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‘WOMEN’S SIGNIFICANT SPACES’: RELIGION, SPACE, AND COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This paper examines the links between religion, space, and women’s identity development through a study of the traditional Hindu house. It describes how some spaces, such as the prayer room, kitchen, threshold, and courtyard, form the settings for and enable life-cycle rituals, women’s rites, and women’s communal activities, and became the locus for women’s social interaction, networking, self-identity, and community-based identity. This study surfaces the important role of religion in the inter-relationships between people (especially women) and their physical environment through enactment of religion-required activities. It points out the role women play in the sustenance and continuation of many religious practices, particularly the pivotal role of women in the practice of religion in the noninstitutional domestic arena. Through development of the concept of ‘women’s significant spaces’, this study points out how these spaces are intimately connected to the contributions of women, the development of their expertise, and the development of the women’s community.

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Introduction

Space and identity

In recent years increased attention has been given to the role of places in the development of the self and identity. According to Mead (1934), the self develops through the process of taking the role of the other, first the significant other, such as parents or teachers, and then later the generalized other, such as the group or community. Rochberg-Halton (1984) has argued that in Mead’s framework of the generalized other not only people but objects and artifacts also have the ‘power’ to act as ‘role models’. ‘The importance of a role model in Mead’s perspective’, he says, ‘lies in its representativeness as a sign, and an inanimate doll can symbolize the role of mother or father to a child just as an animate person can . . . In other words, objects can objectify the self’ (Rochberg-Halton, 1984: 339). This argument has found support among others as well. For Proshansky *et al.* (1983: 57), ‘the development of self identity is not restricted to making distinctions

between oneself and significant others but extends with no less importance to objects and things and the very places in which they are found’. Place identity, then, is ‘a substructure of the self identity of the person consisting of, broadly conceived, cognition about the physical world in which the individual lives’ (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983: 59). In a similar vein, humanist geographers suggest that attachment to places is central to the self (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974, 1977). ‘To be human’, according to Relph (1976: 1), ‘is to live in a world that is filled with significant places’. Thus, it appears that places, especially significant places, can be an important component of a person’s identity. In this paper we wish to investigate women’s significant places and identity in greater detail.

Women’s spaces and the role of religion

A review of the literature on women and domestic space¹ reveals several important features relevant to this study. The literature highlights women’s self identity and emotional attachment to spaces and

artifacts in the home (Saegert & Winkel, 1980; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Churchman & Sebba, 1985; Hummon, 1989). 'Women,' according to Hummon (1989:216), 'are more likely than men to define the home as an avenue of self expression and reflection of self'. This is particularly true of homemakers whose self identity is found to be more intimately linked to their home than those of women who work outside the home (Saegert & Winkel, 1980). With regard to objects, 'males cherish objects of action ... whereas women prefer objects of contemplation' (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981:106). Specific objects which have special meaning to men are 'TV., stereo sets, sports equipment, vehicles and trophies. Females more often mention photographs, sculptures, plants, plates, glass and textiles' (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981:106).

The literature also suggests a connection between males and females, public and private. The public-private dichotomy formulated and introduced by feminist anthropologists (Lamphere, 1974; Ortner, 1974; Rosaldo, 1974; Sanday, 1974) has been provocative, powerful, and a useful tool in analysing women's roles in certain contexts. It focused attention on patriarchy, subordination of women, separation of male and female activities, and the equation of public space with men and private, domestic space with women. In the years following its formulation, the model, or parts of it, has been repeatedly used by feminist geographers, environmental psychologists and planners (Saegert, 1980; McDowell, 1983; McKenzie & Rose, 1983; Spain, 1992).

Two important issues are raised by this literature. First, the public-private dichotomy is problematic. In most societies, compared to men, women do not have the same public roles. However, to define women's roles only *vis-à-vis* that of men, as Sharistanian (1987:5) points out, 'is to judge them externally and from a masculine point of view' (see also Tilly, 1978). Furthermore, focusing only on the gendering of spaces and the exclusion of women from specific areas and activities dismisses women's activities and roles. We wish to show the significant role women play in creating, controlling and using space.

Second, there is a serious omission in the literature on women and domestic space. Missing from the literature (with a few notable exceptions)² is the role of religion in the structuring and use of women's socio-physical environments. While religious studies have focused on women's religious lives without the spatial context, research on women's environments has paid little or no attention to religion.

This paper argues for a comprehensive inclusion of religion into people-environment studies for several reasons. At the macro societal level, religion, particularly nonWestern nonChristian religions, continues to dominate the lives of its believers both men and women. While some scholars believe that the processes of secularization and rationalization have eroded the structural base of religion (Hammond, 1985; Wilson, 1985) this has occurred primarily in the Christian world. In the nonChristian world (and perhaps even in parts of the Christian world), religion and socio-political institutions are not neatly separated and the beliefs, values and customs of people continue to be interpreted and mediated by religion. This has ramifications for women through the enactment of laws related to marriage, divorce, inheritance and so on.

At the intermediate level, religious and sacred spaces in the neighborhood provide spaces for participation in religion and religious activities for both men and women (Eliade, 1959; Sopher, 1967; Rapoport, 1982). Though formal positions and roles may not be available to women in many religions, women participate in religious activities, rituals, and in the care and maintenance of religion and religious spaces. Some religions have neighborhood and other shrines and pilgrimage centers for example, that are exclusively for women.

At the micro, or domestic level there are religious and sacred spaces, as well as significant spaces, where religious activities, rituals, ceremonies and prayers are conducted. In addition, there are spaces where religious instruction and learning takes place. Though formal religious instruction is not available to women in many religions, they none the less have significant religious lives. As Falk and Gross (1989:xv) point out '... women have their own perspective and claims on religion, even in systems in which men have traditionally done most of the acting and talking'. Women's activities in the home, from socialization of the next generation into the religion, and the conduct of religiously proper ways of cooking, sharing food, maintaining food taboos, observing rituals, such as prayer, ritual purification, bathing, appropriate clothing, maintenance of the sacred, to rites related to menstrual and post-partum restrictions, all contribute to the practice and sustenance of religion in the domestic sphere. The home is the focal point of women's religious lives and many domestic activities are intimately enmeshed with religion. While considerable environment-behavior research has focused on home environments, the domestic

religious lives of women have been largely neglected leading to an incomplete conceptualization and understanding of women's identification with spatial settings.

In this paper we wish to examine the tripartite issues of significant spaces in the lives of women, how this is defined and structured by religion, and how these spaces contribute to the development of self identity and social and familial roles. We ask: what are the places significant to women? What are the ritual, communal and social activities enacted and learned in these spaces? How do experiences in such places shape women's sense of self as well as their collective identity as members of the women's community? We thus examine significant spaces in women's religious lives, their relationships with important role models in the women's community, their identities as teachers, ritual specialists and sponsors of women-centered activities, sharing, expressing, and transmitting their expertise in spatial settings they manage and control. We address these issues through a study of the traditional Hindu house.³

Women, religion, and significant spaces in the Hindu house

The lives of women in the traditional Hindu household are structured primarily by two principles: first is the notion of purity and pollution leading to the creation of sacred and profane spaces (Khare, 1962, 1976; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993); second is rules of deference, avoidance and social distance in male-female interaction, for example between daughter-in-law and her elder male affines, leading to separate activity areas and activities within the home (Jacobson, 1989). Within these bounded lives, however, women do not remain 'passive figures' but actively seek to appropriate, create and identify with important physical and social domains (see also Pellow, 1992). The spaces that are significant to women in the Hindu house are closely linked to their *familial* roles as wives, mothers and mistresses of their household, their *ritual* roles as domestic ritual specialist and ritual guardians of the family and household, and their *communal* roles as members of the women's community sharing in their common concerns, desires and needs. We focus on four spatial areas in the Hindu house that are particularly meaningful to women: *pooja* area, threshold, kitchen, and courtyard.

Pooja area

This is the most sacred spatial domain in the Hindu household (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993, 1994a). Religion, in the Hindu tradition is enacted at two significant spatial settings: the temple and the home. Unlike the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions, Hinduism is essentially noncongregational, the focus being on individual worship rather than on collective prayer and sermon. Temple going is not mandatory and no specific day of the week is set aside for collective worship. Although temples are many, and Hindus go to temples for collective and individual prayer, worship and meditation, the everyday practices of religion are enacted at home. The *pooja* area is the home of the household deities, and the repository of sacred objects. Though the *pooja* area is not exclusively a female space (it is ritual space satisfying the needs of the entire family), it is usually the senior female in the household who is in charge of its daily maintenance, cleaning and care. The activities in the *pooja* area are intimately linked to a Hindu woman's ritual role, identity, and status, such as those of ritual specialist, teacher and gatekeeper. She is responsible for the *preparatory rituals* (cleaning the area) as well as many of the *pooja* rituals (such as lighting the lamp, offering flowers and fruits, anointing the deities with sandalwood paste and *kumkum* (vermillion) (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1994b). Here is a description of a senior woman's everyday ritual responsibilities of management of the *pooja* area.

My grandmother's day began in the morning at 05:00 am. First was the purificatory bath, followed by changing into appropriate ritual attire for *pooja*. She would wear her *garod* saree, a ritually pure saree specifically reserved for *pooja*. Wearing her *garod* saree she would pick fresh flowers from the garden in the courtyard and a few leaves from the sacred *tulsi* plant. Singing a devotional song she would enter the *pooja* room. She would clean the *pooja* room herself. The floor was swabbed with water; the ritual vessels were washed. She would then offer the fresh flowers, fruits, and sweets, set up her *aasan* [prayer mat] and pray and meditate for 45 minutes. At dusk, grandmother would enter the *pooja* room again. She would blow the *conch* shell, and then light a clay lamp under the *tulsi* plant in the courtyard. Back in the *pooja* room she would light the incense and the lamp, serve the deities their evening meal, and again pray for another half-an-hour (a: Kalpana 96:6).

Jyotirmoyee Sarma (1963:220) in an autobiographical essay titled the 'Three Generations in my

Calcutta Family' similarly points out:

My grandmother kept the full responsibility for the management of the household. As long as she was alive she would rise early in the morning and worship the household deity. In most Hindu houses there is a shrine where the image of a deity is kept and worshipped. In our house the image of Shiva was installed by great grandmother.

Besides management and care, senior women of the households are also ritual teachers who initiate, instruct and socialize younger female members of the household, such as daughters, daughters-in-law, younger sisters-in-law, into the rituals of the *pooja* area thus ensuring the continuity of domestic religion. The *pooja* room is the setting for many rituals for women: some are performed only by unmarried girls, others by married women and some by widows (see also Sarma, 1963). Shudha Mazumdar, writing about Bengal in her autobiography, describes her mother's instrumental role as a ritual teacher initiating and instructing her step by step into the rituals of *pooja*.

In the *pooja* room, mother taught me how to make the necessary arrangements for the ritual with a set of small copper utensils, I had been given. In the little water vessel I poured out some Ganges water and first washed the flowers, the *durva* grass, the leaves . . . The grass and the fresh flowers I picked from our garden were separately placed on the little copper flower place . . . Crimson and cream sandalwood would then be separately rubbed with water on a stone slab (Mazumdar, 1977:33).

Women's rituals are primarily conducted by women specialists without the assistance of male Brahmin priests. Knowledgeable women in the extended network of kin and nonkin are usually called upon to supervise the less knowledgeable. Senior women also act as ritual gatekeepers enforcing the rules of pollution and purity. They instruct the uninitiated to the need for a bath before engaging the ritual activities, and the nonentry of taboo items, such as leather.

Finally, women's activities in the *pooja* area are indicative of the high ritual status of post-menopausal women (see also Freeman, 1989). Menstruation is regarded as a ritually unclean state and menstruating women are disallowed from participating in sacred rituals and from entering sacred spaces. Post-menopausal women freed from such pollution restrictions have greater freedom and autonomy in sacred affairs and can dedicate themselves more completely to the ritual needs of the family.

Threshold

The threshold of the front entrance also constitutes sacred space and women are its primary caretakers, in charge of its ritual maintenance and decoration. Since the threshold is considered the gateway for both good and evil, women as ritual protectors of the home take special steps to facilitate the entry of good and inhibit the evil.

To repel evil, women place red clay handprints on either side of the doorway (Untracht, 1968). To prevent the entry of disease causing germs, *neem* (margosa) leaves, known for their special repellent properties, are hung on the threshold. This is true especially during epidemics (Aiyar, 1982). Jeffrey *et al.* (1989:125), in an ethnography among women in North India, report that special measures are taken after the birth of a child:

Some Hindu households place earthen brazier containing a small fire (*har*) outside the door and tie a sprig of *nim* leaves above the lintel. Anyone entering pauses to let the fire drive evil influences away.

Women undertake these ritual measures to ensure the health, longevity, and well being of the inhabitants of the home.

To attract the auspicious, women creatively ritualize the area with elaborately executed patterns and diagrams known in different parts of the country as *alpona*, *rangoli*, or *kolum*. These patterns deftly created with rice flour are believed to be auspicious symbols. According to one account:

Kolum is not only an auspicious sign, like a welcome sign, inviting the Lord to enter the home, but also served as *bhutayajna* i.e. offering of rice flour to tiny creatures like ants and other insects (a: Gayatri; 94:11).

Another women described it the following way:

... patterns could get very elaborate and complex. The complexity of the pattern communicated meaning. A simple pattern symbolically communicated to neighbors that somebody was afflicted with disease such as small pox; people would then avoid that home. On festivals and other happy occasions, elaborate patterns were executed marking an auspicious event (a: Surabhi 94:11).

Young girls are initiated into the ritual arts either through observation and or partial participation such as through the role of a helpmate. Gayatri who is particularly gifted in the ritual arts explains it the following way:

I have never been formally instructed in the art of *kolum*. I learned through observing family members and friends. In our neighborhood everybody's threshold had *kolum* executed daily. On my way to school and back I would observe the different patterns and then try to replicate them at home (a: Gayatri; 94:11).

Kitchen

The kitchen in a Hindu household is both a sacred and functional space. Since food for the household deities is sometimes cooked in the kitchen it is essential to maintain its ritual purity. This is strictly enforced in orthodox Hindu households with senior women acting as ritual gatekeepers. In Hindu households cooking is a major responsibility for women. Like other domestic activities, food preparation is structured and organized by the principle of purity and pollution (Khare, 1976). Foods are ranked on a purity-pollution continuum: certain food items such as meat, fish, eggs, garlic, etc. are considered 'impure' and separate cooking facilities are set up in order to prevent 'ritual contamination' (Khare, 1976). Describing her grandmother-in-law's visit to her nuclear home Shudha Mazumdar (1977:134) writes in her autobiography:

It was a memorable day in my life when she passed a complimentary remark about the way I kept the house, stressing the cleanliness. This was perhaps due to the eagle eye with which I watched over the onion peels, fish scales and egg shells to which she objected as an orthodox Hindu widow. A kitchen had been improvised for her in the corner of the verandah adjoining ours and she was very appreciative of the fact that these objectionable things never came her way.

The matriarch of the household, familiar with the rules of ritual ranking of food, is in charge of the 'pure' kitchen while younger female members of the family, such as daughters-in-law, supervise the other facility. If hired help is used, then the Brahmin cook is reserved for the 'pure kitchen.' The following is an example:

My mother-in-law was a Vaishnavite [follower of the Hindu deity Vishnu] and observed strict dietary restrictions avoiding such food as onions, garlic, fish, chicken and meat. The kitchen was under her control. She employed a Brahmin cook to do the primary cooking. If family members desired other food items such as chicken she would not allow it to be cooked in her kitchen. Instead she would require a separate, temporary cooking area set up in the corner of the courtyard. I would supervise this facility and see that separate equipment, such as stove,

utensils and grinders, were used to cook (a: Kalpana 96:6).

Food preparation in an extended Hindu household often takes on a communal character. There is a constant and continuous flow of activities with women actively participating in every level of food preparation from cleaning and sorting to chopping, churning and finally cooking. Activities focus on cooperation and social interaction between related family members. Jyotirmoyee Sarma (1963:222) provides a detailed example from Bengal:

My grandmother's evenings were spent again in directing the kitchen. Since all the daughters and the daughters-in-law helped, the occasion provided opportunities for entertainment as well as for work. The kitchen verandah used to take on the appearance of a ladies club, where along with the kneading of bread, peeling of vegetable and the preparation of sweet dishes, there was much merriment and laughter.

The kitchen then becomes a central space in the socialization process; here younger and inexperienced women learn their domestic and familial responsibilities. They are taught the intricate rules governing the preparation, handling, and storing of food; they learn the ritual ordering of food, the taboo items and treasured family recipes. They are also initiated into the normative expectations behind the domestic division of labor, and the status hierarchies that govern family relationships.

Adjacent to the kitchen is the *bhandaar* or pantry, a place for food storage such as rice, wheat, lentils and other nonperishable food materials (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1994a). Senior women maintain control of this space and its contents, often making specific allocations for different meals to junior members. Control of the keys to the *bhandaar* is an important status symbol in the traditional Hindu household.⁴

Courtyard

For Hindu women, the courtyard is communal space used, appropriated and transformed for multiple activities, such as cooking, conducting business, formal and informal entertainment and sponsoring collective events for women. Within the courtyard, women define activity areas and allocate space for cooking, washing utensils, laundering, hanging clothes to dry, children's play areas and places for the sacred *tulsi* plant. From the courtyard, women conduct the management and running of the

domestic unit. It is to the courtyard that sellers of produce come; the milkman comes calling with the canisters of fresh milk; *sabji wallas* (fruit and vegetable sellers) stop to sell fresh produce; sweetsellers come peddling their sweets and confectioneries. The *dhobi* (washerman) comes to collect dirty clothes and the barber woman stops by to trim women's nails. Beyond these daily activities, the courtyard is the locus for congregational activities (Sinha, 1989; Wadley, 1989). Life cycle rituals is one set.

In Hindu society, birth and marriage transcend family boundaries and unite kin and nonkin women in a common ritual endeavour. Specific rituals focus only on the women's community; they are performed only by women with no assistance from (male) Brahmin priests. One such celebration is the birth of a child. On a chosen auspicious time, the courtyard, after being ritually purified, is transformed into a semi-public congregational space. Female relatives, neighbors and friends arrive through the back alleys connecting one courtyard with the next. Jacobson (1989:65) gives the following example from her ethnography near Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, in Central India:

That evening a women's songfest is held at the home of the new infant. These songfests bring women together as women to celebrate a uniquely female achievement and to honor the new mother. Women and girls from the neighborhood—or the whole village—are invited by the barber woman on behalf of the host family. As darkness settles over the village, the women gather in the *jachcha's*⁵ courtyard to talk, spread news, reminisce about other pregnancies and other births, and sing special childbirth songs . . . As refreshment singers receive sugar candies and also swollen boiled wheat, suggestive of the *jachcha's* formerly swollen body and hence symbolically extending her fertility to the other women.

Marriage is another event which emphasizes the role of the women's community. Many important segments of the marriage rituals, particularly those related to greeting, are conducted by women. In Bengal, these are called *stri achars* or female rites (Fruzzetti, 1982; Mazumdar, 1977). Women gather in the courtyard of the bride's home. On a clean, purified section of the courtyard floor, women using rice flour paste deftly execute elaborate, ritualized, decorative patterns. These are called *alponas*. Mazumdar (1977:91) provides this description from Bengal:

. . . the bridegroom is escorted to the inner courtyard for *stri-achar* the rites of women. He stands in the center of the floor, decorated with *alpana* paintings, ready to receive the formal welcome of the wives

and maidens of the bride's family. Dressed in gleaming Benares brocades and silks covered with gold ornaments and jewels, a glittering group of women, each bearing some auspicious symbol, circle him thrice. When the last round is made, the winnowing fan that holds the little lamps and each of the other articles meant to symbolize aspects of good fortune is touched on the brow and an offering of flowers and sweets is made by the senior-most lady. Usually it is only the elder ladies who participate in this rite, while the younger women blow on the conch shell and raise joyous cries to proclaim the happy event.

Apart from the life cycle rites, *kathas* (religious discourses), collective singing of *bhajans* (devotional songs) are other activities organized by the women's community. Such gatherings are both religious and social in nature; women gather in the courtyard; a singer leads the group accompanied by others. Songs are devoted to specific Hindu deities, of which *Bhajans* (songs) dedicated to Lord Krishna are the most common (see Singer, 1967). Here is one description:

Oil lamps were lit in the courtyard where the *tulsi* plant was planted on a raised platform. Ladies and children assembled on a particular evening and sang devotional songs. Generally the lead singer would sing one line and the others repeat it. Sometimes only one woman sang. The *kirtan* (singing devotional songs) would last for about an hour. After that *batasha* (sweets) were thrown chanting the *Hari Mantra* and everybody present collected as many as they could (a: Kalpana 96:6).

On other occasions, stories are narrated from the Epics, such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, particularly those sections devoted to the idealized roles of Hindu women as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. Such events provide entertainment and leisure as well as help to socialize women into their expected patterns of behavior as legitimized by religion.

Conclusion

Grounded themes

In this paper we have demonstrated the existence of important linkages between religion, women's significant space and identity in the case of Hinduism, the Hindu house and Hindu women. Hinduism fosters, as well as mediates, the development of a Hindu woman's self and communal identity. Hinduism has many religion-required rituals,

events, ceremonies and celebrations. Many of these are conducted at home by women.

In the Hindu house, these religion-required activities are conducted in particular spaces. The *pooja* room is the locus of daily rituals related to cleaning the space, prayers and offerings. In the kitchen, ritual cleanliness, food rules, and taboos are carried out. The threshold is the location of ritual arts, and cleansing rites. The courtyard is the place for several religious events within the family as well as ones involving community members. For example, the courtyard is the focal point for several semipublic life-cycle events, such as those associated with childbirth, which 'contribute to women's sense of solidarity with other women, and publicly recognize women's vital roles in perpetuating and enhancing the prosperity of the family and the larger community' (Jacobson, 1989:60).

Most of these events, rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations are conducted by women. These are learned in their youth, practiced, and taught to the next generation in those spaces in the home, mostly not learned through written texts, or formal instruction, but through contact with other women who are knowledgeable experts.

The traditional Hindu house provided the spaces that were not only appropriate for these activities, but enabled the social arrangements described. This in turn fostered women's development and community formation, as we have illustrated. In these settings, and during these activities, women could learn, show their knowledge and teach, thereby setting themselves up as valuable and contributing members of society. These are also places where women could extend and receive help, and through participation in these ritual events establish their self identities, and build and sustain community. Indeed, these spaces thus became significant spaces for women, and these significant spaces helped make these connections and identity possible. Places, activities and roles then are all important components of place identity.

Three important interconnected themes emerge from this study. First, religion (Hinduism) plays an important role in several relations people have with their physical environment. It establishes the need for many events, ceremonies, rituals, and rites. It also establishes the need for procedures and for knowledge of these procedures. This then provides the need for learning from knowledgeable others, conducting, and teaching. Religion provides the need for several individual and community activities.

Second, women play important roles in the sustenance and continuation of the religious (Hindu) lifestyle. Several of the activities are conducted almost solely for women, by women. In this, women take on a variety of roles, from learner, to practitioner, to knowledgeable expert, to ritual specialist, to teacher or one to be emulated, to convener (of events), manager, host, helper and receiver of help. Through these roles, women set up their own community as well as contribute to the sustenance of the larger community including men and children.

Third, many spaces in the traditional Hindu house become significant to women, and can be labeled as 'women's significant spaces.' These spaces enable the activities and roles described.

Larger implications

This study has larger implications even though it is, what might appear to some, a very specific and unique case. In contrast to secular settings, home in some religious societies is given a sacred status, and women the important role of maintaining not only the spiritual well-being of the family but of sustaining religion itself. Although women in these societies may be excluded from institutionalized religion, it is through their active participation and role in domestic religion that their religious identity is formed, experienced and expressed.

The learning of this identity occurs in multiple ways. One mechanism is through the management and care of significant religious spaces and artifacts. Although men are not disallowed from doing so, in most cases it is women who are the primary caretakers of religious spaces and ritual objects in the home. Like the Hindu *pooja* area, the iconostasi in Greek Christian homes is the repository of sacred icons and ritual objects, such as holy water and candles brought from the church by women, dried flowers, marital wreaths and a votive oil lamp (Pavlidis & Hesser, 1989). Hirschon (1981:83) writes:

... the degree of attention paid to this area depends on the religious commitment of the housewife. The oil lamp suspended in front of it may be lit every evening by devout women, or only a few times a year at major religious festivals, or as in the homes of most of the older women every Saturday evening. ... The responsibilities for religious acts fall on the woman of the house. She is the intercessor for her family, caring for the spiritual needs of both living and dead members.

In Chinese homes, the altar with local deities and ancestors is prominently displayed in an auspicious location. Harrell (1987:413) writes:

Daily devotions at the altar include incense offered morning and evening, first to the gods and then to the ancestors. Often a third stick of incense is placed in a burner just outside the front door of the house and offered to dangerous ghosts. Any family member may perform these simple rites; in practice the duty most often falls to the senior woman.

In the traditional Korean house *Chowang-shin*, the resident deity of kitchen and fire and the protector of the family, is placed in a small bowl of water in a space in the wall of the kitchen range. The care of this household deity is assigned to the housewife. Early every morning, before sunrise, she changes the water in the bowl following ritually correct procedures (Lee, 1989:311). Jewish homes do not have specific religious spaces; it is the woman who lights the candles on the eve of Shabbath. Candle lighting, according to Deshen (1987:401) 'is a major rite for women, a virtual symbol of female religious identity'. Thus, for women, their religious spaces, ritual objects and artifacts become 'literary fields of care' (Relph, 1976:38) taking on special meaning involving 'a real responsibility and respect for the place both for itself and for what it is for [oneself] and others' (Relph, 1976:38).

Second, women are in charge of maintaining the ritual purity of significant spaces. One such space is the kitchen. Like Hindu women, it is the responsibility of Jewish women to follow the rules of *Kashrut* and maintain the purity of the kitchen and dining areas through the separation of food, utensils and appliances. Similarly, Muslim women enforce food taboos and protect the home and kitchen from *nejes* (ritually unclean elements). Betteridge (1987:405) writes:

As the primary guardians of their families' Muslim identity, Chinese Muslim women go to great lengths to avoid cooking with pork and pork products in the midst of the non-Muslim, pork-eating Chinese majority.

Third, women express their religious identity and solidarity with the women's community of believers by sponsoring women-centered congregational events, such as prayer meetings, sermons, group worship and celebration of significant holidays in the religious calendar, and life cycle rites. Muslim women who do not usually participate in congregational prayers with men at the mosque, organize

prayers at home officiated by women, advertised by women and attended by women. These include readings from the *Quran* during the holy month of Ramadan and *rowzehs* commemorating the successful fulfillment of vows made by women (Beck, 1980; Fruzzetti, 1980; Betteridge, 1987). Religion provides the context, the setting and the opportunity to meet women outside of their immediate kin group and extend their ties into the women's community (Fernea & Fernea, 1972; Beck, 1980; Betteridge, 1987).

It is in the women's community, then, that women have a public role in public space. Although Hindu women do not have the same kind of public role in public space as men do, their role extends beyond their domestic unit into the larger women's community mediated by their ritual obligation as women in their roles as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. To understand women's significant spaces, the concept of public space needs to be re-examined. What constitutes public space is contextual, socially constructed and varies from one society to another (see also Bourguignon, 1980; Fruzzetti, 1982). In Greek society, women go to markets and freely use and socialize on streets fronting the home (Hirschon, 1985), whereas in most Muslim societies market or bazaar is a male public space, daily shopping is a male activity and women do not socialize in front streets. Sometimes women define their own public space which can be distinct and separate from that of males. Fruzzetti (1980), in her study of Muslim women in rural Bengal, found that though women do not participate in communal prayers at the mosque, they take an active and exclusive role in rituals at other public sacred spaces such as tombs and shrines of local saints. In Schimmel's (1975:437, cited in Beck, 1980:47) study, shrines of female saints are guarded by women, exclusively for women's use, and men are forbidden entry.

Fourth, women dominate in the activities conducted in their significant spaces whether in the religious spaces, such as the *pooja* room and *iconostassi* or in the kitchen or communal spaces, such as the courtyard. In these spaces they organize ritual events, act as gatekeepers and in general exercise control in terms of maintenance, cleanliness and overall management. This is in keeping with the territorial behavior outlined by Sebba and Churchman (1983:195):

... where an individual has control over an area, that individual will be more likely to act in a dominant manner; use it for optional activities; participate in its cleaning; identify it as a place of his/her own, as a place that is self-expressive, and as a place that provides a feeling of freedom of action.

Contrary to the ethnocentric assumptions of the public-private dichotomy which devalues the home and its activities (see also Hirschon, 1985), home in religious societies is the locus of important, social, economic and ritual activities (see also Sudarkasa, 1976; Hirschon, 1985). Nor are women physically and socially isolated within the confines of the nuclear family. Rather, close ties with extended kin and nonkin emphasizes the integration and solidarity of women with other women (see also Wright, 1981; Hirschon, 1985; Jacobson, 1989).

Fifth, a woman's self-identity and her collective identity emerges through the process of social learning in several significant spaces. These spaces are the focal points in a woman's social interaction with significant others (such as mother, mother-in-law, aunt, sister, sister-in-law) as well as the generalized other represented by the larger women's community (Mead, 1934). In these special spaces learning occurs for roles as ritual specialists and 'continuator' of important religious and cultural knowledge. It is in these roles as specialists and keepers of the tradition and ways of doing things that women play a very important, significant, and critical role. Their privileged knowledge leads to them being consulted and called on to lead many significant life-cycle events, and makes them not only integral and important members, but ones without whom the observance of life-cycle rituals in traditional and culturally appropriate ways would be seriously compromised and be left wanting. These interactions, observances, learnings, and roles give women a status and power that would otherwise have not been available, and makes them more central and integrated members of the larger community.

Sixth, though these spaces are not exclusively for women, and are not exclusively gendered, these are significant spaces. These are spaces that host many activities, events, celebrations, and rituals that are either primarily by, or exclusively for, women. These events provide opportunities for and also enable the formation and continuance of a woman's community, where she can not only meet and know other women, but also develop friendships and camaraderie, exchange information, provide emotional and other support, talk about issues with others who understand and have themselves faced similar experiences, joys and sorrows, not possible in the same way or in the company of men. Women's public role in these situations is not defined by those of men. It allows women to 'let their hair down', be informal, and define the world in the way they feel it should

be defined. They are able to create their own woman's world and sustain it.

Other spaces in the house, and these spaces at other times, provide opportunities for interactions, activities, and events with males. These fulfill another niche and need in the lives of females. Yet, the availability of these special spaces provide the option for social camaraderie, growth, and development of another part or niche in the lives of women. These significant spaces for women become 'refuge spaces' and 'sanctuaries' for women, supporting, enabling and harboring women's activities and their identity development.

Traditional and modern

From the above comparative discussion it is clear that the themes derived from this study have transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and utility on a much wider basis particularly in religious societies. But modern conditions, it might be argued, are quite different from the traditional situation described. Yet, this study of the Hindu house surfaces several issues relevant for consideration in this age.

Hindu traditions are not constant, but have been changing. Separation of several women's activities from those of men, as in the traditional Hindu house, can be seen as irrelevant today. Women are working outside the home. This has led to a change in priorities and there is less time to engage in all the activities required. As a result, women are losing the expertise and specialized knowledge that made them sought-after members of the larger community. In addition, the nature of the women's community is changing. Furthermore, contact with the West has led many Hindu women to question the idea of separate activities for the sexes, and to avoid participation in them. Thus, while some have been giving it up for lack of time and energy, others are voluntarily giving up this possibility. This paper points out that this may not be a change for the better.

Changing modern designs of homes has been another factor contributing to the erosion of these practices. Modern designs, many based on western style or principles, often do not provide some of the spaces significant to women. This can be seen in designs even by Hindu women. Courtyards are unusual in modern Hindu houses. *Pooja* rooms of the kind appropriate for Hindu rituals are also omitted from modern designs. Thresholds are either missing or lack the space for associated rituals and activities. Kitchens, though not

omitted, are not only smaller, but are designed differently and often have fixed furnishings. Designs today often lack women's significant, refuge, and sanctuary spaces. These designs prevent the possibilities for the creation and sustenance of the women's world.

These changing social practices and changing designs, which are affecting not only Hindu women, but women in many other parts of the world, remove the possibility of the women's communal identity and consequent identity of the kind described. Loss of 'communal privacy' takes away the possibility of interactions and a world apart from men. These are losses. The effects of the importation of ideas pertinent to other societies with other alternate forms of social organization need careful consideration. The impacts and effects of these losses are not well known.⁶ These need further research.

Notes

- (1) We have only reviewed literature relevant to our study. For a comprehensive coverage of issues related to women and domestic space see Altman and Churchman (1994); Peterson 1978, 1987; and Watson (1988) among others.
- (2) See for example Hirschon (1981, 1985); Khatib-Chahidi (1981); Pellow (1988); Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1993, 1994a, 1994b); and Pavlides and Hesser (1989).
- (3) To present a detailed, comprehensive and rich narrative, our study incorporated multiple data collection strategies. First was the extensive examination of existing ethnographic literature, specifically those relevant to the traditional Hindu home. Second, data was collected from autobiographies and personal narratives which provided rich insights into women's worlds from their perspective and in their own words. Third, secondary sources were supplemented by interview and observational data and the incorporation of auto-ethnographic notes. The interview and observational data were primarily from the state of West Bengal. Additional examples were provided from Tamil Nadu.
- (4) We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.
- (5) According to Jacobson (1989:63) 'in Hindi, the language of the region, a woman who is in labor or has just given birth is called *jachcha*'.
- (6) One likely effect might be 'environmental deprivation' (Mazumdar, 1992).

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