

HINDUISM AND ABORTION : A TRADITIONAL VIEW

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Abstract : The paper entitled “Hinduism and Abortion : A Traditional View” outlines what the Hindu Smṛiti and Shṛuti texts have to contribute in the abortion debate.

The important Hindu teachings with regard to dharma, Kāma, the āshrama dharma system, the saṁskāra and Kāma and reincarnation are considered in some details. The unborn is considered not only in terms of its embryological development but also in terms of its social and spiritual significance.

The paper concludes that Hinduism is opposed to abortion except in certain very specific circumstances, for example, severe congenital abnormalities in the fetus, where the continued pregnancy is life-threatening for the mother, rape and incest. The traditional Hindu Stand point is pro-life and the Hindu Scriptures provide a comprehensive and multi-faceted argument against abortion. The fetus is considered sacrosanct from the moment of conception. The view arrived at in this paper is that the fetus is a person with rights, and abortion is a violation of those rights. Abortion is considered to be murder. An important and salient contribution from a Hindu perspective is the fact that the fetus is a bio-psycho-socio-Cosmological and spiritual being and as such the abortion debate transcends individual ethics thus raising important social and cosmological concerns.

Hinduism has much to contribute to the abortion debate and many of the Hindu teachings cited in the study are relevant for today. Celibacy, the Hindu view that the sexual act ought to be seen as a deeply spiritual act, the emphasis on the Āshrama system and ahimsā are important principles that need to be emphasized to face challenges of the increasing demand for abortion.

Although Hindu dharma stands against the practice of abortion the religion also prescribes the atonement (Prāyascitta), one that works very well in this modern age is to adopt a child, raise it with tender loving care, believing this soul to be akin to aborted soul.

Key word : Karma, Prāyascitta., Shṛuti, Smṛiti, Reincarnation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is one of the world’s oldest religions, and has over nine hundred million followers worldwide. There is no single doctrine of Hinduism, nor is there any single recognized founder or teacher. Hindus believe in a universal, eternal soul called Brahman, who is the creator and is present in everything. However, they also believe in and worship other deities, each of which exhibits different attributes of the Supreme Being, the Brāhman. Hindus also believe in Karma and the idea that the Soul passes through a cycle of successive lives, each incarnation being dependent upon how the previous life was lived.

One of the main teachings of the Hindu religion is to “do no harm”. The Hindu medical ethics stems from this principle of non-violence or ahimsā. Thus, when considering abortion, the Hindu way would be to choose that action that will bring about the least harm to all involved: mother, father, fetus as well as the society.

Now, from time immemorial, Hindus have considered children to be the gift of God. They believe that all life is sacred because all creatures are manifestation of the Supreme Being.

Thus, Hinduism is generally opposed to abortion. It would be acceptable only when it is necessary to save the mother's life. Classical Hindu texts demonstrate strong opposition to abortion. One text compares abortion to the killing of a priest, while another considers abortion a worse sin than killing one's own parents.

Traditional Hinduism and even many modern forms regard the production of offspring as a "public duty" to continue the family and produce new members of society, rather than as an individual expression of personal choice. Thus, many Hindus see abortion as a breach of duty, because Hinduism teaches that abortion, like any other acts of violence, thwarts a soul in its progress towards the ultimate, God. Hinduism teaches that the fetus is a living conscious person which deserves care and protection. Let us now discuss the Hindu view on abortion from different perspectives.

II. IS ABORTION PERMISSIBLE WHEN CONSCIOUSNESS ENTERS INTO THE BHRŪṆA (FETUS)

The Hindu view of a person is the central theme of the Hindu scriptures. In Hinduism, the human person is a product of two principles: Spirit ("ātmān", "puruṣa") and matter or "prakṛti". The "ātmān" is actionless, self-dependent, sovereign, all pervading, and omnipresent; that it has conscious control over the body and witnesses its doings." The body or "prakṛti" is made of five "mahabhutas": earth (kṣiti), water (ap), fire (teja), wind (marut), space (vyom). According to the Caraka Saṁhitā, a Hindu medical text, "conception occurs when intercourse takes place in due season between a man of unimpaired semen and a woman whose generative organ, (menstrual) and womb are unvitiated —when, infact, in the event of intercourse, thus described, the individual soul (jiva) descends into the union of semen and (menstrual) blood in the womb in keeping with the (Karmically produced) psychic disposition (of the embryonic matter)" Caraka Saṁhitā maintains that "the conscious principle is active in the fertilized egg, directing its growth right from conception. Thus there is no justification for making any qualitative distinction between different stages of pregnancy. Since fetus acquires personhood, that is to say, the embryo contains both "ātmān" and "prakṛti" from the time of conception, killing it would be more than "taking out an appendix". There is, however, a minor tradition in Hinduism that puts the joining of the Spirit with matter closer to the time of "viability" of fetus. The Garbha Upanishad describes this developmental view, ". . . in the fifth month, the back and spine form; in the sixth month, nose, eyes and ears develop. In the seventh month the ensoulment takes place, and in the eighth month it is complete in every part." However, both tradition forbid abortion at any point during pregnancy.

The Viṣṇu Purāṇa describes consciousness in the womb:

"An individual soul (jantu), possessing a subtle body (sukumāratanu) resides in his mother's womb (garbha), which is imbued with various sorts of impurity (mala). He stays there being folded in the membrane surrounding the fetus (ulba). He experiences severe pains, tormented immensely by the food his mother takes, incapable of extending (prasāraṇa) or contracting (ākunčana) his own limbs and reposing amidst a mud of faeces and urine. He is unable to breathe. Yet, being endowed with consciousness (sacaitanya) and thus calling to memory many hundreds (of previous) births, he resides in his mother's womb with great pains being bound by his previous deeds."

More evidences can be adduced in favour of the view that the fetus is not just a piece of flesh but a sentient being having "conscious experiences" The fetus suffers "garbhaduhkṣa" (suffering of residence) and remembers all its previous lives and reincarnations, trapped in the cycle of "karma" and "rebirth". Evidences of the consciousness of the fetus can also be found in the Mahābhārata. Arjuna's son learnt many of the secret of the art of war in the womb when Arjuna described the secrets of war to his wife. If the fetus

has a soul then abortion also interferes with its path of salvation. Not being allowed to be born and given a chance to do good “karma”, the fetus is done a grave injustice. Abortion, therefore, violates not only “karma”, but also “dharma” as it forces an “untimely death” of the fetus.

The embryo is not just an extension of the mother’s flesh, but is an independent soul that is reincarnated in her. She is, however, only a vessel. The embryo/fetus then is not a private concern of the mother alone and abortion cannot be allowed on that ground.

III. HINDU SCRIPTURES ON ABORTION

Hindu scriptures and tradition have, from the earliest times, condemned the practice of abortion, except when the life of the mother was in danger. These scriptures refer to abortion as garbhapāta (womb killing) and bhrūna hatyā. Manusaṣhitā forbids abortion as one of the worst acts. Ṛg Veda too begs for protection of fetuses. The Kaushitaki Upanishad draws a parallel between abortion and killing of one’s parents. The Atharva Veda remarks that the slayer of the fetus, that is bhruōāghni, is among the greatest of sinners.

The Pañca-pātaka (five heinous acts) described by Hindu Purāṇas are:

1. Brahmā-hatyā : killing of a brahmin.
2. Bhrūna hatyā : destruction of unborn fetus.
3. Surā-pāna : drinking of liquor.
4. Svarṇa-steya : stealing of gold.
5. Guru-talpa-gamana: having sex with guru’s wife.

The Viṣṇu Purāṇa, 2.6, states “He who causes abortion, plunders a town, kills a cow, or strangles a man, goes to the Rodha hell (or that of obstruction).”

Let us try to explain the issue, in the context of —

- A. Veda
- B. DharmaŚāstra and Purāṇa

(A) VEDA

(a) Ṛg veda

In the Ṛg Saṁhitā (which embodies some of the earliest canonical scriptures of the Hindus, possibly before 1200 B.C.), the deity Viṣṇu is referred to as “protector of the child to-be”. As we have mentioned earlier, Ṛg Veda begs for protection of fetuses. There are prayers in the Ṛg Veda to guard a growing embryo.

- Ṛg Veda Hymn 11/162/ HYMNCLXII. Agni 3. That which destroys the sinking germ [of life] the settled, moving embryo, that which will kill the baby at birth, even this will we drive far away.

Again, the well being of the unborn is prayed for —

- Ṛg Veda Hymn 6.78.HYMNLXXVIII. Asvins [The divine Physician Twins]
7. Like as the wind on every side ruffles a pool of lotuses, so stir in thee the babe unborn, so may the ten-month babe descend.
 8. Like as the wind, like as the wood, like as the sea is set astir, so also, ten-month babe, descend together with the after-birth.
 9. The child who hath for ten months’ time been lying in his mother’s side, may he come forth alive unharmed, yea, living from the living dame, notice the invocation of a physician, not of a priest.

Thus the Ṛg Veda holds the woman’s self, like any part of her body; it does not want to hurt her, she protects and develops the embryo within herself. As she protects the embryo, so she also is protected.

(b) Atharva Veda

The Atharva Veda (equally old) expresses the same attitude towards the unborn child, with the added implication that abortion counts amongst the most heinous crimes.

Evidently, the “embryo slayer” is seen as a suitable candidate to bear the sufferings and sins of the rest of the Vedic community. The Satapatha Brāhmaṇa compares the reputation of those who eat beef to those who perform abortions. Infact, according to this text, the person who extracts the embryo is called an evil doer, while the Upanishads place him in the category of thieves and outcastes.

(B) DHARMA SĀŚTRAS AND PURĀṆA

- Parashara Smṛti 4.20; as per 1.24 compares abortion to a sin twice greater than that committed by killing a brāhmaṇa. There is no atonement for this sin.
- Further woman becomes an outcaste by obtaining abortion.(Gautama Dharmaśāstra (21.9)). Infact, the worst penalty that could be inflicted upon a member of the traditional Hindu Society was to make her an outcaste; it also had tragic implications on one’s prospects for spiritual liberation.
- In the code of Manusmhitā (5.89-90), libations of water shall not be offered to those who neglect the prescribed rites and who cause an abortion, or kill their husbands or drink spirituous liquor.
- In a number of nights equal to the number of months after conception, a woman is purified from an abortion (Viṣṇu Smṛti 22.25). This refers to miscarriage since: The impurity of a miscarriage lasts for the number of days and nights equal to the number of months from conception. (Gautama Dharmaśāstra 14.17-18, similarly Manu Smṛti 5.66).

The Brahma Khaṇḍa (5.10) of Padma Purāṇa states that, women who have abortions are often damaged psychologically and /or physically. Pregnancy is not just the result of sex. It is also the result of divine will.

“pūrva janmani ya nāri bhrūṇa hatyām ca yo narah
kuryat sa mṛta vatsa ca mṛta vatso bhared dhruvam.”

That is to say, any woman who, in previous births had an abortion, would certainly have a dead child born to her in this life. (Padma Purāṇa, Brahma Khaṇḍa 5.18).

All these evidences indicate that abortion or the killing of a fetus was a great sin (mahāpāpa).

“Yatpāpām brahmahatyayām dviguṇām garbhapatane.
Prāyāścittam na tasyāsti tasyāstyāgo vidhiyote”(Parāśar smṛti 4/20).

As mentioned already, there is no atonement for the sin of abortion. Parāśar smṛti insists that, there is no prāyascitta for this mahāpāpa and in such a case woman has to be abandoned (Parityāga). (Parāśarsmṛti 4/20);

Manusmṛti holds that—

“Bhrūṇānāveksitam caiva saṁsprṣtam cāpyudkyayā.
Patratriḍahvalīram ca śuṇa
Saṁsprṣtmeva ca”. (Manusmṛti 4/208).

‘It is immoral to see the woman who has committed abortion (garbhapatkāri), to touch a woman during the menstruation, and to receive food touched by the birds and dogs.’

Some slokas have been quoted in the following way—

“Pūrve januṣi yā nāri garbhaghātakāri hyabhūt.
garbhahapāten dukhṇārta sāhatra janmani jāyate.” (477/1)

‘Vandheyām yā mahābhāga pracchati svām prayojanam.
garbhapatratā pūrve januyatra phalam tvidam”

(659/1. 856/1, 921/1, 1857/1).

This text also contains injunctions against abortion, as well as protections for pregnant women. In the Viṣṇudharma Sūtra (“sacred-law Book of viṣṇu”), killing either fetus or mother is equated to the worst crime possible in Hindu Society, namely killing a Brāhman:

The Pūrāṇas’ prophecy for Kali Yuga states, “Everyone will be miserable owing to the dominance of vice and Tamoguṇa; people will freely commit abortion. Earth will be valued only for her mineral treasures. Money alone will confer nobility. Power will be the sole definition of virtue. Pleasure will be the only reason for marriage. Lust will be the only reason for womanhood. Falsehood will win out in disputes.” Thus, all these traditional views prove that the practice of abortion was morally condemnable in Hindu culture.

Even in modern times, we find, India’s greatest apostle of non-violence, Gandhiji, contends: “It seems to me clear as day light that abortion would be a crime.” Infact, some Hindu religious leaders go further and regard all forms of contraceptives as act of abortion, because they interfere with nature’s arrangement and, therefore, result in unfavourable Karmic reaction.

Thus from the above discussion we may conclude that according to the Hindu Śāstras abortion is absolutely forbidden. It is a pāpa, a sin. The Śāstras are very clear that abortion means killing a child. Birth is the appearance of the more developed human form.

It is not the beginning of human life, for life begins with fertilization. Birth and death are beyond one’s control, for they depend on God’s will. Thus on this view no one has the right to destroy another to suit his/her convenience.

IV. ABORTION AFFECTS — KARMA, REBIRTH AND LIBERATION AND VIOLATES THE PRINCIPLE OF AHIMŚĀ

According to the Hindu view abortion is the evil of the worst magnitude, and cannot be supported. The Indian philosophers, however, make a distinction between ‘bhrūṇahatyā’ and ‘garbhapāta’. They hold that garbhapāta (miscarriage) which is sometimes an involuntary action may be considered as a morally permissible action. But bhrūṇa-hatyā (fetus-killing) which is deliberate or intentional termination of pregnancy, cannot be morally acceptable, except in the circumstance when the mother’s life is threatened. On this view the practice of abortion is morally forbidden on the following grounds:

- (a) Abortion disturbs the natural and necessary cycle of karma and rebirth.
- (b) Abortion infringes upon the individual’s future prospect of being enlightened or liberated.
- (c) Abortion goes against the notion of jīvan-mukti, which is maintained by some of the schools of Indian philosophy.
- (d) Lastly, abortion violates the principle of ahimsā, the cardinal principle of Indian philosophy and culture.

Let us clarify these grounds a little

(a) **Abortion disturbs the natural and necessary cycle of karma and rebirth.**

Hinduism has traditionally believed that a soul is reincarnated and enters the embryo at the time of conception. According to the doctrine of reincarnation, fetus does not develop into a person, but is a person from the very early stage, and should be treated accordingly. That is why the doctrine of reincarnation can be used to make a strong case against abortion because, if the fetus is aborted, the soul with it suffers a major karmic setback and is deprived of the opportunities and potentialities to earn good karma and be free of the cycle of rebirth.

(b) **Abortion infringes upon individuals prospect to be enlightened or liberated.**

and

(c) **Abortion also goes against the notion of jīvan mukti.**

According to the doctrine of 'jīvan-mukti' an individual can be liberated from re-birth by doing good Karma. Thus, if a fetus is aborted before its birth it cannot live a productive life, and is also deprived of the opportunities of being liberated from rebirth. (jīvan-mukta).

(d) Abortion goes against the notion of ahimsā.

According to the Hindu view, life is manifestation of the Supreme Being (Brahma). Thus it is wrong to kill not only living beings but also the embryos, which possess the living souls. The principle of ahimsā or non-violence forms the cardinal principle of Hindu philosophy. Infact, Hindu medical ethics stems from this principle of non-violence or ahimsā.

In conclusion we may note that Hindu ideology makes an exception in the case where, to save the life of the mother, abortion becomes necessary. The Suṣrutā Saṁhitā, describes a procedure of inducing birth during complications in the pregnancy, that is, when the fetus is known to be defective, or there is danger of the fetus dying, or even a danger to the life of the mother. The ultimate objective is, of course, saving the lives of the mother and the child. However, in the event of this being not possible, the text (Suṣrutā Saṁhitā) affirms, saving the mother should take precedence over that of the child, and an abortion would be justified. This serves as an evidence against the possible assertion that, the real basis for an anti-abortion attitude in Hindu Society stems solely from social goals related to providing sons for the family and, therefore of the caste. For if that were true, and the moral sentiment played no role, then surely the mother would have been considered less important than the child.

V. PRĀYAŚCITTA

Although Hindu dharma stands against the practice of abortion yet for the woman who commits abortion, under special circumstances, the religion also prescribes the atonement (Prāyaścitta). What is the prāyaścitta, the penance, to be done to atone for abortion? One that works very well in this modern age is to adopt a child, raise it with tender loving care, believing this soul to be akin to the aborted soul.

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