



Role of the Feminine

Ethnic Studies | Grades 9-12 | Brooke Pillifant, M.A., M.Ed.

Theme: History and Movement

Disciplinary Area: Asian American Studies, Hindu American Studies, World Religion, US History

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: Historical Knowledge, Geography, Civics and Government

Standards Alignment: CCSS RH.9–10.1, 3, 4; W.9-10.1.b, 2.a, 2.c-d

Oregon Standards: HS1-3, 11, 41, 52, 54-55, 60-61, 63, 66

C3 Standards:

- **D1.3.6-8:** Identify and evaluate the credibility of sources that reflect differing perspectives on gender, religion, and power.
- **D1.5.6-8:** Determine what kinds of sources will be most useful in exploring complex concepts like identity and cultural change.
- **D2.His.2.6-8:** Classify and evaluate historical sources that show diverse gender roles and perspectives across time and culture.
- **D2.His.5.6-8:** Explain how and why perspectives on gender identity and spiritual authority have changed over time.
- **D2.His.14.6-8:** Explain multiple causes and effects of colonial influence on gender roles in Hindu society.
- **D2.Civ.7.6-8:** Apply civic virtues such as respect, compassion, and justice in conversations about gender and religious identity.
- **D2.Civ.10.6-8:** Analyze the roles of diverse groups and individuals in promoting change and equality within spiritual and cultural systems.
- **D3.1.6-8:** Gather and evaluate evidence from sources including sacred texts, poetry, and historical accounts related to gender and the divine.
- **D3.3.6-8:** Identify evidence across texts that supports claims about identity, power, and resistance in Hindu traditions.
- **D4.1.6-8:** Construct arguments using claims and evidence about the intersection of gender, spirituality, and colonial history.
- **D4.4.6-8:** Critique solutions and actions taken by historical and modern figures such as Hindu women saints through civic, ethical, and cultural lenses.
- **D4.6.6-8:** Draw on history, religion, and gender studies to inform artistic or written expressions advocating for justice and inclusion.

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Lesson Overview

This lesson explores how Hindu Dharmas offer unique understandings of gender, especially through their long-standing reverence for the feminine. Unlike many major world religions, Hindu Dharma traditions honor the divine in both masculine and feminine forms, with female divine beings playing central roles in theology, ceremonies, and community life. Students will examine the concept of Śakti, the divine feminine energy, and how this spiritual principle is portrayed in relation to masculine energies through deity pairs like Śiva and Pārvatī, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, and others.

The lesson encourages students to think critically about how Hindu ideas of gender balance, spiritual identity, and the self being beyond gender differ from—or challenge—Western religious and social norms. It also addresses the historical shifts that affected women’s roles in Hindu society, particularly during British colonization, and how Hindu women have resisted and redefined their spiritual identities through poetry, ceremony, and reform.

Key Terms and Concepts

Biological Sex:	The classification of people as male, female, or intersex based on physical characteristics such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive anatomy; typically assigned at birth.
Gender:	A social and cultural concept that refers to roles, behaviors, and identities that people express or identify with; gender may or may not align with a person's biological sex.
Śakti:	Literally power/energy, a feminine gendered word, seen in the Śākta Dharma traditions as the Supreme Being, the source and transformative power of the multiverse. Even in other Dharma traditions that do not venerate solely Śakti as the Supreme Being, Śakti features prominently, even co-equally as part of the divinity venerated in that tradition.
Ardhanārīśvara:	A form of the Supreme Being that is half Śiva and half Pārvatī, symbolizing the unity of masculine and feminine energies.
Ātman	The true self in Hindu philosophy; considered beyond gender and eternal.
Brahman	The ultimate reality in Hindu traditions, beyond male or female.
Deity	A form of the Supreme Being or a greatly revered Illumined Being in a Dharmic spiritual tradition.
Bhakti	A devotional tradition in many Hindu Dharmas that emphasizes personal connection and love for the divine.
Colonialism:	The control or governing influence of one nation over peoples from a different land and with different histories and cultures, often impacting cultural and spiritual practices.
Ceremony:	Specific words, actions, and traditions used to mark an occasion, commonly used in the Dharmic traditions as part of spiritual practices.
Divine Feminine:	A concept of spiritual power expressed through feminine forms or qualities, such as warrior forms, nurturing forms, possessing wisdom, vanquishing oppressors,

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protecting devotees, having wrathful destructive power, and awakening and presiding over potent transformative inner mystical experiences and processes as well as many other qualities nurturing, wisdom, or creation.

Vedic: Related to the four Vedas, sources of knowledge compiled before c.1200 BCE, and the later philosophical traditions that derive from it, ranging from literalist ceremonialism to atomism and yoga.

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze how Hindu teachings on the sacred feminine and gender identity provide a non-Western framework for understanding selfhood and spiritual power.
- Evaluate the role of colonization in shaping and restricting traditional gender roles within Hindu society.
- Interpret the significance of male-female deity pairs as expressions of unity, interdependence, and spiritual balance.
- Reflect on how Hindu spiritual ideas about gender as both/and (rather than either/or) can contribute to more inclusive understandings of identity today.
- Recognize and honor the voices of historical and contemporary Hindu women who resisted social limitations and reclaimed spiritual leadership.

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Hook/Opening

Teacher: “Many major world religions today depict God in masculine terms, but in Hindu traditions, the divine is also deeply feminine. In fact, Śakti, or feminine energy, is seen as the power behind all existence. And Hindu teachings say every person holds both feminine and masculine qualities, no matter their gender. That’s a pretty different way to see identity and power, isn’t it?”

Ask students, “Have you ever felt like you didn’t fully fit into society’s expectations of ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’? What would it mean to be seen as whole, just as you are?”

Allow students to self-reflect by thinking, writing in a journal, or having a discussion. Use discretion when having a classroom discussion as student emotions may be intensified.

Information

When presenting information to students, the information can be read aloud by the teacher or a student, read silently, or read in groups. If a copy is provided to students, have students underline or circle areas that resonate with them. If a copy is not provided, have students jot down parts of the reading that resonate with them on a separate sheet of paper.

Understanding Gender and Biological Sex in Hindu Dharma Traditions

In order to understand Hindu perspectives on identity, it is important to first distinguish between biological sex and gender. Biological sex refers to the physical and physiological characteristics such as chromosomes, hormone levels, and reproductive organs that are typically categorized as male or female at birth. Gender, on the other hand, is a social and cultural concept related to behaviors, roles, and identities. It refers to how individuals understand themselves and how they express that identity to the world. While Western frameworks often recognize two or sometimes three genders, many Hindu Dharma traditions have long acknowledged three traditional gender identities: masculine, feminine, and third nature (also called *tritiya prakriti* in Sanskrit). This third category historically included people who, in modern terms, might be described as transgender, nonbinary, intersex, or others who defy conventional gender classifications. Rather than being seen as abnormal, individuals of the third nature were often given specific spiritual and social roles within Hindu societies. This recognition of diverse gender identities reflects the complex and inclusive understanding of human experience.

The Sacred Feminine and Gender Identity in Hinduism

One of the most powerful aspects of Hindu Dharma traditions is how they honor the divine in both male and female forms. The Hindu Śākta Dharma tradition is one that has always recognized and venerated the Supreme Being as feminine. Even beyond the Śākta Dharma tradition, other Hindu Dharmas venerate the feminine Supreme Being, in various forms; this is central to spiritual life and community celebrations.

Many Hindus venerate Śakti, which means energy or power, as a divine feminine force. Śakti is often personified, and major festivals like *Divālī/Dīpāvalī*, *Navarātri*, and *Vasant Pañchami* are dedicated to

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her. While gender equality in practice has varied across different Hindu communities, Hindu Dharmas continue to offer some of the richest traditions of honoring the feminine in divine and human forms.

Feminine and Masculine: Two Halves of a Whole

Hindu philosophies describe masculine and feminine principles not as opposites, but as two complementary parts of a greater whole like two wheels of the same cart. In Hindu traditions, many deities appear as male-female pairs, symbolizing balance, unity, and the idea that both masculine and feminine qualities are essential and interconnected.

One example is the divine pair Śiva and Pārvatī. While Śiva is often associated with destruction and transformation, he also embodies love, fertility, and devotion. Likewise, Pārvatī, commonly connected with nurturing, love, and fertility, also possesses immense power and the capacity for fierce transformation and protection. Their unity is sometimes portrayed through the composite form Ardhanārīśvara, meaning “The Lord who is half woman,” which symbolizes the profound interdependence and balance of masculine and feminine energies. Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are another significant pair. Rādhā reflects the soul’s yearning for divine love and the blissful nature of the self, while Kṛṣṇa manifests the all-attractiveness of pure being and the playful, loving nature of divinity. Their relationship illustrates an emotional and spiritual union that transcends physicality. Similarly, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī operate as cosmic partners. Viṣṇu preserves the universe and Lakṣmī embodies abundance, beauty, and the sustaining energy necessary for Viṣṇu's work. Rāma and Sītā, central figures in the Rāmāyaṇa, exemplify righteousness, unwavering loyalty, and the ideal of partnership in dharma.

These divine pairs reflect a broader theme in Hindu thought, neither masculine nor feminine qualities stand alone, for each completes and supports the other. This balance is expressed in many forms throughout Hindu traditions, not only through the pairs mentioned above, but through many others as well.

Hindu traditions often teach that every person, regardless of gender identity, contains both feminine and masculine qualities. This belief appears in ancient sources of knowledge like the Upaniṣads, where the self, or ātman, is described as beyond gender. The divine or absolute reality is often referred to with gender-neutral terms such as Brahman, the ultimate reality, which is neither male nor female. Some sources even say that the ideal human being contains a balance of both energies, showing that spiritual identity is not tied to biological sex. In ceremonial practices in temples and households, this idea of balance continues—many rites are traditionally performed by a married couple together, not just the man or woman alone. The symbolism here is important: it emphasizes that both feminine and masculine forces must come together to create spiritual harmony.

Female Deities and the Role of the Feminine Divine

Hindu Dharma traditions include many monotheistic traditions that meditate upon the Supreme Being in the specific form taught in their sources of knowledge. Of the largest surviving Hindu Dharma

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traditions, Śāktas focus on the Supreme Being as Śakti, Vaiṣṇavas as Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu, and Śaivas as Śiva. In the Śākta tradition, the divine feminine is the central figure. She is seen as the source of the Multiverse, responsible for its emanation and well-being. Even in male-centered traditions, the feminine energy (Śakti) is seen as essential for without it, male deities are incomplete.

Temples honoring feminine deities are spread across the Indian subcontinent and the wider Hindu world, showing the deep-rooted presence of female divinity in daily spiritual life.

Women in Ancient Sources of Knowledge

From the earliest times, Hindu sources of knowledge have highlighted women as sages, philosophers, and spiritual leaders. The Rig Veda, the oldest sacred composition, includes poems composed by women like Lopamudrā, Vak Ambhrini, Sikata Nivāvari, Ghosha Kakshivati¹, and many others. Sages Gargi and Maitreyi, both renowned for their intellectual depth, made significant philosophical contributions in the Upaniṣads.

Stories of strong female figures like Draupadī from the Mahābhārata and Sītā, Anasūyā, and Śabarī from the Rāmāyaṇa have been passed down for generations, shaping ideas about courage, loyalty, and devotion. Some revered sources of knowledge² are dedicated entirely to the feminine Supreme Being and remain central to major festivals, ceremonies, and cultural arts today.

Women and Ceremonial Life

In Hindu homes, women often take the lead in daily spiritual traditions. In the Śākta, Vaiṣṇava, and Śaiva Hindu Dharma traditions, and others like them, women have been spiritual leaders throughout their entire histories along with men, and in the Śākta tradition, women leaders are their main authority. However, there are also a number of Hindu Dharma traditions wherein only men can serve in ceremonial and public-facing spiritual leadership roles. That is slowly being re-evaluated by the leaders of those traditions. Today, the number of women performing Vedic rituals, becoming priests, and leading ceremonies is increasing. Some rites, like the sacred thread ceremony (a traditional spiritual initiation), which once included girls, became male-only over time. But now, certain communities are bringing these ceremonies back for all genders.

There are many ceremonies and festivals that are created especially for women and girls, recognizing their unique spiritual roles and celebrating key moments in their lives. For example, the Ṛtu Kāla Saṁskāra, sometimes called the "coming-of-age ceremony," is a rite of passage performed in some Southern Indian traditions to honor a girl's first menstruation—it celebrates her transition into womanhood and acknowledges her capacity to create life. Tīja, celebrated in parts of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and their diasporas is a vibrant women's festival focused on marital harmony, female friendships, and spiritual development. During Varalakṣmī Vratam, women venerate

¹ Other women include: Romasha, Apala Atreyi, Vishvavara Atreyi, Shashvati Angirasi, Godha, Suditi Angirasa, Jarita Sharnga, Agastyasya Svasaisham Mata, and Kashipa Bharadvaji

² For example, the Devī Māhātmyam, Lalitopākhyāna, and Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa, among others

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Lakṣmī for prosperity and well-being, often involving their daughters in the ceremonies to pass on spiritual knowledge. These celebrations not only mark important stages of life, but also emphasize that women play an essential role in preserving spiritual traditions and power within the home and community.

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Discussion Questions

Set 1

- In what ways does the Hindu concept of Śakti challenge or expand traditional Western ideas of gender and power in religion?
- How is feminine power portrayed differently in Hindu Dharma traditions compared to other religions you may know?
- Do you think the idea of Śakti as a divine force could influence how societies view leadership and authority?

Set 2

- Hindu Dharma traditions teach that both masculine and feminine qualities exist in all people. How might this belief shape how individuals understand their own gender identity and spiritual roles?
- What does it mean to say that spiritual identity is not tied to biological sex?
- How could this idea be helpful in conversations about gender identity today?

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Activity 1

Embodying the Divine: Movement and Meaning in Hindu Dharmas

Materials:

- Open space for movement (classroom with desks pushed aside or a multipurpose room)
- Index cards or slips of paper with different Hindu deities or energies written on them
- A Bluetooth speaker for soft instrumental Indian music (optional for ambiance)

Teacher Instructions:

1. Start by having students as a whole class walk slowly around the space. Prompt them to move their bodies to reflect:

- “What might ‘masculine’ energy feel like in movement? Try walking with structure, strength, and single-minded purpose.”
- “Now try ‘feminine’ energy— strength with organic purpose, fluidity, grace, nurturing.”

2. Discuss how both energies are valid and valuable in society. Discuss how Hindu Dharmas see them as complementary, not opposing.

3. Divide students into small groups (3-5) and give each group a pair of deities or energies, such as:

- Pārvatī & Śiva
- Lakṣmī & Viṣṇu
- Rādhā & Kṛṣṇa
- Sītā & Rāma
- Ardhanārīśvara (combined form of Pārvatī and Śiva)
- Śakti as universal energy (can be a solo or whole group representation)

Take a moment to point out that in Hindu teachings, the feminine energy is generally referred to before the masculine energy!

Pārvatī – Śiva

Śiva embodies pure consciousness, stillness, and transcendence, the unchanging awareness underlying all existence. Pārvatī embodies the dynamic creative energy that animates and manifests the multiverse. Śiva is the silent, witnessing principle; Pārvatī is the active, expressive force of life and transformation. Pure consciousness provides grounding and awareness, while

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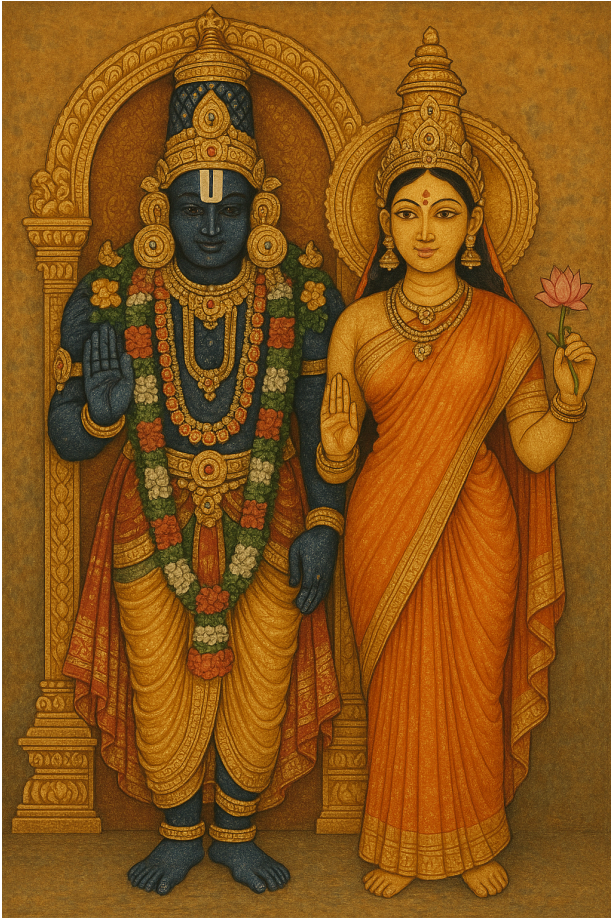
energy brings movement, love, and vibrant life. Together they form a harmonious wholeness of being, leading to spiritual balance, creativity, and awakening.



Lakṣmī-Viṣṇu

Viṣṇu embodies cosmic preservation, order, and sustaining consciousness, while Lakṣmī represents abundance, prosperity, beauty, and the nourishing energy that supports life. Viṣṇu maintains harmony and stability; Lakṣmī's energy provides the material and spiritual wealth that makes preservation possible. Together they embody the harmony of spiritual purpose and material well-being, ensuring both internal and external fulfillment.

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Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa

Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa embody the eternal dance of divine love, where Rādhā represents the joyful and blissful nature of the self, and Kṛṣṇa represents the all-attractiveness of pure being. Kṛṣṇa is the source of divine love and delight, drawing all hearts toward himself, while Rādhā is the highest expression of loving devotion and surrender. Their energies interact in mutual longing and union. Rādhā's devotion invokes Kṛṣṇa's compassionate presence, and Kṛṣṇa's presence deepens Rādhā's love. Together they embody the inseparability of lover and beloved, showing that divine love is both the path and the goal.

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Sītā-Rāma

Sītā embodies devotion, compassion, and the receptive strength of the heart, while Rāma represents virtue, courage, and steadfast leadership. Sītā's faithful love and inner resilience complement Rāma's commitment to virtue and ethical responsibilities. Sītā provides the emotional depth and grace that soften Rāma's disciplined, principled nature, while Rāma's integrity offers protection and guidance to Sītā's devotion. Together they represent the ideal harmony of love and duty, showing how inner virtue and outer action support each other in life's trials. Their union reflects the balance between heart-centered devotion and unwavering commitment to virtuous living.

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Ardhanārīśvara

Ardhanārīśvara embodies the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies, uniting Śiva and Pārvatī together in a single body. This deity symbolizes the inherent balance of opposites: stillness and movement, detachment and engagement, transcendence and immanence. The two principles interact as complementary forces, each incomplete without the other, showing that wholeness arises through their integration. Ardhanārīśvara reveals that emanation, harmony, and liberation depend on the dynamic balance of awareness (Śiva) and energy (Śakti). This form embodies the essential unity of dualities within every being and the cosmos.

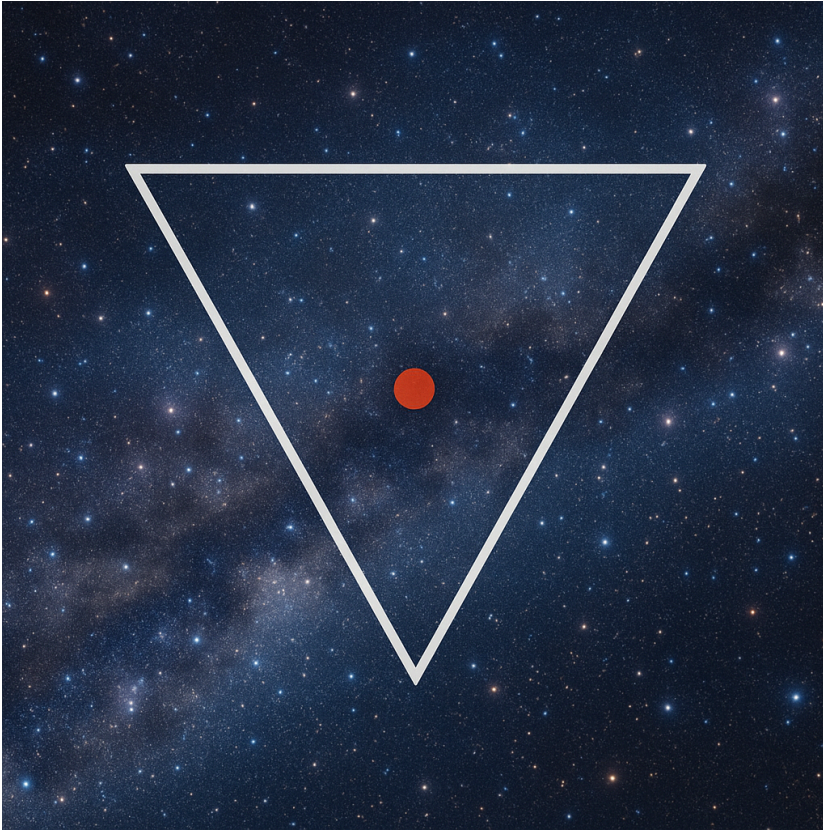
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Śakti

Śakti is the primal, dynamic energy of the multiverse: the force of emanation, transformation, and movement that underlies all existence. She embodies power, vitality, intuition, fertility, and the capacity for both nurturing and destruction. Śakti is an active, manifest aspect of divinity, expressed through various forms representing different facets of feminine power. Śakti is ever-changing, vibrant, and creative, bringing consciousness into expression. Ultimate Śakti is the divine energy that animates all life.

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4. Have each group create a short movement sequence or tableau/pose (30 seconds–1 minute) that shows:

- The energy or qualities of each deity
- How the two energies interact, balance, or support each other
- The idea of *unity*, *cooperation*, or *divine partnership*

Tell students they will create a movement sequence or frozen pose (tableau) that shows the qualities of each deity and how those energies interact or support one another. Their goal is to express unity, cooperation, or divine partnership through movement. Have students start by discussing the meaning or symbolism of their deities, then work together to physically represent those ideas using simple movements, shapes, or stillness. Encourage them to think symbolically and creatively. For example, how can they use body shapes, levels, space, or stillness to communicate these ideas? They should begin by discussing what each deity represents, then work together to choreograph a short sequence or arrange a tableau that brings those qualities to life in a physical and expressive way.

Optional: Play instrumental music softly in the background for rhythm and ambiance.

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5. Each group presents their movement or tableau to the class. After each presentation, ask the class:

- What qualities of the sacred feminine or masculine did you notice?
- How did the group show balance or unity?

Ask each group: How did it feel to express these energies with your body instead of just words?

6. Have students reflect on the activity by writing briefly or discussing in small groups on one or more of the following prompts:

- What did you learn about the sacred feminine or gender balance by moving instead of just talking?
- How did this experience challenge or expand your ideas about gender and spirituality?
- Which deity or energy did you connect with most, and why?

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The Gap Between Ideals and Reality

Discussion Question

Ask students, “Can a religion teach equality, but still have inequality in how people live it out? Why do you think there can be a gap between spiritual beliefs and social practices?”

Allow for responses and discussion.

Tell students, “Many religions teach equality, but social and historical forces can change how those teachings are practiced. In Hindu Dharmas, women once held powerful spiritual roles, but over time, outside influences like colonialism reshaped those roles. Let’s look at how Hindu beliefs about gender were affected and how people are working to reconnect with the original ideals.”

Information

Although some of the earliest Hindu sources of knowledge, like the Vedas and Upaniṣads, include many examples of empowered women as spiritual leaders, philosophers, and poets, gender roles in Hindu society became more restrictive over time. In ancient sources, women like Lopamudrā, Maitreyī, and Gārgī were respected scholars. Women had the right to study sacred knowledge, own property, and participate in ceremonies. Hindu teachings emphasized balance between masculine and feminine qualities and described the divine in both male and female forms.

However, as millennia passed, historical, political, and economic changes began to affect how society functioned—including how women were treated. One of the most dramatic shifts happened during British colonial rule in India (mid-1700s to 1947).

The British imposed new laws and policies that reshaped Hindu society in ways that reflected Victorian European values, which were much more conservative about gender roles. For example:

- The British outlawed some traditional Hindu practices they didn’t understand, and promoted Western-style patriarchy in areas like inheritance, marriage, and education.
- The British established Sharia-inspired law for Indian Muslims, and for everyone else they enforced legal codes modeled on the Manusmṛti (which was not followed by most Hindu Dharma traditions) in ways that excluded women from property rights and access to religious education.
- British schools and courts often replaced traditional Hindu customs with laws that favored men as the only religious or family authorities.

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As a result, practices that had once supported gender equality began to fade, and patriarchal structures became more widespread because of outside pressure and colonization.

Understanding this history helps students see that not all gender-based restrictions in Hindu society come from Hindu Dharmas' teachings themselves. Many of the limits placed on women—like being denied access to sacred texts, religious education, or leadership—were the result of outside influences like colonization, social pressures, and reinterpretations over time. Hindu Dharmas' foundational teachings actually present a more inclusive and spiritually balanced view of gender, celebrating the sacred feminine and the complementary nature of masculine and feminine qualities.

Today, only seven decades after the colonial period ended, many Hindu communities and spiritual leaders are actively working to reconnect with those original ideals. Women are now training to become priests, scholars, and spiritual leaders in traditions where that was once denied to them. In both India and around the world (including the United States), Hindu women are leading ceremonies, performing Vedic rituals, and managing temples. There are now entire schools and organizations dedicated to teaching the Vedas and Sanskrit to girls—something that was discouraged for generations. Festivals, temple leadership roles, and spiritual discourse are increasingly open to all genders, and the contributions of female saints and reformers are being rediscovered and celebrated.

Voices of Resistance and Reform

Long before modern feminism, Hindu women saints used poetry, music, and spiritual leadership to challenge injustice and reclaim sacred roles. During the Bhakti movement—a spiritual revival that emphasized personal devotion to the Supreme Being—many women wrote powerful songs of protest and love.

Lal Ded, a 14th-century mystic from Kashmir, used poetry to challenge religious rules and advocate for direct spiritual experience. She is best known for her deeply spiritual poems called vakhs—short, powerful verses that express her personal journey toward enlightenment. In one of her most famous verses, she writes:

“Up, woman! Go make your offering. Take wine, meat and a cake fit for the Divine. If you know the password to the Supreme Place, you can reach wisdom by breaking the rules.”

Another poet, Bahinābāī, strongly criticized injustice:

“Being married she has to fulfill her family duties: but she must have the craving for spiritual salvation too... Whenever it pleases him, my husband beats me a lot, binds me like a bundle of sticks... My husband earned a living through practicing Veda. Where is the Divine in this? ... But my mind has taken a vow. I will not leave singing for devotion, even if I die.”

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These voices laid the foundation for later reformers like Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule, who fought for women's education and equality.

Progress and Leadership Today

Thanks to both ancient philosophy and modern reform efforts, Hindu Dharmas today include many women spiritual leaders and scholars. Women perform Vedic ceremonies and serve as priests both in India and abroad. More organizations and temples have started to train and ordain women from all backgrounds.

Modern spiritual leaders like Gurumayi Chidvilasananda and Mata Amritanandamayi (also called "the hugging saint") have international followings.³ Temples and spiritual communities are increasingly inclusive—some even elect women as presidents or spiritual heads.

While there is still progress to be made, Hindu Dharmas' deep reverence for the sacred feminine and their acknowledgment of gender as fluid and spiritual make them powerful sources for rethinking gender identity and roles in today's world.

³ Other examples include Sharada Devi, Bhairavi Brahmani, Kalavati Mata, Anandamayi Ma, Mataji Krishnabai, Anandi Ma, Matrusri Anasuya Devi, Dadi Janki, Mirra Alfassa, Ma Yoga Shakti, Shree Maa, Anandmurti Gurumaa, Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari, Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, Sri Guruma Madhobi Maa, Mira Sai Ma, Satyasangananda Saraswati, Parvathy Baul, Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, Sri Karunamayi, Sai Maa, Mother Meera.

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Activity 2

Allow students to work individually or in pairs.

Throughout history, many Hindu women used their voices, poems, songs, and devotion to speak out against inequality, discrimination of all kinds, and the limitations placed on women. Their art was not only personal; it was a form of spiritual protest.

Here are just a few examples:

Lal Ded

Lal Ded was a mystic poet who lived in 14th-century Kashmir. Abused by her husband and in-laws, she left her marriage and dedicated her life to practicing spirituality. Wandering as an ascetic, she spoke directly to the Divine through her poetry. One of her verses says to the Supreme Being:

“Wrapped up in Yourself, You hid from me. All day I looked for you. And when I found You hiding inside me, I ran wild, playing now me, now You.”

Mīrābāi

Mīrābāi was a Rajput princess who lived in the 16th century. She defied expectations by refusing to follow the traditional role of a royal wife and instead devoted her life to Kṛṣṇa. Through her devotional songs, she challenged the authority of her in-laws who told her how to live. One of her songs says:

“I have found a place in the refuge of my Lord; The world finds fault with me, but I am safe in the arms of love.”

Bahiṇābāi

Bahiṇābāi was a 17th-century poet and spiritual leader. She wrote about suffering abuse from her husband as he did not approve of her devotional practices, and the challenges of being a spiritual woman in a male-dominated society. Despite this, she remained committed to her inner truth and spiritual path. In one powerful line, she says:

“He beats me, binds me like a bundle of sticks... But I will not stop singing to the Supreme, even if I die.”

Your Turn: Create Your Voice for Justice

Now it's your turn to use art, poetry, music, or symbolism to speak out just like these women did.

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Ask yourself:

- What injustice in the world today makes you want to speak up?
- What does your inner voice say about that injustice?
- What do you believe needs to change?

You can write a poem, draw a symbolic image, write a song, or create any other kind of artistic piece that expresses your truth. Use your creativity to inspire awareness, healing, or action just like the Hindu saint-poets did.

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Wrap Up

Throughout the lesson we explored how Hindu Dharmas offer unique views of gender that honor both the sacred feminine and masculine as equally divine and interconnected. We learned that early Hindu sources of knowledge uplifted women as spiritual leaders, philosophers, and poets, and that the self is seen as beyond gender.

But we also saw how history, especially colonialism, changed how those beliefs were lived out, leading to restrictions that weren't part of the original teachings. Despite that, Hindu communities today are actively reclaiming those early ideals, with women leading ceremonies, becoming priests, and inspiring change.

This lesson reminds us that identity, spirituality, and power are not fixed; they evolve. And when we understand the difference between a tradition's true teachings and the social systems that shape it, we can begin to imagine a more just and balanced world.

Assessment

Ask students to complete one or more of the following before leaving class:

- One thing I learned about gender in Hindu Dharmas that I didn't know before:
- One question I still have about the sacred feminine or gender identity:
- One way this lesson connects to the world I live in today:

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Homework Assignment

Throughout Hindu history, women have played powerful roles as saints, poets, spiritual leaders, scholars, and reformers. These women have not only shaped traditions, but also challenged ideas about gender, identity, and power in meaningful ways. In this assignment, you'll choose one important Hindu woman and explore how she has influenced the way people think about gender and the sacred feminine.

Your goal is to learn about her life, what she stood for, and how her story still matters today.

Choose one Hindu woman from the list below (or another with your teacher's approval), and research the following:

1. Who was she? Include time period, background, and major life events.
2. What did she do? Describe her contributions—was she a poet, saint, reformer, spiritual leader, or ancient queen?
3. How did she influence ideas about gender or spirituality? Did she challenge norms, inspire change, or redefine the role of women in any way?
4. Why does she matter today? Reflect on what you learned and how her story connects to current conversations about gender identity or equality.

Use credible news sources to research your chosen event to answer the questions below:

Women to Choose From:

Historical Saints and Poets

Mīrābāi – Devotional poet and Kṛṣṇa devotee who rejected the responsibility to bear children, which royal family norms expected her to do.

Lal Ded– Mystic poet who defied conventions and was dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual truth

Bahiṇbāi – Saint who wrote about gender, suffering, and spiritual devotion.

Janābāi – Domestic worker and saint-poet from the Bhakti movement.

Vedic and Scriptural Women

Lopamudrā – Vedic philosopher and wife of Sage Agastya; composer of hymns.

Maitreyī – Vedic scholar who debated the meaning of the self and immortality.

Gārgī Viduṣī Vācakanvī – Great philosopher in the *Upanishads*, known for spiritual insight.

Sītā – Heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*; symbol of strength, loyalty, and devotion.

Draupadī – Central figure in the *Mahābhārata*; known for dignity and courage.

Modern Spiritual and Social Leaders

Role of the Feminine

Anandamayi Ma – 20th-century mystic and teacher who inspired spiritual seekers worldwide.

Amma (Mata Amritanandamayi) – Known as the “hugging saint,” leads humanitarian and spiritual missions.

Gurumayi Chidvilasananda – Female head of a major spiritual lineage.

Savitribai Phule – Social reformer and educator who fought for women’s education and equality between all communities.

Tarabai Shinde – Early feminist and writer who critiqued patriarchy in the Hindu society of her time