

# India may lay death-diet

## ritual to rest

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DELHI

AGED 71, Kalyan Gangwal is healthy, has a happy family and still works long days as a leading cardiologist. But he has already planned how he will end his life: by starving himself to death in a remote cave in western India.

As a devotee of India's austere Jain religion, which preaches non-violence and strict self-control, Gangwal wants to die, like his father before him, in an act of *santhara*, a systematic starvation ritual that followers believe will free them from endless reincarnation and lead to salvation.

But Gangwal's plans, carefully laid out in his will, could be thwarted after a high court

judge in the northern state of Rajasthan this month declared fasting to death a form of suicide, which is illegal under Indian law.

The ruling was based on a case brought by a lawyer and human rights activist, Nikhil Soni, who feared that the elderly could be coerced into *santhara* by relatives who saw them as a financial burden.

Last week, thousands of members of India's 6m Jains protested against the suicide ruling on the streets of several big cities. A group representing the religion has challenged the ruling in the supreme court, in an echo of the debate over euthanasia in many western countries.

The case could be as significant as the 1988 law that banned the aiding and abetting

of *sati*, the traditional Indian ritual according to which widows were expected to burn themselves to death on their husbands' funeral pyres.

"It's an encroachment on our constitutional rights," said Gangwal. "For people who take the *santhara*, it is a voluntary decision. They die very peacefully and with dignity."

Devout followers of Jainism, which dates back to the 6th century BC, follow strict rules that include wearing masks over their mouths to avoid harming microbes or insects by inhaling them. They also believe they can choose to die if they are terminally ill, very old, or if there is a famine — but only after taking permission from a *sadhu*, or priest.

Gangwal was inspired by the "beautiful death" of his father,

who decided at 82 that he would "leave his body" 12 years later.

"He was very healthy," said Gangwal. "The decision was taken only because he found he was not able to do religious rituals like he used to. He said



Gangwal: plans to starve himself so he can 'die with dignity'

'I'm slowly going down, let me decide to leave slowly.'

His father first gave up the thing he loved most: rice. Sweets, butter and salt followed, and as the end approached, he took only milk

and water once a day. He slept on the floor without a mattress, donated all his money to the poor, and owned just three shirts.

When he chose to die on the auspicious day of Gudi Padwa, the Maharashtrian new year, in March 1996, the whole family gathered in their ancestral village home and prayed.

"Chanting an important Jain mantra, he closed his eyes with a very calm expression on his face, no agony. It was as if he was going on a new voyage," said Gangwal.

Gangwal has not yet decided the precise timing of his own death but has already begun to restrict his diet. A strict vegetarian, he has renounced onions and garlic and eats only once a day. Water is forbidden after sunset.

When the time comes, Gangwal has asked his children to take him to Gajpantha, a holy Jain temple cave, to breathe his last.

"A large number of *sadhus* have left their bodies in this cave in a similar fashion. I would never like to die in a hospital," he said. "Everyone has the right to live and die with dignity."

Others outside the Jain community, however, have decried *santhara* as a "social evil" rather than a spiritual rite of passage. In 2006, Soni tried in vain to intervene to save the life of Bimla Devi, a 60-year-old woman suffering from terminal cancer.

Her cries for food and water as she died were allegedly drowned out by the loud singing of her relatives. Soni

was unable to help Devi, but launched a petition at the Rajasthan high court to declare *santhara* an act of suicide that could be prosecuted.

Almost a decade later, his wish has been granted, and anyone who encourages the ritual can be charged with abetting it. Soni, who was unavailable for interview, was denounced by Jains in court documents as a "busybody" and "meddlesome interloper".

Aanike Mangmati Mataji, a priestess at Delhi's main Jain temple, takes a more charitable view.

"The judge should have consulted religious leaders," said Mataji, 61, whose head is bald after she ritually plucked out her hair. "Life is God-given. Death is inevitable."

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