

# THE HOLY EXCLUSION: RELIGIOUS BELIEF OR GENDER BIAS? STRATEGIES FOR THE EMBODIMENT OF GENDER EQUALITY AMONG DIFFERENT RELIGIONS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** Religion in India continues to remain a male-bastion with men occupying positions of leadership in religious institutions and wielding inordinate control. Against this backdrop, this research analyses the recent emergence of women claiming their space in religion, with specific focus on decision making powers, accessibility to religious careers, and rights and entitlements to religious finances and accrements.

**Methods.** The review made use of extensive and in-depth analysis of secondary sources of research and informative materials available, specifically on the subject matters of religion, women and modern feminist campaigns. Major sources utilized were newspaper articles, journal articles, scholarly research on related topics and court hearings and judgments of relevant cases.

**Results.** The analysis reveals that there is clear progress by feminist movements in challenging inequality in religion, by demanding equal access to places of worship and questioning religious practices that exclude them. Women are calling out male leadership where they have abused their power under the guise of faith. Feminist movements are also demanding women's participation in the financial endowments that accrues to religion. Women are also making a determined entry into careers related to religion. The growing number of institutions that provide religious training to women are not only enabling women to take up priestly and other religious roles, but also equipping them to question patriarchal interpretation of scriptures.

**Conclusions.** While the rising feminist movement towards obtaining equality within religion becomes quite apparent, one of the contributing factors could be the consistency of the judiciary in upholding the constitutional rights granted to women. Specifically, the Supreme Court, with its judgements and progressive interpretations of religious laws, has aided women in their struggle. Since the questioning of patriarchal control of religious structures is happening almost parallelly across



all major religions in India, it can also be theorised that there is a rising feminist consciousness that underpins the quest for religious equality and equal treatment.

**Keywords:** Women, religion, influence, equality, gender, feminism

## INTRODUCTION

### – THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON THE LIVES OF WOMEN

India, the second most populous country in the world, is home to citizens professing different religions. The multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-cultural and distinctively multi-caste disposition of the country, lends pluralism to its society. The Indian Census held in 2011 shows that the country embraces religious heterogeneity with 79.80% Hindus, 14.23% Muslims, 2.30% Christians, 1.72% Sikhs, 0.70% Buddhists, and 0.37% Jains (Population Census 2011, 2011). As the largest democracy in the world in terms of population, India is secular and does not adopt a state religion even though religion leaves a tremendous impression on the fabric of the country.

The diverse religions professed in India have shaped the societal norms and culture to the extent that religion is an integral part of the life of Indians. The Ipsos survey on the *Global Views on Religion* shares the importance of religion to Indians. The results state that 70% of Indians surveyed believe that their religion defines them, and 78% of Indians surveyed held the view that religious practices were important to leading a „moral life“ (Ipsos, 2017).

Indians also spend a substantial amount of money on religious activities. As per the *Key Indicators of Household Expenditure on Services and Durable Goods* report released in 2016 by the National Sample Survey Organisation of India, rural households and urban households in India spend close to 9% and 5.7% respectively, of their total monthly per capita expenses under the category of „miscellaneous consumer services“ towards religious services (Jain, 2016). Remarkably, it exceeds the amount Indians spend on sanitation needs and is an indication of the magnitude of importance given to religion in the country.

It is hence unsurprising to observe that personal and societal values in India are a result of the far-reaching influence of religion on an individual and the family. The practices and traditions around menstruation, marriage, child-bearing, ownership of land, education, opportunities and several other aspects of routine life are a consequence of the deep relationship which Indians nurture with religion. Despite several of these pronouncements determining the course of the lives of women, they are governed by religion which is in turn administered and interpreted. Paradoxically, only by men.

It is important to note that the influence of the roles of priests and religious scholars, incidentally roles held solely by men in all major religions, extends beyond the administration and the running of places of worship

and religious institutions. A priest in India also performs rituals and prayers which embraces most aspects of the follower's life. While the role of the priest and the religious scholar differs by religion, they are involved in differing degrees in the significant events of the life of the followers of their religion in India.

The male command over positions of power in religion and their interpretation of it underscores the life decisions of Indian women. Yet, this undisputed power-structure was countered only at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is only over the last couple of decades that the feminist participation in questioning the patriarchal entrenchment of religion has arisen as a new phenomenon in India. It is conjectured that this uprising could be the zeitgeist of the next phase of feminism specific to India. It is in this light that the article proceeds to examine the various dimensions of the relatively new feminist movement against the exclusive male deciphering of religion. It examines the trend of feminism in identifying the atrocities of male religious leaders who have misused their power and the endeavour of women into careers and the finances of religion, which were earlier the singular dominion of men.

## THE IMPACT OF THE MALE INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION

Indian society is almost entirely patrilineal and patrilocal, barring a couple of states which are matriarchal. The inheritance and succession related traditions and practices which are chiefly the expositions of religion as made by its entirely male leadership, additionally, tilt the scales in favour of men, despite the existence of laws of the land which visibly uphold equality.

Rajesh Komath's book review of Jayanti Alam's *Religion, Patriarchy and Capitalism* mirrors reality when it states that „the religious scriptures promoted the practice such that the child preference in the family becomes highly unfavourable to women“ (Komath, 2013). The patriarchal decrypting of religion has allowed for significant opportunities to be earmarked for the male offspring, as a boy child, carries forward the family lineage. As a result, the male child is accorded priority for education and nutrition, especially in under-privileged houses. The female child in such households is considered a liability and the cause of the eventual depletion of money from her maternal home to that of her husband's. Indeed, women in India most often grow up assuming their inferior position to that of men.

The subordinate status is reinforced by a host of customs and values which pervades across the different strata of society. Incongruously, nearly all religions across India consider women who are menstruating to be impure. By associating menstruation with impurity, women are not only denied entry to places of worship but also to the kitchen in their own homes as they are suspected of defiling sacred spaces. The undertones of equating

women to impurity during menstruation, ensure that they remain ineligible to opt for careers or opportunities in religion, thereby perpetuating religion to be under the hegemony of men. The result of several such social, cultural and religious practices, leads women to grow up internalizing their subservient position. Both in the literal and the figurative sense, the role of women is relegated to the background and curtailed due to the symbolic and metaphorical orientations of religion as decrypted by its male interpreters.

## QUESTIONING THE MALE INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION

The views of Kalpana Kannabiran, the Director of the Council for Social Development of Hyderabad, India, that „religion is not a given, it is a negotiated reality” aptly captures the essence of women discovering their way out of the male decryption of religion (Syrian Orthodox Church, 2016). In keeping with these views, it is vital to recognize the progression of women in India, who are negotiating their way through the male dominion of the religious terrain. In a recent historic verdict on the temple of Sabarimala, India witnessed the reappropriation of religion by women which paved the way for the inclusivity at the famous Hindu temple dedicated to the celibate deity – Lord Ayyappa, in the State of Kerala in India.

As one of the largest pilgrimage centres in the world, the Sabarimala temple attracts around 50 million devotees annually who visit the temple atop the hill (*Indian Express*, 2018). The arduous barefooted trek for devotees to the peak of the hill involves prior penance of abstinence from any pleasures and 41 days of purity. The penance for the celibate deity includes physically avoiding any form of contact with women and especially with those who are menstruating. Given the nature of the penance involved and the celibacy status of the God, the temple does not permit women in the menstruating age group of 10 years to 50 years to visit the shrine. The ban of women in this specific age category was challenged legally in 1991. The Kerala High Court ruled in favour of the temple board, mentioning that the board was empowered to decide on the traditions relating to the temple. A group of female lawyers subsequently challenged the ruling. In 2006, a Public Interest Litigation was filed by the Young Lawyers Association with the Supreme Court contending that the ideals of equality and religious freedom for women, as promised by the Indian constitution were being violated by the tradition followed in the Sabarimala temple. The highest constitutional court in India, the Supreme Court announced a much-anticipated verdict in favour of women’s equality in September 2018, requiring the temple to lift the ban on women in the age group of 10 years to 50 years from entering its premises. The judgement reflected such practices to be a violation of the rights of women and referenced it to inequality and gender discrimination (Yadav, 2018).

The Chief Justice of India at that time, Justice Dipak Misra who headed the five-judge constitution bench quoted "Patriarchal rules have to change. Patriarchy in religion cannot be allowed to trump [the] right to pray and [the right to] practice religion" (*Indian Express*, 2018). Interestingly Justice Indu Malhotra, the only female judge on the bench dissented reasoning that „Notions of rationality cannot be invoked in matters of religion". She mentioned that „What constitutes essential religious practice is for the religious community to decide, not for the court" (*Indian Express*, 2018).

Recently, hundreds of thousands of women, formed a human chain with Diyas in their hands, that stretched almost 620 kilometers across Kerala, supporting the right of women to enter the shrine. On January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019, two women, under the age of 50 years were able to secretly pray at the Sabrimala temple. Subsequently however, the temple shut its doors for a „purification" ritual. These individual and collective acts of expressions seeking equal rights and dignity in prayers/ religion are probably the first of many more to come towards challenging the male hegemony over religion.

The country received the highly controversial verdict with mixed responses. Kavita Krishnan, Secretary to the All India Progressive Women's Association, stated:

In Instant Triple Talaq, Haji Ali, and Sabarimala cases; courts have rightly held that women's equality can't be held hostage to religious practices. Just as it's unconstitutional and discriminatory to debar entry to temples based on caste, it's the same to debar entry based on gender. Also, we project our own values on our gods - and patriarchal values that put the burden of men's celibacy or sexual choices on women are deeply damaging to women in real life. (*NDTV*, 2018)

At around the same time, a response on the verdict elicited from the Union Textile Minister, Smriti Irani echoed a deep-rooted religious sentiment carrying the recurring motif of menstrual impurity in her questioning: „Would you take sanitary napkins seeped in menstrual blood into a friend's home? No. Why take them into house of God"? (*The Times of India*, 2018)

Disparate views to the judgement of the Supreme Court were foreseen, given that the years which passed by in anticipation of the decision were replete with divided opinions about the need to allow women of all ages entry into the temple. For instance, the earlier President of the Travancore Devaswom Board, Prayar Gopalakrishnan had in 2015, caused a huge outrage when he was quoted for sharing his views that women across all ages would be allowed to enter the Sabarimala temple only when a machine was invented to scan if it was the right time for a women to enter the temple (*Business Standard*, 2015).

In response to his statement, the #Happytobleed campaign was launched by an Indian college girl Nikita Azad in November 2015, rebelling against the alienation of women during menstruation (*Deccan Chronicle*, 2016). The

campaign encouraged hundreds of Indian women to upload their pictures on social media in support of the theme of #HappyToBleed. The success of the campaign across social media displayed the inclination of men and women of the country to discuss the age-old taboo of menstruation in its role as a sexist tool in the hands of those who fashion them (Sen, 2015).

In another sharp twist to the discussion, Twinkle Khanna - one of India's highest-selling female writers, when asked about the menstruation machine alluded to by Gopalakrishnan, mentioned that men also needed to be checked for celibacy before entering the Sabarimala temple just as women needed to be checked for menstruation (Khanna, 2018). In addition to female lawyers and NGOs discoursing such issues, it is observed that women of high standing like Khanna are openly questioning the lucidity of the religious pronouncements made by men in power.

However, in August 2016, another successful campaign titled #Ready-ToWait was launched by a group of female devotees who indicated the necessity to respect the traditions of the temple and the need to wait till women reached 50 years of age to be able to enter the shrine. Both the campaigns in the hugely contentious debate around the entry of women of all ages into the famous Sabarimala temple received significant traction on social media, signalling the intensity of the dialectic around the existing patriarchal narratives of religion.

In a specific incident, the Hindu Makkal Katchi, a political outfit in the state of Tamil Nadu in India, attributed the devastating floods of August 2018, to the demand for the entry of women across all ages into the Sabarimala temple and the support it received from the leaders of various political parties (*The New Indian Express*, 2018). Incidentally, the state of Kerala was subject to the worst ever floods in nearly a century due to unusually high rainfall in the monsoon season. The proponents of the argument also ignored the construction of buildings in the catchment areas that block the flow of water to drain naturally into the sea. The predisposition to blame women for natural or human-made calamities is an outcome of the non-inclusion of the female perspective in the religious space. The misfortunes were attributed to women similarly during the floods that pummelled the state of Kashmir in 2014. These sectarian opinions disregard the fact that the river Jhelum in Kashmir had inundated the concrete jungle, earlier a low-lying floodplains area. Although the opinions of attributing calamities to women are voiced from small groups of society, the deep-rooted bias against women and their impurity as the cause of problems continues to exist across pockets of most religions in India. Views such as these indicate the lack of female participation at all levels of hermeneutics. While changing mindsets towards the equality of women is likely to evolve over the long term, women are beginning to claim their space in religion, as seen in the Sabarimala case and several others that this article proceeds to mention.

Women's demand for their religious space was similarly witnessed in the Haji Ali Dargah case. In the uprising against patriarchal and misogyny-

nistic pronouncements in religion a large number of women and women's organization in India joined forces against the Haji Ali Dargah Trust for its abrupt decision in 2011–2012 to ban women from entering the shrine that houses the tomb of the famed Sufi saint Sayed Pir Haji Ali Shah Bukhari. The 600-year-old Haji Ali Dargah situated on the islet of Mumbai is a famous religious shrine and pilgrimage centre for Muslims. It is visited by close to ten to fifteen thousand men and women daily who belong to different religions in addition to Islam (Official Website of Haji Ali Dargah Trust, 2018). Access to the inner sanctum at Haji Ali Dargah, earlier provided to men and women through separate entrances was abruptly banned for women in 2011–2012. In response to the ban, Zakia Soman and Noorjehan Niaz, formed a women's organization, the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, initiated a Public Interest Litigation against the Dargah Trust in 2014 before the Bombay High Court quoting that the ban curtailed the right to equality, non-discrimination, and religious freedom of women. In response, the Trust stated that Islam prohibited women from entering the inner sanctum and their proximity to the grave of the male saint was a sin. Additional reasons included that Islam discouraged the „ree mixing“ of the sexes and that the decision to exclude women aimed to protect women from sexual harassment at the shrine (Soman & Niaz, 2016).

In support of the movement, a group of 20 outfits including NGOs and human right activists together created the Haji Ali Sabke Liye campaign. The Hindi title of the movement translates to „Haji Ali is for everyone“ (*First Post*, 2016). The crusade revolved around creating awareness for the right to equal access for both men and women at the sacred Haji Ali Dargah. The Bombay High Court in 2016, ruled in favour of allowing women into the shrine and upholding the constitutional tenet of equality of women. By the end of 2016, the Haji Ali Dargah Trust conceded to the Supreme Court to allow women into the inner sanctum. The freedom for women to enter places of religious worship is symbolic of the equality in society and eliminates the subservient rank accorded to women by the male-led interpretations of religion.

Just as the victory for women in the Haji Ali case indicated the change in the landscape where they rose in opposition against the inequity of the unilateral hermeneutics as made by men, in a similar uprising against Shani Shingnapur temple, women questioned their exclusion and wrestled for their right of equality to offer their prayers at the temple. In the case of the Shani Shingnapur temple, situated at the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, women were not allowed entry for over 400 years as a tradition which held that the Shani deity was to be visited only by male devotees. However, in 2015, a female devotee furtively breached the age-old „men-only“ practice (Ghadyalpatil, 2016). The consequence of the „sacrilegious“ entry led to a series of events including women's organizations and specifically the Bhumata Brigade, an activist organization, protesting against the age-old custom. It culminated with the Bombay High Court in 2016 ruling

in favour of the equality of women and their right to pray at the Shani Shingnapur temple. As seen in the two other instances, there appears to be an increasing remonstrance from women who want to advance from being purely receivers of religion and are now instead staking their claim in its participation as well.

The intensity with which women have questioned their subservient status in male-led religious interpretations is seen to be on the rise across all religions in India irrespective of the size of the following of the religion. Considering the relatively smaller size of the Parsi community, its women have in the recent times challenged Zoroastrian cultural norms regarding the loss of their Parsi identity on marriage to men outside their community. The impact of the loss of their Parsi status extends to not being allowed entry to the Fire Temple and the Tower of Silence. The inability to enter these sacred places also implies they would not be able to attend the final rites of their parents. There have been instances of Parsi women taking up these contentious issues legally in their fight for equality to access places of worship. (Shukla Dasgupta & Sharma, 2018)

Women are seen to be challenging the age-old traditions and customs designed by the patriarchal lens not only concerning equality for access to specific places of worship that ban them from entry but also towards cultural practices. When the advertisement agency FCB Ulka initiated a #NoConditionsApply campaign for the newspaper The Times of India towards inclusivity in the Sindoor Khela ritual, it was adopted by women across the country with great enthusiasm (Campaigns of The World, 2017). The Sindoor Khela ritual is celebrated by married women who smear vermilion on each other the last day of Durga Puja in the state of Bengal. The #NoConditionsApply advocates for the inclusion of women who are widowed, unmarried, divorced, gay and transgenders in the 400-year-old ritual. Women across India who follow the religious ritual adopted its inclusive approach thereby changing the past narrative and bringing about a change in the collective mindset.

In addition to being vocal in inquiring about the interpretations of religion which nearly always excludes the female outlook, women have been equally instrumental in pin-pointing religious leaders who have allegedly misused their leadership and authority under the garb of religion.

### CONDEMNATION OF MALE RELIGIOUS LEADERS FOR PREYING ON WOMEN

Although male religious leaders in India are known to receive the unflinching support of followers, the country has in recent times witnessed the unrest of courageous women, publicly accusing certain male religious leaders of the misuse of their position of leadership and authority under the garb of religion. Notwithstanding the stigma involved, women across the



religious spectrum have started complaining against those male leaders of faith for preying on their female followers.

In a symbol of bravery against the religious milieu steeped in patriarchy, a nun associated with the convent in the Kottayam district of Kerala, lodged a police complaint in September 2018, revealing being raped on 13 instances between 2014 and 2016 by Franco Mulakkal, the bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Jalandhar. The allegation caused a furore within public and religious circles for the lack of response from the clergymen for earlier complaints made by the nun. The nun claimed to have complained about the sexual harassment to the church officials, the Vatican's representative in New Delhi as well as to the Pope in the Vatican despite which there was no action taken against the Bishop. She additionally cited her fear of complaining in detail against the Bishop for the harm he could unleash along with the support of her superiors (Babu, 2018). In support for the fight for justice, five other nuns of the Missionaries of Jesus along with members of Christian reformation organizations staged protests and launched a hunger strike seeking action. The turmoil led to the accused becoming the first Indian Catholic Bishop to be arrested in a case of sexual abuse against a nun.

The complaint by the nun led to a widespread public debate on the misuse of power and authority by male leaders of religious institutions. It is evident that men in positions of leadership in religion, enjoy the respect of the masses and are endowed with unbridled control and enormous power. Women are discouraged and dissuaded from complaining against the misbehaviour of the male leadership for fear of being shamed as seen above or for fear of retribution. In this regard, the famed Indian theologian and former Executive Secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India Commission for Women - Virginia Saldanha, aptly states in her article titled „The power of religion over women in India“:

Religious structures have a negative impact on victims of sexual abuse, too. Women internalize scriptural interpretation that describes woman as sinner, manipulator and temptress. This contributes to their silence on abuse. Seeing the priest in the place of God compounds the confusion and guilt. As a result, the psychosocial and spiritual impact of abuse committed by the clergy is immense on women victims. (Saldanha, 2016)

Complaints by women against male heads of religious institutions arraigning them of misuse of their power and sexual misbehaviour have surfaced in other religions across India as well. In recent times, women have come forward to complain instead of brushing aside such atrocities under the carpet.

Male leaders of religious institutions holding substantial assets have also been under the scanner for complaints of rape by female disciples. The government of the state of Haryana in India has assessed the property of the headquarters of the Dera Sach Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh to be worth INR 1,453 crores. The self-styled Godman owns properties worth an

additional INR 1,600 crores across the state of Haryana (Sehgal, 2017). Yet, the powerful head of the religious outfit Dera Sach Sauda was accused and convicted for the rape and sexual exploitation of two of his female devotees between 1999 and 2001. One of the victims wrote an anonymous letter to the Prime Minister of India of the time Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2002 bringing the case to the broader attention of the country. The eventual conviction led to violence by his followers in the Panchkula and Sirsa districts causing significant loss of life and property as well.

The country lauded the conviction of the Dera Sach Sauda chief. However, it proved yet again that women who were subject to the abuse of the expansive power of the male heads of religious institutions, were not willing to be silenced any longer, as also seen in the case of the religious leader Asaram Bapu.

Bapu, was convicted for sexually assaulting a 16-year-old girl at his ashram on the ruse of curing her of evil spirits in 2013. Bapu was subsequently accused of raping two sisters between 2002 to 2004. The complaint of the 16-year-old victim led to the investigation and conviction of the Godman with life imprisonment (*India Today*, 2018). Unfortunately, the misuse of power by men in leadership positions of religion cuts across different religions. In an incident which has parallels to the above, a Jain monk Shantisagar Maharaj was arrested on charges of raping a 19-year-old female devotee (*Scroll.in*, 2017).

Although the majority of the religious leaders have earned the respect of their followers and known to behave honourably, there exist religious leaders who have masqueraded their misbehaviour under the cloak of religion but brought to justice by women along with the support of society.

#### Women's Foothold in Religious Careers

Men have always been in charge of religion, in their officiation of leadership roles and playing the vital role of the priest. The reasoning that women are impure due to menstruation continues to eliminate them from such opportunities and careers. However, India is gradually beginning to see women break out of the systemic bias and pursue careers earlier reserved only for men.

Women in the Hindu religion have taken up priestly professions after getting trained in schools like the Shankar Seva Samiti and Jnana Prabho-dini situated in Pune in India (Lobo, 2014). Adequately equipped, these women priests are gradually beginning to receive opportunities to perform rituals in Indian households. Despite being trained as experts, they continue to face the hurdle of the broader acceptance in their role as a female priest in society. Ignored and looked down upon by male priests whose fiefdom they encroached upon, female priests claim that the people who hire them for performing the prayers and rituals appreciate their sincerity and attention to detail, found lacking in their male priests. (Heanue, 2018). Despite the hurdles, the numbers of such priests appear to be growing in India. Bhagyalata Pataskar, Director of Vaidik Samshodhana Mandala, an

institute in Pune that imparts education on the Vedas, the ancient Hindu scriptures. estimates that, the state of Maharashtra houses around 2000 women priests (Sen, 2018).

In addition to having garnered a positive reputation of diligence and patience in their veneration of the deities and in performing rituals, female priests are also known to charge lesser fees than their male counterparts. Jnana Prabhodini, has since the 1990's trained 25 female priests in Pune and 13 in another campus in Mumbai through a one-year course. In comparison to the male priests who charge a minimum of INR 5000/- two female priests trained by Prabhodini are known to charge INR 1000/- each for a marriage ceremony. Yet, they counter questions from both men and women in society on whether they are entitled to be priests?

Remarkably, to the question: „Can women be priests?“, the world-famous Indian yogi and founder of the non-profit organization Isha Foundation, Jaggi Vasudev, also widely known as Sadhguru has opined that:

In this country, only the public temples were maintained by men because they were more suitable to manage the public. But there was no home without a little shrine, and these private shrines were always maintained by women. So in that sense, more temples were managed and maintained by women than by men, and it is still so. (Isha, 2013)

Interestingly, women as priests can be witnessed even in the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement which began in 1875 which encouraged women to pursue education and also profess the role of a priest.

Similarly, Muslim women have made strides in their religion. In January 2018, Jamida Beevi became the first Indian Muslim woman to lead the prayers for a mixed-group congregation (Ameerudheen, 2018). Leading the Friday prayer in mixed-congregation at public places is typically effected by men in Islam. Although Beevi continues to receive threats for having done so, she is steadfast in continuing with her role, citing that Islam does not prohibit women from leading prayers.

In another significant move, the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA), an autonomous women's right organization had in February 2018 established a school Darul Uloom Niswaan to train women to become „qazis“. A qazi plays the role of a judge in accordance with Islamic laws and is highly respected within the community for their knowledge and capacity to handle family issues in accord with the Quran. As part of the initiative, 30 women received training on the Quran, Sharia, and laws relating to women's rights along with constitutional laws. Fifteen of them have earned their „qaziyat“ certificates to practice (Basu, 2017). Safia Akhtar, one of the first female qazis mentioned to *The Diplomat* stating „recently, many male qazis haven't been doing their duty. They mislead women, by saying that their decisions are based on the Quran, whereas really, they are just speaking for men's interests“ (Stark, 2016). Similarly, the Jamiat-ul-Mominath seminary at Hyderabad offers Mufti courses for women and have tra-

ined around 355 women as Muftis as of September 2017 (*The Deccan Chronicle*, 2017). Mufti's issue opinions on topics based on the questions keeping in line with Islamic laws and are highly regarded in their community. The recent foray of women into careers in religion that were earlier reserved only for men, speaks volumes about the emerging trend of women claiming their space in all aspects of religions in India.

## THE FINANCIAL ASPECT OF MALE DOMINATION OF RELIGION

Feminist movements have indicated their eagerness to participate in the decisions of governance of the institutes belonging to religion and funds that accumulate thereby. So far, these aspects have been controlled by the men in charge of its management or in their capacity as priests.

In a significant case, the Har-Ki-Pauri, a famous causeway in the ancient Hindu pilgrimage city of Haridwar, has witnessed the demand by women of the families of the male priests for their participation and inclusion in voting rights for the upcoming elections of the management body - the Ganga Sabha. The apex body Ganga Sabha responsible for the running of the Har-Ki-Pauri, manages the religious related affairs at the Har-Ki-Pauri and at Brahmakund causeways at Haridwar. Ever since 1916, when the famous freedom fighter and educationist Pundit Madan Mohan Malviya founded the Sabha, it has been run solely by men. The Ganga Sabha comprises of 782 men who take all decisions in the functioning of the organization. In the light of this age-old custom of „only male“ membership, the recent development of the collective demand for voting rights by women belonging to the families of the priests is significant.

Similarly, women have in their individual capacity as well, questioned the age-old tradition of their male relatives allowed to perform the pooja (veneration or act of worship) in temples and thereby be entitled to partake the offerings received by the temple. In the Sri Kalkaji temple in Delhi, the duties are performed by male priests of two specific families, namely the Bharadwaj family and the Jogi family, who take scheduled turns to receive the temple offerings. The sisters of the priest belonging to the Bharadwaj family pursued the legal route to demand their right to perform duties at the temple and thereby partake in their share of the offerings received as well. The case was upheld by the Delhi High court, leading the priest to resolve the matter through an out-of-court settlement involving a payment of INR 6 lakhs to each of his sisters as their share of the offerings received during the family's turn in performing the duties of the temple.

By breaking from the age-old shackles and by demanding for equitable participation in the management of religious institutions and the funds that accordingly accrue, women are seen to be unfolding a new chapter in the feminist movement in India.

## CONCLUSION

India has in the recent past observed a visible crusade by women inquiring into their religious rights and the hermeneutics led exclusively by men. By doing so, they have been able to gradually, begin to shift the needle of male fiefdom over religious interpretations. In challenging religious interpretations against the backdrop of their constitutional rights, women are beginning to make strides in bringing about a debate for equality and inclusivity in religion. As the country is waking up to women stirring discussions on equality against age-old religious traditions and norms, women are also experiencing conflicting notions around the appropriateness of venturing into such areas.

The quest for altering the patriarchy in deep-rooted religious sentiments has had the support of the laws of the land. As Justice DY Chandrachud, who was part of the bench deciding on the Sabarimala case stated: „The Constitution embodies a vision of social transformation...The social exclusion of women, based on menstrual status, is a form of untouchability which is an anathema to constitutional values. Notions of ‘purity and pollution,’ which stigmatize individuals, have no place in a constitutional order.”

With the steadfast backing of the country’s judiciary in maintaining the equality of the genders, women are raising questions for their due space in religion. One such pertinent question is included in the video clip of the trailer to the documentary by Disha Arora on „Women and Religion in India: a Documentary on Women’s Rights.” It enquires about the reasoning behind female Jain monks who are older or who have received Diksha before male monks being required to worship the younger or junior male monks and not being the other way round (Arora, 2018). Diksha in Jainism refers to the consecration ritual for renouncing the worldly life and adopting that of the ascetic. Questions such as these are slowly but increasingly raised by women in all religions across India.

A 2015 survey by Pew Research indicates that the number of women who consider themselves to be „atheist”, „agnostic”, or „having no religion” has tripled between the years 1993 to 2013 (Bianco, 2016). Just as women in the west appear to be challenging the status-quo around religion, so are women in India currently doing so, although in the larger sense, the feminist movement in India has unfolded in the last two decades. The feminist movement in India challenging the male hegemony in religion is in a nascent phase and is seen to be visibly questioning the moral compass as set by men in religion and the male grip over the finances of religion. The movement has also made humble forays into careers in religion till now safeguarded by men.

As questions opposing the holy exclusion of women abound, it is worth speculating, if such uprisings would have a long way to go before it is marked as a unique wave of feminism specific to India? It is also to be pondered upon, if such movements bear the intended results as expected by feminists? On a similar vein, given that the quest for space in religion has been set in motion by the women in India, is it likely for more such campa-

igns to qualify it to evolve into becoming the zeitgeist of the current times in the country? The holy exclusion of women is certainly a space that merits observation, for the enormous impact that the feminist movement can have on the larger narrative of the lives of men and women in India.

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