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RELIGION

What Future the Priesthood?

Subramurthy Sivachariar explains the modern challenges facing his lineage worldwide

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My father and I, along with my four-year-old daughter, arrived at the Kalikambal Temple in Chennai, South India, mid-morning on February 21. We came to meet and interview for Hinduism Today the famed head priest of this Goddess temple, Dr. T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar. I had earlier met Sambamurthy when he conducted my parents' marriage rededication. When I had gazed at his face for a brief moment at the event, I could feel great serenity. Every sentence he spoke to me began with the words, "mother" or "sister." There was hardly anyone at that function who did not ask, "Who is that great soul who blessed the couple?" He has such a presence!

Though our interview was scheduled for two hours, Sambamurthy set aside his entire day, not allowing us to depart until early evening, to tell us the story of his family and his Saivite priest lineage. Now 75, he has served in the Kalikambal Temple since age 16 and participated in more than 2,000 kumbhabhishkekams at temples all over the world.

These elaborate rededication services require expertise; priests are ranked by them much the same way a concert pianist is known by his number of stage performances, or an artist by his number of solo exhibitions. In the course of it all, Sambamurthy has rubbed shoulders with generations of presidents and prime ministers. Yet he is a model of humbleness, as is his youngest son, Shanmugasundara Gurukkal. We witnessed Sambamurthy performing his daily personal worship of the Siva Lingam with dedication and extraordinary love.

I can easily say that Sambamurthy commands the respect that he does all over the world because of two things, his spiritual demeanor and serenity and his unparalleled devotion to the Goddess. Even when someone touches his feet for blessings, he will say, "Let this show of respect reach the Goddess's feet."

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. He is instrumental in programs of priest training through the South India Archakas Association. Many priests trained by him are serving around the world. He has also represented Hinduism at world religious conferences and received dozens of awards. So, I'm nervous.

As we began the interview, Sri.V. Chandrasekara Sivachariar, a close associate of Sambamurthy and instructor at the temple's

priest training school, explained that there is an hierarchy among Saivite priests. At the head of the priesthood is Lord Siva Himself, the One without a beginning. Then comes the Adi Saivan. These are the Sivachariars, or Siva brahmins, among whom my host ranks highly. According to 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 comes the Maha Saivas, or Smartas, and Anu Saivas or Shastriyas. As we discovered later in the interview, this hierarchy is very much an issue today. Due largely to lack of respect and poor working conditions, many families of Adi Saivas are turning to other professions. At the same time, government laws in India have opened the priest work in Siva temples to anyone of any lineage who is duly qualified in government schools.

Our interview session included Sambamurthy's immediate family as well as distinguished Sivachariars who work closely with him. They were all delighted that Hinduism Today has come forward to speak with them. They have had a long-term relationship with its publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami (known as Gurudeva), whom they hold in high regard. Sri Sivachariar said, "Gurudeva keeps up his word, always." The group in turn holds Sambamurthy in great esteem for the recognition that he has brought to the temple and to the Sivachariar clan.

Foremost on all their minds was the condition of the priesthood in India, and especially that of their own lineage, which they feel has gradually deteriorated over the years. They no longer enjoy the kind of respect or love from the devotees they had years ago. Says Sambamurthy, "A Hindu priest should be, but

isn't, given the same respect that a Christian or Muslim priest enjoys." They complained about low salaries and poor working conditions. But more than anything else, they felt hurt when the traditional duties of Sivachariars are done in the temples by non-Sivachariars, not of the Adi Saiva lineage. Those priests were of any caste, and educated in the government priest-training schools.

The Sivachariars think that no training school can provide one with the knowledge and the experience that one could gain by being a part of a Sivachariar's home, where there are opportunities to learn to be a good Sivachariar twenty-four hours a day. School learning is not the same as living the life, therefore they feel one must be allowed to be a Sivachariar only by birth.

For example, as we enjoyed a sumptuous lunch served by Bhuvaneshvari Ammal, Sambamurthy's wife, I saw their youngest son, Shanmugasundara Gurukkal, sitting down and performing his personal worship with utter concentration, bhakti and peace, despite the commotion in the house. If one could not see or hear any other part of the room but just Shanmugasundara performing puja, one would refuse to believe the noise and commotion in the house at that time. There were multiple conversations going on and the grandchildren were running about. Even these little ones did not fail to notice their uncle in worship amidst all the noise. That was indeed a kind of training not to be found in a government school.

However, Sambamurthy is not a narrow-minded castist. When

Hinduism Today discussed with him the issue of developing a Saivite priesthood for the new temple in Nadi, Fiji, he expressed his willingness to train and ordain anyone from the Fijian Hindu community "willing to commit their life to the worship of Siva and live according to the priest's disciplines." He would thereby create a new caste of brahmin priests, indigenous to Fiji. Similarly, other lineages of brahmins have been created in Hindu history when needed.

What he won't stand for is treating the priesthood as a means to make money through selling special treatment in the temple. Complains Sambamurthy, "The focus today in all walks of life is how to earn, and there is no one who wants to learn." The priesthood has become a fertile ground for those who are willing to please the affluent public and the government officials, while ignoring the actual duties. One should understand that in India, with a few notable exceptions, the temples are run by government-appointed officials, who may or may not be religious. Temple income goes into the government coffers, and only a portion is allocated back to the temples. Such a situation is rather difficult for Americans to understand, especially when, as in the USA, such government involvement in a church or temple is forbidden under the nation's constitutional requirement for "separation of church and state."

Many duty-conscious Sivachariars live below the poverty line. Sri V. Somasekara Sivachariar said, "We are being forced to draw the curtain or open the curtain in the sanctum sanctorum, perform puja and arati as per the wishes of the government officials. If we refuse or fail to do so, the official will suspend us from our duty right away."

The government has gone to the extent of grading temples as "A," "B," "C," etc., based on their income. A priest at a "A"-grade temple has a lot more advantages. He begins to look for the temple where he can make the most and keep his family happy, not serve God. The sense of duty and conscientiousness among priests is fading rapidly.

Sambamurthy says not a single penny should be allowed inside the temples. The fact that devotees make money donations to the priests tends to make the priests favor some devotees over others, especially when the priests' salary is so low, just Rs. 600 a month (US\$15.00)--hardly enough for a few days' expenses. Everyone else who serves in the temple has had their salary increased--even a guard receives Rs. 3,000.

Sambamurthy himself hands in every donation he receives at Kalikambal. He has even refused to accept ownership of the house traditionally set aside for the temple's head priest, so that the next head priest can live there. I doubt anyone else in Chennai would have refused the offer, considering the area's high property values.

When I first entered Sambamurthy's home, it seemed just like the temple, icons of Goddesses were everywhere, and sweet incense filled the air. The smile of his wife, Bhuvaneshvari Ammal,

conveyed a special warmth, love and openness. Only when he casually inquired after the reason for his teenage grandson's gloomy looks--and recommend a movie as the cure--did I realize this home has a normal side to it just like any other. He pointed to his five-year-old grandson and proudly explained what a great artist he is. "He just has to look at you once and he will be able to draw you just as you are." He and his wife have four boys and eight girls--twelve children in all--and now there are grandchildren. But many of those grandchildren are planning to choose other professions, not seeing a future in priest work.

Says Somasundara Sivachariar, "If one chooses to be a Sivachariar, there is no balance possible any longer between the family life and the temple duties. In the olden times temples had many servants: one assigned to make garlands; another to grind sandalwood paste; another to clean; and yet another to cook for the Gods in the proper orthodox manner. Today all of this, along with the daily worship, is done by a single Sivachariar. To top it off, the unreasonable government manager and affluent public needs to be pleased. All this leaves absolutely no family time for a Sivachariar,

or any priest, for that matter." Those Sivachariars who have served in temples abroad and in countries like the United States feel that the conditions are no better. Hinduism Today's publisher, Gurudeva, has recommended to a number of priest families in the US and Canada that they build and own their own temples, something possible under both country's laws. A few such temples exist now and are quite successful. As more priest-owned temples develop and succeed, the increased stature will reflect back to India, just as it has for many swamis and other religious leaders who first established successful missions in the West. The Sivachariars themselves would like to see the priest's salaries in India equal to that of a graduate in a good secular job. In the US, by comparison, a Catholic priest, Protestant minister or Jewish rabbi is paid at the rate of a mid-level corporate executive, and has the same social standing and community respect as a doctor or judge. It is notable, however, that all religions are having similar problems with a lack of candidates for the ministry and priesthood.

According to Shanmugasundara Gurukkal, "The

girls in the Sivachariar families are not willing to marry a Sivachariar. They are afraid a difficult life might unfold. They prefer to be married to an Adi Saiva who is not a Sivachariar." In Sambamurthy's family, only half his son-in-laws are priests; it is the same for other Sivachariar families. But there are some bright lights. Sambamurthy's youngest son has won academic acclaim in Sanskrit, and is now completing his PhD in Agamas.

Another issue for the priests is a proliferation of temples, most built without regard for Agamas, the traditional scriptures which govern temple construction, rituals, etc. Chandrasekara Sivachariar said, "In the past, nothing was allowed to be brought from outside into the temple. Flowers were grown in the temple garden, water was fetched from the temple well, cows inside the temple premises to provide milk for puja, etc., Today every offering to God comes from outside. The sacred feeling is not there anymore." Kalikambal Temple was built long before Chennai was an urban area; now its cramped space does not allow for gardens. Cows are still kept within the temple precincts, even though it is in a densely commercial area of town.

Another problem surfaced in our conversation: all priests are forced to retire at age eighty. Says Sambamurthy, "In the United States there is no retirement age for a judge because the government recognizes that as the judge gets older and older he gets better and better at what he does. It should be the same with Sivachariars." Adds Somasekara, "The older Sivachariars have so much to offer. Even if they just sit inside the temple and offer advice, that would be valuable."

Personally, I think that it is time for all of us to recognize that the Sivachariars are doing their duty to God, and that they are not out to please the public or the government in exchange for donations. A solution should be arrived at to enhance their life style and allow them to discharge their duties efficiently. A sense of equality will come if the public doesn't bring money in the temple. The government and the public should consider the Sivachariars to be the servants of God and not of themselves, and recognize that the Sivachariars are liaisons between the God that they serve and the people that they bless.

Amidst all these problems and despite his ill health, Sambamurthy marches on. He has been invited as a representative of Hinduism to the United Nation's "Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders" at the UN headquarters, New York, on August 28, 2000 (see www.millenniumpeacesummit.com). He is to present a paper on the role of religious leaders in achieving world peace. It is a sign that things might get better. Sambamurthy believes what one saint said, "The one who believes will never fail." And his young son Shanmugasundara is "very positive" about the future of his generation of priests.

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