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HOLY SITES

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Hindus propose a comprehensive plan to modernize the popular pilgrimage destination

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Millions of Hindus come to worship Lord Ayappan at His temple in Sabarimala in a remote area of Kerala State, South India, during the November-to-January pilgrimage season. The crowds have totally overwhelmed the meagre facilities. A group of environmentalists reported, "A post-seasonal visit to Sabarimala is a nauseating experience. The whole area looks like the garbage dump of a huge city such as Calcutta or Mumbai. The air is filled with the stench of decaying flesh from donkeys who died after hauling in supplies and from 3,000 overflowing latrines. The entire area surrounding the central shrine is covered with tons of solid and liquid waste-- a fertile breeding ground for flies and mosquitoes."

Swami Sathyananda Saraswati, chairman of the Hindu Unity Forum, has announced a master plan to rebuild the area's entire infrastructure at a total cost of us$125,000,000. Gone under the ambitious plan by the group of 52 local religious organizations will be the random collection of metal-roofed

concrete buildings which presently nearly obscure the central sanctum. An area of 230 hectares (2.3 square kilometers) surrounding the small central temple will be completely rebuilt, allowing an outer wall for the temple complex to be 600 meters in circumference, with towers built in each of the four directions, all according to traditional Kerala temple architecture.

Outside the wall, pilgrim facilities are planned on a scale sufficient for the huge crowds. For the ordinary pilgrim, the biggest change will be a reduction in the time required to stand in queue to reach the sanctum sanctorum from the present twelve hours to just two and a half. Another major change will be the simple availability of water. Presently pilgrims buy bottled water even to bathe, as there is no other useable supply. Viewing galleries are planned such that on January 14, 2.5 million people could simultaneously witness the "Divine Jyothi," or light--the culmination of the year's worship. The plan also calls for nearby deforested areas to be replanted.

Swami Sathyananda believes the project could be easily funded from the temple's yearly income of $7.5 million and from the tens of millions in taxes

which result from the temple's presence. Swami complains, however, that, as with other temples in Kerala, management is overseen by various boards whose executive committees are political appointees and not necessarily devotees of the temple, or even Hindus. Muslims and Christians in Kerala run their institutions without government oversight. In the early 1990s, then Chief Minister of Kerala A.K. Antony favored the reconstruction, but subsequent administrations shelved it.

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