
UNIT 3 WOMEN'S PLACE IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

The worth of a civilisation can be judged from the position that it gives to women. Of the several factors that justify the greatness of India's ancient culture, one of the greatest is the honoured place ascribed to women. Manu, the great law-giver, said long ago, "*Yatra naryastu pujoyante ramante tatra Devata, yatra itaastu na pujoyante sarvaastatrafalaah kriyaah*" (Manusmriti, 3.56), which translated, reads, "wherever women are given their due respect, even the deities like to reside there and where they are not respected, all action remains unfruitful." According to ancient Hindu scriptures, no religious rite can be performed with perfection by a man without the participation of his wife. Wife's participation is essential to any religious rite. Married men, along with their wives, are allowed to perform sacred rites on the occasion of various important festivals. Wives are thus befittingly called 'Ardhangani' (betterhalf). They are given not only important but equal position with men. A society grows if the women grow, if they partake of the spirit of progress, for they are the proverbial domestic legislators, they are the matrix of social life.

The position of the women in ancient period was good. They enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later (approximately 500 B.C), the status of women began to decline with the Smritis (especially Manusmriti) and with the Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal empire and later Christianity curtailing women's freedom and rights. The Indian women's position further deteriorated during the medieval period when Sati, Child marriages and a ban on widow remarriages became part of social life in India. The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought the purdah practice in the Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practiced. In some parts of India, the Devdasis or the temple women were sexually exploited. Polygamy was widely practiced especially among Hindu Kshatriya rulers. In many Muslim families, women were restricted to Zenana areas.

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you will be able to understand

- The place of women in Hinduism and Muslim society
- The place of women in Buddhism and Jainism
- The place of women in Christianity.

3.2 WOMEN IN HINDUISM

To understand the social and cultural life of the Hindus and their view on women, one must understand Hinduism. Hinduism is for the world and there is no 'unworldliness' in it. In Hindu society, every worldly activity is under the control of religion. It orders ceremonies throughout one's life and gives instructions to one's descendants, which they must follow in order that his happiness may be secured.

3.2.1 Women in the Vedic Period

The position of women in the Vedic period may be judged by the way in which the birth of a girl is received. The Vedic society was a patriarchal one, and hence father was the head of the family (Kapadia, 1966, p.82). All efforts were made to secure the birth of son. The birth of a daughter was looked upon with disfavour (Dutt, R. C, 1967, p.89).

There are numerous hymns in the Rig-Veda indicating, women were assigned a high place in the *Vedic* society. The *Rig Veda* (IX, 112) says: "A bard I am, my father a leech,/ And my mother is a grinder of corn,/ Diverse in means, but all wishing wealth,/ Equally we strive for cattle."

Ghosha, Apala, Lopamudra, Vishwara, Surya, Indrani, Yami, Romasha – all these names highlight the position and the esteem which Hindu women enjoyed in the Vedic period. 'Devi-Sukta' of the Rigveda is courtesy 'vac' (daughter of sage Ambhrna). In a theosophical debate between Shankaracharya and Mandana Mishra, the latter's wife was appointed to be the judge – obviously because of her superior knowledge and spiritual attainments. Vrihadaranyakopanishad (2.34) gives the evidence of Maitreyi opting for Brhamvidya rather than wealth and worldly pleasures. Women were also allowed to observe celibacy (Atharvaveda 12.3.17) and study Vedas. Not only this, the Ashvalayana and Gobhil Grihyasutras and Harit-Dharmasutra show even the sacred thread ceremony (the Upanayana Samskara) being performed for women. Women used to teach also (Paninikalin Bharat, p.281). Additionally, queens like Kaikeyi helped their husbands in the

battlefield. It would thus be seen that at that time there was not a single area where women did not take part or excel their male counterparts.

As far as the history of ordinary womenfolk goes, their position on the whole was free. Girls were normally not married till they were in their late teens and sometimes even later. They had a fair amount of choice in the selection of a mate, which is evidenced by the – then prevalence of the “*swayamvara-system*”. The cases of Sita, Damayanti, Draupadi, Shakuntala (the adopted daughter of sage Kanva) are the instances of the choice women enjoyed in choosing their husbands. From birth till death a Hindu had (and even today has) to perform hundreds of ceremonies and not even one of them could be performed without the presence of the wife (Rigveda 5.102).

3.2.2 Women in the Post-Vedic Period

The period after 300 B.C witnessed a succession of invasions and influx of foreigners such as the Greeks, the Scythians, the Parthian, the Kushans and others. The political misfortunes, the war atrocities followed by long spells of anarchy and lawlessness had a disastrous effect on the society. Fear and insecurity haunted the common people and householders. Sons were valued higher than the daughters because of the need for more fighting males, in order to survive the waves of onslaughts. It was also imperative to protect women from abductors. It therefore became necessary to curtail women's freedom and movements'. Early marriage was perhaps employed as a part of those defensive measures. The education of the girl child was no longer a priority. Sastras too compromised by accepting marriage as a substitute for Upanayanam and education.

3.2.3 Women during Medieval Period

During the 7th to the 9th century A. D, we find that the general level of the culture and position of women was high. Women, including those not belonging to the higher classes, had some opportunities for liberal education, as well as training in fine arts (especially those of painting, music and versification). Rajyashree (sister of the renowned king Harshvardhana) was a disciple of Lord Buddha and her advice was sought on various important matters. Rajshekhar (Kavya-Mimamsa) quotes examples of princesses, daughters of high officials, of courtesans, and of concubines who were poetesses as well as adepts in sciences. Avantisundari, the wife of the poet Rajshekhar, was an exceptionally accomplished woman. Rajshekhar's *Karpurmanjari* was produced at her request and Hemachandra quotes three of her stanzas. The dramas and prose romances of this age also illustrate the contemporary state of learning among women. Here we find that court ladies and even the queens' maids-in-waiting are capable of composing excellent Sanskrit and Prakrit verses. Shila-Mahadevi, wife of Rashtrakuta emperor Dhruva, probably ruled jointly with her husband and enjoyed the privilege of granting large gifts. Several queens of the Kara dynasty ruled in Orissa. Sugandha and Didda of Kashmir administered extensive kingdoms as dowager queens.

The political condition also appears to have had their impact on the status of women. The political reverses, the atrocities due to war and the decline of prosperity, produced a detrimental effect on the society. The preaching of Upnadishism, Buddhism and Jainism started spreading and the status of widow was badly affected. Remarriage of widows was stopped and they were asked to devote themselves to an ascetic life at home. The tonsure (shaving of head) of the widow was enforced by about the eighth century A.D; the purdah system was widely used in the middle class families. There was a marked deterioration in the status of woman in the medieval period (Altekar, 1966, p.13).

3.2.4 Women in Modern Period

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the status of women was improved by the untiring efforts of the following social reformers among others:

- i. Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833)
- ii. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820—1871)
- iii. Dayanand Saraswati (1827-1883)
- iv. Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884)

The important reason of the change in the social status of women in the nineteenth century is the acceptance of the tenets of liberal philosophy from the Western civilisation. It emphasised the principle of contract not the status, a rational outlook of life and its problems, freedom of speech, criticism of authority, authenticity of dogmas and insistence on the rights of man as opposed to his duties.

For the first time in India, social legislation was enacted by the Government in nineteenth century. Rammohan Rai informed Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor-General of India, that there was no mention of sati in the ancient Hindu religious books. Accordingly, in 1829, he abolished sati and made it a crime. Ram Mohan Rai established Bramasamaj and advocated the principle of freedom of women and equality of sexes. The untiring effort of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar promulgated the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 and thus widow remarriage became legal. The great leaders of the nineteenth century saw the pathetic condition of thousands of child widows because of the practice of early marriage that was prevalent throughout the society.

In the last decade of the century, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) also gave a great impetus for the liberation of women from seclusion and bondage. He said, “That country and that nation which did not respect women have never become great nor will ever be in the future.” He advocated the liberation of women and equality on the basis of the vedantic ideals that state: “One and the same self is present in all beings.” According to him, the helplessness and dependence of women on man are due to the training given to her by men. In case she is not governed tyrannically her hidden power will make her a lioness. He emphasised that proper education will enable her to solve her problems and have independent thinking.

In 1917, Annie Besant (1847-1933), enlightened British women who settled down in India since 1803, launched the Home Rule agitation for the liberation of women. She was elected the President of the Calcutta Session of the Indian National Congress. In 1918, The Calcutta Session opined that the eligibility to all elective bodies concerned with the local Government and Education. In 1919 the Nagpur Session was attended by about 200 women delegates. This was also a striking evidence of the political awakening of the Indian women. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged thousands of women to participate in the political movement. Gandhi’s fundamental faith in the equality of women was based, “on non-violence, women have a much right to establish her own destiny as man has to establish his.” He contradicted the preaching of Dharama Sastras for the injustice done to women. He expressed his opinion about the religious texts written after 300 B.C. that they advocate social inequality, promotion of child marriage and widowhood till death. According to Gandhi only the preaching of the Dharmasatras need to be followed that

advocate social equality and social justice, between man and man and between man and woman. He openly said, "I passionately desire utmost freedom of our women" (Gandhi, M. K, 1968).

3.3 WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

Buddhism rose as a protest against the steadily rigidifying Brahmanism. In the post-Vedic period the dominance of rituals increasingly grew, thereby giving indomitable power to the Brahmins. Buddhism emphasised the superfluity of any intermediary between God and man and further opened the portals of religion to all human beings without any distinction.

There is not the slightest doubt that the Buddha was the first religious teacher who gave women equal and unfettered opportunities in the field of spiritual development. Although he had pointed out on several occasions the natural tendencies and weakness of women, he had also given due credit to their abilities and capabilities. He truly paved the way for women to lead a full religious life. They were able to develop and purify their minds and realise the bliss of Nibbana just as men were. The testimonies of the Theris (Nuns) in the days of the Buddha speak amply to this fact. Gautama Buddha permitted women to join his monastic community and fully participate in it, although there were certain provisos or *garudhammas*. As Susan Murcott comments, "The nun's sangha or *bhikkhuni sangha* - the Order of Nuns – was a radical experiment of his time that truly opened to women new avenues of culture and social service and ample opportunities for public life"(Murcott, Susan, 1991, p.4).

3.3.1 Social Attitude towards Women at the Time of The Buddha

The social attitude towards women in the pre-Buddhist days can be traced from the early Vedic literature, such as the Rigveda. A woman was looked down upon as a mere possession or a thing. Her place was the home, under the complete whims and fancies of her husband. She not only had to perform all the domestic chores, but also had to bring up a large family. Some of the priestly caste Brahmins married and lived with their wives, yet regarded food cooked by women as impure and unfit to eat. A myth was built up - that all women were regarded as sinful and the only way to keep them out of mischief was to keep them endlessly occupied with the task of motherhood and domestic duties.

According to what the Buddha taught about the Law of Karma, one is responsible for one's own action and its consequence. The well-being of a father or grandfather does not depend upon the action of the son or grandson. They were responsible for their own actions. Such enlightened teachings helped to correct the views of many people and naturally reduced the anxiety of women who were unable to produce sons to perform the 'rites of the ancestors'.

In the early Buddhist period, an unmarried girl could go along, unabused, contented and adequately occupied in caring for parents and younger brothers and sisters. She might even become the owner of great possessions and rich fields; as did Subha, the daughter of a goldsmith, during the time of the Buddha. But when the Dhamma was taught to her by Mahaprajapati, Subha realised the nature of all fleeting pleasures and that 'silver and gold lead neither to peace nor to enlightenment', with the result that she entered the Order of Buddhist Nuns. This act was a great boon to unmarried women.

3.3.2 Woman's Nature

Despite the fact that the Buddha elevated the status of women, he was practical in his observations and advice given from time to time in that he realised the social and physiological differences that existed between men and women. These were depicted in the Anguttara Nikaya and Samyutta Nikaya. It was clearly mentioned that a man's duty is his unending quest for knowledge, the improvement and stabilisation of his skill and craftsmanship, and dedication to his work and ability to find the wherewithal for the maintenance and sustenance of his family. On the other hand it was stated, as a matter of fact, that it was the woman's duty to look after the home, and to look after her husband.

The Anguttara Nikaya contained some valuable advice which the Buddha gave to young girls prior to their marriage. Realising that there were bound to be difficulties with the new in-laws, the girls were enjoined to give every respect to their mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law, serving them lovingly as they would their own parents. They were requested to honour and respect their husband's relatives and friends, thus creating a congenial and happy atmosphere in their new homes. They were also advised to study and understand their husband's nature, ascertain their activities, character and temperament, and to be useful and co-operative at all times in their new homes. They should be polite, kind and watchful in their relationship with the servants and should safe-guard their husband's earnings and see to it that all household expenditures were properly regularised. Such advice given by the Buddha more than twenty-five centuries ago, is still valuable today.

Although in certain sections of the Tripitaka some caustic comments were made on the wiles and behaviour of women, the Buddha, in the Samyutta Nikaya, did bring forth many redeeming features: under certain circumstances, women are considered more discerning and wise than men and women are also considered capable of attaining perfection or sainthood after treading the noble Eightfold path.

The Buddha's attitude towards women can also be seen when the news of the birth of a daughter was brought to his friend, King Kosala. The King was displeased at the news as he expected a son, but the Buddha, unlike any other religious teacher, paid a glowing tribute to women and mentioned certain characteristics that adorn a woman in the following words:

"Some women are indeed better (than men). Bring her up, O Lord of men. There are women who are wise, virtuous, who have high regard for mothers-in-law, and who are chaste. To such a noble wife may be born a valiant son, a Lord of Realms, who will rule a kingdom" (Horner, I. B., 1975, p.66).

3.3.3 Real Religious Freedom for Women

The establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha - the Order of Nuns, in the 5th year of the Buddha's ministry, really paved the way for full religious freedom for women in the days of the Buddha. It was a splendid success. There arose many eminent nuns who shone brilliantly in the study and practice of the Dhamma. In the eyes of the world, Buddhism was raised to a very high level. The Psalms of the Sisters (Therigatha) containing 77 verses by individual nuns is one of the prides of Buddhist literature.

The Buddha did not place any restrictions on the nuns in the matter of teaching and preaching of the Dhamma. The Bhikkhuni Order produced a remarkable number of

brilliant preachers and exponents of the Dhamma e.g. Sukha, Patacara, Khema, Dhammadinna and Maha Prajapati (the foster mother of the Buddha). Buddhism never shared the Brahmin's view that a son was essential for the father's passage to heaven. Daughters became quite as good as sons and marriage was no longer a compulsory necessity. Women, under Buddhism, had the liberty to lead an independent life and go about their own business. The Buddha by granting women an active share in the religious life also helped to raise their status in secular life as well.

3.3.4 Towards Equality and Freedom

Real freedom is freedom from all forms of bondage that can be achieved only through proper spiritual development and purification of one's own mind - purging and cleansing oneself from all taints of greed, hatred and delusion. No amount of public debates, demonstrations and universal charters could bring true freedom - except through one's own diligence and heedfulness by the regular practice of meditation as taught by the Buddha.

3.4 WOMEN IN JAINISM

In the time of Mahavira, Jainism brought a more enlightened attitude to Indian religious culture. Jainism is a religious equality, devoted to recognising the rights of all living creatures; so not surprisingly it accepts that women are able to play their part on the road of liberation.

The Mahavira period, regarded best in the Jain community for the status of women, who made then a crucial revolt against the existing tradition and extended his solid support to uplift this very important but most neglected organ of the family where they became least powerful and most disregarded and controlled bitterly by men in each and every sphere. Considering all these nefarious practices and alimentative attitude of men towards women, Mahavira stood against these pernicious social elements and freed them from indignation for their own progress in all walks of life.

Some reservations had, of course to be observed due to the slight physical incapability of women. Hence, some special rules were prescribed for nuns. Though they used to be heads of their units as Pravartini and Ganavacchedini, similar to Acarya and Upadhyaya, there were entirely responsible to the Acaryas, Candana, Puspacula, Subarata, and other well-known nuns of long ago, are referred to this context. Even the patriarchal form of the society was developed and nuns were treated as slightly inferior to monks in certain respects. This however, does not hold women as anything less than human beings who, like all souls, have the right and capability to attain salvation.

Although Jainism is in many ways dedicated to equality, for some Jains a woman's femaleness creates spiritual inequality. The Digambara Jain sect believes that women cannot achieve liberation without being reborn as men first. The Svetambara sect disagrees.

Women in Jainism are treated within the same code of ethics as that is prescribed for men. Jainism advocates the code of ethics comprising of the five virtues of non-violence (AHIMSA), truth (SATYA), non-stealing (ACHAURRYA), purity of body and mind (BRAHMACHARYA) and non-possessiveness (APARIGRAHA). These codes of ethics are same for men and women. As per Jainism both men and women are supposed to

play their common roles of helping each other, working for the common welfare of all humanity, and protecting the environment. Each is responsible for his/her moral conduct.

Jainism considers men and women as equals. In reality because of the gender stereotyping that has taken place for thousands of years in a patriarchal society and inherent biological differences between men and women, the roles prescribed for men and women are different especially in a social and cultural setup. Nevertheless, men and women are equal in the eyes of Jainism for the concerns of welfare of their children and family and the roles played by them are equally important.

3.5 WOMEN IN MUSLIM SOCIETY

Women in Islam culture is a contentious issue. However, in many places the Quran says women are equal before God. The treatment of women in Islamic countries varies; while not directly commanded by the letter of the Qur'an, religious arguments are used to justify Islamic women's rights.

The complex relationship between women and Islam is defined in both Islamic texts and the history of culture of the Muslim world Sharia (Islamic Law) provides for differences between women's and men's roles, rights and obligations. Muslim-majority countries give women varying degrees of rights with regards to marriage, divorce, civil rights, legal status, dress code, and education based on different interpretations.

Islamic law is the product of Quranic guidelines, as understood by Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), as well as of the interpretations derived from various traditions of Muhammad (hadith), which were also selected by a number of historical Islamic scholars. Followers of Islam are broadly divided into a) Sunnis (overwhelmingly adherents of the teachings of Imam Abu Hanifa) and b) Shias (predominantly mainline Twelve Imamites). They are roughly 5:1 in proportion. Sunnis and Shias accord the same status to their women folk. Women are clearly subservient to men, but not commodified as they are in Wahabi households.

To analyse the impact of Islam on the status of women we have to look at the immediate pre-Islam Meccan society. It was tribal but had an active mercantile class. Mecca was at the crossroads of caravan routes and its denizens were exposed to diverse cultures. It was, of course, male dominated, but there were note-worthy women too. The prophet's first wife was a businesswoman; the prophet had actually been her employee. The first Umayyad ruler's (Muaviya) mother Hinda actually controlled her clan and incited them to fight against Muslims. Women used to openly propose to men. Infact when the prophet accompanied by his uncle, was going to visit his future wife Bibi Khatija to propose to her, a woman stopped him on the way and offered him a hundred camels if he would marry her.

Noah Feldman, a law professor at Harvard University, notes: "As for sexism, the common law long denied married women any property rights or indeed legal personality apart from their husbands. When the British applied their law to Muslims in place of Shariah, as they did in some colonies, the result was to strip married women of the property that Islamic law had always granted them — hardly progress toward equality of the sexes"(Noah Feldman, March 16, 2008).

During the early reforms under Islam in the 7th century, reforms in women's rights affected marriage, divorce and inheritance. Women were not accorded with such legal

status in other cultures, including the West, until centuries later. The Oxford Dictionary of Islam states that the general improvement of the status of women included prohibition of female infanticide and recognising women's full personhood. "The dowry, previously regarded as a bride-price paid to the father, became a nuptial gift retained by the wife as part of her personal property." Under Islamic law, marriage was no longer viewed as a "status" but rather as a "contract", in which the woman's consent was imperative. "Women were given inheritance rights in a patriarchal society that had previously restricted inheritance to male relatives." William Montgomery Watt states that Muhammad, in the historical context of his time, can be seen as a figure who testified on behalf of women's rights and improved things considerably. Watt explains: "At the time Islam began, the conditions of women were terrible - they had no right to own property, were supposed to be the property of the man, and if the man died everything went to his sons." Muhammad, however, by "instituting rights of property ownership, inheritance, education and divorce, gave women certain basic safeguards." Haddad and Esposito state that "Muhammad granted women rights and privileges in the sphere of family life, marriage, education, and economic endeavors, rights that help improve women's status in society"(Haddad, Esposito, 1997, p.163).

Women are allowed to work in Islam, subject to certain conditions, and even recommended to do so if they are in financial need. This is supported by the Quranic example of two female shepherds; Islam recognises that the society needs women to work for the sake of development. In general, women's right to work is subject to certain conditions:

- The work should not require the woman to violate Islamic law (e.g., serving alcohol), and be mindful of the woman's safety.
- If the work requires the woman to leave her home, she must maintain her modesty.
- A woman may not remain in isolation with an adult male, because as per Hadith, the third one among them is the devil, thus chances of going astray will be avoided.
- Her work should not affect more important commitments, such as those towards her family.

According to a saying attributed to Muhammad, women are allowed to go to mosques. However, as Islam spread, it became unusual for women to worship in mosques because of fears of unchastity caused by interaction between sexes; this condition persisted until the late 1960s. Since then, women have become increasingly involved in the mosque, though men and women generally worship separately. Separation between sexes ranges from men and women on opposite sides of an aisle, to men in front of women (as was the case in the time of Muhammad), to women in second-floor balconies or separate rooms accessible by a door for women only.

3.6 WOMEN IN CHRISTIANITY

The image of woman in one particular religion, in this case Christianity, is far from being uniform; it always includes several aspects, possibly exclusive of each other. At certain times, some traits may become more prominent than others due to extraneous reasons. As the earlier views on women seem to be more differentiated than later ones when positions have become more fixed and rigid, we tend to react strongly against the image of the most immediate past, the image of woman closest to us (Tavard, G. H., 1973).

Two quite different images of the nature and status of woman can be inferred from the two accounts of creation in the Old Testament. The two divergent traditions can be followed right through Biblical literature. Social conditions assigned an inferior position to women but Jesus's behaviour, as recorded in the Gospels, does not follow traditional Jewish reserve. To his companions' surprise, he speaks with the Samaritan woman at the well. He heals women as well as men, entertains relations of friendship with Martha and Mary. The group of his followers includes both married and unmarried women. His teaching on marriage implies the equality of man and woman. This will be of great importance for the concept of womanhood in the early Church; it was at variance with the mainstream of the rabbinic tradition (Ibid., p. 20).

However, the ambiguity of the status of women comes out strongest in the writings of St. Paul. There are those texts which clearly express the subordination of women. For centuries, Pauline teaching that woman is the glory of man and that women are not allowed to speak in Church was taken as the scriptural justification of woman's subjugation to man and the exclusion of women from liturgical activity in Christian Churches. The married woman stands at the bottom of a hierarchy at the top of which is God. Christ and husband mediate in between, so that the woman seems further removed from Christ and from God than her husband (Ibid., p.28).

The striving for an acting out of spiritual freedom found in baptism, and for a realisation of the kingdom of God on earth in tension with the given social environment, characterises much of the history of early Christianity. In principle, there was the equality of women with men found through baptism; in practice, however, the living out of this spiritual freedom could only be realised through strong asceticism and lived by an ascetic elite. Logically, the spiritual freedom given to woman in baptism should have been followed by her complete emancipation in the world. This consequence, however, is only coming into force today.

3.6.1 Ideals of Asceticism

Historically, the freedom of venture and new experiment was soon curtailed when the immediacy of the coming of the kingdom of God receded into the background as only a remote possibility. Christians became settled; the church had to accommodate itself to the world at large. Injunctions for the behaviour and status of women were modelled on the example of the Hellenistic and Roman environment; women were assigned to their customary, subordinate position. Liberation, found in the New Testament through the experience of baptism, was now only possible through the strictest asceticism, a path theoretically open to both men and women. However, many ascetic writings also reflect a strong anti feminist character. The view of woman, as an embodiment of evil and at the root of all, sexual evil gained strong support. Woman was seen as a creature of imperfection and congenital weakness.

It is equally important to remember that only relatively late in the early history of Christian thought did marriage come to be considered a sacrament. In the first centuries, marriage was mainly a family and civic affair. The ordinary Christian woman had the status assigned to her by society. Only the consecrated virgin could claim equality with men as a member of an ascetic elite. Both Western and Eastern Christianity promoted the life of consecrated virginity but the Western Church tended to separate, much more than was ever the case in the East, the liturgical service of the Lord from contact with women. In the West, the marriage of priests was abolished by the decision of a Council in the twelfth century;

instead of the custom dying out, however, we find much clerical concubinage in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the desire of priests to marry reappeared. The Protestant Churches of the reformation all allowed their ministers to marry whilst the Council of Trent reiterated the prohibition of clerical marriage in the Catholic Church, this time with a great deal of success. New questioning of this decision is only recurring in our own day.

3.6.2 No Adequate Model of Woman

The double typology of womanhood – subordination or equality – is reflected in many contemporary Christian writings, both Catholic and Protestant. Referring to various Catholic models of womanhood, the central problem was the open schizophrenia they imply. There is the presence of contradictory streams of thought to see woman as weak and as a symbol of temptation, and to idealise her as a symbol of transcendent goodness.... Encomiums of the feminine ideal and praises of the Virgin Mary notwithstanding, the position of woman reflects the idea of her debility rather than any other of the elements of the total Catholic tradition.... Thus it happens that Catholics who wish to promote the rights of women today confront us with the humanistic tradition of Simone de Beauvoir, with Freudian reconstructions or, at a lower level of sophistication, with statistical data on women in and out of wedlock (Ibid., p.149).

The conclusion to be drawn from a survey of the Christian tradition is that there exists no fully adequate Christian model of woman which would meet modern women's requirements and this can be said of the traditional image of woman in all religious traditions.

3.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit, you have learnt about the position of the women in different periods of civilisation- ancient, medieval and modern period. In the ancient ages, women enjoyed equal status and rights, especially during the early Vedic period. However, later (approximately 500 B.C), the status of women began to decline with the Smritis (especially Manusmriti) and with the Islamic invasion and the Mughal empire and later Christianity curtailing women's freedom and rights. The Indian women's position further deteriorated during the medieval period when Sati, Child marriages and a ban on widow remarriages became part of social life in India. The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought the purdah practice in the Indian society. The status of women as accorded in various religions was exclusively dealt with in this Unit.

3.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the role of women in different cultures.
2. Compare and contrast the role of women in Hinduism and Islam.
3. Compare and contrast the role of women in Buddhism and Jainism.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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