Tradition in Decline
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MONASTERIES

Tradition in Decline

How Puri's once-thriving monasteries came to face extinction

M.P. Mohanty, New Delhi

His forehead crumples as H.H.Sankaracharya Nischalanand Saraswati laments the current status of his pivotal Govardhan monastery and others in Puri, the holy temple town in the eastern Indian state of Orissa. "Our religious practices, ethics and institutions are facing the worst phase in free and modern India. Most maths [pronounced mutts] are severely challenged. This ancient seat of spiritual wisdom, Govardhan Math, was established in the 9th century on 32 acres. Now the lands are being captured by families. From here to the seashore stood 142 mausoleums of the Sankaracharyas. 130 have been destroyed and turned into houses and hotels by illegal encroachment. Therefore, I have had to build a protective wall around my math."

Nischalanand echoes the sentiments of forty Hindu maths (monasteries) struggling against extinction--only five percent remain of the 752 established in Puri over a 1,300-year period. Alarmed at such reports, Hinduism Today sent me to Puri in Orissa, my ancestral state, to investigate the circumstances

firsthand. My queries unleashed an avalanche of stark answers from local Hindu leaders, who have been systematically marginalized in their communities and are seldom even asked about what is happening. The decline began 200 years ago during the British colonialist regime. Under British rule, the swamis explained, the benevolent King of Puri was sent to prison, and laws were changed to deplete monastery power. This trend did not change in independent India, hence the dismal, almost irretrievable, situation in this holy hamlet today.

History: The word Puri is a shortened name for Jagannath Puri, which literally means the "Abode of Lord Jagannath." Puri is extremely sacred for Hindus because of its famous Vaishnava Jagannath Temple and the innumerable maths. Sarat Chandra Mohapatra, former administrator of the Jagannath Temple, said, "There was beautiful planning in setting up the holy town. Jagannath Temple is in the center, with gates located in four directions. Maths were established near the temple and encircling it."

Saints and sadhus of various Hindu sects and other religions had pilgrimaged to Puri for the Lord's darshan (sight), then stayed to establish their monasteries as centers of service and teaching on lands donated to them by the King of Puri, other kings, and rich devotees. Dr. Sidheswar Mohapatra, researcher and author of a book on Puri's language, explains, "Math means a sacred place where disciples learn. Most maths were established as chatas (umbrellas) because they began with the founder's sitting under an umbrella to protect himself from the sun while worshiping the Lord. The maths were created by saints and sadhus to propagate their philosophy, advance their spiritual life and attain moksha, liberation from rebirth.

Although Puri is the center for Vaishnavism, Saivites were dominant. Saivite Dandi saints governed affairs of the Jagannath Temple. Their most ancient maths are Shiv Tirth and Sankarananda." Hindu castes established their own maths to organize religio/social functions in the Jagannath Temple. There are also Sikh maths established here.

Though founders differed, most maths were used to propagate the philosophy of their respective sects, offer scholarships to needy and meritorious students, establish Veda schools, foster cows, offer residential facilities and prasad (food) to the visiting devotees, pupils, ascetics and beggars, and to preserve Hindu arts and crafts. Since the Jagannath Temple is Puri's centerpiece, the maths had a close connection and performed certain ritual services in the temple. The heads of maths were called Mahants in the Oriya language. They personally maintained their maths, discharging religious and social functions with the vast endowed lands and money donated to them from Puri's King and the temple's charitable account. So passed the golden days of Puri for hundreds of years. The temple was prosperous, the monks were secure and the religion was taught in its depth.

Declination: Then came the jolly Brits in the early 1800s to wreak their Anglican havoc--not like earlier invaders who demolished physical structures such as temples, but through long-lasting tactics designed to devitalize every aspect of Hinduism. They knew India's strength was Hinduism, and Hinduism's strength was its temples and its holy men. Marginalize both, and the country would become a suitably docile colony of the Empire.

With cunning, patience and efficiency, the British succeeded, and the result in Puri is seen today--40 monasteries remain, most facing closure, while the remaining 712 are extinct. Their annihilation began in the 1860s with three tactics: defame the monastery leaders by false allegations, strip monasteries of economic power with changes in land and revenue laws and dethrone Puri's hereditary king.

Bhaskar Mishra, Public Relations Officer of Jagannath Temple, explained to me, "The deterioration started right after the British annexed Orissa. Mr. Kedarnath Dutt, an administrator for the British, heavily criticized the maths of Orissa in 1860, and in 1868 an ad hoc committee was appointed to review their affairs. The committee concluded that the maths' property was meant for the general good of the society. The Mahants should not spend the math's earnings for their own purpose. They should lead a pure spiritual life and be treated as mere custodians of maths and should spend time in the service of God. The committee reported that most of the maths had failed in their objectives." As a result of this report, the maths' reputation and standing in society was damaged.

Supported by this report, explains former temple administrator Sarat Chandra, "British officials in 1878 sent Puri's benevolent King Mukund Dev to prison in the Andaman Islands, dealing a severe blow. The maths looked to the King for stability, regarding him as a 'moving God,' and the King's traditional relationship with the temple gave him overall power of its management. With the real king out of the way, the British appointed a puppet, cleverly named King Mukund Dev II, to fulfill their agenda. In 1897 this king promulgated a new method for Orissa's revenue system. Prior to this, the

properties of maths, temples and other religious institutions were nontransferable, but subsequently they could be sold or transferred on a lease basis. As a result, the income of the temple and the monasteries plummeted." Puri was just one of many locations in India to be religiously humiliated in this way. British administrators simultaneously demeaned and dismantled Hindu monasteries in Mumbai and other Indian cities.

Though British governors released physical hold of India in 1947, their policies toward Hindu institutions continued with little change. In fact, the situation worsened in 1959 and 1964 with the Orissa Estate Abolition and Land Reform Acts. Sarat Chandra says these acts conferred "occupational status of temple and monastery properties on the peasants in the form of gifts, mortgages, transfers and leases. Under the previous system, a peasant family would perform a service for the math and in turn receive custodianship of some of the monastery's land, which they would cultivate, keep some profit for themselves, and return the remainder to the Mahant.

"Now, the peasants own the lands. But the monasteries still need their services, so the families help, but must be paid wages. Because most properties were sold, the maths have no regular source of earning. So how can they pay the wages? That is why they are collapsing." Adding to the loss in internal strength, the government in the 1970s secularized math management based on charges of delinquency in religious leadership.

Today's scene: Hinduism Today visited with the priests and

heads of several maths to learn how they fare today. They are in dire straits. Their lands are selling quickly and many Mahants have strayed from traditional duties, due to lack of oversight they previously had from the king.

H. H. Sankaracharya Nischalanand Saraswati is most prominent among Puri's religious leaders. His Govardhan Math is one of four established by Adi Sankaracharya in the 9th century as centers of Smarta authority. I met him shortly after his evening worship. He lamented, "The other Sankaracharya maths are independent of the Endowment Act. But this math has been put under it. According to the act, Lord Jagannath is the owner of the math's properties. You can imagine when vested interests illegally capture the property, Lord Jagannath will not fight them legally. Neither can I, because of the rule. The temple seeks my advice only during crises. The present temple administration has never visited the math. After the country's independence, political leaders used deceit and violence to hijack power from spiritual leaders. At present, true spiritual leadership is rare. Even the Sankaracharyas cannot take a unanimous stand in religious matters. Politically, almost fifty duplicate Sankaracharyas have been created since Independence. When I attended the kumbha mela, police officials refused to provide me a shelter on the pretext that they had already made arrangements for 32 Sankaracharyas. Everybody knows we have four Sankaracharyas. From where did the rest crop up? And how is the government recognizing them and neglecting the genuine ones? Politicians have failed to realize that the safety of religious leadership is a precondition to national stability. Muslims and Christians respect the importance of their religious leaders."

"Nevertheless," continued Swami Nischalanand, "My spiritual practices are undeterred. I work for India's integrity, cow protection and to save the Hindu religion. We have disciples in the math. We have started publishing journals in Hindi and Oriya. Recently I have inspired youth to form Aditya Bahini, an organization which mobilizes public opinion for protection of Puri's religious institutions. We do not collect money from the public--devotees make voluntary donations. Thus my math is managed."

Because of the absence of royal guidance, Bhaskar Mishra of the Jagannath Temple says that "Most maths are not linked with the temple. Some which had ritualistic service in the temple do not function due to lack of resources. Yes, they had plenty of properties earlier. But the Mahants could not manage them properly. They have failed in maintaining the traditional relationship with devotees and public. Most of the maths have become centers of vested interest and even gambling. At the prominent Emar Math there are no religious functions or discourses at all and the present Mahant does not meet people."

Radhakant Panda, priest of Radhakant Math told me, "Everyday hundreds of devotees visit this math. Worship is regular. We have 4,000 acres of land and regular earnings." However, he notes, "The endowment commission has managed the math since 1978. Things were better when the Mahant was managing. Earlier only sadhus, saints and devotees could stay in here. Since the government has taken over, anyone can pay to stay here. They have turned this historic place into a guest house, affecting the math's sacredness." And Shri Dhyanchandra Das, Mahant of this same

math, adds, "Earlier we had fifty students, now we have only two. We do not have a cowshed. The government is transferring properties of the math on a lease basis. They have not even spared the math entrance." The Haridas Thakur Math is fairing better. Mahant Shri Narottam Das says, "There are three students in the math who study the Vedas. We have eight cows. Thirty saints stay here and perform sadhana."

What can be done? Everyone we interviewed offered that laws should be amended to make math properties untransferable. Only if they keep and maximize the use of such lands can the institutions thrive as in the days of old. The maths and temple should be governed by the same law, so they may coordinate their efforts. Math and temple administrative committees should be replaced by religious individuals. Every day lost in reviving the time-tested Hindu traditions which gave abundance and self-sufficiency to these holy places is seen locally as leading to a national cultural failure, and that at a historic juncture of a fledgling nation in full celebration of its 50th year of independence. 1Ã21Ã4

How you can help: Hindu Heritage Endowment has established a perpetual fund for the rejuvenation and care of Puri's once thriving monasteries. Use of the income from the fund will be supervised by Shankaracharya Nischalanand Saraswati and his successors. For information about making a tax-deductible gift from anywhere in the world, contact Paramacharya Bodhinatha, Hindu Heritage Endowment, 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii, USA 96746-9304. Tel: (800) 890-1008 ext. 222; outside US: (808) 822-3152 ext. 222. Fax: (808) 822-4351. Email: Paramacharya_Bodhinatha@ HinduismToday.kauai.hi.us

Whatever Happened?

A monk and two managers diagnose damages

Bhaskar Mishra (Public Relations Officer, Jagannath temple):

The government Endowment Commission has failed to take any concrete steps to revive these mutts. Some of the managers have begun leasing out mutt properties to families and real estate developers. Only 40 mutts are now there, including the new and modern ones. Most of them are reeling under a deep financial crisis. Lack of devotion, lack of regular religious practices and apathy led to this present shape.

Sarat Chandra Mohapatra (Founder, Jagannath Research Center): The King of Puri is now a mere titular body--the statutory effectiveness is negligible, and he does not have any executive power. Maths do not have any collective body of their own. Earlier there was a system of God at the center, then comes the king, then temple, then mutts and surrounding families. Now, the power of the king is gone, the rajguru (royal preceptor) is no more and the present temple management is not a proper substitute to the old one.

Mahant Ram Bhusan Das (Head, Sana Chata Mutt): Yes, we are worried about the decadence. Most mutts are in ruins. There is no unity amongst us. Family men have taken away the mutts and properties. Why blame the government alone? In fact, it has never interfered in our functioning. Take the example of the biggest and most influential mutt, Emar Mutt, nothing happens there. Uttar Parswa, Dakshina Parswa and Ribasa mutts do not entertain devotees or the poor. Some of us (the Mahantas) have violated the rules by marrying, and not performing spiritual practices. We have also misused the mutt properties for our benefit, and the sanctity is lost. Nevertheless, in the Kali Yuga such things happen. But, in the process only the genuine mutts and saints will survive. The rest will perish.