

Nārāyaṇa. In the boat that takes him away he has the vision of Śrī Nārāyaṇa embracing his spouse. This vision seems to express his silent question why a religion that accepts eroticism for the gods forbids it for its priests.

Faced with a similar problem, Subbiah's village priest is luckier (1970: 62–86). An ex-soldier returns to his village, where he finds his friend, the *pūjāri* (priest) of Korravai temple, on the verge of death. He gladly agrees to become his successor. Since the deceased *pūjāri* never married, he thinks that bachelorhood is required from him. This puts him into a predicament when he falls in love with a girl and she with him. Realizing that he does not have his friend's spirit of renunciation, he asks the girl to elope with him. He does so in pangs of conscience since he is deeply devoted to the goddess. When he reaches the place of appointment with the girl, he hears the faraway temple bell ring. Aghast, he tells his beloved to postpone their elopement and goes to see who rang the bell. He finds that in dropping from the ceiling it had rung by itself. Now he prostrates himself in front of the goddess, asks her forgiveness and promises never to leave her again. The next morning the former *pūjāri*'s sister comes to him telling him that she should like to arrange his marriage to the girl he loves. Her brother's bachelorhood was not determined by his priestly duty. The rude brother of the girl he had wanted to marry had stipulated that he would allow him to marry his sister only on condition that he gave up his priestly work. He had refused, and thus the girl was married to another man. Since he could not forget her, he had remained a bachelor all his life. The old woman advises the new *pūjāri* to marry, take up farming and simultaneously perform his priestly duty, which he gladly agrees to do.

In Ramamirtham's novel "The Smile of the Stone Statue" (1987) the Śaiva priest's two sons do not get along with each other. Therefore, the elder brother Dharmarāj leaves, while the younger Maṇi takes over his father's work. After 35 years Dharmarāj returns, asking his brother to let him do *pūjā* (worship) once a week. Maṇi is worried that his already meager income will decrease needlessly, since Dharmarāj is not interested in money but in obtaining the grace of the goddess. Given his intimate contact with her, Dharmarāj believes that her smile encourages him when he performs a compassionate criminal act. He steals the envelope containing his former employee's jewels, which she had pledged with a usurer and is unable to retrieve. The usurer, who suffers from severe asthma is found dead, and the police discovers

that he has been given sleeping pills. Dharmarāj is arrested and charged with murder.

As stated above, scholars and writers are usually interested in different aspects of Hindu rites, but in the priest's case their interests once more coincide. Bêteille (1969), Fuller (1984), and others have stressed the temple priests' relative lack of prestige and their often insufficient income. Several writers deal with these problems. The former priest of the village goddess Korravai, for instance, would have been allowed to marry the girl he loved only if he took up more prestigious work, and his successor was advised to make both ends meet by combining his priestly function with farming. This relative lack of prestige also extends to priests in temples of the Hindu great gods. The major reason for this state of affairs seems to be that temple priests are at the service of all castes and accept money offerings from them, contrary to family priests who can choose their clients. Frequently the priests' sons refuse to follow in their father's footsteps and prefer modern occupations.

However, it is also possible for a youth to be content with serving the deity even if it brings little

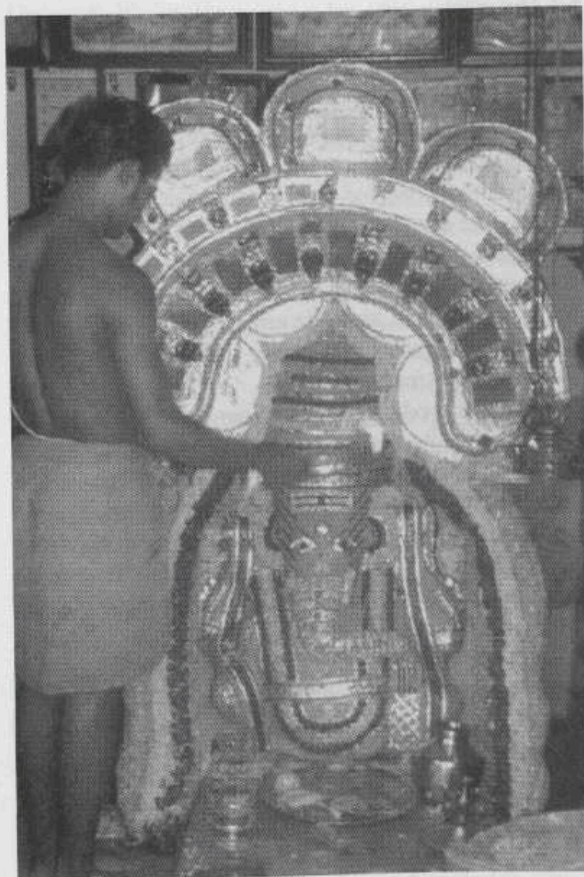


Fig. 5: Worship of the elephant-god in a small temple.