The Female Element in Indian Culture

By

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Introduction

The female element is predominant in India, a land where goddesses are worshipped and women revered as goddesses. Its patriots speak of "the Motherland" and "the whole cultural life is permeated with the idea of the female ideal, the Mother Goddess, and the awe of her representatives, the Indian mothers. . . ."[1] I received a timely letter from a friend who had lived for six months in a village in central India. "Like the cow," she wrote, "honoured above all other animals, the women are honoured above all other human beings. They are regarded as the stronger of the sexes, the most capable of bearing responsibility. . . ."[2] Rama Krishna and Anandai Mai are the two most popular Indian saints. Rama Krishna, who dressed and experienced himself as a woman, was responsible for revitalizing Kali worship, and Anandai Mai, a woman known as "The Mother" is advisor to Indira Ghandi. It can be observed

1. O.R. Ehrenfels, *Mother-Right in India*, p. 133.
2. Personal communication of Heather Nadel, based on stay in Kedagaon, Maharastra State in central India.

that the average Hindu husband treats his wife with mingled respect and tenderness, and a surprising number of recent books and articles by Hindu men plead the cause of women's rights. In fact, it could be said of the whole of India, as it has been said of the Nair of Malabar, that female procreation is highly valued and male envy overt.[3]

How then do we explain the paradox, so often pointed out, that India has traditionally been a land of the seclusion of upper class women, of *sati* (the burning of the widow), and of child marriage? One cannot look only at official law to determine the position of women; it is necessary to distinguish between "folk" and "formal" culture, between the ambiguous position of women in the official culture, as expressed in Vedic literature, and the unequivocal honour and esteem in which women are held in popular religion, myth, folklore, and daily life. My thesis is that this dichotomy between the psychological and legal realities has resulted from the many foreign conquests India has suffered, each of them bringing increased misery to her women. The essence of Indian culture consists of those values and forces which form the character and ethos of Indian civilization—and these are female-oriented. The invaders (Aryans, Scythians, and Muslims) have, without exception, brought with them male-dominated cultures, resulting in a patriarchal overlay on the matriarchal matrix of Indian civilization.

The major deity of the Indus civilization of 5,000 years ago was the Mother Goddess, and all the various aspects of the Indus religion have persisted into the present, forming the core of what we now call Hinduism. When the Aryans entered India, they contributed little to Hinduism; rather, their patriarchal religion was absorbed by Dravidian beliefs, tinging them hardly at all. Wherever Brahmanism was the official creed, and women were religiously disenfranchised, new cults sprang up which gave women a prominent place. Repeated foreign invasions caused a gradual curtailment of women's legal rights, but Indian attitudes towards women have remained positive despite the oppressive laws. Female elements predominate in Hinduism; examples are the Radha-Krishna cults, and Saktism (worship of the Deity as female). The religion of village India is almost exclusively bound up with the cult of the Earth Mother, both protective and malign. The Goddess of village India demands blood sacrifice to appease her anger; she appears to be angry for political reasons, having been overthrown from her former place of honour, just as her worshippers, the dark-skinned Dravidian villagers,

3. N. Singer, ed., *Traditional India, Structure and Change*, p. 246.

now considered to be of low caste, preserve in their legends the memory of a terrible battle. When we examine the situation of women in low caste and tribal India, we find that many tribes and castes are literally matriarchal in their social structure, particularly in the South of India which has been less affected by the invasions. I have divided this essay into six main sections and a summary: I, *The Goddess in the Hindus Civilization*; II, *Matriarchal Matrix, Patriarchal Overlay*; III, *Women in Hindu Society: Legal Position and Matriarchal Traces*; IV, *Female Elements in Hinduism, Saktism, Vaishnavism and Salvism*; V, *Religion of Village India*; and VI, *Women of Tribal India.*

The Goddess in the Indus Civilization

Five thousand years ago, a great civilization, comparable to that of Sumer or Egypt,[4] but larger than either,[5] flourished in India. Racial links with early Sumer have been postulated; cultural links have been proven.[6] What distinguished the Indus civilization from the rest of the ancient world was its architecture—each house had its own toilet, drain, running water,[7] and the people built a great swimming tank for ceremonial bathing.[8] The profusion of toys,[9] ornaments,[10] and cosmetic vessels,[11] the technological superiority of the domestic tools,[12] and the scarcity of weapons suggest that the inhabitants of the Indus valley were a peaceful people.[13]

According to archeologists, the Goddess cult was prevalent at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, where she is represented by numerous terra cotta figurines,[14] nude except for short skirts.[15] Overburdened by a profusion of medallions and necklaces, each figure wears two cuplike objects, one on each side of her fan-shaped headdress.[16] Similar figurines have

4. Sir John Marshall, *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization,* vol. 1, p. iii.
5. *Ibid.*, p. v.
6. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization,* pp. 12, 43, 191.
7. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–18 and Mackay, *op. cit.*, pp. 31–34.
8. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
9. Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 88; and *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro*, vol. 1, p. 239.
10. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization,* pp. 100–119.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 151–53.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
14. E.O. James, *The Cult of the Mother-Goddess,* p. 33.
15. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization,* p. 66.
16. Mackay, *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro,* vol. i, pp. 260–261.

been unearthed in the Kulli and Zhob cultures of Baluchistan,[17] whose grotesque faces suggest they may be early prototypes of Kali[18]. Sir John Marshall, discoverer of the Indus civilization, has suggested that these representatives of the Goddess were kept in the homes as tutleary deities,[20] just as one of the functions of the Mother Goddess of present-day India is considered the guardian of the house and village.[21] Marshall points out that the Mother Goddess of present-day India is altogether closer to her worshippers than any of the recognized Hindu gods.[22] Significantly, very few male figurines have been unearthed; these are invariably nude and unadorned.[23] It is clear that the Mother Goddesses of the Indus civilization were "quite independent of any consort, while . . . only at the present time (are they) being gradually provided with husbands from the orthodox Hindu pantheon.[24]

Archeologists have also unearthed many seals and sealings, approximately one inch square; many of these portray the Goddess. One depicts a nude female, her legs apart and a plant issuing from her womb.[25] Another portrays women engaged in a ritual dance.[26] Worship of Mother-Earth is today associated with worship of tree spirits—who appear on several seals. One of the seals portrays a nude tree goddess seated amidst the branches of a pipal tree,[27] while below her a kneeling worshipper pays obeisance. Below them stand women with sprigs of leaves on their heads, probably votaries of the Goddess.[28] On another seal, two men spread apart a tree as the tree spirit emerges from the center; on the reverse of the amulet, a kneeling man makes an offering to the tree.[29] The deity in these trees is not a mere nature spirit, but an embodiment of the Goddess herself, who in village India often takes up her abode in a tree. In the pre-Aryan tradition, the tree spirit appears as "an important goddess,"[30] but appears in a subordinated role in the

17. James, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
19. Marshall, *op. cit.*, vol. iii. pp. 51, 339 in James, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
20. *Ibid.*, and Mackay, *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro*, vol. i, pp. 260–261.
21. A.C. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, p. 36.
22. Macka, *The Indus Civilization*, p. 67 .
23. Stuart Piggot, *Prehistoric India*, p. 60, in James, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
24. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization*, p. 72.
25. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
26. James, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
27. Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of North India*, p. 71.
28. *Ibid.*, and Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
29. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization*, p. 76; *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro*, vol. i, pp. 351–352; and Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Buddhist tradition as a Yakshī or Yoginī.[31] The transformation of ancient deities into minor spirits under new religious systems is, of course, a common process.

Many seals depict tigers, doves, and bulls, all known to be associated with the cult of the Goddess. One of the seals represents a nude woman with the body of a tiger, wearing many bangles and horns of a goat.[32] In tribal and village India, the tiger is still considered a vehicle of the Mother Goddess.[33] A popular Hindu mantra, which has found its way to America, calls on the Goddess in her aspect as tigress; the mantra is repeated by yoga students to create a feeling of strength.[34] Archeologists have unearthed little figures of doves with wings outstretched; similar models, "also with wings outstretched, occur as early as the Neolithic age in Crete, where a Mother Goddess was powerful, (and) in Sumer . . ." where they were definitely associated with the Goddess.[35] By far the most numerous sealings are of exquisitely delineated bulls who stand with head lowered before a cult object, their necks adorned with garlands. Literally hundreds of these amulets have been found.[36] Other scenes depicted include a bull standing beside a dancing woman,[37] and an effigy of a bull being carried in a religious procession.[38] The bull, known as a symbol of fertility, was probably associated with the Mother Goddess as in the Ancient Near East. In present day India, it is the companion of Shiva who is represented by the linga. In fact, Marshall has identified the prototype of Shiva as it recurs on certain seals:[39] the cross-legged figure has flowers and leaves rising from his head, suggesting a fertility motif.[40]

Further examples of a fertility cult are apparent in the abundance of lingas and yonis unearthed. Hundreds of these are tiny stone miniatures, probably, as Marshall suggests, intended to be worn on the person, as lingas are carried by the lingayat sect today. But in the Indus valley,

30. Mackay, *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro*, vol. i, p. 358.
31. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization*, p. 149.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 85, 86, 93; and *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro*, vol. i, p. 338.
33. Crooke, *op. cit.*, pp. 354–358; and J.H. Hutlon, *The Augami Nagas*, pp. 21–22.
34. Margaret Beals, personal communication.
35. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization*, p. 84.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 149.
37. *Ibid.*, and Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
38. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–55.
39. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization*, p. 84.
40. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

yonis are as prevalent as lingas, and lingas are often found set in a yoni base.[41] At the mound of Periana Ghundai, on the right bank of the Zhob river, stands a giant vulva carved in stone. A huge stone phallus stands at the mound of Mogul Ghondai on the left bank.[42] Holed stones, associated by the Hindus with the female generative organs, are held in awe in India; for example, the Sri Gundi stone at Malabar point is said to purify all who crawl through it of sin and sickness. A similar stone is found at Satrungayā, its hole known as the Door of Absolution.[43] A holed stone of a much later date than the Indus civilization was found, the figure of a nude fertility goddess engraved within the central hole.[44]

The predominance of the female elements in the religion of the Indus valley suggests that worship was at first directed towards the female, maternal aspect of Deity.[45] The veneration of female energy which is pronounced even in modern India is of pre-Aryan origin,[46] and as Sir John Marshall has pointed out:

> In no country in the world has the worship of the Divine Mother been so deep rooted and ubiquitous as in India. Her shrines are found in every town and hamlet throughout . . . the land. She is the . . . prototype of the power . . . which developed into that of Sakti. Her representatives are the . . . village goddesses . . . who one and all are personifications of the same power . . . That like the Mother Goddesses of Western Asia they originated in a matriarchal state of society is a highly reasonable supposition.[47]

It is generally agreed that ancient cultures did not distinguish between sacred and secular as we do; religion was such an integral part of life that it functioned as the eyes through which the world was seen. If women held a central position in the religious life of an ancient civilization, we may safely infer that the female principle predominated in the psychological as well as the spiritual life of the community. Where the supreme Deity is female, women are respected in daily life. And, as Marshall acknowledges, in the religion of the Indus valley, "The female

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41. Stein, *Memoirs of an Archeological Survey of India*, no. 37, 1925, p. 60, in James, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
42. Crooke, in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. ii, p. 872, in Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
43. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
44. James, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
45. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
46. Oppert, *The Original Inhabitants of India*, pp. 440, 451, 503, 513 in Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
47. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

elements appear to be co-equal to, if not predominant over the male."[48]

Matriarchal Matrix, Patriarchal Overlay

The apparent dichotomy between the legal and psychological realities in India is resolved by the realization that many of the elements of Hinduism which oppress women are the result of conflict between the Dravidians* and the Aryans, and the later influence of the Scythian and Muslim invaders.[49] It was once thought that the Aryans were responsible for bringing civilization to India, and that Dravidian contributions to Hinduism were negligible, but the utter fallacy of that belief has been revealed by Sir John Marshall's recent excavations at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. He has conclusively proven that most of the features of Hinduism date from pre-Aryan sources: the cult of the Mother Goddess, the cult of Shiva, reverence towards animals, including bulls, monkeys, and elephants, worship of tree spirits, worship of phallic, yoni, and aniconic stones and yoga. The Aryans did not institute Hinduism; they merely modified an ancient form of belief.[50] The Indus civilization was based on irrigation agriculture and trade, by both land and sea. It possessed a pictographic script, as yet undeciphered, and enjoyed the luxury of spacious houses equipped with indoor plumbing. Its artisans created beautiful jewelry and highly perfected domestic implements, but few weapons.[51] The Aryans, on the other hand, possessors of a "crude nomadic culture,"[52] were "relatively barbaric invaders, provided by their horses with an immense (military) advantage" who conquered the peaceful Indus civilization.[53]

In many of the hymns of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the Aryans express their hatred of the "Dasas" and "Dasyus" whom they describe as dark and ill-favoured, snub-nosed, worshippers of the phallus and of hostile speech. The aborigines were "worshippers of mad gods,"

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48. O.R. Ehrenfels, *Mother Right in India*, p. 133.
49. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 57–87.
50. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization*, pp. 12, 14, 43, 31–34, 100–119, 149–153, 170–171, 191; and Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–18, 76, 102–104.

* The term "Dravidian" denotes a linguistic affinity, not a race, but loosely used it connotes the dark-skinned people who once inhabited the entire Indian peninsula, but were driven south by the invaders.

51. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
52. G. Slater, *The Dravidian Element in Indian Culture*, pp. 45–46.
53. Elmore, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
54. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

"keeping alien rites," but "wealthy in herds, having castles and cities." They dwelt in fortified places called pur, of which Indra the Aryan war god, destroyed hundreds.[55] The word "Dāsa" means "slave," implying that the indegenous population was enslaved.[56] As the Aryans settled in India, "the two main linguistic and cultural streams" coalesced despite attempts by the Aryans to keep them apart by a caste system, based originally on a colour bar: "varna," the Hindu word for caste, means "colour."[57] The government and social structure of the Aryan invaders "was based on principles which underlie the later caste system of the Hindus." Caste solidified as the Aryans tried to preserve their faith, customs, and "racial ascendancy" from the "eroding influence of intermarriage and other forms of contact with alien beings."[58] (It is significant that the various reform movements within Hinduism all aim at simultaneously abolishing caste and improving the status of women.)

As there were few Aryan women in the invading groups, the Aryans often took native wives.[59] Aryan writers repeatedly commented on the promiscuity of women (many Dravidian tribes were polyandrous), and the tendency of wives to poison their husbands. A stanza of the Vedic marriage hymn refers to a spirit which possesses the bride and, through her, attempts to harm the bridegroom.[60] Many seemingly misogynist phrases, such as "There is none whom a woman sincerely loves, she for serving her purpose does not hesitate to kill even her husband",[61] may well refer to the reaction of the native women who were forced to marry their conquerors. In fact, there is direct evidence that the custom of sati, the burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, was instituted to prevent the poisoning of husbands.[62]

The essence of this conflict is expressed in the myth of Parasurama, which refers to the Aryan invasion in terms of the conflict between Mother-Right and Father-Right. The legend is crucial to the ceremonial life of village India. In the traditional Hindu version, Jamadagni is a celibate (Aryan) sage. Renuka, his native wife, envies the sexual pleasure of the other couples around them. Jamadagni is enraged and orders his

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55. Slater, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–46.
56. James, *op. cit.*, p. 99; and Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, pp. 130–140.
57. Oman, *The Brahmans, Priests, and Muslims of India*, p. 76–78.
58. Basham, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–78.
59. *Rig-Veda* x 29.85 in Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, p. 231.
60. Indra, *The Status of Women in Ancient India*, p. 18.
61. Ward, *op. cit.*; and Russell, vol. ii, p. 369 in Ehrenfels, p. 128.
62. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, pp. 137–38.

sons to kill her for this mental infidelity. The four eldest sons who refuse to comply are cursed with idiocy. The fifth son, Parasurama, agrees to decapitate his mother, but later asks his father to revive her and restore mental vigor to his brothers. Jamadagni complies, but makes the mother forget that she has been murdered by her son. Ehrenfels suggests that Renuka symbolizes the originally matriarchal character of India, and that her murder by Parasurama recalls the destruction of ancient Mother-Right. Parasurama is regarded by Hindu India as the bringer of classical Brahmanism,[63] but Dravidian India reenacts this legend at all major festivals, calling it not the legend of Parasurama, but the legend of Renuka![64]

Sanctity of the earth, a Dravidian concept, has remained a basic tenet in Indian thought. The Mother Goddess is worshipped at her earthen shrines, as she has been for millenia. The religion of the Aryans when they entered India was patriarchal, involving the worship of sky and fire gods. But as they settled, they were soon influenced by indigenous belief, and soon each male deity was conceptualized with a dual nature, his female energy (Sakti) being personified as his wife. In this way the worship of the Mother Goddess received Brahmanic sanction.[65]

The Aryans did not succeed in imposing their cultural values on India. Hinduism has been compared to a weaving, the warp Dravidian and the weft Aryan. By the time caste appeared in India, about the fifth century B.C., the syncretism had become permanently established, Hinduism in practice being a combination of Dravidian and Aryan elements inextricably fused into a composite system of belief and practice in which the Goddess cult played a primary role. Foreign influence—Aryan, Scythian, and Muslim, has resulted in the legal suppression of women,[66] but ancient Dravidian ways have persisted in the religion and cultural attitudes.[67] Thus while the original matriarchal culture survives in the Hindu social structure as relics of matrilineal descent, matrilocality, and the like, its fullest expression is in Hindu religion, which emphasizes worship of the Mother Goddess and the divinity of women.[68] The matriarchal stratum of Indian culture was overlaid by the increasingly patriarchal cultures of the Aryans and later invaders, but matriarchal

63. Elmore, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
64. James, *op. cit.*, p. 102; and Basham, *op. cit.*
65. *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 99–101.
66. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
67. Elmore, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9.
68. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 65; and Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

attitudes have remained the essential core of Hinduism and the prevailing ethos of the culture.[69]

Women in India—A Legal Position

India is known as a land of paradoxes; women, and especially mothers, are revered as goddesses, yet the daily lot of women can be miserable in the extreme. The legal and psychological realities are separate and distinct. Literary passages "showing the honour and esteem in which women are held are quite as numerous as those which stress their subservience."[70] It is a fact that wife-beating has always been abhorred in India. Men are required by law to give way to women when treading a path.[71] Yet child marriage is practiced, upper class women are secluded, and widows abhorred. The paradox is resolved when we realize that we are dealing with two distinct traditions. The position of women in India is worst among the upper castes, those with the least indigenous blood. Women have high status among tribal India, the great bulk of the castes, and the peasants; as a caste rises in the social hierarchy, the position of its women declines.[72] Centuries of foreign rule —Aryan, Scythian, and Muslim—have resulted in a severe curtailment of women's legal rights, but the ethos of respect for the female principle has remained central to the culture.

Until this past century, women's legal rights had been steadily declining since Vedic times, when women held an ambiguous position. Patriarchal values are apparent in the idealization of women who sacrifice all, including their children for their husband's sake,[73] and in the inclusion of misogynist statements in the Vedic texts.[74] Early Aryan law permitted women to be gambled or given away, or sold, but the practice was increasingly disapproved of,[75] probably due to indigenous influence, and by the second century, A.D. was outlawed.[76] It was, however, stated

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69. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 183.
70. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 74, 40.
71. W. Ward, *A view of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindus*, vol. i, p. 199; and Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, p. 113; and Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
72. Bhojapranda, ed. *Vidyasayana*, p. 90 in Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 183.
73. Indra, *The Status of Women in Ancient India*, pp. 11, 15, 18.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 18, *Adi Parua.*
75. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
76. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 183; and *Mahabharata*, pp. 1, 74, 40, in *Ibid.*

that the gods will not accept the sacrifice of a man who beats his wife,[77] and marriage was theoretically a union of equals. "Man is only half, he is not complete until he is united with a wife and gives birth to children."[78] "Husband and wife are identical to each other, and the happiness of each depends on the other."[79] The presence of a wife was necessary to sacrificial performance, for "the gods do not accept the oblations of a bachelor."[80] Girls were educated, given Brahmacharya training, and initiated into Vedic studies by investure with the sacred thread.[81] Many of the hymns of the Rig-Veda were authored by women,[82] but between 1500 and 1000 B.C., women scholars became scarce,[83] and by 300 B.C. women were no longer educated.[84] Possibly because many Aryans married native women, all women were soon considered unfit for religious knowledge, and their initiation forbidden.[85] However, women did not remain religiously disenfranchised; as they faded out of Vedic worship around 500 A.D., the Tantric, Bhakti, and Puranic sects opened to them.[86] Popular Hinduism is based not on the Vedas, but on the Puranas, and "women have been its most devoted followers and patrons."[87]

Although women remained the most important religious force in India, transmitting sacred knowledge and carrying out cultic practice, the actual daily conditions of their life worsened under foreign rule.[88] Hypergamy, the rule that women may not marry men of a lower caste than their own, but may marry into higher castes,[89] subdued women by making them social inferiors in marriage.[90] Child marriage came into vogue, the ideal being for a man to marry a girl one-third his age; a twenty-eight year old man would thus marry a girl of seven, although girls were occasionally married when only two or three years old. As late as 1922, a girl who menstruated while still living in her parents'

77. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 113, *Satapatha Brahmana* V, I.
78. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 113, *Manu*, IV.
79. Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–13.
80. *Ibid.*; and Indra, *op. cit.*, pp. 161–166.
81. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
83. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
84. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
85. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 235.
86. Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 334–335.
87. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
88. *Ibid.*, pp. 120–21.
89. Indra, *op. cit.*, p. 58, *Vashnu Purana.*
90. Cousins, *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood,* p. 94. See also *Manu,* XV, iii, p 23; and *Vishnu Purana* in Indra, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–55; 62; and Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

house was considered a degraded woman,[91] and any children she might later have were deemed illegitimate.[92] Marriage is foremost in the parents' minds from the day of a girl's birth, and the littlest girls will pray for a good husband and protection from widowhood and polygamy.[93]

Various theories have been postulated regarding the origin of this custom, as it is known that tribal India practices adult marriage, except in regions of extended contact with the invaders. The girls of tribal India, particularly in Malabar and Assam where matriarchal influence still prevails, enjoy sexual freedom before marriage, some degree of sexual freedom or polyandry afterwards, and matrilocality.[94] When the Aryans instituted patrilocality, it is likely that their adult native wives resented being forced to leave their parents' home,* and, once married, probably did not maintain the fidelity expected of them. Thus it has been suggested that child marriage ensured subordination of the bride to the bridegroom's family, prevented promiscuity, and insured marriage according to the rules of hypergamy.[95]

The custom which is cruelest to women is known as "purdah," seclusion and veiling. Significantly, the strictest seclusion is practiced by the military Rajputs whose adult wives come from other villages, and "By secluding the wives, the chance that they may adversely affect the family interests is minimized."[96] In North India, all upper class married women are immured within prison-like rooms; Manu declared it was not fitting for women to gaze out of the windows, which are "mere airholes through which the women peep as through the gratings of a jail."[97] Wealthy women are confined to the house and courtyard, and are imitated by certain low castes who hope to thus raise their status. But these poorer women live in small huts—often without courtyards. On the rare occasions when women behind purdah venture into the world, they must be heavily veiled.[98] Secluded women often die in childbirth, their hips

91. Ward, *op. cit.*, pp. 342–345.
92. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
93. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*; and Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
94. M. Singer, *Traditional India, Structure and Change*, p. 14.

* See the section on 'Matriarchal Traces' for ritualized examples of overt hostility to the groom and his family.

95. Indra, *op. cit.*, p. 180; and Ward, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–24.
96. Cousins, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
97. Cousins, *op. cit.*, pp. 86–87.
98. Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 199–205.

deformed by rickets caused by lack of sun.[99]

Before the Muslim invasion, only a minute segment of royalty lived in secluded harems, probably due to Scythian influence.[100] It appears that the custom arose to protect Hindu women; Muslim women were secluded and veiled,[101] and "Hindu life and honour did not count for much in the eyes of the conquerors."[102] The Muslims ruled India for five centuries; it has only been 150 years since they lost power, and the extent of their influence may be judged by the fact that in one area of North India, 126 villages out of 160 have Muslim names.[103]. The institution of purdah exists only in areas of Muslim influence;[104] it does not affect the South at all, nor is it practiced among lower caste and peasant women. India is predominantly agricultural, and men and women work together on the land "with the resultant equality of relationship."[105]

According to the traditional custom of niyoga, a woman whose husband was sterile or old could become pregnant by a kinsman of his, and the child would be deemed her husband's. The custom as formulated in Manu appears to be a limited version of a usage which was widespread in ancient times.[106] Until 300 B.C., widows could either marry or have children by levirate.[107] But the fate of the widow deteriorated with time until, by 1000 A.D., remarriage was forbidden and levirate no longer practiced.[108] By this time, the life of an upper caste widow was extremely hard.

> Wherever she went, her presence cast a gloom on all about her. She could never attend the family festivals which play so big a part in Hindu life, for she would bring bad luck on all present. She was still a member of her husband's family and could not return to that of her father. Always watched by the parents and relatives of her lord, lest she break her vows and imperil the dead man's spiritual welfare, (she was) shunned as unlucky even by the servants.... She could wear no ornaments and had to wear plain garments; she could not sleep on a bed, but only on a mat on the floor; she could eat but one meal a day and must do penance for the rest of her life.[109]

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99. Personal communication Suzan Lapai, based on stay in Northern India.
100. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
101. C.S. Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India*, p. 5.
102. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
103. Hartland, *Primitive Paternity*, p. 311.
105. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
106. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
107. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
108. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
109. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 189; and Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

By this time, the custom of sati, the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband, had become common among the upper castes. In theory, sati was "voluntary"—i.e., was often considered preferable to the hardship of such a life,[110] but there are cases on record of betrothed child "widows," whose marriage had not even been consummated, being forced to burn, and of women drugged or tied hand and foot and flung into the fire in order to support the family honour.[111] It must be remembered, too, that many women were widowed because of the age difference between husbands and wives. Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of the practice, it was never universally accepted, and there was much vocal protest, especially by the Tantric sects who objected that women were the embodiment of the Supreme Goddess, and that the souls of those who burnt her would go straight to hell.[112]

It has been pointed out that the ancient Aryans, long before they entered India, may have burnt widows with their husbands. Other scholars consider Scythian influence to be responsible for the spread of the custom; much of northern India was under Scythian rule from 150 B.C. to 250 A.D. Sati is most prevalent in Kashmir, which is close to Central Asia, the home of the Scythians—among whom the practice is common.[113] But whether of Aryan or Scythian origin, there is no suggestion that sati originated among the indigenous population. Originally popular among the warrior classes, the custom was soon adopted by the Brahmans. It has been observed that the severe treatment of widows originated in an attempt to discourage women from poisoning their husbands—a credible theory considering that the conquerors often chose wives from the subdued population. If a Ksatriya died on the battlefield, his widow was not subject to the restrictions of widowhood. Further corroboration is offered by the fact that, thirteen days after the death of her husband, a widow is subject to ritual abuse and villification, and ritually accused as his murderer.[114]

By 400 A.D., child marriage, purdah, and the fate of the widow had combined to darken the lives of upper class women. Supercession became increasingly common: a wife could be replaced by another woman, and treated as a widow. The tendency began around 900 A.D. to out-

110. Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, p. 322–29.
111. Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 146–49; and Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
112. *Ibid.*
113. Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 422; and Russel, vol. ii, p. 369; in Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
114. Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 98, 101, 102, 129; and Indra, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

caste raped women.[115] Yet it is important to realize that these restrictions were never accepted by the population as a whole, and applied primarily to a minority—the upper class women of Northern India, none of whom were of purely indigenous origin.

Matriarchal Traces and Attitudes

Despite the steady decline in women's legal rights, matriarchal traces remained in India, as expressed in customs, attitudes, and loopholes in the law.[116] Examples of the latter are the customary investment of the family's wealth in ornaments worn by the wife,[117] and the fact that the widowed mother was the actual, if not the technical, controller of the estate.[118] The law that a woman who had brothers was protested by many jurists in ancient India.[119] Although marriage was patrilocal, the Rig Veda states: "Let a wife be absolute mistress over her husband's sisters, let her be mistress over her husband's brothers."[120]

Motherhood has traditionally been regarded with the highest reverence; "the apotheosis of the mother has reached a greater height in India than anywhere else."[121] "No other religion of the present time worships goddesses, no other looks on the Mother as Divine.... The slightest wishes of a mother are obeyed to an extraordinary extent by even her middle aged sons."[122] Even Manu[123] states that a spiritual preceptor exceeds ten ordinary teachers in claim to honour; a father exceeds one thousand fathers in right to reverence. There are many mythical taboos against killing women,[124] it being considered that women, Brahmans, and cows were not to be killed.[125] Ancient Indian history knows of no matricides; an anecdote in the Amitayurdhana Sura tells of a king who wanted to kill his father and stepmother. His minister remonstrated and said, "Bad kings, 18,000 in number, have killed their father; but we have not

115. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 324; and Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
116. Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 264–65.
117. *Ibid.*, p. 324.
118. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
119. Oscar Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India*, p. 191.
120. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
121. Cousins, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
122. *Ibid.*, p. 45, Manu, II.
123. Indra, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
124. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
125. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

heard of any who has killed his mother." The king gave up his plan.[126]

Reverence of motherhood is complemented by the culturally determined love of children. A whole class to Tamil poetry is devoted to this theme.

> The touch of little feet that dabble in the mud,
> of little hands still sticky with sweet food,
> . . . . .
> Whose body has not thrilled to these delights,
> he, we shall say, has not the body of a man.[127]

There are few cultures where fathers are as nurturant towards infants and small children as in India.[128]

Indian women are notoriously sharp-tongued and independent, and have been known to beat their husbands during domestic quarrels.[129] An Indian anthropologist notes that the ideal Hindu family, headed by the husband, is "seldom realized. . . . In the majority of cases, the husbands are cornered and dominated by their wives. Many husbands would prefer to submit rather than to rule."[130] Another Indian lecturing in India "likened man to a noun, governed by the verb woman."[131] A humorous poem in the Jaina canon warns of the fate in store for a backsliding monk:

> If a monk breaks his vows,
> and falls for a woman
> She upbraids him,
> and raises her foot to him,
> and kicks him on the head
> . . . . .
> But when she has him in her clutches,
> It's all housework and errands!
> . . . . .
> Now paint my feet
> . . . . .
> Come and massage my back!
> . . . . .
> Fetch me my tweezers and my comb!
> . . . . .
> So pregnant women boss their husbands,

126. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
127. *Ibid.*, pp. 461–62.
128. Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 203.
129. D.N. Majumdar, *Matrix of Indian Culture.*
130. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
131. *Sutrakrtnaga*, in Basham, *op. cit.*, pp. 461–62.

Just as though they were household slaves.[132]

"The henpecked husband was well known in ancient India. Early Tamil literature contains a whole class of poems describing the husband's effort to calm his wife's anger. . . ."[133] One of the most popular plays in India is the Bengali version of "The Thief of Love," which has as its heroine an independent princess who has a child by her lover but refuses to marry. Other women in the play vocally express their discontent with their husbands. Thus old values persist in literature as well as religion.

A considerable body of German research has been devoted to the topic of mother-right. Ehrenfels[134] lists the characteristic features of a matriarchal society: residence is matrilocal; descent and inheritance are matrilineal. The maternal uncle is prominent in social and religious life, and a form of cross-cousin marriage known as menarkin is encouraged. A girl's first menses are celebrated with elaborate and joyful ceremony; girls have sexual freedom before marriage and sometimes after, and polyandry and levirate are permitted. Women are important in the economy of the culture, which is often agricultural, democratic, and non-competitive in character. Other characteristics are the importance of the moon in myth and ceremony, worship of goddesses or ancestresses who founded the tribe, rain and fertility dances performed by women, and the existence of priestesses and other women involved in the service of the temple. We will find that these elements are prevalent in India, particularly in the Dravidian South which has suffered less from foreign influence.

Hindu weddings abound with matriarchal elements. Hindu parents exercise proverbial solicitude in choosing good husbands for their daughters.[135] It is the responsibility of the girl's family to find a suitable husband. "The boy, who must sit and wait for proposals, will become an an object of ridicule if he attempts to act in the least degree."[136] The "market value" of the various prospective husbands are discussed for months in family meetings. Marriage arrangements are made with great care and "not concluded hastily," the decision being made after "many family consultations" involving various relatives, although the veto of

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132. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

133. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–17.

134. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 82; Oscar Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–68; Hari Upadhyaya, *op. cit.*, p. 4; and Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

135. Upadhyaya, *op. cit.*, p. 4; and Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

136. Lewis, Oscar, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–68.

the girl's mother is usually decisive.[137] Concern for the girl' comfort and happiness is the foremost consideration; fathers are said to worry about their daughters' marriage "all day and all night".[138] Ideally, a girl will marry into a nearby family, so that she can come home frequently, and her husband will have several sisters so that she will not have much work to do. Her family will pay for a wedding more expensive than they can afford, in order to marry her into a good family. In North India, the engagement period lasts several years, it being the responsibility of the girl's family to set the wedding date and decide when she can leave home. "The boy's family never makes this request, for it is always the girl's family which takes the initiative in wedding preparations."[139]

The custom of the ceremonial oil baths is widespread throughout both North and South India. The bride and groom, in their respective homes, are bathed and massaged by women. The boy is placed in a position of vulnerability which stresses his subservience to women. As the women bathe him and massage his body with oil, they tease him unmercifully. "This massaging is a time of light talk and high merriment for the girls and women, although the groom may feel a little sheepish."[140] The marriage procession carries the groom in a magnificent palanquin to the bride's house, stopping at the edge of the village where the boy ceremonially sucks his mother's breast.[141] When the procession reaches the bride's house, the bride welcomes the groom by throwing rice over him and placing a garland around his neck.[142] These customs suggest a former matrilocality. The marriage vows express great tenderness; the groom says, "Your heart is in mine, and my heart is in yours, and both are one,"[143] and "promises to consult his wife in all things . . . and not speak gruffly to her."[144]

The groom traditionally eats a meal at the bride's house, after which the women of the family ridicule him and attempt to make him act the fool; they push and beat him with their fists, and trick him into pressing his hand into needles.[145] The custom is widespread throughout India;

137. Lewis, Oscar, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–68.
138. Upadyaya, *op. cit.*, pp. 7–8.
139. Lewis, Oscar, *op. cit.*, pp. 167–70.
140. Ram Ratan, "Socio-Ethnic Studies of the Bhanghis in Delhi," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Delhi), cited in Lewis, Oscar, *op. cit.*
141. Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 177–79.
142. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
143. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-79.
144. *Ibid.*, pp. 180–81.
145. Lewis, Oscar, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

Planalp describes it in Sinapur; "Some of the women are singing and others laugh and tease him, giving him pushes along the way. . . . If he should happen to fall down, they ridicule him unmercifully."[146] Ram Ratan describes it among the Bhangi of Delhi: "Amid loud noise and laughter, the bridegroom is asked to bow down before an old shoe of the bride, wrapped in a red cloth, which is represented to him as a goddess. If the groom bows down, all the women clap and jump and make a roar, all the time hitting with some obscene remarks."[147]

When the bride leaves the village, all the men as well as the women weep. As she enters her husband's house, songs are sung which exalt her importance over her husband's parents, and she herself sings haughtily of her superiority over her mother-in-law, and makes ritualized demands. The bride and groom visit the village shrines together and playfully beat each other with sticks. Soon the girl's brother comes to get her, and she returns home for two or three years. When her parents feel she is ready for married life, they notify the groom's family who come to take her to his village, where they sleep together for the first time. After a few days, during which period she sings ritualized songs of how terrible life is at her in-laws' home, her brother comes to take her home. Within a year she goes to her husband for a few months, returning then to her parents. In this manner the bride is gradually introduced to her new life, "spending progressively more time in her husband's home with each visit." Even after she leaves her parents' home permanently, occasions recur, (such as the birth of a child, or certain festivals) when she returns home or a few months or even longer.[148]

Sometimes a Hindu father gives his daughter in marriage on the condition that she will remain in his house, and that her children will belong to his family.[149] Rajput wedding songs express sorrow that the groom must enter the bride's village, which seems to suggest that at one time he remained there. The Rajput ritually urges her daughter to "try to get influence over your husband and make him come here to live with you. If you cannot persuade him, abandon your modesty and make quarrels in the household." These teachings end in the advice to poison the husband if he cannot be persuaded to move into the woman's house according to matrilocal tradition.

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146. Jack Planalp, "Life Cycle and Life Cycle Rites," (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1955), cited in Lewis, *op. cit.*,

147. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

148. *Ibid.*, pp. 180–191.

149. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

There are many elements of matrilineal descent in India, particularly among the tribes and low castes. Many castes trace their ancestry and derive their names from a tutelary goddess whom they claim as primogenitor.[150] Gait has pointed out that to claim descent from a Great Mother implies that descent was once through women, or, as Ehrenfels states, "The existence of parallels between the religious and social, political and economic life of a community suggests that the Great Mother Goddess . . . may have some social significance", i.e., that the worship of a Divine Mother originated in mother-kin.[151]

The mother's brother is important in social and ceremonial life throughout India. The brother-sister relationship in Hindu India is extremely close; throughout childhood, brothers and sisters play together freely, and, as adults, expect to "understand each other without words." A brother is concerned with his sister's future marriage and will sell his own property to help her marry into a good family. He is expected to visit his sister often in her new home, and these visits are a joyful occasion for the sister, who takes this opportunity to retaliate against her mother-in-law. The first loyalty of a brother is to his sister, not his wife, and the first loyalty of a girl is to her brother; if necessary, she will undermine her husband to help him.[152] In many areas of Southern India, a man's heirs are his sister's children, not his own.

Several cross-cultural studies have examined the initiative puberty rites of boys, but little has been written about those of girls. The fact is, that in a culture in which matriarchal attitudes are predominant, the first menses are celebrated with joy; in a patriarchal society, the character of the ceremony is negative, implying fear and disgust and probably entailing seclusion. The Laws of Manu express typically patriarchal attitudes towards menstruation: "A man becomes impure by touching 'a menstruating woman, an outcaste, a woman in childbirth, or a corpse.' "[153] "If a menstruating woman touches an Aryan, she shall be lashed with a whip."[154] "The wisdom, the energy, the strength, the sight, and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman covered with men-

150. *Ibid.*, pp. 140–43.

151. *Ibid.*

152. *Ibid.*; and Upadhyaya, "Familial Patterns of Behavior between Brothers and Sisters," pp. 197, 200–204.

153. *The Laws of Manu*, v. 85, in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. vii, p. 34 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882), cited in Briffault, *The Mothers*, vol. ii, p. 376.

154. *The Institutes of Vishnu*, vol. 103, in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. vii, p. 34, cited in Briffault, *The Mothers*, vol. ii, p. 376.

strual excretions utterly perish."[155] In accordance with these attitudes, the Hindus of the Punjab (an area which suffered repeated invasions by patriarchal peoples) lock a girl in a dark room at the time of her first mense.[156] However, in other parts of India, where indigenous, matriarchal attitudes prevail, the ceremony is a joyful celebration. In Mysore, a stronghold of mother-right, the native customs have influenced even the Brahmans, who celebrate the first menses with great rejoicing. The girl and her friends dance and sing amorous songs. Prayers are offered to her generative organs; her vulva is smeared with honey and called "the second mouth of the Creator."[157] Moon worship is related to images of women and menstruation. The Bengali observe the menstruation of the Earth Goddess as a Sabbath.[158] The menstruation of the temple Goddess at Travancore is celebrated,[159] and Parvati's image at Chunganor menstruates regularly.[160] The cow is associated with the moon, and the moon is known to regulate menses, so the villagers of Central India paint the horns of their cows red for luck.[161]

Much of indigenous India was polyandrous. Passages in the Vedic literature complain of women's infidelity and insatiable lust:[162] "No one man can satisfy a woman, she will consort with every stranger."[163] Such phrases are frequent enough to make one think that the patriarchal Aryans were unaccustomed to the sexual mores of the native population from which they took wives. Explicit mention of polyandry in the Mahabharata,[164] such as the marriage of Draupadi to the five Pandava brothers, has puzzled commentators needlessly, "for polyandry is still common among certain non-Aryan tribes in India. . . . A later age offered

155. *The Laws of Manu, op. cit.*

156. H.A. Rose, "Hindu Pregnancy Observances," *Punjab Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, cited in Ward, vol. iii, pp. 363–69.

157. Iyer, *Mysore Tribert Caster*, vol. ii, pp. 327–343. See my section on Tribal India for numerous examples of joyful puberty rites.

158. E.A. Gait, *Census of India*, 1901, vol. i, India, p. 189, cited in Iyer, *op. cit.*, vol. ii.

159. V. Nagam Aiya, in *The Travancore State Manual*, vol. ii, p. 89, cited in Iyer, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 431–36.

160. Warigar Sankini, "A Variant of the Bloody Cloth," *Indian Antiquary*, XVIII, p. 159, cited by Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 435–36.

161. Nadell, personal communication.

162. See Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, pp. 28, 76, cited in Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 36. *Mahabharata*, v. 6, 30, and *Manu* ix, cited in Indra, *op. cit.*, p. 15, Basham, op. cit., p. 184.

163. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

164. *Mahabharata Adiparva*, pp. 549, 551, as cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, pp. 682–83.

various explanatory excuses for the polyandry of the Pandus, who, however, as a Northern hill-tribe or family probably were really polyandrous and needed no excuse."[165] The *Mahabharata* notes that in the Punjab, a man's heirs were his sister's children, not his own. This custom is associated with a duolocal, polyandrous social structure in tribal India today. (See section on tribal India.) Muslim historians mention that before Islam, the infields of the Punjab were polyandrous.[165] Fraternal polyandry is practiced even today by many of the tribes of Malabar and Cochin, and was common until a few decades ago among the Gujars of the United Provinces, and the Sudra castes of the Punjab.[167] A relic of fraternal polyandry appears throughout the villages of North and South India, in the friendly joking relationship between a woman and her devar, her husband's younger brother. Sexual relations between a woman and her *devar* are condoned as the norm, occur in nine out of ten cases in Northeast India. The relationship is ritualized during the wedding of a younger brother, when his elder brother's wife opens her legs and he sits between them.[168]

The temple dancers and courtesans, the *devadasis* and *basavis*, were the freest women in Hindu India before British rule outlawed them. These women enjoyed "an extent of freedom and personal independence unknown to Hindu ladies of the same social and cultural level within the caste system."[169] *Devadasis*, unlike other Hindu women, may inherit property and perform their parents' funeral rites.[170] Descent and inheritance among them is matrilineal; a *devadasi* inherits from her father, and passes her inheritance and her name on to her children. Their girl children become temple musicians.[171] Rigorously trained from earliest childhood in the arts of the dance, devadasis sang hymns and danced for the God during processions. Their lives were dedicated to serving God—hence their name, "slaves of God."[172] While Manu and other Smrti writers condemned them, they were actually held in the highest

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165. *Cambridge History of India*, vol. i, pp. 235–58, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 684.

166. Tarikhi Mamaliki Hind in H.H. Eliot, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, vol. vii, p. 202, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, pp. 679–680.

167. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, pp. 239–40.

168. Lewis, Oscar, *op. cit.*, pp. 186–87.

169. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

170. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

171. Iyer, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 155, vol. iv, pp. 147, 152, 608, as cited in Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

172. Iyer, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 22.

esteem.[173] They were ceremonially "dedicated," or married to God, but remained free to consort with any man according to the rules of hypergamy.[174] As the wife of God, a devadasi ate the offerings brought to the temple. When she died the temple paid her funeral expenses; her body was bathed in precious saffron,[175] and covered with a new cloth and flowers taken from the idol. No worship could take place until her last rites were performed, as her husband, the god, was considered to be in mourning.[176] The *devadasi* complex is comparable to a convent in which the nuns, who are married to God and devote their lives to his service, are allowed to take lovers and bear children who will also be nuns.

Another class of temple women are known as Basavis, but unlike devadasis, who are primarily temple dancers, their temple duties are nominal. A Basavi may either prostitute herself, or live with one man, or change lovers at will.[177] Among certain of the lower castes, one girl from each family is dedicated to the temple.[178] This custom gives women a religiously sanctioned alternative to marriage whereby they may enjoy the pleasures of sex and children, as well as the independence and legal rights of men (such as inheritance). In South Canara, widows of any caste, or women who wish to leave their husbands, may go to the temple and live within its precincts, cleaning it in exchange for their food. A similar community in South India, the Maleru, consists of debrahminised women and others who have left their husbands.[179] Among many of the lower castes, a pregnant girl or a widowed or divorced woman may pay a fee to the caste to receive permission to share her bed with whom she pleases.[180] These women are known as "Children of the Caste". Until banned by the British, temple prostitution in its various forms, from the skilled, educated, and highly respected devadasis to the "Children of the Caste" had been popular in India for time immemorial, particularly in the South.[181] These sacred courtesans, beloved of God, have enjoyed legal rights (such as matrilineal descent and inheritance) unknown to any other Hindu women.

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173. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
174. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
175. Iyer, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 220.
176. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, pp. 216–18.
177. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, pp. 213–15.
178. Iyes, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 214–15; vol. iii, pp. 147–55; vol. iv, p. 668.
179. *Ibid.*, vol. iv, p. 185.
180. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 216.
181. Basham, op. cit., pp. 186–87.

There are many elements in Hindu culture which express matriarchal values; certain cases of matrilineal descent and inheritance, sacred courtesans, traces of matrilocality, wedding ceremonies which stress the subservience of the groom to the bride, polyandry, reverence of motherhood, and love of children. The attitudes which underly these phenomena oppose official patriarchal Brahmanism, which is but a veneer on a more ancient, and more female-oriented civilization.

Female Elements in Hindu Religion

The basic ideas of Hinduism are of non-Aryan origin. The worship of the serpent, (cthonic and earth-creeping) the cow, (given of milk) and the bull (symbol of fertility) expresses the fact that most of Hinduism is Goddess worship.[182] Indigenous Indian absorbed Vedic worship,[183] and many Brahman customs reject indigenous attitudes.[184] The Dravidian Mother Goddess was transformed into various female deities within the Vedic pantheon, these goddesses representing the Aryanized form of a pre-Aryan deity.[185] The female-oriented religion of ancient India was, in Vedic times, overlaid by a male-dominated religion, but it reemerged in a series of religious movements.-[86] No sooner were women disenfranchised from the official religion than all sorts of new religions began to crop up; these gave the female element predominance in the religion and gave women a central position in the cult.[187]

The Mother Goddess has always been worshipped by indigenous India, but during the Middle Ages, as the actual position of women declined, her worship found favour among the educated as well as the masses.[188] Most of the numerous reform movements in Hinduism have been both pro-feminist and anti-caste.[189] The real scripture of Hinduism is the Puranas, and the "new" religions of Bhankti, Tantricism, etc. were but ancient ideas in new form. All of the "Hindu sects that resulted

182. James, op. cit., p. 127; Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 339; Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, pp. 105–113. See also Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
183. Oman, *The Brahmans, Priests, and Muslims of India*, p. 120.
184. See Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. i, pp. 74–76.
185. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
186. W.J. Perry, *The Children of the Sun*, p. 206.
186. W.J. Perry, *The Children of the Sun*, p. 206.
187. James, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
188. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 314.
189. Oman, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

from the post-Buddhist revival of Brahmanism are permeated with the worship of the Mother-Goddess."[190] Even Buddhism, originally so patriarchal and abstract, was transformed by the Tantras into worship of Tara.[191] The invading cultures have instituted changes in Indian law which are oppressive of women, but the Hindu religion has continued to express the deepest Indian attitudes and psyche. It is easier to change laws than to change attitudes.

A Christian missionary, living in Bengal in the 1800's remarked in horror that Hinduism "tends to sap the manhood of the people and effeminate the race."[192] He added that "three quarters of the population of Bengal are Saktas, and of the remaining quarter, three parts are Vaishnavas and the remaining quarter are mostly Saktis."[193] Today, Vaishnavism is more popular than Saktism, but the fact significant for our purposes is that both sects give pre-eminence to the female. "Of Brahmanism or other Aryan faith there is no sign."[194]

Saktism

Saktism, as formulated in a few Upanishads, some Puranas, and mostly in the Tantras, is deification of the female principle beyond "the customary homage rendered by all sects to the wives of the gods."[195] In Saktism, the Goddess, as the personification of Female Energy, is the Supreme Deity, the Creator and Mother of the universe, superior to all other gods and goddesses who are but emanations of her."[196] Sakti is the Prime Force, the Great Power. She is the highest divine principle, the eternal primeval energy out of which everything is created, and to which all returns.[197] She is worshipped as the "Great Mother" because, in this aspect, "God is active and produces, nourishes, and maintains all."[198] In worship, a Sakti imagines himself as a son of the Goddess, or as her servant.[199] Because the highest deity is a woman, every woman

190. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 241.
191. Oman, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
192. *Ibid.*
193. Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
194. Sir L. Woodruffe, *Sakti and Sakata*, p. xi.
195. Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
196. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
197. *Ibid.*; and Woodruffe, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 17, 18.
198. Woodruffe, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
199. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

is regarded as the embodiment of Deity.[200] Furthermore, no female animal is to be sacrificed. "Women are Devas, Women are life itself," says an old hymn in the Sarvosalla, and the Mahanirvana prescribes that if a man speaks rudely to his wife, he must fast for a whole day.[201]

There are two main sects of Saktas. The Vamacharis, followers of the left hand path, follow the Tantras and practice ritual sex in the rite known as Sakti Puja, in which a nude, bejewelled woman, representative of the Goddess, is worshipped by a group of couples who offer her flowers, incense, and prayer. The women present, as living embodiments of the Deity, are offered a feast, the men partaking of the leftovers. The meal is often followed by ritual sex, all distinctions of caste and kindred being temporarily suspended.[202]

The worship of the Dakshinas, followers of the right hand path, involves public offerings of bloody sacrifice. Sakti is worshipped in the form of Kali, the destroyer, who is portrayed as dark blue or black, standing on the prostrate body of a white Shiva, drooling blood and laughing her maddened laughter as her huge red tongue hangs to her chin; around her neck hangs a necklace of skulls, and corpses dangle from her ears as earrings. The "garland of skulls" is esoterically a symbol of the world of names and forms, but esoterically it is considered to be formed of the heads of conquered demons. And, significantly, "the severed heads are those of white men."[203] It is Kali who is prayed to for martial power,[204] and it is Kali whom thieves worship before setting out on an expedition.[205] Her Calcutta temple is the site of the daily slaughter of hundreds of animals.[206]

Kali appears in another form as Durga, wielding a different weapon in each of her ten arms. Durga is considered a warrior goddess who, in past incarnations, has destroyed many giants, including one who became a great oppressor through the blessing of Brahma.[207] The most important Hindu festival is the autumn festival of Durga, at which men

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200. *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 109.

201. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

202. Oman, *op. cit.*, p. 26; Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*, vol. i, p. 288; Ward, op. cit., p. 152. All cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. ii; Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

203. Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, p. 179.

204. *Civil and Military Gazette, Lahore*, Dec. 25, 1890, cited in Oman, op. cit., p. 11.

205. Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, pp. 124–25.

206. Oman, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9; Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, pp. 124–25, 152.

207. Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, p. 92.

dressed in women's clothes dance "in delirious ecstasy" while thousands of animals are slaughtered.[208] It is generally agreed that the institution of animal sacrifice is of recent origin, and that the Goddess was formerly offered vegetable foods.[209] In the section on village India, I discuss the undisputedly political implications of bloody sacrifice. It seems that Kali-Durga was worshipped long ago by the indigenous population; when the white men came to fight the aborigines, she became a warrior goddess. At present, she is worshipped as a bloodthirsty warrior, brandishing weapons in her hands or wearing the skulls of the hated while men around her neck and demanding the sacrifice of animals which symbolize her enemy.[210]

It is significant that Kali-Durga is prayed to for martial power and to effect the destruction of enemies. Within the past century, a Hindu vernacular paper made the following appeal:

> O Mother, behold, we are fallen. We have been deprived of our old martial spirit. Thy sons are now a pack of arrogant cowards, trampled under the shoes of the MIechas (Europeans and other Barbarians) . . . Thou art power perfected. How can thou tolerate such emasculation of thy dear sons? O Mother, take pity on India and infuse the timid souls of thy children with the force of thy invincible power.[211]

Yoga students in the United States chant to Durga to gain strength.[212] The Goddess is known by many other names as well. In many of these manifestations she appears in a warlike form—as a destroyer of giants, as the goddesses who assisted Durga in her wars, as a goddess so bloodthirsty that she drinks her own blood, and as a black woman standing on a white corpse.[213]

She appears in positive forms as well; as Lakshimi, the goddess of fortune, prosperity, and learning,[214] and as Sathi, bestower of fertility and protector of children and women. She is worshipped six times a year by the women of the village who bring her fruit, flowers, and curds. They ask her blessings for their children's health, and the fortunate mothers pray for those who are childless: "May the blessing of Shusthee

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208. *Ibid.*, p. 84; Oman, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
209. Ward, vol. iii, p. 78. See also Archer, *The Loves of Krishna*, p. 18.
210. Woodruffe, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
211. *Civilian and Military Gazette, Lahore*, Dec. 25, 1890, cited in Oman, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
212. Margaret Beals, personal communication.
213. Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, pp. 97–101.
214. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

be upon you, and next year may you bring offerings with a child in your arms." The mothers give gifts to the childless women, and at the close of the festival, each husband goes to the parental home of his wife and bows to his mother-in-law.[215] The Goddess also appears as Manasa, who, on one level, is the serpent goddess who protects from snakebite, but, at the same time, is the Supreme Deity.

> How shall I praise you? The land and the waters, the heavens and the heart within all creatures. You are creator, upholder, and destroyer . . . the Mother of all. . . . You are the creator and protector of heaven, earth, and hell; the worlds are all atremble for your mercy.[216]

Vaishnavism

Saktism has declined in popularity due to the growth of the Bhakti movement; Bhakti (worship by devotion) is the basis of popular Hinduism today.[217] Much of it involves Krishna-Radha cults; the worship of Krishna is part of the everyday life of most Hindus, episodes from his life being constantly re-enacted, danced, and sung. He is worshipped as a child god by women who call themselves "the mothers of God," and as the lover of the gopis by men and women who imagine themselves his female lover.[218]

Krishna appears in the legends as a dark-skinned tribal hero, associated with the Pandavas, a polyandrous group who oppose intermarriage with Brahman.[219] In the Bhagavat Purana he is a tribal hero of divine birth, born to kill the demon Kansa who has forbidden worship of Bishnu. He grows up among cowherds, humbling first the Brahmans, then Brahma himself. After insulting Indra, he reinstates the ancient custom of worshipping the spirits of the hills and forests, complementary to the worship of Devi, the Earth Goddess. The cowherds support him: "If we face the facts, we have really nothing to do with the ruler of the gods. It is on the forests, rivers, and the great hill, Govardhana that we really depend". Krishna's pastoral life culminates in the circular Rasa dance in which he is lover to all the gopis.[220]

The gopis, the married cowgirls, are drawn to Krishna and "wild

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215. Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, pp. 138–39, 221–22.
216. Newmann, *The Great Mother*, p. 258.
217. Archer, *op. cit.*, p. 191.
218. Singer, *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, p. 66.
219. Archer, *The Loves of Krishna*, p. 26.
220. *Ibid.*, pp. 33–42.

with love" for him, and their frenzied longing is emphasized repeatedly. The legends present Krishna as a god especially patronized by women; scorned by the Brahmans, he is worshipped by their wives. Even when he goes to the city to slay the demon king Kansa, the women of the city hang over their balconies to greet him.[221] This is easily understood if we remember that Krishna was an indigenous god, perhaps a deified tribal hero, and that the Aryans often married native women. The early Krishna is a god of the forest, espousing a non-Brahmanic morality, and in union with him the gopis find God.[222] His life in the forest is expressed in idyllic terms, and his story abounds with erotic imagery and traces of polyandrous customs.[223] The later tradition of Krishna as prince (rather than tribal hero) appears to be an interpolation.[224]

A new casteless religion arose during the Middle Ages, inspired by Caitanya and based on the doctrine of bhakti. "Not by meditation, or fasting, or good works, or knowledge, but by devotion alone can God's true form be known." During the bhajan, the meeting of Vaishnava devotees, the group joins in ecstatic singing and dancing.[225] A ritual marriage is celebrated between Krishna and Radha, and a symbolic tali tied.[226] Women are important in cultic practice and doctrine. There are many Tantric and Vaishnava authoresses, female gurus, and saints. Krishna's relations with the gopis are celebrated, his love affair with Radha, his favourite, being interpreted as an allegory of the soul's love for God.[227] Radha is often deified beyond Krishna as the central figure of the cult, her worship in some sects eclipsing that of Krishna. There is a sect which worships Krishna as Radha-Bauabba, the lover of Radha, and chants Radha-Krishna, rather than Krishna-Radha, for to first pronounce Krishna's name would be to incur the sin of Brahmincide. "The guru is more venerable than the father, and the Mother more venerable than the guru."[228]

The Vaishnava movement was influenced by the flourishing Sahajiya and Tantric sects, all women being regarded as embodiments of Devi.[229]

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221. *Ibid.*
222. *Ibid.*
223. *Ibid.*, pp. 60–62.
224. Ibid., p. 66, Dimock, *In Praise of Krishna*, p. xiv.
225. Dimock, *op. cit.*, p. xv. *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, pp. 226–28. Singer, *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, pp. 53–54, 137.
226. Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, pp. 28–32.
227. Singer, *op. cit.*, pp. 98–99.
228. Archer, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–73.
229. H.H. Wilson, *Religious Sects of the Hindus*, p. 99.

The highest state is attained through ritual sex, for "the cosmic embrace is embodied in the human."[230] In the Sahajiya ritual, the man washes the feet of the woman and makes obeisance and offerings to her before they unite.[231] It is believed that the individual must experience the male and female aspects of himself, and the male should neutralize his maleness. One "should consider oneself a woman, in relation to the sole male of the universe, to Krishna."[232] During Vaishnava worship, men strive to identify with the gopis in their desire for Krishna,[233] performing dances which are normally danced only by women.[234] Many famous Vaishnava saints who dressed and acted as women imagined themselves as female lovers or servants of the goddess.[235] An example is Ramakrishna, (the most popular saint in India today) who, in his total identification with Radha, dressed, acted, and spoke as a woman.[236]

Much of the Vaishnava poetry written by male devotees, expresses a startling identification with female sensibility.

> Let the earth of my body be mixed with the earth
> My beloved walks on.
> Let the fire of my body be the brightness
> in the mirror that reflects his face
> . . . . .
> Let me be sky, and moving through me
> that cloud dark Shyama, my beloved.
> . . . . .[237]

Among the merchant class which comprises the bulk of the Vaishnavas, child marriage was the rule, and a young girl might be married to an old man for a large sum. Many poems written by men, sympathize with the abject misery of so many women of the time.

> O wicked woman—fouler than the foulest poison.
> So his mother's cruelty, like fire burning in me.
> My tyrant husband, the whetted age of a razor
> . . . . .
> In this family, in that house, who is really
> mine? Whom can I call my own?
> . . . . .

230. Woodruffe, *op. cit.*, p. 504.
231. Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, p. 45.
232. *Ibid.*, pp. 236–41.
233. *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.
234. *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.
235. Singer, *op. cit.*, pp. 97–98.
236. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
237. Dimock, *In Praise of Krishna*, p. 58.

May none other be born to this world.
But if it must be,
Let it not be a girl that is born,
But if a girl is born, let her not know
the agony that is called love.
. . . . .[238]

Vaishnava lyrics use sexual imagery to describe religious rapture, and many of the most religious lyrics could pass for sexual eroticism.[239] Commentators have suggested that the eroticism is symbolic of love for God, but there is a reason that such symbols are chosen; they express a mood strikingly opposed to the austere Brahmanic tradition. Parallels may be drawn with the Song of Songs, which, according to Samuel Noah Kramer,[240] describes a sacred marriage rite designed to ensure fertility of the fields. Similarly, I suggest that while the love of Krishna and Radha has been interpreted as an allegory for the soul's love for God, their story actually involves ideas from an earlier, less intellectual society. In fact, their worship incorporates a sacred marriage rite. The imagery of the gopis' love for Krishna preceded the symbolism of that imagery. We are dealing with a tradition which goes far deeper than mere theology.

The relationship between Krishna, the aboriginal god, and anti-caste, pro-feminist sentiment, is given ritual expression in the festival of Holi, said to be the "divine sport" of Krishna and the gopis. All caste distinctions are temporarily suspended during this riotous occasion of mud-and-dung-slinging, "ribald buffoonery, . . . libidinous songs, . . . and Dionysan dance." Dancers enact copulation and many couples are discovered to be engaged in adultery on this day. A missionary expressed his bewilderment that such a clearly "liscentious" festival could exist in a society which enforced purdah,[241] the answer is that these customs arose from two separate traditions. It is those of high caste who are especially likely to be doused with urine or hit by flying shoes. During Holi, the women, unveiled, attack the men of the village with sticks, sparing only their brothers and fathers, but not the men of their husbands' families. "Many a man feels the pains of his sore and swollen back for days after . . . (the women) are half drunk and so excited by the noise . . . that at last they attack the whole crowd . . . who stand

238. Singer, *op. cit.*, p. 134; and *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, p. 33.
239. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
240. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
241. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

around shouting or laughing."[242] The men do not defend themselves, but try to overt the blows or else run for cover.[243] The villagers claim that in Mathura Krishna's birthplace, "The women ran all year long, drinking milk and eating ghee like wrestlers, and there they beat the men en masse, before a huge audience of visitors, to the music of 200 drums."[244] Sometimes at weddings there are brief outbreaks of Holi playing, when women of the bride's family use rolling pins to beat the men related to the groom. In short, reversal of caste distinctions and ritualized

> . . . conflict between the sexes is the crux of the Holi celebrations. . . . Privileged attacks by women upon men must have existed in village custom . . . for the past 2,000 years. . . . Under the tutelage of Krishna, each person plays . . . his opposite; the servile wife acts the domineering husband . . . (and) the menial acts the master . . .[245]

This ritual expresses a connection between Krishna, the indigenous god, and a social order in which women had a good position.

Saivism

We have looked at Saktism and Vaishnavism. Let us now examine Saivism, the cult of Shiva. Shiva appears to be an ancient fertility god whose attributes have merged with those of some Vedic gods. There are hints in the Vedas of Shiva's struggle for admission into the Vedic pantheon, intruding at last as a form of Agni.[246] Shiva's worship has declined in the villages, to be replaced by worship of the local goddesses who are known as his wives.[247] It will be remembered that the dark Kali is portrayed as standing on the white prostrate body of her husband. Originally an indigenous god, Shiva appears to have taken on many non-indigenous qualities and has been identified with an Aryan god, as most of his current devotees are Brahmans.[251] Marshall, however, has unearthed his prototype at Mohenjodaro and Harappa; that he was primarily a fertility deity has been suggested by his emblem, the linga (found

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242. Dimock, *In Praise of Krishna*, pp. 56, 61; and Singer, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
243. S.N. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite*, pp. 85–106.
244. Oman, *op. cit.*, p. 241.
245. Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India*, p. 233.
246. Marion McKimm, "The Feast of Love," in Singer, *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, p. 204.
247. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
251. James, *op. cit.*; and Wilson, *Religious Sects of the Hindus*, pp. 106–108.

at Mohenjo-daro in connection with yoni rings) and the bull Nandi who is his attendant.[252] Patriarchal Vedic worship abstracted the qualities of Shiva as renewer of vegetation and reproduction, but the linga and the bull have meanwhile remained the principle cultic symbols.[253]

A five-faced form of Shiva is worshipped as a stone which is painted red and kept beneath a sacred tree, attended by old women known as dynasiness.[254] Siva worship also has its anti-caste, pro-feminist movements, such as the Lingayat sect, founded by Basava, who declared he had come to destroy caste distinctions, abolished the idea of ceremonial impurity, resulting from menstruation or childbirth, and insisted on widow remarriage and a woman's free choice of a husband. During a Lingayat wedding, the groom sits behind the bride on a bull as they are led to a temple. Both men and women wear a small stone linga in an egg-shaped case and worship Shiva and Sakti. Another sect is the Virasāivas, who initiate both girls and boys. Their jangham, a non-Brahman priest, performs ten ceremonies to mark the changes in a woman's life, and eight for a man. Women sing praises of the Mother Goddess Devi and various female Virasāiva saints at all ceremonies relating to marriage and during the funerals of saints (but not at ordinary funerals). They are usually engaged in some sort of civic activity as well as running free boarding schools, sponsoring public readings of the Puranas, etc.[255]

In both symbolism and cultic practice, these Saivite sects are intimately involved with women. While Saivism contains strong ascetic elements, fully half of its sects are characterized by the cult of a female, or at least an androgynous deity of pre-Aryan origin. And Vaishnavism and Saktism, the two most popular religious forms, are intimately bound up with women, in both symbolism and cultic practice.

Religion of Village India

There are few traces of Aryan worship in popular Hinduism today, although, unfortunately for the women of India, much of the secular culture of India's various conquerors has remained.[256] Eighty percent of South India alone worships the Mother Goddess, who, for millennia

252. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 52–56.
253. James, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–106.
254. Ward, *op. cit.*, pp. 185–86.
255. Milton Singer, *Traditional India, Structure and Change*, pp. 120–128.
256. Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of North India*, p. vi.

before the Aryans arrived, was the Deity of the land.[257] Each village worships its own local goddesses at earthen shrines, where they are represented by stones or pots of water which are cared for by women.[258] The villagers claim that these Village Mothers, or gramā-devatas, are but many manifestations of the one Great Goddess, both benificent and malign.[259]

An example of a beneficent Mother is Shasthi, protector of infants, children, and married woman.[260] However, many Village Mothers have become associated with the epidemic diseases with which they are believed to punish negligent worshippers. James has suggested that at one time these local deities were worshipped as goddesses of fecundity and fertility, and only recently have they been propitiated as bringers of disease.[261] Hewitt has shown that Mariamma, the Great Mother Goddess of South India, now considered the Goddess of smallpox, was formerly a tree goddess.[262] These changes are probably due to the miserable conditions of village life; Famine is personified as a goddess, and Sitali, another smallpox goddess, is known as "Queen of the World."[263] In her positive aspect, the Goddess is presented with flowers, milk, and the fruits of the earth. But these Village Mothers demand propitiation by animal sacrifice, causing sickness and death if their bloodlust is not satisfied.[264] The Forest Mothers, on the other hand, merely expect their worshippers to add a stone to the heap which marks their shrine.[265] It is in the villages, of course, that starvation and degradation are rampant, and the influence of civilization inevitably causes the Forest Mothers to acquire more bloodthirsty characteristics.[266]

In South India, the most prominent deities are the Seven Sisters whose names vary from village to village. At the festival of Poleramma, the legend of Renuka is enacted as the story teller drives the people into a frenzy with the tales of past heroes. The climax of events is the Buffalo

257. *Madras Government Bulletin,* V, no. 3, p. 174, cited in Elmore, *op. cit.*, pp. 2–3.

258. Whitehead, *Village Gods in South India,* p. 39; and Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 113; James, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–117.

259. Monier-Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 225; Whitehead, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–44.

260. Crooke, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–116.

261. James, *op. cit.*, pp. 325–26.

262. Iyer, *op. cit.*, p. 326, cited in James, *op. cit.*

263. Crooke, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–16, 125.

264. Crooke, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–16, 113, 115, 125, 126, 130.

265. Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 115; James, *op. cit*, p. 120.

266. James, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

Sacrifice, in which the buffalo is decapitated, its front legs cut off and placed in its mouth, fat taken from its abdomen and smeared over its eyes, and a lamp lit from the fat placed on its head. At the festival of Ankamma, the people dance "as if possessed by demons," and the pujari (priest), dressed in women's clothes, bites the jugular vein of a sheep and drinks the blood, and rides to the shrine in procession amidst writhing live animals impaled on stakes.[267]

These unfortunate animals symbolize an overthrown enemy, and the political undertones of the festivals are expressed by the accompanying legends. One legend tells of the fate of some Brahmans who exploited a village; they were decapitated, their legs were placed in their mouths, their eyes were smeared with their abdominal fat, and a lamp lit from their fat was placed on their heads. Another tells of a king who boasted to a Sakti that he would not worship her even if he were to be impaled on a stick—to which she replied that he had named his own fate. It was no coincidence that in 1901, at the festival of a Sakti, everyone suspected of connection with the government was killed.[268] It is apparent that in village worship, politics is intertwined with religion, and for this reason a particularly gruesome form of blood propitiation is required. We may assume that before the Goddess was overthrown, her worship was less horrific.

The Saktis are the ghosts of village women who died unhappy, those who were wronged and oppressed—Satis, suicides, women murdered for their sexual conduct or falsely accused, and even a little girl who was killed because she won all the games she played with boys, and her power was feared.[269] Saktis are women who flaunted the social code and were punished for it—or else, accepting it, committed sati. If the injustice done to these women was not recognized, atonement of their death would be unnecessary. This is not the case, and their spirits demand frequent —and costly—propitiation.

Benevolent ancestresses are worshipped as Perantalus who keep away evil spirits and insure good crops. They are the ghosts of women who died in peace after enjoying a good marriage and many children. Their worship is at first joyous, involving feasting, processions, merry-making, and few, if any, sacrifices. However, as time passes, the memory of the jolly personality of these spirits is obliterated by the general tone of

267. Elmore, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–26.
268. *Ibid.*, pp. 110–116.
269. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–115.

village worship, and they, too, are feared and propitiated.[270] It is obvious that in villages where the position of women is good, there are more Perantalus than Saktis. That the goddesses of present-day village India are largely malevolent is due to the miserable conditions of village life; undoubtedly at one time they were more benevolent.

In village India, only women are deified by ancestor worship. Male gods are occasionally worshipped in peripheral cults, but never attain the independent status of village deities.[271] The explanation, perhaps, is that. . . .

> . . . in South India it is the Dravidian women rather than the men who are . . . (dominant). Aryan and Mohammed as influence has somewhat suppressed the Dravidian woman, yet it is commonly known that these women usually secure their own way . . . their curses are much feared. When such a woman attains the freedom and power of a spirit, it is considered wise to propitiate her.[272]

The major Dravidian legends contain many elements suggestive of female power, as well as hints of former political conflicts. Warrior queens are deified; an example is Minarshi, a Pandian queen who, after her death, was accorded divine status.[273] In one legend, Shiva, originally helpful to the kings, realized the havoc they were causing and determined to destroy them. The kings' power was dependent on the chastity of their wives, so Shiva assumed the form of the sacred tree embraced by barren women. All the wives became pregnant by Shiva and gave birth to Saktis, thus undermining the power of the kings. Does this provide a hint of the origin of hypergamy, the custom forbidding women to have relations with men of a higher caste than themselves? Another legend tells of a king who had only sons and prayed for a daughter, which suggests a different value system from that of the present day.[274]

A particularly interesting legend tells of a Sakti who, desiring Vishnu, lost her power by giving him her discuss and eye. She wandered over the earth in frenzied torment, her only contact with Vishnu the sadistic tricks he played on her. When she approached the chariot of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, they cut her into three pieces with her own weapon, and transformed the three pieces of her body into wives for

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270. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
271. Ibid., pp. 17, 64–65, 141–161.
272. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
273. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.
274. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

themselves, creating from her blood the hundred and one Saktis. In this legend, a frustrated, conquered woman becomes the Saktis; the original Great Goddess is destroyed by the Brahmanic triad, but reemerges as the three subordinate goddesses of the Vedic pantheon, and as the Saktis, the vengeful demonesses of village India. A perfect parable! The bloodthirsty village deities are vanquished women, fragments of the original Goddess who is angry at being overthrown.

The legend of Parasurama is known to the Dravidians as the legend of Renuka. Renuka, the daughter of a native king, wished to go fight demons. Her father, not wanting to send a girl, went himself but got into trouble, so Renuka went to rescue him. Her Aryan husband, infuriated that she left without his permission, ordered his sons to murder her. He cursed his elder son for his refusal. Parasurama, the younger son, agreed to cut off her head, but then asked his father to restore her to life. When Renuka revived, she asked her husband to consent to her setting out to rescue her father. When he refused, she revealed herself to him in all her power. Terrified, all his boasts forgotten, Jamadagne fled to the underworld, whereupon Renuka dragged him up by his hair, and, assisted by her brother, set out to rescue her father.[275]

Renuka's supernatural powers are stronger than those of her husband; he is a famous rishi, but she is Devi. This legend tells of a newly patrilocal society in which the wife's first loyalty is to her natal home, not to her husband. It expresses male-female conflict as well as Aryan-Dravidian conflict, and apparently refers to a historic incident—variants of the legend or reference to it, are found in the Mahabharata, the Bhagauat Purana, the Padma Purana, the Agni Purana, and the Ramayana. In the Hindu variant, it is known as the legend of Parasurama who brought classical Brahmanism to India; for the villagers, it is the legend of Renuka, their heroine. It is reenacted at nearly every village ceremony, followed by the buffalo sacrifice in which the slain buffalo symbolizes an overthrown enemy. This lends credence to Ehrenfels' hypothesis that the legend tells of the historic conflict between Dravidian matriarchy and patriarchy.[276] Similarly, many of the etiological legends about goddesses of disease to strife between a husband and wife, resulting in the wife's transformation into a bringer of disease.

Another aspect of village worship is involved with possession. In the Nellore district, during the festival of one of the Seven Sisters, an out-

275. Ibid., p. 88.
276. *Ibid.*

caste Madiga woman, known as the Matangi, becomes possessed by the spirit of Mathamma, a Madiga goddess.[277] She rushes about spitting on the Brahmans, demanding gifts of food and liquor, which she spite back out at them, singing wildly of the humiliation to which she is subjecting them. She enters their homes and the women give her the clothes off their bodies, and the men their sacred threads.[278] The Matangi is the leader of a female cult, an ordained priestess, who throughout her life is free from sexual restrictions.[279] Even the Brahmans fear her power. Illness, believed to be caused by Sakti possession, is diagnosed by female diviners, and alleviated by cultic activity in which women play a dominante role.

Further expression of reverence towards women is expressed by the fact that, under normal circumstances, when the low caste villagers pay tribute to Brahmans, "Not only are the Brahmans worshipped as gurus, but so are their daughters and wives." Many villagers worship a Brahman girl daily as a form of the Goddess by placing her on a seat and offering her flowers, turmeric, incense, etc. A wealthy man may worship a hundred Brahman girls in this manner to win the favour of the Goddess.

Other forms of village worship involving the earth and related symbols are connected to worship of a female Deity. Stones[280] and pots are worshipped as the abode of the Goddess.[281] Worship of stones has influenced even the Brahmans, each of whom possesses a sacred shalgramu stone.[282] The sacred water of the river Ganges is inhabited by a goddess, and bathing in it is believed to remove the sins of a thousand births.[283]

Serpent worship has been a part of indigenous Indian worship for thousands of years.[284] Numerous shrines are dedicated to serpents,[285] and a vast body of folklore and mythology deals with the legendary Nagas, the deified snake heroes.[286] Ancient Buddhist monuments portray men and women paying homage to the seven-headed cobras which curl,

277. James, *op. cit.*, p. 78; Elmore, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
278. Elmore, *op. cit.*, pp. 16, 136.
279. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 29–30.
280. Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, p. 193.
281. Elmore, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
282. Elmore, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
283. Ward, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, pp. 209, 211–213.
284. Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*, p. 46.
285. *Ibid.*, p. 47; and Ward, *op. cit.*, vol iii, pp. 222–25.
286. Elmore, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

richly jeweled, beneath splendid canopies.[287] The Nagas may actually have been an indigenous tribe of serpent-worshippers persecuted by the Aryans—the Mahabharata begins with a curse on the serpent, and Buddhist scripture speaks of the Nagas as a race which converted to Buddhism.[288]

The Nayars and other castes of Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore, set apart a corner of each compound as a serpent grove or shrine, and stones engraved with serpents appear throughout South Canara and Mysore, placed beneath sacred trees.[289] Serpent-Worship is widespread throughout South India. At their annual festival, worshippers, their foreheads smeared with red, go in groups to places known to be the abode of serpents. These spots are usually marked by sacred stones which are annointed and offered ghee and flowers; the snake's hole is ornamented with garlands and bright colours, and milk is poured into the hole or left in saucers for the serpent to drink.[290] There are many indications that serpent worship is but another form of the worship of Mother Earth. The association of stones (the abode of the goddess), the colour red (representative in other rituals of menstrual blood), and the offering of milk confirms this. A noted Jungran psychologist has pointed out that, in India, the cthonic earth-creeping snake appears as an attribute of the female Deity.[291]

Trees are worshipped as the abode of spirits, just as they were 5,000 years ago in the Indus civilization. In certain parts of the Coimbatore district, if it is necessary that a tree be cut down, the spirits residing within it are given notice in order that they have time to vacate their home before it is destroyed.[292] Throughout India, little patches in the corners of fields are left uncultivated as a refuge for tree spirits.[293] Pipal trees are especially sacred, and women make pilgrimages to them in the hopes of bearing a child.[294] A common tribal practice celebrates the marriage of a girl to a tree, followed by an automatic divorce which leaves her free to marry a man of her choice later on.[295] Devadasis and

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287. Fergusson, *op. cit.*, pp. 73, 114.
288. Iyer, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 476.
289. Iyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 473–74.
290. Fergusson, *op. cit.*, pp. 74, 230–37.
291. Neumann, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
292. Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes,* vol. i, p. 281.
293. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 91; and Crooke, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 801.
294. Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
295. *Ibid.*, vol. i, pp. 416–17; Hewitt, in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1899, pp. 338–39, cited in Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

basavis are usually married to trees.[296]

The pious Hindu of the Punjab pays reverence to Mother Earth each morning. Each time a cow or buffalo is milked, the first streams of milk are allowed to fall on the ground. In central India, a three-sided hut is erected at the edge of a field, a tiny pot of milk is allowed to boil over onto the earth, and offerings of rice, molasses, and saffron are offered to the Goddess. Moon worship per se is known as Chanara, and is most popular in those areas which have remained somewhat isolated from the invasions.[297] Peasants paint the horns of their cows red for luck, because the horn is shaped like the crescent moon, and the moon is known to regulate menses.[298]

Rainmaking rites, associated with the moon, are regarded as women's special sphere.[299] Among the Kholarian[300] and Koch[301] tribes of Bengal, and the tribes of Mazaffarput, [302] "the ceremonies intended to secure a good harvest and to procure rain are carried out by the women, and men are excluded during the performance of the rites."[303] The women go to the fields at night to dance naked beneath the moon, singing erotic songs "to stimulate the god of fertility."[304] In South India, "when rain is wanted, the women make a small clay figure of a man" and carry it from house to house, singing erotic songs, before placing it in a field.[305] During the Gorakhpur Famine of 1873, there were numerous accounts of women yoking themselves naked to a plough at night.[306] A missionary reported that during a drought in Chunar of the Mirzapur district, all the women collected in a field, excluded the males, stripped naked, and shouted to

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296. Crooke, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 11–15.

297. Chandra Milra Sarat, "Vestiges of Moon-Worship in Bihar and Bengal," in the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay*, 1973; cited in Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

298. Heather Nadel, personal communication.

299. Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, vol. i, p. 68.

300. Dalton, E.T., *The Kols of Chota Nagore*, Transactions of the Ethnological Society, v, p. 34, cited in Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

301. Crooke, "Nudity in Indian Custom and Ritual," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, XLIX, p. 437, cited in Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

302. Moore, C.J.S., "Harvest Festivals in Muraffarpu," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, LXXXII, p. 39, cited in Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

303. Crooke, "Nudity in Indian Custom and Ritual," *op. cit.*

304. H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, vol. i, p. 498; Mitra Chandra Sarat, "On the Hari Paurauri, the Behari Women's Ceremony for Producing Rain," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, N.S., XXIX, p. 471, cited in Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

305. Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

306. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

the earth to bring water.[307] The goddess of cholera is propitiated by hundreds of women who go out in the evening, strip, and "perform a most frantic sort of dance," clapping and singing, and accompanied by musical instruments played by the men who stand at a distance.[308] Undoubtedly, these rites are more widespread than has been acknowledged.[309]

Thus it appears that the psychological relationship between women, the moon, and the earth is, in India, given ritual expression. Furthermore, it is female power which is depended on in times of extremity, when the ordinary mechanisms of worship are not enough. If in upper class Hindu society the women are excluded from Vedic worship, in village India, "the women are more familiar with the supporting myths than are the men and are more active in carrying out the religious observances associated with the festivals.[310] Village India worships only female deities, and women are at the very core of cultic practice.

Women of Low Caste and Tribal India

Indigenous India deifies the female. There are 15 million tribal people, 30 million who belong to "criminal tribes," and 50 million untouchables—all of whom deify the female in their religious life, and whose social organization either favours, or shows vestiges of having once favoured women.[311] However, as each caste attempts to rise in the social scale, it forbids widow remarriage and hypergamy, thus lowering the status of women.[312]

The tribes and the low and untouchable castes are descended from the indigenous population which inhabited the land before the Aryans came.[313] These include the three groups, all matriarchal: the proto-Australoids, and Negroids who originally populated India, and the Dravidians who came later to build the civilizations of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa.[314] Oppert, in *The Original Inhabitants of India*, proves that the many diverse Dravidian tribes are "the scattered remnants of once powerful kingdoms"; and W.J. Perry in *Children of the Sun* presents

307. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
308. Fanny Parks, in *Calcutta Review*, XVL, p. 186, cited in *Ibid.*
309. Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
310. Oscar Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India*, p. 253.
311. Crooke, *op. cit.*, pp. 440, 451, 503, 513.
312. Rothfield, *Women of India*, pp. 14, 133.
313. De Golish, *Primitive India*, p. 10.
314. Perry, *op. cit.*, pp. 244–49. ?

archeological evidence that many of the food-gathering jungle tribes (such as the Veddas of Ceylon) ruled great kingdoms before the Aryans came.[315]

The Bhils are known to have held kingdoms and founded temples. The Korumba, once rulers in the South, were driven into the jungle by the Chola kings.[316] Although the Kanis are now considered a race of slaves, many elements in their myths suggest a glorious past. Their legends tell of a time when they were "masters of the world, obeyed by all the tribes," and, significantly, ruled by a queen.[317] Women invariably have a good position among the jungle tribes; often men and women will forage together daily to seek honey, roots and fruit. Other jungle tribes representative of the former inhabitants of South India are the Kadir,[318] the Sholiga,[319] the Iraligai, and the Chenchu.[320] There can be no doubt that the Dravidians as a whole once possessed much higher civilizations than they do now. When the invaders conquered India, the indigenous groups fled south, many to the jungles,[321] and those that remained were enslaved and later known as outcastes.[322] Today, the jungle tribes, as well as the untouchables, still pass on "in myth and legend the memory of their past greatness."[323]

Not every tribe fled to the jungle; some, like the Chandalas, remained as the downtrodden. The Pariah, who comprise the bulk of the untouchables, preserve the memory of a "former greatness and regard themselves as the original owners of the soil, political upheavals having accounted for their present lowly status."[324] The Pulayans of Cochin are believed to have been the original inhabitants of the land who, when conquered by the Chola kings, preferred slavery to jungle life.[325] The myths of the Camars, an untouchable caste of leatherworkers, relate that they were once of high caste but lost their status through trickery.[326] The

315. Oppert, *The Original Inhabitants of India*, cited in Perry, *Children of the Sun*, pp. 112–16.
316. Perry, *op. cit.*, p.116.
317. De Golish, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
318. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 10.
319. *Ibid.*, vol. iv, p. 595.
320. Bhowmik, *Tribal India*, p. 77.
321. De Golish, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
322. Crooke, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 119.
323. De Golish, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
324. Oppert, *The Original Inhabitants of India*, pp. 50–51, cited in Perry, *op. cit.*, pp. 115–16.
325. Iyer, *Cochen Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, pp. 107–10.
326. Singer, *Traditional India, Structure and Change*, p. 205.

Thugs are a band of highway robbers who trace their descent from a group that helped Kali battle her enemies. Defeated in that battle, they now live in poverty as thieves.[327]

It is important, then, to realize that the customs of these tribes and castes are representative of pre-Aryan India. Many of the tribes and castes of South India possess legends of having battled the Aryans, lost their kingdoms, and been driven to the jungles. It is among these groups that we find the most traces of matriarchy. The conflict between the invaders and the aborigines is reflected in the Aryan epics as a battle against mythological creatures (such as the Asuras and Nagas, both names of living tribes) to whom the Brahmanic writers ascribed wealth, luxury, and superior architecture.[328] And this conflict, as summed up in the myth of Parasurama, was between mother-right and father-right.

We have previously given Ehrenfels' list of the matriarchal elements found in India: matrilocality, matrilineal descent and inheritance, sexual freedom of unmarried girls and/or married women, polyandry, levirate, lack of interest in paternity, joyful puberty rites, social and ceremonial importance of the maternal uncle, menarkin, worship of the mother Goddess and of a female primogenitor of the clan or tribe, priestesses who serve the Deity, and the dedication of women as basavis or devadasis. We find all these customs to be prevalent among the tribes and castes of India, particularly in the South. First we will examine the few tribes which remain almost purely matriarchal. Then we will cite examples of each of the customs mentioned above.

The Khasi of Assam are a true matriarchate. Residence is matrilocal or duolocal. Traditionally, a family consists of a grandmother or great-grandmother, her husband and daughters, and their children. The husbands of the daughters are known as "begetters" ("Usungka"), and in some Khasi tribes do not live with the wife's family, but visit at night.[329] The maternal clan is called the "Motherhood" ("Mahari"). The mother is the head and source and only bond of union of the family." Descent and inheritance is matrilineal, the female head of the family being called "Mother of the Root" ("Kyawbei Tynnei") or "Honey, the Sweet One" ("Kangap"). A man has no kinship with his biological children, who belong to their mother's clan, but instead supports and nurtures his sister's children.[330] Property is transmitted from mother to

327. Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, p. 14.
328. Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
329. Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. i, pp. 300, 573.
330. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

daughter; a man cannot own property, and gives his earnings to his mother.[331]

Khasi religion consists primarily of worship of the primal ancestress and her brother. Flat stones, set up as memorials for the dead, are named after the woman who represents the clan, and

> . . . standing stones ranged behind them are dedicated to male kinsmen on the mother's side . . . the other spirits to whom propitiation is offered are mainly female . . . the two protectors of the house are goddesses. . . . Priestesses assist at all the sacrifices and the male officiants are only their deputies. In the state of Khyrim, 'the High Priestess and the actual head of the state is a woman who combines in her person sacerdotal and regal functions.[332]

Assam is known to be an area of mother-right, and a similar social organization prevails among the neighboring tribes, such as the Lalungs,[333] Kochs, [334] and Garos.[335]

The Nairs of the Malabar coast are the indigenous aristocracy of South India.[336] Nair women have the highest degree of health and literacy in all of India. They too live in matriarchal joint families known as the "tarvad" ("Motherhood") consisting of "all persons who can trace their descent in the female line from a single ancestress." The eldest woman of the tarvad is the head of the family, but her eldest daughter actually rules.[337] "The son recognized the priority of the mother before whom he did not even venture to seat himself without permission. The brothers obeyed the eldest sister and respected the younger ones."[338] Among the Nair, "Female procreation was highly valued, and male envy of these functions was overt." The mother remains the supreme moral authority, capable, after death, of punishing those who displease her.[339] Descent and inheritance are matrilineal; sons

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331. P.R.T. Gordon, *The Rhasis*, pp. xxii-xxiii, cited in Perry, op. cit., pp. 245–46.

332. Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 300.

333. E.A. Galt, *Census of India*, 1891, vol. i, p. 199, in Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 669.

334. Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

335. B.G. Hodgeson, "On the Origin, Location, Numbers, Creed, Customs, Character and Conditioning of the Koch, Bhoda and Chimai People," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XXVII, part ii, p. 707, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

336. E.A. Galt, *Census of India*, Assam, 1891, vol. i ,p. 229, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

337. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, pp. 47–48.

338. Singer, *Traditional India*, p. 240–46.

339. Hartland, *Primitive Paternity*, pp. 268–69.

may share in the produce which is held jointly by the tarvad, but, unlike daughters, may not transmit rights to their children.[340]

Nair marriage may be either polyandrous, or fraternal-sororal group marriage. Traditionally women could have six to eight husbands and a number of lovers.[341] Residence is duolocal; husbands live in their natal homes and visit their wives. "Each man had his appointed time. . . . She was at liberty to dismiss whomsoever she disliked." [342] Nevertheless, "the family was dearer to a Nayar than anything else,:[343] the strong bond of affection between brothers and sisters being considered an enduring emotion, while "conjugal love is but a passing sentiment." Fatherhood, meaning the care of one's sisters' children, is highly valued and enjoyed.[344]

The Nair perform two marriage ceremonies. The first of these, "the tali tying ceremony" ("Thalikethu Kalganan") is performed every decade for all the young girls of a tarvad.[345] The tali is tied by a man who may be a mere passerby.[346] The couple may enjoy sex for four days, after which the tali is severed, constituting "divorce," and the groom is dismissed with a fee and some presents.[347] It seems likely that this custom originated as a defloration rite[348] but has evolved into a nominal sign of adherence to the Hindu custom of early marriage, with, however, the automatic divorce ensuring a marriage of free choice later on.[349]

When a girl's first menses appear, the Thirandukuli, a joyful celebration, is performed. The girl remains in a private room, and is given flowers, a lamp, and a mirror. Women come to her bearing gifts to proclaim the event with "shouts of joy." They annoint the girl with oil, and she is accompanied by her friends to bathe. Sumptuous feasts are held in her honour, and she is fed special delicacies, all the while accompanied by "the beating of drums and joyful shouts."[350] This ceremony

340. Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 707. These marriage customs have worked to the advantage of the Nambuduri Brahmans who live among and consort with the Nairs. (Report of the Malabar Marriage Commission, Memo. p. 2, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 711).

341. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 39.

342. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

343. Iyer, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, pp. 47–48.

344. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

345. Slater, *The Dravidian Element in Indian Culture*, p. 129.

346. *Iyer, Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 27.

347. T.K. Panekkar, *Malabar and Its Folk*, p. 134, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 709.

348. Iyer, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 21.

349. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

350. Hartland, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

is followed by the second real marriage, the Sambandham.[351] It is a marriage of free will[352] requiring no formality.[353] A feast is held, after which the couple spend the night together.[354] Nair marriage involves no rights or obligations, is ignored by religion, and may be terminated at will.[355]

Each tarvad worships the patron goddess of its lineage, and its ancestresses and ancestors in the female line. Bhuma-devi, Mother-Earth, is also worshipped as "the devourer of male demons who dare to oppose her power."[356] At funerals men dress in women's garments. Serpent worship is the characteristic cult of the community, and sacred serpent groves adjoin each compound.[357] In fact, some scholars consider the name "Nair" to be derived from "Naga." According to legend, the first Aryan colonists, led by Parasurama, found Kerala uninhabitable, but returned after the Nagas had claimed and settled the land.[358]

There are many links between Nair civilization and that of the Indus valley. The structure of the houses is similar: Nair homes, like those excavated at Mohenjodaro and Harappa, are spacious dwellings complete with running water, indoor plumbing and drainage, and bathing tanks. Nair culture stresses cleanliness and involves bathing several times a day,[359] which has been postulated as a custom of the Indus peoples. Nair women wear their hair in an asymmetrical style; they adorn themselves with many ornaments, and their sole garment is a white cloth which falls from waist to knee.[360] Figurines unearthed from the Indus Valley are coiffed, ornamented, and clothed in a similar fashion. The bodies of Nair women are strikingly similar to the statuette of the dancing girl found at Mohenjo-daro. No temples have been discovered at either Mohenjo-daro or Harappa; presumably, as among the Nair, worship took place within the house or serpent grove. Small figures of gold, silver, or copper representing the ancestors are placed inside the

351. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
352. Iyer, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 27.
353. *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 31.
354. Panekkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 47, as cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
355. Singer, *Traditional India,* pp. 240–43.
356. Thurston, *op. cit.*, II, p. 82, cited in Singer, *Traditional India.*
357. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 110, 115.
358. Kyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 9, cited in Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, pp. 58, 60, 180.
359. Rothfield, *Women of India,* pp. 81–83.
360. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 13; Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 134; Thurston, *op. cit.*, p. 312, cited in Rothfield, *Women of India.*

Nayar houses, recalling the form and size of similar figurines which have been found in Mohenjo-daro.[361] Is it possible that the tiny figurines found in the Indus valley, which have been called Earth Mothers or Mother Goddesses, are actually stylized representations of ancestresses? At any rate, Sir John Marshall believes that the Nayars are a survival either of the Indus civilization itself, or one of its branches.[362]

Vestiges of matriarchy are apparent in another culture, that of the Todas of the Nilgiri plateau.[363] Their origin remains a mystery; they bear no resemblance, either physical or cultural, to any of the neighboring tribes.[364] Many of their marriage and other social customs resemble those of Malabar, suggesting that at one time they had lived among the peoples of that area, and physical anthropologists have commented that their physical dimensions correspond to the Nair. However, the original homeland from which they migrated is unknown;[365] it has been suggested that they are of Mediterranean or Sumerian origin.[366] At any rate, there is no doubt that the Toda once possessed a higher culture than they do now,[367] and are the remains of an ancient people. They go to considerable inconvenience and expense to build parabolic huts the exact shape of the rock temples of 2000 years ago.[368]

Each Toda belongs to a matrilineally and a patrilineally based clan.[369] Toda marriage has been termed both polyandry and sororal-fraternal group marriage. When a man marries, "his wife claims all the other brothers of her husband, and as they . . . attain manhood she consorts with them.[370] This rule applies even to unborn brothers: "all subsequent brothers of the bride-groom elect become from their birth bound to the common prospective wife."[371] If she has sisters, they may marry

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361. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
362. De Golish, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6, 11.
363. Rivers, *The Todas*, pp. 18–23.
364. *Ibid.*, pp. 699, 703.
365. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 23.
366. *Ibid.*, p. 187. Their bearded and long-robed appearance is startlingly Semitic, even Arab; and their world view and religion differ radically from any other in India—but resembles, in essence, that of the Jews. This theory is not as far-fetched as it might seem, considering that intercourse between Sumeria and the Indus civilization has been proven—and if trade, why not immigrations?
367. De Golish, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
368. Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 716.
369. *Ibid.*, p. 643.
370. E.A. Gait, in *Census of India*, 1911, vol. i, "India" part i, p. 240, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 698.
371. Briffault, *op. cit.*

her husband's brothers. Each woman and man has, in addition, a regular sexual partner, as well as frequent casual love affairs. The language contains no word for adultery.[372] Every girl, before puberty, spends a night with a man chosen for his strength. She marries without ceremony at the age of fifteen or sixteen, and divorce is granted by the payment of a fine.[373]

The Toda neither cultivate the land nor hunt. They are vegetarian and subsist primarily on dairy products, their needs satisfied by their buffalo,[374] who are the center of their entire social and religious life. The sacred buffalo are believed to belong to the gods; the dairymen are their priests and the dairies their temples.[375] Milk is considered the "divine fluid," and the buffalo are treated with great kindness and respect. The priests are male; however, the initiation of a Palol, the priest of the most sacred dairy, involves ordination by an old woman, well-adorned, before whom the men strip naked as she ritually feeds them with an overabundance of food.[376]

The female buffalo have varying degrees of sanctity, ranging up to the "bellcow" who possesses, throughout her life, a sacred bell which will be handed down to her successor with a prayer.[377] "Every adult female buffalo has an individual name; males are unnamed.[378] In fact, since bulls are not sacred, they must be sanctified by isolation and fasting before being introduced into the herd of sacred females.[379] Nevertheless, there are no regulations on mating, and "a bull born of an ordinary buffalo might mate with the female of a sacred buffalo, witnessed by total indifference as to the lineage of the stud. The Toda herds are organized into a matriarchal society in which each buffalo belongs to its mother's group, and "paternity is unknown or disregarded." Marshall believes that this system is a relic of matrilineal descent among the peoples themselves, that "at onetime the scheme of (inheritance), descent, and kinship was the same for the Todas as for their buffaloes" before the Toda became patrilineal."[380] Toda society expresses a similar disregard for human paternity.

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372. Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 525.
373. *Ibid.*, p. 503.
374. W. Marshall, *A Phrenologist Amongst the Todas*, pp. 80–81.
375. Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
376. W. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 138; Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
377. W. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 130–32.
378. Rivers, *op. cit.*, pp. 547–48.
379. W. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 130–32.
380. *Ibid.*, pp. 548–49.

Religion permeates every aspect of Toda life. The major deity is the goddess Teikirzi, whose name is repeated in each of the infinite number of sacred formulas and prayers uttered throughout the day. She is a primogenitor, founder of the most sacred clan,[381] and is believed to have lived among the Toda in ancient times, giving laws, instituting customs, and regulating the affairs of the people. At this time she is omnipotent and omnipresent,[382] her influence extending throughout the world, "even . . . to London."[383]

Nevertheless, Toda society is patrilineal and patrilocal.[384] Women are excluded from the dairy ceremonial;[385] in practice this means that men do the cooking as most of it involves milk products.[386] Formerly, the milk diet was supplemented by herbs, roots, honey, and fruit[387] gathered by the women; at present the Toda receive a tribute of grain from the Badaga who cultivate their land;[388] thus women contribute less to the economy than formerly. The relations between men and women are comfortable and equal;[389] the word for marriage is "join."[390] In the seventh month of pregnancy, one of a woman's husbands accompanies her into the forest to collect wood, out of which he makes her a bow and arrow, through this ritual becoming the formally named father of the child. Whether or not this particular husband had recently slept with his wife is unimportant; the first few children will be reckoned as belonging to one husband, the next few to another.[391] A woman gives birth with her head on her husband's chest, and remains in a special hut with her husband and a female friend for a month or two afterwards.[392] An imitation dairy is erected beside the hut, and the new mother ties sacred threads usually worn only by dairymen priests around her waist.[393]

Among the Asur, young girls practice a custom "by which the ties of friendship are made almost as binding as marriage." They arrange

381. Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
382. *Ibid.*, p. 443.
383. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
384. W. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 43, 37; Rivers, *op. cit.*, pp. 77, 503.
385. Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 568.
386. Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
387. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
388. W. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 52; Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 586.
389. W. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
390. W. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 43, 47; Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 74, 503.
391. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
392. Rivers, op. cit., p. 568.
393. *Ibid.*, pp. 323–24.

flowers in each other's hair, exchange necklaces, and prepare a feast for their friends, swearing eternal friendship. "From that hour they must not address . . . each other by name . . . (but) by the names of certain flowers."[394] After a period of free sexual mixing, the Asur may marry.[395] However, an unmarried couple will often live together for many years and have children. Should they later marry, their parents must be married first.[396] Girl children are preferred to boys, it being believed that "if a girl is the first child she will bring prosperity and long life to her parents. . . .[397] The most dreaded ghost is a "churel," a woman who died in childbirth. "The churel runs after and seeks to possess every man whom she meets, for, it is said, her carnal appetite remains unsatisfied in life." The churel also possesses girls during dances, causing trance. It is believed that "the Asur were once a matriarchal society which changed into patriarchy when they came to live among social groups which were patriarchal.[398]

Many of the tribes of India are, like the Nayar and Khasi, matrilocal. Among the Santals,[399] the Mundas,[400] the Lalungs,[401] the Kochs,[402] and the Garos,[403] the husband enters the wife's family, and the children belong to her clan. "When a man marries he lives with his wife's mother, obeying her and his wife."[404] Vestiges of a former matrilocality are exceedingly numerous. Among the Ghonds, a new husband remains in the wife's home for a period of eight months to three years.[405] Among the Kailiads of the Bijapur hills[406] and the Lamars of Ahmadgar, a husband is expected to dwell with his wife's family until they have "at least three children."[407] Among the Bhongi, if a bride is wealthy, her husband re-

394. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
395. Leuva, *The Asur*, pp. 78–79.
396. *Ibid.*, pp. 92–94.
397. *Ibid.*, pp. 89–98.
398. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
399. *Ibid.*, pp. 175–77.
400. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
401. J. Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Tribes of East Bengal*, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, pp. 243–45.
402. S.S. O'Mailey, in *Census of India*, 1911, vol. v, p. 315, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 301.
403. Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
404. B.G. Hodgson, *op. cit.*, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 301.
405. Gait, *Census of India*, Assam, 1891, vol. i, p. 229.
406. Hodgeson, *op. cit.*, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 301.
407. *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, vol. xxii, p. 122, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

mains with her family permanently. During the marriage ceremony of the Killekyata fishermen of Mysore, the husband is waylaid by the wife's relatives who force him to promise them the first born daughter.[408]

Among the wandering Dombar, a gypsy tribe, a husband is expected to live with his wife's family until a child is born. Serving marriage is common among both wandering and settled Dombar.[409] Among the Bhils, a groom traditionally serves seven years for a bride, and a similar custom prevails among the Kadir, a jungle tribe of Southwest India.[410]

Many tribes, presently patrilocal, show a survival of matrilocality in the customary return of a pregnant woman to her parents' home. Among the untouchable Parayan, the expectant mother returns home in her seventh month.[411] Similar customs prevail among the Pulluvans,[412] the Meda,[413] and the Koruba. Women of the (untouchable) Camar commonly visit their parents for periods of two to three years,taking all their children with them.[414]

Matrilineal descent and inheritance are also found throughout India, notably among the Khasi,[415] the Nayars,[416] the Calungs,[417] the Kochs,[418] the Garos,[419] the Haik Poikas, and the food-gathering Veddas of Ceylon.[420] Among these tribes, only women may inherit. Inheritance among the Asur may be either matrilineal or patrilineal.[421] Each Toda belongs to a matrilineal and patrilineal clan, and they operate their sacred herds on a principle of matrilineal descent.[422]

Joyful puberty rites are the norm throughout South India. Among the Valans, a fishing caste of Cochin, celebration of the first mense begins with seclusion of the girl with her girlfriends. The glad tidings are

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408. *Ibid.*, vol. xvii, p. 162, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*
409. *Ibid.*, vol. xxii, p. 122, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
410. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the Northwest Provinces and Oudr*, vol. i, p. 281, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
411. *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 10.
412. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, pp. 147–48.
413. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
414. Iyer, *Cochen Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, pp. 145–48.
415. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iv, p. 198.
416. *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.
417. P. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, pp. 76, 82, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 300.
418. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, pp. 47–48; Hartland, *op. cit.*, p. 268.
419. Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
420. Hodgson, *op. cit.*, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 301.
421. Gait, *Census of India*, Assam, 1891, vol. i, p. 229, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
422. Bhowmik, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

publicly announced, and women and relatives come bearing gifts. On the fourth day, the girl and her friends go to bathe accompanied by musicians. Feasts are held on the fourth, seventh, and fifteenth days to which all the women are invited. These two weeks are a festival occasion; the nights are spent singing songs from the Puranas, playing ball games, and in general, celebration and fun.[423] Similarly, among the Kammalans, an artisan caste of Cochin, the celebration of the first mense involves presents for the girl, feasting, and a ceremonial oil bath after which the girl is led home in procession.[424] The Variyars of Cochin announce the first mense with "shouts of joy," and similar celebrations ensue.[425] Among the Pulayans and Parayans,[426] joyful rites and ceremonies mark the celebration of the puberty of girls. In fact, to the Kanikans, a caste of astrologers, the importance of this day is such that a girl's horoscope is cast not according to her day of birth, but by the day her first menses appear.[427] Matriarchal society permits premarital sex. Among the Asur, adolescent girls and boys live in separate dormitories, but are free to visit one another. This period of free sexual mixing is looked back on fondly as the happiest time in a person's life.[428] Among the Naga of Manipur, single girls live in a common house in which they receive lovers. Ghond adolescents live together in a dormitory, changing partners at will.[429] Virginity is regarded as a disgrace by the Angami Nagas.[430] Most tribes of Central India have similar customs, [431] and similar customs are encouraged by many of the low castes—examples are the Holeya,[432] the Sumuwars of Nepal,[433] the Veddas of Ceylon,[434] the Sholigas (also jungle-dwellers)[435] and the Besta and Koli fishermen.[436]

Among the Parayan,[437] as among the Asur,[438] a young couple may

423. Levva, *The Asur*, pp. 89–98.
424. W. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–81.
425. Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 284.
426. Thurston, *op. cit.*, p. 424, cited in Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
427. Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 139.
428. *Ibid.*, vol. i, pp. 145–58.
429. *Ibid.*, pp. 207–08.
430. Levva, *The Asur*, pp. 78–80.
431. Hutlon, *The Angami Nagas*, p. 169.
432. Bhowmik, *op. cit.*, pp. 111–12.
433. Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 21.
434. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iii ,pp. 332–36.
435. Hartland, *op. cit.*, p. 567.
436. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iv, p. 677.
437. Iyer, *Cochen Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 130.
438. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, pp. 243–48.

live together without marriage and their children will be deemed legitimate.[439] The Koodans of Cochen practice, instead of an actual marriage, a "free will union" in which the woman remains in her parents' hut and mentions her lover's name when she becomes pregnant.[440] All the tribes which have not been subjected to Brahmanic influence practice adult marriage of free choice. Certain tribes and castes (such as the Nayars[441] and Valans[442]) practice a pseudo marriage during childhood, followed by an automatic divorce which permits a marriage of free choice later on.

We have described in some detail three polyandrous societies—the Toda, the duolocal Nayar, and the matrilocal Khasi; it is thought that polyandry formerly existed among the Garos,[443] the Kochs,[444] and in Bhutan and Skiiam.[445] The Santal of the Hazaribagn region practice sororal-fraternal group marriage.[446] Fraternal polyandry prevails among the Thandans, the Panikkans, Valluvanads and many other castes of Cochin.[447] In the towns and villages, polyandry is most prevalent among the lower castes. The artisan castes of the Malabar coast practice fraternal polyandry.[448] Among the Kanamalans, an artisan caste of Cochin, polygamy is allowed but polyandry prevails.[449] The Kanikans, a caste of astrologers, are polyandrous, but as the men travel, the women often live with but one man at a time.[450] The marriage customs of the Chaliyans, a weaver caste, resemble those of the Nayars.[451] Polyandry is known to have existed among the Parayan until the beginning of the twentieth century, and relics of it have been found among the Pulayans

439. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
440. Levva, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–98.
441. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–55.
442. Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 135.
443. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 27.
444. *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 233.
445. E.A. Gait, *Census of India*, Assam, 1891, vol. i, p. 199, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 699.
446. J. Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Tribes of East Bengal*, as cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, pp. 245–46.
447. Gait, *op. cit.*, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 699.
448. Russel, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, vol. ii, p. 317, as cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 676.
449. Iyer, *Cochen Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 296.
450. Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 700.
451. Iyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 343–71.

of Cochin.[452] Among the Khonds[453] and Badagas,[454] a woman has access to her husband's brothers during any absence of her husband. Among the Bhuiya, the husband's brothers are available to the wife until they marry.[455] Similar customs prevail among the Ghonds[456] and the Khonds and probably once existed among the Kharia.[457]

Divorce and widow remarriage are permitted by indigenous India. A few examples will suffice. Among the Sumuwars, a cultivating tribe of Nepal, widows and divorcees may remarry "by simple cohabitation without any ceremony at all."[458] Among the Banjara, widows, who may remarry, often marry their husband's brother.[459] Killekyata widows return to their parents' home and are encouraged to remarry. The Koli fishermen,[460] and the Veddas of Ceylon,[461] the Vlladans, the jungle-dwelling Sholigas,[462] the hunting Koravas,[463] the Holeya,[464] the Nayar, the Madiga,[465] and countless other tribes permit easy divorce and widow remarriage. Brahmanic influence may be seen in the fact that the settled Dombar do not allow remarriage, whereas the wandering Dombar do.[466] The Yanadis honour a widow according to how many husbands she has had.[467] Certain tribes such as the Veddas,[468] the Koravas,[469] and the Oddes,[470] honour a woman who has had seven husband; her blessing is asked on a bridal pair, she holds a place of honour at weddings, and decides disputes over adultery.[471]

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452. *Ibid.*, pp. 207–08.
453. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 117.
454. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–57.
455. R.U. Russell, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, vol. iii, p. 468, cited in Buffault, *op. cit.*, p. 673.
456. Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 700.
457. Russel, *op. cit.*, as cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 673.
458. Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 673.
459. Russel, *op. cit.*, p. 558, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 676.
460. *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. iii, p. 449, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 676.
461. Thurston, *op. cit.*, pp. 49, 108; E.A. Gait, *Census of India*, 1901, VX, cited in Hartland, *op. cit.*, p. 567.
462. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 168.
463. Rothfield, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
464. Iyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 659–68.
465. Iyer, *Cochen Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 67.
466. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iv, p. 595.
467. *Ibid.*, vol. iii, pp. 598–99.
468. *Ibid.*, pp. 332–36.
469. *Ibid.*, vol. iv, pp. 147–48.
470. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, pp. 150–51.
471. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

Many tribes of Southern India practice a "double standard" which is favourable to women. Among the Holeya,[472] the Besta fishermen,[473] the Sholiga[474] and the Vedda,[475] if an unmarried girl becomes pregnant and she and her lover do not marry, he is outcaste and she may marry another man who will be considered the father of her child.[476] Among the Koli fishermen one of the duties of the headman is to find a husband for unwed mothers. Among the Pulayans of Cochin, the lover of a pregnant girl is paraded through the streets on a donkey, undergoing indignities and even tortures, but female infidelity is ignored. The tribal council "takes a serious view of moral lapses so far as the male offenders are concerned, (but) it takes a very lenient view of similar delinquency on the part of their women."[477] Among the Banjara and Korava,[478] both "criminal castes," a woman may live with another man while her husband is in jail, and any children she may bear will be considered her husband's.[479] However, a man who tries to tempt a married woman is shaved and paraded on an ass.[480] Among the Vlladans[481] and Pulayans of Cochin,[482] an adulterous man is beaten or fined—but an adulterous woman is purified by being given coconut milk to drink![483] She may then return to her husband, or leave him for the other man.[484] Significantly, these tribes, so lenient to women, are considered highly untouchable and pollute from a far distance;[485] it could almost be said that the lower the caste, the better the position of women.[486].

Throughout tribal India, girls are dedicated to the temples as devadasis and basavis. These women, beloved of God, have the legal rights of men and complete sexual freedom; their children are considered

472. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iv, p. 677.
473. Thurston, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, p. 489, cited in Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*
474. Thurston, *op. cit.*, vol. v, p. 423, cited in Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*
475. Heine-Geldern, "Megalithwesen in Hinterindien," Lectures, Vienna University, cited in Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*
476. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iii, pp. 332–36.
477. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, pp. 243–48.
478. *Ibid.*, vol. iv, p. 595.
479. *Ibid.*, pp. 147–48.
480. *Ibid.*, vol. iii, pp. 332–36.
481. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 170.
482. Bhargava, *The Criminal Tribes*, p. 5.
483. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 163–65.
484. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
485. *Ibid.*, pp. 598–99.
486. Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 67.

legitimate.[487] They are not necessarily prostitutes, but women who may have one or many lovers.[488] Among many tribes, one girl from each family is dedicated. Among the Korubas, a caste of shepherds, the eldest daughter is dedicated as a basavi when there is no son to continue the line.[489] Madiga divorcees choose between remarriage and dedication.[490] Bekkara[491] and Holeya[492] women who do not wish to marry have the option of being dedicated to a free life in the name of the Goddess.[493] Among the Dombar, a gypsy tribe who perform acrobatics, the girls who succeed in learning acrobatic feats are dedicated; the others, less intelligent or nimble, must marry. If a basavi later wants to marry she must cease her acrobatic performances.[494] The fishing castes of the Killekyata[495] and Besta,[496] the Kanjara,[497] the Kolhati-Beria,[498] the Beria,[499] and the Bedas,[500] are a few other tribes for whom the dedication of basavis are an important part of social life.

Generally, the dedication ceremony resembles marriage. The Killekyata fishermen of Mysore dedicate girls by placing in their garments such lucky items as rice, coconuts, and jaggery.[501] For the Koruba dedication ceremony, the girl is dressed as a bride and led in procession to the temple where she is given coconuts and dates, and her body rubbed with precious saffron. Rice is thrown over her by way of blessing and congratulation and the ceremony is followed by a feast.[502] Among the Dombar, the girl at the age of sixteen, is given of rice and coconuts and taken to the temple in procession amidst song and festivities. Her maternal uncle ties the tali and the ceremony concludes with a feast. When dedicated girls take their first lover, the women of the tribe gather to

487. *Ibid.*, pp. 107–10.
488. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
489. *Ibid.*, pp. 107–10.
490. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
491. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iv, pp. 668–69.
492. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 155.
493. *Ibid.*, vol. iv, pp. 47–48.
494. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, pp. 147–48.
495. *Ibid.*, pp. 243–48.
496. *Ibid.*, vol. iv, pp. 668–69.
497. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, pp. 243–48.
498. *Ibid.*, vol. iv, pp. 668–69.
499. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 155.
500. *Ibid.*, vol. iii, p. 535.
501. *Ibid.*, vol. iii, pp. 243–48.
502. Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

sing joyful songs.[503]

A casual perusal of tribal and low caste India, especially in the South, will reveal many examples of matriarchal elements or respect for women. The maternal uncle occupies an important position in the social and ceremonial life of Southern India, and is often prominent in the marriage of his nephews and nieces. Examples are the Dombar,[504] the Paraya,[505] and the Valans.[506] Bhil women are notoriously independent, and it is on record that they once beat up an English officer who demanded their favours in exchange for help during a famine.[507] Among the Reddies of Tinnevally, and the Malailis of the Salem district, boys are married to older women.[508] Banjara women are known to be "aggressive," and a husband is often younger than his wife, in which case she lives with another man until he comes of age. A prospective husband must pass a period of probation (several months) in the house of his intended father-in-law. When he first arrives, he is seated before an audience of women. For the entire period of his probation, he is not permitted to leave the confines of the house unless accompanied by one of the bride's brothers.[509] During the actual ceremony, the young women throw a piece of the bride's garment around his neck, using it to knock him flat on the ground, and then taunt him. A coin is hidden for the bride and groom to find, it being believed that the one who finds it will have the upper hand in marriage.[510] The Sautal practice various forms of marriage, one of which is "marriage by intrusion" in which a girl moves into the unwilling boy's house—and stays there until he consents to marry her.[511] Among the Veddas,[512] as among the Asur,[513] the birth of a daughter is considered more desirable than the birth of a son. The Vedda fine a man who uses abusive language to a woman.[514] The women of the fishing castes (such as the Valans,[515] Koli,[516] and

503. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, pp. 197–220.
504. Bhargava, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
505. *Ibid.*, pp. 197–220.
506. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iii, p. 535.
507. *Ibid.*, vol. iv, pp. 147–48.
508. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 155.
509. *Ibid.*
510. Perry, *Children of the Sun*, p. 112.
511. Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 233.
512. Rothfield, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
513. *Census of India*, 1901, XV, cited in Hartland, *op. cit.*, p. 567.
514. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 196.
515. *Ibid.*, pp. 161–65.
516. Bhowmik, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

Vlladans)[517] and the jungle tribes (such as the Veddas,[518] Iraligai,[519] and Kadir) the women are particularly well off. Among the "criminal tribes," (such as the Karval, the Matham, and the Sansi) women contribute to the economy of the group and enjoy high status.[521] "The relatively good position of women belonging to these castes, as compared to those of higher social groups, their freedom and participation in the profession of their menfolk, is stressed by Russel. . . . They used to do the major part of the thieving, but by 1850 women no longer performed raids."[522]

Many tribes and castes not only worship the Goddess, but trace their descent from a deified ancestress. The Toda deity Teikirzi, now considered omnipotent and omnipresent, was originally the ruler of a clan who instituted many Toda customs.[523] Nayar and Khasi[524] religion focuses on the worship of ancestresses who are patron goddesses of the lineage.[525] A Bhat or Caran (castes of bards and geneologists) was formerly called a Devi-putra, "the son of a goddess". The Iraligai, a honey-gathering jungle tribe, worship the goddess Mariamma.[526] The Agasa, the washermen of Mysore, claim descent from a mythical woman.[527] The Parayan worship Divine Mothers,[528] and the Budabaike (beggars and fortune tellers) trace their descent from their patron goddess, who gave them the drum with which they earn their living.[529] The Camars worship a group of Mother-Goddesses who are all manifestations of the "One Mother of Creation."[530]

The Banjara and the Dombar,[531] both "criminal castes," invoke their patron goddess before setting out on raiding expeditions. The Thugs (a band of highway robbers who strangle their victims) claim to

517. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
518. Levva, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
519. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iv, p. 595.
520. Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 233.
521. Rothfield, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
522. Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 67.
523. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 10, cited in Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
524. De Golish, *op. cit.*, pp. 26–27.
525. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. i, p. 10.
526. Bhargava, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–54.
527. Russel, *op. cit.*, vol. iii, 189, cited in Ehrenfels, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
528. Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 187; E.A. Gait, in *Census of India*, 1911, vol. i, p. 240, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 698.
529. Gait, *op. cit.*, p. 199, cited in Briffault, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 669.
530. Singer, *Traditional India*, pp. 242–43.
531. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

have aided Kali in her war against the invaders. They call upon her for blessing and protection before setting out on a raiding expedition. In Bengal, thieves and robbers are believed to enjoy her special protection in her aspect as "The Mother of the Universe."[532] Similarly, in the Punjab, thieves used to make offerings to the goddess Devi.[533] Kali or Bhowani is the principle deity of "most of the criminal and lower castes."[534] According to Russel:

> The Chandra Vedi San Auria, a criminal caste . . . make the newly initiated swear never to stead at night. The oath is given in the name of the moon, wherefore the Chandra Vedi are called "those who reverently regard the moon."[535]
>
> . . . . .
>
> The Thugs have changed their entire outlook on life in the direction towards father-right, just as did all the other Indian social units and groups. In former days it was absolutely forbidden to them to murder women. The custom gradually decayed. When they were finally suppressed by the British Indian police, they considered their bad luck as divine punishment for having disregarded the order of their caste goddess Devi, and having resorted to killing, not men only, but also women.[536]

A similar movement from matriarchal to partiarchal values has taken place among the Angami Nagas; Kenopfu, their major deity, is now spoken of as male, but was originally female, and appears in the Naga legends as an ancestress. "The conception of Kenopfu in the Angami mind is apparently at present undergoing a process of change from female to male."[537]

Summary

We have suggested that aboriginal India was matriarchal and that the patriarchal elements in Indian culture were either superimposed by invading cultures, or else arose in response to them. The matriarchal and patriarchal elements in Indian society, the combination of which appears so paradoxical, arose from two distinct sources; we have shown that the earliest known civilization in India, the Indus civilization, was matriarchal in its religious character, and pointed out that in those days

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532. De Golish, *op. cit.*, pp. 26–27.
533. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. iv, p. 198.
534. Thurston, *op. cit.*, pp. 104, 105, 123, cited in *Ibid.*
535. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 350.
536. Mariott, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–58; Singer, *Traditional India*, p. 43.
537. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, vol. ii, p. 192.

a dichotomy between religion and life was most unlikely. We have seen that the position of women in Hindu society has steadily declined due to foreign influence, but when we looked at popular Hinduism, which is a truer reflection of the psyche of the people than the laws, we found that it consists primarily of worship of the female principle. I believe that mythology reflects the true psychological state of a people, and if all deities are female, it seems obvious that, whatever the present day status of women, the female principle is supreme in the minds of the people. We have looked at village India and seen that its religion centers on worship of goddesses whose anger dates from some great battle. Tribal and low caste India abound with matriarchal traces. In short: women have a good position throughout India, except among a minority: the upper castes, most of whom are not of indigenous Indian origin anyway. Popular Hinduism is Goddess worship, as it has been for at least five thousand years. The essence of Indian civilization—those intangible values, ideals, energies, and forces which permeate every aspect of Indian life, is female. Patriarchy has come to India, as it has come to every part of the world, but in India, partiarchy has not conquered, and the Great Goddess lives on.

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