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Some temple priests just go through the motions - for them "It's a job." Others serve the deity believing He can feel their touch, hear their voice and know their thoughts. For them, "It's high dharma." But for all, the sheer precariousness of the often-berated, underpaid priest profession came clear this year in Andhra Pradesh, India. This family craft for an estimated 150,000 men in A.P. alone, millions counting all of India, may be in for total reform. The State Cabinet is now considering recent recommendations made by the Kondaiah Commission to end the hereditary priesthood (opening jobs and training to members of any caste who can qualify), sell endowment lands designated for priest livelihood and cancel hereditary trusteeships of temples. What is being pondered, critics say, is an illegal interference in religion by a secular government.

Priests from the state's .30,000 temples did what little they could in protest, staging a peaceful march on the evening of November 16 organized by the Archaka Sanghams and a contingent of renunciate leaders of various lingages. Their call to close the inner sanctums of thousands of temples for the day after the morning service was only partially successful. Srimannarayana Jeer had said, "It is time for all people, government and even God to take rest" and consider what will happen to Hindu Dharma if the proposals are implemented.

The huge procession culminated in a public meeting at the Gymkhana grounds in Vijayawada. There Hindu leaders urged the government to reject the commission's proposals and form an autonomous body of religious persons to investigate the issues, and to make decisions concerning Hinduism only in consultation with that body. The swami of the Pejawar Math noted that the government does not dare interfere in religious affairs of Muslims and Christians, but tampers with the Hindu traditions "because Hindus are indifferent."

In all, the temples reportedly posses 150,000 acres of land in the name of the

priests and 200,000 acres in the name of the presiding deities. The government has reportedly chosen to sell these lands, deposit the earnings in government treasuries and use the interest to maintain the temples and the priests. One of the motivations has been the difficulty in collecting rent from tenants on the lands.

Hindu leaders do not deny the need for reform, for better trained priests, cleaner and more well-run temples. But, they say, the remedies proposed are incorrect and far too severe. And more importantly, they are fundamentally illegal, for any adjustments to the Hindu fabric must come from the religion itself, not from a secular government. Others disagree, observed News Time of Hyderabad, and feel the government does have a "Constitutional and moral right to streamline the affairs of the important institutions like the temples, which play a pivotal role in the socio-cultural and religious lives of a large section of the people - as long as the intervention is for removing the bad things and introducing reforms." Hmmmm.

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