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Leonard, Karen

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Women in India: Some Recent Perspectives

Research Note

WOMEN IN INDIA traditionally were members of a stratified society characterized by the ideology and practice of inequality. Caste ideology specified privileges and sanctions according to innate attributes, which differed by sex as well as caste. Throughout the subcontinent, social, economic, and political power resided with men, even in matrilineal groups or tribal communities with female farming systems. With independence in 1947 and the subsequent promulgation of the Indian Constitution, the stated equality of all citizens promised revolutionary change for women, as for other formerly subordinate categories such as untouchables. Despite progress for some women since independence, however, revolutionary or even substantial change in the conditions governing the lives of the majority of Indian women has not been achieved.

The purpose of this essay is, first, to discuss some of the major problems for women in India today. A major source of information in this regard will be the recent *Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*, the best single research and advocacy work available. The essay will then go on to review other current research on women in India, pointing to areas where scholarly debate is vigorous or where further research and clarification is needed. The conclusion will assess current thinking in India about the nature of the problems for women and the solutions sought for those problems.

Several factors have recently intensified interest in the problems of women in India. One was International Women's Year, proclaimed by the United Nations for 1975, while Indira Gandhi was still Prime Minister. In preparation for this year-long assessment of women's participation in the social, political, and economic activities of nations, the government of India produced a series of outstanding research reports. Among the government publications taken by Indian delegates to the official United Nations conference and the unofficial but livelier (on women's issues) Women's Tribune convened in Mexico City in June 1975, was *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*.¹ This impressive document is so well written

¹ Published by the Department of Social Welfare in December of 1974, this report was commissioned in 1971. Committee members were asked to report in two years, but the magni-

and exhaustive that it serves as a model for such reports; and parts of it have been reproduced (with and without acknowledgement) in many subsequent Indian publications concerning women. It was one of many publications associated with International Women's Year which stimulated publicity within India about the changing position of women.

Another stimulus has been the interest of both Indian and foreign scholars in research about women. Interdisciplinary women's studies programs outside of India often include material about Indian women, and within India the government's promotion of International Women's Year helped legitimize a variety of scholarly symposia and publications addressed to both empirical and theoretical work concerning women.² Going beyond academic research, consultants have documented "sexism" in primary and secondary school textbooks,³ and the institutionalization of women's studies courses in India's higher educational curriculum has the support of eminent scholars.⁴ This support by government and academic leaders for scholarly research and educational innovation concerning women is important and encouraging.

Further impetus has come from the growth of women's movement activities in India, on the part of both the long-standing All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) and newer, more political, organizations. Increasing opportunities for individual middle- and upper-class urban women (the only segment for whom opportunities have expanded) have led such women to discuss organizing to support each other and other women.⁵ Other organizations have attempted to mobilize women as workers, through economic and political struggle: these include the National Federation of Indian Women, the Kerala Women's Federation, the Progressive Organization of Women, and the United Women's Anti-Price-Rise Front. Regional and national conferences on women's issues are being held, such as the United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference (October 1975) in Maha-

tude of the task and the thoroughness with which they interpreted their mandate required extension of the tenure of the Committee and the final Report coincided with the beginning of International Women's Year.

² A good example here is the publication of the lectures given at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library: B.R. Nanda, ed., *Indian Women from Purdah to Modernity* (Bombay, 1976).

³ K. Nischol, "The Invisible Woman: Images of Women and Girls in School Textbooks," *Social Action*, 26 (July-September 1976), pp. 267-81. This study, by a consultant to the Central Social Welfare Board, was sponsored by the All-India Women's Conference on a grant from the National Council of Educational Research and Training.

⁴ A Research Unit on Women's Studies has been established in Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (S.N.D.T.) Women's University, Bombay.

⁵ Devaki Jain, "The Educated Woman: Has She Become a Social Robot?," *Femina*, 17 (August 1975), p. 29.

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rashtra and the All-India Women's Conference (December 1975) in Kerala.⁶

The problems confronting women in India today are serious, not only for women but for all citizens of India. While our discussion may focus on women, the implications of these problems for overall national development should be kept in mind. *Towards Equality*, the basic source, has some 146 tables, most of which clearly document women's continuing inferior status in Indian society. The broad demographic measures—data on fertility and mortality, age at marriage, literacy, and participation in the work force—are the most telling. An alarming trend is the decline in the sex ratio, from 972 females per 1,000 males in 1901 to 930 females per 1,000 males in 1971. Demographers agree that improved health conditions have reduced mortality more for males than for females; female infant mortality is higher, and female expectation of life at birth is lower (46 years, with 47 for men).⁷ The age at marriage has risen gradually: in 1971 the mean was 17.2 for women and 22.2 for men, with a marked rural-urban difference. Child marriages still occur, although the 1961 and 1971 censuses did not record marital status directly for those under 10 years of age; despite a legal age of marriage for women set at 15, almost 12% of girls aged 10-14 were married in 1971.⁸ The incidence of divorce and separation remains low, .5% of the female population above 10 years of age being so recorded in 1971.⁹

High levels of fertility combine with women's low levels of education and work force participation to contribute to the growth of the population. While the female death rate has been substantially reduced, the birth rate has not, and again the rural-urban difference is significant. 81% of India's women live in rural areas, and the rural woman has an average number of 6.4 children born alive by the time she is 44. There is an inverse relationship between fertility and educational level, so that the low female literacy rate (18.7%, and only 13.2% for rural females, compared to 39.5% for all males) becomes important in the context of family planning efforts. Women with higher education are a tiny elite: only 1.4% of female literates are university graduates. 89% of women workers are illiterate, and of rural women workers, 92%. All of these statistics, combined with the current low

⁶ Renu Chakravarty, "New Perspectives on the Women's Movement After Twenty-Five Years of Drift," *Link* (August 15, 1972), pp. 177-81; Gail Omvedt, "Women and Rural Revolt in India," University of California, Irvine, Program in Comparative Culture, Occasional Paper No. 6 (Irvine, CA, 1978).

⁷ *Towards Equality*, pp. 11-20. The sex ratio has been declining at every decennial census, save for a slight rise (945 to 946 females per 1,000 males) from 1941 to 1951; the gap between male and female expectation of life has increased for the last five decades.

⁸ *Towards Equality*, pp. 23-6.

⁹ The 1971 Census even shows a decrease in the proportion of women recorded as divorced and separated, but the figures may not be reliable.

proportion of women in the work force (13% of rural women and 7% of urban women), make the reduction of fertility difficult, since level of education, urbanization, and work force participation are all inversely correlated with fertility.¹⁰

Another discouraging trend is with respect to women's participation in the work force, where the historical record is one of decline—and very sharp decline after 1961. The proportion of female workers to the female population fell from 28% in 1961 to 12% in 1971, and the proportion of female workers to the total labor force fell from 32% to 17% during the same decade.¹¹ In private industry, agriculture, and home industries, women's share of the paid labor force has been slipping; and because the process of agricultural modernization has almost universally resulted in increased male control of agricultural production, women's share of (unpaid) family agricultural work is also slipping.¹² There are significant differences between the north and the south—the economic participation of women is consistently higher in South India and tribal areas—and this has yet to be satisfactorily explained.¹³ Economist Ester Boserup's influential work on the need to integrate women into development planning and activities to maximize development progress is known, but there seems to be a good deal of ambivalence on this issue among India's official planners. While unemployment and underemployment of women, and even a trend towards female-headed households among the poor, have been fully documented, the Committee on the Status of Women has been one of the few official bodies to press for action on behalf of women workers.¹⁴ And here the Committee differs with the AIWC, which emphasizes education more than economic self-sufficiency as the means to secure women's participation in public life.¹⁵

The chief concerns of the government of India appear to be the removal of all legal discrimination between the sexes and the promo-

¹⁰ *Towards Equality*, pp. 26-32, and 217.

¹¹ *Towards Equality*, p. 153; for the Census definitions, p. 154.

¹² Seminal works on this phenomenon are Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (London, 1970); Nadia Youssef, *Women and Work in Developing Societies* (Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1974); and Irene Tinker and Michele Bo Bramsen, eds., *Women and World Development* (Washington, D.C., 1976). See also Veena Das, "Indian Women: Work, Power and Status," in Nanda, *Indian Women*, for an excellent discussion along the lines of Boserup's thesis.

¹³ A lively debate in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1975 includes discussions by Leela Gulati (January 11, August 9, October 25), J. N. Sinha (April 19), Kamla Nath (May 23), and D. Narasimha Reddy (June 7).

¹⁴ *Towards Equality* devotes almost 100 pages to employment patterns of women in the unorganized and organized sectors, inadequate legislation against sex discrimination in employment, inadequate enforcement of existing such legislation, and the need to integrate women into the modernizing economy.

¹⁵ The AIWC helped secure "reform" legislation to keep female workers from underground work in the mines: Chakravarty, "New Perspectives," p. 177.

tion of social welfare programs and education for women. The best summary of existing legislation against discrimination on the basis of sex and its applicability to various religious and other communities is in *Towards Equality*, chapters III and IV. In addition to many detailed changes in existing legislation to bring about social change, the Committee on the Status of Women strongly recommended passage of a uniform Civil Code, stated as a goal in the Constitution. This would eliminate disabilities suffered by women members of religious groups whose personal law has been left relatively unchanged, especially Muslim women. The Committee also recommended compulsory registration of marriages, a measure long overdue and absolutely crucial to the implementation of existing laws concerning child marriage, polygamy, bigamy, dowry, and divorce. Some of the existing laws, such as those regarding abortion for minors and providing for the dissolution of marriage, respect the family unit more than individual rights. Why, for example, if the legal age for a woman's consent to intercourse is 16, is the legal age for a woman's consent to abortion 18?¹⁶ It will clearly take years of judicial experience and further legal enactments to eradicate barriers to sexual equality even on paper. Far more important, the majority of India's women are unable to avail themselves of ameliorative legislation because of illiteracy and ignorance.

The government of India has great hopes that the growth of education will substantially reduce existing inequalities in Indian society. The Constitution called for free, compulsory education for all children through the age of 14. India has not had the resources to reach this goal, although there has been a substantial rise in enrollment in the formal educational system.¹⁷ The proportion of girls enrolled has risen from 33 per 100 boys in 1950-51 to 54 per 100 boys in 1970-71. Progress for women has been most striking in university enrollments, but since this level currently enrolls only 1.3% of the entire population aged 17-23, the benefits go to a small minority.¹⁸

Special educational problems include the lower level of development among Muslim women and women of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes,¹⁹ and the still-unresolved issues of co-education and the nature of the curriculum for girls. In nineteenth-century India, "women's education" was designed to make women suitable companions, homemakers, and mothers.²⁰ Since independence, a series of government

¹⁶ The Committee recommended raising both the age of marriage and of consent to intercourse to 18 (*Towards Equality*, pp. 111-13, 144).

¹⁷ *Towards Equality*, pp. 236-40. The 1966 Planning Commission report calls for all children to have 7 years of effective education by 1985-86.

¹⁸ *Towards Equality*, pp. 240-1. An excellent source of information on the educated professional women is Muriel Wasi, ed., *The Educated Woman in India* (New Delhi, 1971).

¹⁹ *Towards Equality*, pp. 268-72.

²⁰ J. Murdoch, *The Women of India* (Madras, 1888) provides a good discussion.

commissions have recommended a common curriculum for boys and girls, citing the need to eliminate sex role stereotyping. There is still considerable variance in practice, by state, type of school, and educational level.²¹ The desirability of co-education is even more a matter of debate. Separate girls' schools were conducive and perhaps necessary to girls' education in the past, and their number has continued to increase.²² Yet separate has not always been equal: girls' schools frequently have poorer equipment and lower academic standards than boys' schools. The most recent recommendation is for co-education at all levels of the system.²³

Illiteracy is the most serious educational problem for women, and it cannot be solved by the existing system of formal education, in which only 10% of all females are enrolled. The discrepancy between the rapidly rising rate of enrollment and the slower rate of increase in literacy²⁴ is partly due to the use of enrollment rather than attendance figures for purposes of measuring the progress of education. It is also due to the decline of literacy after leaving school and the population growth; both trends have meant an ever-increasing number of illiterates, disproportionately female. The problem is more severe with respect to older women: only 6.2% of women 15-25 years of age and 1.6% of women 25 and above are covered by the formal educational system.²⁵ Many aspects of national development—family planning, the implementation of health and welfare schemes, the achievement of equality through legislation—depend upon a literate female population. If equality is to be achieved within the existing system, more resources must be allocated to the eradication of female illiteracy.

Political progress for Indian women has been variously evaluated. True, a woman was Prime Minister, and proportionately more women hold high political and administrative positions in India than in many other nations. One analysis contends that the repeated efforts of the Congress Party to run women candidates in 15% of its electoral contests have been the major factor producing this pattern.²⁶ But this small group of female officeholders has had little impact on the conditions governing the lives of the majority of Indian women (the

²¹ *Towards Equality*, pp. 274-5.

²² *Towards Equality*, p. 258.

²³ *Towards Equality*, pp. 272-4.

²⁴ *Towards Equality*, pp. 263-5. The level of literacy for women has risen to 18.7% from 7.9% in 1951, but the level of male literacy is still double that for women. See *Women in India: A Handbook* (Research Unit on Women's Studies, Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University, Bombay, 1975), p. 30.

²⁵ *Towards Equality*, p. 264.

²⁶ Mary Katzenstein, "Towards Equality? Cause and Consequence of the Political Prominence of Women in India," *Asian Survey*, 18 (May 1978), pp. 473-86. She draws upon *Towards Equality* and Padma Desai and Jagdish N. Bhagwati, "Women in Indian Elections," in Myron Weiner and John O. Field, *Electoral Politics in the Indian States* (Delhi 1975), for much of the data.

rural poor).²⁷ Relatively few individuals have benefited from the impressive body of constitutional and legislative support for women's equality. Within the central government, women's employment gains have been promising. Particularly striking is the changing ratio of women to men recommended for appointment to (principally) the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Foreign Service—from 1:65.6 in 1960 to 1:7.6 in 1972.²⁸ But the presence of some women in political and administrative service has not altered the status of most women significantly.

Concern over the inadequacy of current political representation and participation of Indian women²⁹ has led some to advocate that seats be reserved for women in all legislative bodies. This issue was debated at length by the Committee on the Status of Women, and the majority recommended that women's panchayats be established at the village level, with reserved seats for women at the municipal level (the latter as a transitional measure). Thus the prevailing view was that of British political reformers in the late nineteenth century—that change be instituted first at the local level. Dissent within the Committee came most strongly from two members convinced that reservation of seats in all legislative bodies was essential to the amelioration of conditions for women. Reasoning that the ideology of equality of the sexes enshrined in the Constitution is very far from reality, these women called for basic constitutional changes to achieve their (minority) recommendation.³⁰ A judgment of the severity of past oppression of women, as well as of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, is implicit in their argument, accompanied by a willingness to redress it by vigorous "affirmative action."

The problems of Indian women reviewed above, primarily from the perspective of the central government, are truly awesome. Different issues of special relevance to women have attracted a wide variety of scholars; fortunately, reference guides³¹ and discussions of issues and methodology are available.³²

²⁷ Katzenstein, "Towards Equality?" and *Towards Equality*, pp. 301-2.

²⁸ *Towards Equality*, pp. 210-14. The statistics I cite appear in Table XXXVI on p. 214, while on p. 210 they are given as 1:81.6 in 1960 and 1:7.5 in 1972.

²⁹ A leader of the AIWC, formerly active in the nationalist movement, decried the declining interest of Indian women in politics and government today: see Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, "The Women's Movement—Then and Now," in Devaki Jain, ed., *Indian Women* (New Delhi, 1975), pp. 29-36. She attributed this to selfishness and government assumption of welfare functions previously undertaken by private persons and groups. In the same volume, Imtiaz Ahmed in "Women in Politics," pp. 301-12, attributed the "passive political orientation" of Indian women to sex roles and the family structure.

³⁰ *Towards Equality*, pp. 302-5; dissent by Lotika Sarkar and Vina Mazumdar, pp. 355-6.

³¹ Kalpana Dasgupta, ed., *Women on the Indian Scene* (New Delhi, 1976); *A Select Bibliography on Women in India* (Bombay: S.N.D.T. Women's University, 1976); Carol Sakala, ed., *South Asian Women: A Reference Guide* (forthcoming).

³² Hanna Papanek, "Women in South and Southeast Asia: Issues and Research," *Signs*, 1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 193-214; Andrea Menefee Singh, "The Study of Women in India: Some

Most of the work published so far explores the problems of middle- and upper-class educated, urban women. Work by non-Indians tends to provide a comparative analysis of the ways in which Indian structural or cultural features lend themselves to social change for educated women.³³ Some of the work by Indian social scientists is quite sensitive and provides an insider's view of contemporary cultural change. Rama Mehta's work is a fine example.³⁴ Manisha Roy highlights the frustrated personal expectations of her informants—educated Bengali women—in arranged marriages,³⁵ while another study shows young women aggressively choosing their own husbands, not, surprisingly, as “love marriages” but more often to escape from economic or social dilemmas.³⁶ A favorite topic is the tension between marriage and career. The literature coming out in India on role conflict among educated working women includes personal accounts which highlight the desperation and isolation of many such women.³⁷ What may impress a western academic reader as a nearly intolerable lack of understanding and aid from one's immediate family are simply the conditions under which these women live and work. The sense of individual struggle and courage is striking; so also is their inability to analyze or communicate their needs. From Rama Mehta's *Divorced Hindu Women*, one gets the same feeling of individuals being unable to communicate across sex and generational barriers, struggling alone and unassisted after marital crises.³⁸

Despite the popular preoccupation with educated working women,³⁹ little attention has been paid to the work environment, to changes in the socio-economic context and women's employment over time. Padmini Sengupta's 1960 book, *Women Workers of India*, and parts of *Towards Equality* give a real sense of the problems for women in different occupations, but they are exceptions. There is a serious lack of historical research in this area—on the “mill girls” of India, the female landless laborers and construction workers, and the

Problems in Methodology,” in Alfred de Souza, ed., *Women in Contemporary India* (Delhi, 1975), pp. 189-218.

³³ See M.R. Wood, “Employment and Family Change: A Study of Middle-Class Women in Urban Gujarat,” in de Souza, *Women in Contemporary India*, pp. 37-53.

³⁴ See her *The Western Educated Hindu Woman* (New York, 1970) and *Divorced Hindu Woman* (Delhi, 1975).

³⁵ Manisha Roy, *Bengali Women* (Chicago, 1975).

³⁶ C.G. Deshpande, *On Intercaste Marriage (An Empirical Research Work)* (Poona, 1972).

³⁷ Kala Rani, *Role Conflict in Working Women* (New Delhi, 1976), has such accounts in an appendix. Sometimes apparent misprints and misuse of language make one suspect the interviewer or publisher has made these accounts more incoherent and contradictory than they were.

³⁸ The kind of consciousness-raising support groups common in the United States among urban, middle-class working women could fill a real need here, if not perceived as threatening to the family.

³⁹ Promilla Kapur reviews her own and other studies in this area in “Studies of the Urban Woman in India,” in Giri Raj Gupta, ed., *Family and Social Change in Modern India* (New Delhi, 1976), pp. 65-102.

changes produced by industrialization and agricultural modernization.

There is no real counterpart in Indian historiography to the "new social history" being produced for other parts of the world, history which includes healthy components on women and work, women and the family, and aspects of "female culture." Unimaginative use of written textual and administrative sources still dominates. Even those using quantitative materials and genealogical methods and doing comparative, interdisciplinary work end up analyzing men, as Tom Kessinger did in his study of a North Indian village.⁴⁰ It takes a determined focus on women to escape the blinkers we wear when studying a patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal society and to discover new and significant patterns. Norma Diamond managed to do so in her study of the perseverance of traditional rural marriage practices and their hindrance of female participation in leadership positions in revolutionary China.⁴¹ Pauline Kolenda, in a recent unpublished work, has found that the women marrying into the same village in Rajasthan were not always unrelated: village wives included many pairs of sisters and other sets of closely related women.⁴² This finding should lead to reinvestigations of rural kinship structure and village politics, looking at the female inhabitants and their relationships as well as the males.

Research about women is curiously lacking in other important areas. Given the major demographic trends discussed earlier—the declining female to male sex ratio and the rate of population increase in India—one might expect considerable work on the ideology and practice of medicine with respect to women and on sexual attitudes and behavior. Such research has been crucial to contemporary work elsewhere on the history of women and the family,⁴³ and it would be immediately useful in India for the planning and implementation of health, social welfare, and birth control programs. One study of the social structuring of nutrition in South India found no evident differences by sex in patterns of undernourishment,⁴⁴ and research of

⁴⁰ Tom G. Kessinger, *Vilyatpur, 1848-1968* (Berkeley, 1974). Karen Leonard, "Women and Social Change in Modern India," *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Spring/Summer 1976), pp. 117-30, shows how quantitative measures can be used to evaluate the position of women in a given caste or community.

⁴¹ Norma Diamond, "Collectivization, Kinship, and the Status of Women in Rural China," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 7 (January-March 1975), pp. 25-32.

⁴² Pauline Kolenda, "Alliances or Linkages: A Comparison of Marriage Networks in Village Rajasthan," paper delivered at the Association for Asian Studies meeting, Chicago, 1978.

⁴³ See Martha H. Verbrugge, "Women and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs*, 1 (Summer 1976), pp. 957-72, for a review of such work, and examples of it in such collections as Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective* (New York, 1973) and Theodore Rabb and Robert Rotberg, eds., *The Family in History* (New York, 1971).

⁴⁴ Edward Montgomery, "Social Structuring of Nutrition in Southern India," in Lawrence S. Greene, ed., *Malnutrition, Behavior, and Social Organization* (New York 1977), p. 168.

comparable quality needs to be done elsewhere. One of the preliminary findings of Vatuk regarding aging women in a North Indian suburban village is that women attribute stress in their forties to the coming of daughters-in-law rather than to menopause.⁴⁵ Not enough is known about women's concepts of physiology, sexuality, and the life cycle; and efforts towards birth control have been hampered by inadequate knowledge of women's beliefs and practices in these areas.

Despite a basic reliance on legislation to bring about social change, research points more to the failure of legal measures than to their success. (The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 is one notable example.) Why advocate legislation raising the age at marriage as a means to reduction of the birth rate, when the current legal age at marriage for women is not effectively enforced?⁴⁶ With respect to the new marriage and divorce legislation, a leading legal scholar charges that it is being abused for purposes of family feuding rather than used to secure the rights of individual women. He calls for more research on marriage, dowry, and inheritance practices so that legislation, if not more effectively written, can be more effectively interpreted and applied by the judicial system.⁴⁷ Doranne Jacobson's work on women's jewelry in rural central India exemplifies the kind of investigation needed. Since jewelry is an economic resource for women, she analyzes the degrees of control women have over different types of jewelry and the ways in which women use jewelry to provide for themselves and relatives.⁴⁸ Enforcement of the Dowry Prohibition Act will have an impact on the strategies she outlines, as on other factors influencing marriage arrangements and women's status in their husbands' families about which too little is known.⁴⁹

Personal accounts often provide invaluable teaching material as well as primary data on many aspects of women's lives. Those by Chinese women come to mind, portraying intensely personal adjustments to rapidly changing social, political, and economic circumstances. But biographical materials about Indian women are disappointingly few and often of limited usefulness. Most of the earlier autobiographies, like *I Follow After* and *Himself*, are models of self-

⁴⁵ Sylvia Vatuk, "The Aging Woman in India: Self-Perceptions and Changing Roles," in de Souza, *Women in Contemporary India* pp. 37-53.

⁴⁶ Kumudini Dandekar advocates raising the age at marriage in "Age at Marriage of Women," *Economic and Political Weekly* (June 1974), pp. 867-74. Edwin Driver's data in *Differential Fertility in Central India* (Princeton, 1963), questions the effect of the higher age at marriage on fertility.

⁴⁷ J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Sociology and Family Law in India: The Problem of the Hindu Marriage," in Gupta, *Family and Social Change*, pp. 47-61.

⁴⁸ Doranne Jacobson, "Women and Jewelry in Rural India," in Gupta, *Family and Social Change*, pp. 135-83.

⁴⁹ It has been argued that the retention of dowry is desirable, since it often provides a bride with a more secure position (George Conklin, personal communication, March 1978).

effacement, but there is little of intrinsic interest about female experience in these accounts.⁵⁰ With few exceptions, more recent accounts focus on women active in politics, and these, biographies and autobiographies alike, narrate political events in an impersonal fashion. One looks in vain for the perception of self and social context so vividly conveyed by Maxine Hong Kingston in *Woman Warrior*, which gives the reader a powerful sense of this Asian-American's struggle with her Chinese heritage. There is nothing comparable to Ida Pruitt's *A Daughter of Han: the Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman*, to help us learn about peasant and working-class women's lives in India.⁵¹ Literature, folktales, and children's publications give livelier glimpses of real and mythical women than most of the personal accounts currently available in English.⁵²

Dramatic personal details, chiefly about men, abound in scattered works, from Morris Carstairs' *The Twice-Born* to Christopher Isherwood's *Ramakrishna*;⁵³ but the discovery and use of this kind of material for studies of female life experience lies ahead. The cultural account of Bengali kinship by Inden and Nicholas has exciting implications for an analysis of marriage and the life cycle for Hindu women.⁵⁴ The general discussion of love, sex, and marriage in upper-class Muslim society by Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam⁵⁵ raises any number of psychological and other questions for comparative research and reminds us how little has been done concerning women of the various religious and ethnic minorities in India.⁵⁶ Even Papanek's tentative generalization in a 1973 article about *pardah*—that Hindu women are viewed as temptresses and Muslim women as victims—has yet to be fully explored.⁵⁷

"Women in Hinduism," like "women in Islam," is a highly controversial subject, but there are a number of scholars doing exciting work in this area. Some view the centrality of goddesses and the concept of *shakti* as evidence of "women power,"⁵⁸ providing possible

⁵⁰ Laxmibai Tilak, *I Follow After: An Autobiography* (Madras, 1950); Ramabai Ranade, *Ranade: His Wife's Reminiscences* (New Delhi, 1963) (retitled in the new edition from *Himself*).

⁵¹ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York, 1977); Ida Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han* (Stanford, 1967).

⁵² Helen Ullrich shows what can be learned from folktales in her "Women in Selected Kannada Folktales," in Gupta, *Family and Social Change*, pp. 184-206. See also the publications of the Children's Book Trust in New Delhi and the Amar Chitra Katha comics.

⁵³ G. Morris Carstairs, *The Twice-Born* (Bloomington, 1970); Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (New York, 1965).

⁵⁴ Ronald B. Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago, 1977).

⁵⁵ Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Three Mughal Poets* (Cambridge, MA., 1968).

⁵⁶ An exception is Richard Schermerhorn on Anglo-Indians: "Socio-cultural History and Sex Roles in an Urban Minority of India," *Sociological Focus*, 8 (April 1975), pp. 173-81.

⁵⁷ Hanna Papanek, "Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15 (June 1973), pp. 316-7.

⁵⁸ Educational Resources Center, *A World of Difference* (New Delhi, 1977), p. 7.

role models for contemporary women. Susan Wadley seems to take this view in an otherwise excellent article. She contrasts the female power symbolized by the great goddesses and *shakti* to the subordination of Hindu women in behavioral patterns and religious ritual, following Sherry Ortner's influential "female is to male as nature is to culture" model.⁵⁹ As A.K. Ramanujan has pointed out, however, distinctions must be made between the great goddesses and consort goddesses—who worships each type, in what setting, with what materials and texts—and the great goddesses are more relevant to men.⁶⁰ Other work in this general area focusses on Aryan or Dravidian (chiefly Tamil) concepts of female sexuality, power, and social roles.⁶¹

Scholars, government officials, and political activists all contribute to current discussion in India of the problems of women. While there is little disagreement about the nature and severity of contemporary problems, there is a great deal of controversy about the origins of the problems and about future goals for women and the means to achieve them—as much of the discussion above has shown. Part of the disagreement stems from a reluctance to pronounce a definitive judgment on the system of the past—a reluctance to give up some of the myths and ideals used to defend ancient Indian civilization.⁶² The concept of the joint family, with its complementary roles for members of differing sex and age, is still defended and proposed as the basis of a modern society which accords equality to women and men.⁶³ The dominant ideological strand in both writing and organizational activity concerning women's issues in India is reformist, emphasizing the achievement of equality within the existing through legislation, education, and social welfare programs. The role of women in economic development is a minor theme; there is little advocacy of the liberation of women through participation in work outside the home and the socialization of domestic work as in developing countries committed to a socialist ideology like China and Cuba.

When Indian social reformers took up "women's issues" in the late nineteenth century, the participants were men, almost without ex-

⁵⁹ Susan Wadley, "Women and the Hindu Tradition," *Signs*, 3 (Autumn 1977), pp. 113-25; Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford, 1974).

⁶⁰ Remarks at a discussion panel on South Indian Goddesses, Association of Asian Studies meeting, San Francisco, 1975.

⁶¹ Participants in a panel on Conceptions of Woman and Power in Tamil Culture at the Association of Asian Studies meeting, Chicago, 1978, included James Lindholm, George Hart, Margaret Egnor, Sherry Daniel, and Richard Brubaker; others working in this area are Suzanne Hanchett, Wendy O'Flaherty, and Edward Harper.

⁶² See the two articles in Jain, *Indian Women*: Ashok Rudra, "Cultural and Religious Influences," pp. 39-49; and M.A. Sreenivasan, "Panchakanya—an Age-old Benediction," pp. 53-8.

⁶³ See Devaki Jain's introduction in *Indian Women*, and Tara Ali Baig, *India's Woman Power* (New Delhi, 1976). The latter offers a full comparative discussion incorporating a radical or cultural feminist viewpoint.

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ception. Now, Indian women are leading participants in the research and activities concerned with the position of women. The perspective shared by most Indian feminist scholars and activists appears closer to that dominant in the women's movement in the United States, whether it is called "reformist," "bourgeois," or "liberal feminist." Yet Indian feminists reject the idea that goals for women in India need be similar to those which they understand are being sought by feminists in the West. Throughout the India-produced writings cited above runs a strong negative view of women's liberation movements in most western industrialized nations, based on a fallacious impression that they are monolithic, anti-male, and, by producing conflict between the sexes, anti-family.

The goal which most feminists seek for women in Indian society is greater access and contributions to public resources, without changing the family system or the complementary sex roles within the family. China and Cuba, without abolishing the family as an institution, have sharply criticized its patriarchal character and the division of labor by sex in family and society.⁶⁴ The Indian government appears content to promote women's welfare and education and to remove all legal discrimination between the sexes; and the obstacles to implementing even these goals are formidable.

Clearly, scholarly research on women in India has not been limited to the immediate problems of survival and achievement of a reasonable standard of living faced by most Indian women. And it may be misleading, causing those who read the work on women without knowing much about India to underestimate the gravity of the negative economic and demographic trends. But the research, in conjunction with government and organizational activity on women's issues, has made the position of women in Indian society a matter of public concern.

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KAREN LEONARD

⁶⁴ See Marjorie King, "Cuba's Attack on Women's Second Shift 1974-1976," *Latin American Perspectives*, 4 (Winter/Spring 1977), pp. 106-19, for an excellent theoretical discussion.