

[Hindu Temple Priests In America](#)

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Hindu Temple Priests In America

Pattabhiram, B. With the emergence of a number of Hindu temples in North America, the role of priests has become very crucial. The priests appear to be as varied as the Hindu deities. As they'd are to be brought from India, the process of immigration further complicates matters.

American Hindu temples have become centers of religion, culture and social activities for immigrant Indians. The average Hindu looks to the temple priest for religious and social functions. What is done by family priests or purohits in parts of India, such as performing home blessings and sacraments, must be performed by temple priests in America. Thus, a temple priest in America has to perform the role of a purohit as well as temple priest. Therefore, men of higher caliber than that of the Indian temple priest are required in America. But at a time when the "tribe of Vedic scholars" is practically vanishing in India, it is not really possible to get profound Vedic scholars to accept the priestly jobs in America, and the selection of eligible priests is becoming more and more difficult. Temple authorities are forced to accept mediocre priestly service.

Among the most difficult initial tasks is the spotting of qualified persons by temple managements who are not really competent to make such selections, although they are successful in their respective professions. Some of the recent arrivals are a testimony to this lack of experience.

It is widely recognized among temple authorities in the US that there is a great need to set up an organization in India to train priests for American Hindu temples. Many feel that the specially trained priest should be integrated of both Saivite and Vaishnavite traditions since most of the temples have both the deities. The difficulty here, however, cannot be blamed on the traditional division between Saivite and Vaishnavite, but in the fact that the Smarta liberal leaders (most notably those of Kanchi Peetham) encouraged the construction of hybrid, Vaishnava/Saiva temples with no regard to providing proper priests for their

modern invention. As a result, instances of Vaishnavite priests not attending Saivite deities and vice versa in the same temple are not lacking.

An organization styling itself as the Council of Hindu Temples in North America, and even in Europe, was brought into existence in 1984 by some well-meaning people. Like any new organization, it is going through the stage of teething troubles. A strong section thinks that it is just a clearing house of ideas of various temple members. Plus not all the temples in North America are represented on the Council. And as a sort of debating body of the same issues over and over again, it lacks teeth, not being an effective authoritative body. Because of several reservations voiced by leading members, its role almost becomes negligible. The Council is confronted with these and other impediments.

There is considerable feeling that either this Council should be streamlined by giving representation to all the Hindu temples, or a new organization should be brought into existence to solve the problem of adequate supply of unique priests to discharge the onerous responsibilities in this society. Such a body would work to provide a training center in India. However, the Council or some other body would clearly have to be cautious not to become a mere employment agency. It would also have to be careful not to misuse the special immigration privilege to smuggle in non-priests in the name of priests. The emergence of an authoritative body would ease the task of immigration authorities in issuing visas to eligible priests, as the Hindu priesthood is more complicated than that of other systems of religion. There would have to be orientation courses for incoming priests in American conditions and in the needs of the new class of Hindu Indians setting down in this country.

There is also a crying need, which might be filled by this Council, or by some other body, to tackle the problems of a growing Hindu society in America - for example, the generation of American-born Hindus with no Indian roots. Among their problems is that of language. Practical-minded observers believe the Council should conduct research into these various problems instead of remaining a faction-minded "political" type of organization. Whether its members can rise above their differences and take on the task before them is yet to be seen.

Lack of supply of adequate numbers of priests leads to "stealing" of priests by some temples, or desertion of employer-temples by the priests themselves. The causes are many for such developments. Newly-recruited priests are not fully

aware of American conditions. They are ignorant of vagaries of management, minimum wages, working hours, etc. In order to get more money for the temples, the priests are forced to work overtime without any compensation. Some temples are open for 12 to 14 hours. The priests forgo their food and rest. Naturally, priests are tempted to desert the employing temple to some other temple for higher remuneration.

The priests face other problems. The most common one is small gifts of money (Dakshina) from the devotees. The priests believe that these monies rightfully belong to them. Temple management thinks that all money received by priests should be remitted to the temple. The devotees, agreeing with the priests, sincerely believe that they should give something to the priests personally in addition to what they pay to the temple by way of fees for various services and hundi offerings. It has proven very difficult to reconcile the two viewpoints. The chasm has led to malpractice and a tremendous lack of trust. The priests will now not reveal what they receive from the willing devotees. And management suspects priests of cheating the temple.

According to tradition, management can not question the devotees about their offerings to the priests as long as the temple gets its official fees. However, this practice also gives an edge to the priests to pester devotees for dakshina.

Another cause for the desertion of priests is ill-treatment by the head priest. Some head priests have not allowed their juniors to perform priestly services but are instead used as their assistants. The seniors cannot tolerate a junior creating an image for himself. There are instances where such disgusted junior priests have either resigned or defected to other temples where there was promise of better treatment.

There is little doubt that the need of the day is to build up an orderly, enlightened and disciplined priesthood in America, where Hinduism is here to stay. Some of the small measures toward this prodigious goal are to regulate hours of work and to pay adequate remuneration. A third avenue suggested by a few: instead of depending solely upon the priests for temple income, special endowments should be created. Like everything done in the "American Way," even the Indian immigrants have thrown themselves forward in the same spirit, building temples in an almost blissful spirit of progress for the next generation. Now, as Hinduism comes of age in the West as a bonafide religion and not just an elusive shadow

behind new-age yoga teachings, the mature challenges of staffing and managing those temples needs to be squarely faced.