

WOMEN AND RELIGION

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Religion may be defined as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe especially when concerned as the creation of a super human agency or agencies usually involving devotional and ritual observances and often containing a moral code for the conduct of the human affairs.

“The human societies having advanced through various phases and making cultural innovations seem to have developed certain kinds of metaphysical orientations, for one or the other reasons, be it for a moral code or for dependence to gain in the worldly affairs that is an integral part of family and social affairs.” (1)

“It is a web of beliefs which hold culture together through myth symbols and rituals.” (2)

Although one is not sure about the reasons that may have led to the development of religion, “however it can be presumed that death, if not anything else, may have been one aspect to develop ideas about the conception of supernatural realm of existence. It is said that fear, above all, of death was the first mother of gods.” (3)

In order to escape there from, the human beings may have tried to appease the spirits by opting a certain mode of worship which later came to be known as religion.” (4)

Kashmiris as such were no exception to it. From the very inception, we find the development of metaphysical orientations which later culminated in to full-fledged religion.

The fear of death and the appearing of spirits may be one of the reason why Kashmiris buried their dead to prevent their return for they were probably scared. “These dead were so revered that during prehistoric times they were buried under the floors of their living houses,” (5) and “the skeletal remains were painted with red ochre.”(6) .The dead were buried alongwith “various goods and personal ornaments “(7) which suggests that “the impulses of life after death seem to have been strong enough.”(8)

The belief in life after death is self-indicative of some religious faith. The disposal of the dead has been an important religious activity of the human groups .This is because the attitude towards the dead is linked up with the human beliefs regarding this life and after death.

“A pertinent question remains as to what was the source of the human thought for the belief in life after death. In this regard the process of germination of seeds must have greatly influenced the people. The development of agriculture must have resulted in the emergence of the concept of relation of death to life, likewise the seeds which seem to be dead are born a new.”(9) “In this process of seed germination and production water, earth, light and heat are indispensable. The sun seems to have been defined by this society in Kashmir as a male deity while the earth in that case might have been a female deity.”(10)

So it is from the very earliest times that both male and female divinities were being venerated on equal terms without any discrimination of the feminine aspect.

“The depiction of the sun, in a hunting scene engraved on a stone slab at Burzahom, as well as on a rock surface at Bumai reaffirm human belief in the sun and of fertility merging together.” (11) .These depictions reflect that “the sun was recognised as the main cause of the bounty of the soil “(12) and the earth-a mother goddess fertilized by hot rays.”(13)

“The development of agriculture may have equally obliged these people to believe and rightly so, that the processes involved in the seed and human production were by and large analogous; hence might have held the belief that what was the role of the earth in plant germination; a mother’s womb had the same role in human production.”(14)

Hence great significance was attached to women in religion alongwith other aspects of life. The woman was revered for her fertility and the life giving characteristics.

“This is most certainly why they buried some of their dead, significantly women and infants, in embryonic postures possibly believing thereby that the dead would seek rebirth as usually happens to the foetus in the female womb which ultimately grows into a baby, child and adult.”(15)

“Even though we do not find any instance where any kind of female genital or its symbolic form has been depicted, yet the cult of fertility existed is indeed understood from the effort which they made while depicting magnified male genitals in the hunting scene engraved on a stone slab.”(16)

“ The scene as a whole, with sun symbols, stag and the genitals, together with figures of male and female humans becomes a fertility scene, and may therefore, as a whole convey the prevalence of fertility concept”(17) among the pre-historic people of Kashmir.

Thus we can assume that right from the existence of human beings on earth; we find women were closely associated with the spiritual and the religious aspects of life.

Further, we have “now ample archaeological evidences which indicate that the prehistoric people of the valley had contacts with the Indus valley people by the end of the closing centuries of second millennium B.C. The most remarkable effect of such a contact with them or through them with far away countries in the west aroused sympathetic and appreciative religious conception in the minds of the people. The people began to worship the stones of peculiar or uncanny features.”(18) “and this type of reverence to such natural stones formed an integral part of the local culture. A considerable significance was attached to Menhirs.”(19)

“The rod or straight lined forms on the menhirs represented males and other round forms represented the females.”(20) “Right from the ancient times, these stones with carvings were worshipped as

symbolic representation of Shiva and Shakti .The phallus (in stones and terracotta) and the perforated stones recognised as female organ or Yoni (representing Shiva and Shakti respectively) go back to Harappan times.”(21)

Since the people of Kashmir were deeply influenced by the religio-cultural traditions of the Harappans, they attached great significance to fertility cult as well. The Harappan settlements have yielded a very large no. of terracotta figurines. Among them are the representations of females adorned with a wide girdle, loin cloth and necklaces. Sometimes they are shown with an infant. The general notion of fertility is indicated by many representations of pregnancy. The people of Kashmir painted their dead with red ochre.”Red was regarded as a fertility symbol.”(22)

“The people regarded that the mother Earth-a form of mother goddess menstruates in order to prepare herself for fertility and for more crops. Hence the red ochre or the vermilion stood for menstrual blood being the fertility symbol.”(23)

“To paint the bones of the dead with red meant the conception of re-birth and prosperity for the living souls. Only this procedure was adopted by the Burzahomese who were quite ignorant of the art of manufacturing any form of female figurines representing mother goddess or any such particular form.”(24)

Thus, the worship of female deities along with the male deities was in vogue from earliest times. In prehistoric times, goddesses were worshipped for their fertility, fecundity and agricultural bounty.

Many histories of women in ancient societies are now appearing, reflecting the revisionary forces in historical studies and growing refusal to see the passive feminine role in religion. In fact, women played an active role in the religions sphere both as veneration as well as venerator.

Though there are archaeological evidence which reflect influence of Harappan religion on Kashmir but there is no denying to the fact that the earliest inhabitants of Kashmir cherished some aboriginal beliefs, the details of which are traceable now. The NitamataPurana makes it clear that the snake cult or the naga worship seems to have been established in the valley from the remote period and undoubtedly had been one of the religion of the land.

“About the Naga-cult the Nilamata does not supply that much information which one expects from its title ‘teachings of (the Naga) Nila,’ but Cowell’s statement that “ snake worship is hardly alluded to in the copious list of offerings there enjoined throughout the Hindu year”(25) is also not correct. Worship of the Nagas is referred to quite often in the Nilamata, though generally in association with the worship of other deities. The Naga received worship on many festivals. Thus, during the feast celebrated on the 1st fall of snow, Nila as well as the local Nagas are to be worshipped with offerings of flowers, fruits and incense of bdellion.”(26)

According to NilamataPurana, Nila and the local Nagas received worship along with various other gods and goddesses on the occasion of Iramanjaripujana, on the bright fifth of Indra’s fortnight and many other festivals.

“Throughout Rajatarangiri, the Nagas are described as human beings both as males and females and have been credited with supernatural powers.”(27)

Both the literary as well as archaeological sources indicate that the Kashmiris worshiped Nagas as well as Nagins.

“Hieun T-sang narrates a legend as to how the widow of a Naga-a Nagin ceased the waters of a stream east of Khotan’s capital. She was pleased to let the water flow when a minister of noble worth sacrificed himself by entering the stream and married her. M.A. Stein during his expedition there in 1900-1901 discovered a painting ascribable 7th -8th century A.D. depicting a graceful lady in her youth with exquisite physical charm identified as Nagin. On her right is a nude child identified as the minister who disappeared in water.”(28) It thus suggests that the worship of Nagin as a snake goddess was prevalent in Kashmir.

Although the pre-eminent position in the religious sphere was cherished by women in entire sub-continent but from the later vedic period onwards the scope of women narrowed down. However, Kashmir, surrounded by high mountains and aloof from the rest of the sub-continent, appears to have remained mostly unaffected by this illiberal wave.

It seems that Buddhism came to Kashmir in 3rd century B.C. According to the Buddhist scriptures, Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa, the Buddhism was 1st preached in Kashmir by Madhyantika. Hieun T Sang also mentions Madhyantika’s mission to Kashmir.

“Buddhism as such even in Ashokan days, was a well integrated culture in the valley. It was a strong hold of the school of realist philosophy called Sarvastivada(holding the doctrine that all exists). It was with such a glorious cult of Buddhism prevalent in the valley of Kashmir that several monks from Kashmir were invited by emperor Ashoka to participate in the council held by him at Patliputra (29).”After the conclusion of the conference, a Buddhist Saint, Majjhantika was sent to Kashmir and Gandhara to propagate the spirit of true Buddhism,” (30)

“Women of Buddhist faith had comparatively more freedom to pursue the path of knowledge because womanhood was no bar to salvation as per their respective precepts .From Ashokan times, we find women becoming preceptors and nuns and even going outside for teaching Buddhism.” (31) Under Buddhism, the women of Kashmir became freer and received better

religious and intellectual nourishment.

“Magical belief and practices attributed to supernatural powers of certain mythical beings or of legendary fame were developed and this gave rise to Tantric cult in about 5th century A.D. Tantricism played a momentous part when by a natural process of absorption it was incorporated into Hinduism and Buddhism. In course of time, Tantricism was a religious system and a period between 7th to 12th century can be called the peak period of Tantric works and cults of both Hindus and Buddhists.”(32)

“A violent urge for obtrude sensuousness had become the characteristics feature of Kushan art represented in Buddhist establishments at Gandhara, Mathura or Harwan. Depiction of nudity, eroticism, dancing and music at these sites is a clear proof

of systematic decaying trend of the high doctrines of the Buddha.”(33).

“Chakra-Puja or the worship of Chakras or Mandalas (circular diagrams of patterns) depicting Shakti (female power) was related to the worship of Tantras which later on developed into an esoteric movement.”(34) The Tantrics were believers in Yogi and the opening of Chakra and worshipped Siva-Shakti or more usually Devi, the mother goddess. Women played an important role in the Tantricism because it was liberal in matters of caste and social restrictions. The basic tenet of Tantricism was that the women possess more spiritual energy than the man. Therefore, the man could achieve the realisation of the divinity through sexual and emotional union with a woman. The Tantrics admitted both women and children into their ranks and some of the Tantric practices included elements of sexual perversions.

When the Tantricism entered Buddhism, it came to be known as Vajarayana. “The widespread popularity of the system brought about corruption among Buddhists. Superstitious legends were woven some of which were based on the stories of Buddha’s previous births or Jatakas” (35). The followers of Vajarayana advocated many esoteric practices in which women and wine were most essential things. This sect attached great importance to goddesses. They were presented as consorts of Buddha. The goddesses were called Taras. They were considered as the psychic power and strength of their husbands. The followers of this sect believed that access to Buddha was possible through the worship of these goddesses and by correct recitation of the mantras and the citation of the Tantras.”In the Tantrika works of the 10th -11th centuries, women are represented as manifestation of divine energy or Sakti and were permitted to take part in religious rites which tended to raise their social position.”(36)

“The philosophy of Kashmir Saivism is generally called as the Trika Shastra since it is a philosophy of the Triad ; Shiva, Shakti and Nara (the bound individual self). In the early middle ages after the downfall of the liberarian creed, the Kashmiri thinkers evolved an eclectic school of philosophy known as the Trika. The two outstanding features of the new cult were the worship of feminine divinities and the institution of the orders of female ascetics.”(37) With the spread of these doctrines, Kashmiri women gained more importance and achieved a higher status.

The history of introduction of Saivism in Kashmir is shrouded in mystery. The Nitamata Purana says that Saivism was prevalent in Kashmir even before the advent of the Aryans. The country itself was originally called Satidesa, after the name of Siva’s spouse.

“Puranic catholicism and Tantric cult combined to produce collective, co-operative and dynamic powers like Durga, Kali and Chandi whom helpless gods prayed for their survival and destruction of their invincible foes, the demon . Devi, in various forms, symbolises not merely supreme power but also knowledge , awareness and grace. She destroys the forces of evil and helps the suffering mankind in realizing their material well-being and spiritual goals. All women are declared to be forms of Devi, Durga and others.”(38)

The importance attached to Shakti resulted into the cult of Shaktism. Shaktism focusses worship of the goddess Devi as the

supreme embodiment of power of Shakti (feminie strength ;a female diety). Vaishnavism and Shaivism both worship Lakshmi with Vishnu and Parvati with Siva respectively as beings on an equal level of magnitude (the male and female aspects of god). Male deities (such as Shiva and Indra) are believed in some traditions to themselves offer worship to the goddess Durga.

“O Parameshwari, (the supreme goddess) who is praised by the husband of the daughter of Himalayas (Shri Shiva)”.”O Parameshwari who is worshipped with true feelings by the husband of Indrane, please give us the spiritual personality, the victory, the glory and destroy our enemies.”(39)

“Of Shiva’s female consort Uma, the Nitamatapurana speaks so highly as to give her a position higher than that of Shiva. The land of Kashmir is described as her material manifestation and she is further stated to have taken the form of Kashmir’s most famous river Vitasta.”(40)

“Her worship is prescribed on various occasions under different names such as Durga, Syam , Sati, Bhadrakali etc. As regards the origin and development of this goddess Uma, she is mentioned for the time in the Kena upanishad.”(41) Likewise, Vishnu was worshipped alongwith his consort Lakshmi.

“Besides Lakshmi and Uma, the Nitamata mentions various other goddesses. Many of them are wives or mothers of the gods, some are abstractions personified, while others seem to be mountain goddesses of the aborigins. The most important group consists of river-goddesses, five of whom, namely, Vitasta, Visoka, Trikoti, Harsapatha and candravati are identified respectively with Uma, Lakshmi, Aditi, Sali and Diti. All these goddesses are stated to have assumed the form of rivers to purify Kashmir at the request of Kasyapa.”(42)

“Upto now, the figures of Ganga and Yamuna only have been found in the valley of Kashmir, but we may hope for the discovery of those of other river-goddesses also. The inscription on the big Salhi fountain slab (in Chamba) which shows figures of Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Vitasta, Sindhu, Vipasa, Satadru and probably also of Iravati and Candrabhaga seems to have been written by a Kashmiri and if we may be allowed to make use of this hint, it is not unreasonable to support that the images also were the work of a Kashmiri artist familiar with the tradition preserved in the Nilamata. Anyway, the river goddesses-destroyers of sin and bestowers of heaven hold prominent position in the religion of the Nilamata.”(43)

“Separate shrines were dedicated to Shakti the universal conception of mother goddess. Springs and uncanny stones were supposed to be her manifestation through various forms and names. The most important among such shrines were Tripursundari in Kulgam, Trisandhya in Anantnag, Jvalamukhi near Khrew in Pulwama, Sharika at Srinagar, Sharada in Teethwal (now in Pakistan), Rajni at village Tullamulla in Ganderbal, Shaliputri at Baramulla, Bhadrakali in Handwara and so on.”(44)

“The worship of mothers is identical with those of Shiva’s Shakti. Shiva devoid of Shakti means nothing. Both are also inseparable aspects of absolute reality.”(45)

“The ‘matrchakra’ or circle of mothers as referred to by Kalhana at various occasions has subsequently given birth to the conception

of Sapta Matrikas(seven mothers) represented by Brahmani, Maheshwari, Kumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani and Chamunda. Varahamihira in his Brihatsamhita refers to the worship of the Matrganas (the Saptamatrikas) as the chief manifestation of Shakti cult. Varah Purana has added Yogeshwari to the list and the group of mothers is named as "Ashtamatrikas."(46)

"The mystical circle of Devi Chakras of early period have now appeared in the form of different aspects of mother goddess in order to help Shiva in his struggle with the demon and his consequent victory over him. Kalhana while referring to circle of mothers meant that these mother goddesses were placed around a Shrine dedicated to Shiva."(47)

"These were supported to guard the frontier passes or stations" Dvara."(48) "Some of the Matrika images have come from the ancient Shiva's Shrine constructed at the capital site of the valley Purananadhisthana (modern Pandrathan)."(49)

"In Kashmir valley, the mother goddess with a number of different names acquired such an importance that she was adored by the people as a powerful force, able to fulfill their desires as compared to other divine forces. As a result of this the worship of AshtaMatrikas was believed to represent the motherhood of the family and of the society."(50)

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