Women's Importance in Hinduism

In all religions, men and women have different roles. In ancient times, women and men were equal in the principles and practices of their religion. This is especially true in Hinduism. Women played a key role in many aspects of Hinduism. Indeed, the entire principle of Hinduism was living a *dharmic* life. In modern times, however, Hindu women have gradually lost their importance. I want to demonstrate that throughout human history, the importance of the average Hindu women has gradually changed from a significant to a negligible one.

If a non-Hindu glimpses at the Hindu Gods and Goddesses, one finds that all goddesses are of equal stature or importance as the gods. It is said that all gods, regardless of gender, sprung from one *Shakthi*, or main feminine power. The feminine power is reflected in all of the counterparts of the male gods, each having their individual specialty. All the main concepts that humans need to survive stem from the powers of the goddesses. *Bhoomi Devi-* Mother Earth, was the home of all humans.

Knowledge, Language, Speech and Talent come from Devi *Saraswathi*. Wealth, Prosperity and Progeny are attributed to Goddesses *Lakshmi*. Food, Grains, and Agriculture come from *Parvathy Devi*. The energy and power (*Shakthi*) needed for all humans is invested in different Devis-*Durga, Kali, etc.* The quintessence of beauty and poise is reflected in all goddesses, and they are respected and offered devotion. Hence, the roots of the importance of women in Hinduism are obvious, and quite significant in our goddesses and our Hindu culture.

Women were highly revered and held in high esteem. In the olden days, Brahmin women were allowed to wear a *poonal* and participated in and conducted poojas. Now, only male Brahmin priests do so, and very few poojas and festivities such as Navarathri glorify women or demonstrate their importance. With time, however, and throughout the modern history of Hinduism, this importance gradually declined. As years passed, the role of women was pushed farther down the ladder to that of a home-maker and a child raiser. There was a gradual lack of respect for girls and women, and in some instances, Hindus considered it unfortunate to have a girl child. This ignorance and eventual degrading attitude continued.

The duty of women today, is to a man. As soon as a girl was married, she was expected to obey her husband's wishes, living a life somewhat similar to that of a slave. She had to put his life and priorities ahead of her own. Women were not educated or given importance in political or social matters, and were often treated in a humiliating manner. A woman, once married might as well be a servant in chains.

Another main blow to the importance of women is the topic of widowhood or divorce. Regardless of the time period, a widow was scorned and mistreated by society. If a Hindu man died, in the past, the widow committed sati. While the Indian constitution has outlawed the practice of sati, the widow is still expected to live the rest of her life in mourning and sorrow. Wearing only white, and no bindi or jewelry, she is never happy. Widows are not welcome at Hindu poojas or auspicious occasions (although these instances are <u>slowly</u> becoming more socially acceptable). Once a woman's husband is

gone, so is her life. On the contrary, a widower (a man who has lost his wife) could remarry without being misjudged.

Divorce is another controversial issue. It is looked upon badly by Indian society, and a woman's social rank drops if anyone were to find out she was a divorcee. Many conservative Hindus do not consider the mistakes of man in divorce and readily blame the woman.

Despite the harsh attitudes towards women in Hindu practices and principles, there remains one area that women are regarded as extremely important: child-rearing and home-making. Regardless of culture, or custom, the position of a mother is always an acclaimed one. There is no one else in the entire world that can compare to one's mother, and the love of a mother is the strongest kind of love possible. There is a saying in Hinduism - on the order of respecting individuals: *matha*, *pitha*, *guru*, *daivam*, meaning first comes the mother, then everyone else, including god.

In Hinduism especially we see the power of *mathru shakthi*. Adi Shankara, a reviver of Hinduism, requested his mother's permission before leading the life of a *sanyasi*, or a man who dedicates his life to serving the Lord. Lord Krishna respected Yashoda, although he troubled his adoptive mother. The Pandavas were also obedient of their mother Kunti. When Arjuna brings his newlywed Draupathi home, Kunti blindly tells all her sons that they must share whatever Arjuna has. Although having one woman share five husbands was unheard of, the Pandavas obeyed their mother's request. Even Lord Rama, who, through the wishes of his stepmother Kaikeki, agreed to live in the forest for fourteen years. In all the Hindu scriptures, Hindu principles and customs, we see the reverence of the common man, and even the Lord for their mother.

The subject of female importance in Hinduism can be approached in two contradicting ways. On the one hand, goddesses and mothers are respected, glorified and are extremely important in Hinduism. Others may point to the various examples of life of the average Hindu woman as having minimal importance in Hindu customs and culture. Regardless of the stance, we must find a way to make sure that gender roles are equal globally, starting with our own religion. The average Hindu women should be respected like they were in the ancient past, and need not be degraded. We must be proud to be Hindus, and confident Hindu women should have a prominent role in today's society anywhere in the world. This is especially true in the US, where we must attain the best of Hindu culture while trying to assimilate in another land and culture.

