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Indian Women in Leadership: An Introduction

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While India has emerged as a global hub in the past few decades, women's empowerment and emancipation are still facing many barriers (Haq, 2013; Kaushik, Sharma, & Kaushik, 2014). Indian women who emerge as leaders in many domains do so after overcoming countless barriers posed by a patriarchal society. In this opening chapter, we provide an overview of how India's patriarchal society has portrayed women through the lens of religion and mythology and the nuances associated with those perceptions. We hope that, through this overview, you will understand better the contextual conditions that are unique to India and how they continue to shape the challenges experienced by women leaders in India. In the backdrop of this contextual

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understanding, we outline the 15 chapters in this book presented in four parts: barriers and challenges, signs of hope, sector perspectives, and international perspectives.

Women Indian Deities and Women's Leadership

The ancient religion of India is the *sanatan dharma* or Hinduism (Denton, 2012). Islam and Christianity came to India much later. Hence, most references to women in ancient India are from Hindu mythology and epics. Hinduism is rich in idol worship with many goddesses and demi-goddesses (who have some but not all of the powers of goddesses). They are still worshipped with reverence by men and women alike in different parts of India. A few include Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity; Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and arts; Santoshi Ma, the goddess of material or spiritual satisfaction; and Ma Manasa, the goddess of snakes, as a symbol of nature. The goddesses are all depicted as good looking but range in their degree of docility and demureness. Goddesses Durga and Kali are known for their strength and valor. They are the warrior goddesses and are known to have defeated evil spirits or demons when everyone else failed to do so. In terms of marital status, most are consorts of a god. While goddess Lakshmi is depicted as sitting at the feet of Lord Vishnu, her husband, Goddess Kali is seen to be standing on Lord Shiva, her husband, in a spate of rage. Her other form, Goddess Durga or Parvati, is seen beside Lord Shiva as equals. There is also the concept of *Ardhanarishvara*, a composite androgynous form of the Hindu god, Shiva, and his consort, Parvati (also known as Devi, Shakti, and Uma in this icon), depicted as half male and half female, split down the middle (Goldberg, 2002).

This brief description implies that Hinduism, in its original form, does not denigrate women. In fact, Hinduism has the strongest presence of the divine feminine among major world religions, from ancient times to the present (Bryant, 2007). The powerful women deities can serve as enabling role models for women contesting the notions of women subordination and obedience (Rajan, 1998). But, a closer look is needed to understand the influence of women goddesses in Indian society. Does ideological

promotion of women as divine entities through worship of female deities contribute to ordinary women's quest for gender equality and, hence, aspiration for leadership positions in India?

While there is no doubt that female goddesses legitimize women's ability to possess and exhibit power and may counteract banalization of women's leadership to some extent, it also implies that women can be leaders *only if* they are elevated to the status of divinity. There is evidence of a comparison of women political leaders in India, such as Indira Gandhi (late ex-Prime Minister of India) and Jayalalitha (late ex-Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, a state in South India), to powerful goddesses, such as Durga and Kali (Lama, 2001). This further underscores the point that women leaders in India need to be deemed super-human in order to escape typical criticisms (e.g., character assassination and poor judgment as a leader) that ordinary women face. This suggests that, although a few unconventional women may find legitimacy for their non-domestic leadership roles by referring to female deities in Indian society, the average Indian women do not necessarily benefit from the practice of goddess worship. The patriarchal society feels that women can be allowed to serve beyond their expected domestic roles if and only if they can be super humans and handle both responsibilities without the slightest flaw. To be able to attain the freedom of working outside the home, women have to be better than others to be able to earn respect. Furthermore, the practice of worshipping women as divine beings preserves the patriarchal system as then women need to be extra-cautious in protecting their honor in society because their honor as divine beings is considered sacred, which can be harmed if they are granted the freedom that is typical to ordinary humans (Rajan, 1998). This is evident in the Hindu hegemonic discourse noted in the following two quotes from Manusmriti, a highly revered holy text of Hinduism:

In the home where women are worshipped, there the Gods shower blessings. In the home where women are not worshipped, even virtuous deeds go unrewarded. (Laws of Manu III 56; Bühler, 1886)

Be a girl, be a young woman, or even be an aged one, nothing must be done independently by a woman, even in her own house. In childhood,

a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent. (Laws of Manu, V, 147–148; Bühler, 1886)

While these two quotes might appear to contradict each other (as one says that women are to be worshipped and the other states that women should never be allowed independence), a careful reading will show that the recognition of women's divine power through worship is justification for the patriarchal society's inclination to control women's independence (Erndl, 2000). The honor associated with the image of women as divine beings necessitates the additional sanctions on women's behavior in society as, otherwise, that honor might be lost. And so, the answer to the question of whether the cultural practice of worshipping female deities prevalent in Indian society is empowering to women needs to be a *cautious* "yes" (Erndl, 2000; Rajan, 1998), as women, aspiring for leadership roles, in a way, have to prove their divinity to be successful and respected in society.

Women in Indian Epics and Women Leadership

In two famous Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, we see quite diverse and conflicting views of the position of women, ranging from independence of thoughts and actions to limiting roles as an obedient daughter, housewife, and mother. For instance, *Panchakanya* is a group of five iconic heroines of Hindu epics, extolled in a hymn and whose names are believed to dispel sin when recited (Bhattacharya, 2004); Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari. Sometimes, Sita is considered as a *Panchakanya*, in the place of Kunti. Ahalya, Tara, Mandodari, and Sita are from the epic *Ramayana*; while as Draupadi and Kunti are from the *Mahabharata*.

Sita, the wife of King Rama of Ayodhya, is worshipped as an epitome of fidelity and sacrifice. She accompanied her husband to the forest when he was exiled for 14 years by his step-mother. During their stay, Sita was abducted by Ravana, the King of Lanka (present Sri Lanka). Although

Ravana developed a liking for Sita, she never allowed him to come near. A big battle was fought between Rama and Ravana, in which the former won, and Sita was rescued. Sita's chastity, however, was questioned multiple times by her husband, Rama, and his kingdom. Sita obeyed her husband when he asked her to prove her chastity by walking through fire (*agnipariksha*), the idea being that, if Sita had been faithful to her husband, she would be unscathed and that would be her proof of purity. Sita's willingness to enter a burning pyre is regarded as the iconic example of devotion to a husband, and many Indian women are encouraged to model such unquestioning dedication in their married lives. However, a careful analysis of Sita's actions shows that there is more to her character than submission to her husband. When her chastity was questioned, she relented, but her disappointment was reflected in her decision to leave her husband after their sons had grown up as strong warriors. As per the epic legend, Sita decided to return to mother earth (i.e., the earth splits open and Sita disappears into the opening, symbolizing the embracing of Sita by mother earth), instead of a life as a queen with Rama. In this final act, Sita denounces the prestige and luxury of a royal life by exercising her willpower to leave her husband (Pattanaik, 2010).

Mahabharata is a very rich epic and comprises 100,000 couplets. It also has a myriad of characters, some being prominent women. Draupadi is the wife of five brothers (Pandavas). When Draupadi was disrespected by the Kauravas (Pandavas' 100 cousins) who disrobed her in public, she vowed to have her vengeance by having all of them killed by the Pandavas, her husbands. There was also enmity among the cousins regarding ownership of the kingdoms of Hastinapur and Indraprastha, which thus ensued the battle of *Mahabharata* in which all of the Kauravas were killed. Draupadi felt peace of mind after washing her hair with the blood of the Kauravas. Kunti was Draupadi's mother-in-law (mother of the Pandavas) who was widowed at a young age. She raised her five sons, and the epic shows her as a very powerful woman who advised her sons and fought for their rights as heirs of Hastinapur. Kunti also had a son before her marriage, whom she had abandoned due to societal pressure, but who later plays a prominent role in the story of *Mahabharata* against the Pandavas.

While the epics are fictitious, they do carry vignettes of the society and represent the status of women and challenges posed to their leadership. The *Mahabharata*, for example, states:

No man, even in anger, should ever do anything that is disagreeable to his wife; for happiness, joy, virtue and everything depend on the wife. Wife is the sacred soil in which the husband is born again, even the Rishis cannot create men without women.— *Adi Parva, Mahabharata Book*, 1.74.50–51

The Anushasana Parva compares the value of a daughter to a son, as follows:

The daughter, O king, has been ordained in the scriptures to be equal to the son.— *Bhishma, Anushasana Parva, Mahabharata*, 13.47.26

While these may be true in theory, in reality, we often see these values being violated in the epics, thereby reflecting reality in Indian society. For instance, Draupadi's eldest husband, Yudhistira (who is also considered the epitome of dharma or virtuousness) pawns her in a game of dice, thus subjecting her to extreme humility at the hands of his cousins, the Kauravas. A courtyard full of learned and valiant men look on, but no one protests when Draupadi is disrobed in public after Yudhistira loses her in gambling.

It is interesting to note a couple of societal norms from these epics that are relevant in the quest for gender equality. First, there is hardly any mention of unmarried women in these epics. Especially, all of the *Panchakanya* (group of five iconic heroines of Hindu epics) were all married. This implies a familial identity, especially an identity as a wife as it was and is still regarded as central to a woman's self-concept in Indian society. If any woman happens to forego close ties with family (especially as unmarried, divorced, widowed women, or single mothers), they are likely to be regarded as outcasts and rebels. This privileging of family can pose many challenges for aspiring women leaders in India as they are less likely to be deemed successful if they do not sustain a family life beside their leadership roles in professional work contexts.

Second, prominent women in the epics exercised their power indirectly through their husbands or their sons (e.g., Draupadi seeking revenge through her husbands' prowess, Sita and Kunti reclaiming respect through rearing strong sons), thus implying the importance of men as the ultimate harbingers of women's respectability in society. Although the shastras (holy books) speak about respect and equality of women, it finally depended on men as to how the women were treated. This diminishing of women's power speaks volumes about the patriarchal control that women leaders still experience in today's India in both their personal and professional lives.

Overview of Chapters

Now we want to explain how in this book provides a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and opportunities prevalent in Indian society for women leaders. This book consists of 15 chapters, presented in four parts: barriers and challenges, signs of hope, sector perspectives, and international perspectives. The first part on barriers and challenges delineates how deep-rooted patriarchy can pose challenges through institution of gender roles and cultural constraints and how those constraints can spill over into professional contexts, thereby making the pursuit of career development extremely difficult for aspiring women leaders in India. The second part on signs of hope sheds light on the policies and legislation, educational opportunities, and cross-sector partnerships and collaborations that are being developed in India for the benefit of women leadership development and success. The third part gives an in-depth overview of the current state of women leaders in different sectors (e.g., corporate, entrepreneurship, government, education, non-government organizations, and agriculture) in India. And, in the fourth part, a comparative presentation is provided to understand how the challenges and opportunities facing women leaders in India compare to those in other Asian countries.

Conclusion

It is said that leaders are born, not made. Many women leaders are born in India and many of them are able to establish themselves; yet, there are many others who are never allowed to spread their wings due to tremendous societal pressures. It should be our endeavor to nurture a society in which women leaders are not only born, but made as well. This book is a step toward fostering a culture that enables women leaders to grow and prosper through challenging the age-old norms of patriarchy. Through building awareness about the scope of challenges and possibilities for today's women leaders in different sectors in India and through comparing the state of women leaders in India with those in other Asian countries, this book provides a unique glimpse of women leadership in diverse Indian contexts in which traditional cultural expectations and modernized values coexist.

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