My Turn
Category : July 1994
Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 1994

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Women: Exalted and Enslaved

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If Indian women were truly treated in accordance with Hindu beliefs and teachings, India would be a heaven on earth. Instead, many Hindus have formed a convenient duality where they worship women in temples but enslave them at home. Somehow the country that elected the world's first woman prime minister can still burn women alive for bringing insufficient dowries or kill baby girls rather than bear the expense of raising them. This irony is almost unbelievable in a culture where the goddess Durga (or Kali), the embodiment of female power, is one of the most revered deities. Indeed, Hinduism is filled with powerful portrayals of women-from Parvati, who won the love of Shiva, to Savitri, who outwitted Yama, the god of death.

Yet women in India are expected to model themselves, instead, after Sita, whose main role in the Ramayana was to be seen and not heard, who was asked by her husband to take an agni pariksha to prove her chastity, and yet was exiled into the forest by her husband because one solitary man questioned her virtue. This is not to say that Sita herself was a bad role mode. Her virtues of courage, strength in adversity and devotion to her husband are truly admirable. Yet, more often that not, her name is mentioned in the context that it is the woman's duty to accept quietly all the injustices meted to her by her husband or society.

Despite all the advances made by women, their situation is still one that must appall all but the hardest hearts. During the broadcast of the "Ramayana" series on Indian television, a man accused his wife of adultery and set her on fire to test her the way Sita had been tested. In many communities, a woman is still valued not on her talents or her intelligence, but on the amount of dowry she brings. And in some

places, there are women who would rather burn themselves alive on their husband's funeral pyres rather than lead the life that awaits a widow in their society.

A recent newspaper article reported that girls in India and other parts of Asia are still less likely to be educated than boys, and, if they fall ill, they are taken to a doctor less often and usually at a much later stage in the illness than are boys. Clearly, despite all the praises heaped upon Sita, women are worth much less in Hindu society than are men. The article also mentioned women who admitted to killing their female infants because they didn't want their daughters to suffer through the kinds of lives they had to lead.

But it is also not fair to blame only men for the troubles Indian women face. I have personally heard a devout Hindu woman who reads her Gita religiously every day advise a man that he would be better able to keep his wife in line if he gave her a good beating. It is also widely known that many women suffer extensively at the hands of their mother-in-law. Indeed, despite the fact that they had to suffer under the dowry system (or perhaps because of it) women are often the first to criticize a young bride for bringing an insufficient dowry.

Yet studies have found that women in countries like India often work harder and longer than men. The ancient Vedic concept of ardhangini clearly shows the belief that neither is superior between men and women, instead both form an integral part of the whole. Yet, many people ignore this Hindu tenet. Hindu women may not be treated any worse than women in other societies, but based on Hinduism's rich culture and teachings that honor womanhood, we would expect them to be treated better.

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