

[Some Changes - Especially for Women](#)

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Some Changes - Especially for Women

Perhaps the only sure thing I am going to share here is that men and women are different - and even that premise may be called into question by philosophically astute readers who could make a compelling case that, in essence and at the depth of their being, men and women alike are souls, and there are not male souls and female souls. Just souls. Distaff dharma has become part of a minor revolution for this paper.

In this issue, Hinduism Today inaugurates several changes designed to make our journal more useful to the Hindu public. We have increased from 16 pages each month to 20. This has two major advantages. Most importantly, the editors will no longer have to stammer defensively when confronted by intransigent writers who have worked diligently for days or weeks on a story, gathering data, collecting quotable quotes, checking facts, researching background, only to hear that there isn't enough space to present all that information and the article will have to be cut in half! Four more pages means more news. We have determined that actual news (not including columns, features, centerfold graphic posters and editorial page items) will be doubled in the larger edition. That benefit is somewhat neutralized this first month due to reprinting, by popular demand, our now famous four-page "Truth is One, Paths Are Many" center section. Starting in October, there will be a profusion of news, longer articles, larger photos and more graphics.

Another change is that our once quarterly Global Dharma News Digest will henceforth be printed monthly. It seems many readers are busy professionals who like their news brief and to the point, and they find a glance at this page gives them an overview of Hinduism in several nations. And they don't want to wait three months for the next news fix.

You may have noticed another change when you first opened your paper. It is folded differently, with page one showing. Sensible, no? For a long time we rationalized that putting the mailing label on page one would ruin its graphic

integrity. I can hear what you're thinking: "Boy, those so-called Desktop Publishing artisans finally saw the light. I could have told them years ago page one is always on the outside of a publication. That's why it's called page one." We know. We know.

The last change you will find in this issue is our new Women's page. Of all the changes, we find it the most fascinating, the most fervent, the most functional, the most forbidding. Why? Reasons abound. The name itself is a built-in time bomb. One of the first women we mentioned the new feature to scowled, "Oh, and so where's the page for men?" She's right to be indignant. Our paper is for the whole Hindu community, from front to back, and no one intends that because there is one page titled "Women" the other nineteen are for more serious readers (this to be read humorously, with appropriate disdain for male chauvinists, a protected species on the planet).

No, our purpose is quite the opposite. It is to provide editors and writers with a space where more information for women readers can appear. Information may include little-known village remedies like putting a handful of tumeric on a child's wound to stop the bleeding. Information will hopefully also include some tough issues and maybe some controversy-provoking opinions. Hindu women, like women everywhere, are in the midst of extraordinary changes. Fifteen percent of Hindu women live outside of India. But even in India they are entering careers, coping with new demands and needing new tools. Less than Islamic society but more than Swedish, Hindu culture is orthodox and conservative, and instinctively resistant to changing the position of women in any way. To a large extent, it is men protecting their turf, but women themselves are struggling to redefine their relationships, confronting contradictions in their own ideals. Among 325 million Hindu women, some certainly defend the strictest traditional ways and find blissful fulfillment in the home and family. Others, wanting full self-determination, are quietly making it clear they intend to compete on equal footing with men in science, medicine or business.

I believe that Hinduism has far more wisdom than any other tradition with which to tackle many of these issues. I also believe that Hindu men and women are, for spiritual reasons, more at ease with themselves and with each other. There is more insight that the man/woman dichotomy is not inherently a we-they conflict, but a means of mutual spiritual progress and growth. Some of this can be attributed to that unique quality of Hinduism which allows the Divine to be feminine as well as masculine (the male Deity rules in most of the world's pantheons). Then too, there is among Hindus an intuitive understanding of the karmic rules of the game, that

we all take male bodies and female bodies. If we are a man in this life, it may be wise to treat women well, for we can expect our own actions and attitudes to justly return when next we are born with two X chromosomes. The law is clear: what you give, you will get.

But all is not sweetness and light in Asia. Hindus are primates, like everyone else, and there are problems in these areas that need to be discussed, illuminated, argued over, criticized and redefined. A few indicators may help define where some of the bones are buried. When at Oxford in April, I asked a Jain nun her opinion about a debate that was going on among some leaders. She confessed, "My opinion matters little. I am a woman, and I am white." She had learned, to her resigned dismay, that a woman's place is to serve, not to express her thoughts. Other signs come to mind: increased divorce rates; unabating physical abuse of women in India; Pramukh Swami's notorious vow which requires him to refuse to speak with or even be in a room with a woman; Hare Krishna's medieval attitude toward women and family life (of which more in a future issue) and Indian laws which require a woman to be accompanied by her mother-in-law in order to visit a gynecologist (in the power-struggle view, mom represents her son's interests and thus deprives the wife of making her own decisions about private matters).
Interesting, no?

"The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its woman. The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence. Hindu women are very spiritual and very religious, perhaps more so than any other women of the world."

Swami Vivekananda