have not been great women religious leaders. But their enlightenment has not been accorded the same place in 'history' as men's. It is also interesting to see that whatever and wherever the primeval forces of Nature – stones, trees, mountains and rivers - are still worshipped in their

elementary forms, it is by women or by indigenous people yet untouched by 'civilization'.

However, in all mainstream religions women are the bearers and custodians of patriarchal norms, traditions and structures. Myths pertaining to women's vulnerability and weakness were deliberately floated all around, corrupting the reality of equality of the two sexes, misrepresenting biological difference as hierarchical and 'naturalizing' it to harden the stranglehold of patriarchy. Eventually the inferiority of women and the machismo of men got enmeshed with religion. For their own safety and security women had to conform to the dictates of patriarchy. Looked at from a humanist and feminist perspective, all religions propagate the superiority of man over woman; all religions subjugate woman and make her into a lesser human being. Stories of the birth of humanity always talk of man first-Eve was born out of the ribs of Adam, Lump was born from the navel of Vishnu. The very obvious fact of the Female giving birth to all the species on earth has been turned on its head through religious myths. In that sense myths, despite their beauty and fascination, need to be analyzed and understood from a humanist point of view before being appreciated or accepted. Myths are often taken as facts and are also created to serve ulterior motives (like the birth place of mythical king Ram being at the same site where the Barbie Mashed stood in Aloha, which led to the latter's destruction in 1992).

History also tells us that in all methods of worship, initially it was the female rather than the male principle which was worshipped. The early inhabitants of the world saw that females alone had the power to reproduce progenies and thereby continue the miracle that is life. In many ancient rituals connected with sowing and harvesting women, especially menstruating women, (unlike prevalent taboos) played a leading role as harbingers of better crops and abundance. The dethroning of the Goddess by the God is a major sacrilege committed by patriarchy. In Europe and America powerful women were branded witches and hounded out to be burnt at the stake in the name of Christianity, science and civilization during the middle ages. Midwives and women as birthing experts [doctors] are a rarity in the West today. A systematic clipping of the wings of powerful women was executed. In fact the simple, natural miracle of birthing was converted into an 'illness' by modern medicine, to be controlled by male doctors. The women who are accepted are the 'feminine' types or who are patriarchal

(in attitudes and ideas) themselves.

The only remnants of the Mother Goddess as a thriving religious phenomenon perhaps is left in this land despite serious attempts at destroying it [evident in the replacements of the idols of Devi by Shivalingas in many Devi temples around the country where all the symbols and architecture are of the Feminine deity but the idol is a male one]. For a host of her devotees the Devi still retains much of the original power and fascination that had put her above all deities in the Hindu pantheon. The Devi is the Omnipotent, the Ever present and the Supreme Revelation of Divinity. She is 'svayambhu' one who exists and reproduces all on her own. No other deity has that power. The Brahmanical Sanatan Dharma tried to co-opt her as the consort of the male god, in the forms of Parvati and Luxmi. Yet in some corners she does exist all by herself in different parts of the country. She has been eulogized in the beautiful poetry of hundreds of Sanskrit slokas (in contrast to the modern day crude renditions of loud 'bhajans'). The spirituality of these old texts is neither understood nor appreciated today. All those who have been making so much noise over 'popularizing' the Sanskrit language in recent years have no clue to the grandeur of such literature and the beauty of Divinity hidden in a minimalistic language. A small expert from a larger text is illustrative and may not be out of place:

Na panama Dana an cha doyen yoga  
Na panama tantrum an cha stotramantram  
Na janami pujaam na cha nyasa yogam  
Gatistvam gatistvam tvameka bhavani.

How many of us would care to look deep into the vastness and depth of such expressions? Broadly it means, 'I know not what charity is, neither do I know meditation. I am ignorant of tantra and sacred mantras. I do not know what is worship or yoga. All that I know is you are my destination/saviour.' The complete oneness with divinity, the fullness of humility and the essential route to salvation are beautifully and simply expressed in few words. Thus the true worship of the Female Goddess also needs to be resurrected in its full meaning and philosophy, as modern day version/ worship even of the Devil is bereft of its soul.

However, in most parts of the world, together with the pillars of State, Law, the institution of Marriage and family, the economic system and the socio-cultural structures, religion became a strong pillar of Patriarchy. All worship and rituals, prayers and offerings were



attuned towards the superior status of man. The religion that is around us today is more of rituals and festivals, fasts and customs that are its outer paraphernalia in its shining amour clouding the real inner core. The techniques and forms of religion, like prayer, pilgrimage and festivals, over-rode the essence of it. Women were made the standard-bearers of tradition and continuity, who carry forward the traditions of patriarchal power in the name of Religion and God. A command refrain heard in defense of innumerable taboos encrusting women, is 'this is not allowed in our religion'. For instance, 'we do not cook or worship while menstruating, because we are unclean'; women are lesser beings, we cannot enter the masjid; we must obey the Shastras who enjoin us to worship our lord and master as a 'pativrata wife', Every religion is replete with such 'dos' and 'don'ts', that lay out the taboos for women. Breaking them means committing sin, that may break apart the fabric of life. There are no taboos for man in any religion. He is the 'master' fulfilling his duties.

But the dominant religion of this land-the Hindu religion takes the cake in many respects. The subordination of women is complete.

The number of fasts and pujas Hindu women undertake solely for the well being and long life of their men [brothers, sons and husbands], is unparalleled. The extent of glorification of self denial and self flagellation for women is not to be found in any other religion. The Muslim and the Christian women at least do not observe their Ramzaans and fasting for their men, if anything they do it in the name of Allah or Christ or God. This is not to deny the existence of oppression in these religions which are there in other forms, like covering of the female body from head to foot, the right of the husband to divorce easily as in Islam, or the denial of entry to women into the innermost portals of the Church. No woman can become a bishop or a maulavi or a purohit. They have been as a rule forbidden to read scriptures and aspire to spirituality.

Hindu religion so degrades the status of woman that her very existence is nullified without a man. A spinster or a widow does not have any right to live. Manu's laws have etched her life in stone. Strict codes define the boundaries of her life. Her life does not belong to her.

As a young one she has to be under the father, after marriage under the husband and after his death under

the son! Woman has to be controlled all her life as a sexual being she is considered dangerous. She can never be trusted to be on her own. It is an uphill task for single women to carve out a life of dignity. No woman can cross the 'Laxman Rekhas' delineated by men—men of any age or any relationship. The crossing means you will be punished like Seta and Shoorpnakha were. These norms are so internalized by Hindu society that we may not even be aware of them. It is not difficult to find the suffering and sacrificing, the tortured and ostracized women around us in all segments of society. Our Sitas, Satis and Savitris are glorified and put on pedestals to be worshipped but they cannot be treated as human beings.

To the traditional shackles of patriarchy we have now added 'modernity'. In the modern Globalised world the commodification of women [e.g. female figures' sell' male under wears or tyres and cars in most advertisements], the targeting of housewives as consumers, [so common in the West] has put a seal of modern approval on patriarchal norms. A woman's place is in the home. She is an object of beauty. All of a sudden Indian women have 'become' beautiful enough to be crowned international beauty queens! Not for any thing else but because India is a gigantic market for innumerable beauty products being produced by multinational companies.

Religion in India today has been very conveniently wedded to market forces. Special beauty packages, special sales for festivals and fasts like Karwachauth and Haritalika (both for husbands), are held where the cash machines do not stop ringing in urban middle class India. Festivals and marriages become vulgar displays of artificial beauties, wealth and one-upmanship, all reflecting the increasing hold of consumerism on the minds of people.

When the inner core of religion-, the natural, the moral, spiritual, philosophical and devotional content- has been destroyed, as in modern times, when people have forgotten to look inwards at the Self and the Divine hidden within, the outer crust assumes extra importance. It gets painted in garish colours, loud music, aggressive behaviour and observance of rituals bereft of their devotional content. Religious assertions and identities are flaunted with impunity. Mockery of other religions becomes the fashion. Because we have lost touch with true religion we hang on to the superficialities. We do not know our own religion—neither its strengths nor its weaknesses, but

easily jump to deriding other religions. The hollowness of knowledge makes us chauvinists.

Today we see the dangerous use of religion as politics stretched to extreme violent manifestations. The brazen communalization of religion using the mono identity of belonging to a specific religion for mobilization, its marriage with racism and casteism, the narrow precincts to which it has been confined as assertion of false identity alone, has written the ugliest chapters of modern times., Whether it is the Holocaust perpetrated in Germany during the Nazi era –the 1940s, or the killing of Sikhs in 1984 in Delhi, or the genocide of Muslims in 2002 in Gujarat (not to speak of partition horrors of 1947 and many riots of the 90s), or the most modern phase of 'the war on terror' which gives complete mandate to the Modern State India or America to crush Islamists in the most inhuman manner religion is being used as a shield to hold power and supremacy. United States of America and European countries and even India- have painted all followers of Islam as terrorists and used this myth to amass more weapons and kill more of humanity. This in turn feeds stronger terrorism based on narrow interpretations of a great religion - Islam. Which religion teaches suspicion and hatred, animosity and revenge? Human values are at the core of all religions. But we seem to have fallen for ill conceived misinterpretations.

Religion is thus being used in modern times for violent purposes. And let us not forget that in all violent actions women are the worst sufferers. During wars and riots women's tragedy is manifold. Her children go hungry, she loses her hearth and home and the men in her life. And the biggest disgrace of all —her body becomes the field of war-Maidan-e-Jang. Because she is the property of man she is the custodian of his honour. The dishonouring of the women of the enemy community means the dishonouring of the community itself. Religious wars and riots are full of the tales of such trauma that destroys life and humanism. Delhi 1984 and Gujarat 2002 are the most recent and shameful of these dark chapters in our country. Some of these ugly events have also seen women as agents of religious antagonism and violence. It is a well documented fact that in Gujarat of 2002 women from majority community egged on and helped their men in the looting, burning, raping and killing of people of the minority community. We can see women in triple roles in communal situations. As feminist scholar and historian, Yuma Chakravarty puts it, at one level

woman is made into an icon, (the Mother figure – Bharat mata or Durga) on another level she is the victim and at the third level she is an agent. Thus religion trumpeted as a communal agenda can play a destructive role in the lives of women. It can take away all that is good in human nature.

In today's time and age, amidst the ugliness and inhumanity surrounding religion where do we look for its true spirit and essence, that which can perhaps save humanity from the black hole peering at us from down below towards which we are hurtling with full speed? Who amongst command folk, great saints and poets, artists and philosophers, thinkers and theologians, musicians and painters can show us a way out? The truly religious and philosophical, mystical and devotional experiences and expressions that illuminate the human firmament down the ages are there as the cherished heritage of the world. Isn't it time that we start looking at the richness and depth of the soulful creations of Mere and Andal, Yugalpria and Mahadevi, as living and throbbing manifestations of religiosity rather than antiques on the moth eaten shelves? Don't our Bhakt poets and artists, singers and katha vachaks deserve more attention to know what religion actually means? Meera like many other women Bhakt poets, liberated herself from patriarchal hold through deeply religious poetry. Her Krishna is the Cosmic Power that creates and destroys the universe, with whom she has a lovely relationship of the lover and the loved. Once she has become one with her God there is no stopping. She does not care for social and family norms. The husband (Rana) does not mean anything now. She waits only for her lover God Krishna for enlightenment:

Tero koi na rokan haar magan hoi Mira chali  
Loklaaj kul ki maryada sir se door kari  
Maan apmaan dou dhar patake nikasi hun gyangali.  
Sej sukhman Mira sove subh hai aaj ghari  
Tum jao Rana ghar apne meri teri na sari.

For many Bhakt poets men and women - the creator is the man and the Bhakt is the woman. The religious and mystical bonding that they developed is the essence of religion, where the individual soul yearns to become one with God, with Brahman. Even a modern poet like Mahadevi works at the same relationship with elements of the universe - the clouds and the winds, the stars and the birds. For her like many others, creating poetry or painting is a religious experience, a way of communion with the Creator. The

resonance of a Dhruvad rendering of Fahimuddin Dagar or the sweep of Kishori Amonkar's Lalit takes you towards Naada Brahma the Supreme Sound which is the first manifestation of the Divine, as sound is the first sensation. Our philosopher-poets have talked about Anhad Naad, the Sound that is soundless, which unites the soul with the Brahman. Thus the power of music to evoke spirituality is a well known religious practice in the country. The multihued sweeping brush of M.F. Husain draws on the mythical figures of Ramkatha and Puranas to explore and delineate the power and mystery of the Cosmos and his relationship with his God. His depictions of the Devi in different forms-Parvati, Saraswati or Durga reflect primordial sensations and instincts. The same relationship is reflected in the love and compassion of Mother Teresa. The ways might be different but they all flow through the heart and soul. Around the world temples, churches, gurudwaras and mosques – Konarak, Khajuraho, Jama Masjid, Nanakanasaheb, Cathedral of Koln, Al hambra in Spain and innumerable others were created out of love and devotion in times gone by. They are a far cry from the display of the false religiosity evident in the ostentatious houses of gods that are being built today or in the high-pitched mesmerizing sermons of 'popular' preachers. The delicacy of emotions, the simple faith of the Artist and the coming together of these with the refined skills of the artisan are missing today. Thus, as we can see, true religion that emanated from the genuine feelings of awe and wonder that welled up in the hearts of the

early inhabitants of the earth, is alive only in the hearts and works of poets, saints, artists, sculptors, musicians and some unknown simple folk. Creativity is the door to true religion. And where there is creativity there cannot be violence. Creativity harmonies. It is fused with love, forgiveness, magnanimity and beauty of nature. It energises and revitalizes life. Creativity in different forms if followed by every individual is a sure way to address the violence of our times.

To retrieve religion from the disastrous route shown by so-called 'defenders of faith' we need to look at our own if not other traditions – creative, humanist traditions of literature, painting, music, architecture, philosophy, metaphysics and sculpture and at the simple faith of common people. The spiritual and emotional realms of religion that have gone dry have to be resurrected, rejuvenated and replenished to understand ourselves and the world around us. Religion can destroy us if it is allowed to continue the maniac way it is going today or it can prove to be the saviour if we wake up in time. Today's soulless times need the religion of Meera, Kabir, Ghalib and Abida Parveen to save our own souls and the world we live in. The dark rings around religion have to be erased. What is religion without a soul? When nothing exists, says Ghalib, without the Almighty, what is all this noise about the outer paraphernalia of life:

Jab ki tujh bin nahin koi maujood  
Phir ye hangama ai Khuda kya hai! ■■