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WORSHIP

Goddess in Jeopardy

Encroachments threaten wish-fulfilling shrine

Kalkaji temple just feels ancient, even though its present structure is only a few centuries old. Its unique 12-sided building houses a large stone worshiped as Kali Devi, a manifestation of the Goddess. As with many temples in India, Kalkaji has faced loss of lands through illegal encroachment by businesses and poor people. In this interview by Hinduism Today's Delhi correspondent, Rajiv Malik, with Mahant Surendranath, the temple's head priest, we learn more about the temple and its problems.

Problems of encroachment

I understand that a bill is under consideration by the government about this. The temple land is 34 acres, the encroached area is four acres of this. We want legal development in the area and will cooperate with development activities, but we object to a government takeover of the temple. My question to the government is, "Why do you only want to take over the temples that are earning money. Why don't you look after the arrangements of the neglected temples, those which are not that well off?" Our temples have never posed any threat to the country and the society. These people do not have the courage to raise a finger against the

activities of those places of worship which are posing a threat to the country and society. The argument given is that such people are united, they have a society, they have a trust. But is organized crime pardonable? I do not understand this. We ourselves want the jhuggi [slum] clusters removed and the place made neat and clean. If the garbage is removed, that will increase the beauty of this temple. We have no objection to that. The jhuggis came up because of the connivance between the police and local politicians. We have neither any role in setting up jhuggis nor having them removed. The truth is that these jhuggis are like a diseased portion of an otherwise healthy body. I do not understand this whole system. First they allow them to put up jhuggis and have the government and temple land encroached. Thereafter, as a reward, these people are given free alternative land when they are vacated from the encroached land. Even if we do something good with the land owned by us, still we are harassed in so many ways. What kind of government and society is this? I fail to understand.

On the temple's origin

Ma Kalika killed the demon Raktabijasur here at least five thousand years ago. It is believed to have existed at the time of the Mahabharata, but then destroyed or not noticed. Later, guru Baba Balaknatha of the Natha Sampradaya saw this place in a dream and rebuilt the temple. He was the guru of Gorakshanatha [c. 950 ce]. Stories about Balaknatha are common in Bengal and Assam, as well as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. He was a great yogi. This is not only the oldest temple in Delhi, but perhaps in all of India. The temple is so built that on the winter and summer solstice the first rays of the sun in the morning fall directly on the face of the Deity. Just imagine the person who designed twelve entrances to the temple thousands of years back. You will not

find any ancient temple this size with twelve doors.

On the ritual practices and offerings

This temple is unique in that both Vedic [following the Vedas, the traditional brahmanical worship] and Tantric [according to the Tantras associated with the Shakta sect] practices are successful here at the same time. On the one hand, the pandits do not consume onions. On the other hand kayasthas [a merchant class] and others come and offer meat to Ma. Even today this is happening. The slaughtering is not done here, rather Ma accepts the offering herself in a few days time. The goat which is offered dies on its own in five to ten days. In some cases as soon as you present the offering, the life goes out of it. This happens in cases where Ma has a special blessing. Our many generations of priests have witnessed all this. The thing is that Kali is the Goddess of kaal, time. Kaal consumes everybody and does not spare anyone. Offering in terms of worship means something that is consumable. Ma Kalika is fond of this offering. If you offer grass to a lion, it will not eat it. The warrior Gods have been offered such offerings, and this tradition has approval of scripture. On the one hand, a devotee is standing with milk as offering, and on the other hand, another devotee is there with liquor as an offering. Ma accepts both the offerings. Actually, I believe that these offerings of liquor are a distortion of the ancient offerings of soma [the sacred drink of the Vedas, now unknown]. In the ayurveda system, fermented liquor is used, and if prepared properly and consumed in the right manner, it is not forbidden. Someone worshiping through Vedic rituals is acceptable to Ma, and some other person worshiping through tantra sadhana also is acceptable to Ma. And the sadhana of both will bear fruit.

The devotees

During Navarati [the yearly festival to the Goddess], 350,000 to 500,000 people come on each of the nine days. We make special arrangements and have the temple open day and night. Otherwise, most people come on Saturdays, Sundays and Tuesdays, 50,000 to 70,000 a day. You cannot make out that so many people have visited because it is quite an open area and there are twelve doors to the temple. For the devotees of the Adi Natha Sampradaya, this is a special place.

A wish fulfilling temple

Whichever devotee prays to the Goddess straight here, his wishes are granted and fulfilled. After the fulfillment of the desire, the devotee comes back with his thankful offering to the Deity. That is why during Navaratri and other occasions there is so much rush. From the management side, there has never been an effort to promote or propagate the temple. So many people are bonded with this temple because of the powers and blessings of the Mother. There is absolutely no arrangement of any publicity or even of inviting people to this temple. Here the devotees have individual experiences of their own so wonderful that people are amazed when they listen to them. We priests ourselves feel dwarfed in devotion by comparison. You must speak to some of the devotees who come here. Their experiences are full of miracles.