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A New Calling: Freelance Priests

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Hindu Clerics Go Solo to Lead Off-Site Rituals and Meet Needs Of Region's Indian Population

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On a dark Sunday morning in a slumbering [Ellicott City](#) neighborhood, Bhaskar Sastry, freelance Hindu priest, drove down a private drive toward his 6 a.m. assignment. A stone-front colonial came into view, its porch light revealing a large family waiting in the drizzle, parkas over their vibrant silk saris and kurta pajamas. It was move-in day, but they could not proceed without Sastry.

Soon Sastry, 44, was cracking a white pumpkin on the stoop and chanting prayers to a Hindu goddess, his deep voice piercing the pre-dawn silence. Once inside, he sat cross-legged on the floor and adorned an altar with fruits and flowers. He lit a fire in a roasting pan -- modest enough to abide by fire codes -- and led mantras beseeching deities to ward off evil and bless the new home.

It was just another day in the life of Sastry -- and, increasingly, in the wildly diverse Washington suburbs, where in some places Hindu rituals seem as ordinary as cookouts and kickball.

As the region's Indian population swells, so soars the demand for Hindu ceremonies -- baby-naming services, engagements, blessings for new cars -- that are traditionally performed outside the many priest-staffed temples that dot the area. So, for eight years, Sastry has kept busy as one of the region's few freelance Hindu priests. He navigates suburbs where Indians have bought houses, bringing ancient Hindu rites to modern American landscapes.

"Driving, driving, driving. Our work, a little bit difficult. Driving, a little bit tiring," Sastry said as he steered his sky-blue [BMW](#) -- license plate PRIEST-B -- around the Capital Beltway from his [Ashburn](#) home to the Ellicott City housewarming, a ceremony considered most auspicious if performed before sunrise. "But this is a respected thing," he said.

Freelance priests are bountiful in [India](#), but just seven serve one of the Washington region's largest ethnic communities. Census data from 2006 indicate that 105,000 Indians live in the area, about 60 percent of whom are immigrants; most have settled in [Fairfax](#), [Loudoun](#), [Montgomery](#) and Howard counties. To those who regularly call upon them, Sastry and his counterparts become trusted family priests, akin to family doctors or accountants.

Unlike the traveling preachers of the American frontier, Sastry does not proselytize. The affable priest is booked -- months in advance -- purely for his expertise in the elaborate ceremonies and Sanskrit mantras he studied in his native India. Sastry calls his work "community service." His clients say it is crucial in a nation where second-generation immigrants have little interest in Hindu religious careers.

"He knows it in and out and can guide us," said Lakshminarayana Peri, 37, a software engineer who was a guest on a recent Saturday at a prayer ceremony, or puja, at a townhouse in Stone Ridge, a Loudoun subdivision. As he spoke, Sastry's recitations resonated from a nearby room. "He takes the time."

The hosts were Perraju and Laxmi Vadrevu, who book Sastry every few months. On this night, they were holding an all-occasion rite said to bring prosperity and fulfillment. The ceremony marked the upcoming birthday of their son, Aditya, and their second year in the house.

There were no freelance priests in the region when the Vadrevus arrived 12 years ago, so the couple would conduct ceremonies using recordings of chants brought from India. That involved frequent hits of the "pause" button, making for a functional but "less fulfilling" experience, Laxmi Vadrevu said. Sastry, whom they call a friend, changed that.

"He has the best voice," said Laxmi Vadrevu, 35. "It's perfect."

"Some priests will do the prayer like a business. If you do puja like a business, you cannot impress the gods," said Perraju Vadrevu, 44. "Sastry is really a good guy."

Aditya, 13, said it is "pretty fun having the puja," although he confessed that during a long ceremony, he sometimes steps out to play video games.

For two hours, the Vadrevus sat before the altar as Sastry chanted, cracked coconuts and bathed a statue of a deity in a mixture of milk, yogurt, honey, sugar and ghee (clarified butter). Three dozen relatives and guests, most of whom were also Sastry's clients, filed in and out.

Sastry, whose first language is Telugu, grew up in a village in the southern state of [Andhra Pradesh](#), the youngest of 13 children born into a long line of priests. Starting at age 11, he spent eight years learning the vedas, or sacred Hindu texts, eight hours a day. He worked at a temple in [New Delhi](#) until a Lanham temple recruited him in 1995. It was "software time," Sastry said, and Indian technology workers were pouring into the Washington region.

By 2000, temple priests could not keep up with the demand for off-site rituals and weddings. So Sastry and a colleague, Venkatrama Sastrigal, struck out on their own to become the region's first freelance priests. Clients find them by word of mouth or on their Web site, <http://www.vedicpriest.com>. Sastry performs about 25 ceremonies a month, which he schedules after consulting astrological charts for auspicious dates.

Some elements of ceremonies must be adapted to the surroundings. In the United States, unlike in India, it is fairly impossible to get a cow to lead through the home during a housewarming ritual. Mango leaves are rare, so bitter leaves take their place on altars. Keeping in mind the wood frames of American houses, Sastry starts small fires in pans of sand.

"From [Home Depot](#)," he said in Ellicott City, explaining where he buys the sand. "Very easy!"

Sastry declined to discuss his fees, saying the payment is up to the devotees. Clients said they typically pay \$150 to \$200 for a ritual of a few hours. They also pay his expenses, including mileage -- "IRS rate," he said, chuckling. It is enough for a tidy townhouse and a yearly vacation with his wife and two sons, 11-year-old Vignesh and 8-year-old Pavan. Last year, they hit [Disney World](#).

"Money is not important. Only that kids go the good road, the good way. That's it," said Sastry, who plans to apply for U.S. citizenship next year.

When not working, Sastry spends time saying prayers before an altar fashioned out of his kitchen pantry, its shelves holding fresh flowers, golden lamps and framed pictures of deities. He helps with housework, picks up staples at [Costco](#) and ferries the boys to school and taekwon do.

"He's an Indian priest," Vignesh said of his father one evening after demonstrating the Indian drumming he and his brother study. He shrugged. "Most of my friends know that. They don't really care."

When the Ellicott City housewarming ended at 9:30 a.m., there was no time to chat. Sastry had a 10:30 a.m. ceremony and another ritual in the evening, both in [Fairfax County](#).

He pulled on his red raincoat, accepted a zip-locked bag of fried Indian snacks and headed for the car.

Zippering south on Interstate 95, he fielded calls from clients on his cellphone.

"Good traveling," Sastry said, once the calls were over. "Good puja."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

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