

Demolishing Gender Roles within Hinduism

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Abstract

Hindu deities have long been considered an ideal for Hindu men and women. However, such standards reinforce specific gender roles and might be considered essentialist. Thus, the question arises whether Hindu spirituality still has a place in an increasingly anti-essentialist world. This paper critically examines the allegation that Hinduism is gender essentialist and argues that this cannot be the case. This is done through two approaches. First, it examines the characteristics of Ram and Sita, who embody traditional gender roles and contrasts them with Lakshmi and Vishnu, who seem to reverse these roles. It argues that because Ram and Sita are *avatars* of Lakshmi and Vishnu, their characteristics must be taken in totality. Second, it explores the root of Hindu identity in the genderless soul, suggesting that gender is irrelevant to Hindu spirituality. Thus, the idea of Hindus needing to conform to gender roles is unnecessary.

Keywords: Hinduism, Feminist Philosophy, Gender, Essentialism, Aatman, Identity

Introduction

Religion plays a significant role in the formation of culture and profoundly affects how we view those around us, especially women.¹ This affects how we understand concepts like gender identity and gender roles. Hinduism, one of the oldest religions, has had a massive and enduring influence on understanding gender identity among Hindus. Despite the presence of numerous goddesses in Hinduism and their worship among believers, this influence is not always positive and is sometimes even harmful.² For instance, predominantly Hindu or Muslim states typically display the highest levels of gender inequality.³ There are several reasons for this, but one crucial factor is the depiction of women within Hindu texts.

Discussions on gender within Hinduism begin with sacred texts.⁴ Typically, these sacred texts are classified as either *shruti*, those considered divine, or *smriti*, those considered or known to be written by humans.⁵ While *shruti* texts are the ultimate authority on all things Hinduism, *smriti* texts are also considered authoritative by many. For instance, “the *Ramayana* has been used to justify decisions and actions both in the private and public spheres.”⁶ Feminists assert that these texts, which inform the views of billions of Hindus globally, tend to be gender essentialist and even oppressive to women.⁷ For example,

¹ Kamila Klingorová and Tomáš Havlíček, “Religion and Gender Inequality: The Status of Women in the Societies of World Religions,” *Moravian Graphical Reports* 23, no.2 (April 2015) DOI: 10.1515/mgr-2015-0006.

² Rita Gross, “Toward a New Model of the Hindu Pantheon: A Report on Twenty-Some Years of Feminist Reflection,” in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013).

³ Klingorová and Havlíček, “Religion and Gender Inequality.”

⁴ Reva Joshee and Karen Sihra, “Shakti as a Liberatory and Educative Force for Hindu Women,” in *Gender, Religion, and Education in a Chaotic Postmodern World*, ed. Zehavit Gross, Lynn Davies, and Al-Khansaa Diab (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013).

⁵ “Introduction,” Vedic Heritage, Ministry of Culture, last modified April 6, 2023, <https://vedicheritage.gov.in/introduction/>; Examples of *shruti* texts include the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, while examples of *smriti* texts include epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

⁶ Joseph Martin Jose, “Listening to “A Different Voice”: Gendering *Dharma* through Sita in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*,” manuscript (2022): 2.

⁷ Jose, “Gendering *Dharma*”; Joshee and Sihra, “Shakti”; G.R.K. Murty, “Sita in Valmiki *Ramayana*: A Feminist Archetype!,” *The IUP Journal of English Studies* 8, no. 4 (2013); Gross, “New Model”; Sanjay Singh, “The Nurturant-Warrior Archetype: a Meeting Ground between the Metaphors of Sita and Kali in Vedic Hinduism,” *Human*

texts like the *Manusmriti*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* are typically cited as idealizing the role of a woman as a devoted wife and mother.⁹ Meanwhile, these same texts depict men as great warriors and the absolute heads of their households. Feminists argue that this depiction of the ideal woman as a devoted wife and mother, utterly subservient to their husband or father, has led to the oppression of Hindu women throughout history.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, these seemingly essentialist ideals have led to significant harm. However, one might question whether the harmful standards reflected in these texts are a genuine representation of Hinduism or a misinterpretation by those who seek to justify their agenda using the authority of these texts. This paper critically examines the claim that Hinduism is gender essentialist.

First, I view the notion of gender roles within Hinduism by analyzing the characters of Ram and Sita, widely considered to be the ideal Hindu man and woman. I explore their relationship with the deities Lakshmi and Vishnu and argue that synthesis is necessary to understand gender roles within Hinduism. Next, I examine the root of Hindu identity in the genderless soul (*aatman*) and suggest that gender is an altogether unnecessary concept for Hindus. Within each section, I consider some possible objections and respond to these. Finally, I show that those who have used Hindu teachings to justify oppression have either severely misunderstood the teachings or deliberately misrepresented them for selfish reasons.

However, before we begin, we must note that Hinduism is not a monolith. There is no authoritative interpretation of the texts, and various schools of Hinduism exist globally. Thus, any critique, defense, or interpretation of Hinduism necessarily has the caveat that it may not apply to Hinduism as a whole, for indeed, there is no ‘whole’ to which it applies.

Arenas (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-021-00258-3>; Subramanian identifies six archetypes for women in Hindu texts: *Kanya* (The Good Girl), *Apsara* (The Seductive Beauty), *Veera* (The Rebel Warrior), *Rani* (The Noble Queen), *Ma* (The Nurturing Caregiver), and *Rishika* (The Wise Seeker).⁸

⁸ Nirupama Subramanian, *Powerful: The Indian Woman's Guide to Unlocking Her Full Potential* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2021).

⁹ Joshee and Sihra, “Shakti”; Singh, “Nurturant-Warrior Archetype.”

¹⁰ Singh, “Nurturant-Warrior Archetype,” 3.

Gender Roles within Hinduism

By examining the characteristics and relationships of deities that are typically considered the ideal man and woman, we may uncover Hinduism's views on gender roles. We will consider Ram and Sita, as well as Lakshmi and Vishnu, four important deities who exemplify what a man or woman ought to be. The former two embody traditional gender roles, while the latter reverses them.

Ram and Sita are protagonists of the world-famous epic *Ramayana*. Depictions of Ram and Sita as a couple are prevalent all-over popular culture.¹¹ These depictions celebrate and idealize Ram and Sita as the ideal man, woman, and couple and encourage audiences to emulate them. For instance,

*"Sita is assumed to be the supreme Hindu feminine ideal and projected as the highest achievement of Indian womanhood. Children are encouraged to revere and imbibe these mythologically idealized qualities by their parents, ensuring the maintenance of the implicit foundation of Indian society."*¹²

Ram was the king of *Ayodhya*. He is typically depicted as a wise king, an elite warrior, a great commander, and the embodiment of virtue. He is kind, humble, loving, charismatic, and confident. In the *Ramayana*, Ram's role is that of a ruler, protector, and provider. Ram exemplifies these roles throughout the epic – most of the action revolves around his war against Raavan to retrieve Sita. Thus, the emphasis for Ram is on his being a king and warrior.¹³ Sita, on the other hand, is most known for being Ram's wife. She is characterized mainly by her undying devotion to Ram. She is depicted as meek, soft-spoken, loving, nurturing, and devoted. Her role is that of a wife and mother, and she is often seen as someone who should be cherished, treasured, and protected. The emphasis for Sita is almost entirely on

¹¹ Jose, "Gendering *Dharma*"; Singh, "Nurturant-Warrior Archetype."

¹² Singh, "Nurturant-Warrior Archetype," 4.

¹³ This assessment is based on the popular reading of *Ramayana* as a story or historical account. Of course, closer and more careful readings will reveal profound spiritual concepts that go far beyond this admittedly superficial understanding of the *Ramayana*.

her relationship with Ram, suggesting that her entire life revolves around him.¹⁴

There is a clear difference between Ram and Sita. Where Ram is exalted as king and warrior, Sita is limited to being a devoted wife. Where Ram is understood as his own person, Sita is understood almost always in the context of her relationship with Ram. In other words, Ram is Ram, while Sita is Ram's wife. The idealization of Ram and Sita as the epitome of manhood and womanhood suggests that the perfect man is a decision-maker, protector, and provider. In contrast, the ideal woman is soft-spoken, nurturing, and totally devoted to her man. Moreover, Ram and Sita are also idealized as the perfect *couple*, implying that men ought to have most of the power in a relationship and that women ought to be happy to obey. This superficial but popular understanding of Ram and Sita reinforces the traditional gender roles prevalent in Hindu society.

However, in Hindu culture, Ram and Sita are not the only examples of ideal men and women. Equally as important are Lakshmi and Vishnu. For example, in Hindu weddings, the groom is said to be Vishnu, and the bride is Lakshmi.¹⁵ It is pervasive for families to believe that when they welcome a new daughter-in-law to the family, they are quite literally welcoming Lakshmi herself into their home. Lakshmi and Vishnu are central deities in Hinduism. Lakshmi is best known as the goddess of wealth, while Vishnu is the preserver, one part of the main Hindu trinity.¹⁶

Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is typically depicted as a symbol of success, abundance, and fulfillment. She is assured and confident, bringing luck and prosperity wherever she goes. Many small business owners in Hindu societies will have images of Lakshmi in their shops, praying to her for their success. Moreover, Lakshmi has another form known as Durga, a warrior-goddess that exemplifies

¹⁴ Some scholars like Murty, Doshi, and Goldman argue against this understanding of *Sita*. While I agree with them, my aim here is to present *Sita* as she is perceived by most Hindus, and in that, there is no doubt that Sita is limited to the concept of a devoted wife.¹⁵

¹⁵ My use of the term "be" is deliberate and important. They are not "like" Lakshmi and Vishnu, but they *are* themselves Lakshmi and Vishnu. At the very least, this is what is commonly understood by Hindus and is typically explained as such during the wedding by the officiating priest.

¹⁶ The main Hindu trinity is composed of Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer.

righteous anger against evil. Durga is powerful, intimidating, and full of rage. Lakshmi as Lakshmi is seen as a provider and bringer of success, while Lakshmi as Durga is seen as a protector, shielding us from all evil. Meanwhile, Vishnu, as the preserver, is typically depicted as a tender, loving, and nurturing being. In popular imagery, he is often shown reclining on *Sheshnag*, a primordial snake deity that serves as his bed. Vishnu is cool, calm, relaxed, sweet, and charming. He is seen as the ultimate nurturer. As a couple, they are considered equals.

The difference between Lakshmi and Vishnu is almost as stark as that between Ram and Sita. However, where Ram and Sita embody traditional gender roles, Lakshmi and Vishnu seem to flip these roles on their head. While their characteristics may overlap, it is abundantly clear that Lakshmi performs the traditionally masculine role of provider and protector, while Vishnu performs the traditionally feminine role of caregiver and nurturer. Thus, if Lakshmi and Vishnu are also seen as the ideal man and woman, then it implies that the ideal Hindu man ought to be tender and caring while the ideal Hindu woman ought to be strong, savvy, and able to provide.

The importance of Ram, Sita, Lakshmi, and Vishnu as ideals for men and women creates tension. On the one hand, as seen through Ram and Sita, men ought to provide and protect, while women ought to care for and nurture. On the other hand, as seen through Lakshmi and Vishnu, men ought to care for and nurture while women ought to provide and protect. So, Hindus are left to question what kind of gender roles they are expected to perform. However, the problem we are left with is that whichever role is chosen, the charge of essentialism still holds. The solution to this problem is a synthesis of the Ram, Sita, Lakshmi, and Vishnu ideals.

This synthesis becomes quite natural once we realize that Ram *is* Vishnu and that Lakshmi *is* Sita. According to Hindu tradition, Ram is one of the *Das Avatara* of Vishnu. *Das Avatara* refers to the ten main incarnations of Vishnu.¹⁷ It is said that when great evil exists, Vishnu

¹⁷ Vishnu has much more than ten incarnations, but the *Das Avatara* are considered the most important ones. Besides Ram, other notable incarnations from the *Das Avatara* are Krishna and Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha). For a quick list of the *Das Avatara* with brief descriptions, see Rajni Pandey, "Dashavatara: The Top 10 Avatars of Lord Vishnu," Times of India, last modified March 1, 2023 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/religion/web-stories/dashavatara-the-top-10-avatars-of-lord-vishnu/photostory/98322981.cms>. For a full discussion on all of

will incarnate to save humanity. The *avatars* of Vishnu all have their own forms and personalities. Still, they are all conscious that they are Vishnu, and some people they meet on Earth can also recognize that the *avatara* is none other than Vishnu himself. Moreover, Vishnu is not the only deity that can incarnate. Just as Ram is an *avatara* of Vishnu, so too is Sita an *avatara* of Lakshmi.¹⁸ Thus, if Ram is Vishnu and Sita is Lakshmi, and they are conscious of their original forms, then it follows that Ram's characteristics and roles are not just Ram's characteristics alone but both Ram *and* Vishnu's. The same applies to Sita and Lakshmi. By extension, if Ram and Sita are the ideal man and woman, it follows that the ideal man's and woman's characteristics are the synthesized characteristics and roles of *both* Ram and Vishnu for men and *both* Lakshmi and Sita for women.

Earlier, we noted that Ram and Lakshmi's characteristics are traditionally masculine, while Sita and Vishnu's are traditionally feminine. Thus, if the ideal man's characteristics are those of both Ram and Vishnu, then the ideal man has both traditionally masculine *and* feminine characteristics, and *mutatis mutandis*, the same for the ideal woman.¹⁹ Therefore, both men and women ought to have the same characteristics and gender roles as one another. Both men and women should be protectors, providers, decision-makers, nurturers, caregivers, and devoted partners. The *true* ideal for men and women is the same. The ideal man *and* woman are *both* masculine *and* feminine. There is balance, and the charge of gender essentialism can be dropped, for in this sense, nothing separates masculinity from femininity.

It might be objected here that I am making a false equivalence. Just because Ram and Sita are *actually* Lakshmi and Vishnu, it does not mean that Lakshmi and Vishnu are *actually* Ram and Sita. Ram and Sita may be mere characters played by Lakshmi and Vishnu. A particular character may be an actor, but it does not follow that an

Vishnu's incarnations including those beyond the *Das Avatara*, see Nanditha Krishna, *The Book of Vishnu* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001) and M.L. Varadpande, *Mythology of Vishnu and His Incarnations* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2009).

¹⁸ Varadpande, *Mythology of Vishnu*, 24.

¹⁹ It may be interesting to think about the complementary relationship between Ram and Sita and Lakshmi and Vishnu in terms of Yin and Yang in Chinese philosophy. They are different, yet fundamentally the same – each containing an aspect of the other – the masculine and feminine united into a whole. I am thankful to the anonymous referee for suggesting this intriguing comparison.

actor is the actual character they play. Moreover, the *actor's* traits should not be considered when analyzing a *character's* personality. Similarly, if Ram and Sita are characters, we do not have to consider their characteristics including those of Lakshmi and Vishnu.

I argue against this objection that Ram and Sita cannot be characters because they are conscious of being Lakshmi and Vishnu. In the general case of playing a character, the actor is conscious that they are playing a part, but the character itself is not conscious that an actor is playing it. However, Ram is fully aware that he is Vishnu, and Sita that she is Lakshmi. Neither do they make any attempt to deny who they are. For instance, in the *Ramayana* when Hanuman meets Ram for the first time and recognizes that Ram is Vishnu, Ram does not try to convince him otherwise. However, an actor would try to convince others that they are the character and not an actor.

Additionally, rather than characters, it is more apt to consider Ram, Sita, and other *avatars* as roles or functions that Lakshmi and Vishnu play. For example, we play different roles in our lives. We play the role of a child, a student, a sibling, a colleague, a friend, and so on. We may be quite different as students than friends, but both roles are still fundamentally us. Person A-as-student and Person A-as-friend are still Person A, and the characteristics of Person A-as-student cannot be isolated from Person A in totality, nor from Person A-as-any other role. Similarly, Ram is simply Vishnu-as-Ram, and Sita is simply Lakshmi-as-Sita. Thus, the characteristics of Vishnu-as-Ram and Lakshmi-as-Sita should be considered together with the attributes of Vishnu and Lakshmi in totality.

A more forceful objection is that Lakshmi and Vishnu are considered gods, while Ram and Sita are considered humans. What holds in a godly context does not necessarily hold in a human context. Lakshmi's power does not imply that human women should also be powerful. Moreover, when Ram and Sita appear in the human world as humans, they must take on the existing roles and cultures of humans. Since the existing culture holds that women ought to be subservient to men, Ram and Sita must comply. Therefore, Hinduism is still essentialist.²⁰ This objection operates on two levels: (1) the disparity between deities and humans and (2) Ram and Sita adhering to pre-

²⁰ My sincerest thanks to the anonymous referee that brought up this excellent objection. Such a consideration is integral to the argument I am making and must be thoroughly addressed.

existing norms. The former is addressed by the arguments presented in the succeeding section on Identity and Genderlessness.²¹ Thus, we shall address only the latter here.

It is correct that Ram and Sita followed the cultural norms of Hindus. To fulfill the tasks for which they came, it was important for them to do so. However, this objection implies that *because* they followed these norms, Hinduism is gender essentialist. This is precisely what is being argued against in this paper. The core argument is that despite Sita and Ram adhering to certain gender roles, they cannot be used as a basis for claiming that Hinduism is essentialist. The current situation in Hindu society is that the idealization of Ram and Sita is used to promote gender essentialism. However, from a strictly religious standpoint, we cannot isolate Ram and Sita from Lakshmi and Vishnu – they are the same, despite the apparent disparity between Ram and Sita’s humanity and Lakshmi and Vishnu’s divinity. Thus, the problem is that there has been a divergence between what Hindu culture values and what Hindu religion actually expresses. Therefore, while (the latter half of) the objection has been addressed, we are forced to make a disturbing concession. While Hinduism in and of itself may not be essentialist, it seems that Hindu culture *is* and that this has caused much harm. I hope that by showing how the basis for this essentialism is wrong, we may begin correcting the harm that has been done.

It might also be objected that just because a man and a woman ought to have both masculine and feminine characteristics, it does not mean that Hinduism is not essentialist. Characteristics themselves are still perceived as masculine or feminine. This objection can be dealt with by understanding what it means for a particular characteristic to be masculine or feminine. For a characteristic to be masculine or feminine is for that characteristic to be proper to a man or woman. In other words, if a man ought to be some characteristic *c*, then *c* is masculine, and the same holds for feminine characteristics. However,

²¹ While addressed more completely in the succeeding section, the response may be summed up as such: Hindus ought to identify as the *aatman* or soul, which is not at all distinct from Brahman, the fundamental, eternal, and unchanging reality. Deities like Lakshmi and Vishnu are merely projections of Brahman. Thus, Hindus should not see themselves as humans that are distinct from these deities, but rather as an *aatman* that is one and the same as Brahman. Hence, what applies in a “godly” context does apply in a “human” context since Hindus ought not to differentiate between these contexts in the first place.

when analyzing what characteristics are proper for men and women (i.e., what characteristics ought men and women to have), we determined that these characteristics are the same for both. Thus, to say that a particular characteristic is masculine or feminine is meaningless because that characteristic is proper to both men and women. Therefore, there is no question of separate gender roles or any essentialism. What it means to be an ideal man and what it means to be an ideal woman are the same – to be an ideal *human*.

This idea of parity and identity between men and women (and between masculinity and femininity) is nothing new to Hinduism, and several scholars have recognized this. Sugirtharajah asserts that “at the conceptual level, Hinduism affirms the spiritual equality & inseparability of male and female.”²² Meanwhile, Singh proposes a gender-neutral “nurturant-warrior archetype” for women that exemplifies the qualities of both Sita and Kali, a deity very similar to Durga.²³ This proposal of Singh is not too dissimilar from the synthesis proposed in this paper. Heller discusses the existence of the *ardhanaishwar* and of the *Mohini avatara*.²⁴ The *ardhanaishwar* is an androgyne – a deity that is simultaneously man and woman, typically depicted in popular imagery as being split down the middle.²⁵ The *ardhanaishwar* is described as being beyond gender; as neither man nor woman.²⁶ Conversely, the *Mohini avatara* is a female incarnation of Vishnu, a male deity.²⁷ Finally, Joshee and Sihra, as well as Gross affirm that the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are inseparable from their counterparts Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Parvati, and that any analysis of their power and personality must be done with each other, as two halves of a whole.²⁸ Thus, we can see that the idea of gender

²² Sharadah Sugirtharajah, “Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no.2 (Fall 2002): 102.

²³ Singh, “Nurturant-Warrior Archetype.”

²⁴ Birgit Heller, “Symbols of Emancipation? Images of God/dess, Devotees and Trans-sex/gender in Hindu Traditions,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation* 3, no. 2 (November 2017) DOI 10.14220/jrat.2017.3.2.235.

²⁵ In particular, *ardhanaishwar* refers to the fusion of the god Shiva and the goddess Parvati.

²⁶ Heller, “Symbols of Emancipation.”

²⁷ Mohini is not one of the *Das Avatara* but plays an important role in the story of Kurma, the second of the *Das Avatara*.

²⁸ Joshee and Sihra, “Shakti”; Gross, “New Model.”

roles and gendered characteristics is not something Hinduism necessarily promotes.

Identity and Genderlessness

This concept may be extended further because Hinduism is ultimately monotheistic, as will be explained in the succeeding paragraphs.²⁹ Just as Ram and Sita are incarnations of Lakshmi and Vishnu, so are Lakshmi and Vishnu projections or manifestations of Brahman, the ultimate reality.³⁰ The Upanishads, *shruti* texts which form a part of the Four *Vedas*, are explicit about this. For instance, the Svetasvatara Upanishad reveals that “He is the one God, hidden in all beings, all-pervading, the self within all beings, watching over all works, dwelling in all beings, the witness, the perceiver, the only one, free from qualities. He is the one ruler of many who (seem to act, but really) do not act; he makes the one seed manifold.”³² Further, the Chandogya Upanishad confirms that “truly, all this (universe) is Brahman. From It all things originate; into It they dissolve, and by It they are sustained.”³³ Some scholars agree that “it would be more accurate to point out that in some versions of Hindu theology, **both** gods and goddesses are declared to be nothing more than diverse names for an underlying reality,”³⁴ and that “the one Supreme Being is manifest in many forms both male and female; in other words, the many aspects of the one being are represented through the myriad gods and goddesses that populate the Hindu universe.”³⁵ Thus, all Hindu deities, male, female, masculine, or feminine, are ultimately one

²⁹ Actually, it is probably a lot more accurate to regard Hinduism as pantheistic rather than monotheistic, but for simplicity’s sake we will stick to the term monotheistic.

³⁰ Brahman is not to be confused with Brahma. Brahma is the creator, one part of the main trinity, while Brahman is beyond even that, being the ultimate, singular reality and truth. Brahma is merely a projection or manifestation of Brahman, as is everything else.

³¹ John Davidson et al. *A Treasury of Mystic Terms Part 1 Vol. 2: The Divine Eternity* (New Delhi: Science of the Soul Research Centre, 2003).

³² Svetasvatara Upanishad 6.12-13, *The Upanisads*, trans. F. Max Müller (New York: Routledge, 2001).

³³ Chandogya Upanishad 3.14.1, *The Chândogya Upanisad*, trans. Swami Swahananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1956).

³⁴ Gross, “New Model,” 683.

³⁵ Joshee and Sihra, “Shakti,” 74.

and the same being. So, how can Hinduism promote essentialism when the ideal man and woman have the same characteristics and are essentially the same being? Moreover, this being, Brahman, the ultimate reality, is described in *shruti* texts like the Upanishads as being genderless.³⁶ “It is not woman, it is not man, nor is it neuter.”³⁷

This concept is paramount to understanding how gender identity and gender roles fit (or do not fit) within Hinduism because it is fundamentally tied to the Hindu concept of identity. To discuss identity in a Hindu context, we must first discuss two related concepts: reincarnation and transmigration. Simply put, reincarnation holds that we are reborn after death, while transmigration means that we are reborn in different forms (e.g., as a tree, horse, bird, etc.).³⁸ Given these two core elements of Hindu spirituality, an important question is raised: who is this “we” that is reborn?

The root of Hindu identity is the soul or *aatman*. It is not the body, mind, or personality that gets reincarnated and transmigrated; it is the soul. The “we” that we speak of is the soul.³⁹ The soul is described as being part and parcel of Brahman. The Upanishads hold that there is no distinction between *aatman* and Brahman.⁴⁰ This is encapsulated in the four *mahavakyas* or prominent sayings of the Upanishads. First, “Brahman is Supreme Consciousness.”⁴¹ Second, “I am Brahman.”⁴² Third, “Thou art That.”⁴³ Finally, “Aatman is Brahman.”⁴⁴ The Upanishads thus state in no uncertain terms that we are the soul, and the soul is Brahman itself. The body is merely clothing for the soul, which may be adorned and discarded. The problem, however, illustrated in the Upanishads and other *shruti* texts,

³⁶ In fact, Brahman is more than just genderless. It is described in many places within the Upanishads as *nirguna*, beyond any qualities whatsoever.

³⁷ Svetasvatara Upanishad 5.10, Müller, “The Upanisads.”

³⁸ John Davidson et al., *A Treasury of Mystic Terms Part 1 Vol. 6: The Soul in Exile* (New Delhi: Science of the Soul Research Centre, 2003).

³⁹ John Davidson et al., *A Treasury of Mystic Terms Part 1 Vol. 5: Man and the Cosmos* (New Delhi: Science of the Soul Research Centre, 2003).

⁴⁰ One common analogy that really helps clarify this idea is that if Brahman is an ocean, the soul is a drop from that ocean. If the drop were to return to the ocean, then it would no longer be a drop, but become the ocean itself. The same would happen to a soul that “returns” to Brahman.

⁴¹ Aitareya Upanishad 3.3, Müller, “The Upanisads.”

⁴² Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10, Müller, “The Upanisads.”

⁴³ Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7, Müller, “The Upanisads.”

⁴⁴ Mandukya Upanishad 1.2, Müller, “The Upanisads.”

is that we have come to identify ourselves with the body instead of the soul. The root of our suffering is that we perceive ourselves as distinct from Brahman. For example, the Svetasvatara Upanishads explain “On the same tree man sits grieving, immersed, bewildered, by his own impotence (an-îsâ). But when he sees the other lord (îsa) contented, and knows his glory, then his grief passes away.”⁴⁵

The plight of the soul is that it is trapped in a constant cycle of reincarnation and transmigration, which the Law of Karma governs.⁴⁶ The soul is deceived by *maya* or illusion. The entire physical universe is nothing but an illusion.⁴⁷ Kabir, a great Hindu mystic, paints an incredible picture of the dangers of *maya*:

*Maya's the super swindler.
Trailing the noose of three qualities
she wanders, whispering honeyed words.
For Vishnu she's Lakshmi,
for Shiva she's Shakti,
for priests an idol,
for pilgrims a river.
To a monk she's a nun,
to a king she's a queen,
in one house a jewel,
in one a shell.
For devotees she's a pious lady,
for Brahma, Mrs. Brahma.
Kabir says, seekers,
listen well:
this is a story
no one can tell.*⁴⁸

The only reality is Brahman itself. The ultimate goal, then, for the soul, and any Hindu, is to escape the cycle of reincarnation and achieve total union with Brahman – the merging of the soul back into

⁴⁵ Svetasvatara Upanishad 4.7, Müller, “The Upanisads.”

⁴⁶ The Law of Karma, simply put, is that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. As we sow, so shall we reap.

⁴⁷ Davidson et al., *The Soul in Exile*, 232-238.

⁴⁸ Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

its source. To achieve liberation or *moksha* from this cycle, we must, through the process of meditation, realize that we are the soul and that the soul is not at all distinct from Brahman.⁴⁹ The Svetasvatara Upanishad makes this explicit:

*"The one god rules the perishable (the pradhâna) and the (living) self. From meditating on him, from joining him, from becoming one with him, there is further cessation of all illusion in the end. When that god is known, all fetters fall off, sufferings are destroyed, and birth and death cease. From meditating on him there arises, on the dissolution of the body, the third state, that of universal lordship; but he only who is alone, is satisfied."*⁵⁰

Everything within Hinduism is geared toward this singular goal.

We can now see how the concept of gender roles or even gender itself is unnecessary for a Hindu. First, the soul is part and parcel of the genderless Brahman, which means the soul is also genderless. Second, a Hindu's identity ought to be rooted in the genderless soul rather than the gendered body. Moreover, as explained by the doctrines of reincarnation and transmigration, the soul has inhabited an unfathomable number of bodies, most of which were not even human. Thus, to claim that "we" are a man or woman is almost meaningless to a Hindu, for the Hindu is committed to the idea that "we" have been both man and woman (and both and neither) at some point in our existence. Third, the goal of a Hindu is *moksha*, the liberation of the soul, which requires disidentifying with worldly concepts. In contrast, notions like gender identity and gender roles are distinctly worldly concepts formed by *maya*. They are merely illusions! If anything, a fixation on gender roles is an unnecessary distraction and an impediment to the spiritual journey of a Hindu. Gender roles are irrelevant to spiritual progress, which is the ultimate point of Hinduism.

⁴⁹ In fact, we must come to the realisation that *nothing* is distinct from Brahman. Even the experience of Brahman is itself Brahman.

⁵⁰ Svetasvatara Upanishad 1.10, Müller, "The Upanisads."

It might be objected that there is scripture, both *shruti* and *smriti*, that outlines our duties, or *dharma*. *Dharma* is central to Hinduism, and *dharma* differs for men and women. Moreover, *dharma* is believed to be essential to spiritual progress. Thus, either Hinduism is essentialist, or the scriptures contradict themselves. This objection stems from an incomplete understanding of *dharma*. *Dharma* is a term that has been used in various contexts, often referring to different ideas such as *law*, *morality*, or even *religion*.⁵¹ In the simplest terms, *dharma* refers to duties we ought to fulfill to live a good life.⁵² A good life, in turn, is paramount to spiritual progress because acting against *dharma* creates an atmosphere that is not conducive to spirituality. However, duties are present in various dimensions. We have moral duties, social duties, and spiritual duties.⁵³ Thus, we can say that *dharma* is of two general kinds – worldly and spiritual. Worldly *dharma* deals with how to live our daily lives, while spiritual *dharma* deals with making genuine spiritual progress.⁵⁴ The worldly *dharma* is meant to aid us in accomplishing our spiritual *dharma*, but ultimately, our spiritual *dharma* is truly important. For instance, texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* have explicitly linked *dharma* with *bhakti* (devotion), such that devoting oneself totally to Brahman is *dharma*.⁵⁶ Moreover, worldly *dharma* is highly contextual, changing through the different life stages of a person. Thus, it is not a stretch to think that the worldly *dharma* outlined in various sacred texts is contextualized to the conditions of the people who were alive when these texts were written.

Thus, while living well is truly important, fixating on worldly *dharma* may distract us from performing our spiritual *dharma*. If we are so concerned with how we ought to act and follow the extremely stringent and restrictive rules of *dharma*, we may forget that these

⁵¹ Peter Adamson and Jonardon Ganeri, *Classical Indian Philosophy: A History of Philosophy without Any Gaps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 79.

⁵² Adamson and Ganeri, *Classical Indian Philosophy*, 65.

⁵³ Adamson and Ganeri, *Classical Indian Philosophy*, 65.

⁵⁴ Singh outlines “four feet” of *dharma*: (1) truth and (2) sacrifice, which represent the worldly dimension of *dharma* and (3) worship and (4) remembrance, which represent the spiritual dimension.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Sawan Singh, *Philosophy of the Masters: Series III* (Punjab: Radha Soami Satsang Beas, 1965), 186.

⁵⁶ Alf Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 2, 124.

rules are in place to help us exercise our spiritual *dharma*. Ultimately, what truly matters is liberation, and for a Hindu, to fixate on things like gendered worldly *dharma* only serves to entrench us further in this imaginary world. What does it matter if a man or woman ought to do this or that when the very idea of man and woman is a projection of *maya*? Thus, the *dharma* outlined in sacred texts is helpful but not necessary for attaining the ultimate goal, spiritual liberation. Moreover, “if suffering results from observing *dharma*, there is some mistake in understanding it.”⁵⁷ The fact that following the supposed essentialist *dharma* has led to the oppressive conditions seen today means that it has been misunderstood as such.

To this, one might raise another objection: the argument seems too strong – it eradicates the problem of essentialism by dropping a nuclear bomb.⁵⁸ If worldly concerns like gender roles impede spiritual progress, that extends to other “good” concerns like family, friendship, etc. If it is meaningless to think about how to be a good man or woman, then it is equally meaningless to think about how to be a good parent, child, teacher, and so on. It would seem that the Hindu ought to leave everything behind and live a life of prayer and reflection in the Himalayas. Alternatively, one might conclude that if being an ideal man or woman is meaningless, then so is being a terrible one. Thus, oppression is fine because it is ultimately meaningless.

This objection may be addressed on two levels. First, we must further motivate the initial argument. Second, we will clarify the Hindu perspective on these matters. The Aatman-Brahman argument is essential precisely because of the perceived dichotomy between divinity and humanity. If what holds in a divine context does not hold in the human context, then the synthesis of Ram, Sita, Lakshmi, and Vishnu fails. Moreover, the dichotomy implies that primacy ought to be given to worldly *dharma* rather than *spiritual* *dharma*, since the human and divine realms operate on different rules, and we are currently in the human realm. Thus, it is crucial to remove the distinction between humanity and divinity. Furthermore, the lack of a distinction between human and divine contexts is a core aspect of Hinduism.

⁵⁷ Singh, *Philosophy of the Masters*, 187-188.

⁵⁸ My sincerest thanks to Dr. Yujin Nagasawa, who brought up this important objection (and clever metaphor) at a conference where this paper was presented.

Next, the objection may be addressed by considering that the Hindu would *agree*. Hindus would have no qualms saying that attachment to family, friends, country, and so on is equally detrimental to spiritual progress. They, too, are a part of *maya* that further entrenches us within the cycle of rebirth. However, there is a slight nuance. From the Hindu perspective, it is an *attachment* or *fixation* on these worldly concepts that impedes spiritual progress, not the concepts themselves. This does not mean that the Hindu has a license to shirk their obligations and be terrible because it is all an illusion. The only condition is not to place these worldly things above their spiritual duty. The Hindu ought to act in a way that complements and aids their spiritual practice, so committing evil acts is a non-starter. This means that if one's rules or regulations for living cause suffering or harm, then those rules ought to be discarded, and such is the case with the worldly *dharma* outlined in controversial texts like the *Manusmriti*. Thus, there is still good reason to give some importance to being a good partner, parent, friend, and so on – just not to the point that by doing so, we forget how to be a good *aatman*. And, in terms of being a good man and woman, we have seen how those are the same.

Conclusion

Despite the problematic views on gender prevalent within many Hindu societies, Hinduism is not essentialist. An analysis of the ideal man and woman in Hinduism and some primary deities has revealed no distinction between the characteristics a man or woman ought to have. This analysis is further supported by multiple facets of Hinduism expressing parity and identity between men and women. Moreover, we have seen how Hinduism dismisses the very concept of gender through identification with the genderless soul, part and parcel of Brahman, the eternal, unchanging, and genderless ultimate reality. It seems, then, that those who use Hinduism's texts to promote the oppression of others do not have a very good understanding of Hinduism. Still, we cannot deny that Hindu society holds essentialist ideals, albeit mistakenly. Much work still needs to be done to demolish gender roles within Hindu culture, but showing that these roles are not rooted in the religion itself is an important first step.

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