

SPIRIT

PRECIOUS STONE

One man's traffic barrier is another's sacred relic—just ask San Francisco guru Baba Kali Das

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE STONE, A behemoth, bullet-shaped traffic barrier that in 1989 was dumped, unwanted, in a secluded glen in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. There it might have remained, obscure and unremarked—stonelike, in fact—but for the attentions of Baba Kali Das, 60, a self-described New Age Hindu guru and artist. To Baba, who also answers to Michael Bowen, the 4½-foot-high granite slab looked less like trash than like treasure: a Shiva lingam, or sacred phallic symbol that represents the Hindu god Shiva. "Even if this was a traffic barrier, I never saw it stop a car," says Baba, formerly a '60s hippie leader. "I found it in the woods, right where a Shiva lingam should be."

Baba led dozens of devotees in daily worship at the stone, which they credited with magical powers. "It's a healing rock," says Rama, 40, one of a few Baba followers who live in his ashram-studio home near the park (and who help pay the rent). "I used to go through bouts of depression. I'm a very happy person now." As the stone's fame increased, drawing pilgrims bearing candles, so did the problem it posed for the parks de-

partment. Citing the onetime barrier as a fire and crowd-control hazard, as well as a potential source of church-and-state conflict, the department last year ordered the rock removed. Baba fought back in court. The dispute was resolved last January when the city rolled the stone over to him, depositing it in the garage that serves as his temple.

There the stone sat, quietly pulsing with karma. Then, in October, Baba ran a newspaper ad proclaiming, "The magic has worked for me, now it can work for you"—and offering to sell the stone for \$30,000. While not disputing Baba's claims for the rock—it did, after all, bring Baba his latest love, and wife, Italian pilgrim Isabella Paoli, 21—parks commissioner Jack Immendorf had a problem with the price tag. "I thought the guy was genuinely religious," he said. "Now I find out that he's out to make a profit."

Stung by the criticism, Baba, who initially said he needed money to relocate his ashram to Italy, now has an alternative plan. Either the city takes the stone back into the park, he says, "or we'll break it up into 10,000 pieces and sell them for \$5 each, or even give them away free." That way, everybody gets a piece of the rock. ■



August 1, 1995

As of this date, Swami Vandana Jyothi of the Shasta Center of Universal Peace acquired the stone. She moved it to its present location in Mount Shasta where it now sits in a small shrine and is worshiped daily by locals and visitors from around the world.

This is the first religious icon in the custody of the Shasta CUP. It will be installed at the 154-acre site. Refer to "Hindu Icon" article from the *Mt. Shasta Herald* and "The Shasta Center of Universal Peace" article from *Directions*.