From Enlightenment to Equality: Spirituality May Lead the Way to a Gender Just Society in India and Beyond

ERIN SMITH

Abstract

India is a country of spiritual traditions and paradoxes. Its spiritual verve offers sustenance through personal transformation, truth, harmony, and connection, yet today large numbers of people in India struggle against poverty, abuses, injustice, and inequalities. India is a land of daughters, known for their valour, hope, knowledge, and wealth of spirit, yet today the status of women is one of the country's greatest challenges and gender equality is fighting an often-silent battle. This study was conceived from the notion that Indian spirituality, in its truest essence, is the antithesis to this gender paradigm, and accordingly, it examined if spirituality can work to achieve a more gender equal and just society. Organized with the support of Dev Sanskriti University, this pilot study sought to uncover a correlation between participants' spirituality and their beliefs about gender roles, their gender equal attitudes, and gender equal behavior in the home. Though findings revealed no exceptional correlation, results identified a relationship between spirituality and gender equality within which gender discourse should focus and further research should follow. Gender inequality is pervasive in all countries, and such a global crisis deems further exploration into spirituality and gender equality not only compelling but also necessary.

Key words : Spirituality, Gender Equality, Gender Roles, Patriarchy and Sustainable Development

"May Almighty illuminate our consciousness and inspire us towards the righteous path."

-Gayatri Mantra

The culture of India is one like no other-strengthened in its occupation with spirituality and the Vedas. Yet, the harsh realities of society and of women and girls in particular make clear the exploitative and patriarchal thinking that has undermined Vedic qualities of consciousness, connection, and compassion. Despite 50 years of progress in human rights, the country's struggle with gender inequality remains a startling and palpable challenge to development, especially for those aspiring to ethical and sustainable development (Mugali, 2014). India currently ranks an embarrassing 136 out of 186 countries in the UN's Gender Inequality Index, and the UN Development Program recognizes women as one of India's most marginalized groups and pressing challenges (UNDP, 2014). The above translation of the Gayatri Mantra wonderfully captures the essence of Indian Spirituality and defines what is, at its core, needed for society to elevate women to an equal and just status. In a way, this study sought to answer if, through spirituality and spiritual practices, the *Almighty* is able to step up to the challenge.

Gender Inequality and India's Uncertain Road to Sustainable Development

Gender equality's role in India's sustainable development falls within a systems approach, thought as the only viable way to work within the development field; it considers that all aspects, including institutions, ideas, and beliefs, will directly or indirectly affect outcomes (Kothari, 2013). An open economy, climate change, and a globalized world have in undated Indian lives with instability and forceful adaptation (Pande, 2007; Shiva, & Bedi, 2002). Sustainable development addresses the myriad of social, political, cultural, and environmental conflicts, challenges, and

opportunities that arise with such change. The UN highlights gender equality for successful development planning and outcomes (UN Women, 2014). Male hegemony [or domination in any form], sparks corruption and curtails development practices designed to liberate women, men, and communities (Rowen-Campbell, 1999, p.11). By definition, social justice, the feminist movement, and a gender perspective become central attributes to a sustainable development paradigm. This study stems from the current body of knowledge on gender and development while filling a gap that development researchers admit exists in the realm of spirituality (Ver Beek, 2000).

Understanding Inequality

The UN defines gender as the *socially constructed* attributes and opportunities ascribed to individuals based on their sex rather than biologically determined characteristics (UN Women, 2014). In this study, gender equality is defined as *equal physical, emotional, and mental liberty and well-being between genders and the absence of barriers to equitable opportunity and agency based on gender identity.* Under this definition, gender equality is a fundamental human right across cultures and contexts. Despite strides in India, gender injustice--from the violent and shocking to the subtle and often overlooked--still manifest in all sectors; analysis of Indian economy, education, health, and law gives a *slight glimpse* into the challenges[1].

Women's status in these sectors and inequality in the family structure represent an entire complex patriarchal system (Sharpe, 2003, p.283). The system relies on strict and biased gender roles and identities based on *Essentialism*, a theory that claims there are "inherent or natural features" that characterize men and women [outside of physical attributes]" (Kabir & Kumar, 2003). Together they justify a division of labor and lifestyle that exploits and regulates women in

their "roles, responsibilities, mobility, sexuality, and independence" by male counter parts and institutions (VanKlinken, 2013, p. 276). This study gauged participants' belief in essentialism, which contradicts the theory of social constructivism that most modern scholars conclude is superior (Derné 1994; Alsop *et al.,* 2002, p.130; VanKlinken, 2013). Like the UN's defi,nition of gender, *Social constructivism* states that categories of man and woman are "attached to social and symbolic meanings" rooted in "cultural and religious ideologies" [and thus controlled by popular belief rather than science] (VanKlinken, 2013, p. 276).

India's Prevailing Patriarchy

Patriarchy and gender inequality were ingrained and exacerbated through unique elements in Indian history[2]. Their origins are traced to around 1500 B.C. and the brahmanical social order that divested women's religious and scriptural authority (Chakravarti, 1993, p.579). This era also saw society stratified by hierarchal caste distinctions that deemed women's independence a threat to protected societal and familial structures. The caste system became a useful tool to justify and perpetuate strict gender roles through an array of violations- child brides and forced marriage, practical imprisonment of the daughter in the home, subordination of the daughter-in-law, dowry, sati, and the stripping of female agency (Chakravarti, 1993, p.579). Although this history is quite *literally* ancient, patriarchy in India prevails, still dominating today through many of the same practices.[3]

Historical understanding of patriarchy in India and modern-day observation explain the manifestation of gender inequality in the family and the directing of this study's focus to life in the home. Gender inequality, female subjugation, and the inherent dilemma for all Indian people demand reparation of the crisis. Extensive research has examined empowerment and its effectiveness

through economic development, education, and gender focused legal policies; most work concludes that severe challenges still exist[4].

A Missing Piece

Indian philosopher Kreet Joshi explained, "the unique greatness and continuity of Indian culture can be traced to her unparalleled experimentation, discovery and achievement in the vast field of spirituality" (Joshi, 1992, p.56). Studies reveal that religion and spirituality strongly affect an individual's development, identity, belief system, and cultural paradigm[5]. One can assume that likened attitudes, behaviors, and institutions, including those regarding gender, culminate as a result. Despite these truths, spirituality in India remains a virtually untapped resource in gender equality programs and research.

It is important to note the difference between *spirituality* and *religion* however. Though the two can coexist in one's life, religion is extrinsic and reflects constructed behaviors of group membership, coherent theology, belief systems, and worship (Bryant, 2007, p.835). Spirituality is intrinsic and instead defines an individual process, *experience*, and state of being in search of connection with something transcending human existence (Passalacqua & Cervantes, 2008, p.224). Research shows that spirituality has a more profound and positive impact on a person's psyche and actions than religiousness or religion alone (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Berkel *et al.,* 2004; Bryant, 2007).

The Spiritually Awakened Reality and Gender Theory

Both religion and spirituality exist in India today, but the true nature of spirituality is separate of religion and rooted in metaphysics and the Vedas *(*Joshi, 1999). Though Vedic spiritual concepts are experiential phenomenon and thus difficult to define, these aspirations underline the study's scope, and understanding their nature forms a hypothesis wherein spirituality and gender equality are related. Knapp (2006) describes that spirituality in India, or *Sanatana–Dharma,* is a path to understanding oneself, one's divinity, and one's inherent nature, which is ultimately "love for all things" The ego and physical forms belong to the world of senses and illusion (Knapp, 2006). Acharya (2014) said that when one experiences *Atman* (the soul) as the true reality, negative thoughts, character, and behavior stemming from the illusion are purified (p.19). Theoretically speaking, spiritual practice can lead to the pure consciousness, compassion, forgetting of ego, and refinement in character needed for destroying patriarchal structures. In addition, an elevated state of mind reveals the physical body as an illusion and the concept of gender roles can be naturally alleviated.

Spiritual teachers then relay that a profound understanding of the collectiveness of all life can be accessed from this state. Acharya (2014) explains that when ascending towards enlightenment, the sense of belonging expands until "one discovers that [s]he is one with all existence" and the "body-confined sense of I-ness vanishes for good" (p.21). One awakens to the self as one spark in the transcending *Vishuddha Atma,* or "pure, ultimate, Immutable Super Soul" of which all else is and belongs (Acharya, 2014, p.20, 65). Joshi (1999) describes spirituality as "a realm of truths, powers and ecstasies" that we can experience and express directly (p.56). Vedic insight into these truths magnifies a spiritual fabric of life where practices, experiences, and realizations of oneness ought to lead to critical awareness of inequalities and exploitative gender paradigms. For achieving equality, self-exploration essentially leads to a place of connection and consciousness where all distinction between lives, and therefore genders, should by logic fall away.

Testing the Spiritual Theory

Pure knowledge and absolute connection lie at the heart of spirituality in India, and thus premise for biases, stereotyping, and different treatment based on biological sex should theoretically have no place. To examine this theory, this study sought to uncover if correlations existed between participants' spirituality and their beliefs about gender equality and gender roles and identities. It next assessed if spirituality correlated with participants' gender equal behaviors in the home, comparing husbands to wives and sons to daughters, and evaluating equal workloads, agency, autonomy, and access to public space, finances, and opportunities. Finally, the study discovered if participants practicing healthy gender behaviors in the family believed that spirituality helped them to better understand gender equality. It then assessed if those individuals differed from their parental examples, which could confirm a departure from the process of socialization that may be due to spiritual formation.

METHOD

This is an exploratory study with the staff members of Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. It is a qualitative study to uncover in-depth understanding of human beliefs and behavior, primarily using an extensive written survey questionnaire.

Exploratory data analysis summarized and identified patterns in findings. Results for survey sections 1 and 2 used a numerical valuation (from 0-4) of each response to total and categorize within labeled parameters the results for participants' level of spirituality and beliefs about gender equality and gender roles. These labeled parameters were then used to make correlations between concepts (See table-1). Section (3) evaluated gender equal behaviors in the home, where any major life choice made "usually" by one spouse defined an inequality in agency. Inequality between son and daughter was defined as any discrepancy in treatment or expectations. One spouse habitually working at least 35% more hours a week compared to the other (outside job and housework combined) characterized an unequal workload. To define a final correlation between aspects of spirituality and aspects of gender equality, the study required results show 60% or more subjects (or at least 15 of 25) presenting the correlation, else a correlative conclusion was not made.

The study's scope was limited to individuals who believed spirituality to be important in their lives. Opportunity sampling was necessitated based on the timeline of the study and comprised a heterogeneous group of men and women, married and unmarried, from a range of different ages and educational, caste, socio-economic, and urban/rural backgrounds. Two hundred surveys were dispersed; 25 were completed and retrieved. Participants included 16 married males, one unmarried male, 7 married females, and one unmarried female, possessing a Bachelor's degree or higher, ranging from 28 to 66 years in age. This study adhered to all ethical and sensitivity guidelines of the local review board and all participants' personal identification remained anonymous.
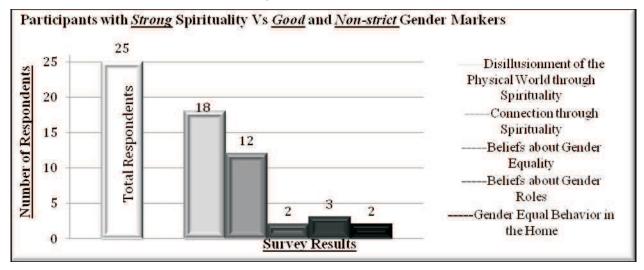
FINDINGS

Table (1) explains the relationships between variables used to define a correlation:

Definition of Correlations Between Findings	Spiritual Measurement	Beliefs about Gender Roles	Beliefs about Gender Equality	Gender Equality in the Home
	Very Strong to Strong	Non-Strict	Good	Good
	Weak	Somewhat Strict	Fair	Fair
	Very Weak to None	Strict to Very Strict	Poor	Poor to Non-existent

Using these parameters, less than 60% of the respondents showed a correlation between spirituality and beliefs about gender equality, beliefs about gender roles, or gender equal behavior in the home. Respondents who showed gender equal behavior in the home did not, in general, differ from their parental example.

Connection, disillusionment and discovering a disconnect (Outcomes 1 and 2)

*The number of respondents showing strong aspects of spirituality was relatively high, while the numbers showing good beliefs about gender equality, non-strict beliefs about gender roles, and good gender equal behavior in the home were *significantly* lower, showing a disconnect.

Table (2) displays total participant correlations between aspects of spirituality and gender measures

	Participants who demonstrated correlation in:	
	Sense of Connection	Sense of Disillusionment of the Physical World
Beliefs about Gender Roles	11 out of 25 (44%)	6 out of 25 (24%)
Beliefs about Gender Equality	13 out of 25 (52%)	7 out of 25 (28%)
Gender Equal Behavior in the Home	9 out of 25 (36%)	6 out of 25 (24%)

*Less than 60% of participants showed a correlation between each spiritual measure and gender measure, so this study did not define any conclusive correlations between aspects. Note-- more participants showed a correlation between gender measures and connection than gender measures and disillusionment of the physical world.

    ** In addition, those who scored highest (top five) for sense of connection through spirituality also scored highest for all gender markers. Similarly, those who scored lowest (bottom five) for sense of connection also scored lowest for all gender markers. These findings show a relationship exists between sense of connection and the gender markers, though not a sharp correlation as defined by the study.

Socialization wins over Spirituality (Outcome 3)

All 25 respondents strongly agreed that spirituality improved their understanding of gender equality, but only two participants showed good gender equal behavior in the home. Both participants had a good parental example for gender equal behavior, so a departure from socialized gender behavior due to spiritual formation could not be confirmed.

Beliefs that are striking -Gender Equality and Gender Roles

Table (3) displays notable results for Beliefs about Gender Equality

Survey Question:	Strongly Agreed	Agreed
Gender equality is good for India	84%	8%
Gender inequality is still a problem in India today	36%	28%
Women should have the same rights as men	48%	40%
It is good for a woman to share her opinion	8%	8%

*Examples are seen showing a discrepancy in beliefs. Although the majority strongly agreed that gender equality is good for India, less than half strongly agreed it is a problem today or that women and men should have the same rights.

Table (4) displays notable results for Beliefs about Gender Roles

Survey Question:	Agreed or Strongly Agreed
Men should be emotionally stronger than women	68%
Men should make the most income and thus hold the power in the family	68%
It is the duty of a daughter-in-law to obey her in-laws	80%
Women should be most responsible for taking care of the home and cooking	84%
It is the mother's responsibility to change diapers, give baths, and feed the children	84%

*Examples are seen of a striking majority showing Very Strict/Strict Beliefs about Gender Roles.
*Twenty-three of 25 participants (92%) showed unequal workloads in the family, with the female habitually working *at least* 35% more hours a week than her husband.

DISCUSSION

Though correlations between spiritual beliefs and gender beliefs and behaviors could not be concluded, the sense of connection through spirituality had interesting results. Since the top and bottom scores for gender equal beliefs and behavior in the home were in-line with the top and bottom scores for connection through spirituality, it may suggests that in its strong presence or strong absence, sense of connection affects gender equal concepts. Had the guidelines for correlation not been so rigid, or quantitative methods of deduction been used, (e.g., the correlation coefficient), correlations would have been more easily noted for spiritual connection.

Gender equal behavior in the home of the participants is also interesting. Only two people were found to have "Good" gender behaviors, twelve participants would have qualified had equal workload not been a factor. This may indicate that connection through spirituality can influence gender equal behaviors in decision-making, financial equality, and treatment of sons and daughters, but that a disconnect lies deeper in realizing a fair and equal division of labor. The study revealed that beliefs about gender roles could be the force behind the behavior. Those with the presence of physical violence in the home, the most overt form of inequality, showed to have the strictest sense of gender roles. Of the participants in this study, the housewife position was related to violence, strict gender roles, and inequality, however it should not be assumed that, outside of this group, a woman working in the home predicts inequality in the marriage.

"'Man' and 'woman' are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendent meaning. Overflowing because, even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied or suppressed definitions" (Scott,1988, p.61)

The above quote is significant to this study. The participants, to varying degrees, seem to have not yet realized its truth to the fullest extent. Most respondents at least agreed that men and women are equal, failing to realize the implications of strict gender roles or their maintenance of a patriarchal system. A major finding was that women were significantly overworked compared to their husbands (as a result of men generally taking far less responsibility for duties of the home and/or children). Research shows that women face physical, mental, and emotional burdens as a result of this standard (Hooks, 2000, P.79). Furthermore, male participants are also victims to these gender roles, evidenced by the majority response that stated men "should be emotionally stronger than women" and that fathers should be the secondary caretakers of children.

The social constructivist perspective explains that men are socialized into masculinities that maintain gender inequalities, such as being "critically judged" based on achievement, success, power, emotional restriction, and aggressiveness-- a value set this study assessed and found present in its subjects (Alsop & Lennon, 2002, p.130). The mentality not only creates a culture of domination, but men are taught "to suppress a range of emotions, needs, and possibilities such as nurturing, receptivity, empathy, and compassion, which are experienced as inconsistent with the power of manhood" (Kaufman, 1999). Women are socialized into an "ideal feminine role" that stresses "conflict resolution, submission, gentleness, [and] nurturance" (Bryant, 2007, p.838) and emphasizes "modesty, obedience, self-sacrifice and attachment to the home" (Derné, 1994, p.205). Again, this portrays a value system revealed via the participants' responses. Sadly, these blindly prescribed attributes successfully limit women's freedom, agency, and mobility,

subordinating their positions to male family members and reinforcing gender injustice in India (Derné, 1994, p.205). Men and women in this study equally upheld these patriarchal norms, thereby confirming an idea that both males and females perpetuate inequality.

Conclusion

This study examined if spirituality in India can help achieve a more gender equal and just society and uncovered whether correlations exist between the presence of spirituality and spiritual practices, and the presence of gender equal attitudes, beliefs about gender roles, and gender equal behavior in the home. It also found whether participants achieving healthy gender behaviors in the family differed from their parental examples, confirming a departure from socialization that could be due to spiritual formation. Initial interpretations between spirituality and gender beliefs and behaviors revealed no revelatory correlations (*in a majority*) of participants, and respondents did not, in general, differ from their parental examples.

However, the context, history, and present-day battle for gender equality and sustainability in India reveal the need for focus in this field, and results of this study displayed a relationship between spirituality and gender equality that is intriguing and invites further attention. Previous work shows that a bridge between spirituality, gender equality, and sustainable development is logical despite its absence thus far in related discourses. Indian spiritual philosophies in particular lead to the self-purification, consciousness, and connection on which gender equality and social change thoroughly rely. This work illuminates a potential in India for gender equality discourse, encompassed by spiritual practice and philosophies, to positively affect one's deeper beliefs about gender equality and gender roles and

ability to integrate gender equal behaviors into daily life.

Though India is a land conflicted with inequalities and exploitations, they are contradictions to the purest essence of its culture and profound spiritual inspirations--which intrinsically value the true self and disregard gender. Today, women and men alike continue to fight for the right and equal place of India's daughters. As the battle wages, India's unparalleled and dynamic exploration into spirituality is well-situated to achieve a more gender equal and just society--and a way forward for the ethical and sustainable development on which all will rely.

ERIN SMITH, B.A. Student, Department of International Studies, University of Nebraska, Omaha, U.S.

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