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4,000-Pound Stones Fall at Jagannath Temple in Puri

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None Hurt as Sandstone Blocks Crash in Sanctum During Puja; Repairs Delayed by Controversy

The world-famous temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri in the eastern state of Orissa has been witnessing a dangerous phenomenon for some years: heavy stone slabs and thick plasters coming off the ceilings and walls, some falling just in front of the deity.

If one asks the devotees visiting the temple the cause of this phenomenon, many of them say it is because the Lord is not happy with the way things are happening in the world today. Some sevaks (servitors) at the temple go to the extent of claiming that doomsday is approaching. Archeological experts have a different explanation for the phenomenon. According to them, stones of poor quality were used in several places to build the temple, and the lime plaster coat given to the temple centuries ago was faulty.

Stone slabs have been falling in the temple for years; plasters, too, have been coming off. But never was so much notice taken of it as when two heavy slabs, one weighing one ton and the other two tons, fell right into the sanctum sanctorum on August 13, 1992, at 4:20 PM when the crowd of devotees was large. Though no one was injured, the incident led to a hue and cry which made everyone - the state government, temple authorities and ASI experts - feel that the matter no longer can be left to providence. A story circulating in Puri says that Lord Jagannath has been repeatedly giving warnings but each time those in charge have ignored them. "It was just the grace of Balbhadra, the elder brother of Lord Jagannath, that neither the devotees nor the sevaks have ever been injured," states Mr. R.C.

Chaturvedi, who recently returned to Delhi from Puri.

In October, Jagatguru Shankaracharya of Puri, Swami Nischalanand Saraswati, wrote Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, seeking his immediate intervention in the matter of repair and restoration of the temple. The Shankaracharya says that slabs and plasters have begun to come off because the conservation of the temple has not received the attention it deserves. Mr. Rao has assured the Shankaracharya of his government's full help in the restoration work.

According to records with the temple authorities, it was on July 9, 1875, that a large stone had fallen for the first time in the garbhagriha. Another stone fell in the sanctum sanctorum on December 14, 1939, causing panic. After 49 years a stone piece again fell on September 17, 1988, this time from the southern side of the temple near the place called Jagmohan. It was followed by a large chunk of plaster coming down again on February 6, 1990, and then a five-ton stone slab - the biggest to have slipped down so far - rolled down the place called Amla of the temple and crashed on the floor during heavy rains on June 16, 1990.

According to G.C. Choubey (Superintending Engineer, ASI, Bhubaneswar) the lime paster which was eight-inches thick at many places soaks up so much water during the monsoon rains that it begins to weigh three times its original weight. It then begins to exert pressure amounting to 102 pounds per square foot on the temple structure beneath it. "This explains why the stone slabs or plasters come off," he told the Statesman of Calcutta in an interview.

From the start, the ASI has been at odds with the temple and state authorities. The chief minister of Orissa, Biji Patnaik even described their work as "shoddy." In dispute is the method of deplastering, which the temple authorities say has led to even more stone's falling. ASI blames the temple for unnecessary restrictions on their work. Outside experts brought in by the state reported that the repair can be done "without causing any damage to the remaining structure."

After removing the plaster, the process of restoring the structure is time-consuming. It involves removing saline moisture by a complex cellulose pulp extraction technique, cleaning the carvings with special chemicals, treating the surfaces with fungicide, fixing the loosening figures and reinforcing fragile ones

with thermoplastic and epoxy resin. And where a block has fallen off leaving a void, a new stone is grouted and carving undertaken on it.

In an interview with HINDUISM TODAY, Dr. K.N. Pandit, Joint Director of the ASI, said that his experts are fully competent to repair whatever damage the temple has suffered. "In fact, we have already been asked to expedite the repair and restoration work," he added. According to him, there was some dispute over how to carry out the repair work in the sanctum sanctorum where the two stone slabs fell on August 13th this year. "This dispute has now been settled, and we will begin the repair work soon," he stated.

A meeting of the pundits of the Mukti Mandap, temple authorities and district officials held recently decided that the idols of Lord Jagannath, Balbhadra and Subhadra would be shifted for nine months to a newly constructed pedestal in a place called Bhitarkhantha (interior portions) in the temple around November 29th to allow repair work in the garbhagriha.

There is, nevertheless, still a strong section of sevaks and daitas (they form the core of servitors) which is opposed to the shifting of the deities to any place because it would make the deities unhappy. A senior daitapati, Kashinath Mahapatra, narrates a story of 1875, when the deities were shifted after the fall of a stone slab. "All the 19 families which were engaged in the shifting of the deities were later wiped out," he claims. According to him, the shifting will cause violation of traditional puja nitis (worship rituals) and offering of mahaprasad to gods will also not be possible. Besides, the deities will have to be shifted through a passage used only once in 12 years for taking out bisarjit bigrapha [discarded idols - see sidebar above] of the trinity. "This will incur the wrath of the deities," he warns. Temple politics plays a part too - the move would reportedly shift the responsibility and prestige for tending the Gods from one group of temple priests to another.

Mahapatra wants the repair work to be done by suspending the visit of the devotees to the garbhagriha for some hours everyday. This will not necessitate the shifting of the deities. Tamil Nadu temple expert V. Ganapathi Sthapathi does not agree with this approach [see sidebar]. The work can also be expedited during the yearly car festival when the deities are taken out in a procession for several days. One, however, hopes Mahapatra's objections will be amicably resolved somehow, thereby helping the ASI take up repair work at the earliest.

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