

Female Hindu priests in India are making strides in a male-dominated profession

For centuries, many Hindu rituals have been performed by male priests. But now a few institutions in Pune have begun offering courses to female priests.



Chitra Lele works as a female Hindu priest in Pune

Hindu chants ring through Pradnya Patil's new home. It's on the 11th floor of a luxury apartment building in Pune. In the sunny living room, statues of Hindu gods are arranged on the floor. A smell of incense fills the air. A traditional house-warming ceremony is underway.

But Pradnya Patil has broken with tradition today - the 35-year-old has invited a woman priest to perform the ritual. Patil is convinced that women priests are better

than their male counterparts. "I recently attended a house-warming ceremony led by a male priest - it took five whole hours! But women priests perform similar rituals in just one hour. They explain the importance of the rituals and why they are still relevant. They're very sincere and committed. Now, my relatives and even my conservative father have switched to women priests."

Chitra Lele sits on the floor in Pradnya Patil's apartment and explains the ritual in the local language Marathi. She looks nothing like a traditional Hindu priest in austere white robes. Instead, she wears a colorful silk sari and trendy rimless glasses. The 41-year-old is married and has a teenage daughter. She was drawn to the priesthood out of an interest in Hinduism and Sanskrit. She performs all kinds of rituals: naming ceremonies, weddings as well as festivals.

She says female priests have struck a chord among young urban Indians. "We women priests explain the gist of the ritual in just one hour. We try and involve the people watching. So we're popular among the young generation."

Priesthood courses

Women like Chitra Lele are challenging traditional notions of priesthood. And they are learning to do that at Pune's Dyanprabodhini center, which was started by a social reformer. The school's imposing stone building is located in the bustling old part of the city.



Mostly young, urban Hindus are calling the female priests for ceremonies

More than 20 women are currently enrolled in the one-year priesthood course. They come from all Hindu castes. Most are housewives between 40 and 65 years of age. They are trained in religious rituals and each of the 16 sacraments of Hinduism. And they're taught Sanskrit, the country's

classical language in which the Hindu religious mantras are chanted - and which few Indians understand.

"We have a great pleasure that women who are learning here are performing outside in society very confidently. They are progressive but they still preserve our ancient traditions and culture also", says Arya Joshi, teacher of the course. The 30-year-old explains that women priests largely perform religious ceremonies at private homes – not at temples. And they don't perform funerals or death rites either. They are more widely accepted in big cities than in more conservative rural India. Joshi is a Sanskrit researcher herself. She's working on her doctorate on Hindu ancestral worship. She points out that Hinduism has never barred women from performing religious rites. There's even



mention of them in ancient religious writings. But later men came to dominate the profession. They declared that priests could only be male and only from a particular Hindu caste. That thinking prevails till today.

"The problem occurs because I think that people don't have an exact idea of women priesthood", says Joshi. "They don't know that this is an ancient tradition for the past 5,000 years. It's a typical orthodox mindset. Some 25 percent of the people aren't ready to accept women priesthood. But we think it will change with the period of time, so we have to wait for that."

EDUCATION

Starting Vedic Studies

Backed by scripture, girls get their sacred thread

V.L. Manjul, Pune, India

Ten young brahmin girls received their *upanayana*, or thread ceremony, commencing the study of the *Vedas*, on April 2, 2000. Normally this rite of passage is only for boys and not allowed for girls. This was the first ceremony of its kind for girls in Pune, India. The followers of Shankar Seva Samiti organized it with Vedamurti Karmabalekar Shastri as the officiating priest. The girls came with their parents and were initiated into the Gayatri Mantra by their fathers. Many orthodox Hindus are against this concept, but the women priests showed them ample literary references to women's thread ceremonies and *Vedic* study in the ancient *Vedic* culture.

It was about 25 years ago, in the Ahmednagar district, that the Shanker Seva Samiti organization began teaching women the *Vedas* as well as training them as priests. Now around 10,000 women are qualified priests. Many are even more popular in the community than their male counterparts because of their enthusiasm, concentration and devotion in doing worship.

In all four *Vedas*, there are references to women ascetics reciting Vedic hymns and even creating mantras. The names of Apala, Ghosha, Shashwati and Indrani are popular in the *Vedas*. In the *Upanishads*, Gargi and Maitrayee are famous women ascetics. The *Rig Veda* (10.109.4) says, "When a brahmin's wife wears the auspicious thread, she becomes very popular."

Other scriptures also mention women wearing the sacred thread. In the *Harit Smriti* it says, "Brahmin women have the right to a sacred thread ceremony, a fire ceremony, the study of *Vedas* and a right to sacred begging." The *Yama Smriti* says, "Performing the thread ceremony for young girls, studying *Vedas* and recitation of Gayatri Mantra was allowed in ancient times."

Paraskar Grihya Sutra (4th-5th century) states, "Those females who have undergone the thread ceremony and those who have not should sleep on their left side with their heads towards the east."

P.V. Kane, in the *History of Dharmasastra*, afforded this topic three-and-a-half pages. Writes Kane: "An interesting question is whether women ever had *upanayana* performed, or whether they had to wear the sacred thread. *Harita Dharmasutra*, as quoted in the *Smriti-candrika*, says, 'There are two sorts of women. Those who are *bramavadinis* (students of sacred lore) and those that are *sadyovadhus* (who marry straightaway). Out of these, *brahmavadinis* have to go through *upanayana*, keeping fire, *Vedic* study and begging in one's house (under the parents' roof). But in the case of *sadyovadhus*, when their marriage is drawing near, the mere ceremony of *upanayana* should somehow be performed and then their marriage should be celebrated. Therefore bramavadini women had *upanayana* performed in the eighth year from conception, then studied Vedic lore and finished student-hood at the age of puberty.' "

Kane continues, "*Yama smriti* says, 'In former ages, tying of the sacred thread was desired in the case of maidens. They were taught the *Vedas* and made to recite the sacred Gayatri verse.'" Kane also indicates that *Manusmriti*, confirmed the performance of *upanayana* for girls but hinted to its going out of practice.

Though too many neglect their duties, this initiation indicates a growing interest and that a significant number faithfully follow their disciplines. The future success of the girls' as well as boys' *upanayana* depends on how well they study the *Vedas* and follow their disciplines.

V.L. Manjul, e-mail: vasudeomanjul@hotmail.com

In Pune, female priests have become quite popular

Mixed reactions

On the hot, busy street outside the school, people are divided about whether women should work as priests.

"I don't think women should be conducting religious ceremonies. Our culture doesn't allow it. That's how it's always been," says one man. But another one is more open: "I don't have a problem with women priests. But I think it's bad if they conduct religious ceremonies during menstruation. It's impure." A woman adds, "I think it's good if women work as priests. As a woman, you feel less scared talking to them than you do to male priests."

Male resistance

Back at the school, Joshi says the main opposition to women priests usually comes from the male clergy. "Actually male priests, who are performing rituals in the traditional ways, have a great worry about their source of income because this is their bread and butter."

Anand Pandharpure agrees. He's been working as a priest for the last 20 years, having been trained at an early age by his own father. He says that to become a Hindu priest, men have to undergo rigorous daily training at special religious schools for at least 7 to 8 years. The 40-year-old is dismissive of what he calls "priesthood light" courses for women.

"You face many complex questions as a Hindu priest", says Pandharpure. "But women often can't answer them because they only get superficial training. And I think people are being fooled when so-called women priests shorten religious rituals. It's more like entertainment. It gives priesthood a bad name."

Pandharpure is dressed in the traditional clothes of a Hindu priest – a white dhoti and a black peaked cap. He rejects the idea that women priests pose a threat to him and his male colleagues. "Women often turn to priesthood after 40, once their kids have grown up, and they have nothing to do. But I don't think that's right. Priesthood is not just a hobby. It's an important responsibility. For

us men, being priests is a lifelong learning experience. But frankly we don't take the issue of women priests too seriously – their numbers are really negligible."



A laptop puja: tradition and modernity tend to blend well in India

Hindu rituals in English

They may not be taken seriously by some, but female priests are increasingly charting their own course in the male-dominated field. Manisha Shete has been working as a priest for three years. The cheerful 40-year-old has found a new target group for her services.

"Nowadays I conduct a lot of marriages in English because Indians who go abroad increasingly marry foreign partners. But they're keen on having an Indian wedding. And Indian parents who live overseas often want their children to learn about their culture. But the children don't understand Marathi. So I conduct the thread ceremony – a rite of passage for boys - in English."

The simplified rituals in English can sometimes lead to unexpected reactions. "A father of one of the boys once came to me and said 'you know, my thread ceremony was done decades ago – but it's only now that I understand why it was done and what it meant'", laughs Manisha Shete.

Author: Sonia Phalnikar (Pune)

Editor: Thomas Baerthlein