

[Women Augment the Priestly Ranks](#)

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RELIGION

Women Augment the Priestly Ranks

Meet four US-based women pujaris whose well-honed sacerdotal skills have earned them respect and appreciation in the Hindu community

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The bride was present, as was the groom, but where was the officiating priest? All the guests gathered in a Milwaukee home for the wedding ceremony were wondering aloud why he was so late. Little did they realize that the priest was already there, sitting amongst them. She is Shashi Tandon, an exuberant grandmother from New Delhi, clad in an orange silk sari and armed with Vedic knowledge. The guests expected a male pujari, as is traditional in Hindu ceremonies. But it was Shashi who calmly led them through the intricate rituals, creating a wonderful aura of spirituality. She has presided over not only weddings, but all the samskaras--Hindu rites of passage from births and first feedings to funerals. Shashi is one of a small but growing number of women pujaris, or purohitis, who are changing the long-standing tradition in which rituals are performed only by male priests of the brahmin caste.

Women Hindu priests in America are still so unusual that when Neelima Shukla-Bhatt performed the upanayana samskara sacred thread ceremony in New Jersey for the son of her cousin, Himanshu Shukla, the guests actually broke into appreciative applause. That's something which never happens at a religious gathering! Himanshu requested that Neelima perform the ceremony because she knew the traditions better than anyone else in the family. She also has a PhD in comparative religion from Harvard University and is fluent in Sanskrit, and the rituals are both meaningful and joyous to her.

Neelima says, "Hindus in India have quietly but steadily reintroduced women priests without any great fanfare, controversy or rioting. There are many women priests around the country, particularly in the western state of Maharashtra, who officiate at various samskaras and yagnas."

Bhatt, a professor of South Asian Studies at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, points out that the Rig Veda refers to women priests making sacrifices and composing hymns. By the first millennium, however, it appears the priestly role was no longer open to women; and by Manu's time a patriarchal system had arisen in which women were forbidden even to study the Vedas.

The Upanishads contain references to strong women such as Gargi who engaged in philosophical debate with male counterparts such as Yagnavalkya. At least eight women religious luminaries are still known from ancient times, including Sati Ansuya, Shashi, Apala, Kaushalya and Arundhati. From the first millennium ce to the medieval period lived many poet-saints such as Andal in Tamil Nadu, Lalleshwari from Kashmir, Mahadevi Akka in Karnataka and Mirabai in Rajasthan. Although these women were not priests, they were revered in a religious context.

Bhatt says that in the latter half of the 20th century a small, quiet revolution has taken place in Pune, where women have been trained as priests and are becoming surprisingly popular. She observes, "People are preferring to have women priests, which is a phenomenon that is striking. It's happening here in the US, too, where women are seeing their work in the context of community need; and people seem to be accepting of it."

One catalyst for this change is the Dyanaprabhodhini Centre in Pune, which for the past 15 years has trained women to conduct religious ceremonies. Jayavantrao Lele, who heads the center, told BBC News that he has been approached both by individuals and temples requesting women priests. On one occasion, 21 women priests went to a Pune temple to perform the rites. The temple officials were so impressed that they wanted to use women priests every year.

Hinduism Today reported earlier on the Shankar Seva Samiti organization which had been training women priests since 1975 (see <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1997/1/1997-1-17.shtm>). At the time, our

journalist was told that the enthusiastic women priests were accepted in part because the community disliked the apathetic attitude of many male priests.

Another factor in the rise of women priests is that many men are leaving the occupation for more lucrative jobs. In times past the priestly class was highly respected, but this has changed. Today, despite the years of training and long hours of hard work, most temple priests are woefully underpaid. As a result, the sons of priests are leaving the family profession for white-collar jobs at an alarming rate.

Bhatt's family is a case in point. Three generations ago her forebears belonged to the priestly class in Surat in Southern Gujarat. "Although my uncles were priests, my father became a professor, " she recalls. "Education was redefined as secular education, and everyone was getting degrees such as in engineering and medicine. No one in my family is now a priest. So my cousin, who grew up in America, decided he would like me to do his son's sacred ceremony, as it's always been done by a priest from our own family."

Anju Bhargava, a banker and management consultant in New Jersey, did her first ritual for friends who were having a Satya Narayan puja for their home. She learned the meaning of the Sanskrit verses from Dr. M. G. Prasad of the Bridgewater Temple in New Jersey. She was motivated by her wish to pass on the Hindu culture to her young daughter. She says, "I grew as my daughter grew. I would say, actually, for me, doing pujas took 25 years of preparation. Most people go from ritual to philosophy; I have gone from philosophy to ritual. Puja has brought the philosophy to life for me."

"Most people do not understand Hinduism or the ritual process, " Bhargava explains. "I have a computer presentation to explain the context, the meaning of the symbols and why we do the puja. It is not just a traditional recitation. I want people to come away with more of an understanding of the Vedantic Hindu tradition and the richness of the puja."

Bhargava stated that women priests have limited access to trained teachers and schools. Ashrams generally do not teach the duties of a priest, so she feels there is a need for Hindu theological schools where people can get degrees. She suggests, "We definitely need to bridge the gap between philosophy and rituals. Only then will

the rituals be meaningful and not just something we are doing because someone is telling us to do them and in a language we don't understand."

Ask Bhatt about the value of women priests and she thoughtfully responds, "Women here are the mothers and the nurturers and are more concerned about the continuity of religion and culture. We bring a different kind of energy, so the more women come into the field, the better it will be for the community."

Shashi Tandon, who came to America 24 years ago, has been regularly presiding at religious ceremonies in the Hindu communities in Chicago and Michigan. A high school teacher, she often performed havans, fire ceremonies, in her free time in India. When her children married and immigrated to the US, she was urged to come and look after the grandchildren. Shashi has performed marriages for intercultural couples, including Hindus who are marrying Muslims. The regular pujaris had refused to perform a wedding between a Muslim girl and a Hindu boy, but Tandon flew out to the Virgin Islands to perform this ceremony. "The priests were not ready to do this, but I see it as a relationship of the soul--I have no problem with that," she says. "In ancient times there used to be a swayamvara where the woman chose her own husband."

Tandon believes many women are losing their culture here in America. She observes, "If the mother is not wise, the children are going to be frustrated. I have seen so many teenagers who ask me questions. They say their mothers don't know about those things."

"I have performed many weddings. Sometimes the boy doesn't even know who Lord Rama is!" she adds incredulously. "Teenagers want to know what we are, who we are, what we should do, which path we should follow. How can they succeed in another culture if they don't know their own culture? This has happened because parents have no guts to sit down and talk to them and tell them the realities of life."

And what would she say to those who claim you have to be a brahmin to perform the rituals? She replies: "You know what the definition of a brahmin is? He who walks on the path of Lord Brahma is a brahman. Sant Ravidas was a cobbler, Kabir a weaver. What you do has nothing to do with who you are. I've worked at Wal-Mart,

but on Saturday and Sunday I served my society."

While most Hindu women priests are self-taught, a few are taking it to the next level--studying Hinduism in an organized fashion and becoming ordained as priests. When Pandita Indrani Rampersad got ordained in 1992 in Trinidad, there was considerable controversy. She recalls that the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement, was supportive, but many of the more orthodox schools opposed her ordination. She notes, "For me, the big thing was that it opened up the conversation."

Why did Rampersad want to become a priest? She explains, "In 1973 I first went to India to study more about Hindu dharma. I enrolled in Banaras Hindu University, but found there was no course on theology." She ended up studying Indian philosophy. On her return to Trinidad, she was encouraged by her grandfather, who was a priest, to get initiated. "As an activist for women's rights, one of the motivating factors was my feeling that if I wanted to, I should be able to be a priest, " she explained. "I was already doing a lot of the priestly functions at the time, such as delivering the lectures in the temple, but I was not allowed to do the rituals. I asked myself, 'Why not?' "

Rampersad, who works as a school teacher, is qualified to do all 16 samskaras and performs them in both New York and Trinidad. She finds people are open to a woman doing these rituals. She says, "A lot of this is educational. When I perform rituals, I use a lot of the time for education. The ritual for me is the center around which I can teach. For a lot of the male priests, the ritual is the center, and that's it."

Unlike traditional male pujaris, most of whom speak little or no English, these part-time women pujaris are all fluent in English and can effectively reach out to the younger generation. Indrani says, "Definitely we need women priests. Women are half the population and they are more sensitive. We can counsel young women and they feel comfortable, while they would not confide in a male priest."

She also believes that women have to take charge of rituals, especially in the home. The mother is the center of the family and determines the tone of the home. "If she is educated in the samskaras, then the samskaras will be passed on to the next

generation. She should at least be able to do Deepavali puja and teach it to her children."

Satish Prakash heads the Dayanand Gurukul in Jamaica, Queens, in New York. It is based on the Gurukul Kangra University in India and serves as a temple and spiritual school for the Guyanese Hindu community. Prakash is a Sanskrit scholar whose PhD dissertation was on rites and rituals. He recently conducted workshops in Hindu philosophy and the 16 samskaras for 268 delegates from across the US and Canada.

"There were more women than men, " he recalls. "I ordained 49 women who got certification and the title of panditas." Most of the women were Hindus originally from the Caribbean countries. Some were from Fiji and Mauritius. Prakash says they will now go out and serve in their respective communities and temples. "That is one of our tenets, " he concluded, "anyone who goes through the training can be a priest."

Women priests are special in that, for them, it is not just a job but a calling. They are willing to devote time and energy to explanations and interactions and are not driven by monetary considerations. Many of them have good day jobs or are comfortably retired. The future looks hopeful as more and more women take charge of passing on the dharma to the next generation.

Tandon's grandson was just one week old when she journeyed to America 24 years ago to impart the Hindu samskaras to him. Today he is a wonderful young man about to become a doctor. The other day he told her, "Grandma, when I have children you have to teach them all that you have taught me." As a priest, Shashi Tandon intends to do just that not only for her own great-grandchildren but for all children of the Hindu community.