Priestly Patriarch
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AWARDS

Priestly Patriarch

Sri Sambamurthy Sivachariar is Hindu of the Year

The priestly profession has been greatly reduced in stature in the last two hundred years by the forces of secularization and worldliness which have swept across our planet at this time in the Kali Yuga. There are priests in India who are still paid the daily wages mandated under British rule, i.e. two rupeesÃ four US cents. Small wonder then that so many brahmin families have directed their children into other professions, leaving, we were told on good authority, only the least capable, if any, of the sons to continue in the priesthood.

Not so Sri T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar and his family in Tamil Nadu, South India. While he's not the only priest to maintain the skill and dignity of his tradition, he's certainly among those who have done it the best. An extraordinary priest in his own right, he's also trained his sons and sons-in-law (a bakers' dozen in all) as humble, devout and knowledgeable servants for the

temples of Lord Siva, the Goddess and the other Gods of the Hindu pantheon. As head of a large number of Sivacharyas, Sri Sambamurthy has trotted the globe dedicating temples and seeing to it that traditional ritual worship is followed. Sri Sambamurthy has garnered the respect of everyone who has met him, even those not normally generous in their regard for priests. In the process he may just well have presided over a great turning point for the Hindu priesthood, one in which the priests regain their old stature and are again acknowledged for their spiritual prowess in bringing God and the Gods into the temples through worship. For this exemplary leadership role, Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, has conferred the Hindu Renaissance Award upon Sri Sambamurthy Sivachariar as Hindu of the Year, 2001.

Starting in 1990, Hinduism Today has honored one eminent Hindu each year who has most impacted the faith and spread its values, compassion and profundity across the globe. Past renaissance winners are: Swami Paramananda Bharati ('90), Swami Chidananda Saraswati, "Muniji" of Parmath Niketan ('91), Swami Chinmayananda ('92), Mata Amritanandamayi Ma ('93), Swami Satchidananda ('94), Pramukhswami Maharaj ('95), Sri Satya Sai Baba ('96), Sri Chinmoy ('97), Swami Bua ('98), Swami Chidananda Saraswati of Divine Life Society ('99) and Ma Yoga Shakti ('00)

Sri Sambamurthy Sivachariar was born November 2, 1925 in the town of Thirumazhisai in Tamil Nadu, South India, son of the renowned priest Sri Shanmuga Sivachariar. He was trained in the priesthood, as all Sivacharyas are, at home under the tutelage of his father and relatives. Upon his marriage, he commenced his priestwork. A Sivacharya cannot perform puja in the temple unless he is married, his initiation into the rites requires the participation of his wife. Should she pass on before he does, he must withdraw from doing the worship.

Such is Sri Sambamurthy's expertise that now, at age 76, he has participated in more than 2,000 kumbhabhishekams, the most complex of all temple ceremonies, allacross India and in many other countries. Not for centuries, we were told, have so many temple dedications and rededications been performed. It is a sure sign of the resurgence of Hinduism within India and the continued devotion to God of the Hindus now spread in a hundred countries. In the course of it all, Sri Sambamurthy has rubbed shoulders with generations of presidents and prime ministers.

Sri Sambamurthy has presided over a number of special peace yagnas, fire ceremonies, for India's

welfare in times of famine and disasters. Outside of India, he has dedicated temples in Washington DC, Texas, Boston, Hawaii, UK, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Australia and Thailand. Many priests trained by him are serving around the world. He has also represented Hinduism at world religious conferences and received dozens of awards. Most recently he represented the Saivite priesthood at the Millennium Peace Summit of World Religious and Spiritual Leaders held at the United Nations in August, 2000.

When we reported on Sri Sambamurthy and the Sivachariya priests in our September/October 2000 issue, reporter Sivakamasundari Shanmugasundaram wrote, "I can easily say that Sri Sambamurthy commands the respect that he does all over the world because of two things, his spiritual demeanor and serenity and his unparalleled devotion." Every day without fail he performs an hour of personal worship of God. Every Monday he observes silence, no matter what the event transpiring or the VIPs present. He's a strict vegetarian, and observes all the rules of personal purity necessary to do the priestly work. Though he probably has more visa stamps

in his passport than most international businessmen, he's made no special attempt to profit from his popularity. In fact, when the government of India offered to give him the very valuable priest's house of the Kaaligambal Temple, where he is head priest, he refused, saying it should be retained for the next head priest.

Sri Sambamurthy is a leading member of the South India Archaka Sangam, the foremost association of Saiva priests. He and his sons are also actively training his family's young men in the priesthood.

Sri Sambamurthy is a forward-looking priest, aware of the needs of a global Hinduism. He's offered to train and ordain anyone as a priest who is willing to dedicate their life to the worship of Lord Siva and follow the disciplines of the priesthood. In this manner, he would establish new lineages, especially in other countries, of people born there. Similar new castes have been established as the need arose by gurus and priests throughout Hindu history.

We at Hinduism Today honor and respect the extraordinary effort Sri Sambamurthy Sivachariar has made to meet the spiritual needs of Hindus, especially Saivites, all across our planet Earth.

Sri T.S. Sambamurthy Sivachariarno. 96, Ramaswamy Street, Mannady, Chennai 600 001 India

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A Priestly Issue

A major concern of all siva-charyas today is the traditional hierarchy of priests who serve in a Siva temple. According to Sri V. Chandrasekara

Sivachariar, a close associate of Sambamurthy and instructor at the temple's priest training school, the priests regard Lord Siva himself as the head of the priesthood. Then come the Adi Saivan priests, who are the Sivachariars or Siva brahmins. According to Sri Chandrasekara, the Vedas hold that these Adi Saivas are the only ones who should perform worship in the sanctum sanctorum of a Siva temple. Next come the Maha Saivas, or Smartas and Anu Saivas or Shastriyas, who are not sanctioned to perform the main worship.

Today, however, law in India has mandated that anyone duly qualified in the government-run priest training schools may perform the main worship. The result is that many Smarta priests are entering the temple sanctums. This is more than just an issue of trying to protect special privileges. The Sivachariyas are uniquely qualified for the main worship, personally and philosophically. Sivacharyas believe in the reality of God Siva and the Gods as real Beings who exist in the Sivaloka, a plane of reality far more refined than the world in which we live.

Through his training, which takes place in his ancestral temple, the Sivacharya learns the mystical methods of worshipÃakin to the most advanced methods of meditationÃto open a channel between our world and the world of the Gods. A Smarta priest is at a disadvantage in such an endeavor, because the Smarta philosophy holds that the Gods we worship are only symbols of an impersonal cosmic reality, not real beings. The result of Smarta priests taking over the main worship is to lessen the power of the temple and thereby diminish devotees' access to the Gods who use the temples to channel

blessings.