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1994: Year of the Family

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This year, 1994, designated "The Year of the Family" by the United Nations, will soon see the release from Vienna of a lovely little book called Family Issues as Seen by Different Religions, which presents how the major faith traditions seek to preserve family values in the face of modern problems. At the request of Father Luis M. Dolan, who coordinated the UN publication, we contributed a chapter from the Hindu perspective, with real-life "voices" from Archana Dongre of Los Angeles and Lavina Melwani of New York. I think you will enjoy reading from it below:

How is the Hindu concept of family experienced differently from that of other faiths? Only in the faiths of India does one encounter the tenet that we all experience a multitude of families in our journey toward God. In birth after birth we evolve, our tradition assures. In family after family we grow and mature and learn. Thus in the Hindu family we find that the past and the future are intricately bound together. How intricately? We know a Sri Lankan family who is certain that their daughter, now nine, is the father's deceased grandmother. In this community it is considered a very great blessing-especially if one has the privilege of being part of a fine, noble family-for a departed relation to be born again into its midst. There is a profound intuition that when relatives pass they will return, perhaps soon and perhaps in the very same home. So everyone watches for the telltale signs. How wonderful, the family feels, to care for grandma as she once cared for us!

This spiritual insight into rebirth extends the family concept beyond the present, binding the present to the past, and promising further continuity with the future. Many Hindu families are aware of such relationships. Many others will consciously seek to be born into a particular family, knowing life there will be fulfilling, secure and high-minded.

Voices: When a married daughter visits her parents' family, she is revered like a guest but showered with love like a daughter, with blessings and all the nice clothes as well as food the family can give. I had such a wonderful homecoming in India after I had lived for many years in the West. Such a homecoming of a few days is an emotionally gratifying, soul satisfying event for the girl, who carries those fond memories for life.

Hinduism teaches a constellation of principles which, if followed by husband and wife, make the bold assertion that preserving the marriage and the integrity of the family holds rewards that far outweigh benefits which they might expect from separation. Hinduism teaches them the ideals of dharma, which includes duty, selflessness, virtue and faith. When dharma is the shared ideal of every family member-as opposed to self-fulfillment or social-economic objectives-it is easier to navigate troubled waters, easier to persist in seasons of loss or lack, in times of emotional or mental difficulty.

Voices: Looking back to my early years, it was the scriptures that tied our family together. I would hear father and grandfather chanting the Vedic mantras together in the early hours of each day. Everyone I know held the highest esteem for the Vedas, the very voice of God, elders would say. I knew they were old, and everyone said they were profound. But it was not until I was in my teens that I really discovered the Upanishads. Such beauty, such profundity, such humor and insight I had never before or since known. I would spend hours with the texts, talking with my parents and friends, wondering myself how these men, so many thousands of years ago, had gained all that wisdom-more, it seemed to me then, than people had today. Through the years I have seen so many families whose lives revolve around the sacred texts. While all honor the Vedas, for others the heart is moved by the Gita, the epics, the Tirumurai or maybe their own family guru's writings, composed only decades ago. Whatever texts they are, it's quite clear in my experience that sacred texts do much to bind a family together in thought.

Then there is faith in karma. The Hindu family believes, in its heart, that even life's difficulties are part of God's purpose and the fruition of each member's past karmas. To go through things together is natural, expected, accepted. Breaking up, divorcing, separating-such reactions to stress don't resolve karmas that were brought into this life to go through. In fact, they make things worse, create new karmas and thus further need for perhaps even more sorrowful births. The belief in karma-the law by which our thoughts, words and deeds reap their natural reactions-helps hold a family together. Thus difficult experiences can be serenely endured by the practicing Hindu. Knowing this in her heart, a Hindu wife in Kuala

Lumpur can find solace in the midst of the death of a child. Knowing this in his heart, a Hindu father in Bangalore can sustain periods of privation and business failure. Each finds the strength to go on.

Voices: There is a beautiful word in the Hindi language: shukur, which means acceptance. Sometimes it's very hard to accept the cards life deals one, yet the Hindu belief in the acceptance of God's will makes it possible to bear incredible hardships. A young friend of mine's husband went into a coma after going in for preventive surgery. They gave him too much choloform, and he never came out of the coma. He was a young man, his children were young. In the beginning his wife was frantic, weeping all the time. Yet her beliefs were solid as a rock within her, gradually calming her. It's five years later, and she's picked up the pieces of her life. Yet she never forgets to have her pujas, her husband's picture is always there in the ritual ceremonies. His presence is there in the family. She seems to know that the soul cannot die, that his spirit lives on. Every year on his death anniversary we all gather for the ritual ceremonies. Everybody feels the grief, and each religion teaches you to cope in a different way. Her belief in the undying soul gives her a little solace. She constantly has the prayers and the satsangs at home and they help her in the changing patterns of her life.

To receive information on how to obtain a copy of this new UN book, send a note to me at Publisher's Desk, Hinduism Today, 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii 96746, USA, along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope.