

Women of India

A sermon by Dr. Mandakranta Bose, University of British Columbia

March 9, 2014

© 2014 Unitarian Church of Vancouver

When I speak of the women of India, I am speaking of a vastly varied population. Although the people of India belong to the same political system and share many social customs, they come from diverse faith systems, such as the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain and aboriginal communities. Despite the leveling influence of a democratic society, their religious roots do influence how they live.

Let me begin with something a lady said to me after a lecture at a church a few years ago; with great anxiety she asked me what I would do if my husband died before me. Would I not have to follow him on to his burning pyre? She didn't quite believe my assurance that this was not to be my fate.

That, I am afraid, is how many outsiders see India. There is a general feeling outside India that India is still in the dark ages or perhaps only just now emerging into modernity, that it is a nation whose millions of women are an oppressed lot dominated by their men folk, made docile by centuries of social and religious misogyny, and have little or no control over their own lives. Like all generalizations, this view is both right and wrong. True, there have been long periods in the history of India when women—of all communities—have lived under duress, and this balances out the freedom and respect enjoyed by women in ancient times, in scholarly roles (*brahmavādinīs* or seers) as well as domestic ones (*sadyavadhūs* or housewives): it was not an empty declaration that the ancient sage Manu made: "a woman is the light of the home (*gṛhadīptayah*); where women are valued, there reside the gods (*yatra nāryastu pūjyante tatra ramante devatāh*)."

I won't go into a long historical discussion but let me note that through the medieval times into India's colonial past and even into the first decades of India's independence, women's lot was indeed dismal.

But what is happening now? Believe me, there has been a radical change. I won't claim that the women of India today have achieved full equivalence to men but I **will** say that they have almost as much freedom of choice today as women anywhere else in the free world. I said "almost as

much”, which may sound half-hearted but when you think of India’s centuries-long crises, that “almost” stands for a giant leap forward. Look at India’s corporate world, the professions, academia, and more importantly, the labour market and domestic workforce. A niece of mine is Google’s country head of communications in Delhi; another is a world-renowned art historian running a world-class research institute in Calcutta; another is an influential journalist. Closer to home, there is a woman from South India, a world-renowned mathematician, now teaching at the University of British Columbia half a year, and half a year in India. Yes, these are women from privileged backgrounds. But what about the woman who raised herself out of destitution by running a business of supplying household goods to my sister’s apartment block? Or the village women across the country who form co-ops or head local administrative bodies? It is on that level too, the level of common, unprivileged life that the revolution in women’s lives is taking place.

All of this still leaves women a long way to go before they achieve total social equality in India, the most important part of which is not just equality at law or job opportunities. A much more important and more deeply rooted matter is the emotional acceptance of women’s independent identity by everybody, men and women alike. You might recognize that women’s equality or parity is still a dream all over the world. Social prejudices and orthodox injunctions are higher obstacles to cross, for they are part of what we are taught through centuries by cultural precepts and practices.

Once again, it is a commonplace of sociological wisdom that it is religion that has made up the precepts and practices that leave the idea of women’s inferiority ingrained in men and women alike. Some say that the obvious solution is to reject religion and the spirituality at the heart of every religion, which is intangible but very real. Well, rejecting religion has been tried in many societies across the world, from post-War Europe to Stalin’s Russia, without making a dent in the armour of gender bigotry. Rather, women’s freedom has come through the opening of the heart, the oppressor’s as well as of the victim’s, to the human spirit that is our fundamental inheritance.

Just where does that inheritance come from? I can only speak as a woman born in the Hindu faith and I have no doubt that in confronting the challenges of being a woman in a still modernizing society, women in India can draw upon the vast resources of their faith. In its social culture, Hinduism does tend to be authoritarian and paternalistic, as do many other religious traditions,

and indeed all human institutions show the tendency to enslave individuals. As Rousseau said three hundred years ago, "Man is born free but is everywhere in chains" (*Le Contrat Social*, 1762). At the same time, Hinduism affirms in all of its teachings and its core worship practices the intimacy between the human and the divine. The 15th c Indian saint Kabir sang, "How can the thread tying me to you possibly break? (*mohi tohi lāgi kaise chuṭe?*)", "My body and mind are grieved for the want of Thee! (*tumh biṇā dukhiyā deh re!*)".

You can imagine how fortifying that assurance is, especially when you are in a crisis situation. The Hindu belief system continually asserts this link between the worshipper and the godhead, formulating their intimacy in varied forms of personal relationships, most importantly that between mother and child and the deity and his female spouse. The 12th century woman poet Ākkā Mahadevī sang, "I love the beautiful one, The formless One, He has no death or decay, The beautiful, the fearless, the dauntless One, Beyond birth is He. . . ". In the 16th century, another woman poet, Mirābāī, wrote, "I am coloured by love for the Dark One (Kṛṣṇa), coloured by love for the Dark One (Kṛṣṇa). . . ". As you can see, these are relationships particularly within women's province and valorize their particular abilities. Why would they not find strength in their belief?

But behind this emotional resource for women stands the essential theology of Hinduism with its assertion of the centrality of the feminine within its philosophical scheme of being and becoming. Not only are women idealized as partners of the divine spirit, as you will find in the art and poetry of the schools of devotion to Kṛṣṇa and Śiva, to mention only two major traditions. In addition, Hindus believe that the feminine spirit is at the heart of creation. Devotion to the Great Mother Goddess, Śakti, is universal. A common prayer is: "O Goddess, the remover of afflictions of the suppliants be pleased. O the mother of the whole world, be pleased. O the queen of the universe be pleased; protect the universe. O Goddess, you are the mistress of the movables and immovables" ("*devī prapannārtihare prasīda, prasīda mātārjagato'khalasya, tvamīśvarī devī carācarasya*") and to the pious, every woman is Her earthly form. In Tantra literature we find, "Every woman, O Goddess, is your very form, you body concealed within the universe. . ." ("*tava svarūpā ramaṇī jagati ācchanna vighrahā. . .*"), "Woman is the creator of universe; the universe is her form, Woman is the foundation of the world, Woman is her form," "There are neither any sacred formula nor any austerity comparable to [the value of] a woman. There are not, nor has there been, nor will there be any riches more valuable than a woman."

If that is true, you may well ask, why have women ever been treated as inferior beings? Besides answering that the ideal and the real hardly ever go together, let me say that the answer is a matter of social and political forces. Women are constrained within gender roles prescribed by social agendas or personal prejudice that replace both spiritual instincts and philosophical reasoning by manufacturing convenient religious doctrines. You might recognize a like-minded spirit in Tertullian, who thought that women were "the devil's gateway" ("On women's Apparel," chap. 2).

That 2nd century diatribe against women is echoed in much of the Hindu rhetoric of religious politics as also in Buddhist and Jain faiths. But it is counteracted by the enormously forceful theology of divine femininity that attributes all active power in the universe to the Great Goddess. A frequently hymn says: *“yā devī sarvabhūteṣu śaktirūpeṇa samsthitā, namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namoḥ”*, *“yā devī sarvabhūteṣu māṭṛrūpeṇa samsthitā, namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namoḥ,”* *“yā devī sarvabhūteṣu śāntirūpeṇa samsthitā, namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namoḥ,”* “I bow to Thee! I bow to Thee! I bow to Thee! O Goddess, who resides in every living being as power and energy, I bow to Thee!” “I bow to Thee! I bow to Thee! I bow to Thee! O Goddess, who resides in every living being as mother, I bow to Thee!” “I bow to Thee! I bow to Thee! I bow to Thee! O Goddess, who is the bringer of peace, I bow to Thee!”

So constant an awareness of feminine power and its worldly potentialities can give women the ability of self-determination and does so in the changed social system of modern-day India with its safeguards for women's rights.

How far has this liberation of women worked? That is still to be assessed fully, but the signs—to go by what women are doing in the public world of India and within their domestic relationships—tell of a world of accelerating self-realization and equality for the women of India today.

Om Śāntiḥ! Om Śāntiḥ! Om Śāntiḥ!