Karnataka Spiritual Centers Threatened by Development
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Three 700-Year-Old Monasteries in Udupi and Scores of Temples to be Displaced by Reckless Industrial Projects

Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

"Only after we received notice our lands would be seized did the environmentalists inform and educate us on the dangers of pollution caused by the proposed industries, and the destruction it would cause to the entire region," recounts Shri Vishwatma Swami of Sodhe Monastery in Karnataka, South India. "We were told thousands of people are going to be rendered unemployed and homeless. We then realized that it was our duty to protect this district and its people,"

As I learned during my recent visit to the area, frenetic efforts are underway to set up five very large industries and 32 smaller ones around the towns of Udupi and Mangalore. Thousands of acres of land, including that on which presently sit important Hindu temples and monasteries, are being acquired for steel mills, electrical plants and chemical and fertilizer factories. The most important institutions affected--Palimar, Admar and Pejayar--are three of the famed eight monastic centers ("maths")of Udupi founded in the 13th century by the Vaishnava saint, Madhva.

While many welcome the economic boon to the area, environmentalists and now the swamis are concerned that all of the industries generate heavy pollution. Waste discharges will ruin local rivers and lakes. The power plants will create ten tons a day of "flyash"--a sand-like substance which poses problems. It will mostly be dumped on nearby land, and the part that escapes through the flues will settled on the landscape.

"The pollution caused by these industries is certain to destroy the entire region, affecting all the ancient temples including those of Udupi. It's only a matter of time," rues Dr. Ravindranatha Shanbagh, a leading environmentalist and professor of toxicology at Manipal Medical College.

The entire area was declared an ecologically sensitive region in the DANIDA report submitted by a group of Indian and Danish scientists. They were commissioned by the Indian government to study the region for three years.Dr.Yellappa Reddy, former Principal Secretary for Environment to the Government of Karnataka, concurs, "The geographical setting of the region is not conducive for large industries. The entire district would be depleted of water resources, and environmental pollution will result in acid rains. The upstaging of the Western Ghats ecosystem will spell doom to peninsular India on an unimaginable scale."

The lands surveyed for acquisition abound in religious, historical and bio-significance. The setting up of the proposed Nagarjuna Steel Plant and Usha Ispat Steel Plant near Bramhavar, the Nagarjuna Thermal Plant and Cogentrix

Thermal plant near Padubidri alone will destroy the Palimar and Admar monasteries as well as Pajakakshetra, the birthplace of Madhvacharya [see sidebar], by the discharge of harmful effluents and flyash. Facing similar danger are 29 other temples, 55 bootadasthanas(small ancient temples dedicated to the various ganasor divine helpers of Lord Siva--favorite places of worship for the local people) and 163 nagabanas(equally beloved small shrines to snakes built under sacred trees).

"Four years ago when Mangalore Petroleum and Fertilizer Company acquired lands surrounding five villages, a number of temples, bootadasthanas, nagabanas, mosques and Christian churches were razed to the ground. No one outside made any noise about it or seemed to realize what happened. These were centuries-old structures being worshiped by the villagers," says Mr. Ravindranath Shetty, an environmentalist from Mangalore. One main reason for the lack of complaints was intimidation. There have been beatings and the sensational murder of one environmentalist in broad daylight. When the villagers resisted the confiscation of their land, they were evicted en masseat night during monsoon season by armed men and dumped at a relocation center.

This year on January 22nd an assemblage of the swamis of the eight Udupi maths at a public meeting gave fresh impetus to the crusade. They vowed to press for shelving of the harmful projects to save the region from environmental doom.

"We will fight tooth and nail any industry that is going to disturb the birthplace of Madhvacharya [see sidebar at right].

If the religious sentiments of the people are hurt, no amount of political remedy will help," thundered Shri Vishwesha Thirtha Swamiji of Pejawar monastery at the meeting.

It is quite unfortunate that these religious leaders have had to curtail their religious responsibilities to enter into this worldly political altercation. Local officials and residents should have come forward as part of their dharmic duty to protect the religious institutions and the area, instead of leaving the monasteries and temples to fend for themselves. But people are frightened by the industries' tactics, and unable or unwilling to take the necessary risks. The swamis with their substantial followings and connections throughout society are less subject to intimidation.

The Places Threatened

At the Palimar mutt I saw several temples which will be displaced, among them the 700-year-old Anjaneya, the ancient Subramanya, the thousand-year-old Vishnumurthy, famous for its perfect adherence to traditional temple design, and the equally old Bramhalingeshwara. Also threatened are the samadhis[burial shrines] of the Palimar leaders going back to the 13th century. "All these temples will go if we allow the industries to take foothold in our land," says Gangadhar, my driver-cum-guide who took me across the picturesque countryside. Gangadhar would stop every few hundred yards to point out a temple or nagabana facing imminent threat.

Our next stop was a vast Chamudeshwari temple tucked away

into the quiet interiors of Padubidri. "They have exempted this temple from acquisition. They are scared. Anyone who tries to touch this temple will be doomed. A few years ago the government wanted to acquire this temple also for the National Thermal Power Corporation power project in collaboration with the Soviets. See what happened, the Soviet Union disintegrated. This temple has stood here for over a thousand years, and this Goddess is very powerful," proudly stated Sri Ananthanarayana, the temple priest.

From the hilltop 1,000-year-old Mallikarjuna Swami temple (25 kms. from Udupi) one can look down upon the divine sight of the Sita and Suvarna rivers intermingling and flowing into the Arabian Sea. "People come here from far-flung places to realize and experience the tranquil quietness. The devotees have unbounded faith in this powerful deity. If the industries have their say, this divine place will be destroyed a few years from now," says Gnana Vasanth, a teacher turned environmentalist.

A Thermal Plant Thwarted--For Now

Former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao was scheduled to lay the foundation stone for the Nagarjuna Thermal Plant at Nandikoor near Mangalore on February 9th of this year, the first of the giant projects. The swamis expressed their resolve to resort to a hunger strike if the stone was laid. The prime minister promptly cancelled the program. "Had it not been for these religious leaders, the government would have certainly gone ahead with the project," says Dr. Shanbagh.

The swamis then adjudicated an open meeting with industrialists, government officials and the environmentalists to resolve the issue. "They assured us that none of the holy shrines would be disturbed and offered to help towards their development. But they failed to convince us these industries will not disastrously pollute the region," reports Shri Vishwatma Swamiji. "We are not against development. We are only insisting that the government should consider the carrying capacity of the region before loading it with mega industries," added Shri Vibhudesha Thirtha Swami of Admar Math.

The industrialists' guarantee to protect the holy shrines does not solve the problem. How would these temples and monastery be kept sacred in the midst of an industrial compound or flyash dump? If people from the surrounding villages are displaced to miles away, how will they visit the temples frequently, or celebrate the various festivals? These questions remain unanswered.

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In Brief: Madhva and the School of Pure Dualism

To this day, the monasteries and places of worship established by Madhva in the 13th century, mostly in western India, are carefully maintained by a large following. Like many other Vaishnava leaders, he was educated by a teacher of the impersonalist Sankara school and was dissatisfied. He was the most prolific writer of Vaishnava philosophy.

Madhva's philosophy of dvaita,dualism, emphatically stresses the differences between God, the world and the souls. His

dualism is in near direct opposition to Sankara's monism in that he virtually ignores any concept of oneness. Souls in his philosophy are of different qualities--sattva, rajas and tamas, corresponding to those eternally free, freed and bound. He held the doctrine--unique in Hindu philosophy --that some souls are eternally doomed to hell and cannot hope to get liberation.

Even liberated souls remain very much different from God, though they are blessed with varying degrees of closeness to God, who is worshiped as Krishna. In common with other Vaishnava schools, study of scripture, living with saintly persons, going on pilgrimage, glorifying and repeating the sacred name of God and meditating on God's divine form are among the means to liberation.

There are 24 major monasteries in the Madhva tradition located in the southwestern parts of India. Of these the ashtamathas,"eight monasteries," of Udipi which were personally founded by Madhva are the most prominent. They are traditionally responsible for the world-famous Shri Krishna temple of Udupi, their spiritual heads taking turns (two years at a stretch) in performing the 14 daily pujas. Over the years, each math has come largely under the control of one or another family, from whom the next religious successor is chosen.

Sidebar: Even Madhvacharya'sBirthplace Not Spared

By Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

The narrow winding roads snakes through rich green vegetation lined alongside by rising hillocks of huge boulders on either side. My destination was Pajakakshetara in Kunjarugiri, a small village of 2,000 located ten kms. from Udupi. It is the birthplace of Madhvacharya. The house in which he was born and grew up exists even to this day. It is an expected stop for pilgrims to Udupi.

Upon approach, this home-turned-temple looks like any ancient dilapidated house crying for maintenance and suffering the vagaries of nature for centuries. The idols in the sanctum sanctorum are those worshiped by Madhvacharya's father. As I entered, a vibrantly strong spiritual power enveloped me. I was overpowered by the thought that the great acharya indeed lived and grew up in this very house. Here is the kitchen, the dining hall, the platform where Madhva's father sat teaching his son and over there the "Brindavana" built where the young lad had his aksharabhyasa (initiation into reading and writing).

The Madhva house belongs to the Kunjur Math, one of the eight monasteries [maths] of Udupi. The villagers and sources at Udupi reveal that the head of Kunjur Math has been stalling efforts to renovate the rundown premises. "The swami is more of a businessman. He owns cinema theatres. He is unfortunately not doing anything, nor is he allowing the others to develop the place," divulges an elderly gentleman at the Krishna temple in Udupi. The other math heads in Udupi are making earnest efforts to persuade the Kunjur swami to do his duty in preserving this sacred place.

Today, Pajakakshetra suffers from more than the unfortunate neglect of its trustee owner. The proposed mega industries will greatly impact the area. Equally threating is a quarry barely 200 meters away. Dynamiting and the resulting granite dust are affecting the structure. The quarry was approved by the Karnataka government in 1983, but a local village headmaster, Ganapayya Shetty, got it shelved. When he died two years later, the stalled quarries went into production at breakneck speed, the crushers working at a furious place. The adjacent richly productive agricultural land has been layered with granite dust and now lies barren. The nearby Durgaparameshwari temple and Parashurama temple--places of Madva's childhood--are developing cracks in their walls. Shetty's 70-year-old daughter, Rajeevi, has renewed her father's struggle. Hers is the only voice in the village crying to protect it.

"Most of the villagers are illiterate. They are complacent about the issue, saying it is the duty of the swami to fight against it. I have approached all the concerned officials and made petitions. The village headman wrote to me saying there are no quarries in the region on their records, even though truck loads of granite are being transported every day," says Rajeevi.

As I tried to take pictures, officially non-existent granite-laden trucks kept crossing my view finder. The cry of one Rajeevi Shetty is not enough to save Pajakakshetra. The need of the hour is to halt this unsavory onslaught on the holy land and ensure its preservation.