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## Rethinking the Ambiguous Character of Hindu Women

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## Chapter 8

### Rethinking the Ambiguous Character of Hindu Women

Yasumasa SEKINE

The statement that Hindu women combine within their being the two opposing poles of a positive (or bright) aspect and a negative (or dark) aspect would seem to have become almost a *cliché* when discussing Hindu society. The aim of the present article is to shed fresh light on this seemingly clear-cut yet static and essentialist proposition and to both criticize it by throwing the one-sidedness of its definition into relief and to present a more valid theoretical framework for understanding Hindu women. I will begin by describing pollution and purification in everyday life on the basis of my own observations in Tamil village society in south India, focussing in particular on the coming-of-age ceremony for girls performed in the village where I conducted fieldwork. Then, following an examination of the Tamil view of women, I hope to extend the scope of the discussion to embrace the wider context of Hindu women in general. My objective is not only to criticize the current situation, in which an interpretation based on "pure-impure" ideology has come to be understood in substantialist terms and has won social acceptance, but also to demonstrate that consideration of an interpretation from the perspective of "pollution" ideology, which I have been advocating for some time now, is indispensable for accurately describing the realities of Hindu women. (The interpretation which I call "pollution" ideology, and distinguish from "pure-impure" ideology will be explained below, but for further details reference should be made to SEKINE 1993a, 1995.)

#### 1. POLLUTION AND PURIFICATION

##### 1) Pollution and Purification in Daily Life

For a time every morning the area around the pump house by the well in the fields on the south side of the village where I stay becomes alive with villagers bathing. This is a typical scene in a Tamil village in a corner of south India. Water gushes forth from the pump of the well used for irrigation, providing a bathing site popular with the villagers. When they rise in the morning, the villagers first go to the edge of the reservoir to answer the call of nature and then bathe themselves. These morning ablutions are not merely for the sake of personal cleanliness, but also represent an act of purification to remove the pollution caused by sleep. After

having bathed, the villagers return to their homes, offer up prayers, and apply holy ashes to their forehead and arms. A refreshing start is thus made to the day.

The villagers usually bathe in one of two ways. In rivers or ponds they will repeatedly immerse themselves completely in the water, or else, when using water drawn from a well, they will pour bucket after bucket of water over themselves. I have seen a young villager pouring close to fifty buckets of water over himself in this manner. After seeing this, and also doing it myself, I realized that the aim of bathing is not simply to remove the soil from one's body, and I discovered just how enjoyable and also how necessary for the preservation of health it is to remove the heat from one's body in this way in a tropical region such as south India. In particular, bathing after having rubbed oneself down with sesame oil has a great cooling effect and is most invigorating.

The woman who always prepares my meals when I stay in the village, a member of the Vellālar caste, invariably bathes in a corner of the kitchen after returning from town and then changes her sari. She says that she does this because going out, especially into town, makes her dirty (*acuttam* in Tamil).

Nowadays it is not only members of the higher castes that are assiduous in purifying themselves, and I heard the following observations from an elderly man belonging to the Harijans (formerly known as the Untouchables).

When I was young (until shortly after independence), I would be totally exhausted after a day's work, and because it was bothersome bathing at night and also sometimes cold, I would often go to sleep as I was. We Harijans were thus really dirty, and I thought that it was only natural that the gods would be angry if we entered the temples. But as a result of the reforms under the Indian National Congress Party the awareness of the Harijans, including myself, rapidly changed, and now we all bathe frequently and keep the area around our houses clean too.

By thus calling to mind just one or two scenes from everyday village life, it becomes evident that apparently casual acts of purification are not meant simply to remove physical dirt, but are also vested with a ritual significance, namely, that of removing pollution felt mentally. In addition, the remarks made by the Harijan hint at the popularization of the act of purification brought about by the winds of modernization. In other words, it could be pointed out that modernization, which brings about popularization of the upper class culture, has spread the enthusiasm for purification amongst greater numbers of people and is actually promoting Sanskritization.

## 2) The Mechanisms of Pollution and Purification

At this stage it will probably be helpful to touch briefly on the mechanisms of pollution and purification in Brahman culture, which continues to exert influence not because of any historical continuity but as a reference point for the villagers' actions in the context of today's new Sanskritization. Let us first consider what the *Manusmṛti* (*Laws of Manu*), of which Brahmins have always been mindful, has to

say about pollution and purification.

According to N. Watase, because of the identification of pollution and sin and because these are regarded as substantive entities, "purification is nothing other than the removal of the entities of pollution and sin" (WATASE 1990: 153). Here we have a succinct expression of the value world of Brahmins, in which purification and the expiation of sin are regarded as one. Watase also points out on the basis of terms relating to purification that purification signified "the 'removal,' 'cleansing,' 'destruction' or 'burning' of, or 'emancipation' from, pollution and sin, which adhere to one's person as physical entities" (*ibid.*: 167–168), while typical means of purification included "fire, earth, water, cow dung, sacred grass (*kuśa*), sesame, clarified butter, gifts, wind, sun, sacred phrases, words spoken by a Brahmin, austerities, religious ceremonies, time, knowledge, true words, meditation, breath control, punishment by a king, renunciation of worldly pursuits, etc." (*Ibid.*: 168).

This being so, what then are the actual mechanisms governing pollution and purification in Tamil villages today? The villagers also seem to believe that sin and misdeeds give rise to pollution, but the karma theory or the theory of transmigration, involving the atonement of sins through rebirth, are by no means obvious to them. As far as I have been able to ascertain through my own enquiries, there seems to be a strong tendency to believe that retribution for one's pollution and sin will occur during the lifetime in which they were committed.

Be that as it may, the generation of pollution requires an appropriate response, namely, purification. If we now consider firstly some of the terms corresponding to "purification," it is found that dynamic expressions conforming to different situations, rather than vocabulary items removed from context, function as actually living words. Therefore, a grasp of verbal expressions and accompanying actions in accordance with their context can conversely provide clues for an understanding of the actual content of purification. For example, giving a newborn baby its first bath is referred to as *tīṭṭu kaḷuvutal* ("washing away pollution"), while the term *mulukutal* ("washing down the whole body") is used when referring to the ablutions of a woman who has just given birth, and there is also the expression *mañcalnīrāṭṭuvilā* ("ritual for bathing with turmeric water"), used as the name of the coming-of-age ceremony for girls that takes place with the onset of menstruation. In general, expressions and actions indicative of washing away with water are those that are the most common. One other commonly performed action is that of using milk to remove pollution. For instance, after a cremation the site is "cooled" by "pouring milk" (*pāl ūrrutal*) over it, thereby restoring the earth's fertility. Methods of purification by smearing cow dung and drinking or sprinkling cow's urine also fall into the same category. These are all methods of purification that rely on the five products (*pañcakavviam*) of the sacred cow (*kōmātā*). A cow is so pure that even its dung and urine are capable of purifying human beings. Other methods of purification include shaving one's hair, eating food that is regarded as "cold," and using objects that are *paccai* ("raw, fresh, cold") as ritual implements.

The most involved method of purification is the purificatory rite to which a Brahman is invited. For example, in the case of the Vellālar caste, the highest caste in the village where I carried out my investigations, a purificatory rite called *puṇṇiyatāṇam* (lit. "sacred gift for accumulating merit") is performed on the thirteenth or fourteenth day after birth in order to remove the pollution of birth, and on this occasion not only gifts but also the power of the *mantras* chanted by the Brahman play an important role. But it should be pointed out that ritual acts associated with a high degree of abstract thinking such as this particular rite are generally confined to certain ritually high-ranking castes, and in the non-Brahman village where I stayed they were quite irrelevant to the majority of villagers.

When viewed in this light, it becomes apparent that pollution is perceived as a "hot" state (*cūtu*), and therefore various means must be devised to "cool" (*kulir*) it (e.g. BECK 1969). Pollution, a "hot" state, is a state of disorder in which things are in flux and mix with one another (DANIEL 1984: 188). The act of cooling serves to reinstate the mixing and confusion in a new order and to stabilize them. This principle underlies all methods of purification, ranging from the exoteric method of pouring water over oneself, which can be performed by anyone, to the esoteric method of chanting mantras, which has been monopolized by Brahmans. One other point that should not be overlooked when considering purification is the fact that the very lapse of time expunges pollution. A certain period of time is necessary for the subsiding of confusion, just as something that is hot will cool down only slowly, and the length of time will depend upon the caste and the event in question (for details see FERRO-LUZZI 1974). Thus, on a phenomenal level, purification may be understood first of all as the act of bringing order (or equilibrium) to pollution, representing a "hot" state of disorder, by various means, including the lapse of time.

### 3) "Purification for Elimination" and "Purification for Creation"

Next let us consider whether or not this understanding of purification to be observed in the villages is identical to the aforementioned Brahmanical conception of purification as the removal of the substantive entities of pollution and sin. This will be discussed in concrete terms in the following section on the pollution and purification associated with menarche, but here I wish to anticipate my conclusions in general terms.

In the case of the Brahmanical view, pollution is regarded as something that is substantive and primarily negative (or evil), and therefore, because of a need to remove it, adherents of this view tend towards "purification for elimination." It is, however, extremely doubtful whether this Brahmanical perspective can fully explain the realities of purification in the villages. These doubts become even stronger when observing rites of passage, which are closely related to the generation of pollution. It must, in other words, be realized that although on one level pollution is indeed treated as a "thing," essentially it originates in events or "incidents" such as birth and death (SEKINE 1993a: Chap. 3, 1995: Chap. 3). One is thus led to

examine the content of the purification that follows on from pollution representing an "incident" irreducible to a "thing." To wit, understanding pollution as an "incident" signifies a switch to a generative perspective liberated from any substantialist view, and because pollution is understood from this perspective as the locus of the manifestation of productive forces, it involves the dynamism of death and the regeneration of life, that is, a process that might be called "purification for creation."

I have for some time been advocating the differentiation of two ways of interpreting the content of what is expressed as pollution and the validity of making this distinction (for details see SEKINE 1993a, 1995). Defining the essence of pollution as "the experience of the destruction of order, which causes a sense of fear of death (or being drawn into a world of continuity)," I have shown that there are two ways of interpreting or responding to this experience. That is, I designate as "pollution" that which ensues from an affirmative and receptive attitude born of abiding within the marginal state of pollution, and this I distinguish from the negative manifestation of pollution, which I call "impurity," that results from standing outside the marginal state of pollution and looking down on it from the centre of the established order. It could also be said that the former regards pollution as an "incident" and has a generative and dynamic perspective that looks outwards from within pollution, while the latter represents a standpoint that treats pollution as a "thing" and considers it in fixed terms from without.

These two ways of interpreting pollution lead of themselves to two forms of purification, namely, "purification for creation" and "purification for elimination." In the case of "purification for elimination," which is predicated on the existence of an external authoritarian viewpoint, pollution is merely pushed away to the fringes of established power or under the carpet, as it were, and this results in no more than a state of constant fear and apprehension. In this respect, L. Dumont's theory of purity and impurity (DUMONT 1980 (1966)), which conceals this type of authoritarian viewpoint, is able to deal only with "purification for elimination," and it affords no scope for discussing "purification for creation." There is a need to aim at greater precision in such debate by disentangling the confusion in discussions based on essentialist substantialism taking the form of relationism, as in Dumontian theory, and setting the situation to rights from the standpoint of a more thoroughgoing hermeneutics by remaining constantly aware of the positions of those who speak of pollution. (In this regard M. Douglas's differentiation of "dirt-affirmative philosophies" and "dirt-rejecting philosophies" is important (DOUGLAS 1966: 164).) "Purification for creation" extracts "pollution" or the positive interpretation of pollution—that is, its latent power and fertility—in such a way that it may be utilized on a social level, while "purification for elimination" adopts the path of coercive purification by suppressing the aspect of "impurity" inherent in the ambiguous chaos of pollution and preserving its aspect of "purity."

On the basis of the above observations, the points at issue may now be summarized in the following manner. For a correct understanding of the content

of acts of purification accommodating the rich ambiguity of pollution, a simple centralized understanding that merely removes the "impure" and, if necessary, arbitrarily transforms it into the "pure" is inadequate, and consideration of the interpretative vector of what I call "pollution," with its orientation towards decentralization, is indispensable. It is this point that I wish to make clear here. This is because I fear that, with an above-mentioned centralized understanding that retains the stratified dichotomy between "purity" and "impurity," one may misconstrue the villagers' true motives.

I now wish to consider this question in more concrete terms by taking up as an example the coming-of-age ceremony for girls that accompanies the onset of menstruation. This celebration of menarche in the form of the coming-of-age ceremony is highly distinctive of south India, for in north India not only is little importance attached to menarche, but it tends to be concealed (WADLEY 1980: 163). Moreover, insofar that the rites surrounding menarche are directly related to views of women, kinship and marital relations, they are also worth taking up in that they represent an important node in the cultural structure of south India (e.g. BECK 1974; REINICHE 1981).

## 2. POLLUTION AND FERTILITY AMONG TAMIL WOMEN

### 1) The Tamil Coming-of-Age Ceremony for Girls

The purpose of the coming-of-age ceremony for girls is to make socially explicit on the occasion of a natural occurrence in the form of menarche the change from a girl, hitherto referred to as a child (*cinṇapillai*), to an unmarried woman or virgin (*kaṇṇi*). This coming-of-age ceremony is generally called *caṭaṅku*, but as is suggested by its alternative name *mañcaṇṇirāṭṭuvilā* noted earlier, the ritual as a whole may be viewed as a process of purification for overcoming the pollution associated with menarche. It could also be described as a process for culturally interpreting and incorporating within society the inescapable natural changes entailed in menarche. The way in which it is incorporated into society constitutes the actual content of its purification. First I wish to sketch the main elements in the process leading from menarche to the coming-of-age ceremony with reference to the Vellālar caste, which evidences the most highly evolved ritual process in the non-Brahman village where I conducted my fieldwork.

(1) The Tamil term for 'menarche' is *kaṇṇippūppu*, but it is worth noting that *pūppu* not only means 'menstruation,' but also has the connotation of 'flowering' (KOLENDA 1984: 114). First of all the relatives are informed, with priority being given firstly to the mother's brothers (*tāymāman*) and their wives (*attai*) and secondly to the father's sisters (*attai*). That is, these closely related cross-kin play an indispensable role in the ceremony. This is closely linked to the practice of cross-cousin marriage (REYNOLDS 1980). Other village women are also invited. This is called "village message" (*ūr colli*). It is customary for those who have been

invited to the ceremony to bring bananas, flowers and milk. The ritual begins with an odd number of five or seven women, starting with the wives of the mother's brothers and followed by the father's sisters, sprinkling holy water containing turmeric (*mañcal*) and flowers over the girl, who sits facing a direction that is auspicious for her on that day. This is looked upon as "ordinary" bathing. Next, the girl changes into a new sari given to her by her mother's brothers and sits facing east in an open area such as a courtyard. Then, after a tray bearing bananas, flowers, milk, rouge (*kuñkuman*), and sandalwood powder (*cantaṇam*) brought by the mother's brothers has been placed in front of the girl, an odd number of women, again starting with the wives of the mother's brothers, apply rouge to the girl's forehead and sandalwood powder to her cheeks and hands. This is called *nalanku*, which also refers to a rite during the marriage ceremony in which the bride and groom apply rouge and sandalwood powder to one another, and one may thus read into this action a metaphor of marriage. Next, the waving of lamps, or *āratti*, is performed in order to exorcise the girl of, and also protect her from, the malevolent influence of the evil eye (*tiruṣṭi kalikkiratu*). This also starts from the mother's brothers' wives. Slaked lime, turmeric, and betel leaves and areca nuts (*verilai-pākkū*) are placed on a tray, and the girl is exorcised of evil by means of the tray bearing a camphor lamp (but no money). Because the objects on the tray are believed to have absorbed the evil, they are discarded on the road outside the house. In this fashion the vulnerable girl is placed in a liminal state in which she is protected from the evil eye and other malevolent influences, and, as was hinted at by the metaphor of marriage, preparations are made to direct her towards auspiciousness and prosperity. (This represents the prelude to sacred symbolic conception.) The girl could indeed be identified with the initiand (*dīkṣita*) in the initiatory rite of return to the womb (*dīkṣā*) (ELIADE 1965: 104–108). Following the performance of *āratti*, the girl is given bananas and milk, and the remaining milk is boiled and consumed by the other participants. It is considered meet to give the girl gruel (*kūḷ*) made from the powder of black grams, this being regarded as "cold" food.

(2) The girl is kept in seclusion in a room inside her home until the coming-of-age ceremony (*catanku*), which is performed on the sixteenth day. Usually a room in the southwest (*kannimūlai*) part of the house is used for this period of segregation. During her segregation, the girl's mother delivers her meals in such a way that the mother does not touch her daughter's eating utensils. "Hot" dishes are avoided, and the girl bathes daily with water brought to her room. During this time she wears worn-out saris, and the washerman's wife comes regularly to collect her soiled garments. When explaining the reasons for her segregation, the Vellāḷars themselves state that she is segregated because she is in a state of menarcheal pollution (*kannittittu*), but at the same time they also say that it is an "auspicious event" (*mañkalamāṇa kāriyam*). These statements merit attention in that they explain the seemingly negative phenomenon of segregation from a perspective that would comprehend the pollution associated with menarche in a positive light. It is



true that this explanation gives clear expression to the villagers' perception of menarche as being both an auspicious (*maṅkala*) and a polluted (*tittu*) event, but if anthropologists then simply classify menarche as a point of intersection of the two axes of auspiciousness and pollution, they have done no more than superficially rehash the villagers' words without having grasped the essence of the matter. (In this respect the discussions presented by Das (1977: 143) and Good (1991: 200), although of considerable interest, are inadequate). As will be discussed below, the question of how to interpret the southwest quarter where the girl is segregated and the villagers' above explanation must be considered in greater depth.

(3) On the sixteenth day, when the period of menarcheal pollution is over, the house is cleaned and purified (with the floor and walls being recoated with cow dung or lime), and then the coming-of-age ceremony is performed. Letters of invitation to the ceremony have already been prepared and sent out, although personal visits are made to the mother's brothers and the letters of invitation are delivered directly together with bananas, betel leaves, areca nuts, and one-rupee coins. On the day of the ceremony, the mother's brothers bring with them numerous gifts, including silk saris, rice, eggs, crystallized sugar, sweetmeats, fruit, betel leaves, areca nuts, and makeup implements. The Brahman priest sits facing north, while the girl sits facing east. In front of them are placed three water vessels (*karakam*) full of turmeric water and a small water pot symbolizing the gods, ritual utensils, the saris and other gifts. After the priest has chanted mantras to sacralize them, the girl is taken to the bathing site and purified by her mother's brothers' wives with holy water from the water vessels. (It has also been reported that the priest besprinkles the girl with holy water (Good 1978: 284, 290).) This represents a type of consecration (*apiṣṭakam*), and it should be interpreted not just as an act of purification, but also as a form of sacralization.

(4) The girl changes into a silk sari and returns dressed up like a bride to where everyone else is waiting. Then wicks are stood in sweets called *pittu* and in sweetmeats such as the pudding-like *kalī* and thin bread (*aṭai*) made from the powder of raw rice (*paccāi aricī*), and the act of *āratti* is performed by waving trays bearing these sweetmeats with their wicks lit to and fro in front of the girl. The tray of *pittu* is first brought down in front of the girl, from her head down to her knees, and then it is similarly brought down parallel to her back. This is performed by the mother's brothers' wives and the father's sisters. The same actions are then performed using the tray of *kalī*. In this manner the girl is gradually purified, and the tray of *aṭai* is rotated three times near her head expressly in order to ward off the evil eye, after which the *aṭai* is discarded in the four quarters. The Brahman priest first sacralizes the girl with fire that has been offered to Gaṇeśa and then gives the holy ashes to the girl and other participants. The women, starting with the mother's brothers' wives, apply a mixture of sandalwood powder, rouge and flowers to the girl's forehead, this being the second time that the ritual act of *nalanku* is performed. When this has been completed, the mother's brothers rub holy ashes on the girl's forehead, and the girl then pledges respect and obedience to

her parents, her mother's brothers, and others.

(5) Lastly gifts of money and other valuables which are called *moy* are presented to the girl, and then a banquet (*viḷuntucāppātu*) is held. On either the following day or three days after the coming-of-age ceremony, *piṭṭu* and *aṭai* are prepared and distributed among the relatives, who are again notified that the girl has indeed come of age.

## 2) Interpreting the Coming-of-Age Ceremony: "Pollution" and "Purification for Creation"

As is indicated by the numbers used in the foregoing section, the above ritual process surrounding menarche has, roughly speaking, five phases: (1) "ordinary" bathing prior to segregation, *nalanku*, and *āratti*; (2) segregation due to the pollution associated with menarche; (3) ritual bathing after segregation; (4) *āratti* and *nalanku* of the finely dressed maiden; and (5) presentation of gifts and banquet. If we compare this with, for example, my own observations of a menarcheal ritual among the Jaffna Tamils of Sri Lanka (SEKINE 1983: 101–103) and Good's report from Tirunelvēri in southern Tamilnadu (GOOD 1978, 1991), the basic structure of the ritual is identical in all cases. However, one point deserving special mention is to be found in the instance described by Good, for it clearly incorporates a mock marriage in phase (4) in which the role of groom is often played by a matrilineal cross-cousin (*viz.* a daughter of one of the mother's brothers) (for details see GOOD 1991: Chap. 7). In the ritual that I have described above, it is also quite possible to regard the ritual act of *nalanku*, which is performed twice (in phases (1) and (4)), as a metaphor of marriage. At any rate, through the consecration ritual of phase (3) and this phase (4) the pollution associated with menarche is transformed into a sacred fertility and firmly incorporated into the culture that the girl belongs to. In other words, after having absorbed her wild, untamed power, culture moulds her into a fertile woman. As is noted by Good, these ritual actions are not simply expressions of culture, but have a "performative" content whereby a woman conforming to a particular cultural pattern is created through the performance of these actions. The girl is not merely imitating her cultural rules; instead, Tamil culture is being generated through the performance of a ritual in the form of the girl's coming-of-age ceremony.

But here we are concerned with the question of what exactly the cultural patterns generated and moulded in this fashion actually are. In this respect, when compared with Good, who has produced analytical interpretative diagrams of the ritual sequence in which he unthinkingly uses the objective concepts of purity and impurity (see GOOD 1991: 195, 209), the observations of S. Wadley, who espouses a cultural approach and attaches special importance to women's own powers of self-control (regarding the celebration of menarche in Tamil society as a ritual the objective of which is to control the ambiguous energy that manifests as the "heat" of a woman's body and to convert it both internally and externally into a power of abundant beneficence (WADLEY 1980)), would seem to come closer to the ideas of

the Tamils themselves, notwithstanding certain shortcomings (namely, the fact that because she has not freed herself sufficiently from a viewpoint centred on the established order, she is still encumbered by "pure-impure" ideology).

Bearing these facts in mind when interpreting the above coming-of-age ceremony, I would now like to focus on the girl's segregation in the southwest room. Those segregated in this room are not restricted to girls experiencing menarche, for pregnant women about to give birth and the bodies of the dead are also transferred here. This room may be described as a marginal place within the residential sphere that borders on the otherworld. The deity presiding over the southwest is the goddess *Kaṇṇi*, a virgin goddess who died unmarried. (On the differences between *Kaṇṇi* and *Nirrti*, the latter a goddess of calamities associated with the southwest in north Indian Hinduism, see REINICHE 1981.) As is suggested by the fact that the southwest is associated not only with this virgin goddess, but also with the god of chastity, *Gaṇeśa*, the southwest may therefore be looked upon as a direction replete with powerful sexual potentiality (DANIEL 1984: 126). Thus the southwest, also said to be linked to the earth, becomes a uterine direction which, similar to the return to the "forest (or the wildness)," incorporates within it as a single process the ambiguity of death and birth or destruction and creation (see REINICHE 1975). The creative power of the southwest, comparable to the forest, can be confirmed in the importance attached to the southwest and northeast in architectural rites and in their interchangeability (SEKINE 1993b). It is found, namely, that the southwest can be substituted for the northeast (*Isana*), which is associated with both fertility and good fortune (see also MOORE 1989).

What we must clearly realize through these observations on the southwest is the fact that the dynamism of destruction and creation (representing a single process rather than a dichotomy) embodied in the uterine direction of *Kaṇṇi* is indicative of the essence of "pollution," which abides on the borderline between untamed nature and tamed culture, and that it is here that the generation of the extraordinary power of *śakti* becomes possible. We should note that the essence of this "pollution" corresponds to the ambiguity found at the marginal point of a culture, and under no circumstances is it the ambiguity representing the sum of the two terms "purity" and "impurity," which have been differentiated within the culture. The usage of the word pollution when it is said that the segregation of the girl is due to the pollution associated with menarche must not be confused with "impurity." It is not appropriate to reduce this pollution only to the "impurity" that has been interpreted within the authoritarian cultural order of "pure-impure ideology" as having primarily negative connotations. When this point is clearly understood, then the real intent of the villagers in identifying menarche with both pollution and auspiciousness becomes clearer. In a word, this embodies the villagers' wish to allow this untamed power, once its existence has been basically recognized, to circulate within society in a productive and stable manner. *Śakti*, which has its origins in the chaos corresponding to the marginal point where culture encounters nature, is the fountainhead of the villagers' lives, and they embrace it in such a way

so as not to damage them and then transform it into a productive and reproductive power in their daily life. The girl's segregation (being a metaphor of death and the regeneration of life) corresponds to the generation of this power in a uterus, while the aim of the *āratti* and *nalanku* (a metaphor of marriage) following her ablutions is to ensure the stabilization of this generated power. Stated in more figurative terms, it constitutes a single process of "purification for creation" in which first the power of the red "hot" blood is accepted in positive terms and then a white "cold" enclosure is installed in order to stabilize it as an auspicious force (cf. BECK 1969: 553). This differs from the methods of "purification for elimination," in which red, having been ascribed a negative value, is then decolorized and eliminated so as to leave only white, marked by tranquillity. The character of "purification for creation", interpreted with a view to accepting this power in its entirety, points to the existence of a cultural pattern (or ideological dimension) differing from "pure-impure" ideology, namely, the dimension which I have termed "pollution" ideology. This is fundamentally the same as the villagers' affirmative view of menstruation (—"the menstrual flow cleanses a woman's body") and their assertion of the need to make blood sacrifices to the village gods (—"blood sacrifices purify both the temple and the worshippers"). It could also be argued that this ideological dimension is linked to the south Indian view of women, which discovers within the being of women themselves a fertility value, expressed by P. Kolenda, who compares views of women in north and south India, as "woman as 'flower'" (KOLENDA 1984).

However, it is not necessarily correct to maintain that the ideological dimension represented by the concepts of "pollution" and "purification for creation" is peculiar to south Indian culture, nor is it my intention to make any such assertion. Rather, it should be considered that Tamil society, although situated within Hindu society, is a place where "pollution" ideology is readily visible. (In this sense, it is dangerous to simplistically reduce the existence of two ideological dimensions to the contrast between north Indian culture and south Indian culture.) At any rate, using as a theoretical framework the existence of the two ideologies belonging to two different dimensions that I have deduced on the basis of observations in Tamil society—namely, "purity-impurity" ideology, which looks down on the marginal state of pollution from without, and "pollution" ideology, which seeks to abide within this marginal state—I now wish to set about correcting the biases inherent in ideas concerning "the ambiguous character of Hindu women," which have won wide but ill-considered currency. This I shall do by reviewing the relevant literature. Consequently, in the following section the scope of the discussion will be extended from Tamil society to Hindu society in general.

### 3. RETHINKING "THE AMBIGUOUS CHARACTER OF HINDU WOMEN"

It seems to be one of several remarkable phenomena in Hindu culture that women possess a split character combining the negative with the positive. In this

context, menstrual blood, which clearly distinguishes a woman from a man, becomes a focus of the symbolism of women. That is to say, menstruation itself is considered to have a dichotomous character, with elements of the destructive and the creative. More correctly speaking, menstruation, which is connected with a woman's reproductive power, represents the mediating character of women that converts the polluting to the prosperous. For example J. Krygier notes that "[i]n India there is the remarkable notion of embryo murder" (KRYGIER 1982: 77). This notion includes the view that menstrual blood is associated with conception and a child is formed from menstrual blood, so that a woman's menstruation must be rendered fruitful (*ibid.*: 77). This type of Hindu ideology (or cultural interpretation) evidently shows the preeminence of "a metaphor of birth" (e.g. NICHOLAS 1981: 378; HERSHMAN 1977: 287). In any case, it is my task here to clarify how I understand these phenomena.

### 1) The Limitations of an Understanding Based on "Pure-Impure" Ideology

The ambiguous character of Hindu women is commonly expressed stereotypically in various social contexts. Expressed simply, Hindu women possess aspects of both "purity" and "danger," or "compassion" and "sexuality (passion)" (TAPPER 1979: 1). M. Allen clearly exemplifies the dual character of Hindu women by means of pairs of terms such as pure/impure, sinister/benign, creative/destructive, ally/opponent, and goddess/witch (ALLEN 1982: 1). More precisely, according to P. Hershman, "[v]irginity and motherhood are both highly esteemed states in Punjabi society but wifehood and sexuality are those aspects which devalue a woman and make her the inferior of a man" (HERSHMAN 1977: 275).

These descriptions of Hindu women are not incorrect, but their cultural analysis, the standpoint of which is static and top-down, still remains vague and confused. The vagueness of the analysis is due to the lack of a clear understanding that pollution has two different interpretations or dimensions, namely, "impurity" and "pollution," depending upon whether one's standpoint is centralized (top-down) or decentralized (bottom-up). In this connection Allen's conclusion is suggestive, although it juxtaposes several views of women and does not show the dynamic relationship obtaining among them. According to Allen, "the orthodox renouncer *avoids* them (*viz.* women) as dangerous distractions; the seeker after high social status *controls* them in order to maintain his status through their purity;... the low status worker *values* them as providers of material satisfaction...; while the Tantric *uses* them as a necessary means of attaining spiritual liberation" (ALLEN 1982: 18). This statement of Allen's naturally invites the application of my distinction between "impurity" and "pollution" to the present context. We notice that Allen's four categories can be broadly classified into two major ideological tendencies, with the former two being separated from the latter two. The distinctive feature that divides these two groups is the difference of attitude towards female sexuality. The former group tends to negate or segregate it, while the latter

enjoys or accepts it. This contrast clearly corresponds to the distinction between "impurity" and "pollution," which is typified in the contrast between the orthodox renouncer and the Tantric. The high status seeker is eager to keep the "purity" of women under his control because an uncontrolled woman is seen as "impure," and so he joins the group of the renunciators. Since the low status worker, because of his distance from the dominant ideology, does not exhibit an explicit attitude of rejection towards women, he tends to accept her as she is, and this is the reason that he and the Tantric form one group.

Thus it becomes clear that Hindu women must be understood in terms of an analytical map consisting of the two dimensions, or ideological tendencies, of "impurity (pure-impure)" ideology and "pollution" ideology. In this respect, I am convinced that the accounts by Allen, Hershman and perhaps Tapper, cited above, are the results of confusion in that they fail to distinguish between these two ideologies because of the strong influence of what I call "impurity" ideology here, that is, Dumontian "pure-impure" ideology. Although in "pure-impure" ideology women have to be segregated as the "impure," it is impossible for secular people, who must live together with women, to chase them away altogether. Therefore, they are required to resolve this contradiction. Then, as a last resort, within this ideology they invent the dual character of woman, such that she is "pure" and at the same time "impure." For example, according to H. Orenstein, the code-writers as typical symbolic producers of the dominant ideology touch on the "pure" as well as the "impure" aspects of women (ORENSTEIN 1968: 122). It is, then, natural to pose the question of what makes it possible for such contrary ideas to coexist. This conundrum can never be solved within the confines of "pure-impure" ideology alone, and it is to be concluded that in actual fact use is made of the logic of sacrifice as a device for achieving the coexistence of the "pure" and "impure." In this sense, we notice that "pure-impure" ideology is in fact supported by "pollution" ideology, the central logic of which is sacrifice (*viz.* death and the regeneration of life), but the Brahman code-writers hide this fact in order to protect the preeminence of "pure-impure" ideology. Moreover, most South Asianists superficially describe what they have read or observed with regard to Hindu women without, however, analyzing it in depth, and they just repeat the above Brahman-biased and male-biased view, which is circumscribed by "pure-impure" ideology.

Generally speaking, the limitations of this attitude naturally reflect upon one's understanding of menstruation, which is the key phenomenon in ideological discourse about Hindu women. For instance, in his discussion of Draupadi's hair, A. Hildebeitel notes that "conventional notions of menstrual blood as defiling are somewhat one-sided. To the women, at least, menstrual blood is also purifying." Furthermore, "[t]here are numerous statements in the *Dharmaśāstra Samhitās* to the effect that women are cleansed by the menstrual flow" (HILTEBEITEL 1981: 203). Outside textual sources, Hershman reports that "Punjabi women do not look upon menstruation as a curse but rather see it as a necessary bodily process in order to purge themselves of pollution and make clean their wombs" (HERSHMAN 1974: 286).

(This report from Punjabi society is exactly the same as what I heard in the course of my investigations in a Tamil village.) These accounts provide very interesting material because they not only indicate the "pure" aspect of women but also touch on the dynamic process in which the menstrual flow changes women from "impure" to "pure." Nonetheless, these materials still await a deeper analysis going beyond the confines of "pure-impure" ideology. In other words, menstruation has to be dealt with as a dynamic "incident" rather than as a "thing." For that, one has no choice but to consider women from the viewpoint of "pollution" ideology, which is based on the logic of sacrifice.

## 2) From the Viewpoint of "Pollution" Ideology

In order to investigate the "pollution" dimension of women, it is useful to focus on the position of widowhood, which is degraded as "impure" from the viewpoint of "pure-impure" ideology.

Firstly, let us take up the topic of *satī* in connection with widowhood. Especially among the higher castes, whose culture is more Brahmanical, a widow tends to be regarded as very "impure" and as inauspicious, and she is, therefore, excluded from normal social life. For example, "a common term of abuse in Kannada is *randi*, a word which means both widow and whore" (BRADFORD 1983: 316). This implies that a widow is "impure" not only because of the effect of death pollution but also because of her sexuality, which has lost its controller (her husband), as E.L. Stutchbury also points out (STUTCHBURY 1982: 62). Therefore, it is usual for the "impure" widow to be socially segregated as a mourner throughout the rest of her life. However, there is one other drastic way of responding to her husband's death. This is the custom of *satī*. *Satī* is a form of self-sacrifice in which a widow throws herself into the cremation fire of her husband. According to Stutchbury, through *satī*, "the widow, extremely polluted by her husband's death, is transformed into the purest of wives by sacrifice" (*ibid.*: 62). This is followed by her explanation that, by this sacrificial death, the threat that the widow presents to the patrilineage is completely removed and the honour of the purest wife makes her lineage prosperous.

A wife, especially among the socially higher castes, is also required to sacrifice herself for her husband in everyday life, though in not so drastic a fashion as *sati*. The sacrifice is to serve her husband faithfully. For example, it is a sacrificial action when a wife eats dinner by using the plate which her husband has used and after having served him his meal. This action is conceived of as absorbing and removing pollution from her husband, so that if the wife accumulated pollution in her body through this action and ultimately died, this could be equated with *satī* as the result of her everyday efforts of self-sacrifice.

In the same context, it is said that the devotion of a wife to her husband has the value of renunciation in this world (OJHA 1981: 255). In short, a husband is a god to his wife (HARPER 1964: 181). Thus we are convinced that a wife's devotion to her husband in this world is regarded as a *religious* act participating in the sphere of

the sacred. In this connection, it is C.J. Fuller who tries to give a systematic explanation of this phenomenon. According to him, the relationship between wife and husband is similar to that between man and God (FULLER 1979: 471). As evidence in support of this statement, he points to the resemblance of the patterns of giving meals: although in the usual *social* sphere the status of a giver is necessarily higher (or purer) than that of a taker, the situation is reversed in both the wife-husband relationship and the man-God relationship. Namely, in both situations the lower-status party gives a meal (or offering) to the higher party, i.e., husband or God. This indicates that these relationships belong to the *religious* sphere, where the logic of the *social* sphere does not operate, as is indicated by Fuller when he states that "the gods themselves cannot be polluted" (*ibid.*: 459).

These examples suggest that the self-sacrificial actions associated with wifehood belong to the *religious* (or sacred) sphere, not to the *social* (or profane) sphere. It is to be noted that there is a clear contrast between these two spheres. The underlying logic of the *social* (or profane) sphere is the "pure-impure" ideology in which women are regarded as "impure" while at the same time the "purity" of women is also stressed. In this sphere, importance is attached to "self-preservation." By way of contrast, the *religious* (or sacred) sphere requires "self-abandonment," namely, self-sacrifice, which represents the underlying logic of "pollution" ideology. In the *religious* sphere, women are seen as a source of energy and their "sacredness" is stressed. Therefore, although it is said in the *social* sphere that the self-sacrificial actions of a wife change her into the "pure" (or "purest"), the "pure" in this context should be regarded as the "sacredness" from the viewpoint of "pollution" ideology. This argument obviously implies that a "pure" wife is a misleading expression which both wittingly and unwittingly ignores the distinction between the two ideological spheres. It is logically impossible to change women from the "impure" into the "pure" within the *profane* sphere (or secular world), and, therefore, it is necessary for the proper understanding of women to go beyond the *profane* sphere. It must be taken into account that such a change inevitably requires a sacrificial action like *sati* that is equated with world renunciation, that is to say, an incident in the *religious* sphere or a "pollution"-ideological action. Thus, our task is to see through the above-mentioned code-writers' attempt to hide this fact and to correctly demonstrate the actual ideological discourse in terms of Hindu women.

### 3) Women as an Arena of Ideological Struggles

It is clear from the above arguments that images of Hindu women are made up of two different ideological dimensions, namely, "pure-impure" ideology and "pollution" ideology. Therefore, we can say that the ambiguous character of women has to be investigated on the basis of the fact that they embody these two ideologies, each with its own logic. In other words, women on the one hand submissively conform to the hierarchy governed by the logic of "pure-impure" and contribute to the preservation of the *social* (or profane) system, while on the other



hand they violate or transcend the hierarchical social order and renew it through the logic of sacrifice.

If we now reconsider the ambiguous character of Hindu women after having taken cognizance of the differences between these two ideological dimensions, it becomes evident just how indifferent to the distinction between these ideological dimensions the popular stereotypical image of Hindu women is. That being so, by way of conclusion I wish to delineate the characteristics of the images of women corresponding to each of these two ideological dimensions. The important point that I wish to confirm is that ideological differences do not simply reflect different types of value orientation, but attest to fundamental differences in the locus of their respective interpretative perspectives.

In other words, the essence of "pure-impure" ideology lies in a secular attitude that objectifies from without that which it regards as marginal. It thus represents a top-down interpretation from the standpoint of the centre of the dominant order, and in the present instance, from its position at the centre of a male-centred and Brahman-centred order, it defines women as peripheral and marginal entities and looks upon them as "impure." Yet at the same time, because women are a *sine qua non* for society, it moulds women who are pure by imposing various kinds of self-sacrifice in the form of social restrictions and then extolling their observance, and the power of women is in actual fact incorporated into the dominant order. This is put into practice by means of the act of "purification for elimination." In this manner, on the basis of the reciprocity of the centre and the periphery, which manifests as subservient devotion and domineering protection and is predicated on an uneven distribution of power, women are forced to embody a veritably split and ambiguous character combining the contradictory aspects of the "impure" and the "pure."

By way of contrast, the essence of "pollution" ideology lies in an attitude grounded in a perspective from within that which the socially dominant view defines as marginal, and it therefore represents a world that places value on the dynamics of living on the borderline linking chaos and cosmos, which are not embraced by nomos. Here there is maintained an attitude that seeks to accept in a positive light the existence of the pollution brought about by a woman's physiology (equivalent to chaos) as an independent latent power corresponding to what I call "pollution," and the efflorescence of its productivity and fertility (equivalent to cosmos) is enjoyed as something sacred. Because this sacredness is reached via the path of "pollution," I shall designate it "pollution-sacredness." This process whereby pollution is regarded as "pollution" and "pollution-sacredness" is attained corresponds to what I have referred to as "purification for creation."

The fact to which we must now turn our attention after having recognized the above ideological differences is that, as has already been pointed out, "pure-impure" ideology, with its viewpoint centred on the dominant order, comprehends the phenomenon of a woman's flowering fertility by translating it into the acme of "purity" (which might be described as "purity-sacredness"), thereby attempting to

keep it within the confines of the nomos of the centralized ideology. In this fashion, the interpretations made by two different ideologies of one and the same phenomenon (*viz.* fertility) occurring in the person of Hindu women run into direct conflict. This is why I would suggest that women are an arena of ideological struggles.

It might assist the reader's understanding of my arguments if I were to borrow K. Karatani's concepts of "particularity" and "singularity" in order to characterize this ideological struggle that takes place between "pure-impure" ideology and "pollution" ideology as a struggle between the dimension of "particularity" and that of "singularity." The distinction between "particularity" and "singularity," which Karatani illustrates by means of the expressions "me" and "this me (and none other)," is explained as follows: "Whereas particularity represents individuality as seen from generality, singularity represents individuality that can no longer belong to generality" (KARATANI 1994 (1989): 11). Karatani thus equates differences that can be compared by means of a common yardstick with the individuality of "particularity" and differences for which there is no common yardstick, and which thus reject comparison, with the individuality of "singularity." Restated in my own terms, the gist of his argument would seem to lie in the fact that he makes explicit the rupture existing between the discovery of the relative other and the discovery of the absolute other. The discovery of the relative other takes place in this world through the comparison of known objects premised on the existence of a common yardstick, whereas the absolute other represents that which is no more comprehensible by this worldly yardstick, and its discovery takes place through the experience in which we encounter the otherworld (the world of death) at the ends of this world. When we consider that the absolute marginal experience of death which embraces the logic of sacrifice represents the essence of pollution, as I have explained above (see also SEKINE 1995: Chaps. 1, 3), it becomes clear that Karatani's purpose in separating "singularity" from "particularity" in general evidences close parallels with my arguments for separating "pollution" from "impurity" in general. Just as the essence lying at the root of individuality is "singularity," so is "pollution" the essence lying at the root of pollution. What I mean here by "essence" could be "structure" in Levi-Strauss' sense, and is the nature of the world that becomes visible when one consistently adopts a perspective from within the marginal sphere, and this is the key point underlying both "singularity" and "pollution."

When considered from such a viewpoint, it becomes evident that the image of women that is produced by relatively particularizing women with the dominant values of Hindu society (*viz.* male-centred or Brahman-centred values) as a common yardstick—that is, the view of women as being "impure" but also "pure" when certain conditions are fulfilled—represents a discourse or narrative emanating from the world of "particularity" predicated on the existence of a this-worldly common yardstick in the form of "pure-impure" ideology (Foucault's *normalisation* (FOUCAULT 1975)). By developing a suppressive narrative typical of

a centralized ideology which, as was pointed out earlier, would regard menstrual blood and sexual intercourse, representing the starting point of reproductivity, as "impure" while interpreting the resulting fruit of fertility as exalted "purity" (or "purity-sacredness"), the existence of "pollution" as representing the dimension of "singularity" (and corresponding to the process of "pollution-sacredness") ends up being concealed. If the situation is understood in this manner, it will be realized that the popular conception of the ambiguous or two-sided character of Hindu women has unwittingly rehashed this thesis of the dominant ideology. What I am trying to clarify here is the fundamental difference in positions of viewpoint to be observed between the dimension of "particularity" and that of "singularity," a difference which this worldly and dominant ideology conceals and obscures, for the clarification of this difference becomes a focal point when reconsidering the popular understanding of the two-sidedness of Hindu women.

A typical illustration of this difference in positions of viewpoint is the contrast between obedient and compassionate goddesses who represent the consorts of male gods and ambivalent, bellicose and independent goddesses (for details see SEKINE 1993a, 1993c). According to my theory, these are regarded as classic manifestations of "purification for elimination" based on "pure-impure" ideology and "purification for creation" based on "pollution" ideology respectively. Therefore, one must take care not to interpret this contrast from the perspective of the dominant value of "pure-impure" ideology, thereby drawing both back into a relative stratified system of values with the former goddesses being regarded as "pure" and the latter as "impure." As will have become clear in the above discussion, it is important to squarely recognize the fact that Hindu women are themselves an arena in which two fundamentally different ideologies clash with one another, and it should not be considered admissible to reduce this conflict to a stratified bipolar contrast characteristic of the dominant ideology's view in the form of an image of women as being both "pure" and "impure," which represents an interpretation based on "pure-impure" ideology. I wish to again point out that the "pure-impure" ideological interpretation of Hindu women is based on this-worldly ambiguity produced within the *social* sphere, while the "pollution" ideological interpretation of Hindu women is derived from other-worldly ambiguity encountered at the end of the *social* sphere. By "pollution" ideology, I hope to reclaim the dangerous but powerful creative horizons, which have hitherto been obfuscated, of the dimension of "pollution" or "singularity." As was noted earlier when citing Hildebeitel and Hershman, without a clear and systematic understanding along these lines, one is able to analyze but inadequately the intriguing data on the purifying powers of menstrual blood. The arguments developed by Hildebeitel and Hershman seem to be positioned merely in a vague state of limbo in the arena represented by women, or in between the above two interpretative dimensions, and as such they fail to formulate any systematic theory.

Lastly, I wish to return to the point made by Allen and bring this essay to a tentative close with a comment of my own. "Pure-impure" ideology is more

strongly imposed among castes of higher social standing, and therefore the higher the social standing of those concerned, the greater the degree to which the two-sidedness of women as defined by the dominant ideology is forced to embrace within itself the intense conflict between the above two ideologies in a suppressed form (that is, in the form of the conflict between "pure" and "impure" aspects) (e.g. ORTNER 1978). The higher status women, therefore, can be a more vigorous arena. By way of contrast, the bifurcation into two ideologies is usually quite negligible among lower-status people, and so the ambiguous character of lower-status women is not so distinct. This means that the ambiguous image of Hindu women is not always the property of lower-status women, whose image is more unified and is more simply characterized by the productive aspect. In this manner, the difference between the images of women dependent upon their hierarchical positions can be systematically elucidated in the light of my scheme positing two different ideologies, with a distinction being made between "impurity" and "pollution." Conversely, through the above discussion of women, the explanatory power of my insistence on distinguishing between "impurity" and "pollution" seems to some extent to have been substantiated.

## NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

The spelling of Tamil terms basically follows that of the *Tamil Lexicon* (University of Madras, 1982).

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