

Women's Roles in Hinduism

Women in all societies through history have tried to gain a greater role in their community, religion, or country. Women have done the same in Hinduism, though their roles have been laid out in texts such as the *Laws of Manu* and the *Dharma-Sastras*. The *Laws of Manu*, also known as Manusmṛti, are a set of basic principles stating how one should lead a dharmic life. The Dharma-Sastras explain one's religious and legal duties. These texts were followed more strictly many years ago, but their prominence has declined over time due to circumstance. Nevertheless, there are some principles people inevitably still follow.

Unlike many western religions, Hinduism is not just a religion but also a way of life. Family plays an important role in people's lives and as the keeper of the household, a woman's role would be vital in the tradition. According to Hinduism, a woman is a form of energy, shaktiswarupini, or an aspect of Shakti. She has three roles of being a child, wife, and mother. As a child she is kanya, the goddess Durga. As a wife she is pathni and sahadharmacharini, a partner in her husband's religious duties. As a mother she is a devi, the auspicious one, and is worthy of worship (matrudevobhava).

Historically, the female life cycle in Hinduism has been different from that of males. In the classical, medieval and most of the modern periods, females have followed a three-stage pattern. The Laws of Manu specify that a woman should be adorned and honored by her father, brother, son, and brother-in-law if they sought for their own welfare. It declares "*Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased. Where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards.*" In those days, women were required to be present at the time of a religious ritual, though they would not officially take part in the service. Manu goes on to say "*Day and night, women must be kept dependent to the males of their families. Her father protects her in childhood. Her husband protects her in youth. Her sons protect her in old age. A woman is never fit for independence.*" In this last judgment, Manu implies the three-stages of a woman's life and how she must be under their watchful eyes at any point during her life.

The woman's main duties come when she is at the wife and mother stage. As a wife, a Hindu woman was expected to live up to the ideals of the Sthri-Dharma, the duties of the good wife. She is to revere her husband as the Lord. Her responsibilities are to bear his children and educate them in their traditional practices. She must serve him, follow him, and only after he eats may she eat. She shares his karma and destiny. For this reason she sometimes fasts, and goes on pilgrimages to ensure her husband's long life and success. If he dies prematurely, it was often regarded as her responsibility or her bad karma. The husband in turn should provide his wife any material needs, security, and social status. He must also regard her as a goddess. This reinforces Manu's statement "*Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased.*"

In Hindu culture, the mother is the very embodiment of love, sacrifice, selfless service to her children, and of forbearance. She is considered the first teacher of every child, and is regarded as the highest Guru. Her role as a mother is primarily devoted to the upbringing of her children and ensuring their comfort. She is also busy in up keeping the household. Her duties interlace with those of being a wife. The importance of the mother in the family is greater than anything other. Hindu scriptures say *"The mother must be served by her son even if she is deemed an outcast in the society."* This embodies her significance in one's life. Motherhood is one of the most important parts of being a woman and it is after being a mother you experience not only the wide variety of emotions but also achieve your full potential.

In a changing world, Hindu society is trying to redefine the role of women in the institution of family and society. Unlike the customs back then, women today have more freedom starting at a very young age. They are not put under the same pressures for certain services that do not fit the modern society. Women are showing a greater representation in politics and science today than they did years ago. This is also due to the fact that women are eligible to the same education men are and no gender segregations are present.

Hindu women have enjoyed the rights they have received and are treated better than women in other religions. Although a few duties Hindu women have that may seem a bit extreme, the acknowledgment they receive as a mother compensates for all of those discomforts. It is understandable that today not all the roles are being carried out to their extremities. They are followed up to a certain extent until which they seem unreasonable to most people. It is said that a dharmic person is one who carries out all their duties throughout the duration of their life. Therefore, Hinduism gives a fulfilling life for a woman who follows these essential roles.