

Do patriarchal influences affect Hinduism's inherent beliefs about gender equality?

World Religions Internal Assessment

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Part A: Rationale.

The topic of gender equality has been present in a large part of my education and upbringing, especially in higher learning and in the IB diploma programme. While studying world religions, I noted Hinduism as a belief system that seemed to support women and equality of the sexes most apparently. I wanted to investigate if this was the case, not just in comparison to other religions, but as a standalone theology as well. Does Hinduism at its core support the equality of the sexes and has it just been corrupted by patriarchal society? Or are there underlying patriarchal ideas present in Hinduism?

In conducting research, I looked to academic sources which analysed representations of women in ancient Hindu texts, and read primary sources like the Bhagavad-Gita. Comparing translated versions would allow me to see if the inherent meaning was more patriarchal, or equal between sexes. One translation and interpretation was by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, a Hindu religious leader and author who had a prominent role in spreading Hinduism to the west in the 20th century¹. Another translation was from 'Introduction to Asian Philosophy' and provided a more neutral translation of the Hindu text². These two versions shaped my investigation as they exemplified how Hindu representation of women can vary depending on the source. The academic sources I analysed included 'Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?'³, and 'Women in Indian Mythology'⁴, which both examined representation of women in Hindu texts. These sources highlighted the presence of women and goddesses and how these symbols can suggest equal or patriarchal views. Other sources such as 'Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns'⁵ and 'Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings'⁶ analysed recent developments in society which shaped Hinduism and its beliefs on gender equality.

I also conducted an interview with a practicing Hindu woman to get her opinion on female representation in Hinduism, and her interpretation of primary sources⁷. The point of view of individual women in the Hindu community helped to shape my investigation, with her personal experiences of worship and perspective on Hindu texts helping me explore my questioning of Hinduism as an inherently equal or patriarchal belief system. Additionally, I utilised the source 'Hindu Women Speak Out', a collection of statements from Hindu women about Hinduism and gender equality, to get more opinions of Hindu women on this topic.

Part B: Plan for study.

I will be researching the question: Do patriarchal influences affect Hinduism's inherent beliefs about gender equality? My intention is to determine how the fundamental roots of Hinduism reflect women and equality between the sexes, and if patriarchal influence has affected beliefs. My preliminary research includes primary sources in Hindu theology, academic papers outlining female representation in Hindu practice and scripture, and interviews with female Hindu worshippers. I will focus on how women are portrayed in Hindu texts and will also look to different translations and interpretations of Hindu scriptures. How is it not only translated, but interpreted by different people? And how does this affect meaning? This investigation's use of early texts as primary source material will focus the exploration to the most fundamental beliefs of Hinduism, in my attempt to find out if Hinduism at its core reflects patriarchal or equal beliefs between the sexes.

¹The Bhagavad-Gita, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 66-67.

² 'Introduction to Asian Philosophy', Joseph Dowd. Same passages as other version.

³ 'Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?' Rajeswari Sunder Rajan.

⁴ 'Women in Indian Mythology' M L Ahuja.

⁵ Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion: 'Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns'. Sharada Sugirtharajah. References the social issue of a hierarchical family structure, a woman's dharma 'duty' to her husband and family significant. However, there is worship of gods of both sexes by men and women.

⁶ Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings'. T. Pintchman Though many female deities shown as wives and devoted to husbands is prominent, they are also powerful in their own right. This sometimes overlooked. Goddesses are important figures in Hindu worship.

⁷ For her privacy, her name will not be shared. She is a practicing Hindu woman who now lives in Taiwan.

Part C: Summary of Findings.

Many sources analysing early Hindu texts determined that Hinduism's representation of the sexes is equal, with external patriarchal society affecting beliefs. My interviewee shared this belief, stating that as Hinduism became more influenced by patriarchal values, equality between the sexes was reduced. Several sources and my interview established that of all organised religions, Hinduism has the most prominent presence of women⁸, including images of female divinity showing devotion to the 'divine feminine', 'stri-shakti'⁹. Furthermore, Sanskrit's neuter gender for the supreme being 'OM', highlights fundamentally equal ideals in Hinduism¹⁰. Female deities are shown equal in number and power to males, supporting Hinduism's equality between the sexes¹¹. Many of the sources referenced female deities such as Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Kali, supporting equal and powerful representation of women in Hinduism¹². My interviewee also believed that gods and goddesses were equal in roles and respect.

However, some sources supported Hinduism reflecting patriarchal ideals. Sources claimed inequality is suggested in the early Upanishads, with women present but mostly focused on their roles as wives of brahmins and child bearers¹³. There was also mention of varying depictions of goddesses, with benevolent and malevolent forms which male deities do not have to the same extent¹⁴. However, many academic sources attributed patriarchal aspects of Hinduism to outside patriarchal society instead of fundamental Hindu beliefs. Many Hindu women believe that the ancient Vedic scripts show gender equality, but outside influence has created a discrepancy with original Hindu beliefs¹⁵. Also, my interviewee believed that though goddesses have benevolent and malevolent forms, the malevolent form always has the purpose of destroying evil around her, and these forms are also worshipped.

British colonisation of India played a large role in Hinduism being influenced by patriarchal ideals. Beliefs of gender equality were discouraged under the British Raj as they brought empowerment to not just women, but overall resistance to British imperialism and the ideologies of the coloniser¹⁶. As a result, many Hindu beliefs including those of gender equality were repressed¹⁷. This led to more patriarchal ideals being reflected in Hindu worship, and to misconceptions that female deities were less powerful or only important in association to their husbands, an idea that goes against fundamental Hindu beliefs¹⁸.

Different versions of the Bhagavad-Gita were shown to have differing meaning regarding the representation of women and gender equality¹⁹. The two versions differed in their portrayal of women, with the first employing a harsher tone in depicting women, and the second being more

⁸ Women in Indian Mythology. M.L Ahuja. Agreement that Hinduism is the most representative of women.

⁹ Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist? Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. This source agrees that Hinduism has large representation of female divinity, concept of the divine feminine energy being important to Hinduism.

¹⁰ Women in Indian Mythology. M.L Ahuja. Since the highest power is neither male nor female, highlights ideas of gender equality.

¹¹ Hinduism is a religion which combines monotheism and polytheism, as all gods are manifestations of the supreme being. Females equal in number to male gods demonstrates equality of the sexes reflected in Hindu beliefs.

¹² Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion: 'Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns'. Sharada Sugirtharajah. Sarasvati goddess of wisdom and fine arts, Lakshmi goddess of wealth and prosperity, and Kali the protective mother goddess associated with power and destruction. Many powerful goddesses, source highlighting their power and presence equal to male deities.

¹³ The Character of the Self in Ancient India: Priests, Kings, and Women in the Early Upanisads. Brian Black.

¹⁴ Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist? Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. For example, the goddess Parvati is positively portrayed as maternal and non-sexual, while Kali, is shown negatively as a wild, sexual, aggressive being.

¹⁵ 'Hindu Women Talk Out' by Usha Desai and Sallyann Goodall. These authors collected statements from Hindu women about Hinduism and gender equality.

¹⁶ Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion: 'Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns'. Sharada Sugirtharajah. The concept of female shakti and worship of goddesses was discouraged at this time.

¹⁷ Ibid. Attempts to replace original beliefs with patriarchal ideologies, conversion to ideals of the British.

¹⁸ Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings. T. Pintchman, R. Sherma pg 11.

¹⁹ The primary source analysed, the Bhagavad-Gita, is one of the most prominent holy scriptures of Hinduism. Epic poem of Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu coming to earth to help the warrior Arjuna with moral dilemmas.

neutral. There is evidence of patriarchal values in the first version's translation and interpretation, showing how patriarchal views can alter the original meaning of Hindu texts.

Overall, some sources agreed that Hinduism shows gender equality with high representation of women and female power. Other sources argued that the depiction of women can suggest some patriarchal values in Hinduism especially in more recent times, but still supported Hinduism as a religion with the most gender equality. Sources agreed that patriarchal society influenced Hindu beliefs and made it lean toward gender inequality, different versions of the Bhagavad-Gita being a prime example.

Part D: Critical Evaluation and Reflection.

Through my research of this topic and interview, my ideas about Hinduism were solidified that Hindu faith is not necessarily rooted in patriarchy, but is definitely affected by it. Sources showed that core beliefs of Hinduism support gender equality. Many of the authors were Hindu women, validating the opinion as the authors had personal experiences with gender dynamics in Hinduism. Also, my interviewee had ideas that aligned with these texts, further solidifying that Hinduism is a mostly equal religion between the sexes. My interviewee gave examples of the Hindu deity Ardhanarishvara who is half the god Shiva and half the goddess Parvati, symbolising that the genders are interconnected and inseparable²⁰.

The sources also supported outside patriarchal society influencing representation of women in Hinduism, one example being the Goddess Sati immolating herself upon her husband Shiva's death. This was a tradition that for a time was praised as a wife's duty to her husband²¹, and the practice emerged much later than Vedic texts were written showing the effects of patriarchal influence on Hinduism²². The source 'Hindu Women Talk Out' showed female Hindu worshippers themselves attributing much of the oppressive attitudes to outside influence instead of fundamental Hindu beliefs.

Some sources did claim some inherent patriarchal ideas in Hinduism, such as how the goddess Kali is dually shown as an independent and protective mother-goddess but is also associated with violence and sexuality²³. The sources argued that female power is sometimes portrayed in Hindu texts as dangerous, with Kali being too powerful resulting in Shiva needing to regain control over her²⁴. These depictions suggest some patriarchal views, as goddesses are shown being controlled by men²⁵. However, my interviewee believed the malevolent forms of the goddess had good intentions and the objective of doing good, and these forms are also prayed to. Therefore, it is debated if the depiction of the goddess has patriarchal influences or not.

Different versions of the Bhagavad-Gita showed how patriarchal views can affect the original meaning of Hindu texts. One version by Swami Prabhupada translated a verse saying women "become polluted", and "degradation of womanhood comes unwanted progeny"²⁶. Another version translated the verse to "when women are corrupted, disorder is born in society"²⁷. Women are portrayed differently, the first version having a harsher tone portraying women as the cause of bad

²⁰ Name in Sanskrit meaning 'Lord who is half woman', male and female figure fused together.

²¹ Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings. T. Pintchman, R. Sherma. Until the 19th century, this practice was praised and even forced upon widows.

²² 'Comment: A Broader Landscape. Sati, the Blessing and the Curse, Oxford University Press' Deheja, Vidya, Stratton. Though debated, most historians agree that this practice only became common and forced onto some women in medieval periods and after the time of Vedic scriptures.

²³ *ibid*. Violence and sexuality not necessarily bad, however Kali is sometimes portrayed with negative attributes that male deities do not seem to have as obviously, sometimes seen in a bad light. Could be suggestive of strong female qualities being suppressed or discouraged.

²⁴ Women and the Hindu Tradition by Susan Wadley. Pgs 113-116.

²⁵ Goddesses sometimes shown as good, and sometimes as evil. Powerful and independent, but also require control by their husbands to make them good instead of evil.

²⁶ The Bhagavad-Gita. His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 66-67.

²⁷ 'Introduction to Asian Philosophy', Joseph Dowd.

results. The second version is less direct in blaming women, and states later that “the sins of men who violate family create disorder”, demonstrating equal blame on the sexes²⁸. Furthermore, the interpretation by Swami Prabhupada reflects patriarchal ideals, stating "as children are prone to be misled, women are similarly prone to degradation" and "women are generally not very intelligent and therefore not trustworthy". This outwardly patriarchal and degrading view demonstrates patriarchal views affecting Hindu beliefs, altering the original meaning²⁹. My interviewee believed that the first author's own patriarchal views were the cause of his statements about women, and his translations and ideas these do not reflect those of fundamental Hindu beliefs.

My investigation was effective in determining that patriarchal society has exacerbated the oppression of women in Hinduism and all belief systems. Though patriarchal ideas are suggested, at its core many still see Hinduism as inherently equal between the sexes³⁰. My investigation has developed my understanding of how patriarchy can alter original beliefs and cause ideas to shift to a male-dominated standpoint. The different sources I analysed and my interview deepened my knowledge of Hinduism as a whole belief system, its main objective being to show the divine energy in all³¹. Misconceptions I had in my research were that malevolent forms of the goddess always present women as evil, when in fact this can be interpreted as women being powerful and able to defend themselves and the world³². As this was addressed, I was able to better identify one-sided depictions of the goddess in sources³³. My methodology was effective in my exploration, but may have been slightly biased toward Hinduism as an equal religion³⁴. I found several sources which showed the equality in Hinduism and fewer which argued inequalities, and perhaps searching for more of these sources would have led to a more rounded investigation³⁵. This investigation has made me more interested in feminist studies concerning religion³⁶, possibly analysing several other religions and their portrayal of women to compare their stances on gender equality³⁷.

²⁸ ‘Introduction to Asian Philosophy’, Joseph Dowd.

²⁹ In the interview I conducted, the woman of Hindu faith was of the opinion that this goes against fundamental Hindu beliefs, and patriarchal ideals influenced his translation and interpretation and changed original meaning.

³⁰ It makes sense that there would be some patriarchal influence, due to gender equality becoming reduced in all facets of life as societal structures became male dominated, and belief systems would reflect that.

³¹ Like the interconnection of atman and brahman, the presence of the supreme being's energy in all beings.

³² Through my interview, I gained the understanding that the goddesses such as Kali were defending the world in some of her violent stories and this quality is admired. This changed my original idea of how the goddess is presented and the perceptions of women in Hinduism.

³³ Sources that portrayed the goddess in malevolent forms as simply evil instead of a more varied interpretation with positive attributes as well.

³⁴ Most sources did argue that Hinduism was mostly equal between the sexes, but I could have looked harder for sources arguing the opposite to get a more rounded view of my topic, not just what was most commonly seen in literature.

³⁵ More variety in the sources through further deeper investigation would have allowed me to reach more accurate conclusions. Were I to continue this research, I would look for more variety in sources which have differing viewpoints and this would allow me to come to more accurate conclusions.

³⁶ Through my research I concluded that Hinduism is shown to be the most equal religion between the sexes, out of all the belief systems. Universally agreed to be more equal than others.

³⁷ Because Hinduism is a more polytheistic religion, these are regarded as having more equality between the sexes as they involve more deities and more variety in the gods involved. It would be interesting to examine other monotheistic religions which have a stricter view of a divine leader which can reflect more patriarchal ideals. I would like to further analyse gender equality in religions without such a free view of divine power like Hinduism has, and see how the strictness of a belief system affects in standpoint on gender equality.

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Interview questions:

I would love it if you could tell me your background with Hinduism, and your general thoughts about the way women are represented in hindu texts and practices. Also if you have read different versions of the Gita and have noticed some different interpretations, what did you think?

I was taught in class that Hindu deities can have both benevolent and malevolent forms, but the most prominent examples I remember being shown to us were goddesses like Kali. I don't recall male gods being shown to us in these ways. Do you think that female deities are presented with more negative connotations than male deities?

Also, I have been reading about the traits of goddesses, and noticed how devotion to their husband is mentioned quite often. When I read about male gods, there seems to be less emphasis on this trait of being a faithful husband. Do you think the trait of being a faithful wife is more heavily stressed/shown than that of the male god being a good husband? And do you think this affects the way that women are represented in Hindu beliefs?

My last question is about a passage I found in the Bhagavad-Gita. I found that different versions can present women differently. The first version I read was translated and interpreted by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, and a translated verse said that if the women of the family become "polluted", from this "degradation of womanhood comes unwanted progeny". A different version I read said that "when women are corrupted, disorder is born in society". Do you think that the two versions of the verse differ in their portrayal of women?

The first version of the Gita also had the author's interpretation of the verses, and accompanying this verse he said that "as children are very prone to be misled, women are similarly very prone to degradation". He also said that "women are generally not very intelligent and therefore not trustworthy". I found both of these statements a bit shocking in how they negatively portray women, especially with the author as a prominent/famous Hindu leader. Do you think that his views stemmed from his own patriarchal beliefs only, or is there any basis for his comments in Hindu belief? And do you think opinions like these go against Hinduism's core beliefs of gender equality?