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In My Opinion

Hail Hinduism's Homemakers

How the housewife finds and gives strength to family and community through her sacred role

By Deepti Rawat Paikray

Often, to my dismay, I hear dear friends of mine rationalizing their work as unpaid homemakers. Yet others unconsciously give in to societal, family or ego pressures to climb the corporate ladder, sadly equating success with material acquisition. Both groups during various stages in life confess to barrenness within, few able to trace its roots to a spiritual drought. Only a minority transcend this emotional moratorium to find peace, purpose and meaning. Paramahansa Yogananda aptly elucidates, "It is spiritual poverty, not material lack, that lies at the core of all human suffering."

Like the priest, a homemaker is the high priestess of her dwelling. As a temple without a priest loses the power to provide spiritual sustenance to its devotees, so a homemaker out of balance with her divine nature falls short of nourishing the physical, emotional and spiritual well being of her family. Domestic work and ritual worship are the two wheels of her life's journey, held together by the axle of spirituality. The two are not necessarily separate. If domestic chores show up as drudgery, performance of religious rituals renders a mystical and comforting influence on a homemaker's life, helping her to recoup and recover from daily struggles.

Today, rituals have been curtailed and are often ignored. Yet what saves them from mere rote observance is the depth of feeling of the supplicant, transforming ritual into a living tradition, a live wire between the spiritual and terrestrial. Neetu, a suburban housewife, on the advice of her yoga teacher, performs her tasks to a background of sacred chants. To her, total centering in the mundane chores elevates it to a working meditation, relieving stress.

Kavita Chaddha, a corporate executive, harried mother and homemaker on the go, too rushed to perform a morning puja, chants mantras while in transit to work. In her words, the ritual "connects me to the Supreme Source, better preparing me for the day ahead." I have seen female commuters on Mumbai and Delhi public transit during peak hours religiously reciting prayers, seeking succor amidst the surrounding chaos. Some abstain from partaking of food until it has been offered to the Lord, and others guard the threshold of their domestic arena by drawing auspicious floor designs.

These rituals may seem innocuous, but they confirm the homemaker as a higher conduit for ancestral traditions, thus ensuring the continuity of our culture and beliefs. To keep our traditions is to keep the strength of our families and ultimately the strength of our Hindu community. This conscious rendering of responsibilities has initiated in me an appreciation of the dignity and divinity in my role as a homemaker.

Swami Tathagatananda of the Vedanta Society in New York, during a discourse on the universal nature of the Divine Mother's love, mentioned that often we fail to acknowledge the divine spark within us. The popular book Loving Ganesha by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami explains that Lord Ganesha has five great shaktis, or positive powers, that render a stabilizing influence in one's life. The foremost shakti is harmony within the family--the most difficult to achieve. Satguru quotes the Tirukural: "If love abounds in the home and virtue prevails, the home is perfect and its end fulfilled."

It is imperative that the family acknowledges the homemaker as the centrifugal force in each home, to be cherished for her labors. To repeat Swami Tathagatananda's expressions, the mother in each home is the divine manifestation of Shakti, the feminine power of the universe, and like the celestial spirit, an expression of unselfish love.

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