The Mahilara Miracle
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How we got our ancestral village temple renovated by the government

SABYASACHI GHOSH DASTIDAR, NEW YORK

Mahilara village is ever so dear to my family. It is located in a remote, picturesque area in the Barisal district of Bangladesh. Mahilara is famous for the historically important and architecturally significant 300-year-old Mahilara Matha, a Hindu temple and residence for monks. My parents left their home here years ago after one of the many anti-Hindu pogroms, an organized attack or massacre of an ethnic or religious group. A Muslim neighbor moved into our house.

In Bangladesh, one form of minority oppression has been to attack, desecrate or destroy Hindu temples. Another common form has been confiscation, without notice or compensation, of Hindu homes, shops, land, ponds, farms and businesses using the Enemy Property Act. A few Hindu families have unwillingly changed their names and their religion. Yet, as I traveled the land, I found that in many cases what some of the ordinary people, unlettered yet wise and brave, have done is truly "revolutionary" in my mind. In Mahilara, the villagers rallied around the ancient temple and reasserted their community's presence.

Mahilara is a typical Bengal village. From a distance it looks like a small forest, as each homestead is covered with treesÃtrees that give flowers, others that bear fruits and vegetables, and still others that provide shelter. As the villages are located in the coastal area, they are connected with the rest of the world by a network of canals built by Hindu landlords hundreds of years ago. Most now also have good roads.

Not long ago, Mahilara was an all-Hindu Baidya-caste [physician] village. Other Hindus, both of privileged and oppressed castes, also lived there. A number of Indian luminaries, freedom fighters and women pioneers came from Mahilara. These days it is difficult to find even one of those families! Mahilara was famous in pre-partition India because it used to produce top students in the all-Bengal school exams. It was also known for the old matha, temple and residence for monks, built about three hundred years ago in Bengali brick sikahr-deoul, narrow conical, style. This Radha-Krishna matha was built by Dayaram Sarkar during the Muslim era of Bengal. It is a slightly leaning brick structure about 100 feet high. Mahilara Matha is also known as Sarkar Deoul, Sarkar's Temple, and Helano Matha, Leaning Temple.

This temple has been attacked many times by anti-Hindu terrorists. When I visited, it was being protected by the unlettered Rakhal Sadhu and his widowed mother. I estimated that together they earn less than US$10.00 a month. Even after the ethnic cleansing of educated Hindus, a large number of Hindus continued to live in the area, almost all of them pious, poor and mostly belonging to the oppressed castes, although casteism among Hindus is practically non-existent. Families

routinely intermarry.

My wife and I have been visiting Mahilara regularly for the past two decades. During my 1994 visit, I thought the temple was going to disintegrate unless it was taken care of immediately. Weeds were everywhere, some eight feet high. I learned that when Rakhal and his friends tried to repair the structure, those against the preservation of Hindu temples opposed it. The reason given was, "The job is to be done by the government." Whenever we visit the village, almost everyone comes running to us to share their tales untold since our last visit. In 1994, as we were about to leave the matha, the entire crowd rose to their feet and urged us, "Please help us save our matha. If we lose it, our spirit will be gone." I said, "How's it possible to save the matha from such a faraway land?" They only responded, "You belong to us."

I conveyed Rakhal's request to many of the important personalities in the capital, Dhaka, and in the district town. After my return to New York, I started writing to top bureaucrats and

politicians. Most of my friends laughed at me upon hearing about my effort. Some even asked, "Are you going insane?" But, I just couldn't forget the request of so many of "my people." I kept writing. Between 1994 and 1995 I wrote to the district magistrate, the district police superintendent, the home minister, the minister in charge of archaeological sites, the president and more. Finally, in June, 1996, I received word from the Bangladesh government, "The historic temple would be repaired in the fiscal year of 1996-1997." At first, I could not believe my eyes. My wife Shefali and I read the letter over and over. Finally, I called Mr. Kazi, the letter writer, about its authenticity. One has to realize that there is no dearth of compassionate and sympathetic people in our society! Later, in the summer of 2000, I got a call from a stranger who was visiting New York telling me how pleased he was with my repeated letters to rehabilitate the historic place. He told me that he was one of the government officials who participated in the decision to save the historic matha.

The temple was repaired as promised, and it was just a little over three years ago that I again returned to the village. As I was entering the dirt path leading to the matha, I encountered a sankirtan, a gathering for religious singing, which had just ended. The group included some Muslims from the nearby villages. As we approached Rakhal's mother recognized me. She immediately ran towards me with one of her friends. They held me tight and started crying in joy. Rakhal Sadhu joined them, holding my other hand so tight that it started to hurt, and said, "Dada [older brother], "with the matha being repaired we feel reassured, and we have started regular sankirtans again."

As we were talking, the group started singing in Bengali, "Take God's name," raising their two hands in the typical Vaishnav style. Two of "my own people" pulled me and other guests traveling with me over and began a dance, circling us to the beat of the Bengali

drum, khanjani cymbals, kasar ghanta brass gongs. They sang and chanted, "We have always been here. We'll always live here, with our nation, temple, worship, festivals and Holi celebration. O, our Hindu, Muslim and Christian brothers and sisters, raise your hands and chant one and all. Sing Lord Hari's name, Sing Lord Hari's name."

This great outpouring of appreciation was not the end of our work with the village. After my mother passed away in Calcutta in December, 1999, I wrote to Rakhal Sadhu to ask if a memorial could be built at the temple in honor of my parents and my wife's, all of whom originated from this same village of Mahilara. Both of our parents had offered worship at the famous matha. In a prompt reply, Srimat Dayamoy Chaitanya Brahmachari, who rose from the local peasantry to become a brahmachari, gave us the sad news that Rakhal had passed away. He explained that an organization,

Bhaktabash, had been set up to manage the temple, especially now that, after the renovation, thousands of visitors had been coming. He pleaded with us to help build a pilgrim's center to accommodate not only the visitors but also a school and housing for monks.

I broached the idea to my Bangladesh friends in New York and New Jersey, who decided to build not just a pilgrim's center, but a sturdy concrete structure that would also serve as a shelter in typhoons and floods. Funds were raised rapidly, and the completed structure was dedicated January 9, 2001.

Recently, the shelter provided an unforeseen service when it housed a large number of Hindus during the anti-Hindu pogrom that began after the October, 2001, elections. Then all the Hindu Committee Members, including the head monk, who is also the

headmaster of the new school, were evicted. But the Bhaktabash provided the institutional backdrop to bring back all those who were victimized. I also wrote to Bangla and foreign leaders to provide protection to the local residents.

I, my family and friends first visited the center in June, 2001. We were greeted at the bus stop by over a hundred men, women and children who had waited patiently for six hours to welcome us with showers of flower petals, garlands of marigolds, conch blowing, ululating and slogans. In rural areas, night comes early, but not on this day. Festivity, singing and lectures continued past midnight in that rural darkness, only to restart before sunrise. Over a thousand people attended the ceremony!

The villagers pledged to us, "Now that you have saved our heritage of 300 years, we

promise that all of your names that have been engraved in the marble tablet will remain with us for another 300 years. We believe that you are first Bangladeshi Hindu refugees who have not abandoned us, but have come back to live with us. You are the first to create something new in your ancestral homeland. We appreciate that the daughter of our village [my wife], Dr. Shefali Sengupta Dastidar, is back with us. We have made you all as our own."

They sang, "We have always been here. We'll always live here, with our nation, temple, worship, festivals and Holi celebrations. O our Hindu, Muslim and Christian brothers and sisters, raise your hands and chant one and all. Sing Lord Hari's name, Sing Lord Hari's name."

Contact Sabyasachi Dastidar at:
dastidars@hotmail.com