

In ancient India, women occupied a very important position, in fact a superior position to, men. It is a culture whose only words for strength and power are feminine - "Shakti" means "power" and "strength." All male power comes from the feminine. Literary evidence suggests that kings and towns were destroyed because a single woman was wronged by the state. For example, Valmiki's Ramayana teaches us that Ravana and his entire clan was wiped out because he abducted Sita. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata teaches us that all the Kauravas were killed because they humiliated Draupadi in public. Elango Adigal's Sillapathigaram teaches us Madurai, the capital of the Pandyas was burnt because Pandyan Nedunchezhiyan mistakenly killed her husband on theft charges.

In Vedic times women and men were equal as far as education and religion was concerned. Women participated in the public sacrifices alongside men. One text mentions a female rishi Visvara. Some Vedic hymns, are attributed to women such as Apala, the daughter of Atri, Ghosa, the daughter of Kaksivant or Indrani, the wife of Indra. Apparently in early Vedic times women also received the sacred thread and could study the Vedas. The Haritasmrti mentions a class of women called brahmavadinis who remained unmarried and spent their lives in study and ritual. Panini's distinction between arcarya (a lady teacher) and acaryani (a teacher's wife), and upadhyaya (a woman preceptor) and upadhyayani (a preceptor's wife) indicates that women at that time could not only be students but also teachers of sacred lore. He mentions the names of several noteworthy women scholars of the past such as Kathi, Kalapi, and Bahvici. The Upanishads refer to several women philosophers, who disputed with their male colleagues such as Vacaknavi, who challenged Yajnavalkya. The Rig Veda also refers to women engaged in warfare. One queen Bispala is mentioned, and even as late a witness as Megasthenes (fifth century B.C. E.) mentions heavily armed women guards protecting Chandragupta's palace.

Louis Jaccoliot, the celebrated French author of the [Bible in India: Hindoo Origin of Hebrew and Christian Revelation](#) said: "India of the Vedas entertained a respect for women amounting to worship; a fact which we seem little to suspect in Europe when we accuse the extreme East of having denied the dignity of woman, and of having only made her an instrument of pleasure and of passive obedience." He also said: "What! here is a civilization, which you cannot deny to be older than your own, which places the woman on a level with the man and gives her an equal place in the family and in society."

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## **Introduction**

Recent incidents of sati and rash of "dowry murders" have made headlines not only in India, but all around the world, and have focused attention to women's issues in India. **In the wake of the discussion it emerged that Indian women's problems are not only problems of Hindu women or problems caused by traditional Hinduism.** Media paints India as a dangerous place. But if statistics can be trusted, a study by Hindus Against the Abuse of Women presented at the Second International Conference on Bride Burning and Dowry Deaths in India **puts USA in the lead of familial femicide. It says [USA murders of women](#) committed by "intimate relations" are 15 per year per million population. Too often the underbelly of the West is not reported in their media. Whereas, the English media in India makes a living out of pouring hate and bile on India and her culture. (Refer to [Killings of new, expectant mothers mount in USA](#) - Many pregnant women like them have been slain in Maryland and Mississippi, in California and Kansas, in Ohio and Illinois. A year-long examination by [The Washington Post](#) of**

death-record data in states across the country documents the killings of 1,367 pregnant women and new mothers since 1990. This is only part of the national toll). The rate in Pakistan is 6.44 per million. India's is 6.25 per million. The study says excessive need for control and greed may be the underlying causes, not cultural or religious factors. India recently passed a law making husbands and in-laws guilty until proven otherwise if a bride dies within the first year of marriage. Since then, the rate of women killed by intimate relations dropped by more than 50%. **Tiny Switzerland is home to a mere 7.2 million people. It is extremely rich, modern, industrialised and democratic with excellent health care and a 100 per cent literacy rate. So why has this proud nation with its fiercely democratic traditions failed to curb violence against women? Which is why the statistics for wife beating are about the same in the developed and the developing world.** It is fallacious to think that there is a link between democracy, prosperity, education levels and domestic violence," counters Elizabeth Rod-Grangé, a Swiss sociologist and activist with **Solidarité Femme**, a women's rights group that runs shelters for battered women in Geneva. According to the report, one in every three women suffers violence in her lifetime. **The statistics in Europe are as appalling as anywhere else.** In France, six women die each month at the hands of men who profess to love them. **In Britain, one woman is killed by a partner every three days, one woman in four experiences domestic violence and attacks on partners account for a quarter of all violent crime. Despite media campaigns and shocking statistics, domestic violence continues to be one of Europe's most under-reported crimes.**

Dowry practice plagues Christian community in India - The practice of dowry, normally prevalent among the Hindus, is now making its presence in the Christian community as well. In fact, despite a high literacy rate, **Kerala continues to be one of the epicenters of dowry practice in the country. While the Church is aware of this practice, its leaders say there is little they can do about it.** Far from being a solemn ceremony, marriages have now become an occasion to flaunt wealth and social status. And in a consumer state like Kerala it seems just everyone wants to shell out as much as he can on marriages.

(source: **Hinduism Today** <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/1997/9/> and **Violence against Women** and **Domestic violence in Switzerland - hindu.com** and **Women, a battered section of society in Europe - hindu.com** and **Dowry practice plagues Christian community in India**).

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Hindu religion has been occasionally criticized as encouraging inequality between men and women, towards the detriment of Hindu women. **This inaccurate presumption again arises when people combine social and religious issues.**



*10th century Nayika standing underneath a tree attended by her companions, while she put the finishing touches to her toilet. In her left hand she holds a mirror, while adjusting her coiffure with her right.*

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*"India's femininity and sexual ambiguity, is the very antithesis of Western virility."*

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According to [Guy Sorman](#), visiting scholar at Hoover Institution at Stanford and the leader of new liberalism in France, writes: **idea of feminism and ecology came from the 1968 movement, from the meeting between India and the West.** He says: **"There is hardly anything in European thought to predispose the West to reject virility, the respect for authority, the mastery over nature.** India too has a warrior (khasatriya) tradition of virility as exemplified in the [Mahabharata](#), only it is secondary. First, comes the veneration of thousands of goddesses - for the Indians, India is above all **Mother India.**

**India's femininity and sexual ambiguity, is the very antithesis of Western virility."**

(source: [The Genius of India - By Guy Sorman \('Le Genie de l'Inde'\)](#) Macmillan India Ltd. 2001. ISBN 0333 93600 0 p. 197).

**The Hindu Goddess became the subject of very serious and intense study by many white women in the 1970s when they revolted against the male centric Abrahamic religions.** Today, the Hindu Goddess is often used to enhance the historical narrative of Mother Mary or to reinterpret European Goddesses such as Sophia, Diana, etc. Furthermore, [Gloria Steinem](#), one of the pioneers of the women's liberation movement in the US, spent two years in India in the 1960s, and after her return to the US she helped to launch the feminist movement. **She writes in her autobiography that it was her experiences with women's empowerment groups in India that inspired her later work in the US.**

**Yet, Western scholars and their Indian chelas have started to demonize the Hindu Goddess as vulgar, as a symbol of sexual oppression of Hindu women, and as a cause of violence by upper castes.**

(source: [Myth of Hindu Sameness - By Rajiv Malhotra](#) - sulekha.com).

Testifying to the quiet continuance of an ancient tradition, Abanindranath Tagore painted his famous watercolor Mother India in 1906, as a beautiful, ascetic goddess clad in pale saffron. This dreamy image became the artistic icon for the Indian nation during the struggle for independence. Bankim Chandra's unforgettable song Vande Mataram inspired countless patriots to their martyrdom and still stirs, in everybody's heart devotion to the motherland visualized as Devi.

(source: [Devi in Indian Arts - By Utpal K. Banerjee](#) Tour India April 2001).

And more, an increasing number of both theologians and lay-persons alike are beginning to see nature as being distinctly feminine in essence – a fact that Sanatana Dharma and Yoga philosophy has known and taught for over 5000 years. The Earth is not a static dead rock floating in space that exists solely for man's economic purposes. **The Earth was not created by God to be partitioned into artificial geographic regions, over which men will then foolishly war with one another. Rather, she is a living being, a mother, a woman, a Goddess, whom we are to love, respect and nurture - as she so patiently nurtures us. In the Hindu tradition, Mother Earth even has a name: Bhudevi. In Sanatana Dharma, the dual issues of respecting the ways of nature and respecting women are ultimately inseparable concerns.**

Such respect for the feminine has not been as readily visible in the history of the Western world, unfortunately. **The documented treatment of women in the Western religions has been a truly horrendous record - to state the situation quite lightly.** The Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have not had anywhere near the same abundant degree of women in leadership throughout their respective histories. Indeed, in Abrahamic religious institutions, the norm historically has been to actively and systematically bar women from any and all positions of authority. To this day, for example, women are barred from the priesthood, and any other important position of real authority, in the Roman Catholic Church. **There are no women priests, no women monsignors, no women bishops, no women archbishops, no women cardinals, no women Popes. Thousands of wise and independent women healers and herbalists were burnt at the stake by the church during the post-Classical Dark Ages.**

(source: [Sanatana Dharma as a Liberating Force for Women - By Frank Gaetano Morales](#) - sulekha.com). For Treatment of Women in Abrahmic faith, refer to [Women in Christianity](#) and [Islam](#) and [Mormonism](#). Refer to [Women's Inferior Status in the Bible](#).

Recently Chicago radio and TV talk-show, **Tony Brown** has made remarks like "A woman in the India is never free." (refer to [Hindu-bashing Chicago Radio and TV talk show airs](#)). Perhaps Mr. Brown should read 200 verses in the Bible that denigrate women [Insults to women in the Bible](#) and [Why Women And The Bible Don't Mix](#). According to **Ed Viswanathan** author of [Am I a Hindu?](#): "It is pertinent to remember that **St. Paul** wrote in the Bible, women cannot be leaders and cannot talk in church. That is why Catholics will never have a woman priest. This country (USA) will take very many years for a woman or a black to become president, where as India already had a women prime minister." St. Paul says: "As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let

them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." [1 Corinthians 14:33-36]."

(source: [India Tribune - By Ed Viswanathan](#)).



[Annie Besant](#) (1847-1933) British Theosophist. She was an active socialist on the executive committee of the [Fabian Society](#) along with George Bernard Shaw. [George Bernard Shaw](#) regarded her the "greatest woman public speaker of her time."

She was a prominent leader of [India's freedom movement](#), member of the [Indian National Congress](#), and of the Theosophical Society. Dr. Annie Besant was a housewife, a propagator of atheism, a trade unionist, a feminist leader and a Fabian Socialist. She has observed:

**"For centuries the leaders of Christian thought spoke of women as a necessary evil, and the greatest saints of the Church are those who despise women the most."**

(source: [What Some Famous People Have Said About Christianity](#)).



[Helen Ellerbe](#) a researcher, writer, and public speaker, has observed in her book, that:

"Orthodox Christians held women responsible for all sin. As the Bible Apocrypha states: "Of woman came the beginning of sin/ And thanks to her, we all must die" Christian philosopher, [Boethius](#), who wrote in [The Consolation of Philosophy](#), "Woman is a temple built upon a sewer." The 13th century [St. Thomas Aquinas](#) suggested that God had made a mistake in creating woman: Lutherans at Wittenberg debated whether women were really human beings at all. Orthodox Christians held women responsible for all sin. As the Bible's Apocrypha states: "Of woman came the beginning of sin/ And thanks to her, we all must die." The witch hunts were an eruption of orthodox Christianity's vilification of women, "the weaker vessel" in St. Peter's words. The second century [St Clement of Alexandria](#) wrote:

"Every woman should be filled with shame by the thought that she is a woman." The Church father [Tertullian](#) also explained why women deserve their status as despised and inferior human beings." Pope John XXII formalized the persecution of witchcraft in 1320 when he authorized the Inquisition to prosecute sorcery." Witch hunt were justified in those contexts with reference to the Bible's prescription: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." (Exodus 22:18). "[The Burning Times](#)" is an English term referring to the time of the [Great European Witchhunts](#) (1450-1750). Also sometimes referred to as Women's Holocaust. Refer to [Arthur Miller](#)'s play, [The Crucible](#). Refer to [Women](#) - The Rise of the Religious Right in the Republican Party.

(source: [The Dark Side of Christian History - By Helen Ellerbe](#) Morningstar Books July 1995 ISBN 0964487349 p. 115 - 121).

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[Francois Gautier](#) (1950 - ) Paris-born has lived in India for 30 years - is a political analyst for Le Figaro, one of France's largest circulation newspaper, remarks:



"Countries such as France or the United States, who are often preaching India on "women's rights" never had a woman as their top leader (President), whereas India had Indira Gandhi ruling with an iron hand for nearly twenty years; and proportionately they have less MP's than India, which is considering earmarking 33 % of seats in Parliament for women, a revolution in human history!"

Thus in India - and it is true that it is often a paradox, as women, because of later Muslim influences, have often been relegated to the

background - **the feminine concept is a symbol of dynamic realization.** She is the eternal Mother, who is all Wisdom, all Compassion, all Force, Beauty and Perfection. It is in this way that since the dawn of times, Hindus have venerated the feminine element under its different manifestations. Mahalaxshmi, Mahakali, Mahasaraswati, Maheshwari - and even India is feminine: "**Mother India.**"

(source: [Arise O' India - By Francois Gautier](#) Har Anand publisher ISBN: 81-241-0518-9 p.11-13). For more on Francois Gautier refer to chapter [Quotes221 250](#)).

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### Veneration of Women in Vedic India

[Will Durant](#) (1885-1981) American historian says:

"Women enjoyed far greater freedom in the Vedic period than in later India. She had more to say in the choice of her mate than the forms of marriage might suggest. She appeared freely at feasts and dances, and joined with men in religious sacrifice. She could study, and like Gargi, engage in philosophical disputation. If she was left a widow there were no restrictions upon her remarriage."

(source: [Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage - By Will Durant](#) MJF Books.1935 p. 401). For more on Will Durant refer to chapter [Quotes1 20](#) and [Hindu Art](#)).

[Louis Jaccoliot](#) (1837-1890) who worked in French India as a government official and was at one time President of the Court in Chandranagar, translated numerous Vedic hymns and the celebrated author of the [Bible in India: Hindoo Origin of Hebrew and Christian Revelation](#) said:

"India of the Vedas entertained a respect for women amounting to worship; a fact which we seem little to suspect in Europe when we accuse the extreme East of having denied the dignity of woman, and of having only made her an instrument of pleasure and of passive obedience." He also said: "What! here is a civilization, which you cannot deny to be older than your own, which places the woman on a level with the man and gives her an equal place in the family and in society."

(source: [India And Her People - By Swami Abhedananda](#) - p. 253).

In religious matters, Hindus have elevated women to the level of divinity. One of the things most misconstrued about India and Hinduism is that it's a male-dominated society and religion. It is not.

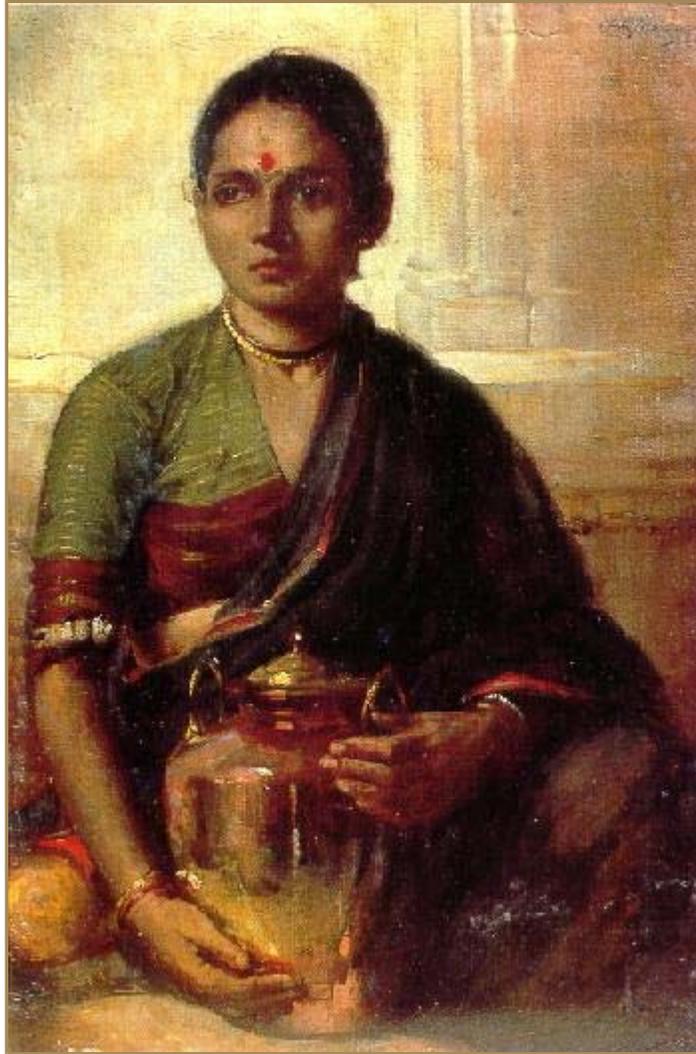
It is a culture whose only words for strength and power are feminine -- "shakti" means "power" and "strength." All male power comes from the feminine. The Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) are all powerless without their female counterparts.

Devi, in the words of [Romain Rolland](#), French Nobel laureate, professor of the history of music at the Sorbonne and thinker, is **the Great Goddess**, the invisible, the immanent, who gathers to her golden arms the multiform, multicolored - Unity. This echoes the sixth century Devi-Mahatraya prayer to her: By you this universe is borne, by you this world is created. By you it is protected, O Devi: By you it is consumed at the end. You are the Supreme Knowledge, as well as ignorance, intellect and contemplation...

Indian Historian **Romesh C Dutt** writes:

"Women were held in higher respect in India than in other ancient countries, and the Epics and old literature of India assign a higher position to them than the epics and literature of ancient Greece. Hindu women enjoyed some rights of property from the Vedic Age, took a share in social and religious rites, and were sometimes distinguished by their learning. The absolute seclusion of women in India was unknown in ancient times."

(source: [The Civilization of India - By R. C. Dutt](#) p 21-22).



*India of the Vedas entertained a respect for women amounting to worship*

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### **Women and the Divine Word**

"Profound thought was the pillow of her couch,  
Vision was the unguent for her eyes.  
Her wealth was the earth and Heaven,  
When Surya (the sun-like resplendent bride) went to meet her husband.  
Her mind was the bridal chariot,  
And sky was the canopy of that chariot.  
Orbs of light were the two steers that pulled the chariot,  
When Surya proceeded to her husband's home!"

The close connection of women with divine revelation in Hinduism may be judged from the fact that of the 407 Sages associated with the revelation of [Rig Veda](#), 21 are women.

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**Professor H. H. Wilson** says: "And it may be confidently asserted that in no nation of antiquity were women held in so much esteem as amongst the Hindus."

In Ancient India, however, they not only possessed equality of opportunities with men, but enjoyed certain rights and privileges not claimed by the male sex. The chivalrous treatment of women by Hindus is well

known to all who know anything of Hindu society.

**"Strike not even with a blossom a wife guilty of a hundred faults," says a Hindu sage,** "a sentiment so delicate," says Colonel James Tod "that Rignald-de-Born, the prince of troubadors, never uttered any more refined."

(source: [Hindu Superiority - By Har Bilas Sarda](#) Publisher: Scottish Mission Industries. 1917 p. 93).

[Louis Jaccoliot](#) (1837-1890) who worked in French India as a government official and was at one time President of the Court in Chandranagar, translated numerous Vedic hymns and the celebrated author of the [Bible in India](#) has observed:

"Besides, what antiquity wholly overlooked, but what we cannot too much admire in India, is its respect for women, almost amounting to worship. This extract from Manu (shloka 55) will not be read without surprise:

**"Women should be nurtured with every, tenderness and attention by their fathers, their brothers, their husband, and their brother-in-law, if they desire great prosperity."**

**"Where women live in affliction, the family soon becomes extinct, but when they are loved and respected, and cherished with tenderness, the family grows and prospers in all circumstances."**

**"This veneration of women produced in India an epoch of adventurous chivalry during which we find the heroes of Hindoo poems accomplishing high deeds, which reduce all the exploits of Amadis, knights of the Round Table, and the Paladins of the Middle Ages, to mere child's play."**

(source: [Bible in India: Hindoo Origin of Hebrew and Christian Revelation - By Louis Jaccoliot](#) p - 40-41 Panini Office Bahadurganj. Allahabad 1916). For more on Louis Jaccoliot refer to chapter [Qutoes61 80](#)).



The history of the most of the known civilizations show that the further back we go into antiquity, the more unsatisfactory is found to be the general position of women. **Hindu civilization is unique in this respect**, for here we find a surprising exception to the general rule. The further back we go, the more satisfactory is found to be the position of women in more spheres than one; and the field of education is most noteworthy among them. There is ample and convincing evidence to show that women were regarded as perfectly eligible for the privilege of studying the Vedic literature and performing the sacrifices enjoined in it down to about 200 B.C. **This need not surprise us, for some of the hymns of the Rig Veda are the compositions of rishnis or poetesses.** Some twenty different hymns were composed by poetesses. Visvara, Sikaata, Nivavari, Ghosha, Romasa, Lopamudra, Apala and Urvasi are the names of some of them. Man could perform the Vedic sacrifices only if he had his wife by his side.

(source: [Education in Ancient India - By A. S. Altekar](#) p. 207-209 Nand Kishore & Bros. Varanasi. 1965).

Knowledge, intelligence, rhythm and harmony are all essential ingredients for any creative activity. These aspects are personified in Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, Music and Fine Arts. Without the grace of Saraswati, or **Saraswati-Kataksham**, as it is called, Brahma cannot do a worthwhile job as the Creator. Any maintenance activity needs plenty of resources, mainly fiscal resources. So Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, is an

essential companion to Vishnu.

Shiva, as Destroyer, needs plenty of power and energy. This is what Parvati, or Durga or Shakthi as she is called, provides. It is only the Hindu tradition, which provides, even at the conceptual level, this picture of the male and female principles working together, hand in hand, as equal partners in the universe. This concept is carried further to its logical climax in the form of **Ardhanaareeswara**, formed by the fusion of Shiva and Shakthi in one body, each occupying one half of the body, denoting that one is incomplete

without the other.

Just three shlokas which are commonly recited during daily prayers are enough to show the status of the three Goddesses. A shloka on Saraswati contains the following line: Yaa Brahma Achyuta Sankara Prabhrudivihi Devaissadaa Poojithaa, which means, 'Saraswati who is always worshipped by Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and other Gods'.

**And Shakti is the fundamental strength of the feminine that infuses all life and is viewed as a goddess. Shakti is the divine feminine power found in everything.**

In Hinduism, all power, shakti, is female. So, the female represents the totality of the power, and the male is imaged as the agent of the female. Also, in Hinduism, the sun is female and the moon is male; he is born of her, dies into her, and is born of her again every month. Shiva, this great power, is the moon god. Parvati, his consort, is the sun power. And although the worship in the masculine-oriented action systems in India is directly to Shiva, it's to the goddess Kali, that the worship finally goes.

So that, actually, in India, Kali is the great divinity. ....the Hindu goddess Kali...is shown standing on the prostrate form of the god Shiva, her spouse. She brandishes the sword of death, i.e., spiritual discipline. The blood-dripping human head tells the devotee that "he that loseth his life for her sake shall find it." The gestures of "fear not" and "bestowing boon" teach that she protects her children, that the pairs of opposites of the universal agony are not what they seem, and that for one centered in eternity the phantasmagoria of temporal "goods" and "evil" is but a reflex of the mind-as the goddess, herself, though apparently trampling down the god, is actually his blissful dream.

**The Goddess  
gives birth to forms  
and kills forms.**



The Vedic pantheon includes a substantial number of female goddesses. There are beautiful hymns to Usha, the dawn, imagined as an alluring young woman:

**Usha, the dawn, is often invoked, and is the subject of some of the most beautiful hymns that are to be found in the lyrical poetry of any ancient nation.**

Beautous daughter of the sky!  
Hold they ruddy light on high,  
Grant us wealth and grant us day,  
Bring us food and morning's ray.  
White-robed goddess of the morning sky,  
Bring us light, let night's deep shadows fly.

This light, most radiant of lights, has come; this gracious one who illumines all things is born. As night is removed by the rising sun, so is this the birthplace of the dawn....We behold her, daughter of the sky, youthful, robed in white, driving forth the darkness. Princess of limitless treasure, shine down upon us throughout the day." - Rig Veda I. 113.

"We gaze upon her as she comes  
The shining daughter of the sky  
The mighty darkness she uncovers,  
And light she makes, the pleasant one that we see."

**" Dawn on us with prosperity, O Usha, daughter of the sky,  
Dawn with great glory, goodness, lady of the light, dawn thou with riches, bounteous one....  
O Usha, graciously answer our songs of praise with bounty and  
with brilliant light.....grant us a dwelling wide and free from foes....."**



*Usha! (Dawn) Hail, Beautiful daughter of the sky!*  
 (source: [The Splendour That Was 'Ind' - By K T Shah](#)).

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Of the hymns to other deities, the hymns to those to Usha, the Dawn, are especially beautiful. Some of the loveliest nature poetry of this period is dedicated to her, depicted as a young maiden who comes to mankind in the special characteristics of the dawn. Dawn brings a feeling of hope and refreshment, of entering into the activity of the universe.

Hindus hold rivers in great reverence. The rivers are female divinities, food and life bestowing mothers. As such, they are prominent among the popular divinities represented in the works of art of the classical period. The most holy of rivers, the best known and most honored, is the Ganga or Ganges. She is personified as Goddess Ganga. The river rises from an ice bed, 13,800 feet above the sea level in the Garhwal Himalayas.

One of the most important of all Vedic hymns, the so-called Devisukta, is addressed to Vak (speech, revelation), the goddess who is described as the companion of all the other gods, as the instrument that makes ritual efficacious: "I am the queen, the gatherer-up of treasures..." It is not unimportant, that Earth (prithvi) is considered female, the goddess who bears the mountains and who brings forth vegetation.

**Education for girls was regarded as quite important. While Brahmin girls were taught Vedic wisdom, girls of the Ksatriya community were taught the use of the bow and arrow. The Barhut sculptures represent skilful horsewomen in the army. Patanjali mentions the spearbearers (saktikis). Megasthenes speaks of Chandragupta's bodyguard of Amazonian women. Kautilya mentions women archers (striganaih dhanvibhih). In houses as well as in the forest Universities of India, boys and girls were educated together. Atreyi studied under Valmiki along with Lava and Kusa, the sons of Rama. Fine arts like music, dancing and painting was specially encouraged in the case of girls.**

Girls had upanayana performed for them and carried out the sandhya rites. A young daughter who has observed brahmacharya should be married to a bridegroom who is learned like her." ([Yajur Veda](#) VIII.1). **Seclusion of women was unknown in the Vedic times. Young girls led free lives and had a decisive**

**voice in the selection of their husbands.** On festive occasions and at tournaments (samana) girls appeared in all their gaiety. Women had a share in the property of the father, and they were sometimes allowed to remain unmarried, with their parents and brothers. The Atharva Veda refers to daughters remaining with their parents until the end of their lives. A part of the ancestral property is given to them as dowry, which becomes their own property, and is called **stridhana** in later writings. "Home is not what is made of wood and stone; but where a wife is, there is the home." (sanskrit: na graham kashthapasanair dayita yatra tad graham - **Nitimanjari**, 68)

(source: [Religion and Society](#) – By **S. Radhakrishnan** ASIN 8172231636 p. 140-149).



**It is significant to note that only Hindus worship God in the form of Divine Mother. In Hinduism the deities for knowledge, learning and material wealth are female and not male.** The past social inconsistencies and injustices that did not arise from Hindu scriptures, but from humans who failed to correctly incorporate the teachings of the scriptures, such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, into their social philosophy.

This concept of the spiritual equality of souls naturally influenced the status of women on an individual and social level.

**"Where women are honored there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honored no sacred rite yields rewards,"** declares **Manu Smriti (III.56)** a text on social conduct.

"Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law, who desire their own welfare." (**Manu Smriti III, 55**)

"Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers." (**Manu Smriti III, 57**).

"The houses on which female relations, not being duly honored, pronounce a curse, perish completely as if destroyed by magic." (**Manu Smriti III, 58**)

"Hence men who seek their own welfare, should always honor women on holidays and festivals with gifts of ornaments, clothes, and dainty food." (**Manu Smriti III, 59**)

In an old Shakta hymn it is said - **Striyah devah, Striyah pranah** **"Women are Devas, women are life itself."**

(source: [Bharata Shakti](#) - By **Sir John Woodroffe** p. 95).

"If a husband dies, a wife may marry another husband.

"If a husband deserts his wife, she may marry another." (Manu, chapter IX, verse 77).

(source: [Hindu Superiority](#) - By **Har Bilas Sarda** p. 95).

In the Vedas, she is invited into the family 'as a river enters the sea' and 'to rule there along with her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family. (source: [Atharva Veda](#) xiv. i. 43-44).

**Sir Monier Monier-Williams** (1860-1888) Indologist and head of the Oxford's Boden Chair, wrote: "Indian wives often possess greater influence than wives of Europeans." He is not a true Hindu who does not regard a woman's body as sacred as the temple of God. He is an outcast who touches a woman's body with irreverence, hatred or anger."

"A woman's body," says Manu the law giver, "must not be struck hard, **even with a flower, because it is**

**sacred.**" It is for this reason that the Hindus do not allow capital punishment for women.

The **idea of equality** was most forcibly expressed in the **Rig Veda** (Book 5, hymn 61. verse 8). The commentator explains this passage thus: "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 work, religious and secular." No other Scripture of the world have ever given to the woman such equality with the man as the Vedas of the Hindus. **The Old Testament, the Zend-Avesta and others, have made woman the scapegoat for all the crimes committed by man. The Old Testament, in describing the creation of woman and the fall of man, has established the idea that woman was created for man's pleasure; consequently her duty was to obey him implicitly. It makes her an instrument in the hands of Satan for the temptation and fall of the holy man with whom she was first enjoying the felicity of paradise.**

In the Vaishnava tradition, which is the most prevalent Hindu tradition today, God is worshipped as 'Vishnu' (all pervading) together with 'Shri', who is also addressed variously as 'Lakshmi'(deity of wealth, splendor, prosperity). They incarnate together, and their incarnations, namely that of Rama and Sita respectively, and so on, are also worshipped as a couple. Perhaps a good idea of the simultaneous and equal reverence that Hindus have for the feminine and the masculine aspects of Divinity may be gauged from the following quotation –**Sage Parashar** said:

"O Maitreya! Always a companion of Vishnu and the Mother of this Universe, Devi Lakshmi is eternal. Vishnu is omnipresent, so is She.  
If She is speech, Vishnu is the object of description.  
Vishnu is the Law, and She is the Policy.  
Lord Vishnu is knowledge, she is intelligence.  
He is Dharma, She is good karma.  
If Vishnu is the Creator, She is the Creation (that abides eternally with Him).  
He is the mountain, She is Earth.  
He is the virtue of contentment, She is the every satisfying.  
If Lord Vishnu is desire, She is the object of desire.  
He is the sacred Vedic ritual, she is the priestly fee..."

**It is important to note that when God is worshipped as 'Divine Couple' by Hindus, the name of the feminine typically precedes that of masculine. For instance, we say that we are worshipping 'Sita-Ram', 'Radhe-Shyam', 'Uma-Mahesh' or 'Shri Vishnu' and so on.**



The 126th hymn of the first book of the Rig Veda was revealed by a Hindu woman whose name was Romasha; the 179 hymn of the same book was by Lopamudra, another inspired Hindu woman. There are a dozen name of woman revealers of the Vedic wisdom, such as Visvavara, Shashvati, Gargi, Maitreyi, Apala, Ghosha, and Aditi, who instructed Indra, one of the Devas, in the higher knowledge of Brahman, the Universal Spirit. Everyone of them lived the ideal life of spirituality, being untouched by the things of the world. They are called in Sanskrit Brahmadinis, the speakers and revealers of Brahman.

When Sankaracharya, the great commentator of the Vedanta, was discussing this philosophy with another philosopher, a Hindu lady, well versed in all the Scriptures, was requested to act as umpire. It is the special injunction of the Vedas that no married man shall perform any religious rite, ceremony, or sacrifice without being joined in by his wife; the wife is considered a partaker and partner in the spiritual life of her husband; she is called, in Sanskrit, Sahadharmini, "spiritual helpmate." This idea is very old, as old as the Hindu nation.

In the whole religious history of the world a second Sita will not be found. Her life was unique. She is worshipped as an Incarnation of God. India is the only country where prevails a belief that God incarnates in the form of a woman as well as in that of a man. In the Mahabharata we read the account of Sulabha, the great woman Yogi, who came to the court of King Janaka and showed wonderful powers and wisdom, which she had acquired through the practice of Yoga. This shows that women were allowed to practice Yoga. As in religion, Hindu woman of ancient times enjoyed equal rights and privileges with men, so in secular matters she had equal share and equal power with them. From the Vedic age women in India have had the same right to possess property as men; they could go to the courts of justice, plead their own cases, and ask for the protection of the law. Those who have read the famous Hindu drama called Shakuntala, know that Shakuntala pleaded her own case and claimed her rights in the court of King Dushyanata. Similar instance are mentioned in the 10th book of the Rig Veda. As early as 2000 B.C. Hindu women were allowed to go to the battle fields to fight against enemies. Sarama, one of the most powerful women of her day, was sent by her husband in search of robbers. She discovered their hiding place and then destroyed them.

(source: [India And Her People - By Swami Abhedananda](#) - p. 255 -267).

Please refer to [Women In Hindu Dharma - A Tribute. A brief compilation done by Vishal Agarwal for the Hindu Students Society of the University of Minnesota.](#)

Women were honored in ancient India. That is why when even today when Hindus refer to the avatar Rama and his wife Sita, as **Sita-Ram** and **Radha-Krishna**.

Women must be honored and adorned by their father, brothers, husbands, and brother-in-law who desire great good fortune. Where women, verily are honored, there the gods rejoice; where, however, they are not honored, there all sacred rites prove fruitless. Where the female relations live in grief -- that family soon perishes completely; where, however, they do not suffer from any grievance -- that family always prospers. ..

Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, her sons protect her in old age. The father who does not give away his daughter in marriage at the proper time is censurable; censurable is the husband who does not approach his wife in due season; and after the husband is dead, the son, verily is censurable, who does not protect his mother. Even against the slightest provocations should women be particularly guarded; for unguarded they would bring grief to both the families.

Regarding this as the highest dharma of all four castes, husbands, though weak, must strive to protect their wives. His own offspring, character, family, self, and dharma does one protect when he protects his wife scrupulously. . . The husband should engage his wife in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in cleanliness, in dharma, in cooking food for the family, and in looking after the necessities of the household. . . .

Women destined to bear children, enjoying great good fortune, deserving of worship, the resplendent lights of homes on the one hand and divinities of good luck who reside in the houses on the other -- between these there is no difference whatsoever.



*The Taittiriya Upanishad teaches, "Matridevo bhava" - "Let your mother be god to you."*

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Motherhood is considered the greatest glory of Hindu women. The [Taittiriya Upanishad](#) teaches, **"Matridevo bhava" - "Let your mother be god to you."**

Hindu tradition recognizes mother and motherhood as even superior to heaven. The epic [Mahabharata](#) says, "While a father is superior to ten Brahmin priests well-versed in the Vedas, a mother is superior to

ten such fathers, or the entire world."

Hinduism offers some intriguing and unique examples of strong women in the form of Goddesses. Two thousand years ago **Saint Tiruvalluvar** observed: "What does a man lack if his wife is worthy? And what does he possess if she is lacking worth?" There is more respect in the East for women and for their role in society.

**To instill such high ideals in humankind, Indian ancestors created a plethora of goddesses who enjoyed equal status with their husbands. The concept of *Ardhanareeshwarar*, where God is depicted as half-man and half-woman, is a concrete example to support this argument. In many philosophical texts God is referred to a *Tat*, meaning *It* and that God is beyond gender.** And, one would find a comparable Goddess for each God. Further, we know for a fact that ancient India was permissive; women could have multiple husbands, **widows could remarry**, divorce was permitted for incompatibility or when estranged.

The article, Vedic Sociology by **Dr. B. G. Sudha** in the Chinmaya Mission publication **Our Vedic Heritage** throws considerable light on this aspect. To quote Dr. Sudha:

"There are a number of women who are considered as the seers of *mantras*, like Saraswati, Goshaa, Vishvavaaraa, Apaalaa, Urvashi, Indrani, and so on. It is said that Dhrutavati, the daughter of Rishi Shandilya, spent her whole life in the study of the Vedas. Likewise, another girl, Srutavati, the daughter of Sage Bharadvaja, also devoted her life to the study of the Vedas.

The names of Gargi and Maitreyi are too well known as great scholars of Vedic lore... We have statements like, "This hymn must be recited by the wife," in the *Srutasutras*, which clearly endorse the eligibility of women to the study of the *Vedas*. The *Ramayana* describes the performance of Sandhya and Havana by Kausalya and Seetha. The wife was a regular participant in the sacrificial offerings of the husband. (**Rig Veda** I-122-2; 131-3; III-53-4-6; X-86-10 etc). **Gobhila Gruhya Sutras** state that the wife should be educated to be able to take part in sacrifices. (*Gobhila Gr. S. I-3*)."



*Yagnavalkya with Gargi and Maitreyi*

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Woman in the role of wife occupies a position of pre-eminence in ancient Hindu tradition. The Hindus from the Vedic times believed in dual worship, Radha with Lord Krishna and Sita with Lord Rama. In this dual worship, the names of Radha and Sita get precedence over the names of their companions Krishna and Rama. This happens to be true of Goddess Saraswati and her husband Lord Brahma. Lord Shiva appears united in a single body with Shakti, his spouse; he at the right side and she at the left, in a manifestation known as *Ardhnarishwar*, the half-man, half-woman incarnation of God. Each of the three principal Gods — Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Protector and Shiva the Destroyer — in the Hindu pantheon, is accompanied by a Shakti, which is both his female double and his power of manifestation.

The **Rig Veda** too places woman on a high pedestal of sublimity: **Yatr nariyastu poojayante ramante tatr devah**, where woman is worshipped, Gods preside there.

**Women, who once enjoyed an honored position and are found in the Upanishads conversing freely with men upon the highest philosophical topics**, had become virtual slaves in the joint family. With the expansion of Vedic religion in Northern India and possibly also under the impacts of threats from the outside, a definition of the place of women in the Aryan society took place, which amounted to increasing restriction of their independence and a clear preponderance of patriarchal rule.

What has been described so far as "Vedic law for women" was largely the tradition followed in North India, the Aryavarta, the Hindu heartland, South India, and to some extent also Bengal and Assam, preserved elements of pre-Vedic matriarchy. In certain South Indian castes the line of inheritance is from mother to (eldest) daughter, and marriage is a "visiting" relationship. Naturally, women were more independence and free in every respect.



Ladies did not lead a secluded life like that of their descendants in later times. Several hymns of the Rig Veda were composed by female Rishis (sages). Young ladies of the time had a voice in their marriage. "the woman who is of gentle birth and of graceful form," so runs a verse in the Rig Veda, "selects among many of her loved one as her husband." Numerous case of Svayamvara, that is, of ladies selecting their own husbands,

are mentioned in the Mahabharata and other works. There is sufficient evidence to show, that **widow marriage was allowed**, and that the right of Sati was unknown in the Vedic period.

"Rise up woman," so runs a text of the **Rig Veda** (X, 18.8) "thou art lying by one whose life is gone, come to the world of the living, away from thy husband, and become the wife of him who holds thy hand and is willing to marry thee."

(source: **Civilization Through The Ages - By P. N. Bose** p. 126-127).

Similar views are echoed by **Radha Kumud Mukherjee** in his article **Women In Ancient India** from the book **Women Of India** (Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi-110001, 1990). He says:

"Every hymn of the **Rigveda** is attributed to a rishi. Though the majority of these hymns were the work of male rishis, the Rigveda contains hymns which were revealed by women seers also. The latter were called **rishikas and brahmavadinis...**"

The **brahmavadinis** were products of educational discipline of **brahmacharya**, for which women were also eligible. The *Rigveda* (v, 7, 9) refers to young maidens completing their education as **brahmacharinis** and then gaining husbands... Rig Veda. iii (55, 16) mentions unmarried learned and young daughters who should be married to learned bridegrooms.

(For more on women's education refer to chapter on **Education in Ancient India**).

**Sir John Woodroffe aka Arthur Avalon** (1865-1936) the well known scholar, Advocate-General of Bengal and sometime Legal Member of the Government of India. He served with competence for eighteen years and in 1915 officiated as Chief Justice. has written:

"Woman was to the Hebrews an inferior being. As **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** says in **Woman's Bible** "The canon and civil law, Church and State alike taught that woman was made after man, of man and for man, an inferior

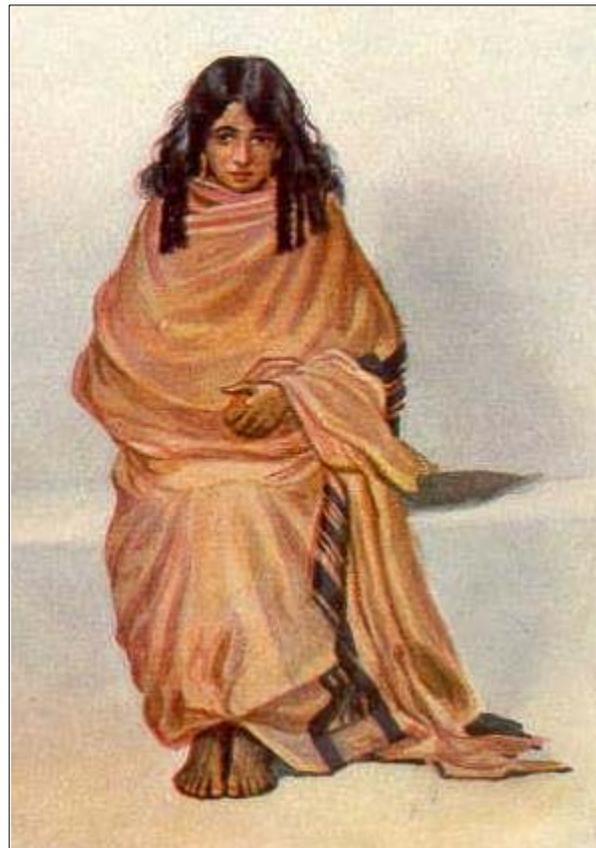
being, subject to man.”

**St Paul and the Christian fathers approved her inferiority and subjection. Their disdain for her and their contempt for marriage are known. St. Augustine asks himself why She was created at all. She is the “root of all evil” created from a rib of Adam’s body not from a part of his soul.”**

In the feudal legislation of Europe woman sank lower and lower. As [William Edward Hartpole Lecky](#) says “**woman sank to a lower legal position than she had ever occupied under Paganism.** [Ernest Legouve](#) says ([Histoire Morale des Femmes](#) p. 183) that “under the feudal regime conjugal morals return to brutality.” Mrs. Cady Stanton gives a summary ([History of Women’s Suffrage](#) iii, p. 290) of the English Common Law which, basing itself on the alleged inferiority of woman, deprived her of the control of her person and property and made her morally and economically dependent on her husband.

**On the contrary many beautiful sayings are found which give honor to woman, marriage, and motherhood, and Hindu law recognizes her rights of property ([Stridhan](#)). In the [Shakta Tantra](#) in particular, woman is regarded as a Divinity, as the earthy representation of the great Mother of all. Over and over again do they prescribe that no injury be done her, that no ill-word even be spoken to her, but that she should be honored always. The history of India tells of many women great in learning, administration, and battle-prowess from Gargi, Maitreyi onwards, and there were many more doubtless who are unknown to fame. "**

(source: [Is India Civilized - Essays on Indian Culture - By Sir John Woodroffe](#) Ganesh & Co. Publishers 1922 p. 195 - 202).





Indian Women - Paintings by Rao Bahadur M V Dhurandhar

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It is, therefore, no wonder that the wife enjoyed with her husband full religious rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with him. In fact, the performance of such ceremonies would be invalid without the wife joining her husband as his full partner... Some grammatical passages show that women had other careers open to them apart from a mere literary career.

The great grammarian, **Patanjali**, author of that monumental masterpiece known as **Mahabhashya**, uses the formation **sakthiki** to indicate a female bearer of a spear [iv, 1, 15(6)]. In this connection, we are reminded of the Amazonian bodyguard of armed women employed in his palace by the Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, as described by Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador to his Court. Similarly, Kautilya in his *Arthasastra*, which is also taken to be a document of Mauryan history, refers to women soldiers armed with bows and arrows... Buddhism kept up the traditions of Brahmanical religion in according to womanhood an honoured place in social life. Women were made eligible for admission to what was known as the *Bhikshuni-Sangha*, the Order of Nuns, which opened to them avenues of culture and social service and ample opportunities for public life.

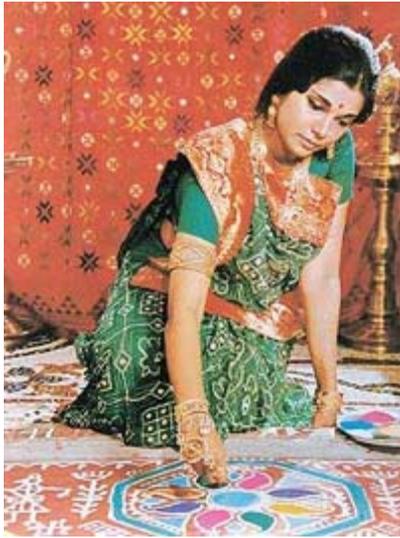
(source: **Women in the Hindu Tradition By S. G. V. Mani**  
<http://www.sulekha.com/article/esc.asp?cid=111278>).

**In Vedic times, Hinduism does not encourage homosexuality nor condemn it very badly. There is no condemnation of homosexuality in Hindu scripture.** Specific mention is made in the Kama Sutra (4th century AD). **Lesbians are referred to as svarini, women known for their independence, who refuse husbands and have relations in their own homes .**

(source: **Hinduism** - Lesbian/Gay switchboard. **Note:** During the British Raj, homosexuality was considered a sin. The British passed the law of 1860, which taken to be an improvement for Great Britain, which had

previously punished homosexuality by execution and torture, **but for India it was a great step backward since Hindu culture had never previously criminalized homosexuality**).

Padmini Sengupta has written in her book, [Everyday Life in Ancient India](#):



"The position of women in ancient India was free and emancipated, and women were well educated and respected members of society. A wife shared all her husband's privileges and was his companion and help-mate in his activities." The position of women was far better than in other countries of ancient times. How else could it be in a culture which placed the Mother before the Father in priority for reverence? **Matr devo bhava** - was the first Upanisadic exhortation to the young. So far as we know, Hinduism is the only religion whose symbolism places the Feminine on a par with the Masculine in the profound concept of Siva-Sakti culminating in the image of Ardharnari-Isvara. The Hindu has honored his country as his Motherland - Bharat Mata and his nationalism has grown up from the seed Mantra - Vande Mataram.

(source: [Hindu Culture - By K. Guru Dutt](#) (with a Foreword by Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar p. 241-242).

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### Anti-native reporting in media and dowry deaths

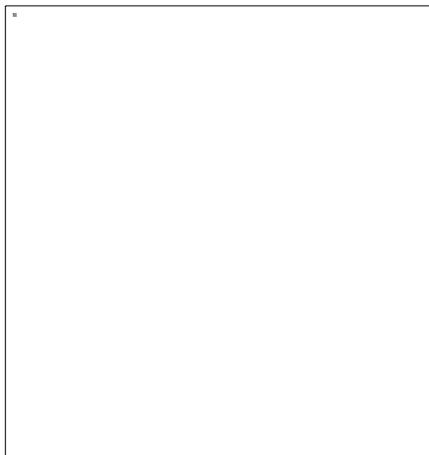
[Koenraad Elst](#) (1959 - ) Dutch historian writes: "This anti-native and pro-westernizing bias is quite systematically present in India reporting. It generally takes the form of gross misrepresentation of Indian culture. For example, time and again those correspondents write to the homefront that there are "still" many dowry deaths. Now everybody knows that dowry deaths typically occur in the westernized circles. (the dowries concerned are seldom the traditional jewels, but mostly videomachines, fridge etc). they are not a traditional phenomenon that "still" exists, but are a typical case of perverting and poisoning of a native custom by the invasion of Western consumerism"

(source: [Ayodhya and After - By Koenraad Elst](#) Voice of India Issues Before Hindu Society SKU: INBK2650 p. 82).

Dowry-deaths in India are of high interest in the West **whereas spousal-killings in America are not given the same emphasis**, despite that fact that statistically the percentage of American women victims of spousal killings are at least as high as the percentage of Indian women victimized by dowry-deaths. The language of 'dowry-deaths' is so India-specific, to begin with, that it precludes the equivalent American phenomenon to be within range of the radar. Once thus framed, the issue of dowry-deaths then gets measured, studied at various levels of scholarship, and gets a life of its own. America's equivalent problems get exempted from examination, especially as the scholars place themselves on a platform above the glass ceiling.

(source: [Is There an American Caste System? - Rajiv Malhotra](#) - sulekha.com).

### Conclusion



**In ancient India, Hindu women did not veil their faces and they enjoyed considerable amount of freedom in society. But repeated attacks on Hindu India by foreigners through centuries changed the situation.** (For more on foreign invasions, please refer to chapter [History of Hinduism](#)).

During such aggressions, and also when India was under foreign occupation, the honor and chastity of women often became the casualties. There have been numerous cases when Hindu women killed themselves rather than yield to indignities inflicted by the aggressors. As a result, Hindu society, became more protective about its women. The freedom of women was curtailed. To protect themselves Hindu women started to cover their faces with veils and started to stay home. Their participation in social events was greatly

restricted.

(source: [The Essentials of Hinduism: A Comprehensive Overview of the World's Oldest Religion - By Swami](#)

[Bhaskarananda](#) p. 52-53).

"The killing of men and enslaving of women and children was standard practice in Islamic conquests. Thus when Mohammed bin Qasim conquered the lower Indus basin in AD 721, he entered Multan and, according to the Chach-Nama, "6,000 warriors were put to death, and all their relations and dependents were taken as slaves." **This is why Rajput women took to immolating themselves en masse to save their honor in the face of the imminent entry of victorious Muslim armies**, eg. 8,000 women immolated themselves during Akbar's capture of Chittorgarh in 1568 (whereas this most enlightend among Muslim rulers also killed 30,000 non-combattants).

(source: [The Saffron Swastika - By Koenraad Elst](#) Voice of India ISBN 8185990697 p. 824).

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### **Sati, the much-highlighted face of Hinduism (excerpts)**

**By Koenraad Elst**

Secularist make the predictable allegation that Hinduism as represented by Manu is anti-woman. Actually on reading this text one would realize that neither dowry (dahe) nor self-immolation of widows (sati) figure in it. Fredrick Nietzsche praised Manu's affection for woman.

Compare study of Indo-European cultures suggests that the incidence of sati is inversely proportional to the status of women: from very common among the Celts ("massively!" says Bernard Sergent in his book - Les Indo-Europeens), where women were rather independent, to a mere epic memory among the Greeks, where women were men's property and not considered to have much 'honor' to uphold by means of heroics.

**Ashish Nandy**, an Indian Christian, and author of the book [Sati, The Blessing and The Curse](#), recommends **Ananda Coomaraswamy** spirited defence of sati: "to shallow, pompous progressives and feminists who believe that one ought only to immolate oneself for secular causes like revolution and nationalism, not for old fashioned religious or cultural causes."

Nandy informs us: "The last "large-scale epidemic of sati" (in Westernizing Bengal of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, where new **British inheritance laws** turned a surviving daughter-in-law into a pecuniary rival) was a "logical culmination of rational, secular cost-calculation against the background in traditional values....if anything, modern values, not traditional ones, were to blame." Indeed, "the epidemic was a feature of exactly the part of the society – the Westernizing, culturally uprooted, urban and semi-urban Indians – that was most dismissive towards the rest of society as a bastion of superstition and activism."

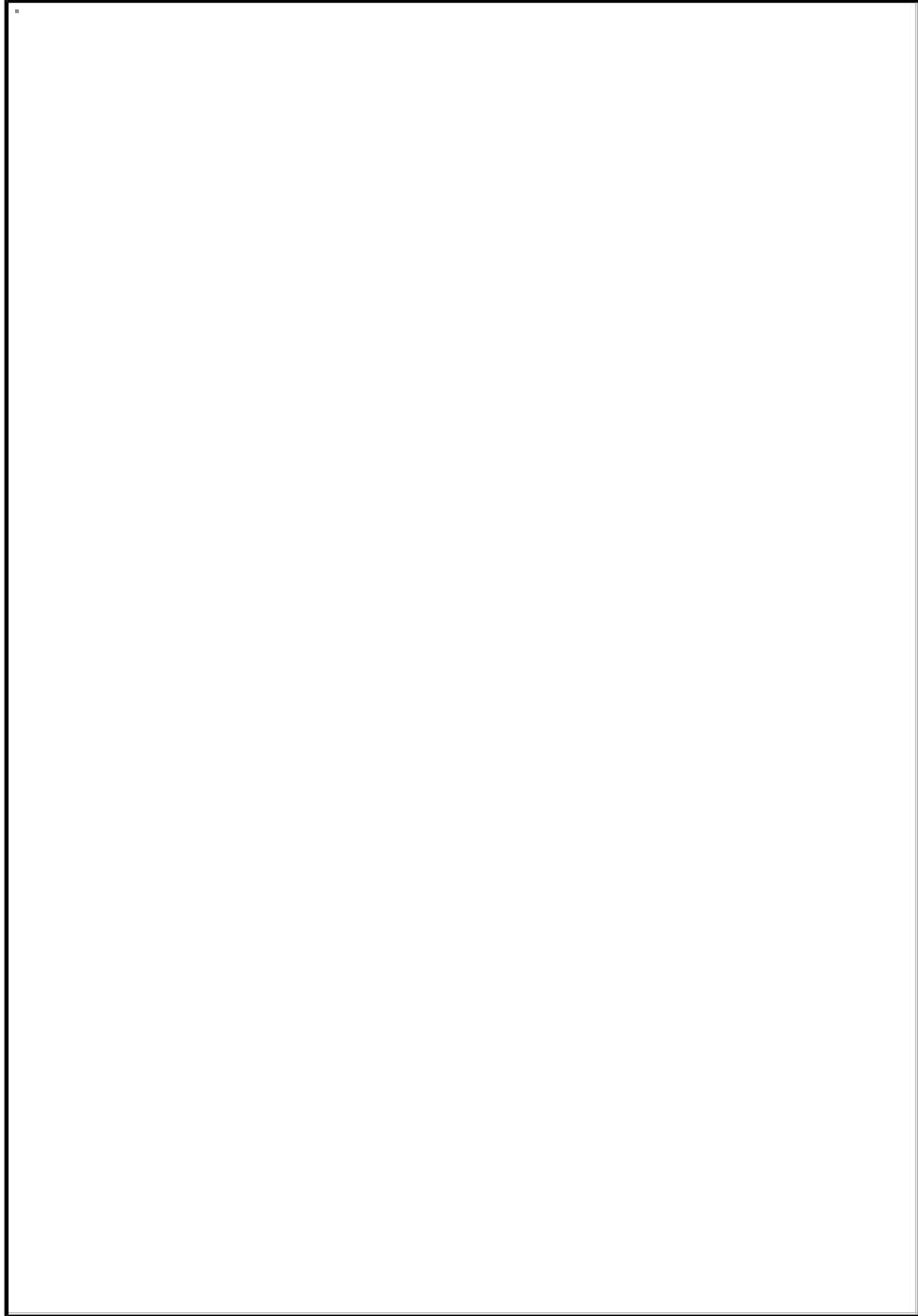
**This is even more true of the dowry murder plague, a typically modern, consumerist phenomenon, historically unconnected to sati.**

The Christian scholar, **J. N. Farquhar** wrote in his book [Modern Religious Movements](#) in 1914, that "**the evil seems to be largely a result of the progress of Western education.**" He adds an example of a girl in Calcutta who committed suicide "to release her father from the impasse." The first dowry deaths in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were indeed suicides by daughters who tried to spare their fathers the huge debts, and this was in the most anglicized communities.

However, the **Indo- Anglican elite** has achieved complete success in passing on its self-interested version of the facts to the outside world, as is evident in numerous anti-Hindu allegations made in passing in articles..."

Ashish Nandy finds it "remarkable how, since the Deorala event, there has been a revival of efforts by

Anglophone, psychologically uprooted Indians – exactly the sector that produced the last epidemic of sati in eastern India – to vend sati as primarily a stigma of Hinduism, not as one of the by-products of the entry of modern values in India.” The commotion about the Deorala sati was just one expression of the colonial mind-set of the ruling class: “At one time, most such efforts were closely associated with attempts to justify the British rule in India. Now, as a cultural projection of a new form of internal colonialism, these efforts are primarily **associated with the rootless, Westernized Indian haute bourgeoisie who control the media, either directly or through the state.**”



*Village beauty - N C Mehta's book - Studies in Indian Painting.*

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The abysmally negative image which Hinduism has acquired has a lot to do with Nandy's following observation:

**“Colonialism has to try to discredit the cultures of the colonized to validate the colonial or quasi-colonial**

**social relationships that it itself has created.** Culture can be resistance, and those seeking hegemony in the realm of political economy cannot afford to leave that area alone. The self-declared social engineers in the Third World and their support base within the tertiary sector of that world know this fully."

**No Hindu revivalist could have said it better. ...**

(source: [Decolonising The Hindu Mind - Ideological Development of Hindu Revivalism - By Koenraad Elst](#) Publisher: Rupa ISBN: 81-7167-519-0 p.513-518). For more on Koenraad Elst refer to chapter [Quotes201 220](#) and to [Universal Rights and Cultural Relativism: Hinduism and Islam Deconstructed - By Catherine E. Polisi](#) - Bologna Center Journal of International Affairs).



**Asymmetric depiction of Hinduism in US academia/texts books**

**Madhu Kishwar** (editor of [Manushi](#), one of India's foremost feminist journals) writes of the practice of widow burning

**"There is absolutely no evidence that any of our vast array of religious texts sanctified such murders as sati."**

(source: [Deadly Laws and Zealous Reformers: The Conflicting Interpretations and Politics of Sati - By Madhu Kishwar](#),)

As **Yvette Rosser** has said: Defining Hindu practices through a discussion of sati is no more accurate than defining Christianity by delving at length into the "Burning Times" in Medieval Europe when as many as nine million women, and even children, were burned at the stake as witches through the encouragement and official approval of the Christian Church. The burning of women does not define Christianity any more than the burning of widows defines Hinduism – both are long discarded practices of the past."

(source: [The Clandestine Curriculum in the Classroom -By Yvette C. Rosser](#) - Education About Asia, Vol. 6:3 (Winter 2001).

(source: [Women and Hinduism in U.S. Textbooks - by Dave Freedholm - sulekha.com](#)).

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Self burning of widows was not sanctioned by the Vedic religion, but was due to other causes. Some say that, when the Mohmmadens conquered India, **they treated the widows of the soldiers so brutally that the women preferred death**, and voluntarily sought it. It is often said that the "Christian government" has suppressed Suttee; but the truth is, that the initiatives in this direction was taken by the noble Hindu, Rajah Ram Mohan Roy, who was, however, obliged to secure the aid of the British Government in enforcing the ideas, because India was a subject nation. The educated classed among the Hindus had strongly protested against this inhuman custom, but as it could not be done without the official help, appeal was made to the then Viceroy, Lord Bentinck, a law against Suttee was passed.

**Sir Monier Monier-Williams** (1860-1888) Indologist and head of the Oxford's Boden Chair says:



"Perhaps the most important point to which Raja Ram Mohan Roy awakened was **the absence of all Vedic sanction for the self-immolation of widows** (Suttee). It was principally his vehement denunciation of this practice, and the agitation against it set on foot by him, which ultimately led to the abolition of Sati throughout British India in 1819."

(source: [India And Her People - By Swami Abhedananda](#) - p. 280).

The eighth richa (X 18.8) specifically commands a Hindu widow to return



alive to her home. **H. H. Wilson** translates: "Rise woman, and go to the world of living beings; come, this man near whom you sleep is lifeless; you have enjoyed this state of being the wife of your husband, the suitor who took you by the hand." Here again, it is confirmed that X 18.8 actually commands a Hindu widow to return to the world of living beings. Also, this very richa confers upon her full right on the house of her deceased husband (apne putradi aur ghar).

**Those who misinterpret the Rigveda to say that it sanctions sati do this mischief by misspelling the last word of richa X 18. 7 as "yomiagne." The last word of this richa is actually "yomiagre." Thus, there is no richa in Rigveda calling for widow burning. Veda, Ramayana and Gita are the three supreme scriptures of Hindus.**

All others (like Brahmanas, Upanishads, Puranas, Dharmashastras, Sutras, etc. ) are just commentaries, explanatory notes or stories written by individuals. As commentaries written on the Constitution of India cannot override the articles of the Constitution of India, similarly, commentaries or explanations on Vedas by individuals cannot supersede richas of Vedas or the Ramayana or Gita. In the Ramayana, everyone knows that after the death of King Dasharatha, his wives were never asked to step into the pyre of Dasharatha. Rather, they lived in family with full honour and Ram always bowed his head before his widowed mothers with full respect. In the Mahabharata, Kunti, mother of the Pandavas did not commit sati. Thus, there is no command in the Ramayana or in Gita to commit sati.

Over the centuries, relatives have been murdering relatives for property. This will continue in the coming centuries too. Greed is human nature. **If greedy people incite a widow to commit suicide on the pyre of her husband, let us not say or believe that widow burning is sanctified by the Rigveda or by Hinduism.** Richa X 18.3 commands a Hindu widow to separate from the dead and richa X 10.8 commands her to return alive to her children and her home. For their own empowerment, Hindu women should to remember the seven richas viz (II 17.7), (III 31.2) (X 18.3) (X 18.8) (X 40.2) and X 40.8) to assert and claim their status and rights.

(source: [The Rigveda: Widows don't have to burn - By O. P. Gupta](#) - The Asian Age October 23, 2002 Mr. Gupta is ambassador of India to Finland).

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**Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime** - How British colonialism created the economic and social climate in India that give rise to various social ills.

**James Peggs** (1739-1850) a man of cloth and a missionary, wrote:

"The doctrines of the Hindoo religion have been singularly careful to protect the female sex and infants from violence; and its is unlawful to put a woman to death for any offense whatever...."Let all the four castes of Brahmin, Khetry (Khatri, the diminutive of Kshatriya) Bys (Vaishya), and Sooder (Shudra), know that the killing of a woman is the greatest of crimes."

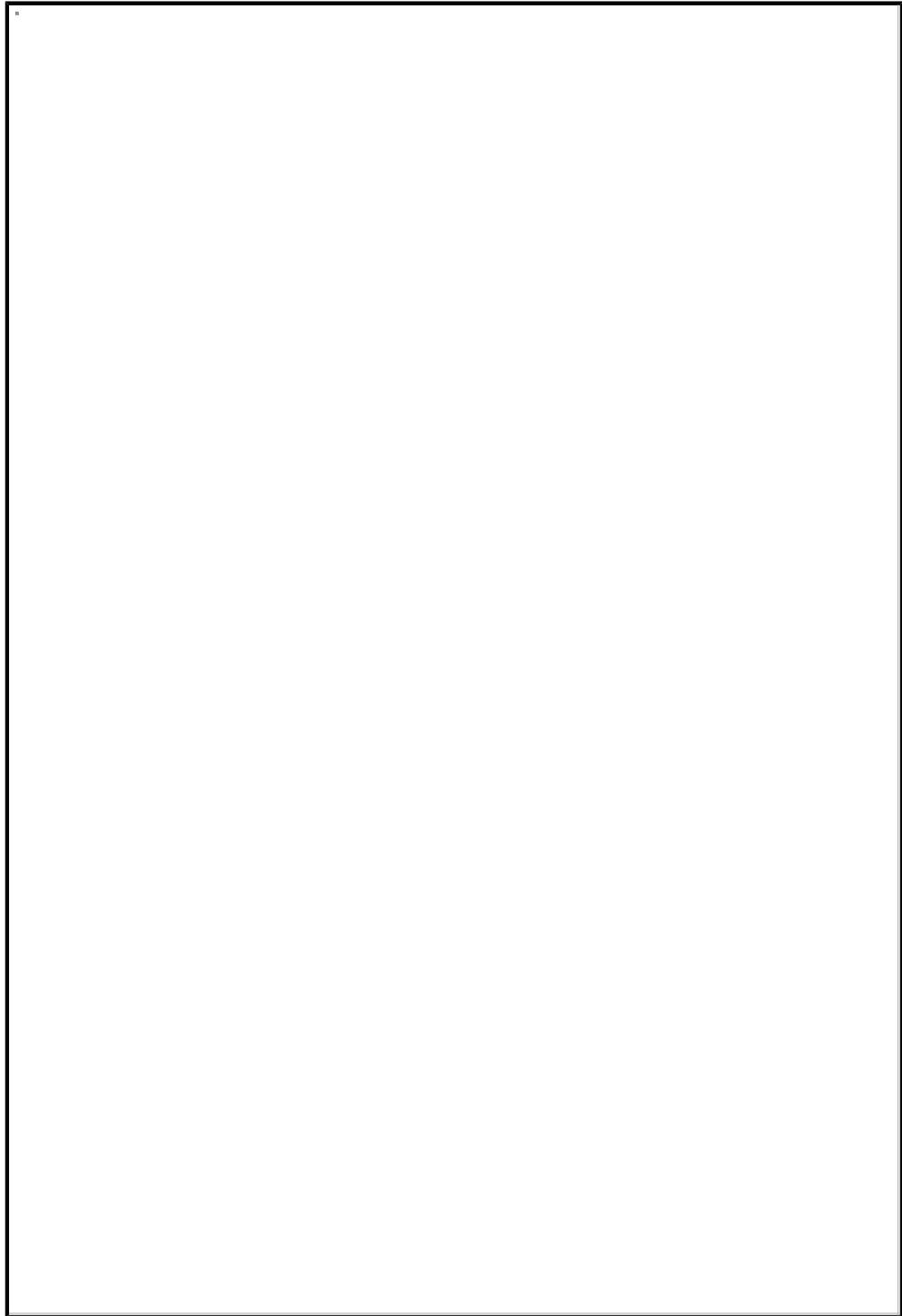
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The Hindu custom of dowry has long been blamed for the murder of wives and female infants in India. In this highly provocative book, Veena Oldenburg argues that these killings are neither about dowry nor reflective of an Indian culture or caste system that encourages violence against women. Rather, such killings can be traced directly to the influences of the British colonial era.

**In the Pre-Colonial period, dowry was an institution managed by women, for women, to enable them to establish their status and have recourse in an emergency.** As a consequence of the massive economic and societal upheaval brought on by British rule, women's entitlements to the precious resources obtained from land were erased and their control of the system diminished, ultimately resulting in a devaluing of their very lives.

Taking us on a journey into the colonial Punjab, she skillfully follows the paper trail left by British bureaucrats to indict them for interpreting these crimes against women as the inherent defects of Hindu caste culture. **The British, publicized their "civilizing mission" and blamed the caste system in order to cover up the**

devastation their own agrarian policies had wrought on the Indian countryside.



*Ablutions of a young woman*

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*The British, publicized their "civilizing mission" and blamed the caste system in order to cover up the devastation their own agrarian policies had wrought on the Indian countryside.*

An East India Company officer made the earliest causal link between the dowry system and violence against girls in 1789, when he discovered female infanticide. The finding added powerfully to the company's description of the exotic "cruel" and "barbaric" culture encountered in the process of its conquest of this strange land. On the backs of such discoveries rode the moral imperative of imperialism – its famous "civilizing mission." **This served**

as the most compelling justification, both to the company itself and to a critical public in England, for the conquest, pillage, and domination of Indian peoples and the destruction of their local cultures. It was in this context too, that Hindu women's apparently degraded position in an allegedly rigid caste system became a central preoccupation of colonial rulers and the subject of endless debates, reform rhetoric, and legislation.

In 1813 the "civilizing mission" received an additional fillip when the British Parliament passed the India Act of 1813 to admit missionaries, who had hitherto been excluded from tinkering with the most exquisite brand of heathenism in the wild Indian empire because of their politically volatile denunciation of Hindu beliefs and practices. Christian missionaries added greatly to the self-righteousness bombast of this mission. **James Peggs**, a man of the cloth, made an exhaustive, **lurid, and cliché-laden** compendium on the entire gamut of "Hindoo social evils." His text was cobbled from pertinent Parliament Papers and it first appeared in 1826 as **Suttee Cry to Britain**, followed by a thicker version with female infanticide added on and tellingly called **India's Cries to British Humanity**. In 1832 this pamphlet was fattened from 110 pages to 518, and renamed **Cries of Agony: An Historical Account of Suttee, Infanticide, Ghat Murders, and Slavery in India**. The Coventry School for the Abolition of Human Sacrifice in India published an abridgement of the original pamphlet and distributed free copies. It remains in print to this day! It was a great victory for **William Wilberforce** and fellow Evangelicals in England to expand their operations to the Indian theatre. The prime target for reform was the generally hapless "Hindoo woman."

These masterly representation of a distant and dangerous world plagued with "Hindoo barbarities, as they were increasingly called (**despite the failure to find them sanctioned in any "Hindoo" texts**) rendered India the ideal site for continued and expanding colonial control.

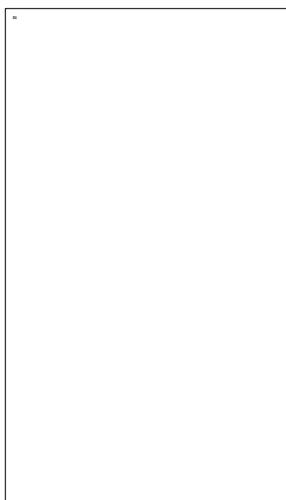
(source: **[Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime - By Veena Talwar Oldenburg](#)** 42 - 46. For more refer to chapter on **[European Imperialism](#)**).

(**Note: During the British Raj, homosexuality was considered a sin.** The British passed the **law of 1860 - Section 377** of the Indian Penal Code, which taken to be an improvement for Great Britain, which had previously punished homosexuality by execution and torture, **but for India it was a great step backward since Hindu culture had never previously criminalized homosexuality.** For more refer to chapter on **[thoughts](#)**).

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### **Dowry And Dowry Demands: What's And How's - By Beloo Mehra**

For a while, we also goofed around with the idea of doing what the African-American feminist author **Bell Hooks** refers to as an "**oppositional gaze**" by coming up with suggestions for 'informative' documentaries that **Indian cable TV networks could produce on the various societal problems in the west.** One member wrote:



**"Why peep into other people's lives when your own is an unmitigated mess?** Is it because you feel that you can get away with it because no one will be peeping into your own house? In my opinion, there is something indecent about 60 minutes poking their nose into someone else's business when they should have been more concerned about the 100 or more date rapes that would have happened just over the duration of this one single show."

One member suggested that such "internationalization of internal debates is highly uni-dimensional and is equal to pathologizing India."

As horrible as a dowry-related crime is, it is no different from any other domestic violence against women, which is a universal social problem. So, while I do not deny the existence of dowry-related crime, I argue that a whole body of academic literature focusing on studying this problem in isolation from the issue of the universal problem of domestic violence has a very high potential of making it a problem closely linked with Indian culture, which is not only bad scholarship but also very dangerous. **One possible rationale for organizing such "international" conferences and producing such journalistic reports like the one on CBS ([For](#)**

**[Love Of Money - By Christiane Amanpour](#)) could be that, by focusing on issues such as violence against "third world women", the western media outlets and these academics help push the issue of violence against women in the west in the background.** This only makes the situation worse for victims of violence in their own countries.

In her book [Dislocating Cultures](#), Uma Narayan writes:

"Most Americans that I have talked to about dowry-murder know that many **US women are killed by their partners as a result of domestic violence. Given that many members of the US public know that domestic violence has fatal forms, why is it that they make no connection between the "foreign" phenomenon of dowry-murder and the "familiar" phenomenon of domestic violence?**

A friend who participated in my search for the numbers of US women annually killed by their partners commented that she was surprised at the difference between the "disappearing dead women" in US accounts of domestic violence and the "spectacular visibility" of women murdered over dowry in India" (p. 89).

**Gandhiji, Vivekananda etc. reacted sharply against external criticism but both stood firmly for internal change."**

(source: [Dowry And Dowry Demands: What's And How's - By Beloo Mehra - sulekha.com](#)).

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## Women as Purohita - priests

The concept of a female priest is not a new one.

Nutan Vimal Motilal is also a practising priest and points out that women priests were written about in the sacred Vedic texts.

### Hindu temples have also requisitioned women.

"They were more honest, sincere and the clarity with which they performed the ceremony was also refreshing," he says.



Both Sunitee Gadgil, who has been practising for 10 years, and Nutan Vimal Motilal, who has been practising for two, say they have never had a negative experience.

With an increasing number of men of religion taking up other more lucrative vocations, women are now stepping into the gap to actually outnumber male priests in Maharashtra.

Dr. V L. Manjul, a research scholar and chief librarian at Pune's Bhandarkar Oriental Re. search Institute, says "between 1986 and '96, about 6,000 women

have been trained as purohits (priests) and today, lady purohits outnumber male ones."

**In the Vedic period**, says Dr. Manjul, "we come across female scholars like **Ghosha, Lopamudra, Romasha and Indrani. In the Upanishadic period, names of women philosophers like Sulabha, Maitreyi, Gargi are encountered."**

**This tradition is exemplified in a verse from "Bhihadaranyakopanishad," which reads "atha ya icched duhita me pandita jayeta," (a well-to-do Political instability and successive foreign invasions further made it difficult for women to take up formal learning, which made it impossible for her to undertake Vedic studies and conduct Vedic rites.**

(source: [BBC - April 26 '2001 and The Hindu February 5 1997](#)).

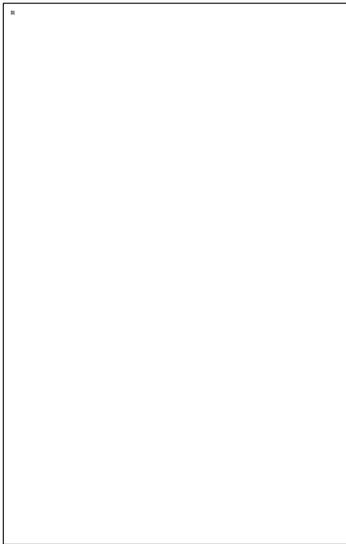
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## Famous Women of Ancient and Modern India

<a href="#">Gargi</a>	<a href="#">Mirabai</a>	<a href="#">Rani Avantibai</a>	<a href="#">Bhagini Nivedita</a>
<a href="#">Sita</a>	<a href="#">Durgavati</a>	<a href="#">Jalkari Bai</a>	<a href="#">Mother Mirra</a>
<a href="#">Savitri</a>	<a href="#">Ahilya Bai Holkar</a>	<a href="#">Shakuntala Devi</a>	<a href="#">Lalleshwari</a>
<a href="#">Draupadi</a>	<a href="#">Kittur Rani Chennamma</a>	<a href="#">Sarojini Naidu</a>	
<a href="#">Akka Mahadevi</a>	<a href="#">Rani of Jhansi</a>	<a href="#">Sarada Devi</a>	

### 1. Gargi



Gargi, the wise and learned daughter of *Rishi* (sage) *Vachaknu*, was known as *Brahmavadini* because of her having the knowledge of *Brahma-vidya*. She participated in a debate with the knower of *Brahma*, *Yajnavalkya* in the *Yajnasala* ( place for sacrifices ) of *King Janaka*. We get in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* a dialogue between *Gargi* and *Yajnavalkya*. Thus it is evident that in ancient India, women used to obtain knowledge of many sciences and disciplines. They also used to participate in public functions and take part in intellectual debates. There used to be no ban of any sort in the field of knowledge, this is established very clearly from the account of *Gargi's* life.

A wife of *Yajnavalkya*, plays a major role in a section of the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, is the first Indian woman philosopher. One of the most interesting discussions of this absolute principle is given in the form of a dialogue between *Gargi*, and her husband *Yajnavalkya*, a great sage. Although in the preceding dialogues *Gargi* has been warned not to ask too many questions, lest her head fall off, she persisted, and was rewarded with answers to her questions.

*Yajnavalkya* said: "Ask, *Gargi*"

She said: "That, O *Yajnavalkya*, which is above the sky, that which is beneath the earth, that which is between these two, sky and earth, that which people call the past and the present and the future - across what is that woven, warp and woof?"

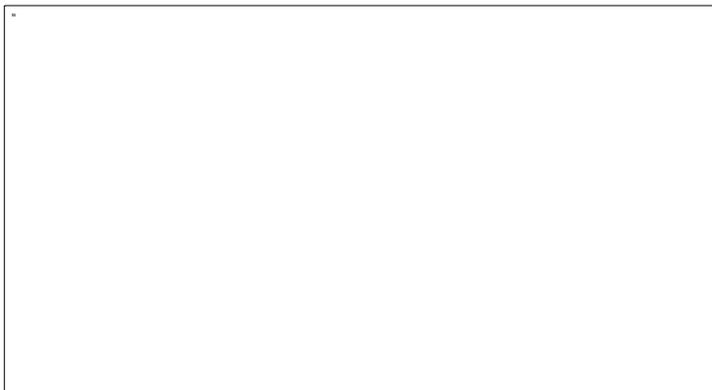
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### 2. Sita

*Sita* in the *Valmiki Ramayana* is not exactly representative for *Vedic stridharma*.

To begin with, she chooses her own husband in a competitive *svayamvara*, only the strongest and the smartest prince will do.



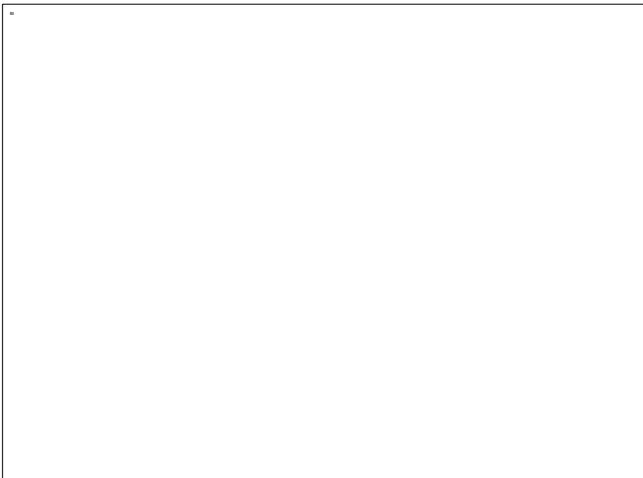
Again, after *Kaikeyi's* intervention, when *Rama* goes into forest exile, she insists on accompanying him. *Sita's* strength and self-possession are apparent. She is dutiful, indeed, but she has to argue her case in order to do what she knows is right. She is not an obedient servant to a godlike husband; she has a will of her own and her relationship to *Rama* is governed by love for him, rather than obedience to his orders.



She shows her determination and independence throughout the years in the forest; her insurances that Rama get the gold-spotted deer and her command that Laksmana come to his rescue, eventually

leads to her abduction by Ravana. She shows self-control and she doesn't give in to Ravanna's will. On being freed, she defends herself whole-heartedly against Rama's accusations. She is far from passive. It is in the context of this "dwelling in another man's house" that Vedic regulations for women are invoked and popular sentiment demands an ordeal to prove her purity.

This strength of character has not gone unnoticed by Indian women, who have found much in her to applaud. Despite being commonly held up as a paragon of the submissiveness, obedience, and loyalty that many men would like to see in their wives, women have often taken other lessons from her behavior. To many Hindu women, she is a great heroine, not just a goddess. Sita is a unique ideal of fidelity and chastity. She had to undergo unbearable trial and tribulations throughout her life but with the power of her unshakable fidelity and dedication to her husband she bore all the difficulties of life with fortitude and she, along with her husband, smilingly enjoyed the hardships of life in jungle. The *rakshas* king *Ravana* failed to lower her morale or weaken her moral strength.



It was through the ordeal of fire that *Sita* proved and established her virtue and stainlessness of her character. With the injury of the time of exile ( *Vanavasa* ) when *Sri Rama* as the king, in order to satisfy some of his subjects, banished Sita, she remained in the hermitage of *Rishi Valmiki*.

The very fact that Rama and Sita are always mentioned in one breath endows Sita with equality: whatever status Rama occupies, this will also be Sita's. If he is king, she will be queen, if he is god, she will become his goddess. However, she is queen and goddess on her own merit, not because of Rama's grace.

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### 3. Savitri



She, who is mentioned among the great chaste and faithful godly women, took *Satyavan* as her husband knowing fully well that he would not live long. When only four days of his age were remaining she undertook a vow to defeat death.

On the fourth day *Satyavan* died with *Yamaraja* ( The god of death ) walking away with his vitality. Savitri walked pursuing Yamaraja. As they were walking one behind the other, on the way there occurred a ' question-answer ' between them. Yamaraja was very



much impressed by the gentle behaviour of Savitri, her wisdom, her one pointed devotion ( dedication ) to her husband. Getting pleased he asked Savitri to ask for boons. Savitri asked for such boons which helped not

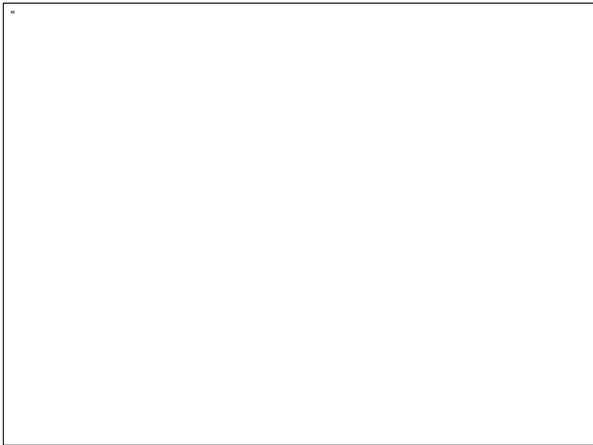
only to obtain for her the well-being of both her father's and her husband's families but Yamaraja had also to return the vitality of Satyavana. Savitri with the power of her chastity and fidelity protected her good fortune.

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#### 4. Draupadi

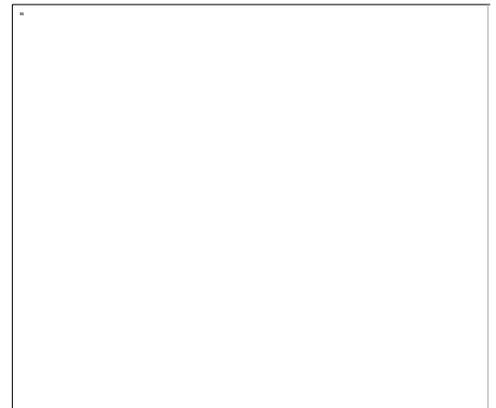
Draupadi was a very impressive and brilliant and strong personality (character) in Mahabharata.



The daughter of Drupada, the king of Panchala (Punjab), came to Hastinapur as a daughter-in-law of the Kuru-clan on being won by Arjuna, at her Swayamvara, by piercing with arrow the eye of a moving fish on a high pole, looking into the fish's image in a cauldron of oil below. **She was never ready to compromise on either her rights as a daughter-in-law or even on the rights of the Pandavas and remained ever ready to fight back or avenge high-handedness and injustice meted out to her and them.** Draupadi had absolute faith in Sri Krishna. She was also dear to Sri Krishna equal to his real sister. Draupadi was put through much suffering and disgrace in life.

Dussasana tried to remove her clothes and as such made an attempt to violate her modesty in full view of the assembly.

During the days of the banishment to jungle of the Pandavas, Jayadratha made an attempt to abduct her and during the period of their dwelling secretly, Keechaka wanted to outrage her modesty. After the duration of their stay in the jungle was over, Draupadi, with a view to fulfill her vow ( promise to herself to tie her untied hair after washing them with the blood of *Dussasana* ) and to punish all those who had disgraced her and perpetrated offence against her, blazed the fire of revenge burning in her heart into the hearts and minds of Pandayas. The refulgence (glow) of Draupadi's lustrous prototype of womanhood shall always be a source of inspiration for the women of India.



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**5. Akka Mahadevi** also known as Akka (elder sister) Mahadevi. She was a 12th century religious poet, much like Meera. She devoted her life to the worship of Lord Shiva.

Born in Udatadi, this young Veerashaiva saint achieved Aikya or Oneness with the Divine within a short twenty years of age. Her outpourings are contained in over 315 vachanas and in a small text for advanced sadhakas called Yoganga Trividhi. She came on the scene when the reformist movement of Veerashaivism had just begun to impact, particularly the lower rungs of the society, with its remarkable empowerment techniques. Right from her childhood unlike other young girls she chose the Beautiful Lord, Pure white as the Jasmine, Chennamallikarjuna, as her playmate. Her friends chose to play with dolls instead. She was never content in fulfilling the restricted role of a girl in the house. It was more interesting to hear the glories of the Lord. The urge to go beyond the average practice of Shaiva sampradaya was compelling. The limitations placed on women, in the pursuit of spirituality and otherwise, was unacceptable

to her.

(source: [Akka Mahadevi](#)).

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### 6. Mira Bai (1498-c. 1546).



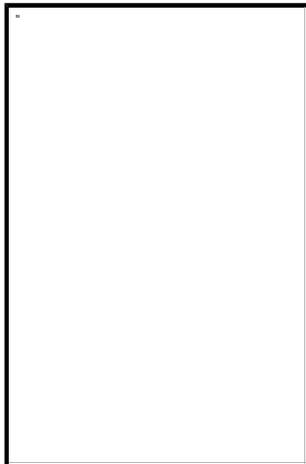
Drenched in the color of love to Sri Krishna, Mira was a well known devotee of God in the 47th century Kali Yugabda (calculation of time in terms of cycles of ages — Yugas) i.e. in the 16th century A.D. Entire Bharat, particularly the area where Hindi is the language that is spoken and read, has been resounding with the verses sung by Mira in her love for Krishna. In the case of Mira, the daughter of Ratna Singh Rathaur, attachment with the devotion to Krishna had touched her heart even in her early childhood. She was married to the son of Maharana, named Bhojaraja, but her heart and mind were already in the grip of her devotion to Krishna.

She used to be always absorbed (engrossed) in devotion to God. In the midst of saints, in temples, she sang her own devotional compositions ( songs ) and danced filled with emotion. After the untimely death of Bhojaraja, his brother Vikramajit wanted Mira to turn her back to the path of devotion and face towards the life of ordinary people. Her going to temples, singing and dancing there, appeared to him to be against tradition and discipline of his family. For not renouncing her obstinacy of love to Krishna Mira was subjected to great deal of infliction of. pain and suffering. But Mira on the contrary, laughingly submitted herself to these inflictions and bore them with fortitude but there did not occur any change in the one pointed ness of her divine love and devotion. The refrain of her life's song was : ' Mine is the preserver of cows who upholds mountain and no one else '. Her songs in the propensity of emotions are unmatched.

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### 7. Durgavati



Durgavati was that brave woman of India during the 47th century of Kaliyugas i.e. 16th century A.D. who fought with the alien invaders with utmost courage and heroic bravery and in the end, thinking that lest her living body may even be unpurified by a touch of the aliens she with her own sword brought forth a situation of self-sacrificing through which she got the ' going of the brave ( Viragati ) '.

After the death of king Dalpatishah of Gadha Mandala there came the hazard of a crisis over the state. The Mughal ruler Akbar sent a big army to capture the state of Gadha ( fort ) Mandala. Mounting on an elephant, Maharani Durgavati fought with utmost bravery along with providing a constant encouragement and inspiration to her army. Unfortunately because of internal disunity and her army being too small in comparison with the invaders, self-defense did not succeed. Among the brave women who resisted, retaliated and acted towards containing the Mughal thirst for empire-building Maharani Durgavati occupies a high place.

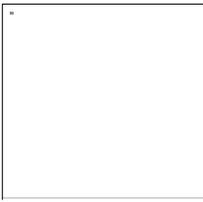
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### 8. Ahilya Bai Holkar



After the death of Malhar Rao Holkar (1694-1766), founder of the Holkar dynasty, as his son had died before him (killed by a cannon ball), he was succeeded by his



daughter-in-law **Ahilya Bai Holkar**. She ruled from 1767 to 1795 with great skill and understanding. She governed the state from a palace fort at Maheshwar on the northern bank of the Narmada river.

**Sir John Malcolm**, in his memoirs of Central India described her as a

**"female without vanity... excercising in the more active and able manner, despotic power with sweet humanity..."**

Though Ahilyabai never stayed in Indore, it is in her reign that Indore grew up into a city. Indore was an island of prosperity in a sea of voilence. Her rule became proverbial for justice and wisdom. She was the rare Indian royalty to be deified in her life time. She contributed a lot to the heritage of India by establishing several religious edifices remarkable in architecture. The *Kashi Vishweswar* temple at Varanasi being notable among them. Her unique pan-indian look is reflected in the fact that she built *Dharmashalas* at Badrinath in the north and Rameshwaram in the south, established *Anna Chhatras* at Dwarka in the west, Jagannathpuri in the east, and at Omkareshwar and Ujjain in central India. She also establishes charitable institutions at Gaya, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Prayag (Allahabad), Haridwar and Pandharpur. She was at heart a queen of whole India rather than that of the Holkar kingdom. She died at Maheshwar where a large mousoleum stands in her memory.

(source: <http://www.ee.ualberta.ca/~naik/holkar.html>).

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### 9. Kittur Rani Chennamma (1778 - 1829)

Chennamma received training in horse riding , sword fighting and archery in her young age. She was married to Raja Mullahsarja of Kittur, a princely state of Belgaum in Karnataka. Her husband died in 1816. Her only son died in 1824. Chennamma adopted Shivalingappa as her son and made him heir to the throne. The British did not accept this and ordered the expulsion of Shivalingappa. The Rani defied the order. A great battle ensued. The Rani fought the British with great courage and skill. She could not, however, hold out for long. She was taken captive and lodged in Bailhongal Fort where she died on 21-02-1829.

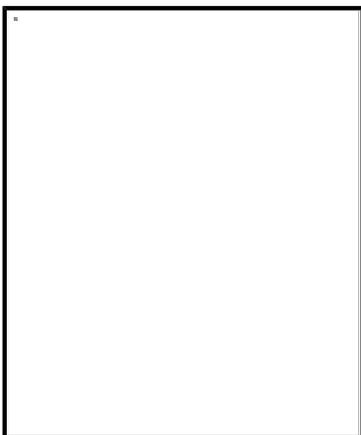
(source: [Great Women of India](#)).

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### 10. Queen of Jhansi - Lakshmi Bai (1830 -1858)

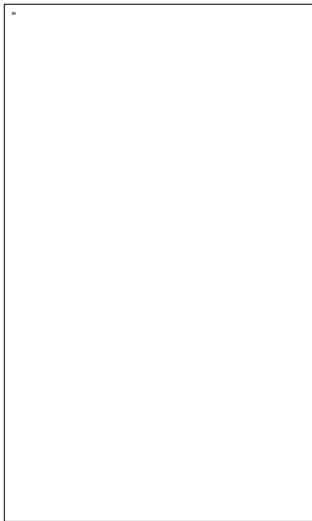
Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of a principality called Jhansi in northern India, led an uprising against a takeover of her homeland by the British. She became a heroine and a symbol of resistance to the British rule.



Lakshmi Bai was born around 1830 into a wealthy, high-caste Brahmin family. **She was named Manukarnika, which is one of the names of the holy river Ganges. As a young woman, she learned to read, write and debate. She also learned to ride horses and use weapons while playing with her adopted brothers.** She accepted the name Lakshmi Bai when she married Gangadhar Rao, the maharajah of Jhansi and became the Rani (short for maharani, the wife of maharajah) of Jhansi.

Gangadhar Rao was between forty and fifty years of age at the time of their wedding. This was his second marriage. His first wife died without producing an heir. The new Rani of Jhansi gave birth to a son, but he died when he was three months old. Subsequently, Damodar Rao, Gangadhar's relative, became their adopted son. In 1853, Gangadhar Rao died.

The Governor-General of India, the Marquess of Dalhousie, announced that since Gangadhar Rao left no heir, the state of Jhansi would be annexed by the British Government. The British rejected the claim that Damodar Rao was the legal heir. According to Hindu law, little Damodar Rao was Gangadhar's heir and successor. In the Hindu religion, a surviving son, either biological or adopted, had an obligation to perform certain sacrifices after his father's death to prevent his father from being condemned to punishment or hell. The refusal of the British to acknowledge the legitimacy of Rajah's adopted son caused a serious consternation in the local population. Rani appealed her case to London, but that appeal was turned down.



Not wishing to give up her kingdom, Lakshmi Bai assembled a volunteer army of 14,000 rebels and ordered that defenses of the city itself be strengthened. Jhansi was attacked by the British in March 1858. Shelling of Jhansi was fierce and the British were determined not to allow any rebels to escape while Rani was determined not to surrender. The British noted that the Indian soldiers fighting them showed more vigor than they ever had while following British orders. Women were also seen working the batteries and carrying ammunition, food and water to the soldiers. Rani, herself, was seen constantly active in the defense of the city. Jhansi, however, fell to the British forces after a two week siege. A priest from Bombay who witnessed the British victory, said that what followed were four days of fire, pillage, murder and looting without distinction. He said it was difficult to breathe due to strong smell of burning flesh. British historians, on the other hand, suggested that while four to five thousand people died in battle, the civilians were spared.

The Rani managed to escape on horseback under the cover of darkness and within twenty-four hours rode over one hundred miles to the fortress of Kalpi. Several other Indian rulers joined the rebel forces there. It is believed that the Rani was influential in convincing the others to go on the offensive and seize the fortress of Gwalior. This maneuver was successful and helped rally the rebel forces together.

It wasn't long, however, before the British forces determined to win Gwalior back. A fierce battle ensued. Rani was in charge of the eastern side of defense, however she lost her life on the second day of fighting. The British won back Gwalior. Rani's body was given a ceremonial cremation and burial by the faithful servants. **Sir Hugh Rose**, the commander of the British force, wrote later, "The Ranees was remarkable for her bravery, cleverness and perseverance; her generosity to her Subordinates was unbounded. These qualities, combined with her rank, rendered her the most dangerous of all the rebel leaders." A popular Indian ballad said:

**How valiantly like a man fought she,  
The Rani of Jhansi  
On every parapet a gun she set  
Raining fire of hell,  
How well like a man fought the Rani of Jhansi  
How valiantly and well!**

"Bundeli har boli mein suni yehi kahani thi...  
Khoob laDi mardaani woh toh Jhansi Wali Rani thi..."

(for more information refer to site on [Jhansi Ki Rani](#)).

J. Lang, who was the only Britisher who saw her face to face, left the following description of her: "She was a woman of about the middle size, rather stout but not too stout. Her face must have been very handsome when she was younger, and even now it had many charms... The expression also was very good and very intelligent. The eyes were particularly fine and the nose very delicately shaped... Her dress was a plain white muslin, so fine in texture and drawn about her in such a way and so tightly that the outline of her figure was plainly discernible, and a remarkably fine figure she had."



"Bundelay harbolon ke munh hamne suni kahani thi/khuh lari mardani woh toh Jhansi wali Rain thi" sings the ballad narrating the valiant struggle of one of the most famous characters of India in recent history. When Rani Lakshmi Bai rose against the British in 1857 AD she



immortalized Jhansi. She has since become a heroine of the Indian independence movement, a sort of central Indian Joan of Arc.

**Long before Bal Gangadhar Tilak said "Swaraj hamara janm huk hai," Jhansi Lakshmi Bai said "Azadshahi hamara huk hai."**

#### References:

1. [The Warrior Queens. The Legends and the Lives of the Women Who Have Led Their Nations in War - By Antonia Fraser](#), Vintage Books, 1994.
2. [Herstory - Women Who Changed the World - edited by Ruth Ashby and Deborah Gore Ohrn](#), Viking, 1995.

For more refer to chapter on [GlimpsesVIII](#)).

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### 11. Rani Avantibai

When Vikramaditya Singh, the ruler of Ramgarh State died leaving behind his wife Avantibai and no heir to the throne, the British put the state under court administration. Avantibai vowed to win back her land from the British. She raised an army of four thousand men and led it herself against the British in 1857. A fierce battle ensued and Avantibai fought most valiantly but could not hold out for long against the superior strength of the British army. When her defeat became imminent she killed herself with her own sword and became a martyr on 20-03-1858.

(source: [Great Women of India](#))

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### 12 Jalkari Bai

The folklore of Bundelkhand (part of Jhansi State then ) are full of heroic exploits of Jalkari Bai. She was a village girl and hailed from a very poor family. It is said that she had an encounter with a tiger while she was collecting firewood in the jungle and she killed the tiger single handed with her axe. She had a striking resemblance to Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi and because of this Rani took interest in her and inducted her into the women's wing of the army.

During 1957-58 there were several British raids on Jhansi Fort and the Rani repulsed every one of the attacks. Later when the fall of fort became imminent Jalkari bai and some generates convinced Laxmibai to escape quietly with the help of supporters. In a ploy to deceive the British, Jalkari bai dressed herself up like the Rani and took command of the army. The British found out the truth, but it was too late. The Rani had covered a considerable distance by then. Jalkaribai fought the British forces valiantly but was eventually forced to surrender. The British general, impressed by her loyalty, courage and fighting prowess treated her with respect and set her free.

(source: [Great Women of India](#))

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### 13. Shakuntala Devi



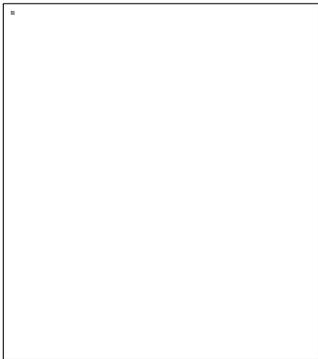
Shakuntala Devi, the human computer - holds an undisputed place in the Guinness Book of Records for multiplying in 1980 two randomly chosen 13-digit numbers and giving the correct answer in 28 seconds.

Her abilities, defying common theories of human intelligence, have been the subject of much research. In 1977 she won a standing ovation from an audience of mathematicians when she extracted the 23rd root of a 201-digit number. That means she found the number that when multiplied by itself 23 times equaled the 201-digit number she was given. She solved it in 50 seconds flat. The day's most sophisticated computer, a Univac 1108, also did the deed - in 62 seconds - but only after days of programming, 13 thousand instructions and 5,000 data locations. No one has a plausible theory as to how she could have arrived at the answer, for the feat far exceeds the supposed limits of human intelligence. Shakuntala Devi attributes her mathematical wizardry to her friendship with **Lord Ganessa**, developed in her early childhood.

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#### 14. Sarojini Naidu



Sarojini Naidu, (1879-a freedom fighter and the first Indian woman as Governor of West Bengal after the partition. Sarojini Naidu was a poet, mother of four and the first President of the Indian National Congress. Widely known as the Nightingale of India, she was the younger sister of the renowned poet, actor and playwright, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. Sarojinidevi was a great patriot, politician, orator and administrator. She had an integrated personality and could mesmerize audiences with her pure honesty and patriotism. She was a life-long freedom fighter, social worker, ideal housewife and poet.

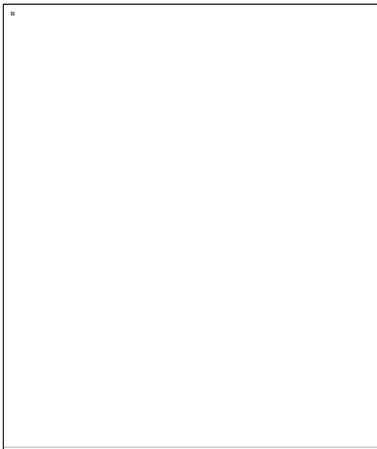
She was born on February 13, 1879 in Hyderabad. Her father, Dr. Aghornath Chattopadhyaya, was the founder of Nizam College of Hyderabad and a scientist. Her mother, Mrs. Varasundari, was a Bengali poetess. Sarojinidevi inherited qualities from both her father and mother.

Young Sarojini was a very bright and proud girl. Her father aspired for her to become a mathematician or scientist, but she loved poetry from a very early age. Once she was working on an algebra problem, and when she couldn't find the solution she decided to take a break, and in the same book she wrote her first inspired poetry. She got so enthused by this that she wrote "The Lady of the Lake", a poem 1300 lines long. When her father saw that she was more interested in poetry than mathematics or science, he decided to encourage her. With her father's support, she wrote the play "Maher Muneer" in the Persian language. Dr. Chattopadhyaya distributed some copies among his friends and sent one copy to the Nawab of Hyderabad. Reading a beautiful play written by a young girl, the Nizam was very impressed. The college gave her a scholarship to study abroad. At the age of 16 she got admitted to King's College of England. There she met famous laureates of the time.

During her stay in England, Sarojini met Dr. Govind Naidu from southern India. After finishing her studies at the age of 19, she got married to him during the time when inter-caste marriages were not allowed. Her father was a progressive thinking person, and he did not care what others said. Her marriage was a very happy one.



Her major contribution was also in the field of poetry. Her poetry had beautiful words that could also be sung. Soon she got recognition as the "Bul Bule Hind" when her collection of poems was published in 1905 under the title "Golden Threshold". After that, she published two other collections of poems--"The Bird of Time" and "The Broken



Wings". In 1918, " Feast of Youth" was published. Later, "The Magic Tree", "The Wizard Mask" and "A Treasury of Poems" were published. Mahashree Arvind, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru were among the thousands of admirers of her work. Her poems had English words, but an Indian soul.

One day she met Shree Gopal Krishna Gokhale. He said to her to use her poetry and her beautiful words to rejuvenate the spirit of Independence in the hearts of villagers. He asked her to use her talent to free Mother India.

Then in 1916, she met Mahatma Gandhi, and she totally directed her energy to the fight for freedom. She would roam around the country like a general of the army and pour enthusiasm among the hearts of Indians. The independence of India became the heart and soul of her

work.

She was responsible for awakening the women of India. She brought them out of the kitchen. She traveled from state to state, city after city and asked for the rights of the women. She re-established self-esteem within the women of India.

(source: [http://swaraj.net/iffw/profiles/naidu\\_s.htm](http://swaraj.net/iffw/profiles/naidu_s.htm)).

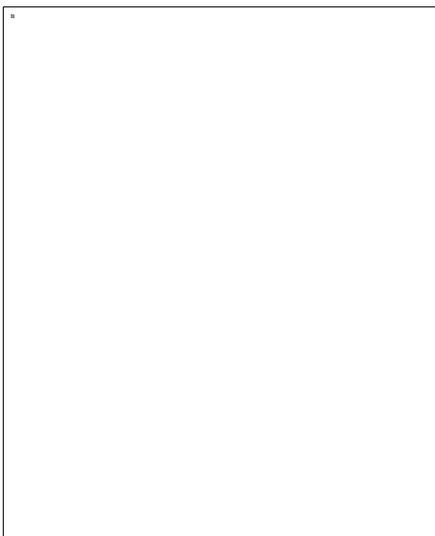
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### 15. Sarada Devi

Sri Sarada Devi was born in Bengal in 1853 to devout Brahmin parents. Her early years were marked by simplicity, charity, prayer, meditation and visionary gifts. At the age of six, she was betrothed to Sri Ramakrishna, but they lived apart until Sarada Devi was 18. It was he who initiated her into many spiritual disciplines, notably into the worship of the Divine Mother. Living a celibate life, they saw God in themselves and in each other. Sri Ramakrishna taught her the great mantras and instructed her in the method of spiritual guidance for others who would seek her help.

Immediately after her husband's death in 1886, Sri Sarada Devi began a pilgrimage through North India. For a time she lived at Vrindavan, where she attained the highest contentless consciousness called nirvikalpa samadhi, and where she began her role as guru.



On her return, Sri Sarada Devi went to Kamarpukur, where she met with great hostility from the uncomprehending villagers. Having no money and strictly observing purdah, she was forced to dig the earth herself to cultivate a few vegetables. When Sri Ramakrishna's disciples heard of her plight, they invited her to Calcutta. There she became known as the Holy Mother and gave spiritual instruction and initiation to many people. She was noted for her maternal tenderness and hospitality, her gift of healing, and her willingness to suffer vicariously for her disciples' sins.

In 1909, Sri Sarada Devi moved into what is known as the Holy Mother's House in Calcutta, and lived there for the next 11 years with several other holy women. In 1919, she was stricken with black fever and, although in great pain, continued to strengthen her disciples and to give spiritual advice until her death on July 20, 1920.

The spiritual teachings of this great woman seer are a window on the beauty of her soul: "As clouds are blown away by the wind, the thirst for material pleasures will be driven away by the utterance of the Lord's name." "No one is a stranger, my child; this whole world is your own."

(source: [http://www.hssworld.org/all/great\\_people/sarada.html](http://www.hssworld.org/all/great_people/sarada.html))

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### **16. Bhagini Nivedita - A Proud, Generous, Momentous and Ardent Woman (1867-1911)**

She great offering, giving her life for Mother India, was like a song of love, Love is blind for it sees no faults of the beloved, and Nivedita never found faults with India. Sister Niveditas childhood name was Margaret Elizabeth Noble.



She was born in Ireland on October 20, 1867 to parents Mary Isabel and Samuel Richmond Noble Her father was a preacher to whom religion meant service to the poor. This had an imprint on Nivedita. She was very intelligent and hard worker, loved music, art, and the natural sciences. After her education, she spent ten years in teaching, from 1884 to 1894. She had a gift of being able to impart knowledge and inspire her students She was a proud, generous, impulsive and ardent woman. By the age eight-eil she came to understand that religion did not mean belief in the doctrines; it meant search of Divine Light and Eternal Truth. She began to doubt the truth of the Christian doctrines. She started reading about Buddhism but only with partial success.

This was the time when she met a Hindu Monk, Swami Vivekanand visiting England in 1895. She attended all the lectures. In question-answer sessions, she was an active and enthusiastic participan!. The Swamiji's words that selfishness, ignorance, and greed were the evils which brought suffering to the world, pierced

through her mind and heart and her life changed for ever. Swami Vivekanand was very much impressed and urged her to help the women of I,?dia in his plans. In response to the call of Swaini Vivekananda, Nivedita left England and arrived in Calcutta on January 28, 1898. Swamiji could envision her future role in the service of Mother India. He initiated her to be his disciple on March 25, 1898 and gave her name 'Nivedita', meaning one who is dedicated to God. She started to study Gita and practice meditation. This helped her to cast off her pride in English culture and became humble. Salvation for one self and the welfare of the world were two of the ideas she pledged herself to follow, For this, she lived a simpler pure, and holy life to realize God and humbly work for the welfare of the people.

By nature, she was optimist but there were times she felt disheartened in such situations. Swami Vivekananda's words 'Death for the cause is our goal, not success' inspired her She made India the object of love and worship When Swami Vivekananda passed away on July 4. 1902, she felt an added responsibility to India and its people. She realized that political independence of India is an essential first step towards equality, progress and justice

She inspired the people in all walks of life through her lectures and writings She always believed that India could not be great and powerful unless there was unity. She emphasized this in every possible way and was never tired of speaking about it. Her hard work and lack of rest was having an adverse effect on her health She passed away on October 13, 1911.

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### **17. Mother Mirra (1878- 1973)**



The Mother, Mirra Alfassa, was born in Paris on the 21st of February 1878. Her mother was Egyptian and her father was Turkish. Both of them were perfect materialists. However, Mirra had divine visions from her childhood.

Outwardly, she was brought up as an atheist until she entered



adulthood. In her early years, she had a good education in music (specially piano), painting, and higher mathematics. During this period she used to have spontaneous experiences including those of coming out of her body to discover inner realities, without understanding what they really meant. As she was growing up, she began to have such experiences more often. One day in the year 1912 the Mother had a first vision of the future: "the advent of universal harmony, the realization of human unity and the establishment of ideal society". Sri Aurobindo had already visualized these ideas in his writings. What a coincidence?

She met Sri Aurobindo on 20th March, 1914. He exactly resembled the man she used to see in her vision since 1904. She went back to Paris, Japan and other places and finally returned to Pondicherry in India where Sri Aurobindo had established an Ashram, a celebrated spiritual centre. Now the question was as to the ways and means by which this great vision of whole-being, whole-knowledge and whole power could be attained for the whole society. Sri Aurobindo found, and this was Mother's discovery, that this could be done through the processes of Yoga, many of which were known, and many of which had to be rediscovered, created, built and perfected, so that they could meet the needs of modern man's upward evolution. This was the task Sri Aurobindo was engaged in since he came to Pondicherry.

The Mother also participated in this endeavor. The result was what is known as 'Integral Yoga' - developed jointly by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. In integral yoga, the Divine Power in us uses all life as the means of our upward evolution and then every experience becomes a step on the path to perfection. In this whole process the Mother was Shakti in action. She accelerated this process with great vigor even after Sri Aurobindo left his mortal body on December 5, 1950. She continued to expand that vision through education and counseling of the seekers of inner peace. Under her direction, Pondicherry developed into a residential Ashram.

Her imprint can be seen in almost all aspects of Ashram routine. She worked relentlessly till she passed away on November 17, 1973.

(source: <http://www.hinduwomen.org/biographies/mother.htm>).

For more information please refer to [Women In Hindu Dharma - A Tribute. A brief compilation done by Vishal Agarwal for the Hindu Students Society of the University of Minnesota.](#)

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## 18. Laleshwari (1320 – 1390).

The Hindus called her Laleshwari and the Muslims Lalla Arifa. But both endearingly called her Lal DED (Grandmother or Grandma).



*Laleshwari was a sadhvini or female wandering devotee of Lord Shiva who was hailed as a great Siddha or enlightend master of her time.*

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Laleshwari was a sadhvini or female wandering devotee of Lord Shiva who was hailed as a great Siddha or enlightend master of her time. As a poet her poetry is still influential, especially in Kashmir. She spent life wandering throughout northern India and renounced the householder life while still very young.

"I lost you out of ignorant attachment to my body. Then I wasted my time searching high and

low. Finally I found you within, O Shiva, then we united in Bliss. Only through the grace and compassion of Siddhanath could this have happened."

Lalleshwari was born into a Brahmin family in Kashmir in the medieval period. Independent by nature she married early to a young man of the same caste. Her husband was apparently very much under the influence of his mother and according to legend the mother hated her daughter-in-law intensely. Not content with acting maliciously towards Lalli, the mother poisoned her son's mind against her and it has been suggested that this may have been because Lalli never became pregnant. Finally her mother-in-law turned her out of her house.

Instead of returning to her family home, Lalli took up the life of a sadhvini or Yogini. Her philosophy and practices as recorded in her poems show a deep understanding of the central tenets of the Shaivite non-dual philosophy.

There is no doubt that Lalleshwari commanded and commands great respect among the Shaiva sects but the great Sufis of her time also revered her. Among the people she was given the title Ded (Grandmother), and this reflects the affection and respect with which the common people regarded her.

(source: [Lal Diddiji - By Vishwanath](#) and [Lalleshwari - By P N Razdan](#) ).

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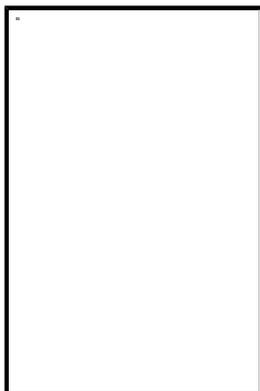


### Did you Know?

#### **Dowry Didn't Evolve from India.**

Where'd We Get This Zany Idea?

Hindus got it from the Europeans.



According to several sources, the present dowry practice in India can be traced only to the 19th century - likely because that is when Indians observed the full-fledged practice of dowry among the British rulers. Here are some excerpts from a wonderfully, enlightening book, *The Marriage Bargain, Women and Dowries in European History*.

"In France, the dowry was almost a universal institution, even among servants, laborers and tenant farmers, until the interwar era (1918-1939). Only the poorest urban industrial workers had no dowries, and as a result many of them did not marry at all. "For the great majority of the bourgeoisie (middle class) marriage is the greatest financial operation of their lives." Wrote an observer of the French scene in 1927.

"What was the status of the daughter whose birth ' filled a father's heart with fear' (Dante, Renaissance poet, 1265-1321 C. E. because of the large dowry which her marriage would require?"

(source: [The Marriage Bargain, Women and Dowries in European History](#). By Marion A. Kaplan. Harrington Park Press. 28 East 22 Street, New York, 100010. USA and [Hinduism Today](#)).

The concept of **stri dhan** in which gifts --usually jewelry, including often a quarter pound of gold--was given to the bride by her family, in order to secure some personal wealth for her when she married. This jewelry remained her personal property throughout the marriage, providing some security in case of her husband's death or other calamity. **However, in approximately the 19th century, under the British rule, the loving practice of stri dhan was joined by the very much different concept of dowry.** Dowry became first an expected, then a demanded, offering given by the bride's family to the groom's family at the time of marriage. Whereas stri dhan is considered the property only of the woman, passed matrilineally, dowry is not.

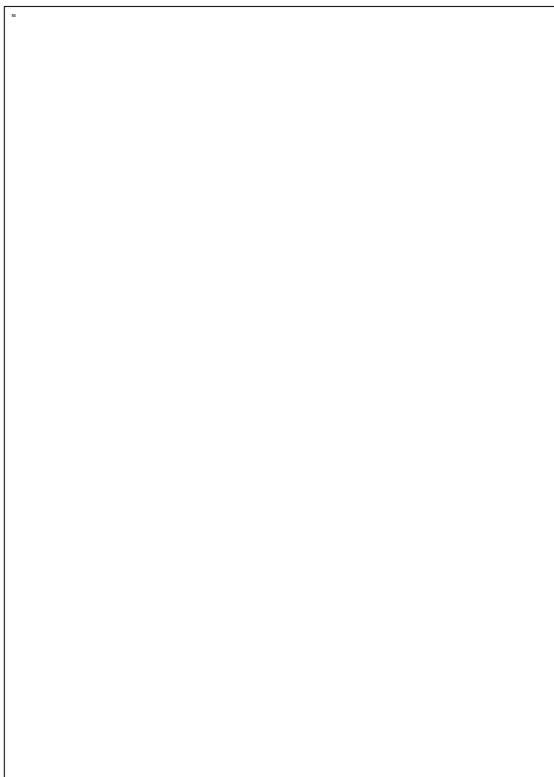
Please refer to a forthcoming book [Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime - By Veena Talwar Oldenburg](#). The author argues that 'these killings are neither about dowry nor reflective of an Indian culture or caste system that encourages violence against women. Rather, such killings can be traced directly to the influences of the British colonial era. In the pre-colonial period, dowry was an institution managed by women, for women, to enable them to establish their status and have recourse in an emergency. As a consequence of the massive economic and societal upheaval brought on by British rule, womens' entitlements to the precious resources obtained from land were erased and their control of the system diminished, ultimately resulting in a devaluing of their very lives.' More good things thanks to the Christian State.

(source: [Taming the predatory State of today - Rajeev Srinivasan - rediff.com](#)).

The book takes us on a journey into the colonial Punjab, Veena Oldenburg skillfully **follows the paper trail left by British bureaucrats to indict them for interpreting these crimes against women as the inherent defects of Hindu caste culture. The British, Oldenburg claims, publicized their "civilizing mission" and blamed the caste system in order to cover up the devastation their own agrarian policies had wrought on the Indian countryside.**

(source: [amazon.com](#)).

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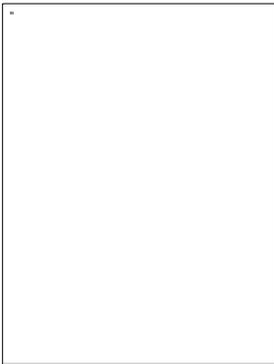
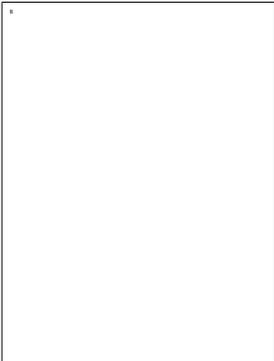
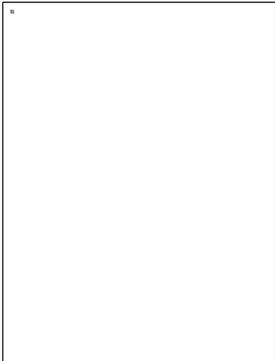
### Victorian Prudery?

#### Indian Temples and 19th century British woman in India

Indian temples were a popular destination for British tourist, but escorts usually steered female sightseers away from the erotic art featured on some temple facades. One 19th century guide book advised women to tip local guides for not pointing out suggestive temple carvings.

(source: [What Life Was Like in the Jewel of the Crown: British India AD 1600-1905 - By The Editors of Time-Life Books](#). p.156).

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