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A Hindu Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

IN ANY DISCUSSION OF ATTITUDES toward women and the treatment of women in Hindu society, one must be attentive to the fact of diversity. "Hinduism" is more appropriately thought of as a family name that encompasses an astounding variety of philosophical viewpoints, religious doctrine, and practice. Although from an orthodox standpoint the Vedas are held to be the supreme source in matters pertaining to religious belief and observance, Hindus, in practice, look to an array of written and oral sources for guiding their lives. Regional customs and traditions differ and there is no central institution or figure speaking authoritatively for all Hindus in matters of doctrine and practice. The tradition has not insisted on uniformity in the religious life. In this regard, it is at a considerable remove from the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

It should not surprise us, therefore, to discover significant differences in the status and roles ascribed to women in Hindu society. Although these differences must be readily acknowledged, it is still possible to make certain meaningful generalizations and to discern prevalent attitudes toward women. Although my discussion draws significantly from classical Sanskrit texts that are explicitly Brahmanic and masculine in their orientation, these texts have and continue to enjoy great prestige within the broad Hindu tradition. Although there is increasing evidence to suggest that the non-Brahmanic traditions have accorded greater value and recognition to women, it is also true that caste groups (*jātīs*) seek to

ascend the ladder of the caste hierarchy by adopting the values and behavior of those at the top. This is the process known as “Sanskritization” or “Brahmanization,” which looks to the Hindu tradition presented in the classical Sanskrit texts as normative.¹

In her recent study on women in Hinduism, Katherine K. Young draws attention to the disturbing trend in India where the economic growth in the rural areas has resulted in more conservative attitudes toward women and toward their withdrawal from the work force. Young associates this trend with the continuing process of Sanskritization or the imitation of Brahmanic values. This new trend toward closeting women seems to involve both cultural and economic factors. It obviously keeps women out of the competitive job market and it also harkens back to the idea that the status of a family increases if the women in the family are not educated and do not work outside the home.²

Such trends should not be surprising when influential teachers in India continue to advocate the position that a woman’s place is only in the home. In a recent publication, a popular Hindu guru and writer offers a ludicrous argument for closing the workplace to women. It is typical of such male arguments to claim that the intention is the well-being of the woman and to assume the prerogative of defining and speaking for the other. In Hinduism, as in other religions included in this volume, apparent compassion for women amounts to a demeaning definition of their nature. Women are more prone to tears and less capable of tolerating pain and scolding; thus they are better off if they are kept in the safe seclusion of the home, protected by men who are brave and able to bear the cruelty of the outside world.³

The continuing prestige and influence of the classical Sanskrit traditions make it possible to speak in certain general terms about women’s issues in Hinduism. Once the process of Sanskritization continues and as long as the values of the classical Sanskrit texts are held to be normative, these texts cannot be ignored and will have to be engaged in critical dialogue.

PARADOXICAL ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN

Any survey of attitudes toward women in Hinduism reveals glaring contrasts and ambiguities. One of the earliest examples of these ambiguities comes from the most famous work on Hindu law, the *Manusmṛiti* (ca. 200B.C.E.–100C.E.). The author of this work, Manu, comments on the duties and obligations of women.

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house.

In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.

Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshiped as a god by a faithful wife.

No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart (from their husbands); if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that (reason alone) be exalted in heaven.

A faithful wife, who desires to dwell (after death) with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead.⁴

Manu also requests that women be treated with honor.

Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire (their own) welfare.

Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields.

Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers.⁵

If Manu appears too ancient and remote, it is important to note that his prescriptions for women continue to be influential. In a recent article, Vasudha Narayanan cites extensively from a Tamil manual titled, *Dirgha Sumangali Bhava*, which was published in 1979. It is a manual for the married Hindu woman that echoes many of the traditional viewpoints articulated by Manu and preserves ancient stereotypes.⁶

If we turn to a relatively recent text, the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, of the sixteenth-century poet Tulasīdāsa, we encounter almost every negative stereotype for women in the Hindu tradition. Tulasīdāsa's work is a vernacular reworking of the ancient Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmiki and has been extremely influential. Gandhi described it as the greatest book

in the religious literature of the world and a scholar recently described it as the Hindu's favorite book.⁷

In Tulasīdāsa's work, Dasaratha, the king of Ayodhya, blames the banishment of his favorite son, Rama, on the fact that he (Dasaratha) trusted a woman.

What a thing to happen at a time such as this! I am undone by putting trust in a woman like an ascetic who is ruined by ignorance when he is about to win the fruit of his austerities.⁸

In addition to the suggestion that women ought not to be trusted, Dasaratha's outburst is also revealing because of the comparison that he chooses to make. He likens his own plight to that of an ascetic who is destroyed by ignorance when his spiritual endeavors are just about to bear fruit. This is a significant analogy because of the fact that women are also held to be responsible for the spiritual fall of men. In a conversation between the sage Narada and Rama, in the same text, the former asks the latter to explain why he did not allow Narada to get married. Rama offers a lengthy denunciation of women as obstacles to all that is noble and worthy in the life of men.

Lust, wrath, greed, pride and all other violent passions form the sturdy army of infatuation; but among them all the most formidable and calamitous is woman, illusion incarnate.

Listen sage, the Puranas and Vedas and the saints declare that woman is the vernal season to the forest of infatuation; like the heat of summer she dries up all the ponds and lakes of prayer and penance and devotional exercises.⁹

Later in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, Bharata, Rama's younger brother, also vents his anger against all women. The following words are addressed to his mother, whom he blames for the banishment of Rama.

How could the king trust you? Surely God must have robbed him of his senses in his last hour! Not even God can fathom the ways of a woman's heart, the repository of all deceit, sin and vice.

Being simple, amiable and pious, how could the king understand the nature of a woman?¹⁰

Bharata pronounces many of the prevalent stereotypes. Women are difficult to understand; they are deceitful, sinful, and they exploit the simplicity and good nature of men. One of the most troubling statements in

the *Rāmacaritamānasa* about women occurs in the *Sundarakāṇḍa* when women are lumped together with drums, rustics, animals, and members of the lowest caste and all of these are described as objects that are fit to be beaten.

A passage like this may be read easily as a justification for violence and abuse toward women. Such views encourage complacency toward domestic violence and convince women that it is a deserved form of punishment. Swami Ramsukhdas offers the following advice to an abused woman about an appropriate response:

Question: What should the wife do if her husband beats her and troubles her?

Answer: The wife should think that she is paying her debt of her previous life and thus her sins are being destroyed and she is becoming pure. When her parents come to know this, they can take her to their own house because they have not given their daughter to face this sort of bad behaviour.

Question: What should she do if her parents don't take her to their own house?

Answer: Under such circumstances what can the helpless wife do? She should reap the fruit of her past actions. She should patiently bear the beatings of her husband with patience. By bearing them she will be free from her sins and it is possible that her husband may start loving her.¹¹

WOMEN ARE SIGNIFICANT ONLY IN RELATION TO MEN

What emerges clearly from the classical texts is that women are accorded significance and status only in relation to men. They are regarded with the highest esteem in their roles as wives and mothers. For a woman, marriage and the service of her husband become the purpose of her life and the means to her salvation. She is to look upon her husband as her lord. Through the service of her husband, she accomplishes what an ascetic might attain after many years of arduous religious discipline.

Hindu texts are notoriously one-sided in emphasizing the obligations of women to men in marriage. In the following quotation from the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, Anasuya, wife of the sage, Atri, instructs Sita about the obligations of a Hindu wife:

Listen, O princess; mother, father and brother are all friendly helpers to a limited degree; but a husband, Sita, is an unlimited blessing; and vile is the woman who refuses to serve him.

Fortitude, piety, a friend and a wife—these four are tested only in time of adversity. Though her lord be old, sick, dull-headed, indigent, blind, deaf, bad-tempered or utterly wretched,—yet if his wife treats him with disrespect, she shall suffer all the torments of hell. To be devoted in thought and word and deed to her husband's feet is her only religious duty, her only guiding rule.¹²

The tragic consequence of perceiving the significance of women only in relation to men is seen most clearly in Hindu attitudes toward women. Widows, particularly those in the upper castes, were regarded as inauspicious. The widow not only mourned the loss of her husband, but also suffered the guilt of living longer than him. It was felt in some circles that if she was pure and faithful, like Savitri, she could save her husband from death itself.¹³ She was required to shave her head and to avoid all forms of personal adornment. With the death of her husband, she had lost the most important reasons for living and was debarred from the quest for the first three goals of Hindu life, *artha* (wealth), *kāma* (pleasure), and *dharma* (family religious ritual). From an early age, girls are instructed to pray for the longevity of their husbands-to-be in order to be spared the plight of widowhood. Boys, however, are not required to pray or fast for the longevity of their wives. A married woman whose husband is alive enjoys an auspicious status (*sumangali*). A widow is inauspicious (*amangali*) and unfit for participation in festivals and ceremonies.¹⁴

While the status of the widow has been improving, the stigma of inauspiciousness continues to linger. Narayanan reports that while widows are no longer required to shave their heads, some South Indian communities do not permit them to be present before religious leaders and they are not allowed to have the *sathari* (a symbol of God's grace), touch their heads.¹⁵

The continuing practice of giving and receiving dowries is another custom that demeans women and makes a daughter less desirable than a son in many families. According to A. S. Altekar, the dowry system is based on the Hindu view of marriage as a *dāna* or "gift." In the Hindu marriage ceremony, the girl (*kanyā*) is given as a sacred gift (*dāna*) by her father to the groom. Since a religious gift is usually accompanied by a gift of cash or gold, the bride is accompanied by a small gift of cash or ornaments.¹⁶

Whatever may have been its historical roots, today the dowry is a condition for the performance of a marriage and a tool for the exploitation and degradation of Hindu women. Although its practice was outlawed in India in 1961, its popularity has not declined and ris-

ing consumerism feeds the flames of desire and demand. The bride is increasingly seen as the means to materialistic aspirations for conspicuous items such as cars, scooters, refrigerators, and TV-VCRs. The young bride is often put under unconscionable pain and pressure by her husband and in-laws to keep the supply of consumer items flowing. Her hopeless predicament sometimes drives her to suicide. Where greed is untempered by compassion, she may even be murdered by her husband or by his relatives. The preferred method is to set her on fire and to explain away her horrendous death as an accident in the kitchen. The bridegroom is now free to exploit another family. At least two women are killed each day, in this manner, in New Delhi.¹⁷

Statistics released by the government of India in 1987 show a steady rise in the numbers of dowry deaths. These rose from 999 in 1985 to 1,786 in 1987. In 1993, the figure was 5,582.¹⁸ Although these figures are extremely disturbing, the reality may be much worse since cases of domestic violence are not usually reported. Male education has resulted in an increasing demand for dowries since a college diploma enhances one's economic potential and allows the parents of the bridegroom to make higher demands for dowries. While the dowry was much more prevalent among members of the upper castes, the desire of the lower castes to imitate the higher ones has resulted in its widespread and increased popularity.¹⁹ The Dowry Prohibition law, passed in 1961, has been largely ineffective in dealing with this tragic matter.

In this tragic and unjust context, the preference for sons in Hindu families does not come as a surprise. The increasing demands of the dowry system make daughters unwanted economic liabilities and Hindus are not averse to employing the most sophisticated technology to prevent their births or to ensure that they never attain marriageable age. Abortion is legal in India and medical procedures such as amniocentesis and ultrasound are commonly used to determine the gender of the unborn child and, if the fetus is female, to request a termination of the pregnancy. Figures for one New Delhi clinic in 1992–1993 show that out of a total of 13,400 abortions performed, 13,998 were of female fetuses. One study done in the state of Maharashtra revealed that out of 8,000 fetuses aborted, 7,999 were female. The exception was a Jewish mother who desired a daughter.²⁰ The practice of female abortion and female infanticide has lowered the ratio of men to women in India. In 1991, the ratio was 927 women for 1,000 men.²¹

The preference for a son (*putra*) in Hindu families is also rooted in religious belief and practice. The eldest son in a Hindu family enjoys a special status because he has the privilege of offering the *pinḍa* (rice-ball) each year when the rites, called *śrāddha*, are performed for the departed

father. This ritual saves the father from suffering in the afterlife. In the words of Manu: "Because a son delivers his father from the hell called *put*, he was therefore called *put-tra* (a deliverer from *put*) by the Self-existent himself."²²

The role of the son in the performance of postmortem rituals causes preferential regard for male offspring and families sometimes continue to have children until a son is born. S. Cromwell Crawford calls for a re-assessment of the beliefs surrounding *śrāddha* rituals and argues that Hindu ethics would be better served by emphasizing the doctrine of karma that teaches personal responsibility for our destinies.

There may be a very pragmatic reason why sons were given the responsibility of making annual offerings on behalf of departed ancestors. Traditionally, the married male child remained a part of the joint household, while the daughter left her home and took on a new identity as part of her husband's home. Her obligations were all centered on her husband and his family. Today, with the growth of nuclear families, both males and females are leaving the ancestral home and establishing households of their own. A married daughter may be closer geographically and may be interested in the performance of family rituals. Due to this change in family structure and pattern it is an appropriate time to reconsider the eligibility of women to perform these rituals.

Hinduism also debar women from leadership and participation in religious rituals because of the belief that the female becomes polluted during two of the distinctive expressions of female sexuality, menstruation and childbirth.²³ Women are usually ranked in the lower orders of the caste system and are prohibited from the study and recitation of the Vedas.²⁴ In orthodox homes the menstruating woman is not allowed to cook or to participate in domestic religious rituals. Among the Havik Brahmans of Mysore, for example, women must take special precautions to ensure that they do not pollute others during the period of menstruation. A Havik woman does not serve food to her family or eat with them during this time.²⁵

Here again, it is necessary that Hindus adopt an enlightened and rational view of normal female bodily functions rather than continue to hold onto the superstitious beliefs of an era when the nature of such biologic processes was not understood. The perception of uniquely female bodily processes as polluting is clearly a male-centered view that provides a further justification for the exclusion of women from male-controlled spheres.

One of the promising developments, in recent times, has been the initiative taken by certain Hindu movements to train women as priestesses. In 1975, Shri Shankarrao Thatte of Pune began the training of women in

priestly roles. Since his death in 1987, his wife, Mrs. Pushpabai Thatte, has continued this work under an organization known as “Shankar Seva Samiti” and it has spread to all parts of Maharashtra. Although there has been opposition from orthodox circles, the initiation of priestesses “has been accepted by most educated people, (and) welcomed as a revolutionary step in Indian society.”²⁶ In South Africa, the reformist Arya Samaj movement, founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1875, has been training priestesses and a branch of the movement in Trinidad recently initiated its first priestess. While the training appears to be almost entirely focused on liturgy and religious ceremonies, one hopes that it will develop an intellectual and scholarly dimension that will enable women to be creative interpreters and assessors of the Hindu heritage.

The previous passage by Swami Ramsukhdas points to a sinister interpretation and use of the Hindu doctrine of karma to condone resignation and fatalism on the part of women with regard to their abuse and subjection to men. I have personally heard many accounts of abused Hindu women who were sent back by their parents or advised to return to the homes of their husbands since the suffering inflicted upon them was a just reward for their actions in earlier lives. A woman who chooses to leave her husband also causes disgrace and embarrassment to her parents and elders.

The doctrine of karma, however, ought not to be perverted and misused to sanction oppression and injustice. While the teaching on karma underlines responsibility by emphasizing that human actions produce consequences for the doer, it does not propose that all experiences in life are the consequences of actions in past lives and it certainly does not require silent and passive submission to injustice. Men who abuse women are choosing to do so and the doctrine of karma must not ignore this fact by transferring blame and responsibility to the victim. Instead of advocating resignation to abuse, Hindu teachers ought to condemn gender injustice as a violation of fundamental Hindu values. If karma entrusts us with responsibility for the condition of our lives, Hindu leaders ought to be empowering women to be active agents of change rather than advising stoic acquiescence in suffering.

“WHAT MEN OWE TO WOMEN”: THE INTRINSIC WORTH OF WOMEN

The major problems faced by women in the Hindu tradition arise because of patriarchal and androcentric views that affirm the value and significance of women only in relation to men. In view of this fact, a

major task for us, as men, is to articulate a value for women that is not dependent on their subservient relationship to us. This would be a value that comes from the very fact of her being. Are there any resources in the classical texts for constructing such a view? I think such resources exist and they are to be found in the same texts that exclude and demean women. As the other chapters in this volume indicate, all religions sin in this way. They all contain the elements of a rich theory of justice but they do not always apply that to women.

The classical texts and the major traditions of Hinduism are unanimous in the view that the human being embodies the real and infinite divine spirit (*Brahman*). While the divine is present in everything, it is uniquely expressed in the human being. The various traditions of Hinduism have characterized the relationship between the divine spirit and the human self (*ātman*) in different ways, dependent on their philosophical standpoints. The nondualists speak of the ultimate identity of the two, while the qualified nondualists describe the relationship as one of inseparability but not identity. All of them agree, however, on the fact that the divine exists equally and identically in all beings and things. As the *Bhagavadgītā* puts it:

*He who sees the Supreme Lord,
Existing alike in all beings,
Not perishing when they perish,
Truly sees.*²⁷

While the social implications of this truth are not consistently and clearly drawn out in the classical texts, all of them articulate it in one way or the other. When the implications for human relationships are enunciated, they are done in terms of a vision of equality and there is no good reason why this equality should also be construed in terms of gender.

*In a brāhman endowed with wisdom and cultivation,
In a cow, in an elephant,
And even in dog or in a dog-cooker,
The pandits see the same (ātman).
Even here on earth, rebirth is conquered
By those whose mind is established in impartiality.
Brahman is guiltless and impartial;
Therefore they are established in Brahman.*²⁸

The Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad specifically identifies the divine with women (*strī*) and unmarried girls (*kumārī*) as well as with men and boys.

You are a woman; you are a man; you are a boy or also a girl. As an old man, you totter along with a walking-stick. As you are born, you turn your face in all directions.

You are the dark blue bird, the green one with red eyes, the rain-cloud, the seasons, and the oceans. You live as one without a beginning because of your pervasiveness, you, from whom all beings are born.²⁹

Although this teaching about the sameness of the divine in all beings has been clearly enunciated in the classical texts such as the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā, it has usually remained as a spiritual ideal and has not always been used as a reforming norm to question and critique social structures and unjust gender relationships. One reason is that it is usually sought by the celibate renunciant (*sannyāsi*) who is ritually freed from social ties and obligations and who may not be interested in harmonizing the spiritual ideal and social reality. A spiritual ideal, however, which is disconnected from social reality and from the life of the community quickly becomes irrelevant. The doctrine of divine equality, so deeply rooted in Hinduism, must become a powerful searchlight in order to illuminate and heal the exploitative and oppressive structures of Hindu society.

In the Hindu tradition, the divine is identified with that which is true or real (*sat*) and the real is not subject to change. As that which is absolutely real, the divine is understood to have the greatest value. Things that are subject to change do not lack value, but are not viewed as having ultimate value. The human form, though finite and perishable, is precious because it is the abode of the imperishable and it is the instrument for attaining liberation (*mokṣa*). If the human form derives its value from divine immanence, then it must be a symptom of ignorance to despise and oppress the female forms which, like the male forms, embody divinity. The forms that express that which we consider to be of ultimate value must also command our respect and reverence.

Women have value and significance, not primarily because of their instrumental roles and relationships to us as wives and mothers, but because, like us, they equally embody the divine. Their worth is an intrinsic one and does not come indirectly through males. The great South Indian teacher, Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) affirmed this truth in a firm stand that he took after the death of his mother. His mother spent the last years of her life at his *āśrama* and became his disciple. Upon her death, Ramana was convinced that she had attained liberation and was not subject to rebirth. It is customary for the body of a liberated person to be buried rather than cremated. Some disciples expressed doubt about whether the body of a liberated woman should be treated like that

of a liberated man. Ramana's answer was unequivocal. "Since *Jñāna* (Knowledge) and *Mukti* (Deliverance) do not differ with the difference of sex, the body of a woman Saint also need not be burnt. Her body is also the abode of God."³⁰

AHIMSĀ: ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR WOMEN

The Hindu belief in the unity of existence through the divine and in the sacredness of all life that expresses the divine, is the foundation of its cardinal ethical principle, *ahimsā* (nonviolence). Belief in divine immanence requires us to demonstrate reverence and consideration for life in all its forms and to avoid injury or suffering to others. Divine immanence is so central to the Hindu understanding of God, that even a text like the *Rāmacaritamānasa* of Tulasīdāsa, full of misogynistic verses, cannot avoid its implications. In often-recited verses from the *Bālakāṇḍa*, he reiterates the doctrine of divine pervasiveness and expresses his reverence for all beings and for the entire creation.

*Knowing that the whole universe, whether animate or inanimate, is pervaded by the spirit of Rama, I ever adore the feet of all with folded hands. Eight million four hundred thousand species of living beings, classified under four broad divisions, inhabit land, water and the air. Realizing the whole world to be pervaded by Sita and Rama, I make obeisance with folded hands.*³¹

The central ethical implication of divine immanence, which is non-violence (*ahimsā*), is also echoed by Tulasīdāsa. In the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, Rama speaks about it to his brother, Bharata.

*Brother, there is no religious duty like benevolence and no sin like oppressing others. I have declared to you, dear brother, the verdict of all the Vedas and the Puranas, and the learned also know it.*³²

If the teaching about divine equality is to be saved from being an abstract and insignificant ideal, then the meaning of its central ethic, which is *ahimsā*, must be enlarged and used to challenge gender inequities. Contemporary Hindu ethics, on the whole, must become more cognizant of the ways in which social structures affect peoples' lives and not limit its application to the sphere of individual relationships. The systemic nature of gender inequality has to be understood and addressed with earnestness.

Ahimsā is violated and women are oppressed when they are forced because of social values to abort fetuses merely because the fetus is female. They are tortured when the cruel custom of dowry strains the precious economic resources of the families into which they are born and makes them feel guilty for being women. They are demeaned by the practice of dowry that signifies that the value of a woman is so low that she becomes acceptable to another only when her family is able to satisfy his greed for the latest gadgets of materialistic fancy. Her suffering continues in the home of her in-laws when she is resented because of dissatisfaction with the dowry and when she is subject to verbal and physical abuse in order to extort more from her poor family. Her life is often in danger and she sometimes chooses to save her family by ending it herself. Women are not honored in a society that inflicts suffering on her in so many ways.

AHIMSĀ AND JUSTICE FOR WOMEN

In his understanding and interpretation of the meaning of *ahimsā*, Gandhi explained that in its negative form it means abstention from injury to living beings physically or mentally. In its positive form, *ahimsā* means love and compassion for all. For Gandhi, *ahimsā* also means justice toward everyone and abstention from exploitation in any form. "No man," claimed Gandhi, "could be actively non-violent and not rise against social injustice no matter where it occurred."³³ From this perspective, we owe women, not only the value, dignity, and respect that stems from their embodiment of the divine, but also justice. Justice for women, in the context of Hinduism, requires that we ensure them the same educational opportunities as men so that they realize the fullness of their human potential.

There are numerous studies that show that the status of women increases with access to education and that the latter also leads to lower population growth and higher standards of living.³⁴ The Indian state of Kerala has achieved 100-percent literacy among girls and a birthrate of two per family.³⁵ Kerala is one of the few states in India where women outnumber men and where the life expectancy of women exceeds that of men. Indian census figures for 1991 revealed 1,040 women for every 1,000 men. The national figure is 929 women for every 1,000 men. The birthrate in Kerala is eighteen per thousand and falling. Kerala's impressive literacy rate (higher than that of the United States), stands in sad contrast to the national literacy level in India that is around 52 percent. A disproportionate percentage of the illiterate in India are

women. One writer recently commented on the national consequences of this fact.

More attention to improving the lot of Indian women in general, empowering them to make decisions about such matters as reproduction and family expenditure, and improving their access to health care, would undoubtedly have benefitted Indian society as a whole, notably by reducing the country's population. But not just that: freeing India's ordinary women from millennia of subjugation would have liberated for the country the productive talents of half the population, which for millennia have been left to languish exploited, abused, and taken for granted, but all too rarely fulfilled.³⁶

There are many ancient traditions that can be creatively appropriated to support the education of women. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, for instance, recommends a ritual to a householder to ensure the birth of a scholarly daughter (4.4.18).³⁷ There are also Vedic hymns that are attributed to women. Early "forest universities" in India were coeducational and girls were entitled to commence the study of the Vedas after the *upanayana* or "sacred thread ceremony." One class of female students were the *brahmavādinīs* who committed themselves to a lifelong study of liturgical and ritual texts and engaged in religious debates.³⁸

Hindu classical texts, as was noted earlier, offer a one-sided emphasis on the obligations of women to men and are glaringly silent on the obligations of men to women. Justice requires that this imbalance be redressed and that mutual obligations be emphasized. There are many ancient traditions that could be drawn upon to support gender equality and mutuality. The Rg Veda, the earliest of the Vedic texts stipulates that the wife must be present at all domestic religious rituals. Young argues that this presence was not just a silent one since, in the absence of the men, the deities could not be left unattended and the wife would have had to assume primary responsibility for making offerings.³⁹

While there has been a certain imbalance in the emphasis on female obligations and duties, the language of obligations and the significance that these have received in Hinduism are laudable and instructive. The contemporary emphasis on human rights often leads to an exaggerated individualism, and needs to be balanced by a stress on human responsibilities and obligations. Freedom without a deep sense of responsibility does little to foster and nurture human communities. The value for the language of obligations in Hinduism arises out of its understanding of the unity and interrelatedness of all

existence. Whether we recognize it or not, from a Hindu viewpoint, our lives are inextricably intertwined with, and dependent on, the universe as a whole, which includes such life forms as the divine, nature, and humans. The wheel of the universe revolves only if we recognize and fulfill our duties to the whole in response to its continuous sustenance of our individual lives. One who enjoys the gifts of the universe without offering anything in return is considered in the *Bhagavadgītā* (3:12) a thief. The Hindu understanding of the source and necessity of obligations is a rich resource for promoting gender equity. A doctrine of human rights in Hinduism will be correctly inseparable from one of responsibility and obligations.

In asking that the Hindu tradition emphasize mutual obligations between men and women, I wish to clarify that this is not an argument for exclusive and complementary roles. This argument is often used to relegate women to the domestic sphere and to deny them the freedom to participate in all spheres of the human community. The justice that we owe to women implies freedom, and we must be aware of the many insidious arguments that are proffered to define her place. The following is one of many examples:

Question: In these days women demand equal rights like men. Is it proper?

Answer: No. It is not proper. In fact a woman has not the right of equality with man but she has a privilege. The reason is that she comes to her husband's house having renounced her parents etc. She is called the mistress and the queen of the house. It is her husband who has a privilege outside the house. As a chariot moves with two wheels which are kept apart, so do the household affairs run smoothly with their separate rights. If the two wheels of the chariot are joined together, it can't be driven smoothly. If both of them have equal rights, how will a man like a woman conceive? Therefore right of equality in fact means separate rights of the two, and this is real freedom for both of them.⁴⁰

Even Gandhi, who advanced the cause of women's freedom by drawing them into the struggle for national independence, argued conservatively for separate and complementary roles. While he argued for spiritual equality, he also claimed that the vocations of the two were different and that the woman's place was in the home. "The duty of motherhood," wrote Gandhi, "which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which men need not possess. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially the mistress of the house. He is the bread-winner. She is the keeper and distributor of the bread."⁴¹

NONTRADITIONAL ROLES FOR WOMEN

To counteract such role stereotyping and exclusivity, we need to highlight the many women in the history of Hinduism who liberated themselves from traditional roles and made their own destinies. They can become inspiring role models for women. Most of them come from the devotional traditions of Hinduism that emphasize the centrality of love in the divine-human relationship and that dispense with the role of priestly intermediaries. These movements have also employed vernacular languages of India as their mode of religious expression.

Prominent among these women are Andal (sixth century C.E.) and Mirabai (fourteenth century C.E.).⁴² Andal was the daughter of Vishnuchitta, a temple priest at Srivilliputtur in South India. Growing up in the shadow of the temple, Andal cultivated a deep love for God that resembled the intense and passionate relationship between Krishna and his *gopis* (milkmaid devotees). She turned down the option of marriage and, according to traditional accounts, disappeared into the image of Vishnu. The devotional compositions of Andal are recited daily in Hindu temples. Mirabai was a childhood devotee of Krishna. After her marriage to Bhojraj, the prince of Chitor, her passion for Krishna became a source of embarrassment to her in-laws. Fleeing persecution in her husband's home, Mira fled to Vrindaban, the sacred city of Krishna. Here, she poured out her heart in poetic songs and, like Andal, was mystically united with the image of her beloved.⁴³

In more recent times, we continue to see women circumventing traditional roles and assuming leadership roles as spiritual teachers. Prominent among these are the Bengali mystic, Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982), and Swami Jnanananda (b.1931).⁴⁴ While some exceptional women have left deep imprints on the Hindu tradition by following their profound religious leanings, my purpose in citing their examples is not to suggest that this ought to be the only alternative for women who may not wish to follow conventional roles. What is necessary today, in the Hindu world, is the creation of opportunities and a climate of attitudes in which women enjoy the freedom and right to self-development and are not constrained into roles that are demarcated for them by a patriarchal and androcentric culture. We owe it to women to become partners with them in the liberation of both genders from the constraints of patriarchy.

The doctrine of divine immanence and the sanctity and worth of the human person that follows from it must become the foundation of a Hindu challenge and critique of all attitudes, values, and actions that

demean and trivialize women and reduce them to sexual objects. Hinduism must resist and respond to the challenges of a materialistic- and consumer-oriented culture in which people determine their own value and the value of others by the worth of the commodities that they own. In a materialistic culture, human value varies with the worth of our possessions and rises and falls with the upward or downward movements of the market. A tradition that affirms unequivocally that the significance of the human being is to be found in the fact that human nature embodies the divine cannot condone the commercialization of human existence. It must champion the dignity of all human beings and attitudes of respect and reverence for all human life.

FEMININE IMAGES OF GOD

One of the great contributions of feminist theology has been to demonstrate the relationship between patriarchy and male images of God. These images are predominant in male-dominated societies and reinforce, in turn, male authority roles and figures.⁴⁵ The images of God in any religious tradition are significant since they affect social structure and human consciousness. The Hindu tradition, however, cautions us about positing any necessary relationship between the presence of feminine images and forms of God in a religion and the status of women. Even though the Mother Goddesses dominated some regions in India, this fact did not translate into greater status for women.

It must be of some significance, however, that the Hindu tradition has not hesitated to use a variety of feminine symbols and appellations for the sacred, and there are no philosophical problems in Hinduism with imaging the divine as feminine. Although many of the goddesses in Hinduism are subordinate to the god-figures and mirror the subordination of women to men, there are figures like Kali that embody all of the traditional features of God. A popular image represents the divine as *ardhanārīśvara* and shows God as the perfect integration of male and female characteristics. One-half of the image is male and the other half is female. What is especially noteworthy about this icon is that the integration of the male and female is complete and equal.

The fact that the tradition uses both male and female metaphors for God underlines the truth that God is neither male nor female. The challenge before us here, once more, is to see the implications of religious insight for social reality and to question the contradictions that result from isolating both. The feminine images of God in Hinduism are a

rich source to be retrieved and interpreted by advocates of gender justice, equality, and rights.

The Hindu tradition, as already noted, accords value and respect to women primarily in their roles as wives and mothers (of sons). In her role as mother, the woman is even more venerated than the father or the teacher. Her role as an educator and spiritual teacher of her children is clearly recognized.⁴⁶ In so many other ways, however, she is devalued and debased. The challenge for Hinduism is not to strip the mother of the sanctity and dignity it has traditionally reserved for her, but to help create the conditions under which women can freely choose their paths to self-development and to ensure that they are treated justly and with honor in nontraditional and traditional roles.

SCRIPTURAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Hinduism has traditionally distinguished between *śruti* and *smṛti* texts. *Śruti* literally means, "that which is heard," and designates those Scriptures that are considered to be revealed and that enjoy supreme authority. The term is regularly employed as a synonym for the Vedas. *Smṛti*, on the other hand, means, "that which is remembered," and refers to sacred texts that have a human origin. The *Dharma-śāstras* or law books of Hinduism, such as the *Manusmṛti*, are classified as *smṛti*. These texts are secondary in authority to the *śruti* and, more importantly, deal with those aspects of the tradition that are contextual and limited to specific time periods and social conditions. Julius Lipner lucidly discusses the relationship between *śruti* and *smṛti*.

In so far as *smṛti* is humanly authored, it is generally fallible and liable to change. It is also liable to criticism. As such, it is a selective term. Sometimes, what is *smṛti* for you may not be recognized as such by me; or rather, though it may be necessary for both of us to recognize the authority of a particular slice of *smṛti*, we may weigh this authority differently according to the particular traditions out of which we come or the exigencies of the situation. *Smṛti* is the medium through which we hear the voice of *śruti*; it is interpretative, selective, collaborative, flexible.⁴⁷

Although the *śruti* texts are acknowledged to be revelation, the sphere of their authority is carefully defined and limited. The purpose of the *śruti* is to reveal only those things that cannot be known through any of our ordinary means of knowledge and its revelations should not

contradict what we learn about the world through other sources of knowledge. For the Vedānta schools of the Hindu tradition, the primary purpose of revelation is to inform us of the nature of absolute reality (*Brahman*) and the relationship between specific ritual actions and their results.⁴⁸

The distinction between *śruti* and *smṛti* and the limits placed on the authority of the former are valuable and creative resources that can be utilized by Hindu interpreters for meaningfully addressing contemporary issues, including those of gender injustice. The problem here, however, is that androcentric views, although predominant, are not limited to those works that are regarded as *smṛti*. Young notes this fact.

That Hindu reformers from the nineteenth century on have looked to the Vedas as the “Golden Age” for Hindu women may be based, consequently, not only on an appreciation of the values of this early society, but also on an early apologetic already structured into the texts. What the reformers often overlooked, however, was how the Vedic Age, especially the periods for the Brahmanas and the Upanisads—also gave rise to many of the features of classical and medieval Hinduism that would eventually be criticized.⁴⁹

Androcentric views in the *smṛti* texts must be dealt with by showing how they reflect specific social structures, beliefs, and patterns of authority. Such texts must be replaced by new *smṛtis* that express the aspirations of women for justice. The explicit recognition that the *smṛtis* are contextual works grants us the liberty to undertake this task. The challenge is greater, but not insurmountable, where androcentric views are expressed in the *śruti*. In dealing with such views, our approach may be twofold. We must affirm that the specific purpose of revelation is to inform us of those things that cannot be known through other available sources. The purpose of revelation, as we have already seen, is to tell us of the nature of the absolute (*Brahman*). We must infer and apply the implications of this revelation for gender relationships. The Hindu tradition, as already discussed, posits that the absolute exists equally in all beings and this must translate into a social order characterized by relationships of justice and mutual respect. This view of the purpose of revelation also gives us the freedom to see that there are *smṛti* (namely, contextual) texts within the *śruti* and these do not have to be granted the same degree of authority. “A hundred *śrutis*,” says Sankara, “may declare that fire is cold or that it is dark; still they possess no authority in the matter.”⁵⁰

CONCLUSION: AVIDYĀ (IGNORANCE) AND PATRIARCHY

The Hindu tradition broadly describes the fundamental human problem to be one of *avidyā*, or “ignorance.” Human conflict and the suffering that it causes are rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the true nature of reality. Hinduism, on the whole, is optimistic about human nature that is not considered to be fundamentally flawed or defective. Ignorance can be overcome, and, when it is and when we are awakened to the true nature of reality, there will be a corresponding transformation in the quality of our relationships and greater social harmony. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, knowledge of the highest kind is described as “that knowledge by which one sees One imperishable being in all beings, undivided in the divided” (18:20). Inferior to this way of knowing is “that knowledge which knows as separate different beings of various kinds among all beings” (18:21).⁵¹ The imperishable that exists in all beings is identified in the *Bhagavadgītā* with the *ātman* or the “deepest level of the human self.” It is here that true human fullness and happiness is discovered and that one learns to see oneself in all others.

Every human being, in the view of Hinduism, yearns for a fullness and freedom from want. This fullness, however, is already inherent in one’s nature at the level of one’s true self where one is inseparable from the imperishable absolute. Ignorant of this, and driven by a sense of incompleteness we seek to become full beings through the multiplication of our possessions and through power. Men seek self-gratification by treating women as objects of possession and by exercising power and control over them. Since the value of wealth or power comes from the fact that these are exclusive and unequally distributed, the one who seeks his happiness through these means lives in continuous anxiety and insecurity. He is diminished by the power and wealth of others. “The spiritual problem with greed,” as David Loy observes, “—both the greed for profit and the greed to consume—is due not only to the consequent maldistribution of worldly goods (although a more equitable distribution is, of course, essential), or to its effects on the biosphere, but even more fundamentally because greed is based on a delusion: the delusion that happiness is to be found this way.”⁵² Loy will probably agree that his observation is also true of the greed to possess, dominate, and control other human beings.

While the historical roots of patriarchy are complex, we must also see that is an expression of *avidyā*, a fundamental misunderstanding of the spiritual equality and unity of human beings and a false search for fullness through human subjugation. Such an understanding helps us

to see clearly that the liberation of women to become full beings is a necessary condition of our own true liberation.

NOTES

1. The caste (*varna*) system is a hierarchical ordering of society into four occupational groups. At the apex of the social order are the *Brahmans* (priests and scholars), followed by the *ksatriyas* (rulers and warriors), *vaiśyas* (merchants and traders), and *śūdras* (laborers and servants of the first three groups). Those who did not belong to one of these four groups constituted the outcastes or untouchables. They are considered ritually impure and do not enjoy the rights and privileges of the higher castes. In practice the four main groups are divided into many subgroups that are referred to as *jātīs*.

2. Katherine K. Young, "Women in Hinduism," in *Today's Woman in World Religions*, Arvind Sharma, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 115.

3. Swami Ramsukhdas, *How to Lead a Household Life* (Gorakhpur, India: Gita Press, 1994), 56.

4. G. Buhler, trans., *The Laws of Manu* (London: Oxford University Press, 1886), 5:147–149; 154–156.

5. *Laws of Manu*, 3:55–57.

6. See Vasudha Narayanan, "Hindu Perceptions of Auspiciousness and Sexuality," in *Women, Religion and Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 64–92.

7. Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 89.

8. *Rāmācaritamānasa*, R. C. Prasad, trans. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, 270.

9. *Ibid.*, 506.

10. *Ibid.*, 354.

11. Ramsukhdas, *How to Lead a Household Life*, 50.

12. *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, 468.

13. The story of Savitri is told in the *Mahābhārata*. Savitri decided to marry Satyavan although he was destined to live only one more year. On the day appointed for his death, she followed him to his place of work and stayed at his side. When the deity of death, Yama, came to claim Saytavan, Savitri refused to let her husband go alone and followed him to the realm of the departed. In order to dissuade Savitri, Yama offered to fulfill any of her wishes except the return of her husband to the world of the living. He quickly consented to her first

two wishes. Her third wish was for many sons. Yama readily granted it, but Savitri kept following him. When he told her to return, she reminded him that a widow could not remarry. Yama had no choice but to return Satyavan. For a retelling of this story see Sister Nivedita, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975).

14. Sakuntala Narasimhan, "India: From Sati to Sex Determination Tests," in *Women and Violence*, Miranda Daves, ed. (London: Zed Books, 1994), 45–50.

15. Narayanan, "Hindu Perceptions of Auspiciousness and Sexuality," 85.

16. A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1938), 71.

17. S. Cromwell Crawford, *Dilemmas of Life and Death* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 35.

18. From "Global Dharma" in *Hinduism Today*, November, 1994.

19. See Elisabeth Bumiller, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990), 48–49.

20. Narasimhan, "India," 51.

21. Narayanan, "One Tree Is Equal to Ten Sons: Hindu Responses to the Problems of Ecology, Population, and Consumption," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65(2):314 (1997).

22. *Laws of Manu*, 9:138.

23. Narayanan, "Hindu Perceptions of Auspiciousness and Sexuality," 85–88.

24. See *Laws of Manu*, 9:18.

25. See David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 164.

26. From V. L. Manjul in *Hinduism Today*, January, 1997.

27. The *Bhagavadgītā*, Winthrop Sargeant, trans. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984). The Hindu view of God is not a simple polytheism that affirms a multiplicity of independent deities. Hinduism affirms the oneness of God while maintaining a multiplicity of God-forms and figures, both male and female. Hindus enjoy the freedom to choose a particular God-form as the focus of their religious life. Ultimately the divine transcends any form and name attributed by human beings.

28. *Bhagavadgītā* 5:18-19. See also *Īśa Upaniṣad*, 6–7.

29. The *Upaniṣads*, Patrick Olivelle, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 259.

30. Arthur Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1970), 79.

31. Prasad, *Rāmācaritamānasa*, 8–9.

32. *Ibid.*, 719.

33. Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 89.
34. For some statistics in the Indian context see Narayanan, "One Tree Is Equal to Ten Sons," 312–316.
35. From "Global Dharma" in *Hinduism Today*, November, 1994.
36. Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to Millennium* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997), 296.
37. See Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 3.
38. See Ellison Banks Findly, "Gārgī at the King's Court: Women and Philosophic Innovation in Ancient India," in *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 37–58.
39. Young, "Women in Hinduism," 62.
40. Ramsukhdas, *How to Lead a Household Life*, 55.
41. Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 161.
42. For brief discussions see David Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993), chap. 7.
43. For more detailed biographical accounts see Swami Ghanananda and John Stewart-Wallace, eds., *Women Saints: East and West* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1946).
44. For Anandamayi Ma see A. Lipski, *Life and Teachings of Sri Anandamayi Ma* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977). For Swami Jnanananda see Charles S. J. White, "Mother Jnanananda of Madras, India," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, eds. (San Francisco: Harper, 1980), 22–37.
45. See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).
46. See *Laws of Manu*, 2:145.
47. Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1994), 75.
48. See Anantanand Rambachan, *Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a Source of Valid Knowledge in Sakara* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), chap. 2.
49. Young, "Women in Hinduism," 71–72.
50. *The Bhagavadgītā with the commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, A. Mahadeva Sastry, trans. (Madras, India: Samata Books, 1977), 18:66.
51. *The Bhagavadgītā*, Winthrop Sargeant, trans. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).
52. David Loy, "The Religion of the Market," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65(2):286 (1997).