

Women and Piety
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I am a tireless advocate for women to have choices and rights in their lives. What makes this possible is the secular value system of modern, western civilization: freedom of---and from--- religion. Those countries in which women have little or no choices are those with religious dictatorships.

But what can we make out of India, a country that aspires to being a modern, enlightened, and multi-faith state? Why are we seeing so many women apparently having no choice over how their religions demean them? What should we think of modern women, supposedly advocates of gender equal rights, wanting the equal right to be stupid?

India is home to hundreds of religious cults, a characteristic of Hinduism, which is a big-tent religion. Such a big tent used to promote religious tolerance, until India began to morph from a secular nation to one promoting a militant form of Hinduism (seemingly in reaction to militant Islam). Women have always gotten short shrift in Hinduism, made worse by adopting Islam's domestic seclusion (Purdah).

The great divide now is between India's secular aspirations, modern, western-style parliament and justice system, and its promotion of gender equality, an uphill battle in this exceedingly sexist traditional state. Recently the courts and one of the Hindu sects collided, the conflict bared to the world.

One of the many Hindu gods is said to be celibate. One would assume that celibacy was his choice---but no, his followers believe that any exposure to women of childbearing age, coming to worship in his temple, would "tempt" him. Therefore, females between 10 to 50 are forbidden to set foot in this temple. Menstrual blood is polluting.

This fear of menstruating women is replicated across the world among those primitive people who believe that women are "polluting." Men, who otherwise honor the shedding of male blood in warfare (heroes) have long feared women's blood and have in various ways segregated them for it.

Ancient Zoroastrians, an otherwise sensible faith, took great pains to segregate women in menstrual shacks so that they would not "pollute" the community's food or water. In orthodox Judaism and Christianity, there are "purification" ceremonies that follow a woman's menstruation or childbirth. England's Queen Victoria considered it offensive that she had to go through being "churched" after her first child was born. She did not find it charming that being churched meant that the church readmitted her after her polluting childbirth. She found this idiotic.

So what do we have in India? We have some modern feminists who believe enough in this cult to demand access for women of childbearing age. These feminists actually took their case to the Supreme Court, which, being a secular institution, sided with them. Women should have the same freedoms as men, they ruled.

This raised the ire of the cult's menfolk, who demonstrated violently in the streets and gathered the support of other religious Hindus. They were outraged, claiming a violation of their "religious freedom." Religion and freedom, alas, do not go hand in hand. Freedom for men does not equate to freedom for women in any traditional faith (the exceptions being Quakers and Christian Scientists).

My annual mocking column that I call the Darwin Awards (awards to people whose actions are so dense that their demise raises the human IQ) comes to mind as I watch modern women demanding the right to be as gullible as the male worshippers of this deity. Why on earth should they want to do this? Are they really so foolish that they believe in the reality of this god?

India's problems with women and religion do not stop with this ridiculous conflict. Another issue has reared its ugly head: the shameful reality of Catholic nuns being regularly raped by priests. One such nun was interviewed and she mourned that priests, who are supposed to be representatives of Christ on earth, could so abuse them. Shouldn't this make them realize that they have been complicit in a faith that does not protect them?

Indeed. And what should they do about this? Replace "blind faith" with good sense. Time to go secular.

684 words

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