



Significant Persons/ Founders

Historical Figures

Aksapada Gautama (600 BCE): Aksapada Gautama is believed to be, at the very least, the principal author of *Nyaya Sutrās*, the foundational text of the *Nyaya* school of Hindu philosophy. *Nyaya* comprises both philosophical and religious practices. Its ultimate concern is to bring an end to human suffering, which results from ignorance of reality. Liberation is brought about through right knowledge. *Nyaya* is thus concerned with the means of right knowledge and right action. The date when the text was composed as well as the biography of its author are uncertain. Estimates vary significantly ranging from between 6th-century BCE to 2nd-century BCE. As well, it is believed that the *Nyaya Sutrās* may have been written by more than one author, and perhaps over a long period of time.

A *sutra* is a Sanskrit word that means “string, thread,” and is a condensed manual of knowledge of a specific field or school of thought. Each *sutra* is written in the form of a short rule, like a theorem summarized into few words or syllables, around which the teachings of any field of knowledge can be woven. The *Nyaya Sutrās* text consists of five books of two chapters each, with a cumulative total of 528 *sutras* about rules of reason, logic, knowledge, and metaphysics.

Kanada (6th Century BCE to 2nd Century BCE): Kanada (also known as Kashyapa, Uluka, Kananda, and Kanabhuk) founded the *Vaisheshika* school of Hindu philosophy. The *Vaisheshika* system holds that the smallest, indivisible, indestructible part of the world is an atom (*anu*). Therefore, all physical things are a combination of the atoms of earth, water, fire, air, and ether. While the atoms are inactive and motionless by themselves, they are put into motion by god’s will, through the unseen forces of moral merit and demerit. Kanada wrote about his beliefs in the Sanskrit text *Vaisheshika Sutra* (also known as *Kanada Sutrās* or *Aphorisms of Kanada*).

The school founded by Kanada attempted to explain the creation and existence of the universe by proposing an atomistic theory, applying logic and realism. It is among one of the earliest known systematic realist ontologies in human history. Kanada suggested that everything can be subdivided, but this subdivision cannot go on forever, and there must be small entities (*parmanu*) that cannot be divided, that are eternal, and that aggregate in different ways to

yield complex substances and bodies with a unique identity—a process that involves heat—and this is the basis for all material existence. He used these ideas with the concept of *Atman* (soul, Self) to develop a non-theistic means to *moksha*. Kanada's ideas were influential on other schools of Hinduism and, over its history, became closely associated with the *Nyaya* school of Hindu philosophy.

Adi Shankara consolidated the doctrine of *Advaita Vedanta*. He is given credit for unifying and establishing the main currents of thought in Hinduism. At a time when Islam and Buddhism were spreading throughout India and threatening the status of Hinduism, Adi Shankara wrote strongly in defense of Hinduism and established the doctrine known as *advaita*. The *advaita* attempted to develop a unifying theme among the more than 200 existing *Upanishads*. He also wrote many commentaries on the *Vedic* scriptures, including the *Bhagavad Gita*, in order to support his doctrine.

Shankara travelled across the Indian subcontinent to promote his philosophy through meetings and debates with other thinkers of his time. He is believed to have established four major, and still existing, monasteries in India: the Sringeri Math on the Sringeri Hills in the South, the Sarada Math at Dwaraka in the West, the Jyotirmath at Badarikashrama in the North, and the Govardhana Math at Puri in the East. He established the importance of monastic life, as sanctioned in the *Upanishads* and *Brahma Sutra*, in a time when the *Mimamsa* School established strict ritualism and ridiculed monasticism. He is also known as Adi Shankaracharya, Shankara Bhagavatpada, sometimes spelled as Sankaracharya.

Ramanuja (1017-1137 CE): Ramanuja was a Hindu theologian and philosopher who had a significant impact on the development of Hinduism. He was a proponent of *Vishishtadvaita* (in other words, he believed Hindus should worship a personal god, Vishnu, and that the world is the lord's body). His *Vishishtadvaita* philosophy, a form of qualified monism or oneness, has competed with the *Dvaita* (theistic dualism) philosophy of Madhvacharya and *Advaita* (monism) philosophy of Adi Shankara. These three *Vedantic* philosophies have been the more influential of the 2nd millennium. His theories assert that there exists a plurality and distinction between *Atman* (soul) and *Brahman* (metaphysical, ultimate reality). He also affirmed that there is unity of all souls and that the individual soul (*atman*) has the potential to realize identity with *The Brahman*.



Figure 14: The *trimurti* (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva) with Lord Shiva in the centre, business card circa 1910's

Mirabai (1498–1557): Mirabai (also known as Meerabai, Mira, and Meera) is the most well-known of the women *bhakti* (Hindu devotional) saints of India. She was born to a noble family and married into the royal family of Mewar in Chittor. However, she defied her family and refused to conform to the social requirements and expectations of the time for women of her caste and class. Deeply devoted to Sri Krishna from childhood, she bravely danced and sang for her Lord in the public spaces of the temple and associated with holy men and people from all walks of life and castes. She ignored gender, class, caste, and religious boundaries, and spent time caring for the poor.



Figure 15: Mirabai

Ultimately, Mirabai left her community to become a wandering religious leader, reportedly traveling to holy places associated with Krishna, including Vrindavan (the land of his youthful incarnation) and Dwarka (the capital of the mature Krishna's kingdom). Although she is admired by devotees of many different branches of Hinduism, she is explicitly rejected by the followers of *Vallabhacarya*. Mirabai's songs express her love and devotion to Krishna, almost always as Krishna's wife. The songs speak of both the

joy and the pain of love. Metaphorically, Mirabai points to the longing of the personal self, *atman*, to be one with the universal self, *paramatma*, which is Mirabai's representation of Krishna. She is also well known for the songs she is thought to have composed before she died in 1557, dedicated to Sri Krishna.

Swaminarayan (1781–1830 CE): He is also known as **Lord Swaminarayan or Sahajanand Swamiis**, the central figure in a modern branch of Hinduism known as Swaminarayan Hinduism. In 1826, Swaminarayan wrote the *Shikshapatri*, a book of social principles that reflected his philosophy. He is believed by his followers to be a manifestation of god.

Swaminarayan drew followers from various faiths including Muslims and Zoroastrians, as well as Hindus from various regions and schools of thought. He is noted for his efforts to reform Hindu society and improve the life and status of women and the poor within Hinduism. He and his followers provided the poor with food, water, and shelter. As well, widows were offered money to help them pay for the necessities of life for their children after the loss of their husbands.

Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883): Dayanand Saraswati was a very important Hindu religious leader in his time and the founder of the *Arya Samaj*, a Hindu reform movement of the *Vedic* tradition. He was also a renowned scholar of the *Vedic* lore and *Sanskrit* language.

He is thought by many to have had a great influence on Modern India, and, as such, his fame has many facets. He was a strong advocate of independence for India and influenced many Indians of the time. He also advocated for women's rights, and denounced idolatry and ritualistic worship prevalent in Hinduism at the time. As a *sanyasi* (ascetic) from boyhood, and a scholar who believed in the infallible authority of the *Vedas*, he strove to revive *Vedic* ideologies in India. During his lifetime he wrote more than 60 works.

Dayanand Saraswati advocated the doctrine of *Karma* and Reincarnation. He emphasized the *Vedic* ideals of *brahmacharya*, including celibacy and devotion to god. Through *yoga*, *asanas*, teachings, writings, and preaching, he inspired the Hindu nation to aspire to *swarajya* (self-governance), nationalism, and spiritualism.

Swami Vivekananda (1863 to 1902): Vivekananda was an Indian Hindu monk, a chief disciple of the 19th-century Indian mystic Ramakrishna. He had a great impact on the status and visibility of Hinduism in the west. He was a major figure and played an important role in the introduction of the Indian philosophies of *Vedanta* and *Yoga* to the Western world when he introduced Hinduism at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893 and through subsequent work. Hence, he is credited with raising interfaith awareness and bringing Hinduism to the status of a major world religion.

In India, he was a major force in the revival of Hinduism, and contributed to the concept of nationalism in colonial India. Vivekananda founded the *Ramakrishna Math* and the *Ramakrishna Mission*. He went on many missions to teach the message of Ramakrishna.

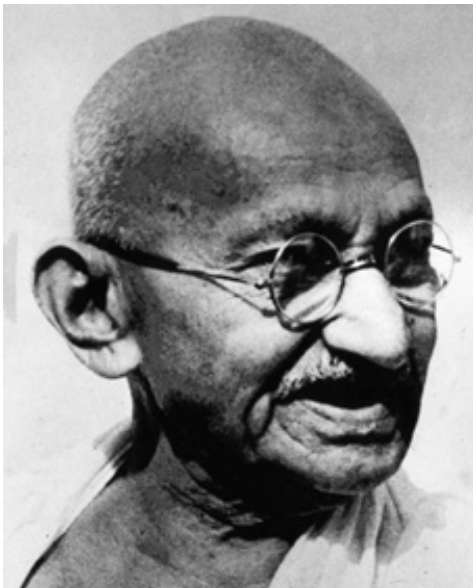


Figure 16: Mohandas K. Gandhi

His dedication to non-violent protest and resistance and interfaith understanding inspired people throughout the world

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948): He is probably one of the most famous Hindu figures of the world, especially in the Western world. Also known as *Mahatma*, honorific *Sanskrit* term meaning “high-souled”, “venerable” that was first applied in reference to him in South Africa in 1914, but is now used worldwide

Born in 1869 to a deeply religious mother, Gandhi is famous for his advocacy to non-violence in response to British colonial repression. Gandhi was trained as a lawyer in Britain and was actively involved in human rights struggles in South Africa and India.

Gandhi first employed non-violent civil disobedience as an expatriate lawyer in South Africa, in the resident Indian community's struggle for civil rights. After his return to India in 1915, he set about organizing peasants, farmers, and urban labourers to protest against excessive land tax and discrimination.

Assuming leadership of the Indian National Congress in 1921, Gandhi led nationwide campaigns for easing poverty, expanding women's rights, building religious and ethnic amity, ending untouchability and, above all, achieving *swaraj* or self-rule.

Gandhi endeavoured to practice nonviolence and truth (*satyagraha*) in all situations, and advocated that others do the same. He lived modestly in a self-sufficient residential community and wore the traditional Indian *dhoti* and shawl, woven with yarn hand-spun on a *charkha*. He ate simple vegetarian food, and also undertook long fasts as a means of both self-purification and social protest.

Gandhi had a vision of and advocated for an independent India based on religious pluralism. This vision was not shared by many and was challenged in the early 1940s by an emerging new Muslim nationalism that demanded that a separate Muslim homeland be carved out of India. In August 1947, Britain granted India independence, with the British Indian Empire partitioned into two dominions, a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority Pakistan.

This resulted in chaos caused by many displaced Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs trying to make their way to their new lands, which led to interreligious violence, especially in the Punjab and Bengal regions. Gandhi chose to miss the official Independence Day celebrations in Delhi, and instead visited the affected areas, attempting to provide support and solace.

In the months that followed, he undertook several hunger strikes or fasts in an attempt to promote religious harmony and interfaith understanding. The last of his hunger strikes was undertaken on January 12, 1948, when he was 78 years old. Gandhi's efforts were not appreciated by all Hindus, including Nathuram Godse, a Hindu nationalist, who eventually assassinated Gandhi on January 30, 1948, by shooting three bullets into Gandhi's chest.

Mahatma Gandhi's birthday, October 2, is commemorated in India as *Gandhi Jayanti*, a national holiday, and worldwide as the International Day of Non-violence.

Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950): Sri Aurobindo (born Aurobindo Ghose) was an Indian philosopher, *yogi*, *guru*, poet, and nationalist. He joined the Indian independence movement from British rule and was, for a while, one of its influential leaders. Later, as a spiritual reformer, he promoted his visions for human progress and spiritual evolution.

He was arrested and released from prison for his work with nationalist groups and the emerging nationalist movement. During his imprisonment he had a mystical and spiritual experience that led him to leave politics and focus on spiritual work.

Aurobindo developed an approach to spiritual practice he called Integral Yoga. The central theme of his spiritual vision was the belief that human life could evolve into a divine life. He believed in a spiritual realization that not only liberated the person but transformed human nature, enabling a divine life on Earth. In 1926, with the help of his spiritual collaborator, Mirra Alfassa (referred to as “The Mother”), he founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

His literary spiritual works include *The Life Divine*, the theoretical foundations of *Integral Yoga*; *Synthesis of Yoga*, a practical guide for *Integral Yoga*; and *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, an epic poem. He also authored texts on philosophy and poetry, as well as translations and commentaries on the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Bhagavad Gita*. Sri Aurobindo was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1943 and for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950.

Sri Chinmoy or Chinmoy Kumar Ghose (1931–2007): He was an Indian spiritual leader known for teaching meditation in the West after moving to New York City in 1964. Chinmoy established his first meditation centre in Queens, New York, and eventually had 7,000 students in 60 countries. Sri Chinmoy was an author, artist, poet, musician, and athlete.

He influenced people the world over and Chinmoy centres are currently located throughout the world including several in Canadian cities, among which one in Winnipeg (see <https://ca.srichinmoycentre.org/centres/list>).

Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952): He is considered one of the eminent Hindu spiritual figures of modern times. He authored the best-selling book *Autobiography of a Yogi*, that introduced millions of westerners to the teachings of meditation and *Kriya Yoga*. He travelled to America in 1920 and was the first *yoga guru* to live and teach in the West for an extended period (30 years).

He impacted the lives of millions with his comprehensive teachings on the science of *Kriya Yoga* meditation, the underlying unity of all true religions, and the art of balanced health and well-being. He is widely recognized as the Father of *Yoga* in the West. He founded the Self-Realization Fellowship in 1920 and the Yogoda Satsanga Society of India in 1917. Both continue to carry on his spiritual legacy.

Sri Ravi Shankar (1956–): He is an Indian spiritual leader also known as Guruji or Gurudev. He is the leader and founder of the Art of Living Foundation created in 1981. In 1997, he established a Geneva-based charity, the International Association for Human Values. This organization engages in relief work and rural development and aims to foster shared global values. In recognition of his work and service, he has received prestigious awards from several countries including India, Peru, Colombia, and Paraguay. In January 2016, he was awarded the *Padma Vibhushan* (the second-highest civilian award) by the Government of India.

Role of Women

Traditional Roles

Many Hindus believe that the role and status of women in Hinduism is often misunderstood and incorrectly portrayed in the West and by non-Hindus. While they acknowledge that women in Hindu communities in India and in other places may at times be poorly treated and face some of the same concerns as women elsewhere in the world, they would argue this is not a result of Hinduism. From a Hindu perspective, maltreatment of women is a violation of the *Sanatan Dharma*. As well, the roles of women in Hindu society and India are changing, as they are throughout the world. Increasingly, the life, roles, status, and privileges of Hindu women are becoming similar to those of males.

“In Hinduism, as in most religions, women play a very important role as transmitters and preservers of sacred stories and domestic rituals. While women had been legally deprived in the public arena since medieval times, they continued to command a major role in worship and character formation.”
(Klostermmaier, 2007)

The position and role of women in Hinduism is complex, sometimes contradictory, and diverse. Hindu texts on women range from those that describe feminine gods and leadership as the highest form of spirituality and power, to limiting women's roles to those of an obedient and subservient daughter, housewife, and mother. Examples of the Hindu reverence for the feminine are

- The *Devi Sukta* hymn of *Rig-Veda*, a scripture of Hinduism, states that the feminine energy is the essence of the universe. It is the one who creates all matter and consciousness, the eternal and infinite, the metaphysical and empirical reality (*Brahman*), the soul (supreme self) of everything.
- In some Hindu *Upanishads*, *Sastras*, and *Puranas*, particularly the *Devi Upanishad*, *Devi Mahatmya*, and *Devi-Bhagavata Purana*, women are celebrated as being the most powerful and empowering force.

Most Hindu scholars would agree that women in ancient India held an elevated position. They had similar education as men and participated with men in philosophical debates. Some were *brahmavadinis*, Hindu religious

leaders who devoted their lives to studying the scriptures, teaching the *Vedas*, and writing some of the *Vedic* hymns. During this time, women of the *kshatriya* (warrior) caste were trained in the martial arts and the use of weapons.

Hindu scriptures such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and others provide examples of women philosophers, politicians, teachers, administrators, and saints. The *Rig-Veda* says

“The wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore, both should join and take equal parts in all works, religious and secular.”

The *Upanishads* state that individual souls are neither male nor female. Hinduism teaches that each person is reincarnated and passes through many lives, both male and female. As well, many would point out that the law of *karma* dictates that what one does to others will in turn be done to the individual and that *ahimsa*, doing no harm to others, must be the guiding principle of all humans. Thus, Hinduism at its core does not promote or justify the maltreatment of others, whether on the basis of gender or for any other characteristic. However, as with any other religion, the actual acts and practice of adherents may or may not be in keeping with the values and principles of the religion.

A different and seemingly contradictory view of women is presented in the *Smritis*, such as the *Manusmriti*. The *Manu Samhita*, which was written long after the *Vedic* period, is one of the *Dharma Shastras* that discusses a woman’s place and role. Within it, derogatory statements about women are made and, while for some *Manu Samhita* is a minor *smriti*, many other sections have formed the basis for much of Indian law. However, some Hindus would point out that the sections on women have not been enshrined in Indian law.

The *Manu Smriti* lays out what came to be understood as the traditional view of women within Hinduism and one that was common until recently. In the *Vedic* world, women were important and their presence was necessary for the Hindu rituals to work, even though they had no official role to play in them. The Laws of *Manu* state

“Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased. Where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards.”

However, *Manu* also speaks to their need to be controlled and have limitations placed on their independence. (Many Hindus believe that *Manu* was affected by the context and conditions during Muslim rule of India and the dangers it presented for Hindu women.)

“Day and night, women must be kept dependent to the males of their families. If they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one’s control. Her father protects her in childhood. Her husband protects her in youth. Her sons protect her in old age. A woman is never fit for independence.”

The *Manu Smriti* talks of the three following life stages for a woman:

- **As a child** she is protected by her father. Traditionally, girls did not receive a formal academic education. Their preparation for their role as women, although considered essential in preserving social and cultural values, was to be learned in the home.
- **As a married woman** she is protected by her husband. Women's roles were centred on the home and they were not expected to contribute towards the family income. Women were expected to dedicate themselves to fulfilling their responsibility to be a loving and available parent. As Hinduism placed great value on pre-marital chastity, and this significantly influenced practices, girls were often engaged and married at a very young age.
- **As a widow** she is protected by the eldest son if the husband died or took *sannyasa* (renounced worldly life and devoted himself to religious study). Elder Hindu women were to always be treated with great respect.

Differences in roles extended to religious duties. Religious ceremonies were often performed by men for men. Women were not allowed to officiate in any *Vedic* ceremony, but they could perform rituals such as *puja* or fasting.

A diverse image of the duties and rights of women in Hinduism is presented in ancient and medieval era Hindu texts. For example, texts recognize eight kinds of marriage, ranging from a father finding a marriage partner for his daughter and seeking her consent (*Brahma* marriage), to the bride and groom finding each other without parental participation (*Gandharva* marriage). As well, scholars point out that *Vedic* era Hindu texts, and records left by travelers to ancient and medieval India, indicate that those societies did not practice *dowry* or *sati*. There is evidence that the *Brahmins* originally condemned the practice of *sati* and there has been some level of opposition throughout the centuries. It is likely that these practices became common sometime in the second millennium CE from socio-political developments in the Indian subcontinent.

Hinduism has the strongest presence of the divine feminine among major world religions, from ancient times to the present. In Hinduism, girls are revered as forms of the goddess Lakshmi, whereas boys are not correspondingly revered as forms of Rama or Krishna. Many Hindu gods, including the Supreme Being, are portrayed as goddesses. The importance of the female goddesses is demonstrated by the fact that the second largest pilgrimage site in India is Vaishno Devi (also known as Mata Rani, Trikuta, and Vaishnavi who is a manifestation of the Hindu mother goddess Mahalakshmi). For *Shakta* Hindus, the mother goddess is considered to be the Supreme Creator. While *Vaishnavites* and *Saivites*, who worship Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva respectively as the Supreme Deity, believe that god cannot be approached except through his *shakti* (female form/mother goddess).



Figure 17: Priti Patel at IIM, Ahmedabad, India

The Priti Patel MP and the British High Commissioner to India, Sir James Bevan visited the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in Ahmedabad, Thursday, January 8, 2015.

It is nevertheless important to recognize that, like many other world religions, Hinduism has been a mostly male-dominated religion. To a large degree, traditional respect for women in Hindu society was limited to their roles as daughters, mothers, and wives. The traditional role of women was to be reliant upon and subservient to their husbands and fathers. Such beliefs and practices with respect to women's place, role, and status in Hindu societies can lead to oppression and abuse.

However, there were movements that sought to address and ameliorate the conditions, place, and status of women. The *bhakti* traditions, which also opposed casteism, featured many women saints who broke away from stereotypical roles. Others remained faithful to their *dharma* and simultaneously developed their spirituality. Many Hindus acknowledge the need to reassess the practical role of women in society today, but strive to maintain the spiritual principles underpinning traditional practice.

Contemporary Roles of Women

In a 20th- and 21st-century historical context, the position of women in Hinduism, and in India in general, continues to be a complex and contradictory one. There are regions that are matriarchal societies (for example, south India and northeast India), where women are the head of the household and inherit the family's wealth. In contrast, in other regions, there are patriarchal Hindu traditions. The concepts of god as a woman and mother goddess are revered in Hinduism, yet there are rituals that place females in subordinate roles.

From the perspective of religious study, practice, and rituals, Hindu women are deeply engaged and invested in sustaining and maintaining religious practice. While it is true that rituals that take place in *Sanskritic, Brahminical Hindu* environments continue to be led and directed largely by *Brahmin* males, women largely control many other types of ritual practice. These include many household, seasonal, and local devotional practices. Even in those environments where *Sanskritic* traditions dominate, women often are active and engaged participants in rituals. As well, in some parts of India and other Hindu communities, women are taking leadership roles in *Sanskritic* ritual performance.

The women's rights movement in India has drawn on two foundational Hindu concepts—*lokasangraha* and *satyagraha*. *Lokasangraha* is defined as “acting for the welfare of the world” and *satyagraha* “insisting on the truth”. These ideals were seen to encourage women to advocate for women's rights and social change through political and legal processes. Women's access to political power has also had a positive effect on the general treatment of women. With role models such as **Indira Gandhi**, females have had images of successful women working in what has traditionally been a man's realm of responsibility. Interestingly, powerful women in politics are common throughout the Indian subcontinent. The countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have all had women Prime Ministers.

As well, there are ongoing movements throughout India seeking to improve the situations of all areas of women's lives. Indian laws and legislation stress the equality of women and men. Today, many women are well educated and well represented in the post-secondary educational system.

Western Views on Women in Hinduism

Many Hindus believe that there is a deeply held bias in Western societies according to which, in Hinduism, women are universally subjugated and that, furthermore, feminism is solely a Western movement. Contemporary Hindu women and scholars question the acceptance of what they see as a colonial stereotype and long-standing assumption. This is especially true of those who draw on the emerging understanding of Hindu *Shakti* tradition-related texts, and empirical studies of women in rural India who have had no exposure to Western thought or education but whose feminism is inspired by their Hindu (or Buddhist) goddesses.

Many Hindus believe that Hindu and Indian attitudes and customs concerning women were negatively impacted by the centuries of invasions and foreign occupation that the people endured. They argue that the careful protection of Hindu women became essential as a result of these influences. They point out that all aspects of Indian society suffered from the British-imposed Christian educational system, the tearing apart of families as a result of aggressive conversion efforts, and the additional disruptions caused by a relatively quick transformation from a historically stable, largely agrarian society to one intensely focused on manufacturing and technology.

For many Hindus, the influence of the male-centric Western religions and contemporary capitalist society has diminished, devalued, and disparaged the role of women as wives, mothers, and their children's first *gurus*: the *Shaktis* of Hindu homes.

Ancient and medieval era Hindu texts and *epics* discuss a woman's position and role in society over a spectrum; from one who is a self-sufficient, marriage-eschewing powerful goddess to one who is subordinate and whose identity is defined by men rather than herself, and to one who sees herself as a human being and spiritual person while being neither feminine nor masculine.

Women and Equality

The reality today is that, regardless of the Hindu foundational beliefs and views of the role of women, the women of India often still have to endure very difficult living conditions. In 2011, a TrustLaw poll of 213 gender experts from across five continents ranked India among the five worst countries with respect to women's conditions (Anderson 2011). The experts were asked to rank countries by overall perceptions of danger as well as by six risks. The risks were health threats, sexual violence, non-sexual violence, cultural or religious factors, lack of access to resources, and trafficking. India was ranked as the fourth most dangerous country for a woman to live in, preceded only by Afghanistan, DR Congo, and Pakistan. Harassment and violence against Indian women occurs both in the public and private sphere. Domestic violence and violence by partners are considered to be widespread.

Modern-day Hindu women face many challenges in achieving equal status with men. Many of these issues are not specific to Hinduism but are related to societal, political, cultural, and regional practices which impact on Hindus and Hinduism. Some of the challenges include

1. Dowry problems, which are especially acute for certain castes and communities
2. Parental interference in marriages and careers
3. Domestic violence and abuse
4. Violence against women being unreported or not being investigated
5. Gender-based abortions
6. Dwindling male-female sex ratio
7. Gender inequality in the treatment of children
8. Kidnapping and trafficking of women
9. Sale of women

India's National Commission for Women was created to protect and defend women's rights in the country. National laws and legislation are in place to safeguard women's rights; however, in spite of these legal protections to ensure women have the same rights politically and economically, gender equality in India, as in most nations throughout the world, is not yet a reality.

The role of women in contemporary society varies greatly, depending on the region and the woman's ethnicity and socio-economic status. To a significant extent, women in India suffer from discrimination and different forms of denial of their human rights. At the same time, there are more prominent and influential women in India than what you may find in many other countries.

Although this may indicate that the roles of men and women are changing, perhaps more today than even before in India's history, social change in India is slow. Patterns of behaviour are deeply embedded in the soul of Hindu India. As a result, implementing change is not as simple as passing legislation. The vast majority of Hindus live in villages and the laws made in the city of New Delhi are often hard to enforce in these villages. Changes in the lives of women and men, therefore, must be encouraged at the local level.

Women as Religious Leaders and *Purohita* (Priests)

A *pundit* (also *pandit*) is a scholar or a teacher of any field of knowledge in Hinduism, particularly the *Vedic* scriptures, *dharma*, Hindu philosophy, or secular subjects such as music. They may be a *guru* in a *gurukul* (a religious school). In colonial era literature, the term generally refers to *Brahmins* specialized in Hindu law. A *pujari* or *archaka* is the term for a Hindu temple priest. The word comes from the *Sanskrit*/Hindi word *puja* meaning worship. They are responsible for performing temple rituals and taking care of *murtis*.

As indicated earlier, for centuries, many Hindu rituals were traditionally performed by males and there were limitations on which rituals women could lead or perform. Many Hindus were not aware of the significant role women played in the religion in earlier times and they do not realize the ancient tradition of female-led rituals that dates back over 5,000 years. Thus, despite historical evidence that there were 30 women *Vedic* scholars to whom the hymns of the *Rig-Veda* were revealed, that there were many *rishikas* (great sages), and *sadhvis* (holy person or female monk), women largely remain absent in important roles in most Hindu temples today.

Hinduism does not directly ban women from becoming *pundits* or *pujaris* and there is no scripture that prevents such developments. In ancient *Vedic* times, women had the same freedom to pursue knowledge as men did and they studied the *Vedas*.

However, there was and often still is strong objection from some Hindus to women serving as *pundits* or other religious leaders. These have to do with beliefs and practices with respect to menstruation and concerns about intimacy between males and females. For example, the tying of the sacred thread or *kankanam*, which is a prelude to most rituals should not be done by a man to a woman or vice-versa unless they are married.

A second factor is that while women and men seemed to have enjoyed equal status in the distant past in religious ceremonies, patriarchal norms became more entrenched with time, economic progress, and other developments. Along with control over the economy, men also gained religious power.

Finally, the studying required to become a *pundit* takes several years and, as women were expected to get married early and start a family, this was seen as a major obstacle to their duties.

Today, perceptions and attitudes are changing. In the last few decades, some Hindu institutions have begun offering courses for female priests. An example is Dyanprabodhini in the city of Pune, India, which was started by a social reformer. In 2010, twenty women were enrolled in the one-year priesthood course. They come from all Hindu castes. Many were homemakers between 40 and 65 years of age. They are trained in religious rituals and each of the 16 sacraments of Hinduism, as well as the *Sanskrit* language.

Women Hindu priests largely perform religious ceremonies at private homes and not at temples. As well, they usually do perform funerals or death rites. Generally, they are more widely accepted in larger cities than in more traditional, rural India.

In 2014, a centuries-old tradition of male-only *Brahmin* priests leading ceremonies came to an end when a female priest was appointed at a 900-year-old temple in Maharashtra's pilgrimage city of Pandharpur. The state government had set up a managing committee for the temple, which interviewed 129 candidates from all castes before appointing a woman. It is now estimated that there are several thousand female *purohits* or *pandits* in India alone.