

Role of Women in India's Interaction with China, Central and West Asia

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ABSTRACT Gender difference is the result of biological differences which further leads to behavioral differences. Since time immemorial, women has been as important as man yet she has often been looked down upon as inferior with no entity of her own. This article traces the high status of women in various societies such as India, China, parts of Central and West Asia. It further seeks to highlight the changes in position of women and its influence on various cultures in the neighbourhood of India as a result of interaction and cultural contact.

As some biological differences exist between men and women, it may seem reasonable to assume that biological differences are responsible for behavioral differences. Yet, sociologists do not make this assumption. Rather, sociologists generally argue that differences in behavior between males and females are largely learned through social interaction. The term gender is used to refer to behavioral differences between males and females that are culturally based and socially learned. Cultures differ widely in their norms and values regarding gender roles, the normative expectations concerning appropriately masculine or feminine behavior in a particular culture. In all cultures, males are typically expected to behave in certain ways: females in other ways. Men are traditionally expected to behave in masculine ways that are aggressive, competitive, dominant and independent. These behaviors are supposed to go hand in hand with thinking that is logical, unemotional and factual. Women traditionally have been seen as embodying feminine traits that are the mirror opposites of their masculine counterparts. Traditionally, feminine behavior includes passivity, cooperativeness, subordination and dependence. Women are conventionally expected to be emotional rather than logical, feeling rather than factual. There are

strong pressures for conformity to conventional gender identities in all cultures. (Applebaum and Chambliss, 1995)

In the long, long history of humanity and development, in the propagation of the human race and in the social economy of the world, woman has been as important a factor as man, yet she was always looked down upon as an inferior creature until an orphan in the desert of Arabia issued the Divine injunction — "the Wombs (Women)". The very word "woman" (old English *wifmann*), etymologically meaning a wife (or the wife division of the human race, the female of the species *Homo*), sums up, "says the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*", "a long history of dependence and subordination" (Kidwai, 1976).

God created Adam and Eve as equal but down the ages, women have been downtrodden and relegated to an inferior position in the social set-up. This is true not only of developing countries like India but of developed countries as well. Historical evidence of the status of women in various countries, however, reveals variations. In the ancient civilizations developed in the fertile river valleys of the Nile and of Asia Minor women were worshipped as Mother Goddesses. In Babylonia and Egypt, women enjoyed considerable independence and high status. However, in Athens, women's status degenerated to that of childbearing slaves. (Sinha, 1993). By old Athenians woman was treated only as a property that was marketable and could be transferred from one to the other. She could also be willed away. Woman was considered to be a kind of evil. Even at the highest stage of Grecian civilization, no other class of women except the prostitute was the subject of any regard. An Athenian was allowed to have any number of wives (Kidwai, 1976)

In contrast to Athens, women in militarist Sparta enjoyed near equality with men and had a voice in politics and public affairs. (Sinha, 1993).

However, Kidwai, 1976 points out that in Sparta female infants and such women who could not be expected to give birth to healthy sons were often destroyed, and the result of it was that the proportion of women in the population was reduced and one woman had several husbands. The loan of the wife of one man to another to get a good breed was also permitted. In Persia, a country so near to that from which woman got her magna charta of liberty and secured a position of honour and respect, men were notoriously voluptuous, and to them woman was nothing more than an object to gratify their base passions. Every wealthy man kept crowds of females in his house, and in the sixth century of the Christian era Mazdak laid down a law that woman should be treated exactly like any other property. He announced himself as a reformer of Zoroastrianism, and carried the doctrine of duality (the two opposite principles) to a much greater height. He taught the absolute indifference of human action, perfect equality of rank, community of property and women, and marriage between the nearest kindred. To the Persians, their religion itself offered a premium on the multiplicity of wives and concubines.

In ancient Rome, a woman's legal position was one of complete subordination; first to the power of her father or brother, and later to that of her husband. At certain stages of the Roman law, a husband was given a right to kill his wife if she was found to have poisoned somebody, or treated somebody with wine, or adopted as her own child somebody else's child.

During the days of early Christianity, women were treated as second class human beings and excluded from public affairs. In the later Middle Ages, however, the Church helped the cause of women by providing shelter, occupation and a dignified existence in nunneries to many women. During the Renaissance in Europe, the status of women received an impetus and there were many brilliant intellectual women in this period, specially in France and Italy. (Sinha, 1993).

The wise men of China have offered free

advice for the benefit of husbands in these words: "Listen to the counsel of your wife, but act against it." The old men of Russia have said that, "There is only one soul among ten women." The Spaniards say, "We shall save ourselves from wicked women, and should never be captivated by any that have good looks." The Italians go a step farther and pronounce, "As a horse, whether good or bad, requires spurs, so a woman whether good or bad, requires thrashing" (Kidwai, 1976).

The Arabs buried alive their daughters. It was considered to be an inauspicious omen if a girl was born to anybody. A woman after the death of her husband, was treated just like another property, and her own son inherited her as a wife. Innocent girls were offered as a sacrifice to the idols. Orphan girls were forced to marry their guardians. It has been said, on the authority of Arab chroniclers, that the pagan Arabs had long practiced the inhuman custom of burying their daughters alive lest they should be reduced to poverty by providing for them, or else to avoid the disgrace which would follow if they should happen to be made captives, or to become scandalous by their behaviour. So the birth of a daughter was considered to be a great misfortune, and the death of one as great a happiness.

In Indian society, women enjoyed a high status during Vedic times. The idea of all-encompassing motherhood as the highest principle was firmly accepted in Vedic times, transmitted to all later periods and has throughout all ages formed the basis of the exceptional degree of reverence paid in India to the Mother. Vedas speak of a life of freedom and strength lived by men and women as equal partners in a great task of home and nation building. In the period that followed the great Vedic days, under the growing influence and ascendancy of the priests, society lost its homogeneity and religion lost its spontaneous quality of genuine worship. The Brahmin became the acknowledged guardian of all things spiritual, and claimed and obtained supreme honour from all the lower castes. The Brahmins realized that their greatest rival in influence and spiritual power was woman, especially so long as she still remained surrounded by that double halo—the mystery of her own life-bearing sex, and this enhanced and sanctified by the ancient worship of the female aspect of deity.

There could be no uncontested or secure supremacy for Brahmins until woman lost her high estate, stood degraded and branded as an inferior being in the eyes of men, and was moulded into a mindless slave to religious dictation. The first step towards achieving this was to inculcate into the minds of fathers and husbands doubts and fears as to the wisdom of continuing to initiate women into the religious mysteries and the doctrines of philosophy. So began the slow, persistent and at-last completely successful effort of the priests to wrest from woman her religious and cultural rights, her social and domestic equality and power. (Das, 1979)

Hindu laws and customs were extremely unfavorable to woman. Manu was the famous lawgiver. Manu's original Dharma Sutra is lost but a later compilation was made. It is Manu's code that has had the most negative effects, forging unbreakable shackles on Indian women for countless succeeding generations. Manu for the first time legally assigned to woman her definite place in the scale of society. But his laws reflect a conflict even within him self between his valuation of woman as a spiritual entity on the one side, and as a unit in society on the other. He averred that a mother is more to be revered than a thousand fathers, yet his laws place woman socially on a level with the lowest of all groups in Aryan Society - the Sudra. Manu says, "Day and night must women be held by their protectors in a status of subjection," that the woman is under the subjection of her father when a child, when married under that of her husband, after her husband under her sons, and if she has no sons then to her agnatic relations, because there is no woman whatsoever who is fit to be independent. He further says, "Women love their beds and ornaments and have loose desires. They have a bad temper, are frail, irresolute, and never straight. They should always be kept under subjection and control. "That of ill-luck, storm, death, hell, prison, snake, nothing is so dreadful as woman. (Kidwai, 1976).

After some time, life-interest in the property was given to women under the name of stridhan but because the custom of suttee came into practice the right was of no practical value. Historical information reveals that with the ad-

vent of foreign rule in India- Muslims, and Mughals- the women were forced to be confined to the four walls of their house and were even denied education. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and others tried to uplift the status of women in India. During the British rule certain legislations were made which uplifted the status of women in India. The general perception has been that there has been a strong influence of western culture on Indian tradition.

The mode of the western cultural import on the Indian tradition had distinctive features, in historical as well as substantive terms. Historically, the distinctive element was in its gradual expansion through succession and replacement of various forms of western traditions differing in political and cultural orientation and influence. The earliest (fifteenth and sixteenth century) contact, of which sociological consequences were marginal, was with the Portuguese. In orientation, their impact was proselytizing and predatory and brought with them pre-modern values and religious prejudices. They were followed by the Dutch and the French in the 17th and 18th century. Neither the Dutch nor the French had christianization as their main objective. The Dutch were mainly interested in commerce. The French had political goals, but their influence was marginal. Only the British finally emerged as a dominant power in India. The western impact on the Indian culture has, therefore, been primarily of the British. (Singh, 1973).

There is historical evidence to show that there has been a greater degree of interaction between Indian culture and the neighbouring countries like China, Iran, and other parts of central and west Asia than between India and the west. This article examines the role of women in India's interaction with China Central and West Asia.

Riencourt (1989) has made the following observations on interaction of Indian and Chinese culture with respect to role of women:

In contrast with the mighty struggle that took place between the male and female elements in the bosom of Graeco-Roman culture and finally tore out the guts of the Roman Empire's civilization, Indian and Chinese cultures display a remarkable equilibrium between the two sexual

entities. These countries remained patriarchal as far as their socio-economic structures were concerned, but their cultural values were such that the feminine principle received its due recognition in the male-female partnership. Values are what human beings live by, and the value-system of any given culture determines the sense of fulfillment and degree of happiness of its members.

It is therefore not surprising that no record exists of any massive discontent of the female element in either India or China. These cultures never included anything like the Greek overestimation of mental creativity at the expense of the creation of life itself; there never was the devaluation of the female's procreative function which finally induced Roman women, victims of this cultural distortion, to attempt to ape men instead of assuming with pride and dignity their physiological being.

The Eastern civilization's roots are sunk deep in a profound metaphysical cleavage that began to separate East from West thousands of years before Christ. Creeds and myths antecedent to the Axial period give us the main clue. The first noteworthy but sharp separation appears to have taken place somewhere around 2350 B.C. in Sumer when the respective spheres of man and the higher divinity began to split away from one another; the king is no longer god but the priest of the divinity. He no longer has to identify himself with the deity. The religious problem is no longer identification but relationship, and the first shadowy contours of the eventual separation between object and subject appear in terms of an I-thou relationship. Already, according to the early Sumerians, man was created for the pleasure of the gods, and in no way does he partake in their essential Being; man does not participate in the divine essence - he is merely human. The Sumerian king is no longer the incarnation of the deity but his devoted servant.

This sharp separation triggered a yearning for the re-establishment of the broken connection between the human and divine spheres, by one means or another, a yearning that counteracted and undermined the cyclical lunar-vegetal outlook that had prevailed until then. The end result of this evolution was that, in place of the cyclical view, a new religious outlook focused

on historical development in linear fashion, with a temporal direction and without any possibility of recurrence; masculine tension replaced feminine rhythm. Man began to understand the cosmic process as a progressive and directional development with a once-for-all creation, followed by a Fall and struggle to overcome the Fall and reach Redemption. The world became the battlefield of a mighty struggle between the powers of good and evil, light and darkness—here again, an essentially masculine and warlike concept of hymn destiny.

All this was foreign to the concepts of the East, where the cyclical view, either historical (China) or trans-historical (India), prevailed. There is no mighty historical struggle between the spirits of good and evil, light and darkness. In fact, man's problem is not to establish a relationship with divine, but to recognize and realize his true identity with divine, to search for and bring out his inner divinity by peeling off the veils of illusion, *maya*. Since the separation between man and the divine is only apparent, a result of the interposition of *maya*, the problem is, by personal striving, to eliminate the mere appearance and rediscover this fundamental identity. In Indian culture, there were no theological problems, only psychological ones.

In turn, this springs from the fact that the East never separated the objective and subjective spheres as sharply as the West: the umbilical cord joining them was not really severed; the subject kept its pre-eminence and its emotional link and closeness with the non-subject surrounding it or underlying it—the world of nature, the multifarious gods and goddesses, and life in general in all its manifestations. This closeness and retention of the umbilical cord implied that, in the East, there was no such sharp severance between conscious and unconscious as took place in the West; contents of the unconscious kept on projecting themselves in the outer world and filling it with symbols. As a result, Easterners were less individualized than Westerners, linked as they were, not only by the exchange of rational thoughts and concepts, but also by openly sharing the common symbolism of their collective unconscious, unrepressed and unfrustrated—which, in the West, occurred only within a strictly disciplined religious framework.

This is why Westerners were and are impressed by the unparalleled calm and serenity that pervades so much of traditional Eastern art and religious symbolism—calm and serenity that the Westerner lacks, swinging constantly as he does between his effort to identify and overpower the autonomous object, and the correlated need to submit to it. The Easterner neutralizes this anxiety and avoids the struggle by focusing on his subjectiveness and on the denial of the object as ultimately separate; this separation is deemed to be essentially unreal, and the object's only apparent reality resides in its being a mental or emotional projection of the sovereign subject.

The unquestionably masculine character of Western religions in contrast to those of the East springs basically from the full acceptance in the West of an objective reality that, in the East, is viewed fundamentally as an illusion: the absolute dissociation of every individual human being from every other, and the equally absolute dissociation of all human beings from the higher divinity. There was in the West (until the advent of psychoanalysis) no conscious problem of identification, of rediscovering one's deeper, divine self; the Western problem was how to relate to divine powers outside oneself, and how to develop one's ego in the process. In the East the problem was how to extinguish the ego, an essential steps on the way to the discovery of one's fundamental identity with the unindividualized divinity within the self. This has striking consequences in terms of the relations between masculine and feminine principles.

According to Indian mythology, the birth of sexual differentiation came about as follows:
...This universe was nothing but the Self in the form of a man

...who still lacked delight ... and desired a second. He was exactly as large as a man and a woman embracing. This Self then divided itself in two parts....The male embraced the female, and from that the human race arose...(Reincourt, 1989: 163).

While the predominance of the masculine principle in what is basically an androgynous Self is here affirmed — a psychological consequence of the supremacy of the patriarchal Aryan invader — the metaphysical conclusions reached are quite different from those that obtained in

the West where the separation between God and His creation remained sharply in evidence. In Indian lore, after pursuing the female who wondered, "How can he unite with me, who am produced from himself?" and transmuted herself successively into all the female animals of creation, the male exclaimed: "I, actually, am creation; for I have poured forth all this" (Reincourt, 1989: 163).

Man, therefore, is the sole creator, but since he is also divinity, this creation stands between him and his divine self. Creation itself is a Fall, whereas in the biblical account, the Fall occurs after the Creation. The biblical Fall is presumed to be a historical event and Redemption is a historical process. The Indian Fall is a metaphysical and trans-historical event, occurring endlessly along with the continuous creation of new life, and redemption is a personal, individual affair completely divorced from history. So, while male predominance is affirmed equally in both myths, the Indian message compromises with the feminine outlook by negating the historical event and placing it on the plane of cyclical timelessness. The biblical one, on the contrary, is uncompromisingly masculine in its affirmation of the irreversible historical process and its ethical tension.

Eastern and Western mythologies diverge in a fundamental sense, the East making far more concessions to the instinctive feminine apprehension of timeless reality, of sheer Being, than the West in its concentration on Doing and Becoming.

The prehistoric roots of Indian culture are barely visible in the archaeological remains of the great civilization of Harappa and Mohenjodaro—the vastest political experiment before the advent of the "Roman Empire," according to Sir Mortimer Wheeler. (Reincourt, 1989: 164). A noteworthy feature of its religious outlook was the cult of the Great Mother which the patriarchal Aryan invaders scorned and discarded. But this cult never really died out. Even today it survives in the Indian countryside, where the Great Mother, known as *gramadevata*, is worshipped in rustic shrines and temples shaped like female genitalia — and its priests, significantly, are not Brahmins but Untouchables who could probably trace their lineage back to the pre-Aryan

Dravidian stock of the Harappa civilization. The little statues portraying the Great Mother are close cousins of the female clay figurines found in Baluchistan and Mohenjo-daro, or the bas-reliefs of Harappa depicting the Earth Goddess with a plant sprouting from her womb. The worship of the divine matris (mothers) is widespread throughout India, each village having its own special guardian mother. The reason for this extraordinary predominance of the female principle and the virtual eclipse of male gods at this elementary level is that. She is held to have a thoroughly feminine nature. She is more easily propitiated by prayer, flattery, and offerings, more ready to defend from evil, more irritable, uncertain, and wayward in her temper and moods, more dangerously spiteful, and prone to inflict diseases, if offended by neglect. (Reincourt, 1989: 164).

The Great Mother survived all the assaults and invasions of patriarchal warriors; she survived in India despite the Vedic Aryans, and as the multiform Kali lived on to be worshipped by the greatest Indian saint of the nineteenth century:

When there was neither the creation, nor the sun, the moon, the planets, and the earth, and when darkness was enveloped in Darkness, then the Mother, the Formless One, Maha-Kali, the great Power, was one with Maha-Kala, the Absolute. So claimed Ramakrishna. (Reincourt, 1989: 165).

With the coming of the Indo-Europeans, the Great Mother temporarily faded into the background. Masculine willpower and drive eclipsed the female-oriented outlook based on a cyclical rhythmic order ruling with a nature-imposed determinism against which man's puny will is powerless, an outlook according to which the rhythm of the Great Mother's universal womb regulated inexorably the life-death-rebirth cycle. There is no need to go through the complex, dreamlike metamorphosis of the Vedic pantheon to see the struggle between the invading Aryan male principle and the stubbornly resisting female principle in the process of being overcome; they soon came to terms.

From the start, the Vedic pantheon made room for the two sexual principles—male Heaven (Dyaus) and female Earth (Prithivi),

from whose union the entire universe, animate and inanimate, proceeds. True enough, the female principle was devalued in this early stage of Aryan settlement in India: the wives of male deities such as Indra and Agni are not associated with their spouses and are not worshipped along with them; the extremely popular Lakshmi, later on wife of Visnu, is not even mentioned in the Rg-veda; Sarasvati is not yet the consort of Brahma. It is only much later, when Indian culture went through its "Renaissance" phase—presumably by incorporating submerged elements of the Harappa civilization—that the female principle began its slow ascent toward full recognition. It is in the Brahmanas and the Upanisads that the sexual duality of the higher Divinity is accepted for the first time.

As Brahmanism turned into Hinduism after undergoing the Buddhist revolution, the metaphysical concept of sexual duality became more sophisticated. According to Vedanta, the separate existence of the eternal masculine Spirit or Self (atman) and of the equally eternal feminine productive force or prolific entity known as illusion (maya) are both recognized as dialectical counterparts. The more abstract minded Samkhya school of philosophy also recognizes the eternal existence of the two sexual principles—male spirit Purusa and female matter Prakrti—whose union is necessary before any creation can arise. Later mythology symbolized the perfect union of the two principles in the Ardha-nari, the androgynous form of the god Siva whose right side is male and left female. But usually the two sexes remained distinct, symbolized in countless bas-reliefs on Indian temples by the male and female symbolic trademarks, the linga and the yoni.

It was reserved to the Tantras to give absolute pre-eminence to the female principle and teach adoration of the wives of Siva and Visnu to the exclusion of their male consorts. The main characteristic of Tantrism was, fittingly enough, a typically female anti-ascetic and anti-intellectual attitude, along with contempt for meditation: liberation is effected, Dionysiac-like, by the full enjoyment of the carnal possibilities of a healthy body. More especially, the followers of what became known as the "left-hand path" (Vama-margis) worshipped exclusively the

divine wives, Durga and Radha, it is significant that Tantrism bloomed essentially in peripheral areas (Bengal, Assam, and southern India) that had been only slightly Hinduized and where the Dravidian influence of the former Great Mother was still immensely strong.

All the female deities were subsumed under the one great heading of Amba or Devi, the great Power (Sakti) of nature, the Great Mother of the Universe (Jagan-mata), the mysterious and mighty power that directs and controls two different operations: "first, the working of the natural appetites and passions, whether for the support of the body by eating and drinking, or for the propagation of living organisms through sexual cohabitation; secondly, the acquisition of supernatural faculties (siddhi)...." (Reincourt, 1989: 166). Such worship of the female principle could not remain confined to the realm of religion and metaphysics; inevitably, it trickled down into the world of social relations. In the Sakta creed, for instance, every female is conceived of as an actual divinity. Here we not only have a rebirth of the Great Mother of pre-Aryan times, along with wonder and awe at the mystery of feminine generative power and its connection with nature's fertility, but we have the feminine principle as such assimilated into the incomprehensible essence of ultimate spiritual reality, the quintessence of pure Being. The male deities of the Vedic pantheon are shunted aside and the primordial instincts reassert themselves, blindly unintellectual, in full retreat from the world-negating mood of the male philosophers of the Vedanta. From the "Apollonian" attitude of Vedanta, the Tantric devotee travels all the way to the female-oriented "Dionysiac" acceptance of life with its joys and sorrows, with its refusal to escape from the coils of a now venerated materialistic Prakrti. The result of this unbridled worship of the female principle was also a remarkable evaporation of all strict moral sense, giving rise to innumerable monstrosities. All the Dionysiac excesses of the Tantric cults can be traced to it. Among all the goddesses worshipped, the one that stands out is the fearful Durga who, under her Bengali incarnation as Kali, venerated by the gentle, saintly Ramakrishna, became also the main inspirer of the greatest criminal conspiracy in history—the

thugs (thagi), the robber-stranglers who performed their monstrous deeds without a qualm, feeling that they were proper tributes to Kali.

It is significant that worship of the female principle in its beneficial aspects was widespread. In the Tantrasara, the following hymn to the Great Goddess in her role as "Ruler of the World," Bhuvanesvari, proves conclusively that she survived quite well the early invasions and the Vedic ordeal:

O Mother! Cause and Mother of the World!
Thou art the One Primordial Being,
Mother of innumerable creatures,
Creatrix of the very gods: even of Brahma the Creator,

Visnu the Preserver, and Siva the Destroyer!
O Mother, in hymning thy praise I purify my speech."

The masculine imprint, however, remained strong in the early phase of Indian culture's development, right through to Buddha and beyond. The early ascetics distrusted, as they always have throughout the ages and in every land, sex, and hence, woman. The Buddha is reported to have stated that the admission of women to the order would seriously shorten the life span of the Buddhist religion. His overall view of women comes out clearly in the following deathbed conversation with his favourite pupil, Ananda, who inquired:

How are we to conduct ourselves, Lord, with regard to women?

Do not see them, Ananda!

But if we should see them, what are we to do?

Abstain from speech.

But if they speak to us, Lord, what are we to do?

Keep wide awake, Ananda!

Ananda is reported as always speaking up, respectfully, in favour of women. But the Buddha would not be mollified; he once told him:

Women are soon angered, Ananda; women are full of passion,

Ananda; women are envious, Ananda; women are stupid, Ananda. That is the reason, Ananda, that the cause, why women have no place in public assemblies, do not carry on business, and do not earn their living by any profession (Reincourt, 1989: 167)

With that, one would have thought that women would have shunned such a religious leader. Quite the contrary; they literally flocked to his banner. Reluctantly, he allowed them to become Sisters, establish convents, and join the Order. They remained technically inferior in status to the male brethren, but having escaped from the drudgery of domestic life and "having abandoned a woman's thoughts and cultivated the thoughts of a man," the Sister obtained from her brethren full recognition as a rational being, a human being rather than a woman. The Psalms make her sing:

Am I a woman in such matters, or
Am I a man? or what am I then?
How should the woman's nature hinder us?
Speak not to me of delighting in aught of
sensuous pleasures!

Verily all such vanities now no more may
delight me (Reincourt, 1989: 168).

The Jains took an equally poor view of women: "As deceitfulness is natural to women, so are standing, sitting down, roaming about, and teaching the law, natural to sages." The Yoga discipline distrusted the female power with words, since all yogic schools emphasized direct experience and nonverbal realization. A holy text states emphatically:

It is always the mark of a weak, feminine nature to endeavor to establish one's superiority on the issue of a verbal quarrel, whereas it is the sign of a man to desire to conquer the world by the strength of one's own arms. (Reincourt, 1989: 168).

Since, viewed from the highest metaphysical level, man and woman are not autonomous personalities in the Western sense of the word, endowed with eternally individual souls and free will, the Indian problem was rather to deal with the interplay between the two sexual principles, not male and female as such, but maleness and femaleness—both being an outcome of maya, illusory deceit. The individual, male or female, is fundamentally without personality or character in terms of timeless Reality, a misguided, blind slice of timeless Divinity, temporarily trapped in the coils of time and space. Some Indian schools of thought, focusing on asceticism, frowned on the feminine principle as an agent of corruption; others, especially the Tantric,

viewed women and sexual congress, as well as intoxicating beverages, as being the 'boons that remove all sin.' (Reincourt, 1989: 168). But woman, here, is viewed as an agent of purification rather than an element requiring spiritual realization in her own right. The poet Jayadeva and the Tantric Sakti sects centred their symbolism on the female principle and its feminine human incarnation: others around the male principle. There were cults and worships for all tastes, as befits the most catholic culture in the world.

But Saktism, in particular, deserves a special mention. It was essentially the worship of power in the shape of a goddess, herself the outcome of the strange nature of the sexless Supreme Being—a self-existent being whose abstract Spirit is Life "without anything to live for, Thought without anything to think about, Joy without anything to be joyful about." (Reincourt, 1989: 169). As soon as this Supreme being becomes conscious of existence, he becomes a personal God, and, automatically, a bisexual one, partly male, partly female (the left side being the female one). The reason for the pre-eminence of the female side of the androgyny is due to the fact that the male side of the god was believed to relegate all his more onerous and troublesome executive functions to his female counterpart. And hence it has come to pass that the female side of the personal god is often more honoured and propitiated than the male. (Reincourt, 1989: 169).

In absolute terms, however, the virtual equality of the two sexual principles was firmly established, as it never was in the West. This was both the cause and the consequence of the fact that, unlike the Greek philosophers, Indian thinkers never attempted to destroy their traditional mythologies never cut themselves off from their anima. Distrusting from the start both the limitations of words and linguistic terminology (nāman) and the external world of perceived forms (rūpa), all Indian schools of thought were unanimous in their conviction that the ultimate goal of thought lies well beyond the world of nama-rupa. This was in complete contrast with the essentially masculine Greek approach, according to which thought should focus on objective reality, the object of thought being

sharply separated from the thinking subject. Pre-Socratic thinkers used the logic of the emerging sciences—astronomy, mathematics, physics—to attempt to depict objective reality, and in the process destroyed their venerable mythology. The Greeks cut off feeling from thinking; the Indians retained the close integration. As a result, Western philosophies progress from thought to thought, from one abstraction to the other, analyzing, deducing, inducing, differentiating, integrating. Indian philosophers progress from one subjective condition to another, from one mode of being to a higher mode of being. Westerners want to know; Indians want to be, to change the form of their consciousness. In terms of Indian culture, religion implies a personal awareness of Ultimate Reality, not an intellectual theory about it. Under those circumstances, mythological symbolism can be as useful as logical, discursive forms of thought. (Reincourt, 1989: 169).

This retention of the close working connection between masculine thinking and feminine feeling and intuition reflected the important advice given in the Bhagavad Gita: "Let him note that knoweth much awaken doubt in slower men of lesser wit." Intellectual knowledge should be calibrated to the specific form and degree of intelligence of the individual. The need for this calibration, implying a working connection between anima and animus, feminine mythology and masculine rationalism, must have been in the minds of the Athenian authorities when they banished Anaxagoras in the middle of the fifth century B.C. for teaching that the sun was not the sun god Helios but a physical ball of fire. Socrates had to drink his cup of hemlock because he was accused of lack of faith in the tutelary deities of Athens. And yet, eventually their gods and mythologies collapsed. No such thing ever happened in India: the all-important feminine component of Indian culture would not allow it; the typically analytical, dissociating, critical faculty of the masculine mind was kept in check.

Thousands of miles to the north and east of India's Himalayan boundary, another great culture emerged at about the same time in what is now northeast China. The overthrow of the female-oriented Shang realm by the patriarchal Chou accomplished, perhaps less dramatically,

a revolution similar to the destruction of the Harappa civilization by the Aryans. Long after this changeover, it was in China as it was, almost simultaneously, in Periclean Athens. According to tradition, Chuang Chou stated that there had been a time when men and women "knew their mothers but not their fathers." The ideogram for a man's family name was and still is formed from the radical for "woman." In fact, the expression for wife means "equal" (Reincourt, 1989: 170).

As far as one can judge, the patriarchal revolution coincided with the establishment of the Chou feudal system, which began to devalue systematically the social and economic status of women. This degradation proceeded in conjunction with a remarkable cultural development that culminated with Confucius—by which time the power of the father or male head of a clan had become almost absolute. While families and clans owned their land and property in common, the male patriarch had complete authority. In those days, the Chinese paterfamilias could even sell his wife or children into servitude and had power of life and death over them; he ate his meals alone, confined females to separate quarters in his house; the women had only rare social contacts with men other than their relatives. Baby boys and girls were introduced quite differently into the world. According to an old book of legendary songs of the first millennium B.C., the Shih King,

Then a boy is born,
Put to lie on a bed,
Robed in a gown
With jade tablets to finger.
And lusty he wails
But one day in red knee-caps shall he walk
Lord or prince, sprung from this house!
Then a girl shall be born,
Put to lie on the floor,
Robed in rags,
With a roof-tile to finger.
No bad thing shall she do,
Nor good thing either.
Enough if she can carry
Wine and plates of food
And give not trouble,
To her father and mother (Reincourt, 1989:

171).

No wonder that social and political life was, as in Periclean Athens, almost completely and exclusively male.

Chinese women were honoured and respected as mothers and mothers-in-law, rather than as wives. However, the fact is that wherever and whenever family ties are as strong as they were in China, woman's role remains primordial, whatever her apparent subordination. The critical point here is that it was not so much the husband as the mother-in-law who had power and authority over the wife. Most of the time, the husband was in no position to protect his wife against his own mother. It was woman against woman rather than a conflict between the sexes, a conflict of generations within the same sex—invariably settled in favour of the older one. Behind a patriarchal facade, partly aimed at assuaging male vanity, a real matriarchy was in operation for the benefit of the older generation of women. As in India, and elsewhere in Asia where the concept of "society", in the abstract was extremely vague, as vague in fact as the feeling of "nationalism." Families and clans were entrusted with many tasks and duties that nowadays belong to our modern social organization. In China, especially, family discipline and solidarity was all-important; the clan was at one and the same time school, nursery, workshop, government, and police; hence, the vital role played by the relationships within the confines of the clan.

Since there never was any question of competition between male and female—their respective spheres of activity were sharply separated according to tradition—cooperation was the watchword. There was little friction between the sexes, all the friction being reserved for the often abrasive relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law—not unintentionally, the Chinese ideogram for "peace" stands for one woman under a roof. (Reincourt, 1989: 171). Only when women attempted to leave their biologically appointed sphere, only when the "hen crows," as the saying went, did trouble arise between men and women. It was a byword in China that marital happiness, or the lack of it, was largely in woman's hands. The Book of Transformations, the I Ching, states categorically that "the happiness of the clan depends on the integrity of woman." (Reincourt, 1989: 172).

The extraordinary vitality and durability of the Chinese social structure resulted from the immense power of absorption of the Chinese family system which, in due course, swallowed all invaders. While the Chinese patriarch took care of the political and social aspect of government, effective power in this remarkable family structure was mostly in the hands of the older women. In contrast, in the western part of the Roman Empire where the family structure had been shattered, nothing similar could possibly happen; the barbarians were never biologically Romanized and were never socially absorbed during the life span of the empire; they remained a separate, alien entity and, eventually, merged with the Latin populations. But only after the collapse of the empire, which they helped to bring about.

In the long run, the success of the female principle in China lay in the downgrading of the individual, whether male or female, and the exaltation of the clan and its ancestors. As individuals, he and she were nothing; as members of the clan, they were everything. They were but small units in the flowing stream of Life, looking back and worshipping ancestors, looking forward and generating a posterity that would, in turn, worship them as ancestors. Family solidarity was total: everyone was responsible for everyone else. A collapse of family life such as occurred in Rome never took place in China, and would have been inconceivable. Legislation and the state became all-powerful in the Roman Empire. In China, they remained weak at all times (except during the brief period of the Legalists, and then during the short-lived socialistic experiments); the individual remained completely subordinate to his kinship group, which in turn enjoyed far greater freedom from state-imposed laws in China than in the West.

Woman's social status is invariably enhanced by social and political conservatism. In India as in China, woman's role was debased during the great periods of cultural creativity coinciding with sociopolitical revolutions during the first millennium B.C. Thereafter, more or less petrified in fully crystallized social frameworks (India's rigid caste system, China's clan structure), the feminine ethos began to prevail at the expense of the free, creative, wide-roaming, revolutionary male

spirit. Unlike Westerners, the Chinese were not possessed by a Promethean urge to master nature, to conquer and dominate the world. The Chinese were determined to adapt to nature, female like, not to regulate it. Somehow, Mother Earth retained her hold on the Chinese mind. There were vague masculine attempts during the creative Spring and Autumn era eighth to fifth centuries B.C.) at overpowering nature, when some Chinese wondered aloud why this Promethean spirit was lacking. The agnostic and rationalist Hsun-tzu asked pointedly:

You glorify nature and meditate on her;
Why not domesticate her and regulate her?
You obey nature and sing her praise,
Why not control her course and use it?
(Reincourt, 1989: 173).

But it was too late. The feminine ethos triumphed in the end, and with it, the Tao. True enough, the official doctrine of the state, the fundamental philosophy of the mandarins, was Confucianism, a stern patriarchal code of ethics; but its very conservatism, its stifling of all individual initiative and free-willing activity, reduced the masculine spirit to complete sterility in the end. Its puritanical outlook, outwardly virile, in fact emasculated the true masculine impulse; whereas its rival philosophy, Taoism, preserved the feminine outlook and inspired most of the cultural output of China, in conjunction, later on, with imported Buddhism. One look at Chinese traditional architecture is enough: while Western architecture is dynamic and full of tension, Chinese architecture is essentially rhythmic. As Lin Yutang puts it, the spirit of Chinese architecture does not, "like the Gothic spires, aspire to heaven but broods over the earth and is contented with its lot. While Gothic cathedrals suggest the spirit of sublimity, Chinese temples and places suggest the spirit of serenity" (Reincourt, 1989: 173).

At the highest metaphysical level, the Chinese placed a mysterious entity, the Tao—the "Way," etymologically a road, and therefore a process. The basic, elementary entities in the process are emblematic concepts, yin and yang, and their interplay. In the famous work *Tao Te Ching*—"The Book (ching) of the Power (te) of the Way (tao)"—the process is defined as follows:

The Tao that can be discussed is not the enduring, eternal Tao;

The name that can be named is not the enduring, eternal name.

From the unnamed sprang heaven and earth. The named is the mother of the ten thousand things (Reincourt, 1989: 173).

The diagrammatic symbol of the Tao displays geometrically the cooperative interplay between yin, the dark, passive, feminine, humid, malignant, and negative; and yang, the light, masculine, active, dry, beneficent, warm, and positive. The two principles, yin feminine and conceiving, yang masculine and creative, represented by a circumference equally divided into two parts by a curved line winding up a diameter, are present in all things and their interplay symbolizes the overall cosmic rhythm. They cannot be judged as morally either good or bad; they simply are in all things, in different alternating proportions. In men, the yang predominates, and in women, the yin; yet they are present in both—an indirect affirmation of the basic androgynous nature of all living beings.

The universe of the ten thousand things is the result of the cooperative, not competitive, interplay of the two principles. No real predominance is ascribed to either one; the overall concept is much closer to the Indian, where the original androgynous self splits in two, than to the biblical account: yin is created simultaneously with yang, unlike Eve who comes later than Adam and is merely one of his ribs. Furthermore, and as in India, the Tao is immanent as well as transcendent; it permeates all things and all beings.

In the *I Ching*, *The Book of Changes*, an oracular work made up of trigrams, the masculine yang is represented by an unbroken line associated with the heavenly (active, light, dry, and warm), and the feminine yin a broken line associated with the earthy (humid, dark, cold and passive), combined in various ways:

— — — is Ch'ien, the Creative, strong, implying heaven and the father.

≡ ≡ ≡ is K'un, the Receptive, devoted and yielding earth, also the mother.....and so on
(Reincourt, 1989: 174).

This dialectical interplay also symbolizes the alternating seasons: the yin prevails during the wintry cold, the yang in the warm summer;

both principles meet during the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, when each one takes over the other's former predominance. Both are symbolized by a door—open door for yang, symbolizing agricultural production, strength, open-air life, and summer warmth; closed door for yin, symbolizing the winter's frost and indoor living when feminine work at home takes precedence. Both sexes were under an antithetical discipline—females indoors (*nei*), males outdoors (*wai*), the respective realms of yin and yang. All the great festivals had a sexual connotation as when, during the equinoxes, all-male and all-female groups met in hollows or valleys, separated from each other by a ritual axis (usually a river or brook), challenging each other in verses, music, and dancing—the males on the sunny side, the females on the dark side: "The yang calls, the yin answers—the boys call, the girls answer," was the general theme of these hierogrammatic celebrations, expressing the sacred harmony (*ho*) resulting from the interplay (*tiao ho*) of the two sexual principles and the fundamental cosmic unity reached by their union in an ultimate coincidence of opposites—an essentially "organism" world-outlook (Reincourt, 1989: 175). The rhythm of nature and the rhythm of human society were in tune with each other.

As in India, it is the quality of immanence that gives the overall Tao its feminine quality. *Te* implies "power," more specifically latent power, like that of a coiled spring: the power of the Way and order of the universe; and the Tao *Te Ching* now describes the eternal feminine, Chinese style:

The Valley Spirit never dies.
It is named the Mysterious Feminine
And the Doorway of the Mysterious Feminine

is the root [from which] Heaven and Earth [sprang]. (Reincourt, 1989: 175).

The sexual symbolism of the male convexity and female concavity had endlessly fascinated poets, East and West. In both the Lao-tzu book and in Chuang-tzu, we find the following verse:

He who knows the male, yet cleaves to what is female Becomes like a ravine, receiving all things under heaven [Thence] the eternal virtue never leaks away. This is returning to the state of Infancy (Reincourt, 1989: 175).

As in India's Tantric cults, and very much unlike the Confucianist tradition to which this was repugnant, Chinese Taoism attributes to the female principle first place in the cosmic hierarchy; Taoist mysticism is rooted in this feminine apprehension of hidden reality. Unlike India, however, where the cultural ethos accepts the laws of nature with quiet resignation and longs to get out of the coils of nature and life altogether, in China there is an optimistic, joyful, and often lyrical acceptance of nature which is delicately expressed in Taoist literature. Nature's right to create and destroy is fully accepted by the Chinese, along with a determination to cooperate with its holy rhythm.

The Indian and Chinese attitudes toward sex—partly a result of their contrasting climates—must be confronted. While yin and yang appear to be the natural counterparts of the Indian yoni and lingam, the Chinese symbols are more truly emblematic and ethereal than the grossly suggestive Indian ones. The Chinese make full use of the sexual duality but sublimate it with the help of geometrical patterns. Contrasted one with the other, their respective cultures show the Indians to be always swinging widely between extremes—utter voluptuousness or utter asceticism; the Chinese are masters of humanistic golden mean, practical, commonsensical, and humorous, but rarely given to exaggeration. What the two have in common, however, as against the West, is full acceptance of both sexual principles as essentially equal although different, and an emphasis on their cooperation in a dialectical interplay in which both principles are equally indispensable. The Chinese compromise was the result of the Taoist revival of the feminine-oriented ideal, resting on the dim foundation of the pre-Chou matrilineal society when the yin principle had the upper hand—as a counterbalancing force to the strongly masculine Confucian doctrine. As Joseph Needham points out:

The Confucian and legalist social-ethical thought-complex was masculine, managing, hard, dominating, aggressive, rational and donative—the Taoists broke with it radically and completely by emphasizing all that was feminine, tolerant, yielding, permissive, withdrawing, mystical and receptive. (Reincourt, 1989: 176).

In praising the "Valley Spirit," the Taoists ran counter to the masculine Confucian ethos which states in the classic *Lun Yu*: "The superior man hates to dwell in a low-lying situation, where all the evil of the world will flow down upon him." It was this dialectical interplay between the two philosophies and attitudes to life that created the vital tension in Chinese culture between the masculine and feminine components:

The recognition of the importance of woman in the scheme of things, the acceptance of equality of women with men, the conviction that the attainment of health and longevity needed the cooperation of the sexes, the considered admiration for certain feminine psychological characteristics, the incorporation of the physical phenomena of sex in numinous group catharsis, free alike from asceticism and class distinctions, reveal to us once more aspects of Taoism which had no counterpart in Confucianism or ordinary Buddhism (Reincourt, 1989: 176).

The parallel between female-oriented Taoism in China and Tantrism in India is unmistakable; the link between the two is Buddhist Tantrism which seeped into China in the early centuries A.D. and revived Taoism, with which it had so much in common—notably a profound interest in the metaphysical significance of sex. Full sexual congress was the quintessence of Tantrism—an orgiastic form of Dionysiac mysticism that is the opposite of the sex-shy traditional mysticism. Tantric metaphysics established that *sunyata*, the freezing emptiness of the void, was a male attribute, whereas *karuna*, "compassion," was female—attributes that had to be brought together through sexual copulation if *advaya*, "unity," was to be achieved. Quite naturally, both Tantrism and Taoism eagerly sought female devotees.

The whole Taoist philosophic outlook is permeated with the fundamental notion that nothing can be achieved without giving woman and the female principle their due. The basic aim (male-oriented, after all) is to use sexual stimulus to accumulate as much life-giving *ching* (sperm) as possible, but without losing it. The yang force in man has to be continually strengthened with the adjunction of female yin; full control has to be exerted over the emission that results, but Taoism never advocated full conti-

nence, which generated neurosis and was absolutely contrary to nature's cosmic rhythm. What was advocated was as great a prolongation of the male act as possible in order to nourish the yang with as much yin as possible; as for the female orgasm (*khuai*), it was beneficial inasmuch as it strengthened man's vital powers by requiring this prolongation of coitus. Obviously, while all this was devised by man for man, it also gave the feminine element its due recognition, whose full satisfaction was absolutely indispensable for man's own welfare (Reincourt, 1989: 177).

Indian and Chinese cultures, each in its own way, emphasized the basic metaphysical equality between the sexes, but they never granted women the same equality in social and political life; nor is there any evidence that women demanded it. Neither in India nor China is there any trace of a full-fledged revolt of women such as took place in the Graeco-Roman as well as the modern Western world. Both Eastern cultures accepted as a fundamental premise that two such different entities could function only through cooperation: in both civilizations, there never was a real striving for competition between the sexes. It is within this framework that one must approach the historical changes that took place in the respective status of women in India and China.

As in early Homeric Greece, women in early Vedic India appear to have enjoyed far greater freedom and influence than later on, although even in the early times they were never allowed to attend the tribal councils or state assemblies (*Sabha*). Women could still choose their mates (*svayamvara*), appeared with men at religious celebrations and festivities, and were allowed to educate themselves. However, while polygyny was tolerated, polyandry was strictly forbidden: according to the *Aitareya Brahmana*, "one man may have more than one wife but one woman has never more than one husband." Woman's complementary role was constantly emphasized: "As the shadow to the substance, to her lord the faithful wife; and she parts not from her consort till she parts with fleeting life." (Reincourt, 1989: 177). But in those days there was no *purdah*, no seclusion; and as a widow, woman was free to remarry. In race-conscious India, the mother was

considered far more important for the preservation of caste purity than the father. The *Vashishtha Smriti* put in this way: "The Acharya is ten times more honourable than an Upadhyaya: the father a hundred times more than the Acharya, and the mother a thousand times more than the father," recalling the same genealogical-biological premium put on the mother by patriarchal Jews (Reincourt, 1989: 177).

As time passed, things changed and woman's status began to shrink. Freedom was increasingly curtailed; woman was enjoined to refrain from education—"For a woman to study the Vedas indicates confusion in the realm," states the *Mahabharata*—and widows were discouraged from remarriage. *Suttee*, the self-immolation of widows on their deceased husbands' funeral pyres, also began in post-Vedic times. These alterations parallel those that took place in Greece between post-Homeric times and Periclean Athens. Under the influence of the austere Jain and early Buddhist movements, an antifeminist trend betrayed itself in India.

From an ethical point of view there is hardly any religion, which stands on such a high idealistic plane as Buddhism does, yet it has not much to say in favour of women. The founder of the religion himself, the great Gautama, who is considered to be the wisest and the most perfect man, found that he could not reconcile a married life with the life of a perfect man, and had to sever his connection with his "numerous wives." Instead of considering woman a necessary adjunct of society, her company was considered to be an obstacle in the development of higher powers in man. Nirvana was beyond question for woman, or even in the company of woman.

While he fought very bravely indeed, and even successfully, against the Brahmanical caste system in establishing the equality of all men in this life, yet he did not consider it necessary to extend the same equality to the female portion of humanity.

To the Buddhist, of all the snares which the Tempter has spread for men women are the most dangerous, and in women are embodied all the powers of infatuation which bind the mind of the world.

Amrapali was a wealthy and famous courtesan of Vaisali and kept many young and

beautiful prostitutes with her. She called upon the Blessed One and asked Him to give her some good teaching.

The Blessed One said, "Amrapali, the mind of a woman is easily disturbed and misled. She yields to her desires and surrenders to jealousy more easily than a man. "Therefore, it is more difficult for a woman to follow the Noble Path. This is especially true for a young and beautiful woman. You must step forth toward the Noble Path by overcoming lust and temptation" (Kyokai, 1989: 226-227).

Manu's great legal code set the tone: "The source of dishonor is woman; the source of strife is woman; the source of earthly existence is woman; therefore avoid woman." The conclusion is metaphysically logical, if the premise is accepted that all creation of new life is itself a Fall and that the goal of life is to put an end, once and for all, to the cycle of reincarnations—to life itself, in fact. Furthermore, echoing Cato the Elder in Rome, the Code of Manu displays the perennial fear that man entertains of woman's uncanny wiles: "A female is able to draw from the right path in this life not a fool only but even a sage, and can lead him in subjection to desire or to wrath." But, as happened so often throughout history, there seems to have been a wide gulf between woman's legal subjection according to the formal codes of law and her real position and influence according to contemporary Greek eyewitnesses in Hellenistic days—position and influence of considerable weight in politics and economics, art, and literature (Reincourt, 1989: 178).

There was no doubt, however, that the increasingly ascetic, even life-denying, ideal of non-Tantric Hinduism was largely responsible for a certain downgrading of the female principle, and of woman's social status with it, and to the limited extent that the ascetic ideal of the *sannyasa* kept on prevailing in India, this downgrading remained a permanent feature of Indian civilization. A life-denying outlook will never be kind to the female sex, viewed mostly as the source of all the temptations that keep the soul entrapped in the snares of flesh and matter. Woman has been considered to be the torch lighting the way to hell. But those enlightened Indians who reacted against the excesses of the

ascetic disposition always made an attempt to rehabilitate the life-creating second sex; in the sixth century A.D. Varahamihara pointed out that the righteous pursuit of dharma depends on woman and that she is essential to human progress. Reacting against Buddhist and Jain-inspired celibacy, Dirghata stated that, in the future, no woman should remain unmarried. But while the idea of womanhood was increasingly respected, and even exalted by poets such as Kalidasa, Bana, and Bhavabhuti, woman's social freedom was increasingly curtailed—proof, if any is needed, that there may be a complete divorce between social conditions and the overall idealization of womanhood. (Reincourt, 1989)

In spite of the patriarchal organization of Hindu society (except in some areas of Malabar where matrilineal structures persisted into the twentieth century), women were treated at all times with utmost consideration. Foreign observers, from the Greek Megasthenes several centuries before Christ to the Muslim scholar al-Biruni some fifteen hundred years later, testify to the good treatment wives received at the hands of their husbands, to their often excellent education and their close contact with literature and the arts, especially during the Gupta era. The completely natural attitude of Indians toward sex, and the care with which experts on the subject (for example, Vatsyayana, presumed author of the *Kamasutra*) emphasized the husband's obligations toward his wife, prove conclusively that woman was not treated as a mere object for man's enjoyment but had as much right as he had to share in this enjoyment. She may have been debarred from knowledge of the Vedas, but not from enjoying the pleasures of life. If customs such as the ban on the remarriage of widows became firmly established, it was partly in name of the ascetic ideal which, deep down, remained the higher aspiration of Hinduism—for men as well as for women. Social pressure compelled women who, through ill luck, found themselves deprived of their helpmate to spend the rest of their lives without replacing him, but woman's position as mother in the joint-family system was secure and honoured, and her enforced asceticism was by no means humiliating—she was simply compelled to conform to

the highest ideal of the civilization into which she was born.

The result is that sexual morality was higher in Indian civilization than in any other: prostitution, except for a few devadasis, was rare; heterosexuality was the rule, and homosexuality as rare as prostitution. By spiritualizing and sacralizing sex, Hinduism removed all traces of that sense of sinfulness that was to plague Western culture. The Hindu woman in public places was never molested or insulted; at the price of severe curtailment of her freedom (not much greater than the curtailment of his freedom) she was entitled to a remarkable degree of consideration, and the protection of custom, which was far more effective than that of any legislation. A Western traveler in the late eighteenth century, the Abbe Dubois—who, in other respects, had nothing favourable to report on northern Indian women's treatment after centuries of Islamic rule—stated:

A Hindu woman can go anywhere alone, even in the most crowded places, and she need never fear the impertinent looks and jokes of idle loungers. This appears to me really remarkable. A house inhabited solely by women is a sanctuary, which the most shameless libertine would not dream of violating.... I have often spent the night in one of the common rest-houses, where the men and women lodging there were lying all huddled together anyhow and almost side by side; but I have never known or heard of anyone disturbing the tranquillity of the night by an indecent act or word (Reincourt, 1989: 180)

In other respects, the degradation of woman's social position in India was largely the result of the Islamic invasions. For centuries, northern and central India lay under Turco-Afghan and Moghul rule; the severely antifeminist attitude of Muslims could not but influence the social life of the subjugated Hindus. The contrast between the fate of woman in Muslim-dominated northern India and in the south where there was no Muslim occupation was striking. Compared with the Muslim sultanates of the Deccan, the social status and influence of woman in the southern Hindu empire of Vijayanagar was considerable: "Women in general occupied a high position in society and instances of the active part they took in the political, social and literary

life of the country are not rare." Women were often historians, accountants, judges, bailiffs, and even guards in the palace—which would have been unthinkable under Muslim rule. Indeed, with Islam came *purdah* and many restrictions that had been unknown in pre-Islamic days, and often, for the sake of the protection of the women themselves, Hindu society embraced these restrictions wholeheartedly (Reincourt, 1989: 180).

Chinese culture, in full contrast with its Indian counterpart, was essentially life-affirming, humanistic, and areligious. Shunning all extremes, the Chinese sought to live well without bothering overmuch about the hereafter or about spiritual problems in general. Woman was no longer a fellow pilgrim journeying through a vale of tears, as in the humourless Indian cultural framework, but a boon companion in the enjoyment of life—a companion, but a definitely subordinate one. Lin Yutang claims that "the respect for women, a certain tenderness toward the female sex, which was characteristic of the Teutonic races already in their barbaric days, was absent in the early pages of Chinese history" (Reincourt, 1989: 181). This is a matter of attitude, of psychological disposition which does not necessarily affect the social position of either sex. As a matter of fact, traces of the early matrilineal structure of Shang times survived right through the Chou feudalism, into the Spring and Autumn era; in those days, the family name (*hsing*) was still the woman's name, whereas man had merely a personal name (*shih*) along with his place of birth or official position. As late as the days of Confucius, woman's sexual life appears to have been quite free, including the freedom to choose her mate (as among the southern aborigines of Kwangsi); divorces were frequent; and widows remarried.

The Confucian Book of Rights soon changed all that and led straight to woman's seclusion. A great deal of this doctrine was rooted in the Master's view of women as completely irrational or rather, unreasonable creatures, largely incomprehensible to men. (Reincourt, 1989: 187). Confucian philosophy was based on a hierarchical view of society, on the strict observance of authority and obedience within the state as within the family. Strong emphasis on the difference between the sexes was one cor-

ner-stone of this hierarchical outlook, and if this emphasis confined woman mostly to home and hearth, it also strongly emphasized, in conformity with the yin-yang concept, that this difference was a matter of complementarity between two sexual principles rather than fundamental subordination. As in every other field of endeavour, so it was with the relationship between man and woman: the Chinese always put the accent on cooperation between polar opposites, not competition between antagonistic elements. Just as they cooperated with nature rather than subduing it in Western fashion, they established cooperation between the sexes, based on a nature-imposed division of labour. If woman wanted power and influence, she had to obtain it through, not against, man. That was the natural way. As Lin Yutang put it, "women who could rule their husbands knew that dependence on this sexual arrangement was their best and most effective weapon for power, and women who could not were too dull to raise feminist problems" (Reincourt, 1989: 181).

To state that the clan spirit was strong in China understates the case; in point of fact, the importance of the "sib" can never be overestimated — the sib being, in contrast to the family which is a bilateral group, a unilateral one, tracing kinship through either the male or the female parent to the exclusion of the other. Unlike many sibs in different parts of the world, the Chinese one was uncompromisingly patriarchal, made even worse by the fact that while the normal family is a loose organization, the sib is a rigid and permanent structure. As Max Weber pointed out, the sib had completely disappeared in the medieval West, but was completely preserved in China "in the administration of the smallest political units as well as in the operation of economic associations. Moreover, the sib developed to an extent unknown elsewhere, even in India" (Reincourt, 1989: 182). Village life was entirely ruled by the predominant sib, whose members were bound together by a common ancestor worship. Within the typical sib, all married men were entitled to vote; unmarried ones had no franchise but could be heard in council. As for women, they were excluded altogether, and although they had dowry rights, they were not entitled to inheritance. Male elders

collected revenues and distributed both the Sib-owned land and the income. At the elementary social level—the self-governing village rather than the walled city in which the imperial mandarin exerted his unlimited authority—women were entirely deprived of authority and power.

The remarkable strength and durability of the clannish sib in China dates from the collapse of feudalism during the Spring and Autumn era and the social reorganization of the newly unified Chinese Empire (third century B.C.) into a bureaucratic state which delegated most of its local authority to patriarchal clans based on bloodlines. The Confucianist view of woman's role came to prevail completely during the Han dynasty (200 B.C. - A.D. 200). Feminine virtues were carefully catalogued by Liu Hsiang, and Pan Ch'ao, a woman writer and author of a *Woman's guide*, conforming to the numerical mania of the Chinese that still endures in twentieth-century Red China, listed the "three obediences and four virtues" of women, according to the new patriarchal canon. Even at that late stage, widows retained the right to remarry; this was eventually taken away from them and under the Sung dynasty, remarriage became a moral crime (Reincourt, 1989: 182).

The steady degradation of her position was obviously not welcome to the Chinese woman who, furthermore, found no emotional appeal in the severely ethical strictures of Master K'ung; they wholeheartedly embraced a new Buddhism imported from India when Chinese society partly broke down with the passing away of the Han dynasty and the subsequent "time of troubles." While Buddhism in India had originally expressed a certain ascetic distaste for the female sex, it appeared in China in its Mahayana aspect as a highly emotional creed that merged, more or less, with the remains of Taoism and appealed to women rather than men, who looked upon the imported religion with a jaundiced eye. In spite of male persecutions, Buddhism held its own for centuries. In China as elsewhere, emphasis on ethics always betrays the masculine influence; while masculine Confucianism emphasized ethics, feminine Taoism and Buddhism stressed emotionalism and magic. As Max Weber explained:

It was almost always through the eunuchs

and the harem, the traditional enemies of the literati, that the Taoist sorcerers found their way to the palace.....Always the proud, masculine, rational, and sober spirit of Confucianism, similar to the mentality of the Romans, struggled against interference in the guidance of the state when such interference was based upon the hysterical excitation of women given to superstition and miracles (Reincourt, 1989: 183).

In conjunction with Taoism, Buddhism began to make the seclusion of women more bearable; they filled the temples of a new and colourful religion in which feminine feeling, repressed under stern Confucianist rule, could express itself. The striking ceremonies with bells and gongs, glitter and pomp, the exciting pilgrimages, the intricate mythology surrounding the Mahayana cult, the message of hope and consolation — all these appealed to Chinese women as the new Oriental religions and mystery cults appealed, at the same time, to their sisters in the Roman Empire.

The pendulum swung back again. As time passed, Buddhism lost most of its influence and the Neo-Confucianist restoration set in. The ideal of chaste widowhood became prevalent:

Worship of chastity.... became something of an obsession and women were henceforth to be responsible for social morality from which the men were exempted. More than that, women were to be responsible for courage and strength of character and which curiously the men so admired in the gentle sex, for the emphasis had shifted from women's ordinary routine domestic virtues to female heroism and self-sacrifice.... A woman who distinguished herself by committing suicide to guard her chastity had a fair chance of leaving her name in literature in one form or another (Reincourt, 1989: 183).

Along with this, however, during the Wei and Ch'in dynasties, both concubinage and the drowning of baby girls increased—one the result of a considerable shift and concentration of wealth in few hands, the other the consequence of the poverty of those who could not afford the extremely expensive wedding ceremonies required to marry off daughters.

These distortions were, by and large, mere pimples on the face of Chinese society; the norm was that Chinese women ruled in the home. And

although Chinese social life was almost exclusively masculine—with a generous sprinkling of courtesans—women found ways and means of making their influence felt as mothers, if not as wives: "The more one knows Chinese life, the more one realizes that the so-called suppression of women is an Occidental criticism that somehow is not born out by a closer knowledge of Chinese life." In the famous novel *Red Chamber Dream*, older women are shown to be the real rulers. Marco Polo is an interesting witness to the considerate treatment afforded Chinese women, along with the social framework in which they were ensconced. Referring to the inhabitants of the great city of Kin-sai (modern Hangchow), former capital of the Sung dynasty, he states:

They are friendly towards each other, and persons who inhabit the same street, both men and women, from the mere circumstance of neighbourhood, appear like one family. In their domestic manners they are free from jealousy or suspicion of their wives, to whom great respect is shown, and any man would be accounted infamous who should presume to use indecent expressions to a married woman (Reincourt, 1989: 184).

In fact, if Chinese women had any real complaints, it was early in their married life when they were subjected to the whimsical tyranny of their mother-in-law. Chinese family and social life was geared to absolute reverence for old age, regardless of sex. The real tyranny in China, if such there was, was not that of one sex over another as that exercised by the old against the young—which was closely linked with the tight clannish solidarity, mutual responsibility, and ancestor worship. As the traditional saying went, a man never married a "wife but a daughter-in-law"; when a son was born, the idiomatic expression was "a grandson in born." The daughter-in-law's obligations were toward her in-laws rather than her husband, and if she needed a consoling thought, she had one ready at hand: she, too, would one day become an all-powerful mother-in-law—if she produced sons.

On another level, Chinese art gives us interesting clues to a peculiar appreciation of woman's plastic form; unlike his Western counterpart, the typical Chinese artist depicts the femi-

nine body as he would any other aspect of Mother Nature:

The whole rhythm of a woman's form is modeled after the graceful rhythm of the weeping willows, which accounts for her intentionally drooping shoulders..... For woman's body, as body, the Chinese have no appreciation.... Chinese artists fail dismally in the portrayal of the human form, and even an artist like Ch'iu Shihchou [Ming period], famous for his paintings of female life, shows the upper part of the female nude form very much like a potato (Reincourt, 1989: 184).

In fact, human forms, male or female, had no appeal for the traditional Chinese artist. In his eyes, the human species did not stand out and apart from nature, as in the West, but was an emanation of it, part and parcel of everything that lived and evolved, was born and died.

What the Chinese admired and revered was a womanly woman, not a girlish, female, or feminine one. Chinese girls' upbringing was far more severe than that of boys; as a result, Chinese women always gave an impression of greater maturity and even strength of character than the weaker-willed men. In spite of all Confucian customs and taboos, seclusion and feet binding—perhaps, partly because of them—Chinese women often developed steely personalities and ruled *de facto* with an iron rod. In this connection, the formidable personality of the last Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi, who was still ruling when Mao Tse-tung was born, comes to mind.

More, perhaps, than any other country, China, the longest-lived cultural entity in the world, was kept going and held together by its women rather than its men; and it is largely in their inferior social status and harder upbringing that Chinese women found the wellspring of their extraordinary forbearance. It is also in the peculiar Chinese lack of notion of "society" in the abstract—an essentially masculine creation—that Chinese woman's real power lay: the Chinese mind went straight from the family and clan (*chia*) as the elementary cell to the state (*kuo*); the basic notion was that "when the family is orderly, then the state is peaceful." The concept of society, *kuochia*, was only a derivative. In this atmosphere, where kinship ties were all-important, the Chinese woman, like her

Indian counterpart in her caste system, could not fail to make her considerable influence felt; and even though she was excluded from whatever social power and influence there was, she hardly cared. The life of the family was of overwhelming import. In India the great civilization of Harappa and Mohenjodaro had been closely connected with Sumer and its religious outlook was essentially focussed on the Great Mother. The numerous clay figurines of females found in the Punjab and Baluchistan testify to this worship. This great civilization collapsed about the middle of the second millennium B. C. under the onslaught of the patriarchal Aryan warrior tribes; urban life disappeared, cities crumbled into dust, and India entered a Dark Age.

Reincourt (1989) has made the following contribution on role of women in Iran and Israel — from a spiritual perspective. It is interesting to note the similarities with role of Indian Women.

The great patriarchal revolution at the dawn of the Iron Age set the stage for the rise of the higher cultures, and is called the "Axial Period." This was the era that started with Zoroaster and the Magians of Persia, a relatively short era during which the most momentous events that started history proper on its course were concentrated — the age of Confucius, Lao-tzu, and the great Chinese schools of philosophy; the age of the Upanisads and the Buddha in India; of Socrates, Plato, and Periclean Athens; of the great Hebrew prophets in Palestine, Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah — all between 800 and 200 B.C., "the most deepcut dividing line in history" (Reincourt, 1989: 79).

In this new patriarchal age, mythology, the mythology that had prevailed in the old days of the Great Mother's pre-eminence, was put to flight by a new, masculine, unmythical thought process, relying increasingly on rationalism and logic: it was logos against mythos, male abstract thought against female concrete feeling, conscious thinking instead of unconscious myth making. Religion became ethical; myths were reshaped into parables; and uncertainty, spiritual questing, took the place of the quiet, passive acceptance of nature and destiny. The calm of polarities becomes the disquiet of opposites and antinomies. It was the first age of philosophy,

of speculative thought. The overthrow of the female-centred outlook allowed mankind as a whole to take a giant step forward: tension replaced repetitive rhythm. Everything was now in flux: the first "universal empires" and male-oriented cultures appeared, along with a new historical consciousness, and catastrophic and eschatological views of life and death, original sin, heaven and hell, final judgment. From now on, all was guilt, effort, struggle, danger, violence — but also thirst for individual freedom, quest for personal development, enlightenment, and spiritual salvation. Power of creation was mythically transferred from the womb (the lotus goddess, Padma, in India) to the navel (Visnu's) or to the brain (Athene springing from Zeus's head). Hence the creative power of the "word," Logos or its Indian equivalent, *manasa putra* ("mind-born child" according to the Puranas); the transfer was quite a natural one, the mouth being assimilated to the vagina and the "word" to the newborn child. In all patriarchal myths, whenever they survived the onslaught of discursive thought, the significance and function of the female were systematically downgraded in a cosmological and symbolic sense. But this revolution was also a major breakthrough, the birth of a new man endowed with a Promethean drive to master the forces of nature and dominate the earth.

Detached and psychologically free of the powers of nature in whose physiological clutches he left woman, man at last became conscious of consciousness, able to reflect on himself and, simultaneously, to ask radical questions concerning his destiny. Set loose from the mythical age with its calm and gentle stagnation, he set out on an anxiety-filled journey of exploration armed with the essential tools of masculinity: philosophic thought in Greece, cosmological thought in Iran, driving willpower among the Hebrews. Even in India and China, philosophers were basically unmythical in their creative intellectual power, although tolerant of surviving mythologies. Men began to rely on themselves in an individual sense, as free, autonomous personalities: Man proved himself capable of contrasting himself inwardly with the entire universe. The sharp opposition between subject and object finally dawned on him, along with a newborn

mystical urge to overcome this sharp opposition which his increasingly acute mind had been able to perceive for the first time since mankind came into existence. This overall modification of humanity may be termed spiritualization" (Reincourt, 1989).

Cultural diversity refers to the richness and variety of human cultural differences between and within countries. The following account traces interaction of Indian culture with neighbouring countries from a historical perspective. In order to sketch the position of India in relation to other countries towards the end of the tenth century, we may divide Asia by a line drawn north and south through Delhi or the 77th meridian. To the west of this line commerce on the whole counted for more than culture; to the east Indian religion spread almost over the whole of eastern Asia and Indian civilization, including religion, spread over the region, insular as well as continental, lying to the South of China (Moreland and Chatterjee, 1969).

On the northern land frontier such a line marks the meeting place of Chinese and Islamic culture at this period. Islam had gained ground for Persia had been conquered by the Arabs in the seventh century, and their faith had now extended north and east into the countries which we call Afghanistan and Russian Turkistan. We possess no knowledge of the relations of India with the latter country in the period preceding the first incursions of the Turks into the Punjab, but in regard to former, the eastern portion was ruled by a Hindu dynasty until nearly the close of the tenth century. It may be inferred that Indian influences predominated in this region as far as the frontiers held by Arabs on the west and by Turks on the north (Moreland and Chatterjee, 1969). There had been active intercourse between India and Baghdad. The sea routes from India to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea remained open and it was by them that Parsee and Arab settlers reached the west coast of India. The former were Persians who adhered to the old national religion of Zoroastrianism and in the course of the eighth century left their homes; and sought a refuge from Islam in India; they were allowed to settle on the coast between Bombay and Surat and there they established themselves, following their own religion.

In order to account for the Arab settlements on the west coast, one must glance at the chief trade-route of the Asiatic Seas, that which connects the ports of China and the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. This route falls naturally into three sections, from China to the narrow waters between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, from Sumatra to the South-west coast of India, and from India to the western termini. The complete voyage is very long and dangerous for sailing vessels. Due to commercial reasons, a change in practice is known to have occurred on this route; the through voyages were gradually discontinued, and goods changed hands at entrepôts in the Straits, or on the Indian coast, or both. Through voyages were certainly made between the fifth and seventh centuries, when Chinese junks were familiar objects in the Persian Gulf: About the year 650 the Arabs had commercial agencies on the coast of China; but later on the junks terminated their voyage on the Indian coast, where the goods were sold to Arabs for transport farther west. From somewhere about 900 then, Arab merchants were settling on the Indian coast in order to pursue their trade. The settlers who adhered to their own faith, took wives in the country, and they are represented at the present day by the race known as Moplahs, who still live in the region where their ancestors once traded (Moreland and Chatterjee, 1969: 135). Crossing the Indian Ocean, and passing by Ceylon, which was for the time incorporated in the Chola empire, one comes to the islands which are now known as the Dutch East Indies. The Indian culture was established here over a wide region. Buddhism and Hinduism were well established and Indian cultural influences were prominent up to the fifteenth century, when Islam reached the Islands. Definite evidence of Indian cultural influences has been found on the north-eastern side of Sumatra, in Java, on the coast of Borneo and in Celebes. Sanskrit inscriptions show that somewhere about the year 400 Hindu or Hinduized kings were ruling on the east coast of Borneo and that sacrifices were offered there by Brahman priests (Moreland and Chatterjee, 1969). About the same time or a little later, Hindu ideas were familiar in western Java and in the seventh century Srivijaya, near the modern Palembang at the eastern end of

Sumatra, was a great centre of Indian Buddhism, where the Chinese pilgrim I-tsing was able to learn Sanskrit.

Towards the end of the eighth century a maritime power known as Sailendra empire emerged in these regions. The origin of the dynasty is still unknown, but its inspiration was certainly Indian, and it patronised the Mahayanist form of Buddhism. That it maintained relations with the motherland appears from inscriptions which have been discovered in India, showing that an early Sailendra ruler founded a monastery at Nalanda in Bihar and that a later one did the same thing in the Chola country in the South. It is to this dynasty that the world owes the greatest surviving monument in Indian Buddhism, the shrine at Borobudur in Central Java; but Buddhism was not the only religion in that part of the island, for remains of Hindu temples have been found in the vicinity (Moreland and Chatterjee, 1969: 137). Survivals of the earlier Indian culture can be traced in Java and Sumatra and in the smaller island of Bali, lying east of Java, the national religion is still definitely Indian in its character.

For ten centuries or more Indian religion and culture were prominent features in the life of the countries which are now known as Burma, Siam, Cambodia, Annam and the Malay Peninsula. In the tenth century Indian culture was in contact with Islam on the west and north-west, and with China on the north-east, while to the east and south-east it had no definite limits. The changes which occurred during the next five centuries resulted in its enclosure between Islam and China, which met first in Turkistan and again at the head of the Malay Peninsula.

Intercourse between India and China was by sea as well as land route. The land route ran from the western provinces of China through Turkistan to the basin of Oxus and thence southward over the Hindu kush to Kabul valley and Peshawar.

From about the Christian era onwards successive Chinese dynasties attached great importance to the east-and-west route by which silk goods could be carried to the markets of the Roman empire; for long periods the road was policed right up to the Oxus basin, and thus offered a comparatively safe journey to the point where a traveler to India had to turn south over the passes of the Hindu kush. Modern explorations along this route have shown that Chinese Turkistan was the meeting place of Indian and Chinese culture. Some where about the Christian era, this route helped in carrying the first news of Buddhism to China. From China, Buddhism spread to Korea and then to Japan so that the seeds first carried from India across the desert of Central Asia nearly twenty centuries ago has borne a marvellous crop (Moreland and Chatterjee, 1969).

In the midst of cultural diversity especially in India's interaction with different cultures such as China, Central and West Asia, the literature survey undertaken in this chapter reveals that there is greater interaction and influence of the diverse cultures of the neighbouring countries on role of Indian women rather than the western influence as has been the general impression.

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