Respecting our Wise Men
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IN MY OPINION

Respecting our Wise Men

India's village pandits deserve our highest esteem rather than the typical, unwarranted criticism

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Although I have lived away from my home in rural Himachal Pradesh for 30 years, I have returned frequently for visits. On these trips I have worked with at least a dozen pandits who performed religious ceremonies at our home and the homes of other relatives or villagers. I found them very sweet, cordial and accessible, deserving praise and higher wages and certainly not criticism.

I feel that there is much unfair criticism of pandits for accepting money for their services, among many other issues. I have attended kirtans where the musicians insulted the pandits for being hungry for money--but at the end of the session, those same men kept their eyes intently on the harmonium where people offered them money.

With little experience outside their own villages, people think that only their own local priests take money for religious services. Salaried officials take bribes and shirk work. We pay a fee toward teachers' salaries and pensions. The benefit of going to school goes to the student, and that of a religious ceremony to the host. Pandits, too, have their families to support; yet it is the pandit--who typically does not even contract how much he will be paid, but rather helps villagers unconditionally--who is insulted for accepting his genuine, charitable income.

India lives in her villages, and pandits epitomize the ideals of village culture. Villagers know their pandit from his childhood. He has served as a model human to earn his honored position. The consistency in his character and behavior is awe-inspiring. Throughout the functions I've attended in homes, if anyone became angry, the pandit remained calm. His tolerance disseminates among villagers. His sermons and advice help keep stress and tension under control, cultivating a sense of brotherhood and ameliorating potential burdens on law enforcement. His presence is a strong deterrent against drinking in the villages.

The pandit's arrival at a home models religious discipline. Children observe how the pandit removes his shoes, washes his hands, chants the mantra Aum. His words of spirituality and his bhajans are practical. Hearing a pandit chant Sanskrit by rote, schoolchildren are encouraged to memorize their lessons.

Besides Vedic prayers for peace, progeny and prosperity, a pandit helps villagers by performing house blessings, weddings and death ceremonies. He speaks respectfully as he walks through a village. If someone touches his feet or greets him, he responds reverentially. He performs pujas in villagers' homes for the benefit of the elderly who can't travel to distant temples.

By talking to a pandit, village folk are able to spiritualize their problems. He draws from ancient scriptures and great epics to encourage them. He freely sits in shops and homes to answer their questions and gives time for them to seek his advice. He quietly leaves if the talk turns to violence, meat, liquor, adultery, theft or inappropriate jokes.

Pandits are instrumental in arranging marriages between boys and girls of different villages. I witnessed one marriage that occurred even after the pandit who was consulted counseled against it upon seeing the horoscopes of the boy and girl. It was a failure from day one. Perhaps if pandits are sidelined, more marriages will be in trouble.

I have never seen a pandit terminate a ceremony and go home murmuring for want of money. Though they have known that I'm a nonresident Indian, not one has ever asked for any especially high donations. Most of them did not even look at what was offered, but continued with the mantras. It would be interesting to calculate the

total expense of a wedding and the proportion paid to the priest--yet when our daughter was married, instead of taking the grains that were offered, the priest requested that we donate them to a kitchen for orphans.

I have found India's village pandits simple, sharing and caring. We must learn to appreciate our priests and treat them with respect, to strengthen them, not weaken them.

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