

Meena Moorthy Shivdas -

'You are always taught that God is perfect'...



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Meena Moorthy Shivdas, brought up in the Hindu religion, is a researcher in the Gender and Development Unit of the Asian and Pacific Development Centre (APDC) in Malaysia. She is currently working on a book that looks at the impact of media in the region. Originally from Bangalore, India, she has lived in Singapore and worked with the women's group AWARE. While on a visit to Manila, she shared some of her thoughts on religion, women and media with our interviewer, Luz Maria Martinez. Here is what she had to say:

"Hinduism by itself is not really a religion but a way of life. You flow with the tide. If you are comfortable fasting you do it, if you don't feel like it you just don't do it. Hinduism has taught me some very basic values that you go by in life."

"Honesty being a value, being true to yourself. When you are tolerant of others you don't impose your opinions on them, there's a lot of give and take. Those are values that become you after a while, it just stems from your personal values."

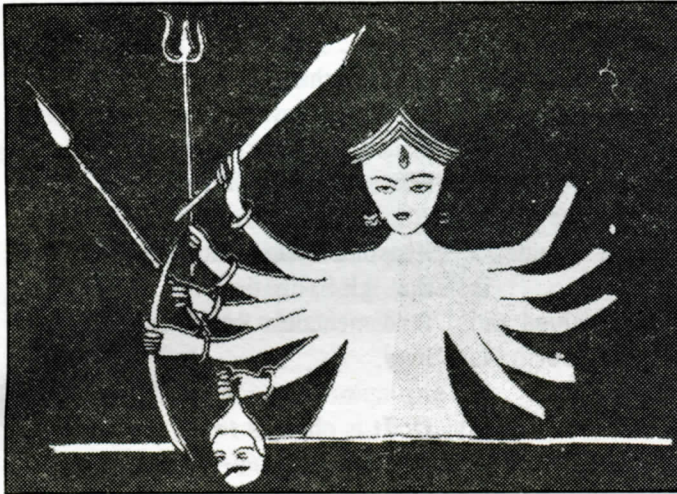
Q: Concerning religion, how were you raised as a child?

Meena: As you grow up in a Hindu home it is the rituals you see. You get up in the morning and pray, things that your mother did or your grandmother who is more traditional than your mother, like my grandfather, who would get up every morning and pray. You really don't know what they mean until you get older and go to school, I think even as an adult you are still observing these things. Your parents, grandparents and uncles tell you little stories from epics, legends and folklore, you learn to pick up values from the stories, what is good, what is evil. I think it happens in all religions.

Hinduism is a pantheon of Gods who have different powers. The female power as in *Shakti*, which means energy and power, has different forms, e.g., *Kali*, *Lakshmi*, *Parvati*, etc. They embody different kinds of power - wealth, knowledge, harmony etc. *Shakti* is the female power, the power of the Earth Mother. The male power is embodied in *Brahma* the Creator, *Vishnu* the protector and *Shiva* the destroyer. *Shiva* is also known as *Harihara* - the one born of man and woman and possessing both male and female qualities.

Q: Do you still practice Hinduism?

Meena: Not Hinduism as the way it was practiced in my mother's home. I think that for me it's a time for quiet reflection but



Kali, from *Against All Odds* p. 132

I do know that it is based on all the values that I grew up learning. It's a spirituality [from] being exposed to some of life's experiences, being exposed to different cultures and religions and different people's friendships and influence.

I do collect idols. Specifically, of *Ganesh*, the elephant headed god in Indian mythology. The reason why I think I am attracted to him is to me he symbolizes harmony and diversity. He has an elephant's face and a human body, to me that is a human being living with other living things and the imperfection to his body. You are always taught that God is perfect, but he (*Ganesh*) is imperfect, he has a big stomach that is so comforting and one of his tusks is broken because there was a time the moon laughed at him because of his big stomach and he broke his tusk and threw it out of anger. He is God and he could have grown it back but he did not. So imperfection is alright as long as you can live in harmony and with all other living creatures, you can have your bouts with temper tantrums as long as you aren't destructive.

If I had a child I would expose her/him to other religions. If I see a church I enter it and pray one Hail Mary, I would love to enter a mosque but as a woman I am not allowed. I keep all things that are associated with different religions like the prayer wheel, the Buddha heads, they are so peaceful and serene.

of each other and each one practices their own faith, and you do have intermarriages. It's all part of life, no big deal. What [to be] wary [of] now is how fundamentalism is creeping into almost all religions. In a way fundamentalism is destroying things that were built over the years, e.g., this deep sense of tolerance of one another, fundamentalism makes you loose respect for one another's values. What happens with fundamentalism is one ideology is superimposed on everything else, it's like nothing has any value except for what they are saying.

I don't know what perspective they have. I think it's the idea of one religion dominating, one of the perspectives they have is women are below them. That's not how we began in the first place because we have the concept of *Shiva* as *Harihara* the daughter of Hari and Harava, half man half woman. She is always the balance. I don't know, it seems that the fundamentalists have lost that balance of good and evil and male and

Q: Who are the fundamentalists and what perspective do they have?

In India, which has been influenced by many religions throughout history, all religions have been living together tolerant

female, it was always half. To them it's just the male view of saying where women are, where they ought to be. How they devalue the women's contributions and they want to tell her exactly what to do. That is how fundamentalist's view the religion.

Q: Is Hinduism a patriarchal religion?

Meena: It is. It's patriarchal in the sense that in the *Shastras* or the basic texts, the *Vedas*, where you have a set of laws, the lawgiver was a man called *Manud* [so] you have the *Manudharmashastra* which is a set of codes by which you have to live. He did place women on a lower level but that was a man interpreting the laws of how society should have to live and where women should be. It was a man in the ancient times who did it but the basic texts, wherever they came from, placed the genders on a par. That is my reading of it.

Q: But as far as it has been practiced over the years, has it been in a patriarchal setting?

Meena: This patriarchal setting translates itself into many cases of violence against women. As in the dowry system where women are burned or *Sati*, when a man died it was alright for his wife to set herself on fire and burn herself to death because her life had ended because his ended. All these things have been added on in the course of history, I don't think the original text had anything that alluded

to *Sati*. This may have happened during one of the wars, where a soldier died and they did not want to endanger her life so she ended her life but it was added to the daily practices of everyday life.



Lynn Lee

You take for granted without questioning it's origins, how it came about or what was the social context by which it was interpreted? I think the original text treated human life equally, including other life forms as in animals, birds and creatures of the forest and the trees.

Q: What are positive aspects in the practice of Hinduism?

Meena: Practicing without any fundamentalist connotations means that a woman is respected in her home, she is seen as a person, as the life giver, her feelings and opinions are taken into account. There is this immense thing of being tolerant of fellow human beings.

Q: Do you think this globalization of media has had an impact on religion and how it views women? In a negative or positive way?

Meena: The globalization of media perpetuates stereotypes and not only in a national context, but now we have STAR TV and ZTV [so] *Ted Turner* decides what everybody sees and *Rupert Murdoch* knows exactly what is happening, all these images get beamed into even the most remote villages in India. It gives rise to new cultures and [images of] how we should be even though ancient Asian texts tell you that women are on a par [with men] - what is being beamed on media is supposedly 'progressive' [but] there are these conflicting messages.

It's double edged really, because in one sense although media shows you that there is a lot of progress for women, that women are allowed to go out and work, in a rural setting that may help her [as she sees] this

as progress that she can go out to work. On the other hand the way media treats women as sex objects, as just literally chattels, suddenly, you have this entire new concept that women are just play things and that is where the trouble begins I guess! Women's work is undervalued and their worth is trivialized.

Consciously or unconsciously people are exuding these images. It's more powerful than these

convoluted texts that have had different interpretations over time. Media is right now - it's graphic.

Q: I am intrigued with your statement about medias' impact on the religious structure.

Meena: Actually, when STAR TV came into India, the fundamentalists turned this into a double edged sword. They said that the reasons they are being fundamentalist, and [saying] everyone [should] go back to the 'good old values' as seen through their eyes, is because of these [media images]. This gives them a certain level of legitimacy, it's a way they turn things to suit themselves, that they have their own agendas is different altogether. The reason they give as to why fundamentalism, especially Hindu fundamentalism, is coming in a big wave, is because there is all this media

portrayal of things which they think are alien and should not be there and so they propose that women go back to the 'traditional' ways of society, where women do not get opportunities and men decide what women will do.

It has different implications, as if somehow the globalization of media and fundamentalism are shaping women's lives.

Q: It is obvious that you have given this concept some thought and that you can see the connections.

Meena: There is a connection. There are advantages when the whole world becomes a global village but there are also disadvantages because our markets are all connected. But if you come from a developing country you lose out so much because the developed countries have set up a system to protect their markets but it's a system that exploits our own. As developing countries we do not have that much bargaining power and indigenous cultures and traditions take a beating because media comes in and destroys that and there are implications for women at every stage.

Q: What impacts do you see media having on the young?

Meena: Because our markets have opened up we are begging for investors to come in, for coke to come in, nevermind that we kicked them out in 1976, the young are caught up in this material thing.



I wonder about the young women growing up - whether even feminism means anything. They even think our anger is irrational. Why are we so angry? They think they are cool and their boyfriends treat them pretty cool so why are we so angry? Despite globalization and the media opening up, I wonder if they are conscious of this on any level, that the world is such a small place.

Q: What about young women and fundamentalism?

What I am being told is that the fundamentalists are trying to reach this age group. They are saying we couldn't control your mothers or older sisters but we can control you. I think this is all part of the brainwashing of the fundamentalists. You may want to speculate on this view because I really have no proof that they are actually reaching out to youth. All I can say is a growing mass of middle class young people are becoming increasingly pro-Hindu and pro-dominant ideology. Fundamentalists also say openly that the Muslim minority will outpopulate the Hindu race. This is statistically impossible, demographers know it so do feminists.



Elephant God Ganesh

personal views

The Rhythm Is Off beat

- a personal view of catholic teachings on contraception
by Marilen J. Dañguilan, MD

"I am convinced that my conscience is correct, even if it conflicts with the moral teachings of the Church."

I am a Catholic. To non-believers and cynics, this statement may mean 'I am sexually repressed' or 'I am always guilty of something'. My Church is perceived as being obsessed with sex and sin. Unfortunately, this obsession has obscured the true meaning and significance of what my Church stands for - social justice and love.

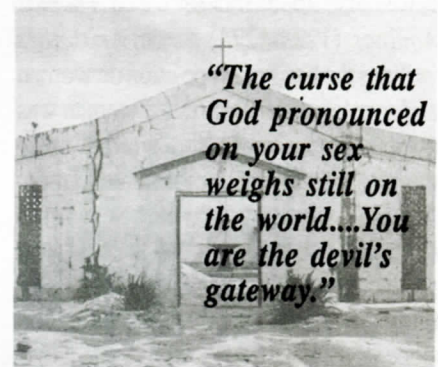
It has supported several causes which strike a harmonious chord in me. I agree when it urges government and international lending institutions to cancel odious loans. I agree when it pushes government to implement a genuine agrarian reform program that gives land to the tillers. I agree when it calls on policymakers to provide more humane housing conditions and just wages for the poor. I agree when it protests against laws like the one on Value Added Tax. I agree with my Church too when it declares that population is not the cause, but an effect of, or that it exacerbates the problems of poverty and underdevelopment.

But when it comes to the issue of contraception, my Church and I differ. After much study, prayer, and reflection, I am convinced that my conscience is correct, even if it conflicts with the moral teachings of the Church. And in inner peace, I cannot but follow my conscience.

I am trying to understand my Church's ban on contraception. I have to go back in time and trace the evolution of its stand. Let

me walk you quickly through its history.1.

It has been almost 2,000 years since Augustine theologically linked sex, sexual pleasure, and original sin. He asserted that sexual intercourse is inherently tainted and needed to be salvaged by procreation. This was a reaction towards a group which appreciated sexual pleasure as a privilege of marital sex and which believed that unbaptized babies had access to heaven.



Bing Conception/FAIN

At about this time, women were already denigrated. Tertullian, a very influential third-century theologian, considers Eve as the cause of original sin and his judgement on women was harsh and severe: "Do you know that Eve is you? The curse that God pronounced on your sex weighs still on the world....You are the devil's gateway."

It has been close to 900 years since the monk Gratian compiled the first collection of canon law. It declared contraception a