



Modern Hinduism: Issues and Challenges

Hinduism, like many other religions, religious perspectives, and traditions, is ever evolving, and responds and reacts to social, political, legal, and other developments, incidents, and trends. Many of the challenges faced by Hinduism at this time are unique to Hinduism, but are very relevant and there are specific historical and contextual aspects that are important to understand and consider.



Figure 35: 2.5 Million Dalit Women to File Land Claims

Caste

The *caste* system still has a significant impact on modern India and Hinduism.

Educational reforms and equity-based initiatives that provide more equitable opportunities for members of “lower” *castes* have had some impact on present-day India. As a result, children of cooks and gardeners are earning their engineering and business degrees, and sweeping their families into the middle class.



Figure 36: Woman—India

As well, during the last several decades, India has experienced significant economic growth which has changed the country, creating jobs and income while nurturing aspirations where earlier there were little. New money and an increasingly powerful middle class are thought to be displacing the old social hierarchies.

As *caste*-based discrimination has been illegal in India for more than six decades (especially in today's urban India, which is very different from rural India separated by cultural and economic differences), the *caste* system seems irrelevant. However, as India transforms, *caste* is still making its presence felt in ways similar to race in the modern United States. Although it is less important now with regard to jobs and education, it is very much alive when it comes to two important societal markers—marriage and politics.

Inter-*caste* marriages in India are on the rise but still tend to be for the more liberal few. For much of the country, with people's preference for arranged marriages and close family ties, *caste* is still a primary determinant in choosing a spouse.

It is also especially relevant in politics. After economics and education, democracy has been the third most powerful force transforming Indian society. Nonetheless, for the Indian populace, *caste* is a key consideration in party choices and voting. For example, nearly 50% of the electors of even a highly educated city like Bangalore consider *caste* to be the most important reason to vote for a candidate.

Within the Indian diaspora, whether in Canada or elsewhere, *caste* is still an important factor in Hindu and Indian communities. Many Hindus still have a strong sense of *caste* identity. And, like in India, the strong urge to marry their children within their *caste* exemplifies the power of *caste* identity present among the Indian diaspora. Even the upward mobility in the employment and socio-economic ladder does not guarantee a change of attitude towards other *caste* members when it comes to marriage.

The following are some questions for discussion concerning *caste* and contemporary Hinduism.

1. How has the *caste* system reflected an understanding of human rights? What challenges does the continuing, although unofficial, existence of the *caste* system pose to a universal understanding of human rights?
2. Hindu society is often organized around marks of class, gender, and age. In what ways does this relate to ideas of human rights? What challenges does such an underlying system pose?

Being Hindu in the Diaspora: Adaptation, Identity, and Intergenerational Challenges

As many Canadian Hindus are of immigrant origins and born outside of Canada (often moving from Hindu dominant societies to Hindu minority societies), they face similar challenges to those individuals who immigrate from other lands with different languages and cultures, some which are unique to Hinduism and other non-Western/non-Christian peoples. While there are Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other religious groups in India, these are vastly outnumbered by Hindus.

As a result, throughout the Hindu diaspora, Hindus experience strong pressures to change practices and traditions, and adapt to fit the new environment and social contexts. As well, many of their children are born in Canada or other parts of the Indian and Hindu diaspora and have acculturated at a much faster and significant level than their parents or the generation before. There may, therefore, be deep intergenerational rifts between the different generations represented in the community.

Language is also an important issue, *Sanskrit* is an important language of the religion as many scriptures and prayers are written and recited in that language. Knowledge of Hindi and *Sanskrit* is required for various rituals and other religious observances. Younger generations, or those born in the diaspora, often have limited, if any, knowledge of *Sanskrit* and may have limited Hindi language skills. This is also true of family members that are not of Hindu or Indian origins that result from intermarriage and other relationships. As a result, some temples and Hindu congregations have provided transliterated and translated versions of prayers and readings to allow them to participate in the rituals and ceremonies at home and in the temples.

One of the changes is that, for many coming from Hindu dominant settings, the temple or *mandir* takes on a more important religious and social role. Attendance at a temple in Hindu dominant countries is something that is not required on a daily or weekly basis, as most observations may be done at home. In the diaspora, the temple becomes an important religious and social centre where Hindus can meet, worship, and socialize with other Hindus. The social aspect of the temple now being a place for cultural and linguistic maintenance becomes much more important.

Impact on Manitoba and Canada

Hindu Canadians and Hinduism have contributed to the shaping of contemporary Canadian society and communities. Like many other groups, they have added to the diversity of perspectives and our cultural and social mosaic.

The following are questions for exploration and discussion with respect to Hinduism and Hindus in Manitoba and Canada.

1. In what ways has Hinduism positively contributed to the development of Manitoba and Canadian society? Provide some examples.
2. Do Canadians in general have a good understanding of Hinduism and Hindu cultures, or do they hold stereotypical and mal-informed views and understandings about Hinduism?
3. How have you benefited from the opportunity to explore Hinduism?



Figure 37: Canada World Religion Day