HOME OR CAREER? PART II
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HOME OR CAREER? PART II

Last month in Part One of our series on women working or staying home to care for their family, correspondent Rani Thilaganathan reported the diverse views of Malaysia families on this important issue. This month we hear from Hindus in mid-America.

Shikha Malaviya, Minnesota

The alarm rings at 6:00am and mom scrambles out of bed. After a quick shower, she wakes up the rest of the family. Daughter needs her hair braided, son can't find his left shoe, husband needs his vegetarian bag lunch, but they all make it out the door somehow. By 9:00am she's at the office, mug filled with tea, already heaving a weary sigh of relief, even before her official work day begins. Is this scene familiar? If not, it's the ever-increasing drama of Hindu women squeezing the roles of wife, mom and moneymaker onto one 24-hour-a-day stage.

Whether in search of self-esteem, more financial independence or simple escape from domestic humdrum, "to be or not to be" a working woman is a hot topic in Hindu circles these days. On one side, career mothers argue their jobs can coexist peacefully with their family obligations. On the other side are those who feel that the home and quality family life are always compromised to some degree when a mother is away from the home employed elsewhere. Who's right?

"It's a personal choice," equivocates Shashi Saklani of Bloomington, Minnesota. "It depends on your priorities, what is important to you." A licensed esthetician who put her career on hold for fourteen years to be home with family, Shashi has no regrets. "My children were my number one priority. I wanted to be there for them everyday when they came from school, so I could hear about their activities and their friends. I also wanted to help them in the delicate adjustments of living part of the day in our Indian environment at home and then a different environment at school." While her children were in elementary school, Shashi volunteered at the school library and chaperoned fieldtrips in order to be a part of her childrens'

educational experience. At home, Shashi tutored her children in their Hindu heritage through books, music and films. Did her husband insist she quit work? "I never forced my wife to stay at home," shares Mukul Saklani, founder of Invotech, a computer consulting firm in Minnesota. "However, both of us felt our children surpassed the need for acquiring more wealth. Today, my children are intelligent, secure adults who revere the culture they came from and respect the culture they are raised in. I am convinced that without my wife's full-time dedication to their upbringing, this really couldn't have happened." Shashi has now resumed her work as an esthetician, because her daughter, now married, and son Praful have embarked on their own lives and careers.

But mothers who stay at home for child-raising years like Shashi, or even after, are still the minority. With so many job opportunities, tempting salaries, generous benefits and available childcare, Hindu mothers are steadily entering the workforce. What are the costs?

Manju Saklani, Sashi's' sister-in-law, immigrated from India three years ago. A trained professional in the hospitality industry, Manju held full-time jobs before and after marriage. She's a firm believer that, "A lifetime career provides you with a stable income and gives you a feeling of purpose and self-worth. Not only are you contributing within the home, you're contributing your skills to society also." Now an employee with United Airlines in Virginia, Manju nevertheless does worry somewhat how her job life affects her nine year-old twin daughters, Aditi and Shruti. "In India, we had an extended family," she recalls. "My daughters spent most of their time with their grandmother, aunts and uncles. I went to work every day, secure that someone was always there to love and care for my daughters." But America changed that. Without relatives and domestic help--very common and affordable in India--Hindu working women like Manju face the task of maintaining a steady income while cooking, cleaning and helping the kids with homework. So how does she do it? "I rely on my husband," she shares with a smile. Husband Anil Saklani is a print production specialist whose schedule is flexible. After Manju leaves the house at 6:00am, Anil gets the twins ready for school, cooks their breakfast, and sees them off to their school bus. "To me, having children means that you have to assume full co-parenting responsibility for them," Anil believes. "It doesn't matter who makes breakfast or who does the laundry as long as it gets done and all of us are content." But with both of their job workloads increasing, Anil now wants his mother to come from India and take care of the twins who are too old for daycare and too precious to be trusted with strangers.

While couples like Anil and Manju Saklani willingly share parenting duties, others

feel there is no need or logic to alter age-old patterns. Sanjay Kumar, an engineer from California, insists that his wife Seema be a full-time homemaker, regardless of the benefits of a second income. "I truly believe that a woman is meant to establish and nurture a loving home for her family" shares Sanjay. "If that means cooking, cleaning, and being there for the children, what's wrong with that? Homemaking is a job to be proud of, because instead of just eight hours a day, a woman is actually working around the clock." Sanjay and Seema [not their real names] agreed to talk with Hinduism Today on the basis of anonymity. Although Seema has a college degree in nutrition science, she stays at home to watch over her two sons, Akshay, 9, and Arjun, 7. Most of Seema's friends in the Hindu community work full-time and tell her they are envious that she has the luxury of staying home. Seema, on the other hand, secretly confesses she blissfully dreams about trading places with them. "Although I love being available for my husband and children, I feel lonely at times. Being in the house suffocates me. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be behind a desk, making decisions, producing ideas, and being surrounded by interesting, different people." Despite her fantasies, Seema is, in the end, reconciled to the traditional attitude that husband, children and home come first. During the day, after all the household chores of dusting, vacuuming and cleaning are done, Seema bides her time watching TV soap operas while ironing her husband's clothes. To her, being a homemaker is the duty of a good Hindu woman which has been passed down for generations. "With families where the husband and wife both work full-time, there is always the nagging fear of less quality time together, and that ultimately leads to problem children who get bad grades or who behave badly," states Sanjay. "I don't want my children to grow up and say no one was there for them, or that we didn't give them our best."

But the tricky question is--what does "best" mean? Hindu society asks for a mother who is happy, healthy and attentive to her children. Can this only be achieved if a mother stays inside the four walls of her home? According to Richa Purohit of St. Paul, Minnesota, a balance needs to be maintained between a woman's parental duties and her personal goals. Richa stayed home for three years with her children Karika, 9, and Ashutosh, 7. However, as her children became more self-reliant, she decided to go back to work. "There comes a point when your children want to be with other children, and you want to be in the company of adults," Richa feels. Richa's daughter even asked to go to daycare so she could be with others her age. However, Richa made the transition easy by leaving her children in daycare for a few hours at a time until they felt comfortable enough to stay the whole day. "I am happy and my children are happy. Daycare has been extremely safe and reliable," she adds.

With an explosion of working women in the US during the 1970s and their high-profile, professional ascent during the 1980s, there emerged the title, or myth

of, "the miserable working women." She was often portrayed as a man-like, power-hungry feminist, craving for money and worldly excitement. Premature graying, heart attacks, high blood pressure, etc., were some of the supposed ills of women trying to be "superwomen" i.e. super moms and super professionals at the same time. National magazines painted tortured pictures of women who "wanted everything," and the terrible price they would pay. This sensational, and mostly negative, publicity buried the real problems working women encountered physically, mentally and socially. In the case of Hindu women in America, most belong to the upper-income bracket where she and her husband both hold college degrees. Intelligent, educated and skilled, she faces the problem of both wanting to fulfill traditional family expectations but equally eager to satisfy personal expectations generated during years of schooling. Shares Sheela Singh (not her real name), "Who likes to keep asking one's husband for money, whether for groceries or that beautiful dress you saw on sale last week? You start to feel like a beggar. Why put ourselves through that when we have skills and resources to earn as much as our husbands, or even more?"

Besides the dislike, or fear, of total financial dependency, many Hindu women feel that their acquired knowledge and skills will become rusty, or even obsolete, if not used and upgraded.

How does a Hindu woman reconcile her wish to nurture her family but nurture herself too? Is this self-interest selfish? "Women have to go through a lot of soul-searching and some sort of a crisis, before they come to conclusions which satisfy them," says Anuradha Jha, a clinical psychologist and mother of two. Anuradha was pursuing her Ph.D. while working as a counselor when she became pregnant. When her sons, Rajat, 8, and Ananth, 4, were born, Anuradha made the conscious decision to stay at home. "My children probably won't even remember that I was there for them the first four years of their lives. I could have worked and they would have managed. Children are born survivors. But I didn't want to miss the unfolding of a flower," she shares with a bubbly smile. However, sacrificing a career and putting her education on hold was really hard for her. "When I first stopped working, I felt the longer I was away, the less I would know." But she later realized that staying home helping her children develop into strong, intelligent individuals gave her the greatest personal satisfaction.

Understandably, when people have worked hard to reach a certain level professionally, and are enjoying the fruits of their labor, it is hard to throw it all away. Such is the case with Prithvi and Sujatha Rao of Gaitherburg, Maryland, who in January became the proud parents of Pranav. Shares Prithvi, "We are very

concerned about the welfare of our son. We want to be there for him all the time, but we don't know how we are going to manage, since both of us hold full-time jobs." Sujatha plans to resume her job in computer information systems after her maternity leave is over, because with all the constant upgrading in software programs and technology, she knows she just can't keep up if she stays at home. Like many Hindu couples, the Raos are relying on the help of the parents. Prithvi's parents are coming from India to help, and Sujatha's parents live two hours away in Salisbury, Maryland.

But alas, not all grandmothers like spending their sunset years being mothers over again, shouldering tasks mothers, not grandmothers, are supposed to do. "To be honest, it isn't fair to push the responsibility of your children onto someone else," shares Mrs. Kapoor (not her real name), 65, of New Jersey. "When my daughter gave birth to her first child, I came from India excited to help and give advice. Now she has three children and I'm the one who does everything for them. My daughter comes home from work so exhausted that I don't have the nerve to ask her to care for her children." Mrs. Kapoor loves her grandchildren dearly. However, she feels that at the age of retirement, she should be enjoying her grandchildren, not worrying about whether they completed their homework or whether they have clean clothes for school the next day. Frustrated and confused about how to approach her daughter, an advertising executive, Mrs. Kapoor still asserts, "You shouldn't have children if you can't care for them."

Hindu society still, by-and-large, views homemaking as a gender-specific, i.e. a woman's, duty, and not a joint effort. This often create tensions and can create claustrophobic living conditions for a wife and make her feel cleaning and cooking are more slave-in-chains work than joyous service. Full-time homemaking and childrearing are often as demanding, if not more so than an average 9-5 job. Mothers, and most fathers, know this. Clearly, all women work and deserve a pat on the back for the services they provide, whether its a report for Friday's meeting or a big chocolate cake fresh out of the oven. I talked with more than twenty couples for this reports, and studied dozens of others from a distance. To me the rightness or wrongness of "to work or not to work" was never settled. Hindu society has not handed down a clear verdict.

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