

Hinduism: a dialectical feminist critique

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Despite its undeniably oppressive patriarchal tradition, Hinduism has always contained strongly 'subversive' feminine elements. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to illustrate that, notwithstanding their unwholesome origin, and the continuing detriment to women caused by this religion, these powerful expressions of femininity need not be abandoned, as they represent a unique and vital storehouse of feminine imagery, symbols and values, which may be distilled and utilised for supporting feminist causes and empowering Indian women in particular.

India is, and has been, a patriarchal society as far as can be established historically¹. India also is, and has been, a rigidly hierarchical society, in which power and material resources have been very unevenly distributed between different classes of people. As well as the existence of a religio-socio-economic hierarchy, (the varna scheme of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra) there is also a hierarchy of life stages. In this 'ashram' system of Brahmanical Hinduism there is an idealised division of the elite male life cycle into successive stages of student, householder, retiree and renunciant. These different periods of male life are valued according to judgements made about their contribution to the material and spiritual good of general society. Both of these hierarchies have been given divine sanction in sacred texts. The varna scheme was described in the earliest Vedic texts, while the ashram model was later appended to this, to form the 'varnashrama' model elaborated in the *Dharmashastras* of the Classical period (500 BCE- 500 CE). Women were affected by both axes of power, a situation that is reflected in the way the 'female' is represented and constructed in religious symbolism, imagery and mythology. Hinduism, in fact, has been and still is, the only major religious complex in which there is a widespread and influential veneration of feminine religious representations as goddesses or as the Goddess. There is, however, no simple correlation between the frequency and the centrality of sacred female imagery and the economic, political and social position of women. This can be attributed (in my own view) to the suppression, control of, and the assigning of a second class status to ordinary women. I will attempt to demonstrate, firstly through an historical account of worship of goddesses in India, and secondly through an analysis of structural elements in Indian society, the complexity of this issue.

In Vedic times (c1500- c500 BCE) it appears that worship of female deities was not widespread in Brahmanical society. While in the Sanskrit Vedic texts there are female deities sometimes depicted, (Ushas, Aditi, Ratri, Shri and Prithvi) they

remain somewhat shadowy and peripheral figures, far less significant than male deities, such as Indra, Varuna and Agni who were of central importance in ritual practice². At the same time, it appears that at least some elite women³ were able to receive initiation into Vedic study, act as priests, become scholars, seers and poets. Some Indian feminist writers have subsequently seen the Vedic period as a Golden Age for Indian women, the 'most beautiful, most blissful, most blessed age'⁴. Vedic women supposedly 'had absolutely equal rights with men in all respects, and were their equal partners, friends, helpers, all throughout'⁵. Because of this 'glorious past' Indian women did not need a 'narrow' suffragist movement to establish women's rights anew, but simply needed to achieve 'the restoration of rights which women enjoyed in the Vedic times'⁶. While women *did* enjoy a higher status in Vedic times than they would subsequently, it is still the case that in Vedism women were regarded as lower in the hierarchy of intrinsic potential than were men. That is, through ritual, men could realise a higher degree of human 'completeness', a higher level of ontological perfection, than was possible for women. This view of women was reflected in the injunctions of Vedic ritual texts, which allowed a very circumscribed involvement for females⁷.

By the time of the Classical period (c500 BCE- c 500 CE), the role of women in religious life was becoming more limited. There was also an ideological tension or ambivalence between the idea that women could potentially achieve enlightenment, and the belief that in reality they were unlikely to do so because of the 'weakness' of their womanly natures⁸. Within Hinduism, the influential Mimamsa school of Vedic exegesis reinterpreted Vedic texts to minimise the role of women. Injunctions given in masculine form were held not to include women, as they had done previously, but were considered to be applicable to males only. According to the Mimamsakas, women could never be initiated, could not own property (and so could not offer sacrifice), and should have a minimal joint responsibility within sacrifices performed by their husbands⁹. The 'Law-books' of Brahmanical Hinduism went even further. With their shift of emphasis from ritual and knowledge to conduct, the law-books emphasised right action in terms of a person's placement in the *varnashrama* scheme. For women, this meant a grouping with the *shudras* at the lowest levels of the socio-religious hierarchy. The various ashram stages of elite male life were considered inapplicable to women, whose duties were those of marriage and domestic activity¹⁰. According to the most influential of the law-books, the *Manusmriti*, women could never become ascetics, could not attain a heavenly future birth without their rendering of service to men, and could not study the Vedas or perform sacrificial rituals¹¹.

From around the fifth century of the Christian era, there rose to prominence the first textual account of the Ultimate Reality conceived as female, within the Devi Mahatmya of the *Markendeya Purana*. This work was the first comprehensive statement in Sanskrit about the Goddess and has continued to be influential in the development of Hinduism¹². It is widely agreed by scholars that the basic impulse

behind the worship of the Goddess is of non-Aryan, non-Sanskritic indigenous origin. In Indian culture there has for millennia been constant interplay between Aryan, Sanskritic and non-Aryan, non-Sanskritic cultural millieux. This interplay has involved a mutual borrowing from and interaction between the two traditions. It has also involved a universalisation of localised non-Sanskritic and Sanskritic elements as well as a parochialisation of both non-Sanskritic and Sanskritic concepts and symbols¹³. The Devi-Mahatmya provides an example of this process of cultural synthesis. The composition of this text reflected the growing popularity of the worship of female divinities in Hindu society, with the author of this work incorporating a variety of different Goddess traditions into a unique amalgam. The Goddess, Devi, emerges with a character that incorporates both maternal and fierce qualities, that is identified closely with the universe of matter, while at the same time offering liberation from the world. Although Devi is associated in the text with both Vishnu and Shiva, it is clear that the Goddess is supreme in her own right and does not require the help of any male god¹⁴. The fact that the Divine was conceived as feminine does not mean however, that human women were necessarily correspondingly elevated. Brahmanical orthodoxy still deprecated female nature and the position of ordinary women, while worshipping their divine feminine archetype.

During the medieval period (500 CE- 1500 CE), there arose religious movements centred on the devotional worship of various deities, especially Vishnu (particularly his avatars as Krishna and Rama) as well as Shiva and Devi. A outstanding feature of many of these Bhakti movements was the way in which they disregarded the caste restrictions and ritualism of Brahmanical Hinduism. Another important aspect of many of these movements was their conception of the devotee in female terms while the Deity was conceived as male. However, the appropriation of an idealised devotional female persona by male devotees often led, paradoxically, to the idea that only men could properly become (culturally-constructed) 'women', with actual women disadvantaged by their 'natural' femininity¹⁵. In theory, devotion to the Deity was available to all, whether women or those of low class. In practice, this egalitarianism was tempered in a number of ways. While women were eligible to attain liberation through devotion to the Deity, they were also expected to follow the accepted norms of social life which saw them relegated to a position inferior to that of men. It was also often felt that women were handicapped in their spiritual practice by a supposedly closer identification with the material world of physicality and relationships¹⁶.

Male 'structural' position within social and religious hierarchies profoundly affected the way women were viewed. The world renouncing *sannyasin* avoided women, seeing them as emblematic of *maya* (illusion); the seeker of high social status controlled female sexuality to attain prestige through the 'purity' of his womenfolk; the politically and economically ambitious honoured them as a source of *shakti* (female cosmic power); the low class male valued them for their economic, sexual and reproductive contributions to his life. In terms of a different, though

related, value system: for *moksha* (liberation), women were shunned by renouncers but embraced (both figuratively and literally) by Tantric ritual practitioners, for whom the female partner was indispensable for religious practice. For *dharma* ('religiosity'), women were worshipped when regarded as pure and despised when thought to be impure. For *artha* (worldly prosperity), they were honoured when fertile and rejected when barren. For *kama* (sensual gratification), they were valued when able to give satisfaction and thought valueless when unable to do so¹⁷.

It is possible also to demonstrate a socio-economic class basis to the way the divine feminine is constructed in the Indian religious tradition. Amongst elite socio-economic groups (those striving for elite status by adopting 'Brahmanical' or 'Sanskritic' religio-cultural norms) in Indian society there is a strong desire to control female sexuality in the interests of group and family prestige, leading to a loss of religious, economic and cultural freedom of expression for the community's women. The religious practices of elite groups usually required participants to possess a high degree of ritual purity. This was determined by a recognised and continuing membership of an appropriately high status socio-religious community, a situation that disadvantaged women. Their biological status, especially menstruation, as well as child-bearing, was held to make them ritually impure. Whereas biological impurity (through defecation, urination, perspiration, disease and sexual activity) also affected the ritual status of men, such impurity was considered to be of temporary duration and could usually be counteracted by bathing or other relatively simple purificatory rites. There were rituals performed exclusively by women, especially those related to marriage and children, with the suitability of any particular women to be involved determined by age and marital status. However, these functions, although regarded as necessary aspects of social existence, were deprecated within Brahmanical religious ideologies that emphasised the impermanence of worldly life and therefore the need to 'transcend' bodily existence and relationships¹⁸.

Amongst (usually) elite groups influenced by Brahmanical values there was a great ambiguity in regards to male attitudes to female sexuality. As the virginal child or fertile wife, whose sexuality was under the control of her husband or other male relatives, the self-sacrificing and faithful female was auspicious, able to bring prestige and prosperity to the family and community. The negative counterpart of this ideal, the female as (potentially or actually) threatening, dangerous and out of control, was represented by high caste widows, unmarried mothers, lazy or faithless wives, unmarried women past puberty or sexually active or low class women generally. In the process of socialisation typically undergone by young Hindu girls from elite status groups, they would be encouraged to emulate the submissive behaviour of certain traditional role models, while avoiding any behaviour that was deemed to challenge male authority¹⁹.

An important source for the inculcation of such 'appropriate' values was to be found in the symbolism and mythology of female divinity. As Parvati, Lakshmi, and the quasi-divine Sita, goddesses demonstrated the Brahmanical ideal of feminine

behaviour. When such goddesses were tamed by marriage to a male deity who kept their great energetic potential under control, they were considered highly auspicious²⁰. This pattern of male dominance and female submission was the normative model in Sanskrit Hinduism, on both divine and human levels, secularising the male/female hierarchy, among deities as well as gods. In the devotional hymns of Sri Vaishnavism, for example, Lakshmi is described as possessing 'the feminine qualities of tenderness, being submissive to your husband, mercy, patience...' ²¹ while throughout the *Ramayana* Sita repeatedly affirms her devotion to her husband Rama: "A wife wins the fate of her husband and not her own...Here and hereafter there is only a single goal for a woman: her lord (her husband), and not her father, her child, herself, her mother nor her friends"²².

The Sanskrit texts that formed the basis of Brahmanical Hinduism have in fact usually portrayed women negatively, even in works where a female divinity was being praised. There is often a stress on the need to control women²³, due to the supposed evils of the female character:

With women there can be no lasting friendship; hearts of hyenas are the hearts of women. (*Rig Veda*)

Through their passion for men, through their natural temper, through natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they are guarded in this world. (*Manusmriti*)

A woman is the embodiment of rashness and a mine of vices. She is hypocritical, recalcitrant and treacherous...she is an obstacle to the path of devotion, a hindrance to emancipation...she is practically a sorceress and represents vile desire. (*Brahma Vaivarta Purana*)²⁴

For falsehood, trickery, stupidity, rashness, excessive greediness, impurity, and cruelty are the faults that every woman is born with by her nature. (*Devi Bhagavat Purana*)²⁵

The goal of *moksha* (spiritual liberation from the material flow of existence) has stood as the highest form of spiritual aspiration for Brahmanical religion from Vedic times to the present. Where ideology especially emphasised male renunciation and world-denial, women were often presented as sexually dangerous, as temptresses and seducers of men:

It is the wine of women's love alone that can intoxicate the three worlds. Wine, only when drunk, produces intoxication- whereas a woman, simply being looked at may madden the senses of man, and enshroud his consciousness in the darkness of nescience. Hence a man should refrain from even beholding a woman, as she is wine to his eyes.(*Agni Purana*)²⁶

Her vagina is a hell-pot filled with mucus and urine, stinking and evil, bringing out the punishment of Yama (death). When a man enters into that vile vagina of women, he himself enters the Kaurava Hell in age after age. (*Brahma Vaivarta Purana*)²⁷

Although women could also become renouncers and ascetics, their position tended to be regarded as anomalous, with suspicion as to their motives quite common. Ascetic Hindu women were in fact often confused with widows, themselves an anomalous category in elite society. There was in fact no terminology that applied exclusively to female renouncers. (*Sadhvi*), the female counterpart to *sadhu* (the term used to designate a male ascetic) could also be applied to a pious housewife. Although Buddhism and Jainism had from the beginning provided monastic orders for women, there was really no Hindu equivalent²⁸.

Low status socio-economic groups who worshipped female divinities constructed a different understanding of symbolism and mythology to that of elite groups who had adopted Brahmanical values and ideals. While the Goddess in Brahmanical ideology was almost always subordinate to a male deity, low status groups more often represented female divinities without any, or with only an insignificant, male consort. Women often occupied a dominant position in these Goddess cults, acting as mediators between the human and divine realms²⁹. The goddesses' autonomy had a correspondence in the relative status, equality and independence of lower class females in relation to their menfolk, as compared to higher status women, a situation due, at least in part to the important economic contribution made by working women to their families³⁰. Amongst low status groups, there were not the same restrictions on, or negativity attributed to female sexuality as there was amongst groups for whom Brahminical ideology was normative³¹.

The greater sexual freedom of low status groups was also reflected in the practices of Tantrism, in which the body and the senses were viewed as the vehicles of salvation, utilised in a type of 'sexual yoga', rather than a source of bondage, as in Brahminical Hinduism. Women were considered to be the embodiment of an essential theological principle (as they participated in the nature and qualities of the Goddess) as well as being a necessary presence in ritual practices, acting as the natural gurus of men in their spiritual development³². Where Tantrism had been influenced by Brahminical ideals of femininity, women were correspondingly devalued³³.

The religious texts important to low status groups also presented a more positive image of women and femininity. In the Khedara Khanda of the *Skanda Purana*, for example, satire, parody and irony are used to subvert negative perceptions of womanhood. In this text, the 'natural', identified with the body and with women, is extolled over the 'cultural', identified as the realm of male control. The natural, especially the body, is also seen as the site or locus of the divinity³⁴. In many folk mythologies and folk Puranas also, as well as in many types of popular cultural forms enacted by mostly female performers, Sanskritic concepts were reworked and subverted to create pervasive mythologies of daily life. In these, the mundane

world is the theatre. for the unfolding of cosmically significant events, and in which male oppression and its accompanying ideologies are demystified and deconstructed to reveal a simple abuse of power, rather than a divinely sanctioned patriarchal social order³⁵. Tantric texts, in particular, presented an extremely positive, secularised view of womanhood that provided a dramatic contrast to orthodox Brahmanical works:

There is no jewel rarer than woman, no condition superior to that of a woman. There is not...any destiny to equal that of a woman; there is no kingdom, no wealth to be compared with a woman; there is not...any holy place like unto a woman. There is no prayer to equal a woman. There is not...any yoga to compare with a woman, no mystical formula nor asceticism to match a woman. There is not...any riches more valuable than women. (*Shaktisangama Tantra*)³⁶

Thus, the complex and even self-contradictory nature of the strands that comprise Hinduism allow for the possibility of a religious construction of women that is conducive to their social, economic and political autonomy. While there is no shortage of material that can be used to legitimate an inferior position for Hindu women, there are also resources available within Indian religious tradition for a more 'feminist' interpretation of Hinduism. Firstly, there is a sense in which the Deity in Hinduism is represented as fundamentally bisexual, androgynous or conceived in the form of a divine couple, rather than represented only in anthropomorphic male terms. This more balanced gender symbolism can be important in the imagining of a more egalitarian social structure. Also, where the Absolute is conceived in specifically female form, that is in terms of divine goddesses or the Goddess, sacred feminine characteristics are given their most complete expression. Ultimate Reality is represented as both powerfully and beautifully female. The Goddess is conceived as autonomous, omnipotent and erotic, giving birth to, maintaining and finally destroying the cosmos. Various forms of the goddesses are also engaged in a very broad range of culturally valued goals and activities that are not limited to those usually considered female and they therefore provide potential models for vastly wider public and private roles and a greatly expanded participation in them for women.

A 'woman-centered' reconstruction of femininity, rejecting the symbolic and mythological representations of 'androcentric' religion, has in fact been undertaken in India in recent years. Feminists have realised that religious imagery and representations of femaleness impact on women's self-perception to a very significant degree³⁷. Many Indian feminists were, therefore, inclined to abandon the cultural expressions of Hinduism as so fundamentally flawed, so inimical to the interests of women, that Indian religion itself was regarded as irredeemably problematic. There has been a growing conviction more recently however, that in fact, the construction of the religious representation of femininity needs to be wrested from its historical domination by men. Representations of femininity in Hinduism need to be revalorised and recreated in a way which is positive to women³⁸. By following this methodology,

the power of traditional Hindu imagery *can* and indeed *must* be harnessed to serve the long neglected needs and interests of long suffering Indian women.

Notes

1. There are claims that in prehistoric times pre-Vedic times worship of female divinity was widespread and reflected in a matrifocal social structure. See for example, Ajit Mookerjee, *Kali The Feminine Force*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988: 129-22.7
2. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, 'The Shifting Balance of Power in the Marriage of Siva and Parvati', in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, eds., *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddessess of India*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1982: 129-30.
3. See Kunkum Sagari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, Rutgers Uni. Press, New Jersey, 1990: 27-87.
4. Renuka Roy et.al., *Role and Status of Women in Indian Society*, Firma KLM, Calcutta, 1978: 10.
5. Ibid: 17.
6. Ibid: introduction, 1.
7. Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*, Oxford University Press, New Jersey, 1989: 82-93.; 155-7.
8. Julie Leslie, 'Essence and Existence: Women and Religion in Ancient Indian Texts', in Pat Holden, *Women's Religious Experience*, Croom Helm, London, 1983: 93-7
9. Ibid: 97-9.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid: 100-1.
12. A discussion of this text is found in, Thomas B. Coburn, *Devi-Mahatmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1988.
13. Ibid: 7-15.
14. David Kinsley, 'The Portrait of the Goddess in the Devi-mahatmya', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLVII/4: 500-1.
15. See, for example, John Stratton Hawley, 'Images of Gender in the Poetry of Krishna', in Caroline Bynum Walker, et. al., eds., *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1986: 231-56.
16. Leslie op cit: 102.
17. Michael Allen, 'The Hindu View of Women', in Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee, eds., *Women in India and Nepal*, ANU, Canberra, 1982: 1-20.
18. Catherine Thompson, 'Women. Fertility, and the Worship of Gods in a Hindu Village', in Pat Holden, op cit: 113-25.
19. Leela Dube, 'On the Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilinear India', *Economic and Political Weekly Review of Women's Studies*, April 30, 1988, WS 11 - WS 15.
20. See, Lynn E. Gatwood, *Devi and the Spouse Goddess: Women, Sexuality, and Marriage in India*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1985: 1.

21. Quoted in, Vasudha Narayanan, 'The Goddess Sn: Blossoming Lotus and Breast Jewel of Visnu', in Hawley and Wulff, op cit: 231.
22. Quoted in, Cornelia Dimmir, 'Sita: Fertility Goddess and Sakti', in Hawley and Wulff: 210
23. Epigraphic evidence suggests that male control was far from total - inscriptions reveal that women made independent grants to religious institutions. This indicates that, in practice, at least some women exercised a degree of autonomy, and had control over resources, in spite of scriptural injunctions to the contrary. Chakravarty and Roy, 'In Search of Our Past', 8.
24. Quoted in, Ranjana Kumari, 'Femaleness: The Hindu Perspective', in Jyotsna Chatterji, ed., *Religions and the Status of Women*, Uppal Publishing House, New Delhi, 1990: 6-7.
25. Quoted in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980: 160.
26. Kurnan, 'Femaleness': 7.
27. Quoted in Gatwood op cit
28. Catherine Clementin-Ojha, 'Outside the Norms: Women Ascetics in Hindu Society', *Economic and Political Weekly Review of Women's Studies*, April, 1988, WS 30- WS 36.
29. As in the cult of Santoshi Ma or Vaishno Devi. Kathleen M. Erndl, *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual and Symbol*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993.
30. For information on the wide range of occupations performed by women in south India, see Vijaya Ramaswamy, 'Aspects of Women and Work in Early South India', *The Indian Social and Economic History Revue*, 26, 1, 1989: 81-99.
31. See Frederique Apffel Marglin, 'Female Sexuality in the Hindu World', in Clarissa Atkinson, et. al., eds., *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, Crucible, London, 1987: 39-59.
32. See Aghhananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, Rider & Co, 1965
33. See June McDaniel, *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989: 71.
34. Wendy Doniger, ed., *Purana Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993: 67-80.
35. A.K. Ramanujan, 'On Folk Mythologies and Folk Puranas', in Doniger *ibid*: 101-20; Sumanta Banerjee, 'Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteen Century Bengal', in Sangan and Vaid: 127-79
36. Quoted in Mookerjee, *Kali: The Feminine Force*: 6