

[Inside Ujjain, Siva's City](#)

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Inside Ujjain, Siva's City

Ujjain is one of the seven cities of India said to grant pilgrims liberation from rebirth. It is today a bit off the beaten path--60 kilometers from the nearest airport, for example. But in ancient times it sat at the crossroads of India as a key political, military, economic, literary and scientific center. One of our calendars, the Vikram era, began when the warrior king Vikramaditya repulsed an invasion of Ujjain. Among the "nine gems " of his court were Kalidasa, arguably the greatest Sanskrit poet and dramatist, and the astrologer and mathematician Varahamihira. Today, Ujjain remains great in religious terms, one of the four sites for the Kumbha Mela, and site of the temple of the great Lord of Time, Siva, Mahakaleshwara. Hinduism Today's team of journalist Rajiv Malik and photographer Thomas Kelly explored Ujjain while covering the April, 2004, Kumbha Mela attended by 30 million pilgrims over a ten-day period. This is their story.

Rajiv Malik, Delhi

Rajiv and Thomas spent ten days in Ujjain during their coverage of the Kumbha Mela, as recounted in the October, 2004, issue. For this report, we pick up their narrative as they set about exploring the city, beginning with a visit to the place Lord Krishna was educated as a youth 5,300 years ago. They proceeded on from there to the temple dedicated to the planet Mars, then to the liquor-drinking Deity of the Kal Bhairav temple. Another day's exploration takes them to the Gadhkalika Goddess Temple, associated with Kalidas, and then Bhartrihari's Caves, sacred to the Natha Sampradaya tradition. The high point of their pilgrimage comes with two visits to the Mahakal Temple, culminating in the unique early morning worship of the Siva Lingam with sacred ash.

We got our first chance to explore the holy sites of Ujjain on April 21, 2004, our third day at the Mela, when we went to the Maharishi Sandipani Ashram in the Ankpaat area. Here in ancient times Lord Krishna came to study with his brother Balaram and friend Sudama. This is one of the most popular and significant places in the city, and there was a crush of pilgrims. Roopam Vyas, a young priest who manages the temple where the icons of Maharishi Sandipani and the trio, Lord Krishna, Balaram and Sudama, are kept, told us that fifty thousand to one hundred thousand people were visiting the place every day during the Mela, while normal daily attendance is in the thousands. Roopam and his family are descendents of Maharishi Sandipani, able to trace their family tree back 2,000 years.

"Lord Krishna," Roopam said, "came here at age 11. He learned the 64 arts and 14 streams of knowledge in a disciplined and humble manner. Today, parents whose children are slow learners come here for the patti puja (worship blessing the slate, patti, upon which children learn to write). It has special meaning done at this place where Lord Krishna studied as a child. Our whole family is dedicated to the maintenance of this ashram. Without our help, devotees and pilgrims would have a lot of problem worshiping. The vibrations of this place are so powerful that we remain in the bhava (ecstatic devotion) of Krishna all the time. This happens automatically. We do not have to make any effort to be in such a state of consciousness. So we keep chanting 'Radhe Radhe' (the name of Krishna's consort) all the time."

From Sandipani Ashram we moved to Mangalnath Temple where again a large rush of pilgrims was waiting, despite the hot weather, in long serpentine queues. Our Kumbha Mela press passes came in handy at all these places. At Mangalnath Temple we bypassed the long queue of pilgrims and spoke to one of the priests, Pandit Diptesh Dubey, a young man like Roopam Vyas. At most temples in Ujjain I came across a young generation of priests who were personable, soft spoken and knowledgeable. It was a pleasant experience to interact with them. Diptesh said two to three hundred thousand people were visiting the temple daily during the Mela.

Diptesh recounted the magical origin of the temple in a battle between Lord Siva and the demon Andhkasur. As a result of that battle, which involved the planet Mangal (Mars), a Siva Lingam formed at the place where the temple is now. He said, "All over the world this is the only place where Lord Mangal appeared. A special worship ceremony offering curd and rice is performed here for people who have an inauspicious placement of Mars in their birth chart (Mangal dosha, or Mars affliction). Mangal planet is also known for blessing couples with a child. For childless couples we worship a left-handed swastika symbol. When the couple is

blessed with a child, they come back and worship the right-handed swastika symbol."

Two days later, on the 23rd, we set out for the ancient Kal Bhairava temple. The worship of the eight Bhairavas, fearsome attendants to Lord Siva, is a part of Saivite tradition, and the chief among them is Kal Bhairava. Located on the banks of the Shipra and built by King Bhadrasen, the temple finds mention in the Skanda Purana. Worship of Kal Bhairava is believed to have been integral to the Kapalika and Aghora sects. Ujjain was a prominent center for these two traditions. Even today liquor is offered as a part of the ritual to Kal Bhairava. We came to know that beautiful paintings in the Malwa style once decorated the temple walls, but only traces are visible now. The village of Bhairagarh, famous for its block printing on fabric, takes its name from this temple and is located nearby.

Thousands of pilgrims and devotees were there in a long queue waiting their turn for worship of Kal Bhairav. Here we came across a young priest, Pawan Chaturvedi, who is attached to Kal Bhairav Temple. He took us inside the main chamber where the statue of Kal Bhairav stands and gave us the opportunity to shoot pictures from a very close distance. Before taking us inside, he made us wait for some devotee to come with a liquor bottle as offering so that we could photograph Kal Bhairav consuming the liquor. We did see it quickly disappearing as soon as it was placed near the lips of Kal Bhairav. The phenomenon defies any scientific or logical explanation. Pawan said liquor offerings had been made for the past 5,600 years--perhaps plausible enough given that distillation of liquor can be traced to 2500 bce in India.

Pawan explained, "Kal Bhairav is worshiped in three ways--sattvic, rajasic and tamasic. In the sattvic (pure) worship, flowers and fruits are offered. In the rajasic (passionate), ornaments of gold are offered to him and in the tamasic (dark or dense), Bhairava is offered liquor. On normal days around two-hundred-fifty bottles are offered. During the Mela, the number goes as high as one thousand bottles per day, as up to 400,000 pilgrims may come in a day. When the liquor is offered to the ancient stone idol of Bhairava, a tantrik mantra is chanted by us. The liquor disappears, and no one knows where the liquor goes. Pawan said researchers are amazed at the consumption of thousands of bottles of liquor by the Kal Bhairav. It is only Bhairav Ji who is worshipped in all the three ways, most days the worship is done in sattvic and rajasic ways only."

Devotees are supposed to come to this temple first, before going to the Mahakaleshwar temple, according to Pawan. "That is because Mahakaleshwar, Lord Siva, is the king, and Bhairava is the head of Lord Siva's army, whose permission is needed to meet the king." As with the Mahakaleshwar Temple, the royal Scindia family helped give the temple its present look and stature. "Our family has been serving this temple for the last sixteen hundred years, of which we have record of eight generations. Only priests in this lineage are allowed to perform the worship here, " stated Pawan.

Gadhkalika Temple: From Kal Bhairav Temple we moved to Gadhkalika Temple, situated two miles from the present town. Though here also there was a constant flow of pilgrims, there were no long lines. The Deity at Gadhkalika, a form of Goddess Kali, was worshipped by Kalidasa in olden times. Legend states that he was an idiot, but by his devotion to the Goddess he was transformed into a great literary genius. We were also told by the priest that Emperor Harshvardhan renovated the temple in the 7th century. There is further evidence of renovation being done during the Paramara period. In modern times it was rebuilt by the erstwhile Gwalior State. Here also the temple priests were accommodating and allowed Thomas to take the pictures from wherever he wanted, even from near the Deity where normally only priests are allowed to go.

According to priest Manohar Nath Pujari, the temple is one of the 51 Shakti Peeths, a specific set of temples dedicated to the Goddess in India. "This is a great center for tantra. All the tantrics who come to Ujjain during the Mela worship the Goddess here. Due to the Mela, fifty to one hundred thousand people visit the temple every day. This temple has been managed by the Natha Sampradaya for the past ten generations. Because it is a huge place, pilgrims have no problem in having the darshan (sight) of the Deity. For nine days during the Mela we invite the Nathas to come and manage the worship. Whatever offering is collected at the temple during these nine days is also given to the Sampradaya so that all their saints who come here during the Mela can be served food and looked after in a good manner."

Bhartrihari's Caves: Just above the bank of the Shipra near the temple of Gadhkalika are the caves of Bhartrihari. Here also there was a big rush of pilgrims. According to popular tradition, this is the spot where Bhartrihari, the step-brother of King Vikramaditya, lived and meditated after renouncing worldly life. Everyone in Ujjain narrates how he became a saint after coming to know that his extremely beautiful wife, whom he loved so much, was unfaithful to him. Bhartrihari is revered as a great scholar and poet. His famous works Shringarshatak, Vairagyashatak and Nitishatak are known for their exquisite use of the Sanskrit language. Bhartrihari

was a disciple of Guru Gorakshanatha, a historical figure and a disciple of Guru Matsyendranatha. His yogic system is perhaps the most prominent in India. An innumerable number of yogis constitute the line of Guru Gorakshanatha, whose impact, especially on medieval literature and spiritual practices, is impossible to overestimate. Near the Bhartrihari Caves is the final resting place of Guru Matsyendranatha.

I saw people running towards the Bhartrihari Caves. Even children and old people were running. I thought this to be something rather unusual and mysterious. I understood the secret behind it only when I removed my shoes and stepped barefoot on the floor. Then I started running myself, because the pavement was so hot from the sun that you just could not walk on it without burning the soles of your feet!

All around the caves were huge tents in which Natha sadhus were camping. As we approached, most were sitting around their dhunis (ritual fires). These sadhus wear very heavy earrings as their special trade mark. They are permanent residents, not here just for the Mela as most of the other sadhus. We recounted our experience with these sadhus in the Kumbha Mela article in October, 2004, issue. Only the Datta Akhara order of sadhus has a larger permanent presence in Ujjain.

Mahakal Temple: It wasn't until the 26th that we got our first chance to visit the Mahakal Temple. A comprehensive website on the city of Ujjain, <http://www.ujjain.nic.in/mpdistrictsroot.htm> poetically describes the temple: "The presiding Deity of Time, Siva, in all His splendor, reigns eternal in Ujjain. The temple of Mahakaleshwar, its shikhara (central tower) soaring into the skies, an imposing facade against the skyline, evokes primordial awe and reverence with its majesty. The Mahakal dominates the life of the city and its people, even in the midst of the busy routine of modern preoccupations, and provides an unbreakable link with past traditions. One of the 12 Jyotir Lingams in India, the Lingam at the Mahakal is believed to be svayambhu (born of itself), deriving currents of power (shakti) from within itself as against the other images and Lingams which are ritually established and invested with power through mantras. The icon of Mahakaleshwar is known to be Dakshinamurti, facing the South. This is a unique feature, upheld by tantric tradition, to be found only in Mahakaleshwar among the 12 Jyotir Lingams. The icon of Omkareshwar Siva is consecrated in the sanctum above the Mahakal shrine. The images of Ganesh, Parvati and Karttikeya are installed in the west, north and east of the sanctum sanctorum. To the south is the image of Nandi. On the day of Mahashivaratri, a huge fair is held near the temple, and worship goes on through the night."

Thomas and I very much looked forward to our visit and the opportunity to attend the famed Bashma Aarati, worship of the Siva Lingam with holy ash.

While there were large queues of devotees and pilgrims at the temple, we entered through a VIP entrance and within minutes we were in front of the Mahakal Siva Lingam. Just the sight of the Siva Lingam is elevating. While one senior sadhu was allowed to go inside the sanctum sanctorum, Thomas, myself and a few others, including two sadhus accompanying us, were only allowed to have the darshan of Mahakal from a distance of 25 to 30 feet. After darshan of Mahakal, we proceeded to the small and compact chamber of priest Vijay Guru and interviewed him there.

Temple lore: Vijay Guru explained to us that the history of the worship here goes back to earlier yugas. There are four yugas in the Hindu system, each many thousands of years long. They are the Sat, Treta, Dwapara and Kali. Presently we are in the Kali yuga. Vijay Guru said that in the Sat and Treta yugas, the temple's Siva Lingam was worshiped with ashes from the cremation of God-Realized yogis who had left their bodies through the power of mantras. Nowadays there are none who so left their bodies, so this practice is not followed. Today the ash used for the worship is cow dung burnt in the sacred fire. It is known as bhasma or vibuthi. Several people in Ujjain told us that cremation ash is used, but Vijay Guru said this is not so. In fact, he said, "A clarification on this was finally given when the people belonging to Congress Party came to offer the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi, after his death, for the Bhasma Aarti of Mahakal. To deal with this situation a shastrartha [a dialogue] was held among the scholar priests. The decision was clearly conveyed that it was not possible to use the ash of any dead body for the worship in the present times. It would be a crime to offer the ashes of any individual or leader for the purpose of Bhasma Aarti."

"For generations we have been serving Mahakal, " said Vijay Guru. "Our record of service is 5,000 years old. We have letters of several kings who wrote that as long as this creation exists, our lineage will keep doing the service of Mahakal. There are sixteen brahmin families in the temple's service. Around 80 serve on a rotating basis. Those who do the Bhashma worship in the morning are on duty till noon, and like that through the day and evening."

"The temple has been built in three parts, " said Vijay Guru. "Below is Mahakaleshwar. In the middle portion above is Omkareshwar and in the uppermost portion is the Nag Chandereshwar where the Snake God resides. That portion opens

just once a year and the worship is done by sadhus of the Mahanirvani Akhara. The temple was built originally by King Vikramaditya but renovated by many kings since. It was destroyed, along with the rest of Ujjain's temples, in 1235 ce by the Delhi Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish. In the recent past, one of the scions of Gwalior Estate, Shri Ram Chander Ji, did the renovation."

After this first visit to the temple, we met a prominent personality of Ujjain, the astrologer and Vedic scholar Pandit Anand Shankar Vyas. Pandit lives in a joint family of around forty members in their ancestral home a few feet from Mahakal Temple. Pandit took us to the Bade Ganesh Ka Mandir, which was built and maintained by his ancestors. This temple has a huge artistic sculpture of Ganesh, the son of Siva. An icon of this size and beauty is rarely found. The middle of the temple is adorned by an icon of the five-faced Hanuman. The temple was full of pilgrims and devotees when we visited it in the evening.

Punditji is quite a repository of information on Ujjain. He recounted how the city is sacred to Saivas because of the Mahakal Temple, to Shaktas because of Siddhi Devi Temple and to Vaishnavas because Lord Krishna was educated here. In the Surya Siddhanta, the oldest scripture on astrology, Ujjain was the zero meridian for time, as is Greenwich today. "The university Lord Krishna attended had over ten thousand students," he said. "Ujjain was a center of education more than 5,000 years ago." He, too, had magical stories to recount. "We Hindus believe there are eight people who are immortal, including Lord Hanuman and Ashwathama, who figures in the Mahabharata War. Our grandfather used to sleep outside the temple so as to attend the Bhasma worship. Many times, an hour before the doors were to open at 4:00 am, he used to hear the sound of someone walking in wooden sandals. This person would go to the temple tank, collect water in a earthen pot, return to the temple and enter the sanctum. He tried to see who it was through the window, but all he could see was someone well built, who he took to be Ashwathama offering his prayers to Mahakal."

Continuing, Punditji said, "Lord Siva is the creator of Natya Shastra, the foremost scripture on dance and drama. There was a time when the worship here included music and dance. During the rule of Gwalior State, they had arranged for a dancer when Mahakal is paraded round the city. A dancer also used to perform during the worship at Mahakal in ancient times. In his famous poem, "Meghadoot" ("Cloud Messenger"), Kalidasa has given an elaborate description of Mahakal. Kalidasa tells the cloud, whom he has implored to take a message to his wife, to go to Ujjain even though it is off the route to his home. He asks the cloud to stay at night at the Mahakal and see the female dancer performing her dance during the evening

worship and listen to the sound of various musical instruments."

Astute observations: Turning to practical matters, Punditji said, "I am a member of the managing committee of the Mahakal Temple and the committee is doing a good job. From a religious angle if some guidance is to be sought it is taken from me. One of the committee members is a professor with the Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya and another member is a priest at the temple. History has it that at one point of time Mahakal was destroyed by the Muslims. It was the erstwhile Scindia royal family that reestablished the temple in the 19th century. The Jyotir Lingam was found inside the Koti Teerth Kund [reservoir] adjacent to the temple.

"Now there are two schools of thought on preserving the ancient heritage/temples in our country. There is a set of people who are of the view that the ancient archeology should be preserved as it is and should not be disturbed. But I and many others feel that the popular ancient places of worship need to be expanded in terms of infrastructure. To that extent their originality may not be maintained. I think this is a fairly reasonable and practical approach. We must have a liberal viewpoint in this regard. We should preserve the principles of the Shilpa Shastras, scriptures on temple architecture, upon which the temple was built. At the same time we should be able to expand it for the convenience of the pilgrims."

He also clarified a confusion which comes up with regard to the Kumbha Mela. The timing of the Mela is based upon the position of Jupiter, so is usually held every twelve years. "But every year, in the circle of the Sun and Jupiter, there is a difference of four days, which in 84 years accumulates to one year. Therefore, once in 84 years, the gap between the Melas needs to be 11 years instead of twelve. This effects the Melas at Haridwar, Nashik and Prayag also."

Punditji is not happy with the education of priests today. "Priests are not paying attention to their education. They are not as scholarly as they should be. This is not just confined to Ujjain, but is found all over. I pilgrimaged to Badrinath Temple and engaged a priest to conduct worship on my behalf. But I found that his knowledge was not that good. Even his pronunciation was incorrect. Ultimately, I had to politely request him to allow me to do the worship myself."

Finally, Punditji lamented, "Hinduism, I regret to say, has become an orphan

religion. There is no one to speak on behalf of Hinduism. When it comes to Islam, the Kazis preach it. Gurudwaras impart education about their religion to the Sikhs. Christians are given education about their religion by their churches. But where is the education about Hinduism being given to Hindus? In the past we had school textbooks which had a lesson on Pandavas. We had lessons on the good qualities of Lord Rama. But today, in the name of secularism, the government is becoming bereft of dharma. What is happening under them is that they are removing the lesson on Ganapati and replacing it with a lesson on a donkey. Even in ancient times no Muslim opposed the lesson on Ganapati. Even those who are anti-religion had never opposed it. Who are the people opposing these things? They are all these politicians. They started shouting, 'communalism, communalism.' And they even destroyed the very basic teachings about Hinduism. The older generation is still educated and aware about Hindu dharma. But, tell me, from where is the new generation of Hindus getting education about their dharma? I think it is high time that the top sadhus and saints sit together and have a discussion on the situation that is prevailing in present times. Individuals like me are making efforts and raising their voice, but there is need for a collective thinking and action on these issues."

After leaving Panditji, we visited the Harsiddhi Temple of Goddess Parvati, which is close to Mahakal Temple. Harsiddhi is said to be the Deity whom King Vikramaditya used to worship daily, and there are a number of stories connecting the two.

We took time also to visit the Kalidasa Akademi. We met with its director, Dr. Kamlesh Datta Tripathi. "The government wanted to institutionalize the study of Kalidas," said Tripathi, "so the Kalidasa Akademi was set up. To understand Kalidasa, it is essential to understand the whole past Indian thought processes and art traditions. Our academy covers all Indian classical art, folk art, music, sculpture, painting, architecture, literature and scripture."

Bhasma Aarti: We were determined to attend the following morning's Bhasma Aarti worship at Mahakal. Normally this would require no special arrangements, but in the crush of the Kumbha Mela we had to go through the Madhya Pradesh government's Public Relations department. Through the good graces of that office, we were included in the VIP contingent for the very next day. We were told to be at the temple at 2:30 am sharp.

One has to take a bath early in the morning to attend the Bhasma Aarti, and stitched clothes cannot be worn. Only a dhoti can be worn, keeping the upper body

bare. Mostly the brahmins enter the chamber and the sacred thread is their identity. It is said that, though there are no official restrictions, members of the scheduled castes do not attend Bhasma Aarti.

We could barely sleep this night, and on April 28 were at the temple right on schedule. The VIPs included prominent saints, politicians, senior bureaucrats and judges. The fifty of us were allowed to sit in the first couple of rows in front of the sanctum, while other devotees could only file by and catch a few minutes glimpse of the worship. Despite requests, Thomas was not allowed closer than 25 feet from the sanctum to take photos. I was lucky enough to get a seat with a clear view of the priests. The recitation of the mantras and intermittent loud chanting of "Jai Mahakal" was keeping everyone focused. The place was full of positive and energizing vibrations. The fact that I was witnessing a tradition that has been going on since times immemorial made me completely blissful and withdrawn. Everything was happening at a hectic pace. A dozen priests were running from one end to the other frantically. They proceeded through the offerings of the sixteen items of worship--lamps, incense, food, flowers, etc. Throughout the worship, the priests chanted Sri Rudram from the Vedas continuously, and almost everybody was listening in total awareness with eyes closed. I felt as if a spell had been cast on us all--that we were one with the Mahakal and time was of no significance. And this seems natural because Mahakal, "Great Time," rules and transcends time.

Finally it came time for the head monk of the Mahanirvani Akahara to offer the sacred ash, bhasma or vibuthi, over the Lingam. Soon the whole inner sanctum was filled with bhasma over the Lingam and billowing in the air. With the continuous loud chanting, this was the most mesmerizing and uplifting moment of the unique worship. The devotional frenzy of was at its peak. I felt that for a moment I was also a tiny speck of bhasma. I was up in the air, mingling with the sacred ash that was floating around Mahakal.

At the final peak of the worship, the priests came forward and accepted the puja material and cash which those attending the worship wanted to offer at the feet of the Lord. Only now I realized there were thousands of people behind us in a big queue. Ever swelling seemed to be their clan, offering their puja material at one particular point and being given the blessed prasad (food offered to the Siva Lingam) in return. A large number of assistants quickly removed the abundant offerings so that the place where they were being kept did not get blocked completely. Finally, we felt absolutely blessed when we got the opportunity of praying to the sacred flame brought to us by the priest along with the prasad. Without a doubt, this was the high point of our pilgrimage to Ujjain.

A quaint encounter: As we wound up our stay in the city, we met Vivek Chaurasia, a young Ujjain-based journalist for the Dainik Bhaskar, a leading daily of Madhya Pradesh. He offered his evaluation of the city and its residents. "There are many types of people residing in Ujjain. One of them is the typical pure resident of Ujjain. I include myself in this category. This typical, pure-at-heart resident of Ujjain loves to eat sitting on the floor. He can have food while sitting at the table also, but he will really enjoy his meal if he is served while sitting on the floor. He loves to walk and see the temples and their tops; he will have a look at their flags. Such a person loves to spend time on the Ram Ghat along the Shipra River and inhale the fresh air there. If he spots a gulmohar tree, he will spend some time having a look at its flowers. Every Sivaratri he will go for worship of the Mahakal. He will see all the seven processions of the Deity that long night, though they may all look alike. He will go for this again even though he has been watching them for the past twenty-five years. And if he does not go, his soul pinches him and tells him that Mahakal is on procession and he did not go to have the sight. This is how a typical, pure-at-heart resident of Ujjain would be, like myself. The pace of life here is very slow. We are not much bothered about what is happening in the outside world. We live in a blissful world of our own."