

Freedom versus Protection

By Satyanarayana Dasa

Recently there was a tragic incident of gang rape in Delhi in which the victim was killed. This crime caught the attention of the entire nation. Since then much has been written about the safety, freedom and protection of women in India. In this article, I contrast the status of women in the Vedic period in India with their status in today's modern times.

In Vedic times, more importance was given to the protection of women than to their freedom. Freedom existed mainly within the folds of *dharma*, and the autonomy of women was dependent on their status, class and education.

Indian scriptures laid down many rules to protect women. A famous verse of *Manu Smriti* (9.3) advises that a woman should not be given independence, but should be protected in her youth by her father, later by her husband, and in old age by her son. This verse has been the object of discussion and criticism by feminists. Usually it is seen as an injunction for men to oppress women. However, when seen in its proper context, it's clear that the intention of Manu is not to oppress women, but to protect them.

Today the concept of protecting women has often been misunderstood. Women's rights movements all over the world strive for women's independence. Consequently, they interpret any form of restriction on women's activities as ways to curb their freedom.

However, where Vedic injunctions appear to restrict women or make separate arrangements for them, it is not to discriminate against them, but to protect them from exploitation and to ensure their rights. In fact, the Vedic injunctions provided protection to everyone who needed it: women, children, the aged and even the cows, as everyone is subject to exploitation, albeit in different ways. The verse of Manu (9.3) is often misread to mean that women should not be given independence. But, when translated properly, it means that women are unable to protect themselves if left independent. If we see the number of women who are molested and exploited all over the world, we may appreciate Manu's wisdom.

For Ladies Only

Rules and arrangements to protect women are made in present times also. Most of the trains in India have a Ladies Compartment reserved exclusively for women which allows them to travel comfortably without the risk of being hassled by men. In Delhi, metro trains have

separate women's compartments with guards to prevent men from entering, and there are special public buses for women only. The Delhi government is also protecting female employees by requiring employers to provide either dormitory facilities or transport home when they work after 7pm. Such measures are intended to provide protection for women, although they can also be seen as restricting their freedom.

In New York City, as early as the beginning of the 20th century, it was not acceptable for single women to rent an apartment on their own. There were, however, several residences for women in different areas of the city, including the famous Webster Apartments. Even today, the Webster Apartments serve as an oasis for women in midtown Manhattan, by providing safe and comfortable housing to women from all over the world who work, study or intern there.

The purpose behind these provisions in modern society and in Manu's texts is the same: to protect women. It is not to restrict their freedom.

Contextual Rules

Smṛti texts are written for a specific period in time and a particular public. If Manu had lived today, he would surely have made different rules. Seeing the Indian girls of today who have exchanged their saris for jeans and T-shirts and who race by on their motorbikes with their hair freely blowing in the wind, one may wonder how Manu would write the *Manu-Smṛti* today. His concern would still be the protection of women, because he knew its importance for the stability and peace of society.

By taking on today's gender-free fashion from the West and with it the new-found "freedom" it symbolizes, the feminine characteristics of India's women are bound to change more and more. Many are out to prove their value outside the home by doing better than men, and many are succeeding. Moreover, they are challenging what for generations has been accepted as male behavior. Women, in India and all over the world, are increasingly discovering their new identity and its power, and are reveling in it. These assured women know what they want and feel that achieving this success will free them from their dependence on men.

But what does "women's freedom" actually mean? Are women *really* independent? By gaining the freedom to compete equally with men, do women no longer need protection? Or does that independence mean that women accept the responsibility for their own safety? Seeing the world-wide rate of increasing violence against women, one wonders if it is actually possible that women's freedom and protection co-exist.

The Concept of Freedom

The divergence between freedom and protection makes us question whether the modern women of today actually have more freedom than their ancient sisters. Freedom is a relative

concept. The freedom to choose a life-partner had a different meaning back then. For women like Draupadī, who chose her husbands at a *svayamvara*, freedom of choice was based on *dharma*, on higher principles of life. Today, however, most choices are influenced by superficial factors, such as what or who gives the most pleasure. Consequently, what we consider to be our choices about what is best for our lives, is ultimately determined more by what we enjoy or not enjoy than by our intelligence. The result of this is evidenced by the short-term and often unfulfilling relationships in today's societies.

This raises further questions. Has woman's freedom created its own predicaments? Are women trapped by the consequences of their own freedom? Has this freedom set women free or created yet another bondage in the form of a more hidden expedient? Is it actually possible for women to be free when they are living within an environment of fear and exploitation?

Freedom entails both great responsibility as well as the possibility of unrestrained licentiousness. To use freedom for self-indulgence without any kind of boundary or self-moderation is the freedom of self-destruction. Taking this into consideration, it would be better to restate these questions: "How well does the present day freedom serve the genuine and essential worth of the feminine?" Today, women have the freedom to choose different partners and divorce at will, but does that give them happiness? Does it give them love? What is the use of freedom without love?

Comparing the lives of women of the past and today, we can see how ultimately their bondage has only changed its appearance. Traditional women were bound by hundreds of rules and regulations, while today women are bound by the consequences of their freedom, their manifold desires to do whatever they want to or be whoever they want.

The Price of Freedom

Degradation of women is the price they pay for their freedom. This freedom may create the impression that these women are sexually available, and it teaches men to see and treat women as ephemeral play objects only.

Despite the freedom that some women claim is their right, we cannot deny the concomitant and increasing misogynistic trend of today. The degradation of women has become so acceptable that it now continues unabated without question or protest. All the different modes of communication have become portals to the most explicit pornography that maligns women as sex objects. A new breed of coarse men is no longer able to recognize or appreciate the finer qualities in the character of women. Such men have made themselves incapable of benefiting from the special quality of women that the Vedic texts recognized and honored, to restore and uphold masculine self-esteem.

Woman, the First Guru

Vedic culture was well aware of how the power of feminine purity enhances and influences masculine self-esteem. For example, freedom fighter Swami Shraddhananda (1856–1926) once told how his mother's tolerance and self-sacrifice changed her drunkard husband.

Swami Shraddhananda's father, Lala Nanak Chand, was a police officer in Kanpur. His wife, Shiv Devi, being very devoted to her husband, observed the rule not to eat before everyone else in the family had eaten. One time, Lala Nanak attended a party and became so drunk that he could hardly walk. When he arrived home, he vomited and lost consciousness.

His wife gave him yoghurt and lemon water, bathed him, changed his clothes, fanned him and gave him a head massage. Finally, in the early morning, he awoke and realized the good care he was receiving from his wife. When he asked her if she had eaten, the wife shook her head and said, "I have never eaten before you finish your meal." In that moment, her husband realised his mistake and stopped drinking for good.

Such examples are no exception in India. The wife would not eat until her husband came home. She would wait for him, serve him affectionately and only then have something to eat herself.

Such real life stories demonstrate why more importance was given to the character and integrity of women than of men. A woman's personality influences both her husband and children. Everyone comes to this world through a woman and is then brought up by her. Vedic culture therefore proclaimed women to be the first gurus and honored the position of women and motherhood as the foundation of society. Keeping this fact in mind, Manu, the first law-giver for Hindus, was very much concerned with protecting women from degradation at the hands of men. So, what may not be appreciated now by modern women, actually has a deep wisdom within.