Chapter 12
Women in Religious Leadership:
A New Framework

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ABSTRACT

The chapter proposes a framework to understand women religious leaders. This operates on two axes: The first axis is that of power where the extremes are 1) Weberian idea of power as authority and 2) power as radical source. While power as authority views it individualistically reinforces patriarchy, power as radical source views it systemically and aims to reverse the power relations in the society. The second axis used in this chapter is that of societal change. In the societal change axis, the extremes are prophetic leaders and institutionalist leaders. While institutionalist leaders focus on reform of the religious structures, prophetic leaders act as the conscience keepers against any injustice in religion. These two axes give us four types of religious women leaders: traditional prophetic (TP), traditional institutional (TI), radical prophetic (RP), and radical institutional (RI). Mother Teresa, Matha Amruthandamaye, Marie Dentiere, and Jamida Beevi are few women leaders of religion the authors explore in this chapter to explain this framework.

INTRODUCTION

Two women, Kanaka Durga, 39, and Bindu Ammini, 40, created history on January 2nd, 2018 by entering Sabarimala temple following the Supreme Court Verdict that women of all ages can enter Sabarimala. In an earlier verdict on August 22nd, 2017, Supreme Court had barred the practice of 'Triple Talaq'. On 30th July 2019, after an extended discussion, the Government of India passed a bill 'The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019, which declared the practice of Triple Talaq as illegal and punishable. Much earlier, in 2016, a similar move to defend women occurred within the Catholic Church. On January 6th, 2016, Pope Francis had issued a decree revising the principles for the conventional foot-

washing ritual on Maundy Thursday. Pope said that the rite should not be limited to men and boys, but also include women and young girls, representing the whole community.

Though faith tradition and patriarchy are intertwined in many cultures, structural changes are happening like reinterpreting religious precepts, increasing the participation of women in religious institutions, and finding gender-specific roles within religious roles. The three events discussed above talks about how religion and therefore the societal structure rewrite rules to protect women. Reasons are many, yet women themselves turn out to be the primary social agents. A woman's perception on how she is being treated within the society plays a significant role. There are women who believe that true service is not possible in a gender discriminated society, they try to change over power to defend them. There are other women who identify themselves with the religious ideology, who do not find patriarchy challenging but work for societal change. The end result is that women voice for structural change. This chapter attempts to bring a framework for such women leaders. The purpose is to identify women leaders based on this model.

The first part of the chapter deals with the concept of 'Power' and 'Leadership', which is followed by women in religious leadership. Then the method and analysis of framework to understand women religious leaders are provided.

THE CONCEPT OF 'POWER'

Power is a much contested concept among philosophers, politicians, and social scientists. Conceptualization of power depends primarily on its context of power relations (Lukes, 1986, 2005). Many scholars accept the classic formulation given by Max Weber. Primarily, Weberian conception of power is considered in this chapter. For Weber, power is "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance…"(1978, 53). Weber assumed that people comply with the state because the state or authority is seen as good, right, or just. A pure subjective evaluation of domination is involved here. Authority perceived in this manner may be best conceptualized as Power. Traditional, charismatic and legal-rational are three types of legitimate domination given by Weber (1978). These types explain the intricacies of power relations in two ways. On one side, how some people become powerful to exercise power over others, and on the other hand, how people perceive this domination as a regular and natural phenomenon.

Traditional authority is given pivotal emphasis in this chapter while talking about the subordinate positional hierarchy of women. Traditional authority is power that stems from the age-old customs or practices of a society. Even today, the traditional form of authority exists in many societies across the world. Religion may be ahead of anything else to propagate/promote this kind of authority. This authority is never challenged, but accepted by the other individuals. Patriarchy is the primary form of traditional authority. The hierarchical structure, where the oldest male member is the head, of traditional Indian families is one of the many examples of patriarchy. According to Weber, "Patriarchalism is by far the most important type of domination the legitimacy of which rests upon tradition. Patriarchalism means the authority of the father, the husband, the senior of the house, the sib elder over the members of the household and sib; the rule of the master and patron over bondsmen, serfs, freed men; of the lord over the domestic servants and household officials' of the prince over house- and court-officials, nobles of office, clients, vassals; of the patrimonial lord and sovereign prince over the 'subjects.'" (Gerth & Mills, 1958, p. 296). Though Weber did not specify Patriarchy in terms of gender-based domination and subordination, the chapter emphasises patriarchy in this sense.

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