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Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 14(0)

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Publication Date

1994

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The Ambiguity of the Historical Position of Hindu Women in India: Sita, Draupadi and the Laws of Manu

SANGEETA R. GUPTA

THE CURRENT¹ SUBORDINATE POSITION of Indian women in social, legal and cultural realms is claimed by fundamentalists to be based on Hindu tradition and supported by religious scriptures. Centuries-old gender roles² for women are depicted as Hindu traditions which need to be protected. Those contesting these views are condemned as attacking Hinduism itself. This article will examine the historical and scriptural basis, if any, of these submissive female gender roles and will provide arguments against their current traditional interpretation. While these roles do have historical roots in the Hindu culture, the scriptural "validation" is a political and social tool used by fundamentalist forces through the ages to justify and perpetuate the oppression of Hindu women. I will further argue that the religious scriptures themselves are open to several interpretations, but only those that perpetuate the patriarchal³ concept of the "ideal" Hindu woman have been espoused by the majority of the Brahmanical class. This article will deconstruct female gender roles through a careful examination of specific characters in the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha*, to illustrate an alternate and perhaps more complete picture of the position of women. The Laws of Manu,⁴ which are frequently quoted by fundamentalists, brahmin priests and others to justify the submissive role of women as "natural," will also be examined to present a more comprehensive picture.

Religious and cultural norms in India are interwoven and, as such, have a tremendous impact on the daily lives⁵ of both women and men. In evaluating the gender roles in the Hindu epics, it becomes necessary to examine the following: the orientation of the primary authors, the individuals who later interpret and transmit them, and whether a selective reading has been utilized to

establish and support a subordinate role for women. Invoking religious tradition to justify the subordination of women is a powerful and persuasive argument to enable society to perpetuate their oppression.

The two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha*, were written by men of a patriarchal society. The epics are also interpreted and transmitted by a particular class of men, the Brahmins, who have a vested interest both in maintaining their status and in controlling the female population. Women—along with the Shudras⁶—are not allowed to even hear, let alone read, the religious scriptures. Thus, they are dependent on the Brahmin men to interpret the scriptures. This creates a rather interesting cycle. Men of a patriarchal culture write the scriptures, the patriarchal Brahmins interpret and transmit them, and furthermore, by excluding women, the Brahmins prevent women from reading and evaluating the scriptures for themselves. Thus, the Brahmins can establish and perpetuate gender roles for women which women have been unable to contest. This arrangement has created a rather successful monopoly.

The “Submissive” Sita

The female roles in the *Ramayana* consist of the negative roles of Kaikeyi, the step-mother of Rama whose jealousy and greed propel her to insist on Rama being banished, Manthara, Kaikeyi’s maid who turns the sweet Kaikeyi into a destructive force, and Surpanakha, Ravana’s sister whose unrequited desire for Rama leads to the abduction of Sita. Against this backdrop, there is the positive female role of Sita herself—the epitome of sweetness, patience, chastity and unflinching wifely devotion.

Sita, which means furrow and is also symbolic of the female vagina, is the daughter of Mother Earth. At the end of the epic, Sita returns to her Mother after trials and tribulations with her husband Rama.⁷ A brief background of the events prior to this action are necessary in order to understand the enormity of Sita’s step and also why this episode is excluded from numerous translations.

Sita is found as a baby by King Janaka while he is plowing the field during a religious sacrifice. He accepts Sita as a gift from Mother Earth and raises her as his own daughter. When she reaches marriageable age, approximately fourteen years old, a *swayamvara*⁸ is arranged. Rama snaps the golden bow in half and thereby claims Sita’s hand. Rama takes her back to his father’s kingdom. Rama’s father, King Dasaratha, is ready to abdicate and names Rama, the eldest son, as the new king. However, Kaikeyi—another wife of Dasaratha and mother of Bharatha—is persuaded by her maid to fight for Bharatha’s rights. She calls in her two boons [wishes] from King Dasaratha⁹ by demanding that the king banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years and that her son Bharatha be crowned

king. The heartbroken king attempts to dissuade her but to no avail. Rama himself insists on honoring his father's boons. Rama instructs Sita to stay in the palace: "I am going to the forest and you, my beloved, must stay here. You have never once displeased me or anyone so far. Remain here since I say so and you must accede to my wishes."¹⁰ Sita, the ever obedient wife, shows a slightly different side to her nature than is normally presented:

Her gentle looks vanished as though by magic. Her eyes were flashing when she said: Rama, what are you trying to tell me? Very casually you are commanding me to do your bidding....The wife...is meant to share the fate of her husband. Whether it is good fortune or bad, which befalls the husband, the wife has a share in it. Well-versed in *dharma* [duty] as you are, I do not have to teach the nuances of it to you."

This certainly sounds as if she is questioning his manner in commanding her and his lack of appreciation of the subtleties and nuances of *dharma*. She continues on to acknowledge her contradiction and subsequently disobeys him: "Please Rama, please do not be angry with me for contradicting you and disobeying you in this manner....I have *made up my mind* to be with you in the forest and I *will not allow you* to try and dissuade me from *my decision*" [emphasis mine].¹¹

Rama's reaction to his "obedient" wife:

Rama did not seem to relish the words spoken by Sita. He did not want to take her with him. He tried to argue with her. He says: "Sita, you are the daughter of a great man who is well-versed in *dharma* and you are yourself no stranger to the nuances of it. You should know that your *dharma* is to obey me....I have considered everything well and I have come to the decision that you should not come with me but stay in Ayodhya till my return."¹²

The "obedient" and "submissive" Sita reacts:

Sita would not be convinced [conveying that he could not just order her, but that he needed to convince her]. She looked at Rama with eyes which were filled with sadness as well as *anger*...."Do not try to keep me away from you. *I am not a child*, and I know that the forest is beset with dangers...."She could take liberties with Rama since she was his wife and she knew that he would not be offended. In that mood born of love, desperation and eagerness to go with him, Sita said: "My father, the king of Mithila made a mistake, perhaps. He has given his daughter to a woman dressed as a man!" [emphasis mine].¹⁴

The previous passages sound surprisingly like those which could be spoken by a "modern" couple as they jointly reach a decision which is comfortable for both of them. It even includes a few insults¹⁵—Sita calling Rama "a woman dressed as a man." She does not sound like a docile and submissive wife. It is also telling that Rama does not react with anger at this insult.

It is clear that these quotes would be ineffective in presenting an obedient image of Sita, which the patriarchal Brahmins would like to perpetuate. They prefer to quote the passages where she states: "When you go to the fearful forest I will proceed before you and clear the path for you by removing the thorns and twigs which are likely to hurt your blessed feet."¹⁶ The view the Brahmins would like to promote is that of a wife sweetly pleading with her husband who is so charmed by her desire to be with him that he consents to her accompanying him. This portrayal is different from the one discussed earlier. The earlier excerpts enable us to see a discussion between a husband and wife where she insists on what she wants and is unwilling to compromise.

Sita and Lakshmana¹⁷ (Rama's younger brother) accompany Rama into the forest. They face many adventures and eventually encounter Ravana's sister, Surpanaka, whose unrequited lust for Rama ends in her disfigurement. She goes to Ravana to plead for revenge, and he devises a plot to lure Rama away from their dwelling. Ravana's uncle takes the form of a beautiful golden deer, which Sita decides she must have. Rama goes to fulfill her desire, despite the warning of Lakshmana who senses foul play. As the deer dies, it reverts back to human form and calls out for Sita and Lakshmana mimicking Rama's voice. Sita reacts in fear and insists that Lakshmana, despite his promise to Rama to stay and protect her, go and save Rama. Lakshmana reluctantly agrees but only after Sita accuses him of coveting her and threatens to kill herself. He draws a circle of protection around her and departs. In the meantime, Ravana assumes the form of an ascetic and approaches Sita who, in unflinching courtesy and desire to maintain dharma, comes out of the circle to offer him food and water. Ravana then reverts to his original form and kidnaps her. Thus begins Rama's quest to find her. When he finally rescues her after killing Ravana, he rebukes her for dwelling in the home of another man. To prove her fidelity, she chooses to undergo an *agni pariksha* [test by fire] and emerges unscathed. At this point, Rama accepts her back, they return to Ayodhya, and allegedly live happily ever after.

There is, however, another recognized ending of the *Ramayana* which is rather controversial and has evoked strong reaction. Sita underwent the first *agni pariksha* to prove her chastity and this event was witnessed by Rama's army. However, upon their return to the capital, Rama hears murmurs in the kingdom regarding his decision to accept Sita back. Unable to bear these com-

ments, he banishes her to the forest even though she is now pregnant.¹⁸ Sita dwells in the forest with the sage Valmiki¹⁹ and gives birth to twins. When Rama later sees the twins, he decides to accept her back. Yet, it would seem that they are not destined to be happy as Rama insists that she undergo another agni pariksha to prove her chastity. It appears that by this time, “the perfect wife” is tired of proving herself and asks her mother (Earth) to take her back. The ground opens up and a throne appears. As soon as Sita sits on it, the throne is lowered into the ground and the earth closes. Rama, in vain, insists that Sita be returned.

It is interesting that this ending can be found only in the original version by Valmiki. I would argue that this ending presents a different aspect to Sita's character—one more in keeping with the woman who had earlier insisted that her husband take her with him to the forest and one who had not been adverse to casting aspirations on his manhood to get her way. It certainly does not fit in with the patriarchal construct of a docile and obedient wife whose every breath is for her husband and who would have been grateful for this second chance. In fact, she would have been revered even more for her patience, if she had accepted the second agni pariksha. She would have been upheld as a model of the martyred woman who patiently waits for her errant Lord to recognize her worth and accept her back.²⁰

Recent translations have omitted this second test and her subsequent withdrawal from Rama's life. Rajagopalchari and Kamala Subramaniam, both of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, have ended the *Ramayana* when Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana return to Ayodhya. Their justification for this omission is that they cannot bear that Sita be treated so. I would argue, however, that by retaining the first agni pariksha and eliminating the second, they have reduced Sita to the patriarchal construct which the Brahmins have created. By validating the first agni pariksha, they are condoning Rama's test of his wife, even though Rajagopalchari comments that he feels it is not appropriate for Rama to subject his wife to these tests. By deleting the banishment, Rama's request for another agni pariksha, and Sita's refusal, they have, in effect, eliminated her agency. By presenting both tests by fire, her refusal to undergo the second test, and subsequent denial of her marital status, Sita's portrayal of womanhood is altered. We would have seen a woman more in keeping with the picture presented by the earlier excerpts—a woman not afraid to stand up to her husband.

We also need to examine other feminine roles in the *Ramayana* which are usually cited as negative role models for young women. Although Kaikeyi is held accountable for the banishment of Rama and all subsequent calamities, it is important to remember two points. One, the events of the *Ramayana* have

been engineered by the gods—male gods of a patriarchal society. Second, Rama's very creation is for the purpose of destroying Ravana who has been granted protection by the gods themselves.²¹ If the events are examined in reverse, we can observe an "inevitability" about them. In order for Rama to kill Ravana, he has a compelling reason to rally troops to go after him. Therefore, Sita has to be kidnapped.²² In order for Sita to be kidnapped, Rama and Sita need to be in the forest. To be in the forest, Rama has to be banished which means that someone needs to do the banishing. Therefore, Kaikeyi's actions are pre-ordained and she is merely following a blueprint that has been established for her by a higher power. This illustrates the strong Hindu belief in *karma* [fate].

The second point is that Rama's father Dasaratha had promised Kaikeyi's father at their wedding that their future male offspring would be crowned king. By naming Rama as heir, Dasaratha is revoking his promise. By announcing the coronation without consulting Kaikeyi or informing Bharatha who was staying with Kaikeyi's father, he is acting in a cowardly fashion. The announcement of the coronation and the actual event were separated only by twenty-four hours. There is no explanation given for this expediency. In fact, it appears almost clandestine. It seems natural and reasonable that kings from surrounding areas would have been invited for the coronation of a king, especially the coronation of one as brilliant and beloved as Rama. The speed is only understandable if the incumbent monarch is critically ill and not expected to survive. This was not the case in Ayodhya [Rama's alleged birthplace]. Therefore, it could be concluded that Dasaratha may not have acted honorably and that Kaikeyi was justified in demanding Bharatha's coronation. Kaikeyi was intelligent enough to realize that Bharatha would not be an effective ruler, assuming he was allowed to rule at all, if beloved Rama was present in the city. Therefore, Rama had to be banished and the story of the *Ramayana* unfolds.

The prominent female roles portrayed in the *Ramayana*, those of Sita and Kaikeyi, and the less prominent and yet pivotal roles of Manthara and Surpanaka, portray women as one-dimensional creatures. They are submissive and therefore "good" or they create havoc by making their own decisions and are therefore "bad." I have attempted to illustrate that a more complete reading of the *Ramayana*, possibly reading against the grain, will bring to life these one-dimensional characters so that they appear more realistic from the perspective of inter-personal relationships. I would argue that Sita is not the docile and submissive woman that a patriarchal mindset has created. Rather, she is simply human and, as such, has subtle nuances to her personality that the Brahmins have attempted to erase. She is, after all, a princess in her own right and has been married to Rama for approximately twelve years at the time of the banish-

ment. Their marital relationship has developed and she has developed into a young woman, with a mind of her own. This is not to say that I would portray Sita as a militant feminist. I would, however, argue that there is more to her character than a quiet, submissive wife who is content to obey her husband's every wish without a murmur of dissent. This portrayal of her character is also more accurate and is evidenced when she refuses to undergo the second agni pariksha and departs from Rama, thereby deserting her role of wife and mother. It is obvious that this more spirited version of Sita would be unacceptable to the Brahmins. We next consider Draupadi, the heroine of the *Mahabharatha*.

The Polyandrous Draupadi

Another prominent female figure in Hindu mythology is Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava³³ brothers. It is noteworthy that Draupadi, who is a well-rounded, intelligent and "spirited" young woman, is not presented to Indian women as the "ideal woman." In effect, they are discouraged from emulating her. Draupadi, who represents the most famous case of polyandry in Indian mythology, has a interesting background. Like Sita, she is also married through a swayamvara in which Arjuna wins her hand through his expert marksman-ship. When she is brought home as his bride, Arjuna's mother, thinking that her sons are bringing home alms, carelessly states that they should all share whatever they have brought home. She is horrified when she realizes that the "alms" is really Arjuna's young bride and attempts to revoke her statement.³⁴ Arjuna insists that he will honor her first statement and leaves the decision to Yudhishtira, as the eldest brother. Even Draupadi's outraged father cannot alter the situation. Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharatha*, appears amidst this turmoil, and explains that Draupadi—born as Nalayani in her previous birth—is fated to have five husbands.³⁵ A system of cyclic sharing was agreed upon as requested by Draupadi, wherein each of the five Pandavas would be her "exclusive husband" for a year while the remaining four would be treated as brothers.

Draupadi engages in the "appropriate" womanly endeavors and is widely recognized and praised for her "wifely" talents. She, like Sita, exemplifies the ideal wife and daughter-in-law as is illustrated by the following passage. Krishna's favorite wife, Satyabhama, questions Draupadi on her ability to please her husbands so completely that they are never angry with her and they never hesitate to fulfill her every wish. Draupadi's reply:

I put aside my ego, I try not to be jealous, I strive to be modest and gracious. I neither bathe nor eat nor sleep til my husband has; til, in fact, our servants have. When he returns from the town or the forest, I have water and a seat ready for him. I do the

household chores, cook and clean at the right time. I don't dawdle at the gate, and I don't laugh unless the joke is really good. I am never long in the bathroom or in pleasure gardens. Giggling is out of the question. I fret when he's gone, and give up sandal paste and flowers. I see that things which don't appeal to him don't appeal to me either. A husband is a god to his wife, isn't he? One thing more—I never speak ill of my mother-in-law.¹⁶

Draupadi continues and states, in response to Satyabhama's inquiries about "aides" for ensuring a husband's love, that she does not use tricks or mantras or cosmetics to keep the love of her husbands, she simply takes care of them:

Don't ask me what painted women do to hold their husbands—I don't know—but I could tell you of simple ways. A husband gives us children, a husband give us beds and seats, dresses and perfumes and garlands, even fame in society and happiness in heaven. Why not act in a way that will make him feel *She really loves me*. When he orders a maid to get something, get up and fetch it yourself. When he is at the gate, be ready to give him your seat and offer to wash his feet. Shun his enemies. Don't be careless and frivolous when other men are present; be silent about what you think [she does not follow this piece of advice herself as we shall see in the next section]; and don't be alone too much *even with your own sons*.¹⁷ Avoid women who drink, shout, steal, gorge and gossip. And learn how to make yourself attractive with ornaments, perfumes and unguents [emphasis mine].¹⁸

However, "she is no silent, suffering and compliant Sita."¹⁹ Draupadi may fulfill the role of a proper wife with regard to her physical care of her husbands, but she goes a step further and challenges their intellectual reasoning and questions their actions. Draupadi, like Sita, discusses dharma with her husband; however, her discussions do not revolve around a personal dharma with affects only her and her husband. Sita's main reason for discussing dharma is to tell Rama that she is going with him and also to clarify the appropriate role of a wife. Draupadi discusses dharma as a personal application and to understand the workings of the universe. Therefore, her interest, while personal, can also be classified as intellectual and philosophical. For example, she engages in discussions with Yudhishtira about fate and why the good suffer. These discussions suggest a sophistication of thought that Sita does not articulate.

I know that dharma must be true. I know that dharma, protected, protects, that for the sake of preserving dharma Arjuna, Bhima and all of us may be sacrificed. But I do not see dharma being specially kind to you, my husband, though you have performed the

Ashvamedha and the Rajasuya, the Cow Sacrifice and the Elephant Sacrifice. Was it dharma that made you lose all of us at the dice game?...Perhaps it is all the work of fate. Like a pearl on a string, like a bull led by the cord through its nose, like a tree falling from the bank into a flowing stream, man follows the will of the Creator. And the Creator plays with us, like a child playing with a clay toy, now mean, now loving. Why do the good suffer, why do the wicked prosper? Why is vicious Duryodhana prospering? If it is God's will that this be so, then guilt attaches to God too. *If man is free to do as he likes, why is he free to do so much wrong and so little good?* [emphasis mine].³⁰

Yudhishtira is very supportive of her opinions and encourages their discussions which may be why she is so articulate. "How pleasing are your sentences, Draupadi," said Yudhishtira, "how charmingly constructed, how persuasive."³¹ However, not all the players in the *Mahabharatha* applaud Draupadi. The fact that she has five husbands, regardless of the fact that it is due to the will of the gods, causes her to be insulted during the Assembly when Yudhishtira stakes her and loses. Draupadi does not meekly submit, but challenges Yudhishtira's right to stake her. As Yudhishtira had staked and lost all their possessions, the five brothers are stripped of their clothing. When Draupadi is dragged into the Assembly so that her clothes can also be claimed, a few of the elders object. She questions Yudhishtira's ability to stake her when he has already lost himself. "Is Yudhishtira morally and legally right in staking me after he has staked and lost himself in the dice-game?" The heart of the matter is that Draupadi had dared to ask a question that cuts at the very roots of the Hindu social tradition, especially in relation to its attitude [regarding] the position and rights of women."³² With this statement Draupadi challenged Yudhishtira's rights over her and in effect, the rights of men over women. Briefly, the situation is: if Yudhishtira lost himself in a wager, then he is a slave. As a slave, what are his rights, if any, over his wife? By allowing Yudhishtira to stake and lose her, the Assembly is stating that a slave has rights over his free wife. Thus, a free woman is of lower status than a male slave, if she is his wife. Therefore, a married woman's status is always lower than that of her husband, even if he is a slave and she is a princess. It is interesting that the elders do not intervene effectively. Bhishma states in response to Draupadi's challenging Yudhishtira's right to stake her: "Dharma is a subtle thing. A man with no wealth cannot stake another's wealth. Can a wife be staked by her husband? Yudhishtira does not say that Shakuni cheated. Yudhishtira knows the difference between right and wrong. It is all very subtle."³³

The other brothers, except Bhima, do not question Yudhishtira's action.

Bhima's reaction is that "Even prostitutes are not staked by gamblers....When you lost us, I did not say a word—you are our elder. But this is wrong, to stake Draupadi is wrong! How has she deserved this? I will set fire to your hands, the hands that lost her. Bring me fire, Sahadeva!" Arjuna, however, states: "Have you lost your head, Bhima? He is your eldest brother."³⁴

Vikarna is one of the few who speak for Draupadi:

I will speak as my conscience dictates. Hunting, drinking, gambling, and whoring are the four vices of kings. Under their influence, kings do irresponsible deeds. Yudhishtira staked Draupadi in a gambling fit. She is not his wife only, but of four others. He lost himself first before losing her. My conclusion is that she is neither morally nor legally won.³⁵

However, Karna, one of the Kauravas, says: "The gods allow one wife to a man. But Draupadi has five husbands.³⁶ What sort of dharma is that? Even stripping a woman like her should not shock anyone."³⁷ The Kauravas then attempt to strip her. She is saved from this humiliation by her speedy appeal to Krishna who turns her single piece of cloth into a never-ending stream of garments so that she is never exposed. Her *five* husbands, as well as her elders stand by and watch her mistreatment without effectively intervening.³⁸

Draupadi does not easily forgive her husbands for her ordeal. She appeals to Krishna himself with complaints against her husbands and chastises them in the presence of others, something Sita did not do:

O Krishna, they dragged me, the sister of Dhrishtadyumna, the wife of the Pandavas, during my period, stained with blood, dressed in a single cloth—they dragged me in front of all the kings—and the sons of Dhritarashtra laughed at me! They wanted to make me their slave by force! And my husbands sat through it, unmoving! Shame on Bhima, shame on Arjuna! Doesn't dharma say a husband should protect his wife's honour? Others they protect—me they couldn't!

Have I not given them five sons? And don't I deserve protection at least on that account? Shame on Arjuna's magic bow, that slept while I was dragged in my period through the hall. Shame on Bhima's strength! Poison he could drink, serpents he could kill, Kunti [the Pandavas' mother] he could save from the burning lacquer house, but me he could not protect! I was seized by my hair, Krishna, while the Pandavas watched, the brave Indras, my own husbands!³⁹

Thus, it is evident that Draupadi presents a more complete persona of womanhood. While fulfilling her roles of devoted wife, she is also an individual with

her own thoughts and expectations. She does not understand her husbands' quiet acceptance of her ordeal nor does she forgive them easily.

In a patriarchal construct, Sita and Draupadi present different portrayals of Indian women. However, when one reads against the grain, their personalities are not that different. Which of these two women is more reflective of the elite women of their time? Sexuality may be the reason why the "submissive" Sita is the epitome of ideal womanhood and not the more well-rounded Draupadi. Sara Mitter, in *Dharma's Daughters*, contrasts the sexuality of the two women—Sita and Draupadi. She states that "the modest Sita is a one-man woman; the sensuous Draupadi lives out an enviable sexual fantasy—variety without insecurity, gratification without guilt. Draupadi may be closer to modern sensibilities, but Sita is safer stuff to work with."⁴⁰ Sita is a more malleable character and, as such, is more in keeping with the male ideal or fantasy of a woman who is quietly subordinate to his needs. Mitter argues that, "In general, Draupadi strikes a more modern chord than does Sita. Less malleable and less accommodated to her sufferings than Sita is, Draupadi is also a more powerful personality: quick-witted and confident."⁴¹

The patriarchal construct of appropriate Indian womanhood did not overlook the issue of women's sexuality, which is often at the heart of the necessity to restrict the movements of women. The Laws of Manu, as discussed below, are also utilized to justify this restriction based on the very "nature" of women.

Manu, The Hindu Law Giver: Misogynist or Misunderstood?

The Laws of Manu are another Hindu scripture often cited to state and justify the "appropriate" position of women. However, this source is also misrepresented through the selective choice of passages that advocate the repression of women. The most often quoted passage states:

Men must make their women dependent day and night, and keep under their own control those who are attached to sensory objects. Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence. A father who does not give her away at the proper time should be blamed, and a husband who does not have sex with her at the proper time should be blamed; and the son who does not guard his mother when her husband is dead should be blamed.⁴²

What is it that the women are being protected against and what are the men blamed for? Manu continues:

Women should be especially guarded against addictions, even trifling ones, for unguarded [women] would bring sorrow upon both families. Regarding this as the *supreme duty* of all the classes, husbands, even weak ones, try to guard their wives. For by zealously guarding his wife he *guards his own descendants*, family, and himself, as well as his own duty. The husband enters the wife, becomes an embryo, and is born here on earth....*The wife brings forth a son who is just like the man she makes love with; that is why he should guard his wife zealously, in order to keep his progeny clean* [emphasis mine].⁴³

At this point, it is clear that the purpose of guarding women is to subjugate their sexuality and ensure sexual exclusiveness for the male. That Manu believes in the sexual recklessness of women is clear from the following excerpt:

Good looks do not matter to them, nor do they care about youth; "A man!" they say, and enjoy sex with him, whether he is good-looking or ugly. By running after men like whores, by their fickle minds, and by their natural lack of affection, these women are unfaithful to their husbands even when they are zealously guarded here.⁴⁴

Though these passages reflect the patriarchal mindset of Manu, other passages in the text illustrate that women were also meant to be revered:

Fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law who wish for great good fortune should revere these women and adorn them. The deities delight in places where women are revered, but where women are not revered all rites are fruitless. Where the women of the family are miserable, the family is soon destroyed, but it always thrives where the women are not miserable. Homes that are cursed by women of the family who have not been treated with due reverence are completely destroyed, as if struck down by witchcraft. Therefore men who wish to prosper should always revere these women with ornaments, clothes, and food at celebrations and festivals.

There is unwavering good fortune in a family where the husband is always satisfied by the wife, *and the wife by the husband*If the woman is radiant, the whole family is radiant, *but if she is not radiant the whole family is not radiant* [emphasis mine].

Thus, a more complete reading illustrates that women have important roles in the family and while, it is important for the man to be satisfied, it is also necessary for the woman to be fulfilled. In fact, there are repercussions if she is not.

Manu is also often quoted as saying that a man who does not give away his daughter in marriage at the appropriate time will suffer dire consequences as he has not fulfilled his duty as a father. This quote is often used to justify child

marriages. However, the following is almost always left out:

But it would be better for a daughter, *even* after she has reached puberty, to stay in the house until she dies than for him ever to give her to a man *who has no good qualities*. When a girl has reached puberty she should wait for three years, but after that period *she* should find a husband like her. If she herself approaches a husband when she has not been given one, she commits no error, nor does the man whom she approaches [emphasis mine].⁴⁵

It would appear, that prior to marriage, a man can be rejected for his lack of good qualities but not after the ceremony has taken place. Yet, would not his lack of good qualities be evident to the elders who are entrusted with their children's lives due to their "superior" discerning power? If he has "good qualities" to begin with, why would he suddenly lose them? If the girl should not knowingly be subjected to a man without "good qualities," then why should a wife? Does a woman lose her right to a decent life after the marriage ceremony? Is this meant to indicate that she has more autonomy as a single woman than as a married one? A wife is required to stay with a man regardless of his lack of good qualities.

Not only does Manu sanction a girl to stay unmarried if her father cannot find a good husband, he encourages her to find her own husband! If a woman has enough discerning power to choose her mate three years after puberty, why is it necessary to involve the parents at all? Why not permit her to choose in the first place? There is the possibility that this statement of Manu is meant to be viewed as a threat to parents—if they do not choose for her, she will be able to do the choosing herself.

As the quoted passages indicate, the Laws of Manu can also be subverted by a selective reading in order to contain women within certain gender roles.

Conclusion

Although the Indian Constitution states that it guarantees the "dignity of the individual" as well as "*social, economic and political justice*" [emphasis mine], the Indian government is, at best, straddling the fence on issues regarding women. India has put restrictions on the use of sonograms to detect the sex of the fetus (this technology was being used to abort female fetuses) and has enacted legislation which prohibits dowry, widow immolation and its glorification. However, the enforcement of these protective laws is sporadic at best. A lack of support for the principles which are the foundation of these laws continues to retard their effectiveness. The crux of the problem cannot be resolved by legis-

lation. Rather, a change in the social perception towards women is needed to redefine their status. Until this takes place, Indian women will continue to suffer for the "sin" of being born as a woman.

A change in the status of Indian women is not just desirable from a sociological point of view; it may soon become a biological necessity. India is the only country where the ratio of women to men is decreasing. This may eventually lead to an increase in the value of women due to their scarcity. However, it would be prudent for society to reverse this trend prior to such an occurrence.

The lack of education among women prevents them from judging the issues themselves. At independence, only seven percent of Indian women were literate.⁴⁶ These numbers have not significantly improved. The literacy rate in 1981 was 36.91% for women age five to nineteen (the figure for men in the same age bracket was 54.56%).⁴⁷ Unable to read and interpret the scriptures for themselves, the majority of women are dependent on the male Brahmin priests who have a patriarchal mindset.

Women have been fighting for basic rights and have generated hostility against their movements and themselves as they become increasingly vocal against centuries-old oppression. In an effort to stem this rising tide of feminine consciousness, fundamentalists are utilizing their interpretations of religious scriptures to push women backwards into a more controlled environment. This phenomenon is not limited to Hinduism but extends to Christianity and Islam as well.

In their attempt to utilize the past to justify the present oppression of women, fundamentalists are emphasizing only certain portions of the scriptures. Hindu scriptures can also be utilized to support the total equality of men and women as stated in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*: "The divine person parted one's own body into two; from that came husband and wife...this body of (husband and wife) is one half of oneself, each is like one of the two halves of a split pea."⁴⁸ The scriptures also state that unless a woman is happy in her home, the blessings of the gods will be withheld. Why are these statements not used to prevent the physical and emotional abuse of women that is prevalent across India?

Many patriarchal customs are an attempt to continue the historical suppression of women. By using religion to justify these practices, fundamentalist forces are manipulating the scriptures to achieve their goals. As a large percentage of the population is illiterate, and by "tradition" the scriptures are off-limits to women, fundamentalists can effectively state their case without fear of serious challenges. Progressives who attempt to counter the fundamentalist arguments are labeled as immoral, thereby eliminating any possibility of a dialogue. The use of this technique has been effective in other countries also, for example, the

backlash against Iranian women. "The association of "chastity" with "conservative" on the one hand, and "modern" with "western" or "degenerate morality" on the other, results in even women sometimes becoming collaborators in the confirmation of their own inferiority, in order not to defy "tradition."⁴⁹ This can be illustrated by the sizable numbers of Indian mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law whose actions have resulted in the physical and emotional abuse of many brides. That women oppress women (victim turned victimizer) is not limited to Indian women but extends to other countries. Oppression in the name of tradition is being carried out even with the families who emigrate to Western countries, as exemplified by the pressure on second-generation Indo-Americans to have arranged marriages.

Just as women act under the guise of tradition, men have been taught that control of a woman's sexuality is paramount to the successful continuation of the culture. Thus, oppression can be justified. "Since male honor is primarily concerned with the sexual purity and exclusiveness of women within a kinship group, the death of the woman is preferred to [the] loss of patriarchal honour through possible sexual misadventure on her part."⁵⁰

Hinduism does not possess one single "authoritative" religious text. The various scriptural works are interpreted differently by each individual reader. As the texts possess internal contradictions, a selective reading has been utilized by various groups to perpetuate their own agenda. Unfortunately, women have been victimized by these readings. By reading against the grain and reinterpreting these texts, women will be in a position to evaluate these works themselves and will be able to formulate and redefine the traditional construct of "ideal" womanhood to reflect their own individuality.

NOTES

1. The oppression of Hindu women is not a recent phenomena. While there are those who would argue that women in Vedic India had greater freedom, for the purpose of this essay, I will proceed under the assumption that Hindu women were oppressed in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods.
2. Portrayals of Hindu women consist of an interesting eclectic combination. There are powerful women like the Rani of Jhansi who led armies against colonial presence and then there are famous cases of the ranis of Rajasthan who immobilized themselves in mass to prevent capture by invading forces. It is beyond the scope of this essay to deconstruct the symbolism of these immobilizations. Suffice it to say that the portrayals of Hindu women have been affected by society's perception of what constitutes appropriate womanhood. For example, historical accounts are full of Indian men who worked towards the abolishment of sati [widow immolation], child marriages and to allow widow remarriage. Where are the feminine voices? Were there not any women who expressed their views on the subject? Or did the men speak for these women? Therefore, the ideal, submissive Hindu women as personified by Sita is also the silent woman.

3. For the purpose of this essay, patriarchy refers to the family structure which includes the following: patrilineal inheritance; an extended family with sons and daughters-in-law living with parents and sometimes grandparents; and the oldest male having authority over the younger males and the women.
4. Believed to be the author of the *Manusmriti*, a major source of Hindu religious law. Manu is often referred to as the Hindu law giver, however, it should be kept in mind that Hinduism does not have one decisive religious text as is found in Christianity and Islam. Hindu religious text can be divided into two basic categories: *scruti*, divine revelations, or "that which is heard", which consists of the Vedas and Brahmanas, and *smriti*, human creativity or "that from memory", which consist of the Vedangas, Sutras, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Puranas, Vendatas, Upanishads and the Manusmriti. The concepts discussed in the smritis consist of interpretations or commentaries by different people and are therefore subject to change.
5. Hindu women in India today and even those among the diaspora are affected by the myth of Sita. Women are compared to her image and the phrase "she is Sita-Savitri" [Savitri is another mythological woman who sacrificed for her husband. She followed him to the underworld and managed to bring him back. She thereby extended wifely duty beyond the grave.] is one of ultimate praise for a woman. It denotes an acknowledgment of her submissiveness and her willingness to sacrifice for her husband. The image of Sita is so powerful and pervasive in the Indian culture that is taken for granted that she is the ideal woman and therefore a model for Hindu women to emulate. There is a growing awareness that the myth of Sita needs to be deconstructed, however, she is still the role model for the majority of Hindu women.
6. Hindu society was divided into four major *varnas* [caste]: the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras. Shudras were the lowest of the four castes.
7. *Agni pariksha* is an ordeal by fire. Sita underwent one when Rama initially Ravana rescued her to prove her chastity. Some interpretations of the Ramayana do not incorporate the second *agni pariksha* which Rama insists she undergo after they return to Ram's kingdom. Sita refuses and leaves Rama.
8. A form of marriage where women of royal birth choose their husbands from the princess which are assembled. The princes were sometimes required to perform feats of strength to win the hand of the princess.
9. Kaikeyi had driven his chariot during battle and had been given two boons [wishes] as a reward for her devoted care of the king when he was injured.
10. Subramaniam, Kamala, *Ramayana* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan: Bombay, 1981), 127.
11. *Ibid.*, 128.
12. *Ibid.*, 128. Sita sounds like a rather modern and independent woman here!
13. *Ibid.*, 129.
14. *Ibid.*, 129-130.
15. The word "insult" is used to convey a particular thought process which transcends cultural boundaries and in which labeling a male with "feminine" qualities or characteristics is de-meaning. This process necessitates labeling certain mannerisms as feminine and therefore not desirable.
16. Subramaniam, *op. cit.*, 128.
17. Lakshmana's wife Urmila, Sita's sister, does not accompany her husband to the forest. Lakshman states that her dharma is to wait for him in the palace and take care of the elders. When Lakshman returns, they pick up the thread of their married life. Clearly, she does not argue with him or argues to no avail.
18. This pregnancy brings up an interesting point. As motherhood is so revered in the Hindu culture, how is it that the perfect woman and perfect wife has not gotten pregnant before the exile or during its fourteen year duration?

19. Where is Rama's concern for his delicate wife whom he felt would be unable to live in the forest during his exile? It is curious that he would abandon her now, pregnant and on her own. It is fortuitous for her that Valmiki accepts her into his ashram as most people would have considered a repudiated wife inauspicious. However, Valmiki knows that Sita is blameless. Sita had stated earlier, in reference to the fourteen-year exile, that she would not survive without Rama. She clearly does survive during this second separation. This illustrates her strength of character, her survival skills and her developing autonomy. Clearly there has been a change in her attitude towards Rama. Her new autonomy is illustrated when she refuses to participate in the second *agni parishva*.
20. This image is perpetuated even today in countless media and literary portrayals of Indian women.
21. Ravana had received a boon from the gods that he could not be killed by any of them. He then proceeded to wreak havoc. The gods appealed to Vishnu who realized that only a man could kill Ravana. In his arrogance, Ravana had overlooked that possibility. Therefore, Vishnu was incarnated as a human being, Rama, whose purpose was to eliminate Ravana.
22. Recall the famous war that took place after Helen of Troy was kidnapped.
23. The story of the Mahabharatha centers around the conflict between two sets of cousins: the Pandavas and the Kauravas.
24. If it is Hindu *dharma* to obey one's parents, then why do the Pandavas not obey the revocation of her statement? It should be noted that there is not general consensus on whether this revocation was actually uttered.
25. Nalayani was married to a filthy, repulsive and despotic sage. She, however, as proper a Hindu wife should, behaved impeccably and treated him with the respect due to him as her *pati-parmeshwar* [husband as god]. Years later, he shows his true form and just like Beauty and the Beast, he is really young and handsome. For her faithful service, he gives her a boon. She wishes that "he love her as five men, in five different forms, yet always coming back to and merging into one". The young couple are happy until he decided he wants to go into solitary meditation. Nalayani, not happy with his decision, meditates and in return for this, she is granted a boon from the gods. She states that she wants her husband—however, she states "my husband" five times. Therefore, the gods decree that she will be reborn and marry five husbands, hence, her rebirth as Draupadi.

There is a subtle yet important nuance here. As a proper wife, she should assist her husband to achieve his dharma. Yet, due to Nalayani's love for her husband, she cannot bear to be separated from him. To be true to her dharma, should she pray for and support his pursuit of dharma or should she pray for his return as her husband? One needs to further examine her motives for desiring his return. Is it love for him or her unwillingness to live alone? As his wife, should her concern for his salvation through the achievement of dharma and thereby fulfilling her dharma or is it appropriate for her to want his return?

It is interesting that polyandry is introduced here. Why should the gods insist on five separate husbands, and not her original wish of her husband loving "her as five men"? It could be argued that the five Pandava brothers constitute an essence as they are brothers, but I would argue against this interpretation. As an alternative interpretation I would suggest that marrying five brothers keeps her sexuality with the family. Is polyandry introduced here as it is present within society? Or is it used as a subtle means of controlling women's sexuality? Draupadi resides with only one husband at a time, in annual cycles—would this then be considered serial or sequential monogamy? Polygamy, in its current form, does not incorporate a one-woman-at-a-time concept. The man is free to sexually engage all the wives at his pleasure. The reason given for Draupadi taking one husband at a time is to alleviate any tension among the men. However, why is this not incorporated for polygamy? Is it not as important to alleviate tension among the women? It is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this article to deconstruct the concept of polyandry in relation to female sexuality.

26. Lal, P., translated, *The Mahabharata of Vyasa*, (Vikas Publishing House Pvt., Ltd.: New Delhi, 1980), 158.
27. Another example of the restrictions placed on women based on the 'sexual fickleness' of women, according to Manu, as discussed in the next section.
28. Lal, *op. cit.*, 158-159.
29. *Ibid.*, 27.
30. *Ibid.*, 145.
31. *Ibid.*, 145.
32. *Ibid.*, 27.
33. *Ibid.*, 132.
34. *Ibid.*, 132.
35. *Ibid.*, 132.
36. If a man can only have one wife, how is it that a woman can dare to have more?
37. Lal, *op. cit.*, 132.
38. This brings up another subtle nuance of *dharma*. Which is the Pandava's greater duty: to their elder brother, Yudhisthira, who has lost everything and has then staked their wife in a game of dice, or is it to their loyal and chaste wife who is being mistreated in front of them? If duty to an elder brother supersedes their duty to their wife, is there a point where they would have intervened to protect Draupadi? What if she had been raped or killed before their eyes? Would the Pandavas have allowed that and then avenged her death? One also needs to examine why they would have avenged her death. Is it because it was wrong to deprive her of her virtue and/or her life or would it have been to protect their honor as men and warriors as a possession of theirs had been mishandled? The bottom line appears to be: where does loyalty to the wife fall in the pecking order of *dharma*?
39. Lal, *op. cit.*, 142.
40. Mitter, Sara, *Dharma's Daughters* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1991), 93.
41. *Ibid.*, 96.
42. Doniger, Wendy, translated, with Brian K. Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, (Penguin Group: London, 1991), 197.
43. *Ibid.*, 197-198.
44. *Ibid.*, 198.
45. *Ibid.*, 208.
46. Narasimhan, Sakuntala, *Sati: Widow Burning in India*, (Anchor Books: New York, 1990), 55.
47. Census of India, 1981, Series 1, Part 3A, General Economic Tables, Office of Registrar, General and Census Commissioner as cited in a publication by the government, Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Welfare.
48. Narasimhan, *op. cit.*, 149.
49. *Ibid.*, 149.
50. *Ibid.*, 58.

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