THE INFLUENCE OF SACRED STORIES AND SACRED ROLE MODELS ON THE GENDER ROLE CONSTRUCTION OF FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION INDIAN HINDU WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

By

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To the two people who made this possible: my husband, David; and my advisor, Dr. Vasudha Narayanan. Thank you both from the bottom of my heart.
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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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By

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This research investigates the role played by narratives, particularly sacred narratives, in influencing the gender role construction of Hindu women in the United States today. Forty-one Hindu women in Florida comprised of 21 first generation immigrants from India and 20 second generation Indian-American women were interviewed in depth to ascertain the influence of stories on their perceived roles as women, wives and mothers. In addition, this study identified female role models, from myth, history and contemporary life, whom they perceived as influencing their self-concept as women.

Results revealed that sacred stories did influence the perceived gender roles of first generation immigrants. On the other hand, second generation women were less familiar with the sacred stories, which thus had little impact on them as women.

However, both first and second generation women were more influenced by family stories and by community pressure to conform to gendered norms of behavior than they were by traditional narratives.
Moreover, neither first generation nor second generation participants valued female characters from sacred narratives as role models for women’s behavior. In fact, second generation women were more influenced by contemporary females, including women from the West, as their role models.

The study also explored the ways in which narratives inform and reinforce the rigorous gender ideology of *pativrata*, which has impacted Indian women’s gender roles for over two millennia and which continues to exert a more subterranean and nuanced influence even today in the U.S. diaspora. Content analysis of interview transcripts identified themes related to strategies employed by Hindu women today to adapt to and negotiate or modify aspects of this ideology in order to assert their own needs and ambitions, while at the same time fulfilling prescribed gender roles for women in Hindu society.

This project also demonstrated the usefulness of a specific qualitative method using narratives in religious studies research, and endeavored to illuminate the kind of “thought path” which is necessary to follow when employing a qualitative methodology.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of stories, especially sacred Hindu narratives of India, on the gender role construction of Hindu women immigrants in the United States, specifically first and second generation Hindu women in Florida. This research also documents the influence of female role models from sacred Hindu narratives on the gender role perceptions of Hindu women, using the interviews and oral narratives of Indian women living in the North/Central area of Florida.

The study primarily looks at the role of narratives/stories in shaping women’s gender role identities, that is, how they perceive themselves as women, wives and mothers. It attempts to answer questions such as: Which characters from sacred stories are admired and emulated and in which contexts? What are the factors that influence and maintain or change the choices of gender role models for Hindu women? Are sacred stories more or less influential than stories from other sources, for example family stories, fiction, biographies, and so on? How do Hindu women construct and reconstruct their own narratives about gender roles within their diverse relationships? What changes in choice of role models or reconstruction of gender role identity can be seen in immigrant women as they negotiate their expected roles as members of a collectivist patriarchal sub-culture within a culture which is marginally less patriarchal, but which focuses on individual rather than collectivist definitions of identity?

In the process of examining the gender role constructions of first and second generation Hindu women in the U.S., and the influence of narratives in this process, it will also be necessary to consider the gender role ideology which has influenced women
in India over the past two millennia, namely the ideology of *pativrata* which informed the sacred narratives, in order to see how women have adopted, adapted, deconstructed or reconstructed this ideology in a new age and a new culture. *Pativrata* refers to the Hindu ideology of womanhood, an ideology which specifies the attitudes and behaviors considered appropriate for women, especially wives, which are endorsed and reinforced through references to women in sacred texts such as the *Dharmashastras* and Epics, thus conveying the belief that this ideology is divinely mandated and upheld.

The *modus operandi* of this research is to investigate these and other questions through the life narratives of Indian women in the United States, as revealed through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with first and second generation Hindu women in Florida, primarily in the Gainesville and Tampa Bay areas. Participants in the study were interviewed and asked to respond to open-ended questions about their own early history and their family life in the U.S., as well as about the sources of stories which have shaped their perceptions of the way women should enact their roles as women within their families and communities. A feminist approach to the narrative inquiry was used to diminish power inequities between interviewer and interviewee, to establish a collaborative spirit of investigation, and to enlist the input and feedback of the participants as co-researchers/explorers of their own lives. The inclusion of both first and second generation immigrant women permits an investigation of the effects of greater involvement from the host culture on gender role expectations and behavior, and on the adoption of role models from sacred scriptures.
The women’s narratives were explored through a thematic analysis of content, using categories both developed *a priori*, as well as emerging from the data, that is, from the responses of the participants, which identified references to sacred narratives and to female characters within these stories who had value as gender role models for Hindu women. Other sources of stories also emerged as categories and themes, as did non-sacred role models (both Indian and Western). Participants commented on the ways in which these narratives and role models influenced their family relationships, the role expectations and responsibilities endorsed within the family and between husband and wife, and marital communication and conflict resolution strategies, as well as their own personal aspirations and ambitions.

In addition to the investigation of sacred stories and ancient female role models on the gender role expectations, attitudes, and behavior of Indian immigrant women in Florida, the proposed study is significant in that it adopts a particular theoretical approach and methodology in the research design and a particular worldview regarding the construction of women’s realities, specifically their gender role identity. The study adopts a social constructionist view of identity construction and a qualitative approach to methodology through the study of narratives.

**The Importance of Narrative**

While narrative theories and the "narrative turn" in research are more than four decades old, the study of narratives has rarely been specifically used within the field of religious studies despite the fact that it would appear to be ideally suited to the study of sacred stories and their influence, especially within the South Asian culture, which is so embedded in stories. Sudhir Kakar says:
The spell of the story has always exercised a special potency in the oral-based Indian tradition, and Indians have characteristically sought expression of central and collective meaning through narrative design. While the twentieth century West has wrenched philosophy, history and other human concerns out of integrated narrative structures to form the discourse of isolated social sciences, the preferred medium of instruction and transmission of psychological, metaphysical and social thought in India continues to be the story.¹

Kakar’s comment underscores the importance of stories/narratives not only “as a way of thinking, as a way of reasoning about complex situations, as an inquiry into the nature of reality”², but also as a didactic tool to teach expected social behaviors, as a manipulative instrument to promote social and political agendas, and as a means of constructing, shaping and changing collective and individual realities. Kakar says:

The belief is widespread that stories, recorded in the culture’s epics and scriptures or transmitted orally in their more local versions, reflect the answers of the forefathers to the dilemmas of existence, and contain the distillation of their experiences of the world.³

In other words, the influence of ancient narratives on the behavior and attitudes of women today is rooted in the acceptance of the continued transmission of sacred wisdom and in the fundamental religious beliefs of the populace. Kakar concedes, however, that encounters with modernity and the West may be influencing the impact and significance of sacred stories on many Indians today, although he says: “Traditional Indians…are embedded in narrative in a way that it is difficult to imagine for their


² Ibid.

³ Ibid.
modern counterparts, both Indian and Western”⁴, despite a “…universal tendency of people all over the world to understand complex matters presented as stories.”⁵

Kakar links the construction of gender, and gender relations in particular, to the transmission of values through narrative:

The larger story of gender relations…is composed of many strands that have been woven into the Indian imagination. There are tales told by the folk and the myths narrated by family elders and religious story tellers, or enacted by actors and dancers…Today, in addition, we also have popular movies as well as modern novels and plays, which combine the society’s traditional preoccupations with more contemporary promptings.⁶

Namita Gokhale agrees with the views expressed by Kakar. She states:

Mythology in India is not just an academic or a historical subject, it is a vital and living topic of contemporary relevance. The complex social, political and religious attitudes of ‘modern’ India cannot be understood without an understanding of our myths and their impact on the collective of the people.⁷

For example, she comments, there have been many different interpretations of Sita as a role model for today’s women. Sita has been both idealized by some as a shining example of an “ideal woman”, and reviled by others as passive and submissive and a poor example for emancipated women. Alternatively, she has been lauded as a woman with a mind of her own, with the courage of her own convictions, and as

⁴ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid. 6.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid. 7.
possessing the ability to assert herself), she “is never, in any interpretation, depicted as having deviated from her loyalty and integrity to her royal husband.”

P. Pratap, in his Ph.D. dissertation, cited by Sudhir Kakar in *The Inner World* (1978), studied 1000 young men and women in Uttar Pradesh to determine their most admired role models. Overwhelmingly, from a list of twenty-four goddesses, literary heroines, and famous women of history, both men and women chose Sita as their ideal female role model. Manisha Roy commented: “That a fictional character would still, after more than 2000 years, exert such a fascination on the lives of men and women in the Indian sub-continent is an extraordinary occurrence.” What is even more interesting is the fact that Pratap’s study was completed several years before the 1986 Doordarshan presentation of the *Ramayana*, which was serialized for television and enjoyed an enormous impact on the viewing public of India. That is, Sita was hugely popular as a role model for Indian women long before her life and ordeals were further immortalized on Indian television.

Sally Sutherland points out that the narratives about Sita are diverse and varied, and that: “…the idealization of Sita as woman and wife…has little basis in light of the story of Rama and Sita as told in the Valmiki *Ramayana*.” Throughout the centuries there have been many versions of the *Ramayana*, and many depictions of Sita, with

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8 Ibid. xiv-xv.


narratives added, subtracted or re-interpreted to meet the agendas of the authors, and the geographical/temporal/religious contexts in which different versions were produced. Thus, the present study also attempts to address the issue of multiples Sitas, Draupadis, and other women from myth and history, and will examine some of the factors which influence the choice of role models for women today.

Sutherland also expressed amazement over the choice of Sita as a preferred role model for Hindu women:

This idealization of Sita is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the Indian epic tradition knows other great heroines-Draupadi, Savitri, Sakuntala-women who undergo similar or equally trying ordeals in devotion to their lords as does Sita. And yet it is Sita who appears to be set apart from the others, and idealized by the Indian populace.12

Sutherland attributes the preference for Sita over Draupadi to the fact that Sita proved her loyalty and devotion to her husband by submitting to his whims and passively accepting his cruel rejection and abandonment, while Draupadi was more active and assertive in her defense of both herself and her husbands, and more aggressive in seeking revenge from those who assaulted and humiliated her. She was also less passive in her dealings with her husbands, vigorously castigating them for their failure to protect her virtue and defend her honor.

The Significance of the Study

The present study has both pragmatic and theoretical significance. On one level, it provides valuable information about the influence of sacred narratives and ancient female role models on the gender role construction of immigrant Indian women as well as in supporting a traditional gender role ideology of subservience to husbands which

12 Ibid.
has influenced Hindu women in India for two millennia. It will also reveal how these gender roles and gender role expectations play out in, and affect, their family and marital relationships and their concept of themselves as wives and mothers. The use of information about and from both first and second generation immigrant women will also provide some preliminary information about changes, modifications or reconstructions of gender role identity and the relationship of these changes to the influence of sacred narratives occurring in young second generation women as they also negotiate the stories and values of a modern Western culture.

On a more theoretical level, the focus on narratives and the use of narrative analysis and a qualitative methodology will demonstrate their potential usefulness in investigations of the role of stories, both religious narratives and accounts of their mundane existence, in the lives of Indian women. The theoretical orientation of the study and an examination of the usefulness of narrative inquiry and analysis and of qualitative research as a methodology will allow for discussion and will suggest directions for future study.

A third goal of this study is to demonstrate the importance of interdisciplinary input, both theoretical and research-oriented, into the field of religious studies. While the discipline of religious studies has incorporated theory and research, primarily from other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, very few studies have been influenced by research, theory, and methodologies from disciplines like medicine, law, business, education, psychology, and other areas. This study has attempted to be more wide-ranging in incorporating contemporary research from many different disciplines, and by utilizing qualitative methods not typically found in religious studies research. This has
been done not to undermine the uniqueness of religious studies as a field of study but to expand its epistemological and methodological boundaries in terms of both sources and ways of acquiring knowledge.

The study investigates narratives at several different levels. On one level, the sacred narratives depicting women can be analyzed to understand their impact throughout the ages, specifically with regard to the construction and reinforcement of the ideology of *pativratya* as a means of controlling women’s sexuality and their availability to serve men and their families. An analysis can also be made of the ways in which sacred stories interconnect with other narratives and agendas which are more spatially and temporally located and which are influenced by social, political, and historical concerns (for example, the impact of Indian and Hindu nationalism on defining women’s roles in society). Most narrative research has focused on the structure or content of stories rather than on their impact. This study will be unique in that it will look at the ways in which narratives influence their audience as well as at the ways the stories can be used to manipulate specific groups. It also examines the dynamic and vital nature of narratives and the way that audiences can interact with, modify, manipulate, and use stories to serve their own empowerment needs or to adapt to changing times or environments.

On another level, the study investigates the narratives produced by women today and how women incorporate cultural myths and narratives into their own life stories and negotiate the territory between tradition and modernity, East and West.

Yet another level involves the narrative told by this research itself which seeks to influence a different kind of audience. This study will examine how this narrative
influences the design, structure, and analysis of the research. Even the narrative of the researcher, who brings to her understanding of the stories of immigrant Indian women her own stories, nurtured in a different spatial/temporal context, must be considered.

Thus, this study is unique in that it purports to examine stories and narratives at several different levels in terms of how they impact their different audiences and how their influence affects the narratives, indeed potentially the actual behaviors and outcomes of specific audiences. Sacred stories and the role models they promote represent one level of analysis. Gender role expectations, attitudes, and behaviors and the narratives that express them represent a second level. The theoretical foundation of the research, choice of methodology, analysis of data, and interpretation of results, all constitute yet a third level. Finally, the narratives brought to the research by the researcher and the way in which the researcher interacts with, understands, and represents the subjects of the research constitute yet another level of narrative which is addressed to and influences different kinds of audiences who also bring their own narratives to the table. As David Loy, among others, says, paraphrasing an ancient Hindu myth:

The world is upheld by the great elephant Maha Pudma, who is in turn supported by the great tortoise, Chukwa. When a Hindu sage was asked what the great tortoise rests upon, ‘Another turtle’ was the reply. And what supports that turtle? ‘Ah, Sahib, after that it’s turtles all the way down’.13

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As Loy analogizes, "The world is made of our accounts of it because we never grasped the world as it is in itself, apart from stories about it....We cannot understand anything without storying it. To understand is to story....Stories all the way down."\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, this research will be a narrative about how stories are received, used, and transformed by different audiences and contribute to the self-perception and identity of still other audiences, as well as how their impact is analyzed, understood, and interpreted by representatives of another culture. The study is concerned with the importance of stories in constructing experienced realities at every level, including the gender roles of Indian women. It underscores the importance of stories as reflecting essentially social relationships, within human time and geography, because stories do not exist without a teller or tellers and an audience or audiences in a mutually reciprocal, even symbiotic, relationship. To paraphrase Loy's analogy, while it may be 'turtles' [narratives] all the way down, it is also 'turtles' [narratives] all the way up.

Moreover, this study is unique in that it investigates the use of a particular approach (narrative analysis) and a particular methodology (qualitative research) in investigating the stories of a non-Western culture and how they impact on the gender role constructions of non-Western women in their marital and family lives. The study adopts some basic assumptions in utilizing this theory and methodology. It proceeds from a social constructionist foundation, assuming that concepts like gender, gender roles, and gender role expectations are socially constructed and are understandable only within their historical, social, political, cultural, religious, and geographic contexts.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
Like narratives, gender constructs are context-bound, embedded in social relationships and networks.

However, as Leela Dube comments: "It should be kept in mind that [in Indian thought] gender differences that are culturally produced are, almost invariably, interpreted as being rooted in biology."\textsuperscript{15} In other words, the "official" narrative about gender roles in Indian thought is that they are natural, immutable, and incontrovertible. Thus, the research narrative adopted in this study, that of the social/context-bound construction of gender and gender roles, may be in conflict with the accepted narrative among Indian women. This does not invalidate a social constructionist point of view, but mandates examination of the analyses, interpretations, and conclusions (narratives) which are outcomes of the research. The appropriateness of using a theoretical foundation and methodology developed in the West has to be considered and justified.

Finally, as will be seen in Chapter 3, which discusses methodological issues, the study employs feminist approaches to the conduct of interviews and inquiry. Feminist interviewing assumes a collaborative interaction between the researcher and the study participants, eschewing a hierarchical relationship of dominant researcher/expert manipulating passive, submissive participant/subject, and taking the cultural differences, personalities, narratives and interactions of both researcher and participants into account.

In a sense, the study is also unique in that it is composed of a set of nested or embedded objectives, where narratives of gender role construction have been utilized

as a means to explore a theoretical foundation, methodology, and set of procedures rarely adopted in the study of non-Western cultures and non-Western religious traditions. These enmeshed narratives constitute, to use Loy’s analogy one more time, ‘turtles (narratives) all the way inside’ too. This research explores the nested and embedded narratives that illustrate the complex interactions and interpretations of the study. The research is thus both the study of a topic and a study of theoretical and methodological issues.

The research involves the analysis of a sample of in-depth semi-structured interviews with Indian-American Hindu women residing primarily in the Tampa Bay area, as well as in Orlando and Gainesville where there are also significant populations of Hindu-American residents. Twenty-one first generation immigrants and 20 second generation immigrants were interviewed. Participants were identified and solicited using a variety of sampling methodologies, including personal contact and snowball sampling. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and were also invited to preview questions and provide feedback on interview transcriptions. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient to the participants. The interview process from beginning to end was regarded as a collaborative effort. Semi-structured questionnaires were developed and utilized, asking questions about the participant’s background and early life, types of exposures to stories involving female characters, including informal family stories designed to educate girls about women’s roles, and information about their lives in America, including their marriage and family life. Participants were also asked to identify influential female role models from narratives to which they have been exposed, and to explain why particular role models were or were not admired or emulated. The
interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a coding system was developed to identify emerging themes related to experiences with narratives/story-telling in childhood as well as themes related to experiences in their current family and marital lives.

**Structure of this Narrative**

The remainder of Chapter 1 will create a context in which the participants in this study may be understood. That is, a brief history of Indian immigration to the United States will be provided and the characteristics of these immigrants will be described. Information will also be provided about first and second generation Indian immigrants, especially women, as well as an account of the Hindu population in the United States, particularly in Florida.

Chapter 2 will examine the literature relevant to an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Specifically, the literature on the role of narratives in human life and in the construction of perceived realities such as gender, gender roles, gender role construction, and identity will be examined and critiqued. A review of the literature relating to social constructionist theory as it pertains to gender and gender role construction will be made. In addition, the importance of stories of all kinds for Indians/Hindus today will be explored. Finally, the ideology of *pativrata* will be considered as it evolved over centuries, with a view to identifying the role played by narratives in its construction, maintenance and modification, both in India and for Hindu women in the West.

Chapter 3 will provide an in-depth discussion of the ontological and epistemological foundations underlying the use of a qualitative methodology in the present study as well as the theoretical underpinnings of narrative and social
constructionist theory approaches to the study of gender role construction. It will also
discuss methodological issues which had to be addressed in order to justify specific steps taken in the conduct of the research.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of the steps taken in conducting the research and a rationale for the methods used. It outlines the specific steps taken in addressing methodological issues as identified in Chapter 3.

Chapter 5 provides demographic data describing the participants and comparing first and second generation groups. It also identifies the criteria for determining whether a theme or subtheme is important for the different groups or subgroups of women.

Chapter 6, The Influence of the Sacred, presents results from one of the two major domains identified through coding, and analyzes themes and subthemes clustered within this domain related to the importance of sacred narratives and female characters within them in identifying significant factors influencing the gender role construction of first and second generation Hindu women in the U.S.

Chapter 7, Influence of Community and Family, discusses the results from sources of narrative influence other than sacred stories and sacred role models, namely from within the family, and within the larger community.

Chapter 8, Ideology of Womanhood: Pativratya, examines data from the second major domain, related to the influence of an ancient ideology of womanhood that has informed and influenced Hindu women, including the female characters in the Epics and in stories from the Puranas and other sources. Responses to questions about the three components of pativratya, the concepts of “ideal woman”, stridharma and pativrata are analyzed and interpreted. Pativrata refers to the concept of a woman/wife who is
devoted to the physical, material and spiritual wellbeing of her husband, as if he were a god. The *pativrata* was considered to be the epitome of an “ideal woman”, one who is devoted, loyal, faithful and submissive to the wishes and needs of her husband at all times. Sita was lauded as the epitome of a *pativrata*, the paramount “ideal woman”. Marriage, and exemplary performance of the role of *pativrata*, was considered to be the *stridharma*, the divinely mandated duty of every woman.

Chapter 9, The “I” in Ideology, identifies and examines themes and subthemes related to an understanding of the ways women shape their gender roles and reconstruct gender ideology in order to incorporate and express their own individual feelings, needs and ambitions.

Chapter 10, The Juggling Act, analyzes the ways in which the study participants attempt to reconcile the conflicting pressures exerted on them by traditional gender role expectations created through gender ideology, by their own personal aspirations and wishes, and by the gender role expectations endemic in the mainstream host culture.

Chapter 11 summarizes and comments on the research findings, considers the limitations in the data and interpretations, and suggests areas for future research.

The remainder of Chapter 1 will provide a brief history of immigration from India to the United States, as well as information about first generation Indian and second generation Indian-America women. The current status of Hindus in this country will also be addressed. Finally, this section will provide data about Hindu women in the U.S, and specifically Hindu populations in Florida. In this way Chapter 1 sets the stage for and establishes the background of the population participating in the present study.
Brief History of Indian Immigrants to the United States

The study to be described employs a rather narrow definition of the terms “Indian” and “Indian-American,” limiting the population to be studied to women whose family origins can be traced directly to the Indian sub-continent, and more specifically the twenty-nine States, seven Union Territories and the National Capital Region of India. Other countries and regions generally considered to be territories of South Asia are not included in this definition. However, the following information often conflates Indian with immigrants from other South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and so on.

Indian immigration to the United States has occurred in three distinct waves between the late 19th Century and the present day.

The history of South Asian Americans in the United States dates back to the 19th Century, when many South Asian immigrants, almost always male, came primarily to the West Coast seeking employment in agriculture, construction, and the timber industry. By the end of the 19th Century as many as 2000 Indians, primarily Sikhs from the Punjab region, were settled along the West Coast, working in farming, building or logging jobs in California, Oregon and Washington State.

Between 1910 and 1920 an increasing number of Indian immigrants turned to agricultural labor since many had come from rural villages where farming was a way of life. Although the 1913 Alien Land Law Act discouraged Asian immigrants from purchasing land, many Asian-Indians at that time did become land-owners.

During the first years of the 20th Century there was growing U.S. opposition to immigration from Asian countries and government regulation of immigration became
much more tightly controlled. Over the first decades of the new century laws were passed which restricted Indian immigration to the U.S.

The second wave of Indian immigration began in 1965 when the Immigration and Naturalization Act was passed and which opened the way for increased numbers of immigrants from Asia. Policies permitting reunification of families allowed spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens to immigrate without quotas.\footnote{Pew Research Center. 2012. \textit{Portrait of Asian-Americans}, Chapter 1. 1. accessed 2/8/2016, \url{http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/chapter-1-portrait-of-asian-americans/}} The Act also promoted the immigration of educated professionals and skilled workers particularly in medical and engineering fields.

Before the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act (the Hart-Celler Act) only about 7629 immigrants from South Asia had arrived in the United States. Since 1965 the number of immigrants from South Asia, or India has dramatically increased. The second wave of Indian immigrants to the United States, between 1965 and 1990, were “overwhelmingly urban, professional, and highly educated, and quickly engaged in gainful employment in many U.S. cities.”\footnote{Tinaz Pavri. “Asian Indian Americans,” Accessed 02/08/2016. \url{http://www.everyculture.com}.} Almost 40 percent of Indian immigrants to the United States after 1965 came on student or exchange visitor visas.

By the time of the 1990 U.S. Census there were more than 570,000 Asian Indians in America, generally residing in major metropolitan centers. In the early days after 1965 most new immigrants from India were educated professionals and their families. However, by the mid-1970s many immigrants from India became small business owners, or were self-employed entrepreneurs in service industries such as restaurants, motels, and travel agencies.
Between 1966 and 1977 the majority (83 percent) of Indian immigrants to the United States entered under the category of professional and technical workers – scientists, medical professionals, and engineers. The second wave of immigrants also differed in their ability to avail themselves of economic and social opportunities and an improved standard of living. Moreover, as a result of increasing ease of travel and communication, they were better able to maintain ties with family remaining in India and with their cultural heritage. This second wave also differed in that it included both male and female immigrants, intact families, couples with children, and even extended family members. These families had occupations which allowed them to buy property, own their own homes, and move out of urban centers to suburban areas of greater integration but often more isolation from their immigrant peers.

By the end of the second wave in the early 1990’s, the Indian population in the United States was about 786,694 persons,\(^\text{18}\) a dramatic increase since 1965. The population of Asian Indians constituted the fourth largest immigrant group in the U.S.

A third wave of immigration began around 1990 with the enactment of the Immigration Act of 1990 which eased the immigration process for family members of those already in the country. This increased the total number of immigrants allowed to come to the United States and provided family based immigration visas as well as an increased number of categories based on employment/occupation. By 2010, an estimated 2.2 million adult Indian/Indian-Americans resided in the U.S., according to the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.\(^\text{19}\) According to the Pew Social

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Research Center, Indians have become the third largest group among Asian Americans representing about 17 percent of the U. S adult Asian population.20

The 1990 Immigration Act allowed large numbers of Indian immigrants to enter the United States and included not only highly educated and skilled professionals, but also working and lower-middle class immigrants who were less economically stable or educated. Many of these immigrants came specifically to join family members. Siblings arrived, or even elderly parents who were unable to work, potentially increasing the financial strain on those already here because of their more limited opportunities for economic independence (Ross-Sherrif and Chaudhuri, 2004). Since many of this third wave of Indian immigrants came to join family members already in the United States, their motivation and opportunity to assimilate to Western culture was more limited and the pressure to maintain their culture of origin was increased. As a result, the creation of small Indian communities enhanced their opportunity to speak in their own language(s), eat preferred foods, wear traditional clothing, and practice their own religion. Communities founded temples to foster group cohesiveness, and to establish places where religious, cultural, and social customs and values could be reinforced and passed on to their children.

The 2000 U.S. Census reported that about 1,678,765 Indian immigrants resided in the United States. The new immigrants tended to identify with their own regional, linguistic, or religious sub-groups, maintaining their own particular culture and traditions rather than self-identifying as of Indian origin. As of 2013, it is reported that more than two million Indian immigrants resided in the United States, representing about 4.7

20 Ibid.
percent of the foreign-born population.\textsuperscript{21} Most immigrants settled in large urban centers such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago, although a sizable number relocated to suburban areas such as Silver Springs, Maryland.

\textbf{First Generation Indian Immigrants to the United States}

First generation Indian immigrants to the U.S. tend to be proficient in English, and hence more employable than many other immigrant groups. They also have a higher level of educational achievement compared to most other immigrants, as well as to the native-born population of the United States. More than 40 percent of Indian foreign-born immigrants arrived in the U.S. in 2000 or later, with a majority of them having completed at least a bachelor’s degree. In 2013, more than 75 percent of Indian immigrants over age 25 had bachelor’s degrees or higher, with more than half of this number attaining a graduate or professional degree. Most of this group (some 84 percent) plan to remain in the U.S. after they receive their advanced degrees.\textsuperscript{22} An average of 90,000 persons of Indian nationality studied in the United States each year from 2002 through 2012, most enrolled in science, technology, medical, or mathematics degree programs.\textsuperscript{23} Almost 90 percent of these students, too, plan to remain in the U.S. after receiving their degrees.

In terms of employment status, according to the Migration Policy Institute about 83 percent of Indian immigrants were of working age. Some 70 percent of Indian immigrants over age 16 were in the labor force and were more than twice as likely to be


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations, compared to other foreign-born immigrants as well as to the native-born population.

As a result of the number of Indian immigrants with higher education, English fluency, and employment in professional careers, these immigrants have much higher incomes and economic stability than other foreign-born immigrants or native-born Americans. The Immigration Policy Institute reports that in 2013 the median income of Indian immigrant households was $103,000, compared to $48,000 and $53,000 for immigrants overall and for native-born households respectively.24

The academic achievements of first generation immigrants surpass even the second generation, with a higher proportion of the first generation compared to the second generation holding an advanced degree. This intergenerational gap in advanced degrees, however, did not hold for women immigrants, where 41 percent of the second generation held advanced degrees compared to 38 percent of Indian-born women.25

While numerically there are more Indian immigrants in California and New York, they represent a higher percentage of the state population in Texas, Illinois, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, North Carolina, and other states. Indian immigrants also represent the largest Asian group in six of the 10 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S., for example Chicago, Dallas, Miami and Atlanta.26

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
Second Generation Indian-Americans in the United States

While “second generation” technically refers to the U.S. born children of contemporary or first generation immigrants, much of the research literature, including the present study, incorporates in this group immigrant children who arrived in this country before they reached adulthood (Gans, 1992; Portes, 1996). Sometimes this group is also called the “one-and-a-half generation” (Rumbaut, 1991). While the cut-off age for inclusion in this group is inconsistent in the literature, in the present study it was considered to be elementary school entry age, usually between five and six years of age.

According to the Migration Policy Institute’s summary of statistics, there are almost 800,000 U.S. born individuals who have at least one Indian-born parent, or who trace their ancestry directly to India. The median age of this population is 11, and 69 percent of second generation American-born Indian-Americans are under 18 years of age. This second generation was more likely than other immigrant groups to marry persons of Indian ancestry—only 14 percent of Indian-American newlyweds married outside their ethnic group. More than 55,000 children under age 18 resided in a household with an Indian immigrant parent. Over 79 percent of these children were native-born U.S. citizens.

Indian and Indian-American Hindus in the United States

The present research investigates issues related to South Asian Hindu women in the United States. Not all Indian immigrants in the U.S. are Hindus, in contrast to the

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79.5 percent of the population of India who self-identify as Hindu. With regard to the religious beliefs of Indian immigrants, according to an article in *The Economic Times* (April 24, 2014) Hindus represent a majority (51 percent) among Indian-Americans. Melton and Jones (2011)\(^{28}\) cited the Pew Religious Landscape Survey which found that Hindus represented .4 percent of the U.S. population responding to the survey, or an estimated 1.2 million Hindus in the United States.

The American Hindu population of the United States is not evenly distributed across the country. Communities initially formed in close proximity to points of entry to the country, to cities with international airports, like New York, Washington D.C., Atlanta, Miami, Houston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.\(^{29}\) Melton and Jones (2011) report 296 Hindu centers in California, 154 in New York, and 96 in New Jersey. Florida is reported to have 72 Hindu centers throughout the state in 2008,\(^{30}\) although Miami as an entry point to the Caribbean tends to have more Indian immigrants from the Caribbean and the West Indies rather than from the Indian subcontinent.

It is difficult in general to arrive at an accurate estimate of the Hindu population in the United States since many parts of the country have no Hindu community meeting-place or temple where a count of people who participate regularly could be made. The larger group of persons who visit temples only occasionally for special events or holy day celebrations is more difficult to estimate even if they identify with and to some


\(^{29}\) Ibid. 8.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.
degree support the institution. In addition, there is a population of people “…who think of
themselves as Hindus…who may or may not engage in private family religious
activities, but who, for various reasons, are not active in any way in supporting the
visible Hindu community.”31 This group becomes visible during Divali which has become
a widely celebrated but secularized national Indian (rather than just Hindu) holiday. In
the group of participants in the study to be described, the majority (especially of the
second generation participants) fell in this category while a small number were devoted
temple-goers and still others engaged in family religious activities in non-temple Hindu
groups or in private spiritual practices.

Hindus in the United States tend to be affluent (about 43 percent in 2008 are
reported to earn more than $100,000/year), married (79 percent), with only 5 percent
reporting divorce or separation and none reporting living with a partner out of
marriage.32

Indian and Indian-American Immigrants in Florida

As of 2005 an estimated 23,467 Asian-Indians lived in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale
area with an additional 12,952 residing in Orlando and its outskirts and about 19,852 in
the Tampa Bay area. By 2010, these figures had increased to 41,334 (Miami-Fort
Lauderdale), 23,526 (Tampa/Saint Petersburg), and 26,105 (Orlando/Kissimmee).33 As
of 2012, some 30,000 plus Indians and Indian-Americans lived in the Tampa Bay

31 Ibid. 10.

Focus/June_2008/Hindus_in_the_U.S....html.

Jacksonville is also rapidly becoming another significant hub for Indians in Florida and is cited as one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the U.S. for this population. There are also smaller but significant Indian populations associated with university centers, such as Florida State University (Tallahassee) and the University of Florida (Gainesville), as well as the Alachua temple for Hare Krishna adherents, many of whom have Indian ancestry. In the present study, the majority of the participants came from the Gainesville area (where the author is enrolled as a PhD student), or from the Tampa Bay area (where she resides). A small number were recruited from Orlando, Miami, and Sarasota after being identified by other participants.

**Indian and Indian-American Women in the United States**

In 2008 there were about 384,000 Indian-born (first generation) women aged 16 and older in the United States civilian workforce, one third of whom were reported to work in management, business and finance, or in information technology. An additional almost 20 percent worked in healthcare fields, as physicians, nurses, and other healthcare support positions. In 2012 the percentage of women from India in management and professional occupations was 66.3 percent.

In 2012 also, immigrant women from India who were in the labor force were reported to have the highest median income ($61,767), compared to other immigrant women ($32,015). In addition, immigrant women from India are the most highly

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36 Ibid.
educated group of female immigrants, with 71.6 percent holding a bachelor’s degree or higher (compared to 79.9 percent for male immigrants from India), while only 10 percent have less than a high school education.37

**First Generation Women Immigrants from South Asia**

Much of the research on first generation South Asian women immigrants to the U.S. deals with the effects of immigration, and with issues of acculturation and assimilation. Some studies, for example, Rayaprol, (1997), argued that South Asian women are empowered and liberated by the experience of immigration while others saw the process as isolating and restricting (potentially contributing to domestic violence). Kurien (1999) viewed the immigration process as producing both effects, as women are subjected to pressure to maintain cultural and religious traditions (and gender roles), while simultaneously having to adopt non-traditional female roles as employees and family income contributors.

Leonard (1997) commented that many highly educated and skilled Indian women, who would probably not have entered the workforce in India, were able to utilize their skills in the U.S., while others worked in family businesses, or opened small businesses of their own catering to the needs of the Indian community.

Kurien (1999) pointed to the important role that first generation Indian women play in the maintenance of religious and cultural values and traditions in their families and communities. She stated that religion is central in South Asian communities, and is “a vehicle for the transmission of culture and also provides the institutional framework

37 Ibid.
for community formation.” Kurien also made a comment relevant to the present study, namely that the impetus or pressure for women to assume the role of “tradition-upholder” comes from the ubiquitous narratives of Hindu gods and goddesses and Epic wives and mothers like Sita and Savitri who are role models for women in the culture, and who may still influence Indian women today (whether Hindu or not). She pointed to the significant presence of women in Hindu mythology and imagery depicted as powerful forces, but utilized in the service of their husbands, sons, and families. In other words, stories and images construct and reinforce particular gender role behaviors in order to validate and sustain cultural values and traditions.

Moreover, Kurien also delineated some important considerations which may prevent any essentializing or ossifying of the description of first generation women immigrants. In the 1950’s, first generation South Asian women generally came to the United States with their husbands and perhaps even their children. Their husbands often came to attain higher degrees. Some 97 percent of students from India at this time were male. By the 1970’s and 1980’s only 70 percent were male and there was an increasing number of single women who immigrated to attain a higher education. While most of the unmarried male immigrants returned to India to find wives and bring them back to the United States, most of the unmarried women immigrants married non-Indians, indicating perhaps a male bias toward seeing the unmarried women immigrants as non-traditional, non-conformist, too “independent,” and hence “unmarriageable.” Thus, single Indian men in the U.S. made themselves “unavailable” as partners for


39 Ibid.
single Indian women here, while married Indian men tended to reinforce traditional
gender role identities through their choice of wives.

Other research studies on first generation Indian women immigrants to the U.S. have focused on health or mental issues impacting them as immigrants, resulting from the isolation and loneliness, and from the restrictions (physical, geographical and linguistic) that they faced after they arrived. Das and Kemp (1997) attributed many of these mental health issues to the hierarchical, patriarchal power structure of the family and the culture where the woman has limited opportunity to satisfy her own needs. Cultural attitudes towards mental health treatment and concern for family (and community) privacy often increase the isolation experienced by first generation women, and may also increase their vulnerability to domestic violence. Das and Kemp saw depression as a primary mental health concern of first generation women, who are reluctant to seek treatment, and are also very hesitant to disclose any form of family violence or abuse.

The issues and concerns faced by first generation South Asian women who immigrate to the United States are thus potentially quite different from those of the second generation, and moreover do not necessarily represent the experiences of all South Asian women immigrants at different times, in different locations, or from different backgrounds.

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Second Generation South Asian Women Immigrants

Second generation Indian-American women contend with often quite different adjustment issues than do their first generation mothers. They have to attempt to integrate multiple identities each fraught with complexity and potential conflict. An Indian-American woman is often immersed in her Indian cultural heritage as well as her Hindu religion, but is at the same time fully embedded within a Western culture, and must negotiate her identity as an American. As a woman in both cultures she must reconcile differing role expectations and responsibilities, both within the family and in the workplace, with all the conflicts and pressures these competing demands may impose.

The second generation Indian-American woman is enmeshed in negotiating and navigating confusing and conflicting cultural pressures in order to construct a cohesive identity (or an integrated network of identities) within multiple cultures and worlds where she has to reconcile often incompatible worldviews and beliefs. National, religious, and gender role identities interweave in her everyday life and experiences. This theme of negotiating and reconciling multiple identities has often been the focus in the relatively scarce literature on second generation South Asian women. Much of the existing scholarly literature deals with second generation women in the 1990’s (for example, Gupta (1999); Das Gupta (1997); and others). It must be remembered that many women in the groups studied at that time are now in their late 30’s and 40’s and are already mothers of third-generation children. Presumably their issues and their strategies for negotiating multiple identities as well as their concerns about helping their daughters negotiate their own different identity issues may have changed over the past 20 years or so. However, there is a significant lack of contemporary literature on these
(now) older second generation women and virtually none on their third-generation daughters who may themselves be approaching adulthood. Some relatively recent studies have focused on intergenerational similarities and differences in the experiences of Indian-American women particularly with reference to their responsibility for maintaining and transmitting cultural and religious knowledge, values, and traditions to their children (Das Gupta (1998)). Women’s function in teaching and reinforcing gender roles in their sons and daughters has rarely, if ever, been specifically researched and there is no research which examines the role of transmission of religious and cultural narratives in gender role construction.

The present study is unique in this aspect and also because the population of both first and second generation Hindu women participants spans a wide age range and includes first generation women in their 30’s and 40’s, who can be compared to second generation age peers who are the children of the first generation women studied in research from the 1990’s. In several cases first generation women and their second generation daughters can be directly compared.

Much of the literature on second generation Indian-American women focuses on conflicts between daughters and mothers over issues such as dating, marriage, male-female relationships, and sexuality, a topic fraught with cultural angst. Roy (1999) suggested that first generation mothers are primarily concerned that their daughters will become too westernized (interpreted as sexually loose and immoral), while their daughters feel guilt for becoming “Americanized.”41 A concern for social approbation or condemnation within the Indian community is often the driving force behind these

concerns and conflicts. Das Gupta and Das Gupta (1998) agree that conflict over sexuality is the primary intergenerational issue between mothers and daughters within the South Asian American community, creating barriers and communication problems which “effectively silence and divide the women in our community.”

Manohar (2008) studied second generation Indian-Americans in Florida (a specific cultural group from Gujarat, named Patel), in order to explore attitudes and practices regarding dating, and how they handled potential interfamilial conflict over this issue. Manohar also explored the differences in cultural views about marriage between first and second generation, and the conflict resulting from a view of marriage as a contract between two families versus a more romantic ideal of marriage as a love relationship between two individuals. The study demonstrates the cultural divide between the collectivist cultural beliefs of the first generation and the focus on the individual which is a culturally Western worldview which may influence the second generation. Negotiating this conflict is especially difficult for second generation Indian American women who are charged with the onus of protecting and maintaining the family’s reputation and “honor” within the extended family and the Indian community. Much of the stress these second generation women experience comes from the close relationships they maintain with their families and the consequent pressure they feel to maintain traditional gender role behaviors and to be a “good Indian woman” while at the same time they are influenced by the individualist values of U.S. culture.


Most research on second generation Indian-Americans, however, does not focus on the experiences and conflicts that women experience in their gender roles and generally deal with issues such as acculturation, ethnic identity (bicultural identity/assimilation/hybridity), experience of racism, and so on. Inman (2006), for example found that first generation South Asians were less concerned about their racial identity than their second generation sons and daughters who grew up in a more racially divided culture. Their daughters in particular were more acutely aware of their non-white bodies, especially with regard to cultural norms of attractiveness and desirability, and were more likely to use race as a personal identifier. Purkayastha (2005) identified the prominent themes of research on the second generation to be how this group “…negotiate[s] the complex web of social relations, including race, gender, nationality, and religion at different levels-transnational, national, and local.”44 Her study also dealt with the ways in which second generation women attempt to form integrated rather than fragmented identities, maintaining their cultural identity while incorporating fragmented aspects of a Western culture.

**Summary**

The research to be described focuses on only one aspect of Hindu women immigrants in the United States, namely on the ways in which they construct their gender roles within a new Western culture, while accommodating traditional influences on women’s gendered behavior implicit in millennia of Indian cultural and religious influence. Specifically, the study addresses the role of stories, especially sacred stories,

in shaping women’s gender role behaviors and women’s strategies to incorporate or resist such influences.

Most research on Indian women immigrants to the U.S. has examined various aspects of the effects of immigration on women’s acculturation, assimilation, health and mental health adjustment, family conflict, mother-daughter relationships, and transmission of culture. Many studies have adopted an intersectionality approach, looking at the interacting effects of race, ethnicity, gender, religion and social class on women’s adjustment to immigration. The present study is unique in that it examines how women perceive their gender roles and the influences, religious, family or social, which operate through narratives to construct and mold these self-understandings.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Every research study tells a story, that is, a narrative about the relationship between persons or events, characteristics, significant factors, how they interact or are related, and what might be predicted as a result of this relationship. These narratives thus have protagonists (human or otherwise), a plot, and an outcome or result. In other words, they contain the elements of story.

The research described in this study is no different. Or, it is distinct because it tells a unique story about the impact or effect of narratives on the gender role construction of a particular audience—a particular group of people (first and second generation Hindu women immigrants)—in a specific context and place (the United States) and at a designated time in history (the 21st-century). Moreover, the impact of these stories is revealed through an analysis of the narrative accounts of the very Hindu women who were the audience for them. That is, the analysis of the research data constitutes a metanarrative, summarizing narratives about the effects of various types of stories on a particular aspect of female identity for a specific population.

Every research study, however, is only one of many possible ways of explaining the relationship between the story’s elements. Stories are always told and received selectively. What is told, what is understood by the audience, and what is omitted or ignored, involves choices and agendas. The storyteller (the researcher) makes his or her selection of story elements (variables) and constructs his or her research narrative based on a particular perception of the world, a unique viewpoint or worldview, and a distinct concept of how knowledge is acquired and categorized, that is, an underlying epistemological theory. This worldview inevitably influences how the research is
conducted and how its story is told. Moreover, the co-authors of the research narrative, the study participants, bring their own worldviews to the stories they tell the researcher and make their own selections and omissions to better reflect their own views.

Thus, it is essential that the worldview, the conceptual underpinnings of the researcher’s narrative selections, should be made transparent and open to discussion so that the theoretical basis of the research study is available for consideration and critique. This transparency should include both the theory which has informed the study and the research literature which has been used in support of the researcher’s selections and which may bolster any conclusions reached. The literature review discussed in this chapter is intended to serve these functions.

In the present study, the researcher adopts the worldview or theoretical position that “reality”, at least on a personal level--one's self-concept, self-understanding, or “identity”--is socially constructed, the outcome of an individual's interaction with the perceptions and understanding of others. That is, the research rests on a social constructionist theoretical model. Social constructionism would say that the way a person understands his or her world and his or her position or function in the world, is shaped through interactions with others--with other individuals, with family members, with his or her social group, community, or culture. In other words, an individual’s construction of “reality” is produced discursively through connection and communication with others in a social context.

This may be contrasted with a constructivist worldview, which, while it also endorses the epistemology that “reality” is constructed, rather than inherent or essential, contends that this construction is a result of mental or cognitive processes operating
within individuals, rather than being socially constructed through discursive interaction and consensus.

Moreover, the mode of communication or interaction in social constructionism is understood to be narrative-based. People construct and communicate their understanding of their world through stories, through narratives of all kinds, through stories told or received textually and orally, through stories imparted to audiences who receive and interpret them according to their own constructions of the world.

Constructivism also endorses the importance of narrative in the cognitive construction of “reality”, but views narrative primarily as an internal activity of the mind, rather than as a discursive activity. In both epistemologies, language is the mediating variable, but the ways in which language is seen to function is quite different in each view.

For example, George Lakoff, a cognitivist/constructivist, while acknowledging language as a means of organizing cognitive processes, sees it as operating through conceptual metaphors in which concepts are expressed by: “linking one kind of object or experience to a different kind of object or experience…” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 196). That is, Lakoff asserts, we think metaphorically; our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical, and we construct our reality cognitively, through conceptual metaphors, rather than through social consensus or discourse (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008).

For Lakoff, the bridge between constructivist and social constructionist worldviews is provided by the idea of embodied thought expressed in partially overlapping but not identical conceptual metaphors, whereby individuals, social groups,
and cultures, share some, but not all conceptual metaphors, expressed primarily through narratives. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) thus state:

Most metaphorical concepts are clearly dependent on culturally relevant activities and experiences. One would not expect to encounter the same metaphors for ideas or the mind across widely divergent cultures, nor would the same metaphor have the same meaning across cultures.¹

Thus, constructivism, or the cognitive approach to the construction of reality, in fact establishes a foundation for the later “turn” to cognitive narrative theories, such as those expounded by Bruner (1987, 1991); Lakoff (1987); (Lakoff and Johnson (2008); or Herman (2007, 2009).

The remainder of Chapter 2 will explore and explicate research and theory supporting a social constructionist worldview or epistemology. It will also examine the role of narrative theories supporting the idea that storytelling is a primary mode of interaction facilitating the social construction of concepts such as identity, gender, and gender roles. Moreover, it will explain how these concepts operate and can be modified in the everyday lives of Hindu women. The key assumptions underlying this research are: 1) gender role constructions are a result of discursive understandings of the ways in which women are expected to behave. That is, they are socially constructed and maintained. A corollary of this assumption is that gender roles are fluid and context-dependent rather than biologically determined and fixed; 2) a primary mode of the social construction of gender roles is narrative or storytelling; 3) these narratives are always contextual, and their content and impact change according to historical, geographical, social, political, religious, economic, and other factors which may be operating at any

given moment; and 4) the narratives selectively influence gender role construction. In addition, they represent only some of the possible stories which might be told or received so that the motivations and agendas of both storytellers and audiences must be taken into account. Moreover, narratives can be modified or transformed so that alternative versions of the same stories can be employed to subvert, undermine or contradict mainstream agendas.

Thus, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 will document the role of narratives in the construction of gender roles for Hindu women and will explore the connection between cultural, religious, social, and community-generated narratives and gender role ideology impacting Hindu women throughout history. In particular, it will illuminate how such stories affect the transmission, deconstruction and reconstruction of gender roles for Hindu women living in the United States today.

Chapter 2 will first outline the constructed nature of social life, the importance of stories in human life, and the role of narratives in constructing “reality” through social consensus. Literature discussing key assumptions will be reviewed and critiqued, specifically as they relate to gender, gender role construction, gender role stereotypes, and gender role ideologies. A particular focus of the review will be the function of religion and sacred narratives in creating and maintaining Hindu women’s gender roles, although the influence of other genres of narratives will also be interrogated. A longitudinal analysis will take into account narrative sources of influence over time, examining diverse agendas and contexts. That is, Chapter 2 will consider the construction of gender ideology during early periods in Hindu history and will examine how this ideology was modified and utilized during colonialism, later by Indian
nationalists, and post-independence by Hindu nationalists reconstructing the roles of women for political purposes. It will also especially examine its influence on women in the U.S. diaspora.

**The Social Constructionist Worldview**

Kenneth Gergen (1985) viewed the development of social constructionist theory in the 1980s as a reaction to the dominance of the human sciences and a search for an alternative to the focus on biological explanations of human behavior. He stated: “Constructionism attempts to move beyond the dualism [of empiricist and rational schools of thought] to place knowledge within the process of social interchange.”

Gergen saw social constructionism as a way that people understand the world or context in which they function: “Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live.” Constructionism seeks to understand the world in categories that are socially constructed, through discourse and communication with others. Social consensus can be applied to categories such as gender, gender roles, self-concept, identity, and so on, categories previously assumed to be biologically determined. Gergen asserted that: “The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people.”

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.
Thus, social constructionism understands the world as: “the result of active, cooperative enterprises of persons in relationships.”5 Moreover, this cooperative enterprise is embedded within historical as well as cultural contexts in which we differentially ascribe socially constructed categories which may change over time and which may be contingent upon religious, political, economic, or ideological changes. The development of social constructionism as an epistemology has undermined the power of biological or material accounts of the world in favor of discursive, consensual visions of reality.

Social constructionism, however, is generally seen as a product of modernization and westernization. In non-Western cultures, such as India, a biologically-based epistemology or account of reality is still the norm in many if not most communities and groups. Gender, for example, is still largely understood to be biologically determined while gender roles are seen as a natural consequence of biological differences and are assumed to be fixed, stable, and essentialized. Thus, a research project on the gender roles of Indian women which is based on a constructionist epistemology must take into account that the participants in the research may have a very different understanding about how gender roles are determined and the factors which maintain them.

Vivian Burr (2003) discussed several key assumptions considered to be foundational for social constructionism. First, social constructionism as already stated challenges taken-for-granted understandings of the world, in contrast to a positivist or empirical stance which is based on so-called objective observations or perceptions rooted primarily in biology. Second, social constructionism views categories and

5 Ibid.
concepts used to describe the world as contextually bounded, that is, as having meaning only within a specific cultural or historical context. They are a product of a specific culture and time, and are “dependent upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in that culture at that time.”

Moreover, the third point made by Burr is that socially constructed culture and time specific knowledge of the world is also sustained by social processes, that is, by day-to-day social interactions, by common language, and by shared practice of particular culture-specific versions of knowledge. Different cultures socially construct different versions of the world and each different construction leads to different social actions and reactions by members of that culture. Burr states: “Descriptions or constructions of the world sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others.”

Clearly, these assumptions have relevance for the discussion of gender and gender role construction in India and of the development of gender ideology prescribing women’s roles in society and proscribing the behavior of women in different domains of social action, for example, the public arena and areas of religious practice and authority. These topics will be discussed at length later.

**The Narrative Turns: A Brief Account of The Study of Narratives**

Roland Barthes (1977, 79), the French semiologist, wrote about the importance of narratives in everyday life:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances—as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulate language, spoken or written, fixed or moving

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7 Ibid. 6.
images, gestures and the ordered mixture of all these substances, narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting...stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under the almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with a very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives...Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, trans-historical, transcultural; it is simply there, like life itself.\(^8\)

Despite the ubiquity of narratives across history, geography, peoples, languages and cultures, early interest in narrative data focused on either a hermeneutic or a structuralist interest in the analysis of texts as such, and not in the content, agendas or circumstances of production, or any outcomes or consequences of stories. David Silverman (2004) dated the beginning of contemporary narrative analysis to the works of Russian formalist, Vladimir Propp (1928), who studied the structure of Russian folk tales, and to post-formalists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and later literary theorists. According to Polkinghorne (1988), contemporary literary studies of narrative had their origins in four traditions: 1) Russian formalists (for example, Vladimir Propp); 2) new criticism in the United States represented by Northop Frye; 3) French structuralism (for example, Tsvetan Todorov); and 4) German hermeneutic studies (for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer).

However, in the 1970s, especially in the United States, the interest in the study of narratives spread from literary theorists into the humanities and social sciences, and by the end of the 1970s there was a steady stream of narrative research issuing from a number of different disciplinary approaches and agendas. MacIntyre (1981/1990), a

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social philosopher, for example, held the view that all social life involves narrative and that the study of narrative was a useful approach to the analysis of social phenomena.\textsuperscript{9} MacIntyre held that in premodern societies storytelling was the primary means of moral education. Barbara Czarniawska, commenting on MacIntyre’s view, stated: “Young people were helped to attribute meaning to their lives by relating them to the legitimate narratives of the society to which they belonged.”\textsuperscript{10}

Matti Hyvärinen (2008) commented:

It is easy to misunderstand narrative simply as a \textit{method} and narratives as \textit{resources} with which to investigate the phenomena of which the narrative makes an account….A more ambitious version of narrative analysis draws from the social constructionist notion that narratives almost always are part of the social, cultural and political world (Bruner, 1991; Gergen and Gergen, 1993)….These notions motivate theoretical investigations on how narratives are constituted, what their places in human life, who is entitled to tell them and when, and how they are received and how they work in the social world.”\textsuperscript{11}

Hyvärinen’s understanding of narrative as a means of constructing the social world and of narrative analysis as a tool to understand how stories function is directly relevant to the present study which examines how narratives are implicated in women’s understanding of their gendered roles in their society or culture. Moreover, Hyvärinen goes on to assert: “Narrative analysis is thus inseparable from concerns of the narrative constitution of selves, identities and social realities.”\textsuperscript{12} Gender, and thus gender roles, are an important aspect of identity or of the multiple identities which constitute a concept


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
of “self.” The way in which a society or culture understands the idea of self or individuality is also important for the present study in that Hindu women in the U.S. will be seen to struggle to incorporate a sense of themselves as individuals into the more collectivist social construction of identity which has been prevalent in India and which has heretofore been influenced by traditional ideologies of womanhood.

Hyvärinen (2008) identifies three separate “narrative turns” in the contemporary study of narrative. As already stated, the initial approach to narrative research beginning around the early 1960s was focused within literary studies and defined by a structuralist, scientific, and descriptive rhetoric. The second “turn” beginning in the 1970s is seen by Hyvärinen as a historiographic approach (Mink, 1987; White, 1987) which critiqued naïve historiography and the “value of narrative as representing reality.”

Hyvärinen’s “third turn,” most relevant to this study, began primarily in the social sciences in the early 1980s and involved “a general anti-positivist and often humanist approach to the study of human culture (Bruner, 1991; Reissman, 1993).” The social science/humanities approach to narrative from the 1980s on was in distinct contrast to the structuralist narratology and post-structuralist discourse of earlier cultural studies. This “third turn,” however, also broadened and diffused the concept of what narrative was and how it should be defined as well as theorized. Hyvärinen states: “Many kinds of research materials were new to be theorized and analyzed as narratives—but often without the smallest consensus on what it actually meant.”

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13 Ibid. 449.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid. 450.
study the term “narrative” includes both the stories and narratives heard and received by the participants through a variety of genres and the stories the participants told about themselves in their interviews.

In addition, Hyvärinen identified two major theoretical moves impacting narrative research. The first move was Lyotard’s (1993 [1983]) rejection of the concept of grand narratives and his focus on “small” stories; for example, personal narratives often seen in feminist research. The second focus was: “a new metaphoric discourse on “life as narrative,” where narratives were seen as having a unique role in studying human lives and behavior (McIntyre, 1981; Ricoeur, 1984; Sarbin, 1986; Bruner, 1987; McAdams, 1988, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Bamberg, 2004a; Hyvärinen, 2006b).”\(^{16}\)

Narrative thus becomes a method utilized to: “re-theorize too static conceptions of self and identity.”\(^ {17}\) The study of narratives confirms the social constructionist view that identities are socially and contextually created, are multiple not singular, and are dynamic and fluid, changing in different spatial and temporal contexts, for example, as a result of immigration to a new culture. This discursive, poststructuralist analysis of narrative, especially personal narratives, rejects the unitary view of identity as a static, unchanging essential aspect of an individual, and allows for multiple contextually determined identities, such as gender and gender roles. As Squire (2004) iterates: “the storyteller is not a unitary self, making holistic sense of his/her life in the telling. Instead, the stories that people tell about themselves [as well as their interpretations of stories

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid. 451.
they are told] are about many selves, each situated in particular contexts and working strategically to resist those contexts."18

Hyvärinen, moreover, made the point that the social constructionist approach to the study of narrative also involved a changing focus from the study of narratives as texts, that is, as self-sufficient works, to a study of narrative in context. In the present research, for example, one focus is on the way in which story, as well as story context and the characterization of females within the story, influences women’s perception of their own gender roles in a different time and context, and how women negotiate with these stories and role models to cope with and modify perceptions of their own gender roles today in the United States. Hyvärinen endorsed this shift in focus of narrative analysis: “When the interest moves from narratives as separate texts into storytelling and narrative practice within social institutions, the social function of narrative can be theorized in a new way.”19 He cited Gubrium and Holstein (2007) who comment:

Concern with the production, distribution, and circulation of stories in society requires that we step outside of narrative material and consider questions such as who produces particular kinds of stories, where are they likely to be encountered, what are their consequences, under what circumstances are particular narratives more or less accountable, what interests publicize them, how do they gain popularity, and how are they challenged?"20

Clearly, all these questions are important in the present study, although not all can be addressed or answered within the limitations of this research.


The Importance of Stories

Tomáščiková (2009) comments that: “Narrative has existed from the time the first stone-age paintings were drawn in caves and the first stories were told at tribal fires.” Narratives are ubiquitous in human life and in human communication. Stories, conveyed through folktales, religious or secular texts, children’s literature, comics, movies, television (advertisements as well as dramas), performative arts, and technological advances such as video games and the Internet, are a daily, even minute by minute, presence in people’s lives in every culture. Stories may be written, oral, visual or performative. They may be grand in scale, documenting the myths and epic narratives of a culture, or smaller in nature, stories about family members and significant marker events in family life. Stories are so pervasive that we barely recognize their presence, and so familiar that we often remain unaware of their message, and of the assumptions, for example, about gender identity and gender roles, which they convey. We fail to recognize, for example, that only women are shown washing clothes in television commercials, or that men are constantly depicted in active, aggressive and often violent roles. We are frequently equally unaware of the assumptions and influences underlying our own narrative creations, our expectations of ourselves, our narrative descriptions of who we are and how we account for ourselves, which often incorporate cultural constructions of gender as self-explanatory concepts. As Roland Barthes put it: “The narrative is present at all times, in all places, and all societies; the

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history of narrative begins with a history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has 
existed, a people without narratives.”

MacIntyre (1981) says that a human is “essentially a storytelling animal,” and 
McAdams (1997) asserts that storytelling “may be the way through which human beings 
make sense of their own lives and the lives of others.” Loseke (2007) agrees with 
these comments. She comments that: “Narratives create identity at all levels of human 
social life…Narratives of identity…are produced at cultural, institutional, organizational 
and individual levels of social life.”

At a cultural level, stories help construct categorical identities like gender and 
gender roles. Loseke comments: “Cultural narrative identity is a social classification 
(Lamont and Fournier, 1992; DiMaggio, 1997), or a collective representation (Durkheim, 
1961) of disembodied types of actors.” Loseke refers to these categorical cultural 
stories as “formula stories” (Berger, 1997), “public narratives” (Somers, 1994), “master 
narratives” (Mishler, 1995), or “schematics” (D’Andrade, 1995; DiMaggio, 1997). Loseke 
comments that these terms: “all refer to narratives of typical actors engaging in 
typical behaviors within typical plots leading to expectable moral evaluation.”

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22 Roland Barthes. 1966. *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of the Narrative.* 5. Occasional paper, 
Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.


26 Ibid., 664

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.
concludes: “Our world is riddled with formula stories constructing cultural identities [like gender roles]…Socially circulating formula stories are continually created, modified, challenged and discarded.” Loseke sees cultural narratives as imbued with symbolic codes such as those representing gender, gender roles, gender-stereotypes, race, ethnicity, and family, which reflect critical elements of social life as well as the rights, responsibilities, and normative behaviors and expectations of social actors. However, in the process of creating and reinforcing normative cultural expectations, for example, for gendered behavior, these formula stories tend to marginalize the expressions of some social groups (for example, women), while privileging the views of others (men).

It is, perhaps, uncomfortable to describe monumental narratives like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana as replete with formula stories because of the richness of the storylines and the complexity of the characters, but it must be acknowledged that the depiction of women in these sacred myths tends to support a patriarchal hierarchy privileging males and to reinforce the pativrata gender ideology which reduces women to subservient positions within a family. Narratives like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are so familiar, so pervasive in Indian life that they influence those who experience them at an almost unconscious, visceral level, as important but often unnoticed as the air they breathe. In India, stories are a major source of discourse, and a means of communicating and perpetuating the culture as well as of teaching moral values and reinforcing appropriate behavior for all social subgroups.

29 Ibid.
As Chapter 1 described, for both Kakar (1989) and Gokhale (2009) stories of all kinds are embedded in the lives of Indians in a way unimaginable to people in the West, and the interactions between men and women, husbands and wives, have been portrayed through history in ways that reflect Indian society’s preoccupation with the primacy of men and the subservience of women.

Thus, the ways in which relationships between men and women are prescribed and reinforced in India through the stories, myths, songs, poems, and folklore which are ever-present in people’s lives and which not only shape but also often essentialize and exaggerate people’s understanding of their gender and gendered behavior.

For Hindu women in the U.S. it is interesting to speculate what happens to their concept of womanhood as these stories become less central in their lives and when their identities “no longer are necessarily or securely rooted in religion, community and family” (Calhoun, 1994), a question which this research may address.

**Gender Identity, Gender Roles and Gender Stereotypes**

Concepts of “gender” and “gender identity” are so pervasive and taken for granted in most cultures that according to Judith Lorber (1994): “Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly ‘doing gender’.” This statement has two important implications: first, that gender identity is not fixed or stable but is fluid and modifiable, depending on time, context and social agendas. It is not an

30 Ibid. 672.

immutable characteristic of being biologically male or female. Nor are gender roles a natural result of one’s biological gender category. Second, gender identity, and the gender roles adhering to that identity, are a result of “performing gender” on a daily basis, of “embodied action,” or “doing” rather than of rational thought, cognition or decision-making. We learn gender identity by observing and modeling, by listening and looking and acting upon what we have seen and heard (by enacting gender roles), and by responding to the reinforcement of others for acting in a “gender appropriate” or gender normative fashion or to the consequences of acting in a way deemed inappropriate by the prevailing society.

Lorber comments: “Everyone “does” gender without thinking about it…Gender is such a familiar part of daily life…Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them-unless they are missing or ambiguous.”32 She goes on to say: “As a social institution, gender is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives…”33, and asserts that:

Gendered social arrangements are justified by religion and cultural productions and backed by law [sacred or secular], but the most powerful means of sustaining the moral hegemony of the dominant gender ideology is that the process is made invisible, any possible alternatives are virtually unthinkable.34

As we shall see, gender role ideology, constructed and maintained in India throughout the ages to maximize male benefit, achieved hegemonic status not only by invoking it as a divine mandate and “duty” incumbent on women but also by co-opting

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid. 14.
34 Ibid. 26.
women as the enforcers of their own subordination and by making this enforcement so ubiquitous as to be invisible and irresistible.

Gender identity refers to the ways in which individuals view themselves as masculine or feminine, that is, how they see themselves as men or women in a particular culture or society (Spence, 1985). Gender identity is attached to one’s social identity as male or female rather than to one’s biological sex. Gender roles, on the other hand, while clearly connected to gender identity, refer to the expectations a society has about the way in which men and women should behave. These societal conceptions of male and female behavior often create gender stereotypes which are the views held by a group or society about the personality traits assumed to be linked to gender, such as men are active and assertive while women are passive and submissive, or men are more instrumental while women are more expressive (Spence and Helmreich, 1978). Stets and Burke (2000) state: “Although gender roles [and] gender stereotypes…influence one’s gender identity, they are not the same as gender identity.”

Stets and Burke (2000) comment that:

In Western culture, stereotypically, men are aggressive, competitive and instrumentally oriented while women are passive, cooperative and expressive. Early thinking often assumed that this division was based on underlying innate differences in traits, characteristics and temperaments of males and females…We now understand that femininity and masculinity are not innate but are based upon social and cultural conditions…Observed differences in temperament between men and women are not a function of their biological differences. Rather, they

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resulted from differences in socialization and the cultural expectations held for each sex.”

Gender identity and the gender roles associated with it are generally assumed to have a high degree of stability over time. Stets and Burke state: “Identity theory suggests that identities are most likely to change in the face of persistent changes in the environment.” In the context of the present study one might suspect that Hindu women’s culturally constructed gender identity and their gender roles would likely be subject to modification in response to their exposure to a new culture, language, and value system.

Thus, gender, gender identity, and gender roles serve the social function of creating social differences that define men and women, “masculinity” and “femininity,” in terms of their relative status vis a vis each other and their respective power to act in various contexts. Lorber states:

As a social institution, gender is a process of creating distinguishable social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities. As part of a stratification process that ranks statuses unequally, gender is a major building block in the social structures built on these statuses.

Narratives, Identity, and the Construction of Gender Roles

Margaret Somers (1994) contends that: “It is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities.” Somers designates these identity

36 Ibid. p. 999.
37 Ibid. p. 1005.
38 Ibid. p. 18.
constructing narratives as *ontological narratives*, which, she says are: “the stories that social actors use to make sense of, indeed to act in, their lives…used to define who we are…a precondition for knowing what to do.”

That is, societies and cultures create narratives that shape and construct people’s identity and agency, which in turn produces new narratives that reciprocally influence culture and tradition. This constitutes what has been referred to as a “communication loop” of dynamic and fluid interaction that permits the possibility of cultural change, even of “therapeutic restructuring” of, for example, gender identities over time. Somers says:

> The relationship between narrative and ontology is processual and mutually constitutive. Both are conditions of the other; neither are *a priori*…People act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives.\(^{41}\)

> Ontological narrative, however, as Somers conceives it, is a process, embedding identities in time and spatial relationships: “Ontological narratives affect activities, consciousness and beliefs and are, in turn, affected by them.”\(^{42}\) Moreover, ontological narratives are both social and interpersonal. They can:

> only exist interpersonally in the course of social and structural interactions over time…Agents adjust stories to fit their own identities, and conversely…will tailor “reality” to fit their stories. The intersubjective webs of relationality sustain and transform narratives over time.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{40}\) Ibid. 618.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
In this way they create both culturally reinforced constructs of, for example, gender identity, while at the same time incorporating into the dynamic process the potential for change.

Ontological narratives which function to endorse cultural, societal or institutional normative identity constructs may be considered as “public” narratives (or “received” narratives), while the creative and reactive narrative transformations individuals construct to explain themselves can be termed “private” (or personal, self-defining narratives). Finally, both personal and public narratives can be analyzed and assimilated into metanarratives, that is, master narratives which allowed comparisons across time and culture by identifying themes and theories of human behavior that may be contextually specific in content and mode of operation but universal in function.

Thus, the analysis of narratives, both public and private, can be used as a research methodology to identify socially created constructs of masculinity and femininity, and of gender roles, both for Hindu women in India, and for South Asian women immigrants to the United States. The many varieties of stories conveyed through oral, textual, visual and performative modalities which contribute to gender identity construction and to the endorsement of masculine and feminine roles and behaviors can be identified and their impact can be ascertained. Specifically, socio-religious and secular/cultural/traditional narratives which potentially impact South Asian views of masculinity and femininity, and of behaviors considered appropriate for women in the culture, can be identified.

In a very real sense, too, human beings come to know, understand, and interpret the experienced world through the stories or narratives to which they are exposed from
birth. In fact, it would not be an unimaginable extension of the statement to assert that on a metaphysical level, humans construct their subjective personal phenomenal worlds (or realities) through the integration of the multiple, multidimensional webs of intersecting stories to which they are continuously exposed during every waking second (and even, perhaps, when they are dreaming). One can argue that phenomenal reality is constructed from a variety of ways of experiencing/sensing external stimuli, combined with a labeling process which achieves an acceptable (though not total) degree of consensus with other experiencing subjects, communicated not only through words but through actions and reactions. This would be the contention of social constructionist theories such as Kenneth Berger and others. Concepts such as identity and gender can be seen as constructed and as communicated through the narratives of a culture or religion.

For example, in many ways the construction of gender and gender roles can be facilitated and maintained by the socio-religious narratives used by a culture or even by a particular group within a culture to valorize its worldview. Narratives can be used to create or consolidate normative values and roles within a culture and can also be manipulated to change these values or to redirect the population toward a different worldview. In fact, narratives have certainly contributed to the establishment of a male normative point of view in India as elsewhere, that is, to a dominance/subordination gender paradigm favoring males. Indian storytellers and the stories they narrate not only convey and communicate traditional and contemporary Indian understandings of gender roles and relationships, but in fact are actively involved in the construction, shaping, and transformation of these concepts. Storytellers not only represent (re-present) but modify
or even create understandings of masculinity, femininity, male-female relationships and gender roles. They bring to their own re-presentations, modifications and creations the entire intersecting, interacting web of stories/narratives to which they have themselves been exposed from the most personal to the most national or even international sources of influence.

Thus, it is essential to remember that given a social constructionist understanding of the contextual construction of gender and gender roles gender constructs are not singular or static. There are multiple dimensions of gender identity, multiple “masculinities” and “femininities,” and gender identities may shift and change over time, location, and social conditions. However, Lorber would contend that:

Members of a social group neither make up gender as they go along nor exactly replicate in rote fashion what was done before. In almost every encounter, human beings produce gender, behaving in the ways they learned were appropriate for their gender status, or resisting or rebelling against those norms. Resistance and rebellion have altered gender norms, but so far they have rarely eroded the status.”

This contention, it will be seen, is supported by the present study which will show that the gender roles of Hindu women may be modified, whether by resistance or rebellion or by input of other norms through contact with different cultures, but the underlying assumptions and the core values conveyed through gender ideology are not fundamentally diminished. Contested expressions of gender role norms may have resulted in some modification of constructions of male and female behavior, but the underlying patriarchy which privileges males and hierarchizes gendered expectations to disadvantage females are slow to change and are not easily altered by resistance or

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44 Judith Lorber, 1994. 27.
rebellion. Moreover, women, despite their resistance to male domination and despite exposure to more egalitarian social models, continue to valorize core elements of their subordination, in that they consistently prioritize the needs of husband and family over their own aspirations, and continue to coopt and reinforce other women to do the same.

Pearson et al. (1995), like Lorber, define gender as: “the learned behaviors a culture associates with being male or female”45, while Wood (2003) contends that gender is “neither innate nor necessarily stable,” but occurs through “interaction in a social world.”46 Pearson et al. suggest that a given culture communicates “ideals” of masculinity and femininity, which then form the basis of gender identity construction for the individual. These “ideals,” it is contended are communicated, at least in part, through the narratives of the culture, transmitted through oral stories and folk tales, through sacred and secular texts, through ritual enactment of gendered role assignments, through the “embodied” performance of gender role models in family life, and in dance and drama productions. Narratives can also construct and reinforce gender roles through visual depictions of males and females in movies and television productions or advertisements, in comics and graphic novels, in video games, or on the internet. Narrative can thus be broadly defined as: “The way a culture communicates its values and ideals, or worldview, through the stories it tells.”47 Patriarchy is the outcome, at least in part, of narratives supporting socially-constructed concepts of masculinity and

femininity which assign different roles to men and women and which value males and females differentially, thus establishing hierarchies of dominance and subordination that privilege males and devalue and disadvantage females limiting their choices and opportunities.

**Gender fluidity in India**

In the preceding sections research has been cited that established the social constructionist view that identities, including gender, are socially and contextually constructed, multiple in nature, and fluid, construed in diverse ways, at different times, by multiple categories of social actors functioning in a variety of contexts, and serving different agendas and needs. It is especially true that in India gender is a complex concept with implications for its understanding that incorporate spiritual as well as socio-political dimensions.

Vasudha Narayanan (2003) comments on the diverse discourses on gender understood within differing Hindu traditions. She states: “The discourses range from equating gender with biological sex, essentializing the “womanly” and “manly” characteristics, to changing behavior patterns which point of fluid gender identifications, to the rejection and transcendence of gender polarities.”\footnote{Vasudha Narayanan. 2003. “Gender in a Devotional Universe.” In Gavin Flood, ed. *Blackwell Companion to Hinduism.* 569. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.} Narayanan thus points out that conceptions of gender in India are quite fluid and context dependent and vary according to source material and locus of interrogation, that is, whether pertaining to philosophical or spiritual levels of discourse, or to mundane, social interactions and understandings. Narayanan comments:
The resources for such discussions can be sought in Brahmanical Sanskrit literature which is frequently patriarchal in tone, vernacular poems, songs, narratives, rituals, icons, arrangement of temple spaces, folklore, and performing arts…over 3000 years of literature and over 4000 years of material culture”\textsuperscript{49}. She goes on to say: “The Hindu traditions have a wealth of material which can inform us on how some human beings have understood gender in many ways over four millennia….\textsuperscript{50}

Narayanan illustrates her thesis by pointing out that fluid concepts of gender abound in Hindu literature: male poets who write from the point of view of a female lover of a male deity (for example, the ninth century South Indian poet Nammalvar); or a male deity who may be described in an incarnation as a beautiful woman (for example, Vishnu portrayed as an enchanting woman (Skt. \textit{Mohini}). Even in the Epics, in the \textit{Mahabharata}, Arjuna is forced to function as a “female” dance teacher, while exiled at the palace in Virata\textsuperscript{51}. Narayanan concludes from her review of the fluid expressions of gender in Hindu literature that:

\begin{quote}
Gender is only one of the terms in Hindu hierarchies: there is caste, class, stage of life, age, and relationship, among other factors which contribute to hierarchies. Gender…seems functional; when the mood warrants it, various roles are taken, and there is no unilateral hierarchy in the literature.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

Narayanan’s many examples from Hindu literature, involving poets, saints and deities engaging in expressions of devotional feeling and behavior, support this contention. However, it must be noted that in the day-to-day enactment of social life by ordinary men and women there were socially constructed models of expected gendered

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid. 584.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
behavior, of “masculinity” and “femininity,” which were widely if not universally recognized and endorsed as normative. Narayan partially contests this assertion, in that she states, referring to the gender fluidity expressed by poets/saints/devotees:

“The voices of the women and men in certain kinds of relationships are valued and privileged in this discourse and, in the changing roles, hierarchies are done, re-done, affirmed and subverted.”53 In other words, under certain circumstances devotion trumps gender.

Narayan cites Ann Gold (2000) who distinguishes between two scholarly approaches to the study of gender constructions in Indian society. The first adopts the view that at every level “from social and economic to cosmological and psychological,”54 women were and are systemically devalued and disempowered. Scholars who adopt this approach do not see women as able to empower themselves or to undermine the patriarchal power structure through their rituals, songs, or words. According to Gold (2000), the second approach views women as able to negotiate their gender identities and their power as women (thus redefining the concept of “power” as situational and subterranean), through their speech and rituals which she sees as: “possessing the actual acute potency in particular situations, and further potentiality to alter existing power structures.”55 While Narayan adopts the second approach in her informative article, the present study proposes a hybrid view where women are able to re-negotiate

53 Ibid. 579.
54 Ibid. 585.
gender expectations in a variety of ways which enhance their power (diversely defined), while at the same time remaining rooted in some key aspects of traditional gender ideology.

Narayanan (2003) summarizes her view of the fluidity of gender in Hindu life by commenting on the ways in which gender and gender roles have been understood in India over the past centuries. She identifies three modes of viewing the relationship between sex and gender: 1) as homologous (that is, they are the same, and gender is biologically determined, while gender roles are naturally hierarchical and privileging to the male); 2) as analogous, that is: “Gender consciousness is understood to be based on socialization and lived experience; thus gender symbolizes sex. Thus, [sex is perceived to be] natural, while gender is cultural, subject to human variation and construction (Warne, 1999, 142)”\(^{56}\); and 3) as heterogeneous, that is, both are not natural or innate: “In fact, gender may construct sex.”\(^{57}\) According to this view: “The choice involving a male/female continuum is a human choice and a conceptual construct. Power is central to the understanding of distinctions: divisions and hierarchy are inherent in the act of ‘gendering’.”\(^{58}\) Narayanan contends that all three understandings of gender can be distinguished in Hindu songs, rituals, and narratives, although the second interpretation is more readily discerned and accepted. Narayanan comments that, from a devotional point of view, “at the human level…the devotees happily distinguish between various gender roles, but keep the boundaries permeable

\(^{56}\) Narayanan, 586.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
and fluid.\textsuperscript{59} At the social and cultural level, however, depending on context, gender roles seem to be constrained by traditional ideologies and reinforced by current political and economic realities and agendas.

In the present study, gender and gender roles are perceived as a cultural construction, and the gender role constructions of Hindu women in the United States are considered to reflect many aspects of traditional gender role ideology, that is, pativrata, albeit subject to modification influenced by the expectations of a new culture. Thus it is necessary to understand how this gender role ideology has operated and currently functions in India to shape the way that Hindu women perform in various aspects of their lives and the role that narratives have played in this process.

**Women’s Gender Roles in Indian History**

It is problematic to generalize about the status and roles of women in India because there is, in fact, no essentialized understanding of women’s gender roles which is held in common by all social groups, castes, socioeconomic classes, regions, or religious sects across India today, or across historical periods in the past few millennia. Western stereotypes of Indian women tend to focus on them as controlled by men, submissive, devoted to their husbands and families, and as having influence only in private, domestic spaces, rather than in the public arena. Indeed, these stereotypes are not just Western but pervade perhaps even a majority of Hindu families in India, although women’s gender role expressions are certainly changing, particularly among educated and/or employed urban or suburban women.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
The stereotype of the submissive, obedient wife devoted to her husband and family has a long history in India, developing particularly within upper caste Brahmin families and spreading to the middle and lower classes through a process of sanskritization whereby status is gained through the assimilation of perceived attributes of higher caste groups. Recent scholarship on women in India has adopted an intersectionality standpoint, examining the way that religion, class and colonial economic and political structures have impacted women’s status in society (Ramusack and Sievers, 1999), while some researchers have explored the self-perceptions of South Asian women with regard to their options in a changing society. Few, if any, scholars have looked at the complex variations and changes in the position of women in India over a period of several millennia.

Little is known about the position of women during the earliest known period of Indian civilization, that is, the Indus Valley civilization of the second millennium BCE (2300 to 1700 BCE). During the Vedic age (1700 to 500 BCE), over a period of time a hierarchical social framework, the basis of the caste system, evolved, with Brahmins (priests and teachers) coming to occupy the primary positions. Each caste group was subdivided into jati which constituted the endogamous groups into which members were expected to marry, although there was some opportunity for mobility and variability between jatis as a result of “ritual, political and economic interactions among jatis and other groups.”

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Most historians have concluded that during the Vedic period, the role and status of women was “fairly satisfactory” (Altekar, [1962] 2014), although the foundation for this conclusion was primarily textual, that is, came from the Vedas themselves, which were orally transmitted and, of course, lacked documentation. Wendy O’Flaherty (1980) evaluated the views expressed in the RgVeda as: “a book by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men [and] one of these concerns was women…." On the other hand, Julia Leslie (1983) believed that some Vedas were, in fact, composed by women who were not only knowledgeable regarding the Vedas but also were active participants in sacrifices and other religious rituals.

During the later Vedic period, the dominance of Brahmins increased despite the growing influence of heterodox religious cults like Buddhism and Jainism by the sixth century BCE. However, all these traditions allowed religious participation by women. For example, Gargi Vacaknavi is reputed to have debated at the court of King Janaka, around 600 BCE, and was held to be a Vedic scholar. In both Buddhism and Jainism, women were permitted to enter monastic life (albeit, in Buddhism, under the control of male monastics). Lay women (non-monastics), however, were valued more highly than nuns, both as donors and patrons, and also as women fulfilling their dharma to be wives and mothers (Falk, 1980).

However, by the end of the Vedic period and in the waning years of the period before the Common Era, Vedic orthodoxy as represented by the Brahmins adopted a

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more restrictive view of the position and roles of women in society. Caste hierarchies became more rigidly enforced and inter-caste marriage was prohibited. Women came to be relegated to the same low rank in society as *sudras*, the servant caste. Altekar ([1962] 2014) attributed these restrictions to the growing trend of men of higher castes intermarrying with *sudra* women, resulting in increased restrictions of women’s religious participation because of concerns about impurity. Leslie (1983), however, saw women’s rights being eroded not only with regard to religious participation but also education, property ownership, and the redefinition of language categories to exclude women unless specifically included. Concern about women’s purity and chastity (and thus about the purity of male and caste lineages) led to earlier age of marriage (often pre-pubertal) for women, which undermined both women’s access to education, their right to own property, and their ability to be productive in society.⁶³ Chakravarti and Roy (1988) commented on the “connections between women’s status and their participation in productive activities, both as producers and as controllers of production.”⁶⁴

Over the first millennium of the Common Era several sources and texts were composed which dealt in some way with the status and role expectations of women. During the time of the Mauryan Empire, the *Arthashastra*, a handbook of statecraft composed by Kautilya, outlined many rights for women, including the right to own some property, namely the *stridhan* (the gift, usually of gold and jewelry, given to a woman at the time of her marriage). Women were apparently also engaged in work outside the

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home, in state owned textile factories, as temple dancers, courtesans and court attendants (Ramusack, 1999).

However, the Arthashastra was a secular text concerned with the practical status of women in society. Other texts composed during the period from the Mauryan Empire to the Gupta Empire were more prescriptive in nature and formulated the behaviors expected or required of the ideal woman. Ramusack stated that between 300 BCE and 300 CE, the classical period of Hindu culture, “three great prescriptive sources evolved. The first two are the epics of the Mahabharata…and the…Ramayana…The third one is the Laws of Manu [the Manusmrti], which belongs to the category of dharmashastras or legal treatises.”65 The dharmashastras categorized the behavior expected from all classes and members of society. The Manusmrti purported to prescribe “the eternal laws for a husband and his wife who keep to the path of duty, whether they be united or separated.”66 In this regard, the Manusmrti recommended tight controls on women at every stage of their lives:

Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their families, and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyment, they must be kept under one’s control. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.67

In addition, the manual described the behavior expected of a good wife, and stressed that her salvation depended on her compliance with these rules: “She who, controlling her thoughts, speech, and acts, violates not her duty towards her lord, dwells


67 Ibid. 9.2-3.
with him (after death) in heaven, and in this world is called by the virtuous a faithful wife, 
(sadhvi).”

Thus, the concept of *pativrata*, as originally conceived, incorporated two separate elements, namely the spiritual/religious element, which focused on a woman’s responsibility for ensuring her husband’s salvation by promoting his performance of his *dharma* in this world, and the cultural element, which provided prescriptive mandates for women’s socially acceptable behavior. The *pativrata* who cared for her husband as if he were a god, who served his extended family with humility, who performed *pujas* and *vrats* for her husband’s material and spiritual wellbeing, in this way also ensured her own path to salvation.

In the *Mahabharata*, while female characters were often depicted as strong and resilient, they were also portrayed as traditional in their gender roles. Draupadi, wife of the five Pandavas, is educated, bold and forceful, yet she is also submissive to the will of her mother-in-law and her five husbands, and in a discourse addressed to Satyabhama, wife of Krishna, she outlines the qualities and actions required by a wife to serve, please, and satisfy her husband—that is, the basic description of *pativrata*, the ideology of the *pativrata*, who worships her husband as a god:

> The wife should never do the least injury to her lord…Keeping aside vanity, and controlling desire and wrath, I always serve with devotion the sons of Pandu with their wives. Restraining jealousy, with deep devotion of heart, without a sense of degradation at the services I perform, I wait upon my husbands. Ever fearing to utter what is evil or false, or to look or sit or walk with impropriety, or cast glances indicative of the feelings of the heart, I do serve the sons of Pritha…I never bathe or eat or sleep till he that is my husband hath bathed or eaten or slept…Whether returning from the field, the forest or the town, hastily rising up I always salute my husband with water and a seat. I always keep the house and all household

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68 Ibid. 9.29.
articles, and the food that is to be taken, well-ordered and clean…I never indulge in angry and fretful speech and never imitate women that are wicked. Keeping idleness at a distance, I always do what is agreeable. I never laugh except at a jest, and never stay for any length of time at the house gate…Having with my whole heart recourse to humility and approved rules, I serve my meek and truthful lords ever observant of virtue, regarding them as poisonous snakes capable of being excited at a trifle…I think that to be eternal virtue for women which is based on regard for the husband. The husband is the wife’s god, and he is her refuge. Indeed there is no other refuge for her.69

The main female character in the *Ramayana*, Sita, came to be idolized as the “ideal wife.” Although there are many versions of the *Ramayana*, with diverse depictions of Sita, some more independent and self-willed than others, it is the obedient, submissive, chaste, and loyal Sita depicted by Valmiki who came to represent the perfect *pativrata*, the wife who serves her husband as a god. Sita has been reinforced as a *pativrata* for almost two millennia and still represents an “ideal woman” for Hindu women today, along with Savitri, who challenged Yama, the Lord of Death, to save the life of her husband. Kannaki, too, the heroine of the Tamil epic, *Shilappadikaram*, sacrificed all that she had to help her husband. However, Kannaki, while devoted in service to her husband during his life, was also fierce and powerfully destructive in her actions to avenge his unjust execution.

Thus, many of the female role models depicted in the Hindu sacred narratives are multifaceted in that they can be strong and independent, fierce and powerful, yet also submissive and obedient in their relationships with men. However, it is the more passive aspects of women’s behavior which have been emphasized, reinforced and repeated through the ages as epitomizing how women should be, specifically in their

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relationships with men. Narratives are selectively transmitted to reinforce the concept of pativratya explicitly or implicitly depicted within them and to laud the female role models who adhered to the behaviors required of an ideal wife.

The prescriptive descriptions of women’s behavior in the Laws of Manu are perhaps the earliest textual formulation of an ideology of womanhood, pativratya, which defined women in terms of their relationships to their husbands, and prescribed that their activities and behaviors were to be totally controlled by men, that is, fathers, brothers, and husbands. Over the next two millennia, these prescriptions were retained, modified, resisted, and used for varying political agendas, and continued to influence Hindu women’s perception of their gender roles into the 21st century. The ideology of the pativrata has been at least in part constructed, reinforced and maintained through two millennia of narratives depicting women in submissive and compliant roles, devoted to their husbands. These “ideal women” are presented to the public as epitomes of womanhood to be emulated by all women.

In the middle centuries of the second millennium, moreover, several treatises were produced, usually by high caste men, outlining the requirements of the perfect woman or wife. The Stridharmapaddhati, by Tryambakayajvan, a little known 18th century Sanskrit text, is one such example of a treatise cataloging characteristics and behaviors considered mandatory for women. This work was written by an orthodox pandit in Tanjore, in southern India, and predates 19th century social reforms promoted by Rammohan Roy, and the British colonialists. According to Julia Leslie (1989), who translated this work, this treatise served as “a dharmashastric appendix to the saga of
Rama and Sita as the ideal man and woman.” Leslie saw Tryambaka’s work as a defense of orthodox Hindu culture and of the dharma of men and women against:

…the constant threat of Muslim domination, the insidious influence of Christian missionaries, and European traders…the customs of the local Tamil population (whose women enjoyed greater freedom than women of the Maratha caste), and also bhakti, which said that women and low caste men could reach heaven directly without attending to traditional duties.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century idealized conceptions of women were also used to support the political agendas of Indian nationalism, where Gandhi promoted the idea that women, like Sita, Savitri, and Draupadi, were capable of furthering the nationalist cause at least in part because of their greater capacity for suffering and endurance. As well as framing the female as a symbol of national liberation Gandhi also “reinforced the value of women in the private sphere, as guardians of tradition and resisters of foreign influence (Devendra, 1994; Forbes, 1996; Kumar, 1993).” McMillin (2002) stated: “Such framing limited women’s participation in the public sphere of national resistance and…further entrenched the patriarchal vision of the passive, long-suffering female in the domestic sphere (Katrak, 1992).”

Later, in post-independence India, the growth of Hindu nationalism also co-opted this traditional image of women not only to represent their need for protection from predatory Muslims but also as a symbol for India, specifically as a Hindu nation. For example, McMillin (2002) argued that the framing of depictions of women on Indian

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71 Ibid. 4.


73 Ibid.
television in the 1980s paralleled the framing of women in nationalist movements. She stated: “Colonialist writings describe the identity of a woman as derived from the men in her life.” Chakravarti (1989) said that the image of Indian woman in the 19th century depicted the Aryan woman, upheld as a Vedic superwoman: “A combination of the spiritual Maitreyi, the learned Gargi, the suffering Sita, the faithful Savitri, and the heroic Lakshmibai...In this model of womanhood there was no difference between the perceptions of the progressives and conservatives.” Sangari and Vaid (1989) agreed:

The recovery of tradition through the proto-nationalist and nationalist period was always the recovery of the “traditional” woman...continuously adapt[ing] the “eternal” past to the needs of the contingent present. Selections from scriptural texts...are not only serviceable in building an identity opposed to the colonial but are also related to the inegalitarian social structure.

Life in India today, considered in terms of the worldview of the Hindu majority, is understood not so much in abstract terms, that is, through immersion in Hindu philosophy, but rather in terms of “the popular interpretations or norms of conduct....” Sara Mitter (1991) stated:

The individual in Hindu society is from the womb secured in a pattern of relationships, social and spiritual obligations, and eventual rewards. These are inculcated by one’s kinfold, reinforced by clan and community, and perpetually represented in art, mythology and popular culture. The Hindu deities, the avatars, and certain epic heroes and heroines incarnate the tradition and transmit the message...They are not merely historical. They are alive and well and living just about everywhere; in wondrously intricate

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74 Ibid. 5.


carved temples, in streetcorner tree hollows, on paan stalls...and photocopy booths, on taxi dashboards and truck tailgates. Their prodigious feats are the staples of mass-market movies and best-selling comic books.  

Such ubiquity of Hindu lore clearly impacts the beliefs, behaviors, and values of ordinary people in their daily lives, underlining what Mitter called “the often abusive interpretations of tradition with regard to women...." 

Hindu women in the United States, however, receive only a diluted version of Hindu lore and perhaps a diminished social pressure to conform to the popular view of the proper norms of conduct for women. The present research and perhaps future studies are interesting because they provide a small window into the effects of exposure to a new culture on the gendered values, beliefs and behaviors of Hindu women in a diasporic setting. Mitter commented that Hinduism, as a way of life as well as a spiritual belief system, has: “the capacity to integrate heterodox elements...” while retaining an overall Hindu identity. She stated that “over the centuries, many apparent anomalies have been absorbed into the living traditions of Hinduism. One such is the equivocal image of the woman." She went on to say that “historically, Hinduism has been capable of generating new interpretations in the interest of social reform." Hindu women in the diaspora, however, are subject to the twin pressures of maintaining their

78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 3.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
traditional Hindu gender roles while at the same time creating new interpretations and expressions of Hindu values within an alien culture.

Mitter described the status of women in India as:

a paradox at the very heart of Hindu culture…Women, worshiped as gods and exalted as mothers, in most practical aspects of life overwhelmed and undervalued, systematically subordinated…[the] manifestations [of this duality]…occur all the way up to the top. Women themselves tend the flame of patriarchal traditions, taking care that inequality be maintained. Yet Indian history is marked by the emergence of powerful, self-directed and charismatic women.\textsuperscript{83}

As Hindu women negotiate their diasporic experience, we must interrogate the ways in which they maintain or contest inequality, and discern what elements of their traditional roles are retained, modified or reconstructed.

**How Is Gender Ideology Reinforced in Contemporary India?**

A revitalization of the construct of the “ideal woman” seems to have retained or regained political cogency in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and in the diaspora. The continued rise of Hindu fundamentalism has given validity to a proliferation of images like Sita and Savitri as a staple of everyday discourse, reinforcing and perpetuating patriarchal beliefs and practices.

Other sources of influence, however, have also served to sustain, and sometimes even reframe, the ideology of pativratya, of the “ideal woman” in India today. Diana Dimitrova (2010), who interrogated the interpretation of gender in Indian film, particularly from a perspective of mythological and ideological images used in the service of promoting a particular view of Indian womanhood, stated:

It is characteristic of these films that no matter how modern the subject matter is—for example, arranged marriage versus love marriage, the ideal

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.11.
woman living according to stridharma (‘traditional norms, duties, rules, roles of womanhood’) versus the ideal of women aspiring for human happiness—the notion of the feminine is mostly conservative and traditional… How can we explain this fascination for traditional archetypes?”

Dimitrova explored how Hollywood movies “have represented gender and translated Hindu myth-models into social role models for women”, analyzing the ideological implications of these representations with regard to media re-mythologizing of contemporary Indian culture. In other words, she argues that Bollywood movies, particularly early examples, serve to reinforce conservative gender roles for women consistent with a version of pativrataya ideology by engaging mythological female role models and gender role stereotypes to construct or reconstruct the version of Hindu womanhood compatible with patriarchal values and with politically charged images of women.

Dimitrova outlined several sources for images of the feminine in the Hindu tradition—illustrating both the mainstream normative traditional gender roles depicted in the Dharmashastras, the Manusmrti, and the Epics, and the subversive alternatives for gendered behavior portrayed in the lives of female bhakti saints and poets of the sixth through the 11th centuries, as well as the powerful and independent Goddess, Devi, “who is aware of her sakti (inherent female power).”

Thus, Dimitrova pointed out that Bollywood films utilize mythology to reinforce the traditional and normative use of women’s gender roles, although they may also

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85 Ibid.
86 Ibid. 70.
illuminate alternative subversive depictions of women’s gendered behavior. The several film versions depicting the life of Mirabai, a bhakti saint, present an image of womanhood where women’s devotion and service is provided to a male deity, as if to a husband or lover, and the devotee seeks direct union with the divine and liberation for herself, not for her husband. In fact, most female bhakti saints chose to remain unmarried, or abandoned their husbands to pursue a more spiritual union.

However, it is interesting to note that in most cases these female saints related to their chosen divinity as a wife to a husband, that is, through devotion, service, submission, and obedience. It could be said that the saints enact the pativrata ideology of womanhood albeit with a divine spouse rather than a mundane husband. Dimitrova refers to women bhakti poets and saints as “images of independent women in the Hindu tradition,” but it could be argued that this is only one possible interpretation of their expressions of gendered behavior.

In addition to the influence of Bollywood films on women’s gender role identification, television shows and in particular the enormously popular serialized episodes of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana shown on Indian television in the 1980s had an enormous impact on the ways in which images of “ideal” women were portrayed and endorsed. The depiction of Sita as a pativrata was resurrected as the epitome of womanhood, the “ideal woman” which all women should attempt to emulate.

Divya McMillin (2002) looked at Indian television depictions of gender roles, and argued that “Indian television in the late 1990s perpetuates, across channels, the 1980’s stereotypical images of women, images that have their roots in Vedic, colonial, and

87 Ibid.
nationalistic literature.”88 On the other hand, she said that: “the emerging genre of hybrid programming, where the greater incidence of female veejays and talk show hosts paves the way for the expression of female leadership and desire, and leads to more positive television portrayals of women in the 21st century.”89 Unfortunately, there are few if any contemporary studies of the gender role depictions of women in Indian television programming today.

However, in a more recent study of gender role depictions in Indian television advertisements, Mallika Das (2011) argued that television advertising plays a major role in disseminating gender role stereotypes (Fowles, 1996; Jhally, 1987), and are often distorted in their portrayal of women, reinforcing traditional stereotyped behaviors. Moreover, she points out that television advertising is “a critical agent of socialization and influences the way adults and children view themselves and learn appropriate gender behaviors (Frueh and McGhee, 1975; Signorelli, 1989).”90 Television advertisements not only disseminate and perpetuate stereotyped traditionally endorsed behaviors for women but also teach and reinforce these stereotypes for the next generation of female children. Since many researchers believe that television advertisements depict idealized rather than real-life gender role models, the result may be a continuation of gender ideology over time.

Das commented that this effect may be even greater in a country like India where television is a relative novelty, having been introduced into the country only in the early


89 Ibid.

70s and initially available primarily to the urban elite and only later to mass audiences. In other countries where television has been available for longer, studies on gender stereotyping in television advertising have found gender stereotyping to be the norm (Kim and Lowry, 2005; Furnham and Chan, 2004).

To date, however, there have been few studies on gender role portrayals in Indian television. Most studies have focused on two aspects of gender role depictions: frequency of portrayals of women; and the nature of the depiction of gender roles. Women are seen to be portrayed in dependent roles such as mother or spouse, and in the home as housewives, rather than in public arenas (Shrikhande, 2003). Das cited Gupta and Jain (1998), who found that Indian television advertising tended to: “reinforce traditional and stereotypical images of women as subordinate to men.” In addition, Das commented, women are shown more often in relationship roles and less often as authority figures. Das stated: “Indian women see equality in not individual-centered but family-centered ways—as still inclusive of maintaining valued roles in the home, and prizing family above all (Wolf, 1991).” In other words, while Das used this analysis as a positive comment on Indian values, it nevertheless indicates the part that television disseminated narratives in the form of gendered TV advertisements play in maintaining and reinforcing aspects of traditional gender role ideology into the 21st century, despite globalization and modernization.

Ritwika Biswas (2012) corroborated Das’s findings regarding the importance of television advertising narratives in perpetuating gender stereotypes. She analyzed over

91 Ibid. 210-211.
92 Ibid. 217.
100 advertisements and found that “almost all of them have been seen abiding by the existing societal structure, thus strengthening the stereotype gender images and roles.” Biswas’s findings are similar to those of other researchers (Gupta and Jain, 1998; Jha Dang and Vohra, 2005; and others) who found that Indian television advertisements “serve to reinforce the traditional and stereotypical images of women as subordinate to men.” Biswas commented, regarding the results of her analysis:

“Women are mostly shown in domestic settings. In these domestic settings female characters were more likely to be involved in housework and childcare than men…These portrayals…may reinforce traditional gender roles….”

In addition, Biswas noted that the range of products targeted for women in these advertisements also illustrated traditional gendered activities, that is, they ranged from beauty aids to household and childcare products. Biswas commented, on the targeted audience for these products:

She is the ideal Indian woman—the good homemaker, a caring wife, a responsible daughter-in-law, and a great “mommy.” In other words she is the “superwoman,” having multifarious qualities—beauty, elegance, passivity, loyalty, devotion. She is responsible, caring, and compassionate, her domain is the private sphere and her very existence is justified by the family. Her family gives her her identity and is the world for her.

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94 Ibid. 11.
95 Ibid. 12.
96 Ibid.
The Narrative Construction, Maintenance and Modification of Gender Role Ideology/Pativratya in India

As we have seen, in India narratives have contributed to the establishment, over the past two millennia of a male normative point of view, whereby a dominance/subordination gender paradigm favoring males has become the bedrock of gender relations in which females are denied access to power or authority especially outside the home. Sacred mythologies, such as the narratives of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, Puranic stories, and tales of gods and goddesses have contributed to the construction of a hierarchy defining women in terms of their service to men and assuring that the needs of men will take priority over those of women. While goddesses are revered in spiritual life and devotion and even ordinary women are described as worthy of the same veneration, at least in theory, in everyday life the lot of women is much different.

The concept of pativrata, or pativrata dharma has been presented over past millennia as a fundamental pillar of Hindu culture where the concept of the chaste, virtuous, obedient wife has been seen as the ultimate exemplar of Hindu morality and nobility. Shalini Shah (2012) commented: “The greatness of Indian culture has often been measured on the touchstone of its virtuous women.” She cited Clarisse Bader (1867) as asking rhetorically: “In what century, in what country, in what literature could there be found a more admirable type than that of Sita?”


However, as already reported, the ideology of *pativratya* was not known in the earliest literature of India. R. C. Majumdar ([1953] 1994) pointed out that marriage rituals in the *RgVeda* and in the *Grhyasutras* did not involve any commitment to obedience on the part of the wife. According to Majumdar, a wife derived her status because she was conceived of as a *patni* (a woman who is the wife of the master of the house). The ideal image of the *pativrata* had no reference in the *Vedas*, although the *Grhyasutra* texts did include terms for wives, such as *pativati* (one with a husband) and *jivapatni* (a wife with a living husband), where a woman’s status and veneration came from having a living spouse. The development of a systemic ideology of *pativrata dharma*, or *pativratya*, was not described until the *Manusmrti* and the Epics, according to Shah. She commented that:

> The most pervasive conception of wife in the twin epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* is that of *pativrata*, which is denoted by numerous epithets such as *patidharmarata*, *patidharma-mahabhaga*, *pativratarayana*, and *pativratanimam*...more than any other guise, [Sita’s] role of *pativrata* became the most valorized one for the wife.”

Shakambari Jayal (1966) traced the evolution of the concept of wife from *sahadharmini*, the wife who is a friend and companion to her husband but who “reserves for herself the right to independent judgement...” to the *pativrata*, the wife who serves her husband as a devotee serving a god, with this service and devotion constituting the only purpose of her life. Shah commented: “*Pativrata dharma/pativratya*...
became the only duty enjoined upon the wife, and the epics were the vehicle for the popularization of this dharma."\textsuperscript{101}

Shah thus made the important point that the ideology of \textit{pativrata} is socially constructed, and that the primary mode of construction and dissemination is narrative, specifically the stories contained in the two major epics, the \textit{Mahabharata} and the \textit{Ramayana}. Moreover, she documented the two major hermeneutical devices aiding the construction of \textit{pativrata} through narratives, namely, male commentary or discourse on this \textit{dharma} (\textit{pativrata mahatmya akhyana}\textsuperscript{102}), and female dialogue (\textit{samvada}\textsuperscript{103}), such as the conversations between Draupadi and Satyabhama in the \textit{Mahabharata}, and between Anasuya and Sita, in the \textit{Ramayana}, expounding on the proper duties of a wife and the ways in which a woman should serve her husband to ensure his happiness and well-being.

In other words, the narratives constructing and reinforcing the ideology of \textit{pativrata} utilized revered female role models in dialogue with each other to lend validity and authority to the patriarchal concepts they were espousing. Shah commented:

The fact that so many of these dialogues were between women was perhaps a masterstroke of patriarchy, for they were able to convince many women that there was security for them in protected subordination. In course of time, this \textit{pativrata dharma} was to acquire an independent cult status….\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
However, it is important to note that it was not just conversations between women that appealed to and convinced Hindu women to accede to this ideology. Even more significant was the fact that these were women of status, even revered or divine status, who would be role models of aspiration for other Hindu women.

Moreover, Laurie Patton (2007) pointed out that the construction of gender ideology is not just a simple process of telling stories about prominent women who espouse the ideology. She commented:

Gender ideology is a multilayered issue, even in the epics' poetics of dharma. In their understandings of male and female roles, these dialogues about gender [between women in the epics] are as complexly constructed as anything that Judith Butler might propose for our consideration.**105**

It is also important to recognize that most Hindu literature, especially the epics, existed in many versions with differing agendas or perspectives at different times in Indian history. In addition, the differing versions presented often radically divergent views of the characters depicted, including the female characters. Shah defined the process of transition for a wife from patni to pativrata as “pativratisation,”**106** and uses the portrayal of Draupadi in versions of the Mahabharata as an example. Draupadi is variously depicted as fearless and independent, educated, and with a mind of her own, but also as the devoted pativrata who lectures Satyabhama, wife of Krishna, on the fine points of being an ideal wife. In this conversation, Draupadi extolls: “to live under the

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husband’s protection (*patyasraya*) is the eternal law (*sanatana dharma*) for women. The husband is god, he is the only refuge. So what woman could displease him.”

Another example of the sanitization of Hindu wives through narrative is that of Anasuya, wife of the sage Atri. Anasuya is generally considered to be one of the most revered *pativratas* in Indian mythology, yet in the *Mahabharata* she is also portrayed as “a *brahmavadini* who left her husband with the firm intention that she would never allow herself to be dominated by him.” Shah summarized her discussion of the development of *pativratya* ideology by stating:

*Pativratya* was an ingenious ideology which eschewed the necessity of applying physical coercion over women in an oppressive patriarchal household, which would have been more difficult to establish and maintain. Instead, this ideology was used to elicit conformity with oppressive norms on a psychological plane.

However, at the same time, Shah developed the argument that while the concept of *pativratya* created by elite Brahmin men to control women’s sexual and social behavior and to ensure that their own needs were met became influential as a result of its valorization by revered role models depicted in popular narratives, another body of narratives popular in the lower echelons of Hindu society functioned to subvert the idea of women controlled and dominated by men.

Shah suggested that we need to look “the alternative folk (little) traditions where the notion of the *pativrata* was overturned in a very fundamental way.”

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109 Ibid. 82.

110 Ibid. 87.
particular, she cites the stories of the *pancakanyas*, asserting that of the five *kanyas* (daughter, virgins), Kunti was an unwed mother, who also produced children through *niyoga*, Draupadi had five husbands, and Tara and Mandodari (a *raksasi*) were “outside the pale of the ‘Aryan’” social order.”¹¹¹ Shah commented: “For a *pativrata*, chastity in thought and deed is a crucial component of her *dharma*, but all these cases [the *pancakanyas*] present a different sexual reality.”¹¹² She pointed out, too, that these women criticized and censured their husbands, even though *pativratas* are expected to manifest unquestioning loyalty to their husbands in both thought and words. Shah concluded: “Should we treat this myth of *pancakanyas* as a counter-discourse, a dissenting voice which picked these five women—by no means the usual kind of *pativratas*—to lay bare a rich texture of ambiguity within our larger cultural tradition?”¹¹³

In other words, while the *pativrata* ideology which has been so pervasive in Indian culture has been constructed through the use of popular mainstream narratives (most particularly the Epics), depicting “idealized” or “sanskritized” revered female role models to communicate their endorsement of this ideology through dialogue, the same ideology is deconstructed and subverted, again through narratives/myths and female role models (often alternative interpretations of the same women) popular in folk culture, in the “little” tradition. In both cases, sacred and folk narratives and the role models depicted in them function to both create and to subvert or modify ideologies of womanhood in the Hindu tradition.

¹¹¹ Ibid.
¹¹² Ibid.
¹¹³ Ibid.
Subversion of *pativrata* ideology, as suggested by Shah, is consistent with an interpretation of the findings of the current research which contends that *pativrata* ideology, and the many ways in which its tenets are reframed or subverted in order to better fit various social/political agendas of different groups in differing times and contexts, is still influencing Hindu women today, even Hindu women in the United States. While many of the original core elements, namely the soteriological implications of a woman’s service to her husband, and the concept of unquestioning obedience and service, may have been lost or severely diluted, the heart of gender role ideology for women, of devotion to husband and family above all other concerns, has been woven into the tapestry of gendered beliefs and is fundamental even for Hindu women today.

While the previous section emphasized the importance of sacred narratives, and of female role models depicted in them, as a major source for the construction of a gender role ideology for Hindu women, the importance of other sources should thus not be ignored.

**Gender Role Construction for Hindu Women in the U.S.: *Pativrata* Reframed**

Although Indian films and television productions appear to perpetuate gender role stereotypes and to maintain and reinforce at least some aspects of traditional gender roles for women, and thus, it could be argued, to continue to some degree the gender ideology of *pativrata*, the question remains whether this ideology in any form is transported to the West with Indian women immigrating to the United States. First generation immigrants, raised in the Indian culture and exposed to traditional gender role norms in their daily lives as well as through narratives of all kinds, including those depicted in films and television productions, might be expected to continue these gender roles in the diaspora. Moreover, they may convey them to their daughters by
modeling the behaviors of their natal culture as well as sharing with them the ancient sacred narratives, through literature, comics, and performative and visual media.

In fact, there is relatively little research demonstrating the gender roles manifested by Indian women in the United States. Much of the U.S. research has focused on the role of Hindu women in articulating, maintaining and passing on to their children key aspects of their cultural/ethnic identity. Shamita Dasgupta stated: “a significant aspect of the process of ethnic identity consolidation is the desire to perpetuate it by socializing the next generation to accept key practices and rituals of the native culture…”114. Dasgupta pointed to issues of gender equality as a point of contrast between India and U.S. cultural norms. She identified gender roles, particularly for women, as a key element of Indian cultural transmission and expressed the hypothesis that more egalitarian gender roles represented a source of stress for Hindu families, particularly with regard to the potential impact on daughters' dating behavior.

This view was supported by a number of South Asian scholars who were concerned with the anxiety triggered in Indian immigrants over this issue of dating, but other researchers have focused primarily on the stress caused by unequal gender ideologies between the immigrant and host communities. Dasgupta, in her study which examined the beliefs regarding gender equality and dating practices among Asian Indians families and the intergenerational stress and conflict this might provoke, concluded:

In terms of gender…the potential for conflict within the community is significantly alarming…Although parents and children were highly analogous in terms of their views on gender equality, the differential

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treatment of women within the community does pose serious concern. The results indicate that both generations of Asian women are being penned by some traditional gender role expectations pervasive in the community.115

Dasgupta cited a similar finding by Kibria (1993), studying Vietnamese refugees, where women were found to "experience singular conflicts that generate from contradictions between patriarchal family ideologies and personal bids for autonomy."116 Dasgupta iterated: "Within the Asian Indian community also, women seem to negotiate their lives by balancing similar discrepancies in group and personal expectations."117 In other words, Indian women in the United States continuously seek to balance traditional gendered expectations of their community with regard to gender role behavior against their own personal gendered aspirations as well as the behaviors modeled within the dominant host culture.

Aparna Rayaprol (1997) also looked at the ways that Indian women immigrants negotiated their identities as women in the United States. Studying a community of middle and upper middle-class Indian women immigrants in Pittsburgh, Rayaprol focused “on the different ways in which women have created a niche for themselves within the community, challenging conventional notions of gender roles and behaviors.”118 Rayaprol’s intention was to examine “the various ways in which South Indian immigrant women attempt to adhere to the values of their country of origin while

115 Ibid. 969.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
at the same time adapting and accommodating some of the cultural features of the host country."\textsuperscript{119}

With regard to women’s gender roles, Rayaprol adapted an analytical framework borrowed from Arlie Hochschild (1989) to examine the effects of gender ideology, and attempted to relate ideology to actual behavior. Hochschild divided gender role ideology expressed within marriage into three categories: 1) traditional; 2) transitional; and 3) egalitarian. A “traditional” woman follows conventionally Indian gender norms, identifying more with her role within the home and deferring to the authority of her husband. An “egalitarian” woman identifies with the same domain of influence as her husband and wants equal power in the marriage. A “transitional” woman identifies with a hybrid ideology, seeking influence in both private and public spheres.

In a similar way, the present study examines the ways in which Hindu women in the U.S. retain, negotiate, and transform traditional gender ideology. Rayaprol, however, commented that Hochschild had identified contradictions between what people said about their ideology and what they actually did, an issue not addressed in the present study.

Rayaprol indicated that the gendered behavior of these women immigrants was rooted in the ideology transported with them India. She stated:

When the patriarchal gender ideology predominant in Indian social life has been internalized by the immigrants, there is a tendency to conform to the norms that are associated with that ideology. Even though many of the Indian immigrant women have made inroads into male-dominated occupations, their primary identification is with their own families."\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. 33.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. 108.
In terms of her findings loosely utilizing Hochschild’s “traditional,” “transitional,” and “egalitarian” classification of women’s gender role identification, Rayaprol indicated that about 80 percent of the Indian women she interviewed had either traditional or transitional ideologies. She stated: “They tended to advocate patriarchal values and acknowledged the superior role of the man in marriage. However, their practices were not all traditional. In fact, many of them expressed the feeling that they enjoyed greater freedom after immigration,”\(^\text{121}\) a finding consistent with many reports from the research to be discussed. However, Rayaprol interviewed only first generation female immigrants, and the finding that 80 percent endorsed traditional or transitional gendered ideology is not unexpected. It will be interesting to see whether this result is different for second generation Hindu women immigrants.

Moreover, it was interesting to note that these first generation women also tended to aspire to a “traditional” gender ideology for their daughters and sons. Even those women who endorsed a “transitional” gender ideology, while affirming a belief in a more egalitarian ideologies for their children, nevertheless had “greater expectations for a son’s success than that for a daughter.”\(^\text{122}\) Thus, the results of Rayaprol’s research suggests that first generation Indian women in the U.S. internalize a commitment to a more traditional gender role ideology both for themselves and for their daughters even while voicing more egalitarian aspirations.

Rayaprol commented, with regard to the women in her study:

The Indians in my study were largely socialized into a post Vedic patriarchal and patrilocal society in which the women had power only as

\(^{121}\) Ibid. 113.

\(^{122}\) Ibid. 117.
the mother of a son… People who have been socialized into traditional Hindu culture believe that the women must either be protected by the male and even worshiped, or else must be controlled…”

Rayaprol, however, provided a caveat with regard to this interpretation especially with respect to essentializing aspects of “Hindu culture.” She points out that her results were based on a small but influential sample of Hindu women and that she had engaged in “a selective reconstruction of popular narratives from Hindu epics which present idealized notions of men and women.” While this caveat is certainly applicable to the present study, which, like Rayaprol, reports findings from a selective non-representative sample of Hindu women, the fact remains true that Hindus in India and the United States read and are influenced by these “popular narratives from Hindu epics” to which Rayaprol referred. Rayaprol admitted, however, that:

Ironically, although Indian society today is far removed from the age of the epics, it nevertheless continues to idealize the character traits of…mythical figures…Many of these ideals seem to be fully incorporated into the lives of most Hindu wives and daughters in law.

She concluded:

[T]he ideal of *pativrata* (meaning one who is vowed to her husband) is romanticized through legend and folklore, and reaffirmed through religious ceremonies of various kinds. The traditional ideology of marital roles articulated by respondents…illustrates the extent to which this ideology has been internalized by women.

The ideology of *pativrata*, according to Vanaja Dhruvarajan (1989), remains prevalent in India and is easily transported to the U.S. by Indian immigrants.

123 Ibid. 123.
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid. 125.
126 Ibid.
Dhruvarajan (1989) studying rural South Indian Hindu women, commented on the understanding of pativrata (pativrata ideology) described by her participants:

The wife as pativrata should be his true helpmate by helping him in every possible way to achieve his goals in life. She should never think that she has an existence apart from her husband…a pativrata always eats whatever is left after her husband has eaten…obeying the command of one’s husband without question is a mark of virtue and good conduct…He does not have to pay attention even when she is in pain. It does not matter whether he is true to her or not.…

Moreover, Dhruvarajan indicated that the influence of the ideology of pativrata is not limited to women but in fact:

defines the roles of all members in the family and everyone strives to perform these roles adequately. The end result is that under the guiding principles of this ideology, both men and women learn to accept their relative position as legitimate and actively participate in its perpetuation.”

With regard to androcentric gender ideology (pativrata), Dhruvarajan (1988) looked at this concept among a sample of 25 first generation Asian Indians in a Canadian metropolis. She reported that the influence of pativrata was experienced more when women had decreased access to resources outside the family. Women who were educated, and/or who were employed in higher-paying managerial or professional positions, were most likely to reject or negotiate this ideology. In contrast to Dhruvarajan’s findings among rural women in India, where she found that pativrata ideology was woven into the prevailing hierarchical gender and social structure, in

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Canada, families demonstrated an erosion of traditional gender ideology, which led to a restructuring of relationships within the family, especially between husband and wife.\textsuperscript{129} While there has been relatively little research on gender roles of Indian or Hindu immigrants to the United States, some contemporary studies of South Asian immigrants to Canada have partially addressed this issue. Naidoo (2003) reported that among several sources of change in South Asian immigrant women’s self-images, a new dualistic worldview has, in a sense, constructed a hybrid gender role identity which combines both traditional values in family life with Western values of personal development. Naidoo related this hybrid self-image to Triandis’ (1988, 1989, 1995) collectivist-individualist concept of “balance,” and Berry’s (1997) “integrative acculturation”.\textsuperscript{130}

Naidoo’s research constituted a meta-study, a review of over 200 studies of South Asian women in Canada, from 1972 to 2003. These studies represented diverse disciplines, a wide range of theories and methods, and eclectic and diverse South Asian populations. Naidoo reported that South Asian women were “adamant about the values from their traditional culture that they wish to retain as part of their cultural self-identity…Essentially they are committed to values pertaining to family and home, marriage, child-rearing, religion and relationships.”\textsuperscript{131} However, Naidoo also commented:

Contrary to popular belief, middle-class South Asian women display self-determination, ego strength, and action-orientedness...These women

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid. 274-275.


\textsuperscript{131} Ibid. 56.
derive their strength from concepts drawn from their own indigenous culture, for example, the concept of Shakti, the active principle in the Hindu conceptualization of the Cosmos.\textsuperscript{132}

Unlike some other researchers, Naidoo included in her reviews studies of second generation as well as first generation women immigrants. She reported “a change of focus between the two generations reflecting shifts from collectivist to more individualist values and norms,”\textsuperscript{133} particularly when it came to mode of choice of marriage partners, and degree of parental participation. This finding was confirmed by Vaidyanathan and Naidoo (1990), who reported generational changes regarding attitudes towards love and marriage, with second generation women wanting more freedom of choice, and marriages based on love, while 63 percent of their first generation mothers had arranged marriages.\textsuperscript{134}

**Summary**

This review of the literature has attempted to outline and discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the research to be described, and to trace the history of Hindu women’s gender role development from Vedic times to the present day in India, identifying political and social sources of influence as well as different genres of communication, enactment and reinforcement. Contemporary research on Indian women immigrants’ gender role attitudes and understanding in the West has also been discussed in an attempt to evaluate how conflicting ideologies of gender and gender

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid. 57.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid. 60.

roles negotiate and reconcile different cultural influences. In particular, research illustrating the role of *pativrata* ideology in India, and how it may be transmitted, deconstructed, reconstructed and modified in the West, has been examined.

The study which will be presented in Chapter 4 elaborates on this theme in that it examines the role of narratives, particularly sacred narratives, in the negotiation of gender roles, for both first and second generation Hindu women in the United States, with a focus on the role played by traditional ideologies of gender.
CHAPTER 3
THEORECTICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Goals of This Chapter

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to describe as fully as possible the processes leading up to a study examining the influence of narratives of all kinds, particularly sacred Hindu narratives, on the gender role constructions of Hindu women living in the United States. The research will attempt to determine how stories of all kinds received by the participants in this study influence the stories the participants tell about their lives as women, and how they learned to understand and negotiate their roles as women in their families and communities.

Chapter 3 will also outline the theoretical and methodological issues considered in the design of the study, that is, in the methods used, which will be presented in detail in Chapter 4. The goal of Chapter 3 is to create a transparent “thought-path,” linking a particular view of the world, of the nature of knowledge and the way knowledge is constructed and/or acquired, to the nature of research design and methodological considerations, and ultimately to the structure of the research process, the conduct of the study, and the rationale for the methods used to collect and interpret data. In this way, it will also create yet another level of story-telling, that is, the story of the research, and of the researcher’s role in constructing this story. The creation of this “thought-path” illuminates every step of the decision-making process, and clearly “locates” the researcher within the research process, as both “listener” and “story-teller,” as collaborator and co-creator, together with the study participants, of a multi-faceted, multi-leveled narrative.
Chapter 3 will be devoted to examining the issues which must be considered and addressed in carrying out a qualitative research study, and will look at the research literature which has addressed these issues and some suggested resolutions. Chapter 4 will locate this research within a particular conceptual framework and will describe the actual conduct of the present study. It will also document the ways in which the aforementioned issues were addressed and resolved in this study and will note some of the limitations experienced in resolving these issues.

By the end of Chapter 3, it is hoped that the reader will have a clear understanding of where the researcher locates herself philosophically, theoretically, and methodologically with regard to telling the stories of participants’ lives as women. However, it must be remembered that the researcher’s stance and her process of decision-making throughout this research is but one “thought-path” of the many that could have been followed and one narrative that could be told out of countless other ways of approaching the issue being researched.

Many qualitative research studies and most qualitative dissertations have been critiqued because the “thought-path” followed by the researcher has been ignored or obfuscated, or simply not reported, so that the researcher’s assumptions and the bases for his or her decision-making throughout the research process are obscured and the effects of these on the outcome of the research cannot be determined. Richards and Morse (2007) state that research design is “the least discussed and least adequately critiqued component of many qualitative projects,”1 and go on to assert that research design is “a problem to be considered carefully at the beginning of the study and

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reconsidered throughout—it is never a given.”\(^2\) The study to be described hopes to avoid such a critique by fully documenting the “thought-path” which has informed the research from beginning to end.

**Qualitative Research in Religious Studies**

The present study also has as a goal the exploration of research considerations and methods not normatively used in religious studies research. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (2011), in the *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, comment that: “The past decades have seen vivid debates about conceptual and theoretical issues in the study of religion/s...So far, however, those debates have remained curiously distant from issues of methodology.”\(^3\) Almost any graduate student in Religious Studies will concur that required courses in Method and Theory in graduate school tend to be long on theory, but woefully short on method. Stausberg and Engler would agree:

Methods are rarely discussed in introductory textbooks, and separate courses on research methods are seldom included in religious studies programs...there are no discussions in the study of religion/s that can compete with the level of technical sophistication established in many other disciplines.\(^4\)

However, these authors concede that: “It is a significant misconception to think that the study of religion/s is significantly different from the other disciplines in its use of a variety of methods; what is different is the scarcity of explicit reflection on methods in

\(^2\) Ibid. 74.


\(^4\) Ibid. 3-4.
the study of religion/s."\(^5\) They go on to say: “There is very little sense of methodology as empowerment in the study of religion/s.”\(^6\)

This is not to say that research in religious studies is not concerned with methodology nor that qualitative methods are not the primary means of carrying out such research. But it might be fair to say that certain qualitative methods are privileged in the study of issues pertaining to religion while others are often overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant. Stausberg and Engler comment:

Some methods are often invoked by name but rarely put into practice by scholars of religion/s…the rhetorical preference [for example, for the notion of discourse] has not been translated into methodological terms: despite much talk of “discourse,” few scholars of religion’s have used the methodological tools of discourse analysis…\(^7\)

In religious studies research, heuristic methods, focused on the study and interpretation of texts have been a primary methodological tool, as have participant/observation methods from ethnography and anthropology, but often there is little transparency regarding the relationship of epistemology to research design, analysis, and conclusions.

Wade Cark Roof (2011) states: “Choosing a research design in the study of religion is made complicated by the interdisciplinary nature and history of the field and by the complexity of “religion” itself.”\(^8\) Research in religion and religious topics overlaps into the fields of anthropology, sociology, increasingly psychology, education, and even

\(^5\) Ibid. 4.

\(^6\) Ibid. 12.

\(^7\) Ibid. 13.

areas such as law, but often does not explore the diversity of research methods employed in these disciplines. Qualitative research in religious studies often involves meticulous observation, documentation and interpretation of “religious behaviors,” but rarely involves rigorous analysis of data following established methodological procedures.

A significant goal in the present study is to employ a rigorous qualitative methodology to investigate a topic in the study of religions. This researcher is particularly suited to such an endeavor, having completed research in psychology at the doctoral level, and holding a firm conviction that religious studies’ research can only benefit from embracing and incorporating at least some of the qualitative methods available in other disciplines.

**What Is Qualitative Research, and Why Is It Used in This Investigation?**

An investigation of the role of stories/narratives, particularly ancient, sacred stories, in the gender role construction of Hindu women in the United States, is best accomplished through a qualitative research design which permits the acquisition of rich, detailed data generated by the women participants themselves, and not subject to the controls, constraints or *a priori* hypotheses of a positivist, quantitative research protocol. In other words, qualitative research validates the study of subjective experience rather than limiting knowledge only to that which is objectively perceivable and measurable. Qualitative research facilitates an understanding of the nuance and subtlety underlying perceived patterns but also allows for the emergence of central themes which can then be explored in greater depth than is possible with positivist methods, thus promoting theory development.
Qualitative Methodology and Qualitative Methods

The term “method” is used to refer to the procedural aspects of research, that is, the strategies and activities employed in gathering and analyzing data to evaluate a specific research question, while “methodology” refers to the underlying assumptions or worldviews (epistemologies) that inform the selection of research methods or procedures. Chapter 3 will discuss methodological considerations while Chapter 4 will deal with the methods used in the study to be described.

Qualitative methodologies, on the other hand, assume that we can know far more than we can observe, measure or quantify objectively. Subjective experiences, and the meanings we attach to them, are thus the particular focus for qualitative researchers. In the case of narratives, for example, although words and sentences can be objectively heard, or seen on the printed page, and can be quantified in terms of frequency of occurrence, the meanings, interpretations, and affective responses attached to them in the narratives constructed by these words and sentences can only be accessed through qualitative methods which allow the voices of the narrators as well as the listeners/audiences to be heard (Slife and Melling, 2012).

Qualitative methodologies do not seek to essentialize, or to establish universals, but rather to describe and interpret particular responses or events in particular contexts or circumstances (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). It is fair to say that, epistemologically, “quantitative research is more attuned to context-less universals, and qualitative methods are more attuned to contextual particulars.” In a sense, then, qualitative methodologies are the logical tools of a post-modern worldview.

9 Ibid. 731.
The only requirement and the potential advantage of qualitative research is that the values and biases of both researcher and participants are brought into the light of day, examined meticulously, and discussed and analyzed openly regarding their effects on the research.

The importance of reflexivity will be discussed in more detail later in Chapter 3, but suffice it to say here that in qualitative research neither the researcher nor the informants are assumed to be neutral or without values or biases, and the interaction between researcher and informants is considered to be a crucial factor to consider and understand, in terms of its impact on conclusions which may be drawn from the study.

However, the question remains: Why were qualitative methods chosen for use in this study? What specific epistemological assumptions were espoused in this research? What worldview was adopted in the approach to studying the relationship, if any, between stories (both received and told) and the ways Hindu women perceive their roles as women, wives and mothers? What specific methods were selected to explore this question, and how do these methods relate to the underlying research worldview? These questions will be addressed in Chapter 4.

**Validity and Reliability Issues in Qualitative Research**

**Validity**

Qualitative researchers have often maintained that validity, as defined in quantitative research, has no meaningful application in qualitative studies. However, in quantitative research the concept of validity may have quite different meanings or inferences than it does in qualitative research. Validity in qualitative research is concerned with the question of the relationship between researchers’ observations/interpretations, and what the participants actually said/did/intended.
In qualitative research, the researcher is concerned with both internal and external validity. Internal validity can be enhanced in several ways. For example, some methods of establishing validity might include the meticulous recording and transcription of the actual words/statements of the participants; the use of literal quotations in analyzing/interpreting/reporting the data; precise and detailed descriptions of people and situations, recorded at the time of or immediately after interactions, in the form of insightful field-notes/observations; the use of multiple researchers/coders/interpreters to ensure and measure degree of agreement regarding handling of the data gathered; involving the participants in the review of the researcher’s synthesis of interview data, or “member-checking,” that is, checking informally with participants about the accuracy of their words/actions during data collection; or the identification and analysis of discrepant cases or negative data that might modify the main themes or patterns found in the data (McMillan and Schumacher, 1997).

Similarly, external validity in qualitative research can be enhanced in several ways: through triangulation, or the use of multiple sources of data or methods of data collection (for example, in-depth interviews, behavior observations, questionnaire data, documents review, textual analysis of diaries, memoirs or other autobiographical materials, and so on); through researcher transparency regarding the rationale for sampling decisions (such as participant criteria, sample size, methods of recruiting samples, etc.) and data collection methods; through data analysis strategies (such as transcription and coding rules, methods of thematic analysis, content analysis, and so on); through acknowledgment of limitations; through the context in which data gathering takes place, and any limitations created by the context; through researcher reflexivity
regarding the characteristics and role of the researcher, and the nature and effects of
the relationship between researcher and participant; through the researcher’s
ideological stance or world-view, and its potential influence on the research; and
through the exploration of alternative interpretations/conclusions/ideological
explanations. (McMillan and Schumacher, 1997).

Reliability

In the same way, the concept of reliability does not carry the same connotations
in qualitative research as it does in quantitative research. In qualitative research,
reliability is defined in terms of the rigor with which the researcher scrupulously
questions and monitors his or her own impact on the research at every phase of the
research process.

Reliability in qualitative research can be enhanced in several different ways:
through open, transparent and continuous reflexivity on the part of the researcher;
through the use of field-logs and field-notes documenting what was said and done, in
what contexts and at what times; through the maintenance of analytic memos recording
the researcher’s thoughts, ethical dilemmas and decisions made during the research
process; through the use of peer de-briefers or colleagues as sounding boards to
corroborate data collection methods, through data analysis and interpretation; through
clear, meticulous and detailed record management strategies (including the recording of
data, coding decisions and code definitions), and decision-making rules supporting
transparency in a “decision trail,” so that another researcher could reach the same
conclusions using the same decision-making rules; and/or through the involvement of
the participant/co-researcher in the verification and confirmation of the research
findings. (McMillan and Schumacher, 1997).
Sampling Issues

Sample Selection

Qualitative studies, in contrast to quantitative methods, employ non-probability sampling strategies to identify a small sample of participants with particular characteristics, who provide rich, descriptive information, but about whom only limited generalizations of findings can be made (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam, 2003; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

In the past, qualitative research lacked clear guidelines regarding principles to be used in the selection of samples of participants, and was often criticized by quantitative researchers because of the use of small, randomly selected samples which:

violate both the quantitative principle that requires an adequate sample size in order to ensure representativeness and the qualitative principle of appropriateness that requires purposeful sampling and a “good” informant (i.e. one who is articulate, reflective, and willing to share with the interviewer).\(^\text{10}\)

Transparency in qualitative sampling strategies is as important as it is in describing the other steps of qualitative research, such as interviewing techniques, transcription rules, and so on.

In qualitative research, a number of sampling strategies may be employed, such as purposeful (judgment) sampling, convenience sampling, and theoretical sampling. Often, a study may utilize a combination of sampling strategies. Purposeful sampling involves selecting participants according to defined characteristics desired to be studied, without any intention to generalize findings to all such cases. Typically,

purposeful sampling methods will implement a combination of several different selection strategies (McMillan and Schumacher, 1997).

Theoretical sampling, on the other hand, means that sample selections are, to a greater or lesser degree, theory driven. The theory driving sampling decisions is not necessarily the *a priori* position of the researcher, but may emerge from the data as it is gathered, thus dictating a need to change sampling criteria to accommodate a new direction in information gathering. Theoretical sampling is used in this way in grounded theory research, but also in most qualitative investigations involving the interpretation of rich, deep data.

Convenience sampling, although in many ways the least rigorous sampling strategy, is probably the most pragmatic and expedient and thus the most often employed in qualitative studies (although often in combination with other techniques). It requires the least expenditure of time, effort, and money, because the researcher samples from the available population, rather than according to criteria dictated by theoretical concerns. Much qualitative research carried out in academic settings involves some convenience sampling, in that there is an easily accessible population of students, faculty, and administrative staff available to tap for participants.

**Sample Size**

While it is generally assumed that qualitative research involves the in-depth investigation of relatively small samples of participants, there are no hard and fast guidelines which dictate sample size. Tuckett (2004) states:

Sampling is a core concern determining the ongoing success of a research project….Whilst there are no closely defined rules for sample size (Patton, 1990), sampling in qualitative research usually relies on
small numbers with the aim of studying in depth and detail (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).  

In other words, sampling strategies in qualitative studies exemplify the dynamic character of qualitative research itself, whereby hypotheses and theories may evolve from the data in the course of data collection, and data collection procedures may be modified as hypotheses and theories begin to emerge. For most types of qualitative research, however, sampling decisions, including sample size, are related to the initial goals and objectives of the research, and are guided by the researcher’s interpretive framework, as well as by practical limitations and logistics (Miles and Huberman, 1994). 

Choosing a sample size and sampling scheme represents “an active process of reflection.” There are, however, relatively few articles which address the issue of sampling or sample size (for example, Sandelowski, 1995). Curtis et al. (2000) state, with regard to sampling decisions: “It seems essential to be explicit about these [decisions] rather than leaving them hidden, and to consider the implications of the choice for the way that the…study can be interpreted.”

Some qualitative researchers have attempted to provide sample size guidelines for different qualitative research designs and techniques. For example, Cresswell (2002) recommended using three to five participants in case study research, while with regard to phenomenological studies, Morse (1994), recommended a sample size of six, and Cresswell (1998) recommended a sample size of ten participants. Cresswell also

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12 Ibid.

recommended a sample size ranging from 15-20 participants (2002) to 20-30 participants (1998) for grounded theory research studies. Morse (1994) suggested conducting 30-50 interviews for ethnographic studies, while recommendations for sample size for focus groups range from six to nine participants (Krueger, 2000), to eight to 12 participants (Baumgartner et al., 2000). Sandelowski (1995) advocates that sample size in qualitative research should not be too small that informational redundancy (saturation) cannot be achieved, or too large, preventing deep analysis of data. The qualitative researcher should be held to a high standard of transparency regarding the logic and rationale behind the selection of sampling strategies, sample criteria, and sample size for the qualitative method chosen for a particular study.

However, since qualitative research involves the collection of deep, rich data from each participant, it is very labor-intensive, so large samples generate a great deal of data to be analyzed, and are thus very time-consuming. Interview recordings need to be meticulously transcribed, coded and analyzed in minute detail. Analyzing large samples can be simply impractical.

Thus, determination of sample size is often based on the context of the research, the research question to be addressed, the characteristics of the participants, the practical and logistical considerations regarding availability and allocation of resources, the data collection strategies employed, and an evaluation of the point at which data saturation is achieved. The main requirement for the qualitative researcher is openness and transparency regarding the factors influencing sample selection and sample size. The researcher needs to be able to explain and justify sampling decisions which are made.
Interviewing in Qualitative Research

The most commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research is the interview. There are many different ways of conducting interviews and some may be more appropriate for some qualitative research paradigms than for others. King and Horrocks (2010) concur that most interviews in qualitative research will have some general defining characteristics: they will be flexible and open-ended in style; the focus will be on the interviewees' actual experiences, rather than on their opinions and/or beliefs; and, perhaps most critically, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is of central importance, and must be taken into account, primarily through interviewer reflexivity.

The choice of interviewing as a method for data collection in qualitative research is not primarily a matter of convenience or pragmatism, but is intimately connected to the philosophical and methodological considerations underpinning the decision to do qualitative research in the first place, and to the ontological and epistemological positions held by the researcher, which guide the ways in which knowledge is defined with respect to the research question, and sought through qualitative research methods.

The choice of methods, for example, of interviewing as a method of data gathering, and of the particular type of interview protocol, is informed by the chosen methodology (qualitative research), which is in turn guided by the underlying philosophical (ontological and epistemological) assumptions adopted by the researcher (King and Horrocks, 2010). It is incumbent on the researcher to be self-aware of, and transparent in disclosing the underlying philosophical and methodological assumptions dictating a chosen method of data collection and in creating a logical thought-path justifying these assumptions and choices. This logical “thought-path” is what Marshall
and Rossman (1999) call “epistemological integrity,” which refers to: “the connection between the nature of the research, overall strategy, research questions, design and methods.” 14

In the present study, it has been important to carefully consider and outline the “thought-path” linking the philosophical and methodological assumptions of the researcher with the research question(s) to be examined, and with the choices (of methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation) selected to address the research question. Thus, in Chapter 3, some amount of time has been spent considering the literature which addresses issues of concern in the conduct of qualitative research, before describing, in the following chapter, how the issues were considered and resolved in the present study.

Moreover, the ontological position of the researcher with respect to his or her perspective on the nature of social reality is intimately connected to what is considered to be relevant knowledge, and how the research to acquire that knowledge is conducted, how interview questions are selected and phrased, how data is analyzed, and how conclusions are drawn from the data.

It is important to realize that the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the participants in the research may not coincide with those of the researcher, and to examine the potential implications and consequences of such discrepant assumptions with regard to participants’ understanding of and responses to questions asked during the interview process. For example, if (as may very well be possible in a population of

Indian descent), gender and gender roles are viewed as biologically or naturally determined (“just the way things are”), while the researcher considers them to be constructed within a specific cultural, historical, social and/or religious context, the implications of these discrepant worldviews need to be considered in interpreting and analyzing the data, and the researcher’s reflexivity becomes paramount in facilitating this process.

The ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the study to be described will be discussed in more detail later, but it is critical to stress the importance of laying a clear trail from philosophical assumptions to choices of methods of data gathering, analysis and interpretation, justifying choices made, showing a logical connection between these steps, and accounting for any deviations from the path along the way.

When justifying the use of interviewing as a data-gathering method in qualitative research, it is important to show a connection between method and underlying epistemological assumptions. Epistemology deals with assumptions about what constitutes knowledge, and or ways of knowing. As King and Horrocks (2010) observe:

> What counts as knowledge and how that knowledge is generated and understood carry real implications for qualitative interviewing. Methods and methodologies do not exist in a vacuum, rather, they are subject to new and extended ways of thinking about the world.15

Thus, interviewing is a logical choice for a qualitative research method of data collection based on an underlying philosophical (epistemological and ontological)

assumption that what is considered to be “real” and “existing” (in this study, gender roles) is, in fact, socially and contextually constructed through human interaction and conversation (in this study, in the form of narratives both received and told).

Stories and narratives must thus be considered to be a particular kind (or even the primary mode) of conversation, conveyed in many ways, including through the interview process. Stories and narratives only exist in the context of human discourse, and constitute a particular kind of interaction which constructs realit(ies) in the process of the communication. Moreover, the data acquired through interviewing, as well as the choices made about coding, analyzing and interpreting this data “are intricately associated with beliefs about reality and knowledge…”16, and with the stories which convey these beliefs and construct these realities.

The underlying philosophical and methodological assumptions dictating interviewing as a method of gathering data in a qualitative study also have implications for the nature of the relationship created between interviewer and respondent during the interview process. For example, King and Horrocks cite Burr’s (1995) position, stating:

…social constructionists [i.e. those researchers who see reality (for example, gender roles) as constructed by social interactions within a particular cultural, historical, religious, etc. context] call for the democratization of research relationships, with research being necessarily a “co-production” between the researcher and the researched.17

This view of interview-based research as a collaborative, “democratized” process has significant implications for the structure of the interview protocol and interview guide, and for power considerations regarding the relationship between interviewer and

16 Ibid.
interviewee, and how these impact on the data gathered and the conclusions that can be drawn from this data. A worldview that construes the interview as a collaborative conversation, a co-construction of “reality”, mandates a more flexible, semi-structured approach, where the nature and direction of questioning is guided by and responsive to the information provided by the respondent.

In addition to the interview structure reflecting the philosophical and methodological assumptions of the researcher, it is also intimately connected to the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participant/interviewee, and the role played by the researcher who is in a very real sense, both the instrument used in the research and the research process itself. In interview-based qualitative research, where the researcher and the participant co-create narratives that have meaning in the life of the interviewee, researcher reflexivity is key: “it is extremely important to understand as fully as possible one’s own contribution, as the interviewer, to the co-construction of experience that the interview represents.”\(^1\)

Interviewing women, especially women from another culture, raises additional issues, both regarding the nature of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and their cultural and linguistic “fit,” as well as more general issues pertaining to women’s experiences.

The implications of women as “other,” linguistically, are compounded when the women being interviewed are also “other” in terms of language, culture and religion, as compared to an interviewer who represents the dominant cultural and language context in which the research is conducted. At the very least the researcher should remain

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
aware of and reflexive about her own role in the interviewing process, her own use of language and its implications, and the effects of differences in language and culture, as well as other factors, on the stories women participants tell and the experiences and meanings they share.

Moreover, interviewing women from a feminist worldview, as collaborators or co-researchers, carries with it some potential problems, particularly when interviewer and interviewee differ with regard to underlying worldviews or conceptions of the roles and values of women. This concern may be particularly appropriate in the context of the current research, where interviewer and interviewees differ not only with regard to age, ethnicity, religion and cultural background, but also may hold very different views of the role of women in society and the inherent versus learned aspects of womanhood.

**Reflexivity**

The importance of researcher reflexivity in qualitative research has been mentioned on several occasions so far and is especially important when gathering data through semi-structured interviews using a collaborative approach to conducting the interviews. Reflexivity at the epistemological as well as the methodological and personal levels is essential. That is, feminist methods of interviewing must have epistemological as well as methodological functions and purpose and these must be reflexively disclosed, acknowledged and discussed in the written report. However, although the importance of researcher reflexivity is frequently stressed in qualitative research, the links between reflexivity and the underlying theoretical and philosophical (epistemological) assumptions are rarely identified and the practical problems of actually “doing” reflexivity are often not addressed.
Mauthner and Doucet (2003) stress the importance of considering reflexivity “in terms of the personal, interpersonal, institutional, pragmatic, emotional, theoretical, epistemological and ontological influences on [the] research and data analysis process…”\textsuperscript{19}, and make the point that: “Data analysis methods are not just neutral techniques. They reflect and are imbued with theoretical, epistemological and ontological assumptions—including conceptions of subjects and subjectivities, and understandings of how knowledge is constructed and produced.”\textsuperscript{20} It is the contention in the present research, however, that reflexivity needs to be incorporated at every level of the research process, from a consideration of the researcher’s underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions through an examination of the methodology and methods such assumptions impel, to the decision-making regarding rules selected to transcribe, code and interpret and analyze the data, to the very words chosen in conveying the narrative of the research. Researcher awareness of the factors affecting and connecting all levels of the research process must be brought into the light and continually acknowledged and examined.

From the onset, the concept of reflexivity clearly reflects the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions inherent in the social constructionist theoretical foundation of the present research. Given the assumption that gender roles are constructed at least in part through narratives received and told, the interviewer/researcher’s reflexive account of his/her assumptions and decision-making

\textsuperscript{19} N. Mauthner and A. Doucet. 2003. “Reflexive Accounts and Accounts of Reflexivity in Qualitative Data Analysis.” \textit{Sociology} 37, 3: 413.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
throughout the process constitute yet another level of narrative construction which cannot be ignored and which is an essential element of the composite research story.

Interviewing in qualitative research in fact involves a continuous process of self-examination on the part of the researcher. The interviewer must reflect on and disclose not only his or her “conceptual baggage”—pre-existing assumptions, biases or worldviews—but must also consider the impact of these on the performance of the researcher/interviewer role, on the relationship established between interviewer and interviewee, and on the choices and decisions made regarding the handling and interpretation of data gathered as well as the way in which conclusions are presented to a particular audience.

One constructionist assumption supporting the concept of reflexivity and the need for meticulous researcher transparency is that there is no underlying “truth” or “reality” regarding some natural or fixed gender role inherent in women, waiting to be disclosed by the research. The assumption is that gender roles are constructed through any number of intersecting influences, but perhaps primarily mediated through language (in this case, narratives), and that the narratives of both interviewee and interviewer contribute to the final picture disclosed through the research. Moreover, another underlying assumption must be that the gender roles narrated by the participants constitute only some of the possible ways in which their gender roles are constructed, dependent upon context, time, the framing of questions, and of course, the interviewer’s underlying beliefs which potentially color how she/he interprets the participants’ narratives.
Thus, the concept of researcher reflexivity assumes an anti-essentialist standpoint and at least some degree of relativism. Meanings, in this case understandings of gender roles, are interactively constructed, influenced by culture, class, ethnicity, age, religious beliefs and other ascriptive characteristics, both those of the interviewee and those of the interviewer. Ping-Chin Hsiung (2010) makes the point that “[R]eflexivity involves making the research process itself a focus of inquiry, laying open preconceptions and becoming aware of situational dynamics in which the interviewer and respondent are jointly involved in knowledge production.”\(^{21}\)

We must be reflexively aware and transparent not only with regard to our underlying worldviews or theories about the nature of reality and how knowledge is produced (ontological and epistemological reflexivity), but also our choice of methodology (methodological reflexivity), and our own personal characteristics, experiences and values (introspective reflexivity or “benign introspection”).\(^{22}\) In the present study, the researcher must explicate and analyze decisions made at every level of the research process: her choice of social constructionism as a theoretical foundation, both as ontology and epistemology; her choice of narrative inquiry as a methodology for evaluating the construction of gender roles in Hindu women; the use of feminist interviewing methods to access the participants’ narratives; the choices made, of rules and definitions, during transcription and coding; the selection of thematic analysis as a method for analyzing data; and, finally, her own contribution to, and effect


on, the dialogic interaction, in terms of personal, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, age, and other characteristics.

**Researcher Positionality: Insider/Outsider Issues**

One of the issues in qualitative research which demands considerable reflexivity on the part of the researcher is the question of where the researcher locates him/herself both conceptually and personally in relationship to the study participants or where he/she is perceived to be located by the individuals interviewed. This issue has been termed “researcher positionality” and in past decades has been conceptualized in terms of a binary, that of “insider” versus “outsider, although more recent research has explored alternative models which permit a more complex, nuanced and multidimensional analysis of the issue. Griffiths (1998), however, warns that the “insider” position cannot be defined solely in terms of common characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, race or cultural background. In fact, even sub-categories such as profession, education or income may be too simplistic to be meaningful.

Marlize Rabe (2003) states that the categories of “insider” and “outsider” can be understood from at least three different perspectives, namely: 1) that cultural membership should define the positionality of the researcher as “insider” or “outsider,” with differing views as to which “position” afforded the most valid interpretation of data; 2) within the context of “power,” where the researcher, the “outsider”, is perceived as the one who has the power in the researcher/participant relationship, while even efforts to diminish power imbalances, such as feminist interviewing aimed at creating a collaborative relationship between researcher and participants, do not erase the fact that the researcher produces the final report, and thus has the ultimate power of interpretation, of speaking for and about participants, of claiming their voice; and 3)
within the context of “knowledge” and who possesses it. In this context, the “insider” is perceived as having knowledge that the researcher does not possess, but wishes to appropriate.\textsuperscript{23}

On the surface this would appear to also allocate power to the participant being studied, who possesses the knowledge required by the researcher, and can reveal it selectively, if at all. The intersection and interaction of power and knowledge is thus no simple calculus, but reflects some of the complexity that a simple “insider”/“outsider” binary cannot convey.

In any research study, researcher and study participants can be said to vary along multiple axes and to be similar or dissimilar in many diverse characteristics or aspects. They may share a language with all the advantages that lack of need for translation conveys. They may differ in cultural background or religious belief with all the disadvantages that dissimilar ideologies and practices invoke. In other words, a researcher may be an “insider” with regard to some characteristics, and an “outsider” with regard to others, within the same research study. Moreover, his or her “insider” or “outsider” status may shift during the course of the research, either temporally, within the context of a single interview, or between interviews with different participants, or as a result of shifting valences of characteristics or their interactions at different points in time.

For example, in the present study, the interviewer may share characteristics of gender, motherhood, marital status, and age with many of her first generation cohort,

but may differ significantly with regard to gender role ideology as a result of being the same age but from a different culture. With regard to gender role ideology, the researcher may have more in common with a younger, even unmarried cohort of the same cultural heritage as the first generation group, but raised in the West, than she does with someone of her own generation raised in a very different cultural context. In other words, the researcher may enjoy “insider” status on some dimensions with some participants but “outsider” status on the same dimensions with other participants.

In the present study, the researcher adopts a view of researcher positionality which conceives of researcher positionality as a fluid, dynamic, multidimensional concept where the researcher’s status vis a vis “insider” or “outsider” varies continuously over time within and between individuals and groups along multiple intersecting aspects and characteristics which combine or interact in a variety of ways. Ultimately, as Chavez (2008) states:

> Determining whether one is an insider researcher is problematic and is ultimately the decision of the researcher…..At some point a….scholar needs to evaluate how participants will perceive them, whether their level of familiarity, and connection will prove to be significant in the research process.\(^\text{24}\)

Clearly, then, in adopting such a poststructuralist or postmodern view of researcher positionality, the researcher’s reflexivity with regard to where she perceives herself in relation to her participants and how she experiences her interviewees perceiving her will be a critical component of reporting and interpreting data from the interviews.

Transcription, Coding, and Data Analysis

Interviews conducted in the course of qualitative research are generally recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness when interpreting the participants’ narratives/conversations. While recording interviews in toto does not involve any researcher decision-making, the processes of transcription, coding, and analyzing the interview data provide many decision-making points where transparency regarding the researcher’s worldview and interviewer reflexivity about his or her own input/influence on these processes becomes crucial.

Transcription

The process of transcribing taped interviews is not a mechanical or passive process but rather involves multiple episodes of decision-making and active choices on the part of the transcriber/interviewer. Often, transcription is carried out exclusively by the researcher, a process which is time-consuming and labor-intensive as well as demanding on-going rule-making with regard to punctuation, editing or correcting grammar, inclusion or exclusion of extraneous sounds (uhs, umms, etc.) and filler words (like, you know, etc.), and inclusion or exclusion of emotive sounds (laughing, crying, sighing, coughing, etc.), as well as pauses or hesitations of any length. At every decision point, it is the researcher who determines what should be included or excluded, or who selects the punctuation which best captures the meaning intended by the interviewee. Thus, every transcription is an act of interpretation rather than simple stenography. Even when the researcher uses a transcriber or transcription service, the transcriptions produced must be meticulously edited while carefully listening to the recorded interview, and the researcher must again make choices in order to best
capture the meaning and phrasing of the interviewee and to ensure consistency of transcription rule-making across all interviews in the study.

Thus, in the transcription process, the underlying philosophical and methodological assumptions of the researcher may again come into play and it is incumbent on the researcher/transcriber to reflexively acknowledge and account for the ways in which these assumptions influence his or her decision-making. For example, in the present study, the researcher follows the analysis of Ashmore and Reed (2000), who distinguish between the audio recording itself, which they see as a “real” object, reflecting a realist worldview, and the transcript as “constructed” by the researcher/transcriber, reflecting a constructivist worldview. Ashmore and Reed comment that in many research projects, recordings tend to be treated as if they reveal or “stand for” the real events recorded whereas the transcription is clearly recognized as construction.25

Roberts (1997) argues that: “The challenge for the transcriber is to produce transcriptions that are accurate and readable but also reflexive in how they make explicit to the reader the constructed nature of written talk and so the problematic nature of accuracy and readability.”26

The very real question of whose voice is being represented in the transcriptions is an issue which must be openly considered and addressed by the researcher. When outside transcribers are used, the problem becomes even more complex, and the

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researcher must meticulously edit these transcriptions to ensure consistency of rule-following, observing and correcting when transcriber influences creep in, and remaining reflexively aware of his or her own editing biases involved in transcription decisions. Stories are always being created and interpreted and we must remain cognizant of whose story is being told—who is the story teller and who is the listener—as well as of the fact that these roles may switch back and forth at different points in the research and the researcher must be aware of when this happens. In this sense, transcription can itself be viewed as a narrative or a component of the larger narrative which involves the interactive construction of the interviewee’s “story” by researcher and/or transcriber in addition to the original story-teller.

Thus, methodological decisions and data analysis choices also underlie considerations of transcription issues and must be transparently acknowledged and evaluated for their effect on the narratives being investigated.

Ultimately, however, transcription is, in its very nature, an act of translation and interpretation and this awareness needs to be in the forefront of the researcher’s mind during the process of transcribing and editing. Phil Bayliss (2007) states: “We, the interviewers, are in control of a process that is neither neutral nor value free. Decisions have to be made about how we commit verbal exchanges to paper.” Even decisions about punctuation can alter meaning. Interviewees often do not speak in complete sentences, or they interrupt the flow of their thought, or speak over the interviewer, or add extraneous comments, sounds or redundant words such as “like,” or “you know.”

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The researcher must make constant decisions about how to handle these problems during transcription.

Clearly then, when transcription involves constant and continuous choices and decision-making on the part of the researcher, the researcher's own “narrative” about what the respondent “means” or intends by his or her choice of words, phrasing, pauses, tone, emphasis, and so on, is an underlying current of interpretation which reflects the researcher's epistemological concerns and assumptions. Transparency with regard to the transcription process, interpretive choices, and rule-making is critical, and a key component of the researcher reflexivity mandated throughout the course of a qualitative research study.

**Coding: Levels of Analysis**

Once recorded interviews have been transcribed with all the researcher decision-making and interpretive choices and the concomitant need for researcher reflexivity that this entails, transcribed data must be reduced to meaningful components and patterns and themes potentially related to the research question(s) must be identified. To facilitate this process, transcriptions must be carefully reviewed and a coding scheme must be created to pinpoint key words, phrases and other indices which might be used to identify larger themes. Thus, coding transcribed interviews involves the process of meticulously searching through transcripts for themes, ideas, and categories, and marking passages so identified with a specific code or label to facilitate retrieval and further comparison and analysis when all transcripts/data have been similarly inspected. Saldaña (2009), who wrote the “bible” on coding, defines the term “code” as: “[A] code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of
language-based or visual data.” 28 Codes can be based on a number of different categories of written material, such as key words, specific words or terms, phrases, ideas or concepts, or particular themes or topics. Chunks of material deemed to be similar are given the same name, code, or label, and usually the code conveys basic information about the significance of the themes or categories.

Codes can be generated on an *a priori* basis, aimed at identifying information to confirm or refute a predetermined hypothesis or theory (Cresswell, 1998). Or, they can emerge from the data/transcript, identifying a pattern which may serve to generate a general theory or to enhance understanding and increase information about the research issue. Many researchers (for example, in this study) use a combination of *a priori* developed codes, based on, for example, questions and topics from the interview protocol and “grounded codes,” that is, codes that emerge from the data through pattern analysis.

Typically, codes are identified by asking questions about what is going on in the transcripts, for example, behaviors or specific acts; events or occasions reported by the interviewees; feelings or emotions; interviewee explanations, interpretations or expressed motivations; relationships or interactions; or other significant expressions. Ryan and Bernard (2003b) have identified other potential coding schemes or ways of uncovering themes in the data, such as: word repetitions; key-words-in-context; missing information; metaphors or analogies; or transitional elements of speech, and connecting words such as “because” or “since.” 29 They also suggest various methods of


manipulating the data to sort and organize coded material, such as: scanning and marking the text; circling, underlining or color-coding similar categories; or cutting transcripts into similar categories and assembling the categories into distinct piles which are then coded with the same label or idea.

As each code is identified, the researcher must provide a detailing description identifying the characteristics or defining elements of the code and giving several illustrative examples from the text. These codes and code descriptions are assembled into a code book, usually developed in the process of reviewing and analyzing the transcripts. During the data analysis process codes may be added, deleted, or combined to form a new code as the patterns and themes become clearer, are repeated, or are shown to be inapplicable.

The code book has several purposes and functions. It allows the researcher to make comparisons within and between participants, and to organize data into larger groupings or more significant themes through second and third levels of coding. It creates an “audit trail” so that reviewers can clearly follow the researcher’s “thought-path” as it pertains to the handling of the data. As a result of this transparency, it allows the research to be repeated and/or validated and permits critique of the methodology and findings, as well as comparison with other, similar studies. Moreover, attaching specific identifiers to the codes allows comparisons within and between participant and participant groupings, while preserving the anonymity of each person. This also allows the researcher to freely use participant quotations to illustrate a particular interpretation without risking any break in participant confidentiality.
Coding begins as descriptive labeling but becomes more analytical and interpretive as initial codes are reviewed, combined, and recoded, through several levels of analysis, to construct abstract concepts or themes where initial codes have been grouped based on their common properties.

Initially, the first level coding process may result in many codes which need to be defined and described, but as they are refined, combined or excluded during subsequent levels of the coding process, the number of codes is reduced to a manageable number, usually no more than five to ten themes or abstract concepts. Moreover, sometimes codes identified through these processes are seen to need to be broken down into additional categories which are a better fit for the data.

It is clear from this discussion of the coding process as a preliminary step in data analysis and interpretation that the entire process involves continuous decision-making on the part of the researcher, and is thus, in a sense, interpretive from the start. As a result it requires rigorous transparency by the researcher regarding the basis or influences informing his or her decisions, clear and organized documentation of every step and of every choice that he or she makes, and meticulous researcher reflexivity to analyze and explicate all the assumptions that motivated or directed these choices. Thus, the coding of data is another area in the research process in which reflexivity regarding epistemological, ideological, methodological and personal preconceptions and assumptions must be minutely examined and reported.

**Reflexivity During the Coding Process**

**Analytic Memos**

One of the ways in which researcher decision-making can be documented during the coding process and also at every stage of the research is through the writing of
analytic memos, that is, notes kept by the researcher throughout the research process documenting his or her reactions to events occurring during the conduct of the research, questions or issues which are generated by activities or observations in the course of coding or analyzing themes, new interpretations which arise or are considered, and reflections on researcher assumptions and influences at every step. These analytic memos can add immeasurably to the transparency and reflexivity demanded of sound qualitative research.

Field Notes

Another method of generating rich, thick data which can be analyzed to enhance researcher reflexivity is the maintenance of field notes recorded by the researcher after each interview which detail the interviewer’s impressions, observations, reactions and thoughts before, during and after the interview. Field notes can be created in the form of jottings, diaries, daily logs, or more formal, detailed records. Field notes can range from simple observations and descriptions to more personal reactions such as feelings, doubts, or reactions to the interviewee or the interview process—the kind of material that might be recorded in a personal journal or diary. More formal field notes might incorporate questions about methodology or about theoretical issues triggered in the course of interviewing participants, and represent the scholarly thought processes of the researcher during the data gathering stage of the research.

The types of information that can be recorded in field notes are descriptions of the physical setting or of the interviewee, material culture objects possibly relating to the research question (for example, pictures of deities, or illustrations from sacred stories such as the Ramayana), tone of conversation, behavior of interviewee, order of events, that is, basically observations related to what, when, where, who, and why questions.
Method of Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

There are many ways of approaching the analysis of coded data from interview transcripts but one of the most common methods used in qualitative research is thematic analysis, which is a particular type of content analysis. Codes are combined into patterns that are repeated within and across interviews and these patterns may be combined and catalogued into sub-themes and themes. The researcher then combines and interprets these themes to produce a coherent understanding which addresses one or more of the original research questions. In other words, the researcher creates a “storyline” from the accumulated patterns of data which are combined into themes.

Thematic analysis, in contrast to more quantitative methods of handling data, such as word counts or frequency counts of phrases, etc., requires more involvement and interpretation from the researcher and thus more transparency and reflexivity regarding the rules established for combining coded elements and identifying, naming, and interpreting themes. In its simplest form, thematic analysis can be considered as a categorizing strategy for qualitative data. Boyatzis (1998) defines thematic analysis as a process of “encoding qualitative information.” He comments that this encoding process can range from the simple listing of themes to the development of complex models or theories where themes are causally related.

Thematic analysis as a categorizing strategy or method for qualitative data need not be tied to any particular epistemology or methodology, and researchers have debated whether thematic analysis can even be considered a “method” per se, or

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simply an analytic tool used to handle data gathered from research with diverse methodological perspectives. Boyatzis (1998), for example, agrees that thematic analysis is not a specific method, but is a “tool to use across different methods.”

However, Braun and Clarke (2013) see thematic analysis as a method in its own right, while Ryan and Bernard (2000) see it as a process performed within a qualitative tradition such as grounded theory, but not as a specific method per se.

Braun and Clarke stress, however, that the decision to utilize thematic analysis involves a number of decisions or choices which the researcher needs to consider before the analysis begins and to discuss transparently and reflexively throughout the process of analysis. These decisions and choices include: a clear consideration as to what counts as a theme, or a pattern; how a theme is named, that is, how is its “essence” identified or defined; and what is the “story” told by each identified theme and how this “story” fits the overall research narrative (that is, the answer to the research question).

Braun and Clarke thus note several advantages of using thematic analysis as a tool for handling qualitative data. They state that it is relatively easy to learn or do, and the results of the analysis are generally comprehensible by an educated public. It is amenable to collaborative research methods where participants are utilized as co-researchers. It has several advantages when handling large amounts of data and in summarizing essential features of large data sets. It also affords “thick description”

31 Ibid.

which enriches the research narrative and permits comparisons across data sets, or information from individuals and groups of participants.\textsuperscript{33}

In summary, however, the use of thematic analysis as a data handling tool in a qualitative research project such as the study to be described is not only justifiable but may, in fact, be the method of choice where there is no \textit{a priori} theory driving the research and no impetus to theory development, but instead is the research is exploratory in nature, for example, seeking to understand the evolving role of narratives in Hindu women’s perceptions of their roles as women, wives and mothers.

Hopefully, Chapter 3 has clearly established the “thought path” involved in constructing the research design and methods utilized in the present study and described in Chapter 4. The intention has been to establish the ontological and epistemological bases of the present research and the underlying assumptions driving the methodological considerations discussed in Chapter 3, which lead to the selection of specific methods to investigate the research question motivating the present study.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
CHAPTER 4
METHOD

Theoretical and Methodological Assumptions of this Research

Following the arguments made in Chapter 3, in the interests of researcher transparency, the epistemological and methodological bases of the researcher’s thought which informed the design and conduct of this study need to be clearly identified and delineated.

Social Constructionism

The researcher adopted as an epistemological basis for this research the tenets of social constructionist theory, that is, at the simplest level, the belief that the social roles (including gender roles) that people (specifically, women) enact in their daily lives are constructed rather than biologically or genetically predetermined or ordained by some ineffable and omnipotent higher power. In other words, the gender roles which women adopt in their lives as women, wives and mothers are a constructed product of social, cultural, political, religious, familial, communal, and other agendas and pressures which vary according to the temporal or spatial context. This view may conflict with the values of the women being studied and in any case represents only one of the many potential narratives about the development of gender roles, but this research was conducted on this theoretical foundation.

Narrative Theory

Following from social constructionism as the epistemological foundation of the research, the next theory which informs the methodology chosen for the research holds that one of the ways in which social roles are constructed, perhaps even the primary mode of construction, is through narratives and stories of all kinds. As discussed in
Chapter 2, the Review of the Literature, human beings are storied animals. Following not only the social constructionist model but also modifying philosophical traditions of idealism within many cultures and religions, “reality” is seen as “constructed” through our accounts of it, and these accounts are transmitted primarily (though not exclusively) through language (written and oral). That is not to say that there are not “real” objects and events “out there” that have impact on our senses, but that the socially acknowledged “reality” of these sense impressions is constructed through the process of naming and accounting for these externalities and by the narratives we tell about them. Thus, the present study is informed by tenets taken from narrative theories which stress and analyze the importance of stories in the construction of our daily lives.

**Feminist Methods**

Finally, just as a social constructionist epistemology informs and guides a narrative theory of how this “construction” of gender roles comes about, narrative theories inform and influence the choice of interviewing as a method of gathering narrative data to be analyzed. Moreover, as has already been discussed in Chapter 3, the interview method works best when interviews are carried out in such a way that the “voices” of the participants, their own stories of their lives, are clearly heard. In this study, the method selected to best capture the authentic narratives of the participants is a semi-structured interview technique in which topics and questions are constructed and asked fluidly and flexibly enough to allow participants to make input, modify, or re-direct the focus of questions and guide the interviewer into more relevant areas of questioning if it seems indicated.

Moreover, this method of semi-structured interviewing was also guided by a feminist approach which seeks to recruit the participants as co-researchers and
collaborators, by giving them access to information about the study, the ability to preview and make input into the interview content, and the opportunity to have some ultimate measure of control over the interview process, in an effort to minimize any potential power imbalances between researcher and participants which might serve to mute or silence the interviewees’ “voices.”

The literature justifying these epistemological and methodological choices, and the methods they inform, has been discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the Review of the Literature. In addition, Chapter 3 primarily discusses methodological issues underlying this study. In Chapter 4 the “thought-path” has been briefly reviewed to reiterate the need for complete transparency and reflexivity by the researcher, and to remind the reader that other worldviews, methodologies and methods could equally have been chosen and justified. In other words, there are many potential narratives and they construct many versions of “reality.” This study investigates just one version.

**Description of the Study: Methods**

**IRB Approval Process**

The proposed research protocol was submitted to the Institutional Review Board of the University of Florida for consideration of design parameters and ethical protection of participants. The protocol submitted included a brief review of the pertinent literature justifying the research and details of the study such as the study’s purpose, goals, target population, and recruiting strategies. In addition, the IRB reviewed the information to be provided to potential participants. This included a detailed letter of introduction outlining the study and what would be expected of the participants and the researcher (Appendix A); an informed consent form to be signed by the participants giving them the option of reading/reviewing the final report (Appendix B); an interview guide informing
the interviewees about areas of questions which might be covered during the semi-structured interview (Appendix C); and two additional forms which would be used to gather supplementary data—a demographic information questionnaire (Appendix D), and a Role Models for Hindu Women Rating Scale (Appendix E).

**Ethical Requirements**

In documenting the study for the approval of the Institutional Review Board, actions to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the potential participants were meticulously described and every effort was made to ensure that participants were fully aware of and engaged in the process of the research. The women who were recruited were informed about the nature and purpose of the research and of their role as co-researchers or collaborators in the study, in that their input and responses would guide the direction of the interview questions. They were also provided with information about the interviewer in case interviewer characteristics might influence their decision about whether or not to participate.

**Anonymity and Confidentiality Protection**

To protect their anonymity, participants were asked to select pseudonyms to substitute for their real names and were reassured that no potentially identifying personal information would be used in the final report. They were given the option of refusing to answer any question and to withdraw from the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. They were also asked to note if they wanted to receive a copy of the final report.

Recorded interviews were downloaded onto the computer and stored in separate files in a folder identified only by the participant’s pseudonym. Additional data, such as transcripts, and anonymous data such as the Role Models for Hindu Women Scale
were also stored in these files identified only by pseudonyms. A list matching names with pseudonyms was maintained in a separate password protected folder, together with any other information revealing the participants’ real identity, such as the Signed Consent Form and the Demographic Questionnaire. A third folder, not password protected, contained an Excel spreadsheet collating all the demographic information as well as the chosen role models for each participant listed by pseudonym only.

**Participation Preparation and Information**

Participants were provided with the Interview Guide ahead of their interview so that they could review and potentially make input into the areas that might be covered in the interview. Finally, they were given the Demographic Questionnaire and the Role Models for Hindu Women Rating Scale in advance so that they could complete them before the interview if they so desired.

**Data Collection Tools, Forms, etc.**

Data was primarily collected through use of a semi-structured interview which gathered information about interviewees’ family background and upbringing; family relationships; education; exposure to stories of all kinds, particularly those involving female characters; marriage and parenting; and interviewees’ perceptions of their roles as women, wives, and mothers. The interviews were recorded and this data was then transcribed verbatim, coded into categories and themes, and analyzed.

Additional data was collected through a demographic questionnaire which provided basic information about the participants so that comparisons could be made between groups differing in age, socioeconomic status, education, or other sociological variables.
Finally an informally developed rating scale was used to gather information about female characters – from sacred stories, myth, fiction, history, or contemporary life – who might be seen as role models for Hindu women generally or for the participants personally. This instrument was not considered to be in any way an empirically valid or reliable assessment of Hindu women’s chosen role models but rather was seen as a fluid and dynamic “prompt” intended to elicit thoughtful responses from participants, and which they were free to modify—to add names to or subtract names from—as they saw fit. This rating scale did, in fact, serve this function, as participants frequently commented on the selection of female characters included in the instrument, added personal role models (that is, women personally known to them), or insisted on including Western (and non-Hindu) women whom they considered to be good role models. Data from this instrument was analyzed to provide illuminating and enriching information about Hindu women’s perceptions of their gender roles, and to corroborate or validate information elicited during the interviews.

**Sampling Strategies and Limitations**

**Participants**

Forty-one Hindu women living in the North and West-Central areas of Florida were recruited for this study. The areas in which the participants were located formed a rough triangle, from Gainesville in the north, to the Tampa Bay area and Sarasota in the west and south, and Orlando in the east. Two participants (personally known to the interviewer) resided in Miami, outside of the triangle in which other participants resided, but were included because they enlarged the small sub-sample of mother-daughter pairs included in the research.
The sample of forty-one women was broken down into twenty-one first generation Hindu women immigrants to the United States, and twenty second generation Hindu-American women.

First generation women were defined as women who were born and raised in India and who came to the United States as adults, that is, at age 18 or older, or married. Second generation women were defined as Hindu women aged 18 or older who were born in the U.S. or who came to this country before age five, who had at least one parent who was Hindu and whose family of origin came from India. There were no upper age limits set for either group while the lower age limit for both groups was eighteen.

**Sampling Decisions and Methods**

A sample size of 20 in each group was arbitrarily decided on, but this decision was informed by a consideration of theoretical issues, discussed earlier in Chapter 3, and by research which has attempted to set guidelines for sample size in different types of qualitative research studies involving interviews. For example, Cresswell (1998) recommended a sample size ranging from 20 to 30 participants for grounded theory research where interviews are continued until theme saturation has been reached (that is, the point at which no new themes are emerging from the interviews). Similarly, Morse (1994) suggested conducting 30 to 50 interviews for ethnographic studies. Mason (2010) indicated that the majority of qualitative dissertation studies involving interviews as a data gathering method involved 20 to 40 interviews. Thus, taking into account the sparse research on sample size available in the literature and because this study is not based on the grounded theory method of interviewing to saturation, a sample size of 20 participants in each group was considered to be adequate and justifiable. An additional
first generation woman was included rather than discarding her data because it was felt that because of her age (86), she provided a unique perspective which deserved to be heard.

Participants were recruited using both purposive and convenience sampling methods. Only women meeting age, ethnicity, religious background, and immigration status criteria were recruited. The primary recruitment strategies used were personal contact, identification of potential participants using key informants, and snowball sampling (that is, asking participants to identify other Hindu women who might be willing to be interviewed). Four women were recruited through personal contact, a total of eight were identified through three key informants, while the remainder were obtained through snowball sampling, referred by women already interviewed.

Contact was usually made via email, following up on email introductions by key informants or other participants. Interviews were usually scheduled via email, with follow-up phone calls once interest in participating had been established. Interviews were scheduled at times and places most convenient for the interviewees. Interviewing was carried out through face-to-face contact, so recruitment was limited to women in locations accessible to the interviewer contingent on her physical and resource limitations. Moreover, since interviews were conducted in English, sampling was limited to Hindu women who were reasonably fluent and comfortable conversing in English.

At the end of each interview, each participant was asked if they would be willing to e-introduce one or more of their acquaintances who met the criteria for participation. Interviewees were also asked if they had a mother/daughter who might also be willing and available to be interviewed.
A total of 54 women were identified using these sampling and recruitment methods, resulting in a total of 42 interviews (22 first generation and 20 second generation women). One first generation participant had to be excluded from the final sample because transcription of her interview was impossible as a result of excessive background noise. The remaining 12 contacts were not interviewed because they did not respond to e-introduction or email contacts, or because they were concerned that their identity could not be adequately protected, or because it was impossible to pin down a time and place that was convenient for them.

**Sampling limitations and biases**

These sampling criteria and decision-making strategies resulted in some limitations in sample characteristics which must be acknowledged and discussed when analyzing and interpreting the data and considering the findings of the study. Sampling through personal contact and personal introduction tended to limit the geographical area within which women could be recruited, leading to a less than geographically heterogeneous sample. For example, while urban, suburban and small town dwellers were represented, there were no participants from rural areas of the U.S. or even Florida although some of the first generation women had, in fact, grown up in rural areas of India.

Moreover, recruiting Hindu women through key informants and snowball sampling tends to result in a sample of women who share important characteristics with the key informants as well as with the other women in the study who identified them. In this case, all three key informants were highly educated professionals. The main key informant was a senior academician attached to the University of Florida in Gainesville, who shared many professional, regional and religious characteristics with the women.
she referred, most of whom were also affiliated with the University in an academic or administrative capacity or were wives or daughters of men similarly associated with the University. As women who were interviewed identified other women to participate in the interviews, these referees tended to be similar in education, profession, and/or socioeconomic status to those who referred them and often came from the same region of India and/or shared a primary language. Many other participants came from the Tampa Bay area, where there is a thriving Hindu population which is among the most affluent of Hindu groups in the U.S., numbering many professional women, doctors, lawyers, or business executives who enjoy a good deal of social and financial success.

Thus, the sample, particularly the sample of first generation women, tended to be skewed or weighted with regard to education, income, and/or social status. The women tended to be highly educated (post-graduate), relatively affluent and middle class, and most often employed in professional positions as doctors, lawyers, business executives or administrators, or academics. The second generation group shared similar characteristics, although because this group included a younger cohort many of the participants were still students or beginning level professionals or were unmarried. However, most of the second generation women were the daughters of highly educated professional parents, and all of them were from families that valued and promoted the education of their children. Thus, generalization of findings from this study may be limited and may illuminate the gender role perceptions and constructions of only a fairly specific segment of the population of Hindu women in the U.S. On the other hand, demographic data provided in Chapter 1 might suggest that the participants in this study
do, in fact, fit the national profile of Indian and Hindu immigrants to the United States, who are described as highly educated and affluent.

**Researcher Positionality/Reflexivity and the Characteristics of the Researcher**

As already discussed, the nature of qualitative research, and of interviewing conducted with a feminist bent, that is, viewed as a collaborative interaction between researcher and participants, necessitates that the characteristics, worldviews and biases of the interviewer be rendered as transparent as possible, and that the researcher reflexively consider not only the impact of these factors on the interviews, and on choices made at every step of the research process, but also her own stance *vis a vis* her similarities to or differences from the participants along these dimensions, and how these similarities and/or differences facilitate or inhibit data gathering.

In the present study, the research was conducted by a 70 year old female retired psychologist who returned to graduate school to obtain Masters and Ph.D. degrees in Religious Studies with a focus on South Asian religions (primarily Hinduism), after practicing as a clinical and forensic psychologist for over 40 years. The researcher differed from her participants in many ways: in ethnicity; in religious affiliation; in cultural background; and, in the case of first generation immigrant Hindu women, in primary language and country of origin. She shared with her first generation cohort the status of being an immigrant, since she was born and raised in the UK and immigrated to the U.S. at age 21 to attend graduate school. She also shared with many of the women participants the experience of being a wife and mother. She differed from the younger participants in age and generation, but had much in common with the older first generation cohort along this dimension. She differed from both first and second generation cohorts in that she is physically challenged, with limited mobility, walking
slowly with the assistance of a cane. She shared a status as a highly educated professional with the majority of her interviewees, while at the same time occupying an ambiguous status of also being a graduate student soliciting help with her research. For the younger participants, she may have been viewed as an authority figure, or as an elder to be treated with respect, as required by their culture. For older participants, she may have been seen as a peer, both professionally, and in her capacity as wife and mother.

While the current research did not specifically address the ideological orientation of the participants with regard to the etiology of gender roles and gender relations, the researcher had to be continually and reflexively aware of her own worldview, that is: the equality of all human beings, male and female; the requirement that women have access to equal opportunities and choices, regardless of their marital status; and the belief that responsibilities within a family should be shared in a mutually agreed on fashion, with no responsibility compelled by gender, or imposed unilaterally or involuntarily by a partner. She also had to constantly strive to be aware of any potential impact of these values on the research; to recognize that her worldview was simply one among many; to remain neutral and respectful with regard to the values held by her participants; and to continually examine interactions between researcher and participants in order to ensure that potentially different worldviews did not impede communication.

The researcher had to examine her presuppositions and assumptions at every stage of the research, from selection of topics to be questioned, to the phrasing of questions, to the choices made in transcribing or editing transcripts, to the selection and
definition of codes and themes, and to the analysis of data and conclusions reached. She had to constantly remind herself that her own “narrative” was part of the research, and factored into how her participants’ narratives were received and interpreted. She had to constantly recognize that the narrative that she would ultimately construct (the final report) was only one of the multiple possible ways in which this research could be storied, and that it may have multiple different interpretations depending on the characteristics of future readers.

As a reflexive interviewer, she had to continually examine her own reactions and feelings, of comfort as well as discomfort, during the interview process. As a putative “outsider,” research literature has suggested that the interviewer might experience a disconnection or sense of separation or distance from interviewees who are members of a different culture. An interviewer from a different culture, or whose primary language is not that of the person she is interviewing, might be expected to miss nuances and allusions which would be known and familiar to women with similar cultural backgrounds, with the kind of “taken-for-granted knowledge” that obviates unnecessary explanation. As Le Gallais (2003) has articulated:

The insider researcher has, as a member of the “in-group,” access to its past and present histories. S/he is a party to nuances and idioms within their shared language; the hierarchical position of members within the group is clearly defined….The expectation is that the context will be understood and appreciated in a way not open to an outsider researcher. Insights and sensitivity to things both said and unsaid and to the culture(s) operating at the time of the research-all these are potentially available to the insider researcher.¹

In the present research, the researcher’s relative lack of experience with the participants’ culture and language(s) and the fact that she had no experience of living in or even visiting the Indian sub-continent made it more likely that she would experience discomfort and a sense of “missing” those nuances and taken-for-granted knowledge. However, in general, the researcher was, in fact, surprised by the degree of comfort she experienced across the board, with participants both younger and older, with students and professionals, with wives, mothers, and grandmothers. The experience of interviewing was uniformly enjoyable and relaxed and the interviewer was most typically aware of a sense of “kinship” and connection with the women she interviewed. She felt free to both ask and respond to relatively personal questions and the mutual exchanges flowed like any enjoyable conversation. Although she asked all participants at the end of each interviewer whether any aspects of the interview or interviewer had caused discomfort or hesitation on their part, all of the participants said that they felt very comfortable and had enjoyed the interaction. Several women, in fact, said that they appreciated being given the opportunity to talk about their lives and culture to someone who was genuinely interested in learning their stories.

In the spirit of reflexivity, however, the researcher felt the need to question whether her level of comfort and enjoyment may have stemmed from some false sense of commonality and identification, that is, from some self-deluding sense of “shared womanhood” which perhaps essentialized and homogenized the disparate experiences of being women from different cultures. Without the opportunity to probe more extensively into how the interviews and interviewer were experienced by the participants, the interviewer was left with her intuitive impression that the interviews
were mutually enjoyable for both interviewer and participants, and that on some level they did in fact communicate, as women, in a gendered language which transcended culture, ethnicity, or age.

**The Interviewing/ Data Gathering Process from Contact to Completion**

Once potential participants were identified, either through personal or key informant contact or through snowball sampling, contact was made via e-introduction (that is, introducing the researcher and providing recruitment information about the study via email). Most of the communication between researcher and participants was carried out via email, with phone numbers exchanged and phone contact made only after an interview appointment was scheduled. Since all participants were computer literate, this was the preferred method of communication and seemed to be perceived as less intrusive in the preliminary stages of negotiating participation. However, again, this was a limiting characteristic of the study population.

Once contact had been established and agreement had been reached regarding participation, the additional information already described was provided via email attachments. Further email communication established a date, time, and location for the interviews. Most participants preferred to be interviewed in their homes, and at this point provided addresses and phone numbers to facilitate the meeting. Others were interviewed in a variety of locations, including local fast-food restaurants or coffee shops, participants’ work-places/offices, public libraries, hotel conference rooms, the researcher’s office, or the Religion Department conference room at the University of Florida. In every instance, the participant chose and controlled the time and location of the interview to reinforce the concept of collaboration and to minimize any perceived power differential between researcher and participants.
After the interview process was completed, the researcher followed up with an email thanking the participant and also asking if they could identify and e-introduce other potential interviewees. Most were happy to do so and provided several other names of women, many of whom also agreed to participate. To a person, the women interviewed were warm, welcoming, gracious, and eager to participate. Despite differences in age, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds between researcher and participants, there seemed to be a genuine shared interest and mutual appreciation of the interview conversations.

The Interview Process

Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations affording varying degrees of privacy, but every effort was made to ensure that participants were comfortable with the interview set-up, and that they felt able to speak freely with the interviewer. When interviews were conducted in participants’ homes, the conversation often took place in the living room, dining room, or kitchen/breakfast room, rather than in a private space. In most instances, no one else was present, although other family members may have been in the home, and occasionally would pass through the interview area on their way to some other part of the home.

In a few instances other family members came in and out or remained in an area where they could overhear what was being said, and on a couple of occasions family members interjected comments related to interview questions or answers. This seemed less than ideal to the interviewer who was concerned that a lack of privacy would be distressful to the interviewees or might constrain their responses. In fact, however, the participants seemed more at ease with the situation than the interviewer was, and seemed to be comfortable with more fluid or permeable personal boundaries and loss of
privacy even when they were asked if they would prefer to move to a more private space. In only one instance did a participant ask to move into a private bedroom because she was uncomfortable with the possibility that her family could potentially overhear her answers.

In point of fact, the researcher initially felt more uncomfortable than the participants with the lack of privacy and experienced some sense of loss of control of the interview situation. In processing these feelings, she had to consider her need to be in control, contrasted with a stated feminist goal of minimizing power and control differences and of affirming participant collaboration and “co-researcher” status. She also had to recognize the fact that power and control in qualitative interviews are not fixed or unidimensional attributes of the interview process, but are fluid, changing, and multi-dimensional, with the control of different aspect of the process attaching to the interviewee as much as the interviewer, at different times, or under different circumstances.

The researcher came to realize that the fluidity of boundaries was, in fact, normal and comfortable for the participants and that they were able to set limits when they felt the need. She understood that discomfort with loss of control was her issue and that she did not need to maintain or take responsibility for such a tight control of the process—indeed that her participants were more comfortable when they felt in control. This realization pointed out to the researcher the many ways in which participants themselves act to realign power differentials in the research process and served to disconfirm the perceptions of early qualitative researchers that the research process always involves a power imbalance in favor of the researcher. While, ultimately, it is the
researcher who produces the final report and interprets the lives of her informants, the participants themselves are not passive respondents but make choices and shape the research in many ways, at different points in the journey.

The first order of business in the interview was to briefly explain the purpose of the study and the protections provided to participants. Most participants had not read or completed the information or forms emailed to them, so some time was taken to allow them to read and sign the informed consent form; to choose a pseudonym to protect their anonymity; and to complete the demographic questionnaire and the Role Models for Hindu Women Rating Scale. Participants were also provided with a hard copy of the Interview guide since most of them had not read the emailed copy. The interviewer also explained that the interviews would be taped and gained the participants’ verbal consent to do so.

The interview process was loosely structured, generally following the outline provided to the participant but flexible enough to vary the order or format of the questions, or to branch out in different directions depending on the responses given by the interviewee. Interviews ranged in length from about 45 minutes to about 90 minutes. Generally the interviews were very relaxed and low-key, with a conversational tone and a good deal of laughter back and forth. A few interviewees were more business-like, and their responses did not deviate from the questions asked or offer extraneous information. Most interviewees, however, were more relaxed and shared often quite personal information with the interviewer.

At times the interviewer, a retired clinical psychologist, felt a need to draw clear boundaries for herself, between “therapist” and “researcher-interviewer” because of her
own habitual pull to respond therapeutically to some of the concerns of the women being interviewed. This was sometimes quite uncomfortable for the interviewer, because not responding to cues provided by the women being interviewed felt inauthentic and disingenuous while at the same time she recognized the need to maintain the boundaries and limitations inherent in her defined relationship with the interviewees. On the other hand, she also asked herself whether failing to respond to cues might, in fact, actually create a barrier between herself and the women who were sharing personal information with her, because it might convey a lack of personal interest or caring, or because it might even re-create or reinforce power imbalances in the researcher/interviewee relationship. These questions troubled the interviewer and were never clearly resolved in her mind. Ultimately, however, the issue seemed to be an internal conflict for the researcher rather than in any apparent way interfering with the easy interaction experienced with the interviewees.

**Types of Data Collected**

**Field notes**

In addition to interviews which were transcribed, with the transcriptions coded and analyzed to identify themes relating to the research question(s), the researcher kept detailed field notes recording the context of the interviews and any noteworthy incidents or observations which might provide additional relevant information. The field notes were also examined to identify any themes related to the interviewer/interviewee interaction and were considered reflexively as part of the researcher’s contribution to the interview process. That is, the significance of what was chosen to be observed and noted, and its meaning for the researcher, was analyzed reflexively as part of the
researcher’s own narrative as well as simply providing more information about the participant.

**Analytic memos**

Throughout the process of interviewing, transcribing, coding, and analyzing data the researcher also wrote frequent analytic notes, recording her thoughts and questions as she went along, identifying issues to be considered both when making decisions and choices during the research process and when forming conclusions from the data. These analytic notes informed and guided the process of understanding and interpreting the data and relating findings to existing research and theory.

**Demographic data**

Demographic information collected from the Demographic Questionnaire was collated and used to identify different groupings of respondents in order to ascertain whether differences in responses related to gender role perception could be identified along a number of different axes, such as, for example, age, region of origin, primary language, or income level/social status and so on. This information also fleshed out a description of the participants and aided in determining the generalizability or limits on generalizability of the research findings.

**Role models for Hindu women scale**

The Role Models for Hindu Women Scale was used informally and analyzed to obtain information about the kind of female persons or characters who might be considered as role models for Hindu women today. Past studies have suggested that female characters from sacred stories, for example, Sita, have typically been chosen as role models of the way that Hindu women, wives, mothers, and daughters should behave, and the intention of gathering data from the Role Models for Hindu Women
Scale was to ascertain whether these sacred role models still had valence for Hindu women today, and, if not, where Hindu women in the U.S. might have found exemplary women to emulate, and what characteristics of these women they most admired. Again, this data could be compared across different groupings of participants, by, for example, age or education level, and could be used to validate responses from the interviews.

**Transcription**

Initially, the researcher intended to transcribe all transcripts herself, using predetermined transcription rules regarding format, punctuation, and inclusion/exclusion of extraneous words or sounds. The intention was to create a verbatim transcript, including filler words, hesitation noises like “uh” or “um,” and emotive sounds such as laughter, weeping, sighs etc. After completing about a third of the transcriptions through this process, the task proved so cumbersome and time-consuming that a decision was made to use a transcription service for the remaining transcriptions. This obviously created some logistical and potential ethical problems which needed to be addressed. Because the transcription service could not guarantee that all transcription would be done by the same person and also because many transcriptions had already been completed by the researcher, in order to ensure consistency of transcription the researcher meticulously listened to all the tapes and edited the transcripts according to the rules she had previously established. This ensured that all transcriptions followed the same transcription procedures and that any interpretive idiosyncrasies or biases that may have intruded into the transcriptions were solely those of the researcher, to be reflexively acknowledged, identified, and discussed by her.

Another issue to be addressed when using a transcription service is the concern for the protection of participants’ privacy and confidentiality. This was safeguarded by
the transcription company, which required all transcribers to sign a confidentiality agreement, while the company itself provided a written declaration attesting to this fact, and guaranteeing full protection of interviewees’ confidentiality. They also guaranteed destruction of the tapes after transcription, following the researcher’s request.

Coding Process

Definition of Codes/ Coding Manual

Once transcripts had been meticulously edited to ensure accuracy and consistency of transcription, each transcript was read carefully, to identify words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs which, on first impression, appeared to be related to the research question(s), and to document them for further analysis.

These records were reviewed and refined throughout the coding process, as the transcripts of individual participants and of groups or sub-groups of participants were coded, and new codes emerged, or previously used codes needed to be modified, combined, or eliminated.

Coding Manual

Throughout the coding process as new code labels or category identifiers emerged or were identified, a Coding Manual was developed which listed each coding label used and provided a detailed description or definition of this label as well as one or more exemplars of this code or category label.

Identifying Coding Strategies

Saldaña (2009, 47) comments that there is no one right way to code qualitative data and researchers may adopt a unique method, depending on their theoretical
approach or they may adopt a position of “pragmatic eclecticism”\(^2\) as a coding perspective. That is, the researcher may “mix and match” coding strategies as was done in this study. For example, the In Vivo coding strategy may be used in this study because the researcher chooses to code the actual language of the participants rather than summarizing their statements in researcher-generated words and phrases.

In the present study some codes were initially generated \(a\ priori\). That is, a provisional list of codes was determined before the data-gathering commenced, constructed to reflect the conceptual framework of the research and the structure and content of topics/questions covered in the semi-structured interview protocol.

Some of the \(a\ priori\) codes were related to demographic information collected from the Demographic Questionnaire that each participant completed or from requests for background information during the interview process.

Other \(a\ priori\) codes were generated from specific topics relevant to the research questions and explored in the interview. This type of code looks for content-based or conceptual phrases related to a topic of inquiry or to specific research questions used to frame the interview (Saldaña, 2009, 67).

Still other codes evolved during the interview, and often generated categories and sub-categories. For example, the concept “women’s power” emerged as a category during the coding process but subdivided into several different perceptions of what “women’s power” meant to women of different ages and stages of life, or of different immigrant generational status.

Second level coding is where initial codes are clustered or combined into categories or themes or are sub-divided into sub-codes. This coding strategy was also used in this study to reduce initial codes into a smaller number of themes which addressed the research questions or to refine themes into sub-codes in order to provide conceptual and explanatory clarity to the data.

**Issues and Problems in the Coding Process**

Coding of transcripts is very labor-intensive, time-consuming, and iterative. Codes need to be reviewed and re-reviewed throughout the coding process and definitions may be refined or modified with repeated iterations. In an ideal world, samples of coded data (that is, randomly selected portions of the individual transcripts) should be reviewed and recoded by an independent research assistant who has been carefully trained in the use of the Coding Manual, to ensure inter-rater reliability or consistency.

In the present study, because of the researcher’s limited resources and isolation from access to potential assistance, this task was completed by an individual who was not familiar with Indian culture (not a research assistant), who coded a random sample of 40 quotations from the transcripts. Because of his lack of familiarity with many of the terms, a brief glossary was provided to assist him. In addition, he was trained in the use of the Coding Manual and was also provided with an analysis of some examples of coded quotations in order to demonstrate the process of coding. While not a perfect method, this code-check method reduced a potentially significant limitation with regard to demonstrating the reliability and/or validity of the research.
Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

The outcome of the meticulous coding process described above was the generation of a number of categories or themes which were further analyzed and interpreted to provide an overarching summary of the findings of the study. The goal of thematic analysis is to identify the smallest number of themes or concepts necessary to answer the initial research questions and/or to provide additional understanding or explanation of the data obtained. In the present study, 15 themes were combined into five overarching domains. These themes and domains will be identified and discussed in Chapters 5 through 10. In other words, in these chapters the accumulated patterns of data will be interpreted to tell the “storyline” of the research and the “story” or narrative of the participants’ gender role development.

Although many researchers contend that thematic analysis of coded data should be used to generate theoretical explanations for the data, others (e.g. Braun and Clarke, 2006) believe that this method is essentially independent of theory or epistemology. Because the present study is exploratory rather than tied to hypotheses and is not intended to generate theory, the focus of the thematic analysis is to generate descriptive themes or concepts which might, in future research, be used to develop a more theoretical understanding of issues which might affect Hindu-American women’s gender role identity development.

Reliability and Validity: Methods and Limitations

Because qualitative research and the thematic analysis this research involves requires continuous and iterative decision-making and interpretation regarding the choices made by the researcher, a great deal of care had to be taken to be meticulous...
regarding researcher transparency and reflexivity, particularly with regard to choices made in the coding process as well as in documenting the rules established for identifying and naming codes and describing and interpreting themes. In addition, the researcher must be transparent about methods used to enhance the reliability and validity of the data collected as well as the limitations, if any, of those methods.

**Reliability**

Reliability can be enhanced in one or more ways; for example, through continuous reflexivity by the researcher in the maintenance of contemporaneous field notes and of analytic memos which increase researcher reflexivity by documenting the researcher’s thoughts, decision-making, and intentions; and by the researcher’s resolution of ethical dilemmas which arose during the conduct of the research.

Involving an academic colleague or research peer in the task of reviewing/checking different aspects of the data collection and interpretation is another method of enhancing the reliability of the study’s findings.

Another desirable method for increasing reliability would have been the use of peer debriefing to discuss and corroborate research decisions such as data collection methods, soundness of design, data analysis and interpretation, record management strategies, and so on. This kind of collaboration was not possible in this case because of the researcher’s isolation from access to collegial collaboration.

Finally, the curtailed code-checking process already described above utilized in this study albeit in a somewhat limited fashion is yet another method of ensuring the reliability and replicability of data. This involved random recoding of sections of interview transcripts by a neutral and independent assistant in order to demonstrate the clarity
and accuracy of code labels and definitions as well as the consistency with which they can be applied by independent raters.

**Validity**

As already indicated, the concept of validity in qualitative research is quite different from the way in which it is understood in positivist research. In quantitative research, validity is understood in two ways: internal validity, where the researcher attempts to demonstrate that the relationship between two variables is causal; and external validity, where the potential generalizability of findings comes into question. In qualitative research, however, internal validity is demonstrated through the soundness of the research design and data gathering processes while external validity is linked to the potential to extend qualitative findings to other contexts.

Moreover, the connection between the researcher’s observations as well as her understanding and interpretation of participants’ statements, and the meaning intended by the participants is obviously more crucial in qualitative research. This connection is demonstrated through the researcher’s transparency and reflexivity and her decision-making and interpretive choices as well as the care with which the data (for example, the transcriptions) are translated, coded and analyzed.

In the present study, internal validity is primarily demonstrated by the meticulous, verbatim transcription of interview data, and by the fact that the researcher personally listened to and edited the transcripts using predetermined rules in order to ensure consistency and accuracy. Moreover, during the coding and analysis process and in the presentation of the results, the researcher used literal quotations from the transcribed interviews, that is, the participants’ own words. In addition, detailed field notes and
observations recorded immediately after each interview also facilitated the researcher’s accuracy.

Another method for demonstrating a connection between the researcher’s understanding of the participants’ statements and their intended meanings is the process of member-checking, which simply means asking the participant directly to review and verify the researcher’s impressions. This was not done in this case, primarily because of the logistical difficulty of re-accessing participants spread over a large area of Florida. Moreover, there are some potential ethical and philosophical questions raised by the possibility of participants’ over-involvement in research decisions. There is a fine balance between empowering participants and reducing power inequities between researcher and participant and giving the participant control of the research outcome. The question of “Whose research narrative is it?” would need to be explored in fine detail. In this case, however, the issue did not arise because logistics made the question moot.

External validity can also be enhanced through triangulation of the data, that is, through the use of multiple sources of data or of data collection methods. To some extent this was done in this study, through the use of interviews, a demographic questionnaire, and a rating scale identifying participants’ chosen role models, all of which provided considerable overlap of data. Also, behavior observations and field notes provided thick data to enhance other sources.

In addition, transparency regarding sampling decisions, transcription and coding rules and data collection methods, as well as researcher reflexivity about problems encountered and any limitations regarding their resolution, created an open process
which could facilitate an external audit of the findings. These techniques provided a degree of process validity (Cho and Trent, 2006) which holistically adhered to every decision mode throughout the research process.

The intention so far has been to follow the methodological trail documented in Chapter 3 in order to present and discuss the ways in which methodological considerations informed and guided the methods used in the implementation of the present research design. Again, the researcher wished to provide an audit trail through demonstrating a degree of transparency and reflexivity often not found in dissertations and also to identify research dilemmas, problems, and, hopefully, resolutions.

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Data analysis is a process by which the researcher attempts to “bring order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data.”¹ In quantitative research, the design of the study, and the method of analysis are identified a priori, that is, before the study is initiated and this plan is followed meticulously without deviation. In qualitative research, while the researcher begins the process with a general outline or plan for the conduct of the research, he/she must be flexible, pragmatic, and adaptable throughout the process, even during data analysis, in order to arrive at the “best fit” method for extrapolating as much “deep description” or understanding as possible. Often, data analysis is initiated at the very beginning of the data collection process and may undergo modification based on the “best fit” criterion for handling the data in the most productive manner possible.

Transcribed interview responses not only constitute the raw data of this research but also represent the narrative input of the participants, that is, their own words, as collaborators in the research. In handling this “raw data,” the researcher must be both respectful and reflexive: respectful, in the sense of maintaining the “truth’ of the participants’ vision; and continuously reflexive regarding the choices the researcher makes in the handling, categorization and interpretation of this “raw data.” When the researcher organizes and synthesizes the raw data/participants’ responses into meaningful themes and overarching domains or concepts through the process of coding, care must be taken to remain reflexively aware of his/her biases, assumptions, and assumptions.

¹ Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman. 1999. Designing Qualitative Research. 150
conceptions or misconceptions, and also to maintain awareness of the connection of the original research question(s) to the data obtained and the interpretations made.

The purpose of this study is to trace the influence of stories/narratives, in particular "sacred" stories (stories that are part of the ancient religious fabric of Hinduism) on the gender role construction of Indian Hindu women immigrants in the United States today. The results of this study are organized and presented according to themes that emerged from the “raw data” of transcribed interviews with first and second generation Hindu women in Florida. These transcripts represent the “voices” of the women interviewed, as collaborators in this research.

The first section of Chapter 5 will present descriptive documentation of the demographic characteristics of the participants, followed in the second section by a description of the major themes or domains which were identified through a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. In all, 15 themes, clustered into five domains, will be identified in this section.

**Participant Characteristics**

Forty-one Hindu women living mainly in the north-central, central, and west coast regions of Florida were interviewed in this study. Twenty-one of these women were first generation Indian immigrants who came to this country as adults, after age 18, while 20 were second generation Indian-American Hindus, born or living in the United States before age five, with at least one Hindu parent who was born and raised in India. This allowed cross-generational comparisons which potentially facilitated an analysis of Western narrative influences on women’s gender role development in addition to the influences of stories of Indian origin.
The majority of first generation immigrant women were married, some with children, at the time of entry to the United States. Only three women were single, and came as students. It was quite unusual for women to come alone to a new country.

Usually women came with their husbands and/or family or to join family already here.

Table 5-1. Participant Characteristics: Age and Marital Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grandma</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Faye</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sailaza</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Achoo</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lite</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laxmi</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sejal</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prabha</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sujatha</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamala</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutan</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rukmani</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bina</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tamanna</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gauri</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kannaki</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Gowri</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Raina</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ele</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ruthi</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parul</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mickey</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalita</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Benni</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alamelu</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Marya</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooja</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vidya</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priya</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnie</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Adriana</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyama</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age and Marital Status

**First Generation.** The age range for first generation participants was 38-86, with a mean age of 56.2 years and a median age of 55. Second generation participants ranged from 18 to 43 years, with a mean age of 28.3 years and a median age of 26.

Ninety percent of the first generation cohort were currently married. They averaged 29.2 years of marriage (with a range from 3 to 55 years, and a median of 29
years). Within this first generation group, only one woman had never married while two were widowed. Only one woman had ever been divorced and had remarried.

Sixty-seven percent of the first generation participants had an arranged marriage, while 29 percent chose their own spouses.

**Second Generation.** In the second generation cohort, 70 percent were not married, reflecting the different age and stage of life of these younger women. Thirty percent were currently married and none had been divorced or widowed. The average length of marriage for the married second generation sub-group was 11.2 years, with a range from 6 to 16 years. In the second generation cohort, of the 30 percent who were married, all had chosen their own spouse. No one in this group had an arranged marriage.

**Education of Participants**

**First Generation.** With regard to education, all first generation women had graduated from high school. Almost 40 percent of this group held bachelor’s degrees, some with some post-graduate education not leading to a higher degree. Thirty five percent held a master’s degree, (MA, MS, MEd, or MEE), while 15 per cent held PhD degrees and 10 per cent achieved MD or DO degrees. Almost 50 percent received their education entirely in India while the remainder received all or most of their post graduate education in the U.S. Only one woman received a bachelor’s degree from a U.S. university.

**Second Generation.** Among the second generation cohort, one participant (five percent of the sample) had just graduated from high school, and was college bound, while four (20 percent) were in their first year of an undergraduate program, and two others (10 percent) were juniors in college. Four women (20 percent) had bachelor’s
degrees and one had some additional postgraduate work. Three (15 percent) had achieved master’s degrees (MPH, MSW, MSN). Of the remaining women, four (20 percent) held MD or DO degrees, while one (five percent) had a JD degree.

The slight difference in educational level between first and second generation women in favor of the first generation group is largely a factor of the different age and stage of life of the second generation group, many of whom were either just beginning their higher education or had not yet completed more advanced degrees.

Table 5-2. Education Level of All Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>High school only</th>
<th>Some College</th>
<th>Bachelor’s Degree</th>
<th>Master’s Degree</th>
<th>PhD, MD, JD, DO, etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>8 (39%)</td>
<td>7 (30%)</td>
<td>6 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Generation</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>6 (30%)</td>
<td>5 (35%)</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Socioeconomic Status/Income

With regard to income/socioeconomic levels of the participants, the group was assessed only in fairly broad categories of self-reported income.

First Generation. In the first generation cohort, 47.6 percent of the women reported a family income of $0-100,000 while 38.1 percent reported a family income of $100,000-200,000. Of the remaining women, 4.8 percent reported a family income of $200,000-300,000 and 4.8 percent reported a family income over $300,000. Only one participant did not disclose her family income.

Second Generation. In comparison with the first generation cohort, 30 percent of the second generation women reported a family income of $0-100,000 while an additional 30 percent reported an income of $100,000-200,000. Five percent (one woman) reported an income of $200,000-300,000 while 25 percent reported a family
income of $300,000 plus. Two women (10 percent) either did not report or did not know their family income.

Table 5-3. Socio-economic Level of All Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>$0-100k</th>
<th>$100-200k</th>
<th>$200-300k</th>
<th>Over $300k</th>
<th>Did not disclose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td>10 (47.6%)</td>
<td>6 (38.1%)</td>
<td>1 (4.8%)</td>
<td>1 (4.8%)</td>
<td>1 (4.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Generation</td>
<td>6 (30.0%)</td>
<td>6 (30.0%)</td>
<td>1 (5.0%)</td>
<td>5 (25.0%)</td>
<td>2 (10.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences in the composition of the two groups, especially with regard to age and stage of life, accounted for the distribution of income levels in the two groups. In the first generation group, the women and their families were generally at the peak of their earning cycle or were older and retired or reaching retirement age. Twenty five percent of the first generation cohort (and their husbands) were post-retirement and among this sub-group three women (60 percent) had an income of $0-100,000, one (20 percent) had an income of $100,000-200,000, and one woman refused to disclose her family income. Thus age and stage of life may have resulted in a lowering of income for this sub-group.

In the second generation cohort the picture is a little more obscure because the participants who were students reported their parents' income, did not know their family income, or simply reported themselves as having income between $0-100,000. Moreover, members of the second generation cohort who were out of school and working tended to be at the beginning of their careers and of their income potential, while those who were somewhat older and married often with two family members contributing to the family income, reported higher income levels than the younger women.
Caste

In terms of class or caste, although this question was not specifically addressed the vast majority of both groups who identified their caste affiliation reported themselves to be Brahmins, although several further distinguished themselves as members of a specific sub-group (for example, Iyer Brahmin; Bunt Brahmin; Vaishya Brahmin; Smarta Brahmin; Iyengar Brahmin). Two women, one in each group, reported that their families were Ksatriyas. However, within the first generation cohort, a full 38 percent either did not report or claimed not to know their caste membership. In the second generation cohort, a comparable 35 percent fell into this category. One inference from this data might be that many women either did not see caste as an important identifying variable or were unwilling to discuss caste, while others saw being of the Brahmin caste as a significant part of their identity or status.

Thematic Analysis of Transcribed Interviews

Forty-one transcripts were reviewed and coded to identify significant themes and sub-themes related to factors influencing gender role development or women’s perceptions of themselves and their roles, as women, daughters, wives and mothers, within both the private and public spheres.

The significance of a particular theme was established by setting a criterion level in terms of the frequency with which a particular theme was mentioned as influential by participants, across groups and sub-groups. The level of significance was set at 50 percent. That is, if 50 percent of the participants in any group or sub-group referred to a particular topic as important or influential, this topic was considered to be a significant theme.
This 50 percent response level loosely follows the criterion recommended by Hill et al. (1997), although the present research did not, because of limited resources, follow the CQR (Consensual Qualitative Research) method advocated by Hill. Hill et al. (1997) recommended three criteria to document the significance of qualitative results. A “general” result indicated that a theme applied to all the cases (participants) in a study, while a “typical” result denoted that a theme applied to at least half (50 percent) of the cases in each group or sub-group. Hill et al. also suggested that the term “variant” be applied to themes reported by fewer than half the cases but more than three.²

In the present study, several different levels of response were initially considered for significance including levels as high as 75 percent, but the 50 percent criterion level was chosen because of its demonstrated history of utility in multiple CQR studies conducted between 1997 and 2005. Hill et al (2005) acknowledged that reporting frequencies in qualitative research is rather a crude method with limited usefulness, because of the difficulty in producing comparable samples in the research, but these authors, after reviewing multiple studies employing this method recommended the continued use of this practice in order to “provide a common metric for communicating results.”³ However, in the present study, only the 50 percent “typical” level was used to document the significance of a theme, while the “general” and “variant” levels were not examined.


Using this 50 percent criterion level, five domains, 15 themes and 82 sub-themes were identified. Sub-themes were identified in several different ways. For example, when identifying a particular source of influence, the identified theme was further defined as either traditional or non-traditional in nature. That is, it was conceptualized as consistent with socially held values practiced and/or accepted and reinforced for the majority of women in India, or as deviant from or rejecting those traditionally held values. This traditional/non-traditional bifurcation was further subdivided to identify whether the influence was valued positively or negatively by the respondent. That is, for example, a respondent might see the influence of traditionally held values for women’s roles as positive or may reject them as undesirable in their lives. The same evaluation of influence could be made for non-traditional values espoused by the influence source.

Another way of identifying sub-themes came from examples given by the respondents themselves. Some themes which were broadly coded (for example, “women’s power”), could be subdivided according to how the respondents themselves defined the category. Women might see “power” as referring, for example, to “personal achievement,” or to being “the power behind the throne” within the family, thus reflecting the woman’s own “voice” and value system.

**Overarching Domains and Themes**

The 15 themes identified through the coding process using the 50 percent response marker of influence already discussed were refined and grouped into five overarching domains.

Chapter 6 describes Domain One: Influences of the Sacred, and has two themes: “Influence of Sacred Stories” and “Influence of Sacred Role Models.”
Chapter 7 covers Domain Two: Other Story Sources and Influences on Gender Role Ideology, and delineates two themes: “Influence of Family” and “Influence of Community”.

Chapter 8 reports data related to Domain Three: The Ideology of Womanhood: *Pativratya*, and includes three themes: “The Ideal Woman”; “*Stridharma*”; and “*Pativrata*”.

Chapter 9 reports on Domain Four: The “I” in Ideology, which has four themes: “Desire for Independence/Autonomy”; “Self-development”; “Wanting It All”; and “Women’s Power”.

Finally, Chapter 10 analyzes a fifth domain, Resolving Ideology: The Juggling Act, which describes four themes which interface and mediate between the influence of family and the importance of self: “Balance”; “Pragmatism/Flexibility/Adaptability”; “Rationalization”; and “Family and Children First”.

In each of these domains, the importance of a narrative transmission of influence (that is, stories) and of female role models identified through these stories, was a major focus.
CHAPTER 6
THE INFLUENCE OF THE SACRED

Participants were asked to identify “sacred stories” that they felt had been influential in delineating their sense of themselves as women and their roles within the family as well as in the public world of work, community, and social activities. The definition of “sacred” was deliberately left somewhat vague to allow for the participants’ own understanding of the term but was generally considered to refer to ancient stories/narratives such as the Epics (the Mahabharata and the Ramayana) in multiple versions; tales from the Puranas; folk-tales about divinities, sages and saints; and so on. These stories may have been heard orally, told by family elders, seen performed or narrated in community festivals or events or in temples, viewed in movies or on television, or read in comics and books. The respondents were also asked to identify female characters in these narratives whom they felt were exemplars for them in their roles as women.

In addition, the participants were given a list of female characters from Hindu mythology or history as well as contemporary public figures and were asked to select and rank those whom they felt were influential to their gender role development. Respondents were also permitted to add names to this list if they so desired, and many participants chose to add names of Western women as well as women known to them personally. Allowing the participants to do this afforded a broader and more accurate picture of gender role exemplars.

Within the domain of sacred influences, two sub-themes were identified: the influence of sacred stories; and the influence of sacred role models.
The Influence of Sacred Stories

First Generation

First generation Hindu women in the U.S. were more influenced by sacred stories than were the second generation cohort. Sixty-seven percent of first generation women identified sacred stories as important and influential in their lives as women while 33 percent reported that these sacred stories were not significant or described them as “just stories.” Of the women who considered sacred stories to be important in their lives, some focused on the influence on their perceived gender roles, while others, however, felt that these stories impacted their spiritual lives as devotees, rather than influencing them as women.

For example, Nutan, aged 57, stated:

I think the stories I hear, especially the religious stories, like the story of Sita…her loyalty towards her husband…all these were important, and they are just as important now as they were then, although there are different ways of showing loyalty and affection today.

Maria, aged 46, agreed that the sacred stories to which she was exposed during childhood did have an impact on her and affirmed that for her the stories influenced her sense of herself as a woman rather than impacting her spiritual or devotional life: “I learned that women are definitely nurturing…you could see that mothers always seemed to care for their children and their families…you could definitely see that side of being female.”

Maria learned many of the sacred stories through dance (bharatnatyam) but was not moved spiritually by the stories, saying that the stories were “just mythology,” but that the dance performances “made me more feminine.”
Maya, aged 56, on the other hand, also learned sacred stories primarily through dance and also felt that these ancient stories were important in her life. However, she felt that the narratives she received through dance influenced her spiritually and devotionally rather than teaching her anything about being a woman. Grandma, aged 86, the oldest participant in this study with the mind and energy of a woman half her age, also commented that while sacred stories were a vital part of her devotional life, they had little or no influence on her understanding of her roles as woman, wife, or mother. She said:

There were goddesses [in the stories] that I…not admired…I just revered them. I can’t think about admiring any of them…they’re too high for me…they’re too high to be admired. I just revere them. I don’t even think about being like them. I would feel guilty even thinking like that. I could never be like them. They are to be revered.

Thirty-three percent of the respondents, however, a minority of the first generation cohort, did not find any significant influence, either spiritual or mundane, of sacred stories in their lives. For example, Lite, aged 71, also learned many sacred stories through her participation in bharatnatyam but downplayed their influence on her. She said, “Dance is an art form…the stories they tell us are all made up…the characters are not influential.”

Sailaza, aged 82, also rejected any influence of sacred stories on her perception of herself as a woman. She stated, “I read the Ramayana, Mahabharata…and stories that are not well known…Those stories were very good…But the stories were not…they were just stories.”

Priya, aged 40, agreed with Sailaza, and saw little if any relevance of ancient sacred stories for women today:
All these mythological goddesses and all, they’re just in stories, right? You learn good things from them, but you don’t know how to interpret it in today’s life. Because they did not go for jobs, right? They did not have to drive cars. They are just stories. In today’s world, you have to be much smarter…much smarter.

Thus, first generation women who grew up in India were exposed to sacred narratives from many sources, often not just through the story-telling of family members, especially family elders, but also through everyday immersion in the community, at festivals, in the temples, and through community “story-tellers” who sang and narrated, commented on, and entertained the local people with stories from the Epics and Puranas, and from folklore. These narratives seem to have been available everywhere, breathed in the air of India, in every community, in every family, absorbed as if by osmosis as part of every individual’s daily life. While their mothers sometimes participated in the story-telling, for the most part respondents indicated that their mothers were “too busy” with other family and household responsibilities and that other family members, grandparents, aunts, or other elders told the stories to the children, who also heard them from extra-familial sources such as priests, community story-tellers, at festivals, and during holiday celebrations. Comic books such as the Amar Chitra Katha series were available to some of the participants, as were movies and later, television series. These sources will be analyzed in Chapter 7.

**Second Generation**

Second generation women, in particular the younger women, were significantly less aware of the stories, had less exposure to them, or failed to remember the essential themes of the narratives or any details of the plot or characters. Seventy percent of the second generation women reported that the stories had no real significance in their lives and again described them as “just stories,” that is, myths, “not
real.” Thirty percent of the second generation group as a whole did find these stories to be influential, but these women also displayed less awareness of details than did the first generation group.

Thus, as a group, second generation participants were less familiar with sacred stories than the first generation cohort. Many had been exposed to these stories through the televised presentations of the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, or through comics or graphic novels such as the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. In general, however, the second generation group of women, especially the younger women, had a much hazier recollection or understanding of the stories, remembered fewer characters or plot details, or misunderstood the narrative. For example, Adriana, aged 18, said:

We watched the *Mahabharata* series, but I don’t think I watched the *Ramayana*. I know I’ve heard some stories about that, but I don’t remember them in depth. I know in the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi was there, and at one point…one of her brothers was being mean, and unraveled her sari, and she just kind of left it up to fate to help her in that situation…she didn’t ask anyone to help her. She just let fate take its course.

Adriana also commented:

A lot of my friends, we’re all religious, and we go to Divali festivals and participate in the prayers or the songs. But we don’t recall the exact stories where these traditions come from. I just remember the things that have an impact on me, and not really the specific details or specific stories.

On the other hand, Amber, aged 18, while also hazy on the details of sacred stories, contended that her sense of herself as a woman was influenced by the stories about Sita and Ram in the *Ramayana*: “She [Sita] showed how to be an ideal woman and wife to Ram. She follows him throughout the forest, and she guides him, and she loves him, so that’s how my mother taught me to be a woman.”
In Amber’s case, the stories about Sita did influence her gender role development, but indirectly through her mother’s interpretations and teaching. Amber reported that she came from a very conservative Hindu family who were immersed in their religion and deeply devotional as well as very traditional in their values, especially with regard to raising a daughter. Amber was quite comfortable with these traditional values and seemed to gain a sense of comfort and security from them rather than seeing them as constrictive or limiting. Her family’s strict rules and traditional values for daughters seemed to provide protection for her as she navigated the confusing world of college and living away from her family for the first time.

Rukmani, a 32 year old attorney who was married and the mother of a young daughter and expecting her second child, a son, learned many of the sacred stories, as did several other participants, through dance, particularly bharatnatyam. Rukmani felt that she had definitely been influenced in aspects of her gender role by the stories enacted through dance. She stated:

In the stories of Krishna and Yashoda, the focus is on a mother’s unconditional love. I’ve learned in watching them just how a mother’s role is supposed to be, how unconditional and how nurturing…and leading children in the right way.

On the other hand, other second generation women commented that their sense of themselves as women was influenced by sacred stories, but not in a traditional, family-centered way. Tamanna, aged 27, felt that the stories tapped into other less traditional aspects of her feminine identity. Commenting on the influence of stories about Parvati and Shiva she said:

In the story about Parvati’s swayamvara, where Parvati danced to seduce Shiva, I learned about the sexual side of her, and how she had such a strong identity. It wasn’t just about her being this crazy god’s wife-this
crazy man who was full of anger and passion-but she had all of that as well, to be able to be compatible with him.

Tamanna referenced stories about Parvati and Durga emphasizing their energy and strength as exemplars of non-traditional womanhood, saying:

They’re these crazy, wild women, who had such crazy personalities-such strong personalities-and they did what they wanted. They’d rip the world apart if they didn’t get their way, whether it was for their children, or for what they believed in.

Tamanna saw herself as strong, independent, and very self-willed, and clearly focused on these aspects of women/goddesses in sacred narratives as influencing her self-concept as a woman. She found powerful, independent goddesses more compatible with her own personality than more traditional, family-oriented female divinities.

Thus, even when members of the second generation group saw sacred narratives as impacting on the gender role development of Hindu Indian-American women, the influence was often more focused on female strength and independence than it was on traditional concepts of women as loyal wives and nurturing mothers. These younger Indian American women, raised in a Western environment, however, appeared to be trying to negotiate and create hybrid identities of both independent women and good wives and mothers. They were not rejecting traditional values of womanhood and in fact endorsed the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, but they also struggled to have more freedom to define themselves and to explore their own interests and express their own personalities and energies. They were asserting choice rather than duty.

Sejal, a 38 year old physician, expressed this view of womanhood:
I was an avid reader, so I would read a lot of the *Amar Chitra Katha* stories—the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* stories. Durga, Sita and Rama, but also stories about the Rani of Jhansi. I was impressed by the stronger [female characters]-Durga, or the warriors… the fierce ones- the ones who really overcame adversity, or fought to the death, or really stood out as atypical from the other women. I think that the other female role models in mythology…there’s some things you can take that are admirable, and then there’s many things that I wouldn’t want my daughter to take as a take-home point.

Several of the second generation women shared their impression that sacred narratives tended to be very male-centered with little focus on female characters except in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Monica, aged 41, a primary care nurse married to a physician, said that she learned all the stories like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and felt that:

> A lot of them were good, but I have to say I think Indian culture is very male heavy—it’s the woman should stand by the man- and to me that’s not enough. Yes, support your husband, but do something of your own.

Ruthi, too, a 24 year old third year medical student, commented:

> I grew up with these [sacred] stories. When I was young we heard a lot of stories from the *Mahabharata* and all that stuff. A lot of these stories were not as female-centered, but my Mom would always make sure that we got all the stories about Savitri, and those stories would make us realize…like stories about Jhansi ki Rani, and all that stuff…she would make sure that we never felt like we were inferior in any way. Hindu literature has a tendency to make you feel that way. It was man-made, man-written, never woman-made, woman-written.

Ruthi was like some other young women, experiencing sacred stories as interpreted by their mothers, whose focus was often on the strength, endurance, and resolve of the female characters rather on their submissiveness, obedience, or subservience to their husbands. This suggests that many of the first generation mothers of these young second generation women may themselves be less traditional in orientation and seem to be determined that their daughters should grow up with a strong sense of self, though
not necessarily at the expense of traditional roles for women. One wonders whether these less traditional first generation mothers became immigrants because they were less traditional and more adventurous or whether they were influenced by Western individualism after immigration.

This finding suggests that women who were raised in India, but who have lived in the United States since adulthood and who have raised their own families and have developed their own careers here are still more influenced by the stories to which they were exposed during childhood than are women in the same stage of life who spent their formative years in the U.S. In other words, early exposure to the sacred stories in India seems to provide a firmer foundation for immersion and lasting influence than the more limited exposure experienced by second generation women during childhood.

The implications of this findings are interesting and complex. Hindu women/mothers in the U.S. are frequently seen as responsible for exposing their children to the narratives and traditions of Hinduism and for creating and maintaining an awareness of Indian culture and a sense of Indian/Hindu identity in the next generation. However, these results seem to suggest that mere exposure to or teaching about the stories or narratives which are a core component of Hindu identity has not produced the desired effects and that second generation Indians/Hindus are not being impacted to the desired degree by their experience of these narratives.

Why this might be happening is not clear in the current research and certainly merits further study. Several factors might be impacting the second generation. Economic pressures might create the need to have two-earner families, resulting in less time for parental influences (although the fact that Indian immigrants constitute one of
the highest earning sub-populations in the United States tends to counteract this argument). A proliferation of nuclear families resulting in decreased cultural/narrative input from grandparents, aunts, uncles and other older family members might also be a factor. The impact of exposure to the mainstream culture, and mainstream narratives, through peer relationships, school influence, Western television, music, and so forth might significantly undermine the second generation’s interest in or attention paid to Indian stories. In fact results from the next chapter seems to suggest that this might be so. Whatever the reasons, it seems clear that the sacred narratives central to Hinduism and so essential to Indian culture are not being received, processed, remembered or understood by the second generation in the same way that first generation women raised in India have absorbed them into their core identities as Indians, Hindus or women.

The immersive exposure documented for first generation participants does not seem to have been generally available to the second generation respondents. Alamelu, a first generation woman, the mother of second generation Anna, aged 18, commented that she felt that she had not been as effective as her own mother had been in introducing Anna to the sacred narratives of her culture. While her own mother had influenced her and exposed her to the stories, especially through dance, she herself had not been able to do the same for her daughter because of the time constraints on her as a physician. All the young second generation women whose first generation mothers were also participants in this study in fact felt that they had been exposed to sacred stories, but it was clear that their knowledge, understanding, and awareness of the stories was often significantly less than that of their mothers. These young women
had a fairly rudimentary knowledge of the plot-lines, but that sense of immersion, of an osmotic absorption of these stories into one’s cultural identity, as it were, was almost entirely missing. Results from these mother/daughter pairs might facilitate understanding of this issue.

Most of the second generation women had been introduced to sacred stories through the televised series of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Often these TV series were used almost as a baby-sitting method, even as background entertainment, with little or no family focus on the story and no commentary on the narrative. The younger second generation participants seemed to have absorbed little meaning or significance from viewing the dramas and tended to remember few events, or to erroneously recall plot and character details, as already mentioned.

For example, Sheila, aged 32, and the mother of two daughters, had only a vague recollection of Sita’s story in the *Ramayana*: “I remember this Sita…that story…just how she was gone for a long period of time…nothing really stood out to me in that story.”

Raina, aged 25, who learned most of the stories she knew through her experiences with *bharatnatyam*, commented on the fact that most of the characters in the stories she performed were male. She indicated that she did not really know any stories from the *Mahabharata* involving women: “Yes, there are women, but you never see women who are displaying all the perfect attributes. They are all either kept in line by the men, or they are devotees, but that’s about it.”

Raina did not feel that these narratives taught her anything about how to be a woman. She asserted that, with her own daughter, she would: “share Hindu stories to
teach them Hindu things and culture...,” but would also: “tell her stories about real people that she knows...” in order to teach her about being a women. In other words, she felt that “real,” personally known women provided better role models than did mythical female characters from ancient times.

Mickey, aged 20, also agreed that many of the sacred stories had little value for modern Hindu women in terms of influencing gender role identity or behavior:

The *Mahabharata* was huge...it was always on in my house. My grandmother and my family always had that specific series on in the background, so I ended up learning the entire story just by watching those videos. But when I look back on it, I don't feel that there were a lot of women in those stories. I think they were centered on men, and the women were almost secondary characters. I guess that women were subservient...they were secondary characters. They had to be particularly deceptive and cunning. But they did have some power...I feel like it was very unequal, like it wasn't exactly an egalitarian society...So I feel weird admitting the fact that I look to someone who was kind of subservient and quiet as a role model of how to be a wife.

Thus, what Mickey learned about being a woman from sacred narratives was that women were inferior to men and that women gained whatever power they possessed by being “deceptive and cunning,” while adopting a “subservient and quiet demeanor.” She did absorb information about gender roles from these ancient stories and characters but what she learned brought her into conflict with what she saw in the western world.

Clearly, Mickey felt confused about her identity as a women. As a reserved, introspective, and shy young woman, she was drawn to a more passive role as a female, where she might feel more protected and be free from the responsibility of decision-making and of choosing her own path. At the same time, her personal role models were her assertive, competent, and outspoken mother and sister who made their own choices in almost every aspect of their lives, as well as her non-Indian female friends who embraced a more egalitarian value system.
Mickey’s sister, Gauri, reaffirmed her sister’s account of their exposure to sacred stories but perhaps because she was older and had a more independent personality, she focused on different aspects of womanhood presented in these stories:

I spent a lot of time actually watching the Doordarshan serials, because my parents would be at work a lot, and my grandmother…would watch the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, because she didn’t speak English. So TV was a lot of my exposure to the stories. I would say the *Mahabharata* probably influenced me the most, because Draupadi was the strongest female mythological character. She speaks the most to me, because she was dealt a lot of terrible hands, and she ended up still getting her revenge. The *Ramayana* didn’t speak to me as much, because I felt like Sita kept getting walked over, and let it happen.

Mickey and Gauri are very different in personality as well as being at different stages of life. Mickey is moving into adulthood, uncertain about her future and confused about her role as a woman, finding some security in potentially embracing traditional definitions of women’s gender roles despite some resentment about what she perceives as men’s assumption of their superior status. Gauri, on the other hand, is in the process of attaining independence, establishing a career, and moving towards marriage. She is more assertive and outgoing than her sister and clearly rejects the role of “submissive woman.” Exposed to the same stories and to the same role models of womanhood, Mickey and Gauri have absorbed different aspects of mythological narratives and gender relations. The ancient stories have, in fact, influenced both of them in their identities as women but in almost diametrically opposed ways.

Marya, also aged 19, rejected Mickey’s view of womanhood, and endorsed Gauri’s assertion of independence:

Sita and Ram…you know how she was kidnapped, and he had to go and save her? It’s great that he rescued her, but I’m kind of feminist…I want to rescue myself. Sita was strong…it’s not like she wasn’t, but I feel like if the story was her finding some way out of it…saving herself, and then saving someone else…that would mean a lot more to me than the way it was.
Marya, like Mickey and Gauri, was raised by an assertive and competent mother, but whereas she described her father as unusually egalitarian and supportive of her mother’s (and his daughter’s) independence, Mickey saw her father as more traditional, expecting traditional gender role behaviors from the women in the family and as wanting to be seen and treated as a traditional *paterfamilias*. This raises speculation about the influence of fathers in daughters’ gender role development, perhaps reinforcing gender roles depicted in mythology in some instances while subverting them in others. This issue will be addressed further in Chapter 7.

Marya and Gauri are good examples of the way in which traditional stories are being re-presented or re-constructed to modify the view of womanhood which has traditionally been depicted in them. Marya epitomizes a desire to “rewrite” the narratives to better represent the needs of modern Hindu women. However, second generation Indian-American women also seem to want to retain many aspects of women’s traditional gender roles as presented in the sacred stories, aspects like being a supportive wife and a devoted, nurturing mother, while at the same time they want to construct a view of women as strong, independent, achievement-oriented, and “equal” to their male partners.

This comparison of the responses of first and second generation respondents has allowed some insight into the different ways that sacred stories have been passed on to the two generations. Indian-born women have been raised in a culture where women have been immersed in the stories throughout their everyday lives, receiving them from multiple sources, often accompanied by instruction and interpretation from both community and family members with little if any contradictory input from extra-
cultural sources. This “total immersion” absorption of stories can be contrasted with the relatively cursory transmission of stories to which the second generation women seem to have been exposed. The second generation Hindu women in this study are certainly aware of the stories but their knowledge and understanding of them is much weaker than that of their mothers, and the impact of the traditional gender roles transmitted through the narratives has been significantly diminished. The young women of the second generation tend to reject the view of women as submissive, or as dominated by men, in favor of a more egalitarian view of women as equal partners, strong and decisive, with a positive sense of their own self-worth, and a focus on personal achievement as well as (not instead of) marriage and motherhood.

It was possible, however, as already implied, to interpret the differences in the responses of second generation women based on their age and stage of development. Seven of the second generation cohort were aged from 18-20, going through the stage of becoming adults and moving into the less sheltered world of college, with more autonomy and somewhat less parental control, while facing the challenge of negotiating heterosexual relationships and finding themselves as women. Five were in their mid-twenties, already out of college or completing medical school, and negotiating the stage of career-building as well as of seeking and consolidating relationships with potential marital partners. All of this group were single, but two were in serious, committed relationships, and were also invested in achievement in the public/work sphere. Another two were married and in the stage of building a family, often while also trying to maintain a career, while four others were married longer with children and established careers. Two women were in their 40s, but unmarried.
The seven college-aged women tended to be less confident in their gender roles, in their identities as women, perhaps having less experience in exploring, establishing, and negotiating male-female relationships. In this group, only Anna, aged 18, had any experience of living far from her family while she attended an out-of-state university. While she exuded more self-confidence than her age/stage peers, Anna still found some security through her willingness to contemplate an arranged marriage in the future. On the other hand, she did not see the relevance of sacred stories for defining or reinforcing her sense of womanhood. She stated:

The stories in religion have never really provided me with a tangible lesson. I think it’s more just shaping my religious and my childhood identity, not necessarily in terms of: ‘…this is what is done in the past…Look what I’m able to do now.’ For me, personally, they’re just stories…I don’t think I’ve faced enough of a struggle in my life to really tap into religion and use that as the primary guiding force for me.

The women who were in their mid-twenties engaged in the process of establishing a career and seeking a mate tended to be more self-confident, assertive and comfortable with themselves and their view of the future. Two were involved in committed relationships with non-traditional partners, in one case outside her religion, and in the other with a person who was both non-Indian and of a different religion. Clearly, both were less willing to accept traditional roles and cultural expectations than their younger counterparts, although they both endorsed values of devotion to marital partner and future children. Raina, aged 25, in fact cited a sacred narrative, the story of Andal’s devotion to Vishnu as a wife to a husband, to illustrate her sense of her role as woman and wife:

That’s the kind of wife or girl-friend or whatever that I would like to be…very devoted and loving…she’s so in love, and she’s just so excited…and I think of those feelings myself. I can imagine myself being in
that kind of position…very excited, thinking: “OK, this is the life I want to have with my husband”.

Rukmani and Sheila, in their early thirties and preoccupied with balancing careers, marriage and motherhood, appeared to be self-confident and comfortable with their female identity and roles. Their developmental task seemed to be consolidating and reinforcing relationships with their extended families (parents and in-laws) and constructing a way of life that is a meld of traditional gender values with a more individualistic awareness of their own needs/ambitions, and a more egalitarian relationship with their husbands. Rukmani, for example, in referring to the story about Gandhari, wife of Dhritarashtra, in the *Mahabharata*, who bound her eyes because her husband was blind, emphasized Gandhari’s strength as “a moral compass for her husband,” rather than her role as “a dutiful and devoted wife, sacrificing herself in support of her blind husband.” She also used the story of Krishna and Radha as Ardhanarishwera, the half male, half female deity, focusing on the “need to balance male and female characteristics and roles to maintain an ordered society…the balancing of male and female ‘power’.” In this way, Rukmani has re-formulated the influence of the sacred story to perhaps reflect the concerns and interpretation of a modern Hindu woman.

The four oldest and most established women in this group seemed to be secure in their identity as women, although many of them struggled with feelings of stress and guilt as they attempted to reconcile family and personal needs. Sejal, aged 38, was in some ways the most conventional of these more established women in her acceptance of gender roles, living as she did with her husband’s parents in a more traditional household. At the same time, she endorsed the strong, fierce female characters in
sacred stories, and decried Sita as “your prototypical good wife,” saying, “I wouldn’t call Sita my role model. There wasn’t anything there that I would necessarily strive to be….”

Sejal held this opinion while living with her mother-in-law, Laxmi, who was perhaps the most traditional of the first generation cohort and who expressed her devotion to Sita as an ideal woman, a pativrata, the perfect role model for women. Despite these diametrically opposed views of Sita and of women’s roles, Laxmi was able to recognize and accept the different feelings and needs of her daughter-in-law, and both could maintain a peaceful and mutually respectful relationship.

Finally, the two older unmarried second generation women had the least direct involvement with their Hindu heritage but appeared secure in their gender role identity, despite embracing non-traditional life-styles.

**Influence of Sacred Role Models**

**First Generation**

Female sacred role models were mentioned as important by about 80 percent of the first generation cohort and sacred females were mentioned 42 times in the participants’ narrative responses to the semi-structured interview questions. Among the second generation group, mention of sacred role models dropped to about 70 percent, with sacred role models named only 32 times. Sita, Mirabai, Draupadi and Parvati were the female characters named most often by both groups.

However, when participants were asked to select female role models from a diverse list of female characters from mythology, history, contemporary life, or fiction, and to order them in terms of how important they might be as exemplars personally or to Hindu women in general, first generation respondents tended to choose sacred role models (mythical characters, goddesses, sages, or saints) only slightly more often than
they chose other categories of women. In this cohort, about 52 percent chose a sacred or divine figure as a role model while 33 percent chose contemporary women and about five percent each chose a historical figure, a western woman, or a family member. No one role model predominated in the selections. Sita, Parvati and Durga were each chosen by two participants, with Mirabai, Akkamahadevi, Kunti and Saraswati each chosen once. Among secular choices, Rukmani Devi, Indira Gandhi and Kiran Bedi each received two endorsements each, followed by Sarojini Naidoo, Rani ki Jhansi, and Hillary Clinton, each chosen once.

In comparison to an earlier study which had identified Sita as the chosen role model for the vast majority of young Indian women (and men), this first generation group of immigrants to the U.S. did not identify Sita as their ideal model for women. In fact, these women were quite eclectic in their choices, with religious women chosen only slightly more often than secular figures. For example, Amanda, aged 72, commented, “For me, there are quite a few goddesses’ names that…now, they are all really ideal women, but to me, it doesn’t apply…they are ideal women, but not role models….”

When second and third choices were included in the analysis, again religious and secular women were chosen almost equally as role models but with a slight preference for “real” historical or contemporary individuals. Durga and Rani ki Jhansi were rated almost equally, followed by Sarojini Naidoo, Sita, Lakshmi and Rukmani Devi. While it seems clear that sacred role models remain viable as chosen role models for first generation women, this group is eclectic in their choices and open to the influence of
secular role models, including both historical and contemporary women, as well as women from the West, such as Hillary Clinton.

What was striking, however, was the fact that many of these women emphasized that they preferred “real” women as exemplars, especially women known to them, as opposed to “fictional” characters. In fact, when asked which female characters from fiction they might choose as a role model, none of the first generation cohort named even one fictional character. Like the women who said that sacred stories were “just stories,” these first generation women clearly saw fiction, and fictional characters, as “not real” and therefore not valid or useful as a source of role models for them.

**Second Generation**

Among the second generation cohort only 30 percent selected a sacred figure as their first choice for a role model with half of this 30 percent choosing Sita as their preferred exemplar. However, 70 percent chose a historical or contemporary “real” Indian woman as a role model, with forty-three percent of this 70 percent selecting Indira Gandhi as their first choice. Thus overall, only about 15 percent of second generation women chose Sita, while 30 percent chose Indira Gandhi. Other choices were evenly divided among several other secular characters, including Vandana Shiva (10 percent), Kalpana Chawla, Aishwarya Rai, M. S. Subhalakshmi, Rukmana Devi, Mother Theresa, and Rani ki Jhansi. Thus, again, second generation women seem to be more inclined to model themselves after “real” women rather than female characters from mythology or ancient history. For example, Rukmani voiced her opinion:

> Oh, you know, Sita was just such a wonderful wife…That’s great, but…I mean, what else was she doing…? They’re not dealing with the same context, and things that we deal with here…Honestly, I like choosing real woman….
Maya, who selected sacred role models based on them as exemplars of faith and devotion rather than as gender role models said:

There’s this lady by the name of Andal…She fell in love with the god himself, and she thinks…”You can get the love of god…through sheer devotion, and definitely god will respond to your prayers….” She was not so much a role model of how a woman should be, but of how a truly devoted person should be.

In summary, it is clear that sacred narratives remain an important influence in the lives of many first generation Hindu women in the United States although this influence diminishes significantly for the second generation. However, while the power of sacred stories and of the female role models contained within them seems to have a spiritual, devotional, inspirational, as well as cultural impact, at least for the first generation, they clearly have little involvement in shaping the gender roles of Hindu women. The reasons for the decreasing influence of these stories for the second generation is unclear and merits serious concern and further study and analysis.

These findings suggest that Hindu women living in the United States are less influenced by mythological and religious female figures as role models of womanhood than were their peers living in India, at least as indicated by the results of studies in the past decades. This influence continues to decline with the move from first- to second generation immigrants. Hindu women, in the United States at least, seem to be turning to “real” women, that is, contemporary or historical secular figures as their exemplars for women today. This weakening importance of cultural and religious narratives may raise real concerns about the maintenance of cultural identity in successive generations of Indian immigrants in the United States.
Chapter 7 is primarily concerned with the ways in which Indian or Indian-American Hindu women are exposed to pressure or influence to conform to socially expected gender role behaviors by the social environment or community in which they live or socialize and by members of their own family. Issues raised in Chapter 6 will be partially addressed by results analyzed in Chapter 7.

Influence of the Community

For the first generation cohort born and raised in India, early immersion in Indian culture on a daily basis might be expected to exert continuous influence: through neighbors and family friends; through the ethos of the neighborhood, village, town or suburb in which they live; through the cultural and social media to which they are exposed on a daily basis; and through the social organizations and institutions with which they have contact, locally, regionally or even nationally. Community influence is thus broadly defined and is intended to include any influence outside the immediate or extended family. The researcher, a first generation immigrant herself, who grew up in a small farming village in Wales, is only too aware of the loss of privacy that exists in such a bounded community and the pressure that can be brought to bear on the individual, directly or indirectly, through the family, by neighbors, by local business owners, or by community organization members who are all too aware of everything that goes on in the community. Community influence under these circumstances is often intense, laser-focused, with little to divert or diffuse it.

For the second generation group of women in this study, the understanding of “community” and “community influence” is somewhat more complex and difficult to
deconstruct and interpret. Second generation Indian-American women are immersed in two cultures to a degree that their first generation mothers can rarely attain. Second generation women are exposed to a version of their Hindu culture from birth, and experience it through the eyes of their parents, of whichever grandparents and older relatives who might be intermittently available to them, as well as of smaller enclaves of Indian immigrants, who are often linked to them through regional or religious affiliations, through temples or through local/regional associations. The cultural experience of these women is often diluted, because of lack of family time and resources, or is flawed because they lack exposure to the real, contemporary, dynamic and ever-changing culture of India, instead learning about a static culture which has already moved on.

At the same time, members of this American-born group are exposed at least from school-entry age to a Western culture-through teachers, school-peers, Western friends and their families, Western television programs, music and other media, and the behaviors, values and customs that accompany such exposure. The community-at-large provides non-Indian models of womanhood, of mothering, of family relationships, of personal and communal values and normative behaviors that are often in direct conflict with the norms experienced within their own families.

Community influence on women’s gender role behaviors in India can be exerted through recognition of sacred narratives, through the lessons about appropriate behavior conveyed by these stories, and through the models of “ideal womanhood” exemplified by the female characters and divinities depicted in them. However, the essential element in this domain in both India and the U.S. is that the gender role pressure exerted on women to conform to conventions of womanly behavior is social
pressure, aimed at bringing women’s behavior into line with socially/culturally-defined norms. In other words, narratives, especially sacred stories, and the sacred role models depicted in them, are only one of many methods potentially employed to bring about women’s socially-compliant gender role behaviors rather than being directly influential and uniquely valued in and of themselves, as demonstrated in Domain One. The role of sacred narratives in influencing women’s gender role identity within the community is not primarily religious or spiritual but is cultural and social, even political in its essence. Moreover, as will be seen, sacred narratives are only one of the many genres of stories that could influence gender role development.

**Community Influence on Women’s Gendered Behavior**

With regard to the influence of community on women’s concepts of themselves as women and to the community’s endorsement of particular gendered behaviors, the present study offers an opportunity to examine whether normative female gender roles were affected by a move from a larger, majority Hindu community, to a smaller, more encapsulated Indian community embedded within a majority Western culture. Are first generation Hindu women in the United States more influenced by community pressure than is the second generation cohort? Is it possible to discern which community (Indian or Western) has the most influence on gender role perceptions or behavior? In the present study, “community influence” is self-identified and self-reported by the women participants rather than being evaluated by any empirically developed assessment tool.

**First Generation**

With regard to the first generation cohort of Hindu women, reported community influence differed according to the age of the respondents. The finding that the oldest women reported the most awareness of community pressure to behave in socially-
endorsed gender role appropriate ways is not unexpected. One hundred percent of women over age 80 felt that their behavior as women had been controlled by social pressure. These women grew up in an India where women’s behavior, especially that of upper-class Brahmin women, was highly controlled and socially mandated. Some expressed an appreciation of the greater leniency they experienced after immigration to the United States where they felt that they had more freedom to make their own choices even though they acknowledged that there were still constraints on their behavior exerted by the Indian-American community and neighborhood in which they were embedded. For example, Sailaza, aged 82, stated: “In India, I could not get a job, because my father-in-law had a big position in the community. I like the freedom in the U.S., because I have freedom—I’m not influenced by people…outsiders.”

Grandma, aged 86, also contrasted the freedom she sees for women in the United States with the restraints she experienced in pre-independence India: “Girls weren’t allowed to go for the matriculation exam. Women usually couldn’t go to the market or anything.”

Grandma is the daughter of a prominent Brahmin family, where women were generally secluded, and restricted in their access to education away from home, as well as to public exposure in the community. She acknowledged, however, that the community pressures exerted on upper-class women did not prevail among lower socioeconomic groups where economic necessity made many regulations for women impractical.

Surprisingly, however, the sub-group of women aged 66-80 did not mention community pressure as definitional of their gender role behaviors. Not one of the
women in this sub-group referenced community influence on their gendered behavior, compared to 43 percent of the 51-65 age group, and 67 percent of the group aged 36-50.

Thus, although 57 percent of the first generation cohort overall reported being influenced by community pressures or expectations, there was no clear pattern discernible in terms of different age groups. In fact, it is perhaps surprising that only 57 percent of the women felt influenced by community pressure, in a culture and society where women are both immersed in ancient narratives of prescribed female behavior as well as exposed to the impact of both visual and textual images of women in modern India, as seen through women’s magazines, TV series and advertisements, and movies.

Some women expressed the opinion that the primary social pressure exerted on Indian women was the pressure to be married at an early age. This community expectation was also experienced by the second generation Indian-American women, although the acceptable age limit for marriage had expanded from puberty or the late teens up to age 30. Today the social/cultural expectation was seen to be that women may complete at least their undergraduate and even post-graduate or professional education before they marry, but that marriage is the only socially permissible next step.

Ele, a first generation woman in her early 50’s commented:

I was 30 when I married, you know…the level of anxiety on the part of everybody…because “Oh, my god, I have a daughter who is single…” and it doesn’t matter if you’re in school, and actually doing something worthwhile, and trying to do something for yourself, and not worried about this…there was a lot of social pressure that was very detrimental.

**Second Generation**

While community influence did appear to be a significant factor affecting many first generation Hindu women, what is surprising is the finding that the second
generation cohort perceived themselves as even more subject to and affected by community pressure than the first generation group. Overall, 70 percent of second generation women reported that they felt pressured and controlled by community expectations of their behavior as women and asserted that they modified their public, as compared to private, behavior based on the age and expectations of the social group in which they were interacting. These modifications pertained to dress, tone of voice, self-expression, eye-contact and other subtle indicators of gendered behavior.

Achoo, for example indicated that she had not been fully aware of social norms for female behavior until her own wedding, which took place in India, where she experienced social disapproval for appearing “too happy” in public: “I was seeing that the woman is supposed to be very demure, and the eyes are supposed to be downcast. She shouldn’t be too excited. I learned this outside the family…by seeing what women do….“ Sejal agreed with this analysis: “You learn the body language of respect…for other people…from female role models….“

In other words, while there is community pressure to behave in socially endorsed appropriate public behaviors for women, the pressure appears to be exerted primarily by other women, and the behaviors are learned by observing other women as role models in the community, just as mothers are considered to be the primary role models for women in family life.

Again, in the second generation cohort there was no clear pattern of responding to social pressure by age of respondent. The age-group that was most subject to social/community pressure was the 26-35 year-old group, that is, those women most engaged in establishing a public identity acceptable to their community, their peers, and
in their work-place. One hundred percent of this group claimed to experience community pressure to behave in traditional normative and socially acceptable ways. Gauri, for example, described this pressure: “If I sit neatly, with my sari on, and my hair braided, they’ll be ‘Oh, look! She’s such a good girl!’ If I’m respectfully talking in Kannada, they’ll say ‘She’s such a cultured girl!’”

However, only 50 percent of the youngest (18-25) group felt similarly pressured. This age-group included a majority of college-aged students who perhaps felt less constrained behaviorally because their immediate “community” consisted of other students who were exploring their independence for the first time and who were engaged in constructing their identities as adults. When they were at home, there was pressure from parents, as well as within their local community, to behave in socially-prescribed ways for Indian women, but at college, while they might still accept and respect their parents’ strictures, they were able to voice their own opinions more freely and to explore and express their individuality in many ways, including dress and activities. For example, Marya, aged 19, indicated that: “When it was just us girls [at college or at home], inside we could dress however we wanted, and act silly….”

Ruthi on the other hand, aged 24 and a medical student, reported that she did experience community pressure:

I do have a certain sense of shyness, or maybe conservativeness in public. I do think that society does place this kind of thing…if you go to temple in a short dress, then everyone is going to look at you funny….

In the 36-50 year-old age-group, who were already established in their careers and/or family lives, 67 percent still felt that they needed to modify their behavior as women according to the norms of the social group in which they interacted. Most of
these women believed that they had to dress and act quite differently when they were socializing with groups of Indians or Indian-Americans. They were more likely to wear Indian dress (saris or salwar kameezes) when mingling at temple, or at Indian gatherings or festivals, including music or dance concerts. Most of the women, while comfortable in western clothing when interacting socially with American friends or when they were out in the community-at-large, said that they experienced subtle disapproval if they wore western dress at Indian community events. They also indicated that they were more reserved, more socially restrained, and more reluctant to express opinions, particularly when interacting with older individuals.

Both first and second generation women had mixed feelings about community influence on their gender role behaviors. Most women were willing to accept and live with social pressures rather than overtly resisting them. However, most also valued the freedom they experienced in more westernized groups where they felt less restrained by group expectations and definitions of normative female behavior.

In general, Hindu women conceded that they experienced the need to lead “double” lives, that is, to behave one way in public, around other Indians, and another way in private, with their close friends, and in less public venues. This double life often extended to their families where they felt freer to be egalitarian in their marriages when they were not around older family members such as parents, grandparents, or aunts/uncles, but especially in-laws.

Kamala, a first generation woman aged 62, divorced and remarried, indicated that in her first marriage she was expected to keep her head covered around male in-laws. Since she has lived in the United States and has remarried, she is less influenced
by community pressure and has become more assertive and independent, living her life
with considerably more freedom.

Kamala’s daughter, Mickey, aged 20, however, despite growing up in the U.S.,
also experienced a great deal of pressure to conform to community expectations. She
commented:

It comes from media, it comes from family, from watching movies and stuff like that. You do feel pressured to be a certain type of woman…In general Indian society is very concerned with appearance, so it’s not how you are, but how you appear…things like status, what caste you are…that’s almost more important than how good of a person you are. I think when my mom was growing up, it was very important…I can understand how looking a certain way, or appearing to be more beautiful, according to the society’s standards, would help you in the process of finding a mate…I reject that…I do not emphasize my appearance…but I think that I’m actually secretly striving to be whatever the ideal woman is, and I’m falling short.

Mickey raises a point reiterated by several women of both generations, namely that both
family and community place a great deal of emphasis on a woman’s appearance, on
how she dresses, how she wears her hair, her jewelry, even the lightness of her skin.
Advertisements for a marital partner commonly stress the desirability for a woman to be
short and slender, attractive, and light-skinned (“wheat-ish”), in addition to being
educated and having a career.

Mickey commented, *apropos* her appearance:

When you’re out in public, especially like Indian gatherings and things like that…my mother always emphasizes that you have to look good…That was the main thing when you were going out. So I guess I put more effort into my appearance when I am out and about in public. As far as the behavior…for example, in public and if you’re out at an Indian gathering, I guess I just learned to be quiet, and not really have an opinion about things, and not argue with people.

Mickey’s sister, Gauri, admitted that she rebels against community (and family)
pressure to conform. She acknowledged the importance of this pressure for Hindu
women but asserted the right to voice her opinions even in situations where it is discouraged. Gauri commented:

I would hear stories about what it is to be a woman...like, sometimes in the lectures at the temple, but it always struck me as b.s., because we would be told in such a manner, “This is how a virtuous woman should act...and this is...these are all the things you should not do...” It was very prescriptive, and it was all coming from a man, so I wasn’t going to listen to it.

Marya, aged 19, however, did not see herself as having experienced any community pressure to conform to expected behavior for Hindu women. She grew up with primarily western friends and her parents are very liberal and non-conventional and are supportive of her autonomy. Her first generation mother, Bina, has never conformed to expected female behaviors and is assertive, outgoing and independent. Marya stated:

I’ve seen some people...girls...I’ve noticed that in public they have to wear certain things. They cannot wear short shorts or anything like that. And they would act different...not many, because we mostly grew up here, but I know some people who are different than mine [my family], because mine’s not the typical Hindu family, I think...but they [these other girls] would be more quiet and reserved, and very polite, and just very robotic, I think.

Rukmani, aged 33, indicated that as a young girl she often went along with community pressure to conform mainly out of respect for her mother and to avoid conflict. However, she admitted to leading a “double life” as an adult as many other young Hindu women feel they must. Rukmani confessed:

My husband and I play a little differently, depending on who we are with, whether more modernized people, or people [who are] a little bit more...people who follow a little bit more customs...I feel that we each have different facets...So, for example, if we are with friends our own age, then he [my husband] has to present it like “Oh! She’s the decision-maker. I listen to her. Don’t even ask me...” At the same time, if we are with an older generation, I may say, “Oh, please! He’s the one that makes that decision...” Our perspective tends to change depending on who we’re
with. My account changes depending on who I’m with…It’s more generational, I think.

Rukmani reiterated what several other Hindu women of both generations had conveyed. Community pressure, in fact pressure to conform from any source, seems to come primarily from elders, especially older women. Hindu women of any generation conform their behavior out of respect for older relatives or community members, at least when in their presence. However, they seem to be able to compartmentalize their lives quite comfortably and are very pragmatic about what they can do, in what circumstances, and with what audience. The function of this pragmatism will be explored in more detail in Chapter Ten.

In summary, both first and second generation women in this study acknowledged the existence of pressure to conform to traditionally expected behaviors for Hindu women, although it is interesting that in general and across sub-groups, second generation women experienced this pressure more intensely and directly and felt that they had to alter their behavior depending on the context and the audience. Much of the pressure seemed to be experienced as coming from other women, particularly older female relatives or in-laws. While first generation women seemed to value the greater freedom of action they experienced in the U.S., second generation women, born and raised here recognized that there were still restraints on their behavior to which their western friends were not subjected.

The Importance of Stories and Role Models in Reinforcing Community Influence

While community does appear to exert influence on Hindu women’s gendered behaviors, particularly in public contexts, the question remains whether the influence is a direct result of sacred narratives and of sacred role models endorsed by such
narratives, or is the pressure for traditionally valued female behavior a product of other sources of narratives, or of customary practice and social/cultural norms for women?

With regard to other sources of narratives, and role models embedded within them, which might influence the gendered behavior of Hindu women both in India and in the United States, a primary locus of influence would seem to be the media in a variety of forms. Indian women are exposed, both in India and in the U.S., to women’s magazines, advertisements aimed at female consumers, television series and telenovelas appealing to women, as well as movies, especially Bollywood movies, which depict more than one model of female behavior. All of these media sources tell stories about women and how they should present themselves, some more directly than others. Fictional works as well as biographies and autobiographies of contemporary or historical women represent another source of stories and role models as do comics and graphic novels and so on.

Often different sources of influence present competing narratives and/or non-traditional as well as traditional role models for women. While women’s magazines and Indian telenovelas often depict women in traditional roles, as home-makers, devoted wives and mothers, in male-dominated households and engaged in normative female behaviors such as cooking, cleaning, child-care and so on, other narratives might endorse counter-normative stories about women who have achieved on their own terms and who live non-traditional lives: Kiran Bedi, the first Indian woman Chief of Police; Vandana Shiva, eco-activist; Kalpana Chawla, first Indian woman astronaut. All these women provide competing narratives which offer alternative sources of community influence.
The Influence of Fiction and Fictional Role Models

Kiran Bedi, Kalpana Chawla and Vandana Shiva, however, are real women, as opposed to role models who are characters in fictional works or novels. In general, this study suggests that participants who were raised in India were not influenced by characters in Indian fiction. Only 19 percent of the first generation respondents reported any influence by fictional role models, and of this 19 percent all stated that the fictional role models who influenced them were characters in Western fiction. This group of participants named a total of five female role models from fiction, including Elizabeth Bennett, Scarlett O’Hara, and Cinderella.

On the other hand, 80 percent of second generation women acknowledged the influence of fiction and fictional role models in shaping their self-concepts as women and as sources of information about socially expected female behavior. Like the first generation group, the second generation cohort named only western fictional role models from TV shows, movies, and literature. They also named many more western role models than the first generation group. Their role models included Disney Princesses (for example, Jasmine, Belle, Esmeralda, Mulan and Pocahontas), Hermione from the Harry Potter series, all the female characters from the TV show Sex in the City, as well as characters from children’s fiction such as Ramona Quimby and Nancy Drew, and women from literary classics, such as Anna Karenina and Elizabeth Bennett. What these Western role models had in common was that in general they depicted women who were strong, confident, independent, adventurous, fearless, able to overcome obstacles, and often defiant and challenging social norms. They were seen as feminine but also tomboyish; as good-natured, but also feisty and strong-willed; as both care-free and driven; and as genuine and authentic.
Thus, it seems clear that while women raised in India do not look to fictional female characters and to works of fiction as a valid source of influence for their gendered behaviors or even as indirectly increasing community pressure to conform to a particular model of womanhood, second generation women raised in the United States are significantly more aware of and influenced by western fictional role models, especially those presenting an alternative, non-traditional characterization of women. The difference may in part be due to the fact that 40 percent of the second generation cohort were under age 25, and 70 percent under age 35, and thus may have been more influenced by TV and movies.

**The Influence of Historical Stories and Role Models**

While many participants had indicated that they had a preference for narratives about “real” women as role models despite the fact that 80 percent of the second generation group had named fictional role models as influential, it is noteworthy that neither group identified historical narratives about “real” women in history as important to them. Only 24 percent of the first generation group and 15 percent of the second generation women named any narrative about historical female characters as influential. The only historical woman named as a role model by either group was Jhansi ki Rani, who was named five times by first generation respondents and three times by members of the second generation group.

**The Influence of Contemporary Public Figures As Female Role Models**

In contrast to the lack of influence exerted by “real” historical role models, both groups of participants were influenced by “real” contemporary women in public life such as Indira Gandhi, Kiran Bedi and so on.
Eighty percent of the first generation cohort named contemporary women as role models while 90 percent of the second generation women also did so. Contemporary women in the public view were an important source of stories as well as of female exemplars.

An interesting finding is that both first and second generation participants named about as many Western as Indian contemporary women as role models. The first generation cohort named 31 Indian women and 29 western women as exemplars, while the second generation group named 22 Indian and 31 western women as role models. Again, the contemporary women named as role models were typically non-traditional in most of their characteristics. They tended to be assertive, forthright, independent and socially active. However, several of the participants also recognized and endorsed traditional aspects of these women's lives as exemplary. Hillary Clinton, for example, was praised as much for her loyalty and support of her husband despite his infidelity, as she was for her intelligence, achievement, and leaderships skills. Michelle Obama was seen as influential as much for her value as an exemplary mother as she was for her achievement as a highly skilled and successful attorney.

In summary, an examination of the many factors contributing directly or indirectly to the influence of community in shaping Hindu women’s gendered behaviors suggests that pressure exerted directly by community members or groups, often through the family, is a primary influence on both first and second generation Hindu women in the U.S., with second generation women even more impacted by such community than their first generation peers.
When considering more indirect sources of extra-familial or community influence, for example, pressure from media, such as magazines, television, movies, and literature through narratives and through female role models depicted in them, both first and second generation women were primarily influenced by narratives about real women, both Indian and Western, as exemplars of valued gender role behaviors for Hindu women today. Fictional role models were not influential for first generation women, although fictional role models from the West were a significant source of influence for second generation women. Neither group found their exemplars among women in history, either Indian or western. Both groups looked to real contemporary women either known to them or those in the public view as their role models.

**Influence of Family**

The analysis in Chapter 7 describing the influence of sacred stories and sacred role models demonstrated that while sacred stories were an important influence in the lives of first generation Hindu women in the United States, or as impacting women’s spiritual lives, as devotees or *bhaktas*, the same stories held less importance and influence for second generation women.

Sacred stories, however, whether influencing first or second generation, are only one type of narrative which may have an impact on Hindu women. This study attempts to identify which other sources of narratives might shape how Hindu women in the United States learn to understand their roles as women, and whether those other narrative influences also identify or provide exemplars of womanhood or role models with whom the women can identify.

Not surprisingly, family exerts a powerful influence on women’s perception of their gender roles and expected gendered behavior, both through stories told and heard
and passed on by women family members, primarily about other female relatives, and through the female protagonists in these family stories, who serve as exemplars of womanhood for the women coming after them.

**Importance of Family Stories**

**First Generation**

Overall, 62 percent of the first generation cohort reported being influenced by family narratives, compared to 65 percent of the second generation group, indicating that family stories are a powerful source of gender role influence both for Hindu women who grew up in India and for those who were born and raised in the United States. In the first generation group, the older women seem to be somewhat less impacted by family narratives than the younger members. Only about a third of the women aged 66 to 80 reported being affected by family stories, while 71 percent of the 51 to 65 age group and 67 percent of the 36 to 50 age group felt that family stories were an important influence.

**Second Generation**

In the second generation cohort there was little difference between the age groups in terms of the influence of family narratives. All age groups in this cohort found family stories to be a significant influence. The youngest second generation women were most affected by family stories (75 percent). For example, Adriana, aged 18, confessed: “My mom had a lot of childhood memories that she shared with me.”

The 26 to 35-year-old age group was the least influenced, although 50 percent still valued the family stories to which they were exposed. Gowri, aged 26, indicated: “My most important stories have been stories of sacrifice, where women have sacrificed for the family.”
Second generation women in the 36 to 50 age group were very comparable to the same age group in the first generation sample of participants, with two thirds of them finding family stories to be a source of influence for their perceived gender roles. For example, Achoo, aged 40, shared:

A lot of the stories that were shared with me were very personal stories. They weren’t fables or myths…They were family stories. They were, like, “This person did this to me…or, This person did that…or, Can you imagine that person did this.” And it just made me think “Wow, I can’t believe this stuff is real.

Overall, it is clear that family narratives are a significant source of influence for Hindu women in the United States, and moreover, that while sacred stories and family stories were more or less equally important to first generation immigrant women’s sense of themselves as women, family narratives were a significantly greater influence on second generation women than were the sacred stories so important to their parents and grandparents. Second generation women valued and sought out family stories but they displayed relatively little interest in and influence by the sacred stories of India.

Perhaps the most important understanding gleaned from this data is that stories and narratives are important for women, but that the type of narrative must be taken into account in terms of evaluating influence. What is it that makes family stories so important but diminishes the impact of ancient sacred stories? Are Hindu traditions as epitomized by the sacred narratives losing their importance for the second generation? If this is so, what should be done to promote and sustain interest in the cultural and religious traditions of their Indian homeland?

While the data suggest that family stories, that is, stories about family members, and about critical events or actions, narrated as entertainment, as lessons, or as a part of the family history and legacy, are of vital importance to family members, it is crucial to
inquire about the ways in which these stories about female family members are intended to influence and in fact do shape the gender role identities of female family members. These treasured family narratives may operate to strengthen traditional concepts of womanhood or to undermine or redefine them in the context of modern life. They may selectively emphasize aspects of femaleness or femininity in ways which may be embraced or rejected by different generations of women. The stories themselves are fluid and dynamic and may be reconstituted and reformed over time in repetitions selectively recalled and transmitted to convey meanings appropriate to individual listeners, or within changing family context.

When participants’ responses are examined in more detail, it is clear that each woman took different messages or lessons from the family stories to which they were exposed. Some were impressed by the strength and responsibility of women who adapted to traditional female roles, as supportive, devoted wives, as adaptable daughters-in-law, and as nurturing mothers, in other words, women for whom family needs trumped personal hopes or desires. Others rebelled against the depiction of women’s roles and instead focused on women in the family who did extraordinary things, who overcame obstacles, who took on nontraditional roles, and who forged their own paths, often in the face of much family resistance. It is generally fair to say that the majority of Hindu women in this study valued and endorsed women’s strength and power, but it will be seen in Chapter 9 that women’s definitions of “strength” and “power” are quite diverse and reflect both the personal values of the individual women and the temporal and spatial context in which their families function.
Both first and second generation women in this study indicated that family stories were important to them, especially stories about their mothers and grandmothers. Moreover, those women who were mothers themselves related that they passed on family stories to their own children, who were most interested in tales about their mother’s lives and events from their childhood. Family stories seem to represent a feeling of connectedness and contact, a sense of continuity and belonging that was experienced not only by the participants in this study but also by their children.

While sacred stories were often “just stories,” either simply entertaining or representative of Indian culture, the majority of these women did not feel personally connected to these narratives, at least not in the same way they felt connected to family stories. Family narratives helped to define these women and to give them a sense of their place in the family saga, that is, where they fit in the family tree, whom they were like, and with whom they could identify. Family stories are passed down through generations and convey lessons about women’s roles and women’s behavior which influence daughters’ and granddaughters’ self-definition, self-esteem, and understanding of themselves.

Often family stories serve to explain family conflicts and family secrets that have influenced, both in the telling and in the silences, how successive generations of women have perceived their roles, and to shape relationships in both positive and negative ways. For example, Achoo, aged 40, has had a problematic relationship with her mother-in-law, who expects more traditional behaviors from her and in her marriage than she is comfortable enacting. Achoo feels that both family stories and family secrets
(not narrated until she became an adult) have shaped both her feelings of discomfort and her strategies to resist compliance:

My mother and I had, probably as many mothers and daughters have, a complex relationship. When I was very young, we were very close, and she would share a lot of stories about her childhood, about her upbringing…A lot more stories that I hear now explain many of the things from years past, like the relationship with her family, with her mother… The strained relationship with her in-laws, all these sorts of things become clearer to me. My grandmother just passed away two years ago, and I got the stories [that my mother didn’t tell me] and I can’t believe…I didn’t realize that my grandmother was so nasty to my mom.

In Achoo’s case not only the stories her mother shared with her when she was young but also the stories she did not tell her until years later shaped Achoo's view of family relationships. Moreover, the unspoken tensions between her mother and her mother’s mother-in-law have subconsciously influenced her own relationship with her mother-in-law, as well as her feelings of resistance to and rebellion against the pressures she has experienced to adopt traditional and normative female behaviors as an Indian wife and mother. Achoo’s solution to the problem, a compromise adopted by many Hindu women, has been to act like a “proper daughter-in-law” when her in-laws are visiting, but to have a much more egalitarian relationship with her husband when they are not around. In this way, the “silent stories” enacted by her own mother and her paternal grandmother were continued to the next generation and clearly influenced her own perception of female gender roles.

Thus, family stories can be conveyed in many ways: through spoken narratives; through unspoken family secrets; through behaviors enacted within the family; and through unspoken tensions which leave the observer to construct their own explanatory narratives.
Family stories can reinforce traditional female behavior and can convey explicit messages about how women should be and what gendered values are important. For example, Gowri, a young unmarried second generation woman, said: “Probably I tend to remember more, and maybe apply more stories of family to my day-to-day life. My most important stories have been stories of sacrifice, where women have sacrificed for the family.”

Gowri was one of the most devout Hindus among all the participants, active in her temple and deeply immersed on a day-to-day basis in the sacred narratives of Hinduism. It was clear that she was strongly influenced, in her faith and devotion, by the sacred stories. But it was also clear that her understanding of her family’s gendered expectations of her was more influenced by family stories, that is, by stories of sacrifice, of devotion to family, and of traditional behaviors for Hindu wives and mothers. Gowri recounted that she had met a young Indian man of a different sect with whom she was interested in beginning a relationship. However, she felt constrained by her role as a “good Hindu daughter,” and by the respect she felt for her parents and believed that this young man would not be acceptable to them. This has caused her a good deal of pain, but she did not consider choosing otherwise. Her family narratives reinforced a view of womanhood that involved respect for parents, obedience, sacrifice, and placing the needs of family above personal preferences.

While sacred stories, as already reported, seem to have declined in importance and influence from the first generation cohort to the second, the same is not true with respect to the influence of family narratives. The second generation cohort was even more impacted by family stories than were first generation participants. Seventy-five
percent of second generation women reported that family stories were important to them compared to 62 percent of the first generation group. Moreover, it appears that the youngest women were the most affected by these stories, although all respondents in both cohorts reported that family stories were significant for them. For example, Adriana, whose mother came to the United States as a newlywed, at age 18, reported being deeply influenced not only by her mother’s courage but also by the tribulations she had faced at such a young age. Adriana said:

I knew my mom was in a situation where it was expected...She was expected to get married really early, and she was really young at the time. I respect her a lot for that...That [family story] is something I will probably always remember, and...I would just probably recount it...just because I think that’s something about my mom that was really bold, and I don’t think I would have been able to do it.

Adriana, at 18, identified with her mother’s courage and adventurousness, imagining her mother taking on challenges, at Adriana’s own age, which she cannot even imagine. Adriana is about to leave home to attend college in California, and she was clearly comparing the adventure she is facing with the much greater challenges her mother had to overcome, newly married and leaving the only family she had known to live in a foreign land with a virtual stranger.

Influence of Family Role Models

First Generation

Overall, over 90 percent of the first generation cohort named one or more female family members as an important role model for them. Eighty-nine percent of those women named their mothers as their primary role models while 11 percent named other family members.
Second Generation

The result found for the first generation was also true for the second generation group, with 90 percent naming one or more family role models and 94 percent of those role models being identified as their mothers, and the remaining role models being divided between aunts, grandmothers, mothers-in-law, sisters, and godmothers.

There was little difference between age groups in either the first or second generation cohorts in terms of identifying family role models.

Several of the women spoke about female family members, including mothers, aunts, or grandmothers who endured abuse within their family or from their husbands, and felt that, while they admired these women in terms of their persistence and commitment to their families, they also felt that they were not good role models for today’s women who had alternatives other than remaining an abusive situation. Monica, aged 40, talked about her father’s verbal abuse of her mother and expressed the opinion that her sister remains very reluctant to marry, not only because her father’s behavior has made her very uncomfortable relating to men but also because she perceives her mother as a poor gender role model, for accepting the abuse.

Influence of Mothers

As already indicated, almost all Hindu women in this study reported that their mothers, while not necessarily the main source of sacred stories, were significant narrators of family stories (along with other family members) and were the primary role models for their daughters.
First Generation.

A number of first generation participants, however, indicated that their mothers’ influence was not a result of what they told or taught their daughters but rather of how they behaved with them. For example, Lite, aged 71, commented:

My mom didn’t tell us anything…My mother was our role model. She never said, “do this,” or, “don’t do this”…We watched, we followed, and we never regretted that. I learned by following mother, seeing what she did…We all knew that once you get married, you have to adjust to your in-laws’ family.

Similarly, Amanda, age 72, affirmed: “I learned about being a woman by observing my mother, and by watching her.”

In the case of both Lite and Amanda, their mothers’ behaviors were seen as traditional, and they were evaluated as positive models of womanhood. The mothers demonstrated not only how to perform the many chores and responsibilities of being a woman and a wife and the roles of mother/caretaker/teacher for their children, but also provided exemplars of a woman’s life, how to be flexible, adaptable and pragmatic, expecting and preparing to adjust to a new family after marriage.

These mothers modeled for their daughters the fact that they were not always going to function as women in their family of origin but would have to not only suffer the loss of and dislocation from their own family, but also must learn and adjust to the gender role demands and behaviors expected of women in their new family and in their roles as daughters-in-law, wives, and ultimately, mothers.

Mothers, as role models, taught their daughters about traditional gender roles. On the other hand, they also at times demonstrated how to subvert these traditional gender roles and to empower themselves. Often, too, they sought to provide their daughters with encouragement to seek their own empowerment, through education,
achievement, and through finding ways to create alternative sources of independence and autonomy. Thus, mothers modeled for their daughters not only how to perform traditional gender roles but they also taught them how to find alternative roles which may be more liberating and satisfying. Thus, they were seen by their daughters as both positive and as negative exemplars of womanhood.

**Second Generation**

Although about a third of the first generation participants, while acknowledging that their mothers were positive role models, indicated that their mothers could also have some negative impact as examples for them of gendered behavior, only about 10 percent of the second generation felt the same way. In other words, first generation women were able to distinguish between maternal characteristics that they wanted to emulate and other traits or behaviors that they perceived as negative or to be rejected. Second generation women, on the other hand, tended to value their mothers more uncritically, and to see them as models to emulate, both in their roles within the family and their career successes.

Several mothers of both generations, but especially mothers of second generation women, specifically promoted the value of economic independence as vital for their daughters, stressing that they did not want their daughters to be dependent on a man for financial security in case they needed to leave an abusive marriage or were left to raise children alone if their spouse died or abandoned them. For example, Nutan, aged 57, the mother of second generation daughter, Sheila, stated:

I wanted her to be her own person and not be somebody else’s view of what a female should be…I wanted her to have a profession…I think I really wanted her to be able to fend for herself….
It is unclear, however, whether this concept of economic independence represents a move to modernity applicable to Hindu women both in India and in the United States or whether the message is in some way a result of westernization created by living and raising daughters in this country.

**Influence of Fathers**

Not all of the family influence and encouragement for independence, autonomy, financial security, achievement and so on, came from maternal role models or even from other female family exemplars. Fathers, too, although not a group explored in the current research, were described as having significant impact on their daughters’ gender role behaviors and even at times were perceived as supporters of the daughters’ nontraditional behaviors. While mothers were often seen as both positive and negative exemplars of womanhood for their daughters, many fathers were described as providing positive endorsement for their daughter’s movement into modern womanhood, independence, achievement, and economic success. While mothers often gave mixed or contradictory messages regarding their daughters gender role behaviors, resulting in confusion or in a sense of not being able to meet their mothers’ expectations in response to either message, fathers on the other hand tended to be clear and unequivocal in their endorsement of either traditional or modern concepts of womanhood for their daughters. They were often seen by their daughters as their primary support system whereas mothers were often seen as ambivalent in their feelings about gender roles and as ambiguous in terms of the messages given to their daughters.

Analyzing the role and influence of fathers in the present study, it becomes clear that fathers were seen as a significant force in their daughters’ lives and as having
strong feelings regarding the daughters’ enactment of gender role behaviors. Moreover, this paternal influence was clearly related to both the age of the daughters and to their status as first generation versus second generation immigrants to the United States.

**First Generation**

Among the first generation cohort, 100 percent of the older age groups (66 to 80, and 80+) stated that their fathers were very influential in defining and enforcing their roles as women. Within these age groups all the fathers were defined as endorsing traditional gender roles for their daughters. None of these fathers encouraged nontraditional or independent behaviors for women.

However, in the 51 to 65-year-old age group, 29 percent of the women did not mention any influence of father while an additional 29 percent reported that their fathers did support their daughter’s education and skill development, but only in the context of and as needed for enacting their traditional roles as women, primarily to make them more well-rounded in order to “get a better husband.” An additional 29 percent of the fathers, however, actively encouraged their daughters in becoming independent and achievement-oriented, while the remaining fathers, although supportive of their daughters, were neutral in terms of their endorsement of any gender role behaviors. Thus, this age group was split between fathers who endorsed traditional gender roles, and those who favored more autonomy for their daughters.

This dichotomy was also seen in the first generation subgroup aged 36 to 50 where one third of the fathers endorsed traditional behaviors for their daughters. Another 23 percent were neutral or un-involved and 44 percent encouraged their daughters’ independence. What is interesting, with regard to this first generation age group, is that 67 percent of the women were highly skilled professionals, working in their
careers as doctors, administrators, or professors. One was an advanced graduate student and only 22 percent were homemakers, all of whom had degrees, with one qualified as an accountant. Thus, despite the fact that a third of their fathers reinforced traditional gender role behaviors and only 44 percent encouraged independence and achievement, a full 78 percent of these women were highly accomplished, and successful in their careers. That is, regardless of the direction of paternal influence and support, it is clear that many women made their own decisions anyway.

**Second Generation**

Among the second generation cohort, 67 percent of the 36 to 50-year-old age group who were born in the United States reported that their fathers supported their daughters’ desires for careers and encouraged them to pursue whatever they wanted to accomplish. On the other hand, 33 percent of the fathers were seen as endorsing traditional gender roles for their daughters with an emphasis on marriage and motherhood. That is, while 44 percent of the fathers of first generation women in this age group supported modern gender roles for their daughters, some 67 percent of fathers of same age second generation daughters did so. Moreover while 67 percent of the first generation in this age group were highly credentialed and working in careers, 100 percent of the second generation women in the same age group were also.

With regard to second generation women aged 26-35, 50 percent of their fathers supported nontraditional behaviors, 17 percent reinforced traditional gender roles, and in 33 percent of the cases the women did not mention paternal views about gender role.

A final interesting result, however, is that among the youngest (18-25) group of second generation participants, most of whom were in the process of completing their college or postgraduate education and establishing careers, a full 38 percent did not
acknowledge the influence of fathers. An additional twenty-four percent either described their fathers as very traditional with regard to aspirations for their daughters and expectations of their gendered behavior or they perceived them as very protective. The remaining 38 percent said that their fathers encouraged them in nontraditional gender roles. It is interesting to speculate why, among the youngest first generation subgroup, only 38 percent of fathers were seen as supporting nontraditional gender role behaviors compared to 50 percent of the 26 to 35-year-old age group and 44 percent of the 36 to 50 age group. Perhaps fathers of younger women are more protective of their daughters and want them to have sheltered lives because of their age. Or perhaps parental expectations are still in the formative stage as the daughters enter adult life and prepare to complete their education, establish careers, and create their own families.

**Influence of Other Family Members**

While most of the women in this study identified their mothers as the primary role models for them as women, other family members often influenced their gender role development. Grandmothers, even great-grandmothers, aunts, cousins or siblings were often identified as role models, usually through family stories told about them. In addition, male relatives such as brothers and grandfathers were named as sources of influence.

**First Generation**

Seventy-one percent of first generation participants agreed that other family members often shaped their understanding of their roles as women compared to 55 percent of the second generation cohort. The decrease in the family influence from the first to the second generation is probably a result of increased distance from and
decreased access to extended family members as a result of immigration to the United
States, and of nuclear families becoming more normative.

Several respondents in both the first and second generation groups but
especially among first generation women indicated that their husbands often provided
positive support and endorsed less traditional gender role models for their wives. Most
first generation participants came to the United States with their husbands, often as
newlyweds, and frequently lacking many independent life skills as a result of being
raised in traditional households, sheltered from non-household responsibilities, or
secluded from public life. Many described their husbands as encouraging greater
independence, and as teaching them life skills necessary to function in the United
States, skills such as driving a car, handling banking and other financial responsibilities,
seeking and finding jobs, and pursuing higher education, as well as tasks such as
shopping, budgeting, and handling the family’s social engagements.

Amanda, age 72, for example, indicated that her husband taught her many of the
skills necessary to function in a Western country and also encouraged her to pursue a
graduate degree. Amanda appreciated her husband’s support and encouragement even
though she chose to remain a homemaker raising their two children and engaging in
volunteer work rather than holding paid employment. Amanda commented:

When I was growing up, it was a very sheltered life. We didn’t go to the
post office. I didn’t go to the bank. I didn’t know how to write a
check…Nothing. Everything was taken care of by my father. Then when
we came here…my husband used to do it in the beginning, then he said I
should learn how to do it. So I had to go to the post office, I had to go to
the bank.

Amanda was raised in a more traditional household, where women were
sheltered and had limited contact with responsibilities in the outside world. Her
relocation to the United States and her husband’s encouragement to learn new skills significantly altered her view of herself as a woman and encouraged an independence that she values.

Bina, aged 51, on the other hand, was raised in a very different way than Amanda. Her family was quite progressive, especially with regard to education for women. She commented:

In our family it hadn’t been unusual for women to be educated…Even my father’s older sisters all went to college…My father’s side were all very progressive people…not traditional in any way. Everyone has married people from different cultures, from different social groups in India, from different countries.

Despite the fact that her father and his family were “progressive” Bina indicated that: “I think the very first message I got was not good in the sense that…it was very much that a woman has to be submissive…and not rock the boat.”

Bina, however, was able to choose her own spouse and commented on the encouragement and support she has received from her husband who has treated her as an equal life partner throughout their marriage. She said:

I think when I met my husband, he changed me a lot, because he was the first person who encouraged me to say what was in my heart…to voice my feelings. And he told me the opposite (laughs). So, that changed….

Alamelu, aged 46, came to the United States as a newlywed in an arranged marriage but experienced her husband as a powerful source of support and encouragement for her nontraditional gendered behavior. Her husband shared equally in household chores and family responsibilities and encouraged her to think of their partnership as egalitarian. Alamelu commented:

My husband likes to clean…I clean as a duty, as a chore. I remember him cleaning and I got offended, and I said “Why are you cleaning? Didn’t I clean well enough?” And he said, “Well, it’s not just your home. It’s my
home too. Why don’t I clean?” It’s a completely different model of men. He loves to cook, and he’s very handy. I’m not used to that kind of male role model at home.

**Second Generation**

Second generation women in this study seemed to be more likely to take their husbands’ support for an egalitarian relationship for granted rather than viewing it as exceptional or unexpected. However, some of the second generation women recognized that older relatives, parents or in-laws, did not necessarily approve of partnerships which deviated from normative gendered roles. Achoo, aged 40, for example, admitted that she and her husband acted differently around his parents when Achoo was more likely to defer to her husband’s authority as a decision-maker and her husband was less likely to assist her in any homemaking tasks. She confessed:

> Especially around my in-laws and that side of the family, I do act differently. I try to act a little bit more subservient. I’m not as outspoken. When our children were really little…I remember the first few times that I was around my in-laws, I would ask my husband to change the diaper or something, and everybody would look at me, like, darts would be shooting at me…So I learned that that’s not a great idea for me to do in front of my in-laws. So I don’t ask my husband to do a lot of things when they are there. I will jump up and do a lot of things, where normally I would go, “Hey, can you do the dishes real quick?” I won’t do that if my in-laws are there…I’ll get up and do it…Because I know that it makes me look bad, and it makes him look bad. I also tend not to do it as much when [my parents] are there…More for him, because he feels like he’s being less manly, and I’m asking him to do too much in front of the elders.

Rukmani, aged 32, on the other hand, expects the support of her husband, she sees herself as very strong-willed and assertive, and knows that her husband acknowledges and accepts her strength and decisiveness. She stated:

> My husband is clear that I believe that we have an equal say in everything. He has always known that I am a very strong-willed woman…He has been really helpful to me in setting up [my business], both physically and for the computers, and in wanting me to succeed in this new endeavor. In fact, he was the one who originally kept saying, “You should really start your own
practice...Start while you’re young, so you can be more successful later...” Then I myself felt “Okay, I’m ready to do this.” So I did it, and he’s been extremely supportive.

On the other hand, like Achoo, Rukmani acknowledges that at times she plays down her assertiveness to protect her husband’s ego:

I let him feel that he’s the decision-maker, so ultimately I can get what I need (laughs). He does like to be the decision-maker, but he knows that if I don’t finally approve, it’s not going to happen. He will make the decision, but I’m the one that gives the final approval on it.

However, unlike Achoo, Rukmani and her husband do not feel the need to lead a “double life” in front of her in-laws. Rukmani commented: “I’m very lucky with my in-laws, because they are not of that thought that women should be respectful and constrained, and they know that I’m very much...I’m very outspoken....

Both Achoo and Rukmani chose their own husbands and their marriages were not arranged or “assisted” by their families. Achoo met her husband in medical school, while Rukmani met hers through an online Indian dating site. In many ways, they epitomize the greater independence Hindu women today are asserting both in the relationship choices they are making and in the ways they negotiate more equal relationships with their spouses, while at the same time recognizing that in certain contexts they pragmatically have to modify their behavior to cater to family and community expectations of male and female gender roles.

Thus, both first and second generation participants in this study reported that they had been influenced in their gender roles by female members of their extended family. However, the greatest source of influence for many married respondents was their husbands who were described as very supportive of their wives’ autonomy and assertiveness and as egalitarian partners. This finding was significant not only for
second generation women and their husbands, who might be expected to negotiate more western-style marital relationships as a result of being exposed to western models of marriage as romantic partnerships rather than as a contractual arrangement between families. However, it is interesting that husbands’ support of an egalitarian marriage style was also frequently seen among first generation women and their partners, many of whom had arranged marriages and had been compelled to learn to adapt to life in a new country where traditional gender roles might not be viable or practical.

The main finding from this analysis of the influence of family is that narratives told within the family and about family members are a major influence on the gendered behaviors of females. Sixty-three percent of first generation women and 65 percent of second generation women indicated that family stories were important, although the influence reported was not consistent across age groups in the first generation cohort, while the youngest second generation participants were the most responsive to family narratives.

In comparison to the impact of sacred stories, second generation women were significantly more impacted by family stories in terms of their perceptions of themselves as women. Family stories, however, at times reinforced traditional role models for women while at other times they promoted alternative gendered behaviors, such as strength, independence and autonomy.

Both first and second generation participants named and endorsed female family members as role models for women. Again, family role models could be identified as positive or negative, that is, either as traditional or nontraditional exemplars. For
example, a female family member might be named as a revered example of a traditional wife or mother or might be seen as providing a negative example to be rejected.

Almost universally, the primary role models for Hindu women in both the first and second generation cohorts were their mothers. Again, however, women often expressed ambivalence in their evaluations, identifying aspects of their mothers’ behaviors as women as positive, desirable and to be emulated, while rejecting other characteristics as constraining or negative for today’s women.

Fathers too were frequently considered to exert significant influence on the daughters’ gender roles. Fathers generally were perceived as giving unambiguous support, either for traditional gender roles or for more modern, nontraditional gendered behaviors for women. Mothers, on the other hand, were often perceived to be ambivalent and inconsistent in the gender role messages they gave to their daughters, often creating a “double bind” where daughters saw themselves as unable to satisfy all of their mothers’ expectations, that is, to behave like traditional women, wives and mothers, and to excel in education, career and married life. Many of the participants, as we will see in Chapter 10, experienced a great deal of stress in their attempts to find an acceptable balance between competing models of womanhood, and the discrepant demands of traditional and modern gender roles.

Finally, the role of other family members in influencing women’s gender role development was discussed, and here, perhaps the most interesting and unexpected finding was the significant role played by husbands in promoting nontraditional roles and behaviors for their wives. Moreover, the influence of husbands’ gender role attitudes seem to be experienced most positively by first generation women who accompanied
their husbands to a new land where they had to adapt to different models of marriage and family life. Despite a tendency to view Western-style marriages as unstable and unacceptable, most of these women and their husbands appeared to value more egalitarian marriages, although at the same time they sought to preserve traditional concepts of commitment to family, loyalty to spouses, and caretaking of children.
CHAPTER 8
IDEOLOGY OF WOMANHOOD: PATIVRATYA

During the process of data analysis it became clear that the women who participated in this study have been engaged in a constant negotiation aimed at reconciling the realities of their lives as Hindu women in the U.S. with the expectations created by an ideology of womanhood which has been pervasive in India across centuries and which has been reinforced, deconstructed, reconstructed, modified and renegotiated not only through time, but across contexts, both geographical and ideological.

The construction of Hindu womanhood and the gender roles which are intimately woven into this construction can be visualized as a tapestry in which the warp represents the influences brought to bear on women and the contexts in which these influences operate, while the weft can be construed as an ideology of womanhood (pativratya) which is represented by the longitudinal thread, the theme continued through time which creates a dynamic pattern defining women’s roles. As in any tapestry or length of cloth, the design or weft is woven into the warp, with variations, combinations and separations of thread that create patterns, forms and texture, permitting a multiplicity of options and an assortment of ways to modify or redefine the design without destroying its unity. While the original ideology may have been quite specific and rigidly followed over time and in contexts where there were few alternate competing ideologies, with modernity and globalization traditional ideologies often began to vary in the form of enactment based on input from these alternate worldviews.

In other words, Domain Three explores the ideology of womanhood which has existed for Hindu women throughout the ages and which has created a normative
definition of gender roles that has been continuously renegotiated both in India and in
the diaspora.

Within Domain Three: Ideology of Womanhood: Pativratya, three themes were
explored: a) the concept of the “ideal woman”; and the related concepts, b) stridharma,
a woman’s duty; and c) pativrata, that is, the devotion and service owed to a husband.
These themes did not emerge from the interview data as other themes did but were
specifically explored by the interviewer who was interested in whether these ancient
concepts had any relevance for Hindu women today, especially for second generation
women growing up in the United States. She was also curious about the effects of
exposure to a Western culture in which these concepts had no roots or relevance which
might influence women from a non-Western worldview.

The “Ideal Woman”

In ancient narratives, Sita was considered to be an ideal woman or wife. She
epitomized the qualities of pativratya ideology. She was loyal to her husband, faithful,
obedient, and submissive and dedicated to his welfare. She was not weak and not
necessarily passive. She resisted the advances and sexual pressures of Ravana, the
demon king who kidnapped her. She also rejected Hanuman, the monkey king’s attempt
to rescue her, insisting that her husband, Rama, would redeem her from her captivity.
But she did not stand up for herself when she was not once but twice asked to prove
her fidelity and chastity by her husband, and she meekly accepted exile for life, despite
the fact that she was pregnant with Rama’s sons. Sita was a model of wifely devotion,
the “ideal woman.” However, the results reported in Domain One suggests that while
Sita has, in the past, been the overwhelming choice for a female role model for Hindu
women in India, for the modern Hindu women living in the United States, she has
considerably less relevance and influence. The question to be asked and answered in Domain Three is whether the concept of an “ideal woman” has any meaning for the participants in this study.

First Generation

In general, first generation women were somewhat ambivalent about the relevance of the concept of an “ideal woman” in their lives. Forty-eight percent felt that this concept had no relevance for Hindu women today while 19 percent saw this concept as referring to a desirable set of values and behaviors for women. The remaining 38 percent of the first generation women felt that the concept itself had some value and relevance but that its definition and enactment should be modified depending on the context. That is, its relevance today should depend on other factors influencing women’s gender roles, such as family structure, economic considerations, single or dual-career families, geographic location, and so on. These women favored the adoption of many of the traditional characteristics of an “ideal woman” but felt that these qualities should append to their husbands too. In other words, they endorsed the concept of an “ideal person” or “ideal spouse” rather than “ideal woman” or “ideal wife.”

Grandma, at age 86 and the oldest first generation participant, felt that the concept of “ideal woman” was impossible for women to achieve and represented an unrealistic goal for or expectation of women:

No…never an ideal (laughs)...But I think that a woman can be...first of all she...a woman has a right to her opinion...I mean she has to be happy...So, being the ideal woman really doesn’t depend upon only the woman herself...It depends upon all the people around her...So there can never be an ideal woman, to my mind.

Sailaza, aged 82, while agreeing with Grandma, asserted that the concept of an ideal woman was a fiction created by men: “The Hindu woman...as long as she does
everything her husband wants, and takes care of the children and the in-laws, that is the ideal woman (laughs).”

Thus, for Sailaza, an ideal woman exists in the imagination and desire of men—but real women can never be “ideal” in all circumstances. Sailaza’s sister, Lite, aged 72, concurred, saying that while some Hindu women who are still religious might endorse the concept, she herself did not. Lite seemed to tie the concept to religiosity rather than to cultural norms.

Priya, aged 40, agreed that the concept of an ideal woman represented a male fantasy or wish: “According to my husband, an ideal wife is the person who works, does job, brings money, plus looks after everything in the house…. “

Thus, the traditional ideal wife has the added burden of working to support the family financially. Moreover, she should look beautiful while she does so.

For Amanda, age 72, however, the concept of an ideal woman is not tied to what a husband wants of his wife. Instead, she reframed the concept in terms of how a woman herself defines her own desired performance as a woman, wife, and mother. Amanda stated:

An ideal woman should be self-confident…She would have perfect children (laughs)...children who are good and smart...An ideal woman would not get upset if her children did something that was not considered good, because it's not her fault if the children did something...She would be very confident and she would...it's...it is very important to be nice...self-confident.

In other words, Amanda re-construed the concept of “ideal woman” defining it as involving standards of behavior established by the woman herself, that is, her own internal characteristics, rather than in terms of behaviors desired by the husband for his own benefit. Obviously there would be some overlap or mutual influence of these
criteria but control of the definition, in Amanda’s case, has been relocated to the woman not the man.

Amanda also commented on the idea of Sita as a traditional exemplar of the “ideal” woman: “Sita is a nice lady, and for...She lived in those days...that was...maybe she was an ideal woman for those days. If she’s dropped into the 21st century, I don’t think she’ll get along (laughs).”

Laxmi, aged 68, on the other hand, was raised to be a traditional wife and mother and for her, Sita remained the ultimate role model for a woman:

The most important person whom I liked, and whom I wanted to be like was Sita...because she was a very good wife, a very good daughter-in-law, and a very good sister-in-law, and a very good mother...She got a good name for her parents by behaving nicely...and taking care of all the in-laws' side. She is an ideal wife...She is a pativrata.

Laxmi felt that the concept of an ideal woman is not only relevant for but also attainable by Hindu women today: “I think there can be an ideal woman, even today...with taking care of the home-style duties also...and taking care of the family...with a lot of love and respect....”

Nutan, aged 57, rejected the concept of an ideal woman, commenting:

“Everybody’s idea of an ideal woman is different...right? Any woman has to adjust, and live with the circumstances that are given to her in life....”

Prabha, aged 65, drew attention to the ways in which the concept of an ideal woman has been promoted and reinforced by the media in modern times:

There’s a magazine in India called Illustrated Weekly of India, and many years ago...they had a whole series [on] “The Ideal Wife,” and...I was impressed...It focused on, you know...you feed your family the healthiest of things...you do creative things for your children’s education and amusement...you participate in fun activities with your spouse...you take care of your elderly relatives...you help out your friends...Yeah...there is definitely an ideal.
Shyama, aged 38, one of the younger first generation participants, however, redefined the ancient concept of an ideal woman:

The ideal woman, in my mind…It’s the modern woman, I think. It has nothing to do with the women of older India, but…like Indira Gandhi, I would say…She was extremely successful…she was a mother…she was a wife for a time…she raised her children very lovingly…she was very modern…That’s what I would think that you can do…I don’t know if you can do everything, but at least you can do a lot of things, and you can at least be a good mother, be a good wife…and a good wife does not mean that you have to serve your husband….A good wife means that you are caring, and you are loving and you are faithful...It doesn’t mean that you have to eat after him, or you have to always…stand by more for him, whatever he is doing.

Shyama has created a female-defined version of the ideal woman as a modern superwoman valued not so much for her loyalty, obedience, and service, but for her ability to succeed personally, while at the same time providing quality care for her family. Modern-day Sita “wants it all,” and believes she can get it for herself, do it all herself.

Among the first generation cohort, two thirds (67 percent) of the youngest women, the 36 to 50-year-olds, felt that the concept of an ideal woman was potentially viable for modern Hindu women but only if they could redefine her characteristics and take into account circumstances and context at different times in their lives. They created for themselves a postmodern view of the ideal woman that is perhaps more challenging and difficult to achieve than any ancient standard set by men in a patriarchal culture. There is an inherent risk in this in that by creating a new standard for women which might increase male expectations of their wives, women are setting themselves up for a different but perhaps even greater level of stress than traditional Hindu women had to endure.
Second Generation

The responses of the second generation women in this study were quite similar to those of the first generation. Forty-five percent said that the concept of an ideal woman had no relevance for women today while 15 percent endorsed the concept and 40 percent had an ambivalent attitude, feeling that a woman’s ability to function as an “ideal woman” depended on context and circumstances.

Achoo, aged 40, began by rejecting the concept of “ideal woman” in favor of “ideal person,” indicating that both husbands and wives should meet the same high standards of behavior and accomplishments. However, she went on to say:

I think that an ideal woman, she should be beautiful, she should be successful, she should be able to do everything...That would be great... You know, it’s hard to be the ideal woman. She should be able to, you know, solve the world’s problems, and throw a dinner party, and take her kids to soccer...Very unrealistic, I think.

Achoo laughed while she described her “ideal woman,” and acknowledged how unattainable this would be. At the same time, she herself a successful physician, mother of four children and an activist who devotes much time to the cause of health care for all, admitted that she lives in a constant state of stress and guilt, for failing to meet her own unrealistic standards, despite exerting all her energies, and accomplishing so much.

Andrea, age 39, was more realistic about the possibility of an “ideal woman.” She stated:

I think that the ideal woman...It’s always evolving and always changing with the times...I think that right now the ideal woman would be that combination of, you know, loyal to her family and her husband and her extended family, as well as have some sort of power and strength to, you know, have a career or accomplish things. And we’re seeing a lot too, especially in the Indian woman...we kind of are seeing a combination of Eastern and Western cultures merging, and even the Eastern culture is
changing...everybody is changing and evolving. So I think the ideal woman would be someone that has a combination of both. I think it’s...you do for others, but you have to do something for yourself too...Which is a change.

Monica, aged 41, acknowledged the desire of modern Hindu women to, in a sense, “have it all” or “be it all,” but to a lesser degree she accepted the standard set by women like Achoo, who strives to accomplish the impossible, and suffers as a result.

Monica agreed:

I think [the concept of the ideal woman]...I think it gets a lot of women, including me, into trouble...Because we have these expectations...As far as...I have to have something on the table, and I have to make sure my kids are going to school...Probably [I learned it] from my mom- just watching...And that’s why, when I meet women and their husbands do all the cooking, it’s such a foreign concept (laughs). I don’t doubt that my husband could do it all, but I do do it...So...I’m trying to get the dinner on the table, and bring them home from school, and finish the homework, and get all the other nonspecific things done.

Monica and Achoo are examples of women who want and believe that they can do everything, and this would be their definition of an ideal woman today. They have careers, they have husbands and children, and they want to be able to handle every responsibility thrown at them.

Younger women, for example the 26 to 35-year-olds who are developing careers, or perhaps are beginning their families, also believe that all things are possible for them, that they can succeed at career and family responsibilities. Rukmani, age 32, married with one child, said: “I think we all strive to be the ideal woman (laughs), but...What is an ideal woman? To me, an ideal woman is someone who can provide strength for the family, who is like the backbone of the family...."
Sheila, age 33, agreed: “I feel like nowadays it’s like, career and kids and house, and it’s…feel that pressure…If you’re a woman [you’re] kind of expected…like, all these things are supposed to be what you do....”

The youngest second generation women, aged 18-25, those just launching themselves into their adult life, in many ways were the most realistic about what women can accomplish and about the impossibility, even undesirability, of an “ideal woman.”

Anna, aged 18, commented thoughtfully:

I don’t think I’m a fan of the idea of something being ideal, because I think it detracts from the confidence that I think women need to tap into now...It definitely detracts from the self-confidence, and their ability to reach their potential. But I think there are core values that people...or that women in general...and I think people in general...should strive to achieve. I think there are core values that ideal people can uphold...being chaste, being noble, being honest, having integrity, stuff like that...But I don’t think it’s specific to women. For me, I think it’s specific to both sexes.

For Anna, ideal qualities have to do with living according to one’s inner values, and this inheres to men as well as women. She does not define the ideal woman in terms of her service to her husband, but more in terms of what is incumbent on a good human being.

Benni, age 20, on the other hand, while also denying the validity of an “ideal woman,” saw it more as a concept that limits women:

I don’t think there is any way to be an ideal woman, because...I feel like it...alienates...isolates different types of women...Personally, there’s a certain type of woman that I would like to be...strong and independent...I want to be very smart...I want to be assertive...But in general I don’t think that there is an ideal woman...Everybody sees how they want to be as a woman differently, you know.

Benni’s ideal woman is thus self-defined and relative in the sense that each woman conceives of and strives to become her own ideal. This is quite different from the traditional, male defined, and female reinforced concept of “ideal like Sita.”
Thus, it can be seen that overall the concept of an “ideal woman” as conceived in ancient narratives and epitomized by Sita, the loyal, submissive, obedient wife who is faithful and compliant to her husband’s wishes, appears to have little relevance in the lives of Hindu women in the United States today. For those women who acknowledged any potential value for this concept, most appeared to deconstruct the patriarchal aspects of the ancient notion and to redefine it in terms of desired personal characteristics (often the “superwoman” fantasy), or in a more egalitarian fashion in terms of desirable characteristics for both men and women, husbands and wives, or for an “ideal person” or “ideal human being.”

An examination of this construct, however, supports the hypothesis that Hindu women today, rather than rejecting or repudiating traditional values and ideologies, have deconstructed and reconstructed them to fit the time and context in which they might apply, in order to bring about a shift in the locus of control from a patriarchal worldview to a more egalitarian approach to gender roles, based on negotiation and mutuality within relationships and on an acceptance of self-definition for both males and females.

**Stridharma**

The development of the concept of an “ideal woman” evolved at least in part from a worldview which articulated that a woman has a duty or responsibility which is separate and distinct from the dharma or duty which all human beings have to maintain order.

The smrti literature which formulated and documented Hindu codes of conduct specified stridharma as the proper duty for women. The concept of stridharma mandates that a woman’s primary, if not sole responsibility, was the care of her
husband, physically, emotionally and spiritually. All her activities as a wife and mother were offered as service to her husband. Meticulous performance of *stridharma* constituted a woman’s only path to salvation, at least in Vedic times, and *stridharma* has remained the socially mandated duty for women throughout the centuries.

In the present study, however, women were asked whether the concept of *stridharma* had any meaning or relevance for Hindu women in the United States. Many participants were not familiar with the concept but were able to respond when it was explained to them.

**First Generation**

Sixty-two percent of first generation women responded that the concept of *stridharma* had no meaning for their lives in the United States. Thirty-three percent endorsed the definition of *stridharma* in the context of their own view of their responsibilities as a wife, and of their gender role within the context of their marriage. The remaining five percent felt that the concept of *stridharma* delineated appropriate and desirable behavior within a marriage but felt that this understanding of *dharma* applied equally to both husband and wife.

Although it might be expected that age would be a factor in acknowledging *stridharma*, in fact the two oldest participants, Grandma, aged 86, and Sailaza, aged 82, both claimed to be unfamiliar with this concept and both felt that there was no *dharma* (duty or obligation) that was specific for women only. Grandma stated: “*Dharma* is how you lead your life…No typical *dharma* for women…*Dharma* is *dharma*…” Sailaza agreed: “*Dharma* is *dharma* for everybody, women or men…or a child…I don’t know that idea [about *stridharma*] (laughs).”
Within the subgroup of first generation women age 65 to 80, as predicted Lite, Sailaza’s sister, also denied the existence or relevance of the concept of *stridharma*. Amanda, however, aged 72, felt that a modified version of *stridharma* should be followed by Hindu women today. Amanda attempted to justify following *stridharma*:

I would think so [that there is a woman’s *dharma*]. There are certain things that I do which I don’t very much enjoy...cooking...But I think now it’s a *dharma*...almost like my duty. And I do certain things...I don’t know if it’s my duty, but I would like to do it because...women do it, you know.

Laxmi, aged 68, who held the most traditional values in the first generation cohort, endorsed the modern relevance of the concept. Laxmi referred to Sita as an example of a woman whose *dharma* was devotion to her husband. She commented:

She [Sita] is an ideal wife...She is a *pativrata*...because she thought her *dharma* was to take care of her husband...and she wanted to follow her *dharma*. Everyone has their own *dharma*...Her *dharma* was to take care of her husband, and that’s very important.

Laxmi did acknowledge, however, that it might be difficult for Hindu women in the diaspora, particularly in the United States, to obey the *dharma* or obligations of a wife toward her husband. She stated:

I think that it is difficult for women to follow that *[stridharma]* in this country at this time...because women are nowadays working too, so they have also a lot of issues going on at work...So they may not be ready to go through the *dharma* that easily. It is difficult for them...It’s a hard act...but I think if one wants to, they can still do it...like, taking care of a husband is not hard.

Laxmi’s analysis identifies two important points. First, she links the concept of *stridharma*, *pativrata*, and “ideal woman,” thus delineating a precise ideology of womanhood which is husband-focused and which operates for the primary benefit of the husband. Second, she introduces the issue of context and time, indicating that changed circumstances, such as a wife working outside the home, may alter the way in which a
woman’s *dharmic* duties may be performed or even whether they can or should be
performed at all. In sacred Hindu literature, in the *Dharmashastras*, Epics and *Puranas*,
*stridharma* was a fixed and nonnegotiable obligation for a wife, and all women were
expected to become wives.

In the first generation 50 to 65 age group, the pattern of responses varied
slightly. Forty-three percent of these women accepted the concept of *stridharma*,
although some felt that the actual performance was negotiable and involved context as
a factor which determined the kinds of behaviors women might be expected to perform.

Maria, aged 51, for example, responded:

I guess the old idea of *stridharma* had a lot more rules attached to it…That
women had to…that you had to do certain things within the family, or
certain things with their husbands, for…wives had duties too… I mean, we
all have duties now too, but in a different society, I guess…It really does
still apply, but not in that way…I mean it is…as long as it is not forced on
you…You have to share a burden…share, I think.

Maria acknowledged the existence of *stridharma*, but saw it as contextually
determined. Moreover, she restructured the concept to introduce both the element of
choice (“as long and as it is not forced”) and of equality (“you have to share a burden”),
translating a fixed mandate for women into a responsibility shared equally and chosen
by both husband and wife.

Maya, aged 56, also validated the concept of *stridharma*, but again expressed
the opinion that some of the obligations of a wife should be shared by the husband:

We are supposed to [influence our husbands to do good]. Those are some
of the *dharmas* of the wife. They call it *dharmapatini*…a wife who always
believes in [encouraging a husband’s good works…]. In the strictest sense
I’m not a *pativrata*. In those days, whatever a husband said, a wife used to
do…cooking, cleaning, so many things…For me, I can do for family to
some extent, as far as I can do, as much as I can do…In general, be a
good person…things like that will be more or less the same for wife as
well as…for a woman as well as for a man…But for men it could be
usually “Take care of your family…”…that would be his main dharma…duty…A wife’s duty would be to take care of her husband and her children…different way. To a large extent [the concept still has meaning]…but these days people are…woolly minded…They are all eager to do things on their own…they don’t worry about other things in life….There are people who still follow that [stridharma] to some extent, I think. We are probably doing it in an indirect way, in different ways…Maybe not the same as they are doing it in the past.

On the other hand, 43 percent of this group refuted the idea of stridharma. Nutan, age 57, felt that the idea of a specific dharma inhering to a woman or a wife was unacceptable:

She [a woman] has a duty to be the way that she should…that she wants to be…She should be herself, I think. Her duty is to be herself…But that doesn’t mean that she can be herself and hurt other people…I don’t think it [stridharma] is that sort of duty…a specific duty for her to act in a certain way…I don’t think a woman has to have children, or has to behave in a certain way in order to fulfill her dharma…No…I don’t.

Bina, too, rejected the idea of stridharma:

I think stridharma, for me, has absolutely no meaning…I mean, she [a woman] can go ahead and do as she likes…but if she becomes a mother then? Would you say that stridharma has something to do with being a wife? I would see it in two ways…If, and only if you get married and have children…If you don’t, I don’t think it has any meaning.

Just as Raina linked the concept of gender roles to becoming a wife and mother, commenting that differences in gender roles have no meaning outside this context, for example, in the working world, so Bina links the concept of stridharma as she understands it, to becoming a wife and especially a mother. Women do not have a dharma that inheres to them as women, but wives and mothers may have specific responsibilities that are dharmic in nature. Even here, the dharmic duties of a wife and mother are attached to the family, especially to the children, rather than having a soteriological connection to the husband and to his salvation.
Within the youngest subgroup of first generation women, those aged 36 to 50, fewer respondents made any kind of endorsement of the concept of *stridharma*. Seventy-eight percent of this subgroup rejected the concept while only 22 percent considered it to have any relevance for Hindu women today. Ele, for example, aged 50, responded:

Sathya Sai Baba…One of the things he always talks about is *dharma*, and his definition of *dharma* is “right conduct”…irrespective of sex, irrespective of roles in life, irrespective of everything…So you just have to do what is appropriate…Your conduct is decided by whatever role you play [as a wife, as an employee…] but over and above all of that is the fact that you have to act in accordance with the Higher Self.

Ele went on to say:

I would say that in the current situation, if you were to really look at the *stridharma* as prescribed in the old days…that kind of *stridharma* would be able to be fulfilled only if the men were exactly the way they were in those days…if they were virtuous, if they were strong, and they were providers, and they took care of everything…Then I think it would be easy for women to act exactly in accordance with *stridharma* as it is laid down…But things have evolved…changed a lot since then…They tell you that a woman has to be like Sita…long-suffering…But Sita’s husband was Rama, and he was an epitome of *dharma*…He was an epitome of a human being, he was the epitome of a king, he was the epitome of a man. So when you have somebody like that, then it’s very easy to be Sita. But if you have somebody who is not doing that, and he expects just the females to be Sita…It doesn’t work that way.

**Second Generation**

While 62 percent of the first generation group found the concept of *stridharma* to be irrelevant for today’s women only 45 percent of the second generation agreed with this, compared to 35 percent who felt that *stridharma* had meaning for them and 20 percent who felt that responsibilities or duties should be shared equally by men and women.
Moreover, while 78 percent of first generation women aged 36 to 50 rejected any understanding of *stridharma*, only 33 percent of the second generation women in the same age group did so. Fifty percent of second generation women aged 36 to 50 did endorse some kind of acceptance of the concept of *stridharma*. This is unexpected, and somewhat difficult to explain.

Andrea, aged 39, for example, responded:

I didn’t really know that’s what it is called…but I think there is almost like a code of conduct for women…as a daughter, wife, or…mother…I think the woman plays a very strong and powerful role in keeping the family together, and maintaining the relationships…I think it’s the responsibility…to be that…kind of that central stone of the family, to keep the family together.

Andrea, then, clearly sees women as having duties or responsibilities as women, but for the family as a whole, rather than in the traditional sense of *stridharma* as a duty to her husband. Again, Hindu women today seem to be employing pragmatic strategies to redefine ancient concepts so as to make them appropriate for and acceptable to women in different times and contexts.

Faye, aged 43, on the other hand, accepted a version of *stridharma* as very much alive for today’s women:

I believe that there is such a thing as a woman’s *dharma*…I think there are wifely duties…I believe culturally, it’s the way I was raised…and I saw it, and I understand it to be the case…But I think it actually goes across many cultures…I think a wife in general, in any culture, has responsibilities.

However, Faye went on to qualify her opinion:

I think it could work differently…It depends on the person, and I think it depends on the circumstances, and I think people who are brought up here…that should be an independent decision of a couple…how you do it is up to the couple…With the Hindu women that I’m exposed to, it’s very much there…and it’s not for people like…who don’t associate that much with the culture, because they were brought up here, or they have different
views, or their parents are very liberal…It depends on your parents, and how they educated you about that role.

Thus, according to Faye, for women who grew up immersed in Indian culture, the concept of *stridharma* is very familiar and acceptable but for those raised in a different culture, the definition of *stridharma* is relativistic, and can be chosen, rejected or modified according to the desires of the marital couple.

Younger second generation women, however, were less willing to endorse or even consider the concept of *stridharma* as having any relevance in their lives. Sixty-three percent of the youngest age group, aged 18 to 25, rejected the notion of *stridharma*, while 25 percent accepted that it had some relevance for them as Hindu women, and 13 percent were somewhat open to some of the ideas, depending on context.

Anna, for example, aged 18, rejected the concept of specific duties for women: “There isn’t a particular *dharma* for women that says that they need to act this way, or this way, or this way…I don’t uphold something like that personally (laughs).”

Amber, on the other hand, also aged 18, accepted the idea of specific responsibilities for women:

> Every individual has responsibilities of their own, and for a woman it’s to take care of her family, and her husband especially…it’s still seen that way…Part of a woman’s *dharma* is that she must have children…to produce children she must marry.

In the 26 to 35-year-old subgroup however the women were divided in their attitudes toward *stridharma*. Thirty-three percent felt the idea had some validity while 33 percent rejected it and 33 percent felt that acceptance of this concept depended on exigent circumstances.
Gowri, age 26, expressed her belief that *stridharma* is still meaningful in the lives of Hindu women:

There is still such a thing as woman’s *dharma*...Nowadays more and more women are working and...the kids get slightly neglected...as more and more women are adapting and maybe having children late...it plays a role in their relationship with their children and how their children are...So for me, *stridharma* is huge...It means putting family first...It’s building those principles of how religion is really important...It’s a woman’s responsibility.

Rukmani, age 32, on the other hand, is indifferent to the concept of *stridharma*:

“It’s not really…I don’t ever think about that *[stridharma]*.”

However, Sheila, age 33, endorses the concept, although she feels that a woman’s *dharma* is somewhat different from the *dharma* she perceives as pertaining to all people:

*Dharma* is like the way you live your life...the morals and the values that you live by...I think it’s a little bit different for women, just because I feel like...I don’t know if this is a message that has sort of been passed down subconsciously, but I think women are stronger in a sense...that they are able to pick up the pieces and move on more quickly than men. That’s like the...that’s what I feel...women are able to...have an obligation to...I do think it’s more...as far as the health of your family...I feel like it’s more a woman’s responsibility...because I feel like men are less likely to take care of themselves.

In general, then, the concept of *stridharma* has more meaning for first generation women born and raised in India than it did for the second generation cohort, although many first generation women confessed to feelings of ambivalence about its applicability or acceptability for women today. This was true especially for the youngest first generation group, aged 36 to 50, where 78 percent refuted the idea. Second generation women expressed more confusion about the concept and often did not understand the definition of *stridharma* in its original form. While the younger second generation subgroup tended to reject or redefine the concept, 61 percent of the 36 to
50-year-olds surprisingly endorsed some version of it. Overall, the participants in this study accepted the idea that women should be responsible for child care and the management of the home but they were somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of submission to a husband. Many of the younger respondents preferred to reconstruct this concept to be applied equally to both husband and wives.

**Pativrata**

The concept of *pativrata* represents, in a sense, the third leg of the *pativratya* ideology stool. A *pativrata* is a wife that fully embodies the concept of *pativratya*, the Hindu ideology of womanhood that has been followed for millennia, that is the foundation of gender roles for Hindu women in India and potentially in diaspora communities also. The definition of *pativrata* according to the Oxford English Dictionary is “a loyal and devoted wife,” but the reality of the traditional understanding of this term goes far beyond that. A true *pativrata*:

…should never think that she has an existence apart from her husband. His needs should be hers. She should become one with him in every sense of the word… A *pativrata* knows that her salvation lies in her devotion to her husband and to him only… She believes “[Pati pratyakasha devatha](https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/en/definition/hindi/pativrata) (husband is the living God).”

The construct of *pativrata* as epitomized in mythology by women such as Sita, who went through fire to prove her loyalty and chastity to her husband Rama, or Savitri, who negotiated with the Lord of Death to reclaim her husband’s life, may be an impossible standard for any woman at any time but millions of women in India still strive or are required to perform like *pativratas*. This analysis attempts to ascertain whether the concept has any meaning for Hindu women in the U.S.; whether it influences their

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beliefs or behaviors in any way; and how they have negotiated with it, deconstructed, reconstructed, modified or rejected it in their lives as women, wives and mothers in the United States.

**First Generation**

The majority of first generation respondents rejected the concept of *pativrata* as having no applicability in their lives today. Overall, 71 percent of the first generation group did not validate the notion of *pativrata* for a Hindu woman, 10 percent endorsed the concept while the remaining 19 percent felt that it described behaviors and attitudes that were desirable for both men and women.

Not surprisingly, the oldest members of this group, those women between the ages of 66 and 86, were most supportive of or at least familiar with the responsibilities of a *pativrata*. All of the oldest women (that is, Grandma and Sailaza) felt that some of the responsibilities designated for a *pativrata* (devotion to a husband, for example) were still desirable but should be expected from the husband as well as from the wife. Sailaza, for example, said: “Wife follows the husband…Husband follows the wife, and the *pativrata* goes both to husband and wife… It’s called *patnivrata*…”

Grandma, on her part, commented:

*Pativrata*, to me means one who is faithful to the husband, who understands him…And sometimes there will be differences of opinion, but then it is better to…[give in] If it doesn’t go against your principles…That is what I feel is *pativrata*. But what happened later is that…the husband can do anything, but you always have to be obedient to him…and, no…I don’t like that…Submissiveness is not acceptable to my heart.

Thirty-three percent of the 66 to 80-year-old age group also endorsed the idea of *pativrata* for Hindu wives as did 43 percent of women aged 51 to 65, while not surprisingly, only 22 percent of women in the 36 to 50 age group felt that this concept
had any relevance for them and a resounding 78 percent rejected the idea of “husband as Lord”.

Amanda, age 72, for example, commented: “That’s not something that women today would follow…I don’t think they do…Women are getting more independent….”

At the same time, she admitted that some women in her social group did cater to their husbands, did not eat before them, and gave them the choicest foods: “We would make fun [of them] actually…when we…when some of our friends get together…I think it is a little bit outdated….” Amanda conceded, however, that there are still women in India and the U.S. who will attempt to emulate the behaviors of a pativrata:

You know, there may be some women who do it. I’m sure there are Indians…lots of women…who don’t think like me. I know there are some…I’ve met some…and they wait on their husbands hand and foot, and they do everything there…Anytime you go to their house they have all these nice things cooked, and all that stuff…There are lots of women [like that].

Thus, Amanda rejects the idea of being a pativrata for herself but acknowledges that there are Hindu women among her acquaintances for whom being a pativrata is a reality of life.

Kannaki, aged 57, also rejected the idea of pativrata as a standard for women to emulate: “I never believed in that [the concept of pativrata]…I never believed in that, and I think that was just…not right…He’s [the husband] not the Lord….” Maya, aged 56, on the other hand, while denying that she aspired to be a pativrata, stated:

I don’t think I’m a pativrata in any way…But I am sincere to my husband, as far as pativrata aspect is concerned…meaning I’m devoted to my husband…I’m willing to sacrifice anything for him…All that I am willing to do…It’s just that I’m not a person who…for instance, the ancient practices would be men have food first, and their ladies have it last, and things like that…I’m not like that…I’m more practical. If you’re hungry, you eat. So that’s the type of thing I’m saying. In the strictest sense, I’m not like that…In today’s world you should be more practical, not in persistence of being
a *pativrata*….As long as you’re sincere and loyal to your husband, that’s enough.

Maya is demonstrating a pragmatic approach in that she is identifying what for her are the core values of a *pativrata*, that is, loyalty, sincerity, fidelity, trust and even friendship, but is rejecting many if not most of the rules which specify how a husband should be obeyed and served.

Alamelu, for example, acknowledged that some women still followed at least some of the mandates for the *pativrata* but felt that for most Hindu women today, it was unacceptable:

I think my mom [was] a *pativrata*…I mean that’s your lot, and that’s how it is, you know…you serve your husband…So, yes, actually they are…my mom, my mother-in-law, they are all…definitely. I am too, I think…but mine is not completely unconditional…you have to earn it to a certain extent…Now it’s more that you’ve got to earn my respect…so if you don’t deserve it, you lose it…but it’s not because I’m not…It’s a given unless he doesn’t deserve it at all. [But] it has to be mutual…absolutely it has to be mutual. I think it was more skewed in favor of men, and I don’t think it is any more.

Lalita, aged 47, who is unmarried, commented that the concept of *pativrata* still has resonance for girls and women in India today:

I grew up with many conservative young girls who are doing the Monday fasting for a good husband. It [*pativrata*] definitely has [meaning for women today]…In India, it continues to be strictly imposed…I couldn’t generalize…because things happening in the cities are a little different…But [in smaller communities]…It is imposed…especially in the conjoined families. And if a woman is not conforming to that, her life is misery.

However, Lalita agreed that she did not know many Hindu women in the United States who followed the precepts of *pativrata* and shared that her married sisters did not believe in the tradition.

Among the younger first generation women, age 36 to 50, 84 percent did not support the tradition of *pativrata* while the remaining 17 percent were willing to concede
some value to the concept but only if defined behaviors were expected of both spouses. The understanding of service to the husband “as if he were a God” was entirely absent from this definition.

Priya, aged 40, rejected the idea of being a pativrata in her own family but admitted that: “My parents…I should say my mother has been like that. She used to touch my father’s feet and all, whenever…at Diwali or Dasara, or at big festivals.”

Thus, younger first generation women were more aware of the tradition of pativrata than those women not raised in India and many had observed it enacted by their mothers or grandmothers. However, it seems reasonable to conjecture that the tradition may be eroding even in India and that for the next generation it may have no meaning at all.

**Second Generation**

Among the second generation group, the concept of pativrata overall had no meaning. These women were either unaware of the traditional behaviors of a pativrata, rejected the idea altogether or attempted to redefine it. Seventy-five percent of this group did not acknowledge the possibility of a pativrata while 25 percent responded that adopting some of the attributes of a pativrata was possible but should depend on the circumstances.

Eighty-three percent of the older second generation subgroup of women who were generally married with children, did not acknowledge or accept the idea of pativrata. Achoo, aged 40, for example, responded: “I don’t even know what that is…It has no meaning for me…I don’t see my husband as a god (laughs).” Andrea, too, age 39, was unaware of the tradition of pativrata:
I don’t know if I’m familiar with that…Our generation, I feel like we respect our husbands, but I don’t know if we necessarily think of them as divine (laughs). But my mother-in-law…my father-in-law just had surgery last month, and before he went into the OR, she bowed down to his legs. He was on the stretcher about to be wheeled into the operating room, and she bowed down to his legs and kind of prayed…to him, as if he were a God, you know. So that was very…impressive for me to see and to observe…such devotion, and such a divine respect for her husband, you know.

Faye, aged 43, who is unmarried, acknowledged that she was familiar with the behaviors of a *pativrata*:

My mother serves my father like that…Very much so. I mean, they were married almost 50 years…[but] my contemporaries…that’s not the case (laughs). They are like “What? You pick up your own socks.”…It’s very much more balanced…I think it’s very nontraditional. I think it’s generational…because I think Indian women who were either educated or have grown up in this country were very much more forward-thinking than traditional-thinking, even if they were brought up traditional.

Faye seemed to think that changes in acceptance of the *pativrata* tradition are both generational and a result of education as well as of the influence of a Western culture.

She acknowledged, however, that even women who were raised with a *pativrata* model within their family were not accepting the same kind of relationship between husband and wife in their own marriages.

On the other hand, Monica, the wife of a physician, while vehemently rejecting the concept of a *pativrata*, rationalized her “choice” to engage in many of the traditional behaviors:

No, *[pativrata has no meaning for me].* Again, I do it because it’s the right thing to do. I might get annoyed by it sometimes, or I do it because I don’t want to have to hear about it (laughs)…but I do it because it’s the right thing to do. I don’t…and my husband doesn’t believe it either…at all…But, you know, there is dinner on the table every single day…He doesn’t expect me to make it…He yells at me…not yells, but he says “Why do you go through all of this effort? If it’s a tough day, just do take out.”…He’s very…he’s not like “There has to be an Indian meal….” I do it for myself, and I do it for the kids, and I do it for him, whether he wants it or not.
(laughs)...I'm doing it because...[I'm]...I would say a good mother...maybe a good wife.

Thus, while the ancient understanding of a pativrata as responsible for her husband's salvation has been lost, and many of the culturally enforced rules of behavior for a wife are being eroded, even the second generation women have absorbed, by osmosis almost, an understanding of what is expected of a good wife and mother. Moreover, even if they have also incorporated egalitarian values from a Western culture, they feel impelled to follow these behaviors and experience internally generated guilt if they do not, or rationalize their behavioral choices in many different ways.

The group of second generation women aged 26 to 35 who are in the process of creating their own families were in some ways more open to negotiating the behaviors expected of wives and husbands. Sixty-seven percent of this subgroup felt that the concept of pativrata had no meaning for them while 33 percent again felt that the negotiation of gendered behaviors in a marriage depended on context and circumstances.

Sheila, age 33, one of the two married women in this subgroup, refuted the tradition of pativrata:

It doesn’t have any relevance to me. Like, in our life we don’t...my husband doesn’t expect that...I don’t think he would know what that meant, either. I mean, even when I was growing up, that was never done. I mean, my mom definitely made sure my dad had...like, when he came home from work, he had a snack waiting for him. She packs his lunch for him...but she wouldn’t...my mom never ate after him...we always ate at the same time. I have respect [for my husband] but I feel like it’s a healthy respect, not where he’s put up on a pedestal, where he’s more than I am...it’s mutual respect...That whole concept of pativrata has gone by the wayside.

Raina, aged 25, contemplating a marriage in her future, admitted:
I actually don’t know what that [pativrata] is…I might see that later in life, but right now I think that…Sure, I have fights with my parents, because they’re my parents, but if I’m supposed to put somebody on a god pedestal, then it would be my parents…It has to do with the fact that at this point I’m not in a…a boyfriend is not a husband, so right now, at this moment, if I have to think of somebody as a god, it’s going to be my parents…But once he becomes my husband it’s different, because then that becomes the number one person…Possibly he would be on that pedestal…But not serve…we are equals…Because I imagine he would do the same for me…It’s not like “My whole life is for you…” That won’t happen.

Raina is not averse to putting a husband on a pedestal but expects to be standing on the pedestal next to him with a mutual agreement to treat each other well.

Gowri, the most conservative and religious member of this subgroup, referred to sacred stories and role models to support her argument that despite the tradition of pativrata, women were often revered within their marriages and treated with the utmost respect and equally valued:

As our scriptures have also established…like the relationship between Parvati and Shiva…even though she says “You are a god,” and everything like that, likewise he turned around and said “You are nothing less….” I think that plays more of an important role now, because women are so perceived as more timid or less developed, like gender…So for me…like Sarada Devi and Ramakrishna, the fact that he put her on a pedestal and was praying to her was huge. That was not very long ago, you know… These are real people who apply it…that equality…Man is the head of the household…but I don’t think it means that women are not…It used to mean that women would eat last, and serve the husband first…which is still there…It’s my mom’s nature…first she’ll do my dad, and then she’ll do the kids, and then she’ll serve herself, because her mother did it…But I don’t think it means… I think it’s just sincerity… It just shows care… I mean, would I personally do it? Maybe not…But I do appreciate the fact that [my mom does it].

Gowri seems to be struggling to reconcile her conservative religious values and the reverence she has for tradition with how they actually operate or should function in the “real world.”
Finally, 75 percent of the youngest members of the second generation cohort (aged 18 to 25) also felt that the tradition of pativrata was not meaningful for them while 25 percent again felt that women’s behavior within a marriage depended on circumstances. Many of this younger group had little or no exposure to or understanding of the concept. Adriana, aged 18, said:

I have no idea what that means (laughs). I mean, it’s a respectful concept and it really shows...how love could be expressed. But personally I don’t think that I would probably think this of my husband, just because I think male and female should be...were...equally valued in their family, and that...the husband should value his wife...as much as she values him...I don’t know if [that concept] still exists in some households, but I feel like in the families I know and interact with, the males and females have mutual respect...I’ve seen that [traditional behavior] with my grandparents...my maternal grandparents, but...my other grandparents...they don’t do that...So I think it’s just maybe my grandpa...who still thinks that concept should still exist, and my grandmother adheres to it.

Anna, aged 18, also claimed to be unfamiliar with the traditional concept:

It’s not a term I’m very familiar with, but just the idea that husband is god, so therefore you should be sort of undying in your affection and devotion...I don’t think I would necessarily uphold that...For me it becomes sort of a discrepancy between duty and actual love...I would kind of do [things for my husband] out of love...but I wouldn’t want to do it...have to do it out of duty...That’s where I would make the distinction. And at the same time, I think it should still be sort of mutual and reciprocated.

Anna distinguished between notions of “love” and “duty” in evaluating the behaviors of men and women within marriage, although in other areas of her life she had a clear understanding of dharma and of her responsibilities as a good human being. This reflects the younger generation’s focus on romantic relationships rather than on marriage as a contractual agreement between families. Marriages based on romantic expectations are unlikely to incorporate the concept of pativrata into gender roles enacted by the marital couple.
Despite her unfamiliarity with the concept of *pativrata*, Mickey, age 20, had internalized an awareness of differences in gender role expectations between Hindu men and women:

I didn’t know the exact term, but you mentioned the Lord being the husband, and it’s kind of weird because I feel that even when you try to get away from that, it’s still inevitable…Just because so many Indian men in particular, that I have met, do have that sense of entitlement…Just when you meet them you just get that feeling that they have that sense of entitlement…Like, they were always babied…they tend to be very sheltered, and their parents took very good care of them…Like, privileged…and they do have that sense of entitlement where they kind of expect to have whatever kind of life they want, and they don’t expect you to have an opinion, and it’s really uncomfortable…You know, that feeling of Lordship is very prevalent among the Indian community, even if they are in America…I kind of shy away from it.

Finally, Amber, aged 18, also stated: “I don’t know what that concept is…I actually do believe that, but I also believe that it should be mutual.” Amber, who comes from a very conservative, traditional family, questions her mother’s enactment of *pativrata*-like behavior:

I always question my mother when I say “Why are you the one praying for his good life, or his longevity, when no one is praying for you in return?”…So I always question that…She says “I don’t know why, I just do what I’m supposed to do…” So she just prays for him because that’s what her mother had told her. So, I feel like because we came to America, and now this is the next generation, right…from India to here…I have questioned it because of all the equality I’ve seen here, so I think that, yes, I do believe that…and I will pray for my husband and whatnot…But I still believe that they should do the same for us.

Amber, a very inexperienced 18-year-old, is struggling to negotiate a balance between the traditional expectations of women’s behavior promoted within her family and her own observation of more egalitarian gender relations at college. She clearly wants to construct a model of female behavior that preserves the traditions she values while permitting her more freedom of choice in her future.
The view that husbands or men in general are weaker, in that they need to be taken care of and protected in the same way that a child needs protection, is a notion that was expressed by several women in this study and may represent one of the streams of influence responsible for both constructing and maintaining the tradition of the *pativrata*. On some levels, women have been seen as both necessary for a man’s comfort and salvation and as powerful and therefore needing to be restrained and controlled.

It is clear that in some ways the tradition of *pativrata* is seen by women in this study as an idea whose time has gone by the wayside, eroded by modernity and globalization, and by exposure to other cultures and alternative worldviews. They see the underlying ideology and the resulting rules for women’s behavior as irrelevant and unacceptable for today’s Hindu women. On the other hand, it is clear that many Hindu women in the U.S., as exemplified by the women in this study, have incorporated and modified what they see as the core values of *pativrata* into their lives as wives and mothers. In Chapters 9 and 10, analysis of themes relating to Domain Five (The “I” in Ideology, and Domain Six, (Resolving Ideology: The Juggling Act), demonstrate how Hindu women in the U.S. justify maintaining traditional behaviors for women within marriage and assimilating the Western values of equality and individuality in order to create a new hybrid tradition which maintains their cultural values of womanhood in a vital and dynamic way.
CHAPTER 9
THE “I” IN IDEOLOGY: THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF

The analysis of Chapter 8 was primarily concerned with the construction of gender roles for Indian women and in particular the role played by traditional ideologies of gender for contemporary Hindu women in the U.S diaspora. Chapter 9 has a more personal and interior focus, looking instead at women’s own aspirations and wishes with regard to defining or re-defining their gender roles in a new culture. Four themes have been identified as important to Hindu women immigrants in this regard.

Past studies have stressed the significance of India as a collectivist rather than an individualistic culture, in which a person’s roles and functions were thought to be subordinated to the needs of community, caste, and family, with little or no space for individual needs or identity development let alone personal autonomy.

It may be fair to say that much of the early research which emphasized collectivism over individualism was grounded in an India where joint or extended families were the norm. Women were subject to patriarchal dominance and control with little concern for women as persons per se. In this study, first and second generation Hindu immigrants to the United States tended to create nuclear rather than extended family systems, located within a dominant culture which has adopted a primarily individualistic worldview. Chapter 9 thus identifies several issues which have to do with the incorporation of individual desires, needs, aspirations and motivations into the construction of Hindu women’s gender role identities.

Within Domain Four, four themes emerged as important to women’s perception of themselves as individuals, as persons rather than simply as women-in-family: desire for independence or autonomy; self-development; wanting it all; and women’s power.
Desire for Independence/Autonomy

In the present study women’s desire for increased independence autonomy varied across age groups and immigration status. Independence/autonomy meant different things to different women. In general, the concept of independence could be deconstructed into: independence of thought, that is the freedom to own and express one’s own thoughts, opinions and feelings without criticism or approbation; the autonomy of choice, that is, the freedom to make one’s own choices and decisions without external restraint or control; financial independence, that is, the freedom to earn one’s own income and to make one’s own spending decisions; and the freedom of action, that is, the freedom to control one’s own behavior without having to submit to or obey the mandates of other people. Freedom of action also incorporated the freedom to choose one’s own spouse, or to choose not to marry, and to resist dependence on or subservience to a man. The overriding understanding of independence, for many if not most of the women, was “freedom to make their own choices.”

First Generation

Within the first generation group, 95 percent endorsed some concept of independence/autonomy as a desired characteristic.

One hundred percent of the oldest participants (that is, Grandma and Sailaza) indicated that they would have liked to have had more independence. Grandma, aged 86, stated: “Women have the right to their own opinions,” endorsing a concept of freedom of thought. She added:

Submissiveness is not acceptable to my heart…I don’t like it…A woman has a right to her own opinions. Women are more courageous here. They can stand up for themselves. I admire that. I like anybody who is able to stand up for themselves.
Sailaza, aged 82, was even more assertive, saying: “I don’t like people telling me what to do. It is better here [in the U.S.], I can make my own decisions. I like the freedom I have in this country. I make my own decisions. I’m more free….”

Sixty-seven percent of first generation women aged 66 to 80 also expressed a desire for more freedom: of thought and of action, as well as financial independence. Amanda shared that her mother had named her for a queen, so that: “You’ll be like that, you’ll have your own mind…” suggesting that the desire for more autonomy was also present in earlier generations of women in India. Amanda, an elegant, youthful appearing woman of 72, agreed with her mother:

I like people who do something with their lives, not just cook every day and take care of their families…I think [coming to the U.S.] has made me more independent. If I had stayed in India, I don’t think that I would be like I am today…I would be more Indian, in the sense that I wouldn’t speak to you so openly…I would tell you what you want to hear, or what I think is the perfect ideal situation. I heard someone today say “Women control their lives when they control their purses.” I think that is very true. Younger women are earning more, and they are more independent. I don’t care which culture, unless you have some means to do it, if you’re married to a man and he controls the purse strings, you have no independence.

This theme of economic independence was reiterated by several other first generation women. Alamelu, aged 46, for example, felt that financial independence, the ability to support oneself, was very important for her daughter’s generation as well as for herself: “I keep telling my daughter, ‘Be independent. Be financially independent.’ I would like for her to be independent, self-thinking, and, very important, to be financially independent….” Alamelu laughed when she said: “I kind of evolved into a little bit more independent than I had been groomed to be…I wanted to be more independent.”

Ele, too, aged 50, concurred with the wish that her daughter would have the freedom to make her own choices:
I raise my daughter to feel that she is not dependent on having a male partner to make herself complete…That she needs to be complete in and of herself. It’s fine if she never, ever gets married…It’s her choice…If she chooses to be a mother, she can be a mother; if she doesn’t want to be a mother, she doesn’t have to be a mother…I would like to teach her to be confident in herself…To realize that she can achieve whatever she wants to achieve…by herself…And it’s not necessary for her to feel limited in any way because she’s not married, or because she doesn’t have whatever other roles that society has deemed appropriate for a woman.

For first generation women aged 36 to 50, 100 percent endorsed greater independence/autonomy as a value for Hindu women. Within this age group, Pooja and Priya acknowledged that their mothers demonstrated independent role models because they worked and provided some or most of their family incomes. Pooja, aged 45, said of her mother: “Mom was a very strong personality…She was very hard-working…If she didn’t have money, she would work.”

Pooja’s father was not a consistent income provider for the family, so Pooja’s mother was an exemplar of a strong, independent woman who compensated for her husband’s weaknesses through her own hard work and perseverance. Priya, on the other hand, grew up in a large city where: “All the women used to work…All the women worked…My mother, herself, was working.”

Priya commented that her father too was supportive of her independence and encouraged her to challenge herself and to face her fears: “My father always used to say, ‘Don’t be afraid of anything’ like, when I’m working alone, and I’m going to new places which might be dangerous…”

It is clear that for this age group of first generation immigrants, the desire for more independence and autonomy for themselves and their daughters was often encouraged by their mothers who also provided strong models for them. Shyama, for example, a 38-year-old physician, indicated that:
My mother said that we need to be independent, we need to be economically independent... My mom would always say [referring to stories and songs], “You see how... the women sound in these songs... how... not helpless, but... completely dependent, you know... They had no... for every single thing, they are asking somebody to do this for them, do that for them....” She would always say that this is the best time to be a girl... this time where you can do anything and everything... What I learned was that you should be... you should have your own identity... you should be economically independent, regardless of what your husband does or doesn’t do. You should be able to earn money, to take care of yourself. You should not be dependent on somebody else. And you should have your own identity.

Shyama like several other first generation women contrasted the autonomy she experiences in the United States with constraints on women’s behavior that she observed in India:

I think I’m more comfortable here, because I think it’s a more woman-friendly place than India is... or at least, India was. [In India] the moment you go out of your family, you are expected to behave in a certain way... You are criticized for things, you know, if you don’t do... Here I feel free... I can do whatever I want to, I can wear whatever I want to.

Vidya, aged 43, on the other hand, commented on the ambivalent messages about independence that she had received from her mother even as an adult. While her mother endorsed and encouraged her independence, especially concerning education and financial security, she also exerted a great deal of pressure on Vidya to behave in more traditionally feminine ways, particularly with regard to appearance (hair, make up, dress, jewelry, and so on), and most especially with regard to marriage. Vidya stated:

She [my mother] certainly wanted me to be more financially independent... I don’t think she wanted me to be exactly like her, because she felt she sacrificed her whole life for the family, and she would have liked to have had a career and be more independent... So I think in that sense there was a lot of pressure on me to have a career... She would like to have studied further than an undergraduate degree, but she wasn’t able to do it because of family responsibilities.
Vidya’s marriage, at age 42, eased the pressure she experienced from her mother to behave in more socially acceptable ways for a woman by finding a husband and establishing her own home.

**Second Generation**

While over 95 percent of first generation women supported the idea that Hindu women should have more autonomy of thought, of choice, of behavior, and of financial independence, it is somewhat surprising to note that this sizable majority drops to 80 percent for the second generation cohort. Moreover, while 100 percent of the 36 to 50-year-old first generation group endorsed independence as a value only 50 percent of the same age group in the second generation did so. In fact, 50 percent of this age group made no comment at all about desiring more independence. Possibly, the second generation women are reflecting the influence of living in a Western culture where they may experience less pressure to marry and a great deal of family support for education and careers. The second generation cohort may take their independence for granted and may have grown up assuming that they will have the freedom to make their own decisions, choose their own spouse, and control their own money. Certainly, several of the second generation cohort expressed the value of competence and achievement for women just as much as for men. For example, Monica, aged 41, said:

I teach my girls, “You can do just as much as a man can...” [It’s good to be] competent women who can do things on their own...It’s okay to ask for help, but, you know...just be competent women who have a good education and go far...those are the kind of things I think...[that I would teach my daughters].

As in the first generation cohort, several second generation women commented on the importance of their mothers’ support and encouragement of their independence. Sejal, aged 38, stated: “My mother taught me to be independent, strong...to work hard. I
hope that my daughter sees that she can choose her path…and not depend on anyone…and be independent, and have her own individuality and interests….”

Among the younger second generation women, 100 percent of the 26 to 36 age group valued independence and autonomy while 88 percent of the youngest 18 to 25-year-olds did so. For example, Gowri, age 26, stated:

As a girl, I was never told that I have to be a certain way. We were just told, both my brother and I, “You have to study hard and you have to stand on your own two feet…” unlike, maybe, what my mother would have been told, like, “Your husband will be there to support you…” My dad was always, like, “Even regardless, divorce is a realistic part of life…” or, “Becoming a widow is a real…you can’t rely on him…you have to do it yourself.”

Gowri was encouraged by both parents to chart her own course and to become financially independent so that she can handle whatever stresses life throws at her.

Sheila, on the other hand, the mother of two young children at age 33, felt that her mother’s encouragement came because her own independence and achievement had been discouraged in her own family. Sheila stated:

The one thing that kind of stands out to me in the stories that she told me was about feeling a sense of her not being in control of her life as a woman. I got this feeling from her that she really wanted to…that there were things she really wanted to do in her life that she didn’t get to do. And I think the common theme is just women who stand up for what they believe in, and don’t let…who are strong, and don’t let man or other people scare them, or make them feel like…dominate them.

Similarly, Tamanna, age 27, felt that her mother encouraged her independence even though she sometimes felt conflicted about her daughter’s choices:

I think she understood that…She wanted us to be independent, strong women…I remember her always telling me that…which I know a lot of Indian moms don’t do…my mom…I remember her always telling me that, “Screw getting married.” I just remember her telling me that. She’s like, “Yeah, marriage is important, but…” She always told us that our career always comes number one…which doesn’t happen that often, especially in her generation. For her, [my mother] it was always that, “Yes, you can
give it all up for a husband, or if you want to start a family…which is
great…but always…always…always be capable enough, and competent
enough that if you were to walk out of a situation…you walk out, and you
can stand on your own two feet, and you don’t have to rely on a man.”

These kinds of messages suggest that, despite the low incidence of divorce in
Hindu families (for example, in this study of 41 Hindu women, only one out of 24
married women has been divorced), and despite the social pressures to remain married,
many of these women are realistic about the kinds of situations which might result in a
marriage ending and they want to ensure that their daughters are competent and skilled
enough to have a good life without financial support from a man. Several women
commented also that they would never want their daughters to be forced to remain in an
abusive marriage because they were unable to financially support themselves and/or
their children. The women were realistic, open-minded and pragmatic about the
challenges that Hindu women may face, married or not, and they were not constrained
by understandings of ideologies of womanhood which limited women’s capacity for
independence.

Even the youngest first generation cohort, those aged 18 to 25, many of whom
were just beginning their college education with no immediate plans for relationships,
maintenance or children, received the same encouragement from their parents. Benni, aged
20, for example, stated:

My mom was always so independent and strong-minded…She’s always
told me, like, be independent and take care of my own self. Growing up, I
watched so many movies where girls would have their own careers and do
whatever they wanted. Even if they were married they were still just as
equal as their husbands in the relationship, and even if they were
homemakers, they were very assertive about their role in the
household…My mother told me not to depend on a man. Even now she’ll
tell me, “You know, even when you’re in a relationship, you should make
sure you can do things on your own, and even before you get into getting
married, or starting a family, make sure that you can support yourself, first
and foremost…I know you want to get married, and I know you want to have a family, and that’s great, and you should be well-rounded like that, but if you’re going to have a career and you want it to last, you need to make sure that you can take care of yourself and make yourself independent and self-sufficient on your own, outside of being in a relationship.”

Mickey, too, aged 20, learn to value independence, not just from her mother’s encouraging words, but also by observing her behavior:

My mom was very independent, and she was always a working mom… So I think that I learned that from my mom, to be independent… that women were independent, and that they did not have to rely on their husbands… because my mom never did that… they had their own income and so on.

Alamelu, aged 46, encouraged her daughter, Anna, aged 18: “I keep telling her, ‘Be independent. Be financially independent…’ That’s one thing that I really want her to be….”

Thus, for both first generation women who, like Kamala, have asserted their own independence and for others, like Nutan, who felt unable to make her own choices as she was growing up, encouraging independence and freedom of choice for their daughters seems to be a crucial value. They also view financial independence as a critical variable for ensuring their daughters’ future security and even physical safety.

In summary, the theme of independence/autonomy explored in Domain Four clearly reveals that Hindu women in the U.S. of all ages are preoccupied with the need for personal freedom of thought, behavior, and choice, and also that they strongly encourage and support such values for their daughters. In many ways, the endorsement of independence for their daughters is protective, in the sense that they do not want their daughters to be unable to leave situations which might be harmful to them (for example, domestic violence or abuse), or to be left impoverished as a result of death or
divorce. They also want their daughters to have choices and opportunities which might have been denied or unavailable in their own lives for themselves or for other female relatives. Many of the first generation women expressed an appreciation for the greater independence they have experienced in the U.S. suggesting that even women raised in a collectivist society are influenced when they come into contact with a more individualist culture.

**Self-Development**

Within Domain Four, which identifies influences affecting Hindu women as individuals rather than as members of a culture, a community, or a family, there was an identifiable theme which revealed these women’s desires for personal growth or achievement which would enhance their self-esteem and their sense of themselves as individuals, that is, persons in their own right.

**First Generation**

In the first generation group, 57 percent expressed a desire for personal development. The importance of this theme was not consistent across age groups. Fifty percent of the oldest first generation women saw this as important, but none of the next age cohort, that is, women aged 66 to 80, mentioned this need. On the other hand, 86 percent of women aged 51 to 65 saw self-development as important, perhaps indicating changing times, although 56 percent of the 36 to 50 age group also mentioned aspects of self-development as key for them.

Self-development was also defined in various ways, according to age, stage of life, and immigration status. Grandma, aged 86, a first generation woman, commented to the researcher that she admired her for “doing something for you,” but made it clear that this was only possible because of the researcher’s stage of life:
I admire you that you have finished your...what we old-time people say...your wifehood...That means, you look after your husband, your children...now your children are separate, so now you are doing something for you...That I just admire. I just love that sort of thing.

During her interview, Grandma had expressed regret that she had not been able to hold paid employment and earn her own money, given that she had had a very traditional upbringing and marriage.

Bina, aged 57, on the other hand, seemed to define “self-development” in terms of seeing herself as a priority in her own life. Despite the fact that Bina had grown up in a nontraditional family, had married a husband who supported her independence, and had achieved an advanced degree and worked at her career, she commented that “I wish very early in my life I had learned to give importance to myself...” In this way she is expressing the feeling that she had not taken care of her own needs and emotions.

Nutan, aged 57, recounted a story told her by her mother which reflected on the ways women of earlier generations found to take care of their own needs in situations where everyone else’s needs were prioritized. Nutan narrated:

My mother explained to me why [women cared for the tulsi plant]... She had a very interesting explanation. She said it was because, previously, women...especially when they lived in joint families...they had no time for themselves, so...when you did a religious thing, especially when walking around the tulsi...you know...It's exercise...you have time for yourself...you're getting fresh air...Now, everybody is into growing plants [because] of the health benefits.

For Nutan’s mother and for other women of her generation, self-development encompassed having time for oneself, to be achieved under the guise of taking care of a religious obligation. Maya, aged 56, would agree with this:

I can do for family to some extent, as far as...I can do as much as I can do. But I also want to do things which are important for me. What I like about America is...in whatever age...they do things, pursue their dreams...I love that. And they don't give up easily.
Lalita, aged 46, expressed yet another method of self-development or self-care. She stated:

We create these boxes or boundaries...some of which don’t exist. I mean, I can be who I am. People think that I sit quietly a lot, but I tell them there is a very adventurous life happening inside, even though I’m quiet, and I’m by myself.

Lalita is making the point that self-development does not have to involve acting on one’s own behalf but can be internal and occluded. A rich inner life can also be a vital means of self-expression and self-enrichment.

Several of the first generation women compared themselves to their mothers whom they saw as setting examples of self-sacrifice that they were unable or unwilling to emulate. Shyama, aged 38, said:

I’m not as dedicated as she [my mother] was (laughing). I do think about myself also. I do feel like I need time...Some time to rest, or some time to relax. Whatever I saw in my mom or my aunts...They were all professional women, but they were always very traditional too...They were home, they were doing all those things that women are supposed to be doing...But I also realize that they were working extremely hard, and that they had no life of their own.

For Shyama, then, personal development was related to time, time free from obligations to others, time and freedom to decide what was important to women as individuals not just as gendered people responsible for the care of others.

Second Generation

Within the second generation cohort about 65 percent of the women also expressed a desire for personal development in comparison to 57 percent of the first generation group. Moreover, while 56 percent of the first generation women aged 36 to 50 felt that this theme was important, 84 percent of the same age second generation cohort valued self-development. However, only thirty-three percent of the women of the
second generation aged 26 to 35 were concerned with self-development while 75 percent of the youngest age group, aged 18 to 25, felt that catering to their own needs and growth was crucial for them. Perhaps these young women were focused on their own development both because they had few responsibilities for others and also because they were the most immediately concerned with and involved in actually building their own lives and careers. Again, this supports the hypothesis that age and stage of life play a significant role in identifying themes important in Hindu women’s lives.

Self-development, also, was defined in various ways within the second generation cohort. Among second generation Hindu women, the need for personal development was often expressed in comparison to women in America. For example, Andrea, age 39, commented:

I perceive it as, you do for others, but you have to do something for yourself too…I feel like in America…women have a strong sense of self and achievement…that, you know, they want to pursue things and they want to accomplish things…So I think that in that sense, that’s probably something different in America…Although it’s changing India too…But I think if I were in India it might be different, versus being here, and having those dreams, or those goals, or accomplishments.

The theme of taking care of self as well as taking care of others was repeated by several second generation women. There was no sense of “Me first”, but a strong commitment to “Me too”, among the second generation cohort. Monica, aged 41, summarized this: “Yes, support your husband, but do something of your own.”

Benni, aged 20, one of the youngest second generation women, put it this way:

It’s not that you can’t care about other people, it’s just sometimes it’s okay to put yourself first…especially as a girl…It used to be that girls were expected to take a backseat, or not speak up…There are girls in some parts of the world that are still…they can’t do the things that they want to do, or they can’t speak up for themselves…I’m so lucky to live in this
country, and have such a good family, and so I think I should be able to take advantage of...taking care of myself...Here things are a lot different for women than they are in other places in the world...Not to say that we are better than everywhere else, but I've definitely gotten a lot of opportunities to just be myself...I get the opportunity to do the things I want, and to be the person I want to be, regardless of anybody else.

Clearly, self-development or self-care is a need felt by a majority of Hindu women in this study, but definitions of self-development again varied according to age, stage of development, and to some extent, immigration status. Many women credited living in the United States for giving them an alternative view of the choices open to women. For most women, time is a critical variable, not just time to pursue their own goals or to achieve things for themselves but often simply the time to relax, to care for one's own mind and body, or just to think one's own thoughts, and dream one's own dreams. These women are not viewing self-development as an either/or decision. They are not opting out of family responsibilities or of the care of others. They are not rejecting marriage or children in favor of exclusively following their own paths. They desire both, and simply want time and space for themselves in the midst of all their other obligations.

**Wanting It All**

An analysis of the second theme, that of women’s need to have time and space to take care of their own needs, leads naturally to the third theme, the theme of “wanting it all.” The women in this study had no interest in throwing away Indian or Hindu traditions, emphasis on family and family life, maintenance of relationships, or prioritizing the needs of husband or children. Nor were they willing, however, to sacrifice their own identities as women or to subordinate their own needs entirely to the wishes of society or a family members. In other words, they “wanted it all,” that is, both the best of
family life and the opportunities to grow as individuals, both the benefits of tradition, culture and religion, as well as the opportunities offered to women by a different culture. There were clear differences between first and second generation women in their response to the theme of “wanting it all.” Sixty-five percent of second generation women compared to only 19 percent of the first generation cohort endorsed this concept.

**First Generation**

Most first generation women did not mention wanting more opportunities in their lives perhaps because they accepted or did not challenge traditional expectations for women and were accustomed to living according to cultural gender roles. Among the oldest age group, only Grandma expressed a desire to have incorporated less traditional gendered opportunities into her life, but she had accepted that that had not been possible for her. None of the women age 66 to 80, or 50 to 65, mentioned wanting a different life than they had, and only 33 percent of the younger first generation group, aged 36 to 50, expressed a desire for opportunities other than marriage and family. It must be remembered, however, that these younger first generation women often had already completed their post graduate education and were working at careers as well as raising families. They were, perhaps, preoccupied with the dilemma of handling all of the responsibilities which they had taken on and may spend little time thinking about adding more complications into their already crowded lives.

On the other hand, Parul, aged 49, did express the concern that women may be respected less when they did not have a career or did not earn money:

Sometimes I felt that the fact that she [my mother] did not have a career meant she had a little bit less respect from some quarters…Some people, or maybe she herself, felt that she was less because she was not earning money, and that’s why, to me, it’s really important to have a job.
For Parul, life outside the family, that is, having a career and contributing financially, allowed a woman to gain greater respect both within the family and in the community. Being a devoted wife and mother and taking care of the home and family was not enough in itself to gain the respect owed for her service. To gain this respect, one had to “have it all” and to “do it all.”

Shyama, age 38, on the other hand, embraced the concept of “having it all” through the example set by her mother:

She [my mother] was and still is the perfect woman…She was working, but she was also at home. She took care of our family and was very devoted to her family and her children. It wasn’t like she was teaching US anything or she was asking US to be a certain way, it was just by her actions…The ideal woman, in my mind, is the modern woman…like Indira Gandhi, I would say. She was extremely successful, she was a mother…she was a wife for a time…she raised her children very lovingly…She was a leader of a rich nation…She was very modern…I don’t know if you can do everything, but frankly, at least you can do a lot of things, and you can at least be a good mother, be a good wife.

Vidya, aged 43, was also influenced by her mother’s example:

My mother was just incredible. She had a career, and she took care of the family. I don’t think I could do what she did…I think she had a script in her life that she had to follow, and in some ways she was telling me that this is the script you need to follow, but I knew I couldn’t do it.

For some of these first generation women, the example set by their mothers provided both the goal to aim for, that is, marriage, children and careers, all carried out to their utmost ability, but also a standard which they felt they could never reach, which left them feeling inadequate in comparison. “Wanting it all” became both an aspiration and a burden creating both a feeling of unfulfilled desires and of personal inadequacies.

**Second Generation**

In comparison to the women of the first generation, 65 percent of the second generation cohort did express a desire to “have it all,” that is, to enjoy marriage, children
and a career by redefining or refurbishing some of the traditional gender roles in favor of more egalitarian relationships and roles in all these dimensions. Seventy-five percent of the youngest subgroup, aged 18 to 25, expressed these ambitions quite strongly.

Adriana, for example, the youngest member of the group, offered the opinion that:

Women can be nurturing and caring, but they can also have a job aside from that, and not sacrifice their duties as a mother...They can also be a professional...I think society as the notion that women should be mothers and they should just bear children, but I think that’s obviously changing as society is becoming more modern...and women can be mothers and professionals.

Amber, aged 18, agreed with Adriana:

I definitely do want to somewhat...I guess you could say...take on the role of a male, where I also bring most of the income into the family as well...And I also want to...I also see myself as being the one that takes care of the children and the household.

Benni, aged 20, commented that seeing women “have it all” was refreshing and encouraging to her as a woman:

Family is very important in India, like, super important, and so seeing these women having careers, but also making time for their families, and taking care of their in-laws and their kids...It was just kind of refreshing to see...I think to be a woman is not just taking all the men out of your life, or that you just have to be strong and independent all the time, but I think it’s just, like, how well-rounded you are, and how you do what you want to do...I’d be just like that...I would hope...well-rounded...able to juggle a home life and career and stuff.

It may not be unreasonable to conclude that these young women, in the process of moving into adult life and adult responsibilities, still see all opportunities as open to them, and still retain the enthusiasm to want and to believe that they can “have it all.” Women in the 26 to 35-year-old age group, in the process of establishing careers and forming romantic relationships, also still consider “having it all” to be a realistic
possibility. Sixty-seven percent of this age group endorsed this desire. This figure dropped to 50 percent among women in the 36 to 50 age group, who were already fully immersed in the attempt to balance family life and career. Many of these women responded that while they wanted to succeed at everything, at family life as well as in professions they also acknowledged that this was difficult if not impossible. Achoo, for example, a successful physician and mother of four, expressed a concern that modeling and endorsing a message that women can do everything may be subjecting her daughters to unrealistic and stress inducing expectations:

I justify it...that I'm setting an example for my daughters...that this is what you should do...or, this is what you should try to do in your life...I think that is impacting my daughters significantly...I guess I do try to point out women who are successful, and beautiful, and have families, and all that. But sometimes I worry...am I...am I sending that message that it's all possible? I probably am. I don't know how else to not...I don't know how to not do that...I mean, I don't want to not do that also, because I don't want them to think "Well, okay, I just have to."

Achoo's ambivalence has to do with wanting to encourage her daughters to accomplish whatever they want to do in their lives but also wanting them to have the free choice to be less ambitious than she has been, if that is what they want. Achoo also described how this ambivalence has affected her own choices in life:

Guilt is a huge part of my life every single day, and I wish it wasn't. My husband always says “Well you women put that on yourselves,” and I'm, like, “No, actually we didn’t just make it up...Somebody made us feel guilty....” I share that feeling with lots of my contemporaries...that constant feeling of guilt. Everything you’re doing, you feel guilty. I feel guilty if I don’t make dinner. I feel guilty if I go to the gym. I feel guilty...it’s never enough...I feel like I should be with my kids 24/7, but if I’m with my kids 24/7 I’ll be a raving lunatic (laughs)...If I go on a trip...I say to my husband, “I feel bad I’m leaving you.”...I mean, why would I say that? He’s not an invalid...they are his kids too, and he’ll be okay. But I just feel so bad, and I just...you know, it's all the guilt...I wish there was a way that I could get them to know that it’s okay to not do it all...Everyone will be okay...your kids won’t end up on drugs just because you didn’t make dinner once (laughs)...They won’t end up on skid row (laughs) if you went
on a weekend away with your husband, or whatever…Somehow balance that feeling of guilt.

Andrea, age 39, expressed the opinion that:

I think, in our generation, that…with the education, gave us the opportunity to also have a career as well. So I think it was…the best of both worlds, East and West…I think growing up, we saw the moms or the grandmothers that stayed home and took care of the family, but then, with education, we realized that you can also have a career and have both…So both…best of both worlds.

Achoo, however, communicated the stress and ambivalence involved in "wanting it all." She stated:

I want to do everything. I want to do so much…I wonder if I had more ability to do more, that would make me feel more fulfilled. Or if I had less ambition (laughs) I might be more fulfilled…And just…I feel like there are so many things I want to do.

It is interesting to note and to speculate about the fact that while 75 percent of both first and second generation age peers admitted to “wanting it all,” suggesting perhaps that this desire is not a result of growing up in the United States where two career families have become the norm, overall among the first and second generation participants aged 36 to 50, those fully engaged in trying to do everything, only 33 percent and 50 percent respectively expressed the same desire.

The desire to have both career and family in general appears to be characteristic of younger second generation women, who are entering adult life or just beginning careers and thinking about future families. Very few first generation women endorse the desirability or possibility of “having it all” including only 33 percent of the youngest first generation age group, age 36 to 50. On the other hand, over 65 percent of second generation women overall endorsed “wanting it all” although the percentage decreased with age, with younger women validating this possibility most often, while women in the
36 to 50 age group expressed more ambivalence. Thus, “wanting it all” again seems to be related to age and stage of development and may be less desirable to those who have in fact already attempted to “have it all.”

**Women’s Power**

Within Domain Four, Importance of Self, the final theme incorporates concepts of women’s power. As with the other themes, “power” has many different definitions for different individuals or groups of women. In general, “power” has to do with the diverse ways in which women gain control of or influence aspects of their own life or of the lives of others.

The definition of power may be differentiated by “public” versus “private” sources of influence. For example, women may aspire to public leadership: political office; executive positions in major corporations; ownership or management of one’s own business; recognition as a leader in one’s field, or for one’s achievements. Or, women may value more private kinds of power. For example, this may include: the right or ability to make decisions within the family; or the ability to influence a decision-maker, “behind the throne.” Sometimes power is recognized in comparison to male authority or decision-making, even, for example, as the ability to make men look good, or the power to take care of, protect the ego of, or enhance the reputation of one’s husband.

For older women, power may overlap the concept of independence and may refer to the power involved in self-expression, in freedom of thought, speech and action. For these women, power may also be derived from the respect given to them as wives and mothers and as matriarchs of a household or family. For younger women, power may come from economic or financial independence, the “power of the purse,” which gives women freedom to choose their own paths in life.
Definitions of power are as diverse as the women defining it. For some women, power was defined in sexual terms, as the ability to control others through the use of their bodies and through their sexuality and seductiveness, while for others power was acquired through the freedom to control one’s own body, through choice of sexual partners, but also in terms of weight, attractiveness, and so on.

Power was also related to personal characteristics, for example: power gained through one’s ability to be cunning and to manipulate; power resulting from courage, strength, or endurance; the power to resist and overcome limits; the power to achieve equality in terms of gaining the approval and respect of others; and power seen as self-esteem, self-confidence, and the ability to stand up for oneself and assert one’s own needs.

Fundamentally, definitions of power seem to be divided into three categories: 1) power gained from public displays of leadership and achievement, leading to the respect of others outside the family; 2) power derived from influence exerted within the family and in the private sphere, which includes the power to balance personal and family needs; and 3) the power derived from control of oneself and the acquisition of admirable qualities leading to greater personal freedom.

For some women, particularly older first generation women, all of the aspects of power defined above were subsumed under the concept of shakti, or feminine power, the female principle, the dynamic force that energizes all things, the ultimate definition of “women’s power”.

First Generation

Among the first generation cohort as a whole, 67 percent of the women mentioned the concept of women’s power in some form. However the importance of this
concept varied widely by age. Power was not mentioned in any form by women aged 66 to 80+, whereas 86 percent of women aged 50 to 65, and 89 percent of women aged 36 to 50 brought it up. One could argue that either older women did not see public, private or personal power/authority as a possibility for them, or they simply did not perceive whatever influence they actually exerted in their lives as being a manifestation of power. Certainly, women who became mothers-in-law must have seen themselves as having gained status within the hierarchy of a patriarchal family, but perhaps they could not conceptualize this status as in any way related to power.

For younger women, power and control may perhaps be seen as sought to be manifested in a variety of ways, especially in the context of living in a Western society where women demanded and acquired more control of their own lives in both public and private spheres.

Among first generation women aged 50 to 65, respondents often talked about women’s power in terms of positive characteristics such as strength, endurance, and also as influence within the family. The ability to exert influence (rather than control) within the family, as “the power behind the throne,” was mentioned twice, while the opportunity to exert leadership or authority in public was only mentioned once within this age group.

Maria, age 51, for example, referred to the model of her grandmother, whom she described as a powerful influence in her family:

I knew who was in charge was my grandmother… She would think…she would even say so many times, “You think your grandfather gives you everything, but you know (laughs)…” But if she didn’t plan it I probably wouldn’t have it, so she…there’s a silent power behind…the thing, you know…the power behind the throne.
Nutan, age 57, referred to sacred narratives to illustrate women’s power within the family:

I think that story [of Kunti telling her sons to share Draupadi] impacted me more because of how the children followed their mother’s instructions...She was powerful...the mother...in that sense...The mother-in-law was pretty powerful...mother and mother-in-law.

Priya, however, had a more all-encompassing cognition of power, using Parvati as a role model for the limitless power of women:

Parvati made an idol of a small boy, and then the boy came to life...and this shows that women can do everything on their own...make a child...because she had that much power...she had that much power.
Actually, in India, in the real...real time...in the olden times...women were considered more important.

Overall, eight different definitions of power were used by women in the 50-65 subgroup. First generation women as a whole, however, perceived more sources of power in their lives, mentioning 16 different ways in which power could be acquired. Within this age group, public power was as valued as having the power to influence decisions within the family, although the power acquired through the respect accorded to their performance of the roles of wives and mothers was also highly valued. Ele, aged 50, compared women’s power to that of men:

It’s the women who kind of make things go on, but it always looks like it’s the man’s idea...But it’s really not. I kind of figured that even though men were portrayed as being macho in society, I think the strength in India is really because the women are strong in the home.

However, Ele went on to say that in the past, women often had to restrain or conceal their strength to maintain peace in the family and even to protect themselves.

She said, of her paternal grandmother:

There was nothing that she could not have achieved. She could have achieved exactly what I have achieved, had she had equal opportunity...She was an extremely strong woman...I would have liked for
her to recognize that the strength was in her, that she didn’t have to cover it up.

Kannaki, age 55, on the other hand emphasized the fact that women have been seen to have public power, even in the past:

There’s Sarojini Naidoo, and…Akkamahadevi…all those people in the time when men were thought to be powerful…They stepped in…like, Indira Gandhi and all of them, they just…I mean even today, in the United States, in spite of it being such an open society, I haven't seen a woman Prime Minister or President, but look at India…look at Pakistan…look at all those places, everyone has a woman…So, to me, that's where I look at these people and I say “You know what? They did it well…They can prove to everybody in the world that they are just as capable as men…They have come to let the world know that women are…can also be great leaders…” And that's what I think we should be…all those other women that, you know, have been such great leaders.

**Second Generation**

Among second generation women, 75 percent overall referred to the concept of women’s power as important for them. Within the 36 to 50-year-old age group, 67 percent (compared to 89 percent of the same age group for first generation participants) brought up issues related to power in some form. Eighty-three percent of women aged 26 to 35, and 75 percent of women aged 18 to 25 also referenced women’s power. Within the 36 to 50 age group, women seem to be less concerned with public power than they were with overcoming obstacles and limits confronting them. They saw personal strength and courage as important characteristics or sources of power. Several women expressed the opinion that power, in women, should be a combination of personal strength and a quality of caring for and nurturing others. Andrea, age 39, for example, referred to Sita as an example of such a woman: “She was very loyal to her husband, yet I think she was powerful…I think she came across as loyal, caring, nurturing, but understated was the power and strength.”
On the other hand, Andrea also validated a different kind of power and strength, demonstrated by Durga:

You have a powerful goddess, Durga, who, kind of, has this really physical strength…able to conquer those demons…I think that is kind of a good combination for a woman to be, because you don’t want to be one or the other…Merge the two…and be that kind of person.

Sejal, aged 38, however, found more inspiration in the fierce strength that epitomized Durga’s power: “It was the stronger ones that influenced me…the ones that…Durga…or the warriors, the fierce ones, the ones that really overcame adversity, or fought to the death, or just stood out as atypical from the other women.”

Despite their concern with overcoming personal limitations and obstacles, women in the 36 to 50 age group, that is, women fully engaged in raising their children and caring for their own families, also saw women’s power as most fully expressed through family life. Andrea, again, commented:

I think the woman plays a very strong and powerful role in keeping the family together and maintaining relationships…you know, with parents, or with their own brothers or sisters or in-laws…their own children. I think that as a woman, directly or indirectly, you have to be cognizant of that, of your role in the whole family, because I think that women have such a powerful ability to bring the whole family together, and keep it together…I think it’s just a strong sense of self and empowerment, and their strong self-love…for loving others…to keep it united…I hope that [my daughter] would learn that women are powerful and strong, and yet can have this…this soft, nurturing kind of nature, which makes them powerful and strong too.

On the other hand, Sujatha, age 37, who is not married, expressed her sense of empowerment as a woman as coming from the opportunities afforded her by her education:

I feel very powerful as a woman. I feel like I’m very lucky to live in a culture where women are educated, and where that is valued…I really benefited, I think, from the generation ahead of me…both in India and here…There are wonderful things about being a woman on some level. Just how we…I
think women someday will…I think we’ll take over the world eventually, because I think we’re better at relationships, and therefore make better leaders sometimes…So, for me, I feel like I could do whatever I want… There are some limits, but they’re not proscribed because you’re female.

However, in addition, Sujatha expressed a sense that women’s biology also made them powerful, a kind of power not available to men: “Women are lucky. We can do all these cool things with our bodies, like, we can make…our bodies can make children.”

Although 67 percent of the 36 to 50 age group commented on women’s power, 83 percent of the 26 to 35 age group and 75 percent of the 18 to 25-year-olds also felt that this concept was important for them. Again, these are women who are either just entering adult life with a sense that all things are potentially possible for them, or who are in the process of career and relationship building, testing their own strengths in the public arena while still developing them in the private sphere of family life.

It is interesting to note that the only age group which mentioned physical beauty and sexual attractiveness as a source of women’s power was the 26 to 35-year-old cohort. This group also focused on the ability to influence others from behind the scenes as being as important as the influence gained from public leadership roles. It is possible that they saw their physical attributes as in some ways tied to both the public and private, direct and indirect ability to impress others.

Tamanna, aged 27, a university administrator and also a dance instructor, credited her bharatnatyam teacher with making her aware, as an adolescent, of the physical source of a woman’s power:

I remember her saying that...when you’re in high school, you’re shy of boys and men, and you don’t know how to act, and so you’re coy... [She showed us] how she would move then...So, it was very seductive...So, her teaching us was how to emote seductively...It was very interesting...
And apparently they teach that the women’s power comes from her sexuality…A lot of people are taught that, when they learn to dance…Later I understood what she was trying to say…I think it was a great lesson, because I think a lot of girls are taught to be very submissive…and I think this was a very subtle way of teaching young girls that they will be women one day, and that it’s okay to be a seductive woman, like, to have a seductive side to yourself…to have multi-personalities, you know. I think [dancing] definitely helped me to accept the fact that I am a woman, and that I can express myself when I dance, and that it is attractive, and that there is sexuality to that as well, and that it’s okay, and that there is some power in that…the fact that you are an Indian Hindu woman who can express through dance…And I realize that…this means that I have power.

Among the second generation women, Mickey, age 20, talked about women’s power as related to their ability to be “deceptive and cunning,” but felt that with greater self-esteem she would be able to express her power more directly: “If I were able to feel better about myself in some way, I could potentially be that outspoken…I guess, that strong and powerful.”

Adriana, aged 18, on the other hand, felt that women needed to develop their strength and power, as a reaction to being constrained by social and family restrictions: “Females have been exposed to such oppression, and they’ve just been taught to…think a certain way…so I think we need to go beyond that expectation and…make our own path, and pave our own way to becoming strong people.”

She mentioned goddesses like Durga, as exemplars of female power and strength:

There were some strong female goddesses like Durga, and they obviously…We have seen that women can be strong and can be portrayed as strong females…I’ve learned that women can be strong, confident leaders…Females should be strong and confident.

Raina, however, aged 26, dreaming about her own future marriage, felt that sometimes women’s power needed to be held in restraint to avoid social or familial conflict:
I feel like women have to be kept in line. I think mainly of the rivers, like Ganga or Yona...They're just kind of going rampant, or they're following their own paths, and they have to be kept in line. Obviously, growing up in the U.S., I think that's kind of a gender thing that is propagated in India, and I don't think that it's fair...But I can see in India how that's kind of just...how people feel that they have to keep women in line, or keep them in a certain role...to dress in a certain way.

Raina appeared to be ambivalent in her attitude towards women's power. As a second generation woman raised in the U.S., such socially imposed limitations seem unfair or unacceptable, yet at the same time, her traditional Hindu upbringing teaches her to see the benefits of tamping down her personal ambitions for the sake of family and community cohesiveness. Raina's sister, Rukmani, age 32, also sees women's power as exercised in a more judicious and indirect manner, influencing husband and family without creating conflict or dissension. Rukmani referenced Gandhari as an example of a woman in sacred narrative who represented the moral strength of her family, influencing her husband indirectly while serving as an exemplar of service and compassion:

    One of my role models that I really actually like is Gandhari...Because as much as she is supportive to her husband, in saying “He’s blind, and I’m going to blindfold myself, so that I can see his world truly, to appreciate what he appreciates, or to leave behind what he can’t have....” At the same time, that doesn’t mean she plays second fiddle to him either. She is very strong in trying to guide him in the right direction, because he is constantly wanting to do things that are inappropriate, for the sake of his son, but in the process he’s actually ruining everything for his son. Meanwhile, Gandhari is constantly reminding him that this is not ethical...She actually sees the light...she actually sees everything...and she’s constantly trying to show him the right path...So I like that she is not stuck to his thoughts at all, she has her own point of view, and she’s trying to guide him in the right direction.

    For Rukmani, a woman manifests her power as the moral compass of the family subtly directing ethical action for husband and children. She cited an old saying: “The husband is the head of the family, but the woman is the neck that turns the head.”

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Thus, to summarize the findings from the subtheme of “women’s power” both first and second generation Hindu women, with the exception of the oldest first generation subgroup, strongly endorsed the concept of “women’s power” and clearly felt that women were empowered in a variety of different ways including: within the family, by exerting influence either directly or indirectly; in public, through demonstrations of achievement or leadership; through control of their own choices in decision-making, or of their own bodies; but also through their nurturing, care and guidance of children, or their support of their husbands.

With regard to the influence of narratives and female role models from stories, it is clear that several women in both generations cited sacred narratives and characters to illustrate their understanding of women’s power, and also to deconstruct and reconstruct aspects of the narratives and of the female exemplars, to better fit their conceptions of how modern women should be.
CHAPTER 10
THE JUGGLING ACT

Discussion in Chapters 6 through 9 has chiefly been concerned with identifying and analyzing the main sources of influence which are involved in the development of gender roles, and of gender role identity, or in the re-formulation of traditional gender role ideology, among Hindu women in the United States. Tradition, community, and family have been identified as major sources of gender role pressure. At the same time, however, women’s desire to develop their own identities leads them to assert their own interests and self-care needs as a priority in their lives without ignoring or abandoning responsibilities to family and community. Chapter 10 addresses some of the concerns raised by women participants, as they attempt to juggle and reconcile conflicting needs and demands on their time and energy, and to find a way to care for themselves without abandoning responsibility for others.

Within this domain, four subthemes emerged which are intricately involved in the strategies women develop to handle conflicting pressures and expectations: balance; pragmatism, flexibility or adaptability; rationalization; and family and children first.

The concept of balance represents a goal sought by Hindu women in the United States who seek to find a way to meet the expectations of community and family as well as their own needs and ambitions within the context of a new culture with potentially different views of women and their gender roles.

Pragmatism, adaptability, and flexibility all represent characteristics and strategies helpful to women in their struggle to achieve balance.
Rationalization is a defense mechanism used to reassure women that the goals and strategies they have chosen to employ can be justified both to themselves and to others.

The concept of “family and children first” is the ultimate resolution of the conflict between individual and family expectations and between cultural pressures coming from India as well as from the west.

**Balance**

The term “balance” in the context of Chapter 10: The Juggling Act, refers to the participants’ expressed desire to “have it all,” that is, to handle the responsibilities of womanhood placed on Hindu women by their culture, their community and their family, but at the same time to pay attention to and nurture their own dreams, ambitions and needs.

In the present study, “balance” is a goal to be achieved and may be defined and attained in several different ways. For some women, balance refers to the ability to negotiate the requirements or obligations to care for the family and the home while at the same time they struggle to handle the responsibilities inherent in having a job or career outside the home. Balancing the needs or requirements of career and family is a task endemic to women in the modern world, and Hindu women in the United States or in India for that matter, are not immune to such a conflict.

For other women, especially older Hindu women, the balance sought is on a more basic and fundamental level. Rather than dealing with the competing needs of family versus work outside the home, older women have struggled with the need to balance their own desire for more independence or autonomy and their need to have freedom of thought and freedom of expression, against the cultural mandate to respect
and defer to the expectations of elders, particularly in-laws and parents, as well as of their husbands.

**First Generation**

Overall, only 33 percent of first generation participants felt that the need to find balance in their lives was an important concept. This finding is somewhat surprising because 95 percent of these women had expressed a desire for more independence and autonomy in their lives while at the same time they do not seem to be preoccupied with gaining such autonomy at the expense of family life or with seeking to balance their own needs against the requirements of their family. They perceived their gender roles and their view of womanhood in traditional terms, as service to husband, to children, and to extended family members, and while harboring desires for more personal growth and freedom, they did not seem to conceive of this as a possibility for them.

Within the first generation cohort, however, the oldest participants, those aged over 80, did not express a desire to have had more balance between their own needs and wishes and the demands of family life, although 50 percent of these older women had expressed regrets about the lack of autonomy in their lives.

Among the oldest first generation respondents, only Sailaza, aged 82, had held employment outside the home and for her the concept of balance meant “doing it all,” that is, taking care of the family and household chores as well as handling a full-time job. Sailaza, now retired, was widowed in her middle years and raised three daughters on her own. Clearly, she had no option but to handle all responsibilities for maintaining a home, raising her children, and supporting her family financially. For Sailaza, the concept of “balance,” from necessity, became a central focus in her life. Sailaza is also constantly aware of the need for “balance” as she observes the multiple pressures
experienced by her youngest daughter as she attempts to juggle the demands of family and work:

My youngest daughter…she has a daughter who is 11 years old. She has to take her for tennis, she has to take her for music…and she has her homework…and cleaning the house…After going to work. She leaves at 6:30 AM and comes back at seven in the night, and sometimes she has to get up in the night, because she [has to call] Europe, and Europe time is different from the U.S., so she has to get up according to their time.

In addition to the lack of concern about balance expressed by the oldest group of first generation women, only 33 percent of the women aged 66 to 80 and 14 percent of women aged 50 to 65 mentioned finding balance as a need. For example, Laxmi, now living comfortably with her husband, son, grandchild, and daughter-in-law, did not mention the struggle to find balance in her life as a concern for her at this time. However, she commented that in her life in India she had seen her main responsibility to be devoting her full attention to her family. After immigration to the United States with her husband and children, she had had to work outside the home and felt that her ability to handle family responsibilities had been diminished as a result:

In India, I was able to give full attention to the family…Once we came here, even I was working…So…going to work and taking care of the home, it may not have been the same quality…what I would have given if I didn’t work.

Maria, aged 51, on the other hand, conceived of balance as the ability to negotiate between personal feelings and wishes and the expectations of the older generation:

If there are some older generation, who expect a certain behavior from you, then probably I will hold my mouth…It’s a balancing act, you know…Sometimes I say, “You have to be astute, to understand the repercussions of both…” Sometimes just…fighting may not be the right way, you know.
The group of first generation women most concerned with balancing competing demands on their time was the subgroup of 36 to 50-year-olds, where 63 percent saw finding balance as an issue. Almost all of this age group were married and working at their careers, while 75 percent were still raising children. This is the age group for whom achieving balance in their lives was a more pressing concern. Shyama, aged 38, a physician who was raised in India, commented:

You should be there for your family. You should not be that forward, you know, that you leave everything behind, and you’re just a feminist kind of woman that…Not taking care of family or not taking care of children. I think you should find a balance…It’s a lot of work to find balance, you know…But whatever I saw in my mother or my aunts…that’s what I figured out. Because I saw them doing that…They were all professional women, but they were very traditional too…They were home, they were doing all the things that women are supposed to be doing…but I also realized that they were working very hard, and they had no life of their own.

For the 36 to 50-year-old first generation women torn between the demands of traditional gender role behavior and the pressures of full-time work, sometimes balance could only be achieved at the cost of sacrificing any time for oneself or any personal life.

Thus, for first generation Hindu women in the United States, the need for balance between family obligations and personal wishes was not a major concern across the board although it was an issue mentioned by women in the 36 to 50 age group, that is, the women most involved in trying to juggle family and career responsibilities. For the older women, for whom finding balance in their lives was not mentioned as a priority, in all likelihood, their lack of interest came from community and family pressure to perform gender roles in traditional ways which overshadowed any awareness in the women themselves that it might be possible to have needs or desires outside of family life or that such needs could be met.
Second Generation

While the theme of finding balance between competing demands was not a major concern for most first generation women, it was a somewhat greater concern for the second generation cohort. Overall, 55 percent of this group saw the struggle to find balance as an issue in their lives. Surprisingly, the group expressing the least concern about finding balance was the 36 to 50-year-old age group, that is, the group that is most directly involved with juggling competing demands, with maintaining a career, managing a household, and raising a family. In this age group, only 33 percent mentioned the problem of balancing all these tasks as an issue for them. In fact, this second generation age group was less concerned with the issue of balance than the same age group for first generation women, where 63 percent felt that it was a concern.

One possible explanation for this lack of concern among the second generation women is that many of the women in this group had resolved their dilemma by working part-time while their children were young and reentering the workforce full-time only when their children were older. As a group, these women were energetic, organized, and fully engaged in the process of “having it all” and of trying to balance family, work and personal expectations all at the same time. Needless to say, this group expressed the most stress in their lives and experience the most guilt that they could not do everything to the level they wanted. Andrea, age 38, who recently returned to full-time work, expressed the opinion:

I think it’s just trying to find a balance and...It’s like, you know, we want it all. We want to have the family, and cook and provide for a family, and then we also want to have that career, and I think it’s just trying to find the balance...So, what I’ve been doing is working part-time, and then still be able to manage the kids at home and stuff...But it’s all a balancing act...I feel like it’s so hard. I know my mom’s generation...there was more staying at home, and cooking and things like that...but I think with our
generation, it's kind of trying to have the best of both worlds, or trying to have that combination...and sometimes it's very hard...It's really hard balancing...It's a juggling act...So sometimes I wonder maybe they did have it right...Maybe we should be doing that.

Achoo, aged 40, on the other hand, a human dynamo who works full-time as a physician while raising four children aged between four and 11, saw the "juggling act" of balancing work and family as necessary for her personally, as meeting her needs to accomplish her own goal: "I feel like there are so many things I want to do, and...The balance is so difficult...Finding the balance is a daily struggle."

Achoo is trying to live her life without compromising her own ambitions and goals while at the same time taking care of her family and fulfilling her professional obligations. The cost to her is often a lack of personal time, exhaustion, and constant daily guilt that she cannot do everything perfectly.

It is interesting to note the discrepancy between first and second generation women in the 36 to 50-year-old age range in reference to concerns about achieving balance in their lives. While 63 percent of first generation women in this age group were concerned with finding balance, only 33 percent of the second generation women mentioned this as a concern. In both the subgroups, most women were caring for home and family, raising children, and working either part or full time. Within the first generation subgroup, 89 percent were married, 78 percent were raising children, and 78 percent were working outside the home. In the second generation subgroup, 67 percent were married, 67 percent had children, and all were now working full-time. Moreover, the first generation subgroup had the added stress of having to adjust to a new country and culture. Perhaps this additional stress accounted for the greater importance attached to finding balance among the first generation women aged 36 to 50.
Within the second generation cohort, finding balance between family life, careers and personal goals, was most acutely a concern for women age 26 to 35, that is, women who were struggling to establish careers, find partners, and begin creating their own families. Eighty-three percent of this group mentioned achieving balance as a goal.

For Gowri, age 27, the conflict that she experienced was not between taking care of family and career demands. Since she is not yet married, her struggle is to establish balance between a level of independence acceptable to her rather traditional, conservative family and her respect for the values and expectations of her parents and other elders. The balance sought by Gowri is a compromise between needing the freedom to establish her own identity and to “speak her mind” and the need to maintain the love and approval of her family, that is, the balance between personal and career needs and family expectations. Gowri confessed: “I try to keep the balance between speaking my mind and having other people like me.”

Gowri is the most religiously devout and traditional of the younger second generation Hindu women participants in the study and was clearly the most concerned about family and community approval. She was particularly concerned about choosing a mate acceptable to both her and her family and was struggling to find a balance between her own emotional needs and her family’s expectations.

In this age group, the need to establish personal identities and to gain independence of thought and action as well as the struggle to express themselves freely as adults appeared to be a primary concern which was articulated by most of these young women. Finding a happy medium or balance between these desires and
the need to respect parents and elders and to meet their expectations was central for women of this age range.

Most of the women age 26 to 35 were unmarried and child free. Only 33 percent of this group were married and raising children and those women were either not working or working part-time although they were all trained professionals. For these women, achieving balance was sacrificed in favor of, or perhaps satisfied by, opting to prioritize family over career and personal needs while their children were very young.

Sheila, age 33, mother of two daughters, stated:

I do feel a little bit of pressure to be someone who can balance a lot of different things...Like, nowadays it's career and kids and home, and it's...I feel that pressure to balance all of that and not struggle with it. Like, it's supposed to come pretty easy to you if you're a woman...kind of expected...Like, all those things are supposed to be what you do, and...the expectation that women are supposed to balance everything and be perfect with it...I think that's a fallacy (laughs)...but most women I know are not...It's hard...and I think that they are expected to be that way by society...and in a certain way, like, my husband...Maybe more by Hindu society...but I do feel like, you know, people are...non-Indian people too...my friends are...they're homeschooling their kids, and they're cooking their home-cooked meals, and they're...their house is perfect...It's just an image of...And I think now even more than before there are all these expectations of...you should be feeding your kids this...they need to be going to this kind of school...they need to have this kind of education...But it's, like, piled on...piled on...All these things are pretty hard to live up to.

Sheila attributes much of the pressure she feels to do everything and to balance discrepant responsibilities to the expectations of modern society, both Hindu and Western, that she should be a high-achieving professional as well as a wife and mother. However, she concedes that a portion of this stress comes from the traditional gender roles expected for an Indian woman. Sheila indicated that, in addition to all the societal pressures to be the “perfect woman” some of her stress initially came from her
husband’s assumption that she alone was responsible for home and family care and maintenance:

It was very frustrating for me, because I would work, and I would come home, but everything was still on my shoulders...Like making dinner, washing dishes, cleaning the house, getting the kids...He would help a little bit, but it was expected that it was my role, and he was my assistant...you know, not his responsibility...And I don't know if that's anything that's going to ever be changed...(laughs).

Rukmani, age 32, agreed with Sheila about the difficulty of balancing all the demands placed on women today:

I wish I could find the perfect balance of how you can be...very, you know...a great, strong career woman, but also be able to spend time with your kids, and balance that whole life. And I wish I could do that to the perfection that I want, but it’s so difficult...(laughs), and I’m nowhere near that...It’s not possible. You only have 24 hours a day. You can only do so much, and to try to be perfect in all aspects of it is...It’s not possible.

The youngest age group in the second generation cohort, women aged 18 to 25 who were entering adult life, but who were generally more preoccupied with their educational and/or career aspirations were in many ways more concerned with and optimistic about the possibility of finding a workable balance between the dreams of family and career than were the other second generation women. Seventy-five percent of this age group mentioned the concept of balance as important for their future goals and aspirations.

Benni, aged 20, a senior in college heading for medical school, was positive and optimistic in her vision of the future. She said:

Girls can have their own careers, and do whatever they want. They can be equal with their husbands in relationships, and assertive about their role in the household. I think it’s cool to see women being so well-rounded, but with family so important.
Adriana, aged 18, about to begin her college life away from home, also affirmed the belief that all things were possible in the future and that her ability to juggle all the options open to her was a foregone conclusion: "Women can be nurturing and caring, but can also have a job...not sacrifice family, but be professional. There has to be a balance."

The majority of these youngest women credit their mothers with providing positive examples of women who juggle competing needs successfully. Marya, a junior in college, commented:

I learned a lot about balance from my mother. I want to be like her...She takes care of the family, but she has her own life, and does her own thing too. She is able to find a balance between the family and her own needs.

Ruthi, too, a 24-year-old medical student, agreed with Marya: “I have to be superwoman, like my mother. She balances everything. She’s a great wife, a great mom, and she works she maintains all that energy.”

Thus, the previous generation who struggled to do everything, to find a balance between maintaining a career in providing for the needs of family, and who freely express the frustrations and stress they experience in this endeavor, have somehow conveyed to their daughters, through their examples, that having it all is a possibility for women today and that it is possible to balance all the competing demands young women will face in their future. Somehow these mothers have encouraged their daughters to be positive and optimistic about their futures and to believe that they can achieve any goals that they set for themselves.

To summarize, within Domain Five the concept of seeking and achieving balance between competing demands in the lives of women seems to be relatively unimportant for first generation Hindu women in the United States, and only achieved a
predetermined level of significance for first generation women aged 36 to 50, where 63 percent of these women mentioned the struggle to find balance in their lives. This struggle for balance was mentioned more frequently by second generation participants as a whole where 55 percent saw this as an important goal. The importance of finding balance was more critical for younger second generation women where 67 percent of the 26 to 35-year-old subgroup and 75 percent of the 18 to 25-year-old subgroup mentioned finding balance as significant for them.

**Pragmatism, Flexibility and Adaptability**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines pragmatism as: “a reasonable and logical way of doing things or of thinking about problems that is based on dealing with specific situations instead of on ideas and theories.”¹ The Macmillan Dictionary has a slightly different definition based on the adaptability of the individual, rather than on pragmatism as a mode of reasoning: “…a practical way of thinking or dealing with problems at emphasizes results and solutions more than theories.”² or, “…character or conduct that emphasizes practicality.”³ In other words, pragmatism is an approach to problem-solving, or to dealing with life’s obstacles which may be stressful or challenging and which may involve compromise and flexibility as well as the ability to adapt to less than ideal situations.

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³ Ibid.
The concept of pragmatism as a strategy for resolving stressful life problems or events was a recurring theme among the Hindu women in this study, albeit more often espoused by first generation immigrants to the United States who were often married before they came to the U.S., usually to a man not of their free choice, and who typically have lived in extended family settings with their in-laws and other relatives from their husband’s family. Each of these women grew up knowing that she would be required to leave her family of origin and to adapt and conform to the lifestyle and values of her husband and his family. Hindu girls in India are taught virtually from birth that they will be expected to marry and that the marriage will be the result of a family rather than a personal decision. They learned that their husband’s family will take the place of their own and that they will be required to leave their natal home and to live with their husband’s family, where they will initially have little status and where they will be required to conform to the values, practices, traditions and expectations of their in-laws, and to serve their elders.

First Generation

In the present study, a recognition of and concern about the need to be flexible and adaptable was expressed by 81 percent of the first generation cohort as a whole. One hundred percent of first generation respondents age 66 to 80 talked about adaptability, compared to 86 percent of those age 50 to 65, and 78 percent of the 36 to 50-year-old age group.

These women were raised from birth to recognize that they would have to adjust to new ways and new positions within a family and that their ability to accept this would require that they adopt a pragmatic view of life and an acceptance of a situation over which they as women would have little or no control.
First generation women were required to adapt to life with men whom they did not know and perhaps had only seen on one or two occasions, who were chosen for them as a consequence of negotiations between two families, often with community members mediating the transaction. In addition, after marriage, at some point they had to endure another separation, from their familiar environment and surroundings, from their culture, country and language, and had to adjust to a new culture, language and customs, and life with a virtual stranger. Such transitions demanded a high degree of adaptability and flexibility and necessitated a pragmatic approach to life as a strategy for dealing with often overwhelming stresses.

Sailaza, aged 82, who came to the United States with her husband and children, but who was widowed after immigration and raised her children alone in this country, recounted her upbringing and her initial introduction to pragmatic strategies of problem-solving, saying that she had always been taught by both her mother and father that she must be flexible and able to adjust to her new family after marriage. She commented: “Women are more flexible. They can adjust to anything.”

Sailaza thus implied that women are raised to be prepared to adapt to any circumstance without expressing resistance or complaint. Women were expected to be compliant and obedient and to accept whatever decisions others made for them.

Maria, also a first generation woman, confirmed that pragmatism, defined as adaptability and accommodation to the expectations of others, was a necessity for women of her generation and was often expressed through a woman’s flexibility in response to others, based on their age or status:

If there are some older generation [people] who expect a certain behavior, then I will probably hold my mouth, and pretend like, “Okay, I’m an
obedient wife…” It’s a balancing act. I’m not always saying, “You go fight for your right!” or whatever…I sometimes say, “You have to be astute, to understand repercussions”.

Amanda, aged 72, on the other hand, interpreted adaptability and pragmatism quite differently. She saw the ability to adapt not in terms of adjusting to the ways of a new family, but in terms of learning to master new practical skills necessary to thrive in an unfamiliar country and culture. After relocating to the United States, with her husband’s encouragement she learned to drive a car, to handle money and banking chores, and to negotiate with the world outside the family. She became more independent, more flexible, and better able to handle new situations. She commented:

My generation of women are much more traditional. Like my own sister-in-law, even though she’s very independent, she…I don’t think she does a lot of these mundane things, like going and talking to people, calling a plumber, asking the plumber to come to the house…I had to learn.

Lite, aged 71, however saw adaptability as a more pragmatic strategy for dealing with life’s challenges. She felt that women were trained from birth to have the ability to selectively respond to pressure and to modify their behavior to fit changed circumstances or expectations. She stated: “Whatever is good, we follow; whatever is not to our liking, we leave.”

Thus, Lite is implying that women’s pragmatism and adaptability is not a nonnegotiable blind acceptance of and submission to external pressures but in fact involves a pragmatic choice or decision to maintain stability in potentially unstable situations.

Nutan, too, indicated that the struggle to accept and adjust to difficult changes in her life had required a great deal of flexibility and the need to be pragmatic in her strategies for overcoming problems:
We [my husband and I] were separated for a whole year [before my husband could join me in America]...I came here...I have a baby...After he came we lived with my parents...Then he got a job, and we moved out...So I was living a life on my own...with the baby...and a man...a strange man actually (laughs)...I don’t know how I did it (laughs)...But, well you have to adapt...But I think my life at that point was more about just survival rather than anything else.

Nutan commented however that she learned how to handle stresses from watching her mother and grandmother adapt to their lives:

I saw that they were happy with their different lives...I saw that as a woman you could do whatever you want, as long as you are happy...take the good from both, you know...If you have an arranged marriage, and [you are] not necessarily paired up with a person you would choose, or with whom you’re compatible...you have to adjust. That was the one thing [my mother taught me] you have to compromise, you know...It’s not like, “Oh, you can change him.” No. (laughs)...you have to adjust...I've had to follow it, yes...And I don’t think it will ever change for women...(laughs). I remember my cousin told me that her grandmother told her when she got married, that you could...her grandmother told her, “Remember, in your marriage, that you can either be right or you can be happy...” So, you can choose...Any woman has to adjust, and live with the circumstances that are given to her in life.

For Nutan, happiness was a choice, a choice related to the pragmatic decision to adapt to and accept what could not be changed. For her, this was a choice that faced all women, primarily because women had fewer options open to them other than adjusting to an arranged marriage, because in the past they had no financial resources of their own to support any alternative choices.

Laxmi, aged 68, summarized the opinion of many first generation respondents:

Basically, I think attitude is more important...If you face things with the right kind of attitude and positive thinking, I’m sure things will work out...I think there is no separate heaven or hell...the heaven or hell is right here...If it’s a small thing, and you take it and make it into a big issue, then that will be like hell.
Second Generation

While 81 percent of the first generation cohort saw pragmatism, flexibility and adaptability as essential strategies for dealing with potential challenges and the expectations of others, only 30 percent of the second generation women overall saw this concept as important for them. Only 33 percent of women aged 36 to 50 raised pragmatism as a concern, although 67 percent of women in the 26 to 35-year-old group did so.

Few of the second generation women had ever lived in extended families or had even had parents or in-laws as permanent members of their households as married women. Most of those who were married lived in a nuclear family setting, with their husbands and children, while those who were unmarried usually resided with their families of origin, which in the United States, also tended to be nuclear in structure with the occasional presence of other relatives being experienced as visitors rather than as members of the household. While their in-laws or natal family members might reside with their families, often for several months at a time, and often providing extended support and childcare when parents both worked, these older family members were clearly visitors in their children’s homes, and were not seen as heads of the household.

The concept of adaptability, however, was interpreted in different ways by second generation women, as compared to first generation participants. Second generation women were not raised with the same expectations that they must leave them natal families and adapt to the demands and expectations of a new family. While marriage was seen as a given by both the second generation participants and their parents, there was an expectation or understanding that choice would be involved and also that after marriage, the couple would probably establish a nuclear family rather
than moving in with the husband’s family. Thus, many of the assumptions which led first
generation women to expect that they would be required to be flexible and adaptable
and to develop a practical approach to handling stresses were not emphasized in the
upbringing of second generation women.

Among the youngest second generation group, the 18 to 25-year-olds, the
concept of pragmatism/adaptability was not mentioned as a concern of the future. This
lack of concern with adaptability was true also for the 36 to 50-year-old second
generation women, where only 33 percent saw this is an issue, perhaps because most
of them had already adjusted to marriage and family life and had already negotiated
more egalitarian relationships with their husbands as well as any compromises
necessary for dealing with parents and in-laws. This subgroup did not concern
themselves with the need to be pragmatic because they had already developed
practical approaches to problem solving as well as the ability to negotiate and
compromise rather than simply adapt or adjust to the expectations of others.

In comparing the second generation subgroup aged 36 to 50 with women of the
same age who were born and raised in India, only 33 percent of the second generation
women compared to 78 percent of first generation felt that adaptability was important.
This suggests that women raised in India are receiving different messages about the
need to be flexible and adaptable than are the second generation of women raised in
the United States.

Within the second generation cohort, however, the concept of adaptability and
pragmatism was mentioned most by respondents in the 26 to 35-year-old age group,
where 67 percent saw this as a concern. These young women were in the process of
establishing themselves in careers, as well as seeking and settling into life partnerships. The ability to adjust to future challenges was perhaps more central and immediate in their thoughts and they may be more preoccupied with the challenges and accommodations which they anticipate will be required of them when they adjust to marriage and to the loss of a previously single life in which they did not have to negotiate or compromise regarding their life choices.

It is also possible that being raised in a Western country where individualism is more the norm and where young people expect to have freedom of choice in their lives, these young second generation women are forced to negotiate between the expectations of a more collectivist, family-oriented culture and the individualistic definition of self, and of personal rights, that they find in the United States.

The difference found between first and second generation women with regard to the perceived need to be adaptable and flexible in their lives and to be able to cope with demands and expectations by adopting a strategy of pragmatically handling stress by, in a sense, “going with the flow,” was, however, acknowledged by second generation participants.

Rukmani, for example, related the concept of pragmatism to women who were raised in India rather than in the United States. She commented: “I think if I were in India, and I had been totally raised there, I might’ve had to have that…thought process of just, “put up with it.” Putting up with things just seems to be the norm.”

Despite being brought up in the United States, Rukmani still recognized that she makes accommodations for the sake of keeping peace and her family. She shared her
family’s response to a question about how they would feel if she married someone who is not Indian or Hindu:

They [my parents] said, “Sure we’re going to be a bit disappointed, but in the end your happiness is what’s going to matter, and so of course we’re going to support you, and do everything with you, and look forward to grandkids just the same… But we can’t say that it’s all the same…” So, I did know from the beginning. That was difficult for me when I was younger… And it came to a point in my life when I myself said, “You know what, my parents’ happiness is important to me, because I know that I can be happy with somebody of any culture, but if I marry someone of the same culture, and it makes me happy and my parents happy, why shouldn’t I do it?…” If both of us can be happy with me choosing somebody of my own culture, then why not? It makes everything a lot easier for everybody.

Rukmani’s comment is a perfect illustration of the ways that pragmatism can influence the decision-making of U.S.-born Hindu women, even though they are not subject to quite the same pressures to conform to family and community expectations that their Indian born parents might have experienced. Second generation pragmatism seems to kick in around the time that these American-born women come face-to-face with important life decisions like marriage and children, and constructing or reconstructing relationships with parents and in-laws, challenges not yet faced by these young women at an earlier stage of development. The major practical challenge faced by the second generation as adolescents usually involves learning how to moderate their behavior in the community or around elders and how to negotiate or manipulate their parents, particularly with regard dating.

To summarize this theme, the majority of Indian-born Hindu women in the United States felt that there was an expectation that women need to be flexible and adaptable, particularly within their marriages and with their husband’s family, but also in all aspects of their life. These women shared that they were raised always to know that they would
leave their natal family and would have to accommodate to the demands and expectations of their husband and in-laws. First generation women saw such accommodations as a practical necessity and as a choice they must make that would affect their ability to be happy in their lives. Personal goals and desires would likely lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, and pragmatism was a necessary strategy to give them a chance at happiness as well as to promote stability and peace within the family.

Second generation women, on the other hand, particularly those who had not yet faced many adult decisions and compromises, saw the concepts of pragmatism, flexibility, adaptability, compromise and accommodation as less relevant for their lives. Even second generation women who were married and had children and families of their own seem to feel that these strategies should apply to both males and females, and that compromise and adjustment was a two-way street in marriage. There was, however, a subtle, subterranean sense that women were more equipped to be pragmatic and adaptable than men were, a message that seems to be passed down from mother to daughter.

**Rationalization**

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, rationalization refers to the action of: “attributing (one’s actions) to rational and creditable motives without analysis of true and especially unconscious motives; to create a more attractive explanation for the problem.” Rationalization thus involves two steps: 1) a decision or action is made for some reason, known or unknown. For example, an arranged marriage may be accepted

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by a woman because of pressure from family or community or because it is a culturally expected normative behavior; and 2) the behavior is then rationalized, that is, explained and justified to oneself or others in a way that avoids psychological discomfort, such as guilt or shame, for the individual.

In the context of this study, rationalization becomes a strategy or technique that is used by Hindu women in the United States to justify engaging in culturally expected, traditional gender role behaviors, particularly when the mainstream U.S. culture might see these behaviors as undesirable or oppressive for modern women. Hindu women may rationalize or justify the adoption of traditional gender roles and the performance of culturally expected female behaviors by claiming that such behaviors were a result of their free choice or by explaining them in terms of expedience, ability, or pragmatism.

For instance, women may justify typically gendered behaviors such as cooking or cleaning by claiming that it is their free choice to do those tasks, or that they are doing them because they enjoy it, or that they do it better than, for example, their husbands, or that they have more time available than other people and so it is practical and expedient for them to assume such responsibilities.

These explanations allow the women to deny to themselves and others that they are engaging in traditional gendered behaviors because they are expected or pressured to do so. This denial alleviates the discomfort they feel as modern women when they suspect that their ability to choose has been co-opted. Such rationalization to alleviate feelings of guilt or shame is only necessary when there is a conflict of cultural values and where the mainstream culture reinforces nontraditional gender roles for women of the minority traditional culture.
It is also reasonable to speculate that Hindu women who have been raised in India, and are more attuned to traditional gender role expectations would engage in less rationalization of traditional gendered behaviors than would Hindu women born and raised in the United States, acculturated to mainstream gender role expectations but still subject to the norms and values of their Indian communities and families.

First Generation

Overall, only 14 percent of the first generation participants used rationalization as a mechanism to justify acceptance of traditional female responsibilities. Within the different age subgroups, rationalization was used by 11 percent of women aged 36 to 50, and 14 percent of those age 51 to 65. Thirty-three percent of women aged 66 to 80 used rationalization as a justification for their gendered behavior choices. However none of the women over 80 did so. That is, rationalization does not seem to be a necessary defense mechanism for first generation women, who seem to be comfortable with, or at least accepting of their traditional gender roles.

This first generation group is comprised of women raised in India, generally in traditional households where women were trained from birth to expect to marry, move to their husbands' family household, and to assume all of the traditional responsibilities of a wife and mother. Raised with these expectations, there would be fewer reasons to feel the need to justify or rationalize performing in the expected way.

On the other hand, some first generation women did try to justify their traditional behaviors. Amanda, age 72, attempted to explain how she viewed her role as a woman: “I do certain things…I don’t know if it’s my duty, but I would like to do it because…women do it, you know.”
For Amanda, duty and choice become confused, and her traditional gender role behaviors are justified as wanting to do certain things “because women do it.” Amanda wants to act the way women are expected to act but at the same time she seems to also want her actions to reflect their own choices and inclinations.

Maria, too, aged 51, has trouble distinguishing between “duty” and “choice”: “We all have duties now, too, but in a different society, I guess… but not in that way…I mean, it is… as long as it is not forced on you… you have to share a burden… share, I think….”

In other words, women have responsibilities, or have to share the responsibility for certain tasks but taking on the responsibility should not be coerced but freely accepted.

Among the 36 to 50-year-old group, most women did not use rationalization to justify their behavior. Of those that did, Winnie rationalized:

I choose to spend more time at home than my husband does… That’s my personal choice… because I want to spend more time with the kids doing certain things… I get a satisfaction out of feeding them… and coming home to prepare those meals… or to drive them wherever they have to go after school… I’m in charge of the kitchen because I like things a certain way. I like my meals better when I cook them… Like I said, I like to feed the kids. So I don’t do it because I think it’s my duty, but because I want to do it. I’m a control freak that way, if you want (laughs)… But that’s the reason my mother did it, and because… In her case, because my dad was at work and she was home and she cooked the meals.

While clearly some of the first generation women did feel the need to rationalize their gendered performance of household responsibilities, most, however, did not. This was not so true however for second generation respondents.

**Second Generation**

Fifty percent of second generation women, as a group, employed rationalization as a technique to justify engaging in traditional gendered behaviors. The subgroup most
prone to use rationalization as a defense mechanism included women age 26 to 35, women in the process of forming relationships and marrying, and thus negotiating their traditional behavior within a marriage. Sixty-seven percent of these women used rationalization to justify their gendered behaviors. Gauri, age 26, for example, who is involved in a serious relationship with a non-Indian man, felt the need to justify the assumption of traditional female tasks within the relationship:

I feel that it’s my responsibility to take care of a lot of the domestic tasks…Only because I like to take care of them, though, so I make it my responsibility…But I expect help…I don’t expect it to be all my responsibility. I do think it’s my responsibility to cook (laughs)….I just think I’d rather cook than the other person. That’s what it is…it’s more out of self-interest.

Raina, aged 26, also justified her choices to take on traditionally female responsibilities as she begins to contemplate her future marriage:

I’ve noticed more now, as I am getting older, and I actually kind of like these domestic duties, it’s something I want to do….I like cooking, I like cleaning, I like doing these things….So, if we’re having dinner together, I like the cooking….But then, again, why do I want to? It’s because that’s kind of the way I see it, and I want…I just want to do these things…but they are also things I enjoy.

While 67 percent of women in the stage of forming relationships and creating their own families tended to rationalize many of the roles they adopted or anticipated in their family life, only 50 percent of younger women, those aged 18 to 25, did so. Some of these younger women did fantasize about their futures as wives and mothers but most were preoccupied with facing the challenges of adult life, achieving an education, identifying career goals, and managing an acceptable level of autonomy and independence. Many of these young women were more concerned with establishing their own identity and with demonstrating their own autonomy and decision-making abilities. Amber, aged 18, for example, a freshman at a major university, indicated: “I
would want to show that I’m not following…I’m not truly following what has always been
done…I want to do it all, but I want to do it from choice.”

Benni, age 20, a junior in college headed for medical school, explained:

If you’re a homemaker, that’s fine…not all women have to go out and have
careers….You do what you want, and…and as long as you love it, and do it
well…and you’re not doing it because of anyone else…I think that’s really
important….You take on the ones [responsibilities] that you [want]…I don’t
think that the expectations that there might be for women…like, I shouldn’t
have to do all that if I don’t want to, or don’t feel like I can, or maybe I want
to do something different…because women used to be repressed, or
whatever….But it’s also ideal if you want to not be….maybe you like being
in a relationship, or maybe you don’t want to have a career…that’s okay
too…as long as you know who you are as a person and you don’t let
people walk all over you.

Marya, aged 19, a junior in college, involved in a two-year relationship with a
non-Indian, also attempted to rationalize her choices of gendered behaviors:

I’ll do things because I feel like doing them, not because, you know, “If you
don’t fast, that’s wrong, blah…blah…blah.” You know, “Fast before your
husband…” That’s just not how….There’s things that I would do because I
like doing them…like, for example, I love cleaning…that’s just me…I love
cleaning my room…like, being organized makes me feel good, so I would
clean the house and organize it because that makes…that relaxes me…I
wouldn’t do it because sometimes it’s, like, “That’s your house, you should
take care of it…. ” So of course I would take care of my…but I would also
want my husband to….It’s not like I would say, “Since I’m the girl…” like,
“I’m the wife, I’ll do it….“ He has to clean too.

In summary, the use of rationalization is a method of justifying the performance
of tasks and responsibilities traditionally allocated to women by re-designating them as
freely chosen and not culturally coerced, seems to be experienced primarily by second
generation Hindu women in the United States, that is, by those women more fully
acculturated to mainstream Western concepts of “liberated.” First generation women
born and raised in India, seem to be more likely to accept traditional gender roles for
women and do not feel the need to justify performance of these roles. They do not feel
the same sense of discomfort or dissonance that second generation women born and raised in a Western culture may experience when they continue to perform “traditional” gendered behaviors which conflict in many ways with the gender roles they experience and adopt in the United States.

**Family and Children First**

Domain Five has explored some of the ways in which Hindu women in the United States have managed to deal with the conflict between community and family pressures to behave in traditionally female ways and their desires for personal growth, autonomy, and the attainment of educational and career goals. For the participants in this study, a major goal has been to find a balance between the responsibilities to and for others and their desire for personal development. One strategy for reconciling conflicting expectations has been to develop a pragmatic approach to life choices, accepting the need to be flexible, and to be able to adapt to the challenges and obstacles presented in their lives. Another strategy, or defense against the psychological tension resulting from being unable to conform to conflicting cultural gender role expectations, has been to rationalize and justify gendered performance as being the outcome of freely made choices, personal preferences, or expediency.

However, the theme to be described, “Family and Children First”, explores the ultimate resolution of the juggling act performed by Hindu women. While struggling to find a balance between conflicting needs and expectations, using both pragmatic and psychological strategies to reconcile this conflict, ultimately Hindu women tip the scales in favor of commitment to family. Collectivism wins out over individualism. Personal goals are ultimately subordinated to the needs of family and children. The value and focus on family unity and benefit which is so traditionally a feature of Indian life.
becomes the final resolution of the conflicting pressures experienced by Hindu women, a reconstructed, selective view of the traditional gender role ideology of pativrata.

**First Generation**

Seventy-six percent of first generation women mentioned placing the needs of family and children ahead of other demands on their time and behavior. This value is held by 100 percent of the oldest women in this group, and by 86 percent of women aged 51 to 65. In addition, 67 percent of women aged 66 to 80, and of women aged 36 to 50, also mentioned the needs of family as a priority.

Sailaza, aged 82, who worked full-time until her retirement, commented:

As long as she [the woman] takes care of the family, and stays with her husband and children…takes care of all the extended family…that’s it. The Hindu woman…as long as she does everything the husband wants and takes care of the children and the in-laws…that is the ideal woman.

Amanda, age 72, who has never worked, concurred: “I think a wife should concentrate on the family…take care of the house…and the wife should take care of the children. A wife’s duty is to make sure that things run smoothly.”

Kannaki, aged 55, a full-time professional college administrator, also agreed that taking care of family first should be a woman’s primary responsibility, regardless of whether or not she worked outside the home:

I like the fact that a lot of women think it’s their duty to take care of their families…And I think that’s innate in any woman…It doesn’t matter whether it’s an American or an Indian It’s just that I think it’s in your genes.

For Kannaki, women’s responsibility to take care of their families and children is not a cultural construction but is biologically determined. However, it may be argued that the definition of family and responsibility for family, may, in fact, be culturally determined. In India, for example, duty to family extends beyond husband and children,
beyond parents and in-laws, and includes extended family members, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and so on.

Alamelu, aged 46, expressed women’s broader cultural responsibility for family:

As a woman, as a family, if you will…it’s important to keep the family unit together. It’s not…you know, you…you have to be independent, but not at the cost of your family. So, if you have to give and take, basically it’s okay…more so for a woman…Basically you have to take care of everybody…you have to nurture and…be comfortable with the credit mostly for your husband (laughs), and….We kind of put the family above ourselves, and that is from the way we’ve been brought up…I’ve grown up with, “Yes, you are, you know, faithful and…you take care of your family, and you’re deferential and respectful of your elders…you take care of the older people in the family.” It’s never been, “What I do” kind of thing…It’s been what I would do for the family…that kind of thing…putting family before self.

Parul, aged 49, agreed, and also indicated that these values were passed on to her from her mother and grandmother:

I think one thing that comes again and again…not so much in the telling…but just in modeling…was that women have to hold families together…It’s not necessarily that they [my mother and my grandmother] told us, in so many words, but just by the way they were…And we sometimes saw the difference between women who did not, who were not…there were some women who were more kind of aloof from the family…and then some women who were much more involved….So we saw the difference between their families…and that kind of influenced us, because my grandmother definitely had the philosophy that women…that a woman holds the family together.

Second Generation

It was not unexpected that the majority of first generation women endorsed a value of placing family needs and especially the needs of children, ahead of personal goals or desires. However, it was surprising that second generation women supported this belief to an even greater extent than their first generation co-respondents. Ninety-five percent of second generation women covering all age groups felt that the balance they were seeking in their lives was tipped in favor of family life and of children’s needs.
One hundred percent of women aged 36 to 50, as well as of those aged 26 to 35, endorsed this value, while 88 percent of the youngest group also supported this concept.

Andrea, age 39, saw women’s responsibility in this area as almost a mandatory requirement:

I think there is almost a code of conduct for women, and as a daughter, wife, or mother, I think just being loyal to the family, taking care of the family, educating your children, taking care of the parents...just being the kind of person that keeps the family together, that kind of weaves the whole family together....And I think the woman plays a very strong and powerful role in keeping the family together and maintaining relationships with parents, or their own brothers or sisters, or in-laws, or brothers and sisters-in-law...their own children.

Achoo, aged 40, agreed with Andrea and other second generation women who described it as a woman’s responsibility to maintain family unity: “Women can be that sort of glue in families, and can bring families back together.”

Sejal, aged 38, extended this duty as a woman beyond simply taking care of family members and maintaining relationships to a gendered responsibility to nurture the feelings and welfare of other people ahead of one’s own:

I do think there’s a duty for a wife... I don’t know if you’re talking about a mother, or women in general, but...a duty to take other people’s feelings and well-being into consideration with everything that you do. I think...when you become a wife...when you become a mother...I think you take that pledge to not consider yourself as a lone entity anymore.

Sujatha, age 37, also commented that caring for others was definitely considered to be the responsibility of women. She shared that when her widower father was ill, it was expected that she would defer her education to take care of him even though she had a brother who lived at home:

When I was thinking of going to college or going to medical school, my father was ill, and it was definitely an expectation that I would be there,
that I wouldn’t…I wasn’t the one who left…My brother, a couple of years later went away to college, but I stayed…and I think there was a sort of caregiver role that was an expectation…I think it still would have been that “You, as the daughter…” That would have been the expectation whether I was married or not.

Sujatha also concurred that in addition to a perceived responsibility for women to be caregivers they also carry the burden of maintaining family relationships: “I really do think it is women who are the maintainers of relationships, and the maintainers of families, and they are the ones who sort of keep the connection going.”

Women’s responsibility to preserve family units seems to be a value that is accepted and validated by all Hindu women in the United States, whether they were born in India or in the West. Even the younger second generation women, most of whom had not yet established their own families, had absorbed this value within their family of origin. And above all, women learn from their mothers that the care of children trumps all other demands and expectations,

For example, Gowri, age 26, recounting the stories and narratives she has been exposed to in her family, stated:

My most important stories have been stories of sacrifice, where women have sacrificed for the family. I think it builds character, where you’re…like, you’re less…you’re more selfless, and I think in this world we need more people like that…I think both sons and daughters should be like that…But there are more stories of women who are like that than there are men.

For Gowri, narratives, both ancient and those originating within the family, have the effect of teaching women to be selfless, self-sacrificing, and to put the needs of family before everything else. Stories construct and reinforce the Indian value of family as a priority and of women’s responsibility to preserve and maintain family unity. As
Rukmani, age 32, a practicing attorney, affirms: “To me, family is very important. That’s going to be first.”

Sheila too, age 33, the mother of two daughters, stated:

Just seeing the way my mom was with us, I feel that there’s no one that can replace that…I mean there’s nothing bad about having another caretaker….And I know in Indian stories there are people…a lot of different people take care of things…it’s not necessarily the mom that will take care of them….It’s interesting because you think in India…so traditional…like, the women are going to be home with the kids…but it’s more of like a collective effort there…because I think they [the mothers] were doing a lot of the house stuff, and the children would be with these girls that were working in the house, and they would take care of the children, and the women would be doing the cooking and the running of the house, and things like that….I think [a woman/wife] should be…”supportive” is important to me…supportive of your children, supportive of your husband.

The youngest second generation women, most often unmarried and free of any responsibility for child care, still expressed the same values for women that they had learned from their mothers, that is, family and children come first. For example, Amber, aged 18, stated:

When you grow older and you marry, you have to take care of your children….The mother takes care of the children and takes care of the household….You need to know how to cook and you need to know how to take care of the household, and all the religious parts of it, where you need to be able to do, like, pujas, ceremonies, and….The woman is allowed to work, but they are the key roles in the household…Every individual has responsibilities of their own, and for a woman, I guess you could say it’s to…take care of the family, and the husband especially.

Anna, at 18, also believes that family is a woman’s primary responsibility: “I think it’s still important that a woman acknowledges her responsibility to her family, just in terms of being a caregiver, and being a provider, and being a protector….”

For these young women still struggling to define themselves in terms of their gender roles, validating the responsibilities of women which they learn from their
mothers and at the same time attempting to extend the dimensions of a woman’s life and to incorporate achievements in the outside world is difficult, although they express optimism about their ability to do so.

Megan, aged 19, related that her mother had told her that it was important to think carefully about her future goals and about the responsibilities that different objectives entailed:

She told me it was important to have balance…that you needed to find…if it was going to be a wife, I needed to be loyal and faithful, I needed to be able to see my partner as an equal…as well as…I needed to be able to take care of the children…and if I was going to be a good mother, I needed to be able to understand the values that I believe in so strongly.

Ruthi, age 24, agreed:

When we were growing up…my mom always taught is that there were certain important things…certain cultural values that you had to keep with you, including knowing how to take care of your household…knowing how…constantly making sure that you maintain your religion….Maybe the whole idea of the cooking and taking care of the household, and being the primary caretakers of the children…maybe that idea is still there.

Mothers teach their daughters to prioritize responsibility for family wellbeing both through the sacred narratives and family stories they tell their daughters, but also, and perhaps primarily, through the gendered behaviors they model for them.

This analysis makes it clear that despite the fact that the women in this study had indicated that they valued and wanted both career and family, both the opportunity to pursue their own goals as well as marriage and children, and despite their avowed goal of seeking a way to juggle and balance the multiple demands placed on them both within and outside the family, at the foundation of their life they clearly prioritize the needs of family, husband and children over any other claims on their time, energy, or emotions.
While second generation women may be less familiar with sacred stories and may express a great deal of optimism about their ability to be more independent than Indian women of past generations, more than any other lesson they have learned and absorbed and prioritized the Indian value placed on family. The women in this study may seek to have more of a life of their own, may try to achieve balance between competing demands, may promote flexibility and adaptability as a pragmatic approach to resolving dilemmas, or may rationalize their gendered choices to make them more palatable and less psychologically uncomfortable for them, but fundamentally all their strategies have one basic goal, that is, to promote the care, unity and welfare of their families. They see this as a duty, an obligation, and a gendered responsibility incumbent on and imperative for women.
CHAPTER 11
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 11 examines the initial research questions interrogated by the study as well as other issues and areas investigated which emerged out of the interview data. The implications of the answers which emerge from the data and of the subsequent questions the results have generated will be discussed and suggestions for future research will be offered. Finally, some of the limitations in the present study will be addressed, together with potential ways to resolve these limitations.

This study was initially designed to explore whether a connection could be found between sacred Hindu narratives (such as the stories of the Epics and the Puranas), presented in a variety of formats over time, and the gender roles assumed by Hindu women immigrants to the United States as well as by second generation Hindu American women.

**Influence of Sacred Narratives**

With regard to this initial question, the data suggest that about two thirds of the first generation Hindu women interviewed did report that sacred stories influenced them, although while most indicated that these stories affected the way in which they viewed themselves as women, especially with regard to their gender roles, others asserted that the stories impacted them in a non-gendered way as devotees rather than with regard to their gender roles in marital and family relationships.

In comparison with the responses from first generation Hindu women, the second generation cohort did not see themselves as influenced by sacred Hindu narratives either with regard to their gender roles or as devotees in a spiritual sense. Only 30 percent of the second generation women saw these narratives as influencing their
gendered behavior or attitudes in any significant way. In fact, the second generation women, as discussed in Chapter 6, appeared to have only a superficial knowledge of the content of these stories and little awareness of their significance as sacred Hindu literature. Some of the reasons for this erosion of understanding of the importance of these narratives both spiritually and culturally have been discussed. A significant take-away point from these results is that the efforts of Hindu immigrants to the United States, particularly of Hindu women and mothers, to sustain the cultural and religious values of Hinduism are not having the desired effect to the desired degree.

Hindu families may be constrained in the U.S. by economic demands and by pressure for both parents to be employed; by the move toward nuclear families and the relative absence from the home of grandparents and other relatives who can transmit and discuss the stories; and by the competition exerted by Western narratives and values which claim the interests of Hindu children. The many cultural activities to which Hindu children may be exposed: bharatnatyam and Bollywood dance classes; Sunday schools where children learn the stories and bhajans of the culture; and participation in community festivals, vrats and home-based pujas, and temple activities, do not seem to be having the desired effect. In this study, the few young second generation women who did seem to be knowledgeable about the ancient narratives and about Hindu religion and culture, either grew up in families which were immersed Hinduism on a daily basis and where parents engaged in discussions with their children, or had taken college-level courses in Hinduism and had an interest in and understanding of the religion on a deeper level.
Future research should perhaps examine the reasons for this dilution of awareness of Hindu culture and religion in the United States and should consider ways in which the sacred stories could be restored to a central place in the transmission of Hindu values in the West.

On the other hand, in the spirit of reflexivity endorsed in this study, one must ask whether a Western researcher has any authority to conclude that this dilution of the cultural transmission and influence of sacred stories constitutes a problem for Hindu immigrants to the U.S. or for their American-born children, or to propose that future research should address this issue. The question of whether this change constitutes a problem, and for whom, surely is an issue for U.S. Hindus to resolve.

**Influence of Sacred Females as Role Models**

The second and related issue addressed in this research asked whether the female characters who were portrayed as central, or at least significant, characters in the sacred narratives, such as Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, Kunti, or Gandhari, have had any influence as role models on how Hindu women perceive themselves as women or understand their gender roles within the family or the gendered behavior expected of them by their communities.

Within the first generation Hindu women respondents, sacred role models were mentioned as influential about 52 percent of the time, but no specific female role models were identified as particularly influential, and real women, contemporary or historical, were also valued as exemplars of womanhood. Some first generation women expressed the opinion that sacred (especially divine) female role models were to be revered but not emulated, while others indicated that while these figures were admired
as “ideals” they had little direct relevance for women today and their ability to function as role models was limited by context.

Among the second generation respondents, the influence of female role models from sacred narratives was weaker as would be expected. The second generation women mentioned sacred female role models as influential only 30 percent of the time. It is interesting, however, that when a role model was mentioned, Sita was the primary role model mentioned as influential for the second generation women. As previously reported, in research in India in past decades both men and women had identified Sita as the most important role model for female behavior, but this was not found to be the case for first generation respondents in this study. In fact, second generation women mentioned Sita as an influence more often than did first generation women. This might be simply attributed to the possibility that the name and character of Sita was more familiar to the second generation than other female Hindu exemplars. In any case, the connection was not particularly strong, since only 15 percent of the second generation cohort mentioned Sita as an influence. Second generation respondents, in fact, selected historical or contemporary women as role models 70 percent of the time, with Indira Gandhi being named as a woman to be emulated 30 percent of the time overall.

In summary, then, it can be said that with regard to the main questions raised by this research, sacred stories do seem to impact the gender role perceptions of first generation Hindu women who also claimed to be influenced by female characters from these narratives as well as by historical or contemporary women. Second generation Hindu women, however, were not influenced by sacred narratives and had only a
superficial awareness of their significance. Moreover, they preferred real or modern day women like Indira Gandhi as role models rather than characters from ancient stories.

As it became apparent that sacred narratives were not as influential as might have been expected, especially for the second generation of Hindu women in the United States, the next question to be investigated was whether narratives or stories of any kind have an impact on the gender role perceptions of Hindu women. Do Hindu women learn anything about how they should behave as women from stories? This question was broken down into two parts: first, the impact of stories told within and about the family; and second, the impact of stories from external sources, from neighbors in the community, and from different sources in different genres such as movies, television, TV advertisements, fiction, comics and so on.

Community Pressure to Conform

With regard to extra-familial sources of community influence and from narratives, 57 percent of the first generation cohort overall admitted to feeling influenced by community pressure to conform to the behaviors expected of females. This influence appeared to have the most effect on women aged 36 to 50, that is, women who were in the process of raising their own daughters and who were most burdened by the task of transmitting cultural and religious values to their children.

What is interesting, however, is that among the second generation women the influence of community pressure was felt even more strongly. A full 70 percent of these respondents claimed that they experienced community pressure to conform their behavior in ways that were considered culturally appropriate for women. This influence was felt in areas such as physical appearance, dress, demeanor (downcast eyes, soft speech, respect for elders, no argument or disagreement raised voices, and so on), as
well as dating, marriage choice, and children. In the second generation group, community pressure was experienced most by women facing the challenges of adult life, that is, women age 26 to 35, who were in the process of making choices about marriage, careers and children, where 100 percent said that they felt this pressure. Women aged 36 to 50, who were in the process of passing on cultural values to their children also felt a good deal of pressure. In this age group, 67 percent said that they felt community pressure to conform to expected female behaviors. The least pressured group among the second generation women were the young adults aged 18 to 25, where 50 percent said they were aware of community pressure to conform to gendered behavioral norms.

Influence of Stories and Role Models Generated Outside the Family

Only 19 percent of first generation women identified fictional stories and/or female role models as influential in defining themselves as women. This figure rose to 24 percent in stories about historical women were considered, but only Jhansi ki Rani was mentioned as a role model in terms of her gender. However, when contemporary female public figures were added to the mix, about 80 percent of the first generation women saw them as influential. The interesting finding here was that both Indian and Western women were viewed as role models in almost equal proportions, suggesting perhaps that it was the qualities and characteristics of the women named which made them exemplars rather than their cultural or ethnic status.

Among second generation women, however, the results were quite different. The second generation cohort was influenced by contemporary female public figures (90 percent) but almost equally by fictional characters (80 percent), and all of the fictional women who influenced them came from Western novels, movies, or TV series. Thus,
while first generation women paid little heed to fiction, or to characters from fiction, unless it related to sacred stories and myths, second generation women seemed to be highly influenced by fictional depictions which portray Western female characters and Western values. In the light of the finding that second generation women were not influenced by sacred narratives and sacred role models, it might be hypothesized that they are being more significantly affected by Western values conveyed through fictional stories and characters in a variety of genres. Future research might be important to evaluate this finding, and to identify ways to increase the influence of Hindu cultural narratives.

**Influence of Family Narratives, and Family Members as Role Models**

Thus far it has become apparent that first generation Hindu women, while they are influenced by sacred narratives (67 percent), and by female role models characterized in these stories (80 percent), they are also influenced by stories about real contemporary women (80 percent). With regard to the importance of family generated stories and female members of the family as role models, the distinction between stories and behavior comes into play.

Sixty-two percent of the first generation women found stories about female family members to be influential in shaping their behavior as women. However, 90 percent felt that family role models were even more important, and among these role models, 89 percent of the women named their mothers as the most significant role models in their lives.

This in itself is not particularly surprising but it is interesting to note that these women said that their mothers were not influential because of the stories they told their daughters or the lessons they taught them orally. In fact, most women said that their
mothers were too busy to tell them stories. These women found their mothers to be influential because of the gendered behaviors they modeled for them on a daily basis. This tends to suggest that "actions speak louder than words" and that demonstrations of desired behavior are more effective in teaching gender roles than is telling stories.

This finding was duplicated almost exactly for second generation women, where 65 percent said that family stories were influential and 90 percent said that family role models, especially their mothers (94 percent), were significant influences.

Other family members who were identified as important in shaping the gender roles of the women in the study were female family members such as aunts, grandmothers, sisters, and mothers-in-law. However, a surprising result was that many women named fathers and husbands as important in shaping their gendered behavior, either in a traditional direction or by encouraging modern gender role values and women’s achievement in education.

The Role of Gender Ideology

One of the topics which emerged during the course of this study in response to interview questions, had to do with the ways in which other influences were involved in shaping women's gender role identities. The women participants were asked questions about their understanding of concepts related to the ancient gender role ideology of pativratya, an ideology which spelled out prescriptive behaviors required of a woman or a wife in relationship with her husband and with her family.

Pativrata, beginning more than two millennia ago, severely limited the freedom of women within the society and also in relationship to men. Within marriage, this ideology made the wife responsible for ensuring her husband's salvation and made her own salvation dependent on how well she cared for and treated her spouse. The
obligation to care for her husband “as a god” included the responsibility for bearing sons, for taking care of the children and the household, and also for serving her in-laws and her husband’s extended family members.

All participants were specifically asked about the concepts of “ideal woman,” *stridharma*, and *pativrata* for two reasons: first, these concepts are incorporated into the sacred narratives since these narratives were composed during the same years that prescriptive behaviors for women were being developed and documented and the female characters in the narratives were in large part subjected to these prescriptive limitations on their gendered behavior. Sita, for example, heroine of the *Ramayana*, was described as an “ideal woman.” Draupadi, heroine of the *Mahabharata*, lectured Satyabhama, Krishna’s wife, on the duties of a *pativrata*. The behavior of both was expected as examples of *stridharma*, the obligations pertaining to a good wife. In developing a study looking at the influence of sacred narratives on contemporary Hindu women’s gender role development, it would seem disingenuous to overlook the ideology influencing the female characters in these narratives.

Secondly, the researcher was curious to see whether this ideology and the concepts delineated by it, were either known to or influential for Hindu women today. She was assured by Hindu women friends that this ideology had “gone by the wayside,” but she entertained a hypothesis that it might be operating in a more unconscious or subterranean fashion, through community and family influence, and through stories and models of female behavior. That is, Hindu women might be unaware of the ways in which this ideology could still be impacting their gendered behavior, or they might have developed strategies for subverting and modifying its impact on them, but even so the
ancient ideology of *pativratya* might still be alive and well in the Hindu diaspora in the United States.

**Traces of the *Pativratya* Ideology Today**

With regard to the study participants’ conscious awareness of any role of *pativratya* ideology in shaping the gender roles, 48 percent of the first generation said that the concept of the “ideal woman” was not relevant in their lives compared to 45 percent of the second generation women. However, for the first generation, while only 19 percent said that it was relevant in its traditional form, a further 33 percent said that it could be relevant, in modified form, depending on contextual factors. These figures were 15 percent and 40 percent respectively for the second generation cohort. That is, more than half of both groups felt that aspects of the concept of an “ideal woman” could be or were relevant for Hindu women today. Thus they saw the concept as contextual and able to be modified or reconstructed depending on circumstances. This is an example of how Hindu women pragmatically extract what they find valuable and useful from prescribed or expected behaviors, and reformulate expectations to make them fit their own lives and especially their desire for more equality and freedom.

With regard to the concept of *stridharma*, 62 percent of first generation women felt that the idea of *stridharma* was irrelevant for today’s women while only 38 percent felt that it was or could be relevant in a modified form. For the second generation cohort, these figures were 45 percent irrelevant and 55 percent relevant or possibly useful in modified form. It is interesting that the first generation participants seemed to reject the idea of a duty specific to women more than did women who were born and raised in the United States. For most women, the modification they sought was not that the prescribed behaviors of *stridharma* were unacceptable, but that they should be
considered to be objectives for both men and women, husbands and wives. This finding was also true to some degree for the concept of *pativrata* (the idea of service to a husband, as if he were a god). Seventy-one percent of the first generation women refuted this concept while 29 percent felt that it was acceptable if applied to both husbands and wives. Among second generation respondents, 75 percent found the concept of *pativrata* unacceptable while 25 percent indicated that it depended on context and/or should be applied to both men and women.

Thus, overall, Hindu women in the United States appeared to reject prescriptive behaviors for women included in the ideology of *pativratya*, but a substantial number found elements of these prescribed behaviors to be acceptable or even desirable depending on context, and if required of both men and women equally.

Again, however, in the interests of reflexivity, the researcher must consider the possibility that this focus on *pativratya*, on the on-going importance of an ancient Hindu ideology of womanhood, might reflect at least to some degree her own interest in the pressures faced by women to be “female/other” in ways acceptable to men, within a dominant male worldview. The questions asked of participants in this study, the analysis of their responses, even the identification, grouping and ordering of themes and domains and their interpretation, could be influenced overtly or more subtly by the values of the researcher. Subjectivity in qualitative research can only be identified or acknowledged, it cannot be entirely eliminated. Thus, the narrative developed by the researcher must always be seen as only one of many possible stories which could be created to explain the findings of this study.
The “I” in Ideology

In the course of evaluating these ancient concepts related to pativratya, it became apparent that they were unacceptable primarily because women in this study had more individualist goals for themselves, complementary or supplementary to the collectivist behavioral prescriptions and values promoted by the Indian culture. A major domain which evolved from the investigation into the influence of pativratya ideology was the development of a focus on “self” and personal development, that is, Hindu women’s desire to satisfy their own needs and aspirations as well as meeting their perceived responsibilities for children and family. Ninety-five percent of both first and second generation women expressed a desire for more independence and autonomy in their life choices. Fifty-seven percent of first generation women and 65 percent of the second generation cohort wanted more freedom to pursue their own goals and aspirations not instead of but in addition to their family obligations.

Sixty-seven percent of first generation women and 75 percent of the second generation felt that women were “powerful” in many different ways and they valued the opportunity to experience and express their own power. For many, particularly first generation women, this power was desired and experienced within the family, through influencing family decisions perhaps as “the power behind the throne.” For others, especially second generation women, the “power” was desired in public contexts, through career success or in leadership positions. However, it is reasonable to infer that these Hindu women did not feel powerless in that they identified and exercised numerous sources of power which enhanced their self-esteem.

Finally, only 19 percent of first generation women compared to 65 percent of the second generation group endorsed the concept of “wanting it all” as a value in their lives.
as women. That is, second generation women expressed a strong desire to have both family and career, to exercise influence not only within the family, but also in a public setting. At the same time, many of the older second generation women complained of the stress they experienced in their attempt to “do it all” and of the constant guilt which tormented them because they felt that they could never do enough, could not accomplish all they wanted, and were continuously shortchanging one or the other aspiration.

Optimism and ambition seem to be a characteristic of the younger second generation women in this study while stress and guilt was the burden carried by the older members of this group. It is possible that this pressure to “do it all” is linked to the individualist nature of Western culture, to economic pressures, to personal ambition, or to the influence of feminism which leads women to believe that they should be able to “have it all.” In addition, some of the respondents felt that the pressure came perhaps from their mothers who had wanted more for themselves, from both parents who wanted their daughters to be economically independent “just in case,” or even from their husbands who felt that their wives could or should contribute to the family income. This again would be a fruitful area for future study.

The final topic which evolved from a consideration of the influence of gender ideology and how Hindu women respond to it as individuals, how they cope with it, and how they balance their lives, was a consideration of the strategies they employ to negotiate and resolve the conflict between cultural expectations of gendered behaviors and their own personal aspirations. The domain called “The Juggling Act” identified the ways in which Hindu women in the United States have conceived of the resolution of
conflict between collectivist and individualist values, the strategies they adopt or adapt to bring about this resolution, and the mechanisms they used to justify their actions and to avoid psychological discomfort or guilt resulting from trying to reconcile opposing demands.

With regard to the desire to find “balance” in their lives between the demands of family and personal needs, only 33 percent of the first generation group saw this as a concern while 55 percent of the second generation cohort did so. Perhaps the first generation group did not identify finding balance as a concern, because for them, at least for the older members, the issue had already been resolved in terms of opting or being compelled to place family above self. This speculation is confirmed by the fact that 63 percent of the youngest first generation group, those aged 36 to 50, experienced finding balance as a concern for them, compared to 0 to 33 percent for the older subgroups.

Within the second generation cohort, while overall 55 percent saw finding balance as a significant issue for them, this was expressed more by the younger groups, those aged 18 to 25 (75 percent) and 26 to 35 (83 percent), than by the oldest second generation group, aged 36 to 50.

One can only speculate as to why first generation women, age 36 to 50, were more preoccupied with finding balance in their lives than were their second generation age peers. The difference between these two subgroups boils down to where they spent their formative years, in India or in the United States. In many ways, comparisons between women aged 36 to 50 who were raised in India and came to the U.S. as adults, and their age peers who were raised exclusively in the U.S., would be a fruitful area for
future analysis. Data available in the present research presents an interesting and mixed picture of the ways in which they are comparable as well as the many differences between them, and could easily constitute a separate study.

One of the strategies that participants in this study identified as a means to attain balance in their lives was a focus on pragmatism, flexibility, or adaptability. Many of the first generation women confided that they were raised from infancy, as daughters, to be cognizant of the fact that they would have to leave their natal families and adapt to life in their husbands household with his family. Consequently, they shared that their training from birth, especially by their mothers, through both teaching and modeling acceptance and flexibility was to be both adaptable in their behavior and pragmatic with regard to what they could expect out of life.

Eighty-one percent of first generation women endorsed the concept of adaptability and pragmatism as a necessary survival mechanism in their lives, a strategy that not only prepared them to handle marriage to men who were often strangers to them, to learn obedience to mothers-in-law, and to cope with both the separation from their own families and the disruption and dislocation of migration to live in a foreign country. For first generation women, adaptability and pragmatism were essential coping strategies that were indispensable for women’s gender roles.

Within the second generation group, however, only 30 percent saw this strategy as an essential component of their gendered behavior. The second generation group expected to choose their own spouses, to set up their own households, and to maintain ongoing relationships with their own families. They anticipated more egalitarian relationships with their husbands and more freedom to pursue their own goals and
aspirations. Pragmatism and flexibility might be valued attributes, but they were by no means as essential to their gender role behaviors as they were to the first generation.

Pragmatism and the ability to adapt might be an essential strategy for first generation women but was not seen as equally significant for the second generation cohort. Moreover, Hindu women born in the U.S. had more difficulty coping with the discomfort they felt when they engaged in traditional gendered behaviors within a mainstream society which saw these as unacceptable or inappropriate for modern women. Hence, while only 14 percent of the first generation women felt any need to rationalize or justify behaving in a traditional gendered fashion, 50 percent of the second generation experienced a need to explain that performing traditional gendered behaviors like cooking and cleaning was a choice rather than a duty or expectation. That is, they felt impelled to explain or justify their choice rather than accepting the subterranean (or often more direct) pressure being exerted by their families and community to behave like a traditional Indian wife.

However, when it came to the ultimate reconciliation of the conflict experience between the pressure to conform to traditional expectations of female behavior and the desire or aspiration to pursue individual goals, as well as to conform to the gender role expectations of the mainstream society, the Hindu women in this study resolved their conflicts firmly in the direction of “family and children first”. That is, they opted to conform to the ultimate gendered expectation for Indian women to place the needs of their family ahead of their own when conflict arose. In a sense, this could be interpreted as the basic core value of stridharma, or of the pativratya ideology. While some original elements of pativratya, such as women’s soteriological responsibility for the successful
accomplishment of their husbands’ spiritual goals, have been substantially discarded, at its heart the ideology prescribes that a woman’s first responsibility is the care of her husband and children and the gendered obligation to take care of their needs before any other requirement. Those needs might be fulfilled through completion of household chores, through deferring personal aspirations until the children were grown or by contributing to the household income if necessary. The definition of “care” is clearly modifiable, for the women in this study, by context and circumstances. However, the ultimate criterion is whatever benefits the family group rather than the individual woman.

In summary, the results of the present research not only address the issue of the influence of narratives and role models, sacred and otherwise, on the gender role constructions of Hindu women in the United States, but they also take the reader further afield into the ideas and concepts governing women’s gender roles that were developed in ancient times and expressed within the sacred narratives under review. These concepts have been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed over time, subject to diverse influences but they continue to influence the gendered behavior of Hindu women in the United States even today.

In a sense, this research became bifurcated: one part of the research answered the original research questions about the influence of narratives on gender role construction. A second section, however, evolved to address questions which arose from responses to the influence of sacred narratives on gender role construction.

The present research, in a sense, raises more questions than it answers and points the way towards many interesting future directions for investigation. What, for example, if anything, should be done to retain the vitality, force and essential cultural
value of the ancient narratives when their cultural and spiritual importance has been so clearly eroded among second generation Hindu women? And, who should make this decision? What is the role of men, fathers and husbands in shaping the gender roles of Hindu women, and how will or should their influence assist the women in their lives in a modern Western nation? These and other issues are fruitful topics for future research.

**Limitations of This Study**

It would be remiss to avoid pointing out that this research has several limitations, in both methodology and interpretation of the data, which should be addressed in future research.

1. The participants in the study were all middle or upper middle-class, highly educated, primarily Brahmin women. The sample cannot be considered to be representative of all Hindu women in the United States or even all Hindu women in Florida, although overall the sample mirrors the Pew Institute’s demographic data for Hindus in America. Future research should seek to involve a more diverse sample of participants.

2. The sample bias among the participants is largely a result of sampling strategies which were limited to personal and key informant contacts and snowball sampling, that is, to identifying participants through personal relationships, referral from key informants and through asking participants to identify other possible contacts. The problem with this method of sampling is that it tends to produce respondents with very similar backgrounds and characteristics. The limitation comes about because of the difficulty with using more representative sampling methods, which are often more time-consuming and labor-intensive. This limitation, however, applies to most, if not all, research generated in a university setting.

3. The issue of researcher/participant compatibility, with regard to ethnicity, age, and so on, has been addressed and the insider/outsider issue was discussed in Chapter 3. However, this does constitute a potential limitation. On the other hand, while some might argue, legitimately, that participants might not be open with a researcher from a different cultural background, others might suggest with equal legitimacy that the women who were interviewed might be more disclosing with a stranger who had no connection to their cultural community.

4. While the design and conduct of the research was carried out as meticulously as possible, some limitations of resources, particularly with regard to issues relating to coding, constitute an area which should be addressed in future research. The
lack of availability of peer review and the inaccessibility of auditors, both in the definition and identification of codes, and in the availability of interrater reliability checks, is an issue that is easily addressed with more resources. In this study, the research was conducted away from a university campus with no access to funding or labor resources, so it was impossible to address this limitation. Although the researcher did construct and carry out a limited verification of code definition and identification, a study with more access to labor resources would greatly benefit the validity of the research. This is also true with regard to triangulation of validity measures.

5. A limitation which impacts almost all qualitative studies, especially those employing interview methods for data collection, is the issue of researcher selectivity, and the resulting need for transparency as well as researcher reflexivity, both of which affect the replicability of the study. No matter how careful or transparent the researcher may be, he/she is constantly making decisions, choices, selections about what to include or exclude, how data should be analyzed and interpreted, and how the research narrative should be presented, to what audience. This is an inherent limitation, and a reader must always be aware of the researcher’s actions to structure the narrative, and of the potential consequences of this structuring. Researcher transparency is, however, also an immense benefit if handled appropriately in terms of expanding, deepening and enriching the understanding which might emerge from the research.
APPENDIX A
LETTER OF INTRODUCTION AND INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

Department of Religion
107 Anderson Hall
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida 32611
Contact: Diane V. Lillesand Ph.D., 305-972-3313

Informed Consent Study Information

Dear potential study participant,

My name is Diane Lillesand. I am a Ph. D. candidate in the Department of Religion at the University of Florida, studying South Asian Religions, primarily Hinduism, and especially issues affecting Hindu populations in the United States. My dissertation supervisor is Distinguished Professor, Vasudha Narayanan Ph. D., a senior faculty member in the Department of Religion. I am beginning the process of conducting research necessary for the completion of my doctoral degree, and would like to enlist your help with my research. If you need to speak with Dr. Narayanan, she can be reached at 352-273-2928. You can also reach me at 305-972-3313 if you have questions for me. Finally, you can call the University of Florida Institutional Review Board at 352-392-0433 if you have any concerns about the nature of the research I am about to explain to you.

I am interested in learning about the ways in which sacred stories from the Epics and the Puranas, as well as the oral/folk and family narratives from different regions of India influence women, both women who grew up in India and moved to the U.S. as adults, and those who were born and/or raised in the U.S. I would like to explore how these narratives shape a woman’s identity and her gender roles, and to examine their role in maintaining cultural continuity, or even perhaps facilitating change, in the ways that women view their roles as women/wives/mothers/daughters as they adapt to living in a primarily non-Hindu mainstream Western culture.

A major part of my research will involve interviewing Hindu mothers and adult daughters living in the Central/West Central areas of Florida- mainly the Tampa Bay area, Orlando, and Gainesville Hindu communities. The interviews will be loosely structured, covering many aspects of women’s lives as they grow up, marry, and raise families of their own. I am interested in hearing women’s own stories and narratives, rather than just asking questions from a structured questionnaire. I see the interaction between myself and study participants as a collaboration between women sharing the ways in which stories from childhood have shaped our lives as women. I hope that the women who participate in my study will see themselves as co-researchers and collaborators with me in gaining an understanding of our lives as women, and of the influences that have shaped how we lead our lives.

In particular, I am asking two different categories of women to volunteer to participate in the interviews. The first group would include women who were born in India and came to the U.S. as young adults (that is, aged 18 or older, or married). The second group would include women who were born in the U.S. or came here before school-starting age (5 or 6), who grew up here, and whose mothers were born in India.
If you agree to participate you will be given the opportunity to read the transcripts of your interviews, to make sure that they have represented your life in the way you are most comfortable with. The interviews will take an hour or two at most, and will be scheduled at the most convenient time(s) and place(s) for you. The interviews would be conducted in English, and transcripts of our conversations would also be in English, so reasonable English language speaking and reading skills will be necessary. I will be making audio tapes of the interviews, to make sure I have a complete and accurate record of what you tell me, but no one else, including Dr. Narayanan, will have access to these tapes, and they will be destroyed by me after my Ph.D. is completed.

In addition to the interviews, I will also ask you to complete a short questionnaire gathering basic demographic information, somewhat like questions on a census, as well as a very brief rating scale asking you to rank the importance of various possible female role models in your life.

I want to reassure you that everything possible will be done to protect and preserve your confidentiality and privacy. You will be able to choose a pseudonym (or name that substitutes for your real name), and I will be the only person who knows whose pseudonym belongs to whom. No information which might reveal your identity will be disclosed, or it will be disguised to protect the privacy of you and your family. Also, as I indicated, you will have the opportunity to read your interview and to provide clarifying information or feedback to me. You have my guarantee that NO information will be disclosed that would in any way be hurtful or embarrassing to you or your family. I will also be open to answering any questions or concerns that you might have, and to discussing the uses to which the information I obtain might be put. Thus, there are no risks or discomfort associated with this research, and I will certainly try to alleviate any concerns you might have. Of course, you will be free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time, and you also do not have to respond to any question you do not want to answer.

Individual interviews will be kept very private, although a summary of the group results and conclusions will, of course, be shared with my research advisors, and with other members of the academic community. I will be happy to provide you with a copy of my final report, if you request one.

Unfortunately, I am unable to provide compensation for your participation in my study, much as I would like to, but I hope that you will gain some satisfaction from helping me enhance our knowledge about the lives of Hindu women in the U.S. diaspora.

I believe that my study will help scholars understand the roles that Hindu women play in their families and communities, in the diaspora, as well as, especially, the importance of stories and narratives in maintaining or modifying traditional roles for women within a different culture or country, and from generation to generation.

About Me.

You should also know a little about me, since I am not the typical graduate student, which I hope will not be a problem for you. I am an almost 70 year old mother of an adult daughter-old enough to be a grandmother, or even a great-grandmother, although as yet I am neither. I returned to university late in life, after a full professional life, to get a second Ph.D., this time in South Asian Religions. At 70, I am having the time of my life learning about other cultures and their religious beliefs and practices. I have not yet studied any of the languages of India, except Sanskrit, and so unfortunately speak only English. I
am also somewhat limited in my mobility, with all the normal problems of aging, and will have to take that into account when I set up meetings with you. I am also very shy, and hope you will be patient with me during our conversations.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to sign the attached form acknowledging that you have been fully informed about the nature and purposes of the research as well as the protections of your privacy which will be followed, and agreeing to become a participant. This is a requirement of the University of Florida.

I will also provide you, before we meet, with an outline of the areas we might cover and the general topics for discussion, so that you can think about your answers ahead of time. This will only be a guide, and you may end up suggesting areas of interest that I have not thought about, or our conversations may lead U.S. into others topics of discussion. The interviews will be more like extended conversations between people getting to know each other, rather than structured interviews where one person asks the questions, and the other provides the answers.

I would like to thank you, in advance, for agreeing to participate in my study. I hope it will be a rewarding and pleasant experience for all of U.S.

Diane V. Lilesand Ph. D.
Informed Consent to Participate:

I, ________________________ (name) consent to participate in the study described above, and agree that I have been fully informed about the nature and purposes of the study, and about the measures that will be implemented to protect my privacy and to ensure that no harm will come to me or my family as a result of my participation.

I would/would not like to receive a copy of the final report of this study.

Signed___________________________

Date_____________________________

Chosen Pseudonym_____________________
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Department of Religion
107 Anderson Hall
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida 32611
Contact: Diane V. Lillesand Ph.D., 305-972-3313

Interview Guide

As I promised, I am providing you with a brief guide to the kinds of things I hope we will talk about during our interview(s). I hope that our time talking together will be more like a conversation between new friends who are getting to know each other, and although I will be introducing many areas of interest to me, I hope you will feel free to initiate topics that you think are important too.

As I have explained, I am interested in the stories women are exposed to as they are growing up, in their families, communities, schools, and places of worship. These stories may be narratives you heard as a child or teenager. They may have been told to you by a parent, grandparent, or other relative, by a nanny or family servant, by a teacher, by a professional story-teller, or by anyone else. They may be stories you read yourself, in books or comics, or stories you saw, in movies or videos on TV or in the cinema. They may even be stories you saw performed, in plays, lilas, at festivals, or through dance concerts. They could even be stories enacted through rituals, or told during vrats or other religious practices. I am interested in the stories that were particularly important to you.

In order to understand these stories in the context of your life, I will ask you to tell me your own story, the story of your life, or at least many aspects of it relevant to your growth as a woman.

- I will begin by asking you to tell me about your early life: your childhood; where you were born? Where you grew up? Who lived with you in your family? What your family life was like?-things like that.
- I will ask you to tell me about your parents, and about grandparents, aunts and uncles who may have been close to you, especially those who told you stories.
- What rituals did you participate in with, or learn from, your mother? Do you still participate in the same rituals, at home or in the community? What has changed about your ritual
participation today? Have you taught your own daughter the rituals you learned, and the stories attached to them?

- I will ask you to think about being a little girl growing up: how you learned what women did, or how they were supposed to act? Who taught you this? What stories did they tell you to influence or guide you? Who were the female role models they recommended as good examples of how you should be? Were neighbors or members of the community important in teaching you how women should be?

- I will ask you to tell me (briefly, in your own words) one or more of the stories that interested you most as a little girl, and as a teenager. Especially, tell me a story or stories that involved female characters that might have impressed or influenced you. Who was your favorite female character, in any story, and why did you like her so much?

- I will also ask you about your education: Where you went to school, and for how long; what were the stories you heard at school; especially those with important female characters? How did these stories affect or influence you?

- I will ask about the circumstances leading to your marriage: how you met your husband? How was your marriage planned and brought about? How were you prepared for marriage, and were there any stories that influenced you in learning how to be a wife? If so, what were they, and how did you learn about them? How do you see yourself in your marriage, and as a wife? What roles and responsibilities do you see yourself as having, as wife and/or mother? What do you think your husband expects of you as his wife?

- I will also be asking you to tell me the story of how you came to the U.S., and how you ended up in Florida. What were the circumstances that brought about your immigration? When did you arrive in this country? Where have you lived since you have been here? How was it for you, as a woman, coming into a new culture? Did you come with your husband, or meet him here, or return to India to marry him?

- I need to ask you about your expectations and goals for yourself as a wife: What is your own view about how a wife should be? What is your understanding of a woman’s dharma, particularly stridharma, the dharma of a wife? Is the concept of dharma still important for Hindu women today? What do you think should be the responsibilities of a wife or woman, and how are they different from the responsibilities of a man/husband? What stories/female characters do you think would best illustrate a woman of today fulfilling her dharma?
• Does women’s *dharma* change depending on the context (that is, time and place) in which she lives? If so, how? If no, why not?

• What do you think about the ancient, perhaps even archaic, concept of *pativrata*, the ideal wife? Does this concept have any meaning for Hindu women today? How do you understand this as applying to you? Does it have any different meaning today than it has had in the past? Or, any different meaning for Hindu women in the U.S. than for women in India? Do you see yourself as a *pativrata*? Why? Or, why not? Do you want your daughter to be a *pativrata*?

• What do you think are a woman’s/wife’s roles and responsibilities in different areas of her life? For example, in household chores; food preparation and cooking; child-bearing; child care; educating children; maintenance of Hindu culture/tradition; transmission of religious knowledge to children; domestic ritual responsibilities (*vrats, pujas, fasts*, etc.); care for elders/parents/in-laws/relatives; hospitality; self-care and beauty; manner of dress; relationship with husband; and so on? Are these roles and responsibilities different now, in a new culture/country? How have they changed? What do you *personally* do differently in the U.S. than you did in India?

• Do women have different roles and responsibilities in public (that is, in the community) than they do in private (that is, in the home)? What are the differences, if any, and why?

• Do you think your daughter has, or should have, the same responsibilities, or are things different for the younger generation? How are they different? Why?

• I will certainly be asking more about your child(ren), especially your daughter(s). What is it like raising a daughter, especially in a new country? How did you teach her about being a woman? Did you tell her any stories as she was growing up? If so, what stories? Where else did she experience stories and story-telling? For example, was she involved in dance, and if so, was her dance teacher an influence in exposing her to traditional stories, especially those involving women, that might teach her how to be a woman? What other women in your community might have influenced your daughter in the way she grew up to be women? What are your expectations for your daughter(s) as she (they) grow up and become adult women? What schools has she attended, what teachers might have influenced her, and what kinds of stories has she experienced in her different school environments, and among her school friends? Does she have any other relatives nearby, especially close-in-age cousins who might influence her?

• In what ways have you raised your daughter differently from the way you were raised? Why?
What is your daughter like as a woman, how would you describe her? In what ways is she like you, and how is she different from you? If she is married, how do you think she views her role as a wife? If she has children, how is she different from you as a mother, how the same? Is your daughter living her life as a woman in the U.S. in any way different from the way you were raised to be? Or, the way you would like her to be? What would you like to see changed about the way she leads her life?

What female characters from any of the stories you know would be good role models for your daughter in today’s world, growing up in the West?

How do you think the internet, social media, video games (and the stories they convey) have influenced the way your daughter sees her roles as a woman? What do you think these influences teach girls about themselves?

If your daughter is not married yet, how do you think she will see the process of finding a husband and getting married? What do you think her expectations will be?

Are there any stories/narratives with female characters that you have experienced in the U.S./West, that have influenced, in a positive or negative way, how you see yourself and your roles/responsibilities as a woman? If so, tell me about these stories and characters

Do you see your understanding of your roles/responsibilities as a woman changing (in a positive or negative way) the longer you live in the U.S.? If so, how?

If you were choosing a female role model from any story for your life as it is today, who would it be?

If you could change anything about your life as a woman today, what would it be?

Thank you so much. We have covered so many topics, and you have been so patient and accommodating. Do you think there are any questions I should have asked, not asked, or asked differently if I had been from the same cultural background as you, or was younger. Would it have been easier for you to feel comfortable talking to me about such things if that had been the case? Is there anything I could do differently to make this interview process more comfortable for the other women I will be taking to? Is there anything you think I could do or ask differently to enhance my understanding of Hindu women’s lives in the U.S.?
APPENDIX D
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Department of Religion
107 Anderson Hall,
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida 32611
Contact: Diane V. Lillesand Ph.D., 305-972-3313

Participant Information Questionnaire

1. Name:
2. Address:
3. Phone number: Cell/home (circle one)
4. Email address:
5. What chosen pseudonym would you like to use instead of your real name:
6. What is your date of birth:
7. Where was your place of birth (country, state or region, town/city/village):
8. What social or religious community do you belong to:
9. What is your highest level of education:
10. Where were you educated
   (If you have never married, do not answer questions 11 through 16).
11. What was the date of your marriage:
12. What is the first name of your husband:
13. How old is your husband (date of birth):
14. Is your husband from the same social or religious community:
15. What is your husband’s highest level of education:
16. What is your husband’s job/profession:
17. What is your family income level now? (0-100K; 100-200K; 200-300K; 300K+) (circle one):
18. What language(s) were spoken in your home while you were growing up:
19. Who lived in the family with you while you were growing up. (if relatives, include whether maternal or paternal):
20. Where did you live while you were growing up:
21. Who lives with you now (please list everyone, and their relationship to you):
22. How long have you lived in the U.S:
23. How old were you when you arrived in U.S:
24. Were you already married:
25. If you work outside your home, what is your job/profession
   (If you do not have children, ignore questions 26-27)
26. Please tell me the names, and dates of birth, of your children:
27. Are any of your children in college? If so, who? And which college(s) do they go to:
28. Do you or your family belong to any temple? If so, which one:
29. What religious sect do you belong to (e.g. Saivite, Vaishnavite):
30. Was your marriage arranged, for example, through matrimonial ads, or was it through personal choice:
31. What rituals/vrat/festivals do you participate in, or are you responsible for, at home:
32. What rituals/celebrations do you participate in at the temple or in the community:

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APPENDIX E
ROLE MODELS FOR HINDU WOMEN RATING SCALE

Role Models for Hindu Women Rating Scale

Pseudonym of Respondent:_____________________

1. From the following list of women/goddesses, please choose the 10 that you think are the best role models for Hindu women today. Then, please rank the ten you have chosen from 1 (the best role model) through 10 (the least important of the ten).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Akka Mahadevi</th>
<th>Mirabai</th>
<th>Andal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarada Devi</td>
<td>Anandamayi Ma</td>
<td>Ammachi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gargi</td>
<td>Maitreyi</td>
<td>Lopamudra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sita</td>
<td>Draupadi</td>
<td>Damayanti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gandhari</td>
<td>Kaikeyi</td>
<td>Kunti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rani of Jhansi</td>
<td>Rani Mukherji</td>
<td>Rani Lakshmibai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savitri</td>
<td>Radha</td>
<td>Parvati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakshmi</td>
<td>Sati</td>
<td>Durga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indira Gandhi</td>
<td>Sarojini Naidu</td>
<td>Pratibha Patil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiran Bedi</td>
<td>Phoolan Devi</td>
<td>Vandana Shiva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rani Lakshmibai</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kalpana Chawla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aishwarya Rai</td>
<td>M. S. Subhalakshmi</td>
<td>Rukmani Devi Arundale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anita Desai</td>
<td>Shobha De</td>
<td>Jumpha Lahiri</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. In a few words, tell me what characteristics make your Number 1 choice such a good role model for Hindu women:

3. Looking at the same list, pick the three women/goddesses who have been the most important influence for you as a woman. List them here, from 1-3 (most influential to least):
   1. ___________________________
   2. ___________________________
   3. ___________________________

4. In a few words, tell me why your number 1 choice has been so important to you:

5. Is there anyone that I haven’t mentioned who has been a female role model for you?
   Who:_________________________. Why is this woman a good role model?
LIST OF REFERENCES


Bamberg, Michael. 2006. “Stories Big or Small: Why Do We Care?” *Narrative Inquiry* 16, 1: 139-147.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Diane Lillesand graduated from Reading University, England, in 1965, with a high honors degree in psychology, and received an English-Speaking Union Teaching Fellowship and a Fulbright Award to study and teach at Smith College, Massachusetts. She earned a master’s degree (1970) and Ph.D. (1974) in Psychology from the University of Wisconsin (Madison). She practiced clinical and forensic psychology for 35 years in Miami, Florida. In 2008 she returned to academic life, and was awarded a master’s degree in Religious Studies from Florida International University in Miami. In 2017 she earned a second Ph.D. degree in Religion, with a major in Religions of Asia, from the University of Florida.