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Hindus In America Speak out on Abortion Issues

The battle over the issue of abortion reached the stage of vigilante bombings of abortion clinics in America recently. Pro-life and Pro-choice combatants have sworn to fight to the bitter end. It is a struggle fired by conscience, and this often rules out compromise on the moral, social and legal repercussions of this admittedly hard choice of life or death. The American public remains polarized on the issue, most opposing abortion on principle, but less than half willing to tell another American how to live. This makes for legislative deadlock and near hysterical efforts to sway the voting public.

The question arises: do the Hindu experience, views and culture contribute anything special to the problems? The solutions? In the last decade large numbers of Hindus in America have reached the stage common to all immigrant populations when they see their children enter society as born citizens. The adjustments of their parents to America's secular society were made by them in infancy. They are at home in its schools and corporations and discos. Hinduism is also part of America now, and abortion has become a Hindu experience. Hindu families today are privately meeting the special agony of making the hard choice.

A full assessment of abortion must address the spiritual, moral, social and legal consequences. The legal aspects are recent history. Only in the 1800's were laws against abortion passed, this being in response to better medicine in Europe which could offer safe abortion to masses of women. It was outlawed, judged to be against Christian principles. Communist Russia was the first nation to totally legalize abortion in 1920. The tendency around the world since then has been to liberalize abortion laws, often removing them entirely. America's turn came in the Supreme Court decision of 1973 which struck down all restrictive abortion laws in the USA. The law now says an abortion during the first 90 days of pregnancy is totally the choice of the woman involved. No state law can have any say during this first trimester.

The social issues are birth control and quality of life for both the child and society. Why burden society with an unwanted life? Moral issues deal with a human being's inalienable right to live. When that life begins remains the question. Hindu doctors and nurses face this personal trauma when asked to perform abortions. Despite their training and clinical detachment, one Hindu physician notes, staff members grow increasingly uneasy with repeated exposure to the cruel reality of a dying fetus. One strategy among veterans is: 'Don't Look.' A bolder one is: 'Don't Take Part.' Every U.S. hospital allows its staff to refuse abortion duty out of conscience.

The chief opponents of abortion around the world are conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics, both of whom believe that the soul is created with the embryo and if it is killed without being born and receiving Christian sacraments it is doomed to wander all eternity with no hope of salvation. The most forgiving stance they can take, therefore, is to utterly oppose it but refrain from stopping others by force or law.

Hinduism brings a profound reverence for life to the subject, and the Hindu tenets of karma and reincarnation. Viewing the soul as dwelling in one physical body after another through a timeless series of births, Hindus do not live in fear of death or Judgement Day. What Hindus do fear is the fruit of bad conduct. Karma is the inexorable principle of cause and effect - what you set in motion will return to you in equal force. Ever hoping for a better share of human happiness and spirituality in future lives, Hindus guard their conduct in full knowledge that they create their own destiny by actions and decisions made now.

Several Hindu institutions have shared their positions on abortion recently. The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University does not take a formal unchanging political or religious stance on the issue of abortion. They advise that each case requires unique consideration. The final decision will be based on a long series of choices made by the woman on her lifestyle, morals and values. Usually, the choices that created the unwanted pregnancy in the first place have been irrational or emotional ones, not the mature commitment motherhood needs. The Brahma Kumaris counsel those facing an abortion decision, both man and woman, to understand that by abortion they do not escape responsibility for their actions. When both the parents have fully understood the seriousness of the choice, the University would support the right to make their own decision.

The Brahma Kumaris view the body as a physical vehicle for the immortal soul,

and therefore the issue is not "pro-life" or "anti-life" but a choice between the amount of suffering caused to the souls of the parents and child in either course, abortion or motherhood. They view existing legislation in America as fair and reasonable, with the proviso that abortion after the 4th month should be avoided except in medical emergencies, since in their view the soul enters the fetus in the 4th to 5th month.

ISKCON calls the 1.3 million abortions done in America last year "a kind of doublethink," whereby people deny the status of humanity to the fetus. "According to Vedic literature an eternal individual soul inhabits the body of every living creature...The soul enters the womb at the time of conception, and this makes the fetus a living, individual person." All forms of contraceptives, says ISKCON, and the act of abortion, "interfere with nature's arrangement to provide a soul with a new body and are therefore bound to result in unfavorable karmic reaction...If you don't want to suffer the reactions...then don't have sex unless you want to have a child."

Swami Bhashyananda, President of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago, says that "under no circumstances the jiva should be destroyed. That is uniformly stated, from the point of conception onward. When such questions are asked, we advise them not to perform abortions...One has to try one's level best to save mother and child both. And beyond these efforts, whatever happens is God's will. But we do not have any opinion on this matter in this country, nor do we get involved in it in India. If people seek our advice, we give our advice."

Mr. Arvind Shukla, a Gujarati Hindu, says "Abortion is absolutely not allowed. It is called garbha batta, womb-killing. It is papam, a sin. All Hindu shastras say so. It doesn't mean that people don't do it. Of course, people do it...I feel the mother should take her chances. The shastras are very clear that you are killing something, whether that is good or bad, whatever it is, you are killing it."

Swami Prakashananda Ma of the Integral Yoga Institute says they always advise against abortion, although they do not involve themselves in any political action to change the laws. She said they view the fetus as a life form from the moment of conception. "Of course, we follow the very basic teaching of Ahimsa which just doesn't allow killing in any way."

Mrs. Mythilli Penumurthy, a Tamil wife and mother living in Northern California, offered her personal view. "I'm against it. I think that it is an Atma and I have no right to destroy it. Birth and death are beyond our control, and it's just God's will. I don't think any human being has the right to destroy another to suit their lifestyle or convenience."

Another Tamil wife and mother, Mrs. Rathi Anandasekharan, said, "I know that certain people do get it done as a secret. They won't talk publicly...because they know it is wrong. They do it with a guilty conscience. I have never met anybody who feels it is okay...Once the baby is conceived it is like killing...Even for unmarried mothers who have no financial resources, it is still out of the question. She is already an adult who knows the consequences. There is no excuse...The laws should be changed. They give freedom for the younger generation to act without responsibility."

This subject will continue to be covered in future issues of Hinduism Today. All Hindu organizations, and individuals, are invited to give their comments and views.

YOGIRAJ SWAMI BUA is a devout, elder sadhaka living in New York City, where he runs his Indo-American Yoga-Vedanta Society, teaching a small circle of students. His comments on Hindu marriage:

It is my belief that the Hindu concept of marriage is different from Western views. According to Hindus, if a man is married once in his lifetime, he is considered married the rest of his life. The death of his wife, or divorce, or living separately from his wife would not alter his marital status. Such a man is no longer considered a brahmachari or a celibate or unmarried. For Hindus, there is no such thing as "a man was married but is not married now."

A man need not be a brahmachari or unmarried or celibate to take to sannyas. But when he does take to sannyas he must renounce worldly pleasures, observe celibacy, lead the life of a renunciate and have no contact with kith and kin. If his wife is alive he need not divorce her, just sever all contact and connections.

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