

# Gender Concepts and Deities in Hinduism and Buddhism

30<sup>th</sup> July 2022, *Sandeep Shrestha*

Gender contrary to popular usage does not refer to just the female sex but is the socially constructed identity of being either a male or a female. So, gender concepts in religion will focus on both the sexes and how they exist as both an abstract reality as well as a concrete reality. Eastern religion goes into detail about the male and female forces and explains the implications for devotion and world view.

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions and has a rich tradition of religious thoughts and ideas on the questions of creation and other mysteries. Among the several early Hindu texts, the Vedas are “the oldest Indo-European literary and philosophical monument.” (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 1957) The first of the four Vedas, the Rig Veda consists of hymns to the gods and most of these gods are referred to as male. References are made to deities like Surya (sun), Agni (fire), Dyaus (sky or heaven), Maruts (storms), Vayu (wind), Apas (waters), Usas (dawn), and Prithvi (Earth). In Hinduism, what is usually considered female is associated to male deities. So, the female Diana (moon) is the male Chandra while Aphrodite, the goddess of love in Greek mythology is Kamadeva a male deity. This would indicate the dominance of male signifiers for deity which is similar to other classical theism such as in the West. Religious language is often accompanied by its use of male metaphors like lord, father, and he when addressing god.

‘Examining the position in ancient India it is clear from the evidence in the Rigveda, the earliest literature of the Indo-Aryans, that women held an honorable place in early Indian society. There were a few Rigvedic hymns composed by women. Women had access to the highest knowledge and could participate in all religious ceremonies. In domestic life too she was respected and there is no suggestion of seclusion of women and child marriage. Later when the priestly Brahmins dominated society and religion lost its spontaneity and became a mass of ritual, we see a downward trend in the position accorded to women.’ (Dewaraja, 1994) So, Vedas cannot be said to be entirely male centric but that later interpretations of the Veda led to gender polarities between men and women.

If we look at Hinduism, we find several Hindu goddesses that share a status equal to their male counterparts. These goddesses are often consorts to a male counterpoint. This might be somehow similar to the eastern concept of yin and yang where the male and female energies together in harmony create a complete whole. Shiva himself is sometimes shown as having a male and a female side. The Hindu trinity holds an important place in Hindu lore representing the abstract concepts of Creation (Brahma), Preservation (Vishnu), and Destruction (Shiva). The three have Saraswati, the ‘goddess of knowledge and the arts’, Lakshmi, the ‘goddess of wealth and fortune’, and Parvati, who is often considered

to be Mahadevi, Shakti, or Durga. These goddesses and their association with abstract concepts like wealth, knowledge, and purity might indicate that these concepts are thought of as feminine.

Shakti is thought to be the creative feminine energy that correlates to the male aspect of Purusha or 'being'. Also called the divine mother, Shakti is described as being in every god and without Shakti, all gods including Shiva are powerless. The female energy is power of 'ability' while the male being is the one 'able' to project that energy. This is related to how the female consorts are important to the male trinity. So, Lakshmi is the energy of Vishnu, Parvati is the energy of Shiva and so on. So, here we find that even abstract concepts like energy having feminine association. Interestingly, there are very few goddess worshipping cults. Shakti is the only goddess that has a large worshipping cult called the Shakta. They worship Shakti as Devi or Mahadevi and believe that all goddesses are manifestations of Shakti. Similarly, we find that time and its destructiveness is embodied into the female deity Kali. Also called the devourer of time, she is depicted naked with Maya as her only covering. She is thought to be pure, un-manifested energy and therefore devoid of the concepts of light, color, good and bad. Kali represents the destructive nature of Shakti while Durga represents Shakti's channeled energy. A lesser feminine force is Prakriti or nature.

When talking about gender in Hinduism, we cannot ignore the two important female figures that appear in the Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. In the Ramayana, the prince of the kingdom of Ayodhya marries the princess Sita who is then kidnapped and the whole epic revolves around her rescue from the demon king Ravana. Sita is used often in Hindu lore to describe the ideal wife. It can be argued that Sita's character is used to argue for female submissiveness to their male counterpart and faithfulness towards the husband. The Mahabharata on the other hand has Draupadi who is married to the five Pandava brothers. Draupadi is often thought to be a more positive portrayal of women because she is more independent and strong willed. Sita is often comparable to the western cliché of the 'damsel in distress'. Draupadi on the other hand displays the wrath and fury of a woman who is wronged against. The Mahabharata could be interpreted as the story of the destruction of the Kaurava family that incurs the wrath of Draupadi.

When we talk about gender and abstraction of gender concepts, we cannot forget the concept of 'Maya' which is all important in Hinduism. Maya is usually thought of as being feminine. Maya is the illusion of reality that is created around us and which fools us into believing that it is fundamental reality of things. Maya is considered to be a powerful force. According to Upanishad texts, the infinitely powerful, eternal and omniscient Brahman is unable to escape Maya. According to Brahmanistic philosophers, we are Brahman who has fooled itself into thinking that the world is real and that we are individuals living out here. Even Buddhist texts refer to the illusionary aspect of the world and that one can obtain moksha upon realizing the fundamental reality.

In Buddhism, we find that wisdom is associated to as a female concept. A female Bodhisattva who is also thought of as the mother of all Buddhas becomes the personification of the 'Perfection of Wisdom.' This is very similar to the Hindu Goddess Saraswati who is the personification of knowledge and the arts. There are also many female holy beings that are associated with wisdom in Tantric Buddhism. In tantric Buddhism, we find the mention of yi-dams which are holy beings that are in harmony with the tantric practitioner's nature and act as his tutelary deity. The yi-dams may either be male or female and wrathful or peaceful. One particular wrathful female yi-dam worth mentioning is the Dakini which are seen as playful but tricky beings. The peaceful female yi-dam is called a Bhagavati or 'Lady'. 'The most popular 'Ladies' are the Green and White forms of the Bodhisattva Tara, the 'Saviouress' Though some of her twenty-one forms are wrathful, the Green and White forms are the most popular of all yi-dams.' (Harvey, 2005) The Bodhisattva Tara, the 'Saviouress' is one of the most important female deities among many which Tantric Buddhism reveres. As Harvey writes, 'In Tibet, these came to be among the most well-loved deities, one becoming Tibet's patron goddess. They are seen as graceful, attractive and approachable, and as ever ready to tenderly care for those in distress. Their compassionate nature, in responding to those who call on them, is reflected in the story that they were born from two tears shed by Avalokitesvara when he saw the horrors of hell.' Also, interestingly, in China the male Avalokitesvara is depicted as the female Kuan-Yin. Harvey (2005) writes, 'This may have been because the Chinese saw his compassion as a female quality'.

While there is this popularity of female deities in Buddhism, the female rebirth is still seen as being less favorable. Although in Buddhism everyone is seen to have had past lives as males and females, it is considered inferior to a male rebirth because a woman has to face a lot of hardships (having to leave her family for her husband's, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and having to wait upon a man). The man is free from all of these. These above conditions according to Buddhism make it impossible for a female to become a Buddha or a Mara. However, a female can become a Buddha if she can make good karma and be born again as a male in the next birth. This however does not mean that women are not respected in Buddhism or are second to men. Harvey writes about how the Buddha's equal concern for both men and women is described in a passage where he vowed not to die until the monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen were well trained.

Harvey further elaborates on the gender roles and concepts in Buddhism that talks about early texts and their reference to many Arhat nuns some of whom even gave important teachings. 'The Therigatha ('Verses of the Elder Nuns') records teachings and experiences of over a hundred. While the Mahayana never had the concept of a female Buddha, it gradually came to emphasize sexual equality, partly through saying that 'maleness' and 'femaleness' are 'empty' of inherent reality' (Harvey, 2005).

For women, the home was considered to be the place of power and that husbands have to surrender certain respect and authority to his wife in the home. But there are some

differences in the gender outlook among the different schools of Buddhism. The wife is considered to be inferior to women in Eastern Buddhism (Japan, Korea) whereas in Confucius theory, women and men are thought of as equals because apparently both have the inherent potential to become a Buddha. In Thailand which is thought of Southern Buddhism we find equality among the sexes. Other Southern Buddhist lands, women have been traditionally been practicing law and medicine and also wield political power. Divorce is not common among Buddhists but is not thought to be objectionable. Therefore, Buddhist societies accord certain amount of respect to single women (widows and spinsters). The Northern Buddhism, which is mostly in Tibet, women enjoy sexual freedom equal to that of men and have property rights and free will.

In the Buddhist monastic orders, we find both monks and nuns though the Buddha is said to have founded monks first and nuns second. As mentioned before, nuns have had an important role in Buddhism and there were even Arhat nuns who taught the Therigatha. It is to be noted however that the Buddha did have reservations about putting nuns on equal footing with monks. This could have been due to the problems of sexual relations whereby the monks would have their minds go astray with women around them. This could be explained by the social norms of the times and women were considered unsuitable to face the hardships of living a life apart from civilization. The life of a monk was respected in society and by allowing women to become nuns, they would be in a respected position that was against social norms of the day. The Buddha was asked if women were capable of becoming Arhats to which he replied that they were. So, the nun community called bhikkhuni was formed with the conditions that the nuns would have to follow a set of eight rules, such as having to bow to all monks, regardless of their rank or position. The bowing rule is not based upon intrinsic value because even if a junior monk is enlightened, he still has to bow to a senior monk who is not. Also, the nuns were made dependent upon the monks for certain things like ordination ceremonies. Today the bhikkhuni only exist in Eastern Buddhism. The nun ordination line in Northern Buddhism is not accepted as being up to Theravadan standards as it did not originate in India. Today, nuns are more independent of monks which would not be so as bhikkhunis. So, as witnessed, women have an alleviated position in Buddhism.

Therefore, looking at two of the main Eastern religions, we find that many of the key concepts are gender specific. Women are celebrated and worshipped in their divine forms as goddesses and supreme mothers. The Advaita philosophy believes that both the male and female forms are part of Brahman who is genderless. So, the traditional gender values in Eastern religious philosophy says a lot about the feminism and feminine power in religion. Abstract and concrete realities and their connections with gender concepts leads one to contemplate the implications on the then gender perceptions. In the end, the importance of gender in religious philosophy just goes to prove that religion at least has alleviated women to divinity and that the social realities are to blame for undermining the position of women today.

## About the Author

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