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PRIESTHOOD

On Different Shores

Two men share how their careers fare in the US

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Dozens of temples have sprout-ed in US cities over the last 15 years. Trustees sought learned priests from India who, with proper visas, were flown in to officiate in the new facilities. They were often loaded with all the startup work, the natural growing pains of a new temple. Devotees only see their ritual duties--performing aratis, archanas and homas. But what are their own experiences? What is the priest's life like outside of India? I queried some of the priests practicing their ancient religion in the new land.

Narasimha Bhattar, 50, head priest at the Venkateshwara Temple near Malibu, California, has lived in the US since 1984, after serving 22 years in Srirangam, South India, where his family profession stretches 12 generations. "I perform the same rituals here," he says, "but the people are unusual--Indians from varied states and Americans, whose curiosity and interest in our religion fascinates me." Among the challenges, he finds that culture outside the temple is vastly different. "Violence, lust and illicit sex are propagated on TV.

These vibrations battle with the purity we strive to create in the community through the temple," Bhattar told me. "It's not like Srirangam, where you get the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi TV channel beaming hours of Veda chanting." He adds humorously, "In the temple, my priestly dress of dhoti and bare, shirtless shoulders works, but outside, even a grocery store will not accept me in that attire."

His family, wife Rajivi, daughter Vidya and son Vivek, now 21 and 17 respectively, joined him in 1989. Did the kids experience culture clash at school? "They liked America and became well adjusted," says Bhattar. "My son would tell me bad things other kids do, like drugs, and I would explain our Vedic tradition. When he saw bad things, he would put his hand on his yajnopaveeta (sacred thread), and pray that the kids' vices leave. They took vegetarian lunches from home." By proximity to Hollywood, Bhattar enjoys a rapport with a growing number of celebrities who visit his temple, including pop singer Madonna, who's said to be giving an undisclosed financial donation, and Michael Love of the Beach Boys, whom Bhattar takes to India every year for special pujas.

US temples are run by volunteer trustees, who are professionals in other areas and inexperienced religiously. Does this induce conflicts between priests and administrators? Bhattar reports no such friction. "Our expertise is different. The board of directors are my guardians," he says. "When a problem arises, I worship Lord Venkateswara with a confidence that His power will take care of everything."

Pandit Ravi Chandran, fortyish and single, a freelance priest in

California, views it differently. After serving nine years at Tirupati in India's deep south, Chandran worked a bit in Mauritius and came to the Siva Vishnu Temple in Livermore in 1983 as its first priest. But he quit in 1988 due to "temple politics." "Now I don't want to be an employee of anyone," he says. "I'm happy as a freelancer." Chandran is invited all over US for abhishekams and homas, "But once the job is completed, I leave, I do not expect the host to take me places," he shared. He does not charge a specific amount for services, but gives clues. "Service to God is priceless. I don't put a price tag on it," he says. Some are generous in paying, while others take advantage of him.

An adherent of the Smriti Shastras by birth and training, Chandran teaches Vedic chanting to small groups of people, and also trains them in how to perform special pujas. "My goal is to see that people know their religion properly and the mantras and shlokas, with precision and perfection in rituals. They do not have to run to me for everything," he expressed. Bhattar and Chandran have successfully shown the way for many more priests to settle on Western shores.