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## Mandakranta Bose. Women in the Hindu tradition. Rules, roles and exceptions. Routledge. 2010.

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**Mandakranta Bose. *Women in the Hindu tradition. Rules, roles and exceptions.*  
Routledge. 2010.**

“Where women are respected, the deities rejoice there, but where they are not respected, all rituals are fruitless” (Manusmṛti, p. 3.56). Mandakranta Bose’s *Women in the Hindu Tradition. Rules, roles and exceptions* tackles the predicament of Hindu women as goddesses and divine beings on the one hand and housewives and submissive beings on the other. *Women in Hindu Tradition*, published in 2012 as part of the Routledge Hindu Study Series, attempts to show that the fundamental notions of gender in Hindu ideology are more accessible and debatable than one might expect. Her account of the role of women, from divine to mortal, from the ancient times to today is an important contribution to existing literature that bridges gaps in the existing knowledge. Bose takes an original approach to recurring discussions of gender ideology within the Hindu belief system and traces both the origins of women’s roles in modern India and the authority of the ancient and medieval texts on the subject. Within this context, she discusses issues like female ownership of power, widow remarriage, the birth of baby girls, inheritance, and the nature of women. Right from the start, Bose clarifies the limitations of her work, acknowledging the vast array of sources, rituals, opinions, and interpretations as well as contradictions existing on the topic. The author notes that “the conception and evolution of the major Hindu goddesses, placed against the judgments passed by texts of Hindu sacred law on women’s nature and roles, illuminates the [existing] Hindu discourse in gender, the complexity of which is further compounded by the distinctive spirituality of female ascetic poets” (p. 1).

Her work benefits immensely from the use of primary sources and original Sanskrit texts of the ancient tradition as well as the inclusion of English translations. The Hindu sacred texts paradoxically position women at the core of Hindu thought, admiring and praising them while at the same time condemning and limiting them. While reading *Women in the Hindu Tradition*, the pressing relevance of these ancient and medieval texts, including all the contradictions and categorizations placed on women, emerge. Goddesses are an essential part of the Hindu pantheon, and women are indispensable for worship, yet when not categorized as goddesses and mothers, they are often neglected and mistreated. What sets Hinduism apart from other religions and schools of thought is its longevity, uniqueness, and the absence of a single authority or voice. Bose succeeds in her intention “to pull together the views enshrined in the authoritative texts of the Hindu tradition on a historical basis, and on that basis to construct a textually grounded, general framework within which one may make sense of women’s lives in Hindu society” (p. 3). In addition, she draws attention to the continuities and contradictions in Hindu thought and the sacred Hindu laws and texts while emphasizing that fact that the “readiness to rely on past authority is certainly a striking feature of [Hindu] culture” (p. 4).

*Women in the Hindu Tradition* is divided into four major parts or chapters based on a chronological and thematic scheme; each chapter is complemented by a wealth of primary sources. “Gendered divinity” focuses on the goddess figure in general and some Hindu goddesses in particular while addressing the paradox of the divine and the mortal in a gendered context from the ancient to the classical and medieval ages. Bose also attempts to define the meaning of ‘feminine’ based on the significance of the goddesses and how they have shaped the roles and expectations of mortal women. The ambivalence between protection and destruction is striking, and Bose affirms that such an ambivalence demands “close scrutiny because of [the goddesses’] continuing and undiminished power to mobilize vast numbers of worshippers irrespective of caste, class and gender” (p. 6). The roles of goddesses and the very idea of feminine divinity evolved over time, adapting several

personalities and identities such as mothers/nurturer, wielder of power/protector, wife/helper/daughter, and destroyer (p. 13). Apart from a few exceptions, such as Saraswati, goddesses, like mortal women, are always associated with a male figure, as the author discusses in great detail, supported by several examples of goddesses like Usas, Kali, and Sri/Lakshmi. Bose also draws attention to the fact that the opposing portrayals of women might derive from the concurrent respect for and fear of the goddesses. It is important to note how the status of the goddesses and their worship shifts throughout the time periods Bose covers, particularly during the Puranic period, which brought goddess worship to the forefront. Once again underlining the contradictions and continuities of the feminine, both divine and human, Bose recognizes “a particularly sophisticated aspect of Hindu thought on femininity, [one which] acknowledges that there is a part of female nature which resists conventional social roles without subverting them” (p. 44).

“Shaping women’s lives” highlights how the religious, social, and literary texts as well as social customs have shaped ordinary women’s lives, with all their contradictions. Bose argues that the “continuing discourse on gender ... is facilitated by the idealization of women as icons of virtue and the deification of the female” (p. 58). Despite the variety of texts and opinions, most sources, according to Bose, do not consider women political beings and refer to women as existing within the home and associate women’s status in society with the family (the exception to this being the discussion of learned women and female sages). “That the denigration of women was founded on an understanding of women not only as lesser beings to men but also as moral defectives are amply evidenced in texts at every age, although why they are so viewed remains a mystery,” (p. 65) Bose explains. She further provides numerous examples of these texts, such as the Manusmṛti, which exercised and still exercise continuing authority over the perception of women and women’s status in Hindu thought.

“Women Poets of Hinduism” explores women’s self-expression, self-construction, and self-determination in form of poetry and the contribution of such poetry to the gender discourse in Hinduism. Bose states that “women poets of Hinduism find freedom in a direct, unmediated relationship with God, whom they feel, imagine and express in their poetry” (p. 8). Poetry and songs provided an escape from their gendered identity within Hindu thought and helped women express themselves as individuals outside the realm of the family and society. Bose discusses several poets from different regional, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and concludes that despite the variety among poets and their work, “the thread that runs through these poems is the determination with which the authors launched their spiritual journey from their childhood, pursuing their love for god despite all the obstacles that conventional social regulations and expectations could throw against them” (p. 115). The final chapter, “Sanctuary,” addresses women’s power and influence over religion in the family and returns to the idea of subject and authority. Bose claims that “though here, as in every other part of their lives, women put the family before themselves, these ceremonies provide room for women to act on their own” (p. 137). The performance of *vratas* (religious practices performed to carry out certain obligations in order to achieve divine blessing) especially provides women with a place of authority and authenticity.

Bose concludes in the introduction and conclusion that Hinduism and the perceptions of women that are derived from it are not homogeneous and that no single authority exists. She says, “Hindu thought forges links between goddesses and women, and invests women with mystical authority even as it locks them within subservient social roles” (p. 10). The variety of sources and voices on the matter, both men’s and women’s, accentuates the contradictions within gender discourse in Hindu thought. *Women in the Hindu Tradition* emphasizes the complexities of Hindu thought on women, both divine and mortal. Bose explains, “By setting goddesses and mortal women within a shared framework, Hindu

thought has historically conflated power and dependency within the idea of womanhood, no matter how irreconcilable the two positions might be” (p. 153).

Overall, Bose’s work is indispensable to the field of women’s studies in general and to the study of women in Hindu social and philosophical thought in particular; the author manages to bridge gaps in the existing knowledge, and her work will hopefully spark new discussion, especially given the preoccupation with women by men throughout history. As mentioned earlier, the wealth of primary sources and their translations represent a particular nuance of *Women in Hindu Tradition*; however, especially in Chapters 2 and 3, the sources could be incorporated into the chapter rather than being placed at the end of each chapter. In addition, images used are missing references. Nonetheless, this textual analysis of the feminine, both divine and mortal, contributes to the larger gender discourse on women in India from a historical, social, and political angle, shedding light on women’s lives and status in contemporary India.

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