

# Shrine Devotees Go to Court

Park says no to holy rock, so group goes to higher authority

By Phillip Matler  
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Officials at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park have spoken — the world-famous traffic barrier turned religious shrine has got to go.

Or does it?

Devotees of the four-foot-tall solid granite rock are headed to federal court this week in an effort to keep the "Shiva Linga" just where it is — right behind the Japanese Tea Garden.

The brewing court battle was triggered by a recent meeting among Recreation and Park Director **Mary Burns, V. J. Patel, and Baba Kali Dass**, one of the linga's earliest devotees.

"We asked her what she want-

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ed to do with the stone, and her response was: 'I want it out of there,'" says Kali Dass.

Kali Dass' initial reaction was to ask Burns to give his group the stone, but then he had second thoughts.

"What's the harm? This wasn't built by any one group. It just evolved very naturally as a place where Hindus, New Age

Hindus, Christians — even atheists — can come to meditate and find some peace.

"Isn't that what parks are for?" Kali Dass said Friday as he sat before the stone.

Upshot: Kali Dass and his attorney, **Richard Critchlow**, will go to federal court to ask for an injunction.

"All we want is for it to be left alone," Kali Dass said.

Such is the latest twist in a story that began years ago when a city worker dumped the carved stone traffic barrier in Golden Gate Park.

Eventually, the bullet-shaped rock was adopted as a New Age Hindu shrine that has drawn pilgrims from as far away as India.

For years, park officials either

didn't know — or pretended not to know — of the shrine's existence.

Things got sticky when the rock's devotees asked for permission to build a permanent shrine over it — further raising the issue

of separation of church and state.

Kali Dass and others say the rock is what you make it. To some people it's a rock, to others it's a manifestation of the god Shiva. But in any case, there are plenty

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of other religious images in the park — among them, the Buddha in the Tea Garden.

Whatever the case, you can bet the rock's future is not set in stone.

# New Age Shrine Moved From Park

S.F. gives 'Shiva' to worshiper

By Phillip Matler and Andrew Ross  
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Golden Gate Park's world-famous traffic barrier-turned-religious shrine is gone.

In its place, devotees and curiosity seekers found this note: "The

Shiva Linga has been removed for temple protection — call Kali Das at 560-4002."

We called, and here's the

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story:

Thanks to a spur-of-the-moment agreement between park officials and devotees, the four-foot-tall "Shiva Linga" has a new home — in a Sunset District studio, of all places.

It's the latest twist in an "only in San Francisco" spiritual journey that began a couple of years back when a city crane operator dumped a no-longer-needed traffic barrier into a little glen behind

the Japanese Tea Garden.

Apparently, the shape of the stone and its tranquil setting under tall trees corresponded to descriptions of the sacred manifestations of the Hindu god Shiva.

The barrier caught the eye of some local New Agers, and it developed into a religious shrine, drawing pilgrims from as far away as India to worship before its phallic form.

Eventually, city officials said enough is enough. Citing the need for separation of church and state, they ordered the rock to roll, A.S.A.P.

But Linga devotees such as

New Age Hindu **Kali Das** wanted the bullet-shaped stone to stay. They filed a federal lawsuit and vowed to fight the city to the holy end.

Then Kali Das got a \$14,000 legal bill.

It became clear that a lot of money was going to be spent by both sides, and that even if the rock stayed, it wouldn't be as a shrine.

Plus, there was a new and un-

expected problem.

Crazies and panhandlers have started popping up at the site, alternately threatening devotees and stealing the coins that they leave as offerings.

"One guy even came after me with a sword," Kali Das said.

Hence, when Recreation and Park Commission President **Jack Immendorf** offered to give Kali Das the rock last week, he accepted.

The next day, the same city worker who dropped the stone off in the park four years ago cranked up his crane and moved it over to Das' studio in the Sunset, where it now sits in all its glory.

Meanwhile, back at the park, the ever-inventive panhandlers have erected an imitation Linga in the hopes of keeping the spare change coming.