



Volume Number: 3-09

For Private Circulation Only

Date: 15-09-2016

Thought for Today: <http://www.thoughtfortoday.org.uk/todays-thought/>

➤ **From the MD's Desk:**

Dear friends,

Season's greetings to all of you.

I am looking forward to seeing many of you at the AGM.
I do hope that you have ensured your participation at least through a proxy.

We have tried to "go by the book" and follow all secretarial standards so that we ensure a professional approach to the conduct of AGM. New rules have come into effect from last year. Some of the things we have done in the past are not applicable anymore. I seek your cooperation in this endeavour.

Let us all work towards having a procedurally correct, democratic and cordial meeting. Let us all accept the majority view with equanimity.

Regards,

Dr. K. Lakshman



SNL Archives: All back issues of Suidha News Letter are available at: <http://suidha.co.in/news-letters.html>

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➤ Event Highlights:

✚ 14-08-2016: All about Electronic Gadgets :

Thanks to Ms. Nandita, daughter of Mrs. Ramaa and Mr. SM Subba Rao of cottage No: 139, who conducted an interactive session on “how to put our computers and mobile phones to better use”. The session was well attended and the residents immensely benefited from it. Ms. Nandita’s live demonstration of each application and practical hints made the session very interesting. On popular demand, it is envisaged to arrange the part two of the programme in the near future to cover other areas of application of these electronic gadgets.



✚ 15-08-2016: Independence Day celebrations

This year the Independence Day was celebrated with usual gaiety and enthusiasm. The National flag was hoisted by Dr. Vanaja Rangaswamy MA, Phd, who is an eminent historian and an authority on the independence movement. Our COO, Mr. Veeranna Chigateri welcomed the gathering and delivered the welcome address. After the flag hoisting ceremony, Mrs. Ramaa Subba Rao distributed the new uniforms to the staff of SUVIDHA.



Speaking on this occasion, Dr. P M Chandrasekhara, introduced the new biodegradable dry waste collection bags to the residents as well as the house keeping staff. He further informed that biodegradable black bags for the wet waste and yellow bags for the dry waste will be made available at the Office free of cost under the introductory programme. He urged that every one should co-operate to see that the waste that is generated from the cottages is segregated at the source and properly disposed off as per the BBMP directions and make the “Swachataa programme” at SUVIDHA a successful and sustainable endeavour.

The Independence Day celebration was concluded after tree-plantation by the residents as a mark of 2016 Vanamahostava celebration.

✚ 25-08-2016: Sri Krishna Janmastami

Sri Krishna Janmastami was celebrated with devotion. It was a well organised and disciplined programme by Suvidha Samskrit and Bhagavadgitha Study Group. The participants of the function took part in Bhajans and Githa chanting. The programme was followed by chanting of Ashtothara Pooja and Prasaad distribution. Here is the link to photos taken on the occasion. <https://goo.gl/photos/qByx5VE7CLTq965s8>





5-09-2016: Vinayaka Chaturthi celebrations



The Ladies Club of Suvidha arranged the Vinayaka Chaturthi celebration on a grand scale. The residents as well as the staff participated in the event in a disciplined way whereby each and everyone had the opportunity to be blessed. Suvidha Club House had a festive look and residents performed Pooja with Arti and devotional songs.

Here is the link to photos: <https://goo.gl/photos/chG2xGYQYx5uoqYN8>



10-09-2016: Monthly Movie Program



Monty Python's Life of Brian, also known as *Life of Brian* was screened with an unprecedented attendance of the residents. Perhaps it was also due to the fact that it coincided with Mr. Chandrakant Bhat's birthday celebration. We wish Mr. Bhat many more happy birthdays and thank him for sponsoring the entire event including the celebrations!



The Movie is a 1979 British religious satire comedy film starring and written by the comedy group Monty Python. The film tells the story of Brian Cohen (played by Chapman), a young Jewish man who is born on the same day as, and next door to, Jesus Christ, and is subsequently mistaken for the Messiah.

Thanks to Mr. CB Prabhakar, Cottage#119, for arranging this interesting movie for the benefit of the residents of Suvidha.



14-09-2016: Onam Celebrations @ Suvidha

"Onam" - The Festival of Flowers was celebrated at Suvidha with lot of enthusiasm and fervor. All residents, Senior Suvidha Management and other shareholders participated in the celebrations. A mouth-watering sumptuous lunch was served to all the participants. Grateful thanks are due to Mrs Vani and Dr K. Lakshman who sponsored the entire function.



Here is the link to photos taken on the occasion.

<https://goo.gl/photos/CaEDGSLwxdCJCKcq6>

➤ Suvidha On The Move :

- **Phase 1a:** The roof and plastering of the new cottages that are under completion, is progressing fast and by 15th of October the neighbouring residents will be relieved from the dust and noise coming from the construction work. The approach road to these cottages and the Viewing Deck are also fast shaping up well.



- **Main Gate & Security:** Front elevation and the security cabin project are taking final shape with the installation of gates.
- **Staff quarters:** Renovation work has been completed as per the stipulated time frame.
- Beautification of the approach road is progressing well with the arrival of flower pots and the interlocking cement bricks.

- **Green House project:** Stripping off of the roof and the side green sheets has been completed and these sheets have been transported to the generator room to reuse them in the construction of a shed there to accommodate the generator, compost drums as well as the dry waste collection bay.



- **Solar Project:** The solar project is progressing well and more than 15 cottages have roof top solar panels fixed.



➤ **Suvidha Family News:**

- On 04-09-2016, Mrs. Raji And Dr. Jinka Subramanya hosted a private sumptuous lunch to the residents of SUVIDHA. Their daughter Nalini, son in law Vinayak and their 1 year old son Nikhil were at the reception to welcome the invitees. It was an enjoyable event for all.
- Brig. Pardhasaradhi of cottage #84 has donated a folding wheel chair to Suvidha. We thank him immensely for his generous gesture.

➤ **Suvidha Staff News:**

- On 01-09-2016, a Send Off get-together was organised for Chief Cook, Mr. Balakrishna, who resigned from his post. He has been with Suvidha for quite a few years and was well appreciated for his culinary skills and ready to help attitude. He has left Suvidha for personal reasons. We wish him all the very best in his future endeavours.

➤ **Suvidha AS IT IS:**

In this issue, we present a special thematic video prepared by Dr. M Mohan Rao a resident of Suvidha Village for the last 3 years. Formerly he was the M.D. & Chief Surgeon at Dr U Mohan Rau Memorial Hospital, Chennai. After retirement, he joined the Suvidha Family. He is a gifted professional with special aptitude in culinary experimentations, music and accumulation of knowledge. His recent endeavour has brought out a video on "Rocks & Rock Gardens of Suvidha". Click on the link below and enjoy a brief journey through Suvidha Village.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSc_dZJLva8

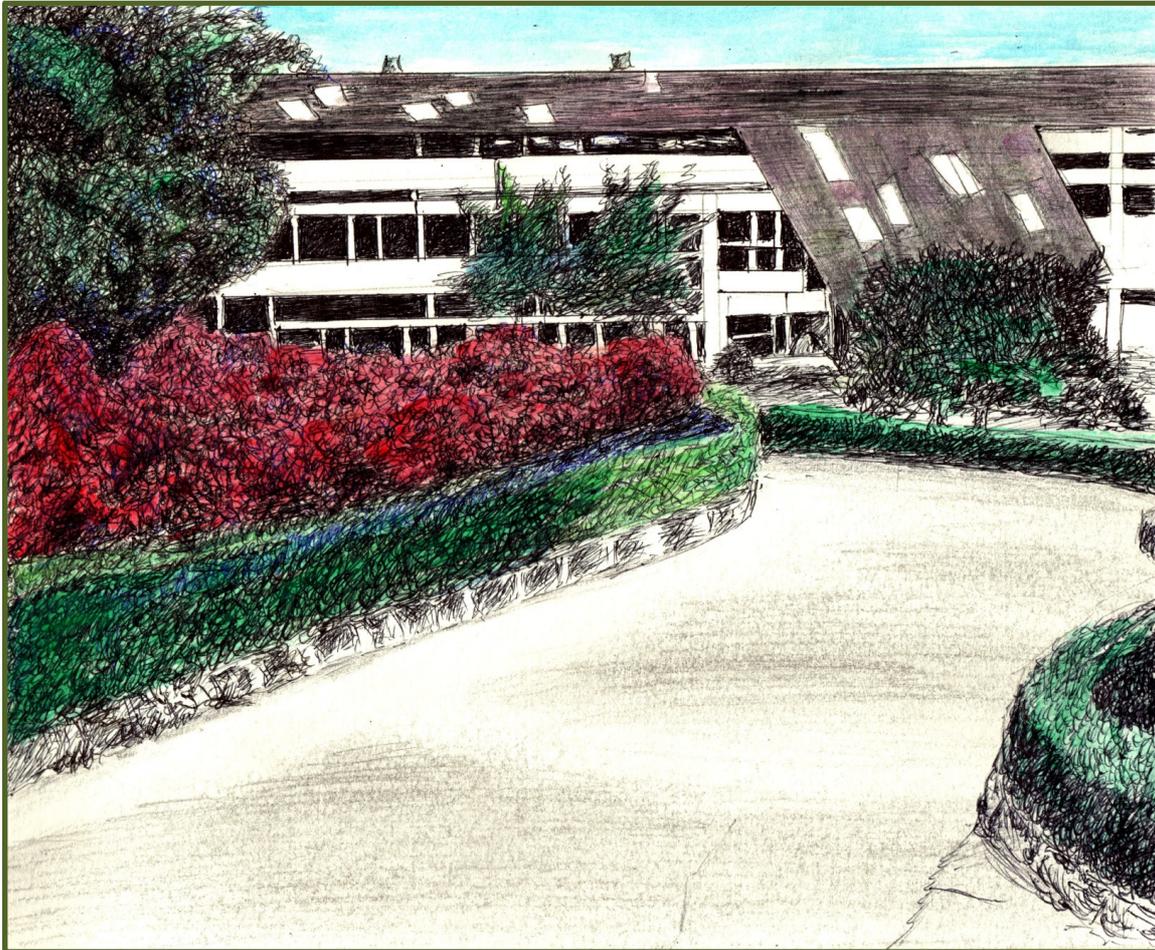
➤ **Suvidha Talent Corner:**

Under this banner, we introduce to our readers, the contributions of our Suvidha family members who have developed substantial special skill-sets as hobbies. Hope you will all enjoy such presentations. We welcome all such talented members to participate in this endeavor.

- **Paintings:** Dr. Narayanan R, is a popular gynecologist and a resident of Cottage No. 107 at SUVIDHA. Dear readers, you have enjoyed some of his paintings over the past two years. They were captioned under the heading, "Flora of Suvidha". To bring in a change, he now intends to capture the beauty of Suvidha by sketching a few familiar scenes. Hope you will enjoy !



OFFICE AND CLUB HOUSE



- **Birds of SUVIDHA:** This is a series of beautiful and at times stunning pictures of birds that are either resident of or visitors to our Village. Mr. Ashok Dey, a permanent resident of SUVIDHA since November 2010, has been able to photograph as many as 101 different species of birds in the Village.



BULBUL: Red-vented & Red-whiskered

This month I thought I should acquaint you with the two ubiquitous species of the Bulbul : the **Red-vented Bulbul** (*Pycnonotus cafer*) and the **Red-whiskered Bulbul** (*Pycnonotus jocosus*). Both these are almost as prolific in our Village as the different species of Sunbirds.

Both species are about the same in size : 20 cm from beak to tail. It is important to note that while all Red-whiskered Bulbul are also red-vented, Red-vented Bulbul do not have red-whiskers.

Red-vented Bulbul



Red-vented Bulbul

A smoke-brown bird with a partially crested black head, it has scale-like markings on its breast and back. The conspicuous crimson patch below the rump gives it its name. Its white rump is particularly noticeable in flight. It is distributed in most parts of the sub-continent except Pakistan. It has been seen all the way up to about 1,500 metres. A common bird in most gardens, it lives both near and away from human habitation, feeding on insects, fruits, berries, vegetables like peas and flower nectar. While it does not sing, its call sounds joyous. Its nesting season is between February and May and its nest is made up of rootlets, plastered with cobwebs in bushes and trees at heights varying from 1 metre to 10 metres from the ground. Both sexes share parental duties.

Red-whiskered Bulbul



Brown above and white below, this species is distinguished by its black, upstanding pointed crest, crimson 'whiskers' and crimson patch under root of tail. It is found all over India except the arid portions (like Rajasthan, etc) and in Bangladesh, Myanmar and across the Bay of Bengal in the Andamans. It prefers more wooded habitats than the Red-vented species and it has been seen at heights of 2,500 metres. Sometimes both species are found together. Its call is more musical than that of the Red-vented species and is quite distinguishable. Its food habits are similar to that of the Red-vented species. Its nesting season is from February to August, but can vary depending on local conditions. It uses fine twigs, rootlets, grass etc., to build its nests, frequently in thatched roofs or overhangs of inhabited huts. Both sexes share parental duties.

- **Butterflies of SUVIDHA:** India has over 1,500 species of butterflies. Mr. Ashok Dey, permanent resident of SUVIDHA since 2010, has been able to photograph and identify 47 species of butterflies inside our Village until now. Our Newsletter will carry this new series comprising pictures and descriptions of butterflies of SUVIDHA.

PIONEER

With a wing span of 40-55 mm, the **Pioneer** aka **Caper White** (*Anaphaeis aurota* aka *Belenois aurota*) is a medium-sized butterfly with white and yellow markings. Its upper side is white with black apical markings. It has a distinctive 'hockey-stick' shaped black bar at the front edge of the forewings. The hind wings are marked only at the margin. The underside which is seen when the butterfly with its wings folded, is bright yellow with marginal markings and black bands along the veins. The males are brighter yellow, thinner and smaller than the females.



This butterfly is found almost all over the sub-continent except in the north-east and flies up to 2,800 metres in the Himalayas. It is easily attracted to flowers, especially nectar-rich species like *Lantana*. It flies rapidly with fluttering wing beats, following an irregular path with quick up-and-down and sideways deviations. As it is wary while feeding and very quickly takes off when approached, it is a little difficult to follow and photograph. Hence one has to patiently follow the butterfly and wait until it decides to sit and bask with its wings spread half-way.

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➤ **Readers' Corner :**

Rethinking Gender: Based On Sanskrit Texts – Part I

Courtesy: Dr. T. S. Rukmani, PhD, D Litt., Resident of Suvidha Village, Cottage # 73-74
(Presently, the author is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.)

In Part I of this paper I present a general assessment of the prevailing attitude amongst scholars, both western and Indian, regarding the position of women in Hinduism. In Part II, I try to point out through Sanskrit textual references that women have had some 'agency' in deciding how to run their lives. Available evidence may be meager but is sufficient to provide another lens to view the position of women in Hinduism. One can view the position of women in different ways as Amartya Sen mentions in his book *The Argumentative Indian* (2005). One can either examine the way society attended to the overall well being of women equally with men in many areas, in which of course the society failed miserably. On the other hand, we can also examine whether women themselves found space to exert their agency in spite of their handicaps that a patriarchal society imposed on them. We do find evidence to show that Hindu women did indeed find space to exercise their choices in different fields.



Part I

Before I begin let me make a few points clear. I am not trying to argue that society as presented in the Sanskrit texts I am dealing with is not a heavily patriarchal one. In common with other ancient societies Hindu society was loaded heavily against women. However, what I am trying to do is like Jamison, Patel and others, to read the texts in a nuanced manner to see if there are any evidences for a voice for women in such texts or was there evidence for empowerment of women in society. The word empowerment can be understood in this context to mean 'to give ability to', 'to give a voice to', 'to permit', 'to have authority to take action' etc. Thus what I am looking for is not broad statements of patriarchy that deny a significant voice to women but reading between the lines for evidence that does indeed indicate some kind of agency or empowerment of women in Hindu Society. As Kartikeya Patel writes (Sharma, 2005:50-1) "...one can approach a given religious tradition with the aim of retrieving what is feminist / womanist and respectful of women in that tradition as opposed to showing how a given religious tradition has historically excluded and degraded women in religious life" (ibid). Patel does that by exploring the Śākta-Hindu tradition in which the divine is a female body wherein "women, earth, and the Goddess are but different manifestations". I am trying to do the same thing by looking for statements and facts that do give some voice to women in Hindu society. There are some points that one has to bear in mind in this context and even though scholars have pointed them out, it still bears repetition, as there is a tendency to make sweeping statements, without sometimes realizing how complicated this question is.

Hinduism itself is not a monolithic area, where one can take one model of practice and apply it across the board. Secondly, there are also traditions like the Vedic and the Tāntric, where the presentation of women is diametrically different. Thus one has to guard against trying to fit one single paradigm of interpretation into these divergent, multiple voices. Lest I am told that the Tāntric tradition is only a later 5th/6th century phenomenon, and it could very well be a reform movement, I would like to state that though written texts are indeed from that period there is no uniform theory that assigns the origin of Tantra from that period. Scholars like Kamalakara Misra, for instance, would point to the occurrence of powerful female imagery in Vedic literature to substantiate its hoary past. Thus for instance, in the Umā Haimavati parable in the Kenopaniṣad, there is a suggestion that Brahman is Śiva and Umā is a synonym for Śakti and is Brahman as well. In any event there is no proof that the Tantra tradition did not exist in an oral tradition, much before the period when it was written down. Thus it is difficult to address the question of agency or empowerment in the context of Hinduism, without being sensitive to the many sidedness of the tradition itself.

The twentieth century gave an impetus to the study of women's issues and feminist studies, started in the West, have had its impact in other parts of the globe as well. Today there are departments devoted to looking at issues concerning women in all areas including Religion as well. For too long, women in Hindu society have been judged solely on the single statement of Manu that a woman deserves no independence in all stages of her lives (Manu: IX.3). While Hindu society, like many other societies, which till recently was predominantly patriarchal, one has to acknowledge that Hindu society, at least in its beginnings, as evidenced by the R̥gveda, seemed to be more fair towards its women than most societies, even though we do not have any written text to compare, belonging to the same age from that period in other cultures. I do not want to rehearse the Vedic utterances that glorify women here, as they are very well known. What led to the deterioration in the status of the Vedic women, after the R̥gvedic period, has remained a mystery to this day.

It is well known that many an idea gains currency once the West sets the trend as has been with feminist studies. However, when westerners study other cultures, there is a tendency to transfer some ideas and interpretations from a western perspective, into an alien context (Patton, 1991:viii). Similarly, Patel writes that "...the contemporary analysis of the rites, rituals, and beliefs of a non-western society often has a Western cultural bias" (Sharma, 2005:53). There is also a tendency to "overdetermine third world women's lives" to fit into certain preconceived models of understanding (Khandelwal, 1989: 4). Moreover, media representations of third world women and children have tended to emphasize the negative side of these cultures. Westerners, who study other so called third world cultures, start off with the presumption that western women are free agents. Like all studies, one already starts off with a hypothesis and very often one only looks for examples that "reinforces and not what contradicts" one's previous presumptions (ibid). But we all know that is not the whole picture. There are sections in every society, even in the most developed nations, where oppression of women and children are still prevalent. Abuse of women and children in western countries is not something of the past. Polygamy is seen even today amongst some groups in Christian communities, which is considered a sign of backwardness and patriarchy amongst feminists. Thus western women are not all free agents that they imagine themselves to be.

Another problem in cross cultural studies is the difficulty of coming to terms with different ethnographic models on a piece by piece analysis. A piece by piece analysis is much more laborious than subsuming types under a holistic umbrella like Hinduism, for instance. Thus it is easy to sweep the whole question of the position of women in Hinduism under the carpet of Manu's statement that a woman deserves no freedom, than to undertake a piece by piece analysis of the available

evidence from individual texts belonging more or less to the same period as the Manusmṛti (MS). “Appadurai argued that a holistic conception of culture has led to India being defined by caste and hierarchy and ... this has blinded scholars to the diversities and indeterminacies of social life in South Asia” (Khandelwal: 44). Veena Das echoes the same when she says that the “analytical tools of anthropology” are such, that can render other societies knowable and they are not so much concerned with “transgressions, disorder, and violence” (ibid). This tendency to view societies through single lenses, and within certain rules and regulations, has made it difficult to come to terms with subjects which do not fall into these broad, holistic structures. While all cultures have their down sides, and there can never be judgments that apply to all women across the board, there is a tendency to “over determine” women’s lives in third world countries in general. Hindu women do not form a single homogeneous category as mentioned earlier and neither is the Hindu family governed by a single set of rules. There are no legal treatises or books that prescribe conventional behavior for the early period as is available in other cultures. Rta and dharma were more descriptive than prescriptive and good behavior evolved in a social context within a religious ambit. For Manu to accept four ways of learning what dharma is (Manu: II.12), only emphasizes this aspect of dharma. While Gārgī could be a representative of a Vedic Hindu philosopher there are any number of examples of women who used the mantras and charms in the Atharvaveda to gain their ends, who are no less Vedic Hindus. And then you have the Tantra in which “women share with the goddess a continuity of being” (Bose: 114). Therefore one has to be wary to jump to conclusions by reading single texts.

While there is recognition of these limitations in recent studies, earlier images are very difficult to live down and will need many more studies, before there is a truer and more realistic picture presented of the cultures one studies. Recent books like Faces of the Feminine, Jewels of Authority, Sacrificed Wife Sacrificer’s Wife, Women in Ochre Robes, The Graceful Guru etc., are all helping in this new direction, but much more needs to be done to counteract the images that are already formed by earlier studies. My intention is not to point a finger at only the westerner’s study of women in Hinduism. Indian scholars are equally at fault in this area. As most of the texts, dealing with Hinduism are in the difficult Sanskrit language and till recently, those interested in women studies were not necessarily Sanskritists but anthropologists and sociologists who normally have a tendency to rely on translations of texts like the Manusmṛti, for instance, the picture presented does not take into consideration the vast nuances that can be read into the texts. It is easy to extrapolate from single statements like Manu’s i.e. that a woman deserves no independence. But what about all the other statements in the same text that goes counter to this sentiment itself. Moreover the MS is a text belonging to a period between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE in history if we go by what Patrick Olivelle says in his latest critical edition of the MS (2005). It is high time, also, that one acknowledged that the MS is, after all, only one text of a particular genre. And some of the other texts we know that belong more or less to the same period are the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Kalpasūtras which include the Dharmasūtras and the Gṛhyasūtras, Bharata’s Nāṭyaśāstra, and perhaps some early philosophical texts which were forerunners of Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Pūrvamīmāṃsā, etc., as well as some Purāṇas. If, as now accepted by scholars (Olivelle, Fitzgerald, Hildebrandt) these texts came into being during the time when the Nandas and Mauryas were defeated and there was a hope of revival of Vedic dharma due to the rule of Pusyamitra amongst some influential sections of thinkers, it is but natural that they would be tempted to write such works promoting their own take on what Vedic dharma really means to them.

One other point that is interesting, particularly when we find so many different genres existing more or less contemporaneously during the same period is, whether the authors of these different genres consciously pursued their own ideology within the genre they had chosen to write under. In other words, was there an over-riding ideology being pursued even within the chosen genre? In our own times, we find works written to promote a certain ideology be it Marxist, feminist, fundamentalist and so on and so forth. Why would those writing in earlier times have been different from present day writers particularly when there were no curbs to express oneself by an over-arching political or religious organization to impose a uniform ideology?

Narayana Rao writing in Purāṇa Perennis (Doniger, 1993 : 85-100) illustrates through examples how the Purāṇas promoted brahminic ideology by including local tales and local mythology into the Purāṇic genre. “Vast bodies of folk/regional stories, events, legends and histories have been incorporated into the Purāṇas along with prescriptive modes of behavior appropriate to people of different stations of life.” (ibid: 92). He further adds that such a device enables a “Brahminic interpretation of the material possible without necessarily erasing local color and regional flavor” (ibid). I would call this as a Sanskritization of folklore using Srinivas’ typology with a different meaning i.e. bringing other tales within the contours of a Sanskritic worldview. The further question of whether there is a connection between a genre and a historical period is something that researches in Indology have not so far looked at.

We can see the different kinds of texts in this period we are addressing, as belonging to different genres. Thus the Kalpasūtras clearly belong right in the centre of the “Dharma” ideology with its three divisions self-consciously styled as Śrautasūtras, Dharmasūtras, and Gṛhyasūtras and seem to attend to the main topics that deal with “dharma”. There is not much freedom to express alternate views in those works but they also find some leeway to include material reflecting

changed conditions. How does one construe the statement in the Āpastamba Dharmasūtras that one should follow what the women say in the funeral saṃskāras? (ApS. ii.6) The Smṛti literature on the other hand, dealing with presumably the contemporary scene, was able to weave in different viewpoints as well as allow a certain freedom to the author to moralize and promote his/her own views and ideology within the body of the text. That the smṛti texts are dealing with contemporary issues as much as contextually situating themselves within Vedic dharma ideology can be seen when the Devala Smṛti (ca 600-900 CE) addresses the question of purification of persons kidnapped and molested by mleccchas. (Wadekar:Vol II. 1996: 246-249). When the Mahābhārata (Mbh) defines itself as a dharmasāstra, mokṣasāstra, arthasāstra and kāmasāstra, and also proclaims that “Whatever is not found here cannot be found anywhere else” it proclaims its intention to include everything that is there in society in all areas of dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa at the time. It is this all inclusive nature of the Mahābhārata that allows us to get a picture of many women characters who do not all fit into Manu’s paradigm. Whether the Mbh was the work of a single author as Hildebeitel argues or whether it came into being through many redactions, what we have today is a work of a grand nature. Its self proclaimed all-inclusive nature gives it the rationale to include new ideas and values that have come in the wake of new changes in society, representing all facets of human existence. While narratives and oral recitations were very much part of Vedic culture as seen in the abhiplava recitations on the occasion of Vedic sacrifices, to weave all new material that was available in this period (400 BCE-400 CE) into a grand narrative and consciously compose the text to situate it within the Vedic dharma-ideology was indeed a stupendous task and is seen in the attempt to incorporate new ideas and values into its plan. We therefore get lengthy discourses without a definitive answer to many questions raised and there are many unresolved issues in the Mbh. Thus there is for instance, the uneasy juxtaposition of meat eating and non-killing (ahiṃsā) in the section XIII.115 in the dialogue between Janaka and Śuka on the great merits of non-killing or ahiṃsā without a categorical condemnation of violence to animals. While exaggerated descriptions of the advantage of being a vegetarian and a condemnation of killing/violence to animals is propagated, it does not result in any definite resolution in favor of non-violence as that would go against Vedic sacrifice. The discussion is thus left to wander in thin air. So also there exists a tension between following the varṇāśrama-dharmas or the sādharma-dharmas as illustrated in the famous Kṛṣṇa-Arjuna dialogue on the battlefield and on many other occasions. Similarly, the Mbh gives us examples of independent women like Satyawatī and Śakuntalā as well as Sāvitrī recalling to mind women of the Rgvedic age as well as providing other examples of the inferior position of women. It seems that the author or authors of the Mbh choose their own preferences in the Vedic ideology while trying to accommodate the changed circumstances as well. We also have another genre i.e. the philosophical sūtras which confine themselves to their area of expertise but also serve the over all task of reinforcing Vedic dharma. Thus what unites all these different genres is the attempt to valorize Vedic dharma in their own individual ways. Thus when one reads these various texts belonging more or less to the same period, it is important to be conscious of these motives at work and not to take whatever is said there in a literal sense.

The tendency to write works to situate them in a Vedic dharma ideology has been present throughout history, which we are witness to. In fact Śaṅkarācārya explicitly states in his introduction to the commentary on the Bhagavadgītā that one of the aims of his work was the establishment of Vedic dharma. In Śaṅkarācārya’s time there was another threat looming large in the form of unorthodox schools of religion and philosophy gaining ground and the commentaries of Śaṅkara, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, Maṇḍana Miśra, Vyāsa (Yoga-bhāṣya), Vātsyāyana (Nyāya-bhāṣya) and others on the various schools of philosophy between the 5th - 8th centuries of the Common Era, were in their own way trying to bring back the world view of Vedic dharma. In medieval times the nibandhas and paddhatis were again trying to go back to Vedic dharma and texts like the Strīdharmapaddhati clearly are much more rigid than the Smṛti literature. This was again an attempt to preserve the dharma which was now subject to threats from unfamiliar people professing different religions and life styles (Julia Leslie, 1989). The attempts of Ram Mohun Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda and others working towards that understanding in different ways in modern times can also fall under the same category. Thus many of the attempts of these writers and reformers straddle between trying to accommodate changed societal conditions and trying to fit them into an overall Vedic view.

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Road Map to tread the Last Years of Life - Part III

Compiled by Dr. P M Chandrasekhara, Cottage # 75

In old age the top most concern is about the degenerative changes that take place in ones life. It is what happens short of death – losing their hearing, their memory, their best friends, and their way of life. In other words “Old age is a continuous series of losses”. With luck and fastidiousness – eating well, exercising, keeping our blood pressure and sugar under control, getting medical help when we need it – people can often live and manage a very long time. But eventually the losses accumulate to the point where life’s daily requirements become more than we can physically or mentally manage on our own. As fewer of us are struck dead out of the blue, most of us will spend significant periods of our lives too

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reduced and debilitated to live independently. We normally do not like to think about this eventuality. As a result, most of us are unprepared for it. We rarely pay attention to how we will live when we need help until it's too late to do much about it.

In the olden days, unless family could take care of the old and debilitated persons, they had no options left except a poorhouse, or alms house, as it was often called. These institutions went back centuries in Europe and the United States. If you are elderly and in need of help but did not have a child or independent wealth to fall back on, poor house was your only source of shelter. Poorhouses were grim, odious place to incarcerate elderly paupers, out-of-luck immigrants, young drunks, the mentally ill etc. Filth and dilapidation were the norm. In 1935, with the passage of Social Security, the United States joined Europe in creating a system of national pensions. Suddenly, a widow's future was secure, and retirement, once the exclusive provenance of the rich, became a mass phenomenon.



In time, poorhouses passed from memory in the industrialised world, but they persisted elsewhere. In developing countries, they have become common, because economic growth is breaking up the extended family without yet producing the affluence to protect the elderly from poverty and neglect. In India, existence of such a plan is often unacknowledged. One such example at Delhi is Guru Vishram Vridh ashram, where the home is a converted warehouse – a vast open room with scores of disabled elderly people on cots and floor mattresses. According to the manager, he has not turned away any one as long as he had an open bed. About half of the residents there by retirement homes and hospitals if they couldn't pay their bills. The other half were found in the streets and parks by volunteers or the police. All suffered from a combination of debility and poverty.

Fortunately, the industrialized world's elderly have escaped the threat of such a fate. Prosperity has enabled even the poor to expect nursing homes with square meals, professional health services, physical therapy and bingo. They have eased debility and old age for millions and made proper care and safety a norm to an extent that the inmates of poorhouses could not imagine. Yet still, most consider old age homes frightening, desolate, even odious place to spend the last phase of one's life. We need and desire something more. To understand what happened, one has to trace the story of how we replaced the poorhouse with the kind of places we have today – and it turns out to be a medical story. Our old age homes didn't develop out of a desire to give the frail elderly better lives than they'd had in those dismal places.

In the middle part of the twentieth century, medicine was undergoing a rapid and historic transformation. Before that time, if you fell ill, doctors usually tended to you in your own bed. The function of hospitals was mainly custodial. As the great physician-writer Lewis Thomas [1937] observed "If being in a hospital bed made a difference by providing warmth, shelter, food, and attentive friendly nursing care, whether you survived or not depended on the natural history of the disease by itself. Medicine made little or no difference."

From World War II onwards, the picture shifted radically with the availability of numerous antibiotics for treating infections. Drugs to control blood pressure and treat hormonal imbalances were discovered. Breakthroughs in everything from heart surgery to artificial respirators to kidney transplantation became commonplace. Doctors became heroes and the hospital transformed from a symbol of sickness to a place of hope and cure.

Meanwhile, policy planners had assumed that establishing pension scheme would end poorhouses, but the problem did not go away. The reason old people wound up in poorhouses, it turned out, was not just that they didn't have money to pay for a home. But hospitals couldn't solve the disabilities of chronic illness and advancing age, and they began to fill up with people who had nowhere to go. The hospitals lobbied the government for help, and in 1954, lawmakers provided funding to enable them to build separate custodial units for patients needing an extended period of 'recovery'. That was the beginning of modern nursing home. They were created to help the elderly. They were created to clear the hospital beds – which is why they were called "nursing' homes.

The next major spur to American nursing home growth was similarly unintentional. When Medicare, America's health insurance system for the aged and disabled, passed in 1965, the law specified that it would pay only for care in facilities that met basic health and safety standards.

This is the consequence of a society that faces the final phase of the human life cycle by trying not to think about it. We end up with institutions that address any number of societal goals – from freeing the hospital beds to taking burdens off families' hands to coping with poverty among elderly – but never the goal that matters to the people who reside in them: how to make life worth living when we're weak and frail and can't fend for ourselves anymore.

TO BE CONTINUED....

Acknowledgement: Excerpts from various articles including the novel "Being Mortal" by Atul Gawande - Publisher Malcolm M Gladwell

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