

## Ajmer Urs not far, but Nizamuddin shrine hardly festive

The dargah of Sufi saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya here is caught in the throes of an intense cold war that has even rubbed off on the festive spirit of the Urs at the Ajmer-e-Sharif in Rajasthan.

The 'pirzadas', or traditional caretakers, at the Nizamuddin shrine, and the Delhi Wakf Board - the legal body entrusted with the responsibility of managing Muslim properties - are locked in a battle of nerves.

The tussle is reflected in the lacklustre preparations there for pilgrims of the Ajmer Urs, an annual religious celebration dedicated to Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, at his shrine from July 6 to 11.

On their way to Ajmer, nearly 500,000 pilgrims will pray at the Nizamuddin shrine and in the neighbouring mausoleum of Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki.

The priests at Nizamuddin usually organise mass kitchens for the pilgrims and even allow the poor ones to camp inside the shrine.

'But we don't have anything special in mind for the Ajmer pilgrims this year,' head priest Farooq Nizami, looking rather subdued, told IANS.

Nizami fears that the Wakf Board might introduce an entry fee to the shrine and 'take away the essence of spirituality that surrounds the place'.

'It will become just another heritage property if the government has its way. It might become inaccessible to the poor because here we do not discriminate between the rich and the poor; the prime minister of the country and a beggar are treated alike out here.'

The 13th century shrine is one of the leading centres of Sufi music and culture. It comprises a cluster of tombs, including the mausoleums of Amir Khusro and Mirza Ghalib, ramshackle jerry-homes and an old Muslim bazaar in the complex.

The Delhi High Court handed over the management of the shrine to the Wakf Board in 2006 following a petition by a Muslim lawyer alleging misuse of funds at the shrine.

Nearly 400 families of the pirzadas reside around the shrine. They claim to have descended from the Sufi saint. As the Wakf Board tightens control, the pirzadas are reluctant to relinquish the reins of the shrine.

'There has been no interference since 1947. This is the first time the government is having its say,' said Nizami, who traces his lineage to Hazrat Nizamuddin's sister.

The Wakf Board on its part has ambitious plans to make the shrine a major spiritual tourism attraction.

'We plan to clean up the place, remove the encroachment along the approach roads and beautify the landscape inside the premises of the shrine like the way we are sprucing up the shrine at

Mehrauli,' said S.M. Ali, the chief operating officer of the Wakf Board.

Notices have been served on the inmates of the Mehrauli shrine complex to clear the encroachment and illegal structures in the dargah area.

Ali has sought a status report from the Nizamuddin committee on the state of affairs before 'preparing a makeover blueprint. I expect the status report in a month and begin work by the end of this year.

'The pirzadas have been administering the shrine for 700 years, how can you do away with their hold overnight?' Ali said. Beautification and landscaping of the dargah top his priority list.

According to sources in the shrine and in the board, the cold war centres on money.

The Wakf Board still feels some part of the donations - the smaller offerings - are misappropriated by the 'residents' of the shrine while the pirzadas argue that the takeover would lead to commercialisation of faith.

According to a rough estimate by the pirzadas, the shrine earns between Rs.1 million and Rs.500,000 annually on an average by way of donations. The earnings have been going up over the last five years because of the increase in the number of visitors to the shrine.

'Even five years ago, the average footfall per day was around 8,000. But today we draw around 25,000 to 30,000 visitors on Thursday and around 15,000 on Sundays. Nearly 70 percent of the visitors are foreigners,' said Nizami.

One of the major attractions of the shrine, whose air is redolent with the scent of roses throughout the day, is its daily three-hour 'qawaali' recital in the evening.

But now an air of gloom hangs at the Nizamuddin dargah, where the army of caretakers and clerics is going about their everyday rituals with a sense of resignation.

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