

13. Two Images of Women in Hinduism

The status that has been accorded to woman in Hinduism ranges from one of equality and freedom to that of unjustifiable subservience. While at the philosophical level one finds a positive affirmation of womanhood, at the social level, it is highly ambivalent alternating between glorification and negation of it.

Women in Hindu Literature

From the philosophical standpoint the role of woman poses no problems as the spiritual equality of male and female principle is acknowledged. In the Upanishads one finds the idea of male and female as equal halves of one divine substance, each completing and fulfilling the other. Furthermore, the concept of the innate divinity of man and woman does not raise the question of equality but affirms it. The Atman¹ being the 'sexless self' calls for transcendence of sex which is symbolized in the relationship of Sri Ramakrishna and his wife Sarada Devi, which is one of spiritual union. From the ultimate philosophical point of view, the Divine is neither male nor female as it transcends both without negating it. The same principle applies to humankind, in the sense that sex cannot be seen as the determining factor in human relationships. To put it differently, each individual has worth because of the Atman or Self in her or him, regardless of sex, colour, race, class or creed. That one must love one's wife or husband for the sake of the Atman in her or him finds expression in the Upanishads:

"Verily, a husband is not dear, that you may love the husband; but that you may love the Self, therefore a husband is dear.

Verily, a wife is not dear, that you love the wife; but that you may love the Self, therefore a wife is dear²."

Hindu mythology is replete with examples of equality of man and woman. Shiva, the multifaceted god of the Hindu Triad, in one of his forms figures as half-man and half-woman, Ardhanari, and he is also worshipped in the form of a linga, a phallic symbol, in association with yoni, a female symbol - both symbolizing the equal validity of both the female and male principle. In fact the male deities are incomplete without their female counterparts who play an important and sometimes even dynamic role. In the Tantric tradition, the Supreme is conceived of in feminine categories, as Shakti or divine energy that sustains the universe. Kali, the Mother Goddess is depicted as dancing the death of destruction on the prostrate figure of her husband Shiva, and in the form of Durga, she is seen riding on a lion or tiger and slaying a buffalo-demon - both reflect the supremacy of the female principle over the male.

Hindu Epic literature is surfeit with images of chaste and devoted women such as Sita and Draupadi who are seen as models of ideal womanhood. Sita's identity as a woman has always been seen in terms of her loyalty and devotion to her husband. Her sense of individuality and identity comes through forcefully towards the end when she refuses to go through the test of purification (fire-ordeal) the second time, as a proof of her chastity. The first test shows her enormous capacity for endurance and the second, an affirmation of her selfhood/

womanhood. Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava brothers figures in the Mahabharata, as a dynamic and devoted wife who follows her husbands into the forest after all their wealth is lost in gambling. She offers them not only comfort but also rouses them to action when their spirits are low. Her refusal to yield to Duryodhana's command that she should serve as a servant in his household, as Yudhishtira had pledged her after he had lost all other possessions in gambling, shows her as a woman of courage and determination. Her wifely devotion does not prevent her from expressing her anger and disapproval of the behaviour of Yudhishtira. In both Sita and Draupadi one finds conformity to the tradition and yet at the same time a sense of individuality which hitherto has not been given due emphasis. Though they belong to the aristocratic class and see their roles in terms of giving rather than receiving, they do not fail to assert their identity when faced with a crisis, demanding recognition of the innate worth of a human being.

Women in Hindu Society

One discerns a pronounced sense of ambivalence reflected in the Hindu attitude to woman at the social level. The legal texts, The Dharmasutras express contradictory views concerning the role of woman. On the one hand, she is elevated to the status of a goddess, worshipped as Shakti, but on the other, she is lowered to a status that is dehumanizing. Manu³, the oldest of the Hindu law-givers is unfair to women:

"Where women are honoured there the gods are pleased⁴, but where they are not honoured, all rites are fruitless.

Day and night should women be kept by the males of their families in a state of dependence. If they attach themselves to sensual enjoyment, they must be kept under the husband's control ...⁵"

The freedom and equality that women (poets, philosophers, scholars, saints and seers) enjoyed during the Vedic period and later in the Bhakti period, stands in sharp contrast to the subservient position accorded to woman by Manu. His view that women are not capable of independence cannot be applied to the epic models either. A woman is seen as an object, having no importance whatsoever except in relation to her husband and her family which is one of dependence, loyalty and devotion to the husband even if he is lacking in these virtues.

*Their fathers must guard them in childhood,
their husbands in youth, their sons in old age.
A woman is never fit for independence⁶.*

*Though of bad conduct or debauched, or
even devoid of (good) qualities, a husband
must always be served like a god by a good wife⁷.*

As mother, a woman is more venerable than the teacher or the father - idealized and deified by men, but as wife she has no equal status with her husband. Furthermore, motherhood enhances her value as a woman, even more so, if she gives birth to a male child. This preference for a male child is rooted in the belief that only a son can perform that last funeral rites on the death of the father,

necessary for salvation. Such preferences are found in the scriptures where the birth of a son is valued but on the other hand, daughters in the Vedic period were initiated in Vedic studies and some of the Vedic sacrifices required the participation of both the man and woman without which they were not complete. They were not seen as a burden as neither marriage nor widowhood posed any problems. It was in the Smriti Purana period (500 BCE - CE 600) that one finds certain changes affecting woman. The initiation ceremonies for girls which were hitherto the practice slowly declined, giving less scope for intellectual and spiritual fulfilment. Other factors such as child marriage which became the custom about the beginning of the Christian era affected the education of girls. Since intermarriages were also disapproved, the prospect of finding suitable partners became a problem and with remarriage being no longer possible, widowhood posed problems for daughters and their families. It was further aggravated by the *Sati* custom which was beginning to affect women (about 5th CCE), causing a great deal of anxiety for both daughters and parents. The word *Sati* means a 'virtuous woman'. One does not 'commit Sati' but 'can only become a *Sati*, i.e. a virtuous one - sometimes by the fact of her immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband⁸. It is possible that this act which was symbolically performed by a widow during the Vedic period may have paved the way for the practice of Sati in later centuries⁹. Furthermore, the ideal of *pativrata*, devotion and fidelity to the husband was popularized and glorified by the Puranic writers to such an extent that woman's identity ceased to have any meaning except in relation to her husband - whether alive or dead. ore, It is also possible this ideal gave rise to and commended the practice of Sati¹⁰ which was not prevalent during the classical period.

A daughter is not looked upon as a permanent member of the family as she is given away in marriage as *dana* (worthy gift) to a suitable partner to be loved and respected. Since daughters were married at a young age during the Smriti period, parental choice and decision played an important part. The idea of gift does not suggest that the husband had the right of ownership over his wife, though the Hindu law-givers have accorded a subservient status to women. A son does not leave his parental home as he is the bearer of the family name and renewer of the race - he is the one who provides security for his parents in old age. The belief that sons alone can ensure the salvation of fathers has affected Hindu attitudes to women. The undesirability of a female child is perhaps based not so much on the hatred of sex as the anxiety to see daughters happily settled in marriage.

Marriage is seen as a sacramental act and the Hindu marriage rites emphasize the equality of man and woman but at the same time they include a prayer for a male offspring¹¹. It is not possible to speak of marriage in isolation as it is not simply a marriage of two individuals but of two families. An ideal Hindu marriage calls for companionship which involves compromise and adjustment, especially to a greater degree in an extended family. More often than not, women are expected to measure up to the standards set by men. Women have been led to believe that marriage and motherhood alone can confer on them dignity and recognition.

The role of women in Hinduism will have to be seen in relation to the family as her identity is defined in terms of it. The organization of the family itself imposes certain limitations, and where roles are more or less defined, there is less scope for individuality. The older members of the family, especially men, have greater freedom and authority whereas a woman's role is primary in some respects and secondary in certain other respects. She is seen as a worthy partner in the performance of religious duties, as an ideal mother, as the best guru and as the mistress of the house who is responsible for the well-being of the family. Some would see this more as a duty to the family than as a denial of freedom. A woman's freedom and authority is recognized when she becomes a mother and later a mother-in-law.

The woman in Hindu society today claims recognition as an individual, not so much as a rival to man as to be acknowledged for what she is. To phrase it differently, she sees affirmation of her individuality and identity not in opposition to man's, rather in relation to him - not to widen but to bridge the gulf between the two so that one complements the other. But how men see this is another matter altogether.

Notes

1 It is not woman, it is not man, nor is it neuter in N. Macnicol, *Hindu Scriptures*, Dent & Sons Ltd., London, 1959, p.218

2. Ibid., p.99

3. Manu's work, the *Manava Dharmasastra* or the Laws of Manu (probably attained its present form in the second or third century A.D.) deals with duties and rules pertaining to different classes of people, including the role of women. They have no general application today, though in some measure they reflect the social conditions of the age. The Hindu Law Codes have been reinterpreted and modified by later commentators to suit changing social needs.

See K.M. Pannikar, *Hindu Society at Cross Roads*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1961, pp.78-80.

4. J. Murdoch, *The Laws of Manu — Manava Dharma Sastra* (ET), CLS, London, 1898, p.51.

5. Ibid., p.52

6. Ibid., p.52

7. Ibid., p.53

8. Romila Thapar, *A History of India 1*, Penguin Books, 1986, p.152.

9. Ibid., p.41

10. K.M. Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India*, OUP, 1959 (Reprint), London, pp. 169-70.

11. 'Having taken seven steps with me, become my friends; .. May we walk together and take our resolves together ... You act in accordance with me so that we may attain a son...'

See *The Religion of the Hindus*, Kenneth, W. Morgan (ed.), Ronald Press, New York, 1953 p. 295.

V. Sharada

