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Ordination of Indrani Rampersad Stirs Debate Over Female Role in Religion

Paras Ramoutar, Trinidad

In an impressive initiation ceremony at the Seereeram Memorial Vedic School in Montrose, Trinidad, Indrani Rampersad was ordained as Pandita-the first ever official woman priest in Trinidad. Rampersad, a member of the Arya Parthinidhi Sabha of Trinidad, Inc. (Trinidad's Arya Samaj), was inducted on Wednesday before an array of dignitaries. Among them were Zalayhar Hassanaali, wife of the Prime Minister, Hindu government ministers Lenny Saith and Ralph Maraj, House Speaker Occah Seepaul and several parliamentarians and diplomats. The ordination brought statements pro and con from the Caribbean nation's leaders, as well as an examination of the role of women as priests and spiritual leaders from the early Vedic times until today. Pandit Ramcharan Gosine, a government senator, went on record that he supports the ordination of women as panditas because it is sanctioned by the Vedas. "As a person of conscience, I feel that women aspiring to be priests should be allowed to do so. This nation now needs more spirituality, and there are none better than women to do the job." The growing number of women priests in several countries is fueled not by an "equality" movement, but, by the fact that male priests are unable to meet the needs

of the community, or it is felt that the men are not performing their religious duties with the proper care and devotion. On the day of the induction, Professor Chintamani Lakshmanna, the High Commissioner of India, noted that women panditas were present in India from "time immemorial" and that the many foreign invasions of India changed this. He congratulated Pandita Indrani for reviving this tradition in the Caribbean, home to over half a million Hindus. More panditas have come forward in India over the past few decades and Pandita Indrani is symbolic of a resurgent Hindu spirit, he stressed. In a press release from the Arya Parthinidhi Sabha, Vice President, Pandit Sadanan Ramnarine stated, "The Vedas are the final authority for all Hindus. The Arya Samaj, or the people who subscribe to the basic principles of noble living as outlined by its founder, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, are not sectarian, since the Vedas are not sectarian, but are universal in their view. The Vedas and Vedic culture do indeed support the education of women, and women and men shared equal status in Vedic times. With the fall in the status of women came a parallel fall in Hindu civilization." There are women panditas in the Arya Samaj in Africa, India, Guyana, North America, and the East. The ordination aroused strong criticism too. The Secretary General of the Sanatana Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS), Satnarine Maharaj, denounced Rampersad, saying she represented neither the wider Hindu community nor Hindu women. "The Maha Sabha does not recognize women in the priesthood just as the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans do not recognize women as priests," said Maharaj. He was unaware that the Anglicans have recently approved the ordination of women. The Arya Samaj is a Hindu sect radically different from the orthodox Sanatanist tradition. Claiming that they represented a mere two percent of Trinidad's Hindu population, Maharaj acidly commented that this was a free democracy and anyone was free to act as they wished, "even if

it is to make fools of themselves." Two other women, he pointed out, have been practicing as panditas "but outside the mainstream." Pandita Rampersad studied the doctrine of Hindu philosophy at home and in India. After years of scholarship, she satisfied the examiners of the APS and the Pandit's Council of Trinidad. She holds a BA degree in geography, Indian Philosophy and English Literature from Banaras Hindi University, India (1976). In 1988, she completed a post-graduate course in Indian writing in English at the same university. She has also contributed articles to Hinduism Today. Maharaj's reaction to Rampersad's induction was not unexpected. In the feature address at Wednesday's ceremony, attorney Amrika Tiwary anticipated a heated debate on its propriety. She argued, however, that it was sanctioned in the Vedas but warned that "there are still persons, chiefly male, in our society who insist on discriminating against women and attempt to find scriptural jurisdiction for this." In his press release, Pandit Ramnarine responded to the critics, "The Arya Pratinidhi Sabha is the second largest Hindu organization in Trinidad and does not wish to wrangle over figures. It places its full authority in the Vedas alone. The Arya Samaj was founded in 1875 in India and is a reform movement that has had the greatest impact on Indian society in the modern era. They were the first to educate women and denounce superiority on the grounds of birth, race, gender and so on. Equality and mobility had to be achieved by actions. "We cannot credit Mr. Sat Maharaj, who is neither a pandit nor one versed in the Vedas, with the authority to interpret the rights of women as they existed in Vedic times and as are contained in the Vedas. Mr. Sat Maharaj's concerns should not be about Mrs. Indrani Rampersad's becoming Pandita Indrani Rampersad, but should rather be directed to the exodus of the many Maharajas, Singhs and others from the Hindu fold to other churches." Speaking on the issue, Ravindranath Maharaj, founder and

President of the Hindu Prachar Kendra, said, "It would seem that we have an inhibition so deep-seated in the Hindu psyche that we are unable to capitalize on the best resources in our society, in order to explore our fullest potential. In India and in many parts of the globe, women are increasingly participating at the highest level and in all spheres of Hindu deliberations. They have not been found less than their menfolk in skill, vision, spirituality and the ability to advance the cause of Hindu Dharma in their local context as well as in international forums. As the Hindu civilization impacts internationally, it has to anticipate challenges and respond in a way that does not compromise its values, but pulls all its resources together-establishing itself in a contemporary mold. As Hinduism continues to respond to the dynamics and challenges of its international presence, it will find many voices, sometimes seemingly different, but they must not be viewed as conflicting. Right now, this is no more an issue. There are many challenges facing our community that require all our attention and energies." Dr. Anil Sooklal, a Sanatanist Hindu and lecturer in Hindu studies from South Africa, was distressed by the negative reaction. The ordination of a pandita should be welcomed by the Hindu community at large, he declared. "The ordination of a pandita is perfectly in keeping with tradition from a scriptural, as well as historical, standpoint. It is a non-issue to debate whether a woman should be ordained as a pandita, because that has been the case from the dawn of history. Women have always had esteemed positions and equality with men. It is only in India, because of the foreign domination, that women were relegated to a subordinate role. This is not an issue in South Africa. We have close to 70 panditas in the Arya Samaj there, and we also have pandits fully functional within the Sanatanist tradition. Any opinion that argues against this historic occasion goes against the grain of Hindu philosophy and is a step backwards.

Such energy should be used creatively in cementing Hindu solidarity and working towards the betterment of Hindu society and the society of Trinidad as a whole. The ordination of a Hindu pandita should pave the way for the upliftment of women in this country." Raveena Sarran-Persad, president of the Hindu Women's Organization, said that women in Vedic times received the upanayan sanskar which accorded them the privilege to read and study the scriptures. "Pandita Indrani Rampersad has been inducted under the APS to practice as a pandita and we have no hesitation in accepting her," avowed the women of HWO. Address: Mrs. Indrani Rampersad, c/o Trindad Guardian, Mid-Centre Mall, Chaguanas, Trinidad.

Women Priests, Gurus And Sannyasinis of Today

Women play a paramount role in the preservation and promotion of the Sanatana Dharma. Traditionally they have been responsible for the religious vibration of the home, training of the children and observance of family rites. Since Vedic times, women have also been teachers, seers, poets, mystics and great yoginis. They have created and maintained ashrams and centers for training.

Women as Religious Leaders

Here's just a partial list of women saints actively promoting Hinduism in the world today or in the recent past: Mata Amritanandamayi Ma, India and USA, voted one of three "Presidents" of Hinduism by the Hindu Host Committee of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions; Shree Ma, India and USA; Sushuri Siddhesvari Devi, Canada; Mataji Nirmala Devi, England; Vimala Thakar, India; Dhaneswari Devi, Kashmir, India; Swami Savitripriya, USA; Mother Meera, Germany; Srimata Gayatri Devi, USA; Swami Chidvalasananda, SYDA, India and USA; Devi Parvati, USA; Pravrajika Ajayaprana Mataji, Australia; Andavananda Mataji, India; Sunita Ramaswamy, USA; Swami Indra Puri, Austria; Swami Sivananda Radha, Canada; Kapila Vatsayayan, India; "The Mother," Aurobindo Ashram, India; Dr. Lakshmi Kumari, India; Mata Bhagavati Devi Sharma, India; Mataji Indra Devi, Argentina; Mother

Krishnabhai, India; Ma Yoga Shakti, USA; Meera Devi, USA; Daya Mata, USA. Dr. Siva Brinda Devi is the President of the World Hindu Woman Organization and the first woman Aadheenam Kartar, monastery head, in South India. Vibhuti Sai Baba initiated her into Sannyas in 1971. In 1983 she took the reins of the Thilakavathiyar Thiruvarul Aadheenam with blessings from the Sankaracharya and the Thondaimandala and Perur Aadheenam Kartars. Women as Priests

There are organizations and ashrams in several parts of the world actively engaged in training and ordaining women to perform priestly functions. Here are a few examples: South Africa's Arya Pratinidhi Sabha (the South Africa equivalent of India's Arya Samaj) has officially ordained seventy panditas since 1975. Panditas Vidyawatia Satgar, Dharamdevi Singh and Pandita Gyanwatie Parthab are just a few. Among their many religious duties, the panditas perform havan, traditional Vedic fire ceremony, and are qualified to administer all the samskaras. In Pune, India, are the Udyan Prasad Mangal Karyalaya, the Shankar Seva Samiti and the Vedanta Mandal-three thriving centers that train women to chant Vedic mantras and perform the various rites. Founded by Shankarrao Thatte in response to the careless manner men were executing the rites and carried on by Shughangi Bhalerao, these schools train hundreds of women, some of whom have become the preferred choice for Vedic services. They serve in Pune, but have also travelled abroad. Also in Pune is an ascetic order of kanyas, maiden brahmacharinis, called the Upasani Kanya Kumari Sthan. This order was established by Guru Upasani Baba Maharaj, disciple of Sai Baba of Shirdi. Kanyas enter the ashram with vows of physical purity, strict celibacy and daily worship. They are expert in performing the srauta ritual and the Ganesha, Vishnu, Rama, Guru, Chandra, Surya and Rudra yagnas. Paid to teach Vedic mantras, they attend religious events in the village for this purpose. Presently, there are

forty-eight kanyas at the ashram, though, at its height, there were 150 brahmacharinis there. At Australia's Sri Visvanath Temple-currently under construction in Sydney-the visa expired for the official priest, requiring him to return to India. Swami Chidanand Saraswati, Muniji, of Parmath Niketan, has since given his blessings to a new lay priesthood. The men now perform the simple Sivalingam pujas in the evenings and on the weekends. On weekdays, three sisters perform the rites: Shantha Manohari Sriganeshan, Gowri Manohari Kandarajah and Jeya Manohari Ponnambalam. Though these women would never call themselves priests, they are an excellent example of how women are coming forward wherever there is a need. And, with the blessings of Muniji, the Hindu community fully supports them. The Vedic Woman

The Position of women in Hindu Civilization by A.S. Altekar of Banares Hindu University assesses the priestly status attainable by women in Vedic times. The following are excerpts: Till about the beginning of the modern era, upanayana or the ceremonial initiation into Vedic studies was as common in the case of girls as it was in the case of boys. In prehistoric times lady poets themselves were composing hymns, some of which were destined to be included even in the Vedic Samhitas. According to the orthodox tradition itself as recorded in the Sarvanukramanika, there are as many as twenty women among the seers or authors of Rig Veda. Some of these may have been mythical personages; but internal evidence shows that Lopamudra, Visvavara, Sikata Nivavari and Ghosha, the authors of Rig Veda 1.179; 5.28; 8.91; 9.81 11-20; and 10.39 and 40 respectively, were women in flesh and blood who once lived in Hindu society. The authors of 10.145 and 159 are also undoubtedly ladies. Women students were divided into two classes, brahmavadinis and sadyodvahas. The former were lifelong students of theology and philosophy; the latter used to prosecute their studies till

their marriage at the age of 15 or 16. They used to learn by heart the Vedic hymns prescribed for the daily and periodical prayers and for those rituals and sacraments in which they had to take an active part after their marriage. Like men, women used to offer regularly their Vedic prayers both morning and evening. For instance, in more than one place in the Ramayana, Sita is described as offering her daily Vedic prayers. In the philosophical tournament held by King Janaka of Videha [related in the Brihandaranyaka Upanishad] the subtlest philosophical questions were initiated for discussion by the lady philosopher Gargi, who had the honor to be the spokesperson of the distinguished philosophers at the court. The searching cross-examination of Yajnavalkya, the newly arrived philosopher, by Gargi shows that she was a dialectician and philosopher of a high order.