

Anurekha Chari Wagh

PUROHITAS: NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES, SHIFTING BOUNDARIES AND REFRAMING SACRED SPACES¹

Abstract

The paper addresses the process of reframing sacred spaces from within spaces of privilege. While one recognises that for purohitas, their status as priests, places them in a position of privilege, their gender pushes them into marginalized spaces where they constantly negotiate for their rights, dignity and acceptance. The paper addresses three issues: One, it highlights how women are challenging the entrenched Brahmanical patriarchal 'religious sacred spaces', by claiming the right to perform and preside over religious rituals as a professional purohita. Two, can we think of everyday resistance in the lives of people who, even when seemingly privileged, are often pushed to the fringes. Three, if the agents themselves have no clear articulation of their agency, then would it still be considered agential? The paper based on field work in Pune, Maharashtra and using gendered theorisation of religious agency and negotiation explores how the identity of a trained professional religious self i.e purohita, helps women to negotiate, shift and reframe the visible and invisible boundaries of the sacred spaces.

Keywords: Purohitas (women priests), Gender, Negotiation, Doing religion, Reframing sacred spaces.

Introduction

*Purohitas*² (Hindu women priests) in India inhabit a space that is a blend of privilege and marginalization. While being a priest is a position of privilege, their gender identification as 'women' pushes them into marginalized spaces where they have to constantly negotiate for their rights, dignity and recognition. The paper addresses three issues: One, it highlights how *purohitas* are challenging the entrenched Brahmanical patriarchal 'religious sacred spaces', by claiming the right to perform and preside over religious rituals as a professional *purohita*. This professional identity of being a *purohita*, is not only giving them new aspirations and goals, but also respect and recognition as a professional in some ways. Two, can we think of everyday resistance in the lives of people who though seemingly privileged, are pushed to the fringes.

ANUREKHA CHARİ WAGH, Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad-500046, E-mail: anurekha@uohyd.ac.in

Three, if the agents themselves have no clear articulation of their agency, then would it still be considered agential? The paper draws upon gendered theorisation of religious agency and negotiation of spaces to examine the how the identity of a trained professional self, i.e., women *purohita*, help them to negotiate, strategize and reframe the visible and invisible boundaries of the sacred spaces. The paper is based on the narratives of women mostly from the dominant caste who have been trained as *Purohita* (Hindu priests) and have been performing and conducting religious rituals in the city of Pune, Maharashtra, India. The narratives help us to explore the process of negotiation, which is done through three processes namely; one, getting themselves trained as certified *Purohitas*/priests- '*Adhikrut Patra*' (legitimate and certified priests), by undergoing a training programme organized by Jnana Prabodhini, an organization based in Pune, Maharashtra two, their pride in their professional identity of priests and three, the way in which they challenge normative prescriptions of purity and pollution associated with 'female body'.

The chapter is organized into three sections. **Section one Jnana Prabodhini: Training of *Purohitas*** highlights the manner in which the organization trains the women and the reasons for not dismissing women as priests **Section two, Negotiating Visible-Invisible Boundaries and Religious Agency**, highlights how women by appropriating religious spaces that are controlled and accessed only by men, create a dynamic religious self, which frames their religious agency. The third section, **Doing Religion: *Purohitas* and Negotiation of Spaces**, highlights the ways in which *purohitas* have reframed not only their religious selves, but also their practices and spaces. This section is followed by the conclusion.

Section One: Jnana Prabodhini: Making of the Religious Self

The organization Jnana *Prabodhini* is crucial to the making of the religious self of the *Purohitas*. By training the women as *purohitas*, the organisation has played an important role in the making of their religious self. What is this organization all about? Dyahadroy (2016) states that Jnana Prabodhini 'has a political project of creating a community that poses a challenge to the state as well as those groups seeking to develop alternate anti-caste, secular identities' (2016:77).

As Dyahadroy writes (2016) Prabodhini, 'combines science (new innovations, usability in daily life), knowledge (both modern scientific and indigenous), culture (predominantly Hindu Brahmanical), religion (Hindu), and values (enforcing existing hierarchies) making space for reinventing and reinterpretation of Hindu tradition for new times and on new sites' (pp 90). By the mid1980s, Dyahadroy (2016:80) argues Prabodhini had an important place in Pune's educational and cultural practices and that there was a clear link between aspirations of the new middle class growing in the city of Pune to seek scientific leadership in building a Hindu nation. In discussions with the

purohitas, one could sense how the organization gave these women a sense of purpose, a feeling of worthiness and the confidence of becoming perceived as a person of consequence. According to them, the identity as a *purohita*, gave them a sense of life purpose, and respect.

Dr Manisha Sethe, the head of the *Santrika*³, shared that, in 1990, the organization started a training programme on Priesthood- *Purohitas*, where they emphasized instilling the 'right *Samkaras*' (values). According to her, 'the eligibility for this training for Purohitas are men and women of all castes and classes, who are above 18 years and below 60 years and have knowledge in Sanskrit language. The idea is to make everyone '*swayampurohit*' (one who is a priest herself). The reasons behind such a move were to rebrand Hinduism as a religious practice, where the relationship to God would have no intermediaries, and believers could be self-reliant, in terms of the performance of ritual practices and maintaining accountability. Anyone can perform all the rituals themselves and thus be accountable to themselves while performing the rituals' (Interview on 16th March 2018; Tilak Road, Pune).

Dr. Shethe says, '*immense work has to be done on the individual so that one can be transformed into a disciplined, enlightened person within a traditional perspective. The first process is that of 'unlearning'*'. Analysis of the one-year course design revealed a well-designed and planned structure, with equal emphasis on theory and practical. In general, the classes have an hour long duration, taking place five days a week (Monday to Fridays). The focus is on encouraging learning and chanting of mantras, so as to make its pronunciation fluent and smooth.

According to the organisation's principles⁴ the role of the *Purohit* has to be freed of Brahminical domain, thereby redefining the right to perform as a purohit. It emphasizes that Religion is dynamic and diverse, where rather than the ritual, the ambience of the place, particularly its cleanliness, purity, peace, solidarity, brotherhood, faith is crucial. Further learning the meaning of mantras is prioritized over the mantras itself. The organisation also mentions that caste and gender does not decide one's eligibility, and anyone has the equal right to perform as *Purohitas*. The aim is to emphasize the fact that a religious leader is not one who is divinely ordained – upper caste Brahmin male - but anyone who desires to be so, irrespective of caste, class and gender. People, irrespective of caste, class and gender, should be encouraged to perform the rituals (but after necessary training) so that it could be performed in a well-managed, disciplined and time-efficient manner. It questions the ascribed right entrenched within the caste system. Thus, to become a *purohit*, one need not be born into a family of religious priests and be born as a male, but all that they have to do is to undergo a training programme, which ranged from 4 months to 1 year, with a complete set of syllabi, classes, exams, tutorials, practical demonstration so that they could become certified *purohitas*- 'Adhikrut Patra'.

This shift, I believe, from a divinely ordained priest to one trained, challenging both gender and caste does seem to have immense possibilities for secularizing religious practices at least in theory. Though traditionally there were rules with regard to performance of *Purohit*, the organisation believes that religious rituals and practices are dynamic and thus needs to evolve so it is important that these be reframed, reworked and changed keeping in mind contemporary society.

The specific pedagogical training includes: publishing a number of booklets explaining various rituals, detailing ceremonies and mantras. Further training the *purohita* to pronounce mantras in the way they can be understood. In the classes the women are encouraged to break mantras into parts and make clients repeat after them. The idea is to engage the clients in the process so that they are involved in the rituals and feel responsible. Further in the course the *Purohitas* are trained to explain each and every mantra so that the people recognize the value of the ritual. In the training sessions the teachers use a number of teaching and learning techniques, such as lectures and learning by rote, with an emphasis on practical training, (Head of the Santrika, Jnana Prabodhini, Pune). At present there are 28 women registered as *purohitas* in Pune and 18 in Dombivili, Mumbai due to the demand for their services since the inception of the course (Prabodhini website).

How does one interpret this? The organisation tries to frame religious rituals as scientific, logical, and to this end seeks to build a modern rational perspective of religion. To do this the organisation claims to have built a network of "modernized and rationalised" religious priests who would link the shift from the traditional conceptions of religion that viewed castes and women, especially their body as impure, to a notion of religion which is more scientific. It is a powerful idea. As one of the *purohitas*, Tai 1⁵, has received dual training, initially from traditional priests- *gurus*, and then later through the *Jnana Prabodhini* course. She was drawn towards the course and wanted to be trained to be a *Purohit*. *This experience of being a purohita, helped her in having a closer relationship with religion.* She says, I quote, 'me he samaj karya mahun karte' (I am doing this as social work) thus for her performing these religious activities as a *Purohit* is social work that nurtures society'. The most crucial learning that she learnt from Dynana Prabodhini is the realization that '*Streeyana adhikar ahe dharmik karya karayala*' (women have the right to perform religious rituals).

It is a powerful expression, where women are claiming to have the right to officiate religious rituals and lead the prayer. This is done by claiming her right to be the integral part of the religious rituals, to occupy and own physically the sacred spaces and reject strongly the notion of the female body, 'her body' as ritually impure. The sites of hegemony within the practices of Hindu religion, were reframed and restructured by the *purohitas*, by their reclamation of the sacred spaces as persons of religious authority.

Adding to this, Tai 2, states that because women now have the right to perform *dharmic karya* (religious rituals), they also have the right to experience – *Munji* (thread ceremony performed within upper castes that signals access to learning). An important initiation ceremony to access knowledge, where traditionally Hindu women of all castes were denied access to *Munji*, and thereby to knowledge. Now by reclaiming the right to undergo the *Munji* ceremony, the idea is to claim access to religious knowledge as a right. What is important is the recognition that this right to knowledge, is not only as a learner but also as a teacher and interpreter of sacred texts. In arguing for Hinduism as an inclusive, tolerant and scientific religion and making it accessible to all, especially the educated middle class mobile upper caste groups, the organization emphasises connecting with Hindus in the diaspora.

Consequently, they have published booklets detailing religious rituals in both the original Marathi and Hindi along with translations, transforming hitherto complex religious rituals into simple “do-it-yourself” kits⁶. For their convenience Jnana Prabodhini has translated the rituals and rites such as Marriage, *Namakaran* (naming ceremony); *Upananyanor Munji* (Thread Ceremony), *Shashtyabdi* (Completing 60 years), *Vastushanti* (entering a new house), *Ganesh Puja*, *Satyanarayan Puja*, into English (Marriage Booklet, pg 1; Janana Prabodhini 2014).

Purohitas perform a number of wedding ceremonies in foreign lands. According to Tai 3, there is a high demand for ‘Women *Purohita*’, particularly when marriages are mixed (inter caste/religious/nationality/language), and there is a specific requirement for the explanation of mantras in English. In particular, educated young people demand their services as they are inquisitive about the meaning of each religious ritual, offering and Mantra, used in the wedding ceremony⁷ (*Purohita* 16th March 2018).

While reading their booklets I was reminded of the DIY (do-it-yourself) kits which are available in the market of world-famous paintings, which not only demystifies art but also makes it accessible. The demystification process is also related to the manner in which requirements for the ceremony is mentioned in the booklets⁸. In the booklet on marriage, they mention the following articles needed for the ceremony. It includes the following: The organization mentions clearly in one of the booklets, “Thousands of Hindus are settled outside India all over the world. They have strong ties with the Hindu Culture and way of life, and feel that they should, on such important occasions of life such as marriage, avail themselves of the rich, noble heritage of the Hindu thought. They like to perform *Samskara* (it is an emotional commitment expressed in traditional action) in the traditional Hindu way⁹”. In this way I believe that the organization is engaging with the role of *Purohitas* and positioning them ‘not as revered gurus but as facilitators of religious practices for the modern Hindus who want to engage with tradition and religion scientifically in the contemporary world’.

An analysis of the curriculum and its designs reveals the aim of the organisation to alter some religious practices to suit contemporary demands. This aim seems to situate religious practices within the secular domain. The emphasis on making the rituals simpler in practice and performance seems to push towards demystifying religious practices. This aim is different from the traditional conceptions of religion and its practice which seemed to be based on mystification, being dense and complex. Further the idea of training anyone to be a priest or *Purohit* questions one of the core traditional conceptions of Hindu religious practices, that purity, auspiciousness and skill is inherently ascribed. By redefining *Purohitis* as a skill-based occupation that could be learnt by anyone irrespective of class, caste and gender, frames a contemporary understanding of religion and religious practices that is based on an individual's own relationship with religion and its practices.

In this manner the organisation seems to be different, but the fact that they still attach themselves to Hindutva ideology makes it challenging to develop a nuanced analysis. While there seems to be a possibility for the analysis to be framed within the larger Hindutva argument, but in such an analysis the agency of the women is completely missing or is framed as conscious believers of Hindutva politics.

Discussion with the *purohitas* on the other hand has pushed for a subtle analysis where one finds two trends that complicates one's understanding of religion, religious practices and individual agency. Though these *Purohitas* believed in Hinduism on the one hand they rejected a monolithic understanding of the religion. The importance of the organisation for them lay in the fact that it trained them in a skill and gave them space as 'right to perform', within the largely constricted religious space. Such analysis avoids simplistic reduction of perceiving Hindu religious practices with Hindutva politics. Maybe it exists, but what is important is that by providing for such spaces, it is making for a strong case for gendered understanding of religion and religious practices.

Secondly, if one analyses data from the field it is clear that the majority of the *purohitas* belonged to the lower middle class and middle, majorly upper castes with husbands in stable jobs or have retired from government jobs. Further what was interesting that most of the *purohitas* had children settled abroad, working in respectable private companies. The women thus had a steady income and secure livelihood and did not need to depend on their earnings as a *purohita* to maintain their everyday expenses.

Although these *purohitas* have been working together for quite some time, the development of a strong network of sisterhood between them was missing. The reason why it was difficult to develop a network of sisterhood among them, is because even when the training took place in group settings, the focus was on the individual. The idea behind the course was not to develop a collective religious agency, but to build individual capabilities, so that

purohitas can function and perform their duties as religious priests efficiently and professionally. It was essentially a skill building exercise and not perceived as building collectives among women. On the contrary one could observe that the Purohitas were extremely competitive.

Research on women coming together and framing their collective religious agency has been conducted and highlighted especially in the work of African American Muslim women who appropriated and negotiated their religious agency within Mosque (Nageeb 2007; Prickett 2015). Here in the case of *purohitas*, it was more of an individual orientation, where they tried to prove to their clients that they were more efficient than the other. It was more of a business model than that of women coming together to form a collective religious agency.

The research on women's collective agency was framed in the context where women came together as a collective to claim some of the spaces denied to them within a specific religious space. On the other hand, in the context of *Purohitas*, women identified themselves more as an 'individual agent', who trained themselves to perform religious rituals as an economic activity. The women's agency has to be analysed in its complexity, as in certain cases, it is an identified need for women, which helps them to claim and reclaim spaces that were institutionally denied to them. In other cases, agency sometimes gets created as a result of certain individual acts consciously undertaken by the women.

Further the change observed seemed to be gradual and slow. There was no conscious reflection as to how this could be a process of Hindutva consolidating. This paper did not explore in detail the process of Hindutva, rather the focus was on religious agency of women as *purohitas*. It is important to analyse how the organisation adopted a large number of practices, especially ordaining women as priests, allowing menstruating women to conduct religious rituals, encouraging widowed women, divorced women, single women to officiate religious ceremonies particularly marriages and other auspicious religious rituals. It is important to recognize that the majority of scholarship analyses Jnana Probodhini as an Hindutva organization. But if one focuses on the course that trains women transcending gender and caste to become certified as *purohitas*, then the analysis could be organized within the realm of redefining religion and its practices. While one could highlight the attempt to render religious practices more inclusive, one needs to realize that such attempt is limited as it dislodges only some of the dominant principles of exclusion embedded within Hindu religion and its hegemonic principles.

Section Two: Negotiating Visible-Invisible Boundaries and Religious Agency

Women's position within the Hindu religion may be characterized as

marginal since women framed within the discourse of 'purity and impurity' are mostly excluded from officiating in religious rituals. They are crucial as a group, but not as leaders, leading the prayer. Women's position is thus defined as 'paradoxical' given that religious communities tend to be composed predominantly of women, but governed by men.

In recognizing the importance of women shaping the religious sphere, anthropologists emphasize that women's role is always a negotiated and an acquired one, the result of their struggle for recognition within male-dominated institutions (Pasioka 2016: 38; Mahmood 2005). In this context one can draw upon the work of scholars examining the life worlds of female Catholics, who have enquired into the idea of female authority within male-dominated religious institutions and the potential of religion for women's empowerment using religious teaching and activism to re-define women's role in public and private spheres (Flinn 2010) thereby redefining religious agency.

Research on women's religious participation mostly hinges on their abilities to act and perform within constricted and demarcated institutional spaces. By using, participating and appropriating religious spaces particularly the performance of rituals, hitherto forbidden and denied to them –one observes a push towards a project of religious self-making where women consciously create an alternative religious image for themselves. This alternative space not only provides a way to bind them together and creates networks of solidarity but also facilitates growth of their subjectivity. The paper argues for a nuanced understanding of female subjectivity, that is emancipatory in the sense that it carves out spaces, particularly through access and control over institutional power. Such a perception of agency is contested where there is not much change in the patriarchal structures of religion, but through performance of religious rituals where the access and use of spaces within religion that were historically denied to them, *purohitas*, claim their agency.

Negotiation refers to the process of how women bargain to access the resources, spaces and assets not generally available to them. Thus more often than not, negotiation refers to the strategic use of the 'patriarchal codes' as a tactical move to access 'spaces, respect and freedom' to lead their life with self-esteem and pride (Hartmann 1976, Gearson and Peiss (1985). How do negotiations take place? One can state that 'negotiation' describes how women bargain for privileges and resources. The process is also based on 'accepted patriarchal values' but provides a multi-dimensional perspective as women make conscious decisions to adhere, push, certain patriarchal practices so as to create 'spaces'. Such a perspective perceives women as active agents and not 'passive victims' (Hartmann 1976, Gearson and Peiss 1985, Ranad 2007). The resources available to women are generally patriarchal codes, to negotiate with men, state and community to access privileges and opportunities. In the context of fewer resources and lack of power, women have less wherewithal to negotiate and often accept the limitations of patriarchy to derive advantages

and 'shift boundaries. It is clear that for women to access the resources and create their own spaces they have to comply and use patriarchal structures, while doing so it steadily shifts patriarchy, but does not dislodge and in some cases reinforce patriarchy. It is a continuous process of negotiations that helps in shifting the boundaries and recreating new boundaries.

The paper refers to 'agency' beyond perceiving it in terms of a binary either as agential or as passive. It is rather limiting to perceive agency as the ability of the actors, i.e women active in religious groups to one, disturb the gendered social order and two, resist male domination. Instead, agency in this paper is viewed as a capacity to act, which is created by and becomes possible within a specific relation of subordination. It argues that it is possible to think of everyday resistance in the lives of people who though seem to belong to a privileged group, in many cases are pushed to the fringes. Further even if the agents themselves have no clear articulation of their agency, it remains agential as some spaces are being shifted which may have a long-term impact.

Based on empirical research, using research methods such as interviews and focus group discussions with male and female *Purohitas*, the paper draws upon the argument of Mahmood (2005) on the women's mosque movement in Cairo, especially locating it within the context of women's agency. She argues that it is sociologically relevant to analyze how women appropriate and transform public-religious spaces and make it their own.

Leming (2007) writing on religious agency also states that it is an important sociological concept that provides a framework to sharpen our understanding of the ways that individuals claim and enact a meaningful religious identity. Leming writes,

'Agency is not practiced in a vacuum, but is enacted within a specific social context. Religious agency is understood here as a personal and collective claiming and enacting of dynamic religious identity...To constitute religious agency, this identity is claimed and lived as one's own, with an insistence on active ownership...religious agency thus can help us to understand ways in which individuals and collective religious agents exert pressure on institutional structures that helps to break down a monolithic perception of state religion' (2007:74).

What are then the strategies used by the religious agents to exercise their agency? The religious agents use diverse strategies that include emotional, intellectual and behavioural practices to exert their agency. Therefore, this concept of religious agency can provide a useful framework, where by one can examine how *Purohitas*, exhibit religious agency by analyzing their practices and strategies while engaging with religion. The identity of becoming a priest, the performance of performing religious rituals and the respect given to them as religious authorities are crucial towards their construction of religious agents.

In times where women are waging a war to enter temples, for instance Sabarimala, the idea of women as 'designated religious priests', is not only interesting but also crucial to the discourse of gender and religion. Denial of access to women, within the menstruating ages (10-50 years) into the Sabarimala temple is based on the argument that a menstruating women is impure and that being near her and even her presence, her touch can ruin the '*vratham*' (purification vows) of the male devotees who have spent 41 days in complete 'austerity and celibacy'. This is a complex narrative about how women's menstrual blood is impure, that while highlighting her fertility and reproductive capacity, also renders her innately polluted.

On one hand where traditional conceptions of religion and accepted religious behavior appear to be hesitant to accept women as 'legitimate devotees', the possibility of them being allowed and accepted as religious authorities is critical to the discourse of women and their right to worship. It has been well documented that situated within dominant patriarchal religion, women face not only institutionalized discrimination but also find themselves fewer in number than their men counterparts within leadership and authoritative roles in religious practices. Feminists have long argued and established that religion is innately patriarchal and has been institutionalised in such a manner so as to erase women's contribution to knowledge making, dissemination and exclude women from leadership roles. Within the growing body of work on religion, feminists have engaged with conservative religions and have highlighted the creative, novel ways women benefit from their participation in men dominated religious traditions.

Further as Avishai (2008) argues that the 'paradox' approach in analyzing religion that while it binds women, it also liberates women, assumes a false dichotomy (pitting) agency against compliance. Such an approach based on binary construction does not lead to a nuanced evaluation of experience of women's agency within religious practices. She argues that on the other hand one needs to analyze how women construct their religious selves over time through observance, conduct (pg 429) and gradually changing certain aspects of religion. Avishai terms this process 'doing religion', which occurs as women simultaneously negotiate multiple identities. Such an analysis is broad based and helps us to ground women's religious practices in a more dynamic manner

Feminist theories of religion and space focusing on women doing religion, state that while women 'do' religion, they negotiate spaces – especially in the performance of ritual and thereby create religious and social identities. Religious space matters because to determine its meanings and appropriate uses is to have power over it, along with the symbolic and material resources encoded in such space (Morin and Guelke 2007, xxv). Literature on religion and space has been used to explain how women may exert agency by inhabiting and/or appropriating the physical spaces of religious performances of rituals. In their negotiations of different spaces, at times the women are in

direct conflict with men trying to occupy the same space and thus, they reinforce shared gender and religious identities. With less direct institutional access, women have generally leaned on either organizational support or have formed their own networks. Either way the strategies are limited as the organisation frequently forces them to follow a particular line of thought and the networks that the women build are either weak or are structured around competitive lines. In such cases the negotiations become extremely challenging and therefore layered.

In such a context, could one argue that when *purohitas* engage within Hindu religion, they are negotiating a Hindu identity, which may reflect a 'strategy of finding personhood that could have both possibility of framing an independent selfhood and may also (very important) be susceptible to larger dominant Hindutva ideology. It is crucial to analyse the role of *purohitas*, as they have, even within male dominated religious organisations with limited symbolic and material spaces for women, successfully exerted agency over their own religious experience and staked their claim over the power of knowledge creation and dissemination.

Religion and Space: A Contested Relationship

To understand religious practices in everyday life, one needs to examine the role of space in religion (Korteweg 2008). Women's abilities to engage religion at the local level, are contextualized within and across different spaces. One way would be to focus on ways in which religion or religious beliefs are expressed in everyday life practices rather than top down approaches that theorise religion as a set of beliefs imposed uniformly on believers. The interviews with women highlight how *purohitas* have managed to carve a distinct set of identities, and negotiated their rights. They also have been able to make certain changes within the practices, which have had a gradual impact on their lives, by conducting ritual practices such as 'pujas' by single women, particularly widowers and divorcees.

They have also encouraged funeral rites being performed by mothers, which is a very important and strong step towards dislodging the patriarchal practices. Within Hindu religious rituals, funeral rites are mostly the domain of the man and the women play a silent supportive role. But the *purohitas*, by encouraging mothers to perform the funeral rites, help them to deal and cope with grief and slowly and gradually but consistently displace patriarchal institutional structures.

The *purohitas* have also developed their own little differences in approach. For example, while planning the funeral rites; they specifically share crucial information on organ donation. This is a reflection of how the contemporary demands of society are woven integrally into traditional rituals. Though they do not have any data to show much any of their clients have

donated organs after their counseling, the *purohitas* share that their experience has been extremely positive.

The reframing of religious spaces was used to analyse how space gets expanded to include those on the margins but within a particular structure. It was interesting to see the presence of *Purohitas* who belonged to castes other than Brahmins. But before one gets too excited about it, the majority of the non-Brahmins belonged to upper caste non-Brahmins. Though one could see how the caste issue is being addressed, it is not enough to challenge the hegemony of caste.

Another interesting possibility is the presence of *purohitas* who are widows and divorcees, who perform all kinds of 'auspicious' rituals. Within Brahmanical patriarchy, widows are perceived as harbingers of inauspiciousness, are stigmatized and are said to represent ill luck. Their very presence during religious ceremonies was avoided because a women's state of auspiciousness depended on their husbands. As long as a man lives, his wife is auspicious, but upon his death, his widow is rendered inauspicious. In such a context the fact that widows not only participate in the ceremonies but are themselves conducting the religious ceremonies is a very promising way of carving out spaces within a highly institutionalized and patriarchal religious practice.

This expansion in defining religious agency, leads to reframing of the religious practices to make it more inclusive. One could further argue that through defining themselves as *Purohitas* women were using the spaces now made accessible to them to redefine not only religious practices, but also how they could relate to religion. Religious rituals and practices which were once forbidden to women could now be accessed and redefined to empower themselves. This paper does recognise that the spaces available within religious domains could be limiting. But what is interesting for us to understand is that accessibility to limited spaces within larger hegemonic religious practices, could go a long way in carving out significant meaning in the quest for redefining their relations with religion.

Further to focus on how religion is spatially structured provides a framework to assess women's agency. Control of space accords the ability to regulate those within it (Morin and Guelke 2007, xix). While doing so I focus on how the right to create, impart and disseminate religious knowledge, is highly gendered within Brahmanical Hindu religious practices. Thus the right granted to women to perform religious rituals – '*Adhikrut Patra*' (Legitimate right to perform) through the course structured by *Jnana Probodhini* gives them social, religious and cultural legitimacy and provides some of them economic and livelihood support. Although priesthood did not guarantee monetary sustainability, it was an important way to earn a livelihood with dignity.¹⁰

Such analysis of religious spaces emphasizes that gender relations are constructed differently across settings and these constructions enable, regulate and constrain women's mobility (Massey 1994). This approach that structures religion as dynamic and not a monolithic entity, avoids essentialist notions of religion as innately patriarchal or misogynistic by reconnecting agency to subjectivity (Korteweg 2008). It is also reflected in the manner in which the Purohitas shared their photos where they are seen conducting rituals with pride, confidence and happiness.

The focus on Hinduism and women, especially women's performance as Devotees – presence of Hindu women at religious gatherings is not new. Women have always been a visible presence at religious ceremonies. Hinduism has always encouraged women to be present in all religious ceremonies but mostly as devotees, followers, workers (such as preparing the hall, cleaning, preparing the food, the Prasad, organizing the religious ritual) but not as leaders of the rituals. What is new and distinct about this analysis is the role that women are playing now as officiating religious ceremonies, directing the performance of the ritual, organizing the performance and advising the male to perform in the right accepted manner, being a religious leader is extremely crucial in their negotiation of religion.

Within Hinduism one generally found different rules and regulations for men and women in the performance of rituals. There is not only physical segregation (certain castes), but also during religious practices and rituals along with systematic exclusion of women from leadership roles, which institutionalised the privileged role of men. What is thus striking was the strong visible presence of the women as *Purohitas*, - the priest to conduct the ceremony. Performance as a *purohita*, which gives them a legitimate authority to lead and direct religious ceremonies was interpreted by the women as a novel, inspiring and positive experience. This role was for them a crucial way to engage with religion, with respect, dignity and authority. It is a crucial way of negotiating both visible and invisible religious boundaries.

Section Three: Doing Religion: *Purohitas* and Negotiation of Spaces

The majority of research on women's religious participation focuses on their ability to act within constricted institutional spaces (Pricket 2015). As mentioned above through the process of religious self- making, women participants can over time successfully exert agency over their own religious experience. Individual religious self thus emerges with individual acts of observation of religious rituals and ceremonies and being part of a network (Avishai 2008).

In my analysis of *Purohita*, the focus is more on gender and caste negotiation. Majority of the *Purohitas* belong to middle class households belonging to the dominant caste –the Brahmins, who generally experience

‘gender invisibility’ within their homes and are attracted towards priesthood as it gives them meaning and a sense of purpose in their lives. The focus of this paper was to analyse how women use the institutionalized religious spaces—such as religious rituals and make it their own and thus religiosity is a social construction grounded in observance and achieved through performance.

How does the identity of *Purohitas* as forming a social space for women at the societal level is leading to the appropriation and transformation of a public/religious and highly masculine space through performance of religious rituals is an important question? This transformation of space is slow and gradual within the social, religious and cultural context.

Purohita narratives demonstrate the way in which religious authority is expressed and asserted. It gives a sense of how women are making their own authority through gendered experiential knowledge. DeNapoli states that religious performance ‘not only demonstrates their religious expertise (knowledge) but also contributes to the production of their prestige (influence) as leaders (2013: 125). Hindu women in Maharashtra embody the role of *Purohita*, defined in classical Hindu tradition as an authoritative male figure. What is interesting is the subversion, where single women such as widows, divorcées (considered to be marginal - inauspicious for the widow and transgressive for the divorcee), who are *Purohita*. Such new age *Purohitas* find gendered ways of resituating themselves within the religious orders by expressing their religiosity being religious priests. Through such ‘doing religion’ religious performance the *Purohitas* negotiate the social order and develop agency for themselves.

It is important to focus on the gendered strategies by which female priests authoritatively transform tradition and renegotiate the social order.

- a. **Redefining menstruation as natural**, therefore significant, important as a life continuation process. Such a perspective delinks menstruation from the ‘purity-impurity’ framework and frames its meaning as a process that is natural, thus normalizing it. *Purohitas* perform religious rituals even if they are menstruating and also encourage women in the client house to participate despite menstruation. While this is true, one could also see the dominant presence elderly women in their post-menopausal stage as *Purohitas*.
- b. **Subverting the ‘inauspicious’ tag of widow and resituating themselves as pure, auspicious enough to conduct religious offerings; rituals and ceremonies.** This is powerful as it establishes the right of the woman, without it being dependent on her relationship with a man, particularly her husband. It removes the idea of priesthood from the religious patriarchal structure to a rather more secular and professional domain. *Purohitas* are religious priests, who are trained to perform as highly skilled religious professionals .

- c. **Pushing the envelope** – with non-brahmins also trained as '*Purohitas*'- one could analyse it as reconfiguration of caste expression within the traditional Hindu structures as only two out of twenty-six *purohitas* are non-brahmin. In this case, then who is redefined as a *Purohita*? It is anyone 'anyone of an impeccable character; and the one who understands the Mantra and the action (Booklet – The Hindu Marriage Ceremony, Jnana Prabodhini, Pune).
- d. **Framing newer ways of religious rituals.** Eg- encouraging 'Mother' to perform *Shradhha* (Funeral Rites) for her child, especially if she is a single mother. The *Purohitas* believe that it was the mother who had connected with the child, so she is the best person to perform the last rites. Priests who perform funeral rites generally do not eat in the house where the last rites were performed. They take money or dry grains instead. One of the *Purohita* said that she does not believe in such regulation. She says, I quote, 'There is no problem in eating in the house of the client. It is much better than eating at restaurants (especially if you have travelled to perform the ritual). Further it is not in our culture that women go out and eat alone at a restaurant, so I think it is good if we eat in the house of the client' (Women *Purohita*, 73 years).
- d. **Performance as religious leaders-** very crucial in spaces where religious knowledge was denied to women. As interpreters of rituals, the *purohitas* interpret the meanings of various religious discourses, are celebrated by clients who claim that the *purohitas* perform the rituals in a manner that reflects professionalism and excellence; disseminate religious knowledge; become family priests.

Towards a Conclusion

The narrative engaged with through this article is about women's agency and the need to go beyond perceiving agency and compliance within binary constructs. Rather this article makes a case to locate agency as self-defined by the agent themselves. The analysis highlights how the *purohitas* with their choices and actions have redefined some of the religious practices and through it not only claimed a dignified identity for herself but also managed to shift in different ways religion itself. The paper pushes for an argument claiming that through such redefinition of religious practices, the religion does not remain the same. Though the alternation may not be visible enough, it is significant and crucial within the larger discourse of agency. This personal strategic claiming of religion through practicing it, adding on to it and changing certain aspects of it in the manner of one's choice, is what 'doing religion' is all about. This dynamic interpretation gives an agential role to women's intervention within the religious domain.

What are then the strategies through which they claim their role within the largely dominant patriarchal religious practices?

First, I believe is to claim their identity as *Purohitas*. This identity as legitimate priest is crucial as it empowers them to reframe the religious discourse while placed within it. It helps in redefining who is a *purohit*, and important step towards being accepted as a person of religious learning.

Second, refers to the respect they receive from the people who have invited them to officiate at their religious rituals. This larger acceptance by the people from the community is interpreted by the *Purohitas* as important steps towards their recognition as legitimate interpreters and performance of religious practices.

Third, the right the *Purohitas* have to interpret rituals and add their own interpretation in small but significant ways is crucial towards their framing as independent agents within religious practices. Here I draw attention to the manner in which they subtly encourage the 'mothers' to perform funeral rites, challenging the entrenched patriarchal practice of denying strategic roles to women in the death rituals.

Fourth, one finds a positive engagement with religion and religious practices. The focus here is on the performance as the priest, a *purohita*, the demeanor, conduct and the dignity through which they define their role as a priest.

Finally, the religious rituals are conducted by the *Purohita*, even when the women are menstruating in significant way redefines the established notion of innate impurity among women. It also in significant ways redefines the manner in which *Purohitas* change some aspects of the religious terrain they are part of it.

Some questions are left unanswered. How much value does possessing such agency have?, Would it have an impact on the larger idea of Hinduism?. Further sociologically, is the fact that some privileged women claim to have a better religious agency, that has brought positive values to themselves in terms of self- belief, confidence worth emphasizing? But these are questions for another paper. For now, by 'doing religion', the *Purohitas* are redefining and changing significantly, what one refers to as religious practices. This dynamic interpretation of the role of *Purohitas* gives an agential role to women's intervention within the religious domain.

Notes

- 1 This article was developed from the ICSSR-JSPS Social Science Indo Japan joint Seminar Programmes led by Prof. Meenakshi Thapan, Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi and Prof. Akiko Kunihiro, Faculty of Arts & Sciences, Waseda University, Tokyo – 2017, 2018 and 2020. I am grateful

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- 2 Purohit, in the Brahmanical Hindu context, means family priest, from the puras meaning 'front' and hita, 'placed'. The word is synonymously used with the pandit which also means "priest" (Wikipedia). The organization Dyanaprabhrodini, that offers a training programme refers to purohita as 'someone who would lead others especially in the right direction, i.e in the 'Yogya Dishala'. In Vedic times, a king's chief priest or court chaplain, a position of immense political influence. The term is now used for a domestic priest who performs rituals for a particular family or group of families (Oxford Reference Dictionary).
- 3 An amalgamation from (Sanskrit (Sanskrit language) and Sanskruti (Culture) and Sanshodhika (Researcher), was established to conduct research on Sanskrit, culture and Indology. The aim of Santrika was to conduct research and present culture expressed within Hindu/Hinduism framework, particularly to present Hindu religious practices and rituals as scientific, logical and rational
- 4 This Prabodhini ideology is explained in their '*Mahitipatra*' (Information booklet).
- 5 The names of the purohitas are mentioned anonymously using the nomenclature of Tai (in marathi, Tai means elder sister). I have numbered them.
- 6 It includes courses that deal with religious ceremonies that deal with 'Shanti' (peace and blessings) such as Vastu, celebrating 60 years of individual. Further there are various pujas such as Vat Savitri (a religious ceremony where the wife prays and fasts for the longevity of her husband), Satyanarayan, Dipawali (festival of lights), Ganesh puja (worship of the God, identified as 'Elephant God' and many more, including different Samskaras (religious functions marking important moments of life) such as Namakaran (naming ceremony); Marriage, Funeral rites, Organ donation, etc. One of the interesting rituals that the organization performs is the ritual of Hindukaran (Conversion into Hindu). It is performed mostly in context of eloping couples, having mixed religious marriages. For this they require certain government documents such as an affidavit, consent letter from the person who is planning to convert, Aadharcard and an Identity card for performing this ritual. Thus in the context of increasing discussions on inter caste and inter religious marriages, that challenges dominant religious perceptions of endogamy; it is interesting as to how an organization tries to use religious rituals and practices to bring into fold, the acts that seems to challenge dominant notions of religious principles of caste and gender.
- 7 In February 2021, actor Dia Mirza's wedding was conducted by a women priest and it was celebrated in the popular media as a act of feminism, with hashtags #RiseUp and #GenerationEquality.
- 8 In the booklet on marriage, they mention the following articles needed for the ceremony. It includes the following:
 1. Kumkum (Vermilion) and Haldi (Tumeric) powder
 2. Rangoli (design made for a religious, social or cultural function)
 3. Incense – Agarbatis
 4. Wooden seats- (if available)- 8
 5. Metal Urns- 2, Metal glasses- 4, metal Bowls (small)- 4, Meatl dishes- 2, big

- metal bowl- 1 spoons- 4
6. Oil lamps- 2
 7. Garlands- 2
 8. Mangalsutra- necklace with black beads
 9. Gold chain or a gift for the bridegroom
 10. Electric heater or similar arrangement for Homa
 11. Darbha (dry grass); Samidhas (dry wood) about 25 pieces. If possible few pieces of sandalwood
 12. Coconuts- 3
 13. A kalash- copper pitcher filled with water, decorated with Mango or similar leaves and topped with coconut
 14. Rice grains (Akshata) mixed with slight kumkum
 15. Antahpat- the holy piece of cloth to be held between the bride and bridegroom before the Muhurta (Except new moon day and eclipse, all days are considered auspicious by the shastras). The auspicious time is the one that is convenient for the family members of the bridegroom and bride.

What does it reveal? One, has always associated marriage practices as extremely complicated ceremony, with a large number of requirements to proceed with the ceremony. The organization has restructured the ritual in such a manner that it does not involve too many rituals and offerings. A lean version of the ritual is offered and presented as a logical, rational and scientific way of engaging with religion. By limiting the number of things required for the ceremony and doing away with notions of auspicious time, it places the marriage as a ceremony that marks two individuals deciding to live together, rather than as a religious ceremony that is marked by rituals and practices not understood by anyone but something which has to be done to please the family. Further when these practices are performed by women, it does bring about a shift (*maybe limited*) in the manner religious practices are framed and practiced.

- 9 The authorities at Prabodhini, explain that for them *Samskar* (religious rituals) is structured around four concepts: *Sarthata* (important to explain meanings of rituals and mantras to all present for the ceremony); *Samshikata* (everyone present needs to be involved in the ritual); *Shistabadhtata* (need to be disciplined in thought and action) and *Samabhav* (Inclusive without making distinctions between caste, religion, class and gender). One could see that accessibility of religious practices, responsibility of all involved in religious rituals, discipline and inclusion of all are the four core ideas of framing a modern, rational and scientific outlook of Hindu religion.
- 10 The *purohitas* are paid very less- eg 1000/-rupees for wedding and 800/- rupees for *Vastu Shanti* (Religious ritual performed by practicing Hindus, to bless the house and kind of inauspiciousness from the house)not economically sustainable as a stable form of livelihood. Most of them thus come from stable middle-class families with children settled abroad and their average earning as a *Purohitas* is approximately 15,000/- per month.

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