

Temple Takeovers

Interview with Ram Chandra Acharya

This interview with Ram Chandra Acharya was tape recorded by Madhu Kishwar when he visited Delhi along with Baba Lal Das in July 1993

I am the mahant of a temple called Mumuksh Bhavan in a locality of Ayodhya named Vibhishan Kund.

I became the mahant in 1988. It is five years now.

How does one become a mahant?

The chief mahant has some disciples. After his death the seniormost disciple, if capable, becomes the mahant.

What was your age when you became the mahant?

I was 24 when I became the mahant.

Has it ever happened before that someone so young was made a mahant?

In Ayodhya, there is no mahant who is younger than me.

How and why did this happen in your case?

Our guruji was murdered by people from Bihar. Our guruji also came from Bihar. The one who was to become the mahant after him was the one who murdered him. He even controlled the mandir for two months.

Why did he commit the murder?

What was his name?

His name was Jitendra Pandey and he came from Gopalganj in Bihar. He committed the murder because he was impatient to become the mahant. He kept wondering when the mahant would die and when he would take his place.

How did he do it?

I have only heard about it—I was not an eyewitness to the crime. It is

said that he hired some local *goondas* and opened the gate of the mandir and got him murdered. After they murdered him, they dumped his body in a tank in the mandir. The body was discovered only after one and a half months.

Do such things routinely happen in mandirs?

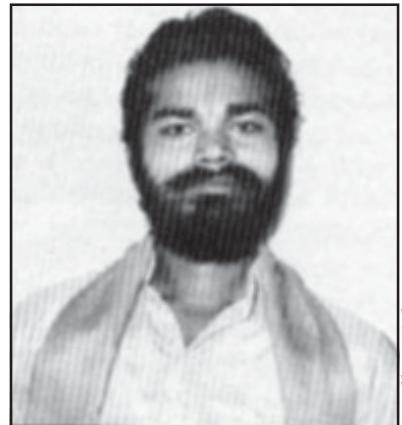
In Ayodhya, the murder of mahants is a common occurrence.

Since when did this practice of murders start?

It is more than 15 years now. It is because persons of bad character on the run come to Ayodhya, grow a beard and start serving the mahants. Years pass but their nature does not change. Basically they have a criminal bent of mind.

They can get away with it because in mandirs there is no special checking done about anyone's antecedents. They come and tell the mahant that they come from such and such place and they want to become his disciple. Some say that they are disappointed with their family life and so they want to live in the temple. As the older mahants are simple and there is no evil in their hearts, they accept these persons as their disciples. After becoming disciples, they serve the mahant with such dedication and loyalty that everyone is impressed by them. So, if such a person even commits a murder, people will not suspect him. This has been happening for 15 years.

Why has it been like this for the last 15 years?; [This question is



Madhu Kishwar

addressed to another fellow mahant] You were going to say something?

Earlier only those people who had a spirit of sacrifice or had renounced the world became sadhus. They used to serve the people and because of this they were made mahants of some mandirs. With the criminalisation of politics and criminal influence pervading different walks of social life, the criminals thought that the mandirs and *maths* were wonderful places where by just growing a beard you not only got protection but also shelter. Besides, there was a lot of wealth around in the mandirs, both moveable and immovable property. When without any effort they could get all this, they thought why not strangle the mahant and take over as mahant.

Did other people inside the mandir not oppose their becoming mahant?

There is a lot of protest in society. People do protest, but the circumstances are such that the administration and the police stand to gain a lot from such a situation. The police are well aware that these fellows who have taken over as mahants are murderers, but that does not seem to concern them. The only thing the police is interested in is how much they can extract from the fellow who claims to be the mahant after murdering the previous mahant. According to their capacity and the

kind of mandir involved, anything from Rs 10,000 to Rs 4 lakhs is extorted by the police. After this, the case is dismissed or tampered with in such a manner that there is no strength in the case against these criminals.

What happened in your temple after the previous mahant was murdered?

First of all we lodged a report that the mahant was missing and that there was no information about him.

Why was he so foolish as to dump the body in the tank? He could have thrown it away at some distance from the mandir.

He was very foolish; he had no sense. He used local people to commit the murder and after the murder he took control of the mandir. When people came to meet guruji and enquired after him, he would sometimes say that guruji had gone to Nepal; sometimes he would say that he had gone to Bihar or to Haridwar. He gave different answers to different people, never the same thing to everyone. People began to suspect something. Chait Ramnaumi, Sawan Jhula and Parikrama Kartika are occasions for which guruji would always be in Ayodhya even if he had to come back from America.

On these three occasions there is a fair organised by the state government. When he was found absent on Ramnaumi, people began to suspect that either he had been murdered or he had been abducted and kept prisoner somewhere. When the imposter realised that he would be exposed, he tried to run away. He took away all the gold and silver jewellery from the mandir. An old man from Gonda district, a retired military man, who was his accomplice, had stayed back. When Chait Ramnaumi also passed and there was no trace of guruji, a special probe was started. Soon afterwards, the bank in Ayodhya where guruji had his account received a letter requesting

them to transfer the account to Bharuch (a district in UP). The bank people knew guruji personally, and as the signatures were not tallying, they spoke to other mahants in Ayodhya. The mahants advised the bank not to take any action to transfer the account till investigations were completed.

An FIR was lodged with the police about the missing person and the police were informed about the application received in the bank for transferring guruji's account. A police party was sent to Bharuch to investigate the matter. There it was found out that the person who had requested the transfer of the account was about 24 or 25 years old. On this basis the police were convinced that it was not guruji because guruji was about 60 years of age. The transfer of the account was stopped. Thereafter, the brother of guruji's guru came here from Brindavan and took temporary charge. While he was here he was getting the latrine repaired. During the repairs the cover of the sewer tank was lifted and it was discovered that there was mud inside. There should not have been any mud in the sewer tank. Suspecting that there was something below the mud, he informed the police. The police came and recovered two bodies —that of guruji and his female disciple Ganga Dasi, who was an eyewitness to the murder. That is why she was also killed. After this the ex-military fellow from Gonda was arrested and the other one surrendered after one year.

I was doing my studies for M.A. at that time. I used to wear modern clothes like trousers and a shirt, and I lived in separate quarters. I was known as a socially conscious person and had published a couple of books of poetry. So when they went looking for guruji's disciples, they came to me and made me the mahant.

So this is not an ancestral heritage? Anyone can be made the mahant?

Yes, it is not ancestral.

How many temples in Ayodhya have criminals taken over?

About 30 per cent of the mandirs must have been taken over by criminals.

Did it happen on its own or were the mandirs forcibly taken over?

They were forcibly taken over.

What is the role of political parties in this?

Political parties have a role in this because whichever party the criminals are close to, they will use that party's influence to get their way. As Sharmaji told you, the police do not play their legitimate role in these affairs. The police is involved in all the crime that is going on. Money was even demanded from me, but in a different manner.

As I told you, the person from Brindavan had been given temporary charge. When my name was proposed for the post of mahant, it was opposed on the grounds that I was too young and that I would ruin everyone. Others argued that when a small child's father dies, the child is not deprived of the father's property; therefore there was no harm in my becoming the mahant. My dispute with them started over this issue.

Who are the people who decide this?

There is a Vaishnav committee of mahants. In Ayodhya there are two categories of mahants - Vairagi and Acharya. I am from the Acharya category which has about 150 mahants.

So they sit together and decide as to who should be in which mandir?

Yes. In case the mahant of a mandir does not appoint anyone as the mahant during his lifetime, then this Vaishnav committee decides who the next mahant is going to be.

I was selected by the Vaishnav committee. The police then demanded money from me to support my case

and to remove the person who was opposing me. But I did not give them a single paisa. I was not worried because the people were with me; moreover I did not have any money. I was a student and therefore I could not give any money.

When this dispute over the Ramjanmabhoomi was going on, what was the role of the Acharya samaj?

Its role was insignificant. Only two or three top mahants are courted by the political parties; no one else is affiliated or involved with any party or institution. It is just like in a village, when two persons are fighting, no third person wants to get involved in it. In Ayodhya, three or four political parties are fighting over the disputed structure. Now there are four different parties with different viewpoints. In case I go with one, the three other parties will become my opponents. Therefore, to avoid conflict, local people do not show any interest in the matter.

So how did the VHP get involved in Ayodhya?

This happened in 1984. But they do not have control over any mandir.

Have they appointed any mahants of their choice?

No, they do not even have the right to do so. What has happened is that they have supported some persons. Two or three persons may have sought their support; but they do not have any right to appoint any mahant. There is no possibility of that in our system.

What was the opinion of the majority of the mahants in Ayodhya about destroying the Babri Masjid?

The mahants of Ayodhya did not have any role in the demolition except two or three mahants like Ramachandra Paramhansa, Natgopaladas or Avadeshdas Shastri. These people were involved

in the conspiracy. The majority of the mahants in Ayodhya were not involved in this.

From the outside it looks like the VHP has the support of most of its mahants.

As an elephant's large foot accommodates many small feet, the VHP have taken control of the big

mahants. They think that since they have the big mahants on their side, the smaller mahants will naturally be with them. But no one is supporting them.

Those of you who do not support them, are you all together or are there differences amongst you too?



An example of a temple takeover. The writing at the entrance of a temple in Bhopal reads: Shri Ram Mandir Khatlapur, Bajrang Dal extends a hearty welcome to you

People do get together on certain occasions and then go their own ways. Like if there is a feast, everyone will collect to eat, but their only intent is the food and they do not bother to know what the others are doing.

There were so many riots and disturbances, how can you not have anything to do with it?

We have nothing to do with it because the big mandirs have made a lot of money out of this rioting; but the smaller mandirs have been destroyed.

Is your mandir big or small?

It is a small one. The total worth of the property would be about Rs 20 to 25 lakhs, or maybe Rs 50 lakhs. But these days, that is not of much value.

How much do you get annually?

I earn some money by preaching and giving sermons. Then there are three fairs in the year. Altogether I get a personal income of about Rs 70,000 to Rs 80,000.

Does this mean your personal income through your efforts alone?

Yes.

Now that there is talk of building a RamLalla mandir at the disputed spot. Has there been any decision by the mahants of Ayodhya among themselves as to what should be done there?

By the mahants of Ayodhya, if you mean Avdesh Shastri

No, leave him aside. Supposing you were asked as to what should be done there, what would be your reaction?

As I am a Hindu, I would like a

mandir to be made; but because this is likely to cause rioting I would like the verdict of the courts to be implemented. As the matter is already before the courts, the court judgement should be honoured. If the court decided that there should be a mandir, then let a mandir be made, or if the court decides that there should be a masjid, then a masjid should be made. □

(The interviews with Baba Lal Das and Ram Chandra Acharya have been translated from Hindi by Aditya)

An Appeal

The murder of Baba Lal Das is part of a pattern of killings of mahants in many parts of UP. The VHP and the Sangh parivar are among the driving forces in the increase in brutal takeovers of mandirs by thieves. We ask all Manushi readers, especially those from UP, to write a letter to Chief Minister MuLayam Singh Yadav at the following address demanding a full inquiry into the causes of these killings, including that of Baba Lal Das.

**Shri Mulayam Singh Yadav
Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh
Lucknow**