

RELIGION AS CATALYST OF EMPOWERMENT AMONG THE JAIN ELDERLY WOMEN

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Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to explore the role of religion in the domain of elderly women empowerment. Empowerment acts as a primary agent of socialization committed to egalitarian view of gender roles and identities and encouraging gender sensitization. In case of elderly women population, empowerment is necessary since with age they lose their credibility as well as utility in the patriarchal structure. In this scenario, socio-cultural institution like religion often acts a catalyst in empowering or disempowering the elderly women population, whereby religion often act as a medium of power which can manipulate consciousness. The study makes an ethnological exploration of the position of elderly women within the domain of Jain religion. Jain religion projects women in active roles, who can primarily participate in religious rituals. Various rituals within this religion often encourage women to live an active life and stay empowered throughout. In conclusion the study that culturally elderly women should be bestowed with major social responsibilities. At the same time, they should be encouraged to live an active life of work in the wake of spiritualism.

Keywords: Elderly Women, Religion, Empowerment, Power, Jainism.

CONCEPT OF GENDER INEQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT

Gender inequality is a universal reality which differentiates between men and women. Various cultural constructions are prescribed as per respective gender within the society. However, with respect to culturally designated gender roles, women are always rendered in disadvantageous position where their identity and primordial responsibility is restricted to rearing and bearing. Hence women are often imagined as the entities whose identities are limited to homes and household chores. In most of the societies, it is seen that an inequality persists among men – women participation rate, in labor force as well as in the spheres of politics, economics and educational factors, which becomes detrimental for the development of the country. In developing countries, situation gets worse, with low rate of education among girls. Here, it can be aptly remarked that the dominance of the patriarchy creates a vicious circle within the society where the female population becomes entangled within child care and domestic chores thereupon bolstering gendered division of labor. (Sahay 1998).

Gender inequality is unfavorable for a country's development, hence to secure and develop a country, women empowerment becomes essential. Women empowerment is necessary in every society because it performs the primary agent of socialization and inculcates values and norms in favor of egalitarian view of gender roles and identities and generates further empowerment of both male and female children without any form of gender discrimination. Hence women empowerment

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in the long run often tends to bring a consequent drive towards gender equality, since empowered women tend to be more responsible with reference to gender sensitivity to their family, community or the society as a whole.

The concept of women empowerment is diverse in nature, but the most apparent part of the word empowerment is that it contains the word power and that it challenges the existing power relationship within the society. There exists several definition of empowerment but we are going to discuss the definition of empowerment as provided by Batliwala, who referred empowerment as “the process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and the gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society”. (Batliwala, in Gupta & Yesudian, 2006, p366). Individual empowerment of women consists of both control of resources or which is termed as extrinsic factor as well as control of intellect which forms the intrinsic factor of empowerment. From this abstraction of empowerment, two features comes out to be prominent viz, women empowerment does not mean to exert power or control on other but to develop within the power to satisfy their goals and ends in life so that they can successfully contradicts the ideology of patriarchy. This definition of empowerment also acts as a booster to develop a self confidence, inner strength and power so that they can overpower the external challenges posed to their development. (Gupta and Yesudian 2006).

There are three important elements which constitute within the concept of women empowerment, these are – ‘resources’, ‘agency’ and ‘achievements’. Resources are those components of empowerment which give impetus and act as a catalyst in bringing about empowerment within women and become highly beneficial. Agencies are means which are utilized by women to specify systematically the choices or strategy they are going to adopt to enhance their autonomy to control their own resources and make decision by their inner self and wish which will bear important effect on their life and later consequences. Achievements comprises of the positive outcome which came to the forefront in the life of the women as a consequences of their self control on their resources and agency. According to scholars, women empowerment should first initiate within women’s own self and knowledge, and then it can be channelized externally through ensuring greater independence and autonomy of women in both public and private spheres, receiving higher education, pursuing highly skilled jobs and becoming financially independent and securing a greater position in taking financial or household related decisions. We can also claim that before bringing about a change at societal level regarding gender discrimination, the women themselves have to become aware about their own potential and should not encourage any gendered issues or identities within their household which can earn a greater impact and change within the society and challenge the patriarchal foundation of the society. (Gupta and Yesudian 2006)

THEORY OF POWER

Power is a concept which preoccupies a central and crucial position in the contemporary political and other sphere of the society. Power is understood as a force or the potentiality of an agent to exert or compel his own will on the powerless and the latter simply conforms or submits to his power, hence power explained from this perspective represent it as a quality possessed by the powerful. It is a form of relation which exists between people and also between people and institution. Michael Foucault conceptualized power as a form of relationship existing between individuals, society, groups and institution. His theory and analysis of power was focused on how the social institution exerts power on both the common natives and various groups in their day to day activity and how individuals successfully ratify their own individuality and resistance to the effects of the power exerted on them. According to Foucault's conception of power, it should not be regarded as an oppressive force functioning in the society; rather he viewed power as the resistance it poses by those people on whom the power is exerted upon by the powerful. He is concerned about providing a model of power, where power is exerted and debated in our day to day mundane and normal life. Foucault's evaluation of power is centered on the individuals as their associated relations and hence the individuals are not viewed as mere objects of power that are exploited but rather are considered as the locus on which the power as well as resistance to be exerted. For Foucault, power is not a possession but a network of relations or strategy applied as enveloping the entire society rather than only establishing the relationship between the exploiter and the exploited. (Balan 2010). Thus according to Foucault, power is no longer explained as a quality or capacity which gets concentrated in few hands or become integrated into a particular institution and is utilized by them according to their own interest but rather as a force which running through the entire society as a chain of network which is decentralized, dispersed and disseminated throughout the society and located in some particular sphere. As Foucault says "power is everywhere... as it comes from everywhere" (Foucault in Newman, 2007, p51) as it is explained by him as a mode of action which is imposed on other's action. Thus in Foucault's opinion, the subjects are product of power and so this power is applicable to the everyday life and action of the individual, this power performs the function of classifying individuals, adhering them with their own individuality and applying a law of truth on them and making them realize his/her own selfhood and identity and which other also recognizes about him/her. Thus in this way, Foucault conception of power produces the subject out of the individual where they can receive power from any part or location of the society or institution as power is dispersed according to Foucault. (Newman 2007)

EMPOWERMENT OF ELDERLY WOMEN

Foucault's notion of power can often be analyzed within the domain of cultural construction of gender and power relations associated with it. In the present paper, we are concentrating on evaluating the notion of power from the domain of empowerment within senile women populace, i.e. how empowerment functions with the older individuals of the society who are considered to be vulnerable, helpless and dependant. The elderly female populations are in dire need of empowerment, because along with their age and decreased credibility, they have to constantly confront the patriarchal structure of the society where gender discrimination is a persistent reality. There are several aspects or reasons which contribute in depreciating power within the female elderly population. The first issue remains the deteriorating health condition followed by common health problems such blood pressure, hypertension, heart diseases etc which slowly decreases their inner strength adversely affecting their empowerment. The second aspect of loosing empowerment among the elders are related to their physical condition which compel them to depend on external helps and their inefficiency to perform ADL which means activities of daily live where they become incapable of performing the basic activities which every human being carry out on everyday basis like eating, bathing, dressing, toileting and movement from one place to another. This loosening of self reliance becomes a huge blow to the inner strength and confidence and becomes a reason for their decreasing power within themselves. The third aspect involves the issue of participation in work force which is definitely true and an intense cause of decreased power within women in developing countries as most women who are aged now were not involved in any workforce but were restrained in their household work but with age and weak physical condition that participation in work also becomes difficult for them and they try to look at themselves as worthless and suffers from loneliness which becomes source of decreased power within them. Even though some women may had been participated in labor force but now with their growing age they cannot continue their work life which change their perspective regarding themselves and they feel disempowered by their present condition. The fourth potential aspect is the economical issue and status of the elderly population and mostly the female population. In developing countries we observe the female older population those who don't have any source of income has to financially depend on their husband or children which makes them economically handicapped which is an important cause leading of degeneration of their power status, sometime in any cases we also observe elderly women being ill treated by their male counterpart n their family as they are economically dependent on them. (Kirst-Ashman and Hull 2014). As poverty is a constant reality for developing and under developed countries the female population has to go through more severe and critical condition where maintaining their own identity and dignity becomes a severe hurdle and many a times we see they are going though relentless situation due to economic and health related problems.

Referring Foucault, it can be aptly remarked that power is established by individuals often with the help of various institutions present within his/ her socio-cultural landscape. Thus, individual without any institution can often be deduced as a powerless entity. In this sense it can be stated that it is the institutions which legitimize the imposition of power within society. Sticking to this proposition, let us evaluate the role of religion as an institution to establish and disseminate power. Religious institution often prescribed the dos and don'ts of the society. Unconsciously, we accept them and legitimize them by working on its path. In this regard, we can state that various religious rituals have prescribed and adherence to elderly population irrespective of gender. Deducing this, we can then claim that women are not at all powerless and can obtain their power from religious practices where they are often projected as a subject of reverence, love and care. Religion thus acts as an important catalyst for evacuating these aspects of decreased power which causes disempowerment among the female elderly individuals and support them to reconfigure their power status in the society as well as individual household. Elderly women are accorded a higher place in the sphere of religious practices and celebrations and they eventually outnumber males in this category as in maximum household we see women holding religious responsibility in their own hands. The elderly women also play important roles of imparting religious teachings and socialization which are normative in nature to the children of the houses and try to discipline and educate them according to the religious teaching which gives them the basic knowledge about morality and the distinction between right and wrong. The elderly women gets largely affected by their religious orientation many women find assistance in their religion and religious practice which encourage them to go through critical phase of their life and act as a great inception of strength and empowerment in their life and proves beneficial in ringing about organizational unity among the elderly womenfolk where a number of women come together and share their feeling and alleviate their loneliness and also instill in their new hope and optimism. Religious functions and worship gives new direction and meaning to the elderly women who becomes disoriented and helps the in resolving conflicts and guide them at practical matters. We find in many cases religion acts as the groundwork on the basis of which the elderly women establishes or realizes their own self identity which also becomes as important requirement for empowering the women by making them realize about their inner potential and capacity. Religion also enables elderly women to transforms their mundane life from being submissive to the patriarchal structures of the society to integrate their experiences to the wider social structure which will empower them and change their decision making capability. (Hall 2013). Thus we can certainly claim that embracing religious practice or spirituality acts as a significant means for empowering elder women. At the same time, it is also seen that in case of elderly population religion associated with its respective rituals and philosophy often acts as a major resource to their solidarity,

relaxation and most importantly mental strength. For elder women, religion is not a separate aspect as it is intertwined with every part of their life as well as entity and they cannot separate it from themselves. While analyzing empowerment of elderly women, we cannot ignore the significance of religion and its effect on their life as by practicing a particular religion their quality of life gets enhanced. (Maynard, et al. 2008)

We find a long tradition of associating religion and its connected practices to old aged people, especially elderly women. In most Indian household, we find the elder women of the households engaged in performing all the religious duties and praying for the well being of their family members. The religious rituals may often be carried out by them individually or with their family members mostly in the morning time after taking a bath. All these rituals become a daily part of the Indian household and the member expects the fulfillment of these important rituals from the elderly women itself. Apart from individual household religious worships, the elderly women of India also takes part in collective worship where all the elderly women of the communities come together to practice their religious worship take part in various ceremonial pujas and many a times we find them performing and singing religious hymns popularly known as bhajans together. All these activities among the elderly women act as a source of empowerment which keep their body and soul sanctified and content and while carrying out all these performances they come to interact with other elderly members and in the due course they share their feelings and stress with each other and share their religious values which becomes helpful for them to overcome their loneliness and give them a new impetus towards living their life on their own terms and make decisions which positively affects them. (Majumdar 2005)

JAINISM AS A CATALYST OF EMPOWERMENT FOR ELDERLY WOMEN

In the present paper, we have concentrated in evaluating the role of Jainism as a religion in empowering women elderly population. Jainism is an ancient world religion whose history can be traced back to the religious teachings offered by their twenty four tirthankaras who were knowledgeable person and on whose decided paths the Jain people follow and lead their life which was started by the teachings imparted b their first tirthankara known as Rishabh and their last tirthankara Mahavira. Their teachings were based on three important doctrines these are – non-violence, non-absolutism and non-possessiveness. The religious dogma of Jainism is propagated in acoustic form which mainly includes prayer, incantation, song, narrative or pure speech. The Jain religion begins as a religion which is based on the belief or act of listening and this listening act is accompanied by songs which are performed by Jain women who come together and celebrate the existence and of the Jina who is referred as their God. Within Jainism, Sravika forms another

religious doctrine which means “a woman who listens”, thus from this we can understand that women plays an important role in religious practice and celebration with in the Jain religion. Thus we can claim that elderly women of Jain religion takes active participation in their religious practices as it is also a very important belief associated with the religion which gives them solace and derive their inner strength and power from such practices as they are held important and crucial part in their religion by their families as well as society. (Keltling 2001). Within Jain religion, we come across several rituals or practices which provide great impetus to elderly women to lead their life as an empowered being such as there are rituals of Mangal Mantra where the most senior female member of the family engages herself or carries out the duties of chanting religious hymns in front of their grand children or children and impart them the religious teaching of their religion which enlighten them as well as socialize them to the culture and values of their society. Hence due to this particular Jain ritual, we witness how member from two distinct generations comes together and perform this ritual which also become beneficial in withering away the gap or disparity between the two generation and work towards forming a intergenerational bond or cord which has several effect on the life of the Jain elderly women. On one hand, through this intergenerational bond the loneliness and isolation of the elderly women can be meted out as they can spend some quality times with their grandchildren on the other hand due to performing this ritual the elderly women regard themselves as performing something which is valuable and worthy which gives them motivation and act as a catalyst of empowerment.

The Jain religion like any other religion consisted of several religious ritual which is appropriate and purposive for Jain elderly women who engages a good amount of their daily life in performing this ritual which safeguard them from leading a desolate or empty life. Religious ritual forms an interspersed aspect of a Jain women which include household activities such as cleaning the stoves where cooking is to be carried out before lighting it, sweeping the floor, filtering water as well as boil water for the sadhus. Within Jain religion, daily worshipping is an important aspect which involves idol worship with eight fold offering each carries its own significance and according to Jain belief there are eight karmas and in order to destroy those eight karmas they perform eight ‘pujas’ on a daily basis. Apart from these, there are several other special ‘pujas’ performed within Jain religion including Snatra puja, Panch Kalyanak puja, Antaray Karma puja and Pujan. (Jain 2009). Furthermore, Jain elderly women also practice religious rituals like Samayak every day (a ritual followed by Jain disciples in search of liberation from the cycle of Karma) and it requires a good amount of time which the elderly invests in their daily day to day life which give them relive from their emptiness and empowers them spiritually and maintain the peace and stability of their mental as well as physical life. Bereavement and solitude are feelings which encroaches the life of elderly women very easily. The Jain elderly women find a way out

from this feeling through organizing religious Gosti or group where a considerable number of Jain elderly women come together to perform religious rituals such as samayak and pratikraman together in the Gosti meet which takes place on a weekly basis. On this Gosti meet the elderly woman accumulates and spend valuable time and carry out several purpose like after performing the rituals like samayak they sit together interacts with each other share their tragedy or loneliness in life and many a times provide solution to resolve some problems which are taking place in anyone's life and many a times they also involves in discussing their religious beliefs and values and implement them in their own life to overcome their feeling of bereavement and distress and instill hope instead. Sometime such interactions are accompanied by kitty parties which are organized by the elderly women who brings or prepare food together and have a party or event which lightens up their mood and also provide some positive moment or feeling which encourage them to lead a purposeful life. All these events bring about some meaning and direction in the life of the elderly women who are otherwise become subjected to lead a isolate and alienated life but being engaged in all such religious activities brings about a determination within them to lead an empowered life as all these activities make them think of themselves as occupying their own identity.

CONCLUSION

Religion, as one of the dominant cultural institution acts as a primordial means to empower elderly women. The power of religious institution is an invincible reality which often prescribed the 'ideal' pattern of behavioral expectations. In case of elderly women, religion like Jainism has prescribed the active participation of elderly women within religious as well as other social activities. Thus to empower elderly women, social responsibility should be accorded to them, where they have to take care of their grand children so that they do not feel themselves to be futile and insignificant but by carrying such little responsibility without hampering their health will make them feel valuable because they are contributing their part in their family. Similarly the elderly women should also be encouraged to participate in religious seminar and meetings which are arranged by religious leader and this will help them to enrich themselves spiritually. At the same time, society should also be compassionate enough to give them the space towards empowering themselves. Often they can engage themselves in producing handicrafts items for their family members or donate them to various social service centers or they must enroll themselves in some NGOs where they can carry out charitable functions like donating food, cloths, books for children which will help them attain their mental peace and they will have a satisfying feeling within themselves and will remove their distress and depression. Engagement in some sort of functional and useful errands is very much essential for elderly women which will protect them from feeling disempowered and in order to do so religion proves highly beneficial as

by involving in religious rituals, listening to religious hymns and songs, reading religious texts and occasions or events should be organized where the elderly can impart their religious knowledge to their grandchildren and other members of the family as well as society and this will fulfill the purpose. The elderly women should also engage themselves in self development programs, where they can learn how to maintain their physical and mental health by practicing yoga, meditation and reiki and by taking care of their of their health they can ensure a health livelihood which will In turn help them to feel good about themselves and will increase their activity and physical wellness which are important concoction for their empowerment as their dependence on others reduces. Religion therefore becomes a ray of hope in elderly women's life, by bringing aspects of empowerment within themselves. In conclusion, referring Foucault, it can be remarked that individual can derive their power from any sphere of our society so for elderly women religion acts as their source or catalyst of empowerment where religion provide them with the power to resistance.

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