

A Reflection on the Challenges for Hindu Women in the Twenty-first Century¹

Neelima Shukla-Bhatt

Introduction

AT the turn of the 21st century, it is clear that religion is not an institution of the past; it continues to be a powerful force in societies across the world. For this reason, some purely secularist and sociological theories of religion of the early twentieth century, which led to a wide spread view that religion was on the decline in the modern times, have proved to be limited, even though they are helpful in examining the social aspects of religious life.² As Brian Hatcher suggests in a recent article, a major shortcoming of the secularist approaches to religion has been a purely dichotomous view of faith vs reason and tradition vs modernity. Instead of the demise of religion, Hatcher finds transformation of religion with changing times, as proposed by sociologist Damiele Hervieu-Leger a more helpful way to understand religious phenomena (Hatcher 2006: 54–55). An aspect of religion that is widely debated with regard to need for transformation is treatment of women.

In most organized religions of the world, women have not enjoyed equal rights with men. The norms assigned to them by male religious authorities have subjected them to various forms of marginalization. A major challenge for religious communities across the world today is to ensure that their religious practices and values are compatible with the ideal of gender equality as an aspect of the ideology of social justice, which is being widely upheld across the globe. While the ideology of social justice is shaped by multiple political, economic, and intellectual currents, many of which are purely secular, religious communities have begun to re-evaluate and modify the social norms they have held for centuries in light of this ideology. The modification of social norms involves a re-interpretation of religious texts in reference to whose authority the norms were established. Defining women's roles is an area in which the need for such modification has been most acutely felt. In many communities, women themselves are taking active interest in the process of re-interpretation, creating a current of faith-based feminism.

In the Islamic tradition, Laleh Bakhtiar's translation of the holy

Quran, *Sublime Quran* (2007) provides one example of such feminism. Indonesian Muslim women's participation in religious leadership provides another.³ Christian feminism has not only been a subject of several books and articles written by feminist theologians, it has also stirred the issue to women's leadership in many denominations.⁴ The feminist interpreters of religious sources recognize that historically women have suffered injustice in their communities. They maintain however, that this is because men have had the monopoly of interpreting the texts and defining norms for women based on their interpretations. They argue for equal rights of women not by severing their ties with their faith but by re-interpreting religious texts and practices from a feminist perspective. Their task is not easy. On the one hand, they are challenged by orthodox groups within their own religious traditions. On the other hand, they find themselves in debate with those secular feminists who think that feminism cannot be reconciled with religion since religion itself has been the main source of women's oppression. Even though the faith-based feminists have not been greatly successful in getting fully integrated in feminist movements, the debates they have stirred have drawn attention of some thinkers. A well known human rights leader, Dorothy Q. Thomas, recognizes faith-based feminism as an important voice in feminist movements.

Attempting to bridge secular and faith-based feminism is very important. Women of faith feel that the rights movement is anti-religious and the rights activists haven't made enough effort to listen to and include the women of faith. The social justice movement needs both voices. We need to be able to move to the next step, the rights world and the religious world.⁵

Thus, the debate about faith-based feminism has proved to be both a challenge and an opportunity for religious women in some communities. In the Hindu context, the issue of women's equal rights and empowerment seems to have taken a different trajectory. Even though feminist interpretations of goddess traditions and Hindu women's practices prevail in academic writings, the concept of faith-based feminism is not wide-spread among practicing Hindu women.⁶ A major challenge for them appears to be development of awareness about and argument for such a possibility. In the following short reflection, I attempt to delineate broadly some issues faced by Hindu women in the contemporary times and briefly discuss the resources that they may choose to re-interpret for their empowerment. While sweeping generalizations about Hindu

women in India and around the world are apparently not possible, it is possible to observe some broad patterns in their lives in current times.

In examining Hindu women's issues in the twenty first century, an important factor to consider is the paradoxical implications of modernity and/or post-modernity for their lives. These implications are related to their challenge to create a space for re-interpretation of their religious resources from a feminist perspective. While the focus of this reflection is the twenty-first century, a quick reference to Hindu women's early encounter with modernity helps in understanding its paradoxical implications for them.

Early Encounter with Modernity

Hindu women's early encounters with modernity occurred in the context of the British colonization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through what are known as "Hindu reform movements." These reform movements, which developed largely in response to the British colonial presence and engagement with Christianity, focused a great deal on the issues of women. Two features of these early movements are worth noting. First, in spite of being strongly patriotic, the leaders of these movements were able to work collaboratively with "Westerners" (chiefly, British officials) in introducing landmark reforms that had positive implications for women's lives. Second, even though arguing passionately for reforms within Hindu society, the leaders generally supported their arguments drawing attention to passages from ancient texts, which they re-interpreted in the light of modernity. The leader of an early movement, Brahmo Samaj, Ram Mohun Roy, sought support from British official William Bentinck in his efforts to secure legal abolition of the practice of sati (the practice in which a Hindu widow burned herself to death climbing the funeral pyre of her husband either voluntarily or by coercion). The legal act abolishing the practice, which was passed in 1829, is considered a landmark in the history of modern India. It is notable that in Roy's writings supporting this act, he put passages from sacred texts of moral codes (*dharma sastras*) advocating and opposing sati in debate. He concluded on the authority of the code of Manu, which recommends a simple life for a widow, that sati was not recommended for a Hindu widow. Further, referring to ancient mystical texts—the Upanishads—which recommend eternal liberation of the soul rather than temporary residence in heaven, Roy suggested that since sati only ensures the latter, it is not a spiritual practice of great merit.⁷ Thus, Roy advocated a social change for liberation of women from a cruel

custom by re-interpreting authoritative Hindu sacred texts.

A century later, during the period of nationalist movements for independence in the early twentieth century, Gandhi became a prominent ideologue for women's status and role in society. Even though the tone by now was more of resistance than collaboration with the British officials, the trend of re-interpretation of traditional concepts continued. Gandhi advocated looking at the *smritis* (Hindu sacred texts and code books) in light of the principle of non-violence, which in his view, included equal rights for women. He suggested that all that was "repugnant to the moral sense" in these texts, should not be viewed as divinely inspired. In one place, he went on to suggest that women with pure moral character—similar to that of the heroines of Indian epics, Sita and Draupadi—should be viewed as having the same moral authority as *smritis*. He also referred to Hindu woman saint princess Mira as a model of bravery to support women's participation in public life.⁸ A large number of women joined the freedom movement and social reform work led by Gandhi. Like early reform movements, the re-interpretive lens of Gandhian movement also privileged the religious concepts of the elite rather than popular practices of Hindu women. Further, in many ways the re-interpretation of Gandhians was based on a male conception of idealized Hindu women. However, its appeal filtered through many layers of society and mobilized a large number of Hindu women to take up the opportunity to redefine their roles in society and participate in the freedom movements. Thus, in the pre-independence period, some prominent male leaders used re-interpretive lens to secure for Hindu women positions as more equal members in the society. However limited their overall vision of women's rights, it was based in an interpretive and integrative imagination. Apart from these male leaders, an eloquent woman leader, Sarojini Naidu, also spoke of women's rights evoking the heroines of epic traditions. In doing so, she presented feminist aspirations as supported by tradition.⁹

Post-colonial India

In the decades after independence and continuing to the contemporary time, transformation of traditional values has remained an ongoing process within the Hindu society. However, in the more recent times, the propelling forces behind a large number of changes appear to be a variety of economic, political and social currents. The feminist initiatives and movements have been largely secular. The initiatives for women's empowerment are not necessarily accompanied by a drive to re-interpret

traditional religious resources. With the backdrop of the British rule gone, the inspiration to use interpretive and integrative imagination in dealing with Hindu women's issues seems to have receded. While many female Hindu gurus traverse the world as charismatic figures, the drive to interpret the tradition in order to empower lay women through multiple layers of the society seems to be overshadowed by purely economic and political motivations. Emerging in the midst of immense religious and linguistic diversities, feminist movements in India have remained busy in dealing with practical issues of providing legal, social, as well as, economic support for female victims of violence of various types. In a way, the purely secular nature of feminist movements has helped to bring women from a variety of backgrounds together for common concerns. At the same time, this has also had paradoxical implications for women within specific communities, including the Hindu community.

During the post-independence decades, educational opportunities for women have increased. In the educated middle classes of the Hindu society, a large number of women have been able to enter the work force and enjoy economic independence. They enjoy considerable freedom in selecting their partners in marriage and live in nuclear families after marriage. Their lives present a notable departure from the life style of traditional women who lived in large joint families just fifty years ago. They are not expected to fulfill their wifely duties by observing a number of religious rites and serving extended families in the same manner as their mothers and grandmothers were expected to do. They support their husbands financially and contribute to the education of the children. Even though most of these women continue to have a religious life, its nature has transformed from more community based practices to practices of individual choice. On the one hand, this has given women a great sense of empowerment. Yet, on the other, one implication of this freedom is a weakening of their ties with the social networks that provide a strong support system in the traditional Hindu milieu. This is especially important in the context of the Hindu tradition because except in the sectarian groups, it has neither a central authority, nor churches or worship places with formal membership. Women's rituals, even though modeled on male notions of idealized femininity and reinforcing patriarchal norms for that reason, have traditionally provided spaces for expression of women's concerns in a rather informal way. Women gathered at a shrine or in someone's home to perform a votive rite would inevitably form a support group for themselves. For many educated working women, secular spaces such as office lounges and social networks of colleagues have replaced these traditional spaces for close

bonding. While the new networks are empowering for working women, an indirect outcome of this situation is that the cultural gap between the educated middle class and their sisters in the lower economic classes, especially of rural areas, is growing wide.

Roles for Hindu women in some pockets of the society, especially in remote rural areas have not undergone extensive changes. In these areas, the literacy rates among women are poor. Yet, with the accessibility to technological advances such as sonogram in nearby cities, abortion of female fetus is not uncommon even in these areas, especially in the castes that have the practice of dowry. Many privileged Hindu women are involved with NGOs working to bring about change and awareness among underprivileged women. However, the cultural continuity based on shared practices and related vocabulary, a platform for communication among women in the traditional context, is gradually fading. It is not that the register of religion is the only channel to communicate with rural women; but it is a powerful one and could provide an opening for communication regarding re-interpretation of their traditional roles.

A further paradox related to these situations has to do with politicization of Hindu identity by Hindu nationalist groups, many of which are orthodox in interpretation of their own tradition and intolerant of non-Hindu communities. These groups are successful in manipulating religiosity of some women. As the above quote of Dorothy Q. Thomas suggests, religious women in many communities feel left out in the purely secular feminist discourses. Traditional Hindu women are no exception. Some of these women find opportunities for participation in public life in Hindu nationalist groups. Women joining such groups are presented as protectors of the tradition against the non-Hindu "other," including the secular. At the other end of the spectrum from these women are women of Hindu background who think that in order to establish a commitment to secularism, they must clearly distance themselves from their religion. The space for negotiating female empowerment through re-interpretation of traditional religious resources becomes fairly narrow in the process. In *History of Doing*, Radha Kumar refers to a failure of co-ordination among multiple groups which spoke against glorification of a young woman's death on her husband's pyre as *sati* by her in-laws and members of her community in rural Rajasthan in 1987. Many rural women also joined demonstrations against such glorification. Some women joined pro-*sati* demonstrations. Yet, a number of pro-*sati* demonstrators drew a firm line between worship of a *sati* (at a shrine) and the actual practice of a woman's death on her husband's pyre. Kumar perceptively recognizes one of the issues to be the ambiva-

lence regarding relationship between secularism and religious representation (Kumar 1993: 178–181). Perhaps, if practices such as *sati* are a matter of re-interpretation and a conversation among a variety of feminist voices, a stronger partnership would emerge.

Religion continues to play a powerful role in social life across the world. It is therefore, important that women engage in interpreting it to negotiate their rights. If Hindu women wish to find ways to express some of their feminist aspirations using resources from their religious tradition, it will be crucial for them to use “interpretive and integrative imagination.” This will demand constructive re-interpretation of traditional resources and integration of the new interpretations at practical level with courage. Such an effort can also open a space for dialog with women in other religious communities who are already engaged in similar tasks of re-interpretation.

The question is: does Hinduism allow such a possibility? As is well known, caste and gender norms set by the religious elite of Hindu communities have historically led to acute injustice to low caste people and women. In some circles in India and beyond, these norms are seen as essential features of the Hindu tradition that cannot undergo change. As a result, in public discourses about the Hindu tradition/s either bitter critique or defensive apology or extreme glorification dominates. The perspective on religious phenomena as processes in history, which allows room for transformation based on constructive re-interpretation by human agents, is missing in these discourses. If Hindu women choose to move away from this essentialized view of their tradition and explore the possibilities of developing faith-based currents of feminism, the absence of central authority and a single authoritative text in their tradition can be of much help to them. These aspects of their tradition make it open to multiple interpretations as well as additions and subtractions. It is possible for Hindu women to engage in debates regarding the infamous passages from the code of Manu that declare women’s dependence on men as essential for a healthy society and are in contradiction with passages in the same text that stress women’s happiness as the core of happy family life.¹⁰

It is also possible for Hindu women to constructively explore the potential of their goddess traditions, which have been viewed by many feminists as non-consequential because of the historical subjugation of women in the Hindu society.¹¹ History however, often changes course with will and action of human agents. Hymns to the all pervading goddess that refer to women as embodiment of universal energy can provide a basis for an argument for empowerment of women. Additionally,

Hindu women could also re-interpret their popular practices as sources for empowerment. For example, *garbo* dance from Gujarat region in India, which is a dance of goddess worship traditionally performed by women, has many dimensions that can be used constructively to claim women's empowerment.¹² A large number of songs for *garbo* refer to women as the friends of the goddess; in many other women express their grievances as well as their defiance of powerful people in their worlds, such as in-laws and employers.¹³ Unfortunately, *garbo* as a popular dance has been taken over by commercial ventures on a big scale, while its potential to create bonds among women and to empower them have remained largely untapped.

Whether a woman wishes to be religious or the way in which she embraces religion is a matter of individual choice. But for women in whose lives religion is an important component, participating in its interpretation from a feminist perspective can be an empowering experience. Like their sisters in other traditions, Hindu women could express their aspirations for equality with men in their society through re-interpretation of some resources of their tradition. Using interpretive and integrative imagination in relation to religious sources does not have to imply that traditional Hindu women's quest for empowerment would become exclusively faith-based. Instead, it could provide one of the many avenues through which they can strive to get equal rights and leadership roles along with men. Hindu women can attempt to add a faith-based current to their own feminist aspirations and to the larger feminist discourses, all of which ultimately aim for greater rights for women in their respective societies. This perhaps is an important challenge for practicing Hindu women in our times.

References

- Coburn, Thomas. 1991. *Encountering the Goddess, A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of its Interpretation*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Cox, Harvey. 1965. *Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*. New York: Macmillan.
- Crawford, S. Cromwell. 1987. *Ram Mohun Roy: Social, Political and Religious Reform in the 19th Century India*. New York: Paragon House Publishers.
- Doorn-Harder, Pieterella van. 2006. *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Gandhi, M. K. 1950. *Hindu Dharma*. Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan.
- Gandhi, M. K. 1959. *Women's Role in Society*. Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan.
- Hatcher, Brian. 2006. "Remembering Rammohan: An Essay on the (re-)emergence of Modern Hinduism", *History of Religions*, Vol. 46, No. 1: 50–80.
- Hunt, Helen LaKelly. 2004. *Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance*. New York: Atria Books.

- Kinsley, David R. 1988. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Kumar, Radha. 1993. *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990*. Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Laws of Manu*. Wendy Doniger, trans. 1991. London: Penguin Books
- Pearson, Anne Mackenzie. 1996. *Because it Gives me Peace of Mind: Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Pintchman, Tracy. 2005. *Guests at God's Wedding: Celebrating Kartik among the Women of Benares*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Ratte, Lou. 1985. "Goddesses, Mothers, and Heroines: Hindu Women and the Feminine in the Early Nationalist Movement" in *Women, Religion, and Social Change*. eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly, 351–376. Albany: State University of New York.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1998. *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*. Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Ruether, Rosemary R. 1998. *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Sublime Quran*. Laleh Bakhtiar, trans. 2007. Chicago: Kazi Publications.
- Weidman, Judith L. 1984. *Christian Feminism : Visions of a New Humanity*. Cambridge, MA: Harper and Row.

Notes

¹ This essay is based on a presentation made in the "Religion, Women, and Society" panel in the conference "East/West in Dialogue: Religious Perspectives on Global Issues in the 21st Century," held at Wellesley College, Wellesley MA on Oct. 19th, 2008. Extensive changes or additions are not made here; therefore, it is in reflection format. The conference was organized collaboratively by the office of the Dean of Religious Life, Wellesley College, and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, Japan. I am grateful to the organizers for the opportunity.

² In 1965, Harvey Cox discussed in his book *Secular City* the rise of urban secularism as raising important ethical issues as it also signaled the collapse of traditional religion. In 2007, during a television interview on PBS, he commented on an increased interest and participation in religion on Harvard campus, even though he still maintained his estimation of atheism as a positive force in discourses on ethics. The transcript of Cox's interview is available at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1019/interview1.html>

³ Laleh Bakhtiar's translation of the Quran, *Sublime Quran* (2007), which interprets passages of the Quran related to women in an empowering way for women, is well received. Muslim women's participation in the interpretation of the Quran and their leadership roles approved by religious organizations Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama are discussed in a penetrating manner by Pieternella van Doorn-Harder in *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia* (2006).

⁴ Writings of theologians like Rosemary Ruether—*Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (1998), *Women and Redemption* (1998)—propose that feminism and faith are not incompatible. Articles in *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity*, edited by Judith L. Weidman (1984) also make a similar point.

⁵ Dorothy Q. Thomas as cited by Helen L. Hunt in *Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance* (2004). In her book, Hunt recounts lives of five historical women since the late

medieval period (including St. Teresa of Avila, Emily Dickinson, and Dorothy Day), who were able to synthesize their faith with their feminist convictions and argues that faith and feminism are in fact, expressions of the same impulse to connect and be inclusive.

⁶ Examples of well received academic writings on Hindu goddess traditions are provided David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (1988) and John Stratton Hawley and Donna Wulff, eds., *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (1986), and of writings on the religious practices of Hindu women are provided by Tracy Pintchman, *Guests at God's Wedding: Celebrating Kartik among the Women of Benares* (2005) and Anne Mackenzie Pearson *Because it Gives me Peace of Mind: Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women* (1996).

⁷ For a discussion of Roy's arguments regarding sati, see S. Cromwell Crawford's Ram Mohun Roy: *Social, Political and Religious Reform in the 19th Century India* (1987) p. 106

⁸ For Gandhi's views on Hindu women and smritis, see M. K. Gandhi, *Women's Role in Society* (1959: 5–6) as well as *Hindu Dharma* (1950: 431). For Gandhi's reference to Mira's bold non-cooperation with her in-laws see M. K. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol. XVIII (1920: 125–127).

⁹ For a discussion of Naidu's appeal, see Lou Ratte (1985: 365–370)

¹⁰ The verses that prescribe dependence of women on men in Laws of Manu are 5. 147–148; 9.2–3, 10–18 and verses prescribing women's happiness as being crucial to family life are 3. 55–58, 60–62. See *Laws of Manu*, Wendy Doniger, trans. (1991: 48–49, 115, 197–198).

¹¹ In January 2009, I had an opportunity to meet an Indian feminist, who thought that the presence of goddesses in Hinduism is non-consequential because even though there are goddesses of prosperity, knowledge and power in this tradition, women in Hindu society are poor, lagging in education, and powerless.

¹² A hymn of this type is found in the *Devi Mahatmya* 11.1–34. Verse 11.5 identifies each woman with the all powerful goddess. See *Encountering the Goddess*, trans. Thomas Coburn (1991: 73–77).

¹³ In my forthcoming work, I discuss songs of *garbo* dance in detail.