Meet the Real Sadhus of Rishikesh
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It's sunrise in Rishikesh, and hundreds of sadhus emerge from their ashrams and huts into the crisp air for their early morning bath in the cold, rushing Ganga. This small North Indian town at the gateway to the Himalayas and on the banks of Hinduism's most sacred river is famous throughout the world as an enclave of illustrious saints and sages. Hundreds of prestigious ashrams and dharmasalas dot the river valley. But nearby, ensconced along the edge of the nearly impenetrable pine forests and rugged terrain, live a myriad of virtually unknown sadhus and saints in nondescript kutias,cottages. One group is located across the river between the Ramjhula and Lakshmanjhula bridges, others lie further into the unchartered Himalayan foothills. These sadhus are fully occupied with contemplation, meditation and a life full of religious practices designed to keep the senses under control. They have no desire to meet people coming to Rishikesh as tourists, but do not mind meeting seekers of truth who come to learn about our ancient religion and culture.

At the request of Hinduism Today, I spent several days visiting these sadhus hosted by Swami Chidanand Saraswati (Muniji) of Parmarth Niketan. One of his sadhaka, Jai Shanker, accompanied me on my visit to this Himalayan Shangri-la. Ninety rough-hewn cottages are strewn among the hills on nearly 200 acres of land owned by the Shri Swargashram Trust, established in 1908 by Baba Kali Kamli Wale Swami Vishudhanand Ji. According to the trust's deputy manager, Ravi Sharma, control of the trust came into the hands of industrialists Jai Dayal Goenka, Jugal Kishore Birla and Padam Pat Singhania in 1938. Baba's original aim was simply to provide food for the mendicants. Now the trust has expanded to include the 90 free cottages (mostly limited to sadhus over 60), a free kitchen where meals are provided twice a day, 2,000 rooms for pilgrims (at Rs. 60/day), a free dharmasala resthouse and a tree plantation. Sadhus must make an application when a cottage becomes available, and only one person is permitted to stay in a cottage. There is a kotwal,a kind of police officer, of sadhus who knows who is who and sees to it that

meals are distributed in an orderly fashion. "There are no plans to expand the facilities," Sharma told me, "We want to extend the best possible care to these 90 sadhus only." Now let's meet some of these sadhus staying at Swargashram trust.

At 30, Brahmachari Shatrughanandais one of the youngest sadhus staying in the trust cottages. He has been here for the last four years. An interesting and articulate person, he gives a good overview of the ashram setup, as well a sense of the issues facing sadhus:

"My guru was Swami Sarvananda Giri, popularly known as Radhey Shyam Baba. He was considered to be one of the top saints of this area. He left his body just eight months back. Our path is the path of devotion. This path does not have any obstacles. Where God is remembered, there are no worldly problems. However, the environment in which you live certainly has an important role to play. I very rarely go outside this cottage. For months I do not go to Ramjhula bridge which is a few hundred yards from here. I get up around 2.30 am. My guru used to get up at 1:00 am and be at his meditation seat by 2:00 am. Originally he meditated for up to 12 hours a day; at age 90 he was still doing seven hours. When I was at his service for three years, I virtually did not sleep at all. After Baba left this world, I slept at a stretch for two months just to catch up.

"Sainthood cannot be attained just by reading books. What matters in a sadhu's life and progress is the grace of the guru. Sainthood is an art which you can learn from a spiritually evolved guru. My guru knew the past, present and future. When he saw that I am to get some pain in the future, he would himself raise the level of his consciousness and correct the fault in advance so that the future problem did not come at all. Whether it was a small thing he said or a big thing, whatever he said would always come true.

"These days I get up at 2:30 am and have my bath around 5:00 am. The scriptures say, `When the entire world sleeps, the one who contemplates or is a sadhu is awake doing his tapas and sadhana. And when the world is awake, he relaxes.' It is not that I do not skip. I do skip my for days together, but when this happens I feel guilty about it also.

"These days allegations are being leveled against sadhus that they lead a

luxurious life. I think this criticism of some swamis and sadhus is quite valid. I feel such people are not from very good backgrounds in their lives and are attracted to material things even if they have become sadhus. But if your family background has been sound, and your guru also teaches you that sainthood is for sacrifice, you will not get attracted to worldly things. If the guru inculcates in you the spirit of sacrifice, how can you become materialistic? But when generation after generation of sadhus is busy in managing big empires in the shape of ashrams, the life style is bound to become luxurious. After all, your mind cannot be used both for worldly and spiritual things at the same time. Now if you decide that you have to set up an ashram, what would you do? The time that you spend on managing the construction of the ashram will be at the cost of your spiritual pursuits. A sadhu should have no desire. But when you construct an ashram, you do it at the cost of your spiritual activities and you also get attracted to it. Now this attachment is the root cause of your becoming worldly and materialistic.

"I have done M.A. in Hindi from the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, Vrindavan. Today the sadhu community needs educated sadhus. The reasons for the downfall of the sadhu samaj are that one, people of all castes have become sadhus. Second, many who became sadhus were illiterate. In fact, sannyas was earlier given only to brahmins. A brahmin has an inborn tendency of sacrifice and non-attachment. In becoming a sadhu, you have to sacrifice everything. Whatever material things you accumulate, your mind will get engrossed in those very things. The sadhus must avoid the tendency to accumulate and inculcate a feeling of sacrifice, kindness in the heart and that the whole world is one.

"We have a large number of disciples coming to us. Baba had twelve thousand disciples. We never ask them to give us even a paisa or donate anything. Our job is done mostly without our uttering a word from our mouth. This is what sainthood is. If one has to use one's mouth for donations, then your sainthood probably lacks something. It is not complete. You have not gained adequate powers. In essence, the blessings of guru are not there on you. A sadhu's work gets done automatically. The food is always there ahead of time. All other things are also available to them without asking. God's promise to His devotee is that He will take care of all his needs without asking.

"A group of cottages is called an ashram. An ashram is a place where you are invited to do labor. Aameans `come' and shrammeans `labor.' therefore it means `come and do labor.' Each cottage has its own individual daily routine and different way of doing meditation. There is no one way. For instance, our cottage is a mini Brij Dham and we worship Radhey Shyam. The next cottage is full of Vedanta

knowledge and only Vedanta is discussed there. There could be sadhus who would be businessmen as well. You see the sadhu community is so liberal that it can accommodate all kinds of people. Most of the sadhus living here are old, and they live here with a feeling that it is the fag end of their lives and they must lead a pious life.

"Though no new cottages are being constructed here, there are certain exceptions. For instance, a cottage has been constructed by Swami Garib Das, a sadhu who is known to be the brother of the chief minister of Rajasthan, Sri Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. After all, Swargashram Trust has a manager and trustees, so pressures can be applied on them. The present situation is that sadhus are becoming less important here and trusts are being dominated by businessmen. All the material and donations that these trusts get are in the name of sadhus. Now it depends on the honesty of the people who are managing as to how much really goes to the sadhus."

Baba Shiv Ramdasis quite old, but he does not know his age. He looks frail, but says he is physically fit and can run for a few miles. A few disciples are there in his somewhat rundown cottage cooking food and serving tea. Smoke from the fire makes it rather difficult for me to talk, but Baba and the others are at ease and in a happy mood.

"I am a fool. I have never been to a school or college. The only thing I have learnt is to recite God's name. God is my teacher. Whatever I know, He has taught me directly. What He has taught me is what I share with people. I just know how to lecture, and in that also, I say things that may be correct and others that may be incorrect. For me remembering God is my main job. In fact, it is the job of every human being. But it is sad the man of today has forgotten God and is busy in money-making and politics.

"Lately I have reduced my intake of food to the bare minimum. Now most of the time I am neither sleeping nor awake. I sometimes get up at 1:00 am, sometimes at 2:00 am. Four or five hours of sleep is enough for me.

"I had been to many places before coming and settling here. I lived in Gangotri and Jwalapurei, Nepal. I have been a wanderer all throughout. I took inspiration for

sannyas from Lord Shankar. My mantra is Ram mantra. I was frustrated and tired of this sadhu life many times, but Lord Shankar always gave me the strength to go ahead. I feel one should never lose patience or be pessimistic in life. My health is fine. Even at this age I can run ten to twenty miles. It is all with the grace of Lord Shankar. My conclusion about life is that ultimately what matters is God's name. This is the only wealth that goes with you when you leave this world."

Balyogi Narayan Swamiis the only saint who has facilities such as a refrigerator in his cottage. By the sale of solidified mercury Siva Lingams he has created an endowment of Rs. 350,000 which produces a monthly income of Rs. 3,000, sufficient to meet all his personal expenses including food. He does not accept donations.

"I am the oldest sadhu living in this area. When I came here, two cottages could be constructed by spending just Rs. 100, however the construction was purely temporary. Before coming to this cottage, I stayed for 36 years in a mountain cave. I heard the story of Bhakta Dhruva from my uncle and was so moved that I decided to become a sadhu at the age of eight. My guru was Baba Sewadas who merged in God many years back. I belong to Udasin Sampradaya. For eleven years of my life I survived on the juice of leaves.

"I do not have any fixed timings for things in my life. When I am sleepy, I sleep. When I am hungry, I eat. Sometimes I am awake throughout the night. There is no fixed time for meditation. However, if I sleep at 3:00 am, I get up at 7:00 am. Four hours is enough for me.

"For the last few years I have not accepted the Swargashram Trust food. Actually, what happened was that some years back when I went to collect my food, I saw a fight going on between some sadhus who were in the queue for food. I also heard some people passing sarcastic remarks that sadhus were having free food, and that they were a liability on the society. After that day, I never went to the free kitchen for my meals. I started to make Siva Lingams of solidified mercury. People bought them from me. Now whatever you see here today including the refrigerator is bought from my hard earned money.

"Though I am a devotee of Lord Krishna, I feel all Gods are one. God is actually like

water, He takes the shape in which you remember him. All living beings are nothing else but the manifestation of God. I have never been to a school. But God has been kind to me. After all, I left my home for God realization. He is bound to take care of me. You see I am an illiterate person. I have no power and brain, but today I am living in a dignified position and I am self-sufficient economically. I feel this is all due to His grace. I am very happy with the way things are. The only aim of my life is to leave this body while remembering God."

Swami Amardasof Udasin Sampradaya has been living in a cottage for 18 years. He was quite reluctant to speak about himself. He became a sadhu 35 years back.

"Getting up at 4:00 am is the rule for all sadhus. This time is called Brahma Mahurta.It is the time I use for doing meditation and prayer. I do not want to make any disciples or have assistants. I cannot allow anyone to stay here with me because the rules do not permit it. Visitors are not many, but people come now and then. I do not hate anybody and love everyone who comes in touch with me. All my spare time goes in reading holy scriptures like Ramayanaand Gita.My conclusion of life is that the world has originated from one point or source, and therefore there is no point in saying bad about anyone. Even plants, birds and animals are His creations."

Swami Govind Swarup Pakodiwalalives in an unauthorized cottage on Trust land right on the banks of the Ganga. As it is unofficial, Swamiji has no water or electrical connections. Life is obviously quite tough for an old person like him.

"My cottage does not belong to the trust. Such a cottage is not allowed, but because I have been here for a long time, I use this small piece of land for living. Previously it was in good shape, but the trust people came and demolished it. They wanted me to pay Rs.50,000. Now I am a poor man, how could I give them so much money? Even for my food I have to beg.

"I am from Vaishnava Sampradaya. On my forehead there is a line which indicates that I will be a sadhu. You have no right to ask me about my education and meditation, etc. I have so much secret knowledge about spiritual matters, but why should I tell you about that?

"My message to people is to please understand why God has given you this body. Only when you understand this will good things happen in your life. You will not get any benefit just by talking superficially. The glory and glow of this world that your eyes see is nothing but a shadow. When a fire will burn in your heart to see God then only you will realize that God is everything, and all else is false. Only God is above maya. While you are attached to your body, you will not be able to understand anything, as the body is also maya. Finally, we must do something extremely good before we leave this world."

Swami Guru Sharan Mishrais 55. He said, "Out of twenty-four hours, I spend sixteen doing puja to God. I am a devotee of Lord Hanuman. I am from Vaishnava Sampradaya. I do not attach much importance to who belongs to which sampradaya. What is important is how much time you devote in remembering God. I have no time to meet people as I am happy with what I am doing. Many people come to me, but are not able to meet me as I am busy for hours together in bhajans and meditation. Moreover, I do all my work myself. There is nobody to assist me. For years I have not eaten food grains. I take some fruit and a glass of cow milk, that also once in 24 hours. Beside that, I take Ganga water which is so powerful that you can just live on it for days together. All the five elements of your body are available in Ganga water, so it is a complete meal in itself.

"Through your paper I would like to convey a message to your readers. That is that all the Hindus all over the world should be proud of their ancient religion and rich civilization. We should be proud of our mother tongue Hindi. Your Hindi edition should also be widely circulated all over the world. We should not be too much influenced by the West and should try to gain knowledge about Vedasand other holy scriptures."

Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Atam Prakashis the founder of the Vishwa Manav Satsang Parishad. "We have a small ashram here. It is not in the Swargashram Trust area. We have 111 branches all over India and in Nepal. Our chief aim is to inspire human beings to have good thoughts, leading to good actions and finally spreading good feelings for the fellow human beings all over the world.

"Our various branches keep doing social service of the people. We try to provide food to the hungry and other things to those who are needy. We also inspire them to go through our holy scriptures. I myself travel to these branches eight months in a year. The rest of the four months are spent in teaching Gitaand Ramayanato

devotees who come to our Rishikesh ashram."

Tatwala Babatold me, "I am spending my time mostly going through holy scriptures. I go on doing my reading work till late at night, but I have no problem in getting up. I lost my hand when I was very small, but God has been so kind to me that I can do everything with one hand. He has given me so much physical power. I take food just once in a day, and I am very contented with my life here. To all those who come to me I just say one thing, that happiness is inside you, so therefore do not waste your time looking for happiness in the outside world."

Swami Hansa Nand Ji Saraswati. said, "I am in this area for the last fifty years, in a cottage for the last 15. My aim in life is to propagate the teachings of Vedanta. I give lectures on Vedanta in my own cottage, and I am also invited elsewhere in prominent ashrams to speak. Vedanta says that you are not this body, but you are pure self, pure consciousness. We must turn inward if we want to be blissful and happy. When you listen to good things you get good thoughts. Therefore try to be in a good company. My guru Karpatri Ji was from Kashi. His message was also to always talk of dharma, devotion and knowledge of the Vedas."

Swami Narayanand Saraswatiis of the Shankaracharya Sampradaya. He said, "I am seventy-two years old. I lead a very disciplined life. My main message to the people is to go through holy scriptures and remember God always. If you live in this way, your life will be happy and blissful."

As I departed Rishikesh after four days, I asked my host, Swami Chidanand Saraswati (Muniji), for his thoughts. He observed, "Solitude has its own importance. It allows the flowering of the inside of an individual. Rishikesh's land has a special significance because a very large number of rishis, munis and even Gods Themselves came to this area. The vibrations and atmosphere of this area is very good for spiritual progress." As an ethereal river of mist filled the Ganga valley that evening, I could sense instantly how right he was.

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