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**Hinduism as a Political Weapon: Gender Socialization and Disempowerment
of Women in India**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS
in
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

by Aindrila Haldar

March 15, 2020

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

APPROVED:

Capstone Adviser

Date

MAIS Director

Date

Abstract

There is a growing use of religion as a political tool to control Hindu women in India, contributing to a rise in gender inequality. Immediate authoritative patriarchal domains such as, household and politics, continuously speak of “protecting” Hindu women by disregarding their voices and needs. Consequently, potentially creating a loss of agency among women. This research will use inductive reasoning to understand the position of Hindu women in the modern Indian society. Particularly, through the understanding of the involvement of religion in the political and household sphere. Hindu women are highly influenced by the expectations of what being an “ideal” woman means in private and public spaces hindering decision-making power in the household, mobility and control over resources. These have become barriers for women to achieve full autonomy in several realms of life. Therefore, this research will examine women’s voices and mobility which have been impacted by existing power structures and potentially eliminate patriarchal expectations that are ingrained within the religious, political, and household domains. In the findings I analyzed my field research and examined ways in which women are disempowered. In conclusion, I have made a provisional view of what can be perceived as ideas of empowerment in the Indian context.

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Introduction

Women in India constitute 48.2%¹ of more than 1.37 billion people² and continue to face marginalisation and low representation across several spheres. One of the biggest challenges women in India face is gender-based discrimination and violence. Gender-based discrimination and violence manifests in different forms in different settings and includes various factors such as religion, caste, class, social and economic status and more. Discrimination against women in any given society must be analyzed through the context of the culture of that society. India has made little improvements in bridging the gender gap. Factors of the gap in implementing policies which address discrimination, lack of access to resources, economic disadvantages, and violence against women at the root level, are largely the patriarchal structures which governs societies and household in India. The interwoven-ness of religion and cultural norms in India has a significant impact on the socialization of Hindu women. I argue that Hindu societies in India express gendered power within a patriarchal model through three main domains: religion, politics, and the household. I also argue that the quality of socialization undergone by the youth, with the influence of internal and external factors mentioned prior, determines the empowerment or disempowerment of women.

There is a challenge among religious communities to ensure teachings from a religion are compatible with the ideals of gender equality as a part of the social justice ideology.³ It is

¹ "Sex Ratio of India." Sex ratio of India | India sex ratio 2020 - StatisticsTimes.com, n.d. <http://statisticstimes.com/demographics/sex-ratio-of-india.php>.

² "India Population 2020 (Live)." India Population 2020 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs), n.d. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/india-population/>.

³ Shukla-Bhatt, Neelima. "A Reflection on the Challenges for Hindu Women in the Twenty-First Century." *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 19 (2009): 61–70. http://www.totetu.org/assets/media/paper/j019_061.pdf.

important to involve and embrace faith-based women seeking gender equal rights and to create a mutual dialogue for equality. Since there is a lack of involvement of spiritual women, the fight for equality and empowerment in India faces a gap in contribution. Politics and household dynamics persist to be patriarchal and religious which affects the potential for full development of women's identity. Hence, many Hindu women struggle with understanding their position in private and public spaces. Additionally, norms are established for Hindu women by men in both realms. It is important that women engage in re-interpretations of texts to negotiate their rights, as "men have had the monopoly of interpreting the texts and defining norms for women based on their interpretations."⁴ Women's engagement in the reinterpretations of texts can lead to a constructive exploration of the potential of their Goddess traditions.⁵ Many feminists have perceived Goddess traditions as non-consequential due to the historical and current subjugation of women in Hindu society and in some instances within religious texts. However, this can be changed with the will and action of human agents through the consideration and comparison of circumstances at the time and now.⁶

Women's empowerment should be understood as multi dimensional especially for a diverse country like India. It is important to adapt empowerment measures because progress can be determined by the way power structures manifest within and in between certain institutional levels.⁷ Additionally, through the transformation of mindsets amongst the population itself. In the

⁴Shukla-Bhatt, "A Reflection on the Challenges for Hindu Women in the Twenty-First Century," 62.

⁵ *ibid.*, 67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷ Galiè, A, and Farnworth, C R. "Power through: A New Concept in the Empowerment Discourse." *Global food security*. Elsevier, June 2019.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6659586/>.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2019.07.001>

general context of India the process of gender development is affected greatly by social norms and expectations, and discourse. Therefore, it involves relational, multi-level and multi-directional processes of change.⁸

In India, family dynamics play a significant role in the socialization of girls,⁹ as women have to be receptive to the desires or demands of the members they reside with. There are deeply rooted social and cultural norms in communities which could prevent the country's development and lead to gender-based discrimination.¹⁰ These norms are highly influential over individuals' behavior. Thus social norms, family dynamics, and community play a large part in determining how a woman ought to be. This creates a lack of autonomy and immediate control or agency in addition to external restraints; such as, economic or political limitations.¹¹ It is under this set of circumstances it is relevant to discuss efforts to challenge power structures that halt the process of women achieving complete autonomy.

The way women live their everyday lives affects the way they understand and perceive the meaning of life. As Simone de Beauvoir has argued, women, like men, are not just born but “but rather becomes, woman”¹² through a process of socialization. “It is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and by society.”¹³ During this process of socialization, de Beauvoir discusses

⁸ Galiè, A, and Farnworth, C R.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ UNICEF's deputy executive director Omar Abdi, quoted in PTI. “India Needs to Address 'Deeply Rooted Social Norms' That Discriminate against Women: UNICEF: India News - Times of India.” The Times of India, December 14, 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-needs-to-address-deeply-rooted-social-norms-that-discriminate-against-women-unicef/articleshow/67091537.cms>.

¹¹ Galiè, A, and Farnworth, C R..

¹² Beauvoir, Simone de, Constance Borde, and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. *The Second Sex*. Vol. 2. London: Vintage Books, 2015.

https://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/1949_simone-de-beauvoir-the-second-sex.pdf

¹³ de Beauvoir, Borde, Malovany-Chevallier, *The Second Sex*, 341.

how boys embrace free movement toward the world while women are conflicted between her autonomous existence and her “being other”.¹⁴ In India, women have come a long way even though patriarchal ideology remains dominant in society. Matrimonial services still relentlessly request potential brides of the same caste with a skinny build and fair skin. The socially constructed reality persists in that a woman’s ‘domain’ is bound to the home, her duties within the household, and in marriage. These standards indicate the slow paced changes in social practices.

The constitution of India grants equal rights to both men and women and embodies itself on the grounds of gender equality as it ensures socio economic and political justice, equality of status, opportunity, and agency of the individual. Human rights are integral to the concept of human dignity which are protected by provisions in the Constitution of India. For the improvement of Indian women, the constitution allows the state to adopt initiatives of affirmative action to counterbalance the collective discriminations and condemnations that women face. However, changes can only occur beyond the domain of legality and are only apparent when implementation and shifts in mindsets of the population are set in motion.

Today there is an acceleration of Hindu nationalism since India’s biggest political parties known as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power. India is a nation that is rooted in the ideals of secularism and diversity. Although this has not been the case in recent years since the current government acquired political power. Many state governments use setting up a lot of ‘movements’ or ‘reformers’ in the name of protecting the nation’s women and the Hindu religion - such as love-jihad, moral vigilantes, cow vigilantes and more - as a political showcase of their

¹⁴ Ibid., 342

commitment to Hindu ideals. When such ideals are examined closely it is not about protecting either the women or the Hindu religion, it is merely about fueling an ideology.

Due to the rise in Hindu nationalism and the negative use of the Hindu religion, Indian women are bearing the brunt of the radical far right shift in democracy. Even though women of all backgrounds across India are affected by the current circumstances, I will be focusing specifically on Hindu women and their socialization through the mediums of religion, purity, politics, family/household authority and dynamic, social interdependence, life passages, and village structure (local government or politics/*Panchayats*).

An ethnographic study was carried out in 6 states in India. I conducted interviews in the various locations and an online survey. In addition to the analysis of secondary sources, my field research includes participant observations and with the help of interviews, it explores the voices of women to understand their own evaluations of events within the realms of religious, political, and household experiences. The goal of the fieldwork was to gain an understanding of how Indian people perceive women's position in society and what factors play a significant role in shaping their position. Additionally, I will be analyzing religion used as a political tool to discriminate against women, lastly, how Hindu households play a crucial role in negatively impacting the socialization of girls. I seek to acquire a proper understanding of what empowerment or disempowerment means to Hindu women and how religion, politics, and household correspond in shaping their individuality and autonomy, with the objective of providing a methodological contribution in closing the gender gap in India. By contributing a provisional framework of Hindu women, this research could be helpful to development

organizations and other institutions who want to implement development programs with the mission of empowering women.

Given the contextual background, these are the research questions: 1) How does the interwoven religious and cultural norms in India affect the socialization of Hindu women? 2) What impact does religion have in the socialization of women within the realms of household and politics? 3) How is the subordination of women in Hinduism reflected in society? 4) Are women empowered or disempowered through the three processes of socialization stated prior?

Background

India is a secular nation, diverse in both cultures and religions. It is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. However out of all the existing religions in the nation, Hinduism is the oldest and make up the majority (79.8%¹⁵) of the Indian population. Religion plays a significant role in the daily lives of many Hindu families and in politics. Politicians have given prominence to the *Hindutva* ideology to manifest a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nationhood). The *Hindutva* term was given significance by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Savarkar was a freedom fighter, Hindu and Indian nationalism politician additionally, was a member of the Great Society of Hindus also known as the Hindu Mahasabha. It is an ideology that embraces “Hindu-ness” and portrays Indian culture in the light of Hindu values with the desire to repossess the Indian heritage and culture which was previously deteriorated by invaders, such as the Mongols (Mughal empire) and the British empire, who arrived in the Indian subcontinent. However, Savarkar did not correlate Hindutva with Hinduism, as it was unrelated to the rituals of the religion and had more to do with political propaganda and ideology. “He does not confine Hindu identity to those who follow Hinduism but those for whom India is both their ‘fatherland’ (place of birth) and ‘holyland’ (place of birth of religion).”¹⁶ Several political leaders and saints have proclaimed for a Hindu revival, with a prime example of a saint named Swami Vivekananda, yet the difference between Savarkar and others was Hindu revival in political

¹⁵Al Jazeera. “Hindus Drop below 80 Percent of India's Population.” News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 26, 2015. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/hindus-drop-80-percent-india-population-muslims-census-150826052655585.html>.

¹⁶ Ismailee, Sania. 2019. “Polemical Encounters: Ambedkar and Savarkar on Muslim Performativity.” *Performing Islam* 8 (1/2): 107–27. doi:10.1386/pi_00007_1.

terms¹⁷. Even though Savarkar describes Hindu revival as non-religious, the connotation, context or meaning of *Hindutva* has evolved or molded overtime. As in recent years the BJP or the current ruling government have made efforts to integrate Hinduism with nationalism in creative ways.¹⁸ Consequently, Hindu women have become vulnerable subjects. Hindu women are caught in between the modernisation and Hinduisation of India.¹⁹ “If remaking women and domesticity required recapturing and preserving some essential Hinduness or Indianness, was that reforms could not entail modeling Indian women on their Western counterparts, and relatedly, that this project of preservation-cum-transformation could only be undertaken by Indians, not by the colonial state.”²⁰ As a result, under the national paradigm, they struggle to fit themselves into a traditional Hindu category or a “modern” one.

The empowerment of women is a social issue that affects the general Indian women population everyday. Issues that affect women have been normalised because of the lack of punishment of the perpetrators and “girl-blaming” continues to persist for crimes committed against them. Hinduism consists of epics, that are also known as the oldest form of literature, and portrays strong women embodying *shakti* to represent their womanhood, with Goddesses such as Durga, Kali, Shakuntala, Draupadi, and Lakshmi. Although this is the case, religion has been

¹⁷Purandare, Vaibhav. “Hindutva Is Not the Same as Hinduism Said Savarkar.” Telegraph India. Telegraph India, August 22, 2019.

<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/hindutva-is-not-the-same-as-hinduism-said-savarkar/cid/1699550>.

¹⁸Apoorvanand. “Umbrella Politics of Hindutva.” India | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, April 23, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/04/umbrella-politics-hindutva-170417091306518.html>.

¹⁹ Seth, Sanjay. "Nationalism, Modernity, and the "Woman Question" in India and China." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 2 (2013): 273-97. www.jstor.org/stable/43553178.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 279

systematically manipulated in the political domain to feed the already existing patriarchal ideologies in many parts of India, significantly in the Northern region.

In the past couple of years, the continuous urbanization and economic development have generated a significant group of educated and working women in India. However, with the rise of nationalism women are still oppressed, especially in the rural areas of India as political, religious, and other leaders continue to justify oppression with religion. Therefore, it is necessary to observe issues concerning Hindu women through an understanding of historical texts, historical distortions, manipulative political use of religion, and tactics formed through the process.

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world and the most prominent religion in India. The complexity of the religion dates back to its roots, various range of forms, beliefs, practices, and deities. The combination of these factors, more recent religious movements, and local cultural beliefs formed by authorities have allowed Hinduism to develop throughout the decades. The plethora of beliefs characterizes notable diversity in India. Hinduism is not just perceived as a religion to the Hindu population in India, it is embedded in the Indian culture and viewed as a way of life. Each individual may comprehend Hinduism in the context of their existentialism. Hence, “it is upto the Hindu himself to find his own *moksha* [salvation] by allowing himself to be led and following his own *dharma* [duty].”²¹ According to Sharada Sugirtharajah, religion was not significant in academia prior to the nation’s independence and the study of Hinduism in an academic setting was perceived as a Western exercise²² especially under

²¹ Panikkar, Raimon, and Milena Carrara Pavan. *Hinduism and Christianity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019.

²² Sugirtharajah, Sharada. "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no. 2 (2002): 97-104. www.jstor.org/stable/25002442.

the British *Raj* or rule. Only after India gained independence was secular education suggested as an option, in a country replete with many religions.²³ Thus, religion becomes crucial to unravel while trying to understand a woman's nature, understanding and the formation of their rights and responsibilities, and the treatment of women²⁴.

²³ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁴ Mandakranta Bose, "Women in the Hindu Tradition," Routledge Hindu Studies Series, 2010, , doi:10.4324/9780203864197.

Literature Review

Empowerment of women in context to India

“Women are human beings and have the right to full development as men have hence, in regard to opportunities for intellectual and spiritual development, we should not emphasize the sex of women as we do not emphasize the sex of men.”²⁵ However, Indian women continue to be deprived of opportunities. Women continuously face a lack of opportunities. The term empowerment is frequently used in development sectors towards the purpose of challenging power structures for the greater good. It is important to understand the usage of the term especially when it regards to the empowerment of women. The perception of what empowerment varies across societies and individually. Various programs in NGOs, NPOs, and other organizations use the word “empowerment” in very technical terms that may not be applicable in every context because gender equality is politically and culturally a sensitive area of topic.²⁶ The process of empowerment should be conducted keeping under consideration the world views of people on the ground. Hence, it is important to remain sensitive when progressing towards gender equality.²⁷ Especially considering the diversity in caste, class, and culture among Hindu women from various regions in India.

Accordingly, Wolfgang Sachs argued, “development is much more than just a socio-economic endeavour; it is a perception which models reality, a myth which comforts

²⁵ Majumdar, Ramesh Chandra. “Ideal and Position of Indian Women in Domestic Life.” In *Great Women of India*, edited by Swami Madhavananda and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, 1-26. Kolkata: Trio Process, 2014.

²⁶ “Gender Equality and Womens Empowerment Strategy - OECD.” *OECD*, February 2016. [http://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/DFAT Gender Equality and Womens Empowerment Strategy.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/DFAT%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20Womens%20Empowerment%20Strategy.pdf).

²⁷ OECD, 13.

societies, and a fantasy which unleashes passions”.²⁸ Furthermore, Gilbert Rist emulates, “development conveys the idea that tomorrow things will be better, or that more is necessarily better”.²⁹ However, the vague use of the term empowerment could be taken for granted, hindering the quality of development. This leaves the implementations conducted in the name of development unquestioned while giving a false impression of progress.³⁰

The Indian constitution grants rights and privileges to women towards equality and fundamental rights in addition to special provisions to strengthen the process of achieving equal status for women.³¹ However, the ground reality reflects poor social perception of women. The society continues to persist on patriarchal values and her value carries on to provide subordination to a male dominated society and sustenance within the household by being a child bearer, taking care of the home, and being confined to the walls within her home.³² “In India the goal of empowerment is particularly critical for women who have been deprived of power within the family by mainstream religious and social traditions. Women cannot hope to exercise public power so long as they are powerless over their own lives because of forced subservience to fathers, husbands, in-laws, familial violence, and limited educational opportunity. Nor can they exercise power over their own private lives or public life if they are subsumed with poverty, ill-

²⁸ Cornwall, Andrea. "Buzzwords and Fuzzwords: Deconstructing Development Discourse." *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4/5 (2007): 471-84. www.jstor.org/stable/25548244.

²⁹ Rist, Gilbert, quoted in Cornwall, Andrea, 471.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Budgujar, Kumkum. "Empowerment of women through reservation A constitutional perspective" *PhD Diss.*, Maharshi Dayanand University, 2006. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/129418>

³² Colman, Leslie J., "Women and Movement Politics in India", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXIX, No. 10, Oct. 1989, p. 949. Quoted in Saxena Kiran. "Empowerment of Women : The Indian Context." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 4 (1994): 391-400.

health and lack of adequate food and clean drinking water.”³³ Kiran Saxena quotes Leslie J. Colman while arguing how cultural and religious impediments become hindrances for women’s equality which are outside the immediate control of governmental action.

There are multiple variables at play when women’s empowerment is examined in a nation like India. The main factors include the lack of education and sex education, geographical location, social status (caste and class), the role of religion and politics in the household, traditional mindsets, and the impact of local politics and media on the socialization of girls and boys. Saxena argues that rights for women cannot be achieved unless their status is improved, which is considered empowerment. She continues to argue that the scope of closing the gender gap is narrowed if one focuses only on the socio economic status of women as empowerment. It cannot be confined to only improving the socio economic status of women. Saxena’s argument is similar to Wolfgang Sachs’ argument, as he de-emphasizes empowerment pertaining solely to the socio-economic status of women.

Many women are joining the workforce with the hopes of being financially independent. Although, “women may have power and influence in some areas of their lives but lack autonomy in others, for example, a woman might be economically independent but different to her husband as she remains sexually submissive to him, and/or excluded from politics.”³⁴ For a woman to feel empowered she should have the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this

³³ Saxena, Kiran, 392.

³⁴O’Neil, Tam, Domingo, Pilar , and Valters, Craig . “Progress on Women’s Empowerment: from Technical Fixes to Political Action.” *ODI*, (November 1, 2014): 1-16.
<https://www.odi.org/publications/8996-progress-womens-empowerment-technical-fixes-political-action>.

ability was previously denied to them.³⁵ However, there continues to be a stigma surrounding the idea of women working. The following stigma is that only a husband or the man of the family who is negligent would let their wives and daughters work, thus, reinforcing a "powerful social norm that obliges men to provide for their families."³⁶ Hence, to live in a context where the ability of making strategic life choices was denied to them, there needs to be an elimination of the deep-rooted stigma itself. According to the *Financial Times*, India has one of the world's lowest rates of female participation in the labour force, with only 27% of all working age women holding paid jobs outside their home³⁷ compared to nearly 80% of men.³⁸ This percentage of working age women is very close to deeply conservative Arab societies and far below prosperous east Asian economies, where upto two-thirds of women work.³⁹ As Annette Dixon, Vice President of World Bank South Asia, has stated "Women's economic empowerment is highly connected with poverty reduction as women also tend to invest more of their earnings in their children and communities."⁴⁰ However she also ensures being sensitive to the needs of women and how "changing social norms around marriage, work and household duties will have to be part of the agenda."⁴¹

³⁵ Banerjee (Chatterjee), Tanmoyee, and Chandralekha Ghosh. "What Factors Play a Role in Empowering Women? A Study of SHG Members from India." *Gender, Technology and Development* 16, no. 3 (November 2012): 329–55. doi:10.1177/0971852412459431.

³⁶ Mammen, Kristin, and Christina Paxson. "Women's Work and Economic Development." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14, no. 4 (2000): 141-64. www.jstor.org/stable/2647079.

³⁷ Kazmin, Amy.

³⁸ Sharma, Smriti. "The Conspicuous Absence of Women in India's Labour Force." *The Conversation*, February 18, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/the-conspicuous-absence-of-women-in-indias-labour-force-109744>.

³⁹ *ibid*.

⁴⁰ Dixon, Annete. "Women in India's Economic Growth." *World Bank*, March 16, 2018. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2018/03/17/women-indias-economic-growth>.

⁴¹ Dixon Annete.

Therefore, it is crucial to examine and refer to social structures, where rules and social conventions (unwritten rules and beliefs) are made and remade by people daily through interactions, to truly understand women's lack of power and meaningful choice, as such structures arbitrate women's access to resources and its uses.⁴²

Process of socializations

Gender socialization is a process of learning how to express the behaviors consistent with one's gender.⁴³ Socialization is a key process in social life. Dr. Satya P. Mohanty, an English Professor at Cornell University who has specialized in minority, colonial and post-colonial studies, argues that the basic questions about identity call for a "general reexamination of the relationship between personal experience and public meanings, subjective choices and evaluations on one hand and objective social location on the other."⁴⁴ The cultural themes mentioned earlier fall under an individual's experience, depending on the location of their upbringing. The knowledge around Hindu women is developed from "social contexts of justification."⁴⁵ Thereafter, A Hindu woman would establish knowledge from personal experiences which can be viewed as justified beliefs, that is derived from other relevant beliefs surrounding people, both empirical and theoretical.⁴⁶ Mohanty discusses a feminist theorist and

⁴² O'Neil, Domingo, and Valters. "Progress on Women's Empowerment: from Technical Fixes to Political Action," 2.

⁴³ Ram, Usha. "Gender Socialization: Differences between Male and Female Youth in India and Associations with Mental Health." *International Journal of Population Research. IJPR*. no. 11. (2014) 1-11.

⁴⁴ Mohanty, Satya P. "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On 'Beloved' and the Postcolonial Condition." *Cultural Critique*, no. 24 (1993): 41-80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354129>.

⁴⁵ Mohanty, Satya, 44.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 54

philosopher, Naomi Scheman, who discusses how the world perceives emotions and feelings.⁴⁷ Usually it is perceived as “inner” possessions, which she contends is a misleading one, as the emotion is developed through the mixture of the social and emotional environment⁴⁸ and in India religious values or Hindu values are ingrained in society. Thus, traditional morals are then imposed onto women while being controlled by patriarchal structures. This consequently affects them in achieving full agency.

In Hinduism, “patriarchal bias in epistemology is privileged and situated in male experience and authority.”⁴⁹ Ivone Gebara, an ecofeminist and a Catholic nun argues that our knowledge is conditioned by those who are in power and make decisions within a given social order. Interpretations and prescriptions of Hindu religious texts are very male-dominated. Male dominance is significant within households and in politics as well. Many political leaders in the current Hindu nationalist government justify religious texts to promote traditional Hindu family values and to keep women “protected”. The goal of the current government is thriving towards building a Hindu nation or a Hindu “ethos” which would shape its political, cultural, legal, and social domains.⁵⁰ The sexuality of a Hindu girl is highly correlated with the honor and reputation of her immediate family and later her in-laws.⁵¹ This reputation of the family should be

⁴⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹Garrity-Bond, Cynthia. “Ecofeminist Epistemology in Vandana Shiva’s *The Feminine Principle of Prakriti* and Ivone Gebara’s *Trinitarian Cosmology*.” *Feminist Theology* 26, no. 2 (2018): 185-194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735017738660>.

⁵⁰Sreenivas, Mytheli. “Women’s and Gender History in Modern India: Researching the Past, Reflecting on the Present.” in *Making Womens Histories: beyond National Perspectives*, edited by Pamela Susan Nadell and Kate Haulman, 161-187. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

⁵¹ Roland, Alan. *Cultural Pluralism and Psychoanalysis: the Asian and American Experience*. London: Routledge, 1997.

jeopardized. Therefore, to achieve a Hindu nation and to maintain a traditional Hindu family, she is socialized and faces a societal pressure to uphold the values of the family by following strict morality or what has been labeled “modesty/shame”.⁵²

Gebara asserts that by building on gender analysis into epistemology, “voices of women and their experiences broaden the act of knowing and alter the principles – the foundation – and the concrete expression of our knowing.”⁵³ It is important to hear the voices of women to eliminate beliefs that have been rationalized by patriarchal structures overtime. To empower women in India, the bottom-up approach is more reasonable as we are able to learn from individuals’ experiences and perception of the world to implement proper actions within the particular society. When the “bottom” is examined, one is able to understand important factors that shape societies, which, consequently, shapes worldviews distinct to the circumstances.

Power is one of the central concept within feminist theory and is integral to critiquing the intersections between sexism and other forms of subordination women face. For example, when women gain power over men, they are usually met with resistance which results in new forms of domination and injustice.⁵⁴ To understand the concept of rationality one has to consider which beliefs are acceptable for a culture. As mentioned earlier, to examine what shapes the knowledge of Hindu women one needs to adopt the bottom up approach to truly understand the micro-level forces rooted in the social and emotional environments for these women.

⁵² *ibid.*, 139.

⁵³ Garrity-Bond, “Ecofeminist Epistemology in Vandana Shiva’s *The Feminine Principle of Prakriti* and Ivone Gebara’s *Trinitarian Cosmology*,” 186.

⁵⁴ O’Neil, Domingo, and Valters. “Progress on Women’s Empowerment: from Technical Fixes to Political Action,” 4.

“Thus, the passivity that essentially characterizes the “feminine” woman is a trait that develops in her from her earliest years. But it is false to claim that therein lies a biological given; in fact, it is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and by society”⁵⁵

Even though Indian society is multi-faceted, there are three foundations that impact the socialization of Hindu women such as religion, politics, family/household authority and dynamics. Within the three domains males hold primary power both over the private and public life of Hindu women. These internal and external pressures of maintaining cultural and social norms creates a sense of threat of social disapproval, punishment, or feelings of guilt and shame. This results in women internalizing cultural norms and behaviors. Children quickly internalise discriminatory gender norms which are upheld through the rules of behaviour in everyday life. When norms and practices generated through biases are internalized by women, they become normalized or cause to conform to a standard. Subsequently, she will pass it on to her own children.

Religion

The study of Hinduism has been confined to selective male-dominated texts hence, there is a masculinization of Hinduism. Majority of the reports on women in the religion come from men. There lies ingrained gender bias, regardless of the position taken within the reports. Therefore Hindu religious values provide women with much lower status than men and it is required that women remain “protected against [their] untamable sexual impulses.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 341.

⁵⁶Rose, Arnold M. "Hindu Values and Indian Social Problems." *The Sociological Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1967): 329-39. Accessed February 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/4105223.

Consequently, these texts are continuously used, even to this day, as a tool to suppress women and keep them in positions that are “predetermined” for them.⁵⁷ Religion is not only an “institution of the past, but it continues to be a powerful force in societies across the world,” and as Usha Rani, a Marxist feminist has iterated, “Religion controls our thoughts. It distorts reality and obstructs us from questioning.”⁵⁸

Religion and culture are interwoven in India. Even though India is home to all the major world religions and more, Hindu culture is considered to be Indian culture.⁵⁹ The belief system in Hinduism is agglomerative, which means it is inclusive of other religions it comes in contact with.⁶⁰ Hence, this “permeates the general culture of India so pervasively that Indian culture might as well be considered entirely sacred.”⁶¹ Arnold M. Rose informs us that “the sociologist can be considered justified in taking traditional Hindu values as his guide in evaluating social problems.” Hence, I will continue to evaluate ways Hindu women face discriminations under the scrutiny of Hindu traditional values within their households and in a society that is highly influenced by politics.

Today, understanding femininity in Hinduism could be understood through a clear observation of how Hindus have reflected and continue to reflect on or act upon issues related to women. It is also important to refer back to the guiding texts of the Hindu religion to interpret the perception of women based on the historical context and therefore, to generate a structure

⁵⁷ Rout, Naresh. “Role of Women in Ancient India.” *Odisha Review*, January 2016.

<http://magazines.odisha.gov.in/Orissareview/2016/Jan/engpdf/43-48.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Saldanha, Virginia. “The Power Of Religion Over Women In India.” *Global Sisters Report*, November 10, 2016.

<https://www.globalsistersreport.org/column/equality/power-religion-over-women-india-43236>.

⁵⁹ Rose, “Hindu Values and Indian Social Problems.” 330.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*

conveying the meaning of women's lives in India⁶². Many religious texts portray women to be extremely submissive. Such portrayals in the religious texts are also reflected in the treatment of women in society today. For example, Indra, the warrior God, destroyed the Brahmin demon, Vritra or Visvarupe and he must now face the consequences of his evil act. Since evil cannot be transformed into something good, it remains evil and is distributed in that form to the detriment of those who receive it.⁶³ When Indra kills another enemy who is a Brahmin then he will distribute Brahminicide again, with compensations.⁶⁴ Hence during the distribution of his evil, "he asked the earth to take a third of his Brahminicide, and in return he promised her that if she should be overcome by digging, within a year the dug out portion will be filled again; and the third of his Brahminicide that she took became natural fissure. [Then] he asked the trees to accept a third [with promising compensation] ... Women took a third of the Brahminicide and obtained the boon of enjoying intercourse right up to the birth of their children; their Brahminicide became the garments stained with menstrual blood."⁶⁵ After a third of Indra's guilt is transferred to women as it takes the form of menstrual periods, it becomes a mark of sin, danger, and impurity.⁶⁶ It is Indra's curse which results in women being severely restricted, especially in the sacrificial arena.⁶⁷ "This is the classic picture of the Indian woman as inferior and passive in a male religious world."⁶⁸ This curse leads to continuous performance of restrictive ritual practices for women implied by the death of Vritra and Indra's guilt.⁶⁹ Now the

⁶² Bose, *Women in the Hindu Tradition*, 58.

⁶³ Doniger, Wendy. *The Hindus: an Alternative History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter 6.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Leslie, Julia. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

woman is forever cursed and bound. Within these practices and in its implications for women, “a pattern - although not an uncontested one - of male dominance in the Sanskrit tradition emerges.”

Women in *Manu's Dharmasastra* are viewed as men's desire and links the existence of women to a sexual crime waiting to happen⁷⁰. *Dharmasastra* is a part of the religious Sanskrit texts which refers to *shastras* or treatises of Hinduism on Dharma or religious duties. Many of the principles and practices of social and religious aspects of modern Hindu civilisation uses these texts as a foundation.⁷¹ Whereas, there are other texts and contemporary instances such as the *Bhakti* movement, which protests against and eliminates hegemonic groups and comes into a formation of new groups and classes working towards the redefinition of dominant classes⁷², which includes the category of gender. Women in the early Vedic period held important roles within society. Although, as the Vedic period progressed, rituals became complex and the importance and roles of women abbreviated⁷³.

Sugirtharajah expresses her concerns by discussing how Western scholars have distracted themselves by focusing on privileging religious texts and interpreting these textual prescriptions as descriptions of actual reality. They have disregarded other avenues and rituals that do provide a realistic perception of women's position in society such as, dance, music, folklore, art, and more.⁷⁴ These modes of expression *are* liberating aspects of Hindu women in Indian culture. One

⁷⁰ Doniger, Wendy. *On Hinduism*. New Delhi, Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2013.

⁷¹ Pal, Bhaswati. "The saga of women's status in ancient Indian civilization", *Miscellanea Geographica* 23, 3: 180-184, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2478/mgrsd-2019-0012>

⁷² Lucia, Amanda. "Innovative Gurus: Tradition and Change in Contemporary Hinduism." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 18, no. 2 (2014): 221-63. www.jstor.org/stable/24713672.

⁷³ Pal, "The Saga of Women's Status in Ancient Indian Civilization." 181-183

⁷⁴ Sugirtharajah, "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns," 99.

of these art expressions is *Rangoli* or *Kolam*, which means beauty and is a form of ritual design made by women all over India to invite Goddess Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth, good luck, and wellness, and banish Mudevi, the Goddess of poverty, bad luck, and misery.⁷⁵ Like *Kolam*, there are various other rituals that women perform to bring prosperity within her household.

Julia Leslie examines Mary Mcgee, who analyses the significance of votive rites or *vratas* for women by comparing textual descriptions accumulated by men with contemporary statements by women.⁷⁶ “According to the texts, votive rites promise both the ultimate goal of spiritual liberation (*moksha*) and a variety of lesser this-worldly rewards.”⁷⁷ Men who compiled descriptions from texts are upper caste Brahmin men. They define such rites as optional rather than obligatory, whereas statements gathered from women consider these rites to be obligatory.⁷⁸ “Ubiquitous in ritual and cultural life, the *kōlam* is one of the most visible ways a sense of sacred space is created. It is said to bless those who smear it accidentally with their feet, the power of the hands of the woman *kōlam*-maker passing through it to the anonymous feet or bodies walking by.”⁷⁹ This portrays the impact women can have through rituals in sustaining the well-being of others, especially for members of the family and community and later husband and children. These goals are significant towards the religious path of women, which is why most women consider rituals to be obligatory.⁸⁰ Additionally, towards the maintenance of happiness within the household, which is a woman’s *dharma* or duty and her potential opportunity for liberation.⁸¹ Liberation can be achieved from the cycle of rebirth. The only problem with

⁷⁵ Nagarajan, Vijaya. *Feeding a Thousand Souls*. Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

⁷⁶ Leslie, *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, 6.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Nagarajan, *Feeding a Thousand Souls*, 51.

⁸⁰ Leslie, *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, 7.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

liberation here is that it is generally assumed that a woman cannot achieve liberation without first being born as a man.⁸² Furthermore, while she practices certain rituals, she hopes for the well-being and prosperity of those surrounding her, such as her family, in-laws, neighbours, and such. In contemporary India, women's everyday lives continue to circulate heavily around domestic and interpersonal concerns. She is still bound to a domestic life as she continues to perform the rituals which mark her vows for health, fertility and long life.

There *are* liberating aspects of Hindu women in Indian culture and by providing power to women through ritual practices it allows them to gather meaning of it through their own experiences. Additionally, there are many prominent Goddesses, like Goddess Lakshmi, in the Hindu religion who can pave the way for women's empowerment in India. However, it can be argued that the role models for women within texts are ambivalent. Which leads to a continuous tendency to refer back to heavily patriarchal treatises such as the *Dharmashastras* and the *Laws of Manu* for the assessment of how women are meant to be treated and what their statuses should be in Hindu tradition.⁸³ *Manusmriti* is one of the oldest written legal codes. Politicians, family, and community members take advantage of the aforementioned texts in attempts to keep women under control or "protected". The omnipresence of women in the Hindu texts is hard to overlook. In the post-vedic period, *Manusmriti* became responsible for putting women in a derogatory position as they came to be regarded as the protectors of *Dharma* and transmitters of patriarchal values.

"A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman, should not do anything independently, even in her own house. In childhood a woman should be under her

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Sugirtharajah, "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns," 100.

father's control, in youth under her husband's control, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence" [*Manusmriti*, 4.147-9; 9.3]⁸⁴

These laws may not be as rigid as they used to be but they still remain ingrained within Hindu patriarchal households and within the Hindu nationalist movement, making it difficult for women to achieve full autonomy. "for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, grasp, and discover the world around her, the less she will find its resources, and the less she will dare to affirm herself as subject."⁸⁵ Although, if she was encouraged to do the same as the males in her surrounding then she would express the same curiosity and profuse quality of autonomous growth.⁸⁶

The lines of the *Manusmriti* become inherited within family members and passed on to their daughters. Mothers play a significant role in the lives of their children, especially daughters. "The boy is brought up by his mother in the beginning but she respects his maleness and he escapes from her relatively quickly, whereas the mother wants to integrate the girl into the feminine world."⁸⁷ Young girls adopt stereotypical mannerisms through the way their mothers maneuver in the household and in society.

"For the mother, the daughter is both her double and an other, the mother cherishes her and at the same time is hostile to her; she imposes her own destiny on her child: it is a way to proudly claim her own femininity and also to take revenge on it... Thus, women given the care of a little girl are bent on

⁸⁴ Doniger, "On Hinduism," 260.

⁸⁵ de Beauvoir, Borde, Malovany-Chevallier, *The Second Sex*, 342.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

transforming her into women like themselves with zeal and arrogance mixed with resentment. And even a generous mother who sincerely wants the best for her child will, as a rule, think it wiser to make a “true woman” of her, as that is the way she will be best accepted by society”⁸⁸

de Beauvoir, compares this type of treatment to gamblers, drug addicts and to everyone who are gratified to belong in a certain community but also humiliated by it. Hence, now she will become the woman her mother taught her to be. In consequence, she remains under scrutiny when she does not reflect *sanskari* or cultural values. Yet, men are usually exempt from such criticism:

“Drinking, associating with bad people, being separated from their husbands, wandering about, sleeping and living in other people’s houses are the six things that corrupt women. Good looks do not matter to them, nor do they care about youth; ‘A man!’ they say, and enjoy sex with him, whether he is good-looking or ugly” [*Manusmriti*, 9.12-17]⁸⁹

By fulfilling the “duties” of a Hindu woman as laid out in the law, a woman will then be virtuous.⁹⁰ This is the ideal world created in *Manu*, where women lack mobility to develop an identity for themselves. The Hindu religion is very hierarchical as everything is given a higher or lower position in society.⁹¹ Rose’s analysis mentions that the “religious principle of hierarchy

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 342-343.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁹¹ Rose, "Hindu Values and Indian Social Problems." 332.

considers women to be inferior to men.” As Hinduism evolved, particular facets became dominant: caste system, *karma*, *dharma*, and reincarnation.⁹²

“Caste determined whom you associated with, who you could marry, and your diet. In certain cases a man was allowed to marry a woman of a lower caste, but a woman could not without disgracing her family and defiling herself. Because of the relative lower status of women in India, if you did not do your proper duty or *dharma*, then you did not accrue good enough *karma* to be reincarnated in a higher caste or life form, including being reborn as a woman, who was inferior to a man.”⁹³

A woman cannot have a fulfilling life even after the death of her husband, as she has to continue her duties but now for the purpose of reincarnation and even in that instance she gathers good *karma* to be reborn in a higher life form, hence, not as a woman but as a man. Although, after the death of a wife, a man “can and indeed must marry.”⁹⁴ To bring change and achieve gender equality, women have to begin actively participating in institutional domains, especially religion in India. Women’s active participation can function strategically to reinterpret, criticize, or even reject existing ideals.

Politics

Cultural and religious barriers discussed above may be outside the realm of governmental action, however, the Hindu nationalist government (BJP) has imposed power *over* women by attempting to manipulate womanhood. Indian women are bearing the brunt of the radical far

⁹² Rout, Naresh. “Role of Women in Ancient India.” 45

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Doniger, “*On Hinduism*,” 261.

right shift in democracy or Hindu nationalism. Indian women across all demographic backgrounds are affected by this shift, even leading female politicians are not left behind.⁹⁵ The BJP launched and led the Bharatiya Mahila Morcha, women's wing of the BJP. Mahila Morcha condemns feminist ideologies from the West and instead wants to "revive the past traditional culture of India which, it is argued, gave dignified status to women."⁹⁶ When the wing was established, most women involved were not affiliates with women's organisations or movements, which caused indifference among them to the issues and problems facing women and as a result, "they performed mostly sex-linked roles in the public domain as their activities in the public arena re-enacted their private roles."⁹⁷ However, through political participation, it still allows women to engage in a domain outside of family and kinship but, at the same time, they do not "fundamentally challenge their "traditional" roles within a generally conservative domesticity."⁹⁸ Therefore, instead of making women aware of their rights and taking women's issues forward, this wing exists to inform women on how to be an idealistic Hindu Indian woman and mother who sacrifice their choices and autonomy to hold their families together.⁹⁹ "The communalised public identity of RSS women reinforced conservative ideas about women and their status¹⁰⁰", as the Hindutva ideology positions them directly within private spaces and generates a patriarchal model despite it bringing them out in public spaces.¹⁰¹

Zoya Hasan, a professor at JNU, argues in her article on *Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India*, that "Hindu religious politics and women's activism associated

⁹⁵ Saxena, Kiran. "Empowerment of Women: The Indian Context," 396-397.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 396.

⁹⁷ Hasan, "Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India," 947.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 948

with it provides a compelling example of the instrumentalisation of women to accomplish the political goals of the Hindu right.”¹⁰² India’s constitution is rooted in the ideals of secularism and diversity, although, since the current government acquired political power these ideals have not been upheld. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is the driving force among other organisations, where together they aim to establish a Hindu *rashtra* or state by “playing down the horizontal divisions among Hindus”.¹⁰³ Seth Sanjay discusses the recreation of women’s gender during the process of establishment of a nationalist paradigm, as they are the “essential marks of cultural identity.”¹⁰⁴ Hence, the “Indian woman, through her religious devotion and her "traditional" dress and demeanor [will] function as [an] emblem and repository of an identity that was pure and unsullied.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, to keep up the national identity women need to be protected. State governments that have set up ‘movements’ in the name of protecting the Hindu religion and women have used their power to further subordinate women’s status and other minorities. Minorities are most affected through ‘movements’ such as love-jihad, moral vigilantes, cow vigilantes etc., and women lose agency as their decision making is determined by the state leaders on what is moral and what is not. “Unmarried teenage girls are obsessively surveilled for signs of forbidden romantic and sexual relationships, especially across caste and faith boundaries.”¹⁰⁶ This affects the way women perceive themselves as they are continuously under surveillance and tight control. Such ideologies, prevent the development of women and therefore, hinder the development of the nation.

¹⁰² Hasan, Zoya. “Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India.” *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 6 (September 15, 2010): 939–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502726>.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 944-945.

¹⁰⁴ Sanjay, "Nationalism, Modernity, and the "Woman Question" in India and China," 278.

¹⁰⁵ ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Krishnan, Kavita. “Gendered Discipline in Globalising India.” *Feminist Review* 119, no. 1 (July 17, 2018): 72–88. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-018-0119-6>.

“Religious politics often betrays a majoritarian nationalism, which seeks to redefine the basis of national identity in a manner that excludes or marginalizes religious minorities.”¹⁰⁷ As I mentioned the establishments of movements by state governments, one of them is Love-jihad. This is used as a regulatory mechanism to control the choices and mobility of young and urban women and marginalize muslim men in India. They are identified as subjects of the imagined Hindu Rashtra¹⁰⁸, therefore shaping women’s behavior through control is a step towards a Hindu “ethos”. Aastha Tyagi and Atreyee Sen discuss how nationalist women leaders use coercive strategies to “socialise young women into the ideology of perfect Hindu subjecthood; by laying its foundation in the dichotomy between the security of ‘Self’ (women uncorrupted by the fluidities of modern life as ideal, permissible and desirable urban citizens), versus the danger of the ‘Other’ (migrants, Muslims and other undesirable communities in urban public space).”¹⁰⁹ In Uttar Pradesh (UP), Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath runs a militia known as the Hindu youth militia or a vigilante organization known as the Yuva Vahini. This youth militia is known for its history of arson and communal violence. CM Yogi Adityanath’s goal is also to achieve a Hindu *rashtra* (nation).¹¹⁰ The CM and his vigilante organization have organized moral policing groups such as anti-Romeo squads. In UP, these squads were deployed in markets, malls, school and

¹⁰⁷ Milan Vaishnav, “The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 2019, 5-21, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/BJP_In_Power_final.pdf

¹⁰⁸ Tyagi, Aastha, and Sen, Atreyee. “Love-Jihad (Muslim Sexual Seduction) and Ched-Chad (Sexual Harassment): Hindu Nationalist Discourses and the Ideal/Deviant Urban Citizen in India.” *Gender, Place & Culture*, May 2019, 104–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2018.1557602>.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 106.

¹¹⁰ Chandra, Abhimanyu. “What The Hindu Yuva Vahini's Constitution Tells Us About Yogi Adityanath's Regime in Uttar Pradesh.” *The Caravan*, August 29, 2018. <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/hindu-yuva-vahinis-constitution-tells-us-yogi-adityanaths-regime-uttar-pradesh>.

college campuses for the purposes of preventing sexual harassment against women.¹¹¹

“According to Uttar Pradesh police, the squads would make ‘our girls safer as they face lurking dangers from various nooks and corners of the society.’”¹¹² This initiative not only led to police targeting and shaming young as potential harassers but also moral policing of couples who were suspected of being unmarried or seen not conforming to the “traditional social norms of interaction.”¹¹³ These police approved vigilante groups especially used violence against inter-religious couples, causing an overlap with the Love Jihad campaign. Love Jihad campaign was a key political campaign for Bajrang Dal, a militant youth wing, established by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, BJP’s affiliate. They recruited young Hindu men from the upper caste, lower middle class, poorly educated, and unemployed Hindu men and offered employment, money and status.¹¹⁴

“The Love Jihad campaign claims that Muslim men seduce, convert, marry, and have children with non-Muslim women to ensure that the Muslim minority in India becomes a majority. The campaign mobilizes lower-middle class, upper- and middle-caste young Hindu men by using social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to promote the perils of Love Jihad and deliver alerts to activists to harass and spy on suspected inter-religious couples.”

When a woman of a reproductive age is removed from one community and joins the “other” community, it is perceived as a loss since it affects and deteriorates the ratio of men and

¹¹¹ Chacko, Priya. “Gender and Authoritarian Populism: Empowerment, Protection, and the Politics of Resentful Aspiration in India.” *Critical Asian Studies*, 2020, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2020.1711789>.ani

¹¹² *ibid.*, 13.

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

women in the Hindu community.¹¹⁵ Hence, such activists aim to discipline young women so they can fit the role of a dutiful daughter and build a proper Hindu national, while simultaneously “exhorting men to exert masculine authority over women, thereby restoring the honor of the nation.”¹¹⁶ Even though, “BJP’s populist project of marketized Hindutva virtues” argues to make women feel empowered and protected, the results of their actions are deeply disempowering for both young men and women who are targeted.¹¹⁷ Their agenda continues to persist stereotypes of women being “responsible, sacrificing, hard workers and nation-builders, which stem from the patriarchal ideology of Hindu nationalism and neoliberal gender logics.”¹¹⁸

Household

Girls are deprived of full social mobility due to controls imposed on them within the individuals’ household. The main method of social control is the protection of female sexuality. Which occurs through the consideration of the caste status of a woman, to maintain the “honor of the agnatic kin-group”, and family structures.¹¹⁹ Most Hindu castes practice a patrilineal family system and the characteristics of the household are influenced by socio-religious beliefs and practices.¹²⁰ There is a process of seclusion and segregation during the time of puberty and family members can sometimes take advantage and gain control of the female’s sexuality¹²¹. In

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 14

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Chanana, Karuna. "Hinduism and Female Sexuality: Social Control and Education of Girls in India." *Sociological Bulletin* 50, no. 1 (2001): 37-63. www.jstor.org/stable/23620149.

¹²⁰ Sonawat, Reeta. "Understanding Families in India: a Reflection of Societal Changes."

Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa 17, no. 2 (2001): 177–86.

<https://doi.org/10.1590/s0102-37722001000200010>.

¹²¹ Ibid.

many cases of sexual assault there are attitudes that exist towards women. These attitudes could be hostile or benevolent “that is, the rejection of women who defy traditional gender roles and the praising of women who abide by traditional gender roles, respectively.”¹²²

Girls are unable to enjoy full autonomy because of existing expectations which ideally require them fitting into the role of a traditional woman who does not bring shame or suffering into the family. Familial relations are managed by *dharma* or duty to the family and it applies to both men and women, however these duties are enforced largely upon women, as discussed earlier. Men have the power of decision making and providing physical and moral protection over female family members within patriarchal households “Through her traditional behavior and duties, especially her chastity and loyalty to her husband, her role as mother, her telling of exemplary epic stories, her fasts for the welfare of all, and her deep piety - she has given the family its social and cosmic mooring.”¹²³ It is important to understand the hierarchical social, cultural and family context of Hindu women when applying the language of “rights” and “equality”.¹²⁴

While gender norms are generally reinforced culturally and institutionally, it is within the household that children initially gain an understanding about gender roles, equating maleness with power and authority and femaleness with inferiority and subservience.¹²⁵ “Culture has been

¹²² Hill, Suzanne, and Tara C Marshall. “Beliefs about Sexual Assault in India and Britain are Explained by Attitudes Toward Women and Hostile Sexism.” *Sex roles*. (2018): 421-430.

doi:10.1007/s11199-017-0880-6

¹²³ Young, Katherine K, “Women in Hinduism,” in *Today's Woman in World Religions*, edited by Arvind Sharma, 77-135. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994.

¹²⁴ Sugirtharajah, Sharada, 100.

¹²⁵ Ram, Usha. “Gender Socialization: Differences between Male and Female Youth in India and Associations with Mental Health.” *International Journal of Population Research. IJPR*. no. 11. (2014) 1-11.

shown to determine the family functioning by delineating boundaries, rules for interaction, communication patterns, acceptable practices, discipline and hierarchy in the family.”¹²⁶ Chadda and Deb argue that the roles of family members are shaped by cultural factors¹²⁷ and Indian culture is patriarchal as “households are a primary site in which male privilege and control over women are expressed.”¹²⁸ A girl child is perceived as a burden since the time of her birth in many Indian households. Selective abortion of female foetuses and female mortality among children under the age of 5 is very common, in spite of it being banned in 1944.¹²⁹ They are expected to marry and most often they are arranged. Daughters are especially seen to be a financial burden when it comes to marriage as they might be expected to produce a sizable dowry for the groom’s family despite existing anti-dowry laws since 1960.¹³⁰ At a young age, girls are informed of their duties, which is within the home and attending to the needs of men. A woman’s life is regulated on a daily basis, from what they do to where they go and who they associate themselves with. This is important because verifying a woman’s chastity is crucial and an additional step during the marriage process.¹³¹

Children try to emulate gender-appropriate behaviors through observing adults, also their role models, in the household.¹³² Hence, if children witness family violence, various treatment of

¹²⁶ Chadda, Rakesh K, and Deb, Koushik Sinha. “Indian Family Systems, Collectivistic Society and Psychotherapy.” *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 55, no. 6 (2013): 299–309.

<https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.105555>.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3705700/>

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Ram, Usha. “Gender Socialization: Differences between Male and Female Youth in India and Associations with Mental Health.” *International Journal of Population Research. IJPR*. no. 11. (2014) 1-11.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² *ibid.*

women of the household in comparison to men, and other behaviors in relation to one's gender, then children could become conditioned to those actions and may reflect that later in life.

“Research in India has already established that violence is transmitted across generations, showing that married men who, as children, witnessed their father beating their mother were significantly more likely to condone and commit acts of violence against their own wives.”¹³³

The way boys and girls are socialized is very important as violent and discriminatory ideologies continue to perpetuate generationally and especially affect girls.

Women within the same household also experience various constraints depending on their status in comparison to other family members. “For example, in patrilocal communities a mother-in-law has more power in the household than does her daughter-in-law. Constraints on women's power and choices therefore relate not only to their individual characteristics but also to the contextual factors that mediate these, such as their legal rights, community norms or household structure”.¹³⁴ There are new norms which are imposed upon a new daughter-in-law, specific to their statuses for example, not being able to have a paid job after marriage.¹³⁵ During the transition from women's homes to their in-laws' home, they use a language marked by sharp dichotomies: “freedom/loss of freedom, lack of responsibility/responsibility, relaxed/tensed, true self/guarded self.”¹³⁶ This is a common occurrence as after marriage daughters leave their natal home and begin to reside with their conjugal families. Consequently, there are a lot of “adjustments” that have to take place, especially from the daughter-in-laws' side. However, sons

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ O'Neil, Domingo, and Valters, 3.

¹³⁵ Puri, Jyoti. *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India Narratives of Gender and Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

inherit a socio-cultural preference from their mothers and enjoy a relatively elevated position within the family. Such a relationship is threatened after the son is married, causing tension between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws.

“Some everyday abusive practices may be both intentional and strategic, especially when they are backed by other members of the household through, for instance, threats to send the woman in question back to her natal household or refuse her access to her children. Others are culturally and habitually embodied: for instance, the community often plays a role in monitoring and even controlling women’s movements outside the household. Other ways of controlling the daughters-in-law include exerting control over their clothes and appearance, belittling their natal household for failing to provide an adequate dowry, and/or preventing them from exercising their reproductive rights.”¹³⁷

These tensions and abusiveness arise because “first, the cultural devaluation of girls and the preference for sons; second, the fact that the centrality of marriage for women conflicts with the parallel importance of maintaining a joint virilocal household, and; third, the importance of the mother-son relationship.”¹³⁸ This relationship between the mother and son is a powerful female-male relationship in Hindu culture, as many scriptures mention the importance of sons. In addition to the son preference example for the *Manu* mentioned earlier, in the *Mahabharata* for example, “Vyasa argues that, ‘He [the householder] should avoid intercourse with his wife when she is old or barren or ill-behaved, when her children die or when she has not yet attained

¹³⁷ Rew, Martin; Gangoli, Geetanjali; and Gill, Aisha K. “Violence between Female In-laws in India.” *Journal of International Women's Studies*, (2013): 147-160.

<http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss1/9>

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 150

maturity, when she gives birth to daughters only or has many sons.’’¹³⁹ A husband can also divorce or terminate his marriage “if ‘a wife... acts as she pleases, who is sterile or gives birth only to daughters or whose children die young.’’’¹⁴⁰ There is an apparent religious devaluation of girls also reflected culturally in many households, whether it is a dichotomy between the mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws or mothers and daughters. Women are viewed as self-sacrificial, which pervades their domesticity.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, since child bearing is time consuming enough, scriptures suggest that women should not be burdened by outside work as men are most capable of handling economic responsibilities.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Iyer, S. and Borooah, V. “Religion and fertility in India: The role of son preference and daughter aversion.” *Cambridge Working Papers in Economics*. (2004)
http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/knigi/tours_2005/papers/iussp2005s50039.pdf.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 8

¹⁴² Ibid.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Design

The goal of this study is to examine how religion plays a significant role in household and political domains and how that affects the socialization of Hindu women. To explore women's experiences, various dynamics, and its effects on women's autonomy within these spaces, I did ethnographic research. My ethnographic research, in addition to literature review and library research, consisted of interviews and field observations. The unit of analysis in my study are Hindu women around the regions of North India, East India, South India, and West India. Although, I interviewed and interacted with a wide array of people, including men and women with different types of backgrounds (urban, some rural, professions, and castes) to gain comprehensive understanding on the perspective on the status of Hindu women in India today. In general, I did not have any specific requirements for the participants, other than that they be over the age of 18 years old. I completed field research in a period of 15 days during Summer in June 2019, and 20 days in December 2019 through January 2020, in winter.

Methodology

My methods included conducting interviews, field observations, a survey, and using secondary sources. I directed 112 interviews in total and the survey received 49 respondents therefore, I had a total of 161 respondents. Out of the total 161 respondents 115 were women and 46 men. I asked the same questions for the interviews and the survey, to acquire consistent data. I would like to consider the ethnographic data to be regional as I conducted interviews in Northern

India, East India, South India, and West India. See *Figure 1.* and *Figure 2.* to refer to the cities I visited, and locations surrounding it.

I began my ethnographic research in East India, initially in the city of Kolkata and then to Basirhat town (*Figure 1. #1*) in the state of West Bengal. I covered 19 interviews in that region. In West India, I was able to cover Mumbai, Maharashtra (*Figure 1. #2*), where I was able to speak with 15 people. In South India, I was able to cover the city of Bangalore, Karnataka (*Figure 1. #3*) and I interviewed 24 people. Lastly, I headed to the Northern region of India and first stopped at Jaipur (*Figure 1. #4*) with 10 interviews and Bharatpur (*Figure 2. #1*) in Rajasthan, with 4 interviews. Then visited New Delhi in Delhi (*Figure 1. #6*), with 22 interviews, and Agra, (*Figure 1. #5*) and Mathura in Uttar Pradesh (*Figure 2. #2*), with a total of 20 interviews. The 49 respondents in my survey were from various states such as, Uttrakhand, Bihar, West Bengal, New Delhi, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh.

I was able to pay visits to two Universities and two non governmental organizations (NGOs). Some of the members of NGOs I interviewed in India were from the Ramakrishna Mission and Bangla Natak in the city of Kolkata, West Bengal. In addition to that, I was able to visit two universities, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi and Jadavpur University in Kolkata. Furthermore, I did a phone interview with a professor from Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. At Jadavpur University I spoke with 5 professors, who have specialized or portrayed interest in the work of feminism and women empowerment, from different academic backgrounds. Due to time limitations I was only able to speak with students. I interviewed 12 students in JNU. Lastly, I was able to make a stop at Basirhat High School, where I got to interview the Principal. Each interview with professors and members of the NGO was

executed with an average time of 35-45 minutes. Additionally, the common day to day people whom I spoke with at parks, bus stations, and other public spaces lasted about 20-30 minutes.



Figure 1. Cities visited to conduct interviews.



Figure 2. Bharatpur, Rajasthan (1) and Mathura, Uttar Pradesh (2)

In my literature review, I discussed how there is power over women through the means of religion, in politics and in the household. My thesis aims to understand how women are disempowered through the comprehension and use of justified religion within significant domains that influence the socialization of Hindu women. Therefore, participants were key in developing the data as they elaborated on their experiences and worldviews. I have allowed the interviews to speak for themselves in how each individual's experiences have helped them, or someone they know, shape the process of empowerment or disempowerment for them. Hence, my research is carried out by inductive reasoning, as I will be shaping themes or concepts around the results of the data I have collected from the field.

I did field observations, in which I was able to participate on and offsite locations, such as temples, family functions and more, to analyze how women carry themselves. Through these observations it allowed me to grasp certain social behaviours of both men and women, in relation

to women's empowerment, across different regions of India. I frequently visited public spaces such as parks, coffee shops, tourist sites, and more to observe social interactions and behaviors. In addition to that, I visited various temples that are significantly important to Hindus in India, such as Dakshineswar Kali Temple in Calcutta, and Various temples in Vrindavan (birthplace of Lord Krishna), and observed the behaviors of both men and women at these sites.

Lastly, the analysis of my secondary sources included observations of news channels and entertainment channels (movies and TV shows). Through news channels, I could gain an understanding of how politicians respond to crimes of violence that have taken place against women and discuss issues women face. Through entertainment channels I wanted to comprehend the portrayals of women in TV shows and in Bollywood. This is important as the media today is in virtually everyone's hands, both rural and urban, as smartphones and affordable data packages with internet speeds have flooded the market.¹⁴³ Hence, not only has the consumption rate increased but the choice of consumption has great effects on the population.

Limitations

The main limitation of the project is to acquire a holistic understanding of the status of women in India. India is a secular nation, and comprises a population with who believe in different religions such as, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and more. Additionally, there are 29 states and 7 union territories in the Nation whereas, I was only able to visit 6 states. Some states or areas within the states portray dissimilar perceptions of the

¹⁴³ "Media Consumption in India: Media Ownership Monitor India." Media Ownership Monitor. Lime Flavour, Berlin. Accessed 2020. <http://india.mom-rsf.org/en/context/media-consumption/>.

status of women or have a different ethnography in itself. There are matrilineal societies present in India, towards the East in the state of Meghalaya and in the South in the state of Kerala.

Furthermore in contrast, women from minority groups, lower castes, and rural India suffer the most prejudice and discrimination in societies. Hence, my second limitation is that, due to time constraints I could not fully cover the lives of rural and lower caste Hindu women and how the demographic differences between societies affects the status of women. Their opinions are very crucial as mainly their lives are affected through cultural expectations, patriarchy, and the changes in government policies. Therefore, it is difficult to apply this research to all Indian women, which is why I have chosen to study Hindu women. However, with the limitation of not being able to cover Hindu women from every single caste and socio-economic hierarchy.

I would also like to add that not all Hindu women feel or are disempowered. However, the subservient nature of women continues to persist under the rule of the current government and societal expectations. Therefore, I am bringing exposure to instances of oppression that many Indian women do deal with.

Data Analysis

The data I have collected is qualitative, since my fieldwork consisted of interviews, semi-structured conversations, and field observation. Before initiating a conversation I made sure to give respondents the option to not participate or to not answer certain questions if they were not comfortable. I kept the dynamic of the interviews semi-structured or casual depending on the type of participants. For the Universities and religious institutions I visited, I was prepared to do interviews, whereas, if I began speaking to common people, in the public spaces listed previously, I would carry casual conversations so individuals did not feel imposed by a stranger. Most casual conversations were carried in English and some in Hindi and Bengali, translated in English in my data. Casual conversations are the key component of my data. During conversations with participants, I brought up questions regarding their perceptions of the empowerment of women in India and how they perceive the status of Hindu women under the influence of the current government, household dynamics, and religion. Some examples of topics which were discussed include: being an “ideal” Hindu woman and its expectations, Hindu women in comparison to Goddesses in the Hindu religion, perceptions on how men and women are socialized in India today, and social, political and economical needs of Hindu women as well as the process of achieving them. In the next sections, I will be analyzing my interviews and data gathered through coding and then using the themes that developed throughout the conversations, interviews, and answers from the survey. In addition to that, I will be using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the respondents.

Justified violence against women

Women face brutal injustices in India as crimes of violence against women is on the rise. According to a Thomson Reuters Foundation 2018 Survey, India was listed as the most dangerous nation for sexual violence against women. The survey kept in account for overall risks faced by women which includes, sexual violence, non-sexual violence, human trafficking, customary practices, healthcare, and access to economic resources.¹⁴⁴ Before beginning the interview processes, I was reluctant to ask questions about gender violence against women as many could have felt uncomfortable speaking about the topic. However, most respondents openly spoke about situations and cases they have faced or someone they knew had faced. Below, I will be discussing the topic of gender violence from the information I have gathered from participants. Participants either experienced these types of gender based violence or knew someone close to them who underwent such events.

Household

Sanjana, A 26 year old South Indian woman, who grew up in a small village in the state of Kerala and came to the city of Bangalore, Karnataka to work and grow her career as a psychiatrist. She claimed, “Falling in love could be dangerous in our society.” She quickly continued to explain more.

“Just by looking around this park you can see so many couples, but of course, you will not be able to tell what anyone’s relationship is actually like because we see it from the outside and it looks like they’re in love. One of my closest

¹⁴⁴ <http://poll2018.trust.org/>

childhood friends, who was planning to go to medical school during her last year in high school, had a boyfriend. Even though she always knew she would have to marry someone according to her parents' wishes. She described him to be like a funny guy who made her happy. But when I was able to see it for myself, it was almost like he was infatuated with her but not in a loving way, you know? He would want to call her all the time, know where she was and who she was with at all times, He would get upset if she was around other men, even if they were our close friends from when we were little. Sometimes they would argue if she didn't let him know about her whereabouts and to me that was odd. All I could see at the time was that she was happy... She never complained about the clinginess that *I* saw in him. When her parents decided to find a suitable boy for her, she quickly agreed. She attempted to break up with her boyfriend over the phone and he was not okay with it... On the day of her *mehendi*¹⁴⁵, she was abducted by a group of guys and they raped her. Her family found out and chose to not speak about it because of the fear that their soon to be in laws will not want her to be the bride anymore.”

According to Sanjana, these types of violence take place because the male ego gets hurt and when this happened he did not want her to be anyone else's. If he could not have her then, no one else can have her. The male ego is developed within the home with the help of the women in the family especially mothers. The male ego is pampered through the means of valuing the men of the household above the women, “with women to agree with them and not question their

¹⁴⁵ *Mehendi* also known as *henna tattoos* in the West, is a temporary dye or a form of skin decoration and is a traditional (Vedic custom) part of Indian wedding ceremonies where the bride's hands and feet are stained for the awakening of their inner light.

opinions or decisions, it is no wonder that so many Indian and Pakistani males cannot take any difference or criticism.”¹⁴⁶ As explored by Wolfgang Sachs and Kiran Saxena, empowerment is not just an issue of acquiring higher socio-economic status. Women continue to lack autonomy within their own homes or in their private lives but are pushed to have prestigious careers.¹⁴⁷ “Her parents feared the loss of “good” in laws during a situation that traumatized my friend and sacrificed her happiness for their gain,” says Sanjana. Deepa Narayan argues empowerment is having the capability to negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions which affect the lives of vulnerable individuals.¹⁴⁸ However, referring back to deBeauvoir and her discussion of what characterized the feminine woman is a trait of “passivity” is clear in the case of Sanjana’s childhood friend. Vani Borooah and Sriya Iyer additionally expand on the religious notion of “women’s self-sacrificing nature” further perpetuating daughter subordination. It is a destiny that is appointed to her by her parents to be a certain way to avoid disappointment and to not bring shame over to her conjugal family when she is eventually passed on to them.

“It is even worse when you can't tell the people closest to you about incidents of sexual assault that has happened to you. It will never be talked about anyway, so why would I tell my family about it?” Says Aditi, who is a 20 years old woman pursuing an informational technology career in Mumbai. Her parents wanted her to pursue engineering because “no one likes to marry

¹⁴⁶ Khair, Tabish. “Humpty Dumpty Is Tougher than the Male Ego.” *The Hindu*. *The Hindu*, March 4, 2018. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/humpty-dumpty-is-tougher-than-the-male-ego/article22920207.ece>.

¹⁴⁷ O'Neil, Tam, Domingo, Pilar , and Valters, Craig . “Progress on Women's Empowerment: from Technical Fixes to Political Action,” 3.

¹⁴⁸ Narayan, Deepa. “Conceptual Framework and Methodological Challenges” in *Measuring empowerment: Cross-disciplinary perspectives*, edited by Deepa Narayan, 3-38. World Bank, Gender and Development Group, 2005.

a girl with no qualifications anymore.” Kiran Saxena discussed this when she explained the restriction of “full-fledged exercise of social freedom” by husbands or society regardless of her being economically independent.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, Aditi lacks autonomy because she is unable to pursue her dreams to be independent, but she pursues her dreams to fulfill another man’s requirements and therefore remains dependent from living under her parents’ roof to now her in-laws.

Aditi also experienced harassment in the form of stalking by her ex-boyfriend when he could not handle the break up and began intense cyber stalking her. When she realized the extent of his annoying messages and repetitive phrases, regarding how much she would be missing out if she did not stay with him. She immediately blocked him on every social media platform only to later realize that he had other fake accounts that he followed her with. Then slowly he began physically stalking her. Her parents were never aware of her boyfriend during the time they were together. But she built the courage to tell her parents about the incidents when she felt unsafe and uncomfortable.

“They told me, that this *badtameezi*¹⁵⁰ should not have happened to begin with.

Instead of asking me if I am okay and instead of consoling me in a situation like this, I received a lecture on how I have disappointed them and went against our cultural traditions.”

When I asked her what they meant by “went against our cultural traditions?” She said verbatim, “they were telling me that I was not being a good Hindu daughter and that this would ruin their reputation among friends and family members.” Similar to Mytheli Sreenivas’

¹⁴⁹ Saxena, Kiran, 392.

¹⁵⁰ A term used to describe an individual who is rude in nature or carries acts of impudence.

argument, her sexuality is highly correlated with the honor of the family and any deviant or “unacceptable” behavior could jeopardize her family's reputation as well. Suzanne Hill and Tara C. Marshall examine the rejection of women who defy their traditional roles, especially when it comes to sexual assault. Even though, Aditi experienced an extreme case of harrassment and not sexual assault, her nature was still questioned by her family. Her family’s disappointment was apparent when she expressed behavior considered to be “non-traditionalism” or going against “cultural traditions”. Subsequently, she faced consequences from her family members because of their unawareness and unacceptance of her previous relationship in addition to the stalking incidents that took place. Which were later dealt with or settled by the family. Although, when his behavior was reported by her parents to his parents, he became aggressive and began showing up to her house and then started sending gory messages. This forced her family to report it to the police and they had enough evidence to do so. They were not aware of what happened to him after, but he did not bother her again. She was surprised by this since, in most cases, she had only heard about how the authorities are not as helpful in cases like this.

I was curious to understand what being a good Hindu daughter meant for her parents and she described it to me as being “too exhausting”. She added, “I didn’t understand why I couldn’t continue to be a good daughter to them without all the expectations.” Consequently, I also asked if she thought these “expectations” were just general or typical expectations that most parents have for their children? She replied,

“I wish I could show you. I live in a joint family, so already there are so many elders that have expectations from you and they are all different. I feel like depending on the generation [of the family member] they expect me to be a mould

of whatever they want me to be... My *dada-dadi*¹⁵¹ have already started me showing photos of eligible bachelors, that too rich ones so I can live lavishly. They want me to learn how to cook *desi* food even though I am not interested, they don't like my short hair, they always want to see me wearing *salwar-kameez*.¹⁵² They always comment on my clothes and hair man and they don't like me roaming with my guy friends. My uncles already know how good I am in engineering and they have already foreseen my future in Bangalore, then San Francisco, then a start-up, then a billionaire *oh god*... So like, no one has really even asked exactly what I want. But that is besides the point, the point is that I can't please people's expectations of being a good Hindu daughter, when I don't even know what that means. Don't get me wrong I am religious, but I don't think religion can tell you how to be a good daughter. It's just ingrained in my family.”

¹⁵¹ Translated to: Grandpa-Grandma from the father's side.

¹⁵² Salwar Kameez is an Indian ethnic clothing

The expectations are clearly overwhelming for Aditi. Especially considering that she resides in a joint family, therefore, there are various pressures surrounding her. I find it interesting that she did not relate her expectations within the household to being Hindu, when I asked her the follow up question. Although religion has an influence in the generation of certain norms. In this case, it seems that it is so ingrained within family values that Aditi could not distinguish the two. Although this may not be definitive.

Religion

As discussed previously, the socialisation of both men and women at home is crucial. In most of the interviews, I heard the differences in how men and women grow up in a household. There were comparisons and differences which were pointed out in conversations with interviewees who have siblings of the opposite sex. “We have to learn to be careful, in the way we speak, the clothes we wear, the people we speak to, how we speak, where we go, and also try to be a good daughter at home.” expressed Pragya, a 21 year old college student from Chandigarh, currently living in New Delhi in a girls hostel, studying civil engineering, and working part-time as a paid intern. “I am happy I don’t have to act the way other people want me to, at least as long as I am living in the hostel.” Pragya grew up in a household where her behavior and her every move was under surveillance. She expands on how she felt like she was being groomed to be a good wife. She did not feel like she was doing enough for herself, such as exploring different avenues like sports, music, and other things she wanted to experience. She says,

“I know what a good Hindu daughter means to me, even though I don’t identify as a Hindu anymore, it means I had no fun, the word fun did not exist in my family’s dictionary. I had a set schedule, I woke up, got ready, went to school, came back home, ate a little bit, then I was sent to tutoring classes, came home, ate dinner, and then slept... My brother is only a year younger than me, so you can say we are basically the same age. He never had a set schedule. My parents bought him a phone before I got my first phone, he learned to drive before I did, I was not able to stay out after 6 o'clock, I could not hang out outside, I always had to let them know which friends’ house I was at and that wouldn’t be enough because my mom always called my friends’ house to make sure they were expecting me and that we will remain inside and he was never treated the same way and questioned the way I was... Also you know how aunties always wait at parties for the men to eat first and the whole time they just hang out in the kitchen the whole time, yeah that’s my family everyday. I had to learn how to cook with my mom at a young age. My dad and my brother are always served food first and I have to serve them while my mom cooks in the kitchen... I always wanted to explore fashion but I wasn’t allowed to wear western clothes... I always had to have good posture, sit properly, do this and do that. I never questioned it, you know? I never asked why they are not expecting the same things from my brother or anything. It becomes a habit, and you don’t realize that you have been doing certain things because you were not taught otherwise. See, my mom has always told me that I was smart, but she also always said that no one will marry me just because I am smart. She

would say that guys like *sanskaari*¹⁵³, who know how to run a family, cook and clean. I mean I left home and wanted to be independent because I do not want a life like that forced on me. I still talk to them, but I realized there are worlds out there I want to explore but not with my family's *tane*¹⁵⁴.”

Pragya does not blame her parents for the way they raised her, but she could identify the differences in her upbringing versus her brother's, and that is what she finds to be unfair. Men are coddled and celebrated as girls learn how to be a good wife, a good daughter, a good mother, a good daughter in law. “Men who are pampered at home end up with bloated egos that can burst at a mere pen prick.”¹⁵⁵ Previously I examined the *Manusmriti* which talks about women's *dharma*. She must fulfill her *dharma* or duties to be virtuous as a woman and remain happy doing so. First as a daughter, then as a wife, then as a daughter-in-law, and then as a widow so she can be reborn in a higher life-form, which is not being a woman.¹⁵⁶ Religion and cultural norms in India are very interwoven.¹⁵⁷ Not every aspect of it reflects the ground reality but, it continues to persist in patriarchal realms, so power can prevail where it always has.

Kamal, who is in her early 50s and used to be a school teacher in Delhi. She currently lives in Noida with her husband and her two children. She spoke about her sisters-in-law who are home-makers:

¹⁵³ A term that is used very often by Indians when referring to well-mannered or well-cultured individuals, but mostly directed towards women.

¹⁵⁴ Translates to jibe which is intended to make someone look foolish or undermining them by taunting or saying unkind things.

¹⁵⁵ Khair, Tabish. “Humpty Dumpty Is Tougher than the Male Ego.” *The Hindu*. *The Hindu*, March 4, 2018.

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/humpty-dumpty-is-tougher-than-the-male-ego/article22920207.ece>.

¹⁵⁶ Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 259-261.

¹⁵⁷ Gupta, Sangeeta R. “The Ambiguity of the Historical Position of Hindu Women in India: Sita, Draupadi and the Laws of Manu.” *UCLA Historical Journal* 14 (1994): 212-230.

“It is a struggle to live in today’s era and obey old traditions and expectations, especially many working women and educated women... If you see, both my sisters-in-law, they are so educated, one of them has a master’s degree in biomedical engineering and the other one studied law. But now they are both housewives, have kids, and take care of the family. None of them were able to practice what they had learned. You know this is just how it is,”

Similarly, Kamal’s daughter Veera, pitched in following what her mother, Kamal, was saying. Veera spoke on behalf of her friend’s situation,

“My friend from Chandigarh and I go to Amity University and she comes from a very conservative family. Her family is already getting ready for her to get married. They only wanted her to go to school so she can have a degree to show off to her in-laws, to appear eligible, and educated enough to be acceptable into a good family. She doesn’t even want to get married. She is doing IT [Information Technology] and she wants to actually do something with it. I don’t think she even wants to stay in India.”

As discussed in the literature review, gender norms are generally reinforced culturally and institutionally¹⁵⁸ however, the degree of empowerment and women’s position is determined by the ways gender identities, gender roles, and gender relations are conceived at the family, household, community and societal levels.¹⁵⁹ Each household may interpret gender roles and what empowerment means differently. In Pragya, Kamal’s sisters-in-law, and Veera’s friend’s

¹⁵⁸ Ram, “Gender Socialization: Differences between Male and Female Youth in India and Associations with Mental Health,” 2.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

case not only are gender roles, rights, and obligations different, they are also highly unequal¹⁶⁰ Kamal's sisters-in-law's situation can be referred back to Borooah and Iyer's claim as the "the lack of a role for women outside the home is justified by the Hindu scriptures using notions of women's supreme 'self-sacrifice' of which they are seen as being more capable than men."¹⁶¹ They add, "as far as the content of Hinduism is concerned, women appear to be unequally equal."¹⁶² Hence, even though Kamal's sisters-in-law are highly educated, they are still confined to domesticity and unable to practice their education. However, Kamal's sisters-in-law have a greater say in household decisions. There is a strange paradox fabricated for Hindu women in the household. Additionally, it pertains to the nationalist paradigm argued by Sanjay Seth, as the aforementioned women may be perceived as modern and yet remain quintessentially Indian.

Households in India could be perceived as a significant domain where male privilege and control over women are apparent. Usha Ram discusses that with few lifestyle options outside of marriage, girls are expected to marry since it is also a rite of passage in Hinduism. Ram talks about how verifying her chastity is a critical step in the marriage process, families are careful to regulate all aspects of their daughters' lives, controlling where they go and what they may do.¹⁶³ Priya Chacko and Ram develop that Indian girls are told that their acceptable position is in the home, to fulfill domestic duties and attend to the needs of men. In contrast, males learn that they are superior to women and must exercise authority over them. Ram asserts in his study that

¹⁶⁰ Gupta and Yesudian, "Evidence of Women's Empowerment in India: A Study of Socio-spatial Disparities," 366.

¹⁶¹ Iyer, and Borooah, "Religion and fertility in India: The role of son preference and daughter aversion," 8.

¹⁶² *ibid.*

¹⁶³ Ram, "Gender Socialization: Differences between Male and Female Youth in India and Associations with Mental Health," 2.

socialization of women implies learning how to portray the behaviors which are consistent to her gender and it begins within the household.¹⁶⁴

Politics

Previously, the topic of “love-jihad” and moral policing was discussed and how the public has taken it under their own hands to teach lessons to the youth on morals and traditions. The general public have taken it upon them to do so through the reinforcement of local leaders and politicians who want to see the women in their community protected from the “other”. Which according to them can be achieved by moral policing the youth. Consequently, the youth may lose trust in authorities after hearing about such incidents as, 134 out of total 161 respondents in the survey and interviews responded with “no”, when they were asked whether they would trust the police if them or any of their friends were in a crisis involving any type of violence against women.

Love-Jihad became a term after a few cases took place in South India, so I wanted to understand this concept through the public. Although, I did not ask explicitly about their thoughts on love-jihad but the concept came up often, so it became one of my follow up questions.

Aaravi, a 25 year old working as a customer service representative at a call center in Bangalore and is the only bread-winner in the family. She supports her recently unemployed and sick father, stay at home mom, and her younger brother's education. Her and her family are from Kerala, but they had moved to Bangalore when she was only 2 years old. She carries the responsibility of her entire household. She comes from a Hindu family and since she was little

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*

she has been groomed to be a “proper Hindu daughter”. She says she was always a good daughter and was always respected within her own family as well. Her family was very proud of her when she got a job before she even graduated. When she began her new job, she also met a young man named Aftab. Shortly after they met, they became very good friends and soon enough they fell for each other. They both looked past their religious barriers and continued their relationship for 6 years! They have been dating since they were 20 years old and did not expect the struggles they would be facing in the coming years. After she would finish work Aftab would wait for her to drop her off at home. He would usually drop her off a couple of blocks ahead of her home, so her parents would not see them. One of those days, there was a BJP rally and crowds of supporters were scattered around the city. Some of the crowd was around the block where he drops her off. She knew some of the men from the crowd, since they were from the neighbourhood. She was instantly worried because she was not ready for her community to find out about her love life. Little did she know about what she was about to face.

“When you ask if politics has an influence on the lives of women in India, I can only say yes and it only makes me sad... when he dropped me off, I am thinking one of them [one of the men from the crowd] saw me get off his bike and told the people around him. They all came to us and started saying very bad things about his faith and what we do together, according to them. They said my parents gave me too much freedom to do dirty things like this behind their backs, that Aftab is recruiting me, and that he’ll convert me first before making me do other things for his religion. I even knew one of the guys very well and he threatened to tell my parents and call me an anti-national. So much more about me, I don’t think I can

say them again, I feel disgusted. All I can say is that people can't tolerate seeing people from two religions in harmony. I was thinking they were going to attack Aftab, thank God they didn't... we left the scene as soon as they backed away"

Aaravi eventually told her parents. They were against their relationship for a very long time but eventually accepted him down the road. She expressed what a struggle it was to get her parents to see what a kind person he is. She also says it helped that Aftab and her little brother got along so well. In addition to Aaravi's case, 12 out of the total 115 women respondents - between the ages of 19-26 - in my interviews and survey experienced moral policing of some sort, "love-jihad" accusations, assumptions, or harassment if seen too comfortable with the opposite sex in public, and derogatory comments regarding choice of clothes or appearance directed at women respondents. All 12 expressed that they have acquired fear of authorities since they are the ones encouraging moral policing and acting on it as well.

The protection of Hindu girls and of tradition has encouraged moral vigilantes to take matters into their own hands. To protect the tradition, moral vigilantes have mainly targeted the youth, as women are exposed to education, independent romantic choices, and urban modernities.¹⁶⁵ As discussed by Tyagi and Sen, love-jihad is used as a measure of regulation and tries to impose "traditional" values towards women as a way of "protecting" them from the 'other' but by taking away their agency, controlling their decisions, and instilling fear in them.¹⁶⁶ From an outside perspective she was seen as a young woman representing the Hindu religion but now she has been corrupted by the "fluidities of modern life"¹⁶⁷ and jeopardize the security of

¹⁶⁵Tyagi, and Sen, "Love-Jihad (Muslim Sexual Seduction) and Ched-Chad (Sexual Harassment): Hindu Nationalist Discourses and the Ideal/Deviant Urban Citizen in India," 104.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 106.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

self due to her inability to separate herself from the 'other'.¹⁶⁸ Aaravi did not internalize what was said about her, as she expressed, "At first I was so upset and questioned myself. Is being in love with a Muslim make me a bad Hindu? Am I a traitor to my family? But then I realized, I have done everything right. I know I am a good Hindu and I also know that I do not have to prove that to others who are not significant characters of my life. I only care about what my family thinks."

This notion and desire of manifesting a Hindu "ethos" has led to violence, hatred, and insecurity within the society but especially among the women, since they are the "essential marks of cultural identity."¹⁶⁹ Seth Sanjay argued the importance of the emblematic nature or representation of women within a nationalist paradigm as discussed in the literature review. Maintenance of the Indian womanhood became a privileged status in the nationalist discourse as "they had to become "modern" *and yet* remain quintessentially Indian."¹⁷⁰ Therefore, modernity is not completely eliminated under the nationalist paradigm however, it is "an attempt to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project."¹⁷¹ Thus, despite Aaravi considering herself a good Hindu daughter, external pressures caused her initial distress and confusion in recognizing her identity. Aaravi may not even realize the scrutiny that she is under while living under a nationalistic project.

From an outside perspective the current Hindu nationalist government may appear to be liberal by claiming to empower women and encouraging women to step forward and participate in politics and by advocating for women's rights. Though, women's participation in politics

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Sanjay, "Nationalism, Modernity, and the "Woman Question" in India and China," 278.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

comes at a cost as women politicians face a shocking scale of online abuse.¹⁷² The study revealed that women politicians who express their opinions online are targeted frequently. Additionally, “Women politicians from ‘parties other than Bharatiya Janata Party’ experienced more abuse”¹⁷³ Abusive messages include, death and rape threats, torture,¹⁷⁴ and for various immutable identities such as, gender, religion, caste, marital status and many more.”¹⁷⁵ Kavita Krishnan, politician, activist, and a powerful voice for women’s rights in India, stated that she receives “non stop” harassment from 50 to 100 abusive messages on Twitter for being vocal in criticizing the current Prime Minister.¹⁷⁶

"These trolls ... they are going after me regularly, routinely, for my skin color, for my looks, telling me I'm not worth raping, what kind of torture and rape I should be subjected to, telling me what kind of men I should be sleeping with ... and on and on and on, more and more... There is an organized army of far-right trolls on Indian social media, which belong to the ruling party, they are basically trained to target you for anything "¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² “New Study Shows Shocking Scale of Abuse on Twitter Against Women Politicians in India.” Amnesty International USA, January 23, 2020. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/shocking-scale-of-abuse-on-twitter-against-women-politicians-in-india/>.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Mackintosh, Eliza, Swati Gupta, and Edward Scott-Clarke. “Troll Armies, 'Deepfake' Porn Videos and Violent Threats. How Twitter Became so Toxic for India's Women Politicians.” CNN. Cable News Network, January 23, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/22/india/india-women-politicians-trolling-amnesty-asequals-intl/index.html>.

¹⁷⁵ Amnesty International USA, “New Study Shows Shocking Scale of Abuse on Twitter Against Women Politicians in India.”

¹⁷⁶ Mackintosh, Gupta, and Scott-Clarke, “Troll Armies, 'Deepfake' Porn Videos and Violent Threats. How Twitter Became so Toxic for India's Women Politicians.”

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*

Trolling is common in political life globally, however, Indian women politicians face nearly twice as much abuse compared to the U.S. and U.K.¹⁷⁸ In addition to that, women politicians are also being affected by “deepfakes” that have surfaced. Deepfakes are a form of artificial intelligence (AI) in which a person in an existing image or video is replaced with someone else's likeness. Men are publishing these deepfakes by doctoring intimate porn videos of women.¹⁷⁹ Chandrani Murmu, one of the youngest members of the parliament, and Alka Lamba, politician, are two of the multiple victims of deepfakes. When Alka Lamba filed a complaint to India’s Cyber Crime Investigation Unit, she was shown profile pictures of all the men, against whom she had reported, standing next to the Prime Minister.¹⁸⁰ India’s cyber crime team told her that, “nothing is going to happen, and this is just a waste of time.”¹⁸¹

With the attempts of silencing female politicians and by spreading traditional and cultural ideologies to the public, Indian government aims to keep women subservient. “Antonio Gramsci first articulated the concept of hegemony and it serves as a form of social control that caters to the needs of the elite within a capitalist society and operates via civil society by actively working to gain the consent of individuals to influence their adoption of a particular understanding of the social world.”¹⁸² The goal of achieving or manifesting a Hindu India is being pursued through continuous subordination of women and other minorities. Media avenues,

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Maya, Oppenheim. “‘Rape Threats Were Routine’: The Avalanche of Online Abuse Faced by India's Female Politicians.” *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, January 23, 2020.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-woman-politicians-rape-death-threats-abuse-twitter-a9298721.html>.

¹⁸⁰ Mackintosh, Gupta, and Scott-Clarke, “Troll Armies, 'Deepfake' Porn Videos and Violent Threats. How Twitter Became so Toxic for India's Women Politicians.”

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*

¹⁸² Atterberry, Adrienne Lee, “Nationalism on the Net: Exploring the ideology of India's Bharatiya Janata Party.” *Media Studies - Theses.*, Syracuse University, 2012.

such as local news channels, have become an outlet for politicians to preach and spread ideas about protecting and looking after “our” women. This instills fear within women and restricts their ability to move freely in society.

Furthermore, In January 2018, an eight-year-old girl was raped and murdered inside a Hindu temple in Kathua district of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). When the accused got arrested, Hindu organisations supported by the BJP broke out protest marches in their defence.

Additionally, lawyers that work with the current government tried to prevent the police from filing charges against the perpetrators.¹⁸³ In 2017, BJP lawmaker Kuldeep Singh Sengar and his friends gang-raped a 17-year-old girl in Unnao. Since Sengar did not try to kill her, his impunity was that he, instead, wiped her tears and promised her a job. Police did not even file an incident report (FIR) or a case until the victim tried to take her own life. There was public outrage following the reports on the lack of consequences against him. Even after police registered a case, they also arrested the victims father for an alleged fake case additionally, he was killed under suspicious terms under police custody. Sengar also allegedly staged a road accident to get her killed.¹⁸⁴ These incidents highly contradict the government’s persistent preaching remarks on the “protection” of women. This is a strange paradox for the Indian government. These are just two of the many instances where the government has failed to act on injustice. According to a world report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), “the government led by the [BJP] harassed and at times prosecuted activists, lawyers, human rights defenders, and journalists for criticizing

¹⁸³ Vij, Shivam. “India's Ruling Bharatiya Janata Party Has a Rape Problem.” Quartz India. Quartz, September 25, 2019.

<https://qz.com/india/1715615/kathua-unnao-up-cases-show-modis-bjp-has-a-rape-problem/>.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

authorities.”¹⁸⁵ The report also states that some senior leaders in the government publicly supported perpetrators of crimes involving, attacks on religious minorities, and those who critiqued the government, such as Alka Lamba and Kavita Krishnan.¹⁸⁶

Counter to PM Narendra Modi’s pitch on women empowerment in India, UP’s CM Yogi Adityanath wrote in an article on his website where he said, “women power does not require freedom, but protection and channelisation”. He also wrote in his article, “Considering the importance and honour of women...our scriptures have always spoken about giving her protection....As energy can go waste and cause damage if left free and uncontrolled, women power also does not require freedom, but protection...” He then cited a Sanskrit shloka, “Father protects women power in childhood; husband does during her youth, and her son protects her when she gets old. Therefore women do not deserve independence.”¹⁸⁷ Indian National Congress Party’s communication department head Randeep Surjewala said, “He says that women...do not need, deserve independence, but they need to be channelised and controlled like commodities that are used. This is shocking.” Surjewala adds,

“The most shocking thing he says is that a man, if ever he gets the same attributes as a woman, such as humility, compassion, love, then he is equivalent to god. But if a woman becomes powerful, if a woman is brave, adopts courage...then she becomes a devil...If this is the mindset and attitude of the BJP, then this is reflective of the policies of the BJP across states. This reflects BJP’s

¹⁸⁵ Roth, Kenneth. “World Report 2019: Rights Trends in India.” Human Rights Watch, January 18, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/india>.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid*.

¹⁸⁷ “On Yogi's Website: 'Women Power Does Not Require Freedom, but Protection'.” The Indian Express, April 17, 2017.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/on-yogis-website-women-power-does-not-require-freedom-but-protection-4617177/>.

anti-women mindset coming from none less than the BJP's mascot... Adityanath must apologise to the women of India for his disparaging, dishonourable and distasteful remarks and also remove this article from his website without any condition."¹⁸⁸

Hence, to protect Hindu women their rights to decision making will also be taken away from them. Another case of a love Jihad accusation took place in Uttar Pradesh where the couple was dragged out of their own home, shamed in front of the public, and taken into custody.¹⁸⁹ An anchor on Aaj Tak commented on this incident, "if the boy doesn't have a problem and the girl doesn't have a problem, then who are you to interfere? Was it your job to police them or should you have called the police?", as she directed it to a local politician who is also a high ranked member of the Yuva Vahini vigilante group and the headlines read: By watching over love, will Indian culture be strengthened?

The general public should not be determinants for who should be punished and taking law into their own hands. On May 1st 2016, a woman in Pune, Maharashtra was dragged out of her car, threatened, and beaten up because she was wearing a short dress.¹⁹⁰ One of the five perpetrators had told her that "none of our sisters, daughters, or female family members roam around at 5:30 or 6:30 in the morning with two guys wearing a dress and that is why the incident wouldn't come up".¹⁹¹ The perpetrator justified his behavior by comparing her choice of lifestyle to their mothers and sisters. Boys, like girls, pick up on their female counterparts' (sisters and

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ "Hindu Yuva Vahini Activists Barge Into A Couple's House In Meerut" *Halla Bol*. Aaj Tak. Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India: April 12, 2017. <https://youtu.be/eAlkWvldwhc>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAlkWvldwhc&list=WL&index=70&t=0s>

¹⁹⁰ "Congress Takes The Issue Of Moral Policing In Pune To State Assembly" *India Today*. Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India: May 10, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFm8m7D6III>

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, quoted victim.

mothers) socially constructed gender identity at a young age. Through interactions and exposure to different socializing agents like, family, media, and other social institutions, males may learn and internalize them to form appropriate behavior.¹⁹² Usha Ram discussed this when he spoke about the results of the socialization of children in Indian households and how children gain an understanding of equating maleness with power and authority and inferiority with women. As a result men may project behaviors which they have acquired in consistency with one's or her gender back into society. This outcome and way of thinking could potentially result in acts of injustices against women like the one mentioned prior.

Out of the total 161 respondents in my interviews and survey only 6 individuals, all middle aged Hindu males, said that the government has taken initiatives towards empowering women. Even though this is true with welfare schemes like *Beti Padhao Beti Bachao*,¹⁹³ and Nirbhaya Fund¹⁹⁴. *Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao* campaign launched in 2015, has gained a lot of attention, however, of the 648 million rupees allocated for the scheme since it's launch, 56% of that amount has been spent on publicity. Only 25% of the amount, so 159 million rupees, has been distributed to states and districts for actual implementation.¹⁹⁵ The department of justice of

¹⁹² Basu, Sharmistha, Xiayun Zuo, Chaohua Lou, Rajib Acharya, and Rebecka Lundgren. "Learning to Be Gendered: Gender Socialization in Early Adolescence Among Urban Poor in Delhi, India, and Shanghai, China." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 61, no. 4 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.03.012>.

¹⁹³ This translates to: educate girls, save girls, and the goal of this scheme is to prevent gender biased sex selective elimination, ensure survival & protection of the girl child, ensure education and participation of the girl child.

¹⁹⁴ Following the brutal tragedy of December 2012 Delhi gang rape of a 23- year old woman, the Government has set up a dedicated fund – Nirbhaya Fund – which can be utilized for projects specifically designed to improve the safety and security of women. It is a non-lapsable corpus fund, being administered by the Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance.

¹⁹⁵ Bureau, Outlook Web. "56% Of 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' Funds Spent On Advertisements: Minister." <https://www.outlookindia.com/>. outlookindia.com, January 21, 2019. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-beti-bachao-beti-padhao-centre-spent-56-of-funds-on-publicity-minister-tells-lok-sabha/324035>.

the central government contributes to the Nirbhaya Fund and none of the states has utilised any fund allocated to them by the department of justice, according to the Centre's reply in Parliament.

¹⁹⁶ “For the funds released by the Union Women and Child Development Ministry, only about 20 per cent has been used by the states. In the case of Union home ministry, the states have submitted utilisation certificates of less than 9 per cent money released under Nirbhaya Fund - Rs 146.98 crore¹⁹⁷ of Rs 1,656.71 crore, respectively, in the past five years.”¹⁹⁸ Hence, the funds are not being fully disbursed towards the schemes established by the government. At this stage, the local governments and smaller local governments known as *Gram Panchayats*¹⁹⁹ play a crucial role because it is upto them to allocate the funds to give households or communities.

One of the interviewees named Anika shared some of her experience as a school psychologist at a high school in Bangalore. She previously worked with the *Gram Panchayat* back in her own village. She was always shocked when she went to visit since there would be close to no social progress for the women in her society. She says,

“I was always surprised going back and seeing women still defecate in the woods at night and at dawn, despite the government granting money to villages to build toilets and one of them being ours. Women and even girls are so shy in sharing their issues and struggles. *Gram panchayats* are given money by the government to take action against cruelty against women like building proper toilets,

¹⁹⁶ Dutta, Prabhask K. “Nirbhaya Fund Utilisation Shows Why Women Continue to Be Unsafe in India.” India Today, December 5, 2019. <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/nirbhaya-fund-utilisation-shows-why-women-continue-to-be-unsafe-in-india-1625407-2019-12-05>.

¹⁹⁷ A crore denotes ten million (10,000,000 or 10⁷ in scientific notation) in the Indian numbering system.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ Village councils

providing education for girls in close proximity to their homes, providing women with proper sanitary materials during menstruations, and also appropriate health care for all women. Because I don't know if you know, but these women are harassed at night, women have bad infections because women don't use sanitary napkins during their periods, and many mothers die during childbirth and also sometimes suspiciously babies also die, there is a conspiracy in my village that it could be female born babies. Men know that women go out at night to do their toilet business, so sometimes men harass them by shining torches at them.

Women are unsafe and Gram Panchayats don't distribute this money to families in the village, they keep it to themselves and villagers sometimes are not even aware of these schemes. If they gave it to families there would be progress. But there isn't. So you know what is happening. But what can you do about it? I think women need to start sharing their struggles and issues to *panchayats* so they can better understand what women endure.”

Anika's frustration is that, despite the hardships women endure without a toilet in their homes and the lack of women's healthcare in villages like hers, the *Panchayat* still does not provide funds or take measures towards the well-being of women. She knows that it would take harsh implementations for a village council to begin helping the women in the community.

Anika explained that there are a lack of toilets inside homes because of religious reasons, as it brings impurity into the home. She also added that “the villagers have moved on from this belief and want to build toilets. However, they cannot afford it, which is why schemes like this exist. But villagers are also unaware of many schemes like this so it is rare that this is a topic of choice

during *Panchayat* gatherings.” Hence, with the lack of implementation at the root-level, she does not believe that she will see progress any time soon. Anika wants to give back to her community in the future with her psychology degree.

Furthermore, multiple sources have confirmed underutilised funds from the Nirbhaya Fund. 'Nirbhaya Fund' continues to see a utilisation of just nine per cent of the funds, with some of its major schemes seeing spending of less than 25 per cent under them,²⁰⁰ as 90% of the funds remained unused and no states reported over 50% utilisation of the funds.²⁰¹ “Recent cases of crimes against women and children that shocked the country took place in Karnataka, Telangana, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh. The study reveals utilisation of allocated Nirbhaya funds by Karnataka, Telangana, and Odisha was only 6%. The figure for UP was 21%.”²⁰² Kailash Satyarthi Children’s Foundation reacted to the low utilisation of the funds by saying that, “despite a rise in sexual crimes and murder against women, only Rs 252 crore have been used by some of the states, which accounts to 11 per cent of the total amount.... Rapes, followed by killing, always lead to a loud outcry from the citizens of the country, however the same is not translated into concrete action, to prevent rapes and to make public spaces in the country safe for women.”²⁰³ Satyarthi added, “The abysmally low utilization of Nirbhaya Fund is a testimony to

²⁰⁰ “Nirbhaya Fund Remains Underutilised; Some Schemes See Less than 25% Utilisation.” Business Today, March 20, 2020.

<https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/nirbhaya-fund-remains-underutilised-some-schemes-see-less-than-25-utilisation/story/398762.html>.

²⁰¹ Pandit, Ambika. “Nearly 90% of Nirbhaya Fund Lying Unused: Govt Data: India News - Times of India.” The Times of India, December 8, 2019.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/nearly-90-of-nirbhaya-fund-lying-unused-govt-data/article72421059.cms>.

²⁰² *ibid.*

²⁰³ “Nirbhaya Fund Remains Underutilised; Some Schemes See Less than 25% Utilisation.” Business Today, March 20, 2020.

<https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/nirbhaya-fund-remains-underutilised-some-schemes-see-less-than-25-utilisation/story/398762.html>.

the fact that there is very little or no political will to ensure the safety and security of women in our country.”²⁰⁴ Following that, the foundation demanded for immediate steps to be taken to make public spaces more secure for women and use current events of rape as a wake-up call for actions.²⁰⁵

Fear and shame is a common feeling observed across victims of sexual assault and violence among women in India. Preeti is a 20 year old student who studies Philosophy at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi. She expressed how safe she feels in the campus but as soon as she steps outside she is constantly stared at or made remarks at, usually guys trying to sing romantic songs as they follow her. This has occurred to her more times than she could count. Some of her friends who are from North India, like Uttarakhand, UP, and Punjab have told her stories of them feeling guilt and shame for undergoing traumatic events of sexual assault. Preeti states,

“Shame is the main reason, why there are so many under reported cases of rape, molestation and all. Indian girls don’t have that freedom to tell their family because even if they tell their families, they will silence them. And even if they do something like tell the police, the police rarely will take down a FIR²⁰⁶ so, now the perpetrator will never be caught and will probably do this to more women... Even I have been told to be quite, like they [her family] say, *zyada mat bol*²⁰⁷, or

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*

²⁰⁶ First Information Report is a written document prepared by Police when they receive information about a cognizable offence.

²⁰⁷ Translates to: Don’t talk too much

when I talk about serious topics, they will be like *sober baate kar*²⁰⁸ or oh god my mum says this all the time, she will say, *bahut udne lagi hai tu?*²⁰⁹, like what I am saying is so unimportant. Self-expression is non-existent *ya*, you should write that.”

Like Preeti, 47% of the total female respondents expressed their distrust in their own families, when asked if they would share any instances where they felt violated with their family members. “A combination of patriarchy, misogyny and extreme conservatism makes women feel ashamed of the crimes being committed against them.”²¹⁰ Such misguided shame has led girls to overpower and internalize feelings of guilt. Like preeti, seven other female respondents conveyed similar or extreme frustration about reactions from family members or friends when attempting to discuss something serious related to their career, love life, sexual assault or harrassment, and independence. The frustration was that conversations were diverted and not paid much attention to because they did not want to create any problems (problems *nahi khara karna*). The fear of deteriorating reputations and the honor of the family, these issues were overlooked for these women who built up courage to speak to their families to begin with.

²⁰⁸ Translates to: Speak in a sober manner. Sober is a term that is often used by Indians to express that one should be more reserved, serious, and to themselves. They are moral and marriage-worthy.

²⁰⁹ Translates to: You have wings now?, it is an insinuation that now she has too much freedom that she can say certain things that she should not be because she is a woman.

²¹⁰ Bhalla, Nita. “The Suicide Letters That Symbolise India's Misguided Shame.” news.trust.org. Thomson Reuters Foundation, August 29, 2014. <https://news.trust.org/item/20140829094100-6ah0b>.

Discussion

After all the interviews, interviewees were asked what improvements for women they would like to see in India? 95% of the total respondents expressed that they would like to see a change in the education system and incorporate sex education. Men's discriminatory or violent behaviors were always related back to the lack of or nonexistence of sex education in the school systems. It was also often expressed that males "put their mothers on a pedestal"²¹¹ and worship them. However, interviewees expressed the paradox of the treatment of mothers in the household versus the treatment of other women in public spaces. "A mother is to be treated like a *devi*²¹²", one interviewee said. However, many also said that men cannot perceive other women in public spaces as Goddesses because they don't embody the same qualities of a mother. Therefore, according to 78% of the respondents it is more likely that women get harassed often by Indian men because the same respect is not reciprocated for other women. Multiple interviewees listed factors why there might not be the same reciprocated respect, it includes: lack of traditionalism in the types of clothes they wore, if they are seen at a bar, seen hanging out with male friends, staying out too late, and more.

89% of the respondents wanted to see a shift in "backward"²¹³ mindsets to more "rational" or "objective" mindsets. I heard the term backward mindsets in every single interview, however, 89% of the total respondents sought to see a shift in these mindsets. To these

²¹¹ This term was expressed quite often.

²¹² Translates to Goddess.

²¹³ This term was expressed quite often.

respondents backwards mindsets were very traditional and they got in the way of their personal development at some point in their life.

Lastly, 100% of the total respondents responded with the need to increase the emphasis and implementation of educating girls. As multiple interviewees expressed that by educating them, especially girls from rural India, it will provide them with an avenue to gain confidence, provide ideas and insights that otherwise would not be brought to light, amplify their voices, and more. In addition to that, when asked about the efficiency of the existing government schemes to empower women: 77% of the total respondents expressed the inefficiency of these schemes due to the lack of implementations. Some of the interviewees even expressed that they have not heard of any follow ups from the government on how successful or unsuccessful these schemes were after being set up or implemented.

Conclusion

This thesis examines the way in which Hindu women are socialized through the domains of religion, household, and politics and consequently disempowered through the influence of deep-rooted socio-cultural and religious practices and norms in efforts to manifest a Hindu India. The experiences of Hindu women discussed above are only some of the stories and instances of disempowerment in the midst of a rise in Hindu nationalism. Women play and have played a significant role in nation building. By investing in the well-being of Indian women and proper education for both men and women we will be investing in our present and the future.

Despite the deep rooted sociocultural challenges, by providing a platform for women and their voices these challenges and issues can be refuted. Women should be questioned and asked what they desire and the changes they would like to see before developing schemes and plans for women empowerment and nation-building. One cannot assume that a woman wants to be protected, there needs to be an analysis of deeper issues and stigmas that are involved, such as the lack of sex education in school systems, impressions of sex-atypical tasks in households, and more. Usha Ram's study portrayed vast differences in the socialization of males and females. Young Indian men most often grow up perceiving unequal practices between men and women within the household, devaluation of women in media, political affairs, work places, and in society. This distorts their perception of women, their representation, and how they should be treated.

Religion is the most significant factor in shaping social and cultural norms as it pervades multiple realms of life for women. They are bound by their "religious" duties which perpetuates

domesticity in lives of Hindu women. Therefore, women must be enabled to embrace and accept religion on their own terms. Therefore, it will be upto her to decide whether participating in or rejecting religion will be an empowering experience for her. Like scholars of other religions, Hindu women's participation and re-interpretation of texts can bring a different light towards the perception of women in mythologies and other scriptures. Additionally, domestic religious practices performed by Hindu women could be explained or perceived in a different manner. Should women affirm to the traditionally developed domestic ideals then that will be her avenue towards achieving empowerment. Whereas, if women chose to comprehend the same domestic ideals through reconfiguration, criticism, or even reject the belief or practice, then that will be her empowering experience. Women can verbalize their longing for equality with men in Hindu societies through the re-examination of some resources of their tradition. This will allow religion to be one of the many avenues towards an equal position and achieving equal rights.

Women in politics should take advantage of their platform in advocating for equal rights instead of reinforcing the performance sex-linked roles in the public domain. Additionally, with more women in power the nation can progress towards eliminating the gender gap and societal perceptions of females and their role. Additionally, women in politics can use their platform to reach out to vulnerable communities and gather voices of women who would otherwise be unable to be heard. They should exercise their political platform by preaching the hardships and struggles of women all over India to bring light to the injustices and lack of accessibility that they face.

My field work was analyzed through the concept of socialization through religious practices and expectations in the realms of household and politics. Findings do suggest the

permeation of Hinduism within households and especially identity politics. It also portrays the importance of maintaining Hindu values especially among members of Hindu households. There needs to be a presentation of more equal opportunities for both boys and girls in the household as this domain can be considered to be a key setting in which gender inequality becomes implied in the fabrics of social life.²¹⁴ Since, households play a critical role in children's growth and understanding of worldviews. Additionally, politically, women experience constant discrimination and frustrations in public spaces due to the existing ideologies, manifested by the nationalist government and its leaders, to build a Hindu nation.

Ultimately, this research argues that there needs further reform in household dynamics of Hindu families, political notion of "protecting" women and imposing conservative morals, and a re-interpretation of religion with further involvement of Hindu women. India has witnessed vast development regarding women's empowerment. However, this requires a total shift in mindsets, common to both men and women, with an intensified focus on the girl child and assisting her in eliminating traditional stereotypes that restrain her potential.

²¹⁴ Ram, "Gender Socialization: Differences between Male and Female Youth in India and Associations with Mental Health," 9.

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