Priesthood: Pittsburgh Hosts First Priests' Meeting
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Priesthood

Pittsburgh Hosts First Priests' Meeting

Pujaris and temple management gather to discuss challenges and opportunities facing the Hindu priests in the US and Canada: Hinduism Today's analysis

Our editorial team did not originally plan to fly 5,000 miles from Hawaii to Pennsylvania to attend the short (day-and-a-half) First Hindu Mandir Priests Conference, April 27-28, 2012. But a last-minute examination of the program convinced us we needed to be there. Thirty-two priests and 40 adult and youth delegates representing over 20 US and Canadian temples explored the conference theme, "The Role of Priests in Sustaining Dharma in America," from four disparate viewpoints: temple management, Indian priest tradition, Caribbean and other diaspora pandit traditions and Western-raised youth. The conference was a project of the yearly VHP-organized Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference and was organized with the local support of Pittsburgh Hindu Jain Temple and the Sri Venkateshwara Temple.

This is not a comprehensive report on the conference, but an examination of two key issues it addressed: 1) the employment and treatment of the priests and 2) the evolution of Hindu temples in the West as they move beyond the functions of the typical temple in India. Dr. Sheenu Srinivasan, founder of the Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple Society, stated the latter issue succinctly: "While we have succeeded in building temples with attractive architecture and sculptures and staffed them with priests on visas, we have failed in the more important aspect of organizing these temples as centers of authoritative learning and spiritual support."

The Priest's Lot

Pandit Chandrashekar Kashavajjala of the Bharatiya Hindu Temple, Columbus, Ohio, was given the task of enumerating all the problems faced by priests who come to work in America. In a good-natured manner, he explained the gulf between what the priests thought would happen in the US, and what actually did happen--the inspiration for our editorial cartoon at right. It was a rare moment for the priests to

"get everything off their chests" before an influential group of temple trustees.

Chandrashekar's list of issues was extensive, including low salary, low yearly raises, poor housing, overwork and inadequate health insurance. In particular, the priests resented management's holding their passport--which is actually illegal under US law. Some temples have restricted priests from marrying within a certain number of years, usually two or three, after commencing work--and once they are married, temples have failed to provide housing for the couple or health insurance that covers the wife. Sometimes priests have been used as pawns in disputes between trustees, making them insecure. Finally, said Chandrashekar, "proper encouragement and appreciation needs to be given to the priest at a regular interval or after performing major rituals."

Forty-three percent of Hindus in the US earn more than $100,000/year. Most temple trustees are in this category, while the priests might be offered as little as $23,000/year to start--a huge disparity. Several speakers explained the priests want to attain the same standard of living as most of the temple devotees--to be able to "take care of their families," including providing a good education for their children. A priest at Tirupati temple in India, one of the richest religious institutions in the world, earns $3,600/year. He can be forgiven for thinking $30,000/year is a decent salary in the US. In fact, it is barely above the poverty line--$24,000--for a family of four. This income disparity was clearly an important issue for the priests, both practically and emotionally.

Such a disparity does not exist for Christian pastors, who are regarded in US communities as professionals on the level of lawyers or doctors. The average salary of a pastor is $85,000/year as of 2012. He or she usually holds a master's degree and has extensive responsibility for the church's operation.

The Temple's Expanding Role

In his keynote, "Elevating the Profile of Priests," Pandit Roopnauth Sharma said the priests should be key figures in sustaining the spiritual and cultural element of North American Hindu society. He urged temples to provide opportunities for the personal development and growth of the priests as a teacher/counselors, mandir executives and community leaders.

These various roles are required because, as you've read in the previous article, community needs have pushed temples into new areas of service, such as teaching and counseling. Pandits from the Caribbean, such as Roopnauth, have already been well trained to fulfill these functions. The priests from India have not been trained, and it was not at all obvious to those at the conference that they should be so trained.

On a spiritual level, the duty of the temple priest is to serve the Deity and perform the worship for the benefit of the community--the same task the priest's ancestors have done for generations. A priest may rightly regard any other duties as outside his responsibility. On the practical level, these expanded roles require a command of English many priests do not have, and which would take years to acquire. Some attendees suggested the priests become teachers of the youth and learn to lead the congregation in singing. Again, these are talents they may not have.

Expecting the priests to expand their functions into these areas is likely short-sighted and impractical. It would inevitably weaken their puja performance and add to their stressful schedule. A broader analysis of how to meet the needs of the congregation is required, balancing the skills and availability of priests, trustees, employees and volunteers. This analysis could be undertaken by the think tank that was proposed by the conference: the Hindu Mandir Pandit Sabha.

Classified ad: "Position Available: Chief Priest,New Hindu Temple in America"

A question-answer period in the conference examined the gulf that has existed between the expectations of priests coming to America and those of temple management, especially for new temples. Sometimes the priest is the temple's only full-time employee, responsible for everything about the temple--not only the puja but also all the cleaning, lawn mowing, accounting and repairs.

High on the list of symbolic issues for a newly arrived priest is the car--just as for any American teen. Before arriving here, the priests envision moving about in a Mercedes. But they can't afford anything in that price range, at least at the beginning, and must settle for purchasing a low cost clunker.

The car can create other issues, as well. If it is too nice, devotees who have spent large portions of their income to build the temple may complain that they are paying the priest too much. But one priest was humiliated--true story--when a temple trustee asked him to move his old, decidedly unprestigious car from the front parking lot to the back of the temple, where it would not be seen!

The car issue does provide a benchmark: once the priest can finally afford a Mercedes, he knows he's achieved the American dream.