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Sect's Death Ritual Clashes With Indian Law

By ELLEN BARRY and MANSI CHOKSI AUG. 24, 2015

PUNE, India — All week, people streamed in and out of the handsome bungalow where the Lodha family lives, eager to witness for themselves the amazing event that was occurring there.

On a bed in a corner of a large sitting room, surrounded by a crowd of reverent visitors, the family's 92-year-old patriarch, Manikchand Lodha, was fasting to death. It was the culmination of an act of santhara, a voluntary, systematic starvation ritual undertaken every year by several hundred members of the austere, ancient Jain religion.

Mr. Lodha had begun the process some three years earlier, after a fall left him bedridden. First he renounced pleasures like tea and tobacco. Then things he loved, like television. He gave up medicine, even refusing an air mattress to ease his bedsores. On Aug. 10, he took the ancient vow and gave up food and water.

When he died Aug. 16, the house was festooned with orange-and-white bunting. Visitors were offered bowls of sweets bathed in syrup.

"Look at us — do we look like we are in mourning?" said Sunita, Mr. Lodha's daughter-in-law. "We are celebrating, because one of our family members has achieved something great. We were able to know him. That was our good fortune."

Mr. Lodha's fast was significant for another reason: He took the vow on the same day that a high court judge in the state of Rajasthan declared the fast unto death to be a form of suicide, which is illegal under Indian law. When the case is

appealed to the Supreme Court, as expected, it will rank among a handful of instances defining when the state should interfere with religious practice — most memorably, the 1987 act that banned glorification of suttee, an outlawed ritual in which widows climbed onto their husbands' funeral pyres and were burned to death.

This is a thorny constitutional question for India, which enshrines the right to both life and religious practice. Religious rituals are interwoven with everyday life in India, where in certain seasons downtown traffic halts behind convoys of flatbed trucks loaded with papier-mâché goddesses headed for Hindu festivals. Indian leaders, from Gandhi to Narendra Modi, have observed strict fasts, and the Indian government subsidizes a range of spiritual pilgrimages.

After the ruling, some blamed the Indian Penal Code, drafted under the British colonial administration, for its inability to accommodate India's variety of spiritual thought.

"Here, the narrowness of English and incommensurable ideas of death run into a head-on collision," wrote Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a policy analyst and a Jain, in the daily Indian Express. "Just as English often flattens translations from Sanskrit by describing all nine varieties of love as 'love,' so it is with death."

Acts of renunciation are central to many of India's religions, but no group practices it as radically as the Jains, who number around six million. Jains are prominent in Indian business circles — they dominate the diamond industry — but they also occasionally choose to cast it all aside to live as barefoot, wandering monks, renouncing family and business and relying on charity for food. Jain monks are forbidden to touch money, and they are expected to pull their hair out by its roots as a form of penance.

No practice is more demanding than santhara, which was first mentioned in texts written more than 1,500 years ago and derives from a word in the ancient Prakrit language meaning "bed of grass." According to Jain doctrine, the ordeal, which generally must be approved by a guru and the individual's family members, burns up the film of karma that clogs the soul, allowing the spirit to break free from the cycle of rebirth and death.

In 2006, an activist based in Rajasthan named Nikhil Soni filed a court petition arguing that the practice violated the Indian prohibition of suicide. He contended that people were being encouraged to take the vow when they could no longer properly give consent and that the practice, like suttee, was used to free families of the economic burden of caring for the elderly.

"Why is it that only those people who are ill and on the verge of death are opting for santhara?" he told the documentary filmmaker Shekhar Hattangadi. "Is it that it's being imposed on them?"

In cases where the individual does clearly wish to die, supporting the fast amounts to abetting suicide, which is also a crime in India, Madhav Mitra, Mr. Soni's lawyer, said in an interview.

"A person who is at the stage where he wishes personal death — that is the case when he needs more care, more medicines, more nourishing food," Mr. Mitra said. "On the contrary, you stop his food, stop his water, stop medicating him in that situation. Anybody can presume how painful it is."

Jain leaders, who argue that the practice is constitutionally protected, are mobilizing to appeal the decision to the Supreme Court, and they led protest marches across the country on Monday. In the meantime, families are no longer publicizing their relatives' fasts the way they once did, with advertisements in newspapers and posters guiding pilgrims to their homes.

Babulal Jain Ujjwal, who publishes an annual newsletter on Jain affairs from Mumbai, has counted an average of 450 santharas a year over the last six years, but he said that reports had dropped off sharply this spring, perhaps because families were keeping them secret.

"Santharas are happening, there is no doubt about that, but they are happening quietly," he said.

One of those was Prekshabai Mahasatiji's. A nun since the age of 18, she had been asking her guru for permission to fast to death for months, but he had refused, saying that at 52 she was too young. But he changed his mind in June, when after

three sessions of chemotherapy her doctors said they could no longer treat her cancer.

She spent 47 days on a hospital bed inside a monastery, with 23 nuns turning her body to alleviate bedsores and craning her neck to feed her water from a tablespoon. During the last stages, her brother said, she could no longer control her bodily functions, and the nuns mopped her body in the bed.

Crowds amassed around her, spreading stories about a divine glow.

"She had a joy on her face that is indescribable," said her guru, Muni Shri Prakashsundarji Swami. "I would look at her and ask, 'Would you like to eat?' and she would smile and say, 'No.'"

When she died, her body was bound to a plank and propped upright in the posture of prayer, her palms tied together inside a white muslin cloth, and placed in a palanquin, which was carried across town in a swarming parade.

Her brother, Praveen Waghji Gala, said the family had hired a professional photographer to document the progress of her fast, starting the day she left the hospital.

"Thousands and thousands of people came to see her," he said. "We worked through the day and night to make sure that our relatives were able to get access to her. It is a very big honor in our community."

Some 90 miles to the north, Manikchand Lodha was also approaching the end.

Born into a prominent family that runs a group of electronics and technology companies, he had hardly lived as an ascetic. He loved sweet tea and Hindi family melodramas, and as he approached his 90th birthday, he asked his grandson's new wife, Disha, to paint his portrait. Around the same time, a fractured bone left him bedridden, and he wrote a letter to his family with instructions on how to dispose of his body.

With that, slowly, at intervals of two to three months, he abandoned one thing after another: tea, newspapers, telephone conversations, then religious recordings,

said his son, Sumitlal Manikchand Lodha. Once eager to recount his physical ailments, he now seemed not to notice his body at all. Then, his son said, "a time came when he detached from relations," and his communications, even with those dearest to him, shrank to a flicker of a smile.

"He was leaving," his son said. "I was observing it very minutely because I was the caretaker, how he was making his circle smaller and smaller."

By early August, he was unable to swallow food, and the family, which had discouraged him from undertaking santhara when he had suggested it before, called in a holy man. Disha, who in recent weeks had been dripping water into his mouth with a spoon, was brokenhearted.

"There was some difference of opinion," his son said. "There was a basic attachment, just like a doctor cannot operate on his own family."

Within a day, the house was filled with people, first a stream of relatives, by word of mouth, and then throngs of strangers, all invited to eat from a banquet table. An invitation bounced around WhatsApp.

"His face was shining like the sun," said Bikramchand Solanki, a distant relative of Mr. Lodha's wife, who said this was the 40th santhara he had witnessed.

After Mr. Lodha died, the house suddenly emptied, but for a few neighbors and well-wishers who lingered, comparing notes on what had happened. The strangest thing, his son said, was that toward the end, when he touched his father, he felt a small shock — he could not explain it — as if his father's body carried an electric charge.

"Santhara is something that came to him," said Sunita, his daughter-in-law. "It does not come to everyone. He must have done something good that he got such a death."

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