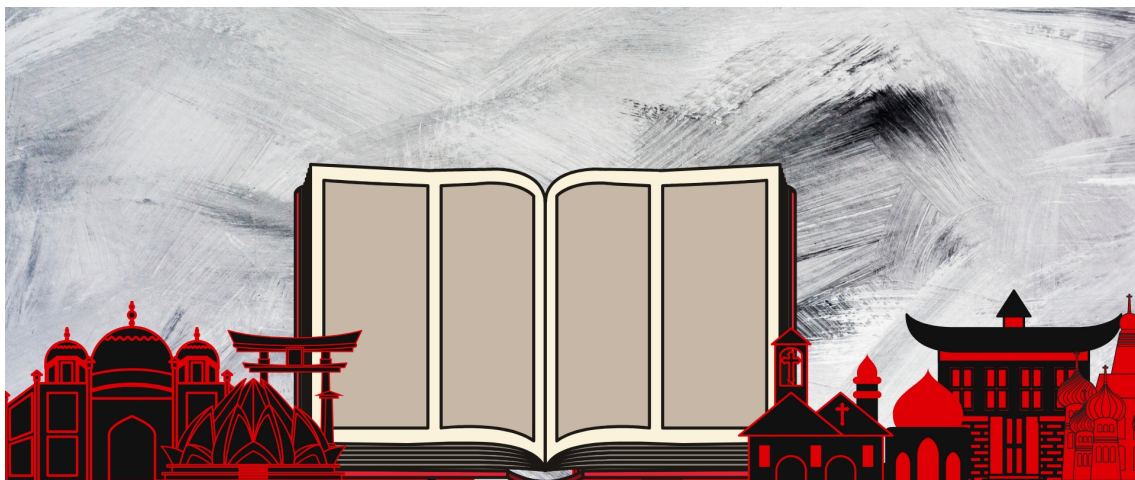


How Can Feminist Theology Reduce Gender Inequality in Religion?

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While judgments that have granted women entry into religious spaces have been hailed as progressive, it must be remembered that religion continues to perpetrate covert forms of inequalities for women.

The recent Supreme Court judgment allowing women to enter the Sabarimala temple has walked a tightrope, in handling the tense stand-off between claims of individual rights and gender equality on the one hand, and matters of faith and religiosity on the other. The judgement has been met with two extreme responses. The Hindutva right is in opposition while the liberals have largely been in agreement with it. The chorus of celebratory voices on women's right to enter religious spaces has opened up several questions of equality, freedom and rights for women by ostensibly challenging gender, and caste-based hierarchies. On the one hand, the Hindutva position of *upping the ante* by disrupting women's entry despite the order is constitutionally perilous and unbecoming of a civilised social order.

It must, on the other hand, be remembered that the overzealousness of the liberals overlooks the critical point that religion reinforces covert forms of inequalities and oppression for women. B R Ambedkar, while agitating for the rights of Dalits to enter Hindu temples, argued that doing away with religious exclusion was an issue of civil rights and

provided only symbolic equality.

While allowing women to participate in worship seems equal, it seeks to legitimise and concretise the structures that reinforce gender inequality

“A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze”
(Atwood 1985).

Of similar entrapments is the delusive idea of imagined freedoms and equality for women sought in the maze of religion. Such a quest for equality within the confines of religion is an unrewarding exercise, with the right of being “let in” only an eyewash in the name of equality. Religion and its artefacts, through the mere act of making themselves accessible to women, cannot ensure equality. They will continue to perpetuate the same inequalities, if not worse.

Amidst the frenzy of the Hindutva parties opposing the judgment, and disrupting the entry of women and the liberals hailing the judgment as progressive and invoking greater gender equality, religious scriptures would probably be having the last laugh. The opposition to entry supports the power inequality rooted in scriptures, denying equality even in symbolism. The merry around the entry would also be legitimising gender inequalities that the preachings would offer.

Inherent Discrimination in Faith and Its Protocols

Across cultures and religions, protocols of faith have applied differently to women and men, especially in places of worship. These decrees are issued by patriarchal, hegemonic religious bodies, and are far more stringent about the inequalities than the scriptures themselves.

All organised religions treat their women unequally. Across faiths, the high seats of religion “express and serve a patriarchal civilization in which it is proper for a woman to be appended to man” (Beauvoir 1949). No religion has an equal definition of property rights for men and women. Without this crucial tenet, how can gender equality be ensured? Religion has emerged as a major institution for the social control of women, and a politically useful instrument of justifying social hierarchies.

Once the discourse on religions serving inequality gains steam, almost all saviours claim equality through grants of selective “rights” (read allowances).

Interestingly, and almost invariably, whenever the question of women’s equality within the predicaments of religion is posed, the immediate reaction is diversionary antics that aim to shift the terms of the discourse. This usually manifests in cultivating the idea of relative freedoms and relative equalities one religion grants over another, giving a false sense of superiority and comfort about belonging to a particular religion.

For example, when the issue of women's entry into temples arises, the immediate response is usually that it happens in mosques and dargahs too. Comparing these relative freedoms diverts the debate from gender-equality within a religion, to a competition of which religion offers the most freedoms to its women. While many religious organisations continue as highly sex-segregated institutions, some religious organisations are making a transition from being male-dominated to "letting women in". This change must be assessed very carefully since on a superficial level, it can serve to further the illusion of enhanced freedom.

What Happens after Entry is Granted?

The demand for religious rights and equality—apart from efforts across religions to fight the denial of rights to women entering places of worship—has often involved taking the fight to male-dominated religious boards that govern shrines.

Another way in which women ask for equality within religions is by taking on the role of clergy-people.

One of the *causes célèbres* in the debate for equality is the ordination of women, resistance to which, both in denominations where ordination occurred, and in denominations where it has not been sanctioned, has been widespread (Lehman 1985; Nason-Clark 1987).

Arguing from both the scriptural text and the example of ancient church practice, women theologians argue for the ordination of women and for an equal role in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. However, women theology scholars within religious organisations are often found at the bottom of the ladder, facing the same barrier of prejudice and discrimination that stops them from rising higher up the hierarchy. It is also noteworthy that in countries like Sweden and Denmark, in which women achieve the highest level in most professions and are broadly represented in political life, are also places where women serve as ministers and adopt other leadership roles in churches. The official Church of Sweden has ordained women since 1958 and the Lutheran State Church of Denmark also ordains women and admits them as bishops.

However, if women are ordained within the confines of the prevailing apostolic order, it is merely a perpetuation of the same inequality that women experience in religion. What are they preaching? How can women's equal participation in religions that preach inequality unto themselves be a desirable thing in the name of equality itself? A comparable situation would be if, in addition to Brahmins, Dalits also began to preach the message of the *Manusmriti* (which preaches that Dalits should be oppressed), and that was seen as reducing inequalities.

Seeking equality through religion seems counterproductive since religion remains embedded in patriarchal norms and inequalities. It cannot be a path to equality. Religion and its artefacts, in echoing the patriarchy, can never define equality to women. While there

is a struggle to go beyond the permissible limits of religion, this struggle can potentially reinforce the existing inequalities that one seeks to fight.

Is Feminist Theology an Answer?

Women in theology, as discussed above, confine themselves to the teaching and study of the existing tenets of religion, without asking for a change therein. Women have sometimes found space in religious institutions to organise on their own behalf; at other times they have created female-based religious groups.

Feminist theologians attempt to address parallel problems within the structures of religion against the secondary role of women. Although feminist theologians agree that organised religion has historically oppressed, subjugated, and marginalised women, they seek greater justice, freedom, and equity for women within the confines of religion itself.

To this end, feminist theology seeks ways to eliminate patriarchal concepts that are related to ancient culture while leaving the intended message unharmed. Important arenas include the ordination of women, a new language about God, and greater denominational recognition of the needs and contributions of women. Other methods comprise goddess worship, with some proponents establishing their own sects devoted to the worship of female power such as fertility and imagination. Ranging from outright rejection of religion, to acting from within traditional religions or denominational lines, feminist theology could range from the use of gender-neutral names for God, the abolition of perceived archaic rules regarding the behaviour and attire of women, and recognition of the spiritual and moral equality of women and men.

Of special mention in the context are Elizabeth Cady Stanton's work, *The Woman's Bible* (1895), and Mary Daly's work, *The Church and the Second Sex* (1985), which were attacks on institutionalised religion and its treatment of women. Stanton's work was a popular bestseller. Ironically, however, it led to the suffrage movement distancing itself from Stanton's broader scope, which included attacks on traditional religion.

This shows that there are severe limits to how much change feminist theology can bring. One important question to ask is why "enlightened" women would agree to be a part of a fold that crushes them. Another concern it highlights is that it is not an easy pursuit to uproot settled and accepted ideas of femininity.

Religion, the hardest barrier that women must overcome in the path to gender equality, has to be crossed by taking recourse to progressive laws that overrule the inherent inequalities. Political economy reforms leading to a more equal redistribution of property and resources can be a possible answer. Legally enforcing equal property rights remains a desirable prerequisite to women possibly having greater control over production processes and market institutions.

Barring women from assemblies of God, or preventing them from becoming members of the clergy reflects a superficial degree of gender inequality that can be associated with religion. Deeper inequalities legitimise the subordination of women through stories of their birth, their legal and property rights after birth, and denial of their sexualities. While feminist theology emerges as a solution, its scope seems limited at present. The real solution then, lies in reforming the political economy, through the introduction of more equal laws and more equal redistribution of property and resources. The question of equality then is not doing what men do, but changing the structure that lets men subordinate women in the first place. Symbolism sometimes may stand in the way of the real fight.

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