

ACTIVISTS BRING NUMBERS DOWN IN GADHIMAI



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It is a hot dusty road to the temple of goddess Gadhimai in Bara district of Nepal. We slowly leave behind the few semblances of civilization as we crawl along a dirt track to an area of soul-wrenching poverty.

Muzaffarpur in Bihar is the last civilized outpost as we drive from Patna to Roxhaul in India, across the border to Birgunj in Nepal and later to Gadhimai. Bihari villagers are dragging little male buffalo calves - the unwanted waste of the dairy industry - and goats, or carrying lambs in their arms, all to be sacrificed to Gadhimai.

I spend a night at the RS Hotel in Roxhaul, where Dawn William and volunteers of the Blue Cross of India have been camping every night, while they fan out 100 km east and west of Roxhaul from 4 am every day to stop the smuggling of animals across the border.

Next day I shift to Hotel Makalu at Birgunj, where an ad film glorifying Gadhimai and the slaughter is broadcast round-the-clock. It shows people saying how happy they are to perform the sacrifice. Apparently the goddess appeared in the dream of the (present) priest's ancestor and freed him from his captivity in jail. In return, she asked for a "nar-bali" or sacrifice of five men. He sac-



The world's largest animal sacrifice at the Gadhimai Temple in Nepal has raised controversy due to the large number of animals killed over two days. — AFP

rificed five animals instead: rat, pigeon, chicken, goat and buffalo, and she was appeased. Now the priest kills one of each and cuts his finger slightly, to give human blood, and leaves the rest to his minions because "his arm aches after all the cutting".

As we approach Gadhimai, the atmosphere changes. There is a mela going on, a one-month long celebration before the ritual slaughter.

Along with the giant wheel and motor car stunts, we go back 500 years: a child with a monster's head and deformed body exhibited for viewing and collecting money; snake charmers; scorpions for sale (as an aphrodisiac). The path is strewn with writhing lepers. I have not seen such sights since I was a child.

The place is filthy; there are no toilets and the air stinks of faeces. One has to be a monster to remain unaffected.

There is a large arena, like a stadium, where the buffalo calves are

thrown in to await their death. There is a stack of hay and some water, but these animals are still suckling babes.

The temple is crowded, but I sit beside the priest whom I met in Jaipur when I tried - in vain - to convince him to stop the sacrifice. "Look at the crowds", he says "Will they let me stop?" He is right. They are all excited and revved up at the thought of the slaughter to come. It is a malaise that runs deep. The crowd is already about 200,000 strong, and the highlight - the slaughter - has not yet begun.

The visitors are Nepalese and Biharis - no difference between the two who speak Bhojpuri and share the sacrifice.

The Gadhimai sacrifice is big business. The contractor has paid Rs 1.6 crore to the committee, of which the priest receives Rs 16 lakh. The rest is divided between the trustees, except the secretary who is a cousin of the contractor and gets a large share. In return the contractor

gets everything: the hundi offerings (of money, gold, etc.), buffalo skins, flesh (to be sold as meat), etc.

To slaughter one buffalo costs Rs 1600, which is paid to the contractor. There are cold storage trucks waiting to transport the flesh to China for food. The skins come to China and India for footwear and handbags. There are no takers for the goat flesh, which the villagers take home to cook and eat.

Some of the visitors look into the arena. "Too few animals," says one. "Is saal achchaa nahin hai!"

After a fruitless discussion with the priest, I prepare to leave. The only hope is that he agrees to work with us after the sacrifice to see what can be done five years hence. He is angry with Bharat Sarkar for stopping the entry of animals into Nepal. But he knows the world is angry.

This is not Hinduism, which taught the world Ahimsa Paramo Dharmah.

On Thursday is the "kshama pooja", when they ask for forgiveness from the animals slaughtered and to be slaughtered. So they know it is wrong.

While the activists assembled at Gadhimai could not stop the slaughter, they have been able to reduce the numbers, thanks to a proactive Indian Supreme Court and Home Ministry. So there is hope for the future.

(The writer is a renowned environmentalist and animal activist)