



GENDER GAP AND NEED FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SAIVISM AND ODHUVAAR IN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

Today in the 21st century the society has evolved so much from ancient times that there is no field that a woman has not achieved in. With supportive measures and initiatives from the government, this has become doubly possible. Bhakti movement in the 7th century onwards opened doors for women who choose to lead their lives in spiritual lives too which was initially seen as a taboo. Despite the stereo typification of women as the role of ideal wives and mothers, women got to voice their voices through their aspirations in spiritual life in the medieval era during the Bhakti movement. Through Bhakti movement, women found self-expression and liberty in the patriarchal society with their songs, abhangas and leading life of ascetic. This topic is of concern even today, because religion being an interlocked feature in our lives, the looming gender gap in this field could still be reverberated in the present day. This paper discusses the gender gap and need for sustainable development in Neo-Bhakti Era.

Keywords: Bhakti movement, Saivism, Nayanmar, Saiva saint, Thirumurai, odhuvaar moorthigal, Tamil Nadu, gender gap, gender equality and sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Today in the 21st century the society has evolved so much from ancient times that there is no field that a woman has not achieved in. With supportive measures and initiatives from the government, this has become doubly possible. Despite these developments, the issue of gender gap and need for sustainable development is still a looming cause of contention. Problems in gender discriminations based on caste, creed, unequal pay, opportunities, education in various fields curbs women folks from excelling. Limitations would only curb the development of the society and economy in the long-run. Spiritual path is no exception to this.

Bhakti movement in the 7th century onwards opened doors for women to choose to lead their lives in spiritual lives too which was initially seen as a taboo. Despite the stereo typification of women as the role of ideal wives and mothers, women got to voice their voices through their aspirations in spiritual life in the medieval era during the Bhakti movement. Through Bhakti movement, women found self-expression and liberty in the patriarchal society with their songs, abhangas and leading life of ascetic. They constantly protested this chauvinistic societal set up and rebelled to out do them.

This topic is of concern even today, because religion being an interlocked feature in our lives, the looming gender gap in this field could still be reverberated in the present day. This paper discusses the gender gap and need for sustainable development in Neo-Bhakti Era with Tamil Nadu Saivite movement as special reference.

WOMEN IN SAIVITE MOVEMENT

Bhakti movement which began in the 7th century CE in Kerala, reached nooks and corners of India had a complex characteristic. It was seen as a social necessity at that era to bring harmony among people. The term “Bhakti”, got a new meaning from how it was perceived in the earlier centuries. It got a new characteristic where Bhakti only meant pure love, surrender to God and rejected the ritualistic form of worship. The complex nature of it was that the movement did not support the strict casteism laws that were being followed of those days and equality was propounded. The usage of vernacular language in the form of songs and council made the movement all the more popular. Like the religious revolutionary shift in the 3rd century BCE, the 7th century Bhakti movement made a powerful impact on the society.

CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN SAIVISM IN THE MEDIEVAL TIMES

With special reference to the Saivite tradition, the nayanmars of this period were Tamil poetic saints who propagated the Saiva Bhakti ideologies across Tamil Nadu through their songs which is collectively termed “Thirumurai.” Though the 63 Nayanmar tradition were predominantly male saiva saints, we had three women saints in the list namely Karaikkal Ammayar, Isaighaniar and Mangayarkarasi.

Karaikkal Ammayar

Born with the name Punitavathi to a wealthy merchant in Karaikudi, took the form of ghoul or Shiva Gana or in tamil “pey” by shedding her beauty and youth after a mystical experience where her husband Paramadathan told everyone that he could no longer perceive her as a wife but a goddess. Thenceforth she renounced her family life to lead a life in Bhakti marga and composed many Saiva poems and was first to do so.

Isaighaniar

Isaighaniar was a perfect example that women in familial background could also render much service and follow the path of Bhakti without having to renounce provided there was support. She was married to Sadai nayanar who was a Nayanmar himself and she gave birth to Sundarar who was also a Nayanmar and was the first to compile Thiruthondar Thokai which was the first compilation of Nayanmars. Isaighaniar breached the traditional patriarchal concept of Bhakti. Her path of spirituality was not hindered by the members of her family which showed the revolutionary ideology of that period.

Mangayarkarasi

Mangayarkarasi was a Pandyan queen of Madurai whose service rendered to Saiva cult has been mentioned in Periya Puranam of Cekkilar. Though being a queen, she made her choice of renouncing her wealth and followed the path of Bhakti Marga by being generous and humble to her subjects after changing her husband King Koon Pandyan to Saivism by curing his health issue. In the 8th century, this was a very novel approach for a queen of a ruling dynasty to take a religious stand and to follow it despite their state duties and taboos.

Bhakti movement tried to uplift women and was against casteism that even low born Shudras could become a Nayanmar or a saiva saint. God became accessible to all and not just for the small section of privileged people who could attain salvation only through rituals and practice. Pure love and devotion were enough. Though there were only three women Nayanmars among the 63 members, shows the patriarchal influence in the society. On the other hand, it also shows that despite the patriarchal nature, these three women saints were defied the social order and went on choose how they wanted to follow their path to salvation. Other than these women nayanmars, there were other important Saivite Bhaktas of those times whose names were worthy of being added in the list of Nayanmars but weren't like Thilakavathiyar, sister of Appar.

ODHUVAAAR MOORTHIGAL

Odhuvaar moorthigal are Saiva saints who sing the twelve Thirumurai or holy songs composed by the 63 Nayanmars in Saiva temples and spend their life rendering service to Saivism. The practice of granting lands and other endowments to the Odhuvaars to sing the hymns of Thirumurai began from the reign of Raja Raja Chola I. However, with time after colonial times, this practice had been deserted. In order to save this situation and to revive the Odhuvaar culture and the Tamil Bhakti literature, the Government of Tamil Nadu initiated a course in Chennai, Madurai Meenakshi amman Temple and in Pazhani where interested students could enrol and render their services in saiva temples under the control of Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Department. From 2022 onwards, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin has announced to give stipend of Rs.3000/ for every Oddhuvaar student to encourage them. The year of 2021, in Tamil Nadu was a revolutionary period in Tamil Bhakti era where all the deserving and interested can become and would be employed as temple priest and Odhuvaar without any caste discriminations.

GENDER GAP IN WOMEN ODHUVAARS

It was chiefly dominated by male population with the taboo that women are not allowed to enter the Garbagriha or Karuvarai or in the sanctum sanctorium of the temple as they are impure. In spite of the support and encouragement from the Tamil Nadu State Government, it is pitiful to say that in all these years, only two women Odhuvaars have been recruited. The patriarchal taboo mentioned in Manu Smriti that women are incapable of following path of spirituality could still reverberated in this aspect.

It is scientifically true that women cannot function up to their full capacity on their menstrual days and that spiritually true as per Siddha and Ayurvedic tradition that entering a temple in the days of menstruation can affect the women in her body Chakras which in turn would affect her health. This was the reason behind the traditional saying. This thus should not be considered a taboo.

The Gender gap shows the concentration of patriarchy in the society. Even though women have engaged themselves and achieved in all spheres of life and in career, when it comes to spiritual life, it still remains a question. Also to mention that no women has so far become or appointed as Mataadhipathi or heads of Saiva Mutts nor have they become Sivacharyars or Saiva Guru to give Deekshato the students. This Gender gap needs to be filled. Proper sustainable developmental goals must be carried forward to mitigate this difference in Bhakti. India is such a country where since our ancient teachings, the ultimate goal or purpose of life or “Purushartha” has been Moksha or salvation by finding the truth common for all individual. This though has been brought down to us through ages in various forms and religions. But when one gender is discriminated and curbed from following this path even if they are interested is a crime. Limiting one’s aspirations is a crime.

WOMEN ODHUVAAR-ANGAYARKANNI AND SUHAANJANA

Breaching the stereo types, in the year 2006, Angayar Kanni was the first women Odhuvaar to have been recruited in the Panchavarnasami temple, Uraiyur, Tiruchy. She was daughter of agricultural labourers from a very poor background. However, the payscale at that time was very less for Odhuvaars that she quitted after a year.

Sahaanjana, daughter of an industrial daily wage labour in Velayudhampalayam, Karur with her devotion to lord Shiva aspired to devote her life to Saiva Marga. After working for a while as a Thirumurai teacher in Mangayarkarasi Araneri Arakattalai, one of the Saiva institutions in Coimbatore, she got employed in Hindu Religious and Charitable Department in 2021 as an Odhuvaar clearing her inetrvIEWS and other tests. She has been recruited in Thenupureeswarar Temple, Maadambaakam, Chennai. She got immensesupport from her family and she hopes to inspire other women who want to take up this path of Bhakti.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, sustainable developmental measures is the only way to mitigate these gender gap. The State government should continue to support and encourage women like they are already doing by providing stipend and hiking salary. Also, further research should be encouraged to be done on this topic so that people get an awareness on these issues of life and get a rationale logical thought or understand the science behind the traditional ways of our ancestors without following blindly as a fanatic. Women empowerment should be thus promoted in all spheres of life and a women is truly considered when all her thoughts and aspirations gets into action without it being limited or curbed by the members of the society. Society plays a major part in an individual's psychological behaviour and in turn the individual's reaction to the surrounding determines changes in history. Thus, women should be celebrated and encouraged to do in their will by the society to see a truly empowered women as per UNDP Sustainable Goal by 2030.

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