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Hindu goddesses as role models for women?

A qualitative study of some middle class women's views
on being a woman in the Hindu society

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ABSTRACT

This report is based on a field study that was carried out in Faridabad, India in the spring of 2007. The aim is to study what role the Hindu goddesses play for Hindu women. To fulfil this purpose I am also studying the interviewed women's underlying understanding regarding gender equality.

To fulfil the aim a qualitative method was chosen and 19 interviews were completed. The informants answered questions about being a woman in the Hindu society and their opinions on how to change women's situation. When analysing the results I was inspired by previous research on gender and Hinduism.

In the Hindu mythology there are both gods and goddesses. Worshipping goddesses can be seen as a source of power and inspiration for women. Therefore I wanted to study if the informants look at the goddesses as role models. The results show that it is difficult to determine whether or not that is the case. Approximately half of the informants said that they looked at the goddesses as role models. In contrast to previous research the informants did not mention the goddesses that are represented with qualities that the ideal wife should possess, instead Durga, the fight goddess, was mentioned. However, previous research also shows that the independent goddesses that were described as role models by the informants are a part of a patriarchal structure. During the interviews the role of being a good wife and a mother is described as the most important thing for the informants. This can, according to me, be related to the most significant result on what the understanding of gender equality is based on. This is the opinion that men and women are born with different qualities. In contrast to the gender theory, the differences between men and women are not understood as primarily socially constructed.

SAMMANFATTNING

Denna uppsats baseras på en fältstudie genomförd i Faridabad, Indien våren 2007. Syftet är att undersöka vilken roll hinduiska gudinnor spelar för kvinnor. För att uppfylla det syftet studeras också de intervjuade kvinnornas underliggande uppfattningar om jämställdhet.

För att kunna uppfylla syftet med uppsatsen har en kvalitativ metod använts och 19 intervjuer har genomförts. Informanterna har fått svara på frågor som handlar om att vara kvinna i det hinduiska samhället och deras åsikter om hur kvinnors situation bör ändras. När resultaten från intervjuerna analyserats har jag inspirerats av tidigare forskning om genus och Hinduism.

I den hinduiska mytologin finns både gudar och gudinnor. Att dyrka gudinnor kan ses som en källa till makt och inspiration för kvinnor. Därför har jag studerat om informanterna ser på gudinnorna som förebilder. Resultaten visar att det är svårt att avgöra om så är fallet. Ungefär hälften av informanterna sade att det ser gudinnorna som förebilder. I motsats till tidigare forskning nämnde inte informanterna de gudinnor som representerar de egenskaper som den ideala hustrun ska besitta, istället nämndes stridsgudinnan Durga. Tidigare forskning visar dock att även de självständiga gudinnorna som beskrevs av informanterna som förebilder är en del av den patriarkala strukturen. Under intervjuerna framgick att rollen att vara en bra hustru och mor värdesätts högt av informanterna. Detta kan, enligt mig, kopplas till det mest framträdande resultatet som framkom i synen på vad jämställdhetsuppfattningen baseras på. Det gäller uppfattningen om att män och kvinnor föds med olika egenskaper. I motsats till genusteori förstås inte skillnader mellan män och kvinnor som främst socialt konstruerade.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on a field study that was carried out in India in the spring of 2007. Women's rights are important to achieve development in a country. The Swedish government decided in the year 2005 that working for human rights in India should in particular be focused on women's rights.¹ When I got the possibility to go to India I decided I wanted to study something related to women's situation. My first idea was to study politicians' views on women's situation. What are the politicians' opinions about the relationship between Hinduism and the possibilities and obstacles to implement a politics towards a more equal society? However, when I arrived in Faridabad and met my contact person I realised that this kind of study would be very difficult to carry out. My contact person was very busy and she also recommended me not to go anywhere by myself. I later found out from other people that the city was not considered to be safe for women. Instead of trying to get in contact with politicians I changed the perspective. I decided to interview women. As it turned out this was very interesting and I am glad I got the possibility to talk to all of the women I interviewed.

In this introducing part of the report I will first give a general background on Hinduism in the Indian society and a brief description of women's situation. After that a problem discussion on Hinduism and women will take place. This discussion will result in the aim and research question of the study. Finally a disposition of the report will be presented.

1.1. General background

India is nowadays often described as a country with many possibilities. The economy has been growing ever since the liberalisation of the financial system in beginning of the 1990's. The country is also classified as the largest democracy in Asia. India has great prospects due to the fact that it is a democracy and because the economy is growing.² At the same time as modernisation is taking place, religion plays an important role in daily life for many people in India. A majority of the population, approximately 83%, are Hindus.³ One proof of the importance of Hinduism in the society is the Hindutva movement. One of the leading actors in the political field is a part of the movement⁴ and religion is a natural

¹ Internet 1: SIDA

² Dagens Nyheter, 2006-10-08

³ Internet 2: Utrikespolitiska institutet

⁴ Hellman, 1999a, p. 9

element in their campaigns.⁵ The party introduces itself as a good option for women. They claim for example that women are more than just mothers.⁶ This explains the general view on the Indian woman.

It is however difficult to talk about the “Indian woman”. Elizabeth Åsa Hole, a cultural anthropologist, explains the phenomenon of talking about the “Indian woman” as talking about the “Swedish woman” but a hundred times more difficult.⁷ Statistics, however, show the under-representation of women in general. The domestic violence against women is another problem that exists in the country.⁸

1.2. Problem discussion and theoretical approach

In the Hindu mythology there are both gods and goddesses. The divine, Ardhanarishvara, is drawn as half man and half woman. The right side is Shiva and the left side is Pavarati. The purpose of the drawing is to show that the divine consist of both a male and a female side and that these two are equally important.⁹ This can be seen as a starting point for equality between men and women. In the Indian society, however, this is not reflected. As Hole argues it is complicated to talk about women’s situation in India, but there are reports that indicate that boys get better treatment than girls.¹⁰ Statistics also show the under-representation of women.

Eva Hellman, Doctor of religious studies, writes in her book about Hindu goddesses and women that there seems to be an unspoken idea that worshipping goddesses is a source of power and inspiration for women.¹¹ Hellman also criticise previous research on gender and women because it has focused on women who actually experience religion as a source of power.¹² A similar criticism is expressed by Raka Ray, Professor of sociology. According to her there is a polarization of the Indian woman. She is either a: “Victim or a heroine, witch or goddess, housewife or prime minister- these are the dual images that persist in our minds about Indian women.”¹³

⁵ Hellman, 2004, p. 110

⁶ Hellman, 1999b, p. 8

⁷ Ibid. p. 10

⁸ Internet 3: Online women

⁹ Hellman, 1998, p. 7

¹⁰ Internet 2: Utrikespolitiska institutet

¹¹ Hellman, 1998, p. 5

¹² Ibid. p. 63

¹³ Ray, 1999, p. 2.

In this report I am studying middleclass women's views on being a woman in the Hindu society. By focusing on them I can see if there seems to be a tendency that Hindu goddesses are role models for the women interviewed and if so, how? In order to analyse this I also need to find out their understanding of gender equality.

By interviewing "regular" women I am avoiding the problems regarding gender and women that have occurred in previous research according to Hellman and the polarization of the Indian woman that exists according to Ray. The women I am interviewing are neither seen as victims nor heroines and they are not representing a group of women that for sure experience religion as a source of power.

1.3. Aim and research questions

The aim is to study what role the Hindu goddesses play for Hindu women. To fulfil this purpose I am also studying the interviewed women's underlying understanding regarding gender equality.

The questions to be answered are the following:

- What is the women's understanding of gender equality based on, from a gender perspective?
- Are Hindu goddesses role models for the women? If so, in what way?

1.4. Material and limitations

The results of this report are based on 19 interviews with middleclass women in the Hindu society. The field study has been carried out in Faridabad, a city 25 kilometres south of Delhi. The city has 1,3 million inhabitants.¹⁴ I chose to focus on women from only one class because I wanted to get a deeper understanding of their situation. Since the women I interviewed are well educated I wanted to get their views on their situation and their opinions about women's situation in general. Interviewing educated and working women is also interesting because they have experiences from both the situation in the family and also outside the home.

¹⁴ Nationalencyklopedin: Faridabad

I analyse the results by using gender theory. It is important to know the informants' views on gender and gender equality to get a deeper understanding of how they feel about the goddesses as role models or not. For the purpose of analysing the informants' views on being a woman and their understanding of gender equality I read Sharada Sugirtharajah's article "Hinduism and feminism: some concerns." I also took part of some research done on Hinduism and women in the worship of goddesses by Hillary Rodrigues.

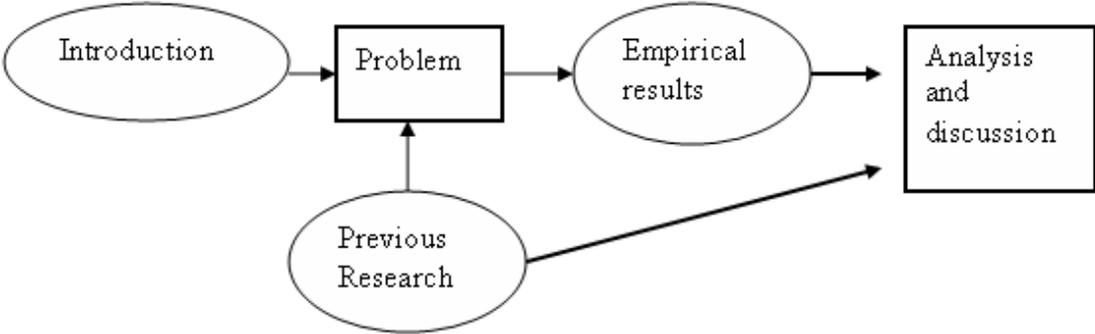
I was inspired by Eva Hellman's book *Hinduiska gudinnor och kvinnor* (1998) when finding out if the goddesses are seen as role models for the informants. Hellman discusses if there is a gender construction in the mythology. Her research is referred to when analysing the results.

1.5. Disposition

After this introduction there will be a part with previous research related to the research questions. It is focused on the relationship between Hinduism and gender. The third part explains the choice of methodology that has been used to conduct the report. The fourth part of the report consists of the results from the empirical research. After that, in part five, the results will be related to the previous research and some conclusions from the study will be drawn.

The figure below illustrates how the different parts of the report are connected.

Figure 1-1 Disposition



2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In this study I have chosen a gender approach. This part describes previous research on gender and Hinduism. The literature I have chosen also focus on the relationship between Hinduism and feminism. I found this helpful when I designed the interview questions.

I will start by defining feminism and gender and then give a brief introduction to the research done on Hinduism and women. After that I will focus on the Hindu mythology from a gender perspective.

2.1. Gender and feminism

First the relationship between gender and feminism should be sorted out. In social sciences gender refers to a social construction rather than a biological condition. The distinction between sex and gender can be defined in the following way: “Sex” refers to the biological division into male and female; “gender” to the parallel and socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity.’¹⁵

Feminism in general assumes that women have less power than men. There is inequality between men and women. This can be expressed in society as well as in the family.¹⁶ Feminism is therefore connected to the power relationship between the sexes and how it should be understood.¹⁷ Sharada Sugirtharajah, Doctor of religious studies, writes that the term feminism is just as complicated as the term Hinduism, there are many different understandings. Some Indian women refuse to call themselves feminists because the term itself comes from the west and not from the Indian women’s movement. For that reason the word feminist, according to those, can not be used in the Indian context. Those who do not reject calling themselves feminists prefer in some cases to exclude religion because they find it oppressive.¹⁸ The message Sugirtharajah gives in her article on feminism and Hinduism is the importance of not trying to compare Hindu women with Christian women in all senses, all women do not share the same problems. Hindu women do not desire the same rights, for example the equivalence of trying to become priests.¹⁹

¹⁵ Oakley, 1981, p. 41

¹⁶ Gemzöe, 2002, p. 16

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 20

¹⁸ Sugirtharajah, 2002, p. 99

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 104

In this study the definition of gender above will be used. It is related to the basic idea for all feminists, that women have less power than men.

2.1.1. Gender in the Hindu context

Femininity and masculinity are keywords when talking about gender (as the definition states). In the Hindu context the feminine is not exclusive to women. Hindu men have for example shown a lot of interest in Kali. Another example of that is taken from the colonial rule when both men and women saw Shakti (the feminine force) as a source of empowerment. The British rule of India was seen as violation of the feminine and mother India.²⁰

The definition also refers to inequality. In the Hindu tradition equality is a complicated term according to Sugirtharajah. “At the conceptual level, Hinduism affirms the spiritual equality and inseparability of male and female.”²¹ In the constitution women have all kinds of legal rights but it is complicated in practice because the family and the society have a hierarchical structure. In the family the woman’s relationship is based on dharma (duty).²²

2.2. Previous research on Hinduism and women

Hillary Rodrigues article “Women in the worship of the great goddess” focus on how women worship the goddess during the Hindu festival Asvina Navaratra. Rodrigues is focusing on the role women have during the rituals. Her assumption is that women’s way of worshipping is different from men’s.²³ Rodrigues also concludes that so is the case. Her opinion from taking part in the festival is that the rituals elevate the feminine. However, there are still some types of womanhood that are given superiority according to Rodrigues. “[...] the festivals serve to maintain orthodox values and social structures.”²⁴ High status is given to virgins and married women while unmarried and widows are ranked low.²⁵

Vasudha Narayanan also writes about Navararti and Hindu festivals with focus on women’s roles. She writes: “There are many areas in the Hindu tradition to which a woman

²⁰ Sugirtharajah, 2002, p.103

²¹ Ibid. p. 102

²² Ibid. p. 102

²³ Rodrigues, 2005, p. 72

²⁴ Ibid. p. 100

²⁵ Ibid. p. 101

can look for encouragement and hope.”²⁶ One of the factors is the philosophical sphere since the soul is considered not to have gender. Another one is the historical factor where women have left marks in the traditional male sphere.²⁷

The articles referred to above focus on festivals and mythology and the positive impact it may have on women.

Next I will present Eva Hellman’s research on goddesses in the Hindu mythology from a gender perspective and her conclusions on what impact it may have on women.

2.3. Hindu goddesses from a gender perspective

The purpose of Eva Hellman’s research on goddesses and women is to find out if there are common features in the constructions of goddesses and women and what kind of qualities that are ascribed to the female side of the divine. In the Puranas the goddesses have two basic qualities; they are either Shakti (the creative or active) or Prakriti (the material condition). These qualities are understood as good ones if they are controlled by forces that are identified as masculine. The protective and creative goddesses qualities are controlled by male gods. Goddesses like Lakshmi, Sita or Pavarati respect and pay attention to their husbands. Goddesses like Kali and Shitala are considered dangerous and they are not controlled by male Gods.²⁸ According to Hole there is a power aspect between male and feminine. She agrees with Hellman who says the feminine need to be under male control. Prakriti represents something wild and untamed; if the male quality Purusa is not controlling Prakriti it is a dangerous condition. The reason why women need to be controlled is because they are dominating when it comes to power, because they have more Prakriti than men. The goddesses are also obeying this order. One example according to Hole is the goddess Kali. The story tells that Kali was in a bad mood and she was running wild killing everyone in her way. The other gods and goddesses was concerned about this and contacted Shiva, her consort. When Shiva came to stop her Kali did not see that it was him and was prepared to kill him. When she realised that it was Shiva she interrupted her action. Purusa defeated Prakriti which means the normal order was establish and everyone could live in harmony.²⁹

²⁶ Narayanana, 2002, p. 56

²⁷ Ibid. p. 56

²⁸ Hellman, 1998, p. 54-55

²⁹ Hole, 2000, p.13

The two qualities the goddesses' posses can be compared to good qualities in women. When a goddess is maintaining the cosmic order women should maintain the social order. The ideal is to be devoted to her husband and unselfish sacrifice for him.³⁰ Goddesses like Sita, Sati and Savitri, that fulfil this ideal, are important as role models for Hindu women.³¹ Hole also explains that the perfect woman lives for her husband. Examples of that can be found in both Ramayana and Mahabharata. The most common one is Sita according to Hole. Sita is the consort of Rama. The story tells that Rama was forced to spend 14 years in the forest, during that time Sita was captured by an evil king. After many obstacles Sita was released and comes home to Rama. A reputation starts to spread that Sita was not faithful to Rama. To prove her innocence she sits on the fire. The flames do not touch her, but the people do not believe her. Rama sends her to the forest where she gives birth to his twin sons. Hole describes in her article that Sita is the ideal and that girls in young ages often get told to behave like Sita.³²

One of the most important goddesses in Hinduism is Durga. She is described as a fight goddess. She is impossible to defeat and is created by the gods to fight the enemy. Durga is contrast to other goddess like Parvati and Sita. However she is an instrument for the gods to protect the structure of power according to Hellman.³³

Hellman concludes in her research that there is a gender construction because the female side is ambivalent while the male side is unified.³⁴ Women and goddesses are also of a certain nature that does not change even if society does. The nature is not something a person can choose, it is something that characterizes a person's life. The female and the male complement each other. The male is seen as representing the consciousness while the female represents the opposite. The female does not have the consciousness and is therefore seen as dangerous.³⁵ What is remarkable is the fact that there are no goddesses in the Hindu tradition who are at the same time independent, creative, powerful and role models for women. From drawing these conclusions Hellman returns to the divine, Ardhanarishvar, which consist of Parvati and Shiva. Hellman says that Parvati can be seen as a symbol of the patriarchal description of the goddesses. She is an instrument for the male side and she

³⁰ Hellman, 1998, p. 56

³¹ Ibid. p. 57

³² Hole, 2000, p. 13

³³ Hellman, 1998, p. 39

³⁴ Ibid. p. 59

³⁵ Ibid. p. 58

is in no way challenging the male power position.³⁶ A gender system where the man is constructed as being authoritative and the woman potentially dangerous manifests a patriarchal order according to Hellman. This means that the men and the male qualities are in focus and are also subordinating women and the female qualities.³⁷

³⁶ Hellman, 1998, p. 68-69

³⁷ Ibid. p. 59

3. METHODOLOGY

In this part I will explain and justify the choice of methodology. I will explain how the choice of informants was made, the procedure and how the interview questions are related to previous research. Finally I will discuss some critical reflections on the chosen method. This information is important in order to estimate the quality standard of the research.

3.1. Qualitative or quantitative method?

There are two types of research approaches: qualitative and quantitative. To fulfil the aim of this report a qualitative method was chosen. I found the qualitative approach most appropriate for what I wanted to study. One of the reasons is because the chosen method can give deeper explanations to describe the reality.³⁸ When the qualitative method is chosen the main thing is not to search for general conclusions.³⁹ I searched to find out the informants' views on women's situation and if there seemed to be tendency that Hindu goddesses play a specific role for them. Using for example a quantitative method to do this would probably have been difficult for many reasons. If I had used a questionnaire it would have excluded the possibility of asking follow up questions. Because there are cultural differences between me and the informants it could have lead to misunderstandings if the questions were not asked in a dialogue. When misunderstandings occurred during the interviews I tried to analyse them. Was it lingual problems that made the informant answer in a way I did not understand or did it have something to do with how the informants interpreted my questions? This is something I will discuss further in the last part of the report. The study has some quantitative elements as well even though I am aware that it can not produce statistical evidence based on probability sampling. Because of the fact that 19 interviews were carried out I use diagrams to give the reader a picture of how the informants answered. I hope the diagram will help to show how the variety of answers was divided among the informants.

³⁸ Svenning, 2000, p. 74-75

³⁹ Ibid.

3.2. Choice of informants

The empirical material is based on 19 interviews. They were conducted during a period of four weeks in February to March 2007. Before I came to India I had contact with a person who would help me to get in contact with people to interview. When I arrived I did not know how many interviews it would be possible to get. My contact person randomly chose women for me to interview. They were asked the same day as the interview took place. They did not know what the interview was about until they met me. This can be seen as both positive and negative. The good thing is that the informant can not prepare for certain questions and answer them in a way the informant feels is the correct way. It is very likely that I got spontaneous answers to my questions. On the other hand it is not necessarily a good thing. Sometimes the questions need to be given a little bit of thought and that can give a deeper answer. One way to solve this problem is to make follow-up interviews where the person can add information if she feels like it. However in this case I could not ask more of the informants' time, they were all very busy women. I do feel like I got deep answers from the informants' and most of them were very open to talk about the subject of the report. It seemed like they already had given, at least the situation of women in India, some thought.

3.3. Procedure

The interviews lasted for 45 minutes up until one hour depending on how much the informant wanted to share. Most interviews took place at Jiva Public school where most of the women worked. This means that a majority of the informants were working as teachers. The interviews were carried out in a semi-structured way. That is, I had some questions I asked all the informants (see appendix) but depending on their answers I had follow-up questions that were different depending on what the informant said during the interview. I also tried to create a sense of a dialogue when I asked the questions, but I did not want to talk too much because of the risk that the informant would be affected to answer in a certain way.

As the interviews were carried out in English, no interpreter was needed. I did not use a recorder. One of the reasons for not using one was because I did not want to ruin the informal character of the interview. Research also shows that the informant can be inhibited

by that.⁴⁰ Because the interviews did not last for that long I think it would have been difficult for the informant to forget about the recorder during that time. What I did instead was to write a script from my notes (taken during the interview) directly after each interview.

3.4. The connection with previous research

The questions asked during the interviews are partly based on the previous research that I described in part two. The gender approach focuses on feminine and masculine and the inequality between men and women. To get a deeper understanding of the informant's view on gender and gender equality I formulated the questions in a way that made it possible for the informant to interpret the question. I asked: Can you describe women's situation? The answer will demonstrate the informants' opinions about what is important when it comes to women's rights for example.

In gender theory there is a difference between the biological sex and the socially constructed gender. I asked if men and women are born with different qualities. This made it possible to get the informants' underlying understanding of any differences between the sexes, biological or social.

The next step in the study was to investigate if the goddesses were in some way role models for the informants. To study if a tendency existed I was inspired by previous research made by Eva Hellman. The informants were asked to describe what being a Hindu meant to them and also what role the goddesses played for them. After the results are presented, in the next part, I will analyse the informants answers regarding this question connected to Eva Hellman's research on the role goddesses' play in the Hindu mythology.

3.5. Critical reflections on method and sources

Some critical reflections can also be considered when it comes to the method used. One thing is the selection of informants. Since I relied on my contact person to help me with that I can not be sure that she did not choose people she thought would be more suitable for me to interview. Maybe she wanted me to have a certain picture of women's situation. However, I do not believe that this happened. She was very busy and she just randomly

⁴⁰ Möller, 2000, p. 18

asked women working at the school if they had time to take part in my research. Also to avoid my contact person selecting certain women for me I did not tell her that much about what kind of questions I wanted to ask the informants.

Another thing that should be reflected upon is the answers I got from the informants. Talking about women's situation can be sensitive for the informants. One consequence can be that they avoided answering in a way that made the situation for women look bad. Many people I was in contact with, both informants and others were very proud of India. A majority of the informants were very open and the fact that I never asked their names may have had a good impact on their willingness to talk. During a few interviews I sensed that after the informant had said something not advantageous about how women are treated, they would say something that was in favour for women. Since I was interested in how the informants described women's situation and not what it actually looks like I do not believe that it had a negative affect on this study.

4. RESULTS

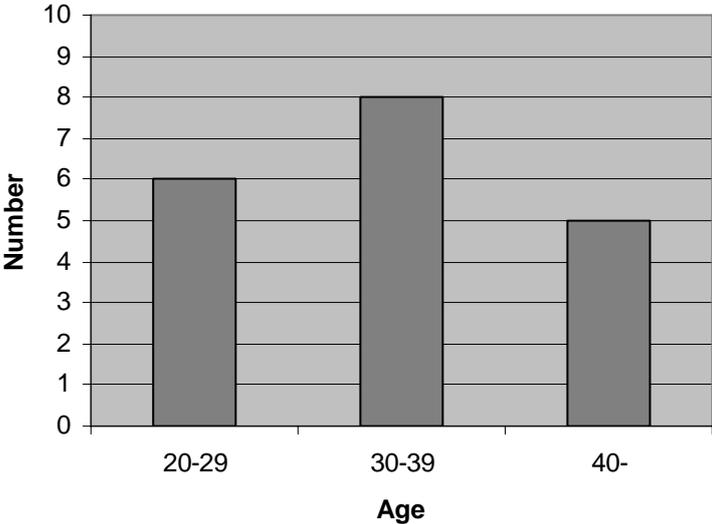
This part will present the empirical data based on the field study. Initially I will give a short background presentation of the informants. After that, in section 4.2, data collected regarding the informants' understanding of gender equality is presented. This is followed by their views of being a Hindu and what role the goddesses play for the women interviewed in section 4.3.

4.1. Background information about the informants

Something that all women interviewed for this study have in common is the fact that they all have a higher education. One of them is working as a secretary, the rest of them are teachers. They teach a variety of subjects and ages, all subjects from biology to Hindi are represented. The informants have classes from kindergarten up to 9th grade. A majority of the informants had long experience from teaching and all of them told me during the interview that they love their job.

The youngest informant was 22 and the oldest 52. Most women were in the ages between 30-39. The diagram shows how the ages among the informants were divided.

Figure 4-1 Ages among the informants



A majority of them, 13, were married and had children. Three of them were single, two were married but had no children and one had a child but was divorced. All of them told me that they grew up in big families.

When asked what they do when they are not working the most common answer was: Cooking or taking care of household.

4.2. Women's situation

The informants were asked to describe women's situation in general. The purpose of that was to see what they thought was important when it comes to issues regarding women and their rights. I got a variety of answers. The most common one was that the situation looks different depending on class or depending on if a woman lives in the city or in the countryside. Nine women gave this answer. Most of them said that the situation in the cities is good or OK. The reason is that women in the cities often are educated or are at least working. Their answers imply that they found their own situation OK because they work and have an education. In the rural areas, however, women get treated in a horrible way. According to some of the informants women in the villages get beaten and used. The general opinion was that if they had an education they would not get used that easily because then they would know their rights. Due to the fact that women in the villages are not working they do not get any freedom, they are always dependent on someone.

The situation in the villages is described as very bad, but some of the informants told me that being a middleclass woman is also difficult. They have to work and take care of the household at the same time. This is something that a majority of the informants pointed out even though they described their own situation as good.

The rest of the informants, 10, did not compare the rural and urban areas when they talked about women's situation. They found the situation either good or bad. Five of them claimed that the situation was difficult because women work and also have full responsibility for their family. Some of them were talking about being a middleclass woman, from their own experiences. Another opinion was that the situation is bad for women because they chose not to work. Another one pointed out that working gives opportunities. "It is frustrating not being able to go somewhere." If you do not have a job it can lead to isolation at home. The same informant said that women, everywhere, always depend on someone, first their family then their husbands. Another woman said that it is

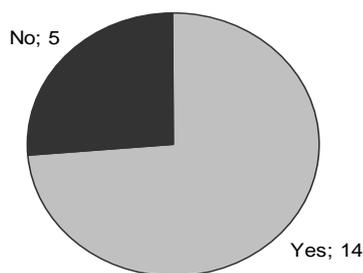
difficult for a woman to take care of the household especially when: “the in-laws are not cooperating”.⁴¹

The women who found women’s situation as ok or good compared it with what it looked like in the past. A common answer was that women today can have a career in any field and that girls get just as good education as boys.

4.2.1. Differences between men and women

When it comes to differences between men and women two questions were asked, one regarding if men and women get treated differently because of sex. The other question on the subject was if the informants thought that men and women are born with different qualities.

Figure 4-2 Do men and women get treated differently because of sex?



14 of the informants said that women and men get treated differently. Five said that they did not feel like that there are differences in what way men and women get treated. Among those who felt like that there were differences, a majority expressed it as something negative. Some of them connected that with the family situation. The man is the decision maker and the woman is supposed to agree with that. The mother in-law gives rights to her son and not to his wife (the daughter in-law). One of the women told me: “You know the Indian man is ego that’s why.”

There were also some informants who did not talk about differences in the family but rather in society. Women get treaded differently in a negative way because of structures that exist everywhere. When the situation in the society is better it will automatically be

⁴¹ What the woman referred to was the tradition of the bride moving in with her husband’s family after marriage.

better in the family too. This opinion was connected to age. All of the informants who were talking about structures were all around 20 years old. When it comes to the rest of them it was not possible to connect their opinions to age. A few of the women who saw differences referred to the biological aspects. Women are stronger mentally and men are physically stronger. That is the reason why men and women are not treated the same way.

Five of the informants did not think that sex matters when it comes to how people get treated. Their answers were for example: “not in my family”, “not anymore” and “yes women can not go out alone but it has to do with security.”

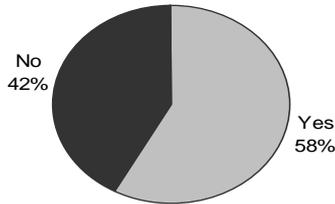
A majority of the informants told me that they truly believed that men and women are born with different qualities. There are some differences created by God, women should take care of children. Therefore they are also more suitable for teaching; women are more emotional than men.

Nine of the informants felt that there was no such thing as being born with different qualities depending on sex. A few said that this way of thinking exists in the villages. One woman said: “A man can also cook”. However during the interviews all of those who said that men and women are not born with different qualities also told me later on that no man could ever take care of children like a woman. This shows that their interpretation of the question was more connected with profession and education.

4.2.2. How to improve women’s situation

I asked the informants if they thought that there is a need to improve women’s situation and what the best way of doing that is. All women said that it was necessary to improve women’s situation in some cases. A majority said that there is in general a need to change the situation because women need to get the equal status as men. It is also necessary for the development of the country. Women are an asset to the country, when the situation is better it will be possible to compete with other countries in many fields. Women need to be more independent and not rely on their husbands.

Figure 4-3 Is there a need to improve women's situation?



42 % told me that they did not feel that there is a need to improve women's situation in the cities, only in the villages. Among these women education is the best way to change the situation in the rural areas. The informants who believed that there is a need to change the situation in general also pointed out education as an important solution. By teaching women about their rights it is possible for them to think of themselves in a different way. Women also need to be educated because they are the ones who teach their children, it does not matter if the father is educated because he is not spending as much time with the children as the mother. Another reason for education is to teach men the benefits of women working. As one of the informants pointed out, women have constitutional rights but they are not exercised.

Except education, three other ways to change women's situation was expressed. Two informants told me that it is most important to give women financial independence. Another two felt that the best way is to encourage discussions in the families. Housewives should be given more chances, it is important that husbands allow that. Another solution is that the man and woman share the work that has to be done at home. Two informants expressed how difficult it is nowadays when women have to work and take care of the household.

To give all women education no matter where they live is the most necessary thing to change.

4.2.3. Gender equality

The results I have presented so far are based on the informants' understanding of equality between men and women. I also asked what the term gender equality meant to them to compare their answers to how they felt about women's situation for example. By doing this

I can analyse their understanding on a deeper level. The most common answer to what gender equality meant to the informants was equal education and equal job opportunities. It is important to change the mentality so that men and women can be given equal status and a person can work anywhere regardless of sex.

The next common answer was equal rights in the family, shared responsibilities and equal rights to do things outside the household's daily chores.

Some women connected the term gender equality as just a business for women. To them it meant that women should be aware of their situation and thereby being able to change their situation.

Two women said that the term has to do with marriage. One of the women was divorced, she told me that she can not remarry because she had been married once and her husband left her for someone else. It was difficult to determine whether this was something she wanted but the main criticism from her side was most likely the fact that her husband can marry again, even though it was something that people frowned upon, but she can not.

A young woman told me about the fact that women do not choose who to get married to. The girls can say no once they get introduced. However sometimes it is not good if the girl says no even though she wants to according to the informant. This was her way of explaining what gender equality meant to her.

One of the informants did not want to use the term gender equality because it divides women and men more than it unites. She was saying that it is more important to talk about individual rights and nothing else.

So far I have given the results of the informants' views on gender and gender equality. In the following part the results that concern Hinduism will be presented.

4.3. Being a Hindu

It is important to get the informants' understanding of what it means to be a Hindu because it is something individual that can differ from person to person. I asked the informants; describe what it means to be a Hindu? Although all the informants prayed at least two times daily a frequent answer was that it does not mean anything specific. Being a Hindu has to do with inner strength. It is also a way of life, for example being a vegetarian.

A majority of the informants prayed primarily to Shiva⁴², but they also prayed to others. Lord Krishna⁴³ was also popular among the informants. Other gods mentioned were Rama⁴⁴, Durga, Ganesha⁴⁵ and Sai Baba⁴⁶. Only two informants said that they prayed daily but not to specific gods.

A few of the informants compared Hinduism with Christianity and Islam and said that the two latter are specific with rules, Hinduism is not like that. In addition to this, being a Hindu also means respecting your family, your husband and your in-laws. Showing respect means that you have to cover your head when you are in the same room as older people for example. Another common answer was; worshipping gods. It is important to have faith in God, it is a matter of brotherhood. Being a Hindu also means respecting other religions. Two of the informants told me that Hindu means fear of God. You should think before you act. One said that it was all about following the holy books. What you can and can not do. There were also two of the informants that had a rather negative explanation of what it means. Hindus are narrow-minded because they follow impractical rules. I wanted her to develop her answer but she could not give me an example. She said that there are many old traditions that are not practical anymore. The other woman started talking about sati⁴⁷ when I wanted her to describe what it means to be a Hindu. She said: “Just because my husband dies it doesn’t mean that I can’t have a life.”

After having the informants giving me a picture of what it means to be a Hindu, the next question was: Can we learn from Hinduism to improve women’s situation?

4.3.1. Can Hinduism be used to improve women’s situation?

Asking if Hinduism can be used to improve women’s situation gives opportunities to a variety of answers. In the diagram below I have categorised three types of answers and how the responses are distributed.

⁴² One of the most important gods in Hinduism. He is considered a saviour.

⁴³ One of the most popular gods in Hinduism. He is often considered as God in his eternal shape.

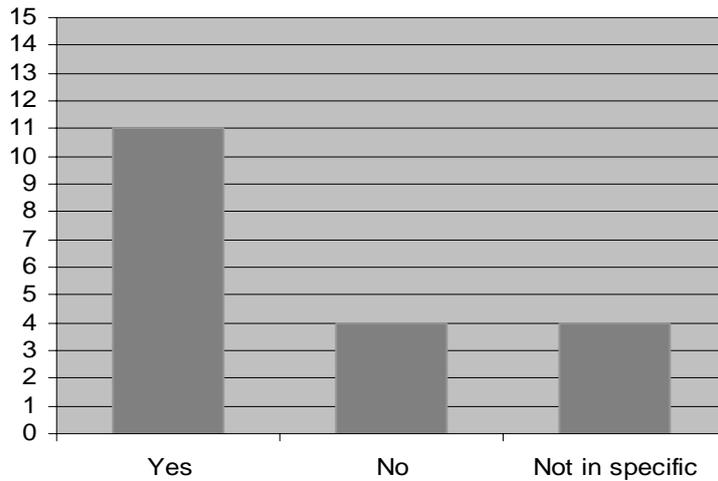
⁴⁴ Was a king in ancient India. He is often considered to be the seventh avatar of Vishnu.

⁴⁵ Leading the people who are following Shiva. He is known for his elephant head.

⁴⁶ An Indian religious leader. He is, among his followers, considered to be a divine incarnation.

⁴⁷ Sati means that the wife should voluntarily die when her husband dies.

Figure 4-4 Can Hinduism be used to improve women’s situation?



Among those who answered “no” I could see a tendency that it was important to separate mythology from real life. The only way women’s situation could be improved is through education, not religion. One woman explained to me that some goddesses, like Sati, just obey and that Hindu women do not need to learn that. Another one said that she never thought of religion in that way. The woman is seen as the enemy in certain situations, for example when it comes to the mother in-law. Hinduism can not be helpful to change that according to the informant.

Some of the informants pointed out that Hinduism teach the equal value of all, not women in specific.

In the group of informants where the answer to the same question was “yes” the majority stressed that Hinduism gives great respect to mothers and wives in the mythology. Therefore it is possible to learn a lot from Hinduism according to them. One woman explained to me that Shiva gave his wife his name before he named himself and Krishna did the same thing with his wife Rada. This is a way of respecting and showing the importance of the woman. Another one said that Rama⁴⁸ did not treat his wife well but there are other gods who did. According to this informant it is a matter of what you want to see and interpret. One woman told me that women are thought of as goddesses and they get a lot of respect. During some interviews I got the possibility to ask why women do not get treated as well as some gods treated the goddesses. Every time this question was raised the

⁴⁸ Rama is the god who was married to Sita.

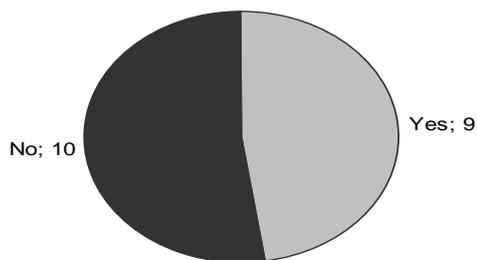
informants answered that women use to have high status in the past but when invaders from other countries came they started to treat women in a bad way.

4.3.2. The role the goddesses play

The interviews showed that a majority of the women said that we could learn something from Hinduism to improve women's situation. So how do the informants feel about the goddesses? Are they role models to them?

I classified the answers into two groups; "yes" and "no". The circle diagram shows the result.

Figure 4-5 Goddesses as role models?



About half of them said that the goddesses in specific give them strength, half of them did not agree with that.

Among those who did not feel that the goddesses in specific made them strong a regular answer was that all gods and goddesses are equal. The gods make them just as strong as the goddesses. God is not a woman and not a man that is what is important. Another one said that goddesses do not get treated nicely by the gods; therefore they can not be role models. The best way is to have role models like Indira Ghandi or just to teach women about their rights.

In the second group, where the informants answered "yes", many women also said that all gods are equal but that Durga gives them inner strength. She does not tolerate everything and she gets aggressive when people are dishonest and disrespectful. Another one expressed her feelings for Durga and Kali in the same way and added that Pavarati is too calm and obeying.

Some women did not talk about a specific goddess but told me that they are role models and ideal for all women. A woman almost become like a goddess if she takes care of the household in a good way. She becomes like an incarnation of the goddess. The role of being a mother and wife just the way the goddess are is something that seems to be important when Durga is not mentioned. In what way the women feel that the goddesses give them strength seems to be abstract in character. They frequently talk about “inner strength”. One woman said at the end of the interview about the goddesses: “They give me strength, they are ideals. People say life is a challenge. I say being a woman is a challenge. Respect it!”

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this report was to study what role the Hindu goddesses play for Hindu women. To fulfil this purpose I am also studying the interviewed women's underlying understanding regarding gender equality.

During my field work I have met and talked to women from the middle class. This was not a coincidence. As Hole states it is impossible to talk about the Indian woman, therefore I decided to try to get a homogenous group of informants hoping that it would be possible to draw some conclusions to be further investigated. After seeing the results of the interviews I am glad I focused my sample to one class. All the informants are individuals with different experiences. If I had interviewed women from different classes I would have needed a larger sample and it would have been even more difficult to say something general about the results from the interviews. I can only analyse the material collected. When using a qualitative method the purpose is not to draw wide conclusions and that is not my intention. Below I will analyse and discuss the results presented in the previous part of the report.

5.1. What is the women's understanding of gender equality based on?

One of my research questions was: What is the women's understanding of gender equality based on, from a gender perspective? To answer this question I have categorised four factors that were most commonly mentioned during the interviews.

- Equal Rights
- Women's concern
- Education to achieve gender equality
- Sex is not socially constructed

The most common answer to what the term gender equality meant to the informants was equal rights of some kind. Sugirtharajah describes equality as a very complicated term in the Hindu context. Women have legal rights which are protected in the constitution but because of the hierarchal structure they are difficult to implement, according to her. When it comes to talking about women's rights, the informants were mentioning other women

from other classes and in the villages. Those women do not have the rights that are expressed in the constitution according to the women interviewed. A majority of the women talked about classes and the situation in the villages compared to the situation in the cities. This can be seen as an expression of the hierarchal way of thinking. Some women were also talking about the women in the rural areas in a condescending way. Those women do not know their rights and they do not have an education. This is also a proof for the second factor I have identified. Gender equality is a concern for women. It is up to women to improve their situation. As I see it there can be at least two reasons for this way of thinking. The first one has to do with women's relationship in the family. Her position is based on dharma (duty) according to Sugirtharajah. It is the woman's duty to take care of her family. This way of thinking may be reflected in other areas as well according to my opinion. If a woman wants to change her situation it is her duty of trying to make that change, for example. The second reason is connected to qualities of men and women. During the interviews, men were described as less patient than women. They were described as physically stronger and mentally weaker. This understanding may also be a contributing factor to why gender equality is seen as a matter for women. It is up to women to change their situation because no one else will do it for them.

The reason why education is expressed as the best way to change women's situation is probably because all the informants were working in the educational field.

The fourth factor is the most interesting one, according to me. This is because they all agreed, in one way or another, that men and women are born with different qualities. A majority said that women and men are born with different qualities that make them suitable for different professions for example. The rest of them said that women are mentally stronger and are born with qualities that make them more suitable for taking care of children and the household. This is not something that is socially constructed according to the informants. This is interesting to analyse on different levels. No one mentioned for example that women were not suitable for professions that are normally dominated by men, like engineers. Some of the informants were saying that women can also be suitable in the military. Some professions that include lifting heavy are more suitable for men because they are physically stronger in general. All of the women agreed that women are mentally stronger. On the intellectual level men are not stronger. The general view among the informants was that they felt sorry for men because they are mentally weaker. This view on men and women are not compatible with the gender theory. The term gender meaning

socially constructed does not exist. It is obvious that men and women are biologically different but the qualities they have are also related to biology. A man can never take care of a child as well as a woman. This is something that can also be related to the Hindu mythology. As Sugirtharajah writes, there is a spiritual complementarity. Male and female need each other. If this is interpreted as an understanding based on differences it can be seen as the Hindu mythology reinforcing the view on men and women as having different qualities. This is closely related to the criticism by Hellman when it comes to the role the goddesses have in the mythology. I will discuss it further in the next section.

At the same time as the informants describe that women and men are born with different qualities they say that the best way to improve women's situation is through education and for all women to be working. This can increase the problem that was expressed by some of the women: too much work to be responsible for family and having a job at the same time. Since the understanding of gender does not exist, there will always be differences as long as men are not seen as capable of taking care of the household.

It should be pointed out that the treatment of women in the rural areas was understood as something socially constructed, but not the sex in itself.

The understanding of gender equality is based on the opinion that it is not equal between men and women. The informants were also identifying themselves with their families as mothers and wives. When they were pointing out the problem of having to take care of the household and work at the same time they also added that women want to take care of their husbands and children, it is a woman's wish to do so. The informants seemed to be proud of that. It is the woman's territory.

My opinion is that the informants would not have opened up to me as much if I had been a man. They did not know much about women's situation in Sweden and I think they believed that it is similar to women's situation in India. There was an understanding that all women have something in common and I think this has to do with their opinions that women are born with different qualities than men. This is something that unites all women. The differences between men and women are rather stressed than hidden. Women are subordinated but are mentally stronger. It would have been interesting to compare this result with women who do not have an education and see if there was a difference of opinion among them.

5.2. Are Hindu goddesses role models for the women?

My other research question was: Are Hindu goddesses role models for the women? If so, in what way? To analyse this question it is important to also describe the informants ideas of what it means to be a Hindu and if it is possible to improve women's situation through Hinduism.

To believe in God was the general answer to what it means to be a Hindu. The informants also described Hinduism as being a lifestyle, how you should live and eat for example. A majority also said that it is possible to learn from Hinduism to improve women's situation. The mythology was something that was mentioned. Gods like Krishna and Shiva treated their wives with respect and that is also how husbands should treat their wives. The informants were primarily focusing on the relation within marriage. Nothing was said about women, just mothers or wives. This is something that Rodrigues discusses. She claims that some types of womanhood are more important than others, such as being a mother and a wife. Maybe that is why the informants wanted to focus on that.

Eva Hellman writes about the qualities the goddesses possess and how Hindu women should try to be like that. Women should sacrifice for their husbands and be devoted to them. This is also something that was expressed by many of the informants. They did not use the word "sacrifice" and referred to it as something voluntary. The goddesses that possess the "right" qualities according to Hellman are Lakshmi, Sita and Pavarati. These goddesses were not mentioned by the informants except for Pavarati. However, when Pavarati was mentioned she was described as too calm. Among those who looked at the goddesses as role models the qualities of being a good mother and wife were expressed. When the informants mentioned the difficulties of taking care of household and work they also pointed out that taking care of household is not forced upon them, they want to do it voluntarily. This general opinion can be related to the mythology and can also confirm the research on what impact the mythology can have on women, according to Hellman. The most common goddess to be mentioned among those who saw the goddesses as role models was Durga. She is not like the other goddesses because she is fighting and is not an ideal for being a good wife. Therefore it is interesting that many of the informants told me that they saw Durga as role model. Maybe this is an expression for dealing with new challenges when the society is changing. Durga does not give up, she is a fighter. However, according to Hellman, Durga is an instrument for the gods and is therefore not as independent as she may appear.

All women except for two prayed daily. All of them saw the gods or goddesses as role models for what they should and should not do. However, only about half of them saw the goddesses as role models for themselves. When analysing this results I can see two factors that can have lead to this answer. Some of the women were critical to if Hinduism is a way to improve women's situation. They did not think that the goddesses should be seen as role models, instead strong women like, Indira Ghandi, are better as role models for women. Sugirtharajah writes that many women who call themselves feminists want to exclude religion because they find it oppressive. Only a few of the informants said that they were feminists, of course one can be a feminist without saying so.

The other possible factor to why half of the women said that the goddesses were not role models for them in specific can be connected to how they interpreted the question. The answers that were given such as "all gods are equal" indicate that they could have interpreted the question as if the goddesses are more important than the gods. These factors can explain why half of them did not see the goddesses as role models even though almost all of them were talking about the qualities of being a good mother and a wife and referred to the gods and the goddesses in that context.

The answer to the question if Hindu goddesses are role models for the women can be both Yes and No. Half of the women said that the goddesses are role models and half did not agree with that. At the same time they pointed out the importance of being a good wife and mother. According to previous research this is something that women learn from the mythology. This can, according to me, be related to the most significant result on what the understanding of gender equality is based on. This is the opinion that men and women are born with different qualities.

When I am finishing this report I realise that there are so many other things that would be interesting to study. If the same questions were asked to one group of women in the cities and one group in the villages, would there be differences between the two groups? Would there be differences depending on class? Another thing that would have been interesting to study women's views on feminism since the term is controversial in the Hindu context. This report has given the women's perspective, but what does men's perspective look like? From a gender point of view that is something that is also interesting. These are questions to be studied in the future.

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Interviews:

From 2007-03-01 until 2007-03-20 nineteen women were interviewed in Faridabad, India.

The interviews took place at Jiva Public school.

APPENDIX

Background information:

For how long have you been working here?

What did you do before you started working here?

What do you do when you are not working?

Do you have a family?

How old are you?

- How would you describe women's situation?

- Do you think men and women get treated differently because they are men and women?

How?

- Do you think that men and women are born with different qualities?

- Do you feel like there is a need to improve women's situation?

How/ In what way? /Why not?

- What do you think is the best way to improve women's situation?

- What does the term gender equality mean to you?

- Can you describe what it means, according to you, to be a Hindu?

- Do you worship any gods and goddess?

Which ones? How often?

- Do you think we can learn from Hinduism to improve women's situation?

In what way?/ Why not?

- How important is the mythology to you?

- Would you say that the goddesses in the mythology are in any way role models to women in specific?