



January 2005

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Recommended Citation

Narayanan, Vasudha (2005) "Gender and Priesthood in the Hindu Traditions," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 18, Article 8.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1341>

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Gender and Priesthood in the Hindu Traditions

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"The English language is not neutral. It comes ready loaded with a cargo of Christian concepts and assumptions."
Normal Solomon (2001:1)

IN writing about Judaism, Norman Solomon has observed that the English language, which evolved in a very Christian atmosphere, is not value-neutral. Most scholars would agree that words are embedded in worldviews. To use a colloquial expression, they carry the "baggage" of social prejudices and articulate perceptions on gender, race, religion, and age that have been part of popular culture at various time periods. It is not just that we project stereotypes on what we study, but we also use categories from our natal traditions to understand other cultures. At least initially we observe phenomena that our culture thinks of as important; later our observations and insights are processed through our language which almost always convey approximations at best. Concepts refracted through the lenses of other languages and cultures may take a life of their own; thus when systems of Buddhist

meditation were explained in the Chinese language with words connected with Taoist literature, the Chan (and eventually Zen) forms of meditation evolved. As all of us know, issues such as monotheism or sacred books that have been traditionally thought of as central to the study of religion in the Judaeo-Christian traditions in the western modern world, or for that matter, the construction of "religion" itself, have proved problematic when projected on to other religious cultures.

This paper has a much more modest aim of trying to understand some connotations of "priesthood," especially in connection with gender issues, in the context of the Hindu traditions. Within the Christian churches and denominations, the priest or pastor has had a central role; in many of them, the priest is a role model "of" and "for" piety as well as a symbol of spiritual and earthly power. Officiating in worship services, involved in pastoral care, ministering to the needy, participating in the governance of the community, presiding over the vast or modest fortunes of a congregation or even an empire, the many

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kinds of priests have embodied the many kinds of power often reserved tantalizingly for the chosen male members of the church.

When I first came as a student to the Harvard Divinity School in 1975 several students asked me if women could become priests in Hinduism. Feminist thinking and gender issues were beginning to be very important in many academic forums including the American Academy of Religion and the issue of what was perceived as female leadership concerned many scholars. The question of women priests, however, was puzzling to me; knowing the family priests we had over the years, I had never really thought that any woman I knew could or would want to be one. Most of the priests I knew -- or at least what I understood by the word "priests"-- were ritual specialists who came by our house regularly, to help conduct various sacraments and rituals done for the welfare of one's ancestors. They were not from wealthy families, they did not seem to be moral or spiritual exemplars, and some did not seem very learned either; in short, this was not what I would have thought of as a leadership role. Most of these ritual specialists were quite anxious to have their children move into other fields such as accounting or medicine. Clearly, I thought, this was one of the areas where western templates were being imposed on the Hindu tradition.

Over the years, however, in thinking through some of the functions of "priesthood," I have had to nuance this issue in connection with caste, gender, and what we perceive to be "sacerdotal" authority. Some, though not all, of the ritual specialists one encounters in India do their work in haste, sometimes in a sloppy manner, and are not particularly great role models. The situation could, however, be very different -- what if we had caring, knowledgeable "priests" or ritual specialists who took their jobs seriously in officiating over a function? And if women wanted to train to be these specialists, who or what can forbid them from doing so? What were the other functions of priesthood in the western

culture that have been undertaken by other personnel within the Hindu traditions? Are there people who are called "priests" within Hinduism -- like the Brahmins -- who are not really priests?

There are, of course, many meanings and many functions associated with the notion of priesthood. Hindus can understand the term "priest" to mean any one of a number of things. It has been the simplest translation for the word "Brahmin." Second, it could refer to the priest, known as the *purohita*, who comes home to conduct the domestic rituals and sacraments (*samskaras*). Third, it could mean the person who does the *arati* and conducts rituals in the temples and other public places of worship. Fourth, some of the functions attributed to the western sense of priesthood -- as in the ordained priest in some Christian traditions who can transmit power or grace through certain rituals -- is sometimes seen in the figure of an *acarya* who comes in a specific line of succession instituted at some point in the last 1200 years or so. We will explore *some* of these functions and discuss the traditional (male but frequently internalized by women also) objections to these issues.

Priesthood and Brahmins

Almost every introduction to the Hindu religion translates "Brahmin" as the "priestly" caste. So the first question we may ask is this: can anyone become a Brahmin? Obviously, there are women Brahmins, but they are not considered priests even though the English translation kindly puts them as belonging to that group. The knee jerk answer is to say no, one cannot become a Brahmin, unless one is born into a Brahmin family. Some people may add that Brahmin-hood can only come when one gets a sacred thread and thus gets the authority to study the Vedas. The question of whether one is a Brahmin by birth or by one's character and behavior has, at least theoretically, been contentious.

While one cannot control birth, the other points are negotiable. Men from

several castes (certainly kshatriyas and vaisyas) can technically be called as being born into the "twice born" communities and even get a sacred thread, but that did/does not make them Brahmins, even if they wanted it. Men from some communities which do not belong to the "twice born" groups do, however, occasionally practice the wearing of the sacred thread. The wearing of a sacred thread is assumed to give them the authority to do certain "priestly" functions that Brahmins do -- for instance, recite the Vedas and even teach them. It is in these spaces that over the centuries we see many innovations.

Let us consider two examples where people who ordinarily do not get a sacred thread and/or study the Vedas have done so. The first example is a Scheduled Caste in Bangalore and the second focuses on women's groups in Pune, India.

Members of the Sri Vaishnava *sampradaya* or tradition who belong to a Scheduled Caste (the bureaucratic name for those who were considered to be "outcaste") community and residing in Gowthamapuram, Bangalore, recite the Tiruvaymoli which they consider to be the Tamil Veda. The Sri Vaishnava community has held the Tiruvaymoli of the ninth century poet, Nammalvar, to be equivalent to the Sanskrit Vedas. The Sri Vaishnava community has members of all castes and all hold the Tiruvaymoli to be very sacred. The men who live near the Nammalvar sannidhi ("Nammalvar shrine") in Gowthamapuram, Bangalore believe that if they can say the Tamil Veda, they have the authority to say the Sanskrit Veda. To do this, they need a sacred thread, and many of the men in this community had received it (Narayanan 1984). Men and women of this community not only recite but teach the Tamil and short sections of the Sanskrit Vedas though they do not recite the Gayatri mantra regularly. Do they call themselves Brahmins or priests? No. But they do believe that in reciting the Vedas, they have assumed at least one of the functions associated with male Brahminhood.

ISKCON members also initiate some male devotees and give them a sacred thread. But even within ISKCON, the initiation of women into "Brahmin-hood" is not common. There are, however, groups in Pune which initiate women into wearing the sacred thread. In April 2002, ten young Brahmin girls received the thread with the traditional upanayana ceremony. The girls were already born into Brahmin families; but just as young Brahmin boys get a sacred thread and thus the authority to study the Vedas, these young girls also received the sacred thread (*Hinduism Today* 2002). In conducting these ceremonies, groups like the Shankar Seva Samiti (which organized this particular ritual in Pune) valorize Sanskrit texts which speak of women wearing the sacred thread and argue that it is perfectly within the bounds of traditional orthodoxy to retrieve and make such texts and rituals relevant.

Other progressive groups within the Hindu tradition are also working to make these changes acceptable. One such group is the "virtual" cyber network, *Navya Shastra* ("new Shastra" or "renewed tradition"). In one of their web page articles, Brahma Dev, an author, quotes the *Mahabharata*: "Neither birth, ceremonies, learning, nor progeny are qualifications for brahminical status. Only brahminical conduct is the basis for brahminical status." (*Mahabharata*, Anusasana Parva 143; quoted in "Foreign Born Brahmins: Substance over Formality; <http://www.shastras.org/>). A young member of this group, Ramya Gopal, who resides in Michigan, publicly and persuasively argues that young girls should have this ritual if they so wish (<http://www.shastras.org/>). Members of this group petition Matha (monastery) acaryas to permit the men and women of all castes to have the upanayana if they choose to do so. And so, one may say that there are communities where men and women have undergone "Brahminical" rituals which may enable them to participate in what we call "priestly" functions.

Priests (*purohita*) in Domestic Rituals

Hindus frequently use the word "priest" for those ritual specialists who either officiate at home or in public spaces for domestic *samskaras* and rituals -- birth, sacred thread, weddings, *griha pravasha*, Sathyanarayana puja, etc. -- and for those who have specific functions in temples. While admittedly it is rare to have women priests conduct these ceremonies, in recent years there are women being trained by Brahmin men to conduct these domestic rites. Some women in Kerala are recently being trained to do the one ritual for which most people insist on male Brahmin priests -- death rites.

Since the late nineteenth century, however, initially through the work of the Arya Samaj leader Lala Devraj, and later through many groups in Maharashtra, women are trained to function as "priests." They recite the Vedas and conduct Vedic sacrifices. The Kanya Kumari Sthan founded by Upasani Baba in 1932 in Sakori (Ahmednagar district) trains women not just to be priests but encourages them to live an ascetic life.

The Shanker Seva Samiti (which had organized the *upanayana* ceremony for the young girls) apparently began training women as priests about 25 years ago, in the Ahmednagar district. About 10,000 women are now said to be qualified priests, and according to at least one report, many "are even more popular in the community than their male counterparts because of their enthusiasm, concentration and devotion in doing worship." (Manjul 2000)

Inspired by this group, Shankar Rao Thatte, a (male) Sanskrit scholar, started a new organization called Udyan Mangal Karyalaya in 1975 in the city of Pune, Maharashtra. The school teaches women of all castes and in all stations of life (unmarried or married), both to recite the Vedas and to perform Vedic rituals. From women composers of Vedic hymns, it has taken a full 3500 years to arrive at women reciters of Vedic hymns.

Temple Priests and Melmaruvathur

While women may officiate over domestic rituals in a few small pockets of India, they are almost never seen in the conducting of rituals in public spaces like temples. One is ordinarily used to seeing male Brahmins perform the worship rituals in temples in India. Some of them apprentice with senior priests, learning from them; others go to specific seminary type schools run by various mathas. The students learn and are trained in the Veda pathasalas and the classes include Sanskrit, sectarian texts, courses on *sad darshana*, *pancaratras* or *saiva agama*, decorating (*alankara*) the temple murti. Ordinarily only young male Brahmins attend these schools though there are a few exceptions. A private school, for example, in Bangalore admits men from other "higher" castes. Some of these young men prevail upon family connections to come and work in American temples. However, there are times in American temples when the priest is called away on an emergency or quits suddenly. In these cases, a lay male Brahmin takes over the worship on a temporary basis, but there is no question of a woman conducting the worship. Questions of non-Brahmins taking over such functions have risen in these contexts but on the whole everyone seems to relinquish these duties to male Brahmins -- as they did in Cambodia more than a thousand years ago.

So are women totally out of the picture in conducting temple rituals? If one looks for those who have undergone *diksha*, the initiation ceremony which authorizes one to conduct rituals in temples, we would probably not find any women. However, one can and must look elsewhere to see changes. In many Hindu temples around the world, it is not just Brahmin men with *diksha* or formal initiation into a particular agamic culture who do temple rituals. In fact such Brahmin men are more in the minority; the personnel in most temple services are lay Brahmin men who are said to maintain a higher level of ritual purity. Many of them are also trained in seminary.

type schools. However, in some places in south India, the region with which I am more familiar, there are not just women who function as "priests," but women who belong to various castes of society.

My first example is anecdotal evidence. Between 1993 and 1999, when visiting my parents in Injambakkam, a suburb of Madras, they would take me to a Pillaiyar (Ganesha) temple located in a local school -- the ALM Matriculation Higher Secondary School. The temple was more like a glorified shrine, the kind one sees on many school campuses. But it did have a murti, an icon, which was worshiped as an icon in temple. The pujari there was always a woman who was well past the menopausal age (menstruation has been cited as one of the main reasons as to why women cannot become priests). Her duties were simple -- simple aratis or sometimes small prayers and blessings in Tamil and Sanskrit. No one had trained her -- she just happened to take this role on. Similar activities take place in roadside shrines which expand, become larger, and go "upscale." When temples get larger they frequently become "Brahminized" and take on male brahmin priests; but in some cases, they retain a distinct vernacular flavor, as we see in Melmaruvathur. It is in these kinds of grass roots movements which eventually get institutionalized that we see the strength and resilience of Hinduism.

The second example is more substantial and speaks about institutionalized commitment to having women involved in major ritual functions in the worship of the deity. There have been women ritual specialists in Hindu temples in pre-modern India and Cambodia, but they have been dancers, devadasis, or people connected with such families. We do not have records of women who regularly went into the inner shrines of temples and conducted worship on behalf of members of the community. However, this is what we do see now in Melmaruvathur. Women priests, again belonging to all castes, are seen in the large Melmaruvathur temple dedicated to the Goddess Para Shakti. This

temple is about 50 miles south of Chennai; it was not built until the 1970s and became popular only a decade later. Thousands of pilgrims can be seen on National Highway # 47 going south from the city of Madras/Chennai to visit this temple. Some walk, some come here in special chartered buses, others come in the back of trucks.

Worship, like the deity here, is new and innovative. Male Brahmin priests do not do the ritual worship in this temple. Rather, we have dozens of women, all of whom belong to spiritual fellowships or associations (Tamil: *manrams*) who rotate in and out approximately every three months and serve as "priests." The temple websites ask devotees to form an association (*mandram*) if they get a small group together in any part of the world. With increasing numbers they can form a "sacred site" or a "peetam" (Sanskrit: *pitha*) directly affiliated with the temple. These associations are from all over the state, and they take turns volunteering and conducting the rituals in the temple. Many of them are from the lower economic classes, many of them have barely passed high school. They are strong, determined women, who serve the Goddess *Adi Para Shakti* in a strong, determined manner. Menstruating women are not barred from serving the Goddess. This system was not initiated by the women but by Bangaru Adigalar, a male (non-Brahmin) devotee, who is also seen as a vehicle for "amma" or the Goddess. He is sometimes identified with the Goddess and is credited with institutionalizing the system of having the women priests. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims pass here every month to have darshan of the Goddess. As they line up for the darshan, the women volunteers also keep the pilgrims moving and address them -- the pilgrims -- as "shakti." All pilgrims, men and women are addressed as "shakti," the cosmic, primordial power of the universe, the appellation of the Goddess herself.

All the pilgrims who visit here wear red clothing, to show their equality with each other. The red clothes that devotees wear is said to signify that despite differences in skin color, the color of blood

is common to all human beings, and that in front of her, all devotees are equal. The Goddess is reported to have said:

Amma's devotees wear red clothes which signify the red colour of the blood that flows within the body of all human beings of whatever ethnicity: white, black or brown thereby emphasizing that the world at large belongs to one community (Natarajan: 73).

The devotees frequently say that the rule of the temple is "One Mother, One family," ("Ore Thai and Ore Kulam") implying that all of humanity is of one class (Moorthy 1986: 19).

The temple is overtly "feminist" in that it insists on equality between men and women. Contrary to the practice of many Hindu temples, by the apparent decree of the Goddess, it seems to be pro-active in not discriminating on the basis of gender or caste:

A total variance of the Agama [a set of Sanskrit sacred texts] doctrine marks the shrine that has neither the lanky Rajagopurams [towers] nor archaic Sastram [texts]....And Surprise! Surprise! -- instead of pigtail priests fleecing gullible visitors, one finds volunteers in red garb belonging to temple-affiliates called Manrams strewn around the world to take care of worship, service, sanctity and decorum of a squeaky clean shrine. Ladies, who for eons were forbidden by sacraments, are now allowed to enter the sanctom (*sic*) sanctorum, touch the Goddess and even perform Archanai [worship] (*Magnificent Miracles*: 13).

Contrary to the practice of traditional Hindu temples, menstruating women also visit the temple and pray here regularly. Widows, who were traditionally discriminated against in Brahmanical societies, are encouraged to participate in

rituals, and there are vocational training institutions for them. The Goddess seems to have explicitly insisted on equality.

According to one devotee, the Goddess is said to have incarnated as Adigalar, for the "upliftment of women" (Natarajan: 72). All devotees who visit the temple are addressed as "Shakti," implying that all human beings have divinity within them. The Goddess is said to have also instituted new pilgrimage and worship rituals specifically for women, and these take place three times a year.

In recent years, the movement has gone upscale and there are frequent visits of the leaders to various European, Australian, and American cities. (Pictures of these visits can be seen on websites if one logs on to <http://www.omsakthi.org/news/2004/040727.html>)

ISKCON temples, too, have women participating in some priestly functions. They regularly show the arati in front of the main altar -- which women cannot do in many temples in India. Nor are women absent in sacerdotal rituals in other parts of India. While women in many sampradaya-s do not ordinarily take the primary role in fire sacrifice-rituals in the south Indian temples either in India or in the diaspora, thousands do in the contexts of Arya Samaj, assuming priestly functions again.

Acharya-s: Spiritual Teachers in a Formal Lineage

Traditional hagiographies which deal with stories of lineages of gurus (guruparampara) have been filled with names of male Brahmins. This is still the case in many sampradayas. It is these teachers who have the charismatic power that is seen to be present in some Christian denominations and groups -- it is they who spiritually get the power invested in the lineage of leaders. There are several paramparas with non-Brahmin leaders in India. But women acharyas? While there are many "independent" women gurus, that is those teachers who are charismatic leaders, there

are hardly any women who are part of traditional lineages of preceptors.

One example is Mate Mahadevi in the Virasaiva sampradaya of Karnataka, who is considered to be a teacher in a hallowed lineage of preceptors.

Akka Mahadevi, (circa 12 century), a well known woman poet, serves as the model for Mate Mahadevi ("The Great Mother Goddess") who was born in the state of Karnataka on March 13th, 1946. Named Ratnamma when she was born, she graduated from college with a degree in science. At this time she decided to become an ascetic. A devotee writes:

She is perhaps the first woman in history who has ascended the pontifical seat of a Jagadguru ["world-teacher," a title given to abbots of some traditional monasteries and lines of ascetics] so far reserved for men.Undaunted by criticism from several quarters.... is her ascent of a Jagadguru Pitha [seat of a monastic leader], founded by her revered Guru, Sri Lingananda Swamiji, as a challenge to show that a woman is as well qualified to become a Guru and entitled to sit on the pontifical seat of a Jagadguru as her right. (S.R. Gunjal, "Authoress: A Brief Sketch." Pamphlet dated 17 December 1973. There is no publication information, but is written by S.R. Gunjal, Deputy Librarian of the Karnatak University, Dharwar, Karnataka.)

Mate Mahadevi met her (male) teacher Lingananda Swamiji and received her first initiation ("ishta linga initiation") in 1965. Following this initiation she started composing and writing *vacanas* ("sayings") like those of Basava, the twelfth century founder of the Lingayat community and contemporary of Akka Mahadevi, the woman poet. It was soon after this that "having a divine revelation of Akka Mahadevi's presence, her spiritual model, [that] she was transported with joy and charged with an irresistible energy and power. On 5th April 1966 she got her

Jangama [ascetic] initiation." (Gunjal, "Authoress.") When she was installed as the monastic leader (*jagadguru*) the *Samyukta Karnatak*, a daily newspaper, wrote in its editorial: "Today has started a new era in the fields of religion and society, with the installation of Her Holiness Mata Mahadevi as the first woman Jagadguru to a pontifical seat, which up till now was reserved for men." (*Samyukta Karnatak*, 21 April, 1980.) For some people in the community, it was almost like having the first woman pope.

Akka Mahadevi, the twelfth century poet, has served as a role model for and has been reappropriated by a twentieth century seeker and reformer. But Mate Mahadevi has also proved to be a scholar and an institutional leader. As of 1973, Mate Mahadevi had already published twenty books on her own and had started an educational and religious institution called Jaganmata Akka Mahadevi Ashrama ("The Hermitage of the World-Mother Akka Mahadevi") at Dharwar, Karnataka, for training and guidance of "spiritual seekers, especially girls and women, dedicated to the cause of women's upliftment and propagation of religious ideals." (Gunjal, "Authoress.") Her books include *Basava Tatva Darshana* in which she discusses the life and philosophy of the philosopher-reformer Basava in 860 pages. Mystic, writer, scholar, institutional leader, and reformer, she has been hailed as a "revolutionary religious leader, revitalising religion" by *Prajavani Daily*, a local newspaper. (Publicity pamphlet called "Here is what news media reports on Mataji," distributed in Pittsburgh in the mid 1970s.)

Wearing a sacred thread, reciting the Vedas and conducting Vedic rituals, supervising domestic and temple rituals, officiating as acaryas of traditional lineages -- these are some of the ways in which women have participated in priestly functions within the many Hindu traditions. However, while many Hindus have welcomed these grass roots innovations and changes, some groups still voice very traditional objections.

Objections to Women's Priesthood

Magazines such as *Hinduism Today* occasionally report in glowing terms about women being initiated as priests. Thus, the rituals by which Indrani Rampersad in Trinidad and the 74 year old "Pandita" Nanackchand in South Africa were initiated into priesthood were reported with approval, in 1994 and 1998. Both women had been initiated by the Arya Samaj and the events had been attended by several political and social dignitaries. The articles also carried nostalgic and rationalizing descriptions of women composing some Vedic hymns or engaging in philosophical debates with men in the distant past. While many may think of it as politically incorrect to publicly object to women becoming priests, at least one reader raised the traditional objections to this story. The letter to the editor written by a Hindu in Australia, following the February 1994 article reporting the initiation of Indrani Rampersad in Trinidad, captures the objections seen in many sectors of the Hindu society, and is reproduced here:

I find that your article on women priests [February, 1994] was basically sentimental in tone and missed the fundamental issues of this contentious topic.

There have been many female ascetics, spiritual teachers, female rishis and female theologians, not to mention the supreme Goddess Herself! Qualified men and women can be initiated and taught to conduct the worship for the sake of oneself and the family, svarta, but temple and public worship was, is and will always remain the domain of males.

The principle orthodox objection to females' serving in a sacerdotal capacity is biological-menstruation. Although in modern Hindu society the rules regarding this subject have been relaxed and indeed it seems to be politically correct not to mention it, ritual restrictions imposed during

menstruation cannot be construed as discriminatory because all excretions of the body (blood, mucous, tears, etc.) are considered as ritually impure, and all males and females in such a condition are excluded from any contact with the Deity or with yajnas.

In the case of a temple priestess, the daily rituals would be interrupted for one week every month. In a large temple with many staff this problem can be resolved, but in a temple with only one priestess what will be the result? If women were ordained as domestic priests (purohita), similar problems would arise.

A secondary, albeit minor, reason for rejecting the idea of female priests is the social intimacy which occurs between the yajamana, patron, and the purohita. For example, the tying of the sacred protection thread, kankanam, as a prelude to most rituals is never done by a male to a female or visa-versa, unless they are a married couple! It is customary for yajamana to give charity, danam, to the purohita. The accepting of gifts by a married priestess would constitute an act of samgrahana, or adultery (see Manu 8.357).

Due to the problems we have discussed, there are only two possible solutions: that female priests be unmarried or post menopausal. The former proposition is tricky to say the least. The second option is difficult because of the long and arduous training required. So, if a post menopausal woman who is free from family obligations is inclined to study and devote herself to the priesthood there can be no technical objections, except in the case of accepting danam. (<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1994/7/1994-7-06.shtml>)

The writer states three reasons objecting to women becoming priests. The first is the traditional reason given in many societies -- menstruation. Here, the Brahmanical, male

viewpoints on purity and pollution are quoted. By these definitions, menstruation is polluting, and therefore women are polluting during those periods; if they were to serve as ritual specialists, there will be periods of interruption. The Melmaruvathur temple explicitly protests these Brahmanical norms by employing people from all castes of society. From their viewpoint, by engaging women as ritual specialists for worship, they are accepted as fully human and not just as people who are acceptable for three months of the year. However, norms of purity and pollution have been entrenched in many of the large temples for more than two thousand years and internalized by Hindu men and women in many parts of the world. Perhaps what may emerge out of the Melmaruvathur and the Maharashtra examples is that both forms of institutions -- those that preserve traditional norms of purity and pollution and those that ignore them -- will thrive not just in India, but in other parts of the world.

The second and third objections raised in the letter relate explicitly to a woman's connection with a man. The relationship between the patron of a ritual (*yajamana*) and the priest (*purohita*) is considered to be one of familiarity. Thus in many rituals, the priest ties a protective amulet (Tamil: *kaapu*) around the patron's wrist and the patron wears it until he completes the ritual. If a woman is also doing the ritual, the husband ties the thread on her wrist. Since the tying of the amulet is an act of binding two people ritually, it is argued that a woman priest cannot tie it on the hand of anyone but her husband, and certainly not on the wrist of any strange man. The third argument is also a similar one--that a woman cannot receive payment for services from a man.

There are, of course, several ways around these situations -- the woman priest may, for instance, tie the amulet on the woman patron first and ask her to tie it on her husband's wrist; similarly she may get the payment ("dakshina") from a woman or the payment may go directly to the institution which trained the woman priest

and so on. The history of the Hindu traditions in the last two millennia shows more drastic innovations than these.

Hindu women must also decide if they want to undertake these functions. From the viewpoint of some feminist movements it may seem to be a good idea for women to have this choice of becoming priests. Many reformers have also thought this would be a good way of leveling the field between genders and castes. However, in many Hindu communities, the status of a priest is not necessarily high. It is certainly not very well paying in most cases, and some Brahmin male priests are trying to get other qualifications to have what they perceive to be a better job. One may ask if women are being trained and "allowed" to become priests just because there is a dearth of male Brahmin priests. The answers are not easy. Many women priests reportedly are doing an excellent job bringing satisfaction to themselves as well as to the family who employ them. Others think of it as an issue of choice, which they can take or reject; it is not a dictate from an authority or authorities which prevent them from doing something just because they are women.

Concluding Remarks

How are we to explain the changes or speak about the authorities on which the new changes can happen? In the case of the Melmaruvatur temple, there is the traditional category of "revelation;" this time, by the Goddess herself to a male devotee. In other cases, it is male or female leaders who wanted to see reform. The reform itself is not understood as anything new or innovative; there are ample narratives in the more than three millennia of texts which provide precedents. These stories are retrieved, valorized and used as precedents for current changes.

One can also see the very diversity, plurality, and lack of centralized authority in Hindu traditions as a way in which changes happen. The many traditions -- Sanskrit, vernacular, Brahmanical etc, interact constantly. While the Sanskritization

elements are well known, the vernacularizing of the many traditions have allowed for a lot of innovative practices. These spaces have allowed women to take on various leadership roles including that of sacerdotal functions.

And, finally, one may point to the Sanskrit sources -- the sources of dharma given in the various dharma sastras. These four different sources allow for innovation. Many texts point to the Vedas and the smriti literature as sources for dharma. A third source is the exemplary behavior (*sadachara*) of the righteous people. The last source is considered *atma tushti*. While this is frequently translated as "conscience," it is also seen as that which gives peace or contentment to one's soul. Seen from this perspective, there is plenty of room for change, room to negotiate gender and sacerdotal functions, room for the contentment that comes in making right what many perceive as centuries of gender or caste inequality

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