

FSR, Inc

Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns

Author(s): Sharada Sugirtharajah

Source: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall, 2002), pp. 97-104

Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of FSR, Inc

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002442>

Accessed: 17-09-2018 10:51 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



FSR, Inc, Indiana University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*

HINDUISM AND FEMINISM

Some Concerns

Sharada Sugirtharajah

I hope the concerns expressed in this brief essay will be of interest to both readers of and contributors to *JFSR*. Some of the issues are not particularly new but are worth raising because they tend to resurface in contemporary discourses.

Feminism: Definitional Ambiguities

As with the term Hinduism,¹ the label feminism, too, is problematic. Not all Indian women scholars are comfortable with the term feminism. Madhu Kishwar, the editor of *Manushi*, an Indian women's journal, rejects the term feminism because she finds all "isms" inadequate, and because the term is closely linked with the Western women's movement, but she has "no quarrel with western feminist movements in their own context."² Rather than being caught up in disentangling Western assumptions and nuances that go with the term, she prefers to dispense with it. Yet there are women's movements in India that have no problems with the label. Feminists such as Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan are less troubled by the foreign origin of the term but more concerned about what it stands for.³

Most of those who are happy to call themselves feminists have little to do with religion, and some prefer to distance themselves from it. They shy away from religion or dismiss it as being oppressive and restrictive. There are some

¹ The term Hindu, which comes from the Sanskrit word *Sindhu* referring to the river Indus, was initially used by Muslims to refer to those who lived near the river Indus. The term "Hinduism" is partly a Western construct, formulated by Orientalists who represented a loosely knit religious tradition as a unified system of beliefs and practices.

² Madhu Kishwar, "Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist," *Manushi* 61 (November–December 1990): 3.

³ Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan, *Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994), 4.

Indian feminists who deal with issues pertaining to Hindu women, but would not call themselves Hindu feminists, for they are looking at women's issues not necessarily from the standpoint of religion but in the context of their own disciplines. In fact, not many Hindu women scholars would like to call themselves feminists.

What I would like to emphasize is that while labels are useful, they are not without limitations, especially with a complex tradition such as Hinduism. The point is that Western conceptual categories are not fully applicable to the Indian context, which itself is complex given the diversity of geographical, linguistic, socio-economic, political, and other factors that apply. What I am indicating is that instead of working out a precise definition, it would be more helpful to spell out concerns as appropriate to the situation.

Hinduism as an Academic Subject

An academic study of religion is very much a Western exercise and would sound strange to many Hindus. This is partly because in India religion is not offered as an academic field of inquiry. Indian universities in the colonial period did not offer Hinduism as a subject. After Independence in 1947, in keeping with the mood of the time, secular education was mooted as a preferential option in a country replete with many religions. There are departments of Indian philosophy, Indology and other disciplines, but not Hindu Studies. Specialists in these fields are not interested in theorizing about religion, as is the case with Western scholars of religion. While most Western scholars of Hinduism tend to be trained scholars of religion, most Indian scholars who write about Hinduism or related topics tend to come from a variety of academic backgrounds. Indeed Hindus who speak and write about Hinduism tend to be gurus of different *sampradayas* (traditions) and laypeople who may or may not have a particular religious affiliation, rather than scholars of religion.

On the whole, most of the Indian scholars who write on Hindu subjects tend to be from other disciplines. For example, the recently published book *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India* (Oxford University Press, 2000) has Indian women contributors (both from India and the West) from diverse fields such as English literature, classical Sanskrit literature, journalism, history, psychology, comparative literature, Oriental studies, Intercultural, and Asian Studies. (Some of these are also women activists.) Departments of religion and divinity schools in the West offer courses on religious and theological studies, and have produced many Western women (as well as men) scholars of Hinduism, such as Diana Eck, Katherine Young, and Kim Knott, who act as spokespersons for the Hindu tradition both within and outside academia. By contrast, there are only a few Indian women scholars from the Hindu background in Western academia, such as Vasudha Narayanan, T. S.

Rukmani, and Lina Gupta, who are making valuable contributions. Also, a minority of South Asian diasporic scholars of Hinduism are now emerging from North American universities and making their presence felt. No such academic study of Hinduism has been undertaken in India, although some universities have begun to offer courses on religion (especially on Christianity and Shaivism). Nor are there any courses on Hindu “theology” or “Hindu feminist theology,” terms which, as we saw earlier, have limited purchase. Interestingly, in Indian theological seminaries “Hinduism” is studied as a subject more in a missionary sense, with an explicit or implicit aim of evangelizing the “Other.”

The paucity of scholars from the Hindu background does not mean that Hindus have not been engaged in public discourse. Nineteenth century colonial India saw the birth of exponents of Hinduism such as Ram Mohan Roy who were not products of academic institutions. They were keen to redefine the fundamentals of their religion in the face of colonial and missionary critiques of Hinduism. The process of self-definition was mainly played out in public discourses, not in academic institutions. Hindu reformers were not concerned with theorizing about the place of women but were practically engaged with issues that affected women.

Privileging Texts

Another issue concerns the predominantly text-oriented approach to Hinduism. There has been a tendency not only to confine the study of Hinduism to selective male-dominated texts, but also to interpret textual prescriptions as descriptions of actual reality. This preoccupation with the text has distracted most Western scholars of Hinduism from exploring or even considering other avenues such as dance, music, folklore, art and so forth, which offer a far more varied and realistic picture of women’s position in society. Religion, to the Hindu, is not limited only to texts, nor for that matter, to a set of beliefs or propositional truths or practices. Religion in the broadest sense covers all these areas, and therefore to confine it only to texts is to marginalize other equally valid repositories of Hinduism. Texts are important but not to the exclusion of these other sources. In fact, texts are not indispensable; they have ultimately to be transcended. Therefore, to restrict Hinduism to texts is to ignore other available sources and privilege scriptural sources. Such an approach does not work well with Hinduism.

There is also a tendency to see Hindu patriarchy in monolithic categories. My point is that there are both redeeming and enslaving features in patriarchal texts. There are ambivalences and contradictions even within a single text. For example, both Sita in the *Ramayana* and Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, figure as devoted wives to their husbands, yet their actions, when wronged by their husbands, challenge conventional patriarchal notions of wifely behavior. While

in classical versions of the epic there are instances of disruption of conventional patriarchal norms, in most women's retellings of the *Ramayana*, disruptions are the norm rather than the exception. It is only recently that women's oral versions of the *Ramayana* have gained some degree of visibility.

Despite the diversity of liberating textual perspectives on Hindu women, there has been a tendency to turn to heavily biased patriarchal treatises such as the *Dharmashastras* or the *Laws of Manu* in order to understand and assess how women are to be treated and positioned in the Hindu tradition. Both Western and Indian scholars conferred upon these under-used texts an authoritative status.⁴ *Tantric*, *bhakti*, and art texts that contain liberating images of women have hitherto been given scant attention. Androcentric texts such as the *Laws of Manu* should be read not only in conjunction with other male and female texts but also with other sources such as the visual, oral and performing arts, which offer positive images of women. What I have in mind is the Saidian notion of contrapuntal reading that involves reading texts simultaneously with other sources, a method that allows alternative interpretations, critiques and correctives to biased approaches, and offers redress to some of the hegemonic texts. A disengagement from a text-oriented study of Hinduism is emerging only now, and scholars are beginning to look at liberating texts and voices (both male and female) and non-textual sources in order to gain a greater understanding of the place of Hindu women from varied geographical, linguistic, caste, and class backgrounds.

Our Concerns, Their Concerns

The language of "rights" and "equality" is problematic when applied to the Hindu family or society, which is basically hierarchical in structure. Although women in India have far greater constitutional and legal rights, these rights remain unexploited for a variety of reasons. "Rights," "equality," and "individuality" as values per se cause no problems for Hindu women. Relationships within the family are regulated by *dharma* (duty). The notion of *dharma* has a wide range of meanings (such as duty, righteousness, eternal law, conduct, behavior, morality and so forth) and it has more to do with "duty" than with "rights." This applies equally to men and women who have a *dharma* to each other and to the family, but an undue emphasis has been placed on women's duty to their husbands. Furthermore, one's place within the family hierarchy has to do with age, gender and seniority. Both younger male and female members are expected to show deference to older members. The question is how does one affirm one's individual aspirations in the context of hierarchical rela-

⁴ See Sharada Sugirtharajah, "Courtly Text and Courting Sati," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 1 (spring 2000): 24–26.

tionships?⁵ In other words, how does one negotiate one's individuality or identity? In some cases both men and women have been equally disadvantaged. As with any other hierarchical system, the Hindu hierarchy has not been a static one; it continues to be negotiated from within, in explicit and implicit ways.

We have examples of subversion of gender and caste hierarchy in *bhakti* or devotional movements that challenged brahminic hegemony, ritualism, and caste hierarchy. Although they did not make any significant impact at the social level, they afforded women and men a greater freedom in the religious realm. *Bhakti* allowed both women and men to relate to God in a personal way. In fact in these movements we find a reversal of gender roles. Men who desired to approach the male deity as their beloved felt free to imagine themselves as a woman yearning for her Lord. Women poet-saints such as Mirabai (sixteenth century) and Akka Mahadevi (twelfth century) did not conform to traditional notions of femininity. They did not consciously seek to promote a social message or contest gender inequality, but they challenged whatever stood in the way of their spiritual aspiration and devotion. Their conjugal status did not prevent them from taking an unconventional stance in the religious domain. In looking upon their chosen deity as their beloved/husband, they subverted established norms. Although they did not succeed in getting rid of caste and gender inequalities, they nevertheless challenged and disrupted them. But for some feminists, these women-saints were not model feminists, for they "did not talk of women's independence and equality as they ought to have" but "merely chose to substitute slavery to a husband for slavery to a God."⁶ Kishwar states: "Expecting Mirabai to be a feminist is as inappropriate as calling Gautama Buddha a Gandhian or Jesus Christ a civil libertarian."⁶ In Kishwar's view, subjecting these *bhakti* saints to Western feminist norms and criteria is a futile exercise and it serves no good purpose to look for modernist notions of gender equality in *bhakti* poetry, which

is not protest literature as the term is understood today. Nor does it carry an easily decipherable social message for other women. Most of it is celebration of an individual choice. Nor does it contain a call for an overall gender equality. To say this is not to view it as somehow inadequate. The idea of gender equality as a desirable and obtainable social and political ideal is a relatively new idea in human history, although in some societies it was occasionally envisaged much earlier in utopian writings. To look for its expression in contemporary terms by these women would be to do both the past and the present an injustice.⁷

⁵ Kishwar, 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Madhu Kishwar, "Introduction," *Manushi*, Tenth Anniversary Issue, *Women Bhakta Poets*, 50–52 (January–June 1989): 7.

Indian Men and Women's Movements

Another issue that needs to be borne in mind is that in India, women's issues have never been seen exclusively as the domain of women. Some Indian men have espoused and championed the cause of women. During the colonial period, as indicated earlier, Indian social "reformers" were at the forefront of women's emancipation. They campaigned against child marriage and *sati* (self-immolation of the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband), and for widow remarriage and women's right to own property. They also challenged negative colonial and missionary representations of Hinduism and Hindu women. Drawing on Orientalist constructions of the imagined glorious Indian past, Indian men tried to demonstrate that Hindu women had an exalted position in their ancient *Vedic* texts. They challenged the proponents of *sati* by producing scriptural warrant against it, and they played a key role in banning the practice. This is not the place to engage in a lengthy critique of men's role, but what I would like to point out is that their patriarchal orientation did not prevent men from advocating women's cause, although their notion of women's freedom was largely directed and constrained by male-centered values. Their espousal of women's cause was simultaneously emancipatory and enslaving. True, men were supportive of women's education but they saw it more in terms of producing efficient wives and good mothers. However, with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian national scene, we note a different scenario emerging, where women joined men in the struggle for freedom from colonial rule. Gandhi, too, was operating according to traditional categories of *stridharma* (duty of a wife to her husband), but the difference was that he was channelling women's *dharma* from the domestic sphere to the public domain. More to the point, he did not look upon the conventional role of a wife as being inferior or secondary. On the contrary, he valued the qualities such as non-violence, self-denial, self-sacrifice, and endurance that were normally associated with womanhood, and he expected men (including himself) to emulate these values in their struggle for freedom from colonial rule. He wanted men to cast off conventional "male" traits such as stubbornness, aggressiveness, competition, and greed and to replace them with the aforementioned "female" traits.

Now I would like briefly to dwell on the link between the masculine and the feminine. My purpose here is to reiterate the fact that women's questions are conjoined with men's. At the conceptual level, Hinduism affirms the spiritual equality and inseparability of male and female. As *Shakti*, the divine feminine power is already latent in the masculine, and without the activating power of *Shakti*, the masculine (Shiva) is rendered powerless. Hinduism is replete with a variety of feminine images ranging from gentler to fiercer forms, from the conventional to the unconventional. The feminine is associated with wisdom and fine arts (the goddess Sarasvati), wealth and prosperity (the goddess

Lakshmi) and power (the goddesses Kali and Durga), all of these aspects traditionally seen as male preserves. Men have no spiritual qualms in worshipping these goddesses, but whether their appropriation of the feminine at the devotional level makes them devoted husbands to their wives is a different story. What I would like to point out is that in the religious domain, the feminine is not exclusive to women nor the masculine exclusive to men. The feminine is very much intertwined with the lives of both men and women. Both Hindu men and women find empowerment in *Shakti*, the feminine force and energy. Both men and women are comfortable worshipping both male and female deities, although some, depending on their spiritual orientation, may be drawn to a particular deity. Feminine qualities are not confined to women. Even at the level of naming, it is not uncommon for men to have a combination of both female and male names such as Lakshmi Narayanan, Radha Krishnan, Sitaram, Jayaram and so forth. As we have seen in the *bhakti* tradition, men are free to adopt a feminine mode of relating to their male deity.

But more importantly, what is striking is the use of feminine images by men. Hindu men have been drawn to the goddess Kali who challenges all gender-based ideology. For example, Ramprasad, the Bengali mystic poet of the eighteenth century, and the nineteenth-century Bengali saint Ramakrishna were ardent devotees of the goddess Kali, and the twentieth-century South Indian Tamil poet Bharati took great delight in describing Kali's terrifying cosmic dance. All these men addressed Kali as Mother—an unconventional mother, one who destroys as well as creates, one who takes as well as gives life. She is associated with life and death and renewal of life. In her transcendental aspect, she is beyond all names and forms, but in her relation to the world she is *Devi*, the manifest one who is both terrifying and gracious, and whose wrath the British rulers feared.

Hindu devotion to the divine feminine shocked the Victorian morality and Puritan sensibilities of colonial administrators and missionaries, who not only derided it but perceived it as a sign of degeneration. Bengali Hindu men who worshiped the feminine were seen as effeminate, weak, miserable, vulnerable, passive, and lacking in martial skills and rationality. Such effeminate men, in the view of colonialists and missionaries, lacked a strength and toughness which only British masculinity could provide. While colonialists and missionaries saw little virtue in the worship of feminine deities, for Hindu men and women who were under colonial rule the feminine force or *shakti* was a source of empowerment. In fact, in the later stages of colonialism, British rule of India itself came to be seen as a violation of the feminine principle, and both men and women were involved in liberating Mother India (*Bharat Mata*) from foreign rule. Contemporary Indian women, too, turn to the goddess Kali for empowerment. Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia chose the name Kali for a femi-

nist publishing house they set up in Delhi.⁸ By contrast, militant Hindu women such as Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati summon feminine symbolism for promoting aggressive Hindu fundamentalism and nationalism. They are arguably more detrimental to women's solidarity. This brief essay does not permit me to engage in further discussion on the complex relationship between gender and religious fundamentalism.

Finally, let me reiterate some of the issues discussed in this essay:

It is important to bring out a variety of Hindu perspectives on women's issues, and to guard against homogenizing Hindu patriarchy.

There is a need to develop flexible conceptual frameworks that will redress the imbalance that has been caused by exclusive reliance on textual perspectives. Since religion to the Hindu is not restricted only to texts, it is important to explore a variety of non-textual domains in order to gain a fuller understanding of the role of Hindu women in family and society. For a creative and critical engagement with "feminist" concerns, we need to go beyond texts, as well as interact with Indian women scholars from varied academic backgrounds who have written extensively on issues concerning Hindu women in the context of their own disciplines. For a fruitful cross-cultural dialogue, we need to see and hear voices of more women scholars from the Hindu background.

It is important to avoid the kind of problem that sometimes surfaces in Hindu-Christian dialogue, which is that Hindus are often invited to address and respond to Christian agendas. It is often assumed that Hindu women are faced with the same problems as their Christian counterparts: for example, the ordination of women. Most Hindu women do not desire to become priests (a profession that has only a ritual status) and even most men from the priestly tradition undertake it as a matter of family duty or *dharma*, rather than out of any aspiration to become priests.

It is necessary to guard against replicating Orientalist representations of India, Hindu women and Hindu patriarchy. We don't need more Katherine Mayos.⁹ One is enough!

As a board member of *JFSR*, I welcome the opportunity to engage in cross-cultural dialogue as well as to look for distinctive contributions from scholars from varied academic and religious backgrounds. The aim is to promote interdisciplinary and cross-cultural reflection and thus bring fresh and challenging perspectives to the journal. With regard to Hinduism and feminism, I hope the issues discussed in the essay will serve as helpful pointers, and lead to further exploration and critical engagement.

⁸ R. Sarin, "Kali's Crusade against Ignorance," *Sunday* 13, no. 7 (December 22–28, 1985): 20.

⁹ See Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927), which caused a storm of controversy because of its Eurocentric portrayal of India. Gandhi referred to it as a "gutter inspector's report."