Country Advice India

India – IND39308 – Hindu Pandits – Marriage – Family Structures – Role of the Wife of a Travelling Pandit

21 September 2011

Background note on terminology

Hindu priests are often addressed as 'pandit', a respectful term[1] which literally means "a learned person".[2] However, Hindus from the Kashmir region are also referred to as pandits.[3] Additionally, Pandit is one common surname for Brahmins in northern India, as are Pandey, Mishra, Sastri and Sharma.[4] Attention to detail is therefore advised when interpreting sources which mention Hindu or Indian pandits.

1. Is it common for a Hindu Pandit to marry?

While abstinence is considered a virtue by some orthodox Hindus, Hindu priests are not generally expected to remain celibate. Sources state that male celibacy is considered a virtue; the retention of semen is said to increase a man's spiritual energy. In the Hindu classic, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the god Krishna is said to have stated: "[f]irm vow of celibacy, subdued in mind, let him sit, harmonized, his mind turned to me and intent on me alone". Additionally, Yogi Patanjali, who lived in the second century BCE, is said to have stated that "[v]ital force is established through sexual abstinence".[5] [6] A source on the Hinduwebsite website further explains that many orthodox Hindus believe that sexual energy, or *retas*, can be converted into spiritual energy, or *tejas*. A person cannot reach the higher stages of human life without celibacy.[7]

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[1] 'The Temple Priests' (undated), The Heart of Hinduism website http://hinduism.iskcon.org/practice/315.htm – Accessed 19 September 2011

[2] Jayaraman, R. 2005, 'Personal Identity in a Globalized World: Cultural Roots of Hindu Personal Names and Surnames', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 38, No. 3, February, p. 484

[3] US Department of State 2011, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 (July-December) – India*, 13 September, Section II

[4] Jayaraman, R. 2005, 'Personal Identity in a Globalized World: Cultural Roots of Hindu Personal Names and Surnames', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 38, No. 3, February, p. 483

[5] Phipps, W.E. 2006, *Clerical Celibacy: The Heritage*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, Google Books website p. 16 http://books.google.com/books?id=JhszdEXB2EwC&pg=PA16&dq=Hindu+pandits+celibate+marriage&hl=en#v=onepage&q=Pandit&f=false – Accessed 15 September 2011

[6] Fichter, S. J. 2009, *Shepherding in Greener Pastures: Causes and Consequences of the Dual Transition of Celibate Catholic Priests into Married Protestant Ministry*, PhD Thesis, State University of New Jersey, January, Google Books website, p. 6 http://books.google.com/books?id=fhfsBhPk6-gC&pg=PA6&dq=Hindu+pandits+celibate+marriage&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false – Accessed 15 September 2011

[7] Jayaram, V. (undated), 'Hinduism and Brahmacharya or Celibacy', Hinduwebsite website http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h_celibacy.asp – Accessed 15 September 2011

Nevertheless, sources report that celibacy is not a requirement for Hindu priests and that, in fact, marriage is a prerequisite for priests who wish to conduct certain ceremonies.[8] [9] A post on the Hindu Dharma Forums website, which is dated October 2009, states that Hindu priests may choose whether or not to marry, and that many of them do marry in practice.[10] Other sources were located, both from academia[11] and on blog websites[12] [13], which mentioned religious pandits having wives, and which contained no comment suggesting that it would be unusual for a pandit to be married.

In 2004, a book about female Hindu ascetics stated that Hinduism encompassed a broad range of professional religious figures, "from married yogis and priests to celibate student-novices, each category representing one religious path (*marg*) among many".[14] This suggests that it is possible that a particular priest who remained celibate as a novice might later choose to marry.

2. Is it unusual for a woman to marry a travelling Pandit and have nothing to do with his family in a neighbouring state?

No information was located regarding how a woman who marries a travelling Pandit would be expected to interact with her husband's family.

Regarding family structures more generally, sources state that polygyny[15] is common in Uttar Pradesh. In a 2007 book regarding Indian family structures, Singer and Cohn state that it is common for a man to live with one wife and their children, while his co-wife lives alone with her children, other relatives or a servant. This family structure is often tied in with property ownership; the wider extended families' may own two or more houses, spread across villages and agricultural fields.[16]

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[8] Phipps, W.E. 2006, *Clerical Celibacy: The Heritage*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, Google Books website p. 16
http://books.google.com/books?id=JhszdEXB2EwC&pg=PA16&dq=Hindu+pandits+celibate+marriage&hl=en#v=onepage&q=Pandit&f=false – Accessed 15 September 2011
[9] Fichter, S. J. 2009, *Shepherding in Greener Pastures: Causes and Consequences of the Dual Transition of Celibate Catholic Priests into Married Protestant Ministry*, PhD Thesis, State University of New Jersey, January, Google Books website, p. 6 http://books.google.com/books?id=fhfsBhPk6-gC&pg=PA6&dq=Hindu+pandits+celibate+marriage&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false – Accessed 15 September 2011
[10] 'Hindu Priests' (undated) Hindu Dharma Forums website
http://www.hindudharmaforums.com/showthread.php?t=5244 – Accessed 15 September 2011
[11] Johnsen, L. 1994, *Daughters of the goddess: the women saints of India*, Yes International Publishers, Minnesota, p. 1 http://books.google.com.au/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ACdgNlL-q3cC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=%22Pandit%27s+wife%22&ots=OcjrqUY7tI&sig=Qwb6q7u7zzdPgRo01Ob92VUMl1s#v=onepage&q=%22Pandit's%20wife%22&f=false – Accessed 15 September 2011
[12] Nayyar, S. 2007, 'History of Ujjain and Mahakaleshwar', India Divine website, January
http://www.indiadivine.org/audarya/hinduism-forum/437457-history-ujjain-mahakaleshwar.html – Accessed 15 September 2011
[13] 'Brief History of Hazrat Ghouse 'Ali Shah Qalandar Panipati R.A' 2011, Qalandaria blog website, 11 February http://qalandaria.blogspot.com/2011/02/hazrat-ghouse-ali-shah-qalandar.html – Accessed 15 September 2011
[14] Khandewal, M. 2004, *Women in Ochre Robes*, State University of New York Press, Sunny Press website, p. 23 http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/60841.pdf – Accessed 15 September 2011
[15] The term 'polygamy' refers to a situation where a partner in a marriage, of either sex, has more than one spouse at the same time. 'Polygyny' specifically refers to a situation when a male has more than one wife at the same time. 'Polygyny' is used in this country advice, in keeping with the terminology used in sources cited. *See*: Nurmila, N. 2007, *Negotiating Polygamy in Indonesia. Between Muslim Discourse and Women's Lived Experiences*, PhD Thesis, Murdoch University, p. viii
[16] Singer, M. & Cohn, B. (eds) 2007, *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, p. 391 http://books.google.com.au/books?hl=en&lr=&id=_g-_r-

A 1995 article also stated that the extensive practice of polygyny was particular to the Uttar Pradesh region. According to this source, Hindu families, a polygynous family was "composed of a man, his two wives, and their unmarried children". Again, in some cases a family would be composed of a woman, her children and other relatives. In these cases the woman's husband lives elsewhere, possibly with another wife.[17]

3. Deleted.

9Oa_sC&oi=fnd&pg=PA339&dq=Indian+%22family+structures%22+Uttar+Pradesh&ots=xCAQVL4g54&sig=gcj Hh2kU8wjogLpcMSYcZNEv4os#v=snippet&q=new%20wife&f=false – Accessed 15 September 2011

[17] Heitzman, J. & Worden, R. L. (eds) 1995, *India: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, Country Studies website http://countrystudies.us/india/83.htm – Accessed 15 September 2011

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Khandewal, M. 2004, *Women in Ochre Robes*, State University of New York Press, Sunny Press website, Chapter One http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/60841.pdf – Accessed 15 September 2011

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