

Today's Lecture

- This Lecture: A comment about speed
- Concluding our study of Hinduism: Women and Hinduism

This Lecture

- I'm again covering a lot of material in lecture. For the sake of keeping up with the revised reading schedule I will only speak in any length on *select* slides and provide merely a passing comment on others (which are straightforward in their content).
- You have a handout offering a summary of the readings for this lecture and reflecting the slides you will see today.
- If you have any questions about this lecture or Vedanta, write them down and raise them on Tuesday of next week (before we leave Hinduism completely and begin Jainism).

Some cautionary comments

- The importance of covering the view of women proffered by the traditions we will be studying is, I think, self-evident. Too often religious studies of a given tradition fall short of describing the place of women, often treating the religious life of the devout male as generic for all within the relevant tradition. This is usually far from the truth (even in the so-called Western traditions). Koller's text is no different in its treatment of the traditions we will be studying.
- Don't be too quick to point the finger at any of the traditions we will be studying on this or any other issue involving human rights or equality rights. Remember the place of women in the Judaic, Christian or Islamic traditions is, in many of their conservative forms, *not equal* to that of men.

Some cautionary comments

- You need to ask yourself the question as we study women and x , where x is a tradition under discussion, is that traditional *essentially* sexist? That is, can we be recognizably x , and yet reject male supremacy?

Stridharma: The Position of Women in Hinduism

- There is a fundamental tension between the value accorded women within classical and traditional Hindu society and the distinction of women in myth and their role in various *Bhakti* movements (*Course Pack*, pp. 47, 48).
- A word of caution here. There is *no strong correlation between* the presence of feminine imagery or figures in a tradition's mythology or scriptures and a gender egalitarianism (see Young, "Hinduism", in *Women in World Religions* [SUNY press]).
- Indeed, despite the prevalence of worship of the Mother Goddess (e.g. *Devali*), Hindu women were/are not regarded as the spiritual, moral or intellectual equals of men (within, that is, a traditional Hindu framework) (see essays 7-9 in Falk and Gross' *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*, 3rd Edition [Wadsworth Thomson Learning]).

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Stridharma: Women as equals of men in early Vedic Religion

- Within the early Vedic tradition there is evidence that women enjoyed a great deal of equality with men. Women could receive an education in religious doctrine and practice, and could even devote themselves to study and teaching (*Course Pack*, pp. 47-48).
- The myths found in the *Rig Veda* contains a number of important female deities including Ushas and Vak.
- Remember that Devi is also a legitimate way of talking about *Saguna Brahman* (*Course Pack*, p. 48).

Stridharma: A growing net of restrictions

- With the emergence of schools for training priests (the period *roughly corresponding to* the emergence of the *Brahmanas*) women no longer received the religious education they enjoyed previously.
- You have the codification of strict rules (i.e. *Stridharma*) governing the behavior of women which reflects a particularly negative view of their ‘nature’. (Look back to the quotes from *Manusmriti* on your handout.) (*Course Pack*, pp. 48-49). Note that under *Manusmriti* the religious life or practice of the adult woman revolves around her relationship with her husband or son(s).
- Women, *within Patriarchal Hinduism*, are primarily concerned to conceive children (particularly sons) and to serve (and revere) their husbands.

Stridharma: A growing net of restrictions

- There are many rituals which women perform *within Patriarchal Hinduism* that concern procreation, the health and longevity of the husband (e.g. *habisha* rituals), and the health and longevity of brothers and sons (e.g. Brother as Second ritual) (see essays 7-9 in Falk and Gross' *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*. 3rd Edition [Wadsworth Thomson Learning]).

- Susan Wadley, in her study of rural Hindu women, observed that the women of her study participated in twenty rituals within a given year.
- “Of these twenty rituals ... three involve directly worshipping male relatives. In these rituals the male relative is actually the deity worshipped, and offerings are made directly to him. Four rituals involve the worshipping of a deity for the protection of a particular family member. Another four annual rituals are concerned with obtaining protection for one’s family in general. Nine more rituals seek household prosperity” (see Wadley, Susan. 2001. “Hindu Women’s Family and Household Rites in a North Indian Village”. In *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives*. 3rd Edition. Edited by N.A. Falk and R.M. Gross. Toronto: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, p.105).

Stridharma: A growing net of restrictions

- Three observations of note raised, though not especially emphasized, in this section, concern (i) *pardah*, (ii) the ritual pollution associated with menstrual or uterine blood and (iii) the suspicion surrounding women of child bearing age (see *Course Pack*, pp. 48-49).
- (i) *Purdah* is the seclusion or segregation of women from the community (primarily of males within the community). This takes various forms including restriction of movement (particularly among higher caste women of child bearing age), the separation of women and men during certain festive occasions or worship rituals, and veiling (*Course Pack*, p. 48).

- (ii) Ritual pollution is associated with women who are menstruating or who have recently given birth (*Course Pack*, p. 49).
- In both cases, a woman is as, or almost as, polluted as an outcast. This is significant. After all, if even the shadow of an outcast crosses you, you become unclean and require purification before performing any religious rituals.
- Though Kolstermaier mentions that women who are menstruating are only especially polluting for one day, and moderately polluting (though increasingly less so) for the two days succeeding the first (*Course Pack*, p. 49), a woman who has just given birth is especially ritually polluting for three days (in which she cannot have physical contact with anyone but a mid-wife), and moderately ritually polluting for *forty days* after the birth.

Stridharma: A growing net of restrictions

- For some documentation on this issue see Jacobson, Doranne. 2001. “Golden Handprints and Red-Painted Feet: Hindu Childbirth Rituals in Central India”. In *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives*. 3rd Edition. Edited by N.A. Falk and R.M. Gross. Toronto: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, pp.83-102.

Stridharma: A growing net of restrictions

- (iii) Lastly, there is the suspicion surrounding women of child bearing age. This suspicion shared by both men **AND** women seems particularly concerned with the purity of the family line, which must remain constant for the family to remain in the relevant caste (or class) (see *Course Pack*, p. 48).
- Do note, this suspicion, as I have just implied, is grounded in the view that women are untrustworthy in matters of sex and fidelity (*Course Pack*, p. 48).

Stridharma: The liberation of women in the Puranas

- The *Puranas*, which (if they are the principal eighteen *Puranas* or *Mahapuranas*) can be subsumed under the designation *Smriti*, contain stories of the Deities important to the Path of Loving Devotion (or *Bhaktimarga*), as well as “everything required for finding salvation” (*Course Pack*, p. 49).
- As these *Puranas* have, during their long history and increasing popularity in Hinduism, gradually become available to all practicing Hindus, irrespective of their gender or class/caste, women have gained access to a means of *moksha* independent of the duties contained in *stridharma* (*Course Pack*, p. 49).

Stridharma: The liberation of women in the Puranas

- In the practice of *Bhaktimarga*, the worship of the Mother Goddess has, from time to time, opened up opportunities for some women to acquire some religious authority.
- Indeed *certain* Hindu women saints have been regarded as incarnations of the Goddess while alive, and treated as Divine personalities in their own right upon death (*Course Pack*, p. 49).
- It is always important to recognize that this has done little to better the *social status* of women in traditional Hinduism.

Stridharma: Heroic women of the Epic Tradition

- Within the texts of the *Bhakti* movements women receive some significant positive treatment. The examples of Draupadi and Sita are often mentioned in this regard (see *Course Pack*, pp. 49-51).
- Draupadi was the wife of the five Pandavas already mentioned when we discussed the *Gita* (see *Course Pack*, pp. 49).
- Sita is the faithful wife of Rama (an incarnation of Vishnu in the great epic the *Ramayana*) (*Course Pack*, p. 50).

Stridharma: Heroic women of the Epic Tradition

- There is an apparent inconsistency in Klostermaier's section here.
- Klostermaier claims that too much emphasis is placed on the fact that Sita can be read to possess the ideal qualities for a wife: “submission to elders and persons of respect, loyalty in adversity, and courage in the face of danger, beauty and sweetness, total devotion to husband and children” (*Course Pack*, p. 50).
- It is Klostermaier's contention that viewing Rama and Sita as the ideal for married couples does the myth a disservice (see *Course Pack*, p 50 or 51).
- He extends this claim to include Radha (the lover of the young Krishna) (*Course Pack*, p. 50).

Stridharma: Heroic women of the Epic Tradition

- However his quote from Gandhi stands in unresolved tension with his claim.
- “Time and again he [that is Gandhi] came back to the classical ideals of woman as depicted in the great epics and he rejected the criticism of those who believed that Sita represented a wrong idea of womanhood. At several occasions he stated: ‘My ideal of wife is Sita and of a husband is Rama. But Sita was not slave to Rama; or each was slave to the other. Rama is ever considerate of Sita’” (*Course Pack*, p. 53).
- Though we might take issue with Gandhi’s presentation of the relationship between Sita and Rama, it certainly runs counter to Klostermaier’s discussion in this section.

Stridharma: Women Poet-Saints

- Klostermaier discusses two poet-saints, Antal (eighth or ninth century C.E.) and Mirabi (sixteenth century C.E.) (*Course Pack*, pp. 51-52).
- Both poet-saints were profoundly devoted to Lord Vishnu. Each went as far as to resist marriage to men on the grounds of their devotion, their perceived marriage, to Vishnu. Mirabi is, however, forced to marry (*Course Pack*, pp. 51-52).
- Do note, as an aside, that Mirabi's fidelity to both her husband and Krishna, and her submission to her husband's authority (as required under *stridharma*), are rewarded when Krishna rescues her from killing herself at her husband's bequest (*Course Pack*, p. 52).

Stridharma: Women Poet-Saints

- Mirabi, again like Antal, escapes natural death by being absorbed into an image of the Lord (*Course Pack*, p. 52).
- The devotion expressed by these saints, and the legacy they left in their hymns, continue to inspire and affect the devotional practices of many devotee Hindus (*Course Pack*, pp. 51-52).

Stridharma: The 'Mothers'

- Of note in this section is the religious prominence accorded some twentieth century Hindu women owing to the perception that they had achieved an advanced stage of spiritual life, if not union with the Divine (*Course Pack*, p. 52).
- We must, however, take care not to fail to appreciate that the religious freedoms accorded certain women in the history of Hinduism did not translate into a more egalitarian social structure in Hindu India (see *Course Pack*, p. 54).
- Indeed the *traditional* sanction of *sati* within Hinduism, particularly among higher caste women, evinces the deep ambivalence accorded the status of women in this tradition.

Stridharma: From sati to dowry murders

- Some facts to keep in mind when thinking about *sati*.
- (1) Child marriage was, until relatively recently, widely practiced in traditional Hinduism. The marriage of very young women continues to be a widespread practice (as it does, by the way, here in Canada). In such circumstances a woman is more likely to outlive her husband.
- (2) Within traditional Hinduism, widows are regarded as inauspicious and treated with suspicion. Widows from the higher castes are often kept in seclusion, or supervised by their late husband's surviving relatives, to ensure that they remain faithful to his memory (*Course Pack*, p. 54).
- (3) Though lower caste women can go on to remarry, this is, strictly speaking, contravening *stridharma* (i.e. there is a karmic cost).

Stridharma: From sati to dowry murders

- (4) A widow is viewed as a considerable burden on the late husband's surviving family.
- (5) Traditionally the premature death of a husband is associated with the actions of the wife in a previous life.
- (6) In such circumstances as the premature death of a husband, it is believed by certain traditionalists that the young bride can atone for her accrued karma by sacrificing herself on her husband's funeral pyre (*Course Pack*, p. 54).
- (7) The term 'sati' literally refers to 'a wife who is faithful' (*Course Pack*, p. 53). In Hindu lore surrounding sati this act is interpreted as an act of extreme devotion and piety on the part of the surviving wife (see *Course Pack*, p. 53, 54).
- By so joining her husband on the funeral pyre, she will join him in a heavenly realm (*Course Pack*, p. 54).

Stridharma: From sati to dowry murders

- Klostermaier suggests that “[r]ules governing the lives of widows were so severe, that many may have considered voluntary death preferable to the miserable life they could look forward to” (*Course Pack*, p. 54).
- Dowry murders are connected to the practice of a bride’s family giving dowry to the family of the bridegroom.
- An often expensive proposition at the best of times (and a particularly burdensome one for poorer families), a bridegroom’s family sometimes extorts more payments from the bride’s family through threat of, or actual, violence against the bride. If the family is unwilling or unable to provide more payments, the bride may be murdered (*Course Pack*, p. 54).

Stridharma: From sati to dowry murders

- Dowry murders continue to be a significant problem in Hindu society.
- Motivated solely by economic concerns, these crimes reflect a view of wives as a means to an end and property of the husband.
- It is important to recognize that unlike *sati*, dowry murders cannot find sanction in Hindu custom or practice (*Course Pack*, p. 54).
- The continued killing of female infants in rural India or the abortion of female fetuses, a problem which has caught the eye of various international human rights agencies, also evinces the lower value accorded females in Indian society.

Stridharma: From sati to dowry murders

- For more information on gender issues and Indian society see Amnesty's report on India by going to <http://amnesty.ca/women/reports.htm>.