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OPINION

Temple Trouble in Delhi

Encroachment on public lands, unsanitary grounds, misuse of properties and establishment of shrines for personal gain hinder our worship

Madhu Kishwar, New Delhi

Last year while helping a friend to buy an apartment in Delhi, I was saddened to find that houses built near a temple command a low price in the market while those near or facing a park are seen as prime properties. Let me give you an example from my own neighborhood.

Almost all the temples that have come up in the South Delhi colony I live in have been built by people illegally encroaching upon a public space such as a park or roadway. They begin as modest structures and then keep expanding and devouring land until they threaten to take over even the roads. In my neighborhood, the beginning was made some decades ago by a local municipal counselor of the ruling party. He first built a small temple in the park on his block. The building kept growing year by year. Today it is a mammoth, ugly structure which has taken over the entire park and part of the road. The building violates every single municipal law. Using the temple

as a cover, this businessman and politician has built a commercially-run wedding facility. Many other such temples--and Muslim mosques and Sikh gurudvaras as well--even go to the extent of building shops all around the complex which are rented out for the personal profit of those who own the temple.

Taking a cue from this politician-turned-temple-owner, several more such "temples" have mushroomed in our area. Their presence has virtually no positive value for the neighborhood. To begin with, all of them start blaring ugly film bhajanas played on poor quality cassette players early in the morning. Anyone who has grown up associating bhajanas with spiritually uplifting verses set to the tune of soothing melodies would experience a nasty, long-lasting cultural shock on hearing these tapes. Almost all of these temples are filthy, with no respect for basic rules of hygiene. The only religious activity associated with each is that poorly paid priests are hired by the owners to carry out some mumbo jumbo by way of rituals and pujas. Most don't have knowledge of the scriptures. These temples are not centers of religious learning or places for spiritual quest. There are virtually no activities which promote the collective welfare of the community by education or provide help to those in need. Far from acting as role models or catalysts for creating harmonious ecological environment, these temples foul the neighborhood surrounding it.

Let me tell the story of how one temple came to be set up near my house by a brahmin family. Let's call them the Sharmas (not their real name). When I moved into this neighborhood twenty years ago, the Sharmas were a humble, lower middle-class family with four sons, all living in a rather

dilapidated house. Over the years, the commercial value of the plot of land their house stood on rose phenomenally. They entered into a partnership with a builder and developed the whole plot into a small commercial complex. Each of the sons got a shop in their name.

Three thrived in business, but one proved a failure at whatever venture he tried his hand. Then he hit upon a foolproof formula. He converted his shop into a small temple--that is, a few garishly dressed deities were installed along with an oversized money collection box. This brahmin family was too poorly educated and ignorant about basic rituals to make even the pretense of acting as priests. So they hired a semi-educated priest for a pittance. They purchased a rickety tape recorder and a few noisy cassettes, which are blared early morning on a loudspeaker while the priest sits in a corner making a show of reading from some religious text. His only role is to offer a few drops of holy water to whoever comes and places a few coins in the collection box.

Establishing a temple has come to be seen as a profitable business activity. The income of big temples is managed by big businessmen, bureaucrats and politicians. There are no known rules of accountability that the income earned in the name of the deity has to be spent properly. Even small local temples, like the ones in my neighborhood, serve a similar purpose for small-time entrepreneurs or even outright thugs who enjoy political patronage.

It is amazing that the Hindu community has paid no attention to the systematic defilement of their religious centers. On the

contrary, much heat and fire is generated in India over keeping our polity "secular." The assumption is that religious concerns and leaders pose a danger to and therefore need to be kept out of the political domain. However, the real challenge before us lies in restoring the sanctity of religious institutions by freeing them from the clutches of politicians and bureaucrats. A society which allows its own religious centers to be so defiled and misused, can only be described as a decaying society. It is time we took steps to stem the rot.

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**Hinduism Holds No Patent On This
Problem**

By Rajiv Malik, New Delhi, India

I find Ms. Kishwar's assessment a one-sided and critical assessment to highlight the temples which have dirt around them or have made

encroachments while ignoring the hundreds of others which are being well managed and are patronised by hundreds of thousands of Hindu devotees. Thousands of people belong to temple managing committees who are absolutely honest, upright and doing good work. They are spending their time and the temple's income money for the betterment of the religion and community. It is not true that temples in Delhi have filthy surroundings or are running from shops from where other businesses were unsuccessful - though the case she points out is certainly a genuine one. But these are isolated incidents and not the norm. While many Hindus deplore this situation, few criticize the widespread encroachments on public land done by Delhi's Muslim mosques or Sikh gurudvaras in the same manner. They would not like to hurt the religious sentiments of these communities. The city's biggest mosque, Jama Masjid, has encroached the area around it to create a big market. All the money from here most certainly goes to the Shahi Imam and his family. There have been rumors that matters would be set right here but no government can dare to take corrective measures. The filth and dirt around Jama Masjid is much more than around any temple in Delhi, and

no one does anything about it. A famous gurudvara in Delhi had encroached upon a lot of public land. When a city demolition squad went a few years back to demolish the unauthorized structure, the Sikhs resisted. A couple of policemen and some of the gurudvara people lost their lives in this battle, besides leaving many seriously injured - and the encroachments are still there. None of these cases justify the problems of Hindu temples, but let's acknowledge that the situation is not unique to our community.