

Exploring Gender Dynamics in Hinduism through Activism and Reform: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This paper looks into the multifaceted socio-historical fabric intertwining Hinduism, gender dynamics and contemporary activism in India. Using a diverse range of historical analysis, legislative reforms, feminist movements and present-day examples of Hindu women's activism, the study offers a thorough exploration of the complex interplay among religion, gender and societal transformation. It highlights the ingrained norms and ideologies that perpetuate gender inequality while simultaneously exploring avenues for thought-provoking and reshaping these norms within both religious and societal contexts. While Hinduism promotes feminine divinity, they also perpetuate the subordinate status of women within societal structures. The paper discusses important legal reforms such as the Hindu Widow Re-marriage Act which have contested conventional gender roles and patriarchal conventions. By underscoring the pivotal role of legal reforms and feminist activism, the paper highlights the evolving landscape of gender disparities within Hindu society. Furthermore, the study focusses on contemporary Hindu women's activism as a catalyst for societal change, citing notable incidents like the Sabarimala controversy and the emergence of organizations such as Durga Vahini. Through these illustrations, the paper elucidates the intricate dynamics of activism at the intersection of gender, caste and religion showcasing how these intersecting identities shape the trajectory of social movements in India.

Keywords

Activism, Gender, Hinduism, Patriarchy, Socio-Political changes.

INTRODUCTION

The intricate interplay between Hinduism and gender dynamics has for long been subjected to scholarly inquiry and social discourse. Rooted in ancient scriptures and cultural traditions, Hinduism has reflected and perpetuated patriarchal norms, which relegated women to subordinate roles while providing space for spiritual expression and empowerment. In recent years, due to rapid socio-political transformation, the intersection of Hinduism and gender has come under renewed scrutiny, prompting critical reflections on traditional practices, legal reforms, and contemporary activism.

Hinduism, as one of the world's oldest religions, has a rich tapestry of mythologies, rituals, and philosophical systems, spanning millennia of cultural evolution. It encompasses a wide range of beliefs, practices, and cultural expressions, reflecting the diversity and plurality inherent in Indian civilization [1]. At its core lies a reverence for the divine feminine, embodied in goddesses such as Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati, symbolizing aspects of power, prosperity, and wisdom respectively. Alongside this celebration of feminine divinity, Hindu scriptures and societal norms have often prescribed rigid gender roles and hierarchical structures that perpetuate male dominance and female subordination. Its scriptures deal with diverse perspectives on gender roles, from the goddesses as embodiments of divine feminine power to the prescriptive social norms delineating women's duties within familial and societal structures [2], [3].

While historical perspectives show periods of relative freedom and agency for Hindu women, such as during the

Vedic era, subsequent centuries saw the patriarchal practices like child marriage, widow burning (sati), and restrictive caste-based codes governing women's behavior and mobility. They persisted through colonial rule and into the post-independence era, shaping legislative reforms aimed at addressing gender disparities and expanding women's rights within Hindu familial and legal frameworks [4]. For instance, the Vedic period saw a relative degree of freedom and agency for women. Subsequently, it was marked by the codification of Hindu law and the entrenchment of caste-based hierarchies, reflected in practices such as child marriage, widow burning (sati), and purdah, which curtailed women's autonomy and mobility. In response to these challenges, legislative reforms were introduced aiming at improving the socio-legal position of Hindu women.

This paper is essentially a review article attempting to provide a socio-historical insight into the intricate relationship between religion and social stratification- how Hinduism as a religion places women within its fold, the structuring of ideologies and scriptures which systematically and creates a space 'for women'- resulting in keeping the women at the receiving end of society. In other words, it intends to bring forth *patriarchy* hidden in the philosophy, scriptures and practices of Hinduism and examine the activism or changes which have taken shape in these. My aim in this paper is threefold. Firstly, to examine the intersection of Hinduism and gender stratification. It shall delve into how Hinduism, as a religious institution, has historically shaped gender roles and hierarchies, leading to the marginalization and subordination of women. Secondly, to evaluate legal reforms and socio-political activism for women's rights. Here it shall highlight the key legislative measures such as the

Hindu Widow Re-marriage Act, the Hindu Marriage Act, and the Hindu Succession Act, as well as analyze the impact of feminist movements and women's activism on advancing gender equality and empowerment. Thirdly, to explore the contemporary dynamics of Hindu women's activism. It would explore the contemporary manifestations of Hindu women's activism, including their involvement in challenging discriminatory practices within Hinduism, advocating for gender equality and religious inclusivity, and navigating the complexities of caste-based discrimination. It would give an insight into case studies such as the Sabarimala incident and the emergence of organizations like the Durga Vahini, and examine the intersectionality of gender, religion, and caste in shaping women's activism in India.

METHODOLOGY

The research uses a qualitative approach. It adopts a literature review methodology to delve into the complex relationship between Hinduism and gender dynamics. It involves an elaborate examination of scholarly articles, books, and journals that address this intersection, spanning historical insights and contemporary analyses. Through a critical analysis, certain key themes, pertinent to the research objectives are identified, offering a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of gender roles within Hindu society.

This study uses secondary sources, delving into scholarly articles, books, and journals to explore nuanced insights and perspectives on the intricate interplay between Hinduism and gender dynamics. It integrates certain case studies and examples to illustrate the changing aspects within Hinduism. Through this comprehensive approach, the study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of how gender dynamics manifest within the context of Hinduism, thereby contributing valuable insights to the existing scholarly discourse on the subject.

DISCUSSION

Hinduism- it's Essence and Nature of Belief

It is difficult to pin point the year of emergence of Hinduism, as a strand of religion. However, it can be said that Hinduism has been existing since 1400 B.C to 1500 B.C. It continues to endure today as a healthy, spirited and colorful group of traditions. It is considered to be the most divergent and complex religion consisting of various gods and goddesses. The Hindus comprise about one-seventh of the world's entire population. Although Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world, it exists primarily in India and Nepal. The plurality of religions in India is often obscured by the fact that Hinduism is usually regarded as demographically dominant and culturally characteristic of Indian society. The census of India (2021) classifies about 79% of the population as Hindus. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jain, Buddhists, Parsis comprise the rest of the population (2021 census) [5].

For the believers and adherents of Hindus, Hinduism it is a traditional way of life. As a matter of fact, many of the believers and practitioners perceive Hinduism as *Sanatana Dharma* or "the eternal law" or the "eternal way". This is considered as the essence of Hinduism [6]. The word '*Dharma*' comes from the Sanskrit root word '*dhri*' which means "to sustain" (Fig 1). Another related meaning is- that which is integral to something. Thus, '*Dharma*' denotes the ideas of maintenance, sustenance or upholding, steadfastness and moral virtue. Such characteristics are both material and spiritual, generating two types of *dharmas*. The first one is *Sanatana dharma*, referring to duties which take into account the spiritual (constitutional) identity as '*atman*' (i.e. the soul) and are thus the same for everyone. The second one is *Varnashrama dharma*, referring to the duties performed according to one's material (conditional) nature and specific to the individual at that particular time [1].

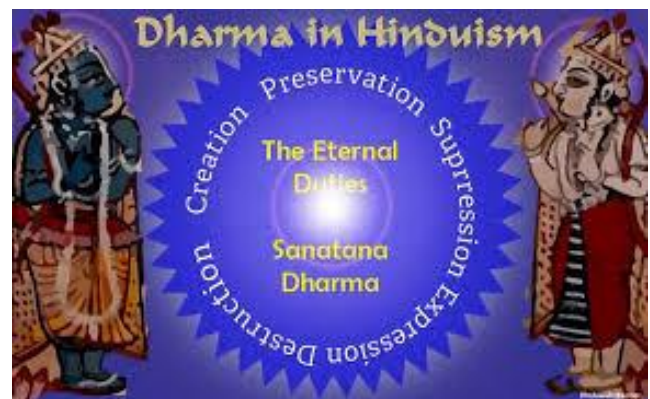


Fig 1. Dharma in Hinduism

(<https://www.hinduwebsite.com/sanatana-dharma>)

The main texts of Hinduism are the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *the Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The *Vedas* are regarded to be the oldest texts of India and contain religious and ritual poetry, ritual formulas, various practices and explanatory prose that interpret these very texts and additionally, in the *Late Vedic Upanishads*. The *Vedas* became the basis for an immense textual efflorescence, comprising Vedic mantras of ritual performances and discursive speculative treatises which are to be performed religiously by all Hindu, especially males [7].

Social Position of Hindu Women: A Historical Glance

The position of women has been varying in Hindu religion since ancient times. The Vedic period held women in quite high esteem. They never observed *purdah* in the Vedic times (Fig 2). They were given much liberty, rights and opportunities to attain high intellectual and spiritual standards. This is evident by the fact that many women *rishis* were found during this period. Moreover, there was also the absence of ill practices like: *sati* and child marriage. In ancient period, the plethora of Goddesses was created to instill respect for women. *Ardhanarishwar* (meaning- God is half-man and half-woman) was highly worshipped. Women even had multiple husbands and also leave their husband. In

the Vedic society, it was observed that women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There was no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives. However, the position or status of women of started lowering with the *Puranic* period. During this time, practices like: child marriage, widow burning, the *purdah* and polygamy worsened the women's position. In the economic field, women were denied the right to inherit ancestral property and husband's property. Some of the reasons behind the low status of women in *Puranic* and medieval times are:

- Imposition of Brahminical austerities and their supremacy on the entire society. The Brahmins imposed the sacred literature, the *Vedas* which postulated the beliefs which is strictly followed till today. The Brahmins exercise power and control on religious and social lines over the social order.
- rigid restrictions and hierarchical arrangements enforced by the Hindu caste system;
- lack of educational opportunities and facilities for women;
- introduction of the non-Aryan wife into the Aryan household;
- Foreign invasion of India, by Alexander and others. [3], [2]



Fig 2. The practice of Purdah
(https://www.indianetzone.com/women_india)

According to dominant Hindu philosophy, the female was created by Lord Brahma as part of the duality in creation, in order to provide company to men and facilitate procreation, progeny and continuation of family lineage. In the *Vedas*, there is much greater duties and responsibilities upon men. It directed the women to help their men in performing such duties [6]. *Manusmriti*, further degenerated the position and status of women. The writings of *Manu* have been the guiding force for governing the lives of women for nearly two decades. The "*Laws of Manu*" set forth the basic principles governing the roles of girls and women in Hindu history. It specified that the respect women enjoyed was as daughters, mothers and wives. It also meant that with the demise of the husband, women lost their status in families and suffered

from various social and religious disabilities [8]. Moreover, the *Vedas* lay down that a woman's primary duty is to help her husband in performing the obligatory duties and enable him to continue his family tradition. In fact the *Vedas* laid down a dual image of the women [4]. On one hand, Hindus worship female deities as representations of Mother Goddesses and consorts of male gods. Also, the law books prohibit men from harassing or neglecting women in their households. It is considered the duty of the husband to protect his wife and take care of her until the end. On the other hand she is expected to have limited freedom. She is considered as a dependent entity in a household dominated by the male members. Her main duty is to procreate and take care of them. Thus, women were not granted any form of civil liberties. Societies ignored all kinds of rights to be enjoyed by the women and thus led a hopeless life.

Changing Socio-Legal Position of Hindu Women

Hindu women have always been at the forefront fighting against the unjust laws and social rules that place them in a subordinate place [9]. Before independence, a small group of elite women who were the beneficiaries of modern education negotiated patriarchal, and class, spaces in order to access education and employment and attain political leadership. In fact, the "New Indian Women" in 1880s began to raise voice by challenging their subordination and subjugation. They achieved this by writing about their lives and the condition of women at large [7]. By 1920s, the second generation of "New Women" became more active and succeeded in articulating the needs of women, critiqued the social structure, started associations and developed institutions to consolidate women's interests. During 1920-70, the main focus of Indian feminists, including the Hindu women, was on gaining equality through two primary channels- one is forming associations and another is becoming active in politics. Issues of women with regard to marriage, property were questioned and efforts were taken to improve their social condition [4]. Here, the efforts taken by Saraladevi Chaudhurani are noteworthy. She was considered the most remarkable of the "New Indian woman", who is both a feminist and a nationalist, an active participant in social reform as well as nationalist movement. She called for participation of women from all walks of life and was probably the first woman to see the need to start for an association for women exclusively. Her efforts led to the emergence of *Bharata Stree Mahamandal* (Great Group of Indian Women) in Allahabad in 1910. In fact many other organizations which came up in the early decades of the 20th century were results of her efforts [10].

The social position of Hindu women, in India has witnessed change and transformation, due to various legislations in the post-independence period. [11], [12]. They have acquired the right to receive education, inherit property and even participate in public life and have become economically independent. Some of the important statutory legislations to improve the positioning of women are listed as below:

- **The Hindu Widow Re-marriage Act of 1856:** This path breaking law legalized remarriage of the widows, during the East India Company rule. It ensured a better life to young widows. In the medieval period, the status of women went down considerably. Hindu widows were subjected to a lot of restrictions. They were faced with malpractices like: prohibition from entry to temples and auspicious religious gatherings, restrictions regarding intake of food, clothes and so on. A woman remarrying was looked down upon society. Her life was made miserable by people at large. Hence, most women committed suicide by jumping into the pyre of their husbands- sati. This law not only permitted the remarriage of the Hindu widows for the first time but also ensured a better life to them in terms of social status and position.
- **The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929:** In Indian society, the practice of child marriage has been a rampant problem. Marrying off young girls after attaining puberty was a common feature in many Hindu households. The social pressure of marriage was such that girls in their teen years were often married off to men who were double their age or even older. This law served as a deterrent for Hindu families. Initially it made marriage of boys below eighteen years and girls below fourteen years an offence. However, afterwards it was amended in 1978 which raised the age for boys to twenty-one years and girls to eighteen years.
- **The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955:** This was a very significant act in improving the social position of women by giving them the power to seek judicial separation. Moreover, it gave them power with regard to the following circumstances- firstly, if a woman is forced to marry against her will, then she would have the power to seek the intervention and help of the police; secondly, a woman can challenge a wedding if the husband is already married. Thus, women have also been granted the right to monogamy.
- **The Hindu Succession Act of 1956:** This Act was a reflection of the nature of Indian society which is essentially patriarchal. On one hand, it gave equal inheritance rights to women, similar to those of men; on the other hand, the daughters were deprived of their right in ancestral property under Mitakshara coparcenary. In a patrilineal inheritance system, like the Mitakshara and Dayabhaga school of Hindu law, a woman has been denied the birth right in her familial property. No woman is a member of the Mitakshara criminal law. According to this system, joint family property devolves by survivorship within the coparcenary. It implies that with every birth or death of a male member in the family, the share of every other surviving male either gets reduced or enlarged. However, it was the Hindu Succession Amendment Act in 2005 which attempted to and managed to broaden the rights of a daughter- both married and unmarried. It

tried to bring her at par with a male member of a joint Hindu family governed by the Mitakshara law. Now, not only married or unmarried daughters but the Act also attempted to bring the female line of descent at an equal level with the male line of descent, which included children of pre-deceased daughters. This was a landmark law that brought in empowerment of women. It gave them economic rights at domestic levels. This law ensured that the daughter is a coparcener in her own right and has the same rights as well as the liabilities in the coparcenary property as the son.

Contemporary Activism among Hindu Women

The traditions associated with Hinduism are in a transition in the Hindu society. There are efforts being made by the Hindu society to redefine the old conventions and reclassify its women. For example, Dietrich Gabrielle in his book “*Reflections of the Women’s movement in India*” says that the Liberals and Conservatives of Hinduism at the moment are quite busy debating over the rule of modernism or traditionalism [10]. Many claim to outlaw the religious norms whereas others have firm religious beliefs as it being routed to success. Most of them usually approve of the intervention of religion in their daily life and matters, thus influencing the existence and life of a Hindu woman. Moreover, Ramabai Saraswati (a renowned social activist of India) in her book “*The High Caste Hindu Women*” notes how women in ancient Hinduism were deprived of education. However, with time, the field of education has witnessed significant reforms [13]. Many renowned men and women have acquired education and have preached its importance and as a result several schools, colleges and universities have been set up. Presently, Hindu women are acquiring education not only in India but all around the world. Also, by gaining education they have undertaken the task of enlightenment and reformation of women issues.

There has been much activism among Hindu women, in India, for the demand of a Universal Civil Code (UCC) [14]. The demand for a uniform civil code implies unifying all personal laws to have one set of secular laws that deal with aspects like: marriage, divorce, maintenance, adoption and inheritance. It is expected to be applied to all the citizens of India irrespective of the community they belong to. Women’s movements and organizations have been arguing in favor of UCC because it would remove many of the social regulations from women and place them, legally and socially, at par with the men which otherwise keep them subordinated in the above mentioned spheres. The controversy around UCC is the ‘secular’ nature of the Indian state as laid down in the Constitution of India. Feminists of the Hindu right support uniform civil laws and argue for gender justice and secular laws. However, a difference in opinion arises between the traditionalists and versus the modernist or elitists. The former are the feminists of the Hindu right and the latter are those who are opposed to it and do not share equal views on secular laws. Ideologically, the differences are evident too- the former subscribe to ‘Women’s strength’ (*nari shakti*) as

against the latter that fight for 'women's liberation' (*Nari Mukti*) [11].

The activism among Hindu women in the sphere of politics is worth noticing [14]. The under-representation of Hindu women in the government has been due to political apathy. However, now there is an increasing desire among Hindu women for political assertion despite evidence that confirms their relative absence at governmental levels. Now, we witness the visibility of women's issues in the media and few concrete amplifications have been made to their political status. In the political sphere, Hindu women are having access to high positions of governance contrary to the medieval times where women were not allowed to take part in the activities of the public arena because they were not considered competent or intelligent enough to do so. Our country has witnessed the emergence of strong and capable female politicians in the modern times, who have been able to carve out their own space like: Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Uma Bharti and so on. Hindu women are continuously struggling to achieve social liberty and civil rights in all aspects. Although many of their rights have been curbed yet it has made women's group strong and rebellious.

The resurgence of Hindu nationalism has contributed to the divisiveness in feminist politics. The *Hindutva ideology* supported uniform secular laws. This is accepted by some feminist organizations which are the women's wings of the Hindu right wing groups. Such organizations defy the 'Hindu womanhood' (*matri shakti*) and talk about economic empowerment of women, affirmative action for women in education an employment. In this regard, Vijaylakshmi in her work "Feminist politics in India" (2005) has pointed out that, interestingly that:

"the symbolic construction of Hindu womanhood synchronizes with the essence of mainstream feminist politics in India, where the image is of the emancipated women ready to confront violence and who is willing to explore new opportunities in the gendered public space". [13]

Although political parties, primarily Hindu, like BJP have sister branches which imbue traditional female domestic roles with political and ideological import as a means of holding them back from political assertion, yet the importance of their involvement also needs to be looked into [10]. For instance, the case of demonstration at Ayodhya in 1992, which witnessed the high profile gathering and participation of about 20,000 women in a single day of demonstration, is worth noting. Similarly, another instance is that of Bombay riots of 1993 which involved *gheraoing* police stations to get the release of arrested 'fascists', along with lying down in the street to prevent fire engines reaching burning Muslim houses has helped increase their perceived political influence. Although this sort of open action by women is not universally accepted by members of the Hindu nationalist movement, yet it has been supported by the young in disregard of opposing elders.

The Sabarimala incident of 2018 (Fig 3) stands as a pivotal movement in the struggle for gender equality and religious freedom in India. It serves as an important case for understanding contemporary activism among Hindu women. From a historical point of view, the Sabarimala temple is dedicated to Lord Ayyappa, revered by devotees as a celibate deity and women of menstruating age were barred from entering the temple premises, based on the belief that their presence would 'defame' the sanctity of the deity. This discriminatory practice was rooted in patriarchal interpretations of religious scriptures and customs, perpetuating gender inequality. It also denied women their fundamental rights to worship and religious participation. However, this age-old practice came to an end when the Supreme Court of India in 2018 delivered a landmark verdict overturning the ban, asserting that it violated women's fundamental rights to equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The verdict was celebrated as a progressive step towards gender justice and religious inclusivity, challenging age-old prejudices and upholding the principles of constitutional morality. However, the decision also received fierce opposition from conservative groups, religious authorities, and traditionalists who viewed it as an infringement on religious freedom and sacred traditions. In this, Hindu women activists emerged as powerful agents of change, leading the charge for gender equality and religious inclusivity. The Sabarimala incident galvanized Hindu women activists across India, igniting a wave of protests, marches, and legal interventions in support of women's rights and religious freedom. Feminist groups, individual activists and the media houses played a pivotal role in mobilizing public opinion, raising awareness about gender-based discrimination, and advocating for the implementation of the Supreme Court's verdict. One such prominent activist was Trupti Desai, founder of the *Bhumata Brigade*, who spearheaded the campaign for women's entry into the Sabarimala temple. Her fearless advocacy and willingness to confront traditional power structures challenged the status quo and inspired other women to assert their rights. Despite facing backlash and threats from conservative groups, Desai remained undeterred in her pursuit of gender equality and social justice. The women activists, led by the *Bhumata* organization Trupti Desai of Balajinagar in Pune, even after receiving various threats from villagers and religious figures were finally successful in entering the temple on April 8, 2016. Here, it is interesting to note that the prohibition of women entering the temple was in spite of the Bombay High Court order on April 1, which held that it is the fundamental right of women to go in places of worship and it is the duty of the government to protect them. The debate over the issue emerged strongly after a woman last year in 2015 tried to enter and offer prayers at the *Shani* temple and since then, the movement has been gaining momentum over last few months as the temple authorities continually barred women from entering the inner sanctum. The Sabarimala incident sparked a broader discourse on

women's rights within Hinduism and the need to reinterpret religious texts and traditions in light of contemporary values. Women scholars, theologians, and spiritual leaders contributed to this dialogue, offering alternative interpretations of scriptures and advocating for gender-inclusive practices within Hindu religious institutions.



Fig 3. The Sabarimala Temple with devotees (October 21, 2024)

The creation of Durga Vahini (Fig 4) as a female equivalent of the Bajrang Dal, which trains boys to take part in agitation activities by the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) also illustrates a move towards an increase in active female participation [6]. Established in 1991, the Durga Vahini is dedicated to promoting Hindu culture, values, and traditions among women and youth. It aims to empower Hindu women by fostering a sense of pride in their heritage, imparting religious education, and encouraging participation in social, cultural, and religious activities. The literal translation of their name means the “army of Durga,” after the powerful Hindu Goddess who is known to protect society from evil. Interestingly, since 1991, the group has gathered around 35,000 women across 29 states who have together agreed to “launch” India on a “path of progress” — by any means that is necessary [14]. It gives rigorous training programs to women who are aged between 15 to 35, with a focus on three core objectives: *sewa* (service), *suraksha* (security), and *sanskar* (cultural heritage). Their training camps are systematically organised with participants beginning their day at 4:30 a.m., adhering to a disciplined routine that includes morning prayers, physical exercises, cultural teachings, history classes, and self-defense training. Notably, firearm instruction is provided as part of the training. During the camp, there are strict regulations including the confiscation of cellphones and restrictions on communication with the outside world, including family members. This intensive training regimen is aimed at instilling a sense of commitment, discipline, and empowerment among participants, preparing them to serve their community, protect their cultural heritage, and uphold Hindu values [14].

Durga Vahini trainers, also referred to as *Matr Shakti*, balance their traditional roles as wives and mothers with the

task of instructing young women in the use of weapons in the context of Hinduism. There are many instances where the Hindu women become a part of Durga Vahini and felt they become ‘visible’ and stand up for abuse and violence meted out to them or their families [9]. The Durga Vahini women find power from embracing their traditional roles while also serving as trainers, imparting the values of submission and devotion to young girls. Their primary approach involves contacting individuals' parents as the initial step in addressing perceived breaches of societal norms.



Fig 4. Durga Vahini (June 19, 2016)

The ‘feminist movement’ of the West is not or cannot be readily transported to contemporary Hindu religious-cultural context. This is because the struggle is not simply viewed as against men, since Hindu men have taken part in social reforms for women; but rather in India, the subordination of women is integrally related to or intertwined with the overall systemic oppression of the majority of the population. This is due to the hierarchical arrangement or stratification of Indian society which makes the situation of women doubly difficult here [11]. In Hinduism, the disadvantaged position of women is not merely evident from patriarchal interpretations of scriptures and traditions; rather women are discriminated and subjugated along caste lines. In this regard, the paper brings in the discussion of women’s activism, in Hinduism, from another dimension i.e.- *caste based discrimination*. The Hindu caste system views the Dalit women as ‘impure’ and ‘untouchable’ and thus socially excluded. There is a complete negation of women’s human rights. In response to this, the Dalit women have been organizing movements, campaigns and seminar to fight against this dual face of discrimination, under the umbrella of *Dalit Feminism* which has been gaining popularity and momentum [12]. Since late 1980s, Dalit women have increasingly articulated the need for a platform where they would carve out their identity and fight for their rights which are in favour of upper caste Hindus especially women. The Dalit women fight against the supremacy of rules and rituals of the upper caste Hindus. They continue to play a critical role in the movements for land rights and are making their mark as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world and visionary leaders in the Panchayati Raj institutions. The National Federation of Dalit Women

(NFDW) was launched in 1995, by Dalit women themselves and committed itself to undertake several tasks to bring about positive changes in the lives of Dalit women, economic empowerment and leadership. Many women political leaders are working to improve the social condition of women. Uma Bharati, a member of a political party in India (*Bahujan Samaj Party*- which caters to the interests of Dalits) comments that

“women are inherently superior as a created species. Men are not such noble beings that women should fight for equality. Instead they should fight to be treated with respect.. If Indian women combine the ‘madhury’ (or sweetness), their femininity, with self pride and political awareness they can teach the whole world the path of liberation” [13]

CONCLUSION

The intersection of Hinduism and gender stratification has been deeply ingrained in the Indian society, shaping the social, cultural, and religious landscape for centuries. Hinduism, as a religious institution, has historically propagated patriarchal ideologies and practices, relegating women to subordinate roles and perpetuating their marginalization and subordination. However, with the socio-political changes, there have been significant shifts in the socio-legal position of Hindu women.

Legal reforms and socio-political activism, particularly in the post-independence era, have played an important role in challenging discriminatory practices and advancing gender equality and empowerment. Legislative measures such as the Hindu Widow Re-marriage Act, the Hindu Marriage Act, and the Hindu Succession Act have attempted to address the inequalities and provide women with greater agency and autonomy over their lives.

Contemporary activism among Hindu women has propelled the movement for gender equality and religious inclusivity. The Sabarimala incident stands as a crucial event in the struggle for women's rights and religious freedom, challenging age-old prejudices and advocating for gender-inclusive practices within Hindu religious institutions. Women activists like Trupti Desai have emerged as powerful agents of change, who fearlessly advocate for gender equality and social justice despite facing backlash and threats from conservative groups.

Moreover, the establishment of organizations like Durga Vahini indicates a growing trend towards active female participation in promoting Hindu culture, values, and traditions. Such organizations aim to empower Hindu women by fostering a sense of pride in their heritage, imparting religious education, and encouraging participation in social, cultural, and religious activities.

However, it is important to recognize that the struggle for gender equality in Hinduism is not without its challenges. The resurgence of Hindu nationalism has led to divisiveness in feminist politics, with differing ideologies and agendas shaping the discourse on women's rights. Moreover,

caste-based discrimination continues to intersect with gender inequality, further marginalizing the Dalit women and necessitating a holistic approach to feminist activism that addresses intersecting forms of oppression. By mobilizing public opinion, raising awareness, and advocating for policy reforms, Hindu women continue to strive towards a more inclusive and equitable society, where all individuals, regardless of gender or caste, can fully realize their rights and potential.

Acknowledgement:

“No financing received for this article.”

“The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.”

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