

[Our Lives As Indian Hindu Women](#)

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Graduate Student Sensitively Dispels Stereotypes in Women's Day Talk

She could have told them all Indian women are treated like Goddesses. But her audience knew better. So did she. Thus Punam Luthra gracefully guided a mostly Western group on a tour of the hidden byways of Indian womanhood - sharing the joys, fulfillments, challenges and some of the hurts.

Punam is a finance graduate and accounting honestly is natural for her. "I told them that last year there were 2,448 dowry deaths. They thought the dowry custom was a thing of the past! They had so many misconceptions," the sprightly 28-year-old graduate student said of those who attended her talk as part of a week-long celebration of International Women's Day, March 2-6 at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. "They were so attentive to even the smallest detail," Punam told HINDUISM TODAY. "They had the impression women in India were completely male-dominated and accorded little or no respect. I explained to them that in India the women play a central role as the wife and mother in our family system. Further, in Hinduism women fully, and invaluable, participate. In fact, there was a time when ceremonial worship was not considered complete without the participation of women.

I shared how both Hindi and Sanskrit - the world's oldest language - reveal a profound respect for womanhood by lending the female gender to the most potent words - e.g. shakti (strength), vidya (education), Shursvati (knowledge) Lakshmi (wealth), bhudhi (intelligence) and shanti (peace) to name only a few. Also when Hindu remember Lord Rama, He is to be remembered with his spouse in the order Sita/Ram, and similarly Lord Krishna as Radha/Krishna, the female first."

But Punam wasn't trying to incite a women-are-better-than-men rally. She abhors

the whole better, inferior, etc. sexist, quicksand mentality. So at every turn, she offered insight and reserved judgement - sensitively juxtaposing past and present, progress and problems, prejudices and praise, working and mothering - never letting go a decidedly feminine delivery. The audience noted this and liked it. In fact, these California professionals were learning more about Indian womanhood just watching this young lady speak - especially how she handled even the most tragic issue in a way that left the truth bitter but her sounding sweet. That's Indian womanhood.

One subject she did bare with intrepid strokes was the dowry specter. She has witnessed its ugly undertows scar girls too severely to pass it off to her audience as some quaint custom. "In India, as in China, daughters, though loved, are considered a handicap. Their contribution to their family is temporary. Once married, she is given to the husband's family and then valued mostly for her ability to produce sons. Sound appalling? It is. Exorbitant dowry demands make girls feel like a burden. Their marriages are more like business deals. Cruel, dehumanizing. The saddest part though, is that the practice has crept into the USA. Yet Indian communities close their eyes to dowry-related divorces and wife-beating, not wanting to see their image of modernity tarnished." This was talk Hindus don't usually let get out of the home. Punam continued.

"In ancient India there is no word for dowry in Hindi or Sanskrit. Gifts were exchanged but no dowry. It got established with Muslim rule when the rules, nawabs, tried to show off wealth." Raping entire households of Hindu girls was part of the spoils-of-war custom during that period of Muslim conquests. Punam related. But today rape is not a Muslim vice. It riddles Hindu society - protected by a macho, "good-ol' - boys" justice system and the tremendous fear girls have in reporting the crime. Punam went on to indict Indian cinema for condoning a related offense, 'eve-teasing.' Movies glorify this as one of the perks a young middle class Indian boy enjoys." she said with quiet exasperation.

Disciplined and energetic, this young woman also paints, draws, does copper-etching, plays tennis, volunteers at a Women's Shelter and nurtures a flock of friends. She has religious roots too. Punam was raised by a tight-knit, extended family, mostly worshippers of Goddess Mata Devi from Punjab and Jammu. "Every day my uncle's family gets up, faces the hill Vashnu Tevi where the Goddess lives and prays. They have no idols because She is right there in front of them. I also am a believer in Mata Devi. Every morning, before school, she prays to a small image of the Goddess in her bedroom in her parents' suburban home.

She gained a love of God mostly from her grandmother, "one of the strongest women I know." She is also proud of her educated mother, a homemaker, who wears only saris or salwar kameezes while T-shirts and designer jeans have converted so many other Indian ladies.

Though strikingly cosmopolitan, Punam is ardently attached to some of the most orthodox wifely attitudes. "In India, wives have pictures of their husbands along with Bhagavan, God, in their shrines," she relates. "In my family too. It's always the men. But the women don't mind. No reason to mind, because it's really a woman's strength giving that honor to the men. There's nothing wrong with saying your husband is like a God to you."

Being a Hindu wife, mother, and fulfilling honored duties of homemaking are near sacred to Punam. "The mother is the primary educator of the children - in morals. Ethics values and religion. The life of a mother is a great thing. My mother and aunts were all well educated. But they chose to stay home because they felt that that brought the home more benefits than extra money. By being at home, raising the children and taking care of the family, that brings a lot of honor to a Hindu family. If the family is maintained in a dignified manner. It replace the extra income they could have secured."

But Punam didn't herself exactly major in home-economics nor does she preach homemaking to every Hindu girl. She wants that to be a choice not a commandment. She herself is now polishing off an MA in Computer Science, with one foot already in the door of law school. It was her grandmother who instilled in her the belief that girls should be educated. "Women often get told they innately do not possess much intelligence and that education is for men. We also hear that education will do-sex us!" Those will stereo types are now partyjokes as women continue to excel in all professional fields. "India licenses more women doctors than men each year," Punam stunned her audience. "They thought that Indira Gandhi's Prime Ministership of our country was a exception," Punam stated. "They were totally unaware that our freedom struggle was equally run by women."

Because many my age in the States put down their Hindu roots, a mistaken idea goes around that all young Indian women are rootless, arrogant and Westernized. Even some of the ladies at the talk wondered why I was so interested in India and Indian women since I had lived here in America most of my life. I told them, 'I am still an Indian woman whether I live here or on the moon!' - a spicy response, just

so her Western peers didn't leave thinking demure Indian women have no fire.

WOMANLY STRENGTHS

One of a Hindu woman's greatest strengths is her capacity to adjust. Also, her ability to nurture our customs, values and culture. It encompasses even the role of being a daughter - growing up, educating herself, learning how to take care of family members, their needs and problems. But always knowing that her new life will begin at marriage - taking care of her new home, family, extended family, in-laws, etc. All in a dignified way - even helping often as a breadwinner too.

I think submission is really a wonderful strength. Even as a girl, a woman learns how to handle herself very gracefully by being submissive in many different ways. She carries that into the role of wife and becomes a sacrificer. But she doesn't feel intimidated or lessened in this. In the West, this quality gets so misconstrued, as implying a woman is being demeaned, not being equally respected, etc. But if you look into our religious history, our greatest spiritual women exemplified this special quality. It is always appreciated as a radiant flower, full of spiritual essence, and so beautifying to a woman. You know, it isn't that easy to be submissive. It takes a lot of strength." - Punam Luthra

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