
Hinduism and the Role Women Play

Hinduism is the oldest existing religion, is the world's third largest, and one of the most widespread religions of the world. Billions of people follow this religion and they mostly live in India. India's population is more than 1.3 billion and about three quarters of that population are Hindus, with half of the population being women (India Population, n.d). In Hinduism, men and women are equal, however, they have different roles. Women are an essential part of society but only for continuing the family lineage. They are responsible for being a respectable wife and taking care of their husband and children. The women in Hindu mythologies show female characters as role model to how women should be. The Vedas, a bible, talks about women having three stages to their life which takes away their freedom. Even though the Vedas talks about women being respectful, in reality, women in Hindu society are not seen as a human being. Also, females deal with domestic violence. Clearly, Hindu culture is based on male domination over women. However, with today's society, the view of women in the Hindu religion has changed over time. Over two millennia, women have been seen as a property, their life revolving around being a maiden, a wife and a widow; nevertheless, society has changed causing the tradition to develop making more free.

Female Deities in Hindu Literature

Even though Hindus worship many female deities, they depict an image of being a good wife to show how other women should be. The female deities in Hindu mythology are strong independent women, who are equal to men. Kali, the mother Goddess, is married to Shiva, one of the three deities that make Brahman (Sharada, n.d). She has another form named Durga who has divine force to fight against evil. She is able to stand up and make decisions for herself without her husband's approval. She goes to war and defeats countless enemies by herself (Sharada, n.d.). However, even with the brave attributes, Kali still needs to finish her duties as a female. Due to the fact she is a god, she does not have to do the domestic chores, but she does have to take care of her children and her husband. She has double standards: taking care of the household duties as well as the outside ones. She is also regarded to as the Mother of the whole Universe and she protects it. This shows that even though female deities go outside to contribute to the world, or society, they still have to come back to her husband's home and take care of him. Another deity is Sita where she portrays an image of loyalty and devotion to her husband (Sharada, n.d). She is a princess who is married with Lord Rama, the human form of the God. After marriage, she decides to be exiled along with her husband and goes to live in the forest. She is the ideal woman that women in society are encouraged to be. She does not involve herself with public life but takes care of household work (Sharada, n.d). She is the typical female character where she mostly listens to her husband, does chores, provides food when her husband comes back home and massages him. However, she does this out of affection. Although her devotion is endless, her story comes to end with unhappiness. While her husband was in the woods looking for food, Ashok Vatika, King of Demons, falls in love with her beauty. He takes the form of a priest and decides to visit her. While Sita was giving offering to the priest, she gets captured immediately. After being rescued by her husband, she faces to pass through the test of purification and chastity. Lord Rama refuse to accept her until she proves her purity and her love for him. She gets depressed, as her husband does not trust her. Sita later proves that she is pure, however, this time she kills herself (Parthasarathy, 2013). Her

sense of identity was taken away from her. Even with all the love and devotion she gave to him, she still has to prove she is worth being with him. This shows if women are raped, they lose all their status even if they came from a high-status family; it does not matter if they were deity, women still need to carry out their duties.

Women in Hindu Literature

The Vedas suggests, Hindu females should follow a three-stage pattern throughout their life which takes a woman's freedom away from an early age. When they were young, they were protected by their father who were concerned that her virginity would be safe until marriage (Hinduism Beliefs, n.d.). They did not receive any education and if they did they would learn it at home. Education was different than what boys learned; they were learning how to do domestic duties from their mothers and some rituals of Hindu's religion. They learned how to take care of their husband, so they would be ready for their second home. As they got married, rather than being protected by her father, her husband would protect her instead. Her life was centred within the house and did not burden herself working outside home to provide for the family because it was the men's job (Hinduism Beliefs, n.d.). The last one is when their husband dies, and her oldest son takes care of her (Hinduism Beliefs, n.d.). Even though women were respected, they had very little to no freedom. Women mostly spent their time taking care of the house and doing chores. The bible states, "women were kept in confinement as per the injunctions of the law books, which stipulated that a woman should not meet any men outside her family without a family member present" (V, n.d.). This is because according to the Vedas, there are many responsibilities that men need to carry. Women to doing their domestic duties comfort them. For example, a woman cooking food when the husband comes back from work. The husband will feel relieved to find foods. Women were respected with very little freedom and were treated like property and assets that could be discarded whenever the husband wanted.

Hindu Women in Society

In society, marriage is one of the sacred ceremonies and it is essential for every Hindus. Just like the Vedas script, from an early age, females was raised to get married. The goal of the marriage is to produce a child, continue his family lineage and economic stability. Marriage is a religious and spiritual duty between two families (Sharma, 2013). Therefore, most of the marriages are arranged by their parents. This would take out the possibility of a person married someone of the same gender as theirs. Females get marries before or when they hit their puberty and men get married, when they are 30s. Before marriage, the female's parents need to provide money for the whole wedding which can roughly costs a few thousand dollars. Remarriage is looked down upon. Only men were to remarried not women because their virginity is taken. Men were allowed to marry more than once or keep mistresses. Men also had no problem visiting prostitute and not felt guilty about it (V, n.d.). Whereas women, as same as the bible, they had no freedom, "A woman is never fit for independence" (Sharada, n.d). They are not allowed to talk to strangers. Men's point of view of women is that they cannot function without a man's help. They always need to guard them because they are fragile. If a woman were to cheat, she would not have any status left causing her to leave her in-laws. She would also disgrace her parents. When women have a baby, male children are more preferred instead of the female's ones. This is because only a son can perform funeral rituals (Hinduism Beliefs, n.d.). A male is able to continue the blood line of the family. The society saw females as not a permanent member of family. They will be given away and the son does not have to leave their

parents' home. When she becomes a widow, most of the time they tend to take their own life too. It could be because of she cannot handle the loneliness or since she does not have a husband anymore, she does not have a purpose. The in-laws may treat her unkindly since she is not needed anymore.

Nowadays with Domestic Violence Against Women

When dealing with domestic violence within the family, most hide it because of the social norm. Going against the norm means they are looked down upon and lose their home. This violence mostly happens within poor socioeconomic status. Sharma explains (2013), "The incidents of wife battering, harassment by husband and in-laws, dowry deaths, suicides, kitchen accidents occur on a large scale. Many cases go unreported. The victims are unable to raise their voice, nor protect against violence" (Sharma 2013). Whatever happens in the house, remains hidden. In a study in India, the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), it was reported that 85% of men acted in "violent behavior against their wives...57% of men admitted to have committed sexual abuse with their wives. 32% of men admitted to committing violence on their pregnant wives" (Sharma 2013). This is due to the husband being alcoholic, not having enough money and women who are not providing money of their own. However, there are solution to this. There are numerous organizations to prevent violence against women. In 2005, India's government passed new legislation on domestic violence called the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence or PWDVA due to women's petitions (The Law, n.d). Having laws will decrease the amount of violation toward women; it makes women feel safer and know that it is okay to ask for help and talk about it.

Today, in the 21th century, a lot the traditions have changed for better for the Hindu women. This is due to the expanding of technologies and education. India is trying to re-establish the ranks for women. People realize how education is important; Pechilis states (2004), "No society can prosper without education for its women. By treating women as the lowest caste, you don't raise them to a level of vidya shakti [educated power], they will end up being avidya shakti [ignorant power]" (Pechilis, 2004, p.77; Hrodrigues, 2008). Society would not progress if men were the only ones to have education. Women are treated more equal when getting higher education. It shows they can also be successful as men. Females do not have to get married before or when they hit puberty. Since the increase of the price of economics, more females start working to save money for herself or husband. They are less likely to get a well-paid job than someone who did not do post-secondary education. There are free educations in India, so the lower-class level climbs up their social class. Nowadays, women are independent who provide income for the family. Even though they face challenges it is way better compared to the past. The marriage customs have also changed. There are laws that gives women right and freedom. Love marriage is accountable, but it needs to be the same religion or else women are caste away from their family, though, this depends on the community they live in (Basharat, 2009). Rural areas are stricter with following the traditions than cities. Men and women pays equal amount for their wedding, but this could change if the family live in poverty. Even though women are seen as more important there are still discriminations toward a widow however, they are allowed to be remarried. Divorces are still looked down upon in India whereas in aboard, it is more common. Although men see women more equal than ever, women are required to do domestic chores and take care of their children (Basharat, 2009). In a lot of families, the idea of women doing the house work did not change. However, there are improvement; a lot of husbands now help doing chores at home to help their wife. They also play with children, so the

wife can rest. With society accepting improvement of their past traditions, they are able to keep traditional value which helps society view women differently.

As society progresses in India, more traditions will improve causing Hindu women to have freedom and not see them as domestic wives. Even though female deities are worshiped, they also portray an image of what a woman should behave and what duties they have to do. In the past, women had no freedom at all. They were always protected by men, whether it is her husband or her father. From the beginning, women would learn how to perform many domestic chores including cooking, cleaning and how to entertain their husband. Marriage is sacred to Hinduism. When they get married, women need to take care of their children. A male child is more preferred than a female child. While the women are suffering, the husband are allowed to have more than one wife and they are also allowed to go to prostitution. Although, in the bible it says women are respected, they had no freedom and were mostly seen as domestic wives or as a property of men. In today's society, there are of improvements of women are viewed. Women are allowed to work and have education. Females do not have to be in arranged marriage. Even though, there are places for improvement, women have more freedom than they have in the past.

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