The Hindu Family
Category : March 1996
Published by Anonymous on Mar. 02, 1996

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Here are the "voices" of Hindus sharing their vision of family, not as family was lived by their grandparents for three-hundred generations (Hindu family history extends back 6,000 years and more1). Here we encounter the Hindu experience today, in many nations, under agreeable circumstances and adverse. Here we broadly survey threats to family integrity in the Hindu community. Then we summon the spiritual values which continue to sustain the traditional household and offer a pledge of well-being for family members and a promise of perpetuation of cultural ways and wisdoms.

This chapter of Family Issues as Seen by Different Religions is recounted by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, publisher of Hinduism Today, with "voices" of personal experience by Lavina Melwani and Archana Dongre.

Voices:Growing up a Hindu in India, I found that pleasure and pilgrimage, religious rituals and daily life were intricately intertwined. My earliest memories are of sitting with the aged family cook, listening to tales from the Ramayanaand Mahabharata. Listening spell-bound to tales of demons and devas, we absorbed the values of right and wrong, good and evil. Religion was always associated with joy and pleasure, never moralistic teaching. Every weekend we were taken to

the beautiful sandstone Birla Mandir--cold marble below bare feet, the softness of the marigolds and rose petals in our hands, the smiling faces of Krishna, Siva and Vishnu, the harmonium and cymbals and the sheer faith of hundreds of devotees. Afterwards, there were joy rides in the temple complex, trinkets and holy pictures and a cold soda. For us, it was a spiritual Disney World.

Voices: Where I grew up, mothers ruled the house, even though they did not go out in the olden days to earn. Sisters were respected and given gifts on at least two religious occasions. The rituals like Raksha Bandhan and Bhau Beej are woven around pure love between a brother and a sister and bonding of that relationship. In the former, the sister ties a specially made bracelet around brother's wrist, requesting him to protect her if need be. In the latter, the sister does arati (a worshipful expression of love and devotion through a tiny lighted ghee lamp) of brother, wishing him long life and prosperity. The brother gives her gifts and sweets on both occasions. Hindu religious principles emphasize that women should be respected. A Sanskrit saying goes, "Yatra naryastu pujyante, ramante tatra devatah."2 It means that wherever women are respected, those are the (only) places where even the Gods rejoice.

Voices:The greatest beauty of Hinduism, for me at least, is that it's such an elastic religion. Thousands of years old with scores of detailed rituals and mantras and texts, hundreds of holy days and fasts, countless Gods and Goddesses and saints, Hinduism still can be as young and uncomplicated as each individual wants it to be. It's really more a state of mind. You don't have to be a very ritualistic Hindu. Although having a

guru, or guide, is the accepted way of reaching God, Hinduism allows you to follow your own path. You feel you can talk straight to God. When I go in the morning to drop my children at school, and there is no one in the car to hear me, I sing devotional songs at the top of my voice. At those moments, I feel I'm communicating straight to God. Many people feel it's essential to have a guru to show one the path to heaven, yet others feel they can deal directly with God, without any middlemen. It's very elastic. It's a well from which you can drink and replenish your creativity. It's a very loving relationship. One day if I don't light the incense, I feel God will understand. We do these rituals to please ourselves that we are serving God. Hinduism is a guiltless religion--God will forgive, and He will understand because He knows what's in your heart. There is no fire and brimstone and no punishment. It's liquid love and forgiveness.

Voices:Looking back to my early years, it was the scriptures that tied our family together. I would hear father and grandfather chanting the Vedic mantras together in the early hours of each day. Everyone I know held the highest esteem for the Vedas, the very voice of God, elders would say. I knew they were old, and everyone said they were profound. But it was not until I was in my teens that I really discovered the Upanishads. Such beauty, such profundity, such humor and insight I had never before or since known. I would spend hours with the texts, talking with my parents and friends, wondering myself how these men, so many thousands of years ago, had gained all that wisdom--more, it seemed to me then, than people had today. Through the years I have seen so many families whose lives revolve around the sacred texts. While all honor the Vedas, for others the heart is moved by the Gita, the epics, the Tirumuraior maybe their own family guru's writings,

composed only decades ago. Whatever texts they are, it's quite clear in my experience that sacred texts do much to bind a family together in thought.

Then there is faith in karma. The Hindu family believes, in its heart, that even life's difficulties are part of God's purpose and the fruition of each member's past karmas. To go through things together is natural, expected, accepted. Breaking up, divorcing, separating--such reactions to stress don't resolve karmas that were brought into this life to go through. In fact, they make things worse, create new karmas and thus further need for perhaps even more sorrowful births. The belief in karma--the law by which our thoughts, words and deeds reap their natural reactions--helps hold a family together, not unlike the crew of a storm-tossed ship who would never think of jumping overboard when things got rough, but work together to weather the crisis, with their shared goal lying beyond the immediate difficulty. Thus difficult experiences can be serenely endured by the practicing Hindu. Knowing this in her heart, a Hindu wife in Kuala Lumpur can find solace in the midst of the death of a child. Knowing this in his heart, a Hindu father in Bangalore can sustain periods of privation and business failure. Each finds the strength to go on.

Voices:There is a beautiful word in the Hindi language: shukur, which means acceptance. Sometimes it's very hard to accept the cards life deals one, yet the Hindu belief in the acceptance of God's will makes it possible to bear incredible hardships. A young friend of mine's husband went into a coma after going in for preventive surgery. They gave him too much chloroform, and he never came out of the coma. He was a young man, his children were young. In the beginning, his wife was frantic,

weeping all the time. Yet her beliefs were solid as a rock within her, gradually calming her. It's five years later, and she's picked up the pieces of her life. Yet she never forgets to have her pujas; her husband's picture is always there in the ritual ceremonies. His presence is there in the family. She seems to know that the soul cannot die, that his spirit lives on. Every year on his death anniversary we all gather for the ritual ceremonies. Everybody feels the grief, and each religion teaches you to cope in a different way. Her belief in the undying soul gives her a little solace. She constantly has the prayers and the satsangs at home and they help her in the changing patterns of her life.

Hindu families all over the world are struggling--some failing, most succeeding. Our experience is that those most rooted in their Hinduness are the better survivors. Hindu households, sheltering one-sixth of the human family, are being threatened. What if the concept of family itself were dying? What if the very institution, the cauldron of our cultural and spiritual consciousness, were struck by some fatal disease and perished? Who could measure such a tragedy? Who could weep sufficient tears? Yet, that is precisely the path which we are semiconsciously following, a path leading to the demise of the traditional Hindu family, the source of our strength, the patron of our spirituality, the sole guarantor of our future.

Is it our fault that the family is disintegrating? Perhaps. Does it portend uncertainty? Be certain that it does. Is it inevitable? Probably not. A eulogy for the Hindu family may be premature. Yet this appraisal of problems may usefully be taken as a warning, a glimpse of the future that all must heed so none may have to see it. With that in mind, let us embark on an

exploration of some of the Hindu family's truly remarkable strengths, some of the most destructive forces arrayed against it and some of the hopeful signs we have seen of its ability to survive.

Case in point: Ramesh is a 25-year-old boy from Bangalore, studying engineering in the US. While at the university, he fell in love with an American student and will soon marry her. The mother and father were torn apart by their only son's decision to marry "an outsider." To them it was the unravelling of centuries of continuity, a break in the stream of tradition, a social calamity. Their friends would not understand. Their life would surely change. Their grandchildren would be "different," in color, in caste, in culture. Furthermore, the new wife came from another faith, and the couple planned to "raise our children in both faiths and allow them to make their own choices as young adults." To the strict, casted parents this was not a welcome sign of interfaith harmony. Rather, it was a warning signal ringing to mourn a break in their lineage, a potential loss of their grandchildren to another religion, another country, another culture.

There are countless Rameshes and their female counterparts scattered about the globe. They are part of a growing Hindu diaspora which has brought with it the very real threat that many families may not persist, that in one or two generations all that Ramesh's grandfather knew and hoped to pass on would have been discarded and in its place would be other values, other beliefs, other ideals and histories. This is a serious concern of hundreds of thousands of families, especially those living in the West or in urban India. The Hindu community in Texas told me that 20% of its young women are

marrying outside of the Indian tradition, outside of Hinduism.

Shanti was raised in America as an American, and her parents were from India. They used to go there when she was young, but not anymore. Shanti is not comfortable leaving her American friends to go to a place where she feels she no longer fits in. At the same time, she feels bad for her father and mother and does not want to hurt them. In her Texas community, Shanti is frequently mistaken as Hispanic, and has been dating a Mexican American named Juan. One day Shanti said: "Father, I have met someone, and he is wonderful. We are going to get married. "Father responded, "You are? Just like that? Married? How long have you been seeing this boy?" Shanti answered, "Well, I have been meaning to tell you, it has been over a year. "The father said, "We had always agreed that you would marry an Indian boy of good breeding, from a proper family." "But Daddy, Juan and I love each other," Shanti cried and ran off to her room. She could be heard weeping softly. Her father sat in a dejected mood. His life was shattered. He knew only too well what was to come!

The Western materialistic goal is personal fulfillment, while the Eastern religious ideal is fulfillment of duty--duty to one's parents, one's society and one's country, which includes tradition. But when the children of Eastern families are raised up with Western values, personal fulfillment overrides duty, passion overrides society, personal freedom overrides tradition, sometimes even country.

Voices:My grandma never tired of reminding us that the Hindu religion always glorified sacrifice. It was considered heroic to

make sacrifice for the family members. Hindu epics like Ramayanaand Mahabharatapurport that even great beings like Lord Rama and noble kings like the Pandavas had to endure trying circumstances and make sacrifices. So what is wrong if ordinary folks had to make some sacrifices? she would say. Parents often make great sacrifices to give good education to their children. Many Hindu parents have gone hungry to afford quality education to their children. The children, in turn, curtail their freedom and luxury when parents become old and infirm and need support from the younger generation. A Hindu never pities a sacrifice, but glorifies it with appreciation. Grandma made a big point to us about hospitality. She took it as a spiritual duty to serve guests as if they were God. This helped a lot in tying her community together and gave the family a loving way to greet the outside world. If a guest comes to a family even unannounced, he is invited in warmly and asked about his well being. His is also served the best food in the house, to the extent that family members may go hungry to ensure that the guest is well fed. Hinduism taught us the love of all living creatures. At lunch time my mother would say a silent prayer and set aside a portion to be fed to the cows. If a hungry man came to the door at meal-time, he was fed and given a few coins.

It is too late for the parents to say no to the Shantis and Rameshes who are driven by youthful emotions, know little about their religion and are impelled to live in a land where sex is a symbol of prowess, independence and esteem. Of course, Shanti and Ramesh did not want to hurt their parents, but they both did so nonetheless. Their parents are hurting and so are relatives and friends. These moms and dads will continue to hurt until they realize that they, without realizing it, relinquished their parental authority somewhere in the process

of raising their children. Shanti did marry Juan, but not without a lot of trouble, almost too much for her to bear. First, mother threatened suicide. Her brother started a fast, but it ended at breakfast the next morning. Dad all but ordered her out of the house, but stopped short because he really did love her. Slowly the parents adjusted, a quiet marriage took place, and with the first child came a softening of feelings.

Unlike Ramesh, Shanti's husband was not affiliated with any religion. Because of this, he took great pride in attending the namakarana, name-giving sacrament, for his first child. It was a boy! Her grandparents came from India, and his from Iowa, and all oo'd and ahh'd over the beautiful child. Yes, the resulting family was different than all had expected, but as one insightful youth told his parents, "If you didn't want me to become an American, why did you bring me to the States?"

There are 32,000 Indian national university students in the US today.2 They are all from wealthy families and know little about their religion, even though their parents may know quite a lot. This is what happened to Shanti and Ramesh. They know more about rock-and-roll, modern art and pop superstars than most Westerners, because they are struggling to fit in.

Hindu families continue to flee Indian, Sri Lankan, Nepalese and other homelands for political, economic and educational reasons. Deprived of traditional support systems, they are faced with profoundly disturbing challenges: teenage crises, violent games, divorce, abortion, suicide, mothers-in-law, dowry, drugs, free sex and the growing challenges of cross-national marriages like those of Ramesh and Shanti.

Hindus are not free of the crimes of abuse to women and children. There are thousands of reported cases each year of not only wife abuse, but of what are called dowry murders. These are cases where a wife is killed, frequently by burning to make it appear to be a kitchen accident, when she cannot procure more dowry. Children, too, are needing better protection in many Hindu communities. And the selective abortion of female fetuses is still practiced in cultures where male children are preferred for economic and cultural reasons. These problems seriously threaten the Hindu family in many nations and must be addressed in the decade ahead.

How is the Hindu concept of family experienced differently from that of other faiths? Only in the faiths of India does one encounter the tenet that we all experience a multitude of families in our journey toward God. In birth after birth we evolve, our tradition assures. In family after family we grow and mature and learn. Thus, in the Hindu family we find that the past and the future are intricately bound together. How intricately? We know a Sri Lankan family who is certain that their daughter, now nine, is the father's deceased grandmother. In this community it is considered a very great blessing--especially if one has the privilege of being part of a fine, noble family--for a departed relation to be born again into its midst. There is a profound intuition that when relatives pass, they will return, perhaps soon and perhaps in the very same home. So everyone watches for the telltale signs. How wonderful, the family feels, to care for grandma as she once cared for us! Thus the spiritual insight into rebirth extends the family concept beyond the present, binding the present to the past, and promising continuity with the future. Many Hindu families are aware of such relationships. Many others will consciously seek to be born into a particular family, knowing

life there will be fulfilling, secure and high-minded.

Voices:When a married daughter visits her parents' family, she is revered like a guest but showered with love like a daughter, with blessings and all the nice clothes as well as food the family can give. I had such a wonderful homecoming in India after I had lived for many years in the West. Such a homecoming of a few days is an emotionally gratifying, soul-satisfying event for the girl, who carries those fond memories for life.

As an example of the ability of spiritual commitment to help families endure and do well, consider the experience of Saiva Siddhanta Church, our small but widespread Hindu fellowship. For every 1,000 families who are devout, practicing members of the fellowship, there have been only two divorces in the last 40 years. In the US the norm would have been 40%, fully 400 fractured families. What kept those 398 families together when statistically they should have disintegrated? In my 40 years of ministry and counseling among Hindu families, I have concluded that it is their faith, their shared spiritual experience and goals, their ideals. Husbands and wives will stay together when they believe the rewards and human potentials are greater than if they split. And they will remain a kindred unit even more often when their joint or extended family is open to advice and counsel from one tradition, when they are firmly committed to one guru, one temple and one body of scripture.

Hinduism teaches a constellation of principles which, if followed by husband and wife, make the bold assertion that preserving the marriage and the integrity of the family holds

rewards that far outweigh benefits which they might expect from separation. We work with families on a daily basis, solving their problems, helping them to individually follow their path and to mutually work together. Hinduism teaches them the ideals of dharma, which includes duty, selflessness, virtue and faith.

When dharma is the shared ideal of every family member--as opposed to self-fulfillment or social-economic objectives--it is easier to navigate troubled waters, easier to persist in seasons of loss or lack, in times of emotional or mental difficulty.

There are many other ideals that help a family survive in Hinduism. An important one is that father and mother are the children's first guru, first teacher of things of the spirit. This brings a deep honoring to the parent-child relationship. Such a tie transcends the physical, emotional, intellectual relationship that is the sum of some family bonds. It brings an air of sacredness into the interactions, a deeper reverencing which powerfully connects a daughter or son to his mother and father. One sees this expressed so beautifully in the traditional family, when young ones gently and lovingly touch the feet of their parents. They are worshiping the Divine in their parents, and thus being prepared to see God in everyone.

In the strict Hindu family there is a clear and well understood hierarchy, based fundamentally on age. Younger members are taught to respect and follow the directions from their elders, and to cherish and protect those younger than themselves. Even differences of a few months are respected. Many problems that could arise in less-structured families--and do,

as proven in the modern nuclear family--simply never come up. There is less vying for attention, less ego conflict, less confusion about everyone's role and place. With the lines of seniority known to all, regulations, changes and cooperative exchanges flow freely among family members.

Voices:In the family life, today as well as in the times when Indian epics like Mahabharataand Ramayanawere written thousands of years ago, a Hindu person was told, "Matrudevo bhava, pitridevo bhava, acharyadevo bhava." The Sanskrit dictums mean, "Be the one who respects his mother as God, his father as God and his guru, or teacher, as God." Such an ultimate reverence for the elders created a profound, serene feeling and certainly prepared the mind to receive the good and loving advice from them in the proper spirit. Bowing down before the elders in respectful salutation and touching their feet is an exclusively Hindu custom. When such a deep respect is accorded to family members, no wonder the family bonds are strong and they remain unified.

Daily worship in the home is a unique Hindu contribution to family sharing. Of course, faith is a shared experience in all religious households. But the Hindu takes it a step further, sanctifying the home itself with a beautiful shrine room--a kind of miniature temple right in the house. The father or oldest son is the family's liturgist, leading others in daily ritual. Others care for the sacred implements, gather fresh flowers for the morning rites and decorate for holy days or festivals. In Hindu culture, family and spirituality are intimately intertwined.

Voices:Every Hindu family in our village had a home shrine

where the family members worship their Gods. Even the poorest set aside a place for this. Rituals are periodic celebrations which are religious and spiritual in character, and they address the inward feelings rather than outward. Such pujas and rituals give an individual a chance to pause, look inward and concentrate on something more meaningful, more profound than mere materialism and the daily drudgery of life. Worships and rejoicings in the name of God, fasting and observances of special days enable people to look beyond the day-to-day life to a larger scheme of things. In the best homes I know, the father performs the rites daily, and the family joins and assists. I guess it's like the old adage, "The family that prays together, stays together." Even in the busy rat race of life in cosmopolitan cities like Bombay or Los Angeles, there are many Hindus who perform at least a mini-puja daily. They claim that even the small ritual of a few minutes a day makes them concentrate, feel elevated spiritually, brings their minds on an even keel, enabling them to perform better in their line of work.

Another family tradition is the kulaguru. Though it is not required that every member of a Hindu family have the same guru, it often happens that way. This gives all members a shared spiritual point of reference, a voice whose wisdom will be sought in times of difference or unclarity, a voice that will also be listened to, its advice followed. That means that there is a kind of outside counselor, a mediator to work out deadlocks, a referee to settle disputes. Thus the family need never be "stuck" in some irresolvable impasse. The kulaguru's counsel can be trusted to transcend the personalities involved, to be impersonal and just. And that simple practice can bring a family through many a quandary.

Hindu heritage gives a strong definition to the growth and maturing of family members through the application of the ashramas. Every member in a family is expected to spend the first 24 years or so in the brahmacharya, or student, stage. It's a time of learning, studying, serving and growing up. Then comes the stage of the grihastha, or householder, and with it marriage, children and social responsibilities. These stages are informally defined in nearly every culture, but in Hinduism the definitions are elaborately detailed beyond raising the family. Sometime around 50 or 60, every member enters the vanaprastha ashrama, a stage of advisor and elder. By formalizing this stage, the Hindu family gives a place of prominence and usefulness to its senior citizens. They do not just retire, and they certainly are not sent off to a retirement home. Rather, their advice is sought, their years of experience drawn upon. Thus Hinduism gives a place to those who have served the family in their youth but with age no longer can serve in that same way. They have a new place. Far from being a lesser function, it is a place of greater honor. It is one of the greatest gifts that the traditional Hindu family offers, and one of the greatest tragedies it thus averts.

Dowry is another threat to the Hindu family. Its economic and social costs are extraordinary, weighing down the wage-earner in a way hardly to be believed. Many Hindus have abandoned the practice of dowry on moral grounds, but the vast majority follow its well-worn ways. Vasanti is a village girl in India. Her father told me of his lot--five daughters, all requiring huge dowries if they are to enjoy a good marriage, which roughly translates to buying a good husband. Even those families that see the wrongfulness of the practice will seldom diminish demands for their sons, for they fear others in the community will presume something must be wrong with the boy if his price

is nominal. Ravi, Vasanti's father, tells of how he and his wife have scrimped and saved for 25 years, gone without many things so that their daughters could have a good life. No vacations for them. No car. No new clothes not absolutely needed. Ravi works two jobs and saves each month more than some of his associates make, for each of his five daughters will require over 50,000 rupees, more than a full year's salary. Many Hindu families are bent and even broken by this social burden. Hindus reflecting on the future of the family tradition will be well advised to harness this onerous custom.

Voices:A daughter is pampered and protected, not necessarily spoiled, in a traditional Hindu family. She is married and sent to a suitable family with whatever gold jewelry and other assets her family can afford. In the old days, the dowry was not something to be forced, but was considered an honor to give. Hindu rules of conduct also stated that women always deserved protection from men. Manu Smriti, an ancient treatise on religion and householder's duties, said, Pita rakshati kaumare, bharta raskshati youvana, putrah rakshati varddhakye, na stree swatantryam arhati. It says, "A woman is protected by father in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and in old age she should be protected by her son. At no stage in life should a woman be left alone and destitute. She deserves protection by man at every stage in her life." When women are cared for, they can perform well their roles of creators, nourishers, educators of children and inspirers so the society becomes happy.3

It is significant that Hindus, numbering 885 million today, constitute 16% of the human race.4 One out of every six people on the planet is a Hindu. So the ability of that large

community to preserve its strengths, to pass on its values and cultural treasures, to protect its members and keep them well and fulfilled is important. Important does not suffice. Crucial, really. On the optimistic side, as much as 85% of Hindus live in rural India, in the 700,000 small villages which remain relatively unaffected by outside influences and thus retain the promise of carrying on the traditional ways, including language, religion and custom.

Voices:I was always taught that we as Hindus must have a magnanimous attitude, that our Hindu religion visualizes the entire earth as one family--Vasudaiva kutumbaka. But while looking at all human beings as one family, I also saw that elders deeply considered the smaller family unit, the dynamism of its members' relationships with one another, and the pivotal role the institution of family plays in building the society.

Leaving the womb, we enter another complex system of support, protection and nurturing. The family is an intricate web of relationships in which we grow from birth to humanhood, from ignorance to knowledge and from cycles of death to immortality.

Notes: 1. The dating of early Hindu civilizations is variously cited as between 2 and 10,000 bce. David Frawley in his book Gods, Sages and Kings. Vedic Secrets of Ancient Civilization (Salt Lake City, Utah, Passage Press, 1991) argues for a dating of Proto-Rig Vedic texts around 6,000 bce.; 2. From the Manu Dharma Shastra 3.56; 3. Ibid, 9.3; 4. Report from The Associated Press, June 1993; 5. 780 million of these are in

India, roughly one-sixth of the accepted 5.1 billion world population. Figures taken from the Indian Census of 1990. See also this monthly journal Hinduism Today, and David Bartlett's World Christian Encyclopedia.

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