

# The Potential for Liberation Feminism in Hindu Practices and its Patriarchal Origins

## Does original knowledge facilitate the perception of liberation feminism in Hindu practices?

Naisha Didwania<sup>1</sup> and Maya Novak-Herzog<sup>#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Aditya Birla World Academy, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

<sup>#</sup>Advisor

### ABSTRACT

Hinduism is accused of suppressing its women devotees, despite a history suggesting a matriarchal approach. Over the years, original knowledge surrounding religious practices have been lost due to misinterpretation, misinformation and autonomy over said knowledge by certain groups. The purpose of this essay is to explore the various practices that accuse Hinduism of being anti-feminist, and to identify their origins to understand the role that both culture and religious doctrine played in promoting women's inferiority, as well as which had greater influence. Previous research relies heavily on scriptural understanding and secondary data analysis, despite the fact that overreliance on scriptures is one of the major contributors to the spread of false information regarding the divorce between the intentions of the religious doctrine and subsequent traditions and customs. I interviewed practitioners of the religion coming from various backgrounds and used the primary data to theorise the origination of women's oppression and means to reduce its continuation. The understanding behind religious practices such as Sati, Pativrata and taboos surrounding female priesthood and menstruation yield results that attribute the patriarchy to factors that were not intrinsic to Hinduism. Hence, my findings conclude that women's original knowledge of the fundamental tenets of Hinduism understood as anti-feminist facilitate their empowerment. Therefore, furthering original knowledge of 'sexist ideals' can increase the potential for liberation feminism for Hindu women by reducing the prevalence of conservative practices.

### **Introduction**

Does original knowledge facilitate the perception of liberation feminism in Hindu practices?

What distinguishes homo sapiens from the billions of other species that populate the surface of the earth? There was a time where homo sapiens were hunting and being hunted: we were in the middle of the food chain. There was nothing spectacular about us, we conformed to the unwritten laws of the universe like every other species did. The animal kingdom coexisted in clans, and in order for it to function each member needed to know one another intimately. And yet, homo sapiens defied the norms and began creating groups that exceeded the typical twenty to thirty, then hundreds and soon, social groups expanded into empires ruling hundreds of millions. The secret? Faith. Common myths rooted in collective imagination. This common belief gave and still continues to give us a sense of purpose, brotherhood and entitlement that other species don't enjoy. As stated in sapiens, 'Two Catholics who have never met can nevertheless go together on crusade or pool funds to build a hospital because they both believe that God was incarnated in human flesh and allowed Himself to be crucified to redeem our sins.'

Hence it can be argued that religion (among other things) is what elevated us to the top of the food chain, and helped shape our species into the number of complex cultures that exist today. How could something as harmless as stories told to unify people, have come to become the laws that define our lifestyles thousands of years later? Was it the intention of the storytellers for their myths to be the basis of subjugation of any members of these communities? Are these scriptures meant to be followed religiously, without interpreting them in today's context? In this essay, I wish to answer these questions in the context of arguably the 'oldest religion' in the world, with around 1.053 billion followers in India itself (2021).

The extent to which religion versus culture promotes women's subjection is constantly under debate. In this essay, I aim to argue that there is potential for liberation feminism in Hinduism, where women adhere to what is expected of them in a manner in which they feel liberated and not obligated. That is to say, the fundamental tenets of Hinduism that are understood as anti-feminist are not intrinsic to Hinduism. Although there are practices of the religion that come across as patriarchal, in this essay I will explore how their patriarchal nature came to be. The original teachings of the scriptures were born from what was referred to as the 'golden age'. This age, formally known as the Vedic period, advocated women's exposure and prominence. Yet, the social reality today is one where most women accept certain androcentric views because they believe these teachings are delivered directly from God and cannot be questioned. However, many said teachings were actually introduced and practiced by the man himself and hence a woman has the authority to question her position if need be. Knowing the origins of practices that are infamous for being oppressive, can in turn facilitate empowerment because women are given the power to reevaluate their status in society without disobeying their faith.

In order to understand what Hinduism is, firstly, one must not assume religion is univocal. As Alfred Stepan points out, when we consider the question of non-Western religions and their relationship to democracy, it would seem appropriate not to assume univocality but to explore whether these doctrines contain multivocal components that are usable for (or at least compatible with) the political construction of the twin tolerations (Stepan). Similarly, in this context, we must keep in mind the ambiguity surrounding how people define and follow religion. Secondly, one must recognise why religion is not to be treated as other markers of identity. This could be because a) it is probably the largest unit to which individuals claim loyalty b) it is an unusually demanding identity c) it can withstand secular onslaught that would eradicate other communal identities. Anna Grzymala-Busse rightfully claims these quantitative and qualitative differences mean that religion may be a unique form of identity, and we should avoid simply treating it like any other fungible marker (Grzymala-Busse). Therefore, when speaking of Hinduism it is essential to keep in mind its command over individuals identity without demeaning its role in modern behaviours.<sup>1</sup>

Many Hindus argue that Hinduism is not a 'religion' as much as it is the exploration of reality. In fact, there is no word in the Indian languages that is equivalent to the term religion. The enterprise that it is exploring is that of understanding the human purpose and human condition rather than seeking a supreme personality. Hinduism, contrary to popular belief, was a term coined only recently. The Vedas, (arguably the oldest scriptures in the world) speak of a Sanatana dharma, which can be roughly translated to 'universal and eternal laws.' Jay Lakhani of the Hindu academy argues this concept is as old as homo sapiens, ever since we began questioning our existence around 80,000 years ago. Said concept, known as Rta, later became codified into the doctrine of Dharma. It is a term derived from the Sanskrit root Dhara which means 'that holds together'. Hence, the Sanatana dharma sought unity in diversity; a set of rules determining the world around us and what holds everything together. Therefore, unlike in religion, it is argued that the premise of the Sanatana dharma is not an invention but a discovery. Hinduism on the other hand was never mentioned in any original scriptures. It was just a term given to people living in India (HinduAcademy). Ashoka guru from ISKCON In the northwest part of ancient India was a river called the river Sindhu. Some stories suggest that the

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the operational definition of religion considered is the religious doctrine while culture is regarded as the ideas, customs and social behaviors of the devotees. In this context, both culture and religion are viewed as fundamentally different.

Persians who came to visit India were unable to pronounce the 'S' sound and hence the river became the Hindu river and people living near it: the Hindus. The Greeks dropped the 'H' altogether and hence derived the name Indians, which is still relevant today. Although it is established that what the Vedic scriptures spoke of was not a religion, over the years, interpretations of several pre and post-Vedic scriptures, traditions, and practices infused to make the religion that we know today. While some people prefer a no-named religion, the name Hinduism was adopted for the sake of administration and classification and it is in this context that I will be using it in this essay.

A common misconception about feminism is that it seeks equality between men and women in society. However, in the context of the Sanatana dharma, this is not a viable goal. Dharma, while referring to the purpose of the universe, also refers to the purpose of everything within it. Thus dharma of sugar is to sweeten, the dharma of fire is to create heat, and the dharma of the river is to flow. Essentially, dharma consists of certain duties that make one's life fruitful. The premise of dharma is that everyone seeks to fulfil a unique purpose that is limited to their ability and willingness (tapas). Therefore, more apt would be to fight for liberation feminism. Equality is the beginning of what anybody needs, but liberation is what will drive change. As Germaine Greer said, "Equality is an incredibly conservative aim." In her opinion, a prerequisite to change is creating a women's polity that has its own way of working, independent from men (Greer). In response to Greer, Nicole Plumbridge added that Liberation should be about celebrating the differences between men and women, not trying to narrow them down. Women should not have to enter the workforce with the same frame of mind as men and do the jobs in the same way that men do (Plumbridge). They should have the opportunity to deconstruct them and do them differently. That would be true liberation. Therefore, when looking at the Hindu pantheon, it would be incorrect to say goddess Durga is equal to God Shiva, but that doesn't mean saying one is superior to the other is correct either. Rather, they are all unique and serve a diverse ecosystem.

Usha Desai and Sallyann Goodall add 'People are comfortable with the idea of complementing each other' - and both men and women use it to justify some of the oppression that women experience and tolerate' (Desai and Goodall). Hindus are generally a non-confrontational people that thrive off compromise and shy away from questioning the reality they have always known. Some scriptures concur with the liberation of women while others are replete with several biases. Hence, I believe it is up to women to use the religion and what it has to offer in a manner that would enable our empowerment. Women have been marginalized based on religion for so long, that their secondary position in the home and society became normalized. Therefore, it is quintessential that women are empowered based on religion, so that, instead, their liberation and unique position in the home and society becomes normalized. The purpose of this essay is to explore the various practices that accuse Hinduism of oppressing women and to identify their origin to understand whether it was the culture or the religion that promoted women's inferiority. In order to answer this question, I interviewed practitioners of the religion coming from various backgrounds and their insights can be found throughout the paper.

## Literature review

### Hinduism and Women Religious Beliefs and Practices

#### *Hari Priya Pathak*

In her article 'Hinduism and Women Religious Beliefs and Practices' Dr. Hari Priya Pathak outlines certain religious scriptures and consequent practices in various Hindu time periods, making her research pertinent in understanding the dynamic trends of sexism within Hinduism. The premise of Dr. Pathak's argument stems from the various types of scriptures as a product of these different periods, demanding varying levels of respect toward women. The earliest forms of said scriptures, namely Vedas and Upanishads, likened women to goddesses: allowing them to enjoy freedom, equality, and liberty in all spheres of life. However, as time progressed, the ideal woman was redefined by texts like the Epics, Smritis, Sastras, which led to practices where women were subservient to men. This dissonance between

the types of scriptures and the respective cultures they were produced in, later gave rise to misunderstandings and thus, oppression.

Research regarding a Hindu women's place in society often concurs with the fact that it is not just religion that attributes to women's condition but also history. The relationship between religion and history is a complex one; while Dr. Pathank acknowledges the integral role scriptures have played in shaping our attitude toward Hindu women, she also argues that these early Vedic scriptures have been modified and appropriated by historical forces. Therefore, she claims 'to say that women in Hindu societies have always been subservient to men, or were differentiated based on gender will not be true.' Society predominantly composed of men has taken the origins of the Santana Dharma, on which much of Hinduism was built, to create versions of the scriptures that ignore the respect originally given to the feminine principle. Henceforth, I will show how this understanding of Hinduism has created a more masculine religion. Despite the Vedas' celebration of goddesses and coining life-givers such as the earth and its rivers as feminine, the general perception of women soon deteriorated.

One example of the early Vedic period being non-discriminatory is the women's ability to undergo Upanayana Sanskaar- a ceremony to begin formal education- and choose to study and become Brahmavadini or become Sadhyavadhu and take care of the household. Vedas often encouraged girl's participation in education, for example, the Atharva Veda, 11.5.18, states ब्रह्मचर्येण कन्या युवानं विन्दते पतिम्, which is to say a youthful Kanya (girl) who graduates from Brahmacharya, obtains a suitable husband. It also expresses this in the following way: 'Brahmacharyena kanyànam yuvàvindate patim' which roughly translates to: a daughter must be properly trained during her studentship in order to gain a husband in her young age through brahmacharya (Majumdar). Brahmacharya, although its definition is ambiguous, in this case, refers to a form of education within the guru's house to learn all aspects of 'dharma' and was compulsory for both boys and girls in this period. This version of the religion also celebrated a woman's ability to be a placeholder like a guru and participate in all the rights and rituals. Hinduism was also one of the only religions that had the svayamvara ceremony, where a girl of marriageable age had the ability to choose whom she wanted to spend her life with, from a group of male suitors. Issues faced today were uncommon in this period: including dowries, child marriage, and widow remarriage was permissible. This proves a woman's future had once laid in her own hands and her fate wasn't determined by her position as viewed by a man.

The post-Vedic scriptures primarily comprised of Dharmasastras, Smritis including Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata which contain the renowned philosophy of Bhagavadgita. The scriptures bred from this period were the ones that went on to introduce philosophies of Hinduism still practiced today including the caste system and the respective duties of practitioners of the teachings. One such scripture, which later became known as the guidebook for women, was the Manu smriti. As Dr. Pathak states, it is a highly controversial and contradictory scripture, which I will address later in this paper. It is evident that gender polarity blossomed in this period and this can be attributed to a number of things including the Aryans establishing themselves in the northern Indian subcontinent and the Brahmin caste's autonomy over religious knowledge. This serves to support my argument that factors aside from religion later led to the promotion of women's inferiority. However, while there was a growing amount of oppressive scripture, what is sometimes ignored is the rise of other traditions including Tantrism, Shaivism, and Shakti which often viewed women as sacred. In a form of Tantric tradition called Kaula, it is mentioned that "Every woman is thought of as a manifestation of the Goddess. No man may raise his hand, strike or threaten a woman. When she is naked, men must kneel and worship her as the Goddess. She has equal rights with men on all levels (Matriarchy v/s patriarchy) ." It is traditions such as these that should be incorporated into modern practices; the revival of certain aspects of religion cannot be cherry-picked and favored over others.

## Hinduism, Empowerment of Women, and Development in India

### *Vanaja Dhruvarajan*

Dr. Vanaja Dhruvarajan argues the importance of religion for people across different walks of life, especially in the Indian context. While we are expected to follow civil laws determined by the state, arguably equally important are our

personal laws governed by religion. She recognizes how all leading religions are male dominant and have been for ages, and believes true gender equality can only be achieved if women feel empowered and hence contribute to all institutional arenas.

Dr. Dhruvarajan stresses that Hinduism's androcentric ideology of 'pativrata' is promoting the female's secondary role: it refers to a woman's complete and unconditional devotion and service toward her husband. That is to say, it encompasses a dynamic where females are applauded for being subservient while men are expected to be dominant. This subordinate position can be reinforced with threats, violence, and economic dependence. However, in these cases it is often difficult to differentiate between devotion and dependency. While scriptures such as the esteemed Ramayana romanticize a devoted wife like Sita, where she volunteers to go to exile with her husband and offers her life in place of his, the means mentioned above to reinforce this are not a product of region (Roland). For example, violence being the leading cause of the subjugation of wives, it is never sanctioned by the religion. Dr. Dhruvarajan makes several blanket statements regarding the women's perceptions of self, due to female representation in Hinduism. For example, claiming that women's housework is not recognized as important can be countered by the immense respect the religion has for mothers, even comparing them to a physical embodiment of a goddess in the household. Sri Ramakrishna (arguably one of the most worshipped Hindu gods) said "The Mother knows all. Cat holds the mouse in one way but its kitten in quite another. Pray to the Divine Mother with a longing heart. Her vision dries up all craving for the world and completely destroys all attachment to lust and greed." There are reasons behind a mother and wife's unconditional love and devotion, and more often than not, those reasons have little to do with religious instruction (Chaturvedi).

Matters of discrimination in workplace wages and job opportunities are determined by social factors, independent of religion. It is these social factors that have coerced and convinced women that they cannot seek financial independence. While it can be argued that religion is the driving factor in molding a woman as a wife and mother, that is not to say it promotes sex segregation and labour hierarchies nor does it advocate for unequal distribution of resources. In the times of drafting the scriptures, a lot of the labour was manual and involved great physical strength that women were not conditioned nor had the time for. Religion characterised women as compassionate and caring entities who would take care of their husbands as they fought wars and earned bread. This characterisation was not meant to deem women as inferior, it was simply to assign a role, and yet it can easily be exploited by the family to control the women in the household. While this may attribute to her degrading self-image and worth, several aspects of the religion also work to emphasize a woman's power, which is often overlooked.

The matter of caste and class also contributes to gender-based discrimination. As pointed out by Dr. Dhruvarajan, BJP's attempt to construct Hinduism into a 'unified centralized hierarchical doctrine', based exclusively upon scriptural sources is a great example of upper-caste men wielding religion as a means to consolidate political power. This example illustrates the events of centuries, hence emphasising how easily the premise of the religion can be manipulated by those in the upper castes. While women are now beginning to earn this status, in the early stages of the religion, it was the brahmin men who had the power to determine the relative importance of certain scriptures. This once again proves the presence of manipulation of religion, where original ideologies were lost in patriarchal translation.

## HINDUISM AND FEMINISM

### Some Concerns

#### *Sharada Sugirtharajah*

Dr. Sugirtharajah claims that while labels are useful, they are not without limitations. She argues that the label 'feminism' is a predominantly western concept, and while some Indians choose to embrace it, others shy away from it. That is not to say that Indians who do not believe in the western term, also do not believe in what it stands for. While dealing with a complex tradition such as Hinduism, it is important to understand that western concepts may not be

entirely applicable to the Indian context, given the differences in terms of politics, geography, language, and many others. However, the greatest difference comes from attitudes toward religion, considering India is further away from secularism. In this essay, I will choose to adopt the term feminism despite its definitional ambiguities solely for ease of understanding due to its universality. Women's oppression has been universal for centuries, and sexism is innate across religions. When I use the term feminism, I am referring to the social philosophy that's aim is to eradicate sexism and not strive toward equality of the sexes. That is to say when referring to 'feminism' in this paper, I am referring primarily to 'liberation feminism, which will be further discussed below.

Dr Sugirtharajah recognizes that studying Hinduism in an academic context is also a concept not previously adopted by Indian institutes, as religion was not offered as a field of inquiry. There have been significant contributions by western scholars toward Hinduism studies whereas in contrast, very few Indian scholars have made significant contributions toward western academia. An academic study of Hinduism, although present, is rare, especially in the context of the role of women in the religion. The exclusion of these studies from typical academics robs students of the opportunity to cultivate an interest in understanding concepts that are essential in determining their daily lifestyles. As rightly stated by Dr. Sugirtharajah 'For a fruitful cross-cultural dialogue, we need to see and hear voices of more women scholars from the Hindu background.' It is this lack of education and conversation within institutes which is allowing for more opportunities to misinterpret and morph religious intent. This was the driving force that urged me toward understanding the origins of Hinduism and the role it expects its women to play. This also illustrated perfectly why the men were able to ostracise women with such ease: their collective lack of education and understanding made it difficult for them to seek liberation.

'There has been a tendency not only to confine the study of Hinduism to selective male-dominated texts but also to interpret textual prescriptions as descriptions of actual reality.' Dr Sugirtharajah said. As she rightly points out, this text-oriented approach takes away from the more realistic and varied picture of women's place in society. She also argues that 'religion' comprises not only of scriptures but also beliefs, practices, and propositional truths. Therefore, to understand religion one must give all the repositories equal priority. The texts themselves carry a number of contradictions, and as Dr. Sugirtharajah points out 'there are both redeeming and enslaving features in patriarchal texts.' She uses the example of Sita in the Ramayana and Draupadi in the Mahabharata, where both devoted wives reacted in an 'unconventional' way when wronged by their husbands. That is to say, these esteemed scriptures themselves boast instances where notions of wifely behaviour are challenged. Dr. Sugirtharajah also draws attention to how some gynocentric retellings of the epics use these 'disruptions' of patriarchal norms not as disruptions but as norms themselves, amplifying the power of interpretation in this context. This furthers my argument as to why our overreliance on scriptures is amplifying the importance of certain practices that would otherwise be overshadowed by a more gender-neutral approach.

Another aspect to note is the multifaceted approach one must observe when trying to understand Hinduism. There are umpteen variations of the scriptures, based on different interpretations as well as varying methods of practicing the religion. Hence, over time it has become apparent that the androcentric versions are given greater importance. An example of this, as Dr. Sugirtharajah identifies, is the importance placed on greatly patriarchal texts such as Dharmashastras or the Laws of Manu when assessing a women's position in the Hindu tradition. Fleeting attention has been given to tantric and bhakti texts and traditions, which are examples of variations of the religion that aims to uplift and liberate women. Dr. Sugirtharajah argues that the androcentric texts are meant to be read in conjunction with other sources that have positive images of women, so as to eliminate bias within interpretation and consider all approaches before preaching a women's standard. This disengagement from text is a new yet crucial concept in understanding the place of Hindu women and considering their differences in terms of class, caste, language, and geography.

Another concept Dr. Sugirtharajah outlines is how from a religious context, it is unrealistic to seek equality. Hinduism is governed by the concept of dharma. Its definition varies depending on whom you ask, but in this context, I am referring to 'duty'. One's place or duty is determined by a number of factors including age, gender, and seniority. These duties vary and hence seeking equality would mean eradicating these differences, which goes against the

principle of dharma. Dr Sugirtharajah goes on to provide examples wherein there were efforts to subvert this gender and caste hierarchy. These included the bhakti movement and the acts of Women poet-saints such as Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi. Although unsuccessful in getting rid of gender inequality, they instead focused their energy toward devotion and challenged traditional gender roles. These efforts were contested by many, but the idea here is to acknowledge people's ability to celebrate individual choice.

Dr Sugirtharajah recognizes the role Indian social 'reformers' played in women's emancipation and yet she argues that by them being male, 'Their espousal of women's cause was simultaneously emancipatory and enslaving.' While, during the colonial period, they helped challenge the negative representation of Hinduism and its women as well as publicly oppose practices such as child marriage, sati, property laws, they were at the forefront of the movement and hence women's freedom was still directed by male-cantered value.

While they advocated for women's education it was more in terms of 'proficient wives and good mothers.' However, at the brink of women joining the efforts, the fight-for-freedom period began to see reform. Sugirtharajah says, 'In fact, in the later stages of colonialism, British rule of India itself came to be seen as a violation of the feminine principle, and both men and women were involved in liberating Mother India (Bharat Mata) from foreign rule.' This speaks lengths about the collective view of the nation; in face of adversity, men and women alike turned to goddesses such as 'kali' for empowerment. British Colonial administrators and missionaries thought of men that worshiped feminine principles as weak and believed their British masculinity would be a source of strength and toughness to said men. This was yet another reason which led to female oppression that was not rooted in religious instruction.

## Method

In addition to reviewing existing literature, I conducted primary research through the means of interviews. The people selected have all been Hindu for over 10 years and are actively engaged in its practice in different religious forums and spheres: Mr Ashok Nahar, Mrs. Nehal Vora and Mrs. Deepti Savla from the International society of Krishna consciousness, Mrs Malini Shroff from the Prempuri ashram, Mrs Vishaka Nanavaty from the Chinmaya mission, Mr. Nikhil Suri from the art of living, Mr. Ran Vijay Singh a city palace tour guide and Dinesh Pandit from Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit Vidyalaya. In order to minimize bias, the interviewees come from both conservative and comparatively liberal backgrounds, and are both male and female. I tried to avoid researcher bias by allowing the interviewees to present their views on the subject unprompted. Therefore, there was no structured question and answer and their responses can be found throughout the paper. However, the limitation of this method was the inability to ensure the validity of interviewee responses due to their subjective nature. Furthermore, their responses are a product of their own experiences and are limited to the extent of their own knowledge and understanding. The justifications discussed below may vary across different regions, practices and educational institutes.

## Culture VS. Religion

A primary source of confusion is the fine line between culture and religion. For example, a lot of the practices that critics claim make Hinduism male-dominated like the dowry or purdah systems are never explicitly supported by the religion. When stating that 'Hinduism is patriarchal' one is arguing that it is the religion that is responsible for subjugating women. In reality, however, the majority of practices are likely born out of culture and societal norms. While there are several operational definitions of both these terms, they are all essentially arguing the same thing. Stated simply, religion is a way of living. On the other hand, culture is the social behavior that is a result of that way of living. Nikhil guru illustrated this concept by comparing religion and spirituality to a banana and the culture to a banana peel. It is the foundation upon which a religion is built that carries the nourishment, however, this is often forgotten because people get too hung up on what surrounds it. This prevents them from ever reaching the religious ideals much like a banana peel preventing access to the banana unless peeled away.

Therefore, the interpretation of religion plays a huge role in the shaping of culture. Hinduism, unlike many religions, does not have a code of laws dictated verbatim by god. Instead, it has Vedas from which sages got inspired to create their own teachings. The Vedas did not comprise of a set philosophy; instead, they boasted a range of hymns and poems with respective themes. These were interpreted in light of the current context, considering the circumstances and positions of people at the time of the ideas being conveyed. This constructed the culture at the time, and not the religion. And yet, people turn to these age-old teachings as a means to govern their life and make assumptions about people's respective positions today, completely disregarding the dynamic nature of said teachings.

The 'Manu Smriti' or 'Manav Dharma Shastra' is an example of scripture that is constantly quoted as being the 'guide book for being the perfect woman' and the 'divine code of conduct'. It is said to be the oldest metrical work in brahmical dharma in Hinduism and the brahmins have begun to interpret the scripture as a Hindu law book. However, it is anything but. When conversing with Jasmine Didi of the Chinmaya mission, she claimed there were two main types of scripture: the shrutis and smritis. The former is usually transmitted verbally and are considered universal and eternal. These works are the closest Hinduism comes to having a standard code of conduct with explicit dos and don'ts. On the other hand, smritis are written by authors and are time-bound; depending on the culture, geography, and era prevalent at the time in which the author lived. Hence the Manu smriti, was perhaps relevant in his time period but holds no authority today. It is believed that the book would never have garnered the influence it did if it wasn't for the British who resurrected it as an instrument to help them rule their colony. It was also cited favorably by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who deemed it "an incomparably spiritual and superior work" to the Christian Bible. He observed that "the sun shines on the whole book" and attributed its ethical perspective to "the noble classes, the philosophers and warriors, [who] stand above the mass." The reason it was held in higher regard than most dharma shastras of the time was that Hindu tradition believed the teachings were from supernatural forces: Brahma himself. Hence, the tone adopted was authoritative rather than scholarly, making it relevant to this day (burton). However, this was not always the case. Sir William Jones, in the late 18th century, was responsible for translating the text into English, while mistakenly exaggerating its antiquity and importance. Many attributed it to be the source of India's inequalities like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar publicly burned the book, justifying himself by saying 'To burn a thing was to register a protest against the idea it represented'(2017).

## Discussion

Hinduism, unlike several worldly religions, consists of a pantheon of feminine idols, some of which are associated with what are traditionally considered male preserves such as wisdom and fine arts (the goddess Sarasvati), wealth and prosperity (the goddess Lakshmi), and power (the goddesses Kali and Durga). While great debate surrounds the topic of whether worshipping goddesses makes Hinduism feminist, I will argue that it does promote a women's role and hence subsequently can be used by women as a source of empowerment. Surprisingly, my research shows that the majority of goddesses do not have a particular origin. Similar to their male counterparts, Goddesses have been worshipped since the birth of the religion and its practices. In fact, when in conversation with Dinesh pandit, he claimed a lot of the Gods went to Goddesses for protection. He says, Ambamata rides a lion, which proves her superiority and power. There are several similar examples of feminine worship that prove a goddess's potential, some of which are discussed below.

Pochamma is the popular Dalitbahujan Goddesses in Andhra Pradesh, whose versions exist across India. Unlike Sita, her gender role is not specified. Like Kancha Illiah, an Indian political theorist says, she is characterized as powerful and independent where her relationships are gender-neutral, caste-neutral, and class-neutral (Iliah). Unlike the comparatively popular goddesses like Sita, Pochamma does not have a husband and is not shamed or looked down upon because of it. She is the goddess of the people, regarding everyone with equal respect and sympathy. Her

---

<sup>2</sup> The Manu Smriti is representative of a much larger group of spiritual texts and is only used in this context as an example of religious scripture being used as a means to serve the patriarchal culture.



existence is just one among many goddesses from whom women can draw daily inspiration and channel that into empowerment. Dr. Sugirtharajah points out that at a spiritual level, feminine and masculine are not exclusive to females and males respectively. The characteristics known as 'feminine' are not exclusive to them. As seen in the Bhakti tradition, males are free to adopt these 'feminine' characteristics or be a combination of them. Shakti, the feminine force and energy, is known to empower males and females alike. Dr. Sugirtharajah also points out males are drawn to the goddess 'Kali' who is an embodiment of unconventional traits that aren't usually associated with feminine like 'terrifying' and 'destroyer.' Ramprasad, Ramakrishna and Bharati who were all pious worshippers of goddess Kali, referred to her as Mother—an unconventional mother, one who destroys as well as creates, one who takes as well as gives life.'

Ms. Nehal Vora, a long-time follower of Hinduism and ISKCON, strongly supports Dr Sugirtharajah's claim that 'at the conceptual level, Hinduism affirms the spiritual equality and inseparability of male and female.' When in conversation with her, she argued that every male god can expand into a female version because all beings are spiritually the same. For example, the masculine Shiva is rendered powerless unless activated by the female shakti; a power already present within males. Lord Krishna can expand into Radharani. Much like a flame's potency does not change after lighting another candle, a God and Goddess each serve a unique and essential purpose. Similarly, Ardhanarishvara is a composite androgynous form of Shiva and his consort Parvati. This form is shown as a fusion of half-male and half-female forms, split down in the center. The right half is depicted as Shiva, while the left half shows the female form of Parvati. This manifestation of lord shiva is another example wherein Hinduism promoted the idea that a man is nothing without a woman and vice versa. They are reliant upon each other, both playing a unique role (Viswanathan). Therefore, the symbolism for ardhnanarishvara is the concept that to worship the male, one must also worship the female.

Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi famously argued 'The worship of the mother goddess does not constitute a matriarchy, but it does constitute a matriarchal culture, in the sense that it preserves the value of women as life-givers and sources of activating energy, and it represents the acknowledgement of women's power by women and men in the culture (Rajan).' In addition to just being a solace to women, the goddess can also be a resource where women use the phenomenon of possession to actively resist oppression. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan argues that goddesses unlike sita or savitri are rarely invoked as explicit role models in the socialization of girls. However, after exploring the different forms in which Goddesses are given exposure and worshipped, we can conclude that knowledge regarding their origins proves that goddesses hold equal power and responsibility. Therefore, I claim the potential for liberation feminism is increased as women draw empowerment from original knowledge regarding Goddesses that aren't as conventionally worshipped.

## The origin of oppressive practices and traditions

When in conversation with Ashok Guru from ISKCON, he outlined the power of conformity among Hindus. He believes Hindus are a people that thrive in collectivism and hence, find solace in following others' footsteps instead of forging our own path. He gave an example of this: there was an elaborate wedding in a village a couple of years ago. A black cat was on the premises and disrupting the event. Therefore, solely for precautionary purposes, the villagers covered the cat with a bucket temporarily. A guest from a neighboring village saw the covered cat and, believing it was part of Hindu customs, began doing the same in his own village. Very soon, all weddings needed to have a covered black cat for good luck. This goes to show the ease with which customs are passed on, with very few questioning their actual intent.

Nikhil Guru from the art of living believed that the passing down of traditions was much like a game of Chinese whispers. The Vedas, the oldest Sanskrit scripture from which most other scripture was born, were not books. Instead, they were a knowledge stream comprising of a set of vibrations. The power of those vibrations was only realized when chanted orally, with specific tones and rhythms, which gave rise to a lot of scope for error and misinterpretation. Furthermore, only few had access to the knowledge and had the liberty to assume the role of the

transmitters and interpreters, namely the priestly brahmin caste who are also known to be highly orthodox (Gerety). Unlike the west, who methodically recorded and learned from the past, Indians did not assume such a precise approach. The majority of Hindu epics start with 'there once was.. many years ago', without focusing on date or time. The idea behind this is that they wanted to give more importance to the lesson and message from the past instead of focusing on practicality. Therefore, it is extremely hard to date Hindu texts and traditions. As a result, it is not uncommon for Hindus to be practicing a vast majority of rituals without ever questioning why and bothering to understand their origins; women-related traditions included. Therefore, it became easier to change traditions over time without facing major questioning or criticism.

### Why our reliance on scriptures should be limited

Like Vishaka didi, a swamini at Chinmaya missions says: in the field of Medical science, we need upto 20 years of education before gaining any credibility. Scripture, what many argue has the same (if not higher) level of intricacy, according to her is treated as a kitty party discussion Ms. Nehal Vora, a staunch practitioner at ISKCON, adds to this by saying that people often forget that the scriptures and Vedas were composed by mature beings in tune with every aspect of spirituality and consciousness. That same degree of scriptural understanding can never be replicated and hence, it is inappropriate to rely solely on scripture for today's traditions. She even claims that most epics outline the stories of supreme beings, and humans cannot physically strive to achieve that degree of consciousness. Nikhil guru explains this concept by saying the feeling and vibration one gets from the singer of the song, is very difficult to emulate by a layman. Similarly, the dumbed down version of scriptures are being used to justify heinous atrocities that scriptures likely never deemed permissible.

Vishakha didi, further explained the reasons behind scriptural misunderstanding. She says that the British identified the key behind breaking India's unity was breaking down our scripture, due to how pious India was. After British colonization, they achieved this by removing Sanskrit from most curriculums and converting schooling to English mediums. As a result, they began propagating English while Sanskrit became close to obsolete. They began treating the religious epics as myths and fiction, and consequently invalidating scriptural significance.

Mr. Ran Vijay Singh, a government tour guide of Udaipur city palace, outlines the fact that literacy rates were very low at the time. The brahmins capitalised on this and kept custody of the religious teachings; to ensure certain practices were enforced, they connected all their wishes with religion to make them more effective. People were extremely god fearing and hence complied with the Brahmins' wishes; ignorantly believing said traditions were an offshoot of original scripture. Due to the easy acceptance, certain traditions later became cultural norms despite the fact that they were simply conjured ideas of the privileged caste. Some of these examples will be discussed below (some examples did originate from the religion, but got mangled to facilitate female oppression over time).

### Pativra

Marriage was a means for organising society; it ensured there were people responsible for the health, education and wellbeing of children in the society. A husband vowed to protect his wife, and their companionship was of mutual respect in the Vedic ages. When conversing with Nikhil guru, he outlined the reason for the birth of many gender related differences. Primarily, a lot of the work involved farming and ploughing. This was physically intensive and better suited for the male body. In fact, it was believed that long hours in the sun and extreme manual labour may contribute to a woman's infertility. Women viewed the ability to give life as a gift, and hence settled for less physically tolling work like taking care of the children and house. Ashoka guru explained this difference in the respective place in society with the following metaphor: there are two types of clothes; a winter fur coat and a casual summer T-shirt. Both serve the same purpose and hold the same intrinsic value and yet are innately different. The value of the coat increases in winter while the opposite can be said for summer. The t-shirt can be washed while fur cannot. The treatment of the clothes and their value depends entirely upon the situation and context. Hence, it would be incorrect to

say the garments are equal but it would be equally incorrect to say one is superior to the other. Ms Vora agrees and states that men and women are wired differently and both play their own role- it would be absurd for a man to get upset over the fact that he cannot give birth. Therefore, women should strive to reach their full potential; a potential is guided by their biological impulses. The female's role in society soon became to nurture and care for those around her including both her children and husband.

Mahatma Gandhi, who played a significant role in women's fight for liberation and freedom, believed in women's innate qualities of 'non-violence, self-denial, self-sacrifice, and endurance'. It was due to these qualities that he was a believer of *strid-harma* or *pativrata* (duty of a wife to her husband), and it was these values that he wished men would emulate. As Dr Sugirtharajah says, 'He wanted men to cast off conventional "male" traits such as stubbornness, aggressiveness, competition, and greed and to replace them with the aforementioned "female" traits.' Therefore, he believed it was a female's disposition to care for her husband in a way that her husband, biologically and physically, could not care for her.

*Pativrata* is the practice of a wife practicing utmost devotion of her husband, some say it is similar to her treating him as she would treat God. Nikhil guru proposed a theory of the origin of the concept in daily life, arguing that Hinduism had once tried to make everything spiritual. Therefore, in a staunch religious household it was the norm to chant prayers before eating, bathing and even conceiving a child. This was the result of the importance placed on vibrations. One's entire life must be led with sincere and unwavering devotion to god. However, at times, it is argued that women were not able to give that much of themselves to God. Life got in the way; taking care of her children and her household. Hence, the ideology of seeing god in her husband was proposed. She would be able to be completely devoted to someone who tangibly embodied God, without having to take away from her daily responsibilities. However, over due course, *pativrata* became a concept where women were only respectable if they were willing to put their husband before everything else, giving the men the power to oppress their women.

A major source of controversy regarding this topic that has been called into question by anti-religions is the legend of Sita's *agni-pariksha*. In brief, after being rescued by Ram from the demon Ravana, Sita felt neglected by her husband. Ram claimed he could not accept her because she had lived with another man. In order to prove her purity, she herself stepped into a fire and called upon goddess Agni who protected her, hence proving her chastity (Seth). Ms. Malini Shroff, the managing committee member of *prempuri ashram*, claimed that English translations have always been messed up and several versions of the story exist. However, the centrality of all stories is that Sita voluntarily got into the fire, Ram never instructed her to. She says the situation was more like *agni pravesh* as opposed to *agni pariksha* with an emphasis on Sita's willingness. In fact, she claims that Ram always knew Sita was pure but he acted the way he did in order to avoid a public scandal where people believe he took her back due to lust and not love. Sita has been painted by scriptures as the ideal wife and role model: extremely devoted to her husband, skilled in house work, and highly spiritual. She voluntarily goes into *vanvas* (exile) to be by lord Ram's side and remains loyal to him throughout. Ms. Shroff says that men today have begun expecting that level of devotion from their own wives, but what they often forget is if they want a wife like Sita, it is their responsibility to be a husband like Ram. She stresses the importance of balance: if a partnership practices *pativrata*, they should place equal importance on *pativrata* (devotion towards one's wife).

## Sati

Sati, although it is now banned across India, is one of the most extreme and widespread patriarchal practices and it is still often quoted by Hindu-bashers when talking about the position of women in India. Sati is the practice of a widowed wife burning herself on her husband's pyre, to join him in the afterlife.

When conversing with Ashoka guru, he argued that the requirement of sati was never mentioned in the Vedas. Instead, what killed thousands of innocent widows was just a matter of misinterpretation. *Atharvaveda* 18.3.1 is mostly quoted as Vedic Mantra which supports Sati Pratha. This mantra is interpreted as: Choosing her husband's world, O

man, this woman lays herself down beside thy lifeless body. Preserving faithfully the ancient custom. Bestow upon here both wealth and offspring (Arya).

In this Mantra the word 'Choosing her husband's world' is often interpreted :the Wife is advised to join the Dead Husband in the afterlife in the next world. So she must burn herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. The Correct interpretation of this Mantra is :This Woman has chosen her Husband's world earlier. Today she is sitting beside your dead body. Now Bestow upon her both wealth and offspring for the rest of her life to continue her afterlife in this world.

What gave the tradition the name sati comes from the Hindu myth of shiva and one of his wife's sati. Legend says, she burned herself on a pyre as a final act of defiance against her father, who disapproved of her husband shiva. This legend, later became twisted to one where a wife can only show her devotion if her gesture is of the magnitude that sati's was. However, the main reason for the continuation of sati was actually women's protection and was initially almost always the widows own choice. In the mid 1500s, India was subject to many foreign invasions, most of them Mughals and afghans. When talking to Dinesh pandit, who has been a practitioner of Hinduism for over 50 years, he claimed that widowed women were taken advantage of. The invaders made and upheld the law, and hence without her husband, a woman's dignity had no protection. Violence (sexual and otherwise) was extremely widespread and normalised at the time. The widowed women were often not allowed to remarry and hence they chose not to live at all rather than lead a life full of grief and humiliation. Sati was more prevalent in Rajasthan, not west Bengal and Odisha, hence proving that only states most affected by foreign invasions were victims of such practices and the tradition was not propagated as a part of religion, as many believe.

The practice continued past this time however, because society began to celebrate the women that followed the tradition. She was highly respected, and the custom often involved the entire village gathering to offer her flowers and prayers while she embarked on this new journey. If she didn't, however, chose to perform sati, the widow was often shunned and ostracised by society and led a miserable life. This is a clear representation of the culture surrounding such practices being the cause of women oppression, despite having never been explicitly sanctioned by the religion.

## Female priesthood

Although changing, for the majority of years it was predominantly the males that held the titles of pandits and pujaris. Females, despite being considered more pious, were still prohibited from entering certain places of worship and conducting auspicious pujas. Ms. Malini shroff said this was largely due to the women's household responsibilities. As aforementioned, it was the males' hardwired tendency to earn as much as it was the females to take care of the house and the children. As a result, her religious requirements could be fulfilled more conveniently within her own home, rather than going through the rigorous process of becoming a Hindu priest and going to the temple every day.

When speaking to Dinesh panditji, he said that in order to conduct a puja, a pujari must wear the sacred thread or 'janeu'. He says the female's acceptance of this thread from a male can be treated as adultery and she cannot accept it unless she is in a marital union with the giver, therefore it is highly uncommon and unorthodox to see a female priest. Jasmine didi proposed the reason for this may have been due to the fact that initially females had to take the thread off monthly. When females go through their menses, it is the body's biological response to release hormones that cause chemical imbalances and hence mood swings. Because Hinduism believes all matter absorbs vibrations, these negative vibrations would be absorbed by the string. To avoid having to conduct the ritual of christening a new string each month, a daughter gave her father the string on her behalf. It was then his responsibility to wear two strings and do sadana (any spiritual practice leading to self-realisation) for himself as well as his daughter. When she got married, this string would be given to her husband and hence the practice came to be known as an act of intimacy. In today's marriages, the ritual of a female and male putting threads on each other still exists but these are symbolic and are often removed after the ceremony. For a stranger to give a woman her thread would be viewed negatively, for this reason.

Mr. Ran Vijay Singh adds that India was still very susceptible to foreign invasions for much of its early history. As a result, it was advisable to keep women inside the house and covered up. This later also became one of the reasons for the purdah system, where women kept their head and face covered. It initially started not as a sign of respect, but a means of protection against the male gaze. Ms malini shroff further adds to this, claiming invaders broke temples and harassed women. A Lot of the jobs of the time started at sun up and commenced at sun down, and for a woman to walk alone in the dark was considered dangerous. Therefore, to go to the temple every day to fulfil her pandit responsibilities would have been near impossible.

Ms. Deepti Savla, a firm follower of ISKCON, outlined another theory. She claimed that the goal of all spirituality was to raise consciousness, mostly in the form of service and sacrifice. The average woman's life was already extremely sacrificial due to the pain endured in labour and menses, her responsibility towards her family, and her job to take care of the house. Hence, women organically gained consciousness and overcame their own attachments and aversions. Men, on the other hand, did not have equal opportunity for this in their regular lives. Hence, to match this level of consciousness they took to doing rituals and conducting pujas in the temple.

Nikhil guru, brings attention to another requirement for being a priest/priestess known as the gayatri mantra. It is a chant added to Rig Veda (10:16:3) by Sage Brahmarsi Viswamitra and was given to children wishing to become pujaris because it helped sharpen their concentration in order to remember the other shlokas. Although becoming more liberal, in some orthodox Hindu societies, controversy still surrounds whether women should be allowed to chant this mantra. The reason behind why that is not advisable is because each Vedic mantra has a certain frequency and acts upon different parts of the human body: glands, chakras and organs (Mantra Sastra). Gayatri Mantra's 24 digits produce vibrations that work on 3 spiritual chakras (Mooladhara, Swadhithana, Manipura) situated near the Pituitary and Prostate glands in the human body. These are some of the most significant glands that release hormones separating male from female children when they attain puberty. It is believed that the repetitive chanting of this mantra can result in male-like tendencies and characteristics like a deeper voice, irregular menstrual cycles and in rare cases, facial hair and reduced milk in lactating mothers. Although these symptoms were never confirmed scientifically, women, in fear of losing parts of their womanhood, more readily accepted their ban from reciting certain such mantras. However, it should be noted that the Vedas never stated women couldn't recite any Vedic mantras. Women are beginning to realise this and now there are cases where they take pride in reciting the religious hymns and mantras. For example, in February 2019, a group of 121 ladies chanted and recited Vedas for 2 hours without break as part of Maha Rudrabhishek in Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh (TOI).

Arguably the main reason women were not to pursue a life as a priestess was due to their menstruation. Over time, menstrual taboos bloomed from the idea that women are impure during their menses, however discussed below are reasons behind the same.

## Menstrual taboos

Women in Hinduism are often not allowed to enter places of worship or even perform rituals when in their menses. Most believe it is because women are impure during this period and thus are not fit to appear before god. However, there are several other explanations which are less explored.

All places of worship including temples and gurudwaras attract people due to their serene and calm atmosphere. This instant change from outside and inside places of worship occurs due to the abundant vibrations confined within the walls. The ayurvedic understanding of the human body says there are 5 principal movements of said vibrations called vauys, the two main movements being: Prana-Vayu ("forward moving air," and its flow is inwards and upward) and Apana-Vayu ("the air that moves away," and its flow is downwards and out) (Cathy et al.). Nikhil guru claims that the body must be at equilibrium, where none of the vauyus are contradicting the other. While meditating, people are in the first state, where vibrations are said to be moving upward. Therefore, people often complain about throbbing and feeling light in the head after meditation. The second movement constituted mainly of excretion: 'getting rid of', and this includes a woman's menstruation. Women were advised not to enter places of worship where the

vibrations were all rising up, so as to avoid biological disequilibrium. However this solely constituted as advice, and a woman could do as she thought best.

Ms. Malini shroff added to this; people who have recently suffered a death of a loved one, are advised not to go to the temple. This is solely to serve as an excuse and intermission from responsibilities. They are allowed and given space to grieve and hence are not expected to go to the temple, but they are still allowed. The concept is the same for menstruating women. People recognised the physical and physiological discomfort a woman may be in during this period and hence they excused women from going to the temple for a week. Because most wives lived in joint families, household duties existed in abundance. Hence, during this time, her husband and children were expected to look after her responsibilities which included household chores and worship. However, over time this too became disfigured into a practice where women are now considered impure and are not allowed anywhere near god during their menses.

Fortunately, the mindset is becoming increasingly progressive. While there are certain cultures that still consider menstruation to be impure, some women are being allowed to conduct direct worship despite being in their menses. Vishakha didi says that no menstruation taboos existed in the Vedas and outlines her own experience: she was going to celebrate Janmashtami (Krishna's birthday) with her renowned guru swami Chinmayananda, when she got her period. Panicked, she asked her swami's swamini if she could still participate. The swamini insisted that their swami viewed everyone as having 'purusha; which was supreme ungendered consciousness. That day, she was the one that gave Krishna all the major offerings in front of her Gurudeva, and realised that religion need not be gendered if more gurus promoted gender inclusivity.

## Preference of sons

One of the primary means of tangible oppression of women emerged in the Vedic period, with families' preference for sons. This preference was demonstrated in terms of inheritance, the dowry systems and in extreme cases, female foeticide. Religion also contributed to this bias, but people often fail to remember the cultural context of the period in which Vedas were written. Due to the abundant wars at the time, Vedas consisted of hymns to summon gods and bear sons. This was solely attributed to the mother's requirement of a warrior to protect her and her family. Another reason was because it was socially acceptable for the male to remain with his parents till their old age, whereas a girl was considered 'paraya dhan' (other's property) and married off. Therefore, women observed the name of their marital home while the men carried the family name and carried forth the legacy and bloodline. While scholars agree that the son was preferred, some fail to acknowledge that in case of the birth of a daughter, she was not neglected. No discrimination was made between a son and a daughter in respect of care, affection, love and education. Henceforth, my argument carries that sexist ideals were constructed later as a result of the culture and not directly constructed by religion.

As established earlier, wealth was often held in the possession of the priests who were predominantly male. As a result, the sons usually inherited familial assets and possessions. It was common for the daughter to get married into another man's house, which is what gave rise to the concept of dowry. Dowry is an amount of money or property given to the bride by her father, before her marriage. Ms. Deepti Savla said this custom originally arose because the father wished to give his daughter her share of his inheritance before she adopts another name. This would then be used for her protection in times of hardship, and was solely for her consumption. Ms. Malini Shroff adds that the concept was introduced to help differentiate whether the girl was her pita's or pati's (father's or husband's) responsibility. The dowry was symbolic and it showed the father passing on his responsibility to the husband by giving his daughter everything that was hers.

While the religion does show subtle bias for sons, the concept of dowry was completely man-made for mostly practical rather than spiritual purposes. Over time, the dowry began to become a source of major violence against brides, if she was unable to produce a sum demanded by her new home. It soon became customary for the bride's

family to give the groom's family the dowry, as opposed to it being for the bride's own possession. This is another example of the role that culture played in female oppression, and a practice that should be made obsolete.

## Conclusion

After having the opportunity to converse with many esteemed Hindu devotees, it is apparent that our religion was once one that was devoid of any gender inequality. Instead, the richness in gender differences were elevated and celebrated, each one playing the part they can, keeping their own biological, psychological and emotional temperaments in mind. Liberation for women was not a goal as much as it was a lifestyle, as their participation and respect in society was abundant. However, over time a number of factors created a culture wherein traditions were presented as patriarchal : a) the Brahmin caste's autonomy over religious text b) foreign invaders posing security threats for women and using language as a means to colonize India c) over reliance on scriptures despite their requirement for oral reciting d) leading to the misinterpretation of scripture. These factors, along with numerous others not discussed in this essay, created a culture where practices that were considered patriarchal were propagated. Everyone I had the opportunity to interview believed education is the main solution. In the past, low literacy rates made Hindus an easy to manipulate and malleable people. With today's religious ashrams and structured disciplines, it is becoming easier to learn religious tradition under esteemed guidance. Vedic and scriptural understanding, although important, must be done with the current cultural context in mind. What was prevalent then, for example wars, can no longer serve as an excuse to prevent women from working. Because women have been god fearing in the past, they have learned not to question traditions believing it is god's instruction. These changes can only be made once women understand that the traditions they follow today are man-made, whether consciously or subconsciously is secondary. The ability to distinguish between culture and religion, can make the path to empowerment one that is fully-informed and highly deserved. Thus, I conclude that original knowledge can facilitate the potential for liberation feminism in Hindu practices.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you for the guidance of Maya Novak-Herzog mentor from Northwestern University in the development of this research paper.

## References

1. Acharya, Sri Rama Ramanuja. "THE LAWS OF MANU For the 21st Century."
2. Arya, Vivek. Vedas and Sati Pratha, 1 Jan. 1970, [vedictruth.blogspot.com/2016/11/vedas-and-sati-pratha.html](http://vedictruth.blogspot.com/2016/11/vedas-and-sati-pratha.html).
3. Burton, Richard Francis. *Vikram and the Vampire: Classic Hindu Tales of Adventure, Magic, and Romance*. General Books, 2010.
4. Cathy, et al. "The Five Vayus." *Yoga Basics*, 11 June 2020, [www.yogabasics.com/learn/the-five-vayus/](http://www.yogabasics.com/learn/the-five-vayus/).
5. Chaturvedi, Dr Harsh. "Worshipping Mother as God an Inherent Part of Indian Culture." *DailyO, Living Media India Limited*, 14 Dec. 2015, [www.dailyo.in/lifestyle/mother-goddess-hinduism-mythology-swami-vivekananda-sri-ramakrishna-adi-shankaracharaya-sri-ram-sri-krishna-sanatan/story/1/7934.html](http://www.dailyo.in/lifestyle/mother-goddess-hinduism-mythology-swami-vivekananda-sri-ramakrishna-adi-shankaracharaya-sri-ram-sri-krishna-sanatan/story/1/7934.html).
6. Desai, Usha, and Sallyann Goodall. "Hindu Women Talk Out." *Agenda*, no. 25, 1995, p. 26., doi:10.2307/4065843.
7. Gerety, Finnian. "Vedic Oral Tradition." *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2017, [www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0184.xml](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0184.xml).
8. Greer, Germaine. "Equality Is a 'Profoundly Conservative Goal' for Women, Germaine Greer Says." *The Guardian, Guardian News and Media*, 8 Mar. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/09/equality-is-a-profoundly-conservative-goal-for-women-germaine-greer-says](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/09/equality-is-a-profoundly-conservative-goal-for-women-germaine-greer-says).

9. Grzymala-Busse, Anna. "Why Comparative Politics Should Take Religion (More) Seriously." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2012, pp. 421–442., doi:10.1146/annurev-polisci-033110-130442.
10. HinduAcademy. "Origin of Hinduism, Sanatan Dharma | Jay Lakhani | Hindu Academy." YouTube, YouTube, 9 Apr. 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Oz3tknj3E4&list=PLtZfryPi0cspqUJK2PADaBoY4XxZOdw56&index=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Oz3tknj3E4&list=PLtZfryPi0cspqUJK2PADaBoY4XxZOdw56&index=1).
11. Ilaiah, K. *Why I Am Not a Hindu a Sudra Critique of HINDUTVA Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. SAGE, 2019.
12. K.Tapas. "Difference between Hindu-Dharma and Sanatana-Dharma." *Differencebetween*, [www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/religion-miscellaneous/difference-between-hindu-dharma-and-sanatana-dharma/](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/religion-miscellaneous/difference-between-hindu-dharma-and-sanatana-dharma/).
13. Majumdar , Pulak Chandra. *Gender-Related Issues in the Vedic Period*. May 2017, [sriramakrishna.org/download/\\_photo\\_418b715fedca82b79c7390ff2f6a41e0.pdf](http://sriramakrishna.org/download/_photo_418b715fedca82b79c7390ff2f6a41e0.pdf).
14. "Matriarchy v/s Patriarchy." *The Vedic Age*, 13 May 2016, [thevedicage.wordpress.com/2015/07/15/matriarchy-vs-patriarchy/](http://thevedicage.wordpress.com/2015/07/15/matriarchy-vs-patriarchy/).
15. Plumridge, Nicole. "Equality vs. Liberation?" *Psychminds*, 12 Apr. 2020, [psychminds.com/equality-vs-liberation/#:~:text=As%20Germaine%20Greer%20said%2C%20%E2%80%9CEquality,trying%20to%20narrow%20them%20down](http://psychminds.com/equality-vs-liberation/#:~:text=As%20Germaine%20Greer%20said%2C%20%E2%80%9CEquality,trying%20to%20narrow%20them%20down).
16. Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. " 'Is the Hindu Gooddess a Feminist?' ." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 44, 1998, Pp., WS34–WS38.
17. "Reason behind Women Not Allowed to Chant Gayatri Mantra - Mantra Sastra." *BooksFact*, 27 Aug. 2013, [www.booksfact.com/mantra-sastra/reason-behind-women-not-allowed-to-chant-gayatri-mantra.html](http://www.booksfact.com/mantra-sastra/reason-behind-women-not-allowed-to-chant-gayatri-mantra.html).
18. *Religion By Country 2021*, 2021, [worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/religion-by-country](http://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/religion-by-country).
19. Roland, Robin. "Pativradya: The Theology Behind the Ideology: Studies of Asian Religions." *Luther College*, [www.luther.edu/religion/asian-studies/resources/papers/pativratya/](http://www.luther.edu/religion/asian-studies/resources/papers/pativratya/).
20. Seth, Priyanshu. "Refutation of SITA'S AGNI-PARIKSHA." *Refutation of Sita's Agni-Pariksha*, 1 Jan. 1970, [vedictruth.blogspot.com/2020/05/refutation-of-sitas-agni-pariksha.html](http://vedictruth.blogspot.com/2020/05/refutation-of-sitas-agni-pariksha.html).
21. Stepan, Alfred. "Religion, Democracy, and the 'TWIN TOLERATIONS.'" *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, 2012, pp. 55–72., doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199827978.003.0005.
22. TOI astrology. "Can Women CHANT Vedic Mantras? Know the Truth - Times of India." *The Times of India*, 29 June 2020, [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/religion/mantras-chants/can-women-chant-vedic-mantras-know-the-truth/articleshow/76686081.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/religion/mantras-chants/can-women-chant-vedic-mantras-know-the-truth/articleshow/76686081.cms).
23. Viswanathan, Priya. "Ardhanarishvara - the SYMBOLIC Unity of Nature and Knowledge." *Dolls of India*, 17 June 2011, [www.dollsofindia.com/library/ardhanarishvara-symbolism/](http://www.dollsofindia.com/library/ardhanarishvara-symbolism/).
24. "Why Did Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Publicly Burn the Manu Smruti on Dec. 25, 1927?" *SabrangIndia*, 2017, [sabrangindia.in/article/why-did-dr-babasaheb-ambedkar-publicly-burn-manu-smruti-dec-25-1927](http://sabrangindia.in/article/why-did-dr-babasaheb-ambedkar-publicly-burn-manu-smruti-dec-25-1927).