

# **FAMILY GODS**

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## Family Gods Paul G. Hiebert

Marcella looked at the beautiful young woman seated on the mat and at the baby playing with his mother's hair, so innocent of her dilemma. "If only life were that simple!" thought Marcella, knowing that she had to give some answer to this new believer. The answer that came to her from her classroom days was clear. Karnamma should have nothing to do with the worship of her family idols or with other Hindu rituals of her household. But the classroom discussions never dealt with the complexities of real life. Marcella wondered whether she could in good conscience ask Karnamma, a new Christian, to pay a price that she as a missionary had never begun to pay. And did the Bible not teach that a woman had certain responsibilities to her family? But what were those responsibilities when the wife became a Christian and the rest of the family remained Hindu?

Five years before, Marcella had come as a doctor to South India and started a hospital in a small town. Not only had this won her the good will of the Hindus and Muslims of the region, but it also had opened the door for an effective medical and evangelical ministry among them. She had a particular burden for young mothers, so twice a week she went out to hold maternal clinics in remote villages, often staying overnight in some Christian's home. Most of the converts had come from the "untouchable" castes, and much of Marcella's work was among the women of these despised groups. As her reputation spread, however, she began to find the doors open for ministry to women from the higher castes. She was invited into the homes of expectant mothers in the "clean" section of the village, and there learned to love and appreciate the women who had so few opportunities to hear of Christ.

"Lord," she often prayed, "please open the door for the gospel to enter these homes!"

One day Karnamma came quietly when Marcella was at camp, waiting patiently at the door until the missionary noticed her. As a Komati, a member of one of the highest-ranking clean castes, she had risked the anger of her family and friends by coming. She knew that they would beat her when she returned if they found out that she had come to the Christian hut in the "untouchable" hamlet where Marcella was spending the night. After Marcella invited her in, Karnamma sat by the door and in desperation told her story.

Six years before, Karnamma had been married by parental arrangement to Ramayya, a promising young merchant in Peduru. There had been the usual traumas of a young bride who was leaving the loving care of her parents to live with her husband in the household of his father and mother and, in this case, two married brothers. Karnamma had been spared a domineering mother-in-law and jealous sisters-in-law, but as the youngest wife in the house she had to do much of the cleaning and cooking. Everyone was pleased when she became pregnant, but a little disappointed when the child was a girl. "We will make a special offering to Vasavi Kanyaka, so that next time it is certain to be a boy," they said. "At least you have shown yourself to be a mother."

Karnamma enjoyed the added prestige of motherhood, even though she often could not act the role. Her father-in-law and mother-in-law, Krishnayya and Achamma, had the right to play with the child whenever they wished. Besides, she still had to do most of the menial work in the house. First one and then the other of Ramayya's older brothers moved away to large towns where they got good jobs. Both had had the opportunity of going to school. Ramayya remained at home to run the family store.

As Achamma became bedridden with arthritis, Karnamma had to take responsibility for running the household. With this came the obligation to make the evening offerings of food and incense to Vasavi Kanyaka Parameshwari, the goddess of all the Komati (merchants). Different members of the family had the right to choose their own personal gods (*ishta devata*), but all Komati were also expected to worship their caste deity (*kula devata*). Ramayya worshiped Krishna, but Karnamma had chosen Vasavi Kanyaka as her personal deity. Vasavi had been a young Komati virgin who lived centuries before. When the king, who was from another caste, tried to marry her, she committed suicide to avoid the sin of marrying out of caste. She went to heaven and there was the patron of all Komati. Karnamma made a pilgrimage to Vasavi's shrine in the city and promised her special