

The University of Western Ontario  
Department of Philosophy  
Philosophy 154E (001)

## A Handout on Women and Hinduism

### *An initial orientation to women and Hinduism*

“Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one’s control. Her father protects (her) in childhood; her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence” (*Manusmriti* IX.2-3; *Course Pack*, p.20).

“In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would make both (her own and her husband’s) families contemptible” (*Manusmriti* V. 148-149; *Course Pack*, pp. 20-21).

“A faithful wife, who desires to dwell (after death) with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead” (*Manusmriti* V. 156; *Course Pack*, p. 20).

Again: “At her pleasure let her emaciate her body by (living on) pure flowers, roots and fruit; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died. ... A virtuous wife who after the death of her husband constantly remains chaste, reaches heaven, though she have no son, just like those chaste men” (*Manusmriti* V. 157, 160; *Course Pack*, p. 20).

“A twice-born man, versed in the sacred law, shall burn a wife of equal caste who conducts herself thus and dies before him, with (the sacred fires used for) the Agnihotra, and with the sacrificial implements. Having thus, at the funeral, given the sacred fires to his wife who dies before him, he may marry again, and again kindle (the fires)” (*Manusmriti* V. 167-68; *Course Pack*, pp. 20-21).

“Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart (from their husbands); if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that (reason alone) be exalted in heaven” (*Manusmriti* V. 154-55; *Course Pack*, p. 20).

### ***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] – the complete bibliography is in your *Course Pack*).

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]).

### ***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 in the *Rig Veda* contain 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'. (Think back to the quotes from the *Manusmriti*.) (*Course Pack*, pp. 48-49).

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.

Susan Wadley has discussed the rituals often performed by rural Hindu women in a given year (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, pp.103-113).

The rural Hindu women in her study participate 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" (p.105).

**Three observations of note** raised, though not especially emphasized in your readings, 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.

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.

(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).

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: Women Poet-Saints***

Klostermaier discusses two poet-saints, Antal and Mirabi.

Antal’s loving devotion was directed towards Lord Vishnu. From the lore surrounding her life as recounted in this section we can *tentatively* conclude that this Eighth or Ninth Century C.E. poet-saint was utterly devoted to Vishnu. Her father, a priest serving at the local temple, apparently gave her the freedom to spend her days in spiritual practice and to refuse marriage. Such practice and attitudes effectively placed her at variance with *stridharma* (*Course Pack*, p. 51).

Mirabi, a Sixteenth Century saint, was, like Antal, devoted to Lord Vishnu, though in the form of Krishna. She too, from an early age, imagined herself to be a bride of the Lord and devoted herself to His worship. Though, unlike Antal, she married, and her marriage was threatened on more than one occasion by her religious devotion on the one hand and the unsympathetic, or even hostile, attitude of her husband on the other (*Course Pack*, pp. 51-52). Do note that her fidelity to her husband and Krishna, and 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).

Mirabi, again like Antal, escapes 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 devote 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).

### ***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).
- (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).

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).

Dowry murders continue to be a significant problem in Hindu society.

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.

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