**How does the portrayal of women in Hinduism differ from the treatment of women in Indian society?**

Vidhi Singh

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**Rationale and Preliminary Research**

Whenever I visit India, I occasionally get looked down upon because not only am I my parent's only child, but also a girl. In Indian society that is not a favorable situation. I always wondered why my parents were reprimanded for their "poor choice" of having only one child. Upon research, I discovered that I am supposedly a "liability" to my parents until marriage (Wadley). According to Indian culture, my parents must provide me with dowry, and I cannot take their traditions or legacy to future generations because I must be submissive to my in-laws (Klostermaier). These cultural beliefs formed from Hindu ideas. However, ironically, all who promote such gender discrimination are most probably ardent followers of at least one, if not more, Hindu goddess. When learning about Hinduism in my World Religion's class, I realized that while goddesses are highly venerated by Hindu's, others, such as myself, are subject to many social restrictions. I sensed a hypocrisy between Hindu beliefs and Indian societal practices. This inconsistency led me to develop my investigative study: How does the portrayal of women in Hinduism differ from the treatment of women in Indian society?

For my research, I consulted journals, books, and interviews regarding the status of women in Hinduism. I cited a journal article titled "A Reflection of Women in the 21st Century in Working Sector." The author, Debjani Roy, states that, "It is known to everybody that Indian society is a patriarchal society; patriarchy is established everywhere and every aspects of life." Because the author generalizes and harbors radical views, I balanced her perspective with a book titled *A Survey of Hinduism*. The author, Klaus Klostermaier, writes that, "In the wake of discussion it emerged that Indian women's problems are not only problems of Hindu women, or problems caused by traditional Hinduism." I also referenced a paper by Susan Wadley on "Women and the Hindu Tradition" that explores the degeneration of women's treatment in Hindu history. Wadley emphasizes the contrasts between Hindu cosmic understanding and the interpretation of that information by society. While the opinionated journals are written by Indian women with a personal connection to my investigative study, the moderate sources are informative and provide background for analysis. The contrasting perspectives allowed me to understand the pathos and ethos within my research topic.

To understand how modern day Indian women are impacted by Hindu traditions, I interviewed Yatendra Nagar, a human right's lawyer in India. His comments helped me understand how Indian society is still greatly influenced by Hindu understandings, which is inherent in legislation for women. His judicial perspective showed me how it is still difficult to counter deep-rooted traditions such as dowry. The interview allowed me to understand why my investigative question matters today, while discerning the possible changes that Indian women could experience in the years to come.

**Plan for study**

For my investigation, I will be researching the question: How does the portrayal of women in Hinduism differ from the treatment of women in Indian society? My intent is to explore the hypocrisy between Hindu beliefs and treatment of women in India. Although Hindu goddesses are largely venerated, I hypothesize that the submissive portrayal of women in Hindu texts has transitioned into Indian society. Within the Summary of Significant Findings, I will explore the representation and treatment of women in early Hindu texts such as the *Rig Veda, Laws of Manu*, and *Puranas*. I will add historical support from the Mughal Empire and British occupied India. Finally, I will present information regarding the representation of women in India nowadays. In Critical Reflection, I will explore why there is an inconsistency between representation of women in Hindu texts and society. Using an early cosmic representation of women, I will discuss why women's status degenerated throughout Hinduism. I will conclude by discussing what my research informs me about the representation of women in India today. Because India's history has been largely influenced by Hindu ideas and principles, I hope to understand the underlying cause to the consistently low-representation of women in Indian culture.

**Summary of significant findings**

The earliest recorded instances of women's treatment are in the *Rig Veda*. Vedic society was patriarchal and emphasized the birth of a boy over that of a girl (Klostermaier 311). Nonetheless, women were educated alongside men, so they could participate in religious activities (Klostermaier 311). Women were not only granted the same religious rights as men, but were also imperative for proper completion of rites and rituals (Klostermaier 312). Interestingly, men were not considered spiritually whole without a wife (Klostermaier 312).

Although Vedic society granted women some rights, Smriti texts[[1]](#footnote-1) such as *Laws of Manu* show a degradation of women's status in society[[2]](#footnote-2). The *Laws of Manu* state that a woman's, "father protects [her] in childhood, her husband protects [her] in youth, and her sons protect [her] in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (Klostermaier 314)[[3]](#footnote-3). There are laws that emphasize the need to respect[[4]](#footnote-4) women too because, "those who desire their own welfare, and where women are honoured, there the very Gods are pleased, but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite even could yield rewards" (Klostermaier 315). Societal practices such as *sati*, however, reflected an abasement of women. In *sati*, a widow would burn herself over her husband's dead body to atone for her bad karma, which was considered the reason for her husband's death[[5]](#footnote-5) (Wadley).

Despite a low societal position, women gained supremacy in the *Puranas*. Women are not addressed as "wives" but "Mother Goddesses" (Wadley). For example, Laxmi, Vishnu's wife, is worshipped as the Goddess of wealth and prosperity (Wadley). Durga, the Great Warrior Goddess, is endowed with powers from the Trimurthi[[6]](#footnote-6) (Wadley). Epics such as *Mahabharata* also portraywomen with strong characterizations. Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava brothers, was given away when the Pandavas' lost everything in a gamble against the Kauravs (Wadley). When dragged into court, she openly reprimanded the elders for defaming her[[7]](#footnote-7).

Historically, the treatment of women degraded during the Mughal Empire[[8]](#footnote-8). The Purdah system[[9]](#footnote-9) was introduced, greatly limiting the involvement of women in external affairs. However, British occupied India saw not only a rise in treatment of women but also increased involvement in commerce and politics[[10]](#footnote-10).

Since India's independence in 1947, various acts have been passed that attempt to improve conditions for women. The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1973 and Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961[[11]](#footnote-11) were landmark legislations (Roy). Nowadays, women continue showing increased involvement in professional careers[[12]](#footnote-12) (Roy).

**Critical Reflection and Evaluation**

My research question did inform my significant findings, and my initial position regarding hypocrisy between Hindu beliefs and treatment of women in society was fairly supported. As expected, most of my research illustrated a degradation of women's rights throughout Hindu history and texts; the exception was British colonial India during which women's rights were expressed. Interestingly, the only account on strong representation of women was within the *Puranas* and *Mahabharata*; I expected to find more because this is where I initially witnessed hypocrisy. Surprisingly, most Hindu texts discriminated against women in society but not religiously. Because of the strong religious undertones in Indian culture and history, the submissive representation of women in Hindu texts reflect the low treatment of women in society.

An inconsistency in my research were the journals I used to gather statistics on modern day treatment of women. Because the writers are present-day Indian females, they have strong opinions on the treatment of women. While they provide useful resources on emotional appeal within my research question, they focus solely on the negativities and not the cause for such discrimination. In addition, I believe that I should have interviewed a Hindu priest to understand what modern-day Hindu's believe in. My focus on current day research was limited to legislation and involvement of women in society; there was little emphasis on Hindu ideas. An extension to my paper would be an exploration of how Hinduism is followed in rural and urban areas, comparing that to the education and employment of females in those demographics. A misconception I had during initial stages of my research was that I would focus solely on Hindu texts. I was unaware the overlaps between Hinduism and India's history, which shows impacts of certain Hindu beliefs on empires, kingdoms, and society.

Biological conception in Hinduism explains how the treatment of women in Hinduism arises from a cosmic level, as is shown in the following diagram:



Figure 1: Cosmic representation of women (Wadley)

The underlying concept to biological conception in Hinduism is that women provide the Energy and Nature onto which the Spirit, provided by men, unite to create a Being[[13]](#footnote-13). A women's *sakti*, Energy, makes her impetuous and she, "must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations...for, if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow" (Wadley). The equation "Women = Power + Nature = Danger" is the overarching principle in Hindu femininity (Wadley). Without the Spirit of a man, women are considered uncultured and uncontrollably powerful. Consequently, marriage and all the relations that follow are a woman's purpose. This idea was inherent in Vedic society and *Laws of Manu*, which emphasize the need to guard women at all times in her life.

The *Puranas*, however, provide a contrasting representation of women. Laxmi, although considered a Mother Goddess, is married to Vishnu. However, she harnesses the power to control wealth and prosperity; Diwali is celebrated in her honor. Durga, on the other hand, is a form of *sakti* that she received from the Trimurti, but she is not married. This difference highlights the hypocrisy I set out to explore. The representation of women changes depending on the relationship they are placed within. Between husband-wife[[14]](#footnote-14), father-daughter, and son-mother women are submissive; between Goddess-human women are highly revered. This connects to the initial Vedic idea that men are religiously incomplete with a wife[[15]](#footnote-15). The relationships that exist between women and society depends on how the female *sakti* can benefit the beneficiary.

Nowadays, the culture I experience in India still draws its principle ideas from Hinduism. The British, nonetheless, brought ideas of the women's suffrage movement that catalyzed change. Today, women are attempting to make progress in fields such as politics and business. Indian culture is so greatly influenced by Hinduism that dowry demands, low education rates, and female infanticide cannot be easily eliminated[[16]](#footnote-16), even if the value of Hindu goddesses and female *sakti* is innately experienced every day.

**References**

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Wadley, Susan S. “Women and the Hindu Tradition”. Signs 3.1 (1977): 113–125. Web.

**Instructor feedback**

***Scoring notes****: feedback to students was originally given via recorded verbal comment. The notes below are short summaries of the feedback originally given to students. They are broken down by criterion.*

***Rational explanations****: when scoring, if I thought the work met part of one descriptor and part of another, I gave scoring emphasis to research and evaluation over rationale and reflection. So, if in criterion D a student had great evaluative/analytical commentary but mediocre reflection and understanding of the research process they scored higher than a student who had the reverse. Also on criterion B, if they student had the question at the end of A rather than repeating it in B they were still awarded full marks for their research question on that part of the rubric.*

***Criterion A:*** The proposal has a strong voice and personal background mixed with solid academic scholarship from a range of sources (5+) and those sources have been analyzed for value throughout the course of the proposal, demonstrating critical thinking, reflecting and understanding along with research. Full marks.

***Criterion B:*** The research proposal is appropriate in scope and well thought out, full marks.

***Criterion C:*** The supporting evidence is well stated and developed, and when needed further development with evidence of clear understanding and scholarship is found in the informational footnotes. The research did rely too heavily on 1-2 sources, resulting in 5/6 marks.

***Criterion D:*** The reflections is detailed and well developed, using both evaluation from classic and modern Hindu texts/sources. The reflection does a good job understanding and explaining the evidence and its limitations. There is strong personal bias indicated and somewhat noted in the reflection. For full marks, more should be considered and the reasons for the bias explained. 9/10.

***Criterion E:*** The work is less than 1,800 words and meets other requirements for formality, full marks

1. Body of texts that are attributed to an author. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *Laws of Manu* emphasize the evil inclinations of women and the need to protect them.

 One of the laws states that, "(When creating them) Manu allotted to women (a love of their) bed, (of their) seat and (of) ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice, and bad conduct" (Klostermaier 315). Fearing their true malevolent nature, women were confined to their homes and kept under control by men. In addition, women were not granted education due their innate cruelty (Klostermaier 315). One of the laws states that, "But if, after a daughter has been appointed, a son be born (to her father), the division (of the inheritance) must in that (case) be equal; for there is no right of primogeniture for a woman" (Klostermaier 316). As a result, the birth of a daughter was not considered beneficial because there would be no one to inherit the property. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As a result, women must, "constantly [worship her husband] as a god" because "If she violates her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world; (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases (as punishment) of her sin" (Klostermaier 314). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While most of the *Laws of Manu* prevent women from participating in society, they do, nonetheless, emphasize the need for respect. A few laws declare the expectation of fidelity from both wife and husband (Wadley). For example, "'Let mutual fidelity continue until death,' this may be considered as the summary of the highest law for husband and wife" (Klostermaier 315). There is also a repeated emphasis on the religious equality of both genders because, "To be mothers were women created, and to be fathers men; religious rites, therefore, are ordained in the Veda to be performed (by the husband) together with the wife" (Wadley). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This practice was largely practiced by Kshatriyas, particularly in northwestern India such as Rajasthan (Wadley). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Durga was created to fight Mahisha, a ruthless demon; her nine arms represent the nine male Gods who provided her with a share of their power (Klostermaier). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. When summoned, Draupadi did not comply to her husbands' order. She argued that they were now slaves to the Kaurav brothers too and had no right over her (Wadley). She criticized the elders and bystanders, declaring that, "where righteousness and justice do not exist, it ceases to be a court; it is a gang of robbers" (Wadley). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Practices such as *sati* were common, as were polygamy and child marriage (Roy). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Purdah System was a Muslim practice in which women were secluded from external affairs because their rightful place was within their home (Wadley). This practice passed onto Hindus, as well (Wadley). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The British established their foothold in India through missionary missions, of which many were aimed towards the education of young girls (Roy). By 1882, there were 2,700 schools and colleges around India that represented 127,000 students (Roy). Furthermore, in 1826 the Sati Prohibition Act was passed, while in 1856 the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act allowed widows to remarry and retain their first husband's property (Roy). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dowry was a kshatriya tradition in which daughters were given insurance, in case their in-laws or husband deserted her (Roy). The practice of dowry, although initially created for the benefit of daughters, would later be practiced by all classes. This became the cause for various litigations. For example, 2055 brides were murdered in Delhi, India from 1978-1988 because their families were unable to provide proper dowry to the groom's family (Roy). Yatendra Nagar, a human right's lawyer, believes that, "Dowry, regardless of legislations, will continue in India. Not only does it provide the groom's family with economic benefit, but also serves as a status symbol for the bride's family. Nowadays, it benefits both parties. People will continue giving dowry, regardless." He also added that, "By connecting dowry to religious rites, fear of not fulfilling the promise to the groom's family adds fear within the bride's family. Will the marriage perish if we do not provide them with money? Will ominous events take place?" [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Twenty-three percent of companies offer programs for women, whereas twenty percent of companies want women to retain leadership positions (Roy). Furthermore, eighty-one percent of companies want to help women develop skills for leadership (Roy). As a result, legislation such as Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace Prevention Act of 2013 have been passed (Roy). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The *Laws of Manu* state that, "By the sacred tradition the woman is declared to be the soil, the man is declared to be the seed; the production of all corporeal beings (takes place) through the union of the soil with the seed" (Wadley) However, "On comparing the seed and the receptacle (of the seed), the seed is declared to be more important; for the offspring of all created beings is marked by the characteristics of the seed" (Wadley). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The exception to this rule is the relationship between gods and goddesses. The goddess acts as a consort, harnessing her with more abilities than a normal wife. The rules shift within Hinduism to be more suited to the situation. It is more beneficial for the community represent a goddess with power because she will add to prosperity. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Because man is incomplete without women, the female serves a purpose. Similarly, by worshiping female goddesses, men attain faith and hope that their desires will be fulfilled. Once again, the relationship shifts to benefit the reciepient of the woman's *sakti*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The sex ratio in India is 933 girls to every 1000 boys (Roy). The literacy rate for women is 54.16%, compared to 75.85% for men (Roy). Of the 15 million girls born in India annually, at least twenty-five percent will not live to their fifth birthday (Roy). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)