

LECTURE # 3

WOMEN IN INDIA

The oldest written scriptures come from India with the Rig-Veda being written from about 1400-1200 BCE.

by the turn of the 21st Cent. there will be about 1 billion people in India.

Hinduism is a blanket word for many different belief systems all of which look at the Vedas as sacred

there is no central concept of God, no founder or sole prophet, no single authoritative scripture, no universal set of dogmas, no uniform moral code.

the word Dharma or duty is most often used to denote religion and is practically coextensive with Indian life.

Hinduism is both extremely tolerant and it countenances both primitive archaic beliefs and highly developed philosophical systems.

NO — I will attempt to trace how Hinduism and Indian Buddhism, its major heterodoxy, regarded and shaped Indian women thru the centuries, as well as deal with the village goddess which pre-dates the coming of the Indo-Europeans and still shows the old worship of the Great Mother.

Early Indian Religion

Early Indian Religion appears to be an eclectic mixture of the Harappans, who flourished in the Indus Valley from 4000 to about 2000 BCE, and of the Aryans, who invaded the Indus valley

from the northwest between 2000 and 1500 BCE.

the only indisputable fact is that developed Hinduism exhibits dependencies on both these early sources.

since the Harrapans left no literature, knowledge of their religion is inferred from figurines, seals, and the like which archeologists have excavated.

These suggest a central interest in fertility--in the worship of a Proto-Shiva (a three faced god, in yogic posture, with penis erectus, surrounded by animals) and a Mother goddess.

the ascetic concentration on Shiva as the divinity of life-force (his symbol is the linga, or male member) and the veneration of feminine power that characterizes later India, are probably both latent in Hindu Harrapan ancestry.

The Harrapans were quite female-oriented, for the Indus valley was settled and agricultural while the incoming Aryans were pastoral and nomadic and warlike, and definitely not as civilized.

The Harrapan strain gives Hinduism its long absorption with divine "mothers". this term first implied village guardians--female spirits invoked for protection.

they have been worshiped mainly by the common folk, and are somewhat "negative", concerned more with warding off evil than with securing good.

The female dieties of later Hinduism are frequently negative, while in the Aryan charm book called the Atharva-Veda, they are normally associated with disease and disasters.

Many of the Harrapan goddess were single and in no way tied to

a controlling male. with the Aryan invasion in Northern India, the goddess were given as consorts or wives to the various gods as the idea was that a woman must be controlled by a male or she is dangerous.

The belief that this power is potentially destructive when unrestrained, ie, not under male control, is reflected in the popular myth of the goddess Kali performing her famous victory dance after killing a giant demon. In a bloody rampage she kills and destroys everything in her path. Even the Gods are unable to stop her. When Shiva, her husband, is sent to restrain her, he lies down at her feet and is finally recognized by his wife who ceases her rampage. Thus, when her husband regains control over her, the earth is saved.

The benevolent goddesses in Hinduism are those who are married and who have transferred control of their sexuality to their husbands.

they become benevolent beings and the male becomes the dominant member of the pair.

transferred to the human sphere, this means that the dangerous force of the female is best contained within the social institution of marriage.

in other words, this power is seen as creative and benevolent only when it conjoins harmoniously with the male. separate from the male, it is dangerous and malevolent.

however, in early India there are many goddess who do not need

male control. these appear in the early Vedas and are from the Harappan tradition

for instance, Saramya "she who runs" she rushes into creation as untamed creative will. she is a model for human life. as mother of both Death and the Asvins (twin saviors born to heal humankind's ills), she both causes problems and creates solutions.

then there is Sarama, who outwits the demons that stole away light and reestablishes cosmic order.

the goddess appears as Saravati, the daughter of lightning and voice of thunder, who grants humans flashes of insight.

Aditi, boundless Mother of All. As boundless she is androgynous: mother, father, son, all gods, being, non-being, whatever is or will be born.

she is also mother of skill--particularly ritual skill needed for perfect spells and sacrifices.

Vak was the goddess who controlled all speech. she conceived the creator and gave birth without male help. she was the parthenogenic, womblike source of cosmic order, the godhead, the author, thru revelation to seers and sages, of the Vedas--the eternal word.

Evidence seems to indicate that the Vedic period itself was a time of comparative freedom for women. At least, vedic women were accorded higher status than their sisters of later periods, though scholars are not clear precisely why.

on the other hand, it is argued that the Aryans brought the notion of benevolent female deities, which the Harappan myths of the dangerous female perhaps mottled.

at any rate, Vedic women apparently were fairly well educated and they seem to have taken part in religious rituals.

in some ceremonies, not only the Brahmin priest, but also his wife, had to be present (probably from a sense of androgynous wholeness).

Vedic women had rituals of their own and the Upanishads record female philosophers such as Gargi Vacaknavi, whose penetrating questions upset the sage Yaj' na va l Kya Yajnavalkya.

several vedic hymns are credited to women, and some lists of scholars, poets, and teachers include feminine names.

it is true that Vedic women were dependent on their fathers, husbands or eldest sons, but they had property rights qualifying this dependence.

women of this period were able to hold money and pass it on to their daughters as well as travel freely, visit temples, attend festivals unchaperoned and associate with men which they could not do in later ages.

nevertheless, the Vedic woman's most honored role was that of the docile wife. In fact, this role predominated in the canonical literature over that of mother.

this no doubt lies in the ambiguity of the Mother Goddess that we noted. She is both fertile and good, evil and dangerous.

By the time of the Buddha (about 500 BCE) the woman had been molded to wifely subservience. the good wife was docile "half the man", source of his happiness, comfort and courage.

they could no longer study the Vedas and had no significant involvement in orthodox ritual.

between the earliest Vedas and the first codes of law (1400-100 BCE) Indian women's religious role steadily declined. a major reason for this was the lowering of the marriage age from 15 or so to 10 or even 5. This both removed the possibility of education, and consequently religious office, and fixed women's role to that of wife and mother.

There are two great epics in Indian literature, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata these both contributed to women's loss of prestige.

The Ramayana (written c. 400-200 BCE) is the story of how Rama won Sita in an archery contest. She went into exile with her husband and was then kidnapped by a demon. The monkey king Hanuman found and rescued her and she ended up being swallowed by the earth to prove her chastity to Rama.

she epitomized the ideal wife from the Aryan point of view.

The Mahabharata written from 400 BCE-400 CE) and the longest epic being about 4 times as long as the bible, says the vices and faults of women were so many that a man would find it inadequate even if he had a hundred tongues, lived for a hundred years and did nothing else but narrate all of them.

among all her vices her sensuality came in for the sharpest rebuke. Her propensity to seduce is stressed and she is compared to the gateway to hell.

she is accused of being lascivious, devoid of love for her husband and always tempting men.

NO her traits of inconsistency and fickleness are emphasized as the following excerpt reflects:

"through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands however carefully they are guarded in this world."
(Manu, IX; 15)

woman's power is to be restrained throughout her whole life:

"The father of a woman shall protect her in her infancy; the husband, in her youth; and her son, in her old age; in absence whereof the duty of maintaining her shall evolve upon his friends and relatives." (Garuda 95; Dutt, p. 27)

Manu even allows man to beat his wife if she dares disobey him.

These religious texts frightened women into submissiveness by very vividly describing the hell-like existence they would have to lead in a future life, if they dare disobey their fathers or husbands in this life.

"By violating her duty towards her husband a wife is disgraced in this world; after death she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases, (the punishment of her sin. .) (Manu, V 165)

To ritualize the attitude a woman should have towards her husband, her lord, it is suggested that the wife adore the big toe of her husband's right foot morning and evening, bathing it and offering it incense, and waving lights before it.

this dedication is to continue after the husband's death. Widow's in the classical Hindu scheme were prohibited from re-marrying. they were supposed to shun men and were conditioned to think they were the cause of their husbands' death.

she is a tragic figure forced to an ascetic life --sleeping on the ground, eating only one meal a day, going without honey, meat, wine or salt, using no ointments, perfumes or colored clothing.

by medieval times they even had to shave thier heads, and it was applied even to child brides whose marriage had not been consumated.

the young widow was thus a triple threat, husbandless, menstruating, and a useless potential jackal.

many women threw themselves on the husbands funeral pyre, and were encouraged to do so, but it only counted if it was from pure conjugal love.

In the Puranas scriptural support is lent to this. "The widow who burns herself in the same funeral pyre with her husband also goes to heaven."

the word 'Sati' means a chaste and virtuous wife. by doing this she earns 35,000,000 years of bliss for herself and her husband.

this practice has been outlawed in modern India but the weight of tradition is such that it and child marriage still occur, not to mention dowerys. These have also been outlawed but still occur meaning the birth of a girl is bad news to a poor man since the dowery demanded can be very large. some fathers even sell their bodies for use to raise the money.

On the other hand, marriage for a man is considered so important to make him morally, spiritually and psychologically complete

C that he is encouraged to marry almost immediately after the death of his wife.

marriage is absolutely essential to the spiritual salvation of woman. The Mahabharata tells the story of a woman who never married tho she was holy. She found she had to marry to attain heaven so married for one night.

during the Vedic period there is some mention of unmarried girls, but in succeeding ages marriage for all girls became a must.

marriage is obligatory so one can have children ie, sons, who can perform funeral obligations for their parents and ancestors. the raising and training of numerous children ensures the welfare of the souls of the parents in the other world.

although the marriage bond is regarded as permanent it is only so for women.

polygamous lives for men have received religious sanction.

a barren woman could be easily abandoned by her husband and a new wife could be legitimately brought in her place.

NO [an abandoned, childless wife must accept her fate if she dares to rebel she can be cast out permanently:]

"a wife who, being superseded, in anger departs from (her husband's house, must either be instantly confined or cast off in [the presence of the family. (Manu, 9.83)]

thus, the ideal wife is pictured in considerable detail in one of the Puranas:

She who speaks sweetly to her husband and is a clever manager of household affairs, is a true wife. She who is one in spirit with her lord, and devotes her whole self to his happiness, is his true wife. He whose wife decorates her person with sandal paste, and perfumes her body after her daily abutions, talks little and agreeably, partakes small quantities of food, is ever fond of him and is constantly engaged in doing acts of piety and virtue with a view to bring happiness and prosperity in the house, and is ever ready to yield to the procreative desires of her lord, is not a man, but the lord of heaven. (Garuda 108)

the role of wife and mother is the optimal, singular and essential role through which a woman fulfills herself.

Female Sexuality

Absolute control of the sexually active woman is maintained by imposing rigid restrictions on her from the moment she reaches puberty.

a menstruating, unmarried girl in a father's house is considered a heavy sin for him

therefore it is the duty of every father to marry off his daughter as soon as she reached puberty.

the religious texts say no menses should be wasted, for a woman is created in order that she may in turn create.

severe restrictions are placed on the unmarried girl and then she is under the fidelity to the husband.

a woman is entitled to sexual pleasure with her husband and it is his duty to satisfy her. in the Mahabharata one who does not know his wife carnally must suffer the pains of hell.

there are fixed periods for cohabitation and sexual union can only be had during these stipulated times.

relations are strictly forbidden during menses and a man who violates this is guilty of one of the seven sins whereby he forfeits his happiness or long life.

one must not have unconventional desires. whoever has "unnatural" intercourse with his wife incurs punishment for such.

unconventional cravings are considered a sign of the approaching dreadful end of the world.

lesbian love between girls is punished with a heavy fine and the stroke of the whip.

the married woman who stains a maid is at once shaved bald and with her two fingers cut off is led on an ass thru the city (Manu VIII)

similarly, homosexual perversion is a cause for loss of caste (Manu XI)

thus the most important norm guiding sexual relations between man and woman is that sexual pleasure should always be lawful and normal.

both men and women are enjoined to preserve virginity before marriage and to be faithful after marriage.

however, tho chastity is demanded from both woman and man, sexual lapses by men are tolerated while a woman who is unchaste is censured, given rigid penance, head shaved, unwholesome food, despicable clothing, public ridicule, and casting out from the house and other such insults.

The birth of a daughter is a dark day. tho the great philosopher Shankara writes that while a bad son might be born, there could never be a bad mother.

Abstractly, motherhood was venerated.

concretely, the birth of a potential mother was not good news first this was a sign of bad karma, both of the parents and the child, since being born female meant you had messed up in a previous life.

second, as has been mentioned, it entailed the financial burden of a dowry, w/o which no daughter, up to this day, would be marriagable.

it is easy to see why a little female's arrival was often announced as "nothing was born."

Female biology and femaleness

The intrinsic biological differences between men and women are repeatedly mentioned in the religious texts.

female biological attributes are generally used to legitimise and justify male controle and domination.

the impure and dangerous woman is a well-known Hindu stereotype. thru their unique involvement relative to men in birth and menstrrution, women are reduced to impure states. consequently, they are regarded as unclean and dangerous beings who have to be avoided and protected.

the idea that a woman is impure when menstruating and when in

childbearing first finds expression in the Brahmanas (c 800 BCE).

later hindu laws reiterate this idea.

a menstruating woman must not be approached and whoever so offends must fast and eat melted butter for three days.

likewise, she is to be kept away from the ancestral sacrifice as one purana states, even her glance makes the person glanced at unclean.

food she touches must not be eaten.

in fact, she is to be shut away from human sight in a dark room.

a person who touches her becomes impure and untouchable and is purified only after a bath (Manu V, 85)

What she looks at the gods will not accept in sacrifice, and she must not lie in the neighbourhood of the ancestral offering or the forefathers will be unappeased for 13 years.

There is a myth that says the storm god, Indra, tortured by the murder of a brahman priest, unloaded a third of his guilt onto women.

women thus were burdened with a part of the sin; and this is seen month after month in the menstrual flow.

the same phenomena of blood flow is repeated at childbirth and therefore women are regarded as extremely sinful and impure during these periods.

Though at the onset of menstrual flow a woman is supposed to be

destructive and dangerous, in the period immediately following it she is seen as creative and regenerative (following her ritual bath). Similarly, tho the mother in confinement is considered as polluting, her milk is a most pure and life-giving substance.

in her very biology the woman is a contradiction. Because of this peculiar biology she is simultaneously devalued and elevated.

tho menstruation is looked upon as a polluting process, its onset in a girl's life is welcomed with great rejoicing.

this is often the occasion for great celebration. the celebration of the reproductive power of the woman.

It is the initiation of a girl into womanhood after a period of strict seclusion to ward off the evil spirits, the girl is decorated, given good food and lots of presents.

similarly, a pregnant woman too is protected and valued as a precious thing.

she is given the choicest food and enjoined not to eat pungent things for fear of subsequent harm to her suckling child.

thus, women's biological nature is seen as a dual thing, polluting and important at the same time.

the ideas concerning menstrual and postpartum pollution and consequent segregation may be looked upon as symbolic statements to associate women with dirt and impurity and thus establish her inferior status.

Read article →

~~thus male superiority is upheld; the biological function of a~~

India: Till Death Do Us Part

In April 1989, Shalini Malhotra, 20, a Delhi newlywed, was beaten and doused in whiskey and then set aflame. Four days later, after accusing her husband, she died of her burns. Women's rights organizations were quick to label it a "dowry death," the murder of a newlywed because she does not bring enough money to the marriage.

Before her death, Malhotra told authorities that her husband Praveen had been pressuring her family to give him money to start a business. Malhotra had resisted this request.

Her murder is cited as one of 110 such dowry deaths in Delhi last year, an alarming increase from the 17 reported in 1980. In recent years the an-

cient Hindu system of dowries and arranged marriages has taken on a gruesome commercial aspect. By custom, a bride's family is obliged to give cash and gifts to the groom in accord with his social standing. A lowly clerk, for instance, might command \$5,000, but a physician or engineer \$50,000. Fearful of the disgrace attached to unmarried women, a bride's family will often go beyond its means to secure a good home for a daughter. Such tribute can come in the form of television sets, refrigerators, VCRs or automobiles, and payments may stretch out for years. But when a bride's family has no avenues for raising money, a husband sometimes kills the woman, so that he is free to remarry and claim another dowry. Investigating police are usually more than willing to rule these inci-

dents suicides: less than 5% of such cases ever result in convictions.

Surprisingly, these men have

little trouble remarrying. "Girls are looked upon by their parents as burdens," says Gargi Chakravarty of the National Federation

of Indian Women, who links the rise in dowry deaths to increasing consumerism in Indian society. "Modernization has not changed general views on women, whose status remains low and devalued," she says. "But at the same time, consumerism has brought increasing greed. The dowry system has become a convenient way of fulfilling greed for luxury items."

Praveen Malhotra, who denies killing his wife, is out on bail. According to a prosecutor, he will almost certainly be acquitted. ■



JAIPUR WOMEN

Women and the Buddha

The Buddha Siddhartha Gautama was born in 563 BCE to the Kyshatira warrior class. He had a very comfortable life, a wife and son, which he left upon seeing some things that disturbed him.

after six years of trying various disciplines, enlightenment came when he realized that desire was the key to karmic entrapment. Only by giving up desire can one leave the suffering world of rebirth and redeath. and find fulfillment or Nirvana.

he gathered a group of disciples and preached his new insight. he preached to all, not just men as in Hindu thought, so had to deal with women's application to join the Sangha or monastic communities.

later monk-editors said the Buddha did open this monastic option for women reluctantly, but whatever the case, religious life was opened for women giving them an option beyond marriage and motherhood.

it meant a sort of career, and a chance for greater independence.

Buddhist women appear to have traveled freely to wherever the Buddha was preaching and were praised for their fidelity to dharma (duty) and their financial generosity.

There is a good analogy of this in Christianity where women did the same.

By offering an alternative to marriage, Buddhism inevitably gave

women more voice in their marriage decisions.

a Buddhist view of marriage approached seeing the spouses as equal.

the husband owed the wife respect, courtesy, faithfulness, relinquishing of authority and adornment.

the wife owed the husband duties well done, hospitality to their parents, faithfulness, watchfulness over his earnings, skill and industry.

for example, both the consent of husband and wife were needed for a child to enter a monastery.

further, married women could inherit and could manage their property w/o interference.

widows were not required or even expected to become recluses, and sati would have been abhorrent to a religion that condemned animal sacrifice, murder, and suicide.

Finally, Buddhist widows could enter the Sangha, where they might find very helpful religious companionship, or they could stay in the world, remarry, inherit, and manage their own affairs.

by the 2nd cent. BCE at the time of the canonical literature, this positive view of women began to abate. the likely source of this was seeing women as a dangerous temptation as male celibacy was becoming more common.

in the Jataka tales which were supposed to be about the Buddha's early lives, women are pictured as ugly, blind and wretched and shown betraying fathers, husbands, sons and

ascetics, who are pictured as noble, loyal and holy, because of their unruly sexual needs.

eventually, then, the Buddhist canonical literature came to mirror the Hindu. The good wife is totally submissive, uses only sweet words, honors all her husbands wishes, and obeys his every command.

in the Sangha nuns position fell so the youngest monk could order a woman around and only the monks could interpret Dharma.

it was believed women could reach nirvana but the common idea was that good works would merit one rebirth as a man.

the story circulated that the Buddha had never had the indignity of being born as a female. thus, women came to be primarily "no-men".

as hinduism ultimately stigmatized women as cosmic matter, so Buddhism finally stigmatized them as bondage, since it is by women we are reborn and the endless cycle of samsara continues.

one dialogue ascribed to the Buddha and his favourite disciple, ananda, shows this:

"How are we to conduct ourselves, Lord, with regard to womankind?"

"As not seeing them, Ananda."

"But if we should see them, what are we to do?"

"no talking, Ananda."

"But if they should speak to us, Lord, what are we to do?"

"Keep awake, Ananda."

By the 8th or 9th cent. C.E Buddhism had largely been absorbed by

Hinduism in India and its real life and influence are found in other lands, particularly Japan, Tibet, Laos, etc.

Mahayana Buddhism

began about 200 years after the Buddha's death and most buddhists today are of one of the various schools of Mahayana Buddhism.

in Mahayana Buddhism, Wisdom is seen as feminine or lady wisdom (prajnaparamita).

this more liberal school believed one could achieve enlightenment from anything since all things will show their emptiness.

Wisdom, therefore, sees a oneness in all reality and goes beyond divisions of "this world" and "the next world".

Lady wisdom is the personification of the realization that all things are one because **no** things are fully satisfying. ~~She follows this line of reason in using means.~~

the important thing is that wisdom is considered feminine.

wisdom is supremely compassionate, the buddhist equivalent of charity or religious love which motivates the Buddha or Bodhisattvas to labor for the salvation of all sentient beings.

unlike the Hindu mother goddess, lady wisdom is pure liberation without this dual aspect of creation and destruction.

one explanation is that in Hindu thought matter and spirit were split, while Mahayana Buddhism tended to keep them whole. matter and spirit are coordinated and codependent.

at the heart of its world-view, then, buddhism sought a holism

that reflected, in philosophical terms, the balance and respect for the feminine that the archaic religious mind expressed through androgyny.

the male equivalent was Upaya or skill in means, thus the union of wisdom with means is a union of intuition and action which is enlightenment.

In Tantra schools within Buddhism, women could become gurus, particularly in Tibet where Tantra is common.

however, this was not easy even within Buddhism.

in Hindu tantra women were usually just objects for the men's spiritual advancement while in Buddhism the two partners in sexual encounter were supposed to grow spiritually.

the Bhakti movements

both in Hinduism and Buddhism devotion to the gods or buddhas was the most common form of religious observance.

it is to bhakti's credit that women were accounted as eligible for salvation and that in some sects women were given the sacred thread (sign of rebirth) allowed to make pilgrimages and vows to their chosen deity, and encouraged to education.

one is saved in Hindu Bhakti by devotion and love for the god.

→ *Shaw clip from M. Woods Indra - @ 9 min.*

in Buddha Bhakti, one calls on the bodhisattva of choice and will be born in the next life into the paradise over which he rules and is guaranteed to reach nirvana in the next life.

the seeds of sexual equality are present in the bhakti movements, both hindu and buddhist.

in a land where ninety % of the marriages are still arranged, hundreds of millions of women continue to be told that they are worth the dowry price they can muster.

because of this, and the pressure of living with in-laws, female suicide is a major problem.

last, the poisonous effects of the dowry continue to foster the belief that the birth of a daughter is due to bad karma, which leads to a "benign" neglect of female children and a high rate of female infant mortality.

also, the desire for sons leads many Indian women into unwanted pregnancy.

Christianity has been a force helping to educate women in India, and for that matter educate all. It is responsible for thousands of hospitals, high schools and universities.

though only about 2% of the population, they have done much to help India and particularly women.

Modern India, thus, is in a crosscurrent of tradition and new aspirations.

A woman may attend the university, but still be expected to be a docile wife and bear many sons.

she may still face the dilemma of being the spouse of a Sannyasi or holy man--a householder who renounces all his possessions, including his wife, in order to pursue moksha.

when a man chooses this path he undergoes a ritual death and rebirth, taking a new name and shedding all his previous worldly ties and obligations. he is free. His wife is caught--is she his spouse or his widow?

often she is neither, for he may acknowledge no relationship to her at all.

since indian society is geared for home and family the devoted wife must face the anguish of either opposing her husband's pursuit or accept her own social and religious diminishment.

One partial solution is for the wife to also become a sannyasini which entails celibate co-habitation. this has been true of several eminent indian religious leaders.

this means that the ascetic wife receives the privilege of giving her husband great attention and care while he pursues his spiritual life.

Mahatma Gandhi did this w/o giving his wife Kasturba much say in the matter.

Ramakrishna the mystic theologian, married but never consummated it, tho he showed his wife great love and affection.

Whether the wife can become a sannyasi depends on the husband's good graces and since most often he does it to get rid of obligations, he will not allow his wife to accompany him.

on the whole, then, this sannyasi tradition remains an ultimate way for men to defect on their conjugal obligations, and an ultimate sign of women's inferior status.

Ramakrishna's influence on modern india makes his view of women a good case study to close with because of his ambivalence.

He warned that "women and gold" keep one from enlightenment, and since women are the main cause for desiring gold, they become samsara itself.

to talk with a woman at length was the same as carnal intercourse.

However, Ramakrishna's own life was dominated by the Great Goddess, to the point of obsession and seizure.

his major mystical experience was a vision of Kali, the Dark mother, and he underwent tantric initiation from a female guru.

when he prayed to Krishna he "became" a woman, dressing for six months in female clothing and imitating feminine gestures. some of his followers even claim he began to menstruate.

all this from a man who said that an ascetic enjoying contact with a woman is like a man swallowing the spittle he had expectorated.

Up to very recent times, then, woman-power in the abstract has been powerful and divine for India. In the concrete, it has been feared, despised, and regularly consigned to inferior human status.