

A Comparative Discourse on The Status of Indian Women in The Light of The Quran and Manusmriti

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Abstract— This paper titled “A comparative discourse on the status of Indian women in light of the Quran and Manusmriti, aims at analysing the status of women portrayed in Hinduism and Islam based on Manusmriti and the *Quran*. No religion in their core, teaches that men and women are unequal rather they advocate that human beings are the creation of God. Both are equal before God. But today what we see and experience is definitely otherwise. In many religious traditions, women are discriminated, degraded and even she does not find her space in the religious circle. . Once we analyse the religious history of each religion, we find that it is a product of historical evolution. Distortions have been taken place in the original spirit of the religious doctrines in the course of the history. Androcentric background of the sacred books of Hinduism and Islam and the historical interpolations caused the degradation of women in the historical process. This paper would analyse the similarities and differences on the status of women found in both religions. This paper can be divided into three sections. The first section discusses the status of women in Manusmriti and the second section deals with status of women in the *Quran*. The final section is a solution for the age old problem of injustice and discrimination against women through modern education. It is being substantiated by citing few examples from India. Through education she finds her own space in the society.

Keywords—*status of women, Manusmriti, Quran, Education, India, Hinduism, Islam.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Status of women has been a bone of contention since time immemorial. No religion in their core, teaches that men and women are unequal rather they advocate that human beings are the creation of God. Both are equal before God. But today what we see and experience is definitely otherwise. In many religious traditions, women are discriminated, degraded and even she does not find her space in the religious circle. Once we analyse the religious history of each religion, we find that it is a product of historical evolution. Distortions have been taken place in the original spirit of the religious doctrines in the course of the history. One of the main reasons for side-lining of women from the main streams of the society is the sense of androcentric mentality existing in almost all the societies. This paper aims

at exploring the status of women in two major religions in the world. How woman is depicted in the religious texts of *Manusmriti* and the *Quran*? How interpolations took place in the religious interpretations of these texts? And education is presented as a solution to overcome the age old problem of women inequality. Though there are almost five centuries differences in their origin between *Manusmriti* and the *Quran*, we can find certain similarities and differences regarding the status of women.

II. STATUS OF WOMEN IN MANUSMRITI

The *Manusmriti* is also known as *Manav Dharama Shastra*, is the earliest metrical work on *Brahmanical Dharma* in Hinduism. As per Hindu mythology the *Manusmriti* is the word of *Brahma*, the God. Hindus consider the *Manusmriti* as the divine code of conduct and the status of women depicted in the text has been interpreted as Hindu divine law. Manu may be a mythical person. He is considered as great law giver of Hindu religion. A range of historical opinion generally dates composition of the text any time between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E [5]. Here my concern is not about the authorship of *Manusmriti*, but its message concerns a lot. Manu tried to frame, and present a comprehensive personal law for Hindus, which has become a point of reference to the later authorities on personal laws and subsequently became the accepted norm for social and religious relationships in Hindu society and culture. His book is responsible for the present concept of woman and her status in the Hindu society. In the course of time, Hindu religion and Manu’s laws became so much interdependent that they merged into each other to the extent that one could say; to be a Hindu is to be a follower of Manu.

Lots of interpolations have taken place in the original script of *Manusmriti* over the periods. Thereby it lost its meaning and became distorted. The interpreters of Manu’s Codes contributed to the gradual degradation in women’s status [4]. Patriarchy was very strong in the ancient India. It was reflected in the sacred writings and thereby man depicted as meritorious while woman was looked down upon. The ancient Indian families were headed by the father. They usually prayed for begetting a male child. The reason for such a preference was that he (male) would perform

religious rights to the ancestors; he is a boat to salvation. *Manusmriti* 9/138 says “Because a son delivers (*trayate*) his father from the hell called *Put*, he was therefore called *put-tra* (a deliverer from *Put*) by the Self-existent (*Svayambhu*) himself” [5]. Here *Put* is a hell. *Tra* means deliverer. A son delivers his father from this hell. So he is called *Putra*. Therefore the ancient Hindus ardently desired for begetting a male child. They considered the birth of a son as blessing and the birth of a female child would bring trouble and misery to the house. It led to the degradation of the status of female in the family and society in ancient India.

A. Contradicting verses on women in Manusmriti

When we analyse the concept of the status of women in *Manusmriti*, we see lots of contradictions. Some parts are praising women while other parts degrading her status. Some of the examples for the same from *Manusmriti* are following: Those fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers in law who desire much prosperity should esteem women and adorn them (*Manusmriti* 3/55). Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards. (*Manusmriti* 3/56) [5]. Manu has very high regard for married and family life and places women at the centre of men’s life, equating her with the goddess of prosperity. Manu considers the abandonment of mother by her sons a crime and provides punishment. And also defaming the mother is also a punishable crime. Mandakranta Bose puts few verses from *Manusmriti* regarding the low status of women in his book *Women in the Hindu tradition: rules, roles and expectations*. They are following: *Manusmriti* 2/213, it is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females. *Manusmriti* 9/2, Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one’s control. *Manusmriti* 9/3, Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her sons protects her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. *Manusmriti* 9/15, through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they may be guard in this world. *Manusmriti* 9/17, the bed, the seat, ornaments, sensual desire, anger, vulgarity, exploitation, and bad behaviour are ascribed to women’s nature by Manu. *Manusmriti* 9/18, there are no rituals with sacred verses for women according to the law established. Women, who have no virility and power from sacred verse, are but falsehood. This is well established [1].

The message of Manu from the above mentioned verses is very clear that woman is not equal as man. She should be protected and guided by men. Then we must ask why the same author is making positive as well as negative comments on women? Are they really inconsistent and incomprehensible? According to Mandakranta Boss, these inconsistencies are due to different authors. He says that it was not the same person who wrote these different judgements and that these was more than one Manu, each responsible for different parts of the total *Manusmriti* [1]. Manu provided legal framework for the support and continuation of institution of patriarchy in the evolving Hindu society; matriarchy and matriarchal principles were made secondary and subordinate to patriarchal ones. The superiority of Aryan gave way to superiority of the male at

every level of society. The man made prejudices against women were taken to be natural tendencies of women and they were made to pay the price. They were considered weak in every aspects of their personality. Hence every effort were made to protect them from falling by providing support and concession here and there, but largely by withdrawing to the extent of destroying her natural and in-built support. According to some scholars Manu is not only biased, but also perpetuate a double standard and criteria in his dispensation of justice with regard to punishment, marriage etc. Therefore we can assure that Manu was highly androcentric in his writings.

III. STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE QURAN

The *Quran* gives equal individual status to women as men. The *Quran* verse 2/23 clearly speaks about her individual rights, “And mothers shall suckle their children for two years, for him who desires to complete the time of suckling. And their maintenance and their clothing must be borne by the father according to usage. No soul shall be burdened beyond its capacity. Neither shall a mother be made to suffer harm on account of her child, nor a father on account of his child, and a similar duty on the (father’s heir). And if you wish to engage a wet nurse for you children, there is no blame on you so long as you pay what you promised according to usage”. As per the opinion of Asghar Ali Engineer, modern Islamic reformer from India, the above mentioned verse emphasizes mother’s individual right as a women [3]. The *Quran* 33/35 is as follows, “Surely, the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women, and humble men and the humble women and the charitable men and charitable women, and the fasting men and the fasting women and men who guard their Chasity and the women who guard, their Chasity and the men who remember Allah much more and the women who remember Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward [8]. The *Quran* beautifully describes the equality between men and women from the above mentioned verse. It is clear that the *Quran* does not make any kind of discrimination between men and women. The *Quran* recognises women’s individuality [3].

The undermining of the status of women in Islam took place in the course of history. In the course of the history, both the *Quran* commentators and the traditionalists emphasised restrictive norms with the purpose of legitimizing the newly restrictive status of women in Islam [7]. It is clear from the history that the majority of the interpreters of the *Quran* were men, so they interpreted the *Quran* in such a way that suited to their interests. All the interpreters were unanimous in keeping women subordinate to men in their interpretation. Therefore the dehumanizing and undermining the status of women in Islam is only a historical development. It was not the intended by the original Author, Allah. He created both men and women equally. The creation of the female is attributed, along with that of the male, to a single soul from which the other is created as its mate. The *Quran* 35/11 says, “Allah created you from dust, then from a little fluid, then he made you pairs” [6]. Thus the *Quran* gives both sexes equality from the perspective of origin and spiritual status.

Therefore, it is necessary for us to distinguish what is ideal and what is contextual? There were many ideal women in the *Quran*. They lived during the time of Prophet Muhammad. For example women like Fatima, Khadija and Aisha. They were very influencing, actively participating in all spheres of life during the Prophetic period. Their actions were legitimised by Prophet Muhammad. Otherwise he could have corrected them. But after his death many changes took place into the interpretation of Islam through personal or vested interested [7]. By the introduction of Islam and the *Quran*, many changes have been brought in the existing social situation. The period before the advent of Islam in Arabia is known as period of *Jahaliya* period or the period of ignorance. The situation of women in *Jahaliya* was very pathetic. Arab society was highly patriarchal and therefore, women had a very limited role to play in public life. She was not considered as human being. She was considered as a chattel of man. He used her according to his wish and whims. She was deprived of all human rights. Her duty was to give birth to male child for husbands. This was the situation in which Prophet Muhammad came to the scene. The following section will analyse some of the changes brought by Islam in the 7th century in Arabia. It was in great mess the marriage during the *Jahaliya* period. But the *Quran* limited number of wives to four from any number of wives for a husband and asked husband to treat them equally. Indirectly the *Quran* was advocating monogamy. The *Quran* 4/129 says, "You are never able to be fair and just between women even if that were your ardent desire" [8]. In order to strengthen the position of women in marriage the *Quran* affirms her full legal capacity to contract marriage and receive her own dowry [7]. The *Quran* 4/4 says, "And give the women their dowry as a free gift" [8]. Hence she becomes a legal partner in the marriage. Here the *Quran* raises the status of women from mere chattel to the position of a dignified human person having rights and privileges.

There is equality in the *Quran* with regard to ethical obligations and rewards. The *Quran* 4/124 says, "And whoever does righteous good deeds, male or female, and is a true believer in the Oneness of Allah (Muslim), such will enter Paradise and not the least injustice, even to the size of a *Naqira* (speck on the back of a date-stone), will be done to them" [8]. And in legal rights also she enjoys equal rights. The *Quran* acknowledges the rights of every woman to buy and sell to contract and to earn and to hold and manage her own money and property. And also the *Quran* guarantees women a share in the inheritance etc. [7]. Sharia law plays a significant role in limiting the status of women in Islam, which is believed to be divine and immutable. Although Sharia law is considered as divine, most scholars would question this. It involves human interpretation, analogy and consensus. Therefore, the divinity of Sharia is questioned [4]. But in reality these laws are historically developed over several centuries by eminent jurists as a result of human engagement with divine pronouncements in the *Quran* and *Sunnah*.

Ashgar Ali Engineer opined that if a person says that there is discrimination between men and women in the *Quran*, then it is injurious to the spirit of the *Quran* [3]. Even the creation of both man and woman are from same kind. They come from *nafsin wahidatin*, i.e., from one being [3]. Most of the liberal Islamic scholars are unanimous in the opinion that the prejudices of male dominated society affected the interpretation of the texts. He justifies certain

attitudes of Prophet Muhammad regarding women within the social context of him. Sometimes we may think that Prophet was against women upward mobility. As per Engineer it is not possible to bring about social changes by totally keeping away from the concrete situations. Otherwise those reforms may become abstract in nature [3]. Therefore, it is a necessity to take into account the social context in which each pronouncement is made. Prophet being a man of high respect, integrity, a social reformer, always behaved kindly towards women. When the women approached him criticising the existing injustices, even he advised them to retaliate to their husband. In the true spirit of the *Quran*, he never said anything which would prevent women's upward social mobility [3]. Another thing to be remembered here is the interpretation. For example regarding the custody of the child by mother and father is not clearly mentioned in the *Quran*. But different *fiqh* (jurisprudence) schools arrive at different solutions for the same matter. Different jurists made their solutions differently. Some of them favoured at very lower age, child must be given to father. Others opined that it should be done later [3].

It is suitable now to analyse why there are inconsistencies found in the *Quran*. There are many reasons for it. Ashgar Ali says that the *Quran* is the word of Allah and this belief is very basic to Muslims. However, the word of Allah, in order to be meaningful to the followers, cannot be devoid of its socio-cultural context. Sometimes people, especially jurists have the tendency to use a particular sentence to define a matter. But there will be in many places, the references of same issue. They all should be taken into account. Since certain *Quranic* verses are contextual, there must be core values which are much more important than contextual injunctions.

Another reason for diluting *Quranic* injunction was the incorporation of traditions of 7th century urban Arab culture. Since it was male dominated one, they interpreted the *Quran* on that basis. That led to dehumanization of women in Islam. And later on new unauthentic *hadith* and Islamic laws deprived the women of their rights [3]. Over a period of time, *hadith* gained importance than *Quran*. The *Quranic* injunctions in respect of women were not acceptable in a patriarchal culture, given that the injunctions directly challenged the ostensible authority of men and made women equal to men in every respect. For this reason, every very unambiguous formulations of the *Quran* were subjected to strange interpretation with the help of *hadith*, contradicting basic tenants of the *Quran*.

Ali Engineer examines the verse that Islamic jurists justify to beat the wife by husband. He says that it was due to misunderstanding of the Arabic vocabulary. It is better to analyse some words from the *Quran* 3/34. The orthodox jurists interpret this verse as giving authority to men over women and permitted men to beat over women. He clarifies two Arabic words and proves otherwise. The Arabic word '*qawwam*' is translated as authority by orthodox authorities. It implies men have authority over women. But in reality as per Ali Engineer, it does not have any such shade of meaning even remotely and yet, in a feudal and patriarchal culture such a rendition became acceptable. It simply means that one who maintains or takes care of the financial and other needs of women. The context of this revelation was when a woman approached Prophet Muhammad seeking redressal after she was slapped by her husband without any fault on her part.

The Prophet told her to go and retaliate. Then this verse was revealed. So it should be seen purely contextually. Another word is 'idribuhunna', translated as beating. The word *daraba* has many meanings such as to travel, to give an example, to strike, to regret, to take away etc. The phrase *idribuhunna* can be and should be rendered to mean separate them, if a wife or husband indulges in disloyalty in marital matters [3]. Therefore, the misunderstanding of the context and meaning of the words in the context would bring distorted understanding.

IV. ROLE OF EDUCATION IN EMANCIPATING THE WOMEN

An African proverb says thus, "If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation)." The historical degradation of women can be overcome by modern education. Today's world is advanced in many ways. We know the reason for that is the influence of education in the modern world. It creates space for each one in the society. Education not only equips women with the knowledge and expertise necessary for playing many modern roles and thereby enables them to compare their position in society against men.

Following the independence in 1947, the liberal state of India, committed to the constitutional principle of equality of women, rejected the colonial educational policy of differentiated curricula between men and women [6]. Then government of India made a common curricula for boys and girls. This was one of the strongest steps in education to empower women and maintain equal status to women. The new education policy helped women to make shift in emphasis and approaches to understand the changing roles and status of women in broader context. Women studies in India strive to promote equality, justice and liberation through knowledge [2]. Women studies in India aims at promoting gender equality and justice by producing relevant knowledge that leads to action. The women's empowerment is essentially about changing power relations that subordinate women in the family and society [6].

A large number of improvements can be seen in the field of women's education in India, especially after independence. There are qualified women, as a consequence, in all the fields like teaching, nursing, medicine, commerce, engineering, law, journalism etc.; many of whom have distinguished themselves and won not only national but international reputation [6]. Spectacular achievements made in the political field by women. There were, and are many great women politicians in India. Because of the higher education and resulted openness and broadmindedness made many women famous and popular.

I would like to substantiate my point with few examples from the contemporary India. Kalpana Chawla was the first Indian woman to go to space. She was one of the seven crew members who died in the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster. She equipped well through education. She had a Bachelor of Engineering degree from Panjab Engineering College. She also obtained a Master's of science degree in Aerospace Engineering from the University of Texas of Arlington in 1984. Another influencing woman in India is Kiran Bedi who was the first Indian woman to join Indian Police Service as an officer. Her contribution as a police officer is praise worthy. Right now she is the Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry in India. She was graduated in 1968 and in 1970

she obtained a Master's degree and in 1988 she got Ph.D. from IIT Delhi. It is possible to mention many names of women who excel in different fields by education. The higher education of the above mentioned women in India helped them to occupy an important position in the society usually considered to be the monopoly of male in India. Therefore it is certain that education can liberate the women from the age old system of discrimination and injustice. So education becomes an instrument of emancipation of women.

V. CONCLUSION AND OBSERVATIONS

It is true that the existence of the world depends not only on male but on the female also. Both man and woman are the two wings of a bird without which it is impossible to fly. The context of the writing of *Manusmirti* and revelation of the *Quran* is almost same. If *Manusmirti* was written in the androcentric context of *Brahmanical* hegemony, the *Quran* was revealed in the androcentric context of the Arabia. The androcentric context influenced the scriptures in so much so that they portrayed woman as not equal to man here and there. The purpose of such influences is clearly meant to protect the interests of the male hegemony. As we have seen that the misinterpretation caused the dehumanization of women in both religions. Therefore, a faithful interpretation would ensure the sanctity and status of women in these religions. We know that as long as woman is ignorant, illiterate, she cannot do anything more than just obeying their male counterpart. Here comes the importance of education. By education, she can be empowered, made aware of her role in the society etc. Only by education, she will be able to understand the misunderstandings in the sacred scripture especially with regard to interpretation. Once she is educated and given an opportunity in employment, she no longer depends on her husband for her sustenance. She can take care of herself even without the support of the husband. Hence economic independence through education makes her more human and proud of herself. I also join with those who say that no religion teaches discrimination on the basis of sex. It is a manmade product in the historical evolution.

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