Initiating a New Priesthood
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Initiating a New Priesthood

Nonbrahmins begin training in temple service

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For the first time in the history of Kerala, 57 nonbrahmin men and boys were ordained into priesthood training at a sacred thread ceremony, upanayana, held April 28 to 30, 2001, at Pavakulam Mahadevar Temple in Kochi.

It is widely accepted in Kerala that the priesthood is the birthright of the brahmin caste only, a system which has ensured the preservation of Hinduism for thousands of years. Though some of the other castes have learned the Vedic scriptures and Tantric texts to become priests, they were not openly accepted by the upper caste people because of the feeling that only the brahmins could do the job. But, with the advent of communism and the influence of Western culture, the lifestyle of brahmins changed. Some of the present generation have deviated from the sattvic or pure way of living required of this caste. Today, there are brahmins who eat beef while wearing the sacred thread. Some educated people consider this kind of behavior a symbol of modernity, and a way to gain acceptance in the elite Westernized local society. Other brahmins have plunged into communism and discarded their sacred thread to be equal among others in accord with socialist doctrine.

Those brahmins who did continue as priests did not necessarily adhere to the norms and dictums of the scriptures and departed from the disciplined, religious life.

Following the historic declaration of 1936 that granted permission to all Hindus, irrespective of caste, to enter the temples, there has been a strong feeling that any Hindu should be allowed to become a priest. However, nothing changed for many decades. In 1987, experts on the Vedas and the Tantric system of Kerala met and decided to pursue the concept that the priesthood should be open to anyone who learns Vedic scriptures, other religious texts and leads the required pious life.

Recently, experts such as P. Parameswaran (an eminent philosopher of Kerala and president of Vivekananda Kendra, Kanyakumari), along with Acharya Narendra Bhooshan, Sastrasharman Namboothiripad (head of the Thantra Vidya Peedom) and Paravoor Sreedharan Thantri stressed the need to change the prevailing system.

Now the Kerala branch of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has started a program at Thantra Vidya, a gurukulam, or priest training school, in Nandipulam, a remote village in the state's Thrissur district. After a week's introductory course at the school, 57 men and boys were given the sacred thread in a mass ceremony during which they promised to lead an austere and pious life. They are now eligible to enter into the priest training program. Parameshwaran believes that the improved quality and discipline of this group will impel improvement even on the part of the traditional brahmins.

For those who participated in the initiation, especially the young boys, it was a novel experience, which they engaged in with energy and enthusiasmÃ even the 4:00 am cold bath. One, Harikumar, said he always wanted to be a priest. "I wish to learn the mantras and do the rituals in a temple," he said. Aravind, a student who is doing a master's degree in computer applications, said he feels he will now have a disciplined life. He pointed out that the wages paid temple priests are meager, priests being the lowest grade of government employees, even below the temple guards. He looks forward to trying to change this situation. Students Dileep and Santosh, both in their late twenties, said, "It is a turning point in our life. We are elevated to a higher level of spirituality, and that has given some meaning to our life. We have become strict vegetarians, and even the lifestyle of our family members has changed." Gopalan Nair, at 55, one of the elder initiates, hoped that all would become true Hindus now.