Books Bouy Up Hindu Women
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Delving into the domain of dharma's daring women, past and present

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If a sudden, a burgeoning interest in the status of Hindu women has produced a multiplicity of books. The resultant field of study is vast, with works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry and prose by both Hindus and non-Hindus. Fresh titles focus on the inspiring lives of women saints conveying the pinnacle of feminine potential--to be the "living Goddess." Others garble Hinduness and Indianness, or leave religion out all together. But virtually all present the traumas and triumphs of Hindu women in some fashion, whether they be crises of the past or advancements of the present.

To understand the struggles and progress of the Hindu woman, you need a feel for her historical relationships with society, religion, politics and economics. India's being a multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic country, its women often share the same concerns as her compatriots of other religions. Even in the Indo-Pakistani region, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh the concerns of women are oftentimes the same, only slightly altered by religion. Thus, readers often must study the status of Hindu women indirectly, through the "Indian" or "South Asian" woman.

Many nonfiction books delineate the general concepts. However, A.S. Altekar's The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization (378 pages, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi) is a well-rounded text, targeted towards the relationships between Hindu women and society. This interesting and informative work spans almost four-thousand years of experience.

Position of Women is superbly organized according to the principle divisions of a woman's life, taking one through discussions of issues such as "The Position of the Widow," "Dress and Ornaments," "Marriage and Divorce" and "Proprietary Rights." Although the author's study relies on surveys, his own voice and opinions lie latent in the text. Not all women will share his viewpoint. With this in mind, however, Position of Women offers thorough, clear and thought-provoking information.

To be frank, an analytical approach such as Altekar's can be tedious reading. The antidote for this pedantry is Timothy Conway's Women of Power and Grace (351 pages, Wake Up Press, $16.95). With lucid and lilting diction, Conway reveals the nature of the heroically spiritual woman by detailing the experiences of nine souls who gave up their lives to serve God through charity or mysticism. Out of the nine, four are Hindu, and five are saints of Christianity and Islam. The author not only contrasts ideas of sainthood, but also compares the stature of woman saints of various faiths.

Conway is generous in his unbiased praise. The love emanating from Hinduism's Amma Mata Amritanandamayi is as carefully told as the passions experienced by Christianity's

Saint Therese Neuman, offering readers an inspirational study into the lives of profoundly religious women.

Should your concerns center more on the political and economic forces that have affected the Hindu woman, try Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (372 pages, Kali for Women Press, $14.00). This study offers a rainbow of readable essays covering the cultural, social, religious and economic challenges faced by Indian women during British Christian rule, when patriarchy strongly imposed its precepts on all women in India. As each essay is written by a different author, Recasting Women gives a composite view of the struggles and changes in status of Indian women during the Raj.

The essays range from broad topics such as "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal" to the more case-specific issues in "Rural Women in Oudh 1917-1947: Bab Ram Chandra and the Women's Question." Such studies provide a detailed accounting of actual confrontations of Hindu women who found their rights and respect repressed.

Fiction is an even richer world, discussing woman's emotional and thought processes, a level that cannot be plumbed by even the deepest historical or sociological study. Fictional works disclose society's perceptions of her, as well as her picture of herself, in sometimes blushing blatancy.

A brazenly contemporary approach to literature is voiced in

Our Feet Walk the Sky (372 pages, Aunt Lute Books, $12.95), offering South Asian women a release from modern social restrictions, allowing them to forge spiritual connections within themselves and with each other. This international collection of short stories, poems and analytical studies from female authors attempts to blend both the conventional and individual experiences of all South Asian women. The first collection of its kind, the editors and writers should be commended for their boldness in printing in black and white the controversial ideas of sexuality and revolution that are often forbidden.

As a second generation Indian woman in the US, I could relate to most of the offerings, but a few simply disturbed me, being a raw collection of raunchy ideas echoing little of my life or the lives of of my friends. The crude nature of these entries make this book strictly for adults. Just when the book seems to be street-smart, we are assailed by long, cerebral essays equally out of sync with the common South Asian experience. That being said, Our Feet Walk the Sky will allow you a glimpse into what it is like to be a worldly-wise Hindu woman today.

Arranged Marriage by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (307 pages, Anchor, $21.00) focuses on the challenges of women in arranged marriages. These fictional stories for adults offer a glimpse into the relationships of Hindu women struggling to reconcile the transposition of tradition into modern life.

Although fiction, the images, characters and their reactions evoke a strong chord of reality. Rather than harp on the cliche topic of arranged marriage versus love marriage, the author has created eleven plausible women's lives which evade

stereotypes. We not only observe the wife's feelings against her cheating husband, but we also see how these feelings affect her relationships with other females and males of her world. These are the bonds that constitute so significantly a part of the identity and soul of the Hindu female's life.

Banerjee opens with challenges faced by women, framed in the more traditional situations of India, and towards the end depicts women struggling in the fantasies of the modern and traditional makeup of their very soul. I like this book.

Buyers be Wary: Before you rush out to buy your next book on Hindu women, examine the wide-ranging options. You'll discover devotional offerings and dane and sometimes egregiously irreligious renderings. But that, avid readers, is Hinduism today.

PUBLISHERS

MOTILAL BANARSIDASS, 41 U.A. BUNGALOW ROAD, JAWAHAR NAGAR, 110 007, NEW DELHI, INDIA

THE WAKE UP PRESS, 222 MEIGS ROAD, SUITE #8, P.O. BOX 24156, SANTA BARBARA, CA 93121-4146 USA

KALI FOR WOMEN PRESS, A 36 GULMOHAR PARK, NEW DELHI, 110 049, INDIA

AUNT LUTE BOOKS, P.O. BOX 410687, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94141 USA

DOUBLEDAY (ANCHOR BOOKS), 1540 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, NY 10036 USA

NEW ISSUES PRESS, COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES, WESTERN MICH. UNIV., KALAMAZOO, MI 49008 USA

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Julie Rajan, a Madurai-born Hindu living in Philadelphia, strengthens the distaff staff at HT, joining Lavina, Archana, Choodie, Prabha and Madhu. She broke our Pat Robertson story in 1993.

Donnish Delights

Winnowing the world of words on women

"Women and Religion in India," by Nancy Auer Falk (New Issues Press, Michigan). An impressively comprehensive annotated bibliography of 1,015 English literary works from 1975-1992. Approximately 650 are by long-term residents of India. Topics range from legal provisions of Hindu law codes, to ritual, to the transformative experiences that have inspired some women to renounce all ties with family and world. Subjects range from wealthy women to the poorest poor, from women considered living Goddesses to housewives, and young girls caught up in prostitution. A must-have in all libraries.

"Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference1927-1990," by Aparna K. Basu and Bharati Ray (Manohar Publications, New Delhi). This fact-filled book details the instigation, development and achievements of the AIWC and its efforts, through 63 years of service, to make the voices and powers of women in India known. Extensive appendices make the book a rare reference on the subject, including short biographies of 46 eminent women.

"Women Saints of East and West"(Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, London). A collection of biographies of women saints

from Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Judaism and Sufism. This work is unique in its discussion of the position of women in each of the religions.

"Women in the Vedic Age," by Shakuntala Rao Shastri (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,Bombay). An intriguing and revealing study of the status and observances of women as indicated, and in some cases stipulated, in Vedic literature. The relationship of wife to husband and the rites of family and marriage constitute the primary focus, but you'll discover fascinating detail and verses you are not likely to have heard before.

"Great Women of India," by Swami Madhavananda and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, editors (Advaita Ashrama, Almora). A scholarly and in-depth look at women and their contributions to Indian culture, religion and history through essays written by Indian female scholars. This book is more expansive than Women Saints of East and West, being thoughtfully divided into large sections, such as "Women in Sanskrit Literature," "Women in Buddhism and Jainism" and "Women in the Modern Period." There is a welcome reliance on the wealth of Hindu scriptures. And chapters such as "Great Indian Women of the Nineteenth Century" provide ample chronicles of women's lives and balance out the historical themes. Buy them all and enjoy.