



Women in Hindu Dharma- a Tribute





Respected Ladies and Gentlemen¹,
Namaste!

Women and the Divine Word:-

Let me start my talk with a recitation from the Vedas², the ‘Divinely Exhaled’ texts of Hindu Dharma –

*Profound thought was the pillow of her couch,
Vision was the unguent for her eyes.
Her wealth was the earth and Heaven,
When Surya (the sun-like resplendent bride) went to meet her husband.³
Her mind was the bridal chariot,
And sky was the canopy of that chariot.
Orbs of light were the two steers that pulled the chariot,
When Surya proceeded to her husband’s home!⁴*

The close connection of women with divine revelation in Hinduism may be judged from the fact that of the 407 Sages associated with the revelation of Rigveda, twenty-one⁵ are women. Many of these mantras are quite significant for instance the hymn on the glorification of the Divine Speech.⁶ The very invocatory mantra⁷ of the Atharvaveda⁸ addresses divinity as a ‘Devi’ – the Goddess, who while present in waters, fulfills all our desires and hopes. In the Atharvaveda, the entire 14th book dealing with marriage, domestic issues etc., is attributed to a woman. Portions⁹ of other 19 books are also attributed to women sages¹⁰.

¹ It is a Hindu tradition to address women before men in a group, out of reverence for the former. For instance, Hindu wedding invitations are normally addressed ‘To Mrs. and Mr. Smith’ and so on and not as ‘To Mr. And Mrs. Smith’ or as ‘To Mr. and Mrs. John Smith’ or even as ‘To Mrs. and Mr. John Smith’.

² The four Vedas, namely Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda are accorded the status of divine revelation in Hindu Dharma.

³ Rigveda 10.85.7

⁴ Rigveda 10.85.10

⁵ According to another count, the actual number is 28. But this inflated list includes feminine speakers such as ‘rivers’ and so on. See Brihaddevata 11.84 for this list.

⁶ Rigveda 10.125, the inspiration of Vac, the daughter of Ambhrina

⁷ Mantra = Sacred verse

⁸ ‘Om shanno devirbhishtiye aapo bhavantu...’. The traditional recitation of Atharvaveda is commenced with this verse. The Paippalada version of Atharvaveda starts with this mantra. It occurs as mantra 1.6.1 in the Shaunaka version of Atharvaveda but even the recitation of this text is often commenced with the invocation to Devi.

⁹ These portions are specifically termed as ‘striikarmaani’ or acts pertaining to women.

¹⁰ Women Sages are termed as ‘Rishika’ while male Sages are termed as ‘Rishi’.

Both male and female deities are extolled in the hymns of all revealed texts of Hindus and in the family prayers¹¹ of all the 10 lineages of Vedic Sages. Numerous schools of Vedic tradition customarily offer homage to women sages during their daily prayers¹². The superlative epithets used uniformly to denote female deities like Ushas, Sarasvati etc., in the Vedas describe them as sweetly-smiling, the first or foremost of deities to whom worship is offered, the shining ones, splendid and beautiful, possessors of wisdom, teachers of mankind and as powers capable of fulfilling the desires of human beings.

While it is true that the word ‘man’ is used in a generic manner to denote ‘human beings’ in the Vedas, authoritative grammar and ritual texts¹³ emphasize that this is merely a figure of speech, and that man and woman together constitute two halves of the same Persona while performing Vedic sacerdotal ceremonies. The language in which the revealed Hindu texts are composed, namely Sanskrit, has a neuter gender in addition to the masculine and feminine. In fact, the Ultimate Reality, the Supreme God¹⁴ of Hindus, is often described as gender neutral. Interestingly, in a famous verse of Rigveda that says that all the various deities are but descriptions of One Truth, the names of deities are all masculine but the phrase ‘One Truth’ (‘*Ekam Sat*’) is in neuter gender as if to emphasize that God is not male. The Gayatri Mantra, the holiest prayer of Hindus in the Vedas, is often represented symbolically as a Devi in classical Hinduism. She is thus a female deity, who is also often termed as the ‘Mother of all Vedas’, and giver of boons¹⁵.



Gayatri, the Mother of Holy Vedas

¹¹ These family hymns are called ‘Apri Suktas’, and all these hymns have invocations to women deities such as Ila, Bharati, Sarasvati etc.

¹² The ritual texts of the Vedas list women Sages to whom homage must be offered while studying the divine texts. See for instance Ashvalayana Grhyasutra 3.4.4; Shankhayana Grhyasutra 4.10 which enumerate women teachers such as Sulabha Maitreyi, Vadavaa Praathitheyi etc.

¹³ cf. Purva Mimamsa Sutras 6.1.8 and Katyayana Shrautasutra 1.1.7 etc.

¹⁴ The very word ‘*Brahman*’ used to denote Supreme Being in Hindu texts is in neuter gender. Likewise, many words used to denote Universal Virtues such as Truth (Satyam) are considered neuter gender in Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hindu Dharma.

¹⁵ Atharvaveda 19.71.1

It is common to read in scriptures of mankind God is like the husband of all human beings and of all churches. In the Vedas however, we even read that God is like a dear wife whom ‘His’ worshipper loves like a doting husband¹⁶. The ‘Divine Word’¹⁷, itself is likened to a beautiful maiden who manifests her beauty to the husband¹⁸.



Devi Sarasvati, embodiment of the Divine Word, Deity of Wisdom, Patron of Art and Literature

As goddesses (*devis*), they are worshipped as mothers of even the most powerful male deities (*devatas*). Devi Aditi is thus the mother of all prominent *devatas* such as Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman, Rudras, Indra, of kings and many other excellent sons. She is invoked as the mistress of the Cosmic Order, omnipotent, every youthful, protector, mother of the devout worshipper and a wise guide of all humans.¹⁹

The Vedas hardly ever conceive of *devatas* without corresponding *devis*. Almost as a rule, the Sage, the worshipper and the ritualist invoke the *devatas* to manifest along with *devis* and partake of the sacred oblations poured into the sacred fire altar.

The Divine Mother: ‘God as Goddess’

Around 2000 years ago, Classical Hinduism, or Hindu Dharma as we know today, started crystallizing. Worship of the Supreme Being through icons and sacred symbols was aligned among five Hindu traditions of worship – Saura²⁰, Ganapatya, Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shaakta. The last three of these constitute practically all Hindus today.

Significantly, the Shaakta tradition specifically worships the Divine as the Mother of the Universe²¹, to whom all the lesser male gods also bow in reverence. Shrines of this

¹⁶ ‘*anavadyaa patijushteva naarii*’ – Rigveda 1.73.3

¹⁷ ‘Vak’, the Sanskrit word denoting Divine Speech, is considered feminine according to grammatical rules.

¹⁸ Rigveda 10.71.4

¹⁹ Atharvaveda 7.6.2; Madhyandina Yajurveda 21.5

²⁰ This mode of worship became extinct several centuries ago.

²¹ Markandeya Purana 91.2

tradition²² have perhaps a greater geographical spread than those of other traditions in the Indian subcontinent.



Durga, the Divine Mother

In this tradition, the Divine Mother is termed as '*Shakti*' or 'The (Supreme) Power', as 'Uma' or the Sacred Wisdom, as 'Mahesvari' or 'The Supreme Goddess' and so on. The Shaakta tradition has hundreds of texts (often termed generically as 'Tantras') and traditions considered authoritative by Hindus even outside that specific tradition.



Shakti, the Almighty Divine Power

The Shaiva tradition is considered the 'male' counterpart of the Shaakta tradition and the two share numerous texts, liturgies and other sacred traditions. In numerous iconic representations, God is shown as '*ardhanariishvara*' or 'God who is half woman', to emphasize that either God has no gender or he is both woman and man.

²² The 52 main shrines are termed as '*shaktipeeths*'. They are spread all over Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nepal. Even Afghanistan has several Devi shrines that have now almost been abandoned because the Hindu minority has been ethnically cleansed by Islamists.

Even male deities such as Lord Vishnu sometimes incarnate as women to serve the cause of Dharma.



Ardhanariishvara – God who is half woman

In the Vaishnava tradition, which is the most prevalent Hindu tradition today, God is worshipped as ‘Vishnu’²³ together with ‘Shri’, who is also addressed variously as ‘Lakshmi’²⁴. They incarnate together²⁵, and their incarnations, namely that of Rama and Sita respectively, and so on, are also worshipped as a couple. Perhaps a good idea of the simultaneous and equal reverence that Hindus have for the feminine and the masculine aspects of Divinity may be gauged from the following quotation²⁶ –

Sage Parashar said:

O Maitreya! Always a companion of Vishnu and the Mother of this Universe,

Devi Lakshmi is eternal. Vishnu is omnipresent, so is She.

If She is speech, Vishnu is the object of description.

Vishnu is the Law, and She is the Policy.

Lord Vishnu is knowledge, she is intelligence.

He is Dharma, She is good karma.

If Vishnu is the Creator, She is the Creation (that abides eternally with Him).

He is the mountain, She is Earth.

He is the virtue of contentment, She is the every satisfying.

If Lord Vishnu is desire, She is the object of desire.

He is the sacred Vedic ritual, she is the priestly fee...

²³ ‘Vishnu’ = ‘all pervading’

²⁴ Lakshmi is also worshipped independently as the deity of wealth, splendor, prosperity and fertility.

²⁵ Vishnu Purana 1.9.142-146

²⁶ Vishnu Purana 1.8.17-20ab



Radha and Krishna

It is important to note that when God is worshipped as ‘Divine Couple’ by Hindus, the name of the feminine typically precedes that of masculine. For instance, we say that we are worshipping ‘Sita-Ram’, ‘Radhe-Shyam’, ‘Uma-Mahesh’ or ‘Shri Vishnu’ and so on.

Devi Parvati - The Universal Mother



Parvati, the beloved wife of Lord Shiva is the Great mother of the universe. She is the power that creates and destroys, the womb from which all things proceed and to which all return. The entire universe is created and sustained by the dual powers of the divine couple. Together they represent the unitary cosmic principle and in imbalance, they disturb the macrocosmic equilibrium. Since she represents the dynamic energy which is of the nature of the mind, she is inseparable and non-different from the Lord himself. It is the goddess in the form of dynamic energy that is the cause of all things being seen or experienced. When this dynamic energy of consciousness rests that itself is known as Shiva. Thus Parvati and Shiva are two names for the same Supreme Being who is the source of all creation.

Uma (Parvati)-Mahesh

In popular non-denominational Hindu prayers, whenever God is addressed as a parent, he is first termed as a Mother, and only then as a Father²⁷.

In the Ganapatya tradition, the major focus of veneration is the Bhagavan Ganesh, well recognized from his elephant head. The followers of this tradition are not numerous, but all Hindus, irrespective of their sectarian affiliation, commence their prayers to God with an invocation to Ganesh. Interestingly, in the sacred stories of Hindu texts, Ganesha is considered more of his mother Parvati’s son than his father Shiva’s. In fact, some versions state that Parvati created Him out of her own power because she wanted a son

²⁷ The prayer commencing with the words ‘tvameva mata cha pita tvameva’ (You alone are Mother, and are also our Father) is recited by millions of Hindus all over the world.

whom only she could call her own. Ganesh is typically worshipped as a child, and is often depicted along with his brother Skanda together with their all-powerful mother.



Ganesha and Skanda with mother Parvati, flanked by Devi Sarasvati and Devi Lakshmi

This we see that even in the male oriented traditions of classical Hinduism, the feminine aspect of Divinity occupies a very central position of significance.

In numerous Hindu communities of Bangladesh, Nepal and India, the most prominent festival in the year is dedicated to the Divine Mother. During Diwali, the most important festival in northern India and amongst Hindu communities in the Caribbean, the main worship is offered to Devi Lakshmi. Diwali itself is often called 'Lakshmi Pujan'.



Devi Lakshmi, deity of Wealth and Prosperity

A period of 9 nights every year is devoted to the worship of numerous manifestations of the Mother. It is celebrated as Durga Puja festival in eastern India and as Navaratri in Gujarat as the major festivals of these regions.



Dandiya – a dance performed during Navaratri in Gujarat

Popular Hinduism also exhibits the concept of ‘*grama-devata*’ in which a local manifestation of the Divine is worshipped as the presiding deity of that place. Many Indian cities and towns, including several important pilgrim centers, have various forms of the Divine Mother as their ‘*grama-devi*’. As examples, we may cite Amba who is worshipped in Kolhapur and Ahmadabad (formerly called Ambavad); Meenakshi who is worshipped in the pilgrim town of Madurai; a form of Sati, the wife of Shiva, worshipped in Jalandhar; and Dhakeshvari Devi of Dhaka (capital of Bangladesh).

It is not surprising that words denoting the Feminine Power of God, such as Shakti, Kali and so on have become a part of the New Age vocabulary because there is a deficiency of such terms in other organized religions. There is even a perfume launched by the name ‘Kali’ in the west.

Mother Earth, Mother Nature:

For Hindus, God is not necessarily a fatherly figure. ‘He’ is Mother and Father combined. In Hindu Cosmology and Ecology, Nature and Earth are uniformly referred to as Mother Nature (*Prakriti*) and kindly Mother Earth²⁸ (*Prithvi Mata*). In Hindu philosophies²⁹, God and Nature are sometimes depicted as Husband and Wife who create the inanimate and animate Universe together just as mother and father give birth to children³⁰. In a long hymn extolling the earth, the Sage concludes with the beautiful words –

‘O Earth, my Mother!
Establish me securely in spiritual and material happiness,
and in full accord with Heaven.
O Wise One! Uphold me in grace and splendor!’³¹

While today we normally assume that the ‘husband is the breadwinner of the household’, traditional Hindus say that it is Devi Annapuurnaa who is the presiding deity of Foodgrains.

²⁸ E.g., Atharvaveda 10.18.10; Rigveda 1.159.2

²⁹ Such as the theistic version of the Samkhya Philosophy

³⁰ Vishnu Purana 1.2; Matsya Purana 1.284.11-18

³¹ Atharvaveda 12.1.63

It is Mother Ganga, Mother Yamuna, Mother Kaveri and so on who have manifested as rivers to feed mankind. Likewise, forests that provide us with so many resources are said to be presided over by Devis who are known as *Vanadevis* (vana = forest).



Iconic representation of Mother Ganga

Rivers, their confluences, their mouths and their origins form prominent Hindu pilgrim centers. The evening worship of Ganga Ma ('Mother Ganges') in the pilgrim center of Hardwar with hundreds of lamps which are set afloat on the river in the night is a breath-taking spectacle. The trend of considering rivers as manifestations of the feminine aspect of the Divine Being has been carried by Hindu immigrants to other parts of the world as well. Sanskrit mantras have already been composed for worshipping rivers such as Mississippi in the United States, underlying the fact that in Hindu belief, the Supreme Being is all-pervading. Such recent developments parallel a similar transplantation of Hindu sacred geography to South East Asia several centuries back.

One's country is always termed as 'Motherland', never as Fatherland in recognition of the fact that the land we live in nurtures us lovingly as our own mother. Indians often worship India as 'Bharatmata'.



Iconic representation of Mother India (Bharatmata)

A popular Sanskrit verse attributed to Lord Rama says that one's mother as well as motherland are more exalted than Heaven.

When a family entered their new home, they invoked God and asked him to dwell therein in a benevolent feminine form to make it come alive –

*Queen of the mansion, our shelter,
Kind devi, you are indeed constructed by the devas.
May you, robed in grass, be gracious to us,
And give us brave children and wealth.³²*

Household women play a leading role in this ceremony and the wife is the first one to enter the new home. This is not surprising because the wife is regarded as 'grhyalakshmi' or the embodiment of Devi Lakshmi, presiding over the house and its welfare and prosperity.

Feminine Spirituality, Feminine Rituals:

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the longest text of Hindu spirituality, describes the proceedings of a marvelous spiritual conference in which the great Sage Yajnavalkya was locked in a debate with several Sages on the other side. Suddenly, a woman sage named Gargi Vachnavi rises and says that if Sage Yajnavalkya can answer her questions, all the other Sages will accept his doctrines³³. It is noteworthy that all the Sages present there accept her as their spiritual leader and allow her to represent them on their behalf. In the same text, Maitreyi, the wife of Yajnavalkya, motivates him to deliver a memorable sermon on the nature of God and soul. Modern India has honored these illustrious women by founding colleges bearing their names³⁴. In a long spiritual lineage given in this text, all the teachers and students are listed as sons of their mothers.



Sage Yajnavalkya with Sage Gargi and Sage Maitreyi

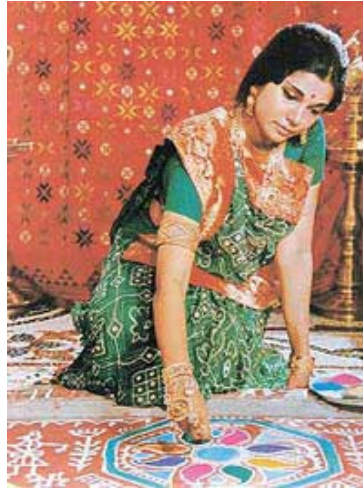
In the Kena Upanishad, knowledge appears as Uma, a women, to dispel the ignorance of Indra. This short text was considered so profound that it was singled out for not one but two commentaries by Adi Shankaracharya (8th century CE), one of the greatest Hindu philosophers of all times.

³² Atharvaveda 3.12.5

³³ Madhyandina Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.8

³⁴ Gargi College and Maitreyi College in New Delhi, India

Scholars of Hinduism point out that in addition to the largely male-authored religious texts of our Dharma, popular Hinduism strongly adheres to non-codified rituals performed by women. Hundreds of thousands of villages in Hindu dominated parts of the world have well-frequented shrines in honor of Devi, the feminine aspect the Divine. Hindu women perform hundreds of small religious rites, keeping Dharma alive in their own way. Little wonder then that even orthodox Hindu texts hint that the study of the Vedas is completed only after we learn the ‘religious knowledge of women’³⁵.



Woman applying ‘Rangoli’ (Sacred Artwork) on Diwali festival

In household religious ceremonies even today, it is not uncommon to see women take the lead role in organizing the entire function. There is no domestic ritual in which women cannot participate, whereas there are several popular Hindu rituals where the presence of men is either debarred, or is not desirable. The sacred rituals are said to bear the desired fruit only if men and women perform it as a pair.³⁶

The intimate connection of women with Vedic rituals is seen from the fact that several sacred mantras from the Vedas³⁷ are specifically meant for recitation by women, as is clarified by Shrautasutras³⁸ – manuals of Vedic rites. Since the wife is indeed the pivot of the house, she was entitled to perform the *sandhyaa*, or the morning and evening rituals with the sacred altar and Vedic texts.³⁹ In the Ramayana, Queen Kausalya performs⁴⁰ the daily fire sacrifice (*agnihotra*) with Vedic mantras as do Tara and Sita etc. In the Mahabharata also, ladies such as Savitri and Amba likewise perform Vedic rituals with the recitation of Vedic texts. Some Vedic texts actually cite women as authorities on minutiae of Vedic rituals.⁴¹ Therefore, though women were debarred from reciting Vedic

³⁵ Apastamba Dharmasutra 2.2.29.11-15

³⁶ Aitareya Brahmana 7.10

³⁷ e.g., Madhyandina Yajurveda 5.17; 3.44-45 etc.

³⁸ e.g., Katyayana Shrautasuta 5.5.10 etc.

³⁹ Gobhila Grhyasutra 1.3.15; Khadira Grhyasutra 1.5.17-18 etc.

⁴⁰ Ramayana 2.20.14

⁴¹ e.g., Aitareya Brahmana 2.9 cites the opinion of Kumari Gandharva-grihita on the Agnihotra ritual.

texts or from performing Vedic rituals in later times⁴², their right to do so in ancient times is quite well established from the extant ancient Hindu literature. In fact, a lost Vedic text named Saulabha Brahmana is attributed to Sulabha, a woman.

Although no sacred-thread ceremony has been performed for women in recent centuries, ancient texts affirm that women did undergo this ceremony in the past, or wore the sacred thread during various rituals. For instance, a text⁴³ says that the bride should wear the sacred thread during her wedding. The Harita Dharmasutra, perhaps belonging to Maitrayaniya school of Yajurveda, has been cited in several texts such as Hindu law manuals such as *Nirnayasindhu* to the effect that women are of two types – *Brahmavaadini* (devoted to the Vedas and to the Supreme Being) and *Sadhyavadhu* (those who marry and settle down as housewives). Concerning the former, the Dharmasutra says⁴⁴ that they undergo the thread ceremony, perform *agnihotra*, study the Vedas, and live by begging alms from their family members (just as male students, although boys have to leave home to live with their teachers). Later texts also cite the opinion of Yama⁴⁵ to the effect that in ancient times, women also underwent the thread ceremony, studied the Vedas and recited the Gayatri and other Vedic mantras. However, these later texts somehow try to explain these old traditions away because they were perceived as anachronistic in later times.

Hindu texts are unanimous in declaring that God does not differentiate between men and women.⁴⁶ From a Dharmic perspective, adherence to Dharma alone decides who is great and who is lowly. In the Hindu philosophy of Bhakti, or devotion to God, the cowherd women (*gopi-s*) who resided in the region of Braj in northern India are held as exemplars for all mankind.⁴⁷ In traditional enumerations of pious people who were saved by the salvific power of God, both men and women are listed without prejudice⁴⁸. Both men and women are said to be God's manifestations in several verses. In these verses, we often see that the Sanskrit word for women is given a graceful precedence over the word for men.⁴⁹

⁴² Manusmriti 2.67 says that the wedding rite is the only Vedic rite of women, and domestic work is like performance of *agnihotra* rite for women. Interestingly, as late as the 15th century, the commentator Kullukabhatta noted several additional verses in manuscripts of Manusmriti found in his times. Right after 2.67, he noticed an additional verse (excluded in vulgate text) according to which wives were actually responsible for performing the daily *agnihotra*, clearly contradicting the preceding verse but consistent with numerous old texts such as Gobhila Grhyasutra 1.3.15; Ashvalayana Grhyasutra 1.9

⁴³ Gobhila Grhyasutra 2.1.9

⁴⁴ 'dvividhaa striyah. Brahmavaadinyah sadyovadhvascha. tatra brahmavaadiniinaamupanayanamagniindhanam svagrhe bhiksacharyeti.'

⁴⁵ Puraakalpeshu naariinaam maunjiibandhanishyatey.

Adhyaapanam cha vedaanaam saavitriivaachanam tathaa.

⁴⁶ Gita 9.32

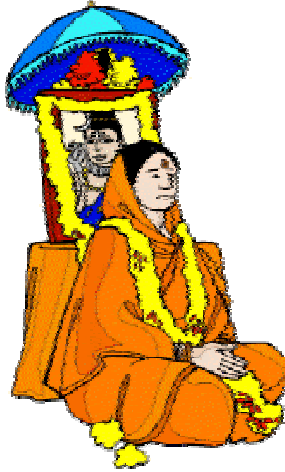
⁴⁷ Narada Bhaktisutra 1.21

⁴⁸ Shrimad Bhagvatam (Book X) mentions several women such as Kubjika, who were emancipated by God.

⁴⁹ E.g., 'tvam strii tvam pumaanasi' - 'Thou art the woman and the man' (Atharvaveda Saunaka Samhita 10.8.27); 'strii pumsau Brahmano jatau striyah brahma uta vavana' - 'Women and Men are both born from Supreme Being, Women are (manifestations) of the Supreme Being and so are these men' (Atharvaveda Paippalada Samhita 8.9.11cd)

Women as Hindu Spiritual Leaders: The Women of God

Hindus have been blessed with a continuous, unbroken chain of women Saints⁵⁰, Yoginis, Nuns⁵¹, Priestesses⁵², Ascetics⁵³ and Seers⁵⁴ who roam all over the world to this day to preach the eternal message of our Dharma.



A Hindu Nun

Meera, Akka Mahadevi, Lalleshvari, Andal and other saintly women of medieval India are considered some of the foremost Hindu Sages. Their writings are treated as scripture, and chanted with great regard to this day.

Meerabai (16th century) was a Rajput Princess of Mewar who decided in her childhood that her husband was Lord Krishna. She was married to a Rajput prince, but forsaking all formal ties, she traveled between various religious centers associated with Lord Krishna. Her Hindi bhajans in praise of Rama and Krishna are very popular even today. Meerabai's soul merged with that of Lord Krishna in Dwaraka when she was 67 years old.

Andal-Goda's songs are recited daily in Shri Vaishnava Hindu liturgy in temples as well as in homes, in India as well as outside India. Her icon is frequently placed alongside that of Lord Vishnu and Devi Lakshmi in temples.⁵⁵

Lalleshvari (14th century CE) is considered the greatest saint poet of Kashmir. Her devotional verses highlight the divinity within our own selves, and exhort us to love the Shiva who dwells in our heart. Lalleshvari walked out of a traumatic marriage and

⁵⁰ In Sanskrit, '*Sant*', used to denote both male and female saints (unlike other terms below, which are specific to women).

⁵¹ In Sanskrit, '*Bhikkhuni*'. Buddhism and Jainism, two offshoots of Hindu Dharma, also have had prominent orders of nuns.

⁵² In Sanskrit, '*Panditaa*'. Numerous women Hindu priests serve the laity in the United States as well, and preside over temple management, monasteries and other Hindu institutions.

⁵³ In Sanskrit, '*Saadhvi*'

⁵⁴ In Sanskrit, '*Rishikas*'

⁵⁵ Vasudha Narayanan, "Women of Power in the Hindu Tradition", pp. 25-77 in Arvind Sharma and Katherine K Young (eds.), *Feminism and World Religions*, SUNY Press: Albany (New York)

roamed the Kashmir valley singing her mystical songs, demonstrating Yogic feats while lost in the bliss of Bhagavan Shiva. Her spellbinding songs are recited even today.



Saint Meerabai (1498-1546 CE)



Saint Andal (8th century CE)

Akka Mahadevi (12th century) lived and preached in Karnataka. Though married, she severed her worldly bonds and instead sought to merge in Shiva. She roamed the countryside of that region singing of Lord Shiva, and ultimately is said to have merged in him. Akka joined the Virashaiva community after her meeting with Saint Basavacharya and wrote 350 exquisite spiritual compositions. Akka and Lallehsvari defied the social norms by eschewing garments for they had surrendered their entire being to their deity and had no use for social norms. A late twentieth century woman ascetic named Mate Mahadevi drew her own inspiration from the ideal set by Akka Mahadevi.

The Shaiva Siddhanta tradition has been blessed with several women saints such as Kaaraikkaal Ammaiyaar, Thilakavathiyaar, Mangaiyarkkarachiyaar, Paravaiyaar, Changiliyaar, Chembiyan Madheeviyaar, Auvaiyaar etc. Some of them led a saintly life dedicating their lives to spiritual pursuits. The others lead a family life while spreading of spiritual teachings of Shaivism in Tamil speaking areas.⁵⁶

Likewise, the Sant tradition of Maharashtra has several feminine voices from Muktabai (13th century CE) the sister of Sant Jnaneshvara, to Bahina Bai. Janabai (1298-1350) also wrote of abandoning social norms and offering herself to the service of God. The hagiographies of many of these women Sants occur in Mahipati's Bhaktavijaya. Most women saints of this tradition were in fact housewives.

Similar examples may be given from many other Hindu spiritual traditions such as Gaudiya Vedanta of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

In more recent times, Shree Shree Ma Anandamoyi (1896-1982) was a Hindu woman mystic whose own husband became her devotee, and who was held in great reverence even by Mahatma Gandhi. She traveled far and wide, preaching compassion

⁵⁶ <http://www.shaivam.org/adwomen.html>

and spirituality, and was instrumental in the setting up of many hospitals and other charitable institutions.



Shree Shree Ma Anandamoyi

In our times, Mata Amritanandamayi and Mata Nirmala Devi as Hindu women Gurus are well known today in the international spiritual circuit as teachers of Divine Love and of Yoga.



Mata Amritanandamayi 'Ammachi'



Mata Nirmala Devi, Sahaja Yoga Guru

Ammachi, as Mata Amritandamayi is lovingly called by followers, was born in a humble Hindu harijan family of Kerala. From her childhood she was lost in Divine Love for God. Today, she travels all over the world preaching love for God and compassion for human beings. She is well known for embracing all the visitors who come to see her with patience and compassion, and with an eternal beatific smile that leaves a profound spiritual effect on them.

Mata Nirmala Devi, born to a Christian priest, converted to Hinduism and discovered a simpler form of Yoga that she teaches to her devotees spread all over the

world. Many other Hindu women Gurus preach in the West in our times, including Ma Yoga Shakti, Shri Ma, Anandi Ma and so on.⁵⁷

Foreign women who adopted Hindu spirituality also made a significant contribution to our Dharma and society. For instance, Sister Nivedita⁵⁸ (Margaret Noble) was born on 28-10-1867) in Northern Ireland. She met Swami Vivekananda in London in 1895 and became his disciple. She came to India in 1898. In India she engaged herself in running a school for girls and young women. After Swamiji's death she involved herself actively in the Freedom Movement. She wrote several books that present different aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism in a very lucid manner for the lay readership. She died in 1911.



Sister Nivedita

Women have played in other sacred traditions that have organic links to Hindu Dharma. For instance, one out of the twenty-four Tirthankaras (founding spiritual teachers) of the Jains was a woman. The heroine of a Tamil Jain didactic epic is a Jain nun named Neelakeshi. Guru Amar Das, the Sikh Guru, entrusted two of the 26 regions marked out for his missionary activity to women spiritual leaders.

Often when married male saints have died, their widowed wives or disciples have assumed the spiritual leadership of his followers⁵⁹. As an example we may cite 'The Mother', who was married to Shri Aurobindo, one of the most influential Hindu Sage of our times⁶⁰. Originally from France, she followed him to India, where she spent the rest of her life.

⁵⁷ Vasudha Narayanan, "Women of Power in the Hindu Tradition", pp. 25-77 in Arvind Sharma and Katherine K Young (eds.), *Feminism and World Religions*, SUNY Press: Albany (New York)

⁵⁸ http://www.geocities.com/dakshina_kan_pa/art31/women7.htm For further details, see http://atributetohinduism.com/Women_in_Hinduism.htm

⁵⁹ Married women, such as Saint Mirabai (a Princess in the 17th century) have also been spiritual leaders of Hindus.

⁶⁰ Likewise, the vast spiritual flock of the influential Swami Muktananda is today guided by his lady disciple Gurumayi Chidvilasananda.



Meera, The Mother



Sharada Devi

Another example is that of Sharada Devi (b. 1853), the wife of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a Hindu Monk who lived in the 19th century. After Ramakrishna Paramahansa passed away in 1886, she continued to guide her husband's followers till her own death in 1920. Portraits of the two are worshipped together by followers of this Hindu saint even today.

In our own times, Bhagwati Devi Sharma (d. 1994) provided spiritual leadership to the Gayatri Parivar, after its founder Guru Shri Ram Sharma Acharya passed away.

It would be a fair statement to make that of all the organized global religions in the world today, women perhaps have the most visible and prominent presence in Hindu Dharma. Feminism is not something that needs to be grafted onto Hindu Dharma. It has always been a part of the core of our faith.

Women Scholars and Poetesses:

We have already cited above several instances of Vedic women seers, ritual teachers, spiritual teachers and so on. In this section, we shall cite some examples of women who were scholars from post-Vedic literature.

In the Mahabharata⁶¹, one reads of a profoundly spiritual nun Sulabha who studied under several teachers and has a philosophical debate with the philosopher King Janaka. Numerous texts of Sanskrit grammar indicate the existence of respected women teachers of grammar⁶². Commenting on the authoritative grammar text Ashtadhyayi 3.3.21, Patanjali says that women commence their education after undergoing the sacred thread ceremony. He then derives the feminine forms of words denoting teachers, professors and so on. Likewise, commenting on Ashtadhyayi 4.1.14, Patanjali mentions

⁶¹ Mahabharata XII.320. All citations from Mahabharata in this article are based on the vulgate text that accompanies the traditional 'Bharatadeepa' commentary by Nilakantha (Chitrashala edn. published from Pune)

⁶² Katyayana's Varttika 125, 2477

that ladies studied the ancient grammar of Apisali and also the Mimamsa text of Kashkritisni.

In the Uttararamacharita 2.3 of Bhavabhuti, it is mentioned that Atreyi goes from the hermitage of Sage Valmiki to southern India to learn Vedas and Vedanta philosophy etc. In Kaadambari, the exemplary text on poetics authored by Dandin, a lady named Mahaashveta is described as adorned with a white sacred thread that shone like pure moonlight.

Numerous ancient Hindu temples (such as the Lingaraja temple in Orissa or the Khajuraho temple in Madhya Pradesh) show women as teachers (with male as well as female students) and painters etc.

Ubhaya Bharati, the wife of scholar Mandana Mishra herself challenged none other than Adi Shankaracharya (8th century CE) to a debate, after presiding as the judge in the preceding debate between him and her husband. The hagiography Shankaradigvijaya of Madhava states that she knew the Vedas, the six Vedangas (perquisite sciences for studying Vedas), poetics and several other branches of learning. When she debated with Shankaracharya, the audience was dumbfounded with the erudition and skill with which she marshaled Vedic citations, logical arguments and profound thoughts⁶³.

Recently⁶⁴, a commentary on Tiruvaayamoli of Shudra saint Nammalvar authored by a woman named Tirukkoneri Dasyai (15th century) has been discovered. The commentary is an exquisite work and shows familiarity with Vedic texts, particularly those of Taittiriya Yajurveda. It may be noted that the Tiruvaayamoli is accorded the status of Samaveda in the Shri Vaishnava community, and is called 'Dravida Veda' or the Tamil Veda.

By and large however, it appears that women were not initiated into rigorous Vedic or religious study as such. The noted social reformer Swami Dayanand Sarasvati cited Vedic testimony to argue that women are entitled to Vedic study. He founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, and its members soon established colleges for teaching Hindu scriptures to girls. Through the efforts of Lala Devraj several decades ago, women scholars were finally able to recite the Vedas and perform Vedic sacrifices publicly. What was a rarity till recently is now becoming an increasingly common spectacle. For instance, in 1931, Upasani Baba founded the Kanya Kumari Sthan in Sakori (Ahmednagar district, India) where women are taught Vedas and the performance of seven sacred Vedic sacrifices every year. Influenced by this endeavor, another institution named Udyan Mangal Karyaalaya was started in the city of Pune wherein women of all castes and vocations are learning to chant the Vedas and become priests.⁶⁵

⁶³ Shankaradigvijaya 9.63

⁶⁴ Vasudha Narayanan, "Women of Power in the Hindu Tradition", pp. 25-77 in Arvind Sharma and Katherine K Young (eds.), *Feminism and World Religions*, SUNY Press: Albany (New York)

⁶⁵ *ibid.*



The lady priest guides the couple in their wedding ceremony

Coming to the modern academic study of religion, several Hindu women have distinguished themselves as scholars. The first non Judeo-Christian President of the American Academy of Religions (AAR) has been a Hindu woman Professor Vasudha Narayanan⁶⁶.



Professor Vasudha Narayanan

Besides writing Vedic and other Hindu religious poetry as noted above, many women also excelled as authors of secular poetry. Several authors of poetry in the Sangam literature in Tamil are women. The Sanskrit epic 'Madhuraavijaya' is attributed to Gangadevi. The epic celebrates the Hindu re-conquest of an area in southern India from invading Muslims who had indulged in large-scale massacres, cow-slaughter, desecration of temples and molestation of women. Many of the poems attributed to the famous Bengali poet Chandidas were actually written by his wife.

Swayamsiddhā⁶⁷: The many achievements and talents of Hindu Women:

Hindu society has produced numerous women who were able Rulers, Warriors⁶⁸, Poetesses, scholars, mathematicians, freedom fighters, musicians, artists and so on.

Musicians and Dancers: Hindu music and dance has always had a very strong connection with women. Devi Sarasvati is the patron deity of all art, music, literature, drama and dance and her blessings are invoked whenever artists commence their work or performance. Most of the classical dance forms of Hindus such as Balinese (in

⁶⁶ Currently in the Department of Religion, University of Florida at Gainesville

⁶⁷ = the self-achieving woman

⁶⁸ Women soldiers are mentioned in Vedic texts. In a particular instance, Vishpala, a women warrior in Rigveda, lost her leg and was given metal

Indonesia), Kuchipudi, Odissi, Bharatnatyam, Kathak and Garba are dominated by women performers today. Even in dance forms where women do not participate, their status is quite exalted. For instance, Kathakali dance of Kerala is traditionally performed by men who wear masks of different colors to denote different categories of persons. Interestingly, the masks for women as well as for all divine characters are painted white in order to indicate their holy, pure and exalted status. Many traditional folk dance forms such as Pandavani of Chhattisgarh are being promoted by women such as Teejanbai.



Odissi Dancer



Balinese Dancer

Lata Mangeshkar, a devoted Hindu lady, is considered one of the foremost lady singers in Indian film industry. She is credited with singing hundreds of devotional Hindu songs in several Indian and non-Indian languages. *M S Subhalakshmi* is likewise the greatest singer of the classical Hindu Carnatic Music style. For her soul stirring renderings of devotional songs from Hindu tradition, she has been honored by numerous prominent religious leaders. Likewise, women such as Kishori Amonkar, Gangubai Hangal and so on are some of the greatest performers of other traditional vocal music styles such as classical Hindustani.



Lata Mangeshkar



M. S. Subhalakshmi

Numerous traditional art-forms in Gujarat, Orissa and other parts of India are still sustained by the efforts of women of these regions.

Ideal Queens: *Queen Kulaprabhavati* of the Khmer Kingdom (in Kampuchea) was a pious Vaishnava queen who in the fifth century (c.475) made many donations to a Vaishnava ashrama. And there were several other Hindu queens--Kambujarajalakshmi, Jayadevi in that dynasty who excelled in charitable and social welfare works. Dozens of inscriptions from various parts of the Indian subcontinent also attest to pious Hindu queens and lady officials making endowments to temples, colleges, monasteries etc.

Queen Ahalyabai Holkar (1725-1795) of the princely state of Indore in central India is often held as an example of an ideal Hindu sovereign. She inherited her kingdom from her father in law since her husband and her son were already dead. Ahalyabai ruled her kingdom with great ability, benevolence and compassion for 30 years.



Ahalyabai Holkar

She got numerous temples and other pilgrim sites constructed or repaired all over India even though they were outside her kingdom. Her reign saw increase in overall prosperity of the people, and she also helped widows get their rightful inheritance from their husband's wealth.

Rani Rashmoni Devi (1793-1861) was the widow of a rich landowner (Zamindar) and managed his estate very efficiently after his death. Once on her way to a pilgrimage to Varanasi, Goddess Kali appeared to her in a dream and asked the Rani to return to Kolkata and construct a temple in that town. Thus was built the famous Dakshineshvar temple (later associated with Saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa).



Rani Rashmoni

She also repaired the sacred steps ('ghats') on the banks of the Bhagarathi river (tributary of Ganga flowing past Kolkata) and made handsome endowments to the Hindu College (now called The Presidency College) and the Imperial Library (now called The National Library) in Kolkata.⁶⁹ She also had a road constructed from the

⁶⁹ http://www.geocities.com/dakshina_kan_pa/art31/women2.htm

Subarnarekha river (that flows past the town of Jamshedpur) to the Hindu pilgrim center of Puri for the welfare of pilgrims.

*Tarabai*⁷⁰: After Rajaram, Shivaji's brother, died - his wife took over and continued the Maratha struggle. Under her leadership the capital was shifted to what is now known as Kolhapur. The struggle continued till Sambhaji's son, Shahu was brought back from the Mughals.

Warriors, Warrior Queens and Freedom Fighters: Women warriors are mentioned in the Vedic texts. Vispala, the wife of chief Khela was an aggressive warrior who lost her leg in a battle. The Ashvins, celestial physicians, gave her a metal prosthesis as a replacement for her lost leg.⁷¹ Mudgalani drove the chariot of her husband in a battle.⁷² In the Mahabharata, Chitraangada, the wife of Arjuna, was an accomplished warrior in her own right.⁷³

The last Hindu ruler of Kashmir was a woman *Kota Rani*, who was the widow of Hindu king Uddyana Deo. She played a crucial role in warding off the Tartar invasion of Kashmir in the early 14th century CE but was finally deposed by Shahmir in 1341 CE. Shahmir started the long lasting Islamic rule in the region that, with traumatic consequences on the Hindu population of the region.

When the ruler Dalpat Rai of Gondwana died in 1548, *Rani Durgavati* became the regent Queen on behalf of her infant son Bir Narayan. Rani Durgavati of Gondwana ruler her kingdom ably for 16 years. The Moghul Emperor Akbar invaded her kingdom in 1564. She fought bravely and when defeat was imminent, she chose to commit suicide by plunging a dagger into herself. She may have lost her life in the battlefield but Akbar could not subjugate her loyal subjects completely.



Rani Durgavati

The legendary *Rani Lakshmibai* of Jhansi fought bravely against British invaders in 1857 and died on the battlefield. She is considered the Joan of Arc of India and is glorified in several Hindi ballads and poems.

⁷⁰ <http://www.arecordofwomen.com/otherwomen>

⁷¹ Rigveda 1.116.15

⁷² Rigveda 10.102.2

⁷³ Mahabharata II.14.51 also mentions women warriors in a general way.



Rani Lakshmibai



Kittur Rani Chennamma

*Rani Chennamma of Kittur*⁷⁴ (1778-1829) received training in horse riding, sword fighting and archery in her young age. She was married to Raja Mallasarja of Kittur, a princely state of Belgaum in Karnataka. Her husband died in 1816. Her only son died in 1824. Chennamma adopted Shivalingappa as her son and made him heir to the throne. The British did not accept this and ordered the expulsion of Shivalingappa. The Rani defied the order. A great battle ensued. The Rani fought the British with great courage and skill. She could not, however, hold out for long. She was taken captive and lodged in Bailhongal Fort where she died on 21-02-1829.

*Rani Avantibai*⁷⁵: When Vikramaditya Singh, the ruler of Ramgarh State died leaving behind his wife Avantibai and no heir to the throne, the British put the state under court administration. Avantibai vowed to win back her land from the British. She raised an army of four thousand men and led it herself against the British in 1857. A fierce battle ensued and Avantibai fought most valiantly but could not hold out for long against the superior strength of the British army. When her defeat became imminent she killed herself with her own sword and became a martyr on 20-03-1858.



Rani Avantibai

Several Hindu women were also at the forefront of the Indian freedom struggle in early 20th century. Of them, the most notable was Sarojini Naidu, often called the 'Nightingale of India' because of her excellent poetry.

⁷⁴ http://www.geocities.com/dakshina_kan_pa/art31/women1.htm

⁷⁵ *ibid.*



Sarojini Naidu, Indian woman freedom fighter

In the Sikh tradition too, women warriors and military generals played a crucial role in their battles against Afghan and Pathan Muslim oppressors.

Women also played the role of spies. Around 300 BC, Emperor Chandragupta Maurya used a woman spy to assassinate his rival King Parvataka.

Several Hindu women avenged the dishonor to our Dharma and our country by employing clever strategy, if not arms. In the year 712, the Arab invader Muhammad bin Qasim invaded the outlying Indian province of Sindh, killed its last Hindu ruler Raja Dahir, and sent Dahir's daughters to Baghdad as a gift to the Caliph. The daughters told the Caliph that Qasim had already ravished them before sending them as a gift to him. Infuriated by this apparent insult, the Caliph had Qasim put to death, only to learn that the Princesses of Sindh had lied to him to avenge their father's death. The two Princesses were tortured to death.

In the early 14th century, Ulugh Khan, a Muslim military general invaded the Vaishnava holy temple town of Shrirangam. He massacred several monks, desecrated the temple and looted its treasury. The Muslim army occupied the temple precincts and put an end to Hindu worship. A temple courtesan, who fascinated the invading general, prevailed upon him not to destroy the temple altogether, and restrict his vandalism to the destruction of a few cornices. The Brahmins in the surrounding areas tried to perform the sacred rituals whenever they could, but were harassed by the occupying Muslim forces constantly. Unable to bear the harassment of the devotees by the Muslims, she enticed the Muslim chief, took him up a temple tower in the east, and in the pretext of showing him a famous icon from there, she pushed him down and killed him. Scared that she will be tortured by the Muslims as a result of her deed, she hurled herself also down and died. According to tradition, to honor her memory, the funeral pyres of temple courtesans were lit by fire brought from the temple kitchen.⁷⁶

It is relevant here to recall some rules of Hindu warfare that are enjoined in texts such as Manusmriti and Mahabharata. Women in general were considered inviolable, and

⁷⁶ V. N. Hari Rao. *History of the Srirangam Temple*. Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati (1976)

were generally exempt from capital punishment. They could be captured to be used as concubines, and could not be assaulted sexually by soldiers.

Looking at the past achievements of Hindu women, it is not surprising that the largest Hindu country namely India has had a Hindu woman as its Prime Minister for 17 long years, and that women have presided over state governments in the largest⁷⁷ states of India. It may be noted that the Council and the Assembly are called the ‘two daughters of God’ in Hindu texts.⁷⁸

Social Status of Hindu Women:

However, it is fair to say that Hinduism has a far from perfect record when we deal with the social status of women. As a Hindu, I consider it extremely important to make this admission with out any reservations, because we cannot solve problems unless we recognize them. The revealed texts of Hindus do not contain much that deals with socio-cultural codes in a concrete manner because social mores cannot be eternally and universally valid or applicable. They must change from place to place, and from time to time. The main intent of Hindu Revelatory texts is to serve as a guide in expounding the more eternal principles and practices dealing with cosmology, theology, ritualism (which too changes with time), spirituality and so on. Injunctions on morality, social codes, political maxims etc., are rather explained in non-revealed texts of Hinduism, called the Smritis. Because of the temporal nature of social, political and moral codes, Hindu Sages have authored their own Smritis from time to time, and from region to region to serve the respective populations of their area. A perusal of these Smritis often reveals some teachings that are demeaning to women in various ways. These Smritis have often been merely ‘normative’ texts and their views did not always reflect social reality. In many ways, the actual position of women in the Hindu society has been better than what is enjoined by these texts, and vice versa as well.

Woman as Mother:

In Hindu Dharma, God is often compared to a mother, and is worshipped in the form of the Divine Mother. In social contexts as well, no person is considered as exalted and worthy of respect and service as one’s mother. The tender love and care of a mother for her children is the subject of numerous Vedic verses. In Hindu culture, the mother is the very embodiment of love, of sacrifice, or selfless service to her children and of forbearance. She is considered the first teacher of every child, and is considered the highest Guru⁷⁹. Hindu texts remind us that as long as we live, we must never forget the efforts and sacrifices our mothers make to bring us up in our childhood. In a recent Indian movie, a daughter makes a statement that perhaps sums up the Hindu reverence for

⁷⁷ Both in terms of population (Uttar Pradesh, governed by Chief Minister Mayavati) and area (Madhya Pradesh, governed by Chief Minister Uma Bharati, who has been a dynamic Hindu nun since her childhood). Note that the Meghawati Sukarnoputri, the former President of Muslim dominated Indonesia was the daughter of a secular Muslim father and a Hindu mother from Bali. Her name itself is Sanskrit derived. Indonesia still retains a lot of its Hindu cultural heritage despite conversion of most of its people to Islam. The erstwhile royal family of Korea traces its lineage to a Hindu princess from India who married a Korean chief.

⁷⁸ Atharvaveda 7.12.1

⁷⁹ Gautama Dharmasutra 2.57; Yajnavalkya Smriti 1.33

motherhood – “Since God could not appear everywhere to take care of us, He created mother.”

In a hymn, Shri Shankaracharya (8th century CE) declares that while a son can be a bad son, a mother can never be a bad mother. The mother is considered a thousand times more venerable than the father⁸⁰. When students graduate from their school, their teachers exhort them to consider first their mothers⁸¹, followed by others, as embodiments of God. If a Hindu man becomes a monk, he is required to sever all his biological relationships so that even his own father is required to salute to him. The sole exception is made for his mother – a monk must salute his own mother if he encounters her in the course of his itinerant lifestyle. Motherly love and affection are considered so exalted and pure that the Hindu doctrine of *vaatsalya-bhakti* advocates loving God just as a mother loves her child. A recurring theme in Hindu devotional literature is the childhood of Divine Incarnations in the loving care of their mothers. For instance, Mother Yashoda (adoptive mother) and Devaki (biological mother) are frequently remembered in hymns together with Lord Krishna.



Mother Yashoda with Lord Krishna

Pregnant women were exempted from paying ferry tolls⁸², and were granted some other exemptions due to the high regard for motherhood in the traditional Hindu society. The sanctity of motherhood was so highly regarded that it was also extended to the animal kingdom. It was forbidden to hunt pregnant animals⁸³. Amongst the most important reason for considering the cow a sacred animal in Hinduism is the exceptional motherly love, patience and concern that she exhibits towards the newly born calf⁸⁴ – a scene used frequently in metaphors occurring in Vedic hymns. By revering cows (the exalted status is not extended to the bull), Hindus are not degrading their mothers, rather they express their deep reverence for the principle of motherhood – reverence that is also manifested in our seeing the Divine Mother in Nature, rivers and earth that nourish us.

⁸⁰ Manusmriti 2.145

⁸¹ Taittiriya Upanishad

⁸² Manusmriti 8.407

⁸³ The famous Banda Bahadur (d. 1713) became an ascetic out of remorse when he discovered that the deer he had killed with his arrow was pregnant.

⁸⁴ There are of course many other symbolic reasons for the exalted status of Gaumata (mother cow) in Hindu Dharma, details of which are beyond the scope of this compilation.

It is said that when Adi Shankaracharya took leave of his grieving widowed mother, he promised to her that as her only son, he will certainly come to meet her at the hour of her death. When the moment came, he was at her bedside, horrifying the orthodox Brahmins of the area for violating the rules of Hindu asceticism which requires the monk to sever all his worldly ties. They boycotted him, but through a miracle, the pyre of his mother that the Saint set up in his home's courtyard caught fire spontaneously. The Brahmins repented upon seeing this Divine intervention and since then many Namputiri Brahmins cremate their relatives in the courtyard of their homes as a mark of respect to the great Saint.

There was no restriction in the ancient Hindu society that sons must always be named after their father. Numerous heroes of Hindu tradition are frequently addressed as sons of their mother. For instance, Arjuna, the greatest warrior of the Hindu Epic of Mahabharata, is often addressed as 'Kaunteya' (son of Queen Kunti) in the text. Lord Krishna is likewise addressed as 'Devakiputra' (son of mother Devaki) in the Chhandogya Upanishad and elsewhere. The Aitareya Upanishad, one of the 10 major Upanishads (texts of Hindu spirituality), is named after Sage Aitareya Mahidasa, whose name derives from his mother Itara. The name of his father is not known. Likewise, the greatest Sanskrit grammarian Panini is also called Daakshiputra, or the son of Daakshi. Again, the name of his father is unknown.

In the Vedic verses, whenever both the parents are mentioned, the mother is typically mentioned before the father.⁸⁵ The position of a mother in Vedic rites is more exalted than that of the father⁸⁶. Numerous childhood sacraments and rites are performed by mothers. In the Upanayana ceremony, after which the child commences his Vedic study and the period of celibacy, there is no mention of the father but the child approaches his mother for alms. This indicates that the mother is considered a child's best well-wisher in life, who would never refuse him nourishment even though his father may. And when the period of study is over and the student returns home after his long absence, he first bows to his mother, and gives whatever he may have acquired during that period to his mother. After one's parents pass away, annual ceremonies called the '*shraaddha*' are performed by Hindus. In these ceremonies as well, the mother is remembered before the father, and special ceremonies are sometimes performed for the mother (though there are none specifically for the father). In fact, the *Chandanadhenu Shraddha*, the costliest and most ceremonial of all such ceremonies, is performed for one's mother. If one's father had been excommunicated for misconduct, *shraaddha* ceremony for him need not be performed. A mother is never considered excommunicated by her son however⁸⁷. The son does not have the option of not performing the ceremony for her, and is responsible for atoning for her sins⁸⁸. This is because whatever may be the crime of one's mother, she is always one's mother and deserving of her children's love and respect. How can we

⁸⁵ Cf. Rigveda 4.6.7

⁸⁶ J. B. Chaudhari. "The Position of Mother in the Vedic Ritual", in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, vol. XIV, Dec. 1938, pp. 822-830

⁸⁷ Vasishtha Dharmasutra 13.47; Gautama Dharmasutra 20.1 etc.

⁸⁸ Hiranyakeshin Grhyasutra 2.4.10.7; Shankhayana Grhyasutra 3.13.5

ever condemn her who nurtured us for 9 months in her womb, and underwent great pains to give us birth, and to bring us up in our childhood?

Woman as Daughter: As in all human cultures⁸⁹, Hindu culture also unfortunately shows a preference for the male child. There are pre-natal rites⁹⁰ prescribed by Hindu texts to ensure that the fertilized embryo is male and not female⁹¹. In ancient times (and also in modern times), birth of a son ensured financial and emotional security for parents when they became too old to fend for themselves because there was no organized social security infrastructure. Whereas the daughter was married off to another man and moved out, the devoted son was supposed to take personal care of his aged parents.

In addition, Hinduism advocates that every man is born with three (or four) debts, of which one was the debt to one's ancestors who gave birth to us. This debt can be redeemed apparently only by marrying and procreating children, or specifically male children, because the family lineage is said to perpetuate only through male issues. It was said that a person who did not discharge his debt to his ancestors by producing male issues was debarred from Heaven. Finally, after one's parents dies, the son (or some other male in the same 'lineage' or *gotra*) was expected to perform worship and offerings to his departed ancestors (to three generations). This worship could not be performed by daughters who technically belonged to the lineage of their husbands after their marriage.⁹²

While such beliefs have been questioned sometimes within Hindu texts themselves, the overall effect has been a very strong preference for male children within the Hindu community. Whereas the birth of sons was accompanied with great merriment, birth of daughters was often accompanied by a sense of gloom or at best subdued celebrations. If a couple did not beget sons, they often had several issues till one or more sons were born to them. There was a constant pressure on the wife to have a male child, despite no fault of hers. In very extreme cases, if the wife bore only daughters, the husband was allowed to marry a second time (while keeping his first wife) in the hope that the second wife will beget them a son.

⁸⁹ The preference for male children over female children manifests in many ways. For instance, studies conducted in the United States show that couples with daughters are more likely to divorce than those with sons. And single mothers with daughters are more likely to remarry than those with sons.

⁹⁰ This rite is called 'Pumsavana'. Of course, it is useless from a scientific perspective because the sex of the child is determined right at the moment of conception. The rite has fallen into disuse for quite sometime now and is not now performed.

⁹¹ However, traditional commentators do emphasize that the same rite may be performed for birth of daughters by merely changing the gender or other things through a standard ritual technique called 'Uuha'. See J. B. Chaudhari. "The Significance of the Vedic Rite Pumsavana", in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, vol. XIV, Dec. 1938, pp. 831-835

⁹² In case a couple had only daughters, they were allowed to adopt their eldest material grandson as their own son nominally (as has happened in my own case) to discharge their debts to the ancestors, and to have their post-death ceremonies performed. This status of the grandson was called 'Putrika' and has been sanctioned by the Vedas (Rigveda 3.31.1). However, in actual practice, birth of one's own sons was always the preferable option. Numerous texts however allow daughters to perform the ceremony directly for their ancestors.

Hindu poets⁹³ say that the birth of a daughter made her parents weep, because as soon as they saw her face for the first time, they realized that their precious jewel would eventually leave them and live with someone else. Daughters were therefore traditionally regarded as '*paraayaa dhana*' or 'a treasure that really belongs to someone else'. At the time of her wedding therefore, her father or her brother ritually 'gifted'⁹⁴ their most precious diamond (i.e., their daughter/sister) to her husband, after extracting promises that he would always take good care of her even if he has to forsake his life, just as her father and brother had done earlier. In fact, in Hindu families that are financially comfortable, daughters are literally pampered (compared to sons) because they would have to manage a lot of household work in their future husbands' home anyway. At seeing their daughters leave their homes and proceed to their husband's abode, parents are filled with grief.⁹⁵ Things are changing rapidly in the Hindu society however and it is often seen that a married daughter takes more care of her aged parents than their son.



The bride's family grieves when their precious daughter leaves after her wedding

The internal testimony of Vedic literature shows its close connection with women, but in the texts of classical Hinduism, women were often debarred from studying the revealed scriptures directly. However, they were allowed, at least in theory, to study the texts of classical Hinduism, such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas which supposedly expound the Vedas in a more lucid manner. By and large, daughters did not undergo the sacraments preceding the formal initiation of study, and this contributed to large-scale illiteracy of Hindu women in the recent centuries. The situation

⁹³ For instance poet Bhavabhuti

⁹⁴ The ceremony is called '*kanyaadaana*' or the 'gift of one's daughter' and is regarded as the greatest of all acts of 'charity'. However, Hindu scriptures are quick to emphasize that the 'gift' of daughters is merely a religious formality and it does not imply at all that women are commodities that can be sold and purchased (cf. Purva Mimamsa Sutras 6.1.15). Manusmriti 9.93 explicitly prohibits sale of a daughter. Likewise, Manusmriti 3.53 promises hell for parents and other relatives who sell their daughter for wealth as if she were a piece of property.

⁹⁵ E.g., Matsya Purana 154.497 where Himaachala is filled with grief when his daughter Devi Parvati leaves her home after marrying Shiva.

has been remedied by various Hindu reform movements⁹⁶, and Hindu women are catching up with men in education rapidly.

Fortunately however, despite the overall preference for male issues, Hindu texts do contain several teachings which equate a son with a daughter⁹⁷. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 6.4.17 actually prescribes a ritual for parents who desire a scholarly daughter to be born to them. During the marriage ceremony, the husband touches all the fingers of his wife except the thumb, if the couple is desirous of a daughter.⁹⁸ After their marriage, the husband shows his wife the Pole Star and other heavenly bodies if he desires that a daughter be born to them.⁹⁹ Several *kaamyashraddhas* (rites done to obtain a specific result) are prescribed in ritual literature to ensure the birth of a daughter¹⁰⁰. A text asks the father to greet both his son and his daughter upon returning from a journey.¹⁰¹

A text states that the birth of a daughter is very meritorious.¹⁰² There have been cases where fathers are said to have been more fond of their daughters than their sons. For instance, according to the Brahmapurana, King Ugrasena was more fond of his daughter Devaki (the mother of Krishna) than his son Kamsa.

In another Vaishnava Purana, a childless Brahmin prays to Lord Vishnu for a child. When the pleased Lord asks him whether he wants a daughter or a son, he responds – “What difference would it make, for a son would be your likeness while a daughter would be the likeness of Devi Lakshmi.” Lord Vishnu blesses him with a daughter. The text says that the Brahmin is overjoyed with the birth of his daughter, and educates her to be a great scholar.

In several Purana texts, the Universal Divine Mother is born in the household of her devotee Daksha as his daughter Sati.¹⁰³ Indeed, in many Hindu households, daughters are considered as manifestations of Devi. Many rituals and pilgrimages (to Shakti shrines such as Vaishno Devi) are completed by worshipping and offering food to eight young girls (which may include one’s own daughters) who are considered as forms of the Devi. A text says that Devi Lakshmi always dwells within our good daughters¹⁰⁴.

The idyllic description of a devout family blessed by Indra includes both sons and daughters.¹⁰⁵ The Tantras accord a very high place to the daughter. The Mahanirvana

⁹⁶ For instance, the Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayanand Sarasvati in 1875 revived Vedic and secular education of women by opening schools for girls. Today, we have several women who are scholars in Vedic and other Hindu texts.

⁹⁷ E.g., Manusmriti 9.130. A similar verse is also cited at Nirukta 3.4 and the accent marks indicates that it is quoted from a lost Vedic text.

⁹⁸ Ashvalayana Grhyasutra 1.7.4; Apastamba Grhyasutra 4.12

⁹⁹ Devapala’s commentary on Kathaka Grhyasutra 25.45

¹⁰⁰ J. B. Chaudhari. “The Significance of the Vedic Rite Pumsavana”, in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, vol. XIV, Dec. 1938, pp. 831-835

¹⁰¹ Apastamba Grhyasutra 6.15.12-13

¹⁰² Matsya Purana 154.414-417

¹⁰³ cf. Devibhagavata Purana 7.30

¹⁰⁴ Mahabharata XIII.11.14

¹⁰⁵ Rigveda 8.31.8

Tantra 8.47 says that the daughter ought to be brought up with great care and affection and should be educated by her parents with as much care as sons.

In several cases, the daughter also provided the family's lineage. Of the two most prominent royal dynasties of the Hindu society namely Suryavamsha (Solar Dynasty) and Chandravamsha (Lunar Dynasty), the latter owes its origin to Ila, the daughter of Manu (the equivalent of Biblical Noah in the Hindu tradition). According to Puranic texts, most of the kings of the Indian subcontinent belong to the Lunar dynasty, including Lord Krishna. A holy place called 'Ilayaspada' or the place of Ila, the daughter of Manu is said to be located close to the confluence of Sarasvati and Drishdvati rivers in northern India. Vedic texts call this site as the holiest place on the earth.¹⁰⁶ Chandragupta I, the founder of the Gupta dynasty (whose reign is considered the Golden Age of Hindus according to some) married a Licchivi Princess, and many later Gupta Emperors took pride in their mother's lineage.

Hindu texts say that the daughter deserves compassion from her parents¹⁰⁷, and is the highest object of his father's compassion.¹⁰⁸ It was forbidden to inflict physical punishment on one's daughter. Some passages of Hindu texts¹⁰⁹ are grotesquely misinterpreted by prejudiced scholars and by anti-Hindu websites to 'prove' that female infanticide through exposure of girl infant is sanctioned in our Dharma. In reality all forms of infanticide and abortions are considered heinous sins in our tradition. How can a true Hindu ever kill his own daughter, who is the very embodiment of Devi, and the object of reverence as well as of supreme compassion?

Woman as an unwanted Fetus: In the last few years, a terrible consequence of traditional preference for male children has been selective abortions of female fetuses after determination of their sex by modern ultrasound techniques. This has resulted in fall sex-ratios in India in the last few decades. Successive census data show that the problem is not restricted to the Hindu community alone – it is prevalent to a great extent in the allied Sikh community, as well as in the Muslim community. It is no consolation that the proportion of abortions to conceptions in India is an order of magnitude less than that in the United States (where an estimated one third of fetuses are aborted, especially in teenage pregnancies) because of the fact that female feticide involves selection and elimination of predominantly female fetuses. It is merely a matter of time before falling sex ratios in India lead to social problems. The government of India has outlawed sex determination tests though they continue to be conducted surreptitiously. And it is seen that female feticide is relatively rarer amongst poorer and rural Hindus who still cling to traditional values of their Dharma, and who also do not have access to these scientific

¹⁰⁶ Rigveda 3.23.4 etc.

¹⁰⁷ Aitareya Brahmana 7.13

¹⁰⁸ Manusmriti 4.184

¹⁰⁹ Yajurvedic Maitrayani Samhita 4.6.4; 4.7.9. These passages merely mean that whereas a newly born son is lifted up by his father for 'showing', the daughter is not shown and is placed down. At worse, these passages could indicate dejection at the birth of a daughter, nothing more. For a reasonable interpretation of all such passages explaining the ritual purpose of this custom, and for a rejection of contrary views, refer – J B Chaudhuri, "The Position of the Daughter in the Vedic Ritual", in *New Indian Antiquary* (May 1941), pp. 77-85

sex-determination tests. The Dharmic position on this problem is that according to Hindu texts, abortion as such is considered one of the four deadliest sins. This injunction against feticide is gender neutral, and therefore from a Hindu perspective, parents who kill their daughters even before they are born are burdening themselves with a lot of sinful Karma. No wonder then, that Hindu and Sikh religious leaders have openly come out against this heinous practice, which has no precedent and no sanction in Hindu Dharma. There is no evidence that this selective abortion of female fetuses is carried out by Hindu communities outside India (or rather some parts of India) and public concern against this evil practice is steadily mounting within the Hindu and Sikh communities.

Woman as Sister: Hindu Dharma is perhaps unique in having a ‘brother-sister’ festival, called the *Rakshabandhan*. On this day sisters come to visit their brothers and tie them a sacred thread (called ‘*Rakhi*’) on their wrist to symbolize that if ever some adversity befalls upon them, their brothers will rise to the occasion. Sisters pray for their brothers’ welfare, and brothers gift their sisters. In the Hindu tradition, a woman can make someone else a ‘brother’ by tying the *Rakhi* to him. If that happens, the relationship becomes one of real brother and sister, and all the requirements and duties of a brother towards his non-biological sister are then expected to be fulfilled by him. A brother is also obliged to present gifts to his married sister whenever she visited him. In the absence of their father, it is the brother who took care of her and made gifts to her as well as to his brother-in-law¹¹⁰. And just as it happens today, the protective brother kept a watch on his unmarried sister’s boyfriends.¹¹¹

Woman as the Bride: It appears that women had considerable freedom in Vedic times to choose their own husband.¹¹² Although there is no evidence in Vedic literature for early marriage of women, classical Hinduism texts advocate marrying off one’s daughter before she reaches puberty (although the marriage cannot be consummated till she attains puberty). Premature marriages has had a disastrous effect on the health of Hindu women, and laws have been enacted in India to prevent marriage of women till they turn 18 years of age.¹¹³



A Hindu bride (with north Indian or Nepali costume)

¹¹⁰ Rigveda 1.109.2

¹¹¹ Rigveda 4.5.5

¹¹² e.g., Rigveda 10.27.12

¹¹³ Ironically, while this seems to have solved the problem in India to a considerable extent, western countries such as the United States are currently beset with the problem of teenage pregnancies.

The evil of dowry which is so prevalent amongst certain Hindu communities today is conspicuous by its absence in the entire range of authoritative religious literature of Hindus. Scholars¹¹⁴ have shown that dowry amongst Hindus started as a result of peculiar conditions created during the British rule in India, and that this practice is actually attested quite well in medieval Europe. In lieu of dowry however, brides were gifted lavishly by her father and brothers upon her wedding. These gifts constituted her personal property not subject to use or control by her husband or her in-laws. Upon her death, it passed onto her daughters. A bride's or a wife's personal wealth was called '*stridhana*' or the woman's wealth. If the bride's father was no longer alive, her brothers were obliged to grant her a share of their own inheritance to create her *stridhana* and for her marriage.

The wedding ceremony involves the bride and the groom walking seven steps together. At the seventh step, the groom is made to declare that he chooses his wife as his lifelong friend. Another custom is to tie the hems of their garments together in a knot, and going around the sacred fire altar four times. The last of these four circumambulations, symbolizing salvation is lead by the bride. This indicates that the salvation of the husband (and the wife) is not possible without her involvement in procreation of children and in religious observances.



Bride leads the final circumambulation of the sacred altar to conclude the ritual

In an interesting custom seen in some parts of India, the bride says 'I do' after making the groom concede seven demands. These include things like the groom promising that as her husband, he will never interfere in her decisions relating to the management of their household, and that he will trust her discretion in the management of their household resources.

¹¹⁴ Such as Veena Talwar Oldenburg



Groom's family welcomes the bride

The bride is considered an embodiment of good-luck and auspiciousness and is welcomed by the groom's family. The Vedic verses express the hope that the bride will be regarded like an Empress by her in-laws.¹¹⁵

Woman as Wife: *'The wife indeed is the home'*¹¹⁶ says a Hindu text. The wife was considered one with her husband.¹¹⁷ A good wife was considered a gift of gods, whom the husband could never neglect or fail to support.¹¹⁸ For the happiness of the household, it was not sufficient for the husband alone to be pleased with his wife. The wife must also be pleased with her husband.¹¹⁹ The status of the wife and husband was not exactly equal however. While a disobedient wife could be discarded¹²⁰, the wife herself was exhorted to treat even a husband destitute of virtues as her Lord because such dedication itself could take her to heaven.¹²¹ She was exhorted to consider her husband alone as her honor and pride¹²² and seek her fulfillment within her home.¹²³ However, the texts also state that women can never be controlled by force, and only wives themselves can guard their own virtue.¹²⁴

In the worldview of classical Hindu texts, the wife was not a producer of wealth. Her sphere of activity was restricted to her home, and her family members. She did all the household chores, managed her husband's wealth, maintained her household possessions, brought up children, cooked food for the family, served her husband and took a leading role in fulfilling several domestic ritual observances. This was true for all traditional societies, and things are changing very fast in Hindu societies today with more and more women exploring opportunities for self-fulfillment outside their homes with the support of their husbands and other family members. In fact, it was never true that women do not

¹¹⁵ Rigveda 10.85.46

¹¹⁶ Rigveda 3.53.4

¹¹⁷ Manusmriti 9.45

¹¹⁸ Manusmriti 9.95

¹¹⁹ Manusmriti 3.60

¹²⁰ Manusmriti 9.83

¹²¹ Manusmriti 5.154

¹²² Shatapath Brahmana 2.6.2.14

¹²³ Shatapath Brahmana 3.3.1.10

¹²⁴ Manusmriti 9.12

produce wealth. Since times immemorial, Hindu women have worked in the fields, as artisans and so on.



Women planting paddy

Savitri: So esteemed was a devoted wife that she was considered to have the power to ensure her husband's welfare even after his death¹²⁵. Hindu tradition reveres the story of Princess Savitri who was so learned that her father was unable to find a match of her. She met a humble student in one of her sojourns and expressed her desire to marry him, against her parents' wishes, although it was prophesied to her that he would die within one year of their marriage. After their marriage, when that day came, she showed great courage and wit in snatching back the soul of her husband from the Messenger of Death, and they lived a long life together happily thereafter. Far from being a meek, docile woman, Savitri was a strong-willed, educated and a powerful woman who defied death, and who married the man she loved.

Sukanyaa: In another tale, the beautiful Princess Sukanya accidentally blinds the old Sage Chyavan. To make amends, she marries him. The handsome divine twins and celestial physicians namely Ashwin Kumars approached her and asked her to forsake her husband and instead marry one of them. But Sukanya remarked that she would never leave her husband as long as he lives¹²⁶. Pleased with her love for her husband, the celestial physicians restored Sage Chyavan's sight and transformed him into a handsome young man.

The loyal husband: Likewise, Hindu scriptures also have several other sacred stories that show the devotion of husbands towards their wives. When due to some objections from his subjects King Rama had to forsake Devi Sita, his wife, he did not remarry. The deep affection and love that Lord Shiva has for his wife Parvati is the subject of numerous Sanskrit works. Even today, Hindu maidens aspiring for a good husband fast for 16 consecutive Mondays, the day considered holy by Shaivite Hindus.

¹²⁵ Conversely, society also unfairly blamed her if she became a widow due to her husband's premature death. Unfortunately, women often turned out to be the worst oppressors of such grieving widows.

¹²⁶ Madhyandina Shatapath Brahmana 4.1.5.9

Hindu texts say that the wife is prosperity of the home personified¹²⁷ and is to be considered fit for worship.¹²⁸ The Vedas consider the wife as auspicious¹²⁹, the most auspicious one¹³⁰. She is the light of the home, the harbinger of many blessings, and worthy of great honor.¹³¹ The Mahabharata says the wife is her husband's best friend. Even in a deep forest, she is like refreshment and solace to her husband. Whenever men are afflicted with sorrow or are in physical pain, the presence of wives serves to alleviate their suffering just as a perspiring person feels refreshed after a cool bath. Dharma, acquisition of wealth and pleasure are all dependent on one's wife. Therefore, even in anger, husbands must never do anything that is disagreeable to their wives.¹³²

A man becomes eligible to perform Vedic rituals only after he marries¹³³. The husband and wife are exhorted to perform their religious ceremonies as a pair.¹³⁴ If the husband is married, he cannot perform Vedic ceremonies without his wife.¹³⁵ During religious ceremonies, the wife holds the hand of her husband whenever he pours the oblation into the sacred altar, signifying that the ritual is performed jointly by them.



Bride and Groom light the sacred altar together

Men and women form complement each other, just like heaven and earth, lyric and melody¹³⁶. They are equal partners in married life. Sage Agastya tells his wife Lopamudra – *“In this world, we will overcome all adversities if we two exert ourselves together.”*¹³⁷ Soon after her wedding, the wife is requested to address a religious gathering or

¹²⁷ Taittiriya Brahmana 2.9.4.7; Manusmriti 9.26

¹²⁸ Mahabharata V.38.11

¹²⁹ Rigveda 3.53.6

¹³⁰ Rigveda 10.85.37

¹³¹ Manusmriti 9.26

¹³² Mahabharata I.74

¹³³ Maadhaviya Shankaradigvijaya 2.14

¹³⁴ Rigveda 8.31.5-9; See Shabarswami's commentary on Purvamimamsa Sutra 6.9.17; Siddhantakaumudi on Ashtadhyayi 4.1.33 etc.

¹³⁵ Taittiriya Brahmana 2.2.2.6

¹³⁶ Atharvaveda 14.2.71

¹³⁷ Rigveda 1.179.3

assembly.¹³⁸ For a husband, his wife is his own half¹³⁹ and is therefore called *ardhaangini* ('half of oneself'). She was a comrade in life (*sahachari*), an equal participant in performance of and in reaping fruits of good deeds (*sahadharmini*).



Bride says to Groom: 'I shall be your comrade all my life'

There is no greater sorrow than to see the death of one's sons and one's wife.¹⁴⁰ The wife is dearer than one's own life, she is to be treasured like one's mother, and respected as an elder sister.¹⁴¹



Groom says to bride: 'I unite my heart with yours'

The very essence of married life is stated in the following words – “Faithfulness to each other must be observed till death – this is the essence of the Supreme Law that must be followed by the

¹³⁸ Rigveda 10.85.26-27

¹³⁹ Taittiriya Brahmana 3.3.3.5

¹⁴⁰ Mahabharata III.193.19

¹⁴¹ Mahabharata IV.3.13

husband and wife. After completing the marriage rites, they should exert with all their might to avoid being unfaithful to each other, and to avoid splitting from each other.”¹⁴²

Woman as Widow: The Vedic texts¹⁴³ indicate that widow remarriage was allowed. The Dharmasutras appended to various Vedic schools also permit widow remarriage.¹⁴⁴ This general permission for remarriage of widows was maintained in some texts of classical Hinduism¹⁴⁵. In certain cases, if the husband went abroad for longer than a particular period of time, the woman was permitted to remarry as well.¹⁴⁶ In general however, the status of widows declined steeply when the texts of classical Hinduism were formulated. As a result, remarriage of widows was highly frowned upon¹⁴⁷ and the ideal widow was expected to live a life of piety, austerity and self-abnegation.¹⁴⁸ Likewise, a widower was excluded from the sacred ritual but could remarry in order to enter normal life, or he could chose to live celibate. No stigma was attached to the remarriage of a widower.



A widow performing worship

Clearly however, widow remarriages continued to occur in historic India, and are mentioned in Dharmashastra texts themselves.¹⁴⁹ One may cite several examples of widow remarriages from ancient India. In the Harivamsha Purana, Ugrayudha proposes to Satyavati, the widow of Shantanu, indicating that it was not taboo to marry a widow. Ajuna married Uloopi, the widowed daughter of the Naga king, and even had a son by her. The Jataka tales narrate some other instances of men marrying widows in the Hindu society in the pre-Buddhist period. Emperor Chandragupta II in the 4th century CE married the Dhruvadevi, the widow of his elder brother. Vira Hammira of Chittor married the widowed daughter of Maldeo and their son Kshetrasimha succeeded him to the throne of Udaipur¹⁵⁰. Remarriage of widow was generally recommended with her younger brother in law, though there does not seem to be an absolute restriction in this regard.

¹⁴² Manusmriti 9.101-102

¹⁴³ E.g., Atharavaveda 9.5.27; Rigveda 10.40.2

¹⁴⁴ Baudhayana Dharmasutra 4.1.16; Vasishtha Dharmasutra 17.19-20 etc.

¹⁴⁵ Parashara Smriti 4.30; Garuda Purana 107.28; Agni Purana 154.5

¹⁴⁶ Manusmriti 9.76

¹⁴⁷ Manusmriti 5.158; 5.162; Apastamba Dharmasutra 2.6.13-14

¹⁴⁸ Manusmriti 5.156-157

¹⁴⁹ Manusmriti 9.175

¹⁵⁰ N K Dutt, "Widow in Ancient India", in *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, vol. XIV.4 (December 1938), pp. 661-679

Such examples were not commonplace though and a life of celibacy was generally recommended for widows.

Widows were often considered useless members of the household, and too inauspicious for invitation to celebrations. In some cases where the bride was widowed at a very young age, she had to spend the long remainder of her life in misery and sorrow¹⁵¹. In actual practice however, numerous Hindu communities such as Jats practiced widow remarriage (the custom was called ‘karewa’) down to modern times. Currently, the stigma against widow remarriages is vanishing fast especially in large cities in India. It is preferred by family members that the widow remarries a widower, though there is no such compulsion.

There are mixed injunctions on the inheritance rights for widows. Some Hindu texts contain the world’s oldest injunctions on the right of inheritance of a widow, while other Hindu texts state that a widow with a grown up son will be provided for by him from his father’s inheritance.

Sati: In the past, the Hindu wife who had been her husband’s comrade and companion when he lived, also often chose to accompany him to death by immolating herself on his funeral pyre. This custom, called Sati¹⁵², is conspicuous by its absence in the Vedic texts. The oldest mentions of this practice do not attach any special merit to it, but merely list it as an alternative for widows¹⁵³, the other options being remarriage or living as a widow. Even Manusmriti is silent about it, but later texts such as several Puranas and law-digests (*dharmaśāstras*) glorify it. Several poets (such as Bana Bhatta), law-digest writers (such as Medhatithi who authored the oldest extant complete commentary of Manusmriti, and Devanabhatta) condemned the practice, which seems to have remained largely confined to the very elite sections of ruling Hindu classes in India. The Peshwa, Hindu Maratha rulers, tried to ban it but without success.

The word ‘Sati’ literally means a truthful woman. According to the Shiva Purana, Sati, herself an incarnation of Shakti, was the wife of Lord Shiva. Anguished by the insult of her husband or her own father, she immolated her own body in full public view by the strength of her inner Yogic powers. Shiva was very aggrieved upon her death, and the text says that he carried her remains and roamed around in grief all over the Universe for a long time before the gods intervened. In course of time (or rather mainly after the British started ruling India), the word ‘Sati’ was itself applied to the practice of women immolating themselves at their husband’s pyre. There is no evidence that the story of Sati and Shiva had anything to do with the practice. Several accounts left by foreign travelers indicated that these self-immolations were not forced or induced, nor was there any

¹⁵¹ The situation was particularly alarming in Bengal in the 19th century, where certain ‘high’ Brahmin families extensively practiced polygamy and married girls to much older grooms. So pitiable was the condition of women in some sections of the Hindu society in the 19th century that the Hindu reformer Dayanand Sarasvati (1824-1883) lamented – “The extremely distressful state of India is due to the curse of (oppressed) widows and Sudras.”

¹⁵² This term with the meaning attached to it currently itself is a colonial invention. Older texts mention it by other names such as *anumarana*, *sahagamana* etc.

¹⁵³ Vishnudharmasutra 25.14

compulsion¹⁵⁴ for the widow to commit suicide. Rather, they note that they were done by devoted wives who were very resolute in their decision, and could not bear to live apart from their husbands. The Puranas saluted the loyalty of these women by attributing them powers to elevate their husband and several other family members to Heaven for long periods of time. The sites of these self-immolations were commemorated by construction Sati Mata temples, indicating that such women were credited with super-natural powers by ordinary Hindus¹⁵⁵. Considering this context, it is unfair to insult the memory of these pious women by alleging that all such self-immolations were done by widows under duress or always with some ulterior motive (such as the greed of living in Heaven). Cases of forced Sati may have surely occurred, and it is perfectly legitimate to argue within the paradigms of Hindu philosophy that such a self-immolation is futile because the fruits of the karma of one person cannot be transferred to another (husband or anyone else), or that the Hindu texts preach the performance of karma without motive of rewards such as Heaven. This is what social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy did, in arguing with some Pandits who supported the practice. The British finally banned it, without eliciting any significant whimper of protest from Hindus (showing that Hindus themselves were keen to stop it) and now it is a thing of the past. An event or two of Sati still occurs in India once every 20 years or so, and generates a slew of ‘scholarly’ publications written in journalistic and sensationalist tones, and reams of ‘research papers’ by arm-chair scholars. But the custom must be considered rare in the context of pre-modern Hinduism (with very little scriptural backing), and defunct in modern times.

The Woman as a Woman: Of Panegyrics and Caricatures –

The texts of all religions are largely male oriented and so is the case with Hindu Dharma although our Dharma does have a very strong feminine component as a part of its very core. It is natural then that Hindu texts make some judgmental remarks concerning women. These remarks are sometimes blanket negative characterizations, or blanket positive characterizations, or they are balanced and nuanced statements that do not stereotype women.

Many of these negative statements are actually found in texts meant for celibate male renunciates or monks for whom sexual temptations are taboo and attraction towards women is considered a hindrance in their spiritual path. Conversely, the feminine spiritual traditions in Hindu Dharma tend to sublimate sexual desires by perceiving the entire ‘mankind’ as feminine. For instance, it is said that once Sant Meerabai went to visit Sant Tulasidas (who had become a celibate Hindu monk by then) but was stopped by his disciples with the plea that their Guru does not meet women. She replied – “How can that be so because I thought that all human beings are women, and God is the only Purusha (Male).” When Sant Tulasidas heard her response, he invited her himself with great respect, realizing that a great devotee of God was at his doorstep. Similar stories are narrated with regard to other lady Sants such as Lalleshvari and others as well. The

¹⁵⁴ Ram Kumar Chaube, *India as Told by the Muslims*, Prithivi Prakashan, Varanasi (1969), pp. 233-234

¹⁵⁵ It may be noted that upon the death of a King, several of his servants and retainers also sometimes committed suicide. For the accounts of foreigners on this practice see - Ashok Kumar Srivastava, *India as Described by the Arab Travellers*, Sahitya Sansar Prakashan, Gorakhpur (1967), pp. 42-43

Tantra texts often invert the patriarchal paradigm, and declare the woman to be superior to men.

Some of these negative statements actually yield a very different import when they are seen in their textual context. For instance, the following verse is often cited to say that Hinduism caricatures women –

*“With women there can be no lasting friendship,
their hearts are like the hearts of hyenas.”¹⁵⁶*

In reality, this statement was made by a woman herself, the celestial nymph Uruvashi, who wanted to spurn the advances of King Pururava. She tries all measures to shoo him away, and it is in this context that she makes this statement about women, so as to dissuade him in his overtures towards her. The hymn in question is called an ‘*aakhyaana*’ hymn or a hymn that contains a story-line with some dialogs and which was probably enacted in theatres in ancient India. Obviously, one would see melodramatic and theatrical remarks in these *aakhyaana* hymns.

Several negative statements on women however are clearly caricatures and negative stereotypes. For instance, some texts say that women like to indulge in meaningless conversations, and hanker after singers and dancers¹⁵⁷ (interestingly these stereotypes exist even today). Significantly, most of such stereotypical statements are often said to be the teachings of women themselves. For instance, Panchachuda, a celestial nymph tells Narada that women are the worst possible sinners, God created them full of vices, they are falsehood incarnates, they cannot control their senses and are obsessed with food, dresses, ornaments and drinks. Their love for their husbands is fickle, they hanker for other men and long for men who sing and dance¹⁵⁸. One wonders how much credence should be paid to Panchachuda, considering that she was a divine courtesan.

Hindus today disregard such silly remarks against women and many actually consider them as interpolations in our texts¹⁵⁹. It is likely that such caricatures promoted prejudices against women in real life, and the sooner we Hindus purge our texts of them, the better it will be.

On the other extreme, Hindu scriptures contain numerous eulogistic remarks on women. A passage in a text argues that ‘given the dependence of women on men for all deeds, they can never be blamed for any fault because it is men who force them to commit sin. It is men who seduce them and cause them to commit adultery. It is men who

¹⁵⁶ Rigveda 10.95.15

¹⁵⁷ Madhyandina Shatapath Brahmana 3.2.3.6; Yajurvedic Taittiriya Samhita 6.1.6.44; Yajurvedic Maitrayani Samhita 3.7.3

¹⁵⁸ Mahabharata XIII.30

¹⁵⁹ Such issues exist even in related traditions such as Sikhism. A part of the Dasham Granth, considered the composition of Guru Gobind Singh (the 10th spiritual master of Sikhs) is the Charitropaakhyaana which describes the various vices of women. Many Sikhs today consider this portion of the Dasham Granth as apocryphal.

though married, commit adultery with other women. Women must not be blamed for adultery, only men should be blamed for this sin. A man who neither takes care of his wife nor provides for her does not deserve to be called her husband or her provider'.¹⁶⁰ It is stated that unlike men, women never kill.¹⁶¹ In his encyclopedia (of Hindu branches of learning) named Brihatsamhita, Varahamihira devotes the 72nd chapter to the praise of women. He says that women are superior to men because all men are born from women, because women are more faithful to their spouses than men, and because women are more faithful in following Dharma. On the whole, if we ignore passages that eulogize women in their roles of mother and wife, passages caricaturing women predominate over eulogistic passages.

And finally, as stated above, many passages exhort us to take a balanced view and distinguish between different types of women. The chaste women are worthy of praise, while those who are not chaste are worthy of condemnation.¹⁶²

The Strength and Inspiration of Great Men:

It is said that behind every successful man, there is a powerful woman. This seems to be quite well-exemplified in the Hindu tradition. Numerous texts within the Hindu tradition have been named by male authors lovingly after their women family members. For instance, Vachaspati Mishra, a celebrated Hindu philosopher, named his magnum opus on Hindu spirituality (Vedanta) after his wife 'Bhaamati'. An ancient mathematician named his work on arithmetic and algebra after his daughter Lilavati. In this way, grateful Hindu scholars have perpetuated the memories of their loving wives, mothers, daughters and so on down the ages.

In the Mahabharata¹⁶³, Queen Kunti narrates the soul-stirring ancient sermon of Queen Vidula to her son, in order to boost the morale of her sons, the distraught Pandava brothers who had been deprived of their kingdom and livelihood by their cousins. The sermon contains memorable passages exhorting men to shun self-pity and a sense of defeat and instead rise to take charge of their own destiny. The narration obviously has its effect because the Pandava brothers soon prepare for the war.

It is said that Goswami Tulsidas (16th-17th century CE), one of the most prominent saint poets of Hindi, was very infatuated with his newly wedded wife. One day, she reminded him that if he were infatuated with Lord Ram in the same way, he would have attained salvation. The words transformed Tulsidas into a great saint and a devotee and he went on to author 12 beautiful devotional works in Hindi.

Jijaamata, the mother of Shivaji, inspired her son from his childhood with stories of great Hindu heroes, and motivated him to become a noble Hindu king who liberated parts of India from the tyrannical rule of the bigoted Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb in the

¹⁶⁰ Mahabharata XII.266

¹⁶¹ Shatapath Brahman 6.3.1.39

¹⁶² Brahmavaivarta Purana, Prakriti Khanda 16.61-67

¹⁶³ Mahabharata, Udyog Parva, chaps. 133-136

late 17th century. Today, she is revered as an inspirational figure in large parts of India along with her illustrious son.



Jijabai, the mother of Shivaji

A particularly touching instance in Hindu tradition is that of Haadi Rani. Newly married, her husband did not heed the call to arms against the enemies of his country. She had her head severed and sent to him on a platter, motivating him to forsake all fear of death and plunge headlong into battle.

Amongst some Hindu communities, notably the Rajputs, when the fall of their citadel or city to Islamic invaders became imminent, the Hindu women of the area committed suicide by mass immolation. This act of sacrifice was termed as *Jauhar*. As a result, shorn of all love ties to their families, the Hindu men-folk of area would rush out of their forts and attack the invaders with their full might and motivation without any fear of death. Such instances of *Jauhar* happened because the Muslim invaders would molest and rape captured Hindu women after victory¹⁶⁴ and therefore Hindu women often preferred death to dishonor and indignity of concubinage. One such instance of *Jauhar* by Rani Padmavati and 700 other maidens of the fort of Chittor before its imminent fall to the invading Muslim Emperor Allauddin Khilji is the subject of a Hindi epic named *Padmaavat* authored by a Muslim poet Malik Muhammad Jaayasi.

More than a thousand years ago, the Buddhist queen of a Hindu Pandyan Ruler of southern India was so disturbed by reports of massacres committed by the army of her husband in a neighboring enemy kingdom that she committed suicide as a way to protest and to impel her husband to shun the path of bloodshed.

It is said that it was the mother of the famous monk Yadavaprakash who motivated him to shun his pride and become a disciple of Ramanuja (who had been his own disciple but had become a renowned spiritual teacher).

Little wonder then that according to Hindu texts, the wife gets half the fruit of her husband's good karma.

¹⁶⁴ In a particularly large-scale instance, some 24,000 women of the Hindu kingdom of Jaisalmer committed mass-suicide just before it was sacked by Muslims in 1295 CE, to avoid falling into their hands. See – Enrica Garzilli, "First Greek and Latin Documents on Sahagamana and Some Connected Problems (Part I)", in *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 40: 205-243 (1997), endnote no. 2

Transforming Hindu Women into Shakti

It is clear from the overview on Hindu women above that in our Dharma, the woman is not merely an adjunct or an associate of men. She is not just that 'extra rib', or merely a 'field that is watered by her husband'. She and her male partner actually form a pair together, or rather, the husband and wife form one whole.

However, social mores have prevented many Hindu women from realizing their full potential. In the Hindu society, women have been often subjugated in their various roles. Evil customs such as prevention of widow remarriage, infatuation with having male progeny and so on has added to the misery of millions of Hindu women. Hindu men should be grateful to our women for holding onto our Dharma steadfastly in the face of such an adverse situation. We would do well to remember the following words from our texts -

Fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law who desire their own good must honor and adorn their women. Gods are pleased only where women are venerated. And where women are not venerated, all the sacred rituals are futile. A family whose women live in sorrow soon perishes. The family whose women are happy always prospers. A household whose unhappy women members curse soon perishes completely.

Manusmriti 3.55-58¹⁶⁵

Five centuries ago, Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru¹⁶⁶ proclaimed –

*“Man takes birth from woman. Within woman does the creature’s body grow.
To a woman does a man get engaged and married. Through her are established blood relations.
The cycle of births in this world is sustained by women.
When a wife dies, the desolate husband seeks another.
Indeed, through women alone are all social connections maintained.
Therefore, why call that woman inferior, from whom great emperors are born?
A woman is born only from another woman (and never from a man).
None in this Universe can take birth without a woman.
Nanak says – Only the Eternal Lord is never born from a woman.”*

These words above are of eternal relevance. Whenever given a chance, Hindu women have shown their mettle in all arenas of life, overcoming numerous social stigmas and religious prejudices by their internal and innate Divine Shakti.

We cannot make the Divine Mother into a Male God, because no man or woman can change the eternal nature of the Supreme Being. But we can surely be more truthful to the Divine Mother by taking steps to ensure that our women, who are Her earthly manifestations, become Her reflections in the true sense – in all Her Beauty, Power, Wisdom, Spirituality, Learning and Freedom. The beatific smile that graces the face of Devi, must adorn the faces of all our women. Otherwise our prayers to the Devi will remain mere lip-movement.

¹⁶⁵ cf. Mahabharata XIII.46

¹⁶⁶ Today, Sikhism is considered a separate religion although Hindus consider the Sikh Gurus very much a part of our Dharmic tradition.

Brahman, the Supreme Being, has already shown us the way by manifesting as the Divine Mother on numerous occasions. ‘He’ has often bypassed men to honor his women devotees. Hindu revelations, theology, ritual and philosophy have by and large created and protected adequate ‘feminine space’. All women and men are manifestations of God, and all are born from God¹⁶⁷. Not just men, but women as well were created in the image of Supreme Being. *Ardhnaariishvara*, our Lord or Lady is half feminine. Therefore, how can we Hindus venerate Her one half and bear contempt towards His other half? We pray to Devi that the social status of Hindu women will continue to improve in future through internal reforms in the Hindu society. May the Divine Mother guide us in the right direction!

***Om kalyaanaaya vidmahe kanyakumaari dhiimahi |
tanno durgah prachodayaat ||***¹⁶⁸

Inspirations: Numerous websites and books have been consulted for this brief compilation, but the following deserve a special mention:

1. *A Tribute to Hinduism*: A beautiful website set up by Sushama Londhe, a Hindu woman, as a labor of love. Visit <http://www.tributetohinduism.com>
2. The following website of *Dakshina Kannada Philately and Numismatic Association* provided several pictures of postage stamps used in this compilation: http://www.geocities.com/dakshina_kan_pa/art31/women1.htm



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¹⁶⁷ Atharvaveda (Paippalada) Samhita 8.9.11

¹⁶⁸ Durga Gayatri mantra, Taittiriya Aranyaka 1.33