

[Babaji's Cave](#)

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In July/August last year, sixty pilgrims, mostly Westerners, accompanied their guru, Sant Keshavadas, to the cave of Babaji, the legendary deathless yoga master, one of eight Hindu saints who, they say, will never die. This trek was part of a 23- day pilgrimage to sacred shrines of the Himalayas. One of the pilgrims, a journalist, scribed these glimpses of their exhilarating experience.

By Peter A. Geniesse, Wisconsin

Indira Champaneri grabbed my arm. She was blinded by the night and the deluge and was terrified of falling off the mountain. "I can't see," she cried. Her thick glasses had fogged. Suddenly, she stumbled and fell, sliding on her back down the steep, muddy slope, coming to rest at the base of an old stump. She was trembling as I helped her to her feet and pledged to be her guide. I held a tiny flashlight in my mouth and firmly grasped her hands.

She's a Hindu, a 56-year-old widow, an Indian born in apartheid South Africa who now lives in Sunnyvale, California. She had to climb to the cave of the Babaji. After all, he had appeared to her only days before near the sacred temple of Badrinath high in the Himalayas. "He came as a beggar and gazed into my eyes," she confided.

She had lingered in meditation in the cave. When she came out, the rain was driving down in sheets, night had fallen, and the pilgrims had scattered. Slowly, we took tiny steps in the red mud and rocky, pooled paths. She trembled with each slip. I, too, was lost, but I repeatedly assured her that we would soon make it back to safety-together. At last we reached a familiar trail that led to the buses.

Joanne Franks, 45, is a California businesswoman, a Catholic University of America graduate and a devotee of a Hindu guru. She'll never forget the last time she was here, a half-dozen years ago, when she and two friends were lost in the dark on a craggy mountain in the Himalayas. They had a taste of terror. And of ecstasy. They had trekked about five miles through the rice terraces, up the stands of tall pines and along overgrown paths with jagged rocks. They forded rushing streams, and were besieged by leeches in the marsh grass. They took stutter steps and grabbed saplings to guide their way 3,000 feet up the precipitous slope of Nanda Devi, the Hindu's sacred mountain. They knew that one slip would mean broken bones-or worse. That day, they made it to the cave. And as they were moved to meditate on the mystery, darkness fell, rains came and their flashlights failed. They were frightened. Their other companions were miles away. They stumbled, slogged and slid through the mud and stopped beneath a giant pine, not knowing where to turn. Suddenly, out of nowhere, they saw an old man with a long white beard carrying a flaming torch. He clasped Joanne's hand and without voicing a word, gently guided them for about 20 minutes onto a familiar path leading to safety. Just as suddenly, he disappeared.

Janaki entered the dank cave, a rough-hewn 8'-by-8' room, with a few other pilgrims. She began meditating and started to sob uncontrollably as she experienced the presence of the Babaji. Others related mystic visions. Some tried to photograph apparitions on the cave wall.

Keshavadas meditated in the cave with all of us. Afterwards, we began our treacherous descent as twilight was fading and the drizzle swelled into a monsoon downpour. Lightning flashed, illuminating the primitive path. In small groups, we slid down the slopes, grasping branches, rocks and each other to break our fall. Tiny flashlights flickered as we guided one another across cascading streams. It was 9pm and the headcount at the buses revealed 15 people missing. A score of volunteers searched the maze of trails for the stragglers and the lost. Hours later, the last pilgrims emerged from the darkness, drenched and covered with mud and leeches.

Babaji and Sant Keshavadas

Personal accounts of the Babaji go back to the mid-1800s. They speak of a holy man of the Himalayas who leaves no footprints and casts no shadow. Legend says that hundreds of years ago he had retreated to a cave near the foot of Nanda Devi,

the mountain that peaks at more than 25,000 feet, where he attained enlightenment.

Babaji has been seen and sensed by many through the centuries. In 1966, at the Kumbha Mela at Allahabad, Babaji appeared to Keshavadas as a tall, naked man. Keshavadas vividly recalls, "When I recognized him, he loudly commanded, 'What are you doing here. You have a big job to do in the West. Go west and spread universal love and peace.'" That was the beginning of the mission that would take him around the world countless times over the past three decades, though he had dedicated his life to the Spirit at a young age.

When Keshavadas was an 11-year-old boy tending cattle in the southern Indian countryside, he had a mystical "white light" experience that changed his life. He heard a voice say, "Sing my name throughout the world." He became the singing saint and roamed the world, establishing centers in Europe, the Temple of Cosmic Religion in the USA and Gayatri University and Bhagavadgita Temple in Bangalore. "I don't consider myself an orthodox Hindu," he explains. "My idea was not to teach Hinduism, but to preach universal love and peace." Pilgrimage has been central in his life. "A pilgrimage is beautiful. You can offer up at a holy place your sins, karma and anger and go back light-hearted."

Editor's note: Hinduism Today's backpage is full of color (some say too full) and typically consists of photo essays (like the story above and the two stories below). In case you feel you get it all with our electronic edition and there's no need to subscribe, know that's not true.