SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND GOALS FOR INDIVIDUAL LIFE

A major pillar of a religious culture is the guidelines it offers to individuals regarding appropriate goals for life and social responsibility. In this chapter, we will consider that pillar of Hinduism. We will review the enduring influence of some norms prescribed by ancient *dharma* texts on social and individual life within Hindu communities. We will also look at the roles of vernacular texts that influence moral values and caste councils (*panchāyats*) that regulate ethical and social behavior of people in communities locally. These preclude a verbatim following of the injunctions of the *dharma* texts by every Hindu, as is sometimes assumed. Like all other aspects of Hinduism, the sources for guidance for a good life and social responsibility are layered. They contain prescriptions, at times stating dire consequences for their disregard; but they are not commandments. In the absence of a centralized religious institution with judicial authority, in ancient and medieval times, the punitive measures for disregard of prescribed injunctions were either taken up by royal courts or imposed by the society through various ways of exclusion. In modern times, social exclusion has been the main form of disciplinary measures, but it is fast losing its impactfulness with increasing stress on individual choice. Further, there is no concept of heresy or blasphemy in Hinduism by which an adherent

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can be judged. In this chapter, reviewing some sources of guidance, we will explore: (a) the organization of Hindu society in a hereditary and hierarchical system of group identity, widely termed "caste," (b) status of roles for women, and (c) goals for individual life. We begin with social organization rather than individual life goals since in some ways the latter are embedded in the former.

ORGANIZATION OF SOCIETY – "CASTE"

In previous chapters, we have seen references to the organization of the Hindu society into occupation related hereditary and hierarchically ordered groups – castes –that has had clearly discriminatory implications. This is one of the aspects of Hinduism that have received the most attention in public discourses around the world. Some people view caste not simply as an aspect of Hinduism but rather as synonymous with it. Caste therefore deserves close attention. The term "caste" is not indigenous, of course. It is a term originally used by the Spanish in the early sixteenth century to denote "race" or "tribe." It was employed by the Portuguese to refer to the various endogamous communities they encountered when they established their colonies in India the sixteenth century onward. The term later came to be used globally to refer to the Hindu social organization. Yet the term conflates two interrelated Indian terms, *varṇa* and *jāti*. *Varṇa* refers to a broad categorization of the society into four groups – priests (Brahmins), warriors and kings (Kshatriyas), merchants and craftsmen (Vaishyas), and servants (Shudras) – hierarchically ordered in terms of their religious status based on the criterion of ritual purity, whereas *jāti* denotes an endogamous community traditionally associated with a specific hereditary occupation and is self-governed in many ways. When a person mentions her/his caste, the reference is generally to their *jāti*. The term *varṇa* is hardly ever used in everyday conversations.

There are literally hundreds of *jāti*s in each part of India. Some *jāti*s are found widely, while some are distinctive to each region, partly based on geography. For example, fishing communities are naturally found in coastal regions and not in landlocked ones. Each *jāti* loosely aligns with a *varṇa*. But this alignment is not permanently fixed. It varies region to region and also in different

historical contexts. In each context, as sociologist M.N. Srinivas has discussed, some *jātis* that are numerically strong acquire political and/or economic power also gain dominance over others whether they have high religious status or not. This may lead a *jāti* to slide from one *varṇa* to another and on the scale of hierarchy. Only the priestly *varṇa* has remained relatively stable since ancient times in terms of *jāti*s belonging to it. It is important to note here that the role of a "priest" in Hinduism differs strikingly from the one found in other traditions. A Hindu priest does not preach in a temple or function as a spiritual guide; nor does he have jurisdiction over people's religious life. A priest in Hinduism is fundamentally a ritual specialist who officiates ceremonies for families, communities, or in temples closely following Vedic or other sacred texts. A learned priest may also train other priests in scriptures and ritual performance. He has a high status but less authority over community and individual lives than priests in some other traditions. It is helpful to keep this in view in understanding the working of the caste system. Since caste is a distinct social system with a truly long history, some questions that arise about it are: How did this system originate? What were its implications at the time? How has it worked over the centuries and what is its state now? Exploring these questions with some scholarly insights can help us understand this aspect of Hinduism to an extent. A comprehensive examination of this extremely complex and over two millennia old system is not possible here.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CASTE (VARṆA AND JĀTI) SYSTEM

It is generally accepted by scholars that Aryans who migrated to India already had a tripartite social system, flexibly divided into priests, warriors, and commoners. The servants were added later. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the textual origins of the caste system are often traced to a verse in RV 10.90, which describes how the creation emerged when the Supreme Man sacrificed Himself. The hymn presents everything in the universe – birds, animals, days, planets, and the Vedas – as originating from a singular divine source. The hymn reflects the almost obsessive tendency of ancient Indian thinkers to classify things, elements, natural products, and

people with what they considered a universally applicable order, as Brian K. Smith has observed. One verse in it states that the four *varṇa*s came out of His mouth, arms, thighs, and feet. Hierarchy (related to the highest to the lowest parts of the divine body) is implicit in this verse; but there is no mention of heredity. There have been extensive debates about the dating of the hymn since the nineteenth century. Contemporary scholars generally agree that it was a later addition to *Rig* Veda (RV), perhaps to claim Vedic authority for hierarchy once it became established. In the early Vedic era, the *varṇa* hierarchy prevailed in an embryonic form.

Clear references to the four *varṇa*s are found in later Vedic texts and the *Gita* (BG). In these, the sense of hierarchy is stronger – with Brahmins placed at the top. But these texts are not specifically concerned about systematically organizing society. Prescriptions for social hierarchy with discrimination and stratified *varṇa–jāti* boundaries are generally associated with *dharma* treatises (fourth-century BCE–fourth-century CE, discussed earlier as formative texts). Of these the *Manu Dharmaśāstra* is considered prominent and has also received most attention in academic and public discourses. We will therefore mainly refer to it here. Some scholars think that *jāti* was likely an indigenous non-Aryan system that became integrated with the *varṇa* system in the social organization as described in *dharma* texts. Following Louise Dumont's influential work *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966), many scholars agreed that the structures of hierarchy as prescribed by these texts were based on notions of inherent purity and pollution of human groups among whom Brahmins were seen as the purest and were expected to follow stringent rules of behavior for it. Each *varṇa* lower on the ladder was seen as relatively less pure in a graded manner and those outside of all *varṇa*s as polluted. At the same time, Dumont observed that higher rank in this schema did not mean greater power or wealth. A similar observation made by Brian K. Smith is that it is possible that throughout history the ceremonially high status of Brahmins was not indicative of their social power.

More recently, Sanskrit scholar Patrick Olivelle (1998) has made two observations based on a close linguistic analysis of *dharma* texts.

First, the *dharma* treatises like Manu's were not so concerned with inherent purity as they were with establishing processes for purifying a person's state. They can be read as manuals for purification. Manu's text, with its focus on the behavior of a Brahmin man, for example, has numerous verses specifying actions or situations that lead to his fall (being blemished) and ways to return to a purified state. Olivelle's second observation is that the *dharma* texts did not create social structures but rather reinforced the existing ones with an authoritative tone.

In Chapter 10 of Manu's treatise there is a section on the implications of marriages in which the husband and wife belong to different *varṇa*s. The children of several types of mixed marriages are assigned no position in the ārya society even as Shudras. They are referenced as so impure that their touch is polluting. Harsh and humiliating conditions such as living outside of a village and eating in broken dishes are prescribed for them. For occupations, demeaning tasks such as cleaning streets and picking up dead animals are specified for them. But was Manu creating new conditions? This section uses expressions like "established" (*iti sthiti*) or "remembered" (*smṛta*), indicating their prior prevalence. As discussed by Y. Krishnan, references to castes in Buddhist texts of this period corroborate that such hierarchies had become a social reality by this time. The *dharma* texts like Manu's reinforced it using strong religious terms. At the same time, as mentioned in Chapter 1, *dharma*, as it appears in these treatises, is context-sensitive. Hindus often say that *dharma* has to be modified according to *des-kāl* (locale and time) when they need to deviate from the norms because of the context. Further, a few verses in *dharma* treatises suggest that their writers were not sure about the validity of the norms they were prescribing. The same chapter of Manu's treatise that prescribes harsh norms for outcasts contains a verse (10.73) that states that the Creator has declared that the Aryans and non-Aryans who take on one another's behavior are neither equal nor unequal. Two other verses (10.126–127) state that except for the Vedic chanting, Shudras may observe all practices of *dharma*. Even with ambivalence reflected in such verses in *dharma* texts, however, it is certain that discriminatory hierarchical social organization has been a reality in Hindu communities for two millennia.

IMPLICATIONS OF CASTE FOR VARIOUS COMMUNITIES

Among Hindus in India and elsewhere, people belonging to *jāti*s that are clearly aligned to the upper three *varṇa*s, especially Brahmins, have enjoyed high social status, even though not necessarily power and affluence. At regional levels, *jāti*s that have enjoyed political and financial dominance in different historical contexts are the ones that have had greater control over land and means of material production. These vary in regions and may or may not belong to upper castes. All communities have followed endogamy and generally avoided inter-dining. Accepting food from castes higher than one's own, however, is common. *Jāti*s loosely aligned with non-priestly *varṇa*s including Shudra have at times moved on the scale of hierarchy when the nature or significance of their occupations or their material, political or social realities underwent change. Some injunctions found in texts like Manu become irrelevant in contexts when occupations disappear or their status changes.

The *jāti*s that have suffered most discrimination consistently are the ones put outside of the *varṇa* grid and came to get the "untouchable" status. Severe restrictions on their movements in villages and towns have excluded them from decently paying occupations. A large percentage of them have remained landless laborers or followed occupations requiring intense and demeaning labor with meager financial gains. Their exclusion from elite ritual spaces and temples, and their discriminatory treatment in village gatherings have left deep scars of humiliation among them. Members of many such communities now identify themselves as "Dalits" (trampled upon) and rightly demand social justice denied to them for centuries. Several modern Hindu leaders have made efforts to bring about change in this aspect of their society. In independent India, caste discrimination is punishable by law. Universal adult franchise and measures of mandatory affirmative action in education and government employment are put in place. These have resulted in some visible changes in areas such as education and government jobs where a percentage of Dalits have seen socioeconomic success. Yet atrocities to Dalits, especially those locked in labor intensive jobs, are regularly reported, indicating that the problem is far from over.

As seen in earlier chapters, there have, however, always been a few voices since the time of Upanishads that have challenged discriminatory hierarchies of caste. The epics and Puranas too contain narratives that challenge the notion; the regional saint-poets clearly derided caste hierarchies. In contemporary times, a good percentage of upper-caste Hindus acknowledge the social injustice that Dalits have historically suffered in the *varṇa-jāti* system. Many of them engage in some corrective activity. Chaitrali, the young woman of the Kulkarni family whom we first met in the Introduction, teaches festival dances to children in low-caste and Dalit communities in such an effort. Some of my school and college teachers made regular efforts to get financial assistance for students from Dalit communities. Caste hierarchies are recognized as unjust and in the need of erasure by these Hindus. But they do not agree with the view that Hinduism is synonymous with the *varṇa-jāti* system. They view caste as an institution that developed over history rather than as a part of fundamental and unalterable religious teachings of Hinduism. In many ways, caste as a system of organizing society is also prevalent among non-Hindus in South Asia. Several of them continue to follow caste with its salient aspects of heredity and hierarchy even after they convert to other religions.

THE HORIZONTAL DIMENSION OF CASTE AND NARRATIVES OF ORIGIN

With the clearly discriminatory implications of caste, the ostensive question is: What advantage could "lower caste" and Dalit Hindus or non-Hindus in South Asia have seen in following it for so long? An important reason appears to be what one can call "the horizontal dimension of caste," which is seen by members of a community as offering stability. This aspect of caste, which explains its continued existence to an extent (**but certainly does not justify it**), gets often ignored because of its starkly discriminatory vertical axis. What does a caste's "horizontal dimension" mean? In premodern societies, which did not have government or other public institutions offering social care, a caste with its distinctive customs and culture offered its members a sense of belonging and a ready-made support network. Whether high or low on the vertical bar, on the horizontal axis of a caste, i.e., within a community, people could turn to one another for emotional and/or financial support in times of crisis. Even now, it is not uncommon for people to seek funding for education from their caste organizations or wealthier individuals within their community. With the implementation of affirmative action set by the Indian constitution and with their own efforts, several individuals from the lower strata of the society have achieved financial and professional success. Such individuals often serve both as inspiration and sources of financial/professional support for younger generations in their castes. During my undergraduate years, the education of some of my classmates was generously supported by their caste organizations.

In addition to support, the horizontal dimension of caste is also linked to regulating family life and preserving distinctive customs of the community. As mentioned before, to a large extent, *jāti*s are self-governed groups. Since Sanskrit *dharma* treatises were almost exclusively directed toward Brahmins and Kshatriyas and were not even accessible to others, the community life of various castes was not regulated according to them. For each caste, a council of local/regional elders (mostly men), called *panchāyat* in many parts of India, has traditionally established regulations and settled disputes according to the customs of the community. Brahmins have no authority in these areas of community life. The role of caste *panchāyat*s is especially crucial in settling disputes in matters related to marriage, family, and inheritance. In traditional contexts, people generally did not disregard the decisions/verdicts (including fines) made by their caste *panchāyat* because they could be excommunicated and lose community support.

While support mechanisms and the *panchāyat* contribute to internal stability, what helps in positive self-perceptions and interactions in the broader society are mythical narratives that various castes retell about their origins. These are transmitted from generation to generation and have nothing in common with the Vedic hymn to the Supreme Man. Especially interesting are the ones from castes considered lower in hierarchy and Dalit communities. In many myths of Dalits from southern India studied by Robert Deliege, there is a pair of Brahmin brothers, one of whom (often the elder one) makes an inadvertent mistake and gets thrown out from his

society. The outcast person and his descendants, however, continue to render crucial services for the society and emerge as morally superior. I heard two such narratives during my fieldwork in Gujarat – one from an old Dalit man and one from a potter. The Dalit man recounted that their progenitor worshipped the earth and kept it clean as a form of worship. Due to the trickery of upper castes, this worship was turned into polluting work and their caste became "untouchable." The potter man said that their community – which makes festival images of deities – was blessed by God to make images that everyone worships. But their work with clay came to have low status. Potters in Gujarat and in many other parts of India identify as Prajapati – descendants of one of the most powerful Vedic deities. Dalit Jogi singers of Rajasthan identify as descendants of Shiva.

It is noteworthy that in most caste narratives, the society pushes people down and not the divine beings, who are, in fact, often presented as endowing the downtrodden communities with important occupational skills. The deities remain beloved among these communities and are worshiped ardently. Many sociologists view such narratives of self-representation as channels for gaining validation within a hierarchical system since none of them explicitly oppose caste. Some see this lack of opposition as reflecting the insidious nature of caste. Yet if we take into consideration the aspects of bonding, support, and community governance discussed above, the draw of caste in the premodern era can be understood to an extent. In contemporary times, with other avenues for support being available, caste bonds are slowly losing their relevance. The narratives are not important to the younger generations. Two paradoxical approaches to caste are seen in contemporary India. On the one hand, many advocate the end of caste. On the other, for historically discriminated communities, articulating caste identity offers a platform for solidarity in resistance to injustice. Caste identities also remain important in elections with different communities often seen as forming voting blocs.

WOMEN IN THE HINDU SOCIETY

Having considered caste, now let us turn to gender. Like most traditional societies in the world, the Hindu society has been ostensibly patriarchal since ancient times. It is sometimes said that

Hinduism has a paradoxical view of the feminine with strong goddesses but subordinated women. When we look at the layered corpus of its sacred texts and its history of practices, we find a consistent tension between the more liberal and conservative perspectives as is also found in other traditions. Sometimes passages of the same text have contradictory messages. Looking at the tensions in texts and practices helps us understand the status and roles of Hindu women.

Beginning with the earliest phase, in some Vedic texts including the Upanishads, voices of a few women are heard clearly. Vedic rituals also required participation of women. However, they were required only as wives of ritual performers; they were not main performers themselves. In the next phase of Hinduism, in epics, there are a range of female characters, some very strong and able to advise their husbands; whereas some are meek and completely dependent on their male relatives. A few Purana passages give women a place with goddesses on a continuum of the creative energy of the universe, *śakti*. But except for Krishna's companions – cowherd women of Vraj – in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, there are few memorable strong female characters.

Among Sanskrit texts, the ones that have drawn most attention with regard to gender in public discourses are the *dharma* texts, a majority of which are focused on the behavior of high-caste men and are considered pillars of orthodoxy. These contain only a few passages related to women that instruct men about how to engage with them in ritual and household contexts. Yet, these texts too do not have a uniform approach. There is discernible tension among liberal and conservative passages here too. Some often cited conservative verses from Manu's text (5.147–149, 9.1–2), for example, stress that women should be constantly kept dependent and protected by men in their families – father, brothers, husband, and sons – at different stages in life. Another verse (2.67) clearly states that for a woman, serving her husband and taking care of the household are equivalents of the study of the Vedas and performance of the fire sacrifice. At the same time, the text also has verses (3.55–60) in which men are asked emphatically to honor women and keep them happy. They state that only those households prosper in which women are happy. Where they are

unhappy, no ritual gives reward and the family parishes. The section concludes by pronouncing that the households where the husband is pleased with his wife and the wife with her husband have everlasting happiness.

The sacred texts apparently provide resources for both conservative and liberal attitudes for women's status and roles. Yet historically, the restrictive passages have been more widely influential. Women's public roles have been limited and their social status has not been aligned with the concept of *śakti* except in a few contexts. Generally, the norm for them has been to dedicate their lives to their husbands and families. A woman dedicated to her husband is called *pativratā* and is held in high regard. Within this framework however, women have consistently negotiated roles and religious agency for themselves. For example, following the age-old taboo related to blood, women generally do not perform religious ceremonies in their "polluted" states of menstruation or childbirth. But many women use their time in these states, especially monthly periods, to pursue hobbies or read sacred texts in vernaculars (because they are freed from all household duties including cooking). Similarly, using their traditionally prescribed roles as a platform, women often undertake rites for the well-being of their families in which they are independent performers without priestly presence. They use vernacular texts that we considered in Chapter 3. While these rites reinforce the patriarchal norms in some ways, they also provide opportunities for women to bond and create support networks in the absence of men. The mood at their performance is celebratory with a great deal of laughing and sharing. Therefore, for a better understanding of the roles and norms for Hindu women, in addition to ancient texts, considering women's vernacular genres and dimensions of their actual use is important.

In the area of family finances too, a layered situation prevails. Since Hindu women's primary sphere has been home and not the world outside, men have been seen as the breadwinners for their families. Yet, economists C. Binder and M. Easwaran have shown that women's work has been central to building the professional success of their families in traditional Indian societies. Almost all work for most traditional occupations was done at home with women as major contributors to it. Acquiring skills in husband's

hereditary occupation was important for women who lived with their in-laws after marriage. Endogamy in the caste system ensured that having grown up in a household with the same occupation as her husband's, the wife had skills in it. An important reason for endogamy, as per these economists, was economic rather than religious. During my family's visits to our ancestral village, I have had opportunities to observe some of these on ground. There, the farmers' wives are adept in farming routines through the year and carpenters' wives in matters related to carpentry. The same is the case in the households of priests and grocers. It is also not uncommon to see women, especially older ones, enjoying command over their families because of their skills in dealing with customers. Women, however, have not been independent owners of property. Since ancient times, their right to property has been through their husbands, though they are well protected in adversity. Even a text like Manu's, considered highly orthodox, stresses that the king must protect the property rights of women in distress, without children, or widowed; and punish as thieves the relatives who try to usurp her assets (8.28–29). Daughters, on the other hand, were given generous gifts at marriage but did not have equal rights over parental property until recently. In contemporary India, with amendments in law after years of activism, Hindu women finally have an equal right to property of their natal families too.

In general, the roles and status of Hindu women have been similar to those in other traditional societies. The situation of upper-caste widows, however, has been more difficult. In extreme and rare cases in history in some regions, a widow climbed the funeral pyre of her husband. Such a woman was called a *satī* (the truthful/loyal woman) and would later likely be deified by her community. The origins of the practice, also called *satī*, are traced to the sixth century. But its specific origins remain unknown. It is not mentioned in any Vedic or *dharma* texts, some of which like Manu, in fact, mention widow remarriage (Manu 9.175–176). At times during the medieval period, *satī* was voluntarily performed by war-widows as the last resort to escape rape and abduction. In later periods, encouragement/force by the in-laws, who were either too poor to support the woman or greedy for her property, became major factors. Even then, the practice was always rare. During the

colonial period, however, *satī* was discussed widely in European publications as a "Hindu custom." And in 1829, with the help of Hindu reformers, the British prohibited it by law in their territories. In independent India, it is a crime. However, a shocking incident of a young woman's *satī* occurred in Rajasthan in 1987. This led to much stricter laws with no further reported occurrence. While *satī* was abolished almost two centuries ago, the life of an upper-caste widow remained difficult until recently. She was not remarried. She had to wear a white or dark color attire and was not allowed to put on heavy jewelry. She had to practically turn into a nun living within a household. I sadly recall the tears of a relative whose mother was widowed in her early 20s and had to be clad in simple clothes even at weddings and festivals. The woman was financially independent. But she could not even think about remarriage. The situation has changed now. Young (even older) upper-caste widows often get remarried, many encouraged by their in-laws who also offer support in raising children. State and central governments also have set up pension plans for them. However, poor elderly widows without relatives are still seen in a few pilgrimage towns living in beggars-like conditions. A few women's organizations like Maitri (https://www.maitriindia.org/) have now taken up their cause.

With the centrality of family life in the Hindu tradition, a Hindu woman's position as a wife and a mother is given most attention in various discourses. Yet there is one avenue outside of family life that extraordinary women have followed receiving immense respect within the society. This is the path of complete dedication to spiritual quest through devotion (*bhakti*), meditative practices as a renouncer, or social service. In an early Upanishad, a woman sage named Gargi is recognized as an equal in knowledge about Brahman to the most learned men of the time. In considering vernacular texts, we saw that many regional medieval saint-poets who spread the message of devotion were women. Their enduring popularity and stature for centuries indicate that spiritually advanced women's words are regarded highly by Hindus in all strata of the society. In more recent times, several female gurus have also been recognized for their spiritual achievements and have large following (literally thousands for some) in India and internationally. They are distinctive on the global scene in

their influence as women. These female gurus work outside of widely followed Hindu social norms. But they are firmly rooted in the Hindu tradition. They draw on the traditionally set spiritual goals for ascetics, and as Karen Pechilis points out, "deemphasize their sexuality." Two Hindu concepts contribute to their rise as spiritual mentors: (a) *śakti* and (b) inner purity attained by following ascetic discipline. Centers of several women gurus also run social service (*sevā*) projects such as free kitchens, schools, etc. in different parts of the world, endowing them with the status of a beloved motherly figure. We will meet one such guru in a later chapter. A strikingly innovative path that women have begun to tread in India and in other countries is that of priesthood, considered a bastion of Brahmin men for two millennia. In the city of Pune in Maharashtra, two institutions – Shankar Seva Samiti and Jnana Prabodhini – have been established for the training of female priests who are just as proficient in their profession as their male counterparts and are enthusiastically invited by people. In Europe and America too, several women are now temple priests and perform rites of passage ceremonies, inverting the earlier restrictions. In fact, women priests see themselves as reclaiming their Vedic heritage. In 2018, I had an opportunity to hear the recitation of Vedic mantras by a woman who is in high demand in Maharashtra and found it extremely impressive.

As the above brief overview and some parts of the previous chapter show, women's roles in the Hindu society have been variegated and often paradoxical. In some ways, Hindu women's lives have been kept under the control of male relatives, especially husbands. At the same time, they have worked shoulder to shoulder with men of their families, been first transmitters of religion to their children, and some have even emerged as icons of spirituality, guiding thousands. As I have discussed elsewhere, in the twenty-first century, one challenge for Hindu women is to resist the manipulative use of selected passages in sacred texts to subordinate them, a trend that has long prevailed. But the other equally important challenge is to claim and employ in their lives those aspects of their religion that enable them to live to their full potential (as women priests are doing), while also drawing from secular feminist discourses.

GOALS FOR LIFE – MEN AND WOMEN

To a certain extent, the religious goals of Hindu individuals have been tied to their gender and caste roles because performing one's duties in the society is considered foundational for a good life. Some regulations for each category of people are also included in *dharma* texts like Manu. While a great deal of social privilege is given to Brahmins, there are also more extensive regulations for them. A Brahmin, for example, is required to avoid certain foods, and prohibited to ridicule poor, uneducated, or disabled people (at least as per texts). Beyond such caste-specific behavior, however, a range of moral and spiritual avenues, which are rooted in a few important metaphysical concepts, are open to all. Two broadly related concepts that frame moral values and life's goals are *saṃsāra* and *karma*. Within the expansive cycles of cosmic time that we considered earlier, created beings also go through cycles of life. They are born numerous times in different forms – human or animal. This is – *saṃsāra* – cyclical nature of life and death. Within these cycles, each deed (*karma*) leads to its inevitable consequence. One's present condition is a result of previous actions based on moral choices in the current or an earlier lifetime. In this schema, a powerful or high-status person with bad *karma* would be reborn in unfavorable conditions as human, animal, or insect. A person with low status with good *karma* would be reborn in favorable situations in the next birth. These ideas are woven in sacred narratives and heard recurrently in everyday expressions. They have paradoxical implications. On the one hand, a belief in the principle of *karma* gives solace to a person facing misfortune that their present moment can be a result of something they did in the past life; but by following a righteous path now, they would be in a better situation in the next life. On the other, it can also be used to explain away someone else's distressing circumstance such as caste discrimination to be a result of previous *karma*. In both types of usages, the stress remains on following the righteous path with appropriate goals in the present life. What are these appropriate goals?

In the Hindu view, whether articulated in elite Sanskrit or informal vernacular expressions, a well-lived life is marked by completion of four pursuits (*puruṣārthas*): *dharma* (duty/virtue/moral self-fulfillment), *artha* (acquisition of worldly means/success), *kāma* (fulfillment of desires/sexual life/pleasure), and *mokṣa* (liberation/total freedom/end of rebirths). While the fourth of these is the ultimate spiritual goal, its direct pursuit by renouncing the world is not recommended for all. That path is only for exceptional individuals. An average person should fulfill the first three before pursuing *mokṣa*. Among the other three, *artha* – production of wealth and worldly success – is important for self-worth, supporting the family, and sustaining the society. But acquisition of wealth must be honest; this is the highest form of purity (Manu 5.106). *Kāma* is important for progeny and full development of life. Body as the basis of action, and mind as a means for cultivation of the self, should not be deprived of pleasure. Enjoyment of food, arts, loving relations, etc. enriches life. But pleasure should not be unrestrained; otherwise, it can lead to a chaotic life. The foundational (holding all together) pursuit of life, however, is *dharma*, generally understood as performing one's duty and following a moral path. It must be integrated in the pursuit of *artha* and *kāma* as well. A part of a person's duties includes honestly carrying out one's assigned work as per social position and fulfilling duties within family. We saw an example of this in the Introduction with Govind, Rukma's husband, who visits his parents every evening as his *dharma*. The other part is following norms of ethical behavior and moral values. As Wendy Doniger points out, the moral values prescribed in texts like Manu (2.87, 6.92, 10.63) for Brahmins can be seen as normative for others. These are also amply conveyed in Sanskrit and vernacular narratives, couplets, and songs functional in everyday life. Important values include truthfulness, kindness, generosity, humility, friendliness to all, keeping one's word, serving guests and elders, and making sacrifices for others. It is when one has fully completed one's duty within the society and achieved the three goals of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*, one is ready for liberation or *mokṣa*, which requires complete detachment from worldly matters and reaching an elevated spiritual state by dedicated following of meditational/contemplative or other religious practices.

In *dharma* treatises, various phases of life are presented as appropriate for pursuing the above goals. In these texts, a lifetime is divided into four stages of being (a) a celibate student (*brahmacarya*),

(b) a householder (*gṛhastha*), (c) a retiree living in the forest (*vānaprastha*), and (d) renouncing the world (*sanyāsa*). Each stage, called *āśram*, has a specific emphasis. In the first, gaining knowledge appropriate for a hereditary profession is the focus. In ancient India, a male child (Brahmin and Kshatriya) left home to study with a teacher at around eight or learned skills from family members; female children learned skills from mothers. The norm for a pupil is to learn and behave respectfully with the teacher. In the householder stage, which is considered the most important because it supports the society, the norm is to pursue *artha* and *kāma* while being true to one's *dharma*. In this phase, a person would get married, raise a family, and acquire wealth to contribute to the society. Householders would also fulfill obligations to parents and ancestors, perform appropriate ceremonies, and may seek a spiritual guide. Around the age of 50, a person is expected to begin to withdraw from the worldly life, transfer wealth and obligations to children (sons), and live a retired life. This is a kind of transitional phase to the last phase beginning around 72 when a person is expected to become completely detached and focus on the ultimate spiritual goal of liberation. Combined with the system of *varṇa*, this schema of *āśrams* has come to be known as *varṇāśram dharma*. It is unlikely that many followed it verbatim in any era, but it has long provided a general framework for organizing society and life. For Hindus of any caste, one's duty to family and society during active years and gradually withdrawing from worldly affairs to focus on spiritual advancement with age serve as important guidelines for life.

The above survey of Hindu social organization, women's roles, and life goals indicates that they are layered and often paradoxical. So, how does a Hindu person navigate their moral/ethical choices within this ethos? Keeping in view two aspects of the tradition helps us understand this. First, while the injunctions in *dharma* treatises have been influential and contributed greatly to severe caste discrimination for two millennia, neither these nor any other sacred texts contain commandments. Nor are Brahmins, the traditional custodians of these texts, have been in charge of regulating people's personal or community lives. A text like Manu has not been a functional religious text like narratives of epics and Puranas or songs of saint-poets in vernaculars. Most Hindus do not even know of Manu's text

let alone read it. As a genre, the *dharma* texts are so embedded in the political/material culture of antiquity that people would not be able to relate to them even if they tried. Narratives and songs are much more relatable. Therefore, taking texts like Manu as fixed "law" leads us away from the ground realities of their usage in everyday life of Hindus. While activists resisting caste oppression and demanding more rights for women rightly object to some passages in Manu's text, overall, as Olivelle aptly observes, there is more "heat" than "light" in debates surrounding it. Second, which arises from the first, is that in the absence of commandments or an authority figure, people make moral decisions based on their knowledge of religious sources like sacred narratives, customs of their communities, guidance from a guru figure, and their own conscience. Since the concept of heresy or blasphemy is not operative in Hinduism, it is generally possible to uphold one's moral choice if it does not transgress too far from the customs of one's caste.

We will end this chapter by looking at the process of making moral choices by a low-caste woman, Jashoda (not real name), whom I knew closely for many years. Jashoda was a young woman whose mother worked in the water-hut (room with drinking water) of an educational institution in a small town in India. Belonging to a caste very low in the hierarchy and with little money, she had no education and was married off soon after her father died. The husband drove her out of home when he fell for another woman. Jashoda came back to her mother. But she too died soon, leaving Jashoda with the responsibility of two younger brothers. Jashoda took her mother's job to fulfill her *dharma* to her two adolescent brothers. But in dealing with them and the ex-husband who had begun to harass her, she had to make some tough decisions (such as remarrying outside of her caste) that would not be easily approved by her elders. Jashoda was known as an upright woman and a devotee of a local goddess whom her community worshipped. She performed *pūja* (worship ceremony) for the goddess daily. When she had to make an important decision, she would consult women whom she trusted and think about the matter during prayers. She would then come to a firm decision. She would present her decisions to her brother and community elders as inspired by the goddess (a euphemism for her conscience). After

some back and forth, she was always able to convince them of the propriety of her choices. Jashoda lived with the dignity of a working woman, married a person of her choice, supported her brothers for long even after her remarriage, and volunteered her time in free cataract camps as social service. One could hear her singing her favorite vernacular devotional songs all the time. She of course did not know the Sanskrit terms for all the *puruṣārthas* except *dharma* in colloquial Gujarati – *dharam*. She referenced her choices using that term – highlighting its foundational significance in Hindu life. By the time I last saw her, Jashoda had successfully completed the goals of *artha*, *kāma*, and *dharma*. She is still not old enough to think about the fourth goal of *mokṣa*.

Table 4.1 Important terms related to Hindu social organization and life goals

	Related Sanskrit terms	*Meaning*
Caste	*varṇa*	lit. color, broad category of classification – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra
	jāti	Regionally based occupational community
	Dalit	"Trampled upon," communities considered "untouchable," outside of the caste system and lowest in the social hierarchy
	panchāyat	Council of leaders (of a caste)
Women	*pativratā*	A woman dedicated to husband
	satī	Woman who climbs husband's funeral pyre, also the act
	śakti	Energy (cosmic)
Moral pursuits and life goals	*Samsara*	The phenomenal world in which cycles of birth and death occur
	karma	Deed, action (generally based on moral choice)
	puruṣārtha	Appropriate pursuit
	dharma	Moral duty
	artha	Financial/worldly success
	kāma	Desire, pleasure
	mokṣa	Liberation (from rebirth)
Stages of life	*āśram*	Stage of life
	brahmacarya	Celibate studentship
	gṛhastha	Householder
	vānaprastha	Retired (in a forest)
	sanyāsa	Renouncing

FURTHER EXPLORATION SUGGESTIONS

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