

Babita and Sanjay Tewari¹

THE HISTORY OF INDIAN WOMEN: HINDUISM AT CROSSROADS WITH GENDER

Introduction: Male Gods and Female Goddesses

Much of the meaning of the Rig Veda is imperfectly understood and the meanings of many words have become obsolete for many centuries. However a broad concept of the religion of Rig Veda is clear enough. The chief object of worship is the Deva (*Prajapati* – father of all gods and humans), who is seen as ‘the bright, shining one’. *Prajapati* retreated in history and was replaced by many other major gods. The main gods of Vedic period are Indra, Varuna, Surya, Agni, Soma, Rudra and Yama.

Indra, the warrior God, was associated with thunder and storm. He rode in a bright chariot with a thunderbolt in his hand as his weapon (akin to Zeus of the Greeks and Thor of the Germans). He is also depicted riding his mount, Airavata the elephant.

Varuna, second only to Indra in importance, was the guardian of the laws of nature. He watched the populace for any misdeeds and assured a moral society. He was ethically the highest Vedic god and was pure and holy. The cosmic order (*Rta*) was his responsibility. Mitra, an important god connected with vows and covenants is also mentioned in the Zoroastrian pantheon under his Greco-Iranian name Mithras.

¹ Dr Babita Tewari, CSJM University, Kanpur, India.
Sanjay Tewari PG in sociology and M.B.A.

Surya, the sun god has several other forms and names. Savitur, the stimulator, is mentioned in the holy *Gayatri mantra*. Pushan another sun god was the protector of the herdsman. Visnhnu, also exhibited solar characteristics and covered the earth in three paces. He would gain prominence much later in Hinduism, and would be retained as the main deity.

Agni, the fire god was considered as an intermediary between gods and men for he consumed the sacrifice and carried it to the gods.

Soma was originally a plant extract, which made a potent drink. However, later soma was identified with the moon.

Rudra was a remote god, dwelling in the mountains. He was an archer and had a fierce character. He could bring disease with his arrows and at the same time was the guardian of healing herbs. Later Hinduism adopted many of his characters in their deity Shiva.

Yama, lord of the dead, was also the guardian of the 'World of the Fathers', where the blessed dead ancestors feasted in bliss forever. A few goddesses also are mentioned in the Rig Veda. Prthvi was the goddess of the earth. Aditi was the great mother of the gods. Ushas was the goddess of dawn while Ratri was the spirit of the night. Aranyani, a nature goddess was the lady of the forest. None of these goddesses played a major role in the practice of the religion. The prominent gods were exclusively male dominated. Kama the love-god was the Indian version of cupid, a handsome man with bow and arrow in his hands.

Gods of Hinduism

Trimurthi

To an uninformed observer Hinduism may appear chaotic and polytheistic. However, fundamentally Hindus believe in a Universal God and this belief is derived from the Vedic philosophy of the World Soul. The hundreds of gods portrayed are faces of the same single force, the Universal God. This God is all pervasive, omnipotent and omniscient, in the true Vedic sense (*sarvantharyami*). A Hindu will see the power of God in everything that surrounds him, animate or inanimate. Animals like cows, monkeys or snakes may be considered sacred and even an ordinary stone may hold the power of God. The all-pervasive God is the creator of all matter and everything created by the Universal God represents a part of Him. This may appear as idolatry to a Western observer, whose religion generally condemns it, but a Hindu worships the Spirit that the idol represents rather than the idol itself. It only gives the

worshipper a channel or a symbol to concentrate on during his prayers and meditation.

Originally, three major faces of gods came to be popularly worshipped, namely Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

Shiva is almost as popular as Vishnu and is evolved from the fierce Vedic god Rudra. Residing in the Himalayan Mount Kailasa, Shiva is a great ascetic, always meditating for the welfare of the world. He is covered with ashes and from his matted hair flows the sacred river Ganga. He is death and time, which destroy all things. On his forehead is a third eye, an emblem of his superior wisdom. His neck is blue (*Neelakantan*), from the effects of the poison he drank in order to save the humanity. The bull Nandi is his mount and beside him sits his beautiful wife, Parvathi. Shiva is also the god of fertility and is mostly worshipped in the phallic symbol called *Linga*. In the South he is also called as *Pashuapati* (Lord of the Beasts). The Shaivite sect considers Shiva as the Supreme Being.

The protector and maintainer of humanity is *Vishnu*. He lives in the highest heaven, the *Vaikunta*. A great eagle (Garuda) is his vehicle and Lakshmi is his wife seated to his right. He is considered as the Universal God (as early as in the *Bhagavad Gita*). He is also called as Hari (as against Hara, another name for Shiva). Vishnu became an embodiment of many popular gods, namely Vasudeva in Western India and Narayana, an obscure god mentioned in the Brahmana literature of Upanishads. Krishna, the hero of the epic Mahabharata came to be identified as an incarnate (avatar) of Vishnu. Rama, the hero of the epic Ramayana was another major avatar of Vishnu, incarnated in order to rid the world of the demon Ravana. When there is disorder in the world Vishnu will incarnate himself to restore order for the welfare of the world. In all there are ten avatars of Vishnu.

Dashavatara

Matsya (The Fish): When the earth was overwhelmed with a universal flood, Vishnu took the form of a fish and saved the first man (Manu), his family and seven sages (*rishis*) in a boat fastened to a horn on his head. The sacred Vedas were also saved.

Kurma (The Tortoise): Vishnu took the form of a tortoise in order to retrieve ambrosia (*amritha*) from the cosmic flood. This *amritha* was essential for the gods to preserve their youth. On the back of Kurma the gods placed Mount Mandara and tied the divine snake Vasuki around the mountain. With snake acting as the rope to twirl

the mountain, the ocean was churned, whence the ambrosia appeared.

Varaha (The Boar): When the demon Hiranyaksha cast the earth into the depths of cosmic ocean, Vishnu adorned the form of a wild boar and slew the demon. Using his tusk, he then raised the earth to safety.

Narasimha (The Man-Lion): The demon Hiranyakashipu, obtained a boon from Brahma after intense asceticism (*tapas*) ensuring that he could not be killed either by day or night, by god, man or beast. He persecuted the gods and men as well as his pious son Prahlada. When the young son called for the Lord's help, Vishnu burst out of a pillar, in a form half man and half lion at sunset and killed the demon Hiranyakashipu.

Vamana (The Dwarf): Here the demon Bali Chakravathy commences a course of asceticism (*tapas*) to obtain supernatural powers. When he was a menace to the gods, Vishnu appeared as a dwarf, asking Bali for alms. Bali granted Vamana three paces of ground as requested. Vamana transformed himself into a giant and covered the earth with one step, the heavens with another. Though a demon, Bali was an honorable one and never went back on his word once granted. Seeing that there was no place for the third step, Bali, accepting defeat and to save his honor, knelt in front of god and asked him to place the third step on his own head. He was thus destroyed and the gods were rescued.

Parashurama (Rama with the Axe): Born as a son to a Brahmin Jamadagni, Parashurama killed the wicked King Kartavirya who robbed Jamadagni. Kartavirya's sons later killed Jamadagni, after which an enraged, axe wielding, Parashurama destroyed all the males of the Kshatriya class for twenty-one successive generations. He is also credited to have rescued the lands of Kerala and South Kanara from the sea and reclaimed them. Parashurama is frequently referred to in the literature, but rarely worshipped.

Rama, the Prince of Ayodhya: Vishnu incarnated himself as Rama to save the world from the oppressions of demon Ravana, king of Lanka, who also abducted his wife Sita. Rama is a benevolent, brave and a faithful husband. He formed a complete family unit with his faithful wife, Sita and three loyal brothers, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Shatrughna. He also is shown as a loving father to his twin boys Lava and Kusha. The monkey-god Hanumat is his loyal friend and helper. His glorious story is depicted in the epic Ramayana, written by sage Valmiki in a set of seven books.

Krishna, the hero of Mahabharatha: Born to Vaudeva and Devaki of the Yadava tribe, he grew up as the foster child of cowherd Nanda and his wife Yashoda. Krishna's life can be studied in three stages. As a child he performed many miracles, slew demons like Puthani and also played numerous pranks on his doting mother,

such as stealing butter from the vessel etc. When confronted by Yashoda and asked to open his mouth she saw the impression of the whole universe in the infant's mouth. As an adolescent Krishna was seen as a flute-playing cowherd, enticing the village girls to come and dance to the tunes. His favorite was the beautiful Radha. Later Krishna married Rukmini, the daughter of king of Vidarbha and made her his queen. His amorous advances eventually led to 16,000 wives and 180,000 children and grandchildren. Krishna's greatest manifestation was as a charioteer to Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers (Kuru Dynasty of Hasthinapura), as depicted in the epic Mahabharata. Here he preached the great sermon of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Krishna also had an older brother called Balarama (also called Halayudha-meaning armed with a plough), who was also worshipped for sometime in the past. Some consider Balarama as another avatar of Vishnu (later supplanted by Buddha).

Buddha: According to most theologians Buddha became god in order to ensure damnation of the wicked by making them deny the sacred Vedas. However Jayadeva's Gita Govinda states that Vishnu became Buddha out of compassion to animals and to put an end to their bloody sacrifice.

Kalki: Kalki is the incarnation yet to come. At the end of the present Dark Age, Vishnu will appear on a white horse, with a flaming sword in his hand. He will punish the wicked, reward the good and restore the Golden Age again.

Brahma: the creator of the world came to be worshipped less and less. Durga, the mother Goddess, later replaced Brahma as one of the main deities and many temples were built for her in India.

Shakti and other Pantheon of Gods

Mother Goddess is called by many names. The chief form is that of the wife of Shiva called in her benevolent form, Parvathi (Daughter of the Mountain), Mahadevi (the Great Goddess), Sati (the Virtuous), Gauri (the White One), Annapurna (Giver of Food), or simply as Matha (Mother) or Ammai (Mother in Tamil).

In her grim form she is known as Durga (the Inaccessible), Kali (the Black One), and Chandi (the Fierce). Shakti (the Potent and Powerful) is also considered to be another form of the same Mother Goddess. In her most fierce form Durga or Kali is dancing on the demons with a garland of human skulls, with her blood-dripping tongue protruding. She has a lethal weapon on each of her many arms. Though there are many temples in India devoted to Mother, she is worshipped as the cult figure Kali, mainly in Bengal and Assam today. As she represents power and potency, she is also worshipped in the form of the female genitalia called Yoni. Sati (Durga

incarnate) was married to the Lord. When her father Daksha quarreled with her lord she flung herself into his sacrificial fire. The ashes of her yoni fell in various spots in India, which then became sacred shrines to her cult.

Another goddess who had temples built for her is Saraswati. She is the wife of Brahma and is considered to be the patron of art, music and learning. Though there is no creator God mentioned in the Rig Veda, by the end of Rig Vedic period, such a god existed by the name of Prajapati (creator of all gods and men), who later is identified as Brahma of Hindus. While Saraswati has many temples built for her, ironically temples for Brahma, her husband, are very rare in India today (there is one on the lake Pushkara near Ajmer). Brahma is usually depicted as seated on a lotus arising from the navel of recumbent Vishnu, lying on the seven-hooded serpent Shesha.

Broadly six forms of godheads are being worshipped in India currently. Apart from the Vaishnavas' Vishnu, Shaivites Shiva and Shakta's Devi there are three more godheads that are adored. Sauras worship Surya, Ganapatyas worship Ganesha and Kaumaryas treat Skanda (Muruga in the Tamil lands), as their godhead. Collectively these six forms of divine worship of Hindus are called as Shanmatas.

However, other gods are worshipped with their own temples and are numerous all over the country. Each god has a special function to perform, be it protection of a certain sect or to bring good luck and wealth to the worshipper. Thus temples were built for Lakshmi. She is the wife of Vishnu and is the goddess of good luck and temporal blessing.

Ganesha (or Ganapati), the second son of Shiva and Parvathi, bore the head of an elephant and is credited with removing snags and obstacles of any venture undertaken. He is worshipped at the beginning of all undertakings. He is called the 'Remover of Obstacles or Vigneshvara'.

Subramanya, the god of fertility is the other son of Shiva and Parvathi. He is also called as Kartikeya, Kumara, Muruga (in South) or Skanda (in North).

Hanumant, the monkey god is the son of Vayu and a servant of Rama. He is mainly a village god and is a guardian spirit.

Vedic literature has long been established as the foundation of Hinduism. This literature is a vast and varied body of work classed as *Surti*, meaning "that which is heard" or "revelation". However, Vedic Goddesses do not play a central role in the male dominant text. Scholars have argued that the Goddesses are in fact mentioned in the Vedas, only with different names. The fact of the matter is that the presence of Goddesses is not indicated in the majority of the time. In the Hindu pantheon, all gods are understood to be manifestations of one God, or one ultimate reality. Even so most texts and traditions understand male deities to be individual beings, while

females are not regarded as such. Nevertheless over the years much has changed and it is evident that Goddesses perform a vital role in Hinduism.

In the Rigveda, many Goddesses are the center of the religion but play a minor role in comparison with the male Gods of the Rigvedas (Majupuria, 100). Each Goddess is very different from the others. Some are referred to and worshipped as the Matrikyas, or "Mothers" who have a strong maternal nature while others lack virtually all maternal characteristics (Kinsley, 5). Some have strong independent natures and are great warriors, while others are domestic in nature and identify closely with their male counterparts. Several dominant Vedic Gods have wives, consorts, or Shakti. Shakti is the Hindu concept developed to define the role of the Goddess's relationship with the God. Shakti symbolizes certain aspects of personality the animating energy of God (Majupuria, 105). The male aspect of divinity is one of passivity and serenity while the female is the dynamic element of activating energy (Majupuria, 105). Shakti manifests both in a single benevolent and terrific form.

The supreme Goddess or The Great Mother, Devi ("Goddess") is the female aspect of the divine. She is the quintessential core form of every Hindu Goddess. Without her the male aspect remains powerless. She entered the pantheon when the Aryan Gods were given consorts (Stutley, 28). In later periods she became the Supreme independent power. She is the wife of the God Shiva, and daughter of Himavat, the Hindu God of snow, a personification of the Himalayan Mountains. She is worshiped throughout India but particularly in the Northeastern region (Molloy, 98). Her worshippers are known for taking on devotion with extreme emotion. Devotees will even wear the clothing of a child or spouse of the Great Mother (Molloy, 98). She appears as several Goddesses with several different forms and can be both loving and cruel. Devi manifests herself as the Trinity being the creator as Durga, preserver as Lakshmi, and destroyer as Kali.

The Goddess Durga ("inaccessible" or "unconquerable one"), is one of the most popular in the Hindu pantheon. She is an ancient mountain Goddess whose name means "fort"; she has been said to be the deity of the fortified towns mentioned in the Rigveda that Aryans encountered when entering Northwestern India. She is the daughter of Yosoda and Nanda. She was created to save the life of her brother Krishna from Vasudeva. After taking Krishna's place Kamsa attempted to dash her but was unable to when Durga flew up in the air announcing her identity (Iyengar, 59). In art, Durga is most commonly represented as a gentle woman with ten arms in which she holds weapons and implements to destroy evil. With one foot she steps on a demon, while the other foot is on a lion (Iyengar, 61). Her face is serene and she has a crown on her head.

Durga is well known for her killing of the two demons Sumbha and Nisumbha. In the story it is said that the two demons had performed austerities for 11,000 years and received a blessing from Shiva by the power of which they could not be killed by any God. After receiving this boon they declared war on the Gods which caused a threat to the cosmic stability. The Gods were advised to seek help from Shiva and Vishnu's consort since no God could kill them but a Goddess could. Therefore, and so, Durga was called upon to destroy the demons. Durga assumed the shape of a beautiful woman and went to the Himalayas where she was seen by spies of the demons. Upon hearing about the beautiful lady, Sumbha sent an invitation to her to be his wife. Durga responded by saying she had taken a vow that she would only marry the person who could defeat her in a single battle. Durga battled with several armies of the demons, defeating each of them as they came. When the demons came to fight her personally, she produced several Goddesses from the locks of her hair and was able to successfully slay both demons (Iyengar, 60). From this story and many others it can be seen that Durga is unyielding and unattainable by force, yet she is gracious and loving to devotees who surrender themselves to her worship (Stutley, 32)

Kali ("dark" or "black") is the most feared destroyer of all beings, and the revealer of the true nature of eternal night which is infinite bliss (Stutley, 59). She is one of the seven tongues of Agni, the God of fire and acceptor of sacrifices. Kali is the consort of Shiva who is said to have destroyed Kala, or time. She represents the abysmal void which is above time, space, and causation (Iyengar, 101). She is depicted as a four armed half naked black woman holding a sword, dagger, and two severed heads. She is painted black because of her mastery over time (Iyengar, 101). She wears a necklace of human skulls, and her long red tongue and fanged teeth are blood-stained (Stutley, 59). Her insatiable thirst for blood comes from her having killed a demon named Raktabija. Raktabija received a boon from Brahma which gave him power to multiply with every drop of blood of his that was to fall on the earth. When Kali killed him she drank every last drop of blood that escaped his wound to keep him from coming back to live.

Kali is widely worshipped throughout India as the Goddess of terror. She is mostly devoted by members of the lower classes who perform dark rites and obscene ceremonies (Iyengar, 100). Devotees are to perform sacrifices of animals to feed her thirst for blood. The Kalika-Purana is one of the eighteen Upapuranas that contains ninety-eight chapters dedicated to the recommended worship of Kali. In the Kalika-Purana there are details of sacrifices and the proper methods of sacrifice. It even includes those of human sacrifice which says:

By a human sacrifice, [Kali] is pleased for a thousand years, and by the sacrifice of three men, a hundred thousand years. By human flesh Kamakhya, Candika, and Bhairava who assume my shape are pleased a thousand years. An oblation of blood, which has been rendered pure by holy texts, is equal to ambrosia; the head and flesh also afford much delight to the goddess [Kali].

Lakshmi is the Goddess of good fortune, love, splendor, wealth, fortune, and beauty. She is analogous to the Greek Goddess Aphrodite and Roman Goddess Venus. Like these Goddesses she is said to have originated from the ocean. She came from the churning of the ocean of milk in which things exist for good human beings (Stutley, 75). Originally she personified the earth and later became the consort of Vishnu. In this role she plays the part of the model Hindu wife that obeys and serves her husband. She is known in the Hindu tradition since pre-Buddhist times and is widely worshipped by Hindus throughout India (Kinsley, 19). Her image is often displayed on doors of temples and houses to protect and bring good luck to the inhabitants (Stutley, 75). The most detailed depiction of her is in a hymn in her praise called Sri-Sukta. Her worshippers are said to be bestowed with gifts of gold, cattle, horses, and food (Kinsley, 20).

Lakshmi is often depicted holding a lotus or is depicted standing on one. This is where she gets her other name Padma, which means lotus. The lotus is associated with fertility and life since the flower takes strength from the waters to flourish. Together the lotus and the water represent the fully developed organic life. In her hymn she is associated with moist, rich, fertile soil. This aspect of her makes her very popular to women villagers. She is connected not only with royal authority but with spiritual divinity as well. And this combination of royal and priestly power is evident in her presence.

Out of all the great world religions Hinduism is the one that perhaps most emphasizes on female divinity. Though there is few mention of females in early texts it evident that the female plays a crucial role in the Hindu pantheon. After all, the Shakti is the energy which gives power to the male Gods, and without the females the male Gods would be ultimately lifeless and powerless (Molloy, 98).

Local Gods and Spirits

The countryside has many more local gods and goddesses. Each village has its own goddess or Gramadevata, often in the form of an idol worshipped under a sacred tree. Goddesses were also worshipped as protectors against diseases. Shitala (the Cool) also called as Mariammai in the Tamil countryside, was prayed to by the

mothers to protect their children against smallpox. Snake goddess Manasa protected from snakebites. Naga, a snake-spirit, guarded the underground city of Bhagovati and guarded great treasures. They can take human form and many ancient tribes claim to be descendents of Nagas, especially from a union between human hero and a feminine form of the snake called Nagini. Assam even today has tribes that are called Nagas.

Yakshas were similar to fairies, who generally were friendly to humans especially to men. Gandharvas were male fairies that were seen as heavenly musicians. Some are depicted with human head and the body of horses, called Kinaras and resembled the Greek centaurs. Apsaras were temptresses of ascetics. Menaka seduced sage Vishvamitra and conceived Shakuntala, heroine of Kalidasa's famous drama. Urvashi was another legendary Apsara beauty. Vidhyadharas are heavenly magicians, residing in the Himalayan magic cities, able to transform themselves at will and also fly through the air. Rishis and Siddhas attained holy status because they were ascetics and composers of the hymns of the Vedas. Some of the famous Rishis are Vashishta, Vishvamitra, Brhaspati, Kashyapa, Agastya and Narada, the inventor of the musical instrument veena.

The evil spirits were the Asuras or demons (Suras were the gods) that constantly fought the gods in heaven. Rakshasas were more of a menace to people on earth. Most famous Rakshasa was Ravana, the ten-headed demon king of Lanka, who died in the hands of Rama. Less terrible were the Pishachas, who also roamed the battlefields and burial grounds at night and distressed men. Betala (Vetala) or the vampire took up its abode in corpses and roamed the charnel grounds. Finally there were the Pretas and Bhutas, naked spirits of dead people, especially those who died an unnatural death. These were very dangerous to their surviving relatives.

Animal and Inanimate Gods

Animals and plants also have attained sacred status. Cow is the most sacred animal, as it is believed to be one of the treasures churned from the cosmic ocean by the gods. The five products of the cow (Panchkavya) namely, milk, curd, butter, urine and dung are believed to have great purifying potency when mixed in a single mixture. Kamadhenu was a mythological cow said to have belonged to Vashishta that could satisfy all desires of mankind. Nandi, the bull is the mount of Shiva and is seen in most Shiva temples. Snake is also sacred and the legendary serpents Shesha, and Vasuki are symbols of both death and fertility. Shesha also is seen as a bed for the recumbent Vishnu while Vasuki was used as a rope used in churning of the cosmic ocean.

Monkey, though not mentioned in the Hindu sacred texts, later is revered perhaps because of Hanumant, Rama's faithful servant.

Villages also had sacred trees. Pippala or Ashvata (*Ficus religiosa*) were especially sacred and the sanctity of these later spread to Buddhism. Vata or nyagrodha, the banyan tree (*Ficus indica*) has also attained religious status. Women pray to the Ashoka tree for blessings in order to conceive children. The legendary Kalpa-vriksha was a tree that fulfilled all wishes. A plant called Tulsi is grown in the courtyard and tended with great care by women and is believed to be sacred to Vishnu. There are two types of grass Kusha and Darbha that are sacred from the Vedic time onwards. However the Soma plant from that period was forgotten. Another inanimate object that attained holy status is the Salagrama (a fossilized shellfish), which is recognized as one of the symbols of Vishnu. Symbols representing Om, Swastika and Mandala were considered to have cosmic and magical powers.

The Ancient Indian Women

In ancient times Aryans were the main inhabitant of India. These people were mainly Brahmins and they used to give the status of goddess to the women. At that time women enjoyed no less than status of Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) in the households. A famous Sanskrit *shloka* (form of Hindu verse) signifies the status of women in that era, "*Yatra naryastu pujiyante, ramante tatra devta*" meaning, "The place where women are worshipped, god themselves inhabit that place". The women of ancient times had immense power this is evident from a South Indian legend that once a king accidentally killed the husband of a woman and she had such powers that she burnt the whole kingdom to ashes. Women in that time had place even superior to men. They had representation in each arena from assemblies to religious rituals. In fact no religious ritual of Hindu Brahmins was supposed to be complete without the presence of the women. An incident of Ramayana is a proof of this as when Lord Rama was performing *Ashvamedha yajna* his wife Sita was not with him and he had to use the gold idol of his wife to compensate for her absence.

Ancient Indian women had say in each and every aspect related to their lives. They had the right to choose their own life partners. The process of choosing the life partner of own choice was known as *Swayamvar* in which grooms assembled at the house of bride and she used to choose the one whom she liked. Maharishi Ved Vyas' Mahabharata and Maharishi Valmiki's Ramayana bear testimonial to this. In Mahabharata, Draupadi's father arranged for her *Swanyamvar* and Arjuna (a Pandava

prince in exile) successfully managed to fulfill the conditions and became eligible to marry her.

Even the model women of Tretayuga, (second out of four ages of Hindu mythology) Sita also had Swanyamva in which kings of different states participated and Lord Rama won her over by breaking the Shiv Dhanusha (Hindu God Shiva's bow). Not only just princely women but the common women were also given the same rights. Women were so important that many of the major battles were fought for them. The fiercest battle of ancient India Mahabharata was fought for the honor of Draupadi (wife of Pandavas, ruler of Indraprastha). The Kauravas (ruler of Hastinapur) insulted her in the court and this led to the enmity between cousins and resulted in the most devastating battle of ancient India.

Another example of women power is evident from the cause of death of most learned man of his time Ravana. He was the best scholar of his time and was the master of all the four Vedas of Hindu religion and had immense powers. Even gods were not able to defeat and kill him but a woman was able to bring his doom. Ravana captured Sita and tried to marry her forcibly which led to his destruction.

Women were not just confined to domestic arena but they were also part of religious teachings. In ancient India woman like Gayatri, Maitreyi, Anusuya were renowned seers of their time this shows that women had the right to religious teachings. They were not prohibited even from learning. They could learn whatever they wanted.

The status of women of Vedic era began to decline with time. Gender inequality started creeping into the society. Slowly women's status degraded to such an extent that they were not given the freedom, which was available to even Sudras (lowest caste of ancient Hindu society). They were not given the basic rights. They were debarred from religious practices. They began to lose their political freedom as well. As Vedic age progressed, the status of women became worst. And till the time of Smritis (religious scripture of Hindus) the condition became so bad that women were not allowed free access to education they were given education related to just domestic purposes.

The Women in Medieval Era

Medieval India was not women's age it is supposed to be the 'dark age' for them. Medieval India saw many foreign conquests, which resulted in the decline in women's status. When foreign conquerors like Muslims invaded India they brought with them their own culture. For them women was the sole property of her father, brother or husband and she does not have any will of her own. This type of thinking

also crept into the minds of Indian people and they also began to treat their own women like this. One more reason for the decline in women's status and freedom was that original Indians wanted to shield their women folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders. As polygamy was a norm for these invaders they picked up any women they wanted and kept her in their harems. In order to protect them Indian women started using *Purdah*, (a veil), which covers body. Due to this reason their freedom also became affected. They were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status. These problems related with women resulted in changed mindset of people. Now they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden, which has to be shielded from the eyes of intruders and needs extra care. Whereas a boy child will not need such extra care and instead will be helpful as an earning hand. Thus a vicious circle started in which women were at the receiving end. All this gave rise to some new evils such as Child Marriage, *Sati*, *Jauhar* and restriction on girl education.

***Sati*:** The ritual of dying at the funeral pyre of the husband is known as *Sati* or *Sahagaman*. According to some of the Hindu scriptures women dying at the funeral pyre of her husband go straight to heaven so it's good to practice this ritual. Initially it was not obligatory for the women but if she practiced such a custom she was highly respected by the society. *Sati* was considered to be the better option than living as a widow as the plight of widows in Hindu society was even worse. Some of the scriptures like *Medhatiti* had different views it says that *Sati* is like committing suicide so one should avoid this.

***Jauhar*:** It is also more or less similar to *Sati* but it is a mass suicide. *Jauhar* was prevalent in the *Rajput* societies. In this custom wives immolated themselves while their husbands were still alive. When people of *Rajput* clan became sure that they were going to die at the hands of their enemy then all the women arrange a large pyre and set themselves afire, while their husbands used to fight the last decisive battle known as *Shaka*, with the enemy. Thus protecting the sanctity of the women and the whole clan.

***Child Marriage*:** It was a norm in medieval India. Girls were married off at the age of 8-10. They were not allowed access to education and were treated as the material being. The plight of women can be imagined by one of the *shloka* of *Tulsidas* where he writes [r1] "*Dhol, gawar, shudra, pashu, nari, ye sab tadan ke adhikari*", meaning that "*animals, illiterates, lower castes and women should be subjected to beating*". Thus women were compared with animals and were married off at an early age. The child marriage along with it brought some more problems such as increased birth rate, poor health of women due to repeated child bearing and high mortality rate of women and children.

Restriction on Widow Remarriage: The condition of widows in medieval India was very bad. They were not treated as human beings and were subjected to a lot of restrictions. They were supposed to live pious life after their husband died and were not allowed entry in any celebration. Their presence in any good work was considered to be a bad omen. Sometimes heads of widows were also shaved down. They were not allowed to remarry. Any woman remarrying was looked down by the society. This cruelty on widows was one of the main reasons for the large number of women committing *Sati*. In medieval India living as a Hindu widow was a sort of a curse.

Purdah System: The veil or the *Purdah* system was widely prevalent in medieval Indian society. It was used to protect the women folk from the eyes of foreign rulers who invaded India in medieval period. But this system curtailed the freedom of women.

Girl Education: The girls of medieval India and especially Hindu society were not given formal education. They were given education related to household chores. But a famous Indian philosopher Vatsyayana wrote that women were supposed to be perfect in sixty four arts which included cooking, spinning, grinding, knowledge of medicine, recitation and many more.

Though these evils were present in medieval Indian society but they were mainly confined to Hindu society. As compared to Hindu society other societies such as Buddhism, Jainism and Christians were a bit lenient. Women in those societies enjoyed far more freedom. They had easy access to education and were more liberal in their approach. According to these religions gender was not the issue in attaining salvation. Any person whether a man or a woman is entitled to get the grace of god. During the time of king *Ashoka* women took part in religious preaching. According to *Hiuen Tsang*, the famous traveler of that time, *Rajyashri*, the sister of *Harshavardhana* was a distinguished scholar of her time. Another such example is the daughter of king *Ashoka*, *Sanghmitra*. She along with her brother *Mahendra* went to Sri Lanka to preach Buddhism.

The status of women in Southern India was better than the North India. While in Northern India there were not many women administrators, in Southern India we can find some names that made women of that time proud. *Priyaketaladevi*, queen of *Chalukya Vikramaditya* ruled three villages. Another woman named *Jakkiabbe* used to rule seventy villages. In South India women had representation in each and every field. *Domingo Paes*, famous Portuguese traveler testifies to it. He has written in his account that in *Vijaynagar* kingdom women were present in each and every field. He says that women could wrestle, blow trumpet and handle sword with equal perfection. *Nuniz*, another famous traveler to the South also agrees to it and

says that women were employed in writing accounts of expenses, recording the affairs of kingdom, which shows that they were educated. There is no evidence of any public school in northern India but according to famous historian *Ibn Batuta* there were 13 schools for girls and 24 for boys in *Honavar*. There was one major evil present in South India of medieval time. It was the custom of *Devadasis*.

Devadasis: It was a custom prevalent in Southern India. In this system girls were dedicated to temples in the name of gods and goddesses. The girls were then onwards known as Devadasis meaning Servant of God. These Devadasis were supposed to live the life of celibacy. All the requirements of Devadasis were fulfilled by the grants given to the temples. In temple they used to spend their time in worship of god and by singing and dancing for the god. Some kings used to invite temple dancers to perform at their court for the pleasure of courtiers and thus some Devadasis converted to Rajadasis (palace dancers) prevalent in some tribes of South India like Yellamma cult.

The plight of women in medieval India and at the starting of modern India can be summed up in the words of great poet Rabindranath Tagore:

*O Lord Why have you not given woman the right to conquer her destiny?
Why does she have to wait head bowed,
By the roadside, Waiting with tired patience,
Hoping for a miracle in the morrow?*

The Modern Day Indian Women

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armored with their talent. They had proven themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female. There are 933 females per thousand males in India according to the census of 2001, which is much below the world average of 990 females. There are many problems which women in India have to go through daily. These problems have become the part and parcel of life of Indian women and some of them have accepted them as their fate.

The main problems of Indian women include:

Malnutrition

Generally in India, women are the one who eat last and least in the whole family. So they eat whatever is left after men folk are satiated. As a result most of the times their food intake does not contain the nutritional value required in maintaining the healthy body. In villages, sometimes women do not get to eat the whole meal due to poverty. The UNICEF report of 1996 clearly states that the women of South Asia are not given proper care, which results in higher level of malnutrition among the women of South Asia than anywhere else in the world. This nutritional deficiency has two major consequences for women first they become anemic and second they never achieve their full growth, which leads to an unending cycle of undergrowth as malnourished women cannot give birth to a healthy baby.

Poor Health

The malnutrition results in poor health of women. The women of India are prejudiced from the birth itself. They are not breastfed for long. In the want of a son the women wants to get pregnant as soon as possible which decreases the caring period to the girl child whereas the male members get adequate care and nutrition. Women are not given the right to free movement that means that they cannot go anywhere on their own if they want and they have to take the permission of male member of family or have to take them along. This results in decrease in women's visit to doctor and she could not pay attention to her health as a result.

Maternal Mortality

The mortality rate in India is among highest in the world. As females are not given proper attention, which results in the malnutrition and then they are married at an early age which leads to pregnancies at younger age when the body is not ready to bear the burden of a child. All this results in complications, which may lead to gynecological problems, which may become serious with time and may ultimately, lead to death.

Lack of education

In India women education never got its due share of attention. From the medieval India women were debarred from the educational field. According to medieval

perception women need just household education and this perception of medieval India still persists in villages of India even today. Girls are supposed to fulfill domestic duties and education becomes secondary for them whereas it is considered to be important for boys. Although scenario in urban areas has changed a lot and women are opting for higher education but majority of Indian population residing in villages still live in medieval times. The people of villages consider girls to be curse and they do not want to waste money and time on them as they think that women should be wedded off as soon as possible. The main reason for not sending girls to school is the poor economic condition. Another reason is far off location of schools. In Indian society virginity and purity is given utmost importance during marriage and people are afraid to send their girl child to far off schools where male teachers teach them along with boys.

The lack of education is the root cause for many other problems. An uneducated mother cannot look after her children properly and she is not aware of the deadly diseases and their cure, which leads to the poor health of the children. An uneducated person does not know about hygiene this lack of knowledge of hygiene may lead to poor health of the whole family.

Mistreatment

In India violence against women is a common evil. Not just in remote parts but in cities also women bear the brunt. They are subjected to physical and mental violence. They are the one who work most but are not given their due. Women are nowhere safe, neither at home nor at workplace. Every hour a woman is raped in India and every 93 minutes a woman is burnt to death due to dowry problem. There are many laws such as The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1937, The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, to protect women and punishment is severe but the conviction rate of crime against women is very low in India.

Overworked

Indian women work more than men of India but their work is hardly recognized as they mainly do unskilled work. Their household chores is never counted as a work, if a woman is working in a field to help her husband it will also be not counted as a work. A study conducted by Mies in 1986 states that in Andhra Pradesh a woman

works around 15 hours a day during the agricultural season whereas a male on an average works for around 7-8 hours.

Lack of power

In India a large percentage of women do not have power. They cannot take decisions independently not even related to their own life. They have to take permission of male members for each and every issue. They don't have any say in important household matters and not in matter of their own marriage.

Marriage

The family mainly fixes the marriages in India. The scenario in villages is very bad. The girl is not consulted [r6] but is told to marry a guy whom her family has chosen for her. They are taught to abide by the whims and fancies of their husbands. Going against the wishes of husband is considered to be a sin. In marriage husband always has the upper hand. The groom and his parents show as if they are obliging the girl by marrying her and in return they demand hefty dowry.

Dowry

It's a serious issue. Courts are flooded with cases related to death due to dowry harassment by husband and in laws. In ancient times women were given *Stridhan* when they departed from the house of their parents. This amount of money was given to her as a gift which she can use on her and her children but her in-laws did not have any right on that amount. This amount was supposed to help the girl in time of need. Slowly this tradition became obligatory and took the form of dowry. Nowadays parents have to give hefty amount in dowry, the in laws of their girl are not concerned whether they can afford it or not. If a girl brings large amount of dowry she is given respect and is treated well in her new home and if she does not bring dowry according to expectations of her in laws then she has to suffer harassment. Due to this evil practice many newly wed women of India have to lose their lives.

Female infanticide

As women were supposed to be and in some areas of India are still considered to be curse by some strata of society their birth was taken as a burden. So in past times they were killed as soon as they were born. In some of the Rajput clans of Rajasthan newly born girl child was dropped in a large bowl of milk and was killed. Today with the help of technology the sex of the unborn baby is determined and if it is a girl child then it is aborted down. In all this procedure women do not have any say they have to do according to the wish of their husbands even if she does not want to abort she has no choice.

Divorce

The divorce rate in India is not so high compared to Western countries but it does not mean that marriages are more successful here. The reason behind low level of divorce rate is that it is looked down by the society. It is regarded as the sign of failure of marriage, especially of women. She is treated as if she has committed some crime by divorcing her husband. In some communities like Muslims women did not have the right to divorce their husband they were divorced at just the pronouncement of "I divorce you" by their husband thrice and they could not do anything except to be the mute spectator. Recently Muslim Law Board has given right of divorce to women. After divorce women is entitled to get her *Mehr* for herself and her children's sustenance. In Hindu society women get maintenance for themselves and their children after divorce.

Conclusions

Vedas, the most adored Hindu scripture, give respectable position to women. Rig Veda allows share in property to the daughter who resides for ever with her parents (2-17-6). It gives right to girls to choose their life partners or husband (10-27-12). A hymn of Atharva Veda says:

May women be united with handsome husbands. They should never be widows and never be in tears. May they be very prosperous and rich! May they wear pretty garments and beautiful ornaments and may they wish to take rebirth in human yoni (form) to maintain perpetuity of humanity.. A husband is supposed to request and praise her wife and get her voluntary consent if he wishes to have sexual union with her.

For example, the great epic Mahabharata says:

The wife is half the man. The best of friends....the roots of the three ends of life, and of all that will help him in the other world. With a wife a man does mighty deeds...with a wife a man finds courage...a wife is the safest refuge...a man aflame with sorrow in his soul...or sick with disease, finds comfort in his wife...as a man parched with heat...finds relief in water...even a man in the grip of rage...will not be harsh to a woman...remembering that on her depend...the joys of love, happiness and virtue...for woman is the everlasting field...in which the Self is born.

There is ample scope to explore on this particular area, which I have tried to address. The position of women in the Indian Society since the ancient age has been commanding, except for the colonial pressures such as the invasion of Mughals, the British etc. which changed the system of the country. Static models of Hindu women as marginalized and muted subjects have in recent years been enlivened by a body of work that investigates the ways in which women both subtly and overtly resist, contest, and re-imagine these roles. Women have never been independent and women's happiness was considered dependent on male control, as mentioned in The Code of Manu, one of Hinduism's oldest foundational texts. (John Rains: 2001, p.1).

Women have to have good education to do resist and to find spaces for liberation and gender justice. Hinduism has positive resources for addressing injustice and working toward the empowerment of women's live. Hindus women have tried to get the empowering arts of resistance and battle to insert their own narratives within the heritage of sacred texts to seek justice in gender relation.

References

- Iyengar, T.r.r. *Dictionary of Hindu Gods and Goddesses*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd.
- Kinsley, David R. *Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1998. 16 Nov. 2007
<<http://books.google.com/books?id=hgTOZEyrVtIC&dq=Female+hindu+deities>>.
- Majupuria, Trilok C., and Rohit K. Majupuria. *Gods, Goddesses & Religious Symbols of Hinduism, Buddhism & Tantrism*. India: M. Devi, Lashkar, 2005.
- Molloy, Michael. *Experiencing the World's Religions*. New York, Ny: Mc Graw Hill, 2005.
- Stutley, Margaret. *Hindu Deities*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharal, 2006.
- Raines, *The Justice Men Owe Women; positive resources from word religions*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.

Abstract

Babita and Sanjay Tewari

THE HISTORY OF INDIAN WOMEN: HINDUISM AT CROSSROADS WITH GENDER

Feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation; it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women and women as a group. Historical circumstances and values in India make women's issues different from the Western feminist rhetoric. In all the three main stages of Indian history, viz. the ancient period, the medieval period and the modern age, we find that Hinduism and the role of women in particular have undergone tremendous changes. Through this paper, I would wish to study the position of Hindu female gods and the male deities and thereupon clarify main concepts as to how this situation has drawn an impact and affected the male dominated system of Indian society. The approach which in particular I seek to adopt is firstly, a comparative study of both the deities, secondly, its impact on status of women in all the three ages, i.e. the ancient, medieval and the modern, and lastly, the position of women in the Indian context.

Key Words: Feminism, Hinduism, Goddesses, God, Rig Veda

Резиме

Бабита и Сањај Тавари

ИСТОРИЈА ЖЕНА ИНДИЈЕ: ХИНДУИЗАМ НА РАСКРШЋУ ПОЛНОСТИ

Феминизам у Индији не може се свести под једну теоретску одредницу. Мењао се током времена у односу на историјску и културолошку стварност, ниво свести, сагледавања и предузете акције како појединих жена тако и жена као групе. Историјске околности и вредности које важе у Индији чине женско питање различитим у односу на феминистичку реторику која преовладава на западу. Хиндуизам као и улога жена у сваком од главних периода индијске историје – древном, средњовековном и модерном, прошли су кроз периоде огромних промена. У овом раду, покушаћу да прикажем концепте везане за

женска и мушка божанства хинду религије покушавајући да одредим како су представе ове врсте утицале на индијско друштво којим доминирају мушкарци. Компаративна анализа божанстава је метод који пре свега настојим да применим, разматрајући његов утицај кроз ова три периода – древни, средњовековни и модерни, на положај жена у индијском контексту.

Кључне речи: феминизам, хиндуизам, богиње, бог, Риг Веда