

AP World History

Reading: Women in Indian History, from the Vedic through the Gupta

(Taken from *Women in South and Southeast Asia* by Barbara Ramusack in "Women in Asia", pages 18-33)

Questions are at the end of the excerpt.

ARYANS AND THIS VEDIC AGE, 1700-500 B.C.E.

The arrival of the Aryans during the centuries after 2000 B.C.E. represented the displacement of an agriculturally based, literate society by one whose economy was based on cattle herding. In Western historiography the most distinctive institutions of the Aryans were their social organization and their religious hymns. The importance of the Vedas as the religious expression and historical record of the Aryans is indicated by the frequent designation of this era as the Vedic period.

Aryan society had three main divisions—priests, warriors, and commoners—and provided the basic outline for what Westerners, first the Portuguese and then the British, described as the caste system. As it evolved over millennia, the Aryan social framework came to include four broad categories known as varna, which means "color." The brahmins, who were priests and teachers, came to be acknowledged as having the primary position. The kshatriya, warriors and administrators, cooperated with the brahmins in the organization and administration of political structures and cultural institutions and were acknowledged to be equal to brahmins, or second only to them. The vaishya—merchants, artisans, and eventually cultivators—were third. These three divisions, which the Portuguese labelled casta (breed), traced their origin to Aryan society and claimed status as the twiceborn or clean castes. As such they enjoyed a physical birth and a later ritual birth when they donned the sacred thread that signified their entrance into adulthood and religious learning. The fourth varna, labelled sudra, were the servants of the three higher varna and probably "the indigenous people conquered by the Aryans. Below the four varna were the "untouchables," relegated to occupations considered physically demeaning and spiritually polluting, which generally meant anything dealing with human emissions and death. This division had its own hierarchy that ranged from landless agricultural laborers at the top to midwives, who directly handled the polluting afterbirth substances, at the bottom. Each varna was divided into caste groups that claimed descent from a mythic founder, and each caste group was further subdivided into jati that formed the endogamous unit within which one married. Within a jati, men and women were born into a gotra or specific endogamous lineage. These categories were not immutable and frequently reflected geographical and ethnic variations. Mobility within the structure also occurred through ritual, political, and economic interactions among jatis or other groups.

Indian historians commonly view the Vedic period, which extended from about 1500 to 700 B.C.E., as the heart of the golden age of Indian culture. It was an era of territorial expansion as the semi-nomadic, cattle-herding Aryans moved from northwestern India into the fertile Gangetic plain and then gradually southward into the jungly recesses of central India. The Aryans also began to cultivate cereal grains and to use wooden and later iron plows to work the soil. There were economic surpluses to support a priestly class who produced the Vedas, four major collections of religious hymns, that they then transmitted orally for centuries.

But what was the condition of women during the Vedic period?

Prior to the 1980s, many historians of ancient India, both Indian and Western, concluded that the position of women in Vedic India was "fairly satisfactory" (Altekar 1978: 338), but they tended to treat the condition of women in a topical manner that did not pay much attention to continuity and change through chronological periods. Since they were transmitted orally, the Vedas, the main source of information for these scholars, did not provide a firm temporal context. Historians of religion sometimes reach opposing conclusions about the religious activities of women. Wendy O'Flaherty has characterized the Rig Veda—the earliest collection of Aryan religious hymns, dating from about 1300 to 1000 B.C.E.—as "a book by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men [, and] one of these concerns is women." O'Flaherty divides the hymns about women into conversation hymns and marriage hymns. Both types are concerned with sexual rejection of the female by the male, but the marriage hymns end happily whereas the conversation ones frequently do not (O'Flaherty 1981). Julia Leslie thinks that some Vedas were composed

by women who performed sacrifices to the Aryan gods and probably wore the sacred thread that signified their knowledge of the Vedas and participation in sacrifice, the key religious act of the Aryans. She argues that three of the most notable hymns composed by women are Ghosa (Rig Veda [RV] X, 39 and 40), Apala (RV VIII, 80), and Visvavara (RV V, 28). Apala sacrificed to Indra, the god of storms and monsoons, telling him, "Drink thou this Soma [a still-unidentified ritual liquid which may be translated literally as "moon juice"] pressed with teeth, accompanied with grain and curds, with cake of meal and song of praise." Visvavara offered sacrifice to Agni, the fire god and a major rival of Indra, pouring oil on the fire and chanting, "Thy glory, Agni, I Adore, Kindled, exalted in thy strength" (Leslie 1983: 91-92). Thus the evidence is mixed on the status of women in Vedic religious practice (Upadhyaya 1974).

Recently Giti Thadani has argued that patriarchal interpretations of the Vedas have obscured the existence of dual feminine principles that reflect non-generative sexual relationships and the shift from woman-focused to male-dominated cosmologies. This transformation is encapsulated in the rape of Usha, the goddess of dawn and light, by the warrior god, Indra, who eventually slays his enemy Vitra, and his enemy's mother. Thadani also reinterprets the sexual relationship between Urvashi, a goddess associated with the moon and mares, and the human Pururvas as signifying that lesbian* feminine desire brings immortality while heterosexual relationships are progenitive and lead to mortality (Thadani 1996). Thadani then delineates the evolution of legal and social constraints on female sexuality, especially female sexual desire for and pleasure with other women.

The later Vedic period, dated from the eighth century B.c.E. onward, witnessed a series of religious challenges to the Vedic emphasis on sacrifice and the growing dominance of brahmans. These revolts paralleled key economic changes in Aryan society. After a gradual shift to agriculture, Aryans, who increasingly intermarried with indigenous peoples, had the surplus wealth to support cities and new forms of political organization. Religious activity shifted from the worship of many gods to the contemplation of one underlying principle or truth and an emphasis on personal self-control. The Upanishads, which were collections of treatises composed by professional philosophers between 700 and 500 B.c.E., explored metaphysical issues and introduced the concepts of karma (that actions have consequences) and transmigration (that essences or souls move through many existences). By the sixth century B.c.E., Buddhism and Jainism provided heterodox means of achieving release from the cycle of transmigration through individuals following the correct life.

All of these traditions allowed for religious participation by women. In the first Upanishad (the Brhadaranyaka), Gargi Vacaknavi, a woman who represents the tradition of Vedic scholarship among women, debated publicly at the court of King Janaka around 600 a.c.E. Her bold questioning of the concept of negative regression pushed a male counterpart to enunciate the basic doctrine that the ultimate principle or supreme Brahman may be defined only by negatives (Findly 1985). In Jainism women were allowed to pursue the monastic life that was considered the preferred life-style. The two major Jain sects, however, had differing views on whether women could attain moksha, release from the cycle of transmigration. The Digambara monks, who argued that total renunciation included nakedness, held that women could not achieve moksha; the Svetambaras, who viewed renunciation as an interior process or condition, saw such external factors as the absence of clothes as irrelevant and allowed that women might reach moksha. Both sects agreed that women were not to accept nudity as a monastic practice (Jaini 1990).

The Buddha sanctioned the establishment of Buddhist nunneries, although reputedly with reluctance and after imposing eight special rules that subordinated nuns of any age to male monks. Reinforcing this unequal status, the Buddha reportedly said that his doctrine would last only half as long in India since he permitted the ordination of women. Within the Theravada or orthodox Buddhist tradition that dominated in India, Buddhist nuns were known as teachers of Buddha's dharma to other women and are given credit for composing a text known as the Therigatha or The Psalms of the Sisters (Gross 1993; Horner 1975; Willis 1985). But Buddhist laywomen were perhaps more honored. Both queens (such as the unnamed aunt of Virpurisadata, an Ikshvaku king in the Andhra region of south India during the early third century c.H.) and courtesans (such as Ambapali) were celebrated for the construction of stupas that housed Buddhist relics, temples, and monasteries. Nancy Falk has attributed this seeming Buddhist preference for laywomen over nuns to the Buddhist effort to reconcile itself with the indigenous Hindu dharma that emphasized women's

role as childbearers. Thus laywomen fulfilled their basic dharma as mothers and still benefited the Buddhist community through their patronage (Falk 1980).

During the last centuries of the pre-Christian era, the more orthodox Vedic tradition associated with the brahmins began to impose restrictions on women as well as lower social groups (Jamison 1996). The sacrificial tradition had become more complex, and knowledge of the Vedas and their ancillary literature was increasingly limited to male brahmins. There was a growing social differentiation as the four major varna of Hindu society became more bounded; intermarriage across varna boundaries was proscribed; and a hierarchy with brahmins at the top evolved. By the late Vedic period women were gradually assigned the same low status as sudras, forbidden to wear the sacred thread, and prohibited from autonomous participation in sacrificial rituals. In an intensive analysis of Vedic texts on *srauta*-sacrificial rituals that involved offerings of food (including ghee, or clarified butter) and flowers on auspicious occasions, such as the occurrence of the new and full moons-Frederick Smith has delineated the reduction of the role of the wife of the male sacrificer. This role was considered necessary for the sacrifice to be efficacious for the generation of children, the continuation of the cosmos, and the spiritual release of the sacrificer and his wife. The sacrificer's wife participated only in connection with male officiants and performed subsidiary functions that resembled household tasks such as caring for implements that the husband alone used. Increasingly, however, male attendants displaced her at critical moments in the ritual, especially those that celebrated her sexuality and procreative powers (Smith 1991). Werner Menski claims that a shift of marriage rituals, from a family-dominated ceremony to one gradually conducted by a priest who transforms the polluting substance of the bride's blood and its potentially destructive attributes into auspiciousness, is another indication of changing conceptions of women (Menski 1991).

Various hypotheses have been proposed to explain these growing restrictions on the rights and status of women in the religious sphere. Altekar, probably the most influential historian on the subject, links them to the growing prevalence of men taking non-Aryan-that is, sudra-wives, who had to be excluded from sacrifices because of their impurity. Thus it was a small step to exclude all wives from such religious participation (Altekar 1978). Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy attack Altekar's focus on non-Aryan wives as racist and call for more attention to the "connections between women's status and their participation in productive activities, both as producers and as controllers of production" (Chakravarti and Roy 1988b: WS-8). Leslie argues that the eroding right of women to religious education and sacrificial participation is related to the effort to restrict such activities to the first three varna, to the redefinition of the masculine noun as specifically excluding women, and to the restricted ability of women to own property-one qualification of the performer of sacrifice (Leslie 1983). Smith proposes that perhaps such Vedic rituals were divided along gender lines, and because men compiled the Vedic texts, they recorded only male rituals (Smith 1991: 43-44).

More recently, scholars have begun to explore how social, political, and economic changes from the eighth to the third centuries B.C.E. created a structural framework that increasingly subordinated women in spheres besides religion. The shift from hunting-gathering and pastoralism to an agricultural economy and growing urbanization after 800 B.C.E. supported the development of class and caste divisions. As occurred in most patriarchal societies, Indian men sought to control female sexuality, which was responsible for social reproduction, to ensure patrilineal succession to property (Bhattacharji 1991; Chakravarti 1993a). However, Indian society is distinctive for its restraints on female sexuality in order to maintain the ritual purity associated with high-caste status. Using prescriptive texts produced by brahmins and literary narratives including epics, Uma Chakravarti traces the evolution of "brahmanical patriarchy," which she defines as "a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other, and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes" (Chakravarti 1996b: 9). Women came to be controlled through socialization in the ideology of *stridharma* (the ideal of wifely fidelity), through laws and customs which sanctioned familial control of women (including physical punishment), and finally through kings, who had authority to punish wayward wives. Thus a combination of consent and coercion secured the compliance of upper-caste women in the perpetuation of caste divisions that subordinated them while they simultaneously provided spiritual and material rewards (Chakravarti 1993a).

Kumkum Roy elaborates on the connection between political and social changes in fostering the subordination of women. The emergence of monarchy from around 700 B.C.E. onward at the expense of

other forms of political association was intimately related to the process of social differentiation and the privileging of the *grha*, a form of household organization that "was characterized by patriarchal control, exercised on the procreative powers of the wife, and over productive resources, which were ideally transferred from the father to the son(s)" (K. Roy 1994: 300). The *raja*, or ruler, supported the *grha* since it was easier to negotiate with single heads of households than corporate groups. In turn the head of a household seeking dominance was strengthened by the external support of the *raja*. This patriarchal hierarchy in the public and private spheres was then reflected in and legitimated by the increasing marginalization and control of women's sexuality and procreative powers in religious rituals. Although this scholarship has significantly deepened our understanding of the complexity of the condition of women in ancient India, its dependence on sources produced by brahmins means the condition of lower-class/ caste women in all areas of India and of elite women in non-Aryan controlled regions remains obscure.

THE MAURYAN EMPIRE, 320-ca. 185 B.C.E.

The Mauryan empire was the first major centralized state in India and would remain the most extensive example of such a political achievement until the great Mughal Empire, founded in C.E. 1526. For this period there exists a major secular source on the legal rights of women. Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the dynasty, was reputedly assisted by Kautilya, a brahmin prime minister, who provided the core of the *Arthashastra*, a handbook of statecraft that is often compared to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. This compendium documents that women had property rights to *stridhan*, the gift made to a woman at the time of her marriage by her parents and afterward augmented by her husband. *Stridhan* was usually jewelry, which among many cultural groups was a convenient way of carrying surplus wealth, but could include certain rights to immovable property. Eight forms of marriage were also recorded. They ranged from the most prestigious, involving the gift of a virgin daughter (*kanyadan*) by her father to another male, to the least honorable, which was marriage by abduction while the woman was incapacitated through sleep or intoxication. Marriage was both a secular and sacred institution. Widows could remarry, although when they did so, they lost rights to any property inherited from their deceased husbands. There is also evidence that women were active in such public economic activities as wage-labor in state-owned textile factories as well as serving as temple dancers, courtesans, and court attendants. There is little information on lowerclass women other than some comments on laboring women and the need to give work as spinners to such disadvantaged women as widows and "defective girls" (*Arthashastra* 1992).

The *Arthashastra* may be seen as the practical guide for dealing with women, but ideal prescriptions for women were also being formulated during the extended period from the Mauryan empire to the Gupta empire (ca. c.e. 320-540). These centuries, the classical era of Hindu culture, were marked by the effort of cultural elites to classify and codify all branches of knowledge. From 300 B.C.E. to around C.E. 300, three great prescriptive sources evolved. The first two are the epics of the *Mahabharata*, an accumulation of almost one hundred thousand verses that relates the conflict between two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and Pandavas, for control of the fertile territory north of Delhi, and the shorter *Ramayana* that has as its centerpiece the ideal king, Rama, and his ideal wife, Sita (Jayal 1966). The third is the *Laws of Manu*, which belongs to the category of *dharma*sastras, or legal treatises.

The *Mahabharata* has a cast of hundreds who display a fascinating, human combination of high virtue and moral weakness. Several women characters play key roles in the action that portrays the futility of war and the desirability of peace as turbulent Aryans gradually expand into the Indo-Gangetic plain and fight over land, which became more valuable as it was utilized for agriculture rather than cattle herding. Draupadi is probably the best-known woman, but she is also the most atypical of the prescriptive literature that was emerging simultaneously. She was beautiful, educated at her father's court, able to make an independent choice of husband at a *swayamvara* (a convocation of suitors), and the wife of the five Pandava brothers. Since polyandry was not practiced in Aryan society, her marriage reflects the influence of tribal customs from possibly the foothills of the Himalayas, which provided a boundary to Aryan expansion. A bold personality Draupadi is usually held up as a strong woman who remained modest.

Other women characters from the *Mahabharata* recur in Indian Culture, generally refashioned in a more submissive form. In the epic bearing her name, *Shakuntala*, the daughter of an ascetic, is a simple young woman who meets a prince hunting near her father's forest retreat. When he proposes marriage by mutual

consent (a form of marriage that did not require religious rites), she audaciously asks that her son be the heir to his throne. After their marriage, the husband returns to his princely occupation and forgets his promise. Several years later Shakuntala boldly travels to the prince's kingdom and demands that he recognize their son as his heir. In his highly acclaimed play entitled "Shakuntala and the Ring of Remembrance," Kalidasa, the great Sanskrit dramatist of the Gupta period, transformed Shakuntala into a shy, submissive girl who becomes a symbol of love in separation.

Neither Draupadi nor Shakuntala were deemed ideal wives (Sutherland 1991a, 1991b), but Sita, of the epic Ramayana, came to be idolized in that role in renditions by Valmiki in Sanskrit compiled possibly around 200 s.c.s. and by Tulsidas (1532-1623) in Hindi. In these two re-tellings Sita is extolled for her chastity, obedience, loyalty, and faithfulness to her husband despite a remarkable series of trials, including an unjust accusation of infidelity by her husband's subjects. Following her husband from a royal palace into a difficult forest exile, she remains faithful despite temptation by an evil king and agrees to an ordeal by fire, at her husband's request, to prove her sexual purity. Even after emerging unscathed from the flames, Sita is forced into forest exile, this time with her sons. She eventually secures recognition of her sons as the legitimate heirs of Rama, and then returns to Mother Earth, where she had been born in a furrow. These events and images are transmitted across time and space through countless oral performances and re-tellings and, during the 1980s, in a television series that dominated the Sunday morning schedule of millions of Indians.

Several scholars, including Romila Thapar and A. K. Ramanujan, have pointed out that there are many different versions or tellings, including Buddhist and Jaina ones, of the Ramayana story (Coburn 1995; Ramanujan 1991; Richman 1991; Thapar 1987). In these alternatives, such as the Tamil telling by Kamban (about the ninth to tenth century c.E.), Sita is portrayed as angry, willful, and so powerful that the fire of her chastity (karpu) burns up Agni, the Vedic fire god, during her fire ordeal (Shulman 1991). In Telugu songs sung-by both brahman and non-brahman women, female characters enjoy agency, and occasionally even revenge; the blemishes of male characters are subtly observed; and the tensions within joint families are poignantly delineated (Narayana Rao 1991). Still Sita continues to be celebrated as the ideal woman along with Savitri, the wife who skillfully bargained to rescue her husband from Yama, the god of death. Subsequent myths tend to ignore Savitri's intelligent bargaining and to emphasize instead her capacity for endurance and her offer to exchange her own life for that of her husband.

There is also a Tamil epic, Cilappatikaram or The Tale of an Anklet, from about c.e. 450, in which the primary heroine is Kannaki, a devoted wife. She suffers the loss of her husband to a beautiful courtesan but still offers to sell a gem-encrusted ankle bracelet to help him repay his debts. When he is beheaded because of an unjust accusation, Kannaki, in her wrath, destroys by fire the city where her husband met his fate. Eventually the goddess Parvati pacifies Kannaki, who is reunited with her husband in heaven. The husband suffers because of bad actions in an earlier life, but Kannaki demonstrates the power of chastity and righteousness.

THE TARNISHED AGE OF THE GUPTAS, c.e. 320-540

Although its territorial extent was about half of that of the preceding Mauryan empire, the Gupta empire is seen as the classical age of Indian culture because of its literary and artistic accomplishments. It was the great age of Sanskrit poetry and drama, of sculpture, and of cave temple architecture as seen at Ajanta and Ellora in western India. The available sources yield relatively little enlightenment about specific women, whether elite or non-elite. But some information on elite women as a category comes from the Kamasutra, a manual about the many ways to acquire pleasure, a legitimate goal for Hindu men in the householder, or second stage, of their lives. Women were expected to be educated, to give and to receive sexual pleasure, and to be faithful wives. Courtesans were trained in poetry and music as well as the skills of sexual pleasure and were esteemed members of society. Since visual artists in India usually remained anonymous until the twentieth century, we know nothing as yet about the possible role of women in the creation of the great sculpture and painting of the Gupta period.

Another secular view of women is provided in such popular stories as the collection Tales of Ancient India, translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen, which portrays faithful wives, decadent Buddhist nuns, and scheming courtesans. Courtesans were the one category of women who were likely to be educated and sometimes

were known to have spoken Sanskrit. A prime example of a noble-hearted courtesan was Vasantasena, the heroine of the "The Little Clay Cart," a popular play in Sanskrit ascribed to Sudraka (ca. c.E. 400). Vasantasena is an exception to the stereotype of greedy courtesans in her willingness to sacrifice her jewelry for her lover. She, however, achieves respectability only by becoming his wife. The other major dramatic female heroine of classical Indian literature is Shakuntala, who is now represented as a docile young woman who yearns for her distant lover in Kalidasa's "Shakuntala and the Ring of Remembrance." Barbara Stoler Miller (1984: 36) has emphasized how Kalidasa's play seeks a balance between duty and passion. Only after the king and Shakuntala have learned to control their passions is the king able to recognize Shakuntala as his wife and the mother of his son Bharata, who will rule his empire. Once again a sexually active woman must be contained within the bounds of marriage.

Legal Rights of Women

The legal rights, as well as the ideal images, of women were increasingly circumscribed during the Gupta era. The Laws of Manu, compiled from about 200 to 400 c.c., came to be the most prominent evidence that this era was not necessarily a golden age for women. Through a combination of legal injunctions and moral prescriptions, women were firmly tied to the patriarchal family, much as Confucianism in China enjoined women to observe the three obediences to father, husband, and son. The following extracts from the Laws of Manu (translated by Wendy Doniger, 1991) reflect the effort of the brahmanical elite to restrict the legal independence of women, to establish the moral subordination of wives to husbands, and to socialize women in self-control.

In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence. (Chap. 5, verse 148, Doniger, p. 115)

A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities. (Chap. 5, verse 154, Doniger, p. 115)

A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven just like those chaste men, even if she has no sons. (Chap. 5, verse 160, Doniger, p. 116)

But a woman who violates her (vow to her dead) husband because she is greedy for progeny is the object of reproach here on earth and loses the world beyond. (Chap. 5, verse 161, Doniger, p. 116)

A wife, a son, and a slave: these three are traditionally said to have no property; whatever property they acquire belongs to the man to whom they belong. (Chap. 8, verse 416, Doniger, p. 196)

The bed arid' the seat, jewellery, lust, anger, crookedness, a malicious nature, and bad conduct are what Manu assigned to women. (Chap. 9, verse 17, Doniger, p. 198)

The appointment of widows is never sanctioned in the Vedic verses about marriage, nor is the remarriage of widows mentioned in the marriage rules. (Chap. 9, verse 65, Doniger, p. 205)

A thirty-year-old man should marry a twelve-year-old girl who charms his heart, and a man of twenty-four an eight-year-old girl; and if duty is threatened, (he should marry) in haste. (Chap. 9, verse 94, Doniger, p. 208)

Thus the Laws of Manu severely reduced the property rights of women, recommended a significant difference in ages between husband and wife and the relatively early marriage of women, and banned widow remarriage. Manu's preoccupation with chastity reflected possibly a growing concern for the maintenance of inheritance rights in the male line, a fear of women undermining the increasingly rigid caste divisions, and a growing emphasis on male asceticism as a higher spiritual calling (Chakravarti 1993a).

Although the Laws of Manu represent the effort of brahmins to impose their ideals as the dominant practice in Hindu society, the authority of these injunctions would be modified in practice by the continuity of customary laws, especially in geographically isolated areas where tribal customs prevailed (Chaki-Sirkar 1984). The impact was also limited in areas where the Sanskrit tradition was relatively weak, such as Kerala, where matrilineal descent among the Nayars prevailed until the late nineteenth century.

In India the legal right of women to hold property is further differentiated by the presence of two legal traditions, the Mitskara and the Dayabhaga, which regulate the division of property among Hindus. In the Dayabhaga school, which is unique to Bengal, widows have the right to inherit stridhan and a limited estate in property (which they may use but not alienate) as members of joint families. These provisions might be one factor accounting for sati becoming more prevalent in Bengal than in other parts of India. The Mitskara school that prevails throughout the rest of India awards ownership in property at birth to males in a joint

family; widows have very restricted rights` to inherit. For example, in this school, a widow may inherit property only after her last great-grandson; by then, she would be long deceased (S. N. Mukherjee 1982).

Prescriptive Roles for Women

During this era we have increasing evidence of the practice of child marriage, the physical seclusion of women, and sati. The age of women at marriage during the early Vedic period seems to have hovered around sixteen, but by the Gupta period there appeared to be a growing preference for younger brides, as indicated in the Laws of Manu. Early marriages were designed to protect the family honor and to maintain caste divisions that were deemed dependent on the chastity of women. Although such marriages were not consummated until puberty, the residence of young brides in their in-laws' home possibly meant that it was easier to engender loyalty to the patriarchal extended family unit among girls of six or seven than among mature women of sixteen. Early marriages might also have been an unconscious response to high rates of maternal mortality and low median ages.

The Laws of Manu acknowledge the same eight forms of marriage as outlined in the Arthashastra, but they discount as base the last four, which involved some individual initiative (P Mukherjee 1978). Kanyadan, or the gift of a virgin daughter in marriage, emerges as the act through which a man gains the greatest spiritual merit. This transaction, which occurs between two males, the father and the groom, also ensures the immortality of the groom's line by providing heirs and enables the young girl to achieve auspiciousness as a mother. Once the marriage of daughters becomes a spiritual necessity, fathers make many concessions in order to effect such transactions. Women become objects to be given, and marriage is their only acceptable social status. Kanyadan also establishes a unidirectional flow of gifts from the bride's family to the groom's family, which reflects the lower status of the giver to the receiver (Fruzzetti 1982; Van der Veen 1972). These gifts come to be crudely labelled dowry. In her work in progress on the concept of dowry, Veena Oldenburg claims that these gifts are also evidence of the love of parents for daughters and their desire to care for them throughout their lives. Others emphasize that dowry might be related to the inability of women to inherit property, the need for men to gift their daughters to a restricted pool of men, and increasing hypergamy (Ehattacharji 1991).

Sati is a term of multiple meanings and the focus of much debate (Hawley 1994; Nandy 1975). It may refer to a virtuous woman so dedicated to her husband that she burns to death on his funeral pyre; it may refer to the act of self-immolation itself; or Sati may be a goddess (Hawley 1994). The first recorded instance of sad as the act of self-immolation is not certain, but Elizabeth Leigh Stutchbury (1982) notes that Greek chronicles relate that in 316 E.C.E. the wife of Meteus, an Indian general who died fighting Antigonos, burned herself and that this custom prevailed among the "Kathia" tribe of Punjab. The origin of sati as a social custom has been ascribed both to the Aryans and to later tribes migrating from Central Asia into South Asia. In the puranas, a class of religious literature that dates from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries C.E. and that integrates indigenous myths with elaboration of the Vedic tradition, Sati is first mentioned as a goddess. She is the initial wife of Lord Siva and commits self-immolation because of an insult to her God-Husband. Many scholars argue that she does not serve as the inspiration for the ritual suicide of a widow, since she died before her husband (Dehejia 1994; Kinsley 1986; Oldenburg 1994). The practice of sati is most dramatically associated with higher-caste Rajputs, especially kshatriyas, and Brahman groups in Bengal, but it was also known in other areas, including south India. Vociferous debate over the religious basis for this practice arose first in the early nineteenth century, when the British moved to outlaw the custom, and more recently after an alleged sad occurred at Deorala near Jaipur, Rajasthan, in September 1987 (Hawley 1994). Orthodox supporters of the custom continue to cite passages from the dharmastra that enjoin a wife to be sati, or pure, and claim that death unequivocally ensures purity and prevents a woman from becoming an inauspicious widow. Opponents of the practice rely on the same passage and argue that to be sati, or chaste, does not require a widow to commit suicide.

The tradition gradually developed that through sati a widow would earn thirty-five million years of bliss for her deceased husband and for herself and would bring auspiciousness for three to seven generations for her marital and sometimes even her natal family. A sati stone erected on the site of a widow's immolation was a perpetual reminder of the woman's sacrifice and a popular place of pilgrimage (Courtright 1994).

There is little evidence about the function of sati from the widow's viewpoint or that of orthodox Hindus who promoted the practice. Many of the most-quoted accounts of sati have come from foreign observers, beginning with Ibn Battuta in the thirteenth century, through the French physician Francois Bernier in the seventeenth century, to numerous British officials and travelers in the nineteenth century. Their accounts have portrayed instances of both voluntary and involuntary sati and have been the filter for women's voices. Scholars have tended to relate sati to the increasingly low status of women in general and widows in particular and to the desire of high castes to maintain their ritual purity. As widows were increasingly held responsible for their husbands' death, sati became a form of personal expiation. For the woman it also presented an escape from the harsh life prescribed for a widow, in which she was to wear white saris and no jewelry, eat only one meal daily, and avoid all celebratory occasions, especially weddings, since she was considered inauspicious. Some commentators have labeled such an existence "cold sati." However, the research of Anand Yang (1989) has revealed the use of sati by lower-caste/class women in Bihar long after the death of their husbands as an honorable means of suicide in desperate economic situations. Sati also brought spiritual and social prestige to a woman's family and in-laws as well as economic relief, since they did not have to provide for the widow who could no longer remarry.

Women in Religion

Although the prescriptive literature of the Gupta period urged submissiveness, chastity, and even ritual suicide for women, the religious literature was more ambivalent about women. The *Devi-Mahatmya*, a Sanskrit text dating from the fifth or sixth century C.e. that is part of the *Markandevya purana*, codified the non-Aryan, non-Vedic tradition of seeing the ultimate principle of the universe as feminine (Coburn 1985). This cult of envisioning the divine as feminine is known as Saktism in India. It is associated with the tribal groups and possibly the Indus Valley and Dravidian cultures that existed in India prior to the coming of the Aryans and that survived on the geographical fringes of the Aryan conquests. The emergence of the *Devi-Mahatmya* reflects the continuing dynamic interaction between Aryan and nonAryan traditions.

Stated in the simplest terms, these female personifications of the divine are usually portrayed in three major incarnations. Most basic is the Mother Goddess, known simply as *Devi*, who protects and nurtures her devotees. The second form is *Durga*, a goddess created by male gods and given all their weapons in order to destroy *Mahisa*, the buffalo demon, whom the gods in their separate existences cannot contain. *Durga*, whose historical origin appears to be non-Aryan, first appears as unmarried around the fourth century c.E. and was frequently associated with mountains that fringed Aryan society. Although her aggressive and bloody behavior violate prescriptive Hindu norms for the ideal woman, *Durga* eventually is married to *Siva* both in her form as *Durga* (where she becomes the focus of *Durga Puja*, a major autumn festival in Bengal) and as *Parvati*, a goddess who exists to bring the ascetic *Siva* into marriage and settled society (Kinsley 1986; O'Flaherty 1982). The most horrific and potent form of the female goddess is *Kali*, the black goddess of Time and Destruction, who is created to help *Durga* in her battle with *Mahisa*. *Kali* is represented initially as autonomous but is eventually viewed as a consort of *Siva*, the powerful god of the Hindu trinity who destroys the world when its inhabitants can no longer observe their caste duty or *dharma*. Wearing a necklace of skulls as symbolic of her destructive power, *Kali* has a long tongue that licks up the blood of a demon who creates new beings from drops of his blood. She embodies the disorderliness of life as well as the existence of death (Kinsley 1986).

These images of female goddesses have been analyzed as evidence of the male fear of female potency, as the embodiment of ambiguous attitudes toward women and female power in a society that was becoming increasingly sex-segregated, and as symbols of female empowerment. For the historian they reflect the re-emergence of female goddesses from pre-Aryan cultures and the continuing interaction among the multiple cultures eventually labeled "Hinduism" by outside observers (Brown 1990; Harman 1989; Hawley and Wulff 1996; Kinsley 1986; Larson et al. 1980; Maury 1969; Pintchman 1994). The divine as female also re-emerged in a new form of Buddhism.

In northeastern India during the Pala period, from the eighth to the twelfth centuries c.H., Tantric Buddhism evolved in reaction to institutionalized Buddhism (Kinsley 1997). This new form of Buddhism taught that enlightenment can be achieved through everyday activities and that if one is spiritually prepared, the senses, desire, and sexual intimacy can be significant aspects of the spiritual journey. Many scholars of Tantric Buddhism have characterized women as ancillary in male yogic practices leading to

enlightenment. But Miranda Shaw claims that women were equal to men as divinities, teachers, and devotees. There were women Tantric teachers: for example, Bhiksuni Lakshmi of Kashmir (ca. tenth to eleventh centuries c.e.), who developed a widely practiced fasting ritual to achieve purification and salvation (Shaw 1994), and women who organized ritual communal feasts which included sacramental food and drink, spiritual instruction, and music and dancing as means to a higher understanding of the ultimate reality. Shaw argues that men and women are complementary and equal partners in the esoteric practice of Tantric sexual union through which both women and men seek "passionate enlightenment" by surrendering to egoless freedom (Shaw 1994: 140-78). Shaw's creative scholarship, combining textual analysis and anthropological fieldwork with extended discipleship with a Tantric guru (teacher), reveals the possibilities of feminist reinterpretation of religious traditions. By discarding Western categories of body and soul, sublimation and passion, her analysis attempts to understand words, actions, and deities within the more fluid conceptual diagrams of the religious tradition being studied.

Questions

1. Summarize the views of women during the Vedic period. Why were women experiencing "restrictions on [their] rights and status...in the religious sphere"? What was the position of women under Buddhism during this period?
2. How were women viewed or portrayed in the major epics of the Mauryan period (for example, the *Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata*)?
3. Describe the Laws of Manu. How did they restrict the property rights of women and why?
4. What is *sati*? What are some of the reasons or explanations for this practice?
5. How were women seen or viewed during the Gupta period?