

2011

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Recommended Citation

Cox, Olivia (2011) "Harnessing Shakti: The Social Implications of Vedic and Classical Hindu Interpretations of Female Power," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 10 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol10/iss1/4>

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Harnessing Shakti: The Social Implications of Vedic and Classical Hindu Interpretations of Female Power

Olivia Cox

Understanding the tenets and worldviews of a tradition is undoubtedly vital in the study of religion; however, there is a limit to the knowledge we can gain by examining doctrinal concepts alone. Essential to the nature of a religion is the way it is practiced, and we begin to build an adequate understanding of a religion only when we consider the connection between religious principle and everyday reality. Indeed, recognizing the true depth of a religion requires us to broaden our focus past the theoretical framework of official texts and teachings to the applications of such teachings in the real world. In this paper, I will analyze the impacts of the “official” Hindu worldview—as expressed by religious authorities and in scripture—on Hindu women’s social status.

A historical perspective is necessary to sufficiently illuminate the links between Hindu religious ideas and societal gender roles; the only way to fully grasp the dynamic relationship between the spiritual belief system and gender identities of contemporary Hindu women is to study the development of that relationship from its earliest stages. A review of the different eras of the Hindu religion reveals a significant turning point between the early Vedic Periods of 1200 to 400 BCE and the following Classical Period from 400 BCE to 400 CE. The transition between these two periods represents a major shift in the way women were perceived both religiously and socially, with the Classical Period introducing significant restrictions on women’s social status. Even in the midst of this monumental altering of women’s roles, we can locate an essential common thread: the existence of female power (or shakti), construed mostly in the context of life-giving capacity, has been a constant across the ages in Hinduism. Whether during the golden age of women’s freedom in the Rgvedic Period or against the backdrop of repression and uncertainty in the Classical Period, shakti was never disputed. Thus, historical fluctuations in the religiously-mandated social position of Hindu women during the Vedic and Classical Periods should not be understood as consequences of debates over whether women possess power. I will argue that the adjustments in women’s social status from the Vedic era of Hinduism to the Classical occurred not because the existence of female power was ever repudiated, but because the political and social conditions of the Classical period motivated specific and distinct

interpretations of women's power.

In her "Women and Hinduism" chapter of the book *Women in Indian Religions*, Katherine K. Young defines the years 1200 to 800 BCE as the Rgvedic Period, a time during which the earliest books of the Rgveda were being written and men and women enjoyed "considerable complementarity" (Young 5). In the Hinduism section of *Women's Voices in World Religions*, Madhu Khanna characterizes the Vedic period similarly, explaining that although the patrilineal nature of Vedic society manifested in small degrees, women were allotted a number of freedoms, including the right to participate in religious ceremonies and access to education (Khanna, 82). The defining feature of the Rgvedic period was its family orientation, and goals of progeny, prosperity, and longevity became pillars of religious life. As potential wives and mothers, women played key roles in attaining these goals; their importance was even acknowledged by the gods, who, during this period, were believed to accept offerings only in the presence of a wife and to require women to fulfill certain ritual purposes (Young 5). In this way, the effectiveness of ritual was at least partially dependent on the involvement of females, and women were actors who made essential contributions to the potency of ritual.

In addition, Mildred Worth Pinkham states in her *Woman in the Sacred Scriptures of Hinduism* that the goddesses as described in the RgVeda embodied societal family-centeredness. For instance, Prithivi, a goddess highly praised in the Rgveda, is described as "Mother Earth," the "all-producer," and is entreated to "give me life of long duration" (The Hymns of the Atharva-veda, in Pinkham 11). Similarly, the goddess Sarasvati is construed as a mother and is associated with rivers, which were ultimately sustainers of life for the people of the Rgvedic Period (Pinkham 12). Consideration of the goddess figures and rituals of the Rgvedic age reveals an important relationship between feminine divinities and human women: in a world where the highest social and religious aspirations involved children and family, women's life-giving capacities were celebrated because the goddess also possessed such capacities on a larger scale. In the Rgvedic Period, people recognized that an important parallel existed between women's fertility and the goddess' power, and earthly women were awarded certain rights and respect because of what they shared with the goddess.

A number of notable shifts in the Hindu attitude toward women occurred during the Middle and Late Vedic Periods (1200 until 400 BCE), foreshadowing the monumental changes to come in the Classical Period. An important element of the historical moment was increasing migration eastward from India into the Ganga Valley, which required clearing and farming new lands as well as cultural dif-

fusion and integration. As migration became more frequent, rituals became more complex and were split into categories of those conducted in the household and in public. In combination with a delegation of many ritual tasks to male priests of the upper Brahmin caste, this ritual division between private and public forms effectively “confined upper caste women’s ritual activity to the domestic sphere” (Young 6). Vedic education for girls was practically inaccessible since teaching commonly occurred in rare, special forest schools for ascetics; the norm was for girls to learn only what was required for domestic worship and the gestures that were necessary to perform their limited roles in public rituals. Women rarely officiated in public rituals, appearing instead as the wives and ritual partners of their husbands (Young 7). On the rare occasion that a woman did participate in public ritual, it was both acceptable and necessary for her to channel her power toward connecting with the gods, but in everyday life, she was forced to conform to the idea voiced in the Brahmanas that “women [are] dependent; whence women are sure to be attendant upon man” (*Sacred Books of the East*, in Pinkham, 61). As female ritual roles became increasingly limited, so did female gender identity, with women’s self-definition beginning to be rooted mostly in marriage and motherhood. The socio-religious roles of women were forced inward, erased from public view and banished almost exclusively to the domestic sphere.

Despite women’s minor roles in public rituals on the surface, ideas about women’s power remained embedded within ritual actions. Through a special gesture called “taking hold from behind,” women illustrated their fertility during rituals, and female fertility and sexuality were the basis upon which the purposes of ritual, including children and crops, could be fulfilled. In order for a ritual to contact the gods and achieve any benefits, participation of a wife was necessary (Young 7-8). This idea that life-giving wives and mothers serve as conduits to the gods is echoed in the Upanishads, a sacred text of the period, with the following statement: “Be one to whom a mother is as a god” (Hume in Pinkham, 69). This passage relates women to gods, thus scripturally asserting their importance in accessing the divine. Indeed, women’s involvement was so vital in rituals that ritual activity was often postponed when a woman’s menstrual impurity barred her from being present (Young 8).

The most important characteristics of the Middle and Late Vedic Periods were recognition of women’s power and more significantly, attempts to harness that power. As the sacred text the Brahmanas defined categories of purity and impurity were more strictly and women’s ritual roles became increasingly confined to the domestic sphere, a new socio-religious reality emerged in which the power

of upper-caste women was called upon only under certain circumstances. In her book *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, Julia Leslie points out that even under those circumstances, additional attempts were made to curb and control female power, such as the use of gold or *kusa*, a special kind of grass, to substitute a wife's presence in rituals (Leslie 42). Shakti was compartmentalized and strictly regulated in its limited realm of influence; it was micromanaged, confined to the domestic sphere and controlled strategically. Thus, the Middle and Late Vedic Periods represent the inception of a movement to use women's power selectively in certain public rituals and dominate it the rest of the time. Leslie effectively captures the tone of this period's approach to female power: "On the one hand, the power of woman's sexuality and reproductive capacity is constantly exalted. On the other hand, her role in the sacrifice—the avowed purpose of which is to secure the generation of offspring, the perpetuation of the cosmos, and the elevation of the sacrificer and his wife to heaven—is systematically reduced" (Leslie 22). This compulsion to calculatedly manage female power began in the Middle and Late Vedic periods and was the predecessor to the Classical era's more radical movement to cage shakti.

A key characteristic of the subsequent Classical period from 400 BCE to 400 CE was the dramatically shrinking social status of women, a phenomenon that was fueled by the Hindu religion and is apparent in the male-written sacred texts of the time, including the Puranas, the Laws of Manu, and the epics (*The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Mahabharata*, and *The Ramayana*). In the texts of the Classical Period, women and their bodies are described in a very different way than they were previously: during this period, the womb was understood as a vessel for male seed and not as a fertile field, impurity rather than fertility was emphasized, and, perhaps most importantly, the uneducated women of the upper-caste were considered *avidya*, "without knowledge," and were associated with the similarly unknowledgeable sudras, or lower-caste (Young 9). The Classical Period thus witnessed an unprecedented conception of women in which they were equated with the lowest realms of the social hierarchy.

If we consider the historical context of this religion-based deterioration of women's position in the Classical Period, it becomes clear that the redefinition of women's place in society was significantly linked to the political conditions of the time. The Classical period was undoubtedly a stressful one: with the encroachment of the new Buddhist and Jain religions (which had been founded by reforming Hinduism), the breakdown of various empires, and frequent foreign invasions, the Vedic tradition was decidedly in jeopardy (Young 10). According to Young,

religious elites (especially Brahmin priests) attempted to protect and maintain their threatened status by defining it as contingent upon knowledge of the Vedas. By making religious education a requirement for high social standing, elites legitimated their own positions and further subordinated those who did not have access to Vedic education, namely women and sudras (Young 10). This concept presented a contradiction in the case of high-caste women: they shared the mark of inferiority (a lack of knowledge) with the lower-caste and needed something to assert their social superiority. The indicators of Brahmin women became chastity and purity: consequently, if a woman wanted to protect her high-caste position, she conformed to the expectations of Brahmin men, which required her to control her sexuality (Young 10).

The web of ideas resulting from women as *avidya* (without knowledge) as well as other Hindu responses to the possibility of collapse (such as the outlawing of female asceticism) represent earnest efforts to maintain the previous socio-religious order by stringently curbing any form of female independence, which was perceived to constitute a major threat to Hindu society (Young 11). Whereas women's power was utilized frequently during the Rgvedic, Middle and Late Vedic Periods, it was completely caged in the Classical Period, suppressed by paranoid male Brahmins whose only concern was maintaining traditional male-dominated power structures. To gain even more insight into the politically-motivated attempts to religiously control female power, it is helpful to focus on two key verses in the sacred text *The Laws of Manu*, both which speak to the dependency of women.

The first of these verses directly addresses the concept of strategic suppression of women, proclaiming that "by a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house... A woman must never be independent" (*Laws of Manu*, 5.148). Author and Editor Kathleen M. Erndl analyzes this passage in her book *Is the Goddess a Feminist?*, explaining that it expresses the need for men to manage female power. It is important to note that the inherent power of women is not disputed in this verse; rather, it is deemed a force over which men must preside. The verse "recognizes women's power and proposes to control it for patriarchal purposes" (Erndl 96). In the world of the Classical Period, where the old patriarchal order was falling under attack, stability seemed to depend on strategic management of *shakti* by men. In this way, political uncertainty motivated a shift in religious interpretation of women's power, which, in turn, diminished women's social status.

In a set of similar verses in *Laws of Manu*, women are established as volatile beings requiring the protection of men. These verses describe women as danger-

ously susceptible to negative influences and therefore in need of regulation by men: "Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations, however trifling (they may appear); for, if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow on two families... He who carefully guards his wife, preserves (the purity of) his offspring, virtuous conduct, his family, himself, and his (means of acquiring) merit" (*The Laws of Manu* 4.5-7). This passage accomplishes two purposes: first, it defines a major part of the female identity as perilously evil and second, it mandates and legitimates male domination. Suppression of women in this excerpt is rationalized and deemed necessary by a socio-religious construction of women as precariously capricious. This construction was undoubtedly influenced by the political conditions of the day and the overwhelming instability Hindu males faced during the Classical Period: the gender views of this and other verses from *Manu* should be understood as scripturally-embedded justifications of oppression of females and as desperate attempts to neutralize an ever-fluctuating, explosive political climate.

A final facet of the Classical Period's strategic harnessing of shakti involves the ideology of *pativrayata*, which stipulated the characteristics of the ideal Hindu wife and emerged from the concept of *pati* (that a woman's husband and her god were one and the same). Vanaja Dhruvarajan discusses *pativrayata* in her book *Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology*, explaining that it is founded upon a belief in fundamental difference between men and women. According to this dichotomized view of gender, men alone possess traits of "ritual purity, physical strength, and emotional maturity," while women are "ritually pollutable, physically weak, and lack strong will power" (Dhruvarajan 27). This understanding of men and women significantly informs the expectations of a *Pativrata*, or a wife who exemplifies the *pativrayata* ideology: because of woman's irrefutable inferiority, her salvation can be secured only by following her husband and fulfilling his needs. She must meld her existence into her husband's and devote herself to "helping him in every possible way to achieve his goals in life" in order to attain spiritual fulfillment (Dhruvarajan 26). According to *pativrayata*, a woman's enlightenment and release from cyclical reincarnation is contingent upon her "virtue" and "good conduct," which are defined as and achieved by obedience to her husband. The most considerable elements of this obedience are: a wife's resolve to be complacent and unquestioning, a sense of gratefulness to precede her husband in death, and an uncompromising understanding that her body and soul belong to her husband (Dhruvarajan 28-29). Embodying these characteristics and becoming a *Pativrata* formed the path to salvation for women during Classical Period. The *pativrayata* ideology, with its relegation of women's power into the narrowest of

contexts, is just one manifestation of the Classical Period's politically-motivated shift in religious interpretation of *shakti*.

This shift in interpretation is also evidenced in the epics and early Puranas, in which wife goddesses modeled the ideal Pativrata behavior. Women of the Classical Period were called to follow these divine paradigms and devote themselves to their husbands as they would to the gods. We find an excellent example of such a paradigm in the story of the *Ramayana's* Sita, wife of King Rama, who endures a number of dangerous and difficult tests to prove her purity and commitment to her husband. The greatest of these tests occurs when she enters a funeral pyre to show her loyalty and devotion to Rama, who continues to doubt her innocence even after all the trials she experienced (which included being seduced by a demon disguised as Rama). Because of Sita's purity, the gods protect her from the fire and she emerges unburned, thus proving her unwavering love for her husband and inarguable chastity (Young 12-13). Sita risks grave danger and exerts great effort to embody the ideology of *pativrayata*. She does whatever is necessary to convince her husband of her loyalty to him, channeling all her strength and tenacity toward being a perfect, devoted wife. Sita's story, combined with similar tales of courageously devoted divine wives, formed the standard for earthly wives: women attempted to follow Sita's path, using all their energy to uphold norms of femininity and exemplify the male-specified expectations of a model female partner. In this way, a narrow and controlling construction of *shakti* that was born of the political elite's apprehension was defended and maintained by divine models.

In analyzing the many elements of *pativrayata* and other forms of religiously-orchestrated suppression of women during the Classical Period, we must be mindful of connections to the political and social context. Indeed, the political conditions of the Classical Period add an important dimension to the way women were religiously and socially perceived, for religious conceptions of women were entirely different during the Vedic Periods, which were contrastingly characterized by relative political stability. The Vedic Periods witnessed expansive freedom for women, as females were valued as essential contributors to ritual, while the religious and social roles of women were stringently confined during the Classical Period. This colossal shift between the religion-based social status of women in the Vedic and Classical Periods of Hinduism can only be explained with a historical and religious perspective: during these eras, religious beliefs were being adapted in response to political circumstances. At the foundation of women's socio-religious status in both periods was a core belief in *shakti*, or female power, but the contexts of each era inspired adjustment to the interpretation of *shakti* and

its application in the real world. Attaining the spiritual goals of the family-oriented Vedic Periods depended on women and they were consequently regarded as vital ritual actors. During the Classical Period, however, religious conceptions about women were used as a means to cope with looming political deterioration and unstable power structures. Thus, the central Hindu doctrine of shakti has been modified throughout history according to political and social circumstances, generating vastly different social realities for Hindus in different time periods.

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