“Re-Rigging” the *Vedas*:
Examining the Effects of Changing
Education and Purity Standards and Political Influence
on the Contemporary Hindu Priesthood

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Introduction

In the academic study of religion, we are often given impressions about a tradition that are textually accurate, but do not directly correspond with its practice amongst its devotees. Hinduism is one such tradition where scholarly work has been predominately textual and quite removed from practices “on the ground.” While most scholars recognize that many indigenous Hindu practices do not conform to the Brahmanical standards described in ancient Hindu texts, there has only recently been a movement to study the “popular,” non-Brahmanical traditions, let alone to look at the Brahmanical practice and its variance with ancient conventions.

I have personally experienced this inconsistency between textual and popular Hinduism. After spending a semester in India, I quickly realized that my background in the study of Hinduism was, indeed, merely a background. I found myself re-learning aspects of the tradition and theology that I thought I had already understood and redefining the meaning of many practices as I learned of their practical application. Most importantly, I discovered that Hindu practices and beliefs are so diverse that I could never anticipate who would believe or practice in what way. I met many “modernized” Indians who both ignored and retained many orthodox elements of their traditions, priests who were unaware of even the most basic elements of Hindu mythology, and devotees who had no qualms engaging in both orthodox Brahmin and quite unorthodox non-Brahmin religious practices.

While in India, I also read some of the writings of C.J. Fuller, an anthropologist of religion who has written about the Brahmanical Minakshi Temple priests in Madurai, the city of my three-month study-abroad program in South India. Fuller’s work contains some of the most extensive fieldwork and insightful conclusions in the discipline, and it inspired me to conduct my own fieldwork at Pandi Kovil, a non-Brahmanical temple in the same city. My time spent at
Pandi Kovil and the influence of Fuller’s writings have led to my interest in the Hindu priesthood. In particular, I am curious about what behaviors and responsibilities are considered normative for priests, how priests are viewed by the laity, and how priests are defining themselves in a time when India is caught between two opposing tendencies: Westernization and a return to religious orthodoxy through the Sanskritization movement. When I came home in hopes of learning more about this subject, however, I quickly discovered that there has been little extensive research conducted on the Hindu priests’ transition to modernity.

In researching and writing this thesis, I have discovered an ever-increasing list of factors impacting today’s priests – a list that is so large that I could not possibly explore it in one year. Therefore, this paper is a preliminary effort to answer some of my questions on this topic. In its most general form, it is an effort to demonstrate the ways in which contemporary Hindu priests are defining themselves by using the contrasting and changing standards of modernization and orthodox Sanskritization, and also how they combine these with localized religious customs and traditions. Specifically, I have chosen to examine three themes of the priesthood – education in the Vedic tradition, standards of ritual purity and pollution, and the role between priests and the political powers of their period – in light of both the ancient texts and modernity.

The first section of this paper will look at the descriptions and expectations of the priesthood defined by the ancient textual sources and will provide a background for an examination of the contemporary priesthood. The next section is an overview of the modern Hindu priesthood, and contains a broad description of the aforementioned themes and how they are manifesting themselves in the present day. The heart of this paper is its case studies section, which discusses recent fieldwork on a variety of communities of priests. These case studies will provide concrete applications of these themes, depict various ways in which contemporary priests and devotees are experiencing and interpreting them, and demonstrate the complexity and
significance that are part of merging ancient tradition with contemporary Indian culture. Finally, I will discuss the modern manifestations of the priesthood in light of the ancient tradition.

This paper has been a preliminary exploration of this subject, and has allowed me to merge ancient textual sources, modern scholarly analysis, and numerous field studies with my own previous research and experience. Based upon my findings, I will demonstrate that although no two temples are exactly alike in their struggle to combine the ancient standards with modernity, these contemporary issues (education, purity, and changing political power) are integral to the practices, self-identification, and religious and social status of today’s priests. I hope that this paper sheds light on the ambiguous status of many Hindu priests who – in a time of changing ideas about modernity, education, purity, authority, and equality – are becoming increasingly unsure of their place in Indian society both inside and outside of the temple.
Ancient Conceptions of the Priesthood

Traditional ideas of the priesthood were highly specified in ancient and medieval texts such as the Black Yajurveda, the Laws of Manu, and the Puranas. While many of these texts clearly engage in a different historical context than today’s, they are still referred to as a model for certain qualities that were – and often continue to be – expected of those serving in the priesthood. Thus, in order to understand the assessment of priestly behavior and status in the present day, we must be familiar with the standards delineated in these texts.

Types of Priests

The earliest body of texts documenting the priestly conduct of Hindu rituals are referred to as the Vedic texts, and were “orally composed” between circa 1500 BCE and 500-400 BCE.\(^1\) The rituals the Vedic texts described did not serve as mere deity worship. First, they were highly symbolic because they recreated the reciprocal relationship between deities, devotees, and priests. Second, they were highly functional; by conducting the rituals, priests were also reenacting, maintaining, and contributing to the reciprocal relationship of the cosmic order, or rta. Finally, these rituals indicated the priests’ vast religious understanding. Through them, priests demonstrated their exclusive knowledge of the “hidden meanings of rituals” and the “web of ‘hidden’ cosmic and mundane interrelations… used… to obtain certain desired effects.”\(^2\)

Because their purpose of these rituals was so complex, so were priestly duties. In their conduct of public (or srauta) ritual, the four priests – each of which was a member of the of the

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2 Witzel, 81
Brahman caste – were given highly specialized roles in order to “represent and use the Four Vedas.” The first three priests physically conducted the rituals. They were in charge of invoking the deity by singing the proper Vedic mantras, knowing the proper melodies to go along with the mantras, and preparing, conducting, and purifying all of the ritual’s physical components, respectively.

The fourth priest, the Brahmin, was most important because he was the overseer of the ritual. This priest was required to have a complete knowledge of all aspects of the ritual, as well as its metaphysical meaning, and while the other priests were conducting the ritual physically, he was conducting it silently and internally. The Brahmin was also called the bhishaj – the “healer” of the ritual or the “doctor of the sacrifices” – because he was also in charge of ritualistically mending any faults occurred during the ritual. The immense knowledge and responsibility of this type of priest has caused some speculation about its origin. Herman Oldenberg tells us that the Brahmin did not emerge until later in the Vedas, and posits that this role likely originated within a specific priestly family whose members were particularly meticulous about ritual

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3 Mahoney defines the Brahman as one who knows the Brahma (the sacred power of the universe), and cites the Satapatha Brahmana 5.1.1.11. See William K. Mahoney, “The Priest as Artist: Universal Drama and the Liturgical Imagination,” In The Artful Universe: An Introduction to the Vedic Ritual Imagination (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 119. However, the term Brahman and its variations are rather confusing in English transliterations. Brahma is the four-headed Vedic god attributed with the creation of the universe, whereas Brahman can be defined as the supreme, cosmic soul, or can be used to denote one who is familiar with this doctrine (which has traditionally been associated with the entire Brahman caste, who is ranked the highest amongst the four castes of the Hindu caste system). Brahmin, then, is a term used to describe those Brahmans who serve in the priesthood – although many English transliterations also refer to these priests as Brahmins. To clear up as much confusion as possible, I will henceforth italicize the caste (Brahman), and leave the priest (Brahmin) as it stands.

4 Witzel, 75

5 Mahoney, 120

6 Mahoney, 120


8 Mahoney, 120-121


performance, and spread to other priestly families until it became an established position.\textsuperscript{11} Whatever the Brahmin’s origin, this title has inarguably proven to be very important in the history of Hindu religious practice, and – as we will later see – is likely the foundation for ancient priestly duties that modern priests are expected to emulate.

In their highly specialized yet interdependent roles, these four types of priests not only performed religious rituals, but also served as a paradigm for the division of mankind and his varying functions in relation to the gods. In this way, these ancient priests demonstrated the necessity of maintaining the cosmic order through ritual. It is perhaps for this reason that the *Laws of Manu* – a collection of 2,685 verses written around the turn of the Common Era that relate to Hindu religious and social duties\textsuperscript{12} – saw the priests practicing Vedic Hinduism as “great custodians of knowledge” and possessing the greatest level of purity.\textsuperscript{13}

Aside from these four main divisions of priests, certain texts and scholars also mention a fifth type of priest called the *purohita*. Described as a family’s traditional priest in some instances and as the king’s hired personal priest in others, the *purohita* was knowledgeable in several realms. He was held responsible not only for the performance of domestic and life-cycle rituals, but was also called upon to serve as a political and religious advisor to the king. In some cases, the *purohita* was even expected to prescribe ritual solutions to his client’s specific maladies – replacing the shamans or “medicine men.”\textsuperscript{14} As a result of his vast wealth of knowledge and expertise, the *purohita* was arguably the most powerful of ancient priests; he was not merely endowed with ritual knowledge and power, but because of his relationship with the

\textsuperscript{11} Oldenberg, 218
\textsuperscript{14} Oldenberg, 210-211
king, he was also in charge of the “security and welfare of the kingdom.” While I have found no contemporary examples of purohitas serving political leaders in this capacity, we will later see that the role of the purohita as family priest has remained in some regions of Hindu practice.

Despite their highly specialized positions in Vedic India, as time progressed, the role of the Hindu priest became more universal. The number of priests needed to perform a ritual gradually decreased, until finally one priest was held responsible for conducting a ritual that would have traditionally been conducted by up to seventeen in the past. He was to conduct these rituals free from error, which Heesterman claims lead to the “development of ritual science.”

Perhaps this is why we see the priest’s responsibility change during the times of Buddhist influence in India and the Upanisadic period; his role was no longer one of a mere “singer of hymns or a priest discharging ritualistic functions.” Instead, priests – now almost universally referred to as Brahmins – became known as sages, poets, singers, and leaders of worship. They were assumed to have a “divine knowledge and virtue,” and were thought to possess “divine favour” and “godly inspiration.” Each priestly Brahmin was, as a result, expected to have an extensive knowledge of the Brahman – the “Supreme Soul.”

**Priestly Education and Religious Knowledge**

From these examples, we can see that a great deal of the priest’s status has traditionally been based upon his knowledge of the sacred texts, his proper performance of rituals, and – in some cases – his metaphysical knowledge, which aids his understanding of these texts and rituals. In order to ensure that the ancient textual tradition continued, the duties of teaching and learning were included among the responsibilities of the priests in the *Laws of Manu.* Since

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15 Upadhyay, 8-9
17 *Brahmana Upanishads* II.5.1, cited in Upadhyay, 4
18 Upadhyay, 6
19 *Upanishads* III.5.1, cited in Upadhyay 4
20 Doniger & Smith, Ch. 1, Vs. 88, Pg. 12.
there were no large institutions of Vedic learning in the ancient times, however, priests were trained in these religious texts and ritual performances by becoming students under gurus and by serving – often under other priests in their family – as apprentices in temples. While, as Oldenberg has argued, this method limited each Brahmin’s knowledge to that of his guru, this oral tradition, nevertheless, facilitated the preservation of these traditions.

Through the tradition of orally transmitting religious texts, we can see that the Brahmins’ obligation toward education was not based merely upon the whim of the people, but upon the models laid down by the ancient texts, themselves. As far back as the Rig-Veda, which states that “the inspired poets who know how to harness the plough and stretch the yokes on either side to win favour among the gods,” we see examples of the importance of priestly knowledge and its reward with divine favor. The Brahma Purana (written between CE 900-1200) makes a similar demand, claiming that the Brahmin should be able to recite all of the Vedas as well as have a familiarity with the Puranas (written between CE 200-700) and other texts, and should obtain this knowledge not out of duty, but out of interest and devotion.

The most explicit and lengthy demands for Brahmanical knowledge, however, come from the Laws of Manu. These texts state that while a Brahmin need not necessarily know the Vedas in order to perform his priestly function, all truly virtuous priests and men are knowledgeable in the Vedic texts:

Among priests, learned men (are the best); among learned men, those who understand their obligations; among those who understand their obligations, those who fulfill them; and among those who fulfill them, those who know the Veda.

21 Oldenberg, 209
26 Brahma Purana 28.1-8, cited in Sheth, 51
27 Doniger and Smith, Chapter 1.97, pg. 13 (authors’ parentheses)
They further state:

[154] (Seniority comes) not through years or grey hair or wealth or relatives; the sages established this law: ‘The man who has learned the Veda with all of its subsidiary texts is great among us.’ [155] The seniority of priests comes from knowledge… [157] A priest who has not learned (the Veda) is like an elephant made of wood, a deer made of leather: these three bear nothing but the name. [158] As an impotent man produces no fruit in women, as a cow produces no fruit in a cow, and as a gift made to an ignorant man is fruitless, so a priest who does not know the Rg Veda is fruitless.  

The texts have made clear, then, that a good Brahmin should be well versed in Vedic scripture. But what if the Brahmin was content in his ignorance, and simply hoped to pursue his profession for monetary purposes? Many texts also imply that there are devastating personal consequences for uneducated priests. The Sankhayana Grhya Sutra, for example, warns that Brahmins who do not assume the responsibility of learning the Vedic mantras are considered “fallen ones,” and accordingly lose their rights to the high Brahmin status – becoming equal with the sudras, or Untouchables. The Satapatha Brahmana gives an even more ominous warning, likening sacrifice to the wilderness and stating, “If any venture into them not knowing the ropes, then hunger and thirst, evil doers and fiends, harass them, even as fiends would harass foolish men wandering in a wild forest.” A Brahmin’s education, then, is not taken lightly nor merely recommended – it is absolutely essential to his spiritual, personal, and social well-being.

With such grave consequences for a lack of priestly education, it would seem that all Brahmins would ensure that they were highly educated in both Vedic scripture and its theological and metaphysical meaning. History, however, tells a different story. In fact, we see an implicit critique of apathetic priests in some of the very same texts. Manu saw the many

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28 Doniger and Smith, Chapter 2, pg. 33 (authors’ parentheses).
30 Satapatha Brahmana 1.9.3.2, in Smith, 108
unlearned priests of his time as “contemptuous,” and “bad luck for virtuous men” and claimed that righteous men of the twice-born castes – those castes other than the sudra caste – would do well to keep away from ignorant priests when performing sacrificial offerings to the gods. This contempt for and avoidance of uneducated priests is closely linked to another set of characteristics with which all Hindus – especially those of the Brahman caste and the Brahmins (priests) within it – are concerned: purity and pollution.

**Purity and Pollution**

All Hindus have an intricate web of physical and metaphysical purity requirements that they must be aware of for religious reasons. Gavin Flood describes the distinction between purity and pollution as “an organizing principle and constraint which controls the regulation of bodies in social space in Hinduism” that “differentiates individuals from each other, men from women and high caste from low caste.” Factors such as being or interacting with peoples of certain ethnicity, social caste, or gender, coming into contact with substances such as bodily fluids and certain foods, and being associated with events such as death, menstruation, and birth all have an affect on one’s level of purity. Temple deities, in orthodox practice, should only come into physical contact with those of the highest levels of purity, which is why those who are impure are not allowed to worship at Hindu temples, and why Brahmins are the only people allowed to conduct public worship and enter into the deities’ inner sanctum.

Since they are the sole humans allowed to enter close to the temple deities and perform rituals with them, priests must be particularly mindful toward maintaining their high level of ritual purity. As a result, there are many daily activities and prohibitions devoted to the matter of ritual cleanliness. One of the most important is the Brahmin’s requirement of performing

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31 Upadhyay, 138
32 Doniger and Smith, Ch. 4, Vs. 205-206, pg. 93
33 Flood, *Introduction to Hinduism*, 220
34 Flood, *Introduction to Hinduism*, 219
diksa ceremonies – an elaborate set of physical and spiritual purification rites – before conducting any worship. The Brahmin must also observe rules concerning the pure and impure substances and situations listed above, although some of his standards (along with the fellow members of his Brahman caste) are more severe than those for people of other castes.

One of the most important examples of the Brahman’s purity laws – which is especially applicable to the priesthood – is that all Brahmins should only eat food cooked by other Brahmins, for the impurities of others passes through the food that they prepare. In this way, purity standards work strangely against the Brahmins. By simply eating the food given to them by their clients – usually as payment for performing religious rituals – the priest takes on the impurities of the devotees. At the same time, the priest is also often expected to eat this food. Firstly, he must do so in order to demonstrate “the limits within which he will agree to exercise his dharma as an officiating priest, as a substitute for the gods, or a representative of the divinized ancestors” – since the Brahmin is, in the most anciently-depicted sense, seen as taking the role of the deity during sacrifice (“one must become Siva to worship Siva”). Second, the Brahmin’s act of taking on the impurities of his devotees through eating such food is seen as a complementary “continuity of the cosmos” – as a favor done by the priest by spiritually uniting with lay devotees. In fact, Heesterman claims that the Brahmin in his classical ritual role was hired for the sole function of eating the polluting substances of ritual in order to reverse the

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37 Heesterman, *Inner Conflict*, 27
38 Malamoud, 26
40 Heesterman, *Inner Conflict*, 28
pollution and death of his clients.\textsuperscript{41} Thirdly, and most simply, many Brahmins simply consume these foods because they are the payment for their services, and their only source of income.

Regardless of their reasons for eating offerings, because members of the \textit{Brahman} caste are supposed to remain both separate from and independent of other beings, priestly Brahmins are placed in a precarious position both through their daily interactions with people of lower castes\textsuperscript{42} and their acceptance of payment for their ritual services.\textsuperscript{43} Even the \textit{purohita}, then, with all of his influence and power, cannot truly be considered amongst the highest ranked \textit{Brahmans} because he is reliant upon his king or employing family.\textsuperscript{44} As a result, temple priests rank below other \textit{Brahmans} and even renunciate – or ascetic – Brahmins in their ritual status, and sub-castes of priestly and non-priestly \textit{Brahmans} cannot intermarry.\textsuperscript{45}

On the other hand, priests have still retained a certain level of status and purity and have also been able to increase their level of purity over time. By reducing the number of ritual performers and specialists from that which existed in Vedic ritual, for example, a single priest conducting a religious ceremony spares himself from being dependent on the input of his fellow priests.\textsuperscript{46} This transition is a tricky one, however, because by making himself the sole ritual functionary, the priest now takes on \textit{all} of the devotee’s pollution by conducting the ritual – whereas, previously, it would have been dispersed among all priests involved.\textsuperscript{47} The only priests who can remain fully ritually pure, then, are those who are not reliant upon others – including the payment he receives for his services. As a result, the highest priest, according to

\textsuperscript{41} Heesterman, \textit{Inner Conflict}, 31
\textsuperscript{42} Doniger and Smith, Ch. 4, Vs. 205-206, pg 93
\textsuperscript{43} Upadhyay, 138
\textsuperscript{44} Heesterman, \textit{Inner Conflict}, 21
\textsuperscript{45} Fuller, “Gods, Priests, and Purity,” 462
\textsuperscript{46} Heesterman, \textit{Inner Conflict}, 14
\textsuperscript{47} Heesterman discusses the priest’s delicate balance of taking on more impurities on his own while at the same time gaining more control of his individual fate in the tangles of \textit{samsara} (which had previously been a result of his reliance upon the other priests). For our purposes, let this example suffice to prove that the priest’s status of purity is contingent upon many factors, and that it has been consciously adapted over time.
Heesterman, is the srotriya – the only priest who does not accept any gifts for his performance of ritual as a conscious attempt to reduce the amount of pollution take from his devotees.48

Kings and Priests

By this point of our discussion of the ancient texts, it is quite apparent that a great deal of respect and authority has been attached to the Brahmin’s status. Not only is he created from the purest and highest part of the body – the mouth – in the Hindu creation myth about Purusa, the “primeval spirit” or “man” from whose mouth, arms, legs, and feet the four castes (or varnas) of Indian society were born,49 he also serves as a close advisor to the king. Manu states that Brahmans and kings should work together, for “rulers do not prosper without priests, and priests do not thrive without rulers.”50

Manu also instructs the kings to hire the most distinguished and intelligent of all priests to serve as a political advisor. When Manu describes the king’s relationship with this priest, he says that the king should “always be confident in [the Brahmin] and entrust all of his affairs to him, and when he has made his decision with him he should then begin his action.”51 In fact, when Manu lists the three things he considers to be the “ultimate source[s] of what is best for kings” – “not turning away from battle, protecting [his] subjects, and [his] obedience to priests”52 – we see that he does not simply demand cooperation between king and Brahmin, but also implies that the Brahmin has authority over the king that is legitimated through his superior Vedic knowledge.

It is important to note that the Brahmin’s association with the king has an impact on his status regarding priestly knowledge and his ritual purity. In Manu’s writings, for example, we see that the priests to whom he grants the greatest level of influence over the king are those who

48 Heesterman, Inner Conflict, 20
49 Doniger O’Flaherty, 7
50 Doniger and Smith, 232
51 Doniger & Smith, 135
52 Doniger & Smith, 137 (my parentheses)
possess knowledge of the Vedas. On the other hand, although this chosen Brahmin has the important role of maintaining the king’s purity and the kingdom’s success through his conduct of worship, his occupational performance of rituals and his worldly entanglements through his association with the king are also polluting to him. While his association with the king recognizes his intellect and grants him greater religious and social authority, his spiritual well-being is sacrificed because he performs his duties for worldly purposes.

**Analysis and Summary**

The priest’s religious and social status is associated closely with his knowledge of Hindu scripture, his relationship with the king and other castes, and his level of ritual purity. What is surprising, however, is that priests have been ranked lower than their fellow educated Brahmans in some of the earliest texts of the traditional Hindu sources. Furthermore, according to the rules of the most orthodox texts, priests have not truly been able to increase their status while still performing their occupation. We see that the priest’s association with ritual performance makes his pollution unavoidable, and that he can only attain a higher status is by becoming a scholar or a renunciate – yet there is demand for priestly services for both the good of individuals as well as the maintenance of the cosmos. These unclear expectations in the ancient texts serve as a basis for the problem of social and religious uncertainty faced by today’s priests.

The ancient texts do not provide definite answers to priests for determining normative behaviors or for placing themselves in the social and religious realms. The texts do show, however, that while the relationship between priestly purity, education, and politics are not entirely consistent or concretely defined, they are incredibly important and highly interdependent. This sets set the stage for contemporary complications; the ambiguities of these relationships continue into and are closely tied with the ambiguities of the contemporary

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53 Flood, *Blackwell Companion*, 8
priesthood, whose priests are trying to merge the effects of modernization and democratization with textual orthodoxy.
While the ancient texts were often ambiguous in regards to the priesthood’s religious and social status, they did provide relevant points of reference. Though the ancient texts lack social and cultural relevance in modern India, the themes they depict are still used as a model of ritual performance and as a basis for critique of the contemporary priesthood. Thus, as we look at the modern priesthood, we will continue to examine the themes of education, purity, and political influence and their impact on the priests’ status and legitimacy.

The Non-Brahmanical Priesthood

While the term “priest” is often considered to be synonymous with “Brahmin,” there are a variety of other figures in Hinduism that also serve as priests in different religious contexts. Therefore, another important person to mention in our discussion of contemporary Hinduism is the non-Brahmanical priest. These ritual performers are often from lower castes and perform functions that are often quite different from those of Brahmanical priests described in the ancient texts. They can serve as priests (either in their own right or in lieu of Brahmanical ones), performers of sacrifice at both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical temples, spirit mediums for deities, and performers of life cycle ceremonies for those of lower castes. Finally, non-Brahmanical priests often serve as personal and spiritual counselors to devotees. In many cases,
unlike with Brahmin priests, the qualifications and status of non-Brahmin priests are based more upon their charisma than on their lineage or formal religious training.\(^{58}\)

That is not to say that because they are not Brahmin they are not important religious figures. Since the majority of temple-goers actually attend popular, non-Brahmanical temples regularly, and may only attend the major Brahmanical ones out of religious propriety,\(^ {59}\) their most genuine respect often goes to those priests who serve at the temples where they feel they have the most productive and interactive experience. In order to get the best results from temple worship, lower-caste devotees often rely on their non-Brahmin priests to reverse orthodox Brahmanical practices – abandoning purity standards, for example, about death and blood by performing animal sacrifices and sprinkling devotees with the sacrificial blood (which is said to bring them closer to the deity).\(^ {60}\) In fact, the low-caste status of non-Brahmanical priests is often seen as an essential part of their position. In a discussion of the priesthood, Richard Brubaker describes the relationship between low-castes priests and village goddesses:

> [The village goddesses can] only be served by those whose religious status is as ambivalent as her own… by those impure enough to perform sacrifices.\(^ {61}\)

As a result, many lay devotees attribute lesser religious authority to the Brahmin priests in comparison to non-Brahmanical priests. If the non-Brahmin village priest and the minor deity he serves help to bring a devotee (for example) the boon of a child, the devotee is likely to continually return to the village temple for his serious needs. In such a case, the orthodox Brahmin priest and his temple are of secondary importance to the devotee, and are merely a part of the traditional system of social status and regulations. While Brahmins may be present in the


\(^{59}\) Brubaker, 148

\(^{60}\) Fuller, “Sacrifice (Bali),” 26

\(^{61}\) Brubaker, 148
lay devotee’s daily life, they cannot provide the results that the lay devotee has come to expect from his village deity and priest.

On the other hand, there is also an observable mirroring of Brahmanical religious practices in many non-Brahmanical temples – from the establishment of vegetarian deities within temples that usually practice animal sacrifice and spiritual possession\(^\text{62}\) to low-caste priests emulating the physical characteristics and ritual performances of Brahmin priests.\(^\text{63}\) Despite their emulation of Brahmins, the non-Brahmin priests are neither held to the same standards of purity as the Brahmin priest, nor are they usually responsible for obtaining a priestly education. They do, however, have their own standards of priesthood, which are often based upon the same themes around which Brahmins determine their behavior. Therefore, an examination of non-Brahmin priests is also useful for our discussion of the contemporary priesthood, and non-Brahmin temple communities will be discussed in the case studies section.\(^\text{64}\)

**Modern Priests and Education**

When scholar Joanne Waghorne asked Mr. Seevaratnam, the founder and employer of priests at a temple in London, what skills are required of a good priest, he said that they should have “*mantra* (the ability to pronounce clearly and accurately), *kirikai* (good ‘body language’ [in the performance of ritual]), and *bhava* (good expression of emotions)."\(^\text{65}\) While these characteristics do not specifically mention education in religious texts, Mr. Seevaratnam’s opinion, I believe, is quite representative of the general public’s expectations of priestly

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\(^\text{63}\) This specific example is taken from Moffatt’s field research on Brahmin and Harijans in Endavur, which is discussed in more detail in my Case Studies section.

\(^\text{64}\) While Brahmin and non-Brahmin priests can often appear indistinguishable, unless I specifically designate the priests as non-Brahmanical, please assume that the priests are of the Brahmanical tradition.

knowledge. So long as they do not let on a lack of familiarity with the ritual procedure and intricacies of Hindu philosophy, contemporary Brahmins can often get by through simply demonstrating – or convincingly imitating – ritual competence.

In reality, of course, this “aura” of Vedic wisdom certainly does not imply that Brahmins are fully educated in the texts or practices. As more Hindus are becoming religiously knowledgeable through the democratization of education and the mass production of religious learning materials, they are increasingly dissatisfied by their priests’ simple, often lackadaisical performances of ritual. As a result, many Brahmins have been criticized not only for their ignorance of proper mantras and texts, but also for their ignorance of the proper performance of many ritual functions. While priests often claim that their bhakti – or personal devotion – to the temple deities is more important than religious knowledge, many devotees have come to expect more. These devotees are upset that instead of being learned teachers of Hindu tradition, their most renowned Brahmins are often merely “symbols of tradition” rather than informed and engaged participants in it.

Furthermore, while lay Hindus have traditionally learned the legends about their deities through dramatic performances at festivals, in contemporary times they gain more detailed stories through religious comic books and popular television series based upon Hindu myths such as the Ramayana. As time progresses and the accessibility of technology and education increase, the laity are learning more about religion while the priests are losing their intellectual dominance. The institution of temple Hinduism, therefore, has become so lax that many Brahmin priests have simply assumed their traditional status without the proper knowledge or devotion to their position.

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67 Martin, 367
68 Martin, 371
However, the devotees’ demands – and as we will see later, the government’s influence – have not completely fallen upon deaf ears. In many cases, younger generations of Brahmin priests are taking an increased interest in becoming better educated in the ancient tradition. While many priests – especially at smaller, village temples – still learn as apprentices at temples, there have also been a number of training facilities created to instruct Brahmins in orthodox Hinduism. Through institutions such as the Swaminarayan Sadhu Training Center for international Hindu priests in Sarangpur, or the “refresher courses” for priests offered by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Commission (HREC) in Tamil Nadu, priests are taught proper worship procedures alongside the basics of many Hindu religious texts such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Agama Shastras*, and the *Upanishads*.\(^{69}\)

On the other hand, these training facilities have not eradicated the problem of uneducated priests. Some priests are simply not interested in taking courses,\(^{70}\) or are so busy serving at temples that they cannot take time out off to attend them. It is also true that some institutions only teach the Sanskrit needed to pronounce the “mantras necessary to the rituals”\(^{71}\) and in most cases, very little of what they teach is of significant theological or philosophical importance.\(^{72}\) Nevertheless, though such institutions of learning have not solved all problems of priestly education, the fact that many Brahmins are taking the initiative to learn more of the ancient texts has allowed for their increase of status among many devotees.

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\(^{70}\) Martin notes this problem with the South Indian village priests about whom he conducted his field research; while the HREC offered courses, only one or two of the priests had ever attended them (Martin, 368).

\(^{71}\) Martin, 367-8

Present-Day Purity Practices

Along with the expectation that Brahmins should be educated in the ancient tradition of Brahmanical Hinduism, they are also required to maintain a high level of religious and social purity. Not only is their purity essential for their own spiritual well-being, but it also has implications for the religious purity and well-being of the lay devotees for whom they perform worship and for the deities with whom they come in constant contact.\textsuperscript{73} As a result, over time priests have reinterpreted the ancient Vedic rituals – which often involved the use of potentially polluting substances such as soma and, on occasion, included the performance of animal sacrifice – in order to purify themselves and their practices. A clear example of such adaptation is the substitution of with vegetarian items such as pongal (a vegetarian dish), milk, and coconut for what – in Vedic times – were animal sacrifices.\textsuperscript{74} Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical village temples, alike, have adopted the shift toward vegetarianism.

Another factor of priestly impurity, the acceptance of payment for ritual performance, has also changed in contemporary times. The major difference in contemporary compensation is that Brahmins – who are now often requested for lower-caste, but upper-class private worship ceremonies – have begun to accept money instead of food for their services.\textsuperscript{75} As a result, they are no longer ingesting the foods prepared by those of lower castes, so Brahmins can accept these payments without incurring as much pollution – moreover, their payment is more useful to them in a financially demanding contemporary Indian society.

One of the greatest threats to the traditional purity of present-day Brahmins, however, has been the democratization of Hinduism and Indian society. As increasing numbers of lower-caste Indians have been able to obtain a quality education and a well-paying job through governmental

\textsuperscript{74} Fuller, “Sacrifice (Bali),” 26
\textsuperscript{75} Hertel 21
regulations similar to American “affirmative action” practices, there has been a corresponding increase of low-caste, upper-class Indians, as well as a blossoming middle class. Additionally, although some temples continue to discreetly refuse admission to low-caste devotees, preventing lower castes from entering Brahmanical temples has been made illegal throughout India.\textsuperscript{76} Consequently, most Brahmins are in constant contact with members of lower, traditionally polluted castes, which has placed them in a questionable position regarding their traditional purity status.

Finally, simply living in modern-day Indian society presents several difficulties in maintaining one’s purity. With such a large number of devotees who enter temples on a daily basis, combined with a thriving tourist industry that brings non-Indian visitors who are unaware of or disrespectful to Hindu purity standards, temple Brahmins not only risk incurring impurities through their contact through devotees on a daily basis, but are also often forced to shorten or omit certain purity rituals in order to meet the time demands of temple-goers.\textsuperscript{77} Furthermore, due to the growing popularity of capitalism and its potentially impure accompanying establishments like restaurant dining, a Brahmin can never be sure whether those who are serving him are observing his high level of purity regulations.

On the other hand, while traditional purity remains an important issue to many Brahmins, this does not seem to be among the complaints of devotees. Other than Parry’s remark that funeral priests are often seen as inauspicious,\textsuperscript{78} I have only encountered significant concern about contemporary priests’ levels of purity by the scholars who compare them with Vedic standards and by the priests, themselves. With the influx of Westernization, capitalism, and sheer size of

\textsuperscript{76} For a specific account of this occurrence, see the section on the Minakshi Temple in Madurai under the Case Studies section of this paper.
\textsuperscript{77} Parry, “Ghosts, Greed, and Sin,” 104
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 94
the Indian population, many traditional standards of purity – it seems – have been forfeited for the sake of engagement with modernity.

The Influence of Law and Government on Priestly Status

Just as the ancient kings had granted the Vedic Brahmins their religious and social authority, throughout India’s history the government has played a significant role in the status and legitimacy of modern priests. As we saw in the Vedic accounts, Brahmins received considerable support and authority from kings who saw the respect of Brahmins as part of maintaining the Vedic social cosmos. Later in colonial times, British colonizers – hoping to popularize the Vedic forms of worship over the “heathen,” indigenous and popular forms – declared Brahmanical Hinduism the proper form of Hindu religious practice, and supported those priests who followed the Vedic tradition.\textsuperscript{79} In present-day, democratic India, however, the government does not always support the often exclusive Brahmanical practices, and – much to the chagrin of many Brahmin priests – also has a larger role in the administration of religious institutions, on temple funding, and in many cases the legal legitimacy of priests. Thus, in many recent cases of Brahmanical priestly authority, we see that the government plays an unprecedented role in the contemporary priesthood. As a result, Brahmins are often dependant upon the government’s authority when it comes to issues of increasing, maintaining, or confirming their legitimacy.

One of the most common disputes over priestly authority involves hereditary status. As we have seen, Brahmins usually obtain their right to serve through their lineage. However, when a priest cannot attend his designated shifts at the temple, his son serves in lieu of him, or – if none of his male lineage are able to work for him – a substitute priest is temporarily hired to

serve in his place. This short-term system of substitution is usually effective. In some cases, however, the priest and his kin are absent from their duties for such a long period of time that his substitute assumes his position in the temple priests’ rotations, and sometimes even passes his once-temporary duty on to his own children. In such instances, the Brahmin’s family must petition – usually to the government – in an attempt to regain his family’s place of service in the temple priests’ rotation.

While petitions to the government sometimes help families reclaim their status in the temple, in other cases the courts rule against them. In one court decree, the judge claimed that the Brahmin priestly position was not hereditary, but was assigned by temple trustees. Such rulings are good for the government (as they grant them authority over the selection of priests) but are devastating for hereditary priests, whose status is then contingent on the rulings of temple trustees who are educated, but often of lower castes than themselves. Such governmental intervention, Richard Brubaker argues, also has a further negative effect on the priesthood because it perpetuates the public’s growing suspicion about traditional priestly status. While the modern government provides a consistent level of temple funding and often aids Brahmins in hereditary court cases, in some instances it has caused a decrease in social, religious, and political status for these priests.

As a result, priests have had to develop other ways to ensure that future generations of their families will prosper in Indian society. In some cases, Brahmins have sent their sons to

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80 Fuller, *Renewal of the Priesthood*, 24
81 Long-term absences are usually a result of the sickness or death of the permanent priest, or due to his extreme negligence of his temple duties.
84 Good, 244
85 Martin, 365
86 Brubaker, 435
secular educational institutions in hopes that they will find employment outside of the priesthood, and many others have part-time, secular employment to supplement their income.\textsuperscript{87} On the other hand, some prospective priests have retained their traditional occupations and gone to religious institutions in hopes of attaining greater flexibility and job security in temple work.\textsuperscript{88} Within the priestly families, many have also discovered ways to procure more frequent or larger rotas (rotations of worship) for their sons by intermarrying with other priestly families.\textsuperscript{89}

As a final attempt to assert their authority upon a government that sometimes rules against them, Brahmins are using Hindu orthodoxy to their benefit. By citing certain ancient texts, for example, many Brahmins have been able to legitimize their authority and place as priests within their temples. Good noted this utilization of orthodoxy in his “Law, Legitimacy and Hereditary Rights of Tamil Temple Priests”:

> Tamil priests use a common set of terms and classifying concepts, and appeal to the same agreed canons of orthodoxy. [By doing so, they have a] set of components from which they can construct arguments appropriate to the situations in which they find themselves.\textsuperscript{90}

In support of such orthodoxy, the growing (but by no means dominating) influence of the Hindu nationalist movement and the religious authority and orthodoxy that are central to its message has also brought more honor to priests – especially in comparison to the anti-Brahmin movements that began around the 1980’s.\textsuperscript{91} As a result, the majority of Hindu worship has shifted toward more Vedic, Brahmanical standards in recent times, and orthodoxy in the priesthood has become increasingly prevalent.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{87} Fuller, \textit{Renewal of the Priesthood}, 3, 45
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 6
\textsuperscript{89} Good, 242
\textsuperscript{90} Good, 257
\textsuperscript{91} Fuller, \textit{Renewal of the Priesthood}, 149
What to Make of These Contradictions?

At this point, we have observed two very different time periods of the Hindu priesthood, which seem highly incompatible with one another. In fact, it would be rather easy to make the claim that the great cultural gap between these two periods makes it impossible to delineate uniformly followed textual standards for the modern priesthood. Although the contemporary priesthood’s relationship with the past has changed, it is important to recall that Hinduism is— in some form or another— still the dominant religious practice in India. Furthermore, the continued presence of tensions about education, purity, and politics imply that the ancient texts are compatible with the changes brought about in modernity. In the next section, then, we will examine some specific Hindu communities in contemporary India, and see how their priests have dealt with the issue of bringing Hinduism into the present day.
Chapter 3

Case Studies

The preceding chapters offer some general descriptions of the key issues facing the contemporary Hindu priesthood, particularly regarding education and purity. Local conceptions of priests and practices are very diverse, however, and it is important to realize that just as there are not uniform characteristics embodied by all Hindu temples or devotees, nor are such characteristics uniform throughout the entire Hindu priesthood. For this reason, I have chosen five case studies taken from very different backgrounds of Hindu practice, each of which will deepen our understanding of how the issues of purity, education, and power have become manifest in particular communities.

The first, and perhaps most well-known case study of orthodox Brahmanical Hindu priests, is a summary of C.J. Fuller’s many writings on the Minakshi Temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. The second is based upon Michael M. Moffatt’s fieldwork, which also looks at South Indian priests, but this time at the relationship between those of Brahmin and non-Brahmin backgrounds. The third, taken from the writings of Gerald D. Berreman, discusses the relationship between Brahmans and Shamans in the Pahari North Indian Hinduism, and their relationship with the recent influence of Sanskritization. The fourth case study is extracted from Jonathan Parry’s work in Benares, where he discusses the many complications associated with the funeral priesthood. Finally, I include my own field study from Pandi Kovil, a non-Brahmanical village temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, and the unique role of counselor that is played by the temple’s most prominent priestess.

While Berreman spells this priestly title “Brahman,” he is indicating what have thus far referred to as the “Brahmin.” I will attempt to honor his spelling while using my own analysis, clarifying his usage as necessary.
While these case studies serve to demonstrate many of the common themes that we have been tracing throughout the priesthood, they also illustrate how regionalized ideas and practices present many of their own unique ideological struggles and assertions. The five case studies that I have chosen will provide five very different examples of the modern Hindu priesthood. After examining these case studies, I will synthesize them with our previous, more general discussion of the priesthood, and derive some general conclusions as to what it means to be a Hindu priest in modern times.

I. Servants of the Goddess, Fuller’s Work on Minakshi Temple Priests

Perhaps one of the most famous anthropologists of South India in contemporary academia, C.J. Fuller has written numerous books and articles about the Brahmins at Minakshi temple. While I have used several of his articles for this case study, the bulk of my information comes from his most recent publication, *The Renewal of the Priesthood: Modernity and Traditionalism in a South Indian Temple*. The Minakshi priests have struggled with educational, purity, and governmental disputes, which makes it a valuable tool for this analysis.

Among Indians and scholars, South India is known for its maintenance of orthodoxy in light of modernization, and Minakshi Temple stands at the apex of this Dravidian traditionalism. That being said, the priesthood at Minakshi should, theoretically, be a bastion of the Hindu Brahmanical tradition. Fuller’s findings demonstrate the opposite. In recent times, the Minakshi Temple priests have been publicly criticized for their textual ignorance, which has significantly affected the ways in which they approach their traditionally prestigious profession.

According to Minakshi Brahmins, all priests must be from the Adisaiva Brahmin subcaste, must have been consecrated through priestly rituals, and must be married. Their neglecting to mention education in this description is perhaps indicative of their lack of priestly

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scriptural knowledge. The devotees in Madurai have, within the past thirty or so years, virulently condemned the Minakshi priests for their ignorance of the *Agamas*, a body of texts outlining the proper worship for the god Siva, the temple’s main deity and a deity of great importance in South India.\(^95\) Fuller found that most Minakshi priests do not know the proper texts associated with these rituals. He further noted there is often “confused discussion” amongst the priests during the performance of less frequent rituals, and they often openly discuss non-religious topics while conducting daily ritual functions.\(^96\) The Minakshi Brahmins’ lack of education and professional demeanor, to many devotees, is not only aggravating, but – as we have seen – is also considered by the ancient texts to be spiritually detrimental.

In some cases, these priests have made the aforementioned argument that their *bhakti*, or devotional worship, takes precedence over ancient textual knowledge or perfection in ritual conduct.\(^97\) This has not, however, been the attitude of all priests. In fact, many of the younger generations of priests have begun to enroll in Vedic educational institutions and are learning the proper conduct, mantras, *mudras* (hand gestures), and preparation involved for ritual practices.\(^98\) Although they still do not usually learn the meaning behind these rituals and texts, their knowledge in this area gives them a higher status than the older priests in the temple,\(^99\) and – although it has caused some friction among generations of Minakshi Temple priests – has helped to increase the overall status of all Minakshi Temple priests in the public eye.

What is most fascinating about the educational debate, however, is its irrelevance. First of all, Fuller tells us that insistence on the priests’ education in the *Agamas* is an “ideological fiction” – for these texts only discuss the performance of private, not public, worship to Siva.\(^100\)

\(^{95}\) Fuller, *Renewal of the Priesthood*, 3
\(^{96}\) Ibid., 11
\(^{97}\) Ibid., 3
\(^{98}\) Ibid., 6, 103-104
\(^{99}\) Ibid., 13
\(^{100}\) Ibid., 81
Second, the public’s complaints are often not strictly based upon the priests’ textual knowledge or accuracy. While a handful educated scholars of ancient religious texts might note the Brahmins’ lack of Sanskrit knowledge, the average devotee knows and cares little about the proper Vedic practice of ritual, but is instead concerned with whether the rituals are performed slowly and reverentially.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 108} Finally, since most of the priests do not know the “theological intricacies” of the ritual practices and \textit{mantras}, their proper education means very little; Fuller tells us that their “elementary understanding of the theory” behind the rituals is sufficient for conducting worship.\footnote{Fuller, “Gods, Priests, and Purity,” 468}

While the next issue, purity, is not one of Fuller’s main concerns, he does reveal some interesting events and circumstances that have greatly impacted the priests’ ideas concerning their status and maintenance of traditional purity. The greatest clash of modernization and ritual pollution occurred in 1939, when the Tamil Nadu government opened Minakshi temple to \textit{dalits} (low-caste “untouchables”) and Nadars (a large, wealthy, and influential low-caste community of South Indians). While the government saw it as a great step toward the democratization of Indian culture, the Minakshi priests saw it as a threat to their and the Temple’s traditional levels of purity, and went on strike for seven years.\footnote{Fuller, \textit{Renewal of the Priesthood}, 3} Although these communities of Hindus are still allowed access to the temple, the priests have grudgingly returned to work.

The democratization of the temple is just one of the many impacts that modernity has had upon the Minakshi priesthood. In contemporary times, the influx of Westernization and secularization into South India has forced priests to struggle between maintaining their high levels of purity and partaking in the social norms of the day.\footnote{Ibid., 68} In order to assimilate into modern society, for example, Brahmins began to adopt contemporary hair and dress styles and more
lenient food purity standards, picking and choosing which rules they will choose to follow.\textsuperscript{105}

How do they justify these often-blatant violations of traditional purity regulations?

When taxed about these changes and how they fail to fit into their own commitment of tradition, the priest often just shrug their shoulders. They easily acknowledge that life has changed, that many habits no longer comply with the orthodox Brahmanical norms, and point out – with more or less regret – that they, like everyone else, must live in today’s world and adapt to it.\textsuperscript{106}

It seems that in the face of modernity, these priests have decided to pick their battles. While it is important that they maintain a certain level of orthodoxy, to ignore the strong influence of modernity would, indeed, place them at a social and cultural disadvantage. Instead of trying to retain every facet of their ancestral behavior, they have chosen to shed certain aspects of orthodoxy – those that would impair their interactions with the public outside of the temple – and retain others.\textsuperscript{107} Through their selectivity, they hope to maintain their hereditary status while also equipping themselves to live in modern society.

The final aspect of the Minakshi priesthood is its change in social standing as a result of modernity. In recent times, the Tamil Nadu government has begun to play a unique role in the region’s temple politics, which has provided further obstacles for these contemporary priests. Having been greatly influenced by the British colonial bureaucracy and pressure for democratization, Tamil Nadu’s government has brought many of India’s political and social changes into the temple realm.

Prior to its colonization, Madurai had been ruled by its traditional kings, the Nayakas, who had established a clear and respectful relationship with the Minakshi priests. When these kings were replaced, first by British pawns and then later by elected officials in 1937, the temple

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 71
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 78
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 5
came under governmental control via the Hindu Religious Endowments (HRE) Board.\textsuperscript{108} It was under these rulers that the Minakshi priests lost a great deal of their traditional power and influence and were scathingly attacked for their intellectual and ritual incompetence.

Along with its criticism of the priesthood, the government has also made the priests subservient to its demands in order to obtain governmental funding; priests are often, for example, required to give preferential treatment to the government’s “VIP’s,” which they claim has interfered with their normal temple functions.\textsuperscript{109} As a result, the priests are embittered by their current relationship with the Tamil Nadu government, argue that the new government has not maintained the standard of mutual respect they shared with the Nayaka kings, and feel that the HRE Board imposes upon their practices with no concern for the ritual and spiritual welfare of the temple.\textsuperscript{110} The tense relationship between the current Tamil Nadu government and the Minakshi priests – along with the debates over education and purity – is an example of modernity that has greatly impacted the priesthood and that cannot be entirely dealt with using textual standards of power, authority, and structure.

\section*{II. “Brahmins for the Harijans”: Non-Brahmanical Worship in Endavur}

In Endavur, a South Indian community, the Brahmin and non-Brahmin castes are highly segregated in their ritual conduct, their daily interactions, and even their residential locations – but this separation does not stop at the level of Brahmin versus non-Brahmin. In his \textit{Untouchable Community in South India} and his “Harijan Religion: Consensus at the Bottom of Caste,” Michael Moffatt attempts to demonstrate the ways in which non-Brahmanical groups mimic Brahmins both in their performance of rituals and in their religious and community hierarchies. What is significant to our discussion of low-caste Endavur religion is not so much the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 3
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 143
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 148
\end{footnotesize}
Brahmanical tradition, but instead the ways that the lower caste, non-Brahmanical priests have emulated it.

In order to discuss low-caste worship, it is important to first understand one of the Brahmanical roles in Endavur’s Hindu ritual. One caste in specific – the *Vettaikaran Pucaris*, or “puja persons” – is an important factor in understanding Harijan ritual because it represents one of the Brahmanical worship positions in Endavur that lower castes emulate in their rituals. In Brahmanical worship, these “puja persons” perform polluting tasks such as bloody animal sacrifices or serving as spirit mediums for possession by the goddess.\(^{111}\) While this position may seem unimportant at the level of Untouchable Hinduism – where all devotees are considered ritually impure – the *pucari* has been recreated in low-caste worship.

This background of the *Vettaikaran Pucari* will facilitate the following discussion of Untouchable ritual performances. Within the group delineated by the term “Untouchable,” there are five different communities that are further ranked. The highest subcaste among the Untouchables is the *Valluvar Pandaram* community – who are often referred to by local Hindus as the “Brahmins for the Harijans.”\(^{112}\) The head of one of these *Valluvar* households serves the role of *purohit* (in this case, a term for the person serving in the role of the Brahmin priest), also known to the Untouchables as the *Nayinar*.\(^{113}\)

The *Nayinar* holds the highest religious and social status among others in the Untouchable communities, and vigorously attempts to mimic the worship, behavior, and social interactions of the Brahmin priest. He imitates Brahmin priests in his dress (from his shaven head


\(^{112}\) The *Harijans* are a subcaste of Untouchables who are considered contaminated due to their work in the cremation grounds. Despite their polluted purity status, the *Harijans* are one of the largest subcastes and command a great deal of power and social clout. Thus, the *Valluvar purohits* or *Nayinars* are able to make a profession of low-caste priesthood by serving the Harijans. See, Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979), 102, 110, 115.

\(^{113}\) Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community*, 102
and topknot to his sacred thread), in his purity standards, and in his behavior (through activities such as refusing to serve the lowest untouchables or observe animal sacrifices). Nayinars also claim to exercise ritual and educational methods similar to those of the Brahmins.\footnote{Ibid., 106}

We do for these Harijans the things that the Brahmin does for the Uur people [of the twice-born community]… but we don’t know what the Brahmins are saying when they perform those rites…. I learned these rituals from my father, just as the Brahmin learns from his. But unlike the Brahmin, I did not learn the books.\footnote{Interview with a Valluvar Purohit, Moffatt, An Untouchable Community, 106.}

Also similar to the Brahmin priests, the Nayinars know little of the proper, textual rituals. In fact, the Nayinars’ mantras are in the Tamil vernacular – not in the Brahmanical Sanskrit used for upper-caste worship – which is said to render the Untouchables’ mantras “less powerful for religious purposes.”\footnote{Moffatt, “Harijan Religion,” 254} Furthermore, even when these Nayinars know the proper performance of rituals, they are still unaware of their meanings.\footnote{Moffatt, An Untouchable Community, 106}

Quite similar to their Brahmin archetypes, the Nayinars – who claim a high social ranking among their fellow Untouchables – are often not venerated as men of high religious and social status. Many of the Untouchables see through the Nayinar’s lack of Brahmanical education and his pursuit of monetary interests, and instead treat him with disrespect; in their eyes, he is “just like a beggar” in his quest for social standing and profit.\footnote{Ibid., 107}

Thus, alongside their attempts to emulate Brahmin purohits, it appears as though these Nayinars have also inherited – though for quite different reasons – the Brahmin’s ambivalent status among lay devotees.

Lastly, in imitating the Brahmanical style of worship, the Untouchable public ritual also recreates the position of the aforementioned Vettaiikaran pucaris – or puja performers. In a function similar to that of the Brahmanical pucaris, Harijan devotees and ritual drummers serve and worship the goddess Mariyamman in her impure manifestations: through possession and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ibid., 106}
\footnote{Interview with a Valluvar Purohit, Moffatt, An Untouchable Community, 106.}
\footnote{Moffatt, “Harijan Religion,” 254}
\footnote{Moffatt, An Untouchable Community, 106}
\footnote{Ibid., 107}
\end{footnotes}
animal sacrifices.\textsuperscript{119} Since the \textit{Nayinar} – like the Brahmin priests – will only perform worship to Mariyamman’s pure incarnation and refuses to associate himself with the other polluting forms of worship, the \textit{Harijan pucaris} actually officiate while the \textit{Nayinar} shields his eyes.\textsuperscript{120}

These Untouchable devotees have made great efforts to emulate the Brahmanical religious structure – a reconstruction that has carried into their social divisions. While it seems odd that lower castes would want to perpetuate the status and caste distinctions that prevent them from attending Brahmanical worship, they clearly consider these structures delineating purity, pollution, and ritual qualification vital to the proper worship of their goddess. What is most fascinating, however, is that they have not been able to fully escape the ambiguities surrounding the Brahmanical priesthood in their reconstruction of it; \textit{Nayinars} may be granted high ritual status, but it seems to be limited to the realm of worship, for they still encounter the public’s scorn. Instead of phasing out these incongruities to create a less tumultuous social structure (or even a highly respected priesthood), the lower-caste devotees have – perhaps unconsciously – retained versions of the same upper-caste struggles in their model of worship.

\textbf{III. Dealing with Sanskritization: The Changing Positions of Brahmins and Shamans in Pahari Religion}

Through the previous case studies, we have already begun to observe variations in the conduct and structure of religious practices within individual Hindu communities. In his “Brahmins and Shamans in Pahari Religion,” Gerald Berreman has found that in the Pahari region of North India, there is a unique, local version of Hinduism with a system of beliefs and practices that – for the most part – transcends caste divisions.\textsuperscript{121} This religious structure,

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 252
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 255
\textsuperscript{121} Berreman, 54
however, is being challenged by the “modern” Sanskritization\textsuperscript{122} of Hinduism that many Pahari Hindus have observed in the nearby “Plains” Hindu community. This case provides a prime example of the change occurring in priestly status as a resulting from the merging of indigenous popular and traditional Brahmanical Hinduism.

In order to understand the impact of modernity on Pahari Hinduism, one must first understand their priesthood. Pahari Hinduism has two main types of priests: the Brahmins and the shamans – each of which has achieved a functional balance with the other. The first of the two, the Brahmins, are of a priestly subcaste. Like most Brahmins, the Pahari Brahmins are known for their reliability in worship and are described by Berreman as “religious technicians” for their performance of “stereotyped ritual actions at prescribed… occasions.”\textsuperscript{123} Along with their temple role, the Brahmins perform rituals at village events dedicated to both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical deities, and for both upper and lower caste devotees. The Pahari Brahmins are known and respected by the local laity for their performance of rituals with “accuracy, knowledge, and competence,” and for their ability to “inject an element of the great tradition” into Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical worship ceremonies – often performing rituals for non-Brahmanical deities with the same reverence that they would for Brahmanical ones.\textsuperscript{124}

A subset of Brahmins, the purohits, work as family priests in hereditary lines that have been serving specific families for decades, and perform life cycle ceremonies for events such as births, deaths, and marriages.\textsuperscript{125} Because his occupation is passed on from generation to generation, the purohit never has to compete with other Brahmins for his clientele.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{122} Sanskritization refers to the contemporary movement toward more orthodox Hinduism, which stresses both religious and cultural orthodoxy and the infusion of orthodox, textual elements into vernacular Hindu ritual. The Hindu Nationalist Movement most heavily advocates Sanskritization. While Berreman does not discuss the social changes in this movement, we definitely see the increased influence of orthodox ritual performance.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 60
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 55-56, 61
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 55
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 60
despite the recent changes in Pahari religious practices, the position of purohit will always be needed for the performance of important Hindu ceremonies; although he may have to adapt his practices to the changing religious tastes, Hindu families will always require his services for their life-cycle ceremonies.\textsuperscript{127}

Unlike the purohits, Brahmins must compete with one another for their services. Devotees are able to choose which Brahmins they will hire to perform their ritual services, and if the Brahmin does not carry out the quality of ritual conduct the devotees desire he will not be hired. As a result, the Brahmins in the Pahari religious system are under a greater level of public scrutiny because their employment rests on their ability satisfy the needs of their devotees. Furthermore, the maintenance of Hindu religious orthodoxy serves in their favor,\textsuperscript{128} so long as they are consistent with traditional ideals of the priesthood, they are able to ensure that they retain their status within the Pahari religious and social divisions.\textsuperscript{129}

The Brahmins in this region have established a balance with the second main group of priests— the area shamans. These men serve as spirit mediums for their individual deities in order to discern the causes and cures of their clients’ maladies. Although shamans serve and come from various castes, most are from lower castes. This occurs for two reasons: first, the shaman’s position of dealing with spirits is often seen as very dangerous, and those who are willing to risk their spiritual and physical safety to become a shaman are usually of greatest financial need, and second, many low-caste people become shamans in hopes of gaining influence and power over their upper-caste clients.\textsuperscript{130} With the spiritual authority that is part and parcel of his job, the shaman can exert a great deal of power over people from various castes, and if he wishes he can

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 65
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 62
\textsuperscript{129} It is important to note, however, that the “orthodoxy” of Pahari Brahmins is not necessarily Vedic orthodoxy – since these priests are not educated in the Vedic texts or the orthodox Vedic tradition. When we speak of “orthodoxy,” then, we speak of what is orthodox to Pahari Brahmical Hinduism.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 61-2
recommend cures that will cost a great deal of time and money to perform. Furthermore, the shaman holds a great deal of sway over the profession of the Brahmins; by prescribing specific rituals his clients should have performed by the Brahmins in order to fix their problems, the shaman is also dictating the types of rituals that the Brahmins perform.\textsuperscript{131} Thus, low-caste citizens who become shamans often do so in hopes of either reforming the caste system or gaining an upper hand over those of higher castes.

Given the very liberal requirements that we have used to describe the shamans, one must wonder what, exactly, determines their position in society. Much like the Brahmins, the shamans must compete for their clients. Unlike the Brahmins, however, the shamans are not known for any sort of ritual orthodoxy, but are instead judged by their efficacy as well as their ability to serve as personable counselors and advisors.\textsuperscript{132} Consequently, those shamans who are able to prescribe the most effective cures and give the best personal guidance – which often comes from their knowledge of community affairs through gossip – are most likely to have more clients. Surprisingly, although they could potentially be at odds with one another, Brahmins and shamans have found a way to work together and have a vested interest in maintaining the current religious structure in Pahari Hinduism.

As the contemporary trend of Sanskritization (infusing elements of orthodox, textual Hinduism into vernacular ritual) has spread throughout India, many members of the Pahari lay community have expressed an interest in integrating ritual elements they have observed in the nearby “Plains” region into their own worship.\textsuperscript{133} Having only been trained in their local, traditional religious practices, Pahari Brahmins are uneducated in these “new” Vedic rituals and cannot fulfill their devotees’ requests. In order to meet the devotees’ demands for priests trained

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 59-60
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 57
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 63
in the Vedic tradition, people from various castes\(^\text{134}\) have become educated in the “Plains idiom” of Hinduism in order to become priests.\(^\text{135}\) Berreman refers to these priests as the “Atraditional” Brahmins. In contrast to the traditional Pahari Brahmins and shamans, the Atraditional Brahmins strictly “advocate… the worship of great traditional gods [and] adherence to Brahmanical rites,” and are able to provide the “modern” religious services that the Pahari Brahmins cannot.\(^\text{136}\) We see, then, that as the public’s ideas about priestly education are changing, the traditional Brahmins who were once known for their religious and ritual competence and knowledge have lost their status – by no fault of their own negligence – to a group of priests whose religious training is different from their own.

Along with taking over the traditional Pahari Brahmin’s position, the Atraditional Brahmins have also denounced the role of the shaman, whose religious authority and methods of practice are most definitely a threat to their status. It is not surprising, then, that the increasing influence of the Atraditional Brahmins is detrimental to the religious and social economy, balance, and structure of the Pahari region. While the Brahmins and shamans are being delegitimized in their own community, virtually anyone who claims to have knowledge of the Plains Hinduism has been able to move into this region and establish a religious monopoly. While this is less of a threat to Brahmins and purohits who can adapt their practices to fit the Sanskrit-based rituals, the shamans and their non-Brahmanical deities face the possibility of becoming obsolete. As a result, shamans have heavily resisted the incoming Atraditional Brahmins and the Plains religion, and have been successful in many cases; not only is their religious authority is very important to many Pahari devotees, but many devotees have merged

\(^{134}\) Although Berreman mentions that these Atraditional Brahmins are of various castes, he does not tell us how their lack of priestly lineage has been received in light of traditional expectations about hereditary Brahmins.

\(^{135}\) Ibid., 64

\(^{136}\) Ibid., 64
some of the Sanskritic practices with their traditional religious establishments in order to keep their shamans.\textsuperscript{137}

While this struggle between regional tradition and modern (yet textually traditional) Hinduism is far from over, the case of Pahari religion also shows the power of traditions in the public eye. Attempts to adopt “modern” and “sophisticated” practices has undoubtedly popularized a form of Hinduism focused upon its Sanskritization, but in many cases, the Pahari populace is still somewhat attached to the personal charm and awe of their local religion. According to Berreman, however, this will probably not last.\textsuperscript{138} Although traditionalism is putting up a good fight against the pressures of modernization, Pahari Hindus are likely to choose the more “sophisticated” and erudite religion over their indigenous one – and their traditional religious figures will be forced to either adapt or lose their status.

\textbf{IV. Necessarily Impure: The Troubled Position of Benares Funeral Priests}

As we have seen, one of the greatest ambiguities that priests face is the struggle between their occupational performance of ritual and impurities that accompany it. Perhaps one of the most complicated examples of the purity issue is that of the funeral priests, who take on the pollution of their devotees more than any other priests.\textsuperscript{139} In his fieldwork with the funeral priests in Benares – an auspicious Indian city where many Hindus make their last pilgrimage in order to die near the river Ganges – Jonathan Parry explores the spiritual and social tensions that many of these priests feel as a result of their profession.

One of the most unique difficulties associated with the Benares funerary priests is that they are not only constantly dealing with the deceased, but they ritually \textit{become} the deceased. According to the philosophy behind funeral rituals, the priest becomes one with the deceased –

\begin{footnotes}
\item[137] Ibid. 64
\item[138] Ibid., 67
\item[139] Parry, “Ghosts, Greed, and Sin,” 89
\end{footnotes}
including wearing their clothing and eating their favorite foods in order to accept gifts from their family, speak for them, and carry out their final rituals.\textsuperscript{140} In so doing, these priests are not only coming into contact with death on a regular basis, but by becoming the deceased, they actually incur the impurities that Hindus traditionally receive when someone in their family passes away (which leaves them in various levels of impure status for up to a year).\textsuperscript{141}

Along with these more extreme forms of pollution, the Benares priests also acquire the standard priestly pollutions associated with the payment – or \textit{dan} – for their services. Between the priests’ often-anonymous relationships with their customers on pilgrimage and their desire to make a suitable income, many priests solicit as much money as possible from their clients – sometimes by being impolite and fraudulent.\textsuperscript{142} Although the priests claim that they are simply providing for their families, many devotees look at them with disdain. They claim that such priests are tremendously impure, as well as bad Brahmins, and that they should try to follow the austere behavior of the ascetic Brahmins in order to regain their purity and the public’s respect.\textsuperscript{143}

This stigma of spiritual and physical pollution places these priests in a morally distressing position; as if being a “cess-pit for the wickedness of the cosmos” were not enough, their impurities carry into simple actions of their daily lives and their interactions with others.\textsuperscript{144}

Adding to the contamination incurred by these priests via physical and spiritual substances, their lack of education also lends to their low status. First of all, many of the priests are not properly trained in the Sanskrit texts and ritual sequences expected of funeral priests.\textsuperscript{145} Instead, most have learned their mantras by reading popular pamphlets written in the vernacular.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{140} Ibid., 93
\footnote{141} Ibid., 94
\footnote{142} Ibid., 96, 100
\footnote{143} Ibid., 103
\footnote{144} An example of the impact of such impurity is seen in these priests’ avoidance of salting their foods – which is associated with the belief that the use of salt establishes a relationship between the cook and the priest, and no one wants to be ritualistically bonded with such a impure person (Parry 1980; 89, 94).
\footnote{145} Ibid., 95
\end{footnotes}
in their few moments of spare time, which they repeat from rote memorization without knowing their meanings or implications. Secondly, many of the priests do not actually know the full mantras by heart, and occasionally mumble through certain sections in hopes that their clients will not notice. This practice is likely perpetuated by the fact that it usually does, in fact, go unnoticed. Finally, even if these priests do know the proper rituals, many priests – often feeling them to be too time-consuming – forgo the lengthy daily purification rituals required of them. Parry does not tell us whether or not they know the ritual importance of performing such rituals, but their neglect nevertheless increases their state of pollution.

With all of the negative implications of the funerary priesthood, it is of little surprise that many of these priests are morally distraught and seem to have given up on retaining even the smallest portion of their ritual purity. Others, having realized the great “spiritual price” of this profession, have shirked their hereditary vocation, opting to pursue other means of income. It is easy to observe, as Parry does, that “no dan is a good dan and the best Brahman is one who steers well clear of the priestly calling;” despite his attempts to better himself, if he is to perform his ritual tasks, the priest cannot escape the accumulation of impurities.

In Parry’s description of the many negative consequences associated with the Benares funeral priesthood, it is easy to forget the importance of such a position. Parry reminds us, however, “if the world were indeed composed of ascetic Brahmans who refused to accept all offerings over and above their immediate subsistence needs, rituals would grind to a halt and the progressive degeneration of the universe would be greatly accelerated.” The Benares funeral priests, therefore, do serve a vital role in the Hindu religious cosmos. Furthermore, Parry claims

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147 Parry, “The Brahmanical Tradition,” 204
148 Parry, “Ghosts, Greed, and Sin,” 103
149 Ibid., 102
150 Ibid., 104 (my italics)
151 Ibid., 105 (my italics)
that the Benares priest’s “discrimination… does not strike [him] as being quite so harsh as the theory prescribes…. He is after all a Brahman; although undeniably an ill-omened one.”

While the Benares priests’ accumulation of impurities surely serves as an important factor in their public and spiritual status, the fact that their profession continues to exist must surely indicate that there is some level of acknowledgement of the position’s importance. Whether it is an obligation to hereditary or religious responsibility or simply a means of earning a living, there is still an abundance of funeral priests in Benares who continue to serve despite its negative religious and social implications.

V. Divine Counselors: Priests and Oracles at Pandi Kovil

This last case study is taken from my fieldwork at Pandi Kovil, a temple dedicated to the non-Brahmanical god, Pandi – a kaval theivam (guardian deity) of the southern region of Madurai. In a city most popularly known for its highly orthodox Brahmanical temple to the goddess, Minakshi, Pandi Kovil has made a name for itself among visitors to the city who relish in its rather unorthodox associations with oracles, animal sacrifices, and deity possessions. The temple is also very popular among its lower-caste South Indian devotees – many of whom travel for hours to worship and seek counsel. In discussing Pandi Kovil in the context of modern, Indian priesthood, I will highlight the temple’s complex blend of practices, the position of priests and oracles as religious counselors, the temple’s relationship with the Tamil Nadu government, and Rajathiammal – the temple’s somewhat controversial head priestess.

One of the most unique characteristics of Pandi Kovil is that it blends two very contrasting types of Hindu practice. First of all, the temple is host to regular animal sacrifices, which are offered by devotees in hopes of receiving a boon from Pandi. The peculiar thing about

\[152\] Ibid., 94 (my italics)

\[153\] Female priests in Hinduism are such an anomaly that they can hardly be considered regular members of the priesthood. Rajathiammal’s position, however, is one of great importance at Pandi Kovil, and to neglect her role would not only be an injustice to her authority in the temple, but would also deprive the case study of one of its finest priestly counselors and oracles.
these animal sacrifices, however, is that they are offered to Pandi only through other guardian deities at the temple; Pandi, whom some devotees claim is an incarnation of the Brahmanical god Siva, is vegetarian and will only accept gifts of pongal (a vegetarian dish typically used for Brahmanical worship) or the freshly-shaven head of his devotee in return for fulfilling their requests. This dichotomy of unorthodox and highly polluting animal sacrifices and spirit possessions with more Brahmanical offerings such as pongal is an example of the temple’s overt attempt to merge its non-Brahmanical practices with orthodox Brahmanical purity standards. Through this example, we again see that even the most unorthodox priests are attempting to emulate Brahmanical Hinduism.

The topic of animal sacrifice leads us to the second subject in our discussion of Pandi Kovil – its relationship with the Tamil Nadu government. For the most part, the temple and its priests is rather detached from the government;\(^\text{154}\) the temple has been able to maintain its autonomy in its placement of priests and its ritual conduct, and those working at the temple consider it to be privately owned and operated. This is not to say, however, that Pandi Kovil is unaffected by governmental policies. In 2002, the Tamil banned animal sacrifice throughout Tamil Nadu. Feeling that their style of worship was threatened, the devotees at Pandi Kovil protested adamantly, and the ban was repealed a few months later.\(^\text{155}\) Another instance of governmental intervention was shared by one of my interviewees, who told me that in the months prior to my fieldwork, the government had unsuccessfully attempted to integrate Brahmin priests into the temple rotation.\(^\text{156}\) While both of the government’s attempts were

\(^{154}\) As the temple become more popular, Vallaiammal (its founder) negotiated with the government so that they would agree to play minimal role in the temple’s operation and administration except during times of dispute within the family. See Christine Shanaberger, “Wave the Flame Without Shaking: A Study of Priest and Practice at Pandi Kovil,” (Independent Thesis, South India Term Abroad, 2004), 5.
\(^{155}\) Shanaberger, 15
\(^{156}\) Shanaberger, 16
ineffective, they still serve to demonstrate the power that governmental mandates have over the daily functions of both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical temples.

Since the temple is mostly a private establishment, they have been able to determine their own standards for the priests’ roles and legitimacy. Like in most other Hindu temples, the priestly families at Pandi Kovil are of a specific (yet non-Brahmanical) caste, operate in rotating shifts, and are comprised of the male descendants of Vallaiammal, the temple’s founding priestess. If a priest in the rotation has passed away or is for some reason incapable of coming to work during his week of duty, and does not have a son of age to fill in his position, his wife will come to the temple and bring a male substitute whom she oversees in his conduct of worship.\textsuperscript{157} The wife ensures that the replacement priest will take care in performing the \textit{pujas}, and that her family will receive a portion of that week’s earnings.

Unlike in our other case studies, the religious and educational guidelines for becoming a priest at Pandi Kovil are rather lenient. Priests and substitute priests are not required to have any sort of education about Pandi or experience in performing worship, and there are no mantras offered to Pandi for the priests to memorize. Instead, they use the knowledge they have attained from their fathers serving at the temple – or from their exposure to the temple over time – and mimic the ritual performance.\textsuperscript{158} When I asked one of the temple’s substitute priests, a man who had been periodically substituting at the temple for around thirty years, if he had to exhibit any special qualifications in order to become a priest, he joked that the only practice you need is to ring the bell and wave the camphor flame around Pandi without shaking.\textsuperscript{159}

This lack of priestly education is not frowned upon by any of the devotees or priests – in fact, it is even supported by the temple’s management. During an interview with a temple

\textsuperscript{157} Shanaberger, 7
\textsuperscript{158} Shanaberger, 8
\textsuperscript{159} Shanaberger, 8
administrator, I was told that Pandi priests do not have specific qualifications or proper methods for worshipping Pandi – but they do have a great deal of devotion and veneration. Instead of worshipping with mantras and Vedic texts, he said, devotees and priests at Pandi Kovil are like Kannappan, the devotee of Lord Siva who – rather unorthodoxly – cut out his eyes as an offering to his god. We do not know what is “best” for Pandi, he said; we worship as well as we know using our hearts.¹⁶⁰ Much like the Minakshi priests, for Pandi Kovil priests devotion (bhakti) supercedes technical and theoretical experience.

Without uniformly established worship methods or mantras to Pandi, the shape of temple pujas is based upon the individual requests and demands of the devotees. While in some ways this provides a more personalized temple experience, it sometimes creates a haphazard and unstructured style of ritual performance. Much like Fuller describes in his discussion of the Minakshi priests, the priests at Pandi Kovil often engage in candid, vociferous conversations about non-religious topics while in the inner sanctum – sometimes while devotees are waiting to worship, or even when they are amidst performing puja rituals. On the other hand, while proponents of Brahmanical Hinduism might stress the need for orthodoxy and order in the temple, the drone of mantras in the temple’s background would likely turn away many of the temple’s devotees. Not only would it alter the open atmosphere that invites Pandi Kovil devotees to encounter the regular presence of their deity through his possessions, it would also minimize the interactions between priests and devotees. A distinctive characteristic of the temple’s priesthood, such interpersonal relations cannot be sacrificed for the sake of orthodoxy.

This relationship between devotee and priest is another important subject in the discussion of Pandi Kovil’s priesthood. By dually fulfilling the role of a counselor along with their regular duties, priests and oracles at Pandi Kovil provide a way in which devotees can both

¹⁶⁰ Shanaberger, 9-10
communicate with Pandi, and get immediate – and usually more practical – solutions to their problems. Thus while devotees often enter the temple distraught or in tears, they leave content and encouraged that their problems will be solved. In describing her dual role as priestess and oracle at the temple, Rajathiammal commented the devotees’ feeling of satisfaction: “I want people to be happy when they come back to me because they are getting help…. When people come to me, they forget their sadness and their problems, and when they leave they have smiles on their faces. I want that smile – that’s what keeps me going.”¹⁶¹ Another priest told me that if he could serve as priest and joke with the devotees, it was a positive way in which he could use his voice.¹⁶² The unique relationship that these priests have with their devotees – undoubtedly coupled with the temple’s other interactive elements – gives Pandi Kovil a personal feel that is not available at most Brahmanical temples.

Finally, a discussion about Pandi Kovil’s priesthood would be incomplete without examining the unique role of the temple’s only current priestess, Rajathiammal. In general, women at Pandi Kovil occupy lower positions than men; while the wives and widows of absent priests are allowed in Pandi’s inner sanctum to oversee the substitute priests, their physical role in the performance of public ritual is limited to collecting money from the devotees and handing out vibhuti, or sacred ash. On the other hand, Rajathiammal, the granddaughter of the temple’s founder, believes that Pandi has given her an extraordinary gift and responsibility to serve as a priestess and oracle, and she has assumed the role of head priestess at the temple’s annual Periya Puja (“great puja”).¹⁶³ When I asked Rajathiammal why she was the only woman allowed to perform these duties, she stated that unlike other women in the family, she had been chosen by Pandi through possession at an early age and was thus justified in her role. The other women, she

¹⁶¹ Shanaberg, 11
¹⁶² Shanaberg, 18
¹⁶³ Shanaberg, 13-14
said, all knew and accepted this fact. A few men, however – including the temple’s administrator – were suspicious of Rajathiammal’s power and authority. He said women do not have any role to play in the temple, and that Rajathiammal does not have the proper authority to touch Pandi or conduct the Periya puja – but she continues do so because devotees have come to expect it.\textsuperscript{164}

While Rajathiammal has been the source of some controversy within the temple, it is important to recall that Pandi Kovil’s short history has traditionally associated it with women in authority; Vallaiammal, a female field worker, established the temple and became Pandi’s first devotee and priestess in 1902.\textsuperscript{165} This history, however, hardly implies a legacy of women. When I asked Rajathiammal if another woman would be able to fill her position after she dies, she said that it may be possible, but the woman would have to – like she had – receive special permission from Pandi to fulfill this role.\textsuperscript{166} It seems as though the only liberation women at Pandi Kovil receive is through the discretion of god.

At Pandi Kovil, we see that many of the themes associated with the contemporary priesthood are present in this non-Brahmanical – or what is increasingly dubbed by scholars as “popular” – Hindu temple. What is especially fascinating about Pandi Kovil is the way its devotees and priests blend Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical tradition. While there are a number of highly non-Brahmanical practices at the temple, there are also conscious attempts to emulate Brahmanical standards such as a vegetarian deity and a male-dominated priesthood. Although Pandi Kovil’s possessions and female priests distinguish it from some of the more mainstream case studies, its priests still struggle with the same Brahmanical standards that priests throughout India are attempting to incorporate into their temple worship.

\textsuperscript{164} Shanaberger, 14
\textsuperscript{165} Shanaberger, 5
\textsuperscript{166} Shanaberger, 15
– Chapter 4 –

Conclusion

We have investigated a variety of representations of modern Hindu religious practice in various regional and socio-cultural segments of the Indian population, along with a brief survey of the ancient traditional texts with which these contemporary priests are compared and evaluated. More importantly, through our case studies – perhaps our most telling sources – we have seen more concretely the major issues of purity, education, and political influence that priests face today. These case studies have presented five very different ways in which priests’ roles are interpreted and defined in contemporary Hinduism. Using them, the ancient texts, and the contemporary general trends of the priesthood, we can evaluate the changing standards of education, purity, and political power, and their role in determining the status and behavior of Hindu priests in recent history.

Why is the modern priesthood so different from the ancient texts?

Hinduism is a highly regionalized, highly diversified genre of religious practices. While there are, indeed, several ancient, authoritative texts devoted to describing the priesthood and worship practices, and it is true that priests and devotees throughout India often refer to these ancient ideals as a basis for their religious practices and understanding, we must not forget that Hinduism is a Western term used to consolidate a large variety of religious practices.\(^{167}\) Furthermore, the British colonizers’ granting the greatest religious authority to Brahmanical Hinduism was an overt attempt to annihilate – or at least delegitimize – the indigenous, “barbaric” practices of Indian villages.\(^{168}\) Consequently, although scholars and students of

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\(^{167}\) Viswanathan, 25

\(^{168}\) Viswanathan, 35
religion often expect Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical Hindu practices and priesthoods to be identical, these expectations are based upon a textual canon idealized by orthodox Brahmins and legitimized by Orientalist scholars of India’s colonial period.

In addition to these fallacies of a unified Hinduism, the various case studies in this paper indicate that even post-colonial Hinduism is not uniform even within a single village, city, or region. For us to expect that modern (or even ancient) Hinduism exists as a standardized practice would be naïve. On the other hand, we do not want to submit to the extremely relativistic conclusion that since there is no unified Hinduism, we cannot determine any characteristics that priests share, any models that they use to guide their actions, or any normative standards that they use to find a place contemporary Indian society. Indeed, the classical Hindu texts have established widely accepted standards for Hindu priests. We can, therefore, extract a few of the ideals delineated in the ancient texts and compare them to main concerns of priests and devotees from our case studies.

So, to a preliminary question: How is it that the standards depicted within ancient textual accounts and those which exist in present-day Hindu religious and ritual practices have become so incongruent when these texts are still implicitly accepted as determining normative behavior? When comparing the ancient and contemporary traditions, it is clear that the contemporary Hindu priesthood has a different set of ritual and educational expectations associated with it than those portrayed in the ancient models; instead of the classically-depicted, highly specialized priests who served specific roles and were educated in the textual canons, priests are now performing their occupation with varying degrees of spiritual and educational commitment, and often serve alone except in cases of elaborate rituals. Furthermore, contemporary Hindu priests encounter more complicated relationships between social structure and democratization, face an ambiguity
of priestly responsibility, and must demarcate the blurring lines between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical Hinduism.

The differences we see between ancient and modern Hinduism and priests could be a result of two occurrences. First, there may have never been uniform orthodox practices, and the classical religious texts could be highly idealized works written by academic and theological elites whose writings did not account for the ambiguity and variety in their own society. Second, it may be the case that Hinduism has – as the colonial Orientalists had claimed – degenerated over time, and that the only true Hindus are those practicing Brahmanical Hinduism.¹⁶⁹

While most contemporary scholars agree that the ancient texts were highly idealized and that priests of ancient times may have deviated from orthodox Hindu practices just as the ones in present-day India, any attempts – on my part – to validate this hypothesis would be highly speculative. Also, without a comprehensive knowledge of a great variety of ancient practices, it would be difficult to prove that Hinduism has degenerated over time. The aim of this paper, therefore, is not to make a laundry list of similarities and differences between the ancient and contemporary Hindu priesthood, nor is it to arrive at any ultimate conclusions as to what happened over time to create the variations that we see today. Instead, the goal is to see how these priests situate themselves within the tension between the Brahmanical tradition and regional variations, social divisions, and modernizing forces of contemporary Indian society. By understanding why and how the contemporary priesthood varies from the ancient ideals, and how these differences shape conceptions of the priesthood’s status and legitimacy, we see which themes have remained important over time – even if they are not uniformly followed.

¹⁶⁹ David McMahan, communication
Contemporary Definitions of Ancient Themes

It is undeniable that contemporary India is characterized by several factors that ancient Hindus never had to consider when evaluating their religiosity or their priesthood. In order to understand the contemporary priest’s struggle in applying ancient values in modern Indian society, we must be able to recognize the specific changes that create this dilemma. The same three themes – political influence, education, and purity – are still important themes today, but they are not as clearly delineated as they were in the classical texts.

Democratization and the Increase of Political Power over Temple Functions:

Democratization has not only impacted the Indian social hierarchy, it has also played a significant role in issues such as public purity, education, and how the government interacts with temples. Instead of being associated with and supported (socially, theologically, and financially) by the ruling powers – a relationship we see described in the Laws of Manu and Madurai’s ancient Nayaka kings – present-day Hindu temples often find themselves at odds with the government over issues such as temple practices, the placement of priests, and non-Brahmin administration and management.

As a result, the priests of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical state-sponsored temples have often been forced to submit to the government’s infringing upon many of their institutionalized practices. We have seen this problem blatantly manifested in two of our case studies – both of which have occurred in Madurai. In the case of the Minakshi temple, we see the priests’ struggle with the Tamil Nadu government’s democratization of temple attendance, as well as their attempt to balance their services between regular devotees and their VIP government guests. We see the same sort of influence at the non-Brahmanical Pandi Kovil temple, where the priests have fought to maintain their worship practices in spite of government bans on animal sacrifice and the threat of government-mandated Brahmin priests. These cases
illustrate the new governmental authority over Hindu temples – which not only impacts the conduct and significance of worship, but also threatens the influence of priests.

*Raising the Bar on Priestly Education:*

In a society where the general public is gaining access to public education, priests are no longer the scholarly elite. Instead, they are finding that many of the once-complacent laity are equipped and willing to critique their performance and qualifications. In light of the textual importance placed upon the education of Hindu priests, as well as the general increase in public education, one must wonder why and how priests have let themselves become so uninformed of the ancient tradition? We can begin to answer this question by looking at the purpose of modern Hindu worship in comparison to the early practices. As time has progressed, we see that the “traditional” priestly status is no longer granted to the Brahmin who dedicates his time to becoming a sage of ancient texts, follows his hereditary tradition of performing rituals for his family’s deity, and takes pride in his role amongst his fellow priests by integrating himself into the cosmic order through his worship. Instead, although most priests are proud of a lineage that links them to generations of service to a deity, their alienation from the socio-political realm (and, as a result, their traditional authority) results in the fact that the priesthood is now almost universally perceived as a career path.

Furthermore, since most hereditary lines of priests are highly regulated and – as in the Minakshi Temple in Madurai – have created an ancestral monopolization of temple worship, priests are not forced to prove their competence in the Brahmanical tradition.\(^{170}\) Without the expectation and devotion to getting one’s education – along with the average hereditary priest’s assurance of sizable temple rotations through political and reproductive manipulation – many priests have become complacent in their lack of theological and ritual education. These two

\(^{170}\) Fuller, *Renewal of the Priesthood*, 77
characteristics of the priesthood have – in my perception – been two of the greatest factors contributing to priestly apathy.

On the other hand, the apathy of hereditary privilege is not universal among all priests, nor can it be the sole explanation for the priests’ lack of education. For instance, in some cases the priests’ knowledge of ancient tradition has simply been considered unnecessary. For Pandi Kovil priests and Pahari shamans, for example, there are no established texts for the priests to study, so their devotees care little about their educational qualifications and more about their charisma, counseling abilities, and capacity to conduct an aesthetically pleasing ritual performance. Also, as we see in the case of the Pahari Brahmins, it was not until the influence of Sanskritization that many devotees even considered the fact the local “Brahmanical” traditions might not meet the standards of ancient texts.

While the bulk of lay devotees are ignorant about the proper knowledge and ritual of the priesthood, the increasing numbers of educated devotees who denigrate priests for being textually ignorant has pressured many priests to become trained in the Brahmanical tradition in order to regain their respect and legitimacy. However, not all priests can afford to attend Vedic instructional facilities. In those instances where they are unable to do so – as in the case of the Benares funeral priests who lacked the time, money, and literacy to engage in the study of ancient Sanskrit texts – many priests continue to be seen as fools carelessly shirking their responsibility of religious education and abusing their hereditary positions of religious authority.

*Maintaining Traditional Purity in a “Modernizing” Society:*

India has increasingly become a Westernized culture with new ideas of “modernization” that are expected of the educated citizen. Therefore, younger generations of priests are confronted with more problematic situations than their predecessors when it comes to choosing between a traditional, priestly lifestyle and that of a modernized, progressive Indian. As in the
case of the Minakshi priests in Madurai, many aspects of present-day, Indian society such as restaurant dining, popular fashion, and a greater interaction between castes are expected of the “modern” citizen, but often directly defy the values and regulations of the orthodox Brahmanical lifestyle. Similarly, when “modern” conceptions of religious practice clash with traditional or “popular” ideals – as in the case of Pandi Kovil where animal sacrifices and possessions are central to worship, or in the case of the Pahari shamans, where Sanskritization negates the validity of their tradition and profession – those priests who endorse and conduct such unorthodox practices are sometimes considered propagators of obsolete, backward forms of religion. Such cases demonstrate that the priest’s choice between modernity and tradition does not merely involve personal comforts and opportunities, but has larger religious and social implications for those priests who decide to either engage in or separate themselves from the “modern” lifestyle.

Additionally, modernization brings with it new questions concerning traditional Hindu ritual purity. If it is true that “Brahmin purity is achieved not so much by Brahmins themselves as by the castes beneath them in the hierarchy,”¹⁷¹ and that “some castes must assume the pollution which otherwise would accrue to those castes [notably Brahman]”¹⁷² which worship the gods, “¹⁷³ what happens to the Brahmin’s purity when traditional determinants of status change? As religious, educational, and social democratization increases, social progress often overrides previous caste limitations in the public eye. On the other hand, as priests engage in modern, secular activities and neglecting many of their traditional responsibilities, they reduce their purity according to traditional standards. Together, these changes decrease the gap between castes, which contributes significantly to the Hindu priesthood’s ambiguous status. Furthermore, not

¹⁷¹ Brubaker, 147
¹⁷² Again, here the author is referring to the priests, or Brahmins.
¹⁷³ Harper, quoted in Brubaker, 147.
only have the ancient texts shown that Brahmin priests are traditionally considered less pure than their fellow Brahmans, the gap between these two subcastes is growing in contemporary India. The Brahman laity are no longer simply the educational elite, but enjoy professional success and wealth in capitalist Hindu society – a status few Brahmin priests can hope to experience.

With so many aspects of contemporary culture that are diametrically opposed to Brahmanical ideals, this generation of priests is forced to decide between fitting into the prevalent, cultural norms or upholding their tradition by isolating themselves in a fundamentalist enclave against contemporary changes. On the other hand, in those cases where Brahmanical conservatism is gaining prominence, those engaging in ritualistically impure activities are threatened by the growing influence of Sanskritization and Hindu religious and ritual orthodoxy.

**India’s Distinctive Approach to Modernization**

India’s modernization is unique in that it has a host of implications that are different from most “Western” notions of modernization. For example, modernization in India is not ultimately linked with secularization. Whereas Western society often uses Enlightenment-based modes of thought to champion science and rationalization over “illogical” elements of religion and tradition, India’s long-standing cultural relationship with Hinduism, as well as its continued valuing of practices such as yoga and meditation, has aided the preservation of Hindu religious ideals, practices, and institutions in contemporary times. In fact, religious ritual and science are not necessarily seen as two different entities; many practices such as Ayurvedic healing and yoga have not only continued into the present day, but have also been consciously represented and defended within the sciences.

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175 In fact, in many of my own experiences in India, educated Hindus have attempted to explain certain religious practices in scientific terms – if only to say that a certain tradition had originated as a simple religious custom, but has since been proven to have a “scientific reason” for its continuation.
Also, through India’s preservation of Hindu theology and practice, religious authorities and practitioners have retained a great deal of authority in contemporary India. Hindus still attend pilgrimage sites in droves, and spiritual gurus still possess – or have even gained, as a result of technology – mass respect and influence. Additionally, although the individual priests are often subjects of critical scrutiny, the institution of priesthood has nonetheless maintained a prominent place in this culture where religion is deeply ingrained into almost every facet of daily life. The importance of the Brahmanical tradition is further proven by the fact that non-Brahmanical temples, priests, and devotees are mimicking and incorporating elements of the Brahmanical priesthood, pantheon, and styles of worship into their own religious practices. This adoption of Brahmanical traits by non-Brahmins is no minor statement: not only are these adopted styles of worship usually exclusive to Brahmins, they often also oppose many of the values of popular, non-Brahmanical religious practices. This loyalty to Brahmanical Hinduism not only indicates that religion and religious authority remain important in contemporary India, but also that there are certain elements of the Hindu priesthood that are (consciously or unconsciously) expected of Brahmin and non-Brahmin priests, alike.

Lastly, it is important to note that in many cases – despite contemporary unorthodox movements toward temple and social democratization – modernization in India is also characterized by the reassertion and reincorporation of ancient textual authority and practices into present-day Hinduism. Instead of abolishing or liberalizing Hinduism, many modern movements demand a shift toward strictly conservative Hindu ethics and practices. Instead of democracy and religious equality, these groups advocate the restoration of Brahmanical religious and caste distinctions, male dominance, and a stronger Hindu religious authority in the government – social and cultural practices that most “modernized” peoples would consider exceedingly backwards. This situation is especially complicated, for while the changes proposed
by nationalists would undoubtedly bring authority and power back to the Brahmin priests, non-
Brahmanical priests and low-caste devotees would lose a great deal of their religious (and social)
autonomy. Non-Brahmanical Hinduism and its priests would, again, be considered backwards,
and low-caste devotees would likely be denied participation in Brahmanical temple worship.

India’s distinctive approach to modernization demonstrates that – unlike many other
present-day movements that strive for secularism and a decreased religious authority – religion
remains a pervasive force in Indian society. Alongside their academic institutions, equal-
opportunity workplaces, and democratic governments, Indians want to retain the rich, religious
tradition that has become synonymous with their country’s heritage. This recurring emphasis on
religion in modernity makes evident the importance of the priesthood’s uncertain position; just as
orthodox religious values have received an ambiguous place in contemporary, democratic Indian
society, the decisions that priests face in their struggle to modernize while remaining the
upholders of orthodox Hindu religious tradition are equally ambiguous.

None of the priests in our case studies have found a way to completely merge traditional
religious standards and expectations with those of modern Indian society, and in attempting to do
so, none of them have gone about it in the same way. What is important to note, however, is that
there are recurring but changing ancient themes present in modernity – namely, standards about
Sanskritic education, purity, and the priesthood’s relationship with the government – and that
these themes have had a major influence on the priesthood. Were such changes simply a matter
of religious propriety or personal preference, they would not be such an issue. The fact is that
these changing and often ambiguous standards are not only used by individual priests to define
normative values and roles, but are also being used by the public to determine how and whether
priests can maintain or regain their legitimacy in a society that expects them to be both
traditional and modern. The effect of modernization on today’s Hindu priesthood, then, makes these changes difficult to ignore.
WORKS CONSULTED:


