

The role of women in Hinduism:

Becoming leaders of patriarchal traditions

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Abstract

“Religious space often requires a spatial separation of men and women that comes with the associated power differentials” (David, 2009). This separation of power can be seen in many religions today although there are also religions, such as certain protestant churches, that present a more equal status between women and men. This paper, however, will only focus on the diverse Hindu religion, specifically on the role and status of Hindu women. Through the study of mostly scholarly journals and some books, and by focusing on Hindu women’s domestic and temple worship, rituals, and their portrayal on Hindu texts, I aim to answer: What is the role of Hindu women in Hinduism? From a female perspective, it is important to explore this question because women used to have a submissive and weak role in the past. However, I have found that as time progresses women are becoming more powerful leaders in Hinduism.

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I. Background: Hinduism and Women

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world with an estimate of 851 million people identifying themselves as Hindus. It is the dominant religion in India, Nepal, and South Asia, and it is very diverse in that it does not have a single founder or holy text, and that there are many different branches of Hinduism. Since Hinduism is one of the biggest religions of the world it is significant to explore the role that women play in developing and practicing this religion. In order to understand this role, Hinduism first needs to be explained a little bit more. As mentioned before, there is no single text that Hindus use. In fact there are many Vedas, which are the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. The four main classic Vedas are Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda. These collections consist of hymns, rituals, and philosophical works. These Vedas are consulted in order to obtain liberation from the cycle of birth and death and for the worship of deities. Hindus recognize a single supreme deity or God and view other Gods and Goddesses as manifestations of that supreme deity. The most common deities are Vishnu, Shiva, and the Goddess, who appeared later on as the first female supreme deity. The Goddess plays a significant role in the development and worship of Hindu women since it is portrayed as a powerful and supreme female.

II. Overview: The Increasing Role of Hindu Women in Hinduism

The influence and role of women in worship, Hindu texts, and society has been increasing in modern day. In worship, Hindu women participate in the daily Puja, domestic

worship, and the temple worship. It is argued in this paper that although women's participation in the Puja is significant and somewhat powerful, their role in temple worship has not always been significant. However, participation and leadership in temple worship has been developing more and more in modern times, especially in the west. Just as with worship, the role of Hindu women in rituals can be seen, in some aspects and at simple sight, as inferior to men's. However, Hindu women have some specific rituals that are conducted only by women, just as there are some rituals that are conducted only by men. If one looks at how women are portrayed in Hindu texts, one needs to take into account that there is a powerful female deity that is seen by many Hindus as the supreme deity and that there are many female contributions to these although some negative aspects still exist. Therefore, as time progresses and Hinduism develops more, the role of women in Hinduism is increasing in status and is advancing to becoming more equal to men's.

III. Depiction of Women in Worship and Traditional Rituals

The main kind of worship that is conducted by Hindu women today is the daily domestic Puja which gives Hindu women a positive and somewhat powerful role in Hinduism. Although there is different kinds of Pujas or worship, the daily Puja is a domestic worship in which the whole family participates to express devotion to a certain deity (Oxtoby, 2010). Even though all the family members can take part in this worship, women are the main participants because certain domestic rituals are to be done specifically by the women of the household. Not only are they specifically for women, but they also carry a lot of power. Women rituals are powerful because they are meant not only for the women's salvation but for the salvation of all their family (Oxtoby, 2010). Not all Hindu women, however, are able to hold this powerful role since

particular rituals may only be performed by unmarried or married women and not widows (Oxtoby, 2010). Still, for married women, the entire family depends on them for the performance of these rituals which places most Hindu women in a powerful leadership role.

Domestic Worship

One of the deities that Hindu women are more likely to worship is the Goddess, one of the main deities. A ritual that is performed in many parts of India to worship the Goddess is when women “gather on certain days of the year to celebrate [her] by fasting and feasting, and then perform what are called ‘auspiciousness’ rituals for the happiness of the entire family” (Oxtoby, 2010). Another example is how in some parts of India “women often gather before a major family celebration (such as a wedding) to ask for the blessing of a particular group of female ancestors” (Oxtoby, 2010). The fact that only women are powerful enough to ask female ancestors for blessings is a major role that Hindu women hold. Apart from being powerful, this role helps women have more control and authority on their spiritual life. During the autumn, for example, women in North India performed a daily ritual called Kartik puja: “Kartik is also celebrated as a deeply sacred month, and many [Hindus count] Kartik among the three or four most religiously important months of the year” (Pintchman, 2004). Kartik calls for abstention from certain foods and a daily ritual bathing throughout the month. After the bath women and girls participate in a special form of puja by constructing Hindu deities out of mud and worshipping these icons (most focus particularly on Krishna). As Tracy Pintchman, a professor at Loyola University with a PhD in religious studies and specialization in Hinduism and gender issues declares, “predominant structures and ideologies in Hinduism and Indian culture, [...] are

largely patriarchal and tend to discriminate against women in a number of ways. Yet Indian women may circumvent, subvert, manipulate, or contest male authority in a variety of ways, even when they do not openly challenge the legitimacy of that authority” (Pintchman, 2004). Kartik and many other rituals performed by women, as the ones mentioned before, are a form of “contest[ing] male authority” because they offer women a more equal authority to men. Such rituals “may give psychological support to the women themselves because they allow women to have active control of events rather than depend completely on their male kin” (Pintchman, 2004). In addition, although it might seem sexist that certain rituals are reserved only for men, one cannot efficiently argue this case because there is also certain rituals that can be performed only by women. Therefore, one can say that women do in fact hold power in domestic worship and rituals. Nevertheless, their role in temple worship is not as big as in domestic worship although it has been improving.

Temple Worship

Although in temple worship the role of Hindu women does not hold as much importance as the domestic worship, their role has been significantly improving, especially in the west. In most Hindu temples in India “male priests direct and control the worship, acting as purified vehicles for the intimate relationship with the deity and offering the only access to divine power for the women” (David, 2009). However, Hindu women in the west have been taking a more active role in temple worship. Since “most of the women are at work and no longer restricted to the home, [they are] experiencing a greater social as well as religious freedom” (David, 2009). In Britain for example, there is a Hindu temple called East Ham temple, which emerged from south

India, where “female devotees no longer remain simply participants, but are becoming transformed into religious specialists and leaders of ritual” in the present day (David, 2009). Just like East Ham temple, there are many other temples in London that are mostly made of females. In these temples Hindu women gather to perform Hindu rituals which “challenges norms and offers the women a space where they can embody and perform the divine, giving them access to a religious agency that is commonly taboo in Brahminical Hindu worship” (David, 2009). Although these change in norms is happening faster in the west, women’s leadership on temple worship is increasing.

IV. Women and Hindu Texts

Although in ancient texts Hindu women are not depicted so positively, their depiction in classical texts is more powerful. In ancient texts, “women came to be depicted as ritually inferior, even disabled, which in turn led to the idea of women as inferior in Hindu society in general” (Leslie, 1991). These depictions have played a big role in today since “[m]odern researched too have often taken such biased interpretations of the ancient scripture to be accurate descriptions of Hindu society” (Leslie, 1991). The ancient Yajurveda for example, explains the ritual darsapurnamasa where the men “bind[ed] the wife’s waist with a rope as she enter[ed] the sacrificial arena. This rope is stated by the Vedic texts to be [...] symbolic of binding [the wife] to her husband” (Leslie, 1991). This submissive role only depicted women as weak and inferior. However, in many classical texts women are portrayed as knowledgeable and strong. In certain occasions women are mention as the mothers of teachers who transmitted the sacred knowledge: “In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (VI.5.1) roughly forty-five teachers are listed with their

mothers' names instead of their fathers'. So, while it is clear that a male spiritual lineage is generally accepted [...], it is generally possible that some teachers received spiritual instruction from their mothers" (Oxtoby, 2010). These women philosophers whose names appear on the Upanishads were highly respected for their wisdom.

Not only are women depicted as knowledge as a result of the philosopher mentioned above, but the fact that one of the main deities is depicted as a powerful and strong woman intensifies women's role in Hinduism. In the "The Devi Mahatmya," the Goddess Mahatmya is depicted as the ultimate strong and powerful God. In the story, she is portrayed as a war hero as she fought a set of three demons. Although other Gods, which were depicted as minor Gods including Krishna, are seen fighting along with her, her fierce and destructive skill of war are given all the emphasis. As a female, the Goddess is portrayed as the motherly protector that fights to restore dharma. This authoritative and powerful portrayal was given to a female Goddess when all these depictions were previously reserved for male Gods. The fact that a woman is depicted as a powerful supreme being, even more so than male Gods, adds great value and significance to women in Hinduism.

V. Conclusion

As in many religions today, Hindu women have been under the leadership of male patriarchal. It is important however that women too are able to express their spirituality with as much authority as men. For one, women have always had a significant, powerful role in domestic puja for their entire family depends on them for the petition of their salvation. Although this has

not always been the case for temple worship in the past, their role is significantly increasing with the years, especially in the west. A recognizable woman in temple worship is Shyama Devi who founded one of the first Hindu temples in Britain in 1969. This leadership role is also expressed in classical Hindu texts such as the story of the powerful warrior Goddess Mahatmya in “The Devi Mahatmya”. Although in the ancient texts women were not depicted as positively, classical texts are used more often today. Therefore one can say that the role of women, although not yet equal to men, is increasing in status as time progresses.

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