Parsis shift sacred fire for temple renovation

75th anniversary of Dadar temple

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GIVING the Rustom Faramna Agiary in Dadar Parsi Colony a facelift for its 75th anniversary on March 27 was more complicated than one might suppose.

Apart from the fact that the fire temple is one of the busiest in the world, non-believers are not allowed into the sanctum sanctorum, where the sacred fire is housed. And finding a crew of Parsi masons to repair the inner sanctum was next to impossible.

"Certainly, about 150 years ago, there were Parsi masons and carpenters who could have repaired the sanctum sanctorum of a fire temple. That was not the case for this renovation," says Zoroastrian scholar Khojeste Mistree.

The solution lay in an elaborate set of rituals to move the sacred fire to another room and allow a group of non-Zoroastrian masons and carpenters to spruce up the sanctum sanctorum (Gumbaj).

Ervad Faredon Kutar, a priest at the Dadar temple, said: It was decided to shift the sacred fire to a ritual room while the sanctum sanctorum was being renovated. The shifting of the sacred fire and objects of worship was done at midnight, when there are few people around.

The ritual room, where the sacred fire was moved to, was cordoned off. The sanctum sanctorum was de-consecrated before repairs began.

The sacred fire was returned to its sanctum after repairs ended.

The elaborate process for the repairs ended on Saturday, when the sacred fire once more burned in the sanctum sanctorum.

Nearly 800 worshippers visit the temple on an average every day. Around Rs 35 lakh was spent renovating the temple's exteriors, changing its electrical wiring and changing the marble in the inner sanctum. Most of the funds came from a young businessman, Jimmy Mistry.

The Dadar temple was built by philanthropist Rustom Faramna, a hotelier from Agra. When he moved to Mumbai, he found that the largest housing colony for his community did not have a place of worship. So he purchased land to build a fire temple.

After his death, the management of the temple passed to his brother-in-law, whose descendant, Rusi Jussawalla, is now the managing trustee.

Jussawalla said, "With the community getting smaller, we want youngsters to be acquainted with their history."

The fire temple also maintains an exhaustive record of community members who have lived in Parsi Colony since its establishment in the 1920s. "It is like the records maintained by a Christian church. All births and deaths are recorded here. So worshippers can come and trace their ancestors, who first lived here," says M Fitter, whose great grandfather moved into the colony in 1949.