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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE [HINDUISM, JAINISM AND BUDDHISM] OF INDIA

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#### Abstract

Religion has long been seen as a conservative force in society across the globe. Religious beliefs serve to justify the existing, unequal social order and prevent societal change by making a virtue out of poverty and suffering. Religion also teaches people that it is pointless striving for a revolution to bring about social change in this life. Religion was primarily an ideological tool by means of which the ruling class legitimated its position and mystified those whom it exploited by conveying the conception that the prevailing social order was not simply a product of the ruthless exercise of a monopoly of power and profit in the interest of a particular social group, but rather a divinely ordained order. Religious ideas, thoughts and practices differed among the groups, along with transformations and developments took place in the various religious forms in course of time. Religion in India was never static in character but was driven by an inherent civil dynamic strength. Despite the consistency of core teachings [*Hinduism*, *Jainism* and *Buddhism*] over the years, since the last decade or globalization has entered into the economic, social-cultural, and political spheres of Indian society, yet another dimension to social change in Indian society was added. In this respect, its practices had gradually changed. Otherwise, Indian spirituality is deeply rooted in ancient philosophical and religious traditions of the land.

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#### Introduction:-

The fundamental relationship between religion and society, may be understood in two ways as direct and mediated by ethics. In a sense of direct relationship, it is fundamental to establish the meaning of the term 'religion'. On the theological note, religion finds its expression in doctrine, which articulates the characteristics of divinity. Yet, evolutionary context sees religion as the product of man's natural evolution over society, possibly made by human consciousness which its roots is present in human brain<sup>1</sup>. This is the reason social changes have considerable influence on the origins of sense of religion. The evolution of consciousness of man has advanced the creation of languages, intentionality and culture, manifested itself through art, science, morality and religion. Over the course of man's evolutionary process and social changes, religion being only an opportunity that humans can escape from

<sup>1</sup>Kirsti Suolinna, 'The Relationship between Social Change and Religious Movement' (2006) Vol. 5 South-East Asian Religion, p. 35.

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daily lives made of hardship, danger, and tyranny. It is likely that an evolution of religion is due to the fact that it is a mechanism useful for maintaining unity within social groups and ensuring that their members work together for the common good. In this form, people of the Indian Sub-continent from the *Indo-Aryan* [1800-1500 BCE] time, have exerted beliefs in the existence of a spiritual world which is parallel to and distinct from the real world. This has captivated the sets of belief systems and pressured the birth of religious impulses [practices] like rituals, asceticism and prayer recitations. They have the objective not only of conciliating the invisible spiritual entities, but also of winning over and inducing them to thus invoked gods to turn their merciful gaze towards human beings afflicted by continuous suffering. This formally became actual practices of religion based on social needs.

The original religion of India is recognized as *Brahmanism* [Vedic period; 1500–500 BC] which is commonly regarded as the offspring of an *Aryan* religion.<sup>2</sup> Based on the social structure, in *Pre-Vedic* [1500–1200 BCE] and *Vedic* society, it seems people believed in the sanctity of the creative force and venerated the male and female aspects of divinity. It appears they were worshippers of the forces of nature [mostly sun, moon & trees] partly substantiated by the early literature of the *Aryans* [practices are found in *Rig Veda*]. The faith was also onto many gods [*Indra, Varuna, Agni, Surya & Rudra*] even to the extent of worshipping female icons. The main constituent of *Vedic* religious practices involved sacrifices and ritualism, offering of food to fire in honor of the Gods. The *Sama Veda* and the *Yajur Veda* [early Indian Iron Age, after c. 1200 and before 800 BCE] were main aspects of the sacrificial acts and ritualism during those times.<sup>3</sup> The temples, images, altars and hereditary priestly classes were conspicuously absent during pre-*Vedic* period. During this period every householder acted himself as a priest. He kindled the sacred fire and recited the hymns. Though the people worshipped various gods they did not consider any one as supreme. In fact, they believed that all gods were one and the same and only the *Sages* had described them differently. People believed in the theory of *karma* and attainment of salvation as well as life after death.

By the later *Vedic* period [1000-600 BC], the polytheism was challenged by monotheistic ideas, and various deities were introduced as different ways of naming one eternal entity based on the need of society. The old beliefs and practices, in fact some of the old religious practices became more complex and stereotyped. The various ceremonies could be performed only by a professional class of priests which set the stages among men. Down the ages, philosophy in India began with a quest after the highest truth, not as mere objective certitude, but as being closely linked with the development of personality and leading to the attainment of the highest freedom. Therefore, society demanded not only a philosophical discipline of reasoning, but also a discipline of conduct and the control of emotions and passions. In parallel, *Upanishads* [700-500 BC] gave development of the religions metaphysical concepts which were used later by the religious leaders and reformers of ancient and medieval India. Thus, the synthesis between deep philosophical analysis and lofty spiritual discipline forges a powerful link in the chain of human fellowship and universal concord.<sup>4</sup>

### Religious Movement and Emergence of Philosophical schools

However, as the society progressed, humans dealt with many issues both external and internal aggressions. There was an internal socio-movement [religious movement] within *Varna* system [*Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras*] in post *Vedic* society, profoundly among *Brahmins, Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas*, which *Brahmins* being superior and the others being more based on nature worship were socially inferior and neglected. At that time, the people who are intellectual elite took the responsibility to protect and preserve the knowledge. Similarly, qualities of the warriors took the responsibility of defending their nation. The trader took the responsibility for the economy of the state and servants provided the social services. Eventually, this categorization of actions became hereditary and took the form of birth based caste system.<sup>5</sup> The humiliation to three lower groups became social activist since they were fed up of existing evils of society. This paved the road to social revolution leading to an unorthodox religious movement associated with *Mahāvīra* [599–527 BCE] and the *Buddha* [around 563–483 BCE] over *Vedic* Authority. On the basis of demand for the social changes ignored the infallibility and supernatural origin of the *Vedas* and rejected a creator God and the existence of *ātma*, the self [soul] besides *karma* being sole seed of every

<sup>2</sup>Milton Singer, 'Religion and Social Change in India: The Max Weber Thesis, Phase Three' (1996) Vol. 14 Economic Development and Culture Change, p 497.

<sup>3</sup>TN Madan, 'Religion and Social Change in India' (1995) Vol. 2 Asia Journal, pp. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup>Mario D'Amato, 'Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion - By Dan Arnold' (2007) 33 Religious Studies Review, p.125.

<sup>5</sup>Akshay Shivdas, 'Varna System: The Forgotten Meaning' (2016) Vol.5 International Research Journal of Social Science 42.

consequence. Initially, *Buddhism* and *Jainism* was merely a reformed form of *Brahmanism*. These two religions appealed to the people to give up their vices and follies, and to practice that purity of conduct and sincerity of belief which is the essence of true religion. They neither taught any new dogmas, nor any new rituals or a new philosophy. While *Jainism* laid stress on asceticism, *Buddha* based his teachings on the philosophy of *śūnyatā* and dependent origination.

In the later *Vedic* period, the definite ideas and philosophies about the true nature of *ātma*, the cosmic principle which represented the ultimate reality were developed. These concepts later on gave rise to six different schools of philosophies called *Śāda-darśana*.<sup>6</sup> Each schools [*Samkhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Mimamsa* & *Vedanta*] carried and developed their own stands and perspective based on the social structures to incorporate the need of society. This common need of hunger for freedom and knowledge, later on led to the evolution of different religious sects like *Vaiṣṇavism* [7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> CE], *Puranik Shaivism* [320–500 CE] and *Shaktism* as an enquiry into the mystery of life and existence in course of time, it had significantly impacts on the expansion of *Buddhism* and *Jainism* in India based on socio-personal need, which accommodated much wanted free will. In parallel, the primary factor that motivated these creeds was *Bhakti* Movement [7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> CE], the single-souled devotion of the worshipper to a personal god with some moral link during the pre-modern era of India.

*Buddhism* and *Jainism*, on special note was emerged at a time of significant social and political change. In the areas where it proliferated, urban centers were growing rapidly and creating new social conditions. Mostly, the commoners wishing to get access in practicing *Brahmanism* were restricted by the *Vedic* authority based on the caste system, were desperately seeking for an alternatives practices. *Buddhism* due to its egalitarian ideals, its structures for organizing community, and its opportunities for social and religious mobility, was well-suited for the time.

### Worship of Gods

The *Bhakti* played very important role in worship of Gods, *Yakshas*, *Nagas* and other folk deities in *Tantric* Tradition, which constitutes the most important part of tribal and folk religious beliefs. Changing the social orders, there was also *Vaiṣṇava* [worship *Vishnu*] Movement and *Shaivism* [worship *Shiva*] Movement within Indian sub-continent on the nature of worship, like Buddhist worshipped *Buddha*, Jains worshipped *Mahavira* and 24 *Tirthankaras*, *Vaiṣṇava* worshipped *Vishnu*, *Shaivism* worshipped *Shiva* and *Yoga* tradition worshipped *Shiva-Shakti* as union in *Kundalini*. Beyond those worship movements, there also had been minor movement which picked worship of the female principle, *Shakti* in *Shaktism*. It gave many path ways to lateral *Tantric* tradition, where female deities like *Tara* meditation became popular.

### Kingship, British Rule and Freedom Movement

The Kingships in ancient India, influenced the foundation of religious bodies [institutions] and developed structural outlook for place of worship besides, already curved monuments. Nevertheless, they patronized the religious institutions, donated villages and land in order to support the economy of temples or monasteries. Later, many scholars across the world, have visited India for higher learning in *Hinduism*, *Buddhism* and *Jainism*. For instant, *Ashoka* [268-232 BCE] extended special patronage to *Buddhism* and spread it not only throughout India, but also in foreign countries like Ceylon. At that time, the various symbols like the stupa and the tree began to be worshipped. While the stupa was a symbol of the *parinirvāṇa*, the *Bodhi* tree symbolized his enlightenment. However, *Buddhism* suffered a temporary setback after the fall of the *Mauryas*. The *Sungas* and *Kanvas*, who ruled the country had essentially *Brahmanical* leanings and extended every possible patronage to *Brahmanism*. Due to the withdrawal of royal patronage and introduction of *Tantric* practices in monastic institutions, *Mahayana Buddhism* suffered popularity in later period [after 8<sup>th</sup> century] but, *Jainism* maintained its consistency throughout the centuries.<sup>7</sup>

Before India's independence, British rule [1858-1947], *Christian* mission and English education played a very important role in changing the face of Indian society, especially in religion. Most of the archeological sites were excavated to display the profound religious practices in ancient India. *Alexander Cunningham* [1814–1893] was the first British to excavate *Nalanda* ruins with reference to *Xuan Zang's* travel writings about *Buddhism* in India. The British colonial rule was based on the capitalist system and in order to bring about desired social changes they brought out a new system of education. Significantly, the same western education became instrumental in the

<sup>6</sup>Abhay Prasad Singh, *Development Process & Social Movement in Contemporary India* (Pinnacle Learning 2015).

<sup>7</sup>J Gonda, 'Ancient Indian Kinship from the Religious Point of View' (1956) Vol. 3 International Review for the History of Religion, p. 36-71.

development of national consciousness and anti-colonial movement, which were mostly influenced by basic teachings of *Hinduism*, *Buddhism* and *Jainism*, specifically *Ahimsa* or non-violence of *Jainism*. Several freedom marches initiated by *Mahatma Gandhi* [1869-1948] was almost all the time based on non-violence. The most important achievement of British colonial rule was the unification of India for a better administrative system to serve the colonial interests, but it served the purpose for uniting India for the future freedom movement. British rule also introduced a new western education, new means of transport and communication, new technology and a new system of judiciary, in turn released new forces of change and the Indian society could never be the same again, thus modernizing India.

### Modernization and Globalization on Religious Practice

A major way that modernization impacts religion is through institutional differentiation. In ancient times of India, religion was frequently tied to Kinship, regional location, and national identity. This is especially true in developing agrarian societies such as India where society's various social institutions are thoroughly infused with religion that it is difficult to separate religion from cultural elements in society. Modernization subjects people to social change and forms competition to religion. *Brahmanism*, *Jainism* and *Buddhism* competed in responding to the need of society. Besides awareness on religions, modernization has been a dominant theme for central concept in the 'social development, referring to the interactive process of economic growth and social change. There came social pressure on gender equality in accessing religious practices and rituals. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was first time ever women's movement in India, never before had an entire country anywhere in the world come out in violent protest against inequality, defending equal political and economic rights for women in India. It came long way even to these days and we can also witness the court case on *Shribrimala* temple being in-accessible to women. In modern days, male dominant hierarchies are diminishing as women roar for equal salvation. Both the genders have more exposures to religious rituals and chants through advancement of technologies. The shared responsibilities among genders in uplifting social welfare, cultural structure and economy, have much more provided the platform for the religious visibilities in modern times.

The major influential factor is modern education, which made religious practices in India became more visible in modern society. But it is questionable on preservation of religion, due to degradation of human values, in-capabilities to realize the sole purpose of life due to busy modern schedules for work, trust and love among individuals. Educational urbanization has led to the expansion of religious structure in cities and most of the ancient sites are identified as cultural heritage by UNISCO. Many religious traditions primarily developed within rural settings are gaining popularity in urban areas of India, the practices like *vipassanā*, *prāṇāyāma* and most profoundly, *Yoga* and *Tantra* are in dire need of spiritual comfort for people.

Multiculturalism have also lead to both negative and positive impact on religious practice in India. Many people today live in religiously pluralistic societies, no longer sheltered from the presence of religions other than their own. This plurality increases the degree of influence exerted by one religion on another.<sup>8</sup> On other hand, globalization gave the road to exchange of different ideas among religions, the linking and intermixing of cultures and religion provides acceptance of other's perspectives. Today, in most Asian countries, one can marry anyone belonging to different religion and not necessary to convert from one religion to another in the name of marriage in modern India. And also rediscovery of Asian philosophy and ancient wisdom, especially *Buddhist* tradition in India is experiencing renaissance in the global history. However, religious practices have also been negatively used, as tools for political gain and also terrorism attacks are mostly associated with religion like *Muslims* attacking *Hindu* sites and vice-versa. Ideologies of religion has also lead to division of region like Muslim state, Hindu state, *Buddhist* state and so and so forth. However, Indian society plagued by various ills like superstitions, degraded position of women and exploitation of caste hierarchy is still a challenge in religious practice.

All belief systems have been affected by globalisation. This has meant that the ideologies of various belief systems have been spread by various methods: conquest, missionary activity, mass migration, mass media and other forms of technology. *Buddhism* and *Hinduism* has spread rapidly and has become popular through the promotion in the media of both its doctrines and its leaders.

<sup>8</sup> Amit Thorat, *No Religious Communities in India: A Development Profile* (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies 2001).

### Digitalization and Pandemic on Religious Practices

Digital evolution has paved the better road for pandemic year, 2020, which brought much reforms in religious practices in India. The health protocols like social distancing, lockdown, restrictions of travels and other social barriers from mass gatherings triggered digital evolution of religious practices. The secret *Tantric* practice of mantras and some profound initiations or empowerments which are supposed to maintain secret are often exposed, but it became necessary for the teachers to digitally teach. Many of the Tibetan Religious Figures [*Rinpoches*] gives initiations and teachings through online mode, without having to make physical presence and the same with *Jain* and *Hindu* leaders as well. Most of the Indian religious teachings and experiential practices were digitalized through YouTube and other alternative social Medias. In this sense, one way, religious practice has become easily accessible by every individual. The practical stems of religion were displayed on screen, without having to travel for conferences, teachings, lectures and so forth.

### Conclusion:-

Social changes being the driving force in evolution has made a major impact on religious practices in India. *Brahmanism* was one of the prominent religion being practiced by most of the Indian people, but it is the same religion which gave birth to the enlightenment doctrines of *Jainism* and *Buddhism*. The caste hierarchy, inferiority of women and *Vedic* authority in society were the main components and influential for the evolution of Jain and *Buddhist* practices in India. Apart from the idea of survival beyond the death of the earthly body, all religions in India [*Hinduism*, *Jainism* and *Buddhism*] have exercised powerful coercion over their followers in order to reinforce their submission to the beliefs imposed on them. This, unfortunately, has involved waging war against those with different religious beliefs. In this way, the other fundamental aspect of religion begins to become clear and seems to give way more and more to fundamentalism as a reaction to use the need for belonging for dividing social groups on the basis of religion and for social political control.

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