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Published by Anonymous on Feb. 02, 1995

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Priest Bashers Beware

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His Holiness Sivaya Subramuniaswami warns that those who abuse priests "are also bashing Sanatana Dharma" [December, 1994]. Priest abusers also violate the civil order. Their conduct is illegal under State and Federal laws. In extreme cases, criminal charges could be filed. For the last two years, I volunteered my legal services to assist priests to form a professional organization. Their organization seeks to "preserve and promote the divine rituals, knowledge, culture and traditions of the Hindu priesthood, and to promote the spiritual and physical well-being of Hindu temple priests in North America." This noble organization is structured professionally much like the America Medical Association, the American Bar Association and similar professional organizations.

While working with the priests, I was shocked to hear of several anti-priest abuses. We heard of a temple manager in the Eastern USA who threatened that priests would be immediately fired if they joined the priest association. Such harassment violates the priest's rights of freedom of assembly guaranteed by federal and state laws, and also violates labor and employment laws. We heard of a long-term, well-liked priest with a family who was fired for extremely dubious reasons on only thirty days' notice. Such wrongful employee termination is not in accord with Sanatana Dharma, nor does it even comply with the employment law of most jurisdictions. There have been several reports of job discrimination against priests. Some temples discriminate against priests who are married, especially priests with families. Bashers treat priests worse than they treat their own employees. This "double standard" is based upon the belief that priests will suffer in silence. In a business, however, employees will not suffer in silence. If an employer engages in "employee bashing," employees will file complaints with state and federal regulatory agencies and perhaps a lawsuit.

Happily, there are several examples of enlightened temples in the USA, such as the Venkateswara temple in Malibu, California. Rather than discriminate against priests with families, the Venkateswara temple accommodates them. Rather than keeping all priests on short-term, "at will" contracts, the temple granted permanent employment status to its two senior priests. The temple is also exploring a system to give other priests permanent positions once they have proven themselves through an appropriate apprenticeship. The Venkateswara temple is a joyous place to visit, with happy priests who dutifully serve the temple. It is a temple blessed with prosperity, a rapidly growing membership and with devotees who drive many miles to visit. The parking lots are almost always overflowing on weekends and holy days.

Temple priests have tremendous responsibilities. They must insure that all the rituals are skillfully and faithfully performed-in exact accordance with ancient traditions and scriptures. For maximum results, the ritual must be performed with the proper mental attitude-a peaceful mind surrendered to the deities. When treated properly, priests can completely surrender, with happy hearts and minds free from worries. They will carry this powerful, positive attitude with them as they perform the abhishekams, pujas and maintain the sanctuaries for the deities. As a result, the deities will become more enlivened and will shower the devotees with more and more blessings.

Unfortunately, priest bashing is not likely to end overnight. Legal action may be inevitable, especially where there are obvious abuses of US immigration and employment laws. If there is news media coverage of priest bashing, it will be very disturbing to devotees because only a few know about these abuses. Priests rarely confide their sad predicaments to devotees. During 1995, let us dialogue together on the proper role of Hindu priests in our temples and whether some power should be shared with the priests, as universities share some power with college faculties. Let us draft a model employment contract. Let us encourage priests to raise their own standards through their professional organization. Let us eradicate the disease of priest bashing from our American temples.

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