

HINDU WOMEN IN INDIA: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF HAIMABATI SEN 'BECAUSE I AM A WOMAN'

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt in bringing forward the status of Hindu women in the familial sphere in different periods of history beginning from vedic times. The paper argues that there was perpetual decay in the status of hindu women in India. When Britishers came to India the status of hindu women was at its lowest ebb. In this an autobiography of a Bengali woman written in colonial times is being analysed. Haimabati Sen was a woman of her times (colonial India) struggled against all the atrocious Hindu practices from being married as a child, then being a child widow crossed all hurdles and became a medic in a time when woman's education was sinful. This autobiography written in colonial times becomes relevant in contemporary times as it show the path to liberation and the way to tackle patriarchal oppression s to be tackled. Woman in order to liberate from oppression has to negotiate and navigate in strategic manner.

Keywords: Education, Hinduism, Negotiation, Oppression,

Historicizing Hindu Women: Pre and the Post Colonial Context : This section of the paper focuses on the status of hindu women in India in pre colonial context and then moves on to the post colonial context. The Indian cultural history which is thousand years old began with the *Vedic* (1500-300 B.C.) period and the epic ages and it becomes fundamental to begin from here to understand the plight of Hindu women in India. 'Early Hinduism perceived woman as a complement to man' [1, p44]. The condition of women in the vedic times in terms of access to education (education of women was an accepted norm), religion, rights, freedom of movement, etc., was much better as compared to the latter periods. The degradation started from period of *Manu Smriti*, i.e., from 500 B.C. to 1000 A.D. Girls were educated equally as boys and as Altekar points out that many of them used to become distinguished poetesses and the poems of some of them were honoured by including in the canonical literature. The marriages were not imposed as it happened at an advanced aged and the normal time was sixteen to seventeen years and the girl had a say in selection of their partners in life [2, p51]. The changes which took place during this period in the position of women were gradual [2, p.52]. The situation which we see today where women are denied of their right to education was never a part of our vedic or cultural history. The restriction of movement of women began in this period as the practice of sending women for education to far distance was discouraged, it was advocated that they would be taught either by their brother, father or uncle at home. Restricted mobility of women resulted in deterioration of education which made women weak gradually.

In the post-vedic period, known as the *Pauranic* and *Smriti* period (300B.C. to 500 A.D.) the status of Indian womanhood declined [1, p44]. In the Puranic Age, she could not go out of the house unless

chaperoned by a socially approved male companion [1, p24]. This is the period in which the concepts of female chastity and strict monogamous marriage took deep roots in the Hindu mind [3, p19]. It accorded an equal status to shudras and the women. Manav code completely closed the doors of education for women, as upanayana was stopped for women and women were equated with shudras. In the end of this period marriage at the age of nine and ten became a common practice. Education of women which was an accepted norm during the vedic period, slowly began to be neglected and later on the girls were denied any access to education [4, p34]. The bitter truth is the patriarchal society in which women inhabit is un-accommodative of women's identity and men tailor made the customs and traditions to suit their needs and desires. In the later age of the *smritis* the age of marriage further declined, the ideal age of marriage for women became eight during this period. R.K. Tandon aptly states that, "... particularly after the establishment of class society and the rise of private property in the post-vedic period, women's position in the society declines" [5, p79].

By the medieval period, the status of women became linked ritually and philosophically with that of sudras [6, p90]. With the advent of *Mughals* status of women further deteriorated as they brought with them the bizarre tradition of purdah which confined women to the four walls of household. The Muslim bogey was a convenient peg to explain the origin of all oppressive practices [7, p75]. Education for women was stopped and they became victims of evil practices like early child marriage with attendant fallouts [2, p.21].

The colonial period was considered as a period where atrocious practices like sati, child marriage and devadasis in Hindu temples were challenged. Britishers tried to curb and curtails such social evils and introduced female education for emancipation of

women. This will be evident in autobiography of Haimabati Sen in the next section. The introduction of female education was a remarkable effort made by the colonial government as it helped & was a way forward to emancipate women from the drudgery of patriarchy. Such emancipation is evident in Haimabati's life. Education, raising the age of marriage, widow remarriage, the abolition of seclusion and rights to property were essentially attempts to improve the woman's position within the family framework, and to ensure for her a degree of dignity and independence [8, p53]. During the pre independence era women did acquire agency through the national struggle for independence. Women came out from cocoons of family in the public sphere to protest against the foreign oppressor.

The government report of 1974 titled, *Towards Equality: Report of The Committee on The Status of Women In India*, is a detailed report on the status of women in India covering almost all the multiple identities ranging from caste to class to religion. The report clearly mentions that, religion has a dynamic character and is shaped and reshaped by historical processes and interactions with popular religion [8, p38]. This report clearly acknowledges the fact that women in vedic period were in a 'high status' and liberated as they had the freedom to study, and also enjoyed considerable freedom in marriage and in selection of their spouse. Therefore, the thick layer of India's classical culture, together with historical experience dictating their own concerns regarding the protection of women, created the bulk of problems for women in India [1, p79]. The autobiographical study of Haimabati Sen gives a sneak peek into the colonial times and the women's position in the familial sphere.

Haimabati and her times: The autobiography titled 'because I am a woman' is written by an upper caste woman born in Khulna district of Bengal. The autobiography becomes central as it shows how a woman in a time when women were caged in the four walls of the household negotiated through all odds of patriarchy. As in India Hinduism is just more than religion it is a way of life determining most of the practices or it could be said all the practices specifically in the life of woman. So was true in Haimabati's case as Haimabati was a neglected child of her mother as her mother was expecting a son. But Haimabati was a pampered daughter of her father and nobody could say anything to her as a child and she used to remain in the outer quarters of the house and dress like a boy. Because Haimabati was a girl she was not allowed to acquire education as it was sinful for a woman to study and she would get widowed if she studied. Resistance and going against the orthodox custom was rooted in her since childhood. Nobody could stop Haimabati from memorising the

lesson which was taught to the boys of the family and later she conspired with her father and started taking the lessons secretly. Since her childhood she was interested in studies. But the women of the house got to know about it and created a fuss that she will get widowed. Haimabati was married off at a tender age of nine and six months to a district magistrate who was four times of her age.

Her marriage was a shock to her, as her husband was a debauchee and even tried to sexually harass her but she resisted, as she states in her autobiography 'I would lie on the bed, silent and stiff as a piece of wood. When I fell asleep, someone removed my clothes. I woke up felt scared and again wrapped my clothes around my body' [9, p26]. Within one year of her marriage her husband died and she was considered responsible for her husband's death. Haimabati Sen critiques the Hindu patriarchal society, *Shame on you Hindu society! A girl of ten will have to pay for the marriage of an old man of fifty. In no other country does one find such conduct; such oppression of women is possible in India* [9, p39].

Later her father, then her mother in law and mother died. She did not have any support system as the property of her husband was seized by her brother in laws. Her brother did not give her penny from the share her father had kept for her. The status ascribed to a woman at different stages of her life remains the status 'that of a non entity' [10, p3]. Her own identity is never recognized she is always associated with a man. In this patriarchal world she decided not to be dependent on anyone and moved to Benares. Widowhood made Haimabati realise that the morality of a widow is always a suspect. Life in Benares was also not pleasant she started teaching at a school where she had face allegations from a fellow colleague who was a man and couldn't digest that a woman is taking her place. Being a woman of self worth and self respect she would prefer to go hungry but not beg, she states clearly in a memoir 'I cannot beg as long as I have hands and feet and eyes and ears' [9, p67].

Teaching ignited the yearning for knowledge and she decided to move to Calcutta but moving to Calcutta was disastrous, she almost fell into a trap which was difficult to escape and even her life was at stake but somehow this woman who was courageous and brave escaped. Tired of her wanderings Haimabati wanted to settle down and married a member of Brahmo Samaj. Remarrying itself was radical and that to a member of Brahmo samaj member during that time was like adding to fuel to the fire. Haimabati's did not get what she expected from her second marriage. She wanted to settle and her husband Kunjabehari was a wanderer and a person who was not even interested in earning for the household. Haimabati herself writes that, now I was a married woman, a

householder, and still my life continued between certainty and uncertainty [9, p148].

Haimabati had negotiated before the marriage that she would continue her studies after the marriage. She resumed her studies and entered into medical profession. The male bread earner model failed for Haimabati as she was the bread earner. Kunjabehari was least bothered about the household expenditure but did not lose his patriarchal hold as Haimabati like servile woman gave whatever she earned to her husband and had to ask him before spending a single penny. Haimabati along with being a woman of respect, Integrity and courage was a woman who was kind hearted and use to bring the poor and orphan children home which itself increased the number of members in her household.

Becoming a medic was not easier for as during training days she stood first and was awarded a gold medal but had to return it as the male counter parts could not digest that the a female was given the medal and pelted stones at Haimabati and her friends. So in lieu of the medal she was granted fellowship and was allowed to continue the certification and also provided with pick and drop facility from her home to the Campbell School. She started working at Lady Dufferin Hospital, however her job at Lady Dufferin was not less problematic there she had to face harassment at the workplace. The male staff of the hospital to which Dufferin was attached tried to trouble her.

Kunjabehari died leaving behind five children of whom the eldest was 8 years old and the youngest was five months old. So Haimabati looked after them and in her old age also she was not dependent on any of her sons and looked after the patients.

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