

# RISHIKESH ONE

1ST - 17TH SEPTEMBER, 2022



## INDIA – 1st - 17th SEPTEMBER 2022

It was my dream to visit north India and see for myself the cave where Babaji taught the Kriya Yoga technique to Lahiri Mahasaya. Was all set to go in 2020 but along came COVID, the Indian government closed the borders and travel was impossible.

The dream came true in September 2022 after I suffered from COVID for nearly a month and the long Covid may well have been with me. The trip was centered around a visit to the cave the Himalayas and Rishikesh. It was organized by Om Prakash a deeply spiritual devout Hindu who provided a penetrating flash of insight into the Hindu religion and his lovely wife Anju a wonderful guide in Rishikesh who took me to temples and for walk along the Ganges the river of life, always the same and always changing.

This blog gives a day-to-day account of my travels starting in New Delhi where I visited the Moth ki Mosque and the magnificent Akshardham Temple. Then the journey in the steps of Paramanhsa Yogananda author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*, a book I read every September. As I learn more on the spiritual path my understanding of the book increases and I draw more inspiration from it.

Driving through the Himalayan jungle with its sprawling pine trees, cows and monkeys by the side of the road and unique temples was a life-changing experience. I feel I have brought the peace of the Himalayas to London with me. India is a journey and a destination. Long may the journey continue.

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1st September, 2022

## The flight

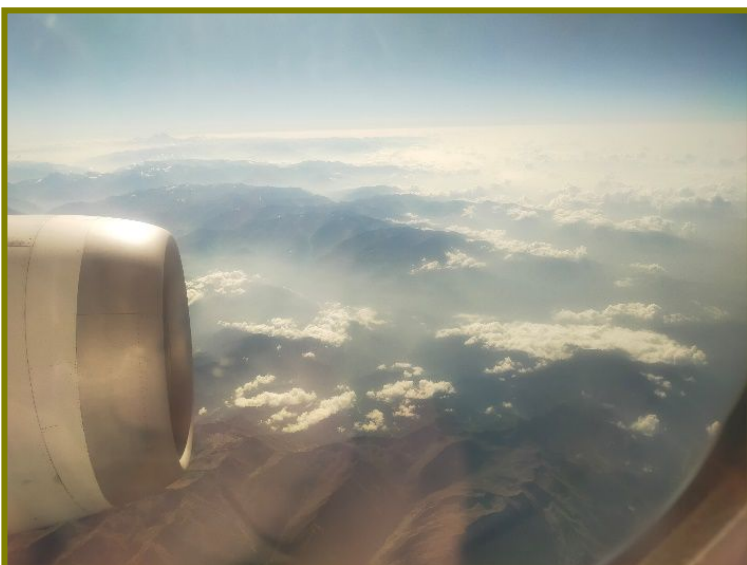
So this day has arrived. There was so much trepidation in view of my not so distant Covid infection that I would not be able to travel but the long Covid symptoms are dissipating slowly. I slept too long as usual and did not manage to do as much as I had hoped. No time for lunch in Khan's but the nails got painted a red colour. Packing was fine. It seemed to come together as if it was being guided by God's hidden hand. Two cases, the light pink/creamy ones. They are easy to spot on the luggage carousel – that's why I bought them. Clothes, the warm parka for Mana village near the border with Tibet took up a lot of room. Felt I was packing too many clothes but could not see how to cut down. And wanted some nice outfits for dinner in the evenings. A very British attitude reminiscent of colonial times.

Decided on the Elizabeth line to Heathrow Terminal 2 which was fine. An affable Sikh gentleman made some room for me so I could lean the cases on the back of the carriage. Ended up sitting on one of them. The other one kept sliding. The journey was quick but the walk to the terminal was long. The shining new subway glittered. It reminded me of Baghdad airport in 1988. Spick and span. Wondered if anyone ever left from that airport.

The queue for Air India was unbelievably long. So many people. Could they all fit on one plane? Two hundred at least! And they kept coming. Perhaps a warning of what to expect in India? Started revising the Devanagari alphabet. *Autobiography of a Yogi* was in my hand luggage but could not bring myself to read it while standing in that long line. Some people came to the airport five hours before and bag drop was open. Will know for next time.

Then security and the walk to Gate 44. I am not going to make it. Twenty minutes at least to reach the gate. Then a man driving a cart stopped. "Air India?" he asked. "Yes," I replied and off I went on the cart. The cosmic is surely smiling on this trip.

My seat was next to the emergency exit. Plenty of leg room and agreed to help with the evacuation if need be. What else could I do? Thank God for the meal. The start of vegetarian stodge but welcome as I hadn't eaten all day apart from an egg mayonnaise sandwich.



My two travelling companions were not talkative at first but they got more friendly as the flight progressed. One was returning to Kerala to visit her parents. She was working as a nurse for the NHS in Slough and could not return until now because of the pandemic. The other one was working in IT. The man opened the nuts for me so well sealed they were difficult to break into. They spoke to each other in Hindi and to me in English. Took some pictures of the specular Hindu Kush both for myself and my companions.

Sleep came and I woke up as the plane was descending to new Delhi.

2nd September, 2022

## Resting in Lutyens bungalow

The airport is like a new pin. There is a separate entry point for foreigners. The affable immigration officer gives up trying to take my finger prints. He laughs when I tell him I hope he takes a better photo than the one on my passport. When he asks where I am going I say “the Himalayas” and he smiles and adds “Rishikesh”.



The duty free comes before the baggage collection point where my bags have already been removed from the carousel. Del Mahandra from Trinetra Tours is waiting with an elegant yellow sign. The garland promised in the promotional literature is given to me with the greatest respect. Del



asks about a SIMcard but that has already been arranged by Om Parkash of Rishikesh Tours and we drive off into the warm New Delhi morning. There is my first encounter with Indian dogs – rabies on four legs. They just lie sound asleep on the footpath and nobody touches them as if they were sacred cows.

Delhi is a thousand shades of green full of palm trees and flowers. Lutyens Bungalow is in the diplomatic quarter with large compounds and large buildings with large gardens. Del, a slim man with a gentle manner, says everyone in Delhi is an immigrant, there is no pollution as all the cars run on CNG. We pass India gate and arrive at Lutyens.

The bungalow looks just like the photographs on the website. The garden is amazing. Stepping into the reception area is like stepping into the times of the British Raj. An elderly woman is writing in the register which she gets me to fill in. Another woman is writing in Devanagari script in beautiful handwriting. There was a time when people took pride in their handwriting. Before the age of keyboard and texts and computers. I think of my father’s beautiful handwriting. Del takes the cases to my room and gives me an orange folder and a bag made of jute. He confirms sight-seeing will begin at 9 am the next morning and declines an invitation for dinner as he has family commitments as does his boss Tapas. It’s Saturday and the Indian weekend has started. Tapas phones and welcomed me to India. He talks about our long relationship. Have been corresponding with him since 2019.

The room is small and cosy with a comfortable chair. Venetta brings me some melon which I eat after drenching it in boiling water. Can’t risk getting sick. The melon may have been washed in ‘dangerous’ water. WhatsApp works and so do the adaptors. What else can one ask for? Dinner is at 7 pm. I drift off to sleep before the alarm wakes me.

So now it’s time to dress up. My nice clothes have the desired effect. Shukla an elderly delightful, welcoming Indian woman takes a liking to me and tells me I look as if I am going to a five-star hotel. I tell her this is five-star hotel and she laughs.



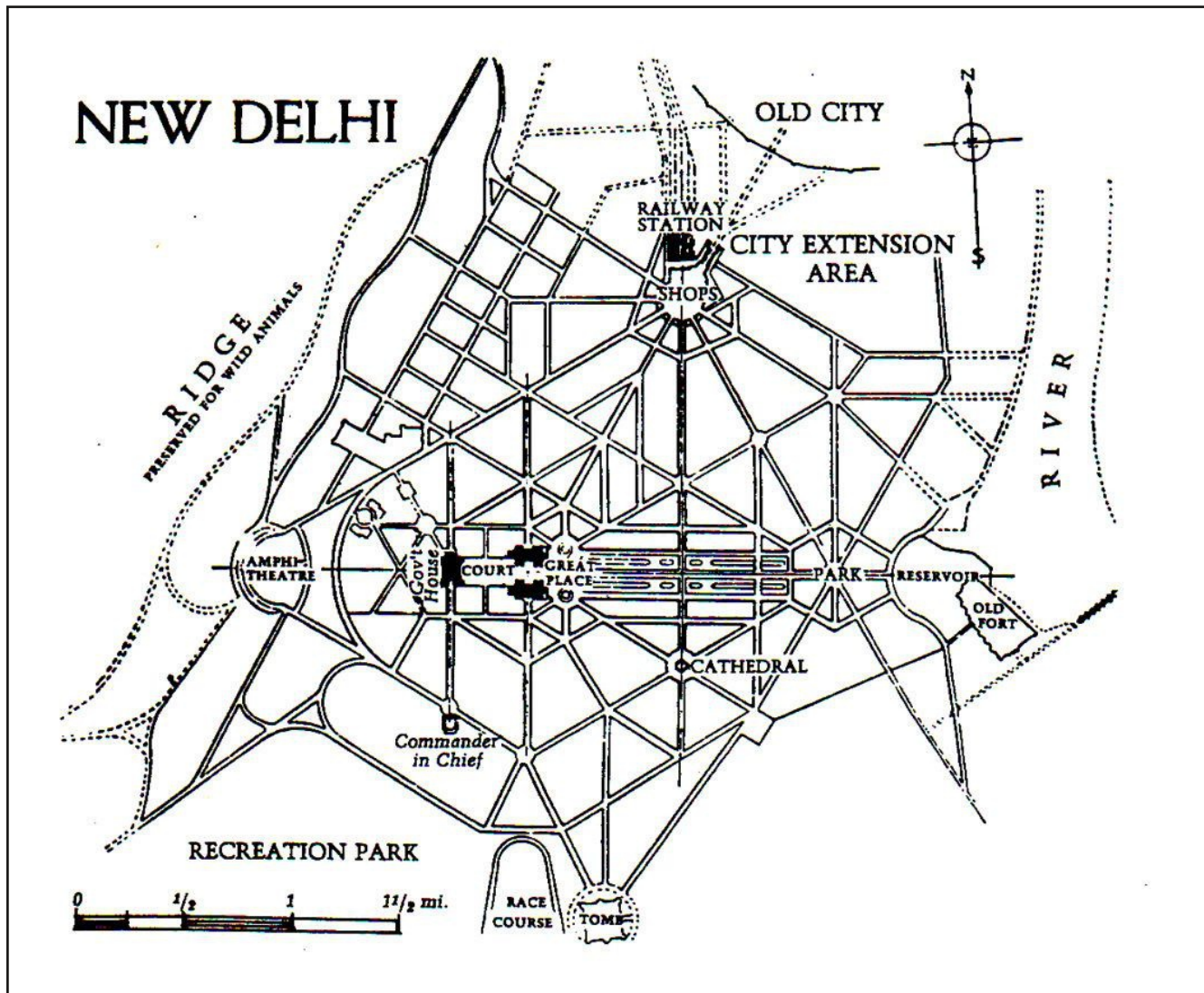
### **Lutyens and his bungalow**

Lutyens Bungalow, built in 1937, is located in the plush green heritage zone of central Delhi. A family-run bed and breakfast highly appreciated due to its exclusive setting, warmth and hospitality. Named after the famous British architect who designed New Delhi, the bungalow is built in the classical style, with a portico, large open courtyards and mature gardens. Its peaceful ambience is in sharp contrast to the bustle of the city.

Lutyens Delhi is one of the poshest areas in New Delhi as well as in India. It is named after Sir Edward Lutyens, the British Architect who designed it. The area got developed when India was a part of the British Empire between the 1910s and 1930s. Lutyens New Delhi was initially built to symbolize British power. The Lutyens zone and Lutyens Bungalow Zone are the two different parts of this central area. However, after the independence of India, Lutyens' Delhi is now occupied by Politicians and Civil Servants. The capital city of British India got shifted to Delhi from Calcutta in 1911. Therefore, the need to build the imperial city of New Delhi was realized. Architects Edward Lutyens and Herbert Baker were assigned to design the new city. They were specialized in the neoclassical tradition of the European Renaissance. Edward Lutyens finalized the layout of Lutyens' New Delhi in 1915. European Renaissance style was the inspiration behind the design of this new city. The addition of elaborate designs of the plantation further added more interest to the design. In addition, the city design followed British Imperial standards; ranging from the roads, buildings, as well as boundaries. The plan of Lutyens New Delhi was very much foreign for India. It was based on the modern style of urban planning, similar to Washington, Paris, and Rome. It also drew great inspiration from nature. The central axis is the main feature of this city. The axis has a vast rectangular mall surrounded by government offices. The Viceroy's House acted as the crown of this central axis. Now known as "Rashtrapati Bhawan", this palace is now occupied by the President of India.

The initial plan for the streets was to make them intersect at 90 degrees, inspired by NYC. However, green roundabouts with big trees were later added to the plan. These were introduced to break the force of dust storms, which are prominent in Delhi. Finally, three-lane streets, radiating from the central vista were added. These converged into hexagonal nodes surrounded by white bungalows, for the administrators. -

<https://thearchinsider.com/lutyens-delhi-british-architecture-in-indian-culture/>



We are seated outside at a large table. Two of the neighbours' cats have come to get fed and Vinente hugs them affectionately. There are also dogs and signs saying not to feed or pat the dogs. They look half dead and sleep most of the time. Maybe they are guard dogs for the night.

Dinner is vegetarian which means basically vegetables, rice and rotis. The food is served in large bowls and a nice young man serves the rotis as each guest takes his/her seat. There is Alison who works for the Australian government. She talks like someone who knows a lot about India. Now that the Indian government has refused aid there are only partnerships. She is working on agricultural partnerships. A couple from France talk about how they are navigating Delhi without a guide on the local buses and taxis. Old Delhi was an experience and they have also been to the Taj Mahal in Agra. Tomorrow they go home.

It gets dark around 7 pm and the common areas of the bungalow are not very well lit. The complex is not big but I still manage to take wrong turnings. There is a vegetable garden in the process of being dug up, a statue of Buddha, a large swimming pool and seating area. It is warm enough to swim in the evening but I am too tired to try it on the first night. Bed time is welcome after a great introduction to India.

3rd September, 2022

## **Akshardham Temple, The Broadway Hotel, Noida Ashram, shopping for salmon and fruit**

The driver Gajendra arrived at 8:50 am. I had just finished the rice and it was time to finish the water. The mineral water came in a large dispenser and I did it justice after ensuring it was in fact mineral water. I invited Gajendra to have a cup of tea and was told by a rather snooty Indian lady that drivers do not normally sit with their guests.

This upset me and I made my views known that they are human beings and all human beings have skills that ought to be respected. I am a journalist and without drivers I would not have made it many an important meeting. Some of the Indians at the breakfast table seemed to agree with me. I said to myself it's their country and they do things differently and I should shut up which I did for the rest of the trip when faced with local customs that did not seem agreeable.

It was a large car with mineral water and tissues in the back and a good natured driver who parked the car did not go sight-seeing as the car could not be left unattended.



*Akshardham Temple*

First stop Akshardham Temple. It did not open until 10am and as we had some time to kill we went for a coffee. Gajendra was happy I paid. I assumed that was the way things were done when on tour and it ingratiated me with the tour guides.

We talked about karma and I told him about how I had lent Naresh £40,000 to help with his business and he had no intention of paying me back. It was an experience that had stuck in my throat as Naresh was supposedly a reborn Hindu who enticed me with his nice words, promises of great returns on my investment and a heavy dose of spirituality. "That is his karma," Gajendra said philosophically. We seemed to bond. He told me he spent 90 minutes in the morning meditating and chanting. This started when his mother died. Before her death she was his goddess.

The temple was surrounded by barriers and many layers of security as a similar temple was bombed by the Muslims. No cameras, no bags. It was a long walk in the blazing sun. The white tiles were free from the heat and we made it to the majestic entrance with an even more majestic statue of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The walls of the temple were adorned with wise sayings and quotes from the scriptures.

Outside were magnificent sandstone sculptures of the life of the elephant. The no cameras policy meant the temple arranged for photos to be taken. Got the obligatory photo and perused the books in the bookshop. Some of the fables for children were intriguing but concern about the weight of my suitcase made sure they stayed on the shelves of the bookshop.



*Akshardham Temple*

‘Akshardham’ means the divine abode of God. It is hailed as an eternal place of devotion, purity and peace. Swaminarayan Akshardham at New Delhi is a Mandir – an abode of God, a Hindu house of worship, and a spiritual and cultural campus dedicated to devotion, learning and harmony. Timeless Hindu spiritual messages, vibrant devotional traditions and ancient architecture all are echoed in its art and architecture. The mandir is a humble tribute to Bhagwan Swaminarayan (1781- 1830), the avatars, devas and great sages of Hinduism. The traditionally-styled complex was inaugurated on 6 November 2005 with the blessings of HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj and through the devoted efforts of skilled artisans and volunteers. Each element of Akshardham echoes with spirituality – the Mandir, the Exhibitions and even the Gardens.

The Akshardham mandir has over two hundred murtis, representing many of the spiritual stalwarts over many millennia. The spiritual premise of Akshardham is that each soul is potentially divine. Whether we are serving the family, the country our neighbours or all living beings the world over, each service can help one move towards divinity. Each prayer is a call towards improving oneself and moving closer to God. A visit to Akshardham is a spiritually enriching experience. Whether it is in realising the power of prayer, in feeling the strength of non-violence, in being aware of the universal nature of Hinduism’s ancient principles, or just in admiring the beauty of God’s abode on Earth — each element has a spiritual significance.

- Opened 6th November 2005
- Constructed by Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS)
- Inspired by HH Yogiji Maharaj (1892-1971 CE)
- Created by His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj
- More than 300,000,000 volunteer hours went into making the complex
- Over 8,000 volunteers from across the world participated in building it
- Mandir built from intricately carved sandstone and marble
- Exhibitions on Hinduism, including Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s life and teachings such as prayer, compassion, and non-violence.
- Open gardens, water bodies and step-well styled courtyard - <https://akshardham.com/>



We were late for the appointment with the Hotel Broadway. They agreed to refund the money I paid in 2020 when this trip was first planned and paid for. Then along came Covid and all was cancelled and sadly the hotel closed due to lack of visitors.

It broke my heart to see this palatial building without any life. The restaurant with iconic black and white pictures, ornate colourful stained glass lamps and a Rolls Royce from the beginning of the 1900s. It seemed ready to receive elegantly clad women in ball gowns as it had in days gone by.

The staff members, ageing gentlemen were polite and welcoming. They let me wander round and use the bathroom. Perhaps the hotel will open next year and perhaps I will stay there and step back into history as I had in Lutyens. Found myself thinking of the next trip when the present one had hardly started. The greenery was becoming scarcer but it was still there. Kept waiting for a time when there would be no greenery but no such time came in New Delhi.

The next stop was Yogananda's Noida Ashram. The grounds were immaculately kept and there was a warm welcome at reception. Explained that I had read the autobiography and was going to Babaji's cave and now wanted to see the ashram. Received a programme in Hindi and English. Gajendra was thinking of the time when I would be able to read the Hindi as I made some attempts to read the signs on our tour having recently learned the alphabet. There was a genuine warm welcome. Wanted to learn kriya yoga. Hope its just an initiation.

We sat in the garden on a bench under the shade of a tree. Asked Gajendra to take some money from the refund envelope but he said I had to give it to him. He could not take. He had not heard of Yogananda or the autobiography but liked the ashram. We sat in the meditation hall with a large altar and photos of Yogananda and his masters Baba ji, Sri Yukteswar and Lahiri Mahasaya. It was a very pleasant meditation and Gajendra was very grateful to me for introducing him to this ashram.



The sun was hot but I felt I had to go shopping for fruit and salmon. The rice and stodge at the bungalow was not welcome every day for breakfast and dinner. The shopping expedition was successful and also got some unsweetened cappuccino. The heat seemed to increase with every step. Stepping out of the air conditioned car was like stepping into an oven.

Back at the guest house the effects of the heat really hit me something awful. My head was aching and felt as if I was wearing a hat but I was not. Put a wet towel on my head and lay in bed. My body was hot, my mouth parched. Did I have sun stroke?

Roy phoned and I complained to him. He did not seem unduly concerned and said it was the effect of too much sun as was the case in Nairobi.

4th September, 2022

## New Delhi, Moth ki Mosque, Hanuman Temple, carpet shop, Lodhi gardens

Was seriously thinking about calling off today's sightseeing as I felt so bad from the heat yesterday but in the end decided to tell Gajendra that we would have to take it easy and stay out of the sun. He agreed to this and off we went to the Hanuman temple. It was quite a modest temple with the bell that ring for good vibrations. Whispered into the bull's ear that I want to be free from fear. The crash course in temple etiquette was paying off.

Gajendra recited a long mantra as I sat on the marble floor and did my best to meditate. All was fine except this seemed to be the wrong temple. I asked Gajendra where was the gigantic statue of Hanuman I had seen on the internet and off we drove to find the giant statue.



*Hanuman*

Got out of the car on the side of the busy road and took a photo. The photo did not do the statue justice. Here was Hanuman towering over Delhi, the eternal number two who could always be relied on. A reflection of my own career. I am a good number two but could never be a number one.

Our next stop was the Moth ki Mosque and out came the scarf. Wanted to see a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Sikh place of worship while in Delhi and the mosque was next. It was quite a long drive but the car was air conditioned and there was no shortage of mineral water so all was well.

“You will have to walk a bit,” Gajendra said apologetically. And off we walked down the narrow road.

The mosque was magnificent – once. Now it was a shadow of its former self. An article by Nasreen Ali told the sad story.

## Delhi's Moth ki Masjid: an example of deliberate neglect of India's rich Muslim heritage

"Kuch nahi – there is nothing." The modestly clad, elderly gentleman with a welcoming smile who keeps watch at New Delhi's Moth ki Masjid shrugs his shoulders. "There is no security, no protection here. Nobody cares. But you are welcome," he says with polite exasperation.

The Moth ki Masjid (lentil mosque) stands proud and majestic a testament to a glorious by gone era. It was built in the first decade of the sixteenth century by Miyan Bhoiya, a prime minister under Sultan Sikander Lodi (reg. 1489-1517). Legend has it that the mosque was built from the proceeds of the plentiful harvests reaped from a single lentil that Sinkander Lodi found at the Friday mosque and presented to Miyan Bhoiya in jest.

Today the mosque is a victim of deliberate neglect. Rubbish including beer and wine bottles and old newspapers are strewn in the entrance by the five towered passage way with impressive arches. A peaceful somewhat eerie silence greets tourists. But most of the visitors are local hooligans and gamblers. "It is now longer a working mosque, you don't need to wear a scarf," my tour guide tells me with a patronising smile. The entrances to the building are sealed and it only possible to gaze at the giant structure and stroll up and down the passage.

There is time to reflect on the legends about the building of the mosque: One of them is that Sikandar Lodhi gave a minister named Miya Buhwa a lentil seed that he found while strolling. The Wazir considered this a gift from the Sultan and instead of throwing it away, planted it. The resultant crop grew more lentils, which he sold and built Moth ki Masjid out of the money.

Another lesser-known variation is that Mian Buhwa and Sikandar Lodhi were at prayers when the Sultan rose from his knees and Buhwa noticed a lentil seed on the mat. The minister took it and used the money he made from selling the crop to build the mosque. Some legends also say that initially, this was the minister's private mosque.

Unlike other traditional mosques, Moth ki masjid has no minarets, calligraphic decorations, or embellishments. It is made of red sandstone, a common theme during the Lodhi Dynasty. The stunning gumba or dome roof structural design commonly seen in most structures of that era is slowly disintegrating. Raised on a high plinth, the mosque has a square layout. Its gateway, made of red, blue, black, and white colored sandstones is from the eastern side of Moti Masjid. It resembles Hindu temples with elephant trunk carvings and square pillars. Many scholars say that this is a fine example of Indo-Islamic architecture and like most Islamic structures.

It is not possible to see the windows with latticework screens, octagonal cenotaphs, a small semi-circular dome, open arches and double-storeyed towers with their beautiful floral designs described in tourist guides. Those with imagination can visualise the light golden structure. The stately turrets rise majestically above the present squalor and dirt of the surroundings. The places not covered with filth are used for parking vehicles. Two and three storey residential buildings have been constructed painfully close to the mosque and overshadow it.

There are some encouraging words from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) about the mosque being a protected monument. A board at the start of the small road which leads to the mosque states: "This monument has been declared to be of national importance under the ancient monuments and archaeological sites and remains act of 1958. Whoever destroys, removes, injures, alters, defaces or imperils this monument shall be punishable with imprisonment which may extend to three months or with a fine which may extend to 5000 rupees or both." But scant attention is paid to these fine words which echo the language of the British colonisers.

Delhi's Moth ki Masjid is not the only victim of the state's deliberate neglect of Muslim historical sites. Mohammed Mirza in an article published by the *Muslim Mirror* in January 2021 identified eight other historic mosques in Delhi which are disintegrating.

The 600 year-old **Kalu Sarai Mosque** built by Juna Shah Maqbool Telangani, Wazir of Feroz Shah Tughlaq, has been illegally occupied by squatters for years. Some of its domes have collapsed and the family residing in it is making modifications and accretions to the heritage structure as it pleases.

The grandest of all seven mosques built by Maqbool Telangani, the Khirki Masjid, is said to be the largest roofed mosque in the world. Today those living nearby the 14 century structure have continued to expand their dwellings at the expense of the mosque's land and the authorities merely watch in despair. The mosque now serves as a home for anti-socials and young couples away from the prying eyes of their respective families. Outside the mosque, the signboard has been vandalized and every mention of "mosque" on it has been haphazardly whitened out.

Within the ruined fort of Tughlaqabad, built in 1321-23 AD by the founder of the Tughlaq Dynasty, Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, lies the unique Tughlaqabad Mosque with a long sloping roof and no domes. Surprisingly, it still survives even though many of the

original structures of the fort have been lost in the mists of time.

During partition the Chauburji mosque, whose name means four towers, was vandalised and illegally occupied. The encroachers have long gone yet the mosque remains deserted. Likewise the Darwesh Shah Mosque from the Lodhi era located within the confines of Gulmohar Park, has been left to the vagaries of nature as has the Madhi Masjid which sees plaster that cover its sturdy stone walls fall with each passing day.

The architecture of the Begumpur mosque impressed Tamerlane so much so that he had a mosque similar to it called the Bibi-Khanym Mosque built in his capital, Samarkand. Unlike Samarkand's Bibi-Khanym Mosque that has been craftily restored, the Begumpur Mosque has been left in neglect and apathy with many of its domes collapsed and a sizeable portion of its land encroached. It finds itself in a horrid state despite the fact that it has been under the purview of the ASI since 1928.

The Mubarak Shah Mosque stands wedged between residential buildings and shops. It is one of the rare mosques built by the sayyids that still survives even though buffalos roam in its courtyard and empty beer bottles are strewn about its prayer chamber. The loss of its physical fabric is so great that it may soon become unsalvageable.

It is ironic the while the iconic Taj Mahal is an internationally recognised symbol of India nothing – kuch nahi as the lone custodian of the Moth ki Majid so aptly put it – is done to preserve other historic Islamic sites.



*Moth ki Mosque*

But can anyone be surprised when Muslims can now be arrested for praying in public, while Hindu pilgrims are congratulated by state officials. The state celebrates the Hindu religion, while protests are orchestrated against Muslim customs like the wearing of the hijab and the call to prayer. Hindu vigilante groups attack Muslims and their businesses. The neglect of Muslim heritage sites is another addition to the scandalous catalogue of injustices perpetrated by the Hindu dominated government against the country's 200 million Muslims, accounting for about 15 percent of India's population.

“It is not a working mosque Gajendra said to me as he expertly tied my scarf round my head. Religious necessities aside it was still welcome in the sun which was becoming hotter by the minute.

After the mosque visit it was time for a break. We stopped at a Starbucks just like Starbucks anywhere and I showed Gajendra the diagram I had made of Hindu gods. It really thrilled him and he really felt like a comrade.

Gave the gudwara a miss as it meant a lot of walking and went to what was purportedly a craft shop. It ended up being an upmarket souvenir shop with the carpet shop in the basement a tourist trap. Out came the cups of tea, the bottles of mineral water and the carpets, large ones, smaller ones, small ones.

Mohammed from Kashmir had been at it a long time. Doubted whether a tourist emerged from his shop without spending any money. Ended up buying a carpet after hearing the story of the looms and how the carpets were made in Kashmir. He even had a loom on display and showed how it was done.

Bought two statues of Ganesh for Sukhla and Vivennta and got one as a present. Probably paid too much for everything but now I had a genuine Kashmir carpet to remind me of my time in Delhi every time I looked at the floor.



Sukhla, Karen, Vivennta (left to right)

Lunch with Gajendra and the driver did not happen despite my best efforts. The driver fed himself and Gajendra was not hungry. Did not have my credit card with me so it was agreed that the shop assistant would come to the bungalow and I would pay. No charge for the delivery which was not a delivery as the carpet went with us in the car. There was trust that everyone would honour their part of the deal.

Gajendra took me to the Lodhi garden very close to the bungalow and held my hand as I was wilting in the heat. Couples were walking arm in arm and he joked people would think we were a couple. Sat in the shade and admired the greenery. It was a wonderful garden. If only it wasn't so hot I could have spent a whole afternoon there.

The driver from the shop was waiting for us at the bungalow. The carpet was paid for said goodbye to Gajendra and the driver and left them with a generous tip. Should send Gajendra a copy of *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Hope he visits the ashram on his own.

Evening dinner was a relaxed affair with lots of Diet Coke and mineral water. Found Shukla and Venetta and give their their small Ganesh god presents. Was going to buy flowers but as Gajendra said why buy flowers for a woman who has a large garden at the bungalow.

A number of Indians were at dinner. They spoke about their children and what they were studying and the cost of school fees. One Indian gentleman told me that India has 14 official languages and 400 sub languages. There was some discussion about it being more difficult to unify India than to unify Europe.

Spoke briefly to Alan the guide from the Goa trip. At first he was not sure who I was and then he told me Joey our mutual friend had just lost his brother. One of the mangy dogs decided to sit in front of my door for about an hour. Remember Del told me that it once bit him in the stomach and did not open the door until it had gone.

As I was packing all the light went off and shortly came on again. The power surge wrecked my small lap top so the blog ended up being written in London. Maybe the cosmic wanted me to take a break from writing and computers. I was getting emails and WhatsApp messages on the phone. I got the time mixed up and thought India was behind the UK rather than in front of the UK in time.

5th September, 2022

## **Ranikhet - Neem Karoli Baba Ashram**

Realised that you could order an omelette for breakfast which I did. It was a very welcome relief to the stodge and the rotis which were very nice but gluten does not agree with me and gives me thrush which I managed to avoid so far. Remembered what the rather snooty Indian lady said to me about not inviting drivers to sit with guests for tea but Maniram waited with his shiny white car at the entrance to the bungalow and the question did not arise.

Took some of my luggage to the car. It was certainly a case of the law of expanding junk. Now the lovely jute bag from Trinetra and a large carrier bag with salmon and the carpet and some of the books which were in the luggage previously were transported in their own bags.

From his photo Maniram looked like a tall man but he turned out to be a pleasant little guy. He came with me to the reception of the bungalow and took the remaining cases. The guests said goodbye and wished me well. We put the Indian SIM card into the New Zealand phone and off we went. I sat in the back. Maniram said that tomorrow I could sit in front and I did not want to upset the protocol.

Had been looking forward to this day for a long time. Ranikhet. The start of the pilgrimage to places where Yogananda lived and worked. Imagined how I would speak to the driver Maniram in Hindi but it did not happen for a while.

Leaving Delhi was rather fast on the motorway and soon we were speeding into the Indian countryside with crops of various kinds. The weather was warm, not hellishly hot. The first large town was Moradabad the kind of town it is probably best to just drive through. Maniram went to buy bananas. He had a good supply of small bottles of mineral water and there was also a supply from Lutyens. Outside the temperature was rising and it was more pleasant to sit in the air conditioned car. Some taxis are air conditioned, some are not. Apparently it costs more to ride in an air conditioned car.

Lunch was at a pleasant roadside cafe with a varied menu: Indian and Chinese. Maniram did not sit with me and I didn't ask him to. That would come later. The food was tasty and cheap and the toilets were European style. I never had to use a squat down toilet which was a blessing as was wearing trousers most of the time. There was a shortage of loo paper. Forgot the good habit learned in Kenya of taking it with me. But the water hoses were always there. A much more hygienic practice.

The mountains were coming into view. Here the road started to wind and turn and my stomach was coming up to my mouth. The magnificent scenery of the Himalayas with its incredible straight, tall pine trees came into view. It was no fun sitting in the back but today decided not to say anything.

The Neem Karoli Baba Ashram was a lovely pleasant orange. Had already acquired the habit of taking shoes off to visit the mosques and ashrams. There were a lot of Gods in their small alcoves but my concern was the bathroom. No sign of the immortal guru who was supposed to give a blessing. Om Prakash from Rishikesh Day Tours who put together the itinerary did not elaborate on the guru.

The Kainchi Dham Ashram is considered as one of the best gems of Uttarakhand, established in a meander of Kosi river, and roosted in elevation of 1400 metres. This Ashram is genially devoted to an enlightened spirit known as, Neem Karoli Baba, and because of him, it is also known as Neem Karoli Baba Ashram.

The Ashram of Neem Karoli Baba is reclined on a corner of Nainital District, and only 23 kms ahead of Nainital on Bhowali-Almora road. Altars of Lord Hanumana, Ram Sita, and Maaa Durga are instituted inside of Kainchi Dham including a gleaming sculpture of Baba Neem Karoli. Kainchi Dham remains full of rabble everyday with lakh of admirers. However, this place is free of strife, and very tranquil for a long term mediation. There are lots of stories about this godsend man. Steve Jobs, familiar as a great tech titan and founder of Apple Inc was searching for a Guru in his life to get enlightened, because he had a lot of belief in yogis. Then, he visited Kainchi Dham with lots of expectation from Maharajs. But, after visiting there he got to know that, Maharajs left the world behind, three months ago. He got very disappointed to hear this, because Steve had lots of expectations, as he was very goal oriented person. - *Joshi Cabs*



So on and one we drove to Ranikhet which was spread out in several locations with rolling hills and lots of greenery. Maniram was not too sure about where the hotel was. We ended up in the center of town then away from the centre of town. Then back to the center and eventually reached the majestic Shivani Hotel with marble floors, large communal areas and friendly staff with a smattering of English.

Took the welcome drink to my room which was upgraded as there were so few guests in the hotel. Dinner came to the room: chicken and rice. Glorious well spiced chicken and black coffee and lots of large bottles of mineral water. Then the altitude sickness started to set in.

6th September, 2022

## Ranikhet, Forest Healing Centre, chemist, computer repair shop

It was clear that the computer had died. The battery would not charge and the screen would not load pictures. More worrying was the headache and the nausea. Googled altitude sickness and that is what I seemed to have. Or maybe a combination of long Covid and jet lag and altitude sickness.

Sent Om a long WhatsApp message asking what medicine I could get for it and he replied and advised promethazine theoclate. Told Maniram no sight-seeing until 12 pm and he agreed. It was probably good for him to have a long sleep as he had been driving for a long time yesterday.



We checked out a chemist who had the tablets and then made our way to a computer store full of students (mostly girls) who wanted to photocopy their certificates. They looked very young and full of energy, their whole lives in front of them. We left the computer in the shop and made our way to the Forest Healing Centre.

A pleasant man opened the gate and a small path took us to trees, trees and more trees, lots of quotes and sayings from famous people about conservation, a statue of Buddha, small huts and viewing platforms. The trees were speaking to me.

Mariam was happy to increase my Hindi vocabulary. Bag tiger, bandara monkey, gay cow and so on. It was a good way to learn.

The First Forest Healing in India which covers around 13 acres was inaugurated in March 2012<sup>1</sup> Ranikhet in Kalika Uttarakhand. It was developed by the Research Wing of Uttarakhand Forest Department after research on the healing properties of the forests and their revitalizing impact on overall health and well-being. Chief Conservator of Forest (Research), Sanjiv Chaturvedi, said, “It draws inspiration from Japanese technique of forest bathing (shinrin-yoku) and ancient Indian traditions. The basic theme is, be silent, go slow, think less and feel more.” There are many activities like forest walking, tree-hugging, forest meditation and sky gazing. According to Chaturvedi it has been found that because of typical molecular vibration patterns of trees, tree-hugging has a beneficial impact on the increase in the level of feel-good hormones like oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine, creating a pleasant effect. In countries like Iceland the forest department has been making efforts to facilitate this activity to enhance the health of local citizens. This healing centre has been established in a pine-dominated forest as it has been found in various studies that coniferous like pine trees emit certain oil compounds to safeguard themselves from various microbes and pathogens, which are called phytoncides. It has been found in various researches that these compounds help to multiply natural killer (NK) cells in our blood, which help in fighting infections and cancerous growth and enhance overall immunity. Another important activity in this healing centre is forest meditation which is distinct from the traditional meditation system of controlling thoughts or concentrating the awareness on some particular point. This practice is based more on immersing oneself in silence and the ambience of the forest without making any extra effort. Another activity is sky gazing which involves looking at the swaying canopy above and the ever-changing sky. This uncommon view offers a new perspective as well as deep relaxation. The healing centre maintains a register in which visitors share their experience. Various boards which explain these four activities in a simple language have been placed at the very entrance and also the instructions for leaving behind the phone, camera or any other distraction and also resist talking if people move in groups. For forest meditation and sky-gazing exercise, tree platforms have also been created. - *Hindustan Times*



On our return to the car par a man on crutches asks Maniram if we would like a local guide to show us the mountain view. I don't want this man in our car and don't need his services but feel sorry for him as he lost a leg in a car accident. So we drive to the top of a large hill and get a fantastic view of the mountains.

There is also a visit to a temple of bells. Well that's what I call it. It is in fact the **Jhula Devi temple** an ancient 8th century temple located at a distance of 7 km from Ranikhet near Chaubatia. Earlier a number of wild animals such as leopards and tigers, who used to attack the villagers, inhabited the dense woods near the temple. Maniram told me it is quite usual to see a leopard at night by the side of the road. Tigers are another story. They are deep in the forest.



Jhula Devi Temple is dedicated to goddess Durga and is well-known for its cluster of elegantly designed bells. Legend has it that this shrine was built in the 8th century. Located on the Kumaon Hill, amidst the tranquil and relaxing settings of nature, Jhula Devi Temple has the deity sitting on a jhula (Hindi word for cradle) and hence the name. Going by folklore, the idol of the goddess was found by a shepherd who was guided by the deity herself in his dream. Locals believe that goddess Durga is the protector of the people of the valley. It is also widely believed that whosoever ties a bell on the temple wall, is granted his/her wish in due course.

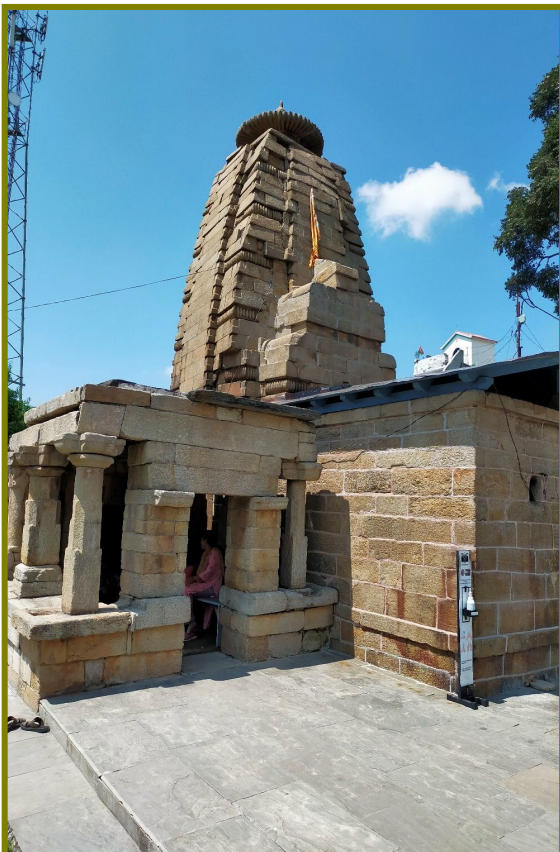
Covid worries me. Who is this man? He does not get out of the car where he got in but hitches a ride back to Ranikent. Give him a 500 rupee tip and am glad to see the back of him. After the peace of the forest it was back to the computer repair shop. The machine could not be fixed as it needed a special battery which set the time and the date and this was only available in New Delhi.

Another lovely chicken dinner and sweet sleep in the king size room in the king sized bed.

7th September, 2022

## Badinath Group of Temples in Dwarahat, Joshi Guest House

It's goodbye to the glorious Shivani Hotel and we are on the road to Baba ji's cave. We stop in Dwarahat to take a look at the Badinath Group of Temples. They are strange looking structures and there is no white marble to protect my feet from the blazing hot sun. Shoes have to be removed quite a long way away from the actual temple.



*Badinath Temple*

Dwarahat is famous for its ancient temples which were constructed mainly by the Katyuri kings. These are now maintained by Archaeological Survey of India. The town has 55 ancient temples of exquisite architectural excellence. These are divided into 8 groups. These temples were constructed in the Indo-Aryan, Maru-Pratihara or Nagara type architecture. They are constructed mainly of masonry blocks of Pre-Cambrian granite available in the nearby area. Instead of mortar, iron clamps dowels have been used to tie adjoining blocks. These temples now have great archaeological value.

The first group of temples is very interesting but as Maniram manages to find more and more of them it starts to feel as if if you have seen one you have seen them all. The temples are in the middle of a residential area and the home owners are welcoming and happy visitors are enjoying what they probably take for granted in their own back yard.

Buy something that looks like a packet of chocolate biscuits and drink a black coffee with buttered toast in the hotel which allows us to make use of the bathroom. Haven't struck the dreaded squat down toilets yet. It is a miracle I managed to avoid them on the whole trip.

Naresh phones. He says he brought me to Babajis cave or rather Baba ji worked through him to bring me to the cave. "Well that's how I see is," he says matter of factly. Realising there probably won't be any

WhatsApp near Babaji's cave I send messages to Roy and the few friends I am keeping in touch with.



Joshi's Guest house is an unassuming building by the roadside. The guest house itself can be reached after walking up some treacherous steps, On street level is a general store and a tea making complex where Joshi spends a lot of his time. There are lots of amazing flowers by the general store. Life is slow in the mountains. Nobody hurries.



This is the real India, the cow by the roadside, the cool mountain air, the peace. My room is in fact a small cabin with three beds, a mirror and plenty of phone charging plugs. The toilet and bathroom are outside. The shower is two buckets and the water comes from a zip on the wall. It all seems incredibly idyllic. A padlock ensures no one gets into the cabin when I am not there. There is a small table outside the cabin and a light. Joshi is friendly. His hair looks dyed but his face is young and fresh. He smiles a lot. Nothing seems like a big deal for him. There is a good supply of mineral water and for me that is the main thing. He makes me a coffee. Then it is time to go to the cabin.

Wash my underwear and two trousers in the bucket and hang them up to dry. Then sit and gaze at the trees and the hills. Darkness comes. The moon is incredible. You can almost touch it. A very polite young man brings me dinner: rice, vegetables and chapatis. The meditation room is large with pictures of Yogananda and his masters. During my meditation felt they were sitting there with me. There are lights on the hill. Just like the lights I saw in my room when I was reading about Babaji in *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Babaji is here, welcoming me. The altitude sickness is gone. All is peaceful. God is in heaven and all is right with the world.

8th September, 2022

## Babaji's cave

The shower with the two buckets is not very successful but manage to pour some water over my hair. Breakfast is puha something like rice, very tasty. A woman is nearby with her cow. She spent most of yesterday afternoon working in her garden.



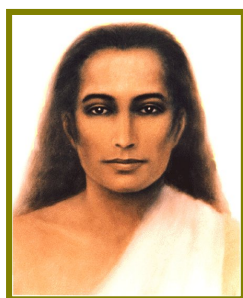
The cave is very close to the guest house down a dirt road. The car is parked and off we go with two bottles of water and the chocolate biscuits. It is early, before 8am. We pass a modest house. Maniram knows the owner.

The trek is not difficult but I soon find myself out of breath. The nature is stunning, a million shades of green. We cross a stream. There are many welcome seats along the way. Before the guest house is a meditation hall surrounded by a garden.

The cave is a lot smaller than I imagined. Or maybe the pictures made it look bigger. Climb inside and sit looking out at the world. Time has stood still. It is just me looking out onto the world from the inside the cave.

Mahavatar Babaji Cave is where Babaji revealed Kriya yoga secrets at the cave to \*Lahiri Mahasay. Babaji is an immortal Mahavatar. Lahiri Mahasaya met first time with Babaji as householder Babaji preached him again to recollect the secret of Kriya Yoga in the Cave in 1861 in order to make it available to all. Shiv-Goraksha Babaji is regarded as a manifestation of Lord Shiva himself and the founder of the Nath Tradition. He has bestowed upon humanity the practices to evolve human consciousness, in particular, the divine alchemy of Shiva Shakti (Kundalini Kriya Yoga), which exercises a double action to hasten the evolution of the self soul. This expands the self-consciousness and burns away past evil karma. Babaji is ever the same. He was never born and therefore can never die. They call him aja (the unborn). But from time to time, this compassionate Lord of irradient splendor does manifest for humanity to do what needs to be done. Pulling the veil of Maya by himself, he will take a form of Lightless light to incarnate amongst the haunts of men. He guards, guides, and enlightens their evolutionary blueprint. His deathless body of lightless light may take any form through which he can express and show himself to the faithful from age to age. He took the form of Adi Nath Shiva himself, and of Rudra of the Ancient of days. He came recently in 500 B.C. as Kal Agni Nath, than as Dakshin Murti when he initiated himself. Then he manifested as Goraksha Nath in 70 B.C. at the time of King Shalivahan and Chowrangee Nath. In the same ever-present immortal body, he manifested as Shiv-Goraksha Babaji in the ninth century A.D. during the time of Guga Nath, whom he empowered to have complete mastery over the Nagas and ultimately be worshipped as a Naga God. <https://siddhanath.org/about/who-is-babaji/>

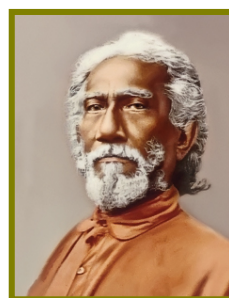
\*Lahari Mahasaya was a great Guru, disciple, loving and caring father, husband, and son. He acquired the knowledge of Kriya from his great Guru Mahavatar Babaji and passed it to his disciples, such as Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri and Panchanan Bhattacharya. Yuktेशwar Giri became the Guru of Paramahansa Yogananda, who is known to be the father of Yoga in the west. He makes Lahari Mahasaya famous in the west through his best-selling book *Autobiography of a Yogi*.



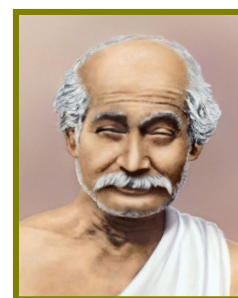
Babaji



Yogananda



Yukteshwar



Mahasaya

After visiting the cave it is time to take a good look at the meditation hall. It is very simple. Just the pictures of the masters, some mats on the floor and some welcome chairs at the back. Never mastered the technique of sitting on the floor. It is time to buy some small laminated pictures: Babaji, Sri Yuteswar, Yogananda and Mahasaya. The store keeper also bring a picture of Jesus Christ. The Hindus respect all masters.



Going down is a lot easier than going up. Maniram holds my hand and we are soon back at the house of his friend who offers a cup of tea and a peach from the tree. A dog is tied up but barks for dear life. The pot boils, the tea is poured. Feel I hold as much curiosity value for these people as they do for me.

Joshi is welcoming on my return to the guest house. Buy more water and lie down. The trek has worn me out. There is no way I can managed to walk up 400 steps to a temple. Sleep for three hours. My oxygen uptake has dropped to 94. Not dangerous but lower than 95 which it should be.

Another simple but delicious dinner of rice, vegetables and chapatis. The moon is there with its powerful energy telling of world's far beyond this earth. Tomorrow it will be time to leave this sacred place. "Babaji tests you sometimes." Joshi says when I tell him about the altitude sickness. He didn't venture an opinion about whether or not I passed the test.

9th September, 2022

## Rice field, Bag River and temples Gwaldham

It was time to say goodbye to Joshi's guest house but the magic and the experienced there will never leave me. The bags were packed last night. Breakfast arrived 20 minutes early. Again the lovely, nutritious puha. The nice young man I spoke to using the translation app took my bags. I told him I would be with the driver at 10 am and took myself off to the meditation room. Joshi's had become a little crowded with a group of Indians who were milling near the meditation room but not going in. My silence was disturbed by a summons to the car.



*Joshi (left)*

Maniram was ready but I had to say good bye to Joshi. He made me a coffee with the satchel from Delhi and gave me his card. I asked how much the room cost and he said 1500. "Rupees?" I asked. "Yes rupees," he replied. "But you can give dollars if you like," he laughed good naturedly. Took a photo of the old man who carried my case as if was a feather and of Joshi. They looked posed and unnatural with plastic smiles.

The Indian countryside spread in front of me. Green, calm, peaceful. Like Delhi a thousand shades of green. Maniram stopped in a rice field. Never knew rice could look so good.

There was a small concrete lane running through stretches and stretches of rice where a lady clad in amazing colours worked happily. Walked down the lane. There were some houses in the distance and Maniram was worried I would not stop walking until I reached them.

A young man talked to me, asked me where I was from, explained he lived in Delhi but was visiting his home town. He was generally friendly and eager to share his story. Photos and more photos. The pink Indian shirt kept the sun off. Soon it would come up with a vengeance.

It was the end of the Ganpati celebrations and we passed some revellers. The music and singing was powerful and I could see how Hindu fanatics could use such songs to incite hatred against Muslims.





Ganpati is a 10-day-long festival starting on the fourth day of the new moon in the Hindu month of Bhadrapada (late in August or in early September). The day is popularly known as ‘Ganesh Chaturthi’; the birthday of Lord Ganpati. The festivity begins with bringing beautiful idols of Ganpati to big Pandals (temporary structures set up to venerate Gods and also in people’s homes). The idols reaching to pandals are extremely beautiful, ornate, and huge. With months of hard work and effort, artisans create such extraordinary Ganesh images. On the home-coming of Ganesh, Modak (*the favorite sweet of Ganesh*) is prepared and offered to the Lord. With flowers, incense, and hymns, Ganpati is worshipped day and night in Mumbai for 10-long-days. Entire cities

indulges in a huge festive mood. On the 11th day, known as ‘Anant Chaturdashi’, the Ganesh idols are taken from pandals to the nearby ocean for immersion. In Mumbai, more than 200,000 idols are sunk in water every year. The ritual is called ‘Visarjan’. Visarjan depicts the nature of the Universal law of constant change; form to formlessness. “A continuous circle of creation to destruction is how the earth is surviving.” However, on the day of Visarjan, the processions begin early in the morning. Followed by an uncountable number of devotees, most of the idols reach seashores by night. People with dying-hearts say goodbye to their beloved God Ganesh and pray for him to come back again next year.

There is a pleasant stop at the Bag River before departing for Gwaldham. A man sitting by the river was selling a strange looking mixture. Bought some on Maniram’s instructions for a few rupees. It was used to fish the fish which came in swarms to the river bank.

Temple time again. The temples were very much like the ones in Dwarahat and it was a case if you have one you have seen them all. The stones were hot but I learned my lesson and wore socks. The Mystic Mountain Tea House had a lovely view and lovely food. Chicken! It was amazing how good the chicken tasted. Long life Joshi and his vegetarian food and long live chickens!

Gwaldham is a small Indian town like I guess hundreds of other small Indian towns. Stayed in the Nature Treat Hotel. All fine except for the fact that no one knew the Wi-Fi password and the water for the coffee came with strange bits of something floating in it. Maniram came to dinner with me for the first time. We were the only ones in the hotel restaurant. This was not the first time. Covid has had a devastating affect on India’s tourist industry and the hotel managers always asked for a review on Trip Advisor. I was tempted to bad mouth this hotel about the Wi-Fi but how could I when everything else was so wonderful and I had such a lovely room. And it was all for me. Could hardly believe this.

The schedule has been altered. After the way I felt in Ranikent decided against visiting Joshimat where the altitude is higher. Mana village the last village in India before the Tibetan border would have been a treat. A parka was bought especially for it but it was not to be. Om Prakash was happy about this. He warned there are no medical facilities high up in the Himalayas and I did not want to be a burden to Maniram if I got sick. There will be plenty to keep me occupied in Rishikesh.

10th September, 2022

## **Rudraprayag, Koteswar Mandev Temple**

Today was a day for the river. We drove to Rudraprayag the confluence of two divine Himalayan Rivers. There were lovely views from the road and Maniram stopped for photos. He always took lots of photos of me and I deleted most of them at night. But some were excellent, real treasures. My friend Lindsay said she wanted more photos of India and less of Karen which taught me a good lesson about quelling my ego.

The Koteswar Mahadev Temple had its fair share of monkeys and was one of those temples that is not friendly for those seeking a meditation space. Sat on the steps close to the river. The water had a magical soothing effect. Like life the river flows, changing at every moment, never the same.

We arrived at the Sangrila Resort. It was pleasant but I was not impressed with the concrete steps leading to the room with no hand rail. Had no desire to leave India with a broken bone. There were problems with the electricity and my torch was in my hand most of the evening with the phone nearby.

Maniram joined me for dinner again in the vegetarian restaurant. Dinner was curry which was not spicy by Indian standards. It was hot for me and couldn't help wondering what a spicy Indian curry but Indian standards would taste like.

So tomorrow is the day I meet Om Prakash, the man himself in person. It has been a long virtual friendship which started when I booked the North India trip in 2022 but it was only this year a few weeks before travelling that I spoke to him once on the phone. All the other communication was mainly by WhatsApp. Received hundreds of wonderful images and videos of India and dreamt of the day those far off places would be real for me. Like the famous Arab explorer Ibn Battuta said: "The one who read is not like the one who saw."

11th September, 2022

## **Temple of Lord Ram, Vashisht cave, Glasshouse, Rishikesh**

Took a photo from in front of the Sangrila Hotel. The scenery was picturesque with a roadside temple. Sometimes the simple roadside temples have as much impact as the elaborate structures with hundreds of visitors. Wanted to give all the people who served me in the hotel a tip so left 500 rupees with the head waiter. Then came to realise there were ten people serving – not that they all served me but it did not seem right to give to some and not to others.

We stopped at Devprayag a place of confluence of the Bhagirathi and Alakananda Rivers. It was here that a friendly priest who got me to recite a mantra kindly brought me a bottle of Ganges water. While the Indians bathed in the river I merely dipped my feet. The bathing would have to wait for another day when I had to right gear. That does not mean a Western bathing suit. The mantra was also for my partner. Could Roy feel any strange vibration across the seas and continents? Standing close to the priest and reciting the mantra after him was an excellent way to catch Covid and there was a total absence of masks among the people even though the Indian government mandated them at public gatherings.

The temple of the day was the ancient Temple of Ram where two elderly priests were reciting the Gita. Got photo with one of them for a price. It all seemed a bit gimmicky but red mark gave me the feeling that I had entered another culture and was part of something more vast and powerful than I could ever imagine.

As we were leaving the temple a man dressed in clothes which resembled a monk, with a shaven head, came towards me on the bridge and said: "I have been looking for you." Was this my guru? I smiled at him. That is the way things happen in the Himalayas. When the student is ready the master appears. Maniram smiled. "I am Om Prakash", the man said. I told him he looked different from the photographs on the internet. He just smiled. Substance and essence. Om was showing some other tourists around. "We took your place," one of the tourists said jokingly.

Stopped by a giant Shiva statue at the side of the road, rang the bell and off we drove to Vashisht Cave on the banks of the Ganges. It was here that I learned why one should not feed the monkeys. The mountain monkeys are not like the Delhi monkeys. They are vicious. One jumped on the window of the car and glared at me. A man in a white dhoti chased the monkey away and gave me the most amazing smile. He had the aura and vibration of a genuine holy man and I gave him 500 rupees. That was one of the best and most appreciated donations of the whole trip. The cave was closed for an hour and a half so we went to the Glass House hotel and restaurant. This was pure luxury with a great selection of food.

Maniram was worried about the price and ordered buttered toast. This was not acceptable and after I told him it was our last meal together and he had to eat something nice he ordered a sandwich and rice and curry and a vegetable. Had the usual chicken and coke and cappuccino. Drinking the milk with the coffee did not appear to be a problem.

The glasshouse was in the tame jungle with no monkeys. The hotel was spread over several levels. Again there seemed to be few guests but the ones who were there looked well satisfied with the environment. How could one not be happy in such an idyllic setting: vegetation, the view of the hills and the river, serenity, the fresh mountain air? Had the feeling very soon I would see Om Prakash again.

The Vashisht cave was down a slight treacherous path which was inclined to be slippery. But it had a rail all the way down to the river. And there was Om Prakash, walking up as I was walking down. "Expect the unexpected in the Himalayas," he said laughing. Guess he knew I was a bit surprised by the two chance meetings. But they were definitely not chance meetings. Nothing in this universe happens by chance but we do not always appreciate its significance. The cosmic puts you where you need to be with whom you need to be.

The modest ashram at the end of the path was surrounded by a modest garden and had its local cows. The cave had a large foyer. The entrance was guarded by a corrugated iron gate which was locked when the cave was shut.

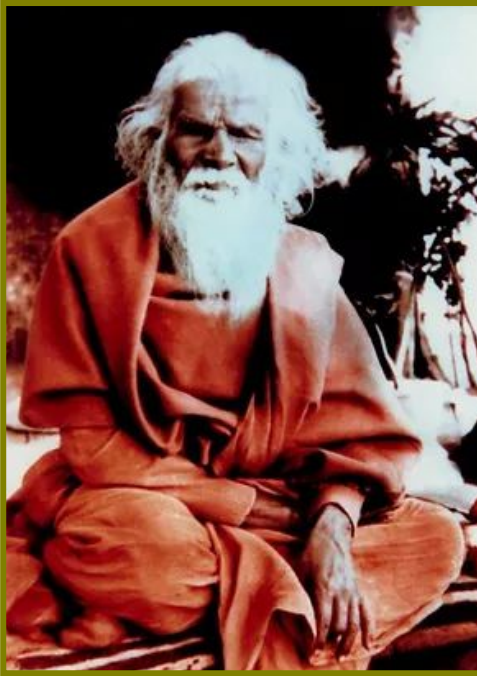
In the foyer was a long introduction to the cave and the sage who gained enlightenment there.

**Vashisht cave** is an ancient 60 feet deep cave located towards the middle of a grove of Gular (Ficus) trees and slopes towards sacred river Ganga. Sage Vashishta who was one among the seven great sages of India (Saptrishis) and a teacher of Lord Rama is said to have meditated here for many years, making it one of the holiest places among Hindus. Also in 1930 Sri Swami Purushottamananda Ji is said to have visited the cave and established the ashram near it, and now the cave is being managed by the trust of Sri Swami Purushottamanandaj ashram.



### Sage Vashishta on How to get or have constant Peace on Mind

Mind is the greatest of all mysteries. It stands between an individual and the highest truth and is the cause of both bondage and liberation. Properly trained, mind can help you attain enlightenment, but if misguided, it can leave you stranded on the shoals of confusion and bondage. Peace is created by the mind. First, make the decision to be content in any circumstance. From that womb of contentment, peace is born. It is foolish to expect to achieve peace by retiring into the deep forest or leaving for a distant galaxy. Ultimately, one must find peace within.



*Sri Swami Purushottamanandaj*

The cave was longish and quite dark needing the light from the mobile to make the walk to the end easier. Just before the altar was a photo of enlightened sage sitting in the semi darkness. The demeanour of the man was peace in human form. And his peace engulfed me. For the first time in my life realised the significance and power of meditating in a cave. The rock against which I leaned did not hurt my back. Legs did not hurt from sitting cross legged when not used to it. Time and space dissolved. Photos were not allowed but I sneaked in a photo before starting to meditate. Maniram seemed to really like this cave. He just took the temples in his stride but this cave had a noticeable effect on him.

The peace was shattered when more visitors came and we left. Outside the modest ashram a man asked me how old I am. "Sixty five," I replied. "Still young," he said. "I am seventy five!" It seemed like a strange question. Was he looking at me as a prospective girl friend? Wasn't the least bit attracted to him but he seemed a nice guy. A women sitting next to him just smiled.

His wife maybe. She seemed to know him and was aware of whatever game he was playing.

Maniram told me of another cave near by. The Arundhati cave, wife of the sage. Thought it a good idea to put my trainers on before climbing over the stones by the Ganges but went in my stocking feet. It was quite fun finding the sand between the stones – some quite large boulders.

Adjacent to the Vashishta cave, is the cave of Purushottamanandaj consort Arundhati. These caves are shrouded in mystery. One of the local monks said, "It is believed that this cave is so long that it has a direct short cut to Badrinath." Another monk vouchsafes for a special divine experience when you meditate in these caves. Spending some time inside the cave in silence, invigorates the being. You can carry that silence for a long time time when you come out.

Arundhati cave seemed too small to sit inside but just outside the cave was a great place to sit with a view of the river flowing silently past. The trees formed a magic circle through which to view the eternal scenery of peace. Here time stood still. It wasn't anything it just was and trying to describe it was to demean it. Like Louis Armstrong said about jazz: if you are going to ask what it is you are never going to know.

This was a magic moment which I vowed to repeat. Maybe even stay in the ashram on the next visit and talk some more to the main who asked my age which would have gone up a year by then. The main the white dhoti was there with his welcoming smile as we emerged from the steep path that took us to the cave. He was happiness personified. If peace and wisdom has an address it is the Vashishta cave.



Rishikesh beacons. Soon I would meet Om Prakash again but I already knew he was the guru I was meant to find on this trip. Just like I found him on the internet, I would now find him in flesh and blood. There was no anticipation, no apprehension, no thinking about what I would say. It would just be like the cave.

The drive to Rishikesh was not long and the car sickness was not bad. The car sickness pills certainly helped and so did the paracetamol. Driving into Rishikesh didn't feel it was that special. Another Indian town with horns tooting more than necessary, lots of cars and trucks and men and women on scoters.

On Homestay was in Upper Tapovan and upper it was. On top of quite steep and narrow hill.

Maniram drove down the lane till the gate of the large house which looked more like a mansion. He brought my luggage I gave him the envelope with \$100 and off he went to his wife and children in a house about 100 kms from Rishikesh. And there was Om Prakash, the man himself and his wife Anju an engaging woman with a beautiful radiant smile.



Sitting at the table on the porch outside the house I got a discourse in Hindu philosophy – or should I say universal philosophy. The importance of non attachment and getting rid of the ego Om Prakash was also happiness personified. “The spiritual is reflected in the material,” Om said with great certainty and authority. But it did not seem as if he was lecturing. He was sharing the knowledge he had acquired and like a true teacher pitching his comments at a level I could understand. Roy told me I had a lot to learn from this man and he was a lot more advanced than me in the spiritual realm. He always spoke with a

non arrogant confidence and pride. A master of his subject and of himself. A bookshelf with many interesting titles including another interpretation of the resurrection drew my attention.

The room was large and welcoming with pictures of Yogananda on the wall. It was such a joy to sleep in the bed after the fold out sofa bed in my place in London. Om said Anju will take you sightseeing and I will take you. He never actually took me but things worked out splendidly with Anju. While unpacking made a mental note that my extra bags would have to go and would have to leave as I had come with two suitcases.



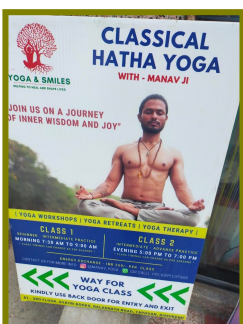
12th September, 2022

### **Rishikesh: River walk, shopping for Dhanvantari statue, Lakshmi Naran temple, Aarti**

Hare krishna, hare krishna. A pleasant chant was audible as I was waking up. Om was chanting and playing the flute Lord Krishna is pictured with in so many illustrations. Breakfast was something that looked like an omelette but was in fact a lentil pancake. It was a bit heavy on the stodge. The start of my journey into Ayurvedic cooking had begun.



Had an assignment in Rishikesh for my Ayurvedic boss in London. To get an 18-inch statue of Dhanvantari the Hindu god of medicine and an avatar of Lord Vishnu. During his incarnation on earth, he reigned as the King of Kashi, today locally referred to as Varanasi. Also had to find out about yoga and Ayurveda places in Rishikesh. Om said he would not recommend any yoga teachers as most of them are out to make money from gullible Westerners.



As we walked down from the house in Tapovan there were many board advertising yoga teaching establishments emphasising walk in classes. Made a note of eight among them: Raqvinder Yoga School, Aym Yoga School, Ashtanga Yogpeeth Ashram, Himalayan Yoga Ashram, Yoga School of Vedic Tradition and Sadhna, Rajendra Yoga and Wellness Center, Vinysu Yoga. Some only had a name and a phone number and looked very much like fly by night outfits, here today and gone

tomorrow. Anju was very patient and pointed out some places for me to make a note of. Rishikesh is a bit light on Ayurvedic clinics. The place for that is Kerala.

Felt sure Raghav would not be disappointed. The statue was easier said than done. Went to an upmarket shop with hundreds of bronze works but no large Dhanvantari. The man in the shop asked his assistant to bring the statue from another shop. In the meantime bought three statues of Shiva doing the cosmic dance: one for me, one for Naresh and one for Luke a guy in my tai chi class who spent some years in an ashram and has an amazing meditation room and altar in his house in East London. If Shiva stops dancing the world will end.

This cosmic dance of Shiva is called ‘Anandatandava,’ meaning the Dance of Bliss, and symbolizes the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, as well as the daily rhythm of birth and death. The dance is a pictorial allegory of the five principle manifestations of eternal energy—creation, destruction, preservation, salvation, and illusion. According to Coomaraswamy, the dance of Shiva also represents his five activities: ‘Shrishti’ (creation, evolution); ‘Sthiti’ (preservation, support); ‘Samhara’ (destruction, evolution); ‘Tirobhava’ (illusion); and ‘Anugraha’ (release, emancipation, grace). The overall temper of the image is paradoxical, uniting the inner tranquility, and outside activity of Shiva.



Anju

After about twenty minutes Dhanvantari arrived. It was a magnificent statue, very heavy but imposing looking with a tranquillity about it. The carving on the bronze was by hand. In fact the whole statue was hand and not machine made as were many of the statues in the shop. Took a photo and said once my boss had given the okay would return to buy it if that was okay. “Very okay”, replied the affable shop keeper. He said he would deliver it to the house for no charge. Told him there was always a charge for delivery in the UK and he laughed. “This is India!” he said. Had already experienced the house delivery in Delhi but at least this time I really wanted what was purchased. After some time in the shop decided on a coffee. It’s not

recommended on the Ayurvedic diet but both Anju and I love our coffee and we climbed upstairs to a pleasant coffee shop with views on the Ganges. All good. The European lady sitting opposite us started gesticulating frantically and pointed to her table where a cockroach had taken up residence. The café owner looked at her as if he didn’t understand what all the fuss was about and shooed the unsuspecting insect away. Hindus and Buddhists do not kill sentient beings. The view from the coffee shop was amazing and the peace of the Ganges came in through the window.

Anju showed me a man dressed up in a funny costume. This was real gimmickry to make money out of the tourists but Anju made the point that at least this man was doing something to earn money and not just begging like the so called holy men by the river who just hold out their hands and then use the money to smoke dope.



She also took me to an artist who was painting with her feet as she had no hands. What I paid for the painting of Hanuman was over the odds but regarded it as donation. The women had a wonderful smile. She was enjoying life to the fullest despite her disability and cashing in on the tourist trade at the same time.



There was a visit to the Lakshmi Naran temple, one of those temples where it is not possible to sit quietly and meditate and the priests relieve you for some rupees. Only had 500 rupee notes so they did well that day. Tried to find the massage oil Raghav asked for but no luck. There were lots of massage oils but not the one he wanted. Maybe different localities have different oils and this one was not to be found in Rishikesh. Anyway found that statue and got the information about the yoga centres. Two out of four is not bad.

Hope to be able to check out some Ayurveda places.

By the river there were amazing statues but the best was yet to come with the evening Arti. First we returned to Homestay for lunch which was high in carbs and a welcome sleep. Meet 12-year-old Sdhart the apple of his mother’s eye. A very charming young man with lovely big brown eyes and a smile of happiness like that of his father.



*Lakshmi Naran Temple*

For the evening Arti is planned and Anju announces that we will go by scouter. “Are you afraid mataji?” she asks. I am called mataji – mother. Very respectfully ji is added to mata. (mother) Feel do not deserve this honour. The last time I was on a scouter was in 1985. When I was immigrating to the UK stopped in Japan. A work colleague put me in touch with his son who was working in Tokyo and we sped through the streets on a motor bike. Just hold on to me and lean with me as we go round the corners,” was his advice. Followed this advice 36 years later.

It is a truly amazing experience. The evening started off in low gear. Then the music got louder, the flames went higher and higher, the chanting reached a good volume and the people sang along in dignified manner.



Situated on the banks of the holy river Ganges, Triveni Ghat is the biggest ghat in Rishikesh. 'Maha Aarti' happens every evening at Triveni Ghat. Triveni Ghat plays an essential role in Hindu Mythology and is also mentioned in the epics Ramayan and Mahabharat. The Triveni Ghat is also where the chattri (funeral memorial) of Lord Krishna was constructed. In fact, the ghat is considered to be the cremation ground for the great Lord Krishna. Along with the holy dips, the devotees also make offerings to the river in the form of milk, while feeding the fishes in the Ghat too. The evening aarti is also called the Maha Aarti and is conducted from 6:00 - 7:00 pm every day. Aarti is a Hindu religious ritual of worship, a part of puja, in which light (usually from a flame) is offered to one or more deities. Aarati(s) also refers to the songs sung in praise of the deity, when the light is being offered. It is one of the most popular and well-attended rituals of the town. The Maha Aarti is performed by chanting bhajans in praise of the lord and is celebrated by beating electrifying drums and rhythmic bells. The prayers offered to the lord are melodious and hypnotising, allowing you to feel the energy of the lord and connect with him. The devotees release small floating leaf boats with oil lamps or gleaming diyas in them. The entire river is dotted with these little burning flames and the beauty of yellow flames in the dark water under the twinkling night sky is unparalleled.

<https://www.holidify.com/places/rishikesh/triveni-ghat-sightseeing-3432.html>



Feel like a tea after the aarti and Anju takes me to a chaikana (tea shop) on the river and we drink a milky tea with a fair amount of sugar. Gaze at the river, the eternal river. It has seen so much of India's history and the history of the world and will continue to do so until the end of time.

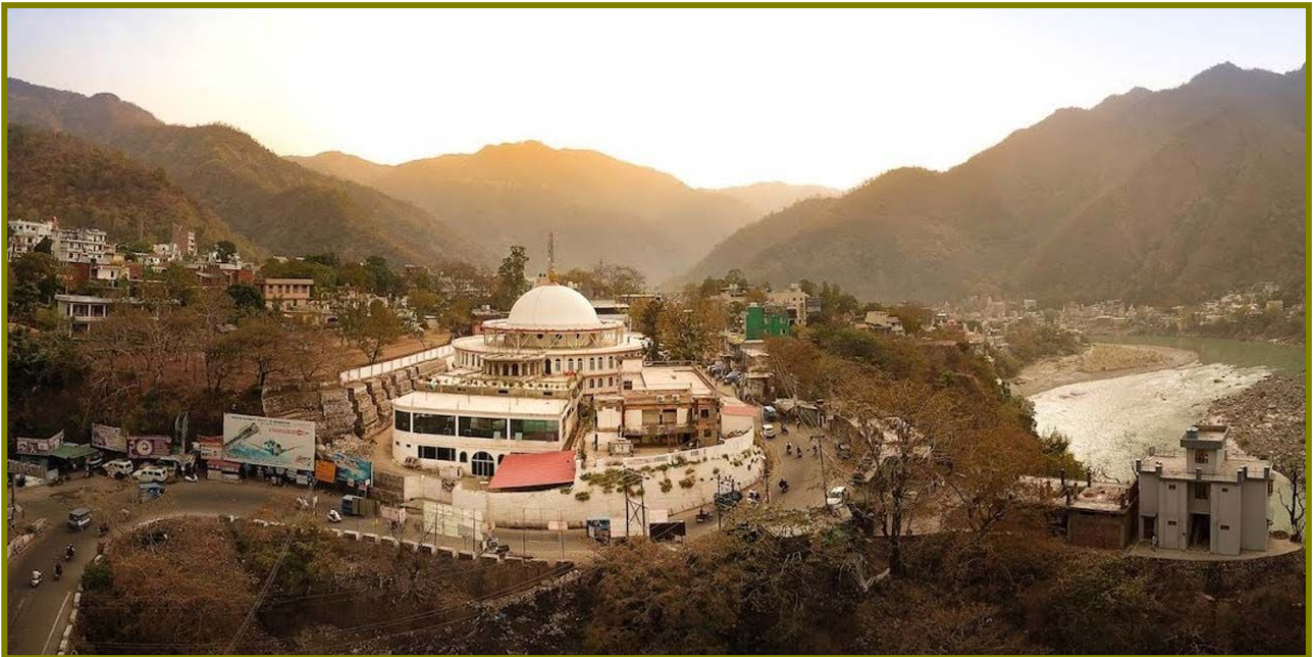
Bedtime is early in the Prakash household. Nine pm or ten at the latest. The statue was delivered as promised. I counted the money then gave it to Om to check then gave it to the shop attendant. Felt happy this mission was accomplished for Raghav. Om gets up a 4 am to meditate and his delightful chanting starts at 7 am a good time for me to get up. Breakfast is at 8 am and then we are on the road for sightseeing.

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13th September, 2022

## Krishna Temple, Beatles Ashram

Think Anju sensed I was not impressed by temples where it is not possible to sit and meditate and the Krishna temple we visited today was an ideal place for sitting quietly with chairs well placed at the back for those who are not able to manage long periods on the floor – even if it is a lovely, polished marble floor. The weather was hot, was drinking lot of water and diet coke but enjoyed every minute of this adventure. Sidhart was with us having a great time and being very helpful and kind.



The statues at the front of the temple were an explosion of colour in marked contrast to the dark statue at the entrance which seemed a bit grim and solemn.

Always meditated in the temples we visited when I could. Had to be careful didn't over do as was also meditating in the morning before getting up.

The next visit was the Beatles Ashram. It meant walking for a while and the sweat was pouring off my body, hair wet, trousers sticking to me. Demolished a medium size bottle of diet coke while Anju and Sidhart had a freshly squeezed orange juice. It looked fine without any ice but they wash the juice making machine with water and could not risk getting ill. Got violently ill in India when I was here in 1980 and drank a juice by the Taj Mahal. Throughout the trip the paranoia about water and uncooked food was high. But at least this time was drinking cappuccinos with milk and they really tasted delicious.

The Ashram was located in the Raja Tiger Reserve. Sidhart assured me that the tigers were kept at bay with a large concrete wall which I did not see. Foreigners were charged 600 rupees to enter the reserve while the locals got in for a lot less. A common practice it seems in India and Africa which I always resent. Foreigners spend a lot of money just to get to these countries and they are not sitting on a pot of gold.

The walk to the ashram is in delightful countryside greenery with well maintained paths. Sadly the same cannot be said for the ashram which has been reclaimed by nature. Plants have taken over all the buildings which are in various states of disrepair. The tourist authority has placed sign boards in front of most of the collapsing structures. Especially disheartening was the notice board which read printing press.



It was here that Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's book *The science of being and the art of living* was printed. It's all there, decaying: the small meditation cells, the kitchen, the post room, the bathrooms and toilets, the large lecture room – all reclaimed by nature.

But despite its dilapidated state the complex had an aura of magic and peace harking back to the long gone 1960s when the Beatles travelled to India. In 1977 I learned Maharishi's transcendental meditation in a quaint hold house on the Terrace in Wellington, New Zealand. It was my last year at secondary school and I was a mess, stressed out, worried about passing the University Bursary exam. My class mates were convinced meditation was for social misfits who could not face life and one of the teachers told me if I wanted to meditate it should be on verses in the bible and the holy name of Jesus. My parents had no idea that the dysfunctional family home was the cause of a lot of my grief and kept asking if the people I learned to meditate with didn't ask what I was doing there. Still remember my teacher an American lady called Joey. There was also the feisty Katherina who had a lovely daughter and an ageing father, Shona a brilliant but extremely shy girl who married another TM practitioner Barry. And there was Rod a very good looking blond guy and Mike with his black hair and deep set eyes. I met one of my first boy friends Alex there and we used to meditate holding hands which was not recommended as it was meant to be a solitary practice.

There were video tapes of Maharishi's lectures and residential courses in Paraparaumu in a beach guest house where I was first introduced to vegetarian food. The centre then moved to a large building once a convent near the zoo and I walked up the hill to the lectures and meditation sessions. Even learned the siddhi's for which I paid \$2000 to the chagrin of my father who told me he regretted signing the permission for me to learn meditation.

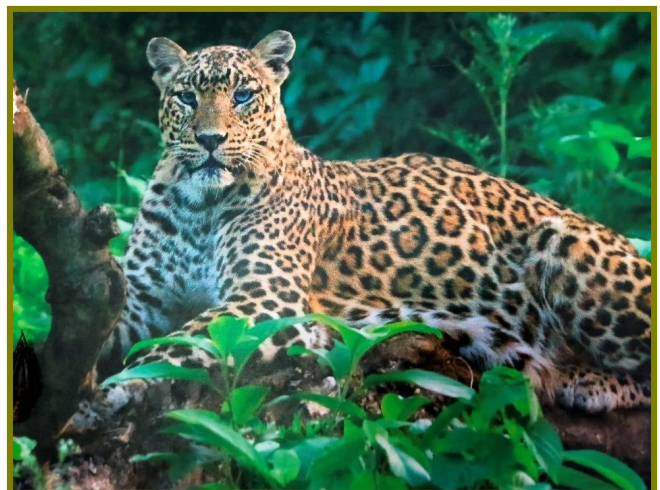
The TM got me fired from a holiday job when I shared some literature about it with a work colleague who had high blood pressure. My parents were not impressed with a cultural evening I invited them to and my father complained he was not allowed to smoke outside the lecture hall. Tried also to arrange a lecture at my place which was quite well attended but my mother was angry that the participants only seemed interested in the food afterwards.



They were good days and I was very committed until my perceived lack of progress led me to quit and I promptly forgot the siddhis I had learned. But the practice of meditation stayed with me and was revived when I joined Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC) in 2003. It was then after many years as a human rights activist that I realised change can only come from within, from a change in the heart.



There was a shaded resting place with a view of the Ganges at the top of a slight incline and I lay down on the bench for half an hour. Didn't sleep. Anju and Sidhart were happy for the rest. They were not feeling the heat.



After the rest there was more walking round the ashram buildings and a visit to the picture library of memories which included a great picture of a leopard. As close as I would get to one on this trip. Understand that there is a tiger sanctuary in Haridwar where it is possible to go on a tiger safari but there is no guarantee of seeing a tiger. They seem to be like the elusive cheetahs on the posters for safaris in the Masai Mara reserve in Kenya. But according to Maniram it is very possible to see a leopard crossing the road at night. Never travelled at night on the roads in Uttarakhand which was probably best as many are narrow with sheer drops down large gullies.

Travelling is a common inspiration behind many artistic creations. Not only the change of scenery but also the exposure to different cultures and traditions rejuvenates the mind. The Beatles' trip to India was one such creative stimulator that was marked by a hyper-productive phase in their decade long career.

The quartet emerging during the crucial 1960s or what is known as the 'counterculture movement' rose to the pinnacle of success too quickly and too fast. Always a casual bunch, as Paul McCartney would later state in numerous interviews, The Beatles found themselves leading the cultural sector of the movement before they could process anything. It would be a lie to claim that they didn't enjoy their wild popularity, of course they did, but fame has its demands, and the foremost among them is to compromise on privacy. Ambushed by paparazzi and constantly interviewed by the media, the group was gasping for some fresh air and peace of mind.

The idea of an India trip came to them in a concretised form when in August 1967, they attended the spiritual guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's seminar on Transcendental Meditation in Bangor, Wales. George Harrison's long-standing enchantment with India and its culture added a motive in favour of the trip. "We have all the money you could ever dream of. We have all the fame you could ever wish for. But it isn't love. It isn't health. It isn't peace inside, is it?" Harrison said to Saltzman. A conditioned society indoctrinated with the stereotypical binaries associated with the West and the East typically didn't approve of this idea. The group, however, desperate to find a leader/guru, as per Donovan, shut out all the noise and prepared for their journey.

Travelling in two groups, the team was joined by John Lennon, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr's wives, McCartney's girlfriend, Donovan Leitch, Mia Farrow, Mike Love, ex-road manager Mal Evans along with few other friends and family members. A huge team of reporters followed the band as well, intent on prying on their retreat, but was kept outside the ashram fences. According to Donovan's account, the first meeting with the yogi was steeped in awkward silence until Lennon pulled one of his antics and patted the yogi on his head saying "there's a good little guru," which tickled everyone present to their core.

Their days were dedicated to the practice of stage four of the seven steps of consciousness, which was "pure" transcendental meditation. Mystic as it might sound, the basis of this practice was more scientific than religious with the aim of building up concentration and alertness. Dressed in traditional clothes procured from the nearby Indo-Tibetan markets of Mussoorie and Dehradun they adapted themselves to the spiritual Indian way of life – a life that focuses on the non-attachment to the material world which is nothing but a *Maya* (illusion). The meditation practice sparked a healthy competition between the band members who would try to outdo each other. Their evenings were sometimes spent listening to the gurgling river nearby or the sitar cassettes which they collected and occasionally singing in Harrison's room, who would sit with a harmonium.

Their time at the ashram stirred their artistic sensibilities, inspiring them to write some thirty-plus songs. As Lennon later said, "We wrote about thirty new songs between us. Paul must have done about a dozen. George says he's got six, and I wrote fifteen. And look what meditation did for Ringo – after all this time he wrote his first song." Most of the songs were included in their 1969 album, popularly known as *The White Album*, the Beatles' only double album.

However, the experience at the ashram was met with varying degrees of interest by the band members. Lennon and Harrison were definitely the star students, while McCartney and Starr struggled with their distractions. "The way George is going, he'll be flying a magic carpet by the time he's forty," said Lennon. At the same time, Lennon's wife Cynthia commented that her husband was "evangelical in his enthusiasm for the Maharishi" and became "increasingly cold and aloof" during the procedure. Missing their prim and proper life, Starr and his wife left the ashram on March 1st followed by McCartney later in the month who was missing the hustle and bustle of public life.

Lennon and Harrison's departure on April 11-12 is steeped in deep controversies that should not be subjected to light discussions. Tensions were brimming with the arrival of Mardas who allegedly plotted schemes of varying degrees against the yogi. But it was Mia Farrow's complaint about the Maharishi's inappropriate behaviour with her and probably with other female students that served as an ultimatum. Though in other versions it was said that they were asked to leave by Maharishi

because there were infringements in the ashram protocol which banned drugs and alcohol. In fact, the Beatles' later claimed the severe allegations against Maharishi to be false, which made the entire event complex and problematic at different levels.

The ashram that witnessed such a noteworthy visit now stands isolated and dilapidated in the arms of the Himalayas resembling an old woman who would flood occasional visitors with warmth and burst into tales of the yore. Situated in the State of Uttarakhand, Rishikesh is a raw beauty sitting on the laps of the holy Ganges river and is hidden from the eyes of the world by the circling mighty snow-covered Garhwal Himalayas and lush green forest. The ashram, abandoned by Maharshi in the 1970s, was called 'Chaurasi Kutia' meaning 84 huts owing to its elaborate structure.

The property became the victim of government politics for some time but nevertheless maintained its artsy vibe. It has been a site of illustrious graffiti since 1990 where trespassers decorated the wall as a tribute to the Beatles. Encouraged by the street artist Pan Trinity Das, the government, after initial hesitation, officially opened the ashram to the public in 2015. In February 2016, The Beatles Ashram Mural Project saw Das along with four other artists producing murals for what used to be the ashram's lecture hall. Marking the 50th anniversary of Lennon and Harrison's visit to Rishikesh, the celebration in the Chaurasi kutia followed the example of the two-year Liverpool museum exhibition.

<https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-beatles-ashram-left-behind-india-travel/> Pubali Dasgupta



We left the ashram and took the scenic walk back to the path that would connect us with the main road from where we took a tuk tuk back to the house. Well not quite all the way but to the start of the hill. It was not a ghost ashram. It was a building which had seen its hey day and stood as a relic to a proud chapter in the history of the introduction of meditation to the West.

Talked a lot to Om about the magic Vashit Cave and he organised a car for me and Anju to make another visit tomorrow. I was pleased but slightly concerned. Would the magic still be there a second time? I should have known that the magic spell cast by the Ganges it always there.

Sent an email to Raghav about the yoga places. It was the first time I had used a computer since I was in New Delhi. Yahoo mail would not log on but managed from gmail. Om did not seem to big a big fan of computers but he had to use one for his work.

14th September, 2022

## Second visit to Vashisht Cave

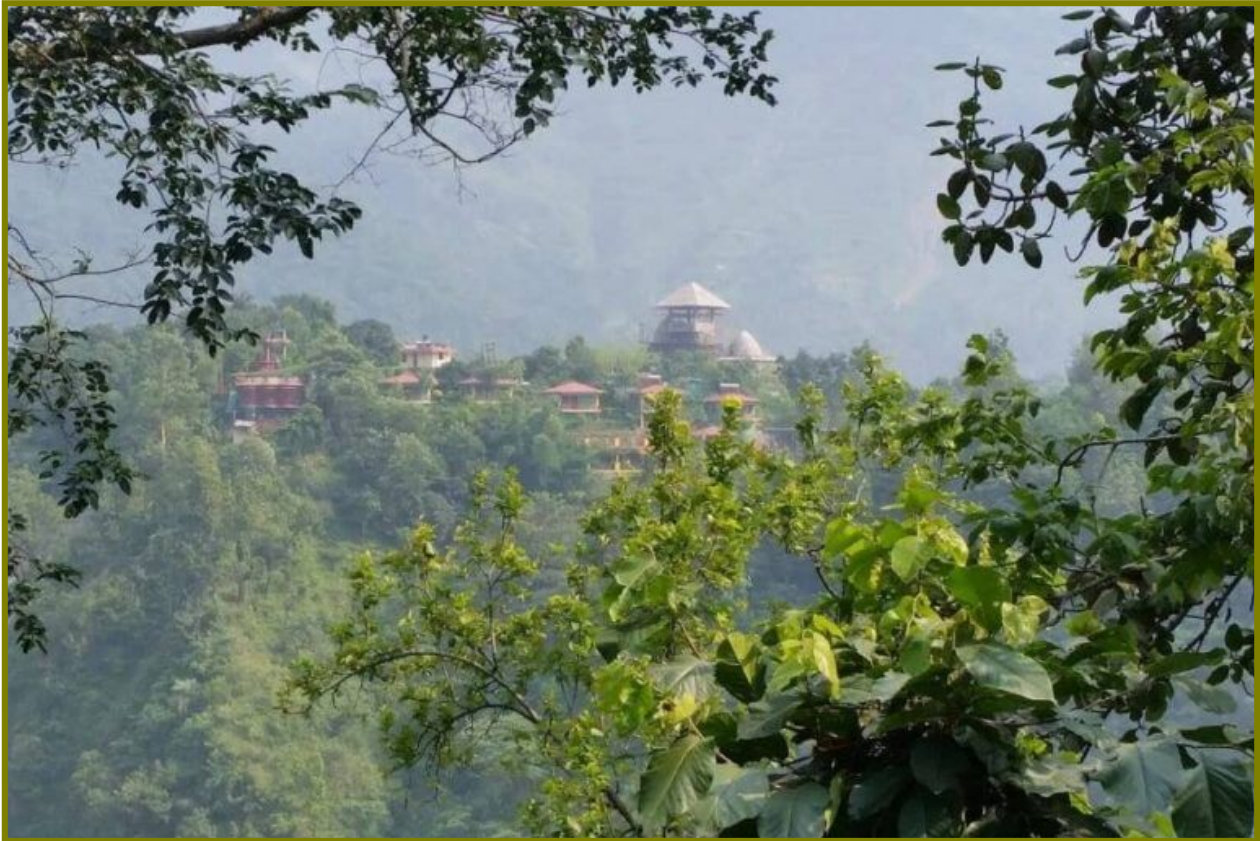
The taxi arrived at 7:30 am. Breakfast was soup and a banana. Was slowly getting used to the Ayurvedic food and not putting on weight. The sweating probably saw to that. The drive is only about half an hour and we were at the cave in the morning. No sign of the man who wanted to know my age. How many other people has he asked that question?

Again there were no visitors in the cave but a monk was reciting from the holy book and a lady was chanting with him. The chanting had a calming effect and took me to another world. It was nothing like the chants Naresh used to play on YouTube before he started work. The sage was looking at me from the picture with his eternal, never changing smile as a faint candle lit up his immaculate face, old face but glowing with glow of a young man.



*View from Ashram of Ganges*

Time passed quickly. This time I put my trainers on for a walk across the stones. At the second cave ate a banana and some delicious Indian snacks and watched the world go by. Anju said she forgot herself, forgot everything. She was happy to be here and I was happy to be with her. Sometimes she looked sad and contemplative but today she was really happy. She made the comment that being with me was like a family outing and not a tourist trip. As we left the ashram the man in the white dothi appeared. Don't know if he remembered me but his face lit up and he started extolling the virtues of the Baghavad Gita. When I come back here there will be more than 500 rupees in an envelope for him. He shows the joy that a belief in Krishna can bring.



*Ashram*

The taxi was waiting for us and we drove to the start of a swing bridge across the Ganges. It was a longish walk, mostly uphill after we crossed the river. Passed the main gate of the ashram and arrived at another gate. The man who opened it directed us to an overgrown path which took us to another gate and we were inside the complex.

Anju explained that I would like to see the ashram as I was thinking of staying there for a few days sometime in the future. It didn't seem to be a problem and we were taken to a dining room with a view onto the river. A middle aged man appeared and offered lemon tea. Anju spoke to him while I picked out a post card with a painting of the Himalayas by Carol Fraser author of *The singing rocks of Rahla*.

A look at one of the rooms followed. It was a pleasant room with two single beds, a toilet and shower and a small living room with a writing table and a sofa. Fine to stay in. No two buckets to wash with. Another view on the river from the room.

Was assured that my bags would be carried to this ashram up the narrow path. A great place for a few days to get to know one's true self and lose the ego in the silence. This was becoming a life changing trip. Decided to spend the beginning of each February at the Anand Lok Ashram. It is \$44 a night as opposed to \$300 in the Glass House.

Tried to visit the bookshop near Homestay with Sidhart to see if I could find Vedic Mathematics by Jagadguru Shankaracharya. The man said the shop was closed and asked us to leave. It was a strange experience as he did not lock the shop after we left.

Early bedtime. Looking at WhatsApp messages and emails. Maybe I needed a break from the computer and the cosmic arranged that with the power surge in New Delhi.

15th September, 2022

## Trivani ghat, shopping, art shop, Bharat Temple, walk by river

Time is passing fast. It is my second to last day in India. Then I will be back in the UK with no one to call me mataji and to take care of my every whim. I will miss India.



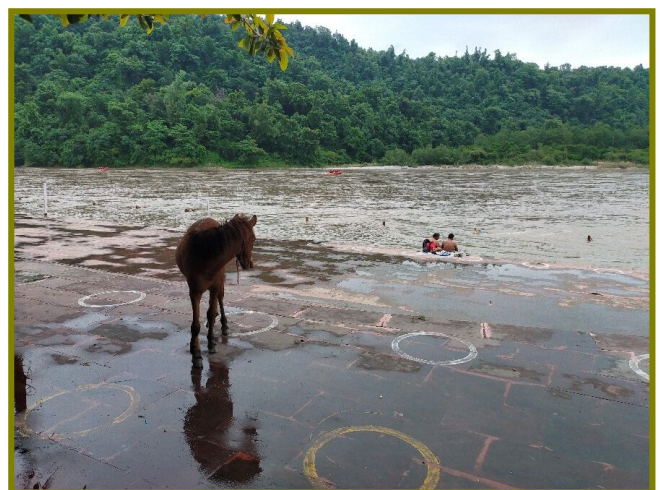
It was a shopping day both for me and Anju. Anju went to the market to buy vegetables. Managed to find some oranges. Got some small presents before we made our way to the Trivani ghat with great views of the Ganges and time for another paddle. The proper bathing will come on the next trip.

The river side was amazing with its trees and horses. Just the place to sit and contemplate and drink a coke which Sidhart lovingly brought for me. I was very happy he was enjoying his day off school on the tour, always ready to serve. He will make a great tourist guide as his father has observed.

The horses are a welcome break from the cows. They do not have the same arrogance and they don't piss and shit all over the place. They are free spirits with their manes blowing in the gentle breeze. Luckily today Rishikesh did have a gentle breeze which was more than welcome. After a pleasant stroll along the Ganges it was time for a temple visit. This time it was the Shri barat Mandir with its souvenir sellers.

I enjoyed the visit but did not like the commercialism associated with temple visits.

The evenings at Homestay were always pleasant evenings with a wonderful family. Anju was a skilled cook. Rotis appeared from her magic hands and so did delicious sweets made of ghee and sugar and flour and rolled lovingly into round balls. Om sat at the other end of the large table in the kitchen, sometimes speaking and sometimes just looking with his perceptive eyes and engaging smile, understanding everything. He was the perfect host who shared his devout Hinde life style. He also chanted in the evening the same melodious chant of the morning with the glint of happiness in his eyes. Why can't all Hindus be like him? Why do some of them politicise their religion and hate Muslims. Jive Lord Ram becomes a rallying cry of animosity. Om does not have a hateful bone in his toned, fit body. He is the best advertisement for enlightened Hinduism.



There was always delicious sweet tea and snacks and a variety of Ayurvedic dishes and mineral water which I brought from my room. Sometimes a monkey would jump on the trees visible through the kitchen window. Sometimes monkeys would sit on the large tree in front of the house. Om advised not to feed them. They have all they need in nature, plants and vegetation. They don't need people to interfere with what nature has provided for them. He also argued that the land provides all the food people need. If you cut a plant it will grow more leaves. It will thank you. But if you kill an animal that is it, end of story.

Tried arguing that we have a digestive system which can handle meat and we are omnivores and to go vegetarian is to go against our nature. He replied that I did not want to change. If we ingest meat we ingest the animal instincts of aggression which may be necessary for cut throat business but not for spiritual development. Told him that when I was not eating meat my iron count was low. He replied that he never went to the doctor. God kept him healthy and if he got sick that was God's will. Neither Om nor Anju took the Covid vaccine yet Om helped many friends during the peak of Covid in Uttarakhand. His faith in God (Krishna) was unshakable. And his mission in life was to show tourists the Himalayas which he described as a temple. I am sure his lectures on self realisation and non attachment were as good as any you would find in a traditional yoga establishment.

16th September, 2022

### **Shopping, bought book on Vedic astrology, art shop, temple, dinner with Sidhart and Anju**

And now it was the last day in Rishikesh. There was so much more to see, so many more temples and nature walks. Did not go to the waterfall at the back of the house and it was raining and Anju was worried I would slip. She is the leader on short treks three to five hours which are a must on my next trip. A youngish Italian man joined us for breakfast.



Today the priority was the Vedic arithmetic book. Finding the bookshop was a lot of fun. It was a branch, the main branch of the shop near Homestay where the shopkeeper virtually threw us out. He was having family problems and his brother apologised for him.

There was a small shop selling paintings. The artist was creating a mandala which I loved but it was already sold. Made a mental note to get one next time I was in town. He said he could make me one for 5,000 rupees. If I did not find the arithmetic book Roy would get a small painting.

Off we went down the narrow lane jam packed with shops. Did not go into any of them as it is difficult to leave without buying anything and did not want a repeat of the experience in the carpet shop.

We reached the book shop, the book was there. Sidhart chose a book about the historic Krishna which was very interesting. Did not know that Krishna was a real person, born in a prison, who had a hard life and who lived and died like every mortal human being. But he was also an incarnation of God. So many wonderful spiritual books. Rishikesh is definitely the place for spirituality which is experienced as well as being read about.

The final temple was magic in its delightful pink colour and equally colourful statues. The priest was welcoming, I got my red mark in the middle of my forehead and parted willingly with 500 rupees. But when he asked for more for his food I balked. Got a receipt for the 500 and only gave him 200 for his food.

The statues in the temple were amazingly colourful and welcoming. There was only statue of an angry Shiva with a black face that made me feel uncomfortable.



*Shri makar wahini genja ji*

The monk was quite happy to let me sit and meditate when he relieved me of my money. Photography was not allowed but sneaked in a photo and then sat quietly. Anju and Sidhart accommodated my meditations and sat quietly themselves as well.

We returned to Homestay. Walked up the hill. Was getting used to the small shops selling water and sweets and the yoga centres and the dogs, many mongrels sleeping seemingly innocently by the side of the road. They were rabies on four legs and I resolved to get some rabies vaccines before the next trip. You can get rabies from dogs, cats, bats, monkeys, squirrels – most animals on four legs that live in India. The dinner for the four of us was not to be. Om was out with the Italian gentleman who he took to the Vashistha cave. When I asked later if he liked the cave Om replied: “He is still young.” G guessed that meant he did not really appreciate the spiritual element – not yet. Of course India was totally different from the glass and concrete of Dubai which he had just left. Thought of stopping in Dubai on the way to India but India was my destination so decided to just head there. Money was also a consideration.



Dinner was a relaxed pleasant affair. Ordered an omelette and had to remove the necklace which said I was a vegetarian: no meat or eggs, onions or garlic. Sidhart and Anju had noodles. Anju was not happy the women sitting in the table next to us were smoking. She did not want Sidhart exposed to that. Guessed there was more to it than just the smoking. Maybe the dark side of India Om said I did not see but assured me was there: the drugs, the foreigners who do not do their countries proud by getting into drugs. And then there was the Indian who kidnapped a tourists child and demanded a ransom. Om never focused on the dark side and did not talk about politics but he was aware of what was going on and told me now that the Queen was dead the Indians want the diamond in her crown back. “What about non attachment?” I asked. He laughed: “You are very clever mataji!”



*The last day in Rishikesh*

Om was back at the house. We talked briefly about my next trip. Anju said philosophically: “You don’t decide, God decides.” She was 100 percent right. This trip was not meant to be in 2020. It was meant to be now and what a trip it was.

My bags was packed. Anju and Om took an interest in the scales. He weighed ten stone, Anju weighed 11. She liked my hair dryer. Thought of giving it to her but then it needed an adaptor.

The bronze statue would go in the hand luggage. Could not risk it not reaching London and Air India did lose my luggage once before so it was not worth the risk.

Took some photos of Anju, Om and Sidhart. They also have an 18-year-old daughter studying in Dehdran, the capital of Uttarakhand who I did not meet.

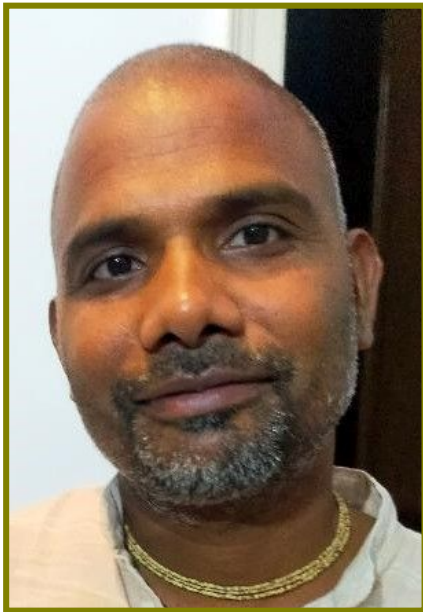
And so to bed for a 5:30 am start when the taxi would come and take me to the airport in Dehdran. Maniram was talking about taking me to the capital for sight seeing. Not this time round. Had enough of being on the road for long periods.

17th September, 2022

## **The journey home: flight to New Delhi from Dehdran, then New Delhi to London**

Got up at the crack of dawn. Well before the crack of dawn. It was still dark at 5 am. Anju surfaced at 5:15 and we walked down the drive to the beginning of the road. Om was nowhere to be seen. He was meditating no doubt. He told me he got up at 4 am to meditate. Sent him a goodbye message on WhatsApp. Gave Anju a hug. She felt like my sister and I felt I was part of the family. Remembered the first night at Om Homestay when they waited for me to finish my meal as guests eat first and then the family. Was really glad they stopped that after the first day and we ate together. Well mainly me Anju and Sidhart. But Om was always there with his wise words and eternal smile. How I treasure those moments in the kitchen, the early morning rises, the Hare Krishna chant, the flute playing.

The cosmic brought me to this wonderful household. And now I have an Indian family. I had an Indian family in London but it went a bit sour. Now I will let the feelings of the past go. "Let it go", Om said. Diplomatic relations will be restored. No malice, no resentment, only love in my heart. May I bring the peace of the Himalayas to London.



*Om Prakash - then*



*Om Prakash - now*

It was a short drive through the forests. Daylight was coming. The airport was incredibly modern. Had to partly unwrap the statue. It was very heavy. Felt this would be a problem but Air India solved it beautifully by putting me in a wheel chair in New Delhi and taking me to the plane.

The flight to New Delhi was short. In New Delhi the wait was from 8:30 am until 2 pm. The prices of the big city shocked me. Six hundred rupees for a coffee and a cake. Last night's dinner was only 500 rupees. Told the Sikh guy in Starbucks about this and he just laughed.

Read the *Hindustan Times*. The dark side. Two Dalit girls were raped and hung from a tree to make it look like suicide. India's dark side is very dark but light side is pure goodness: an amazing religion (except when it is misused for unscrupulous ends), warm hearted welcoming people, magnificent scenery, the peace of the Himalayas, a life changing trip.

Thank God I was not seated next to the emergency exit this time round. Sat next to a youngish man who was talkative. It was his visit to London. He worked for an IT company and was staying for six months.

Showed me a picture of his little four-year-old who he was missing. He asked a lot of questions about London, getting a work permit for his wife, the night clubs.

He said not to worry about not wearing the necklace if I ate meat but it did not seem right not to follow the protocol. So far I had not eaten meat and was served a vegetarian meal on Air India.



The man watched a film about a gay man and a lesbian woman who married to keep their parents happy. In the end their parents discovered the truth and accepted their son and daughter as they were. The film ended with a gay demonstration and the rainbow flag. It all seemed a bit over the top.

The flight was early but the cases were a long time coming. My newly found friend was getting very impatient. Roy booked me a cab and I was in touch my text with Mr Kader the cab driver. He was Algerian and we had an animated discussion about the Polisario Front and Middle Eastern politics. A totally new reality which was not that welcome after the peace of the Himalayas. Both would have to exist in a happy symbiosis. Like Om said, there is London and there is Rishikesh and the Himalayas and both have to be experienced. He is so wise, so thoughtful, so understanding. It is an honour and a privilege to have him as a friend, a fellow traveller and guide on the spiritual path.

## After Rishikesh

The next day Roy came to my place in the terrace near Lancaster Gate in Hyde Park. We unwrapped the \$300 carpet and he told me this was a favourite trick of tour guides and they get a good commission from the shop. Looked at the presents: the small necklace for Shirley and Jessica at the Rosicrucian centre and also for Sue, Elizabetha and Deila at the tai chi centre. Key rings for Marco at tai chi who said I should buy a present for everyone. For the master and Egon a nicely painted mask and for Jono who asked for a turban a truly magnificent turban – not the piece of cloth Sikhs tie around their heads. For Naresh and for Luke who has a small altar in his historic house in Leyton and dancing Shiva – a nice one for me as well. Long may he dance. There was interest in my trip from the friends. Now the social engagements will follow: a visit to Wajdan and her daughter Nina who live in Banbury and to Sabah Mukhtar the Arab lawyer who assured me it was fine to use two passports, one for leaving and entering the UK and one for leaving and entering India. I feel I owe him a nice lunch.

Every morning I play the Hare Krishna chant. The lovely WhatsApp photos and videos keep coming from Om and now I am also communicating with Anju. See Naresh in his shop from time to time and there is no more resentment. I have let it go.



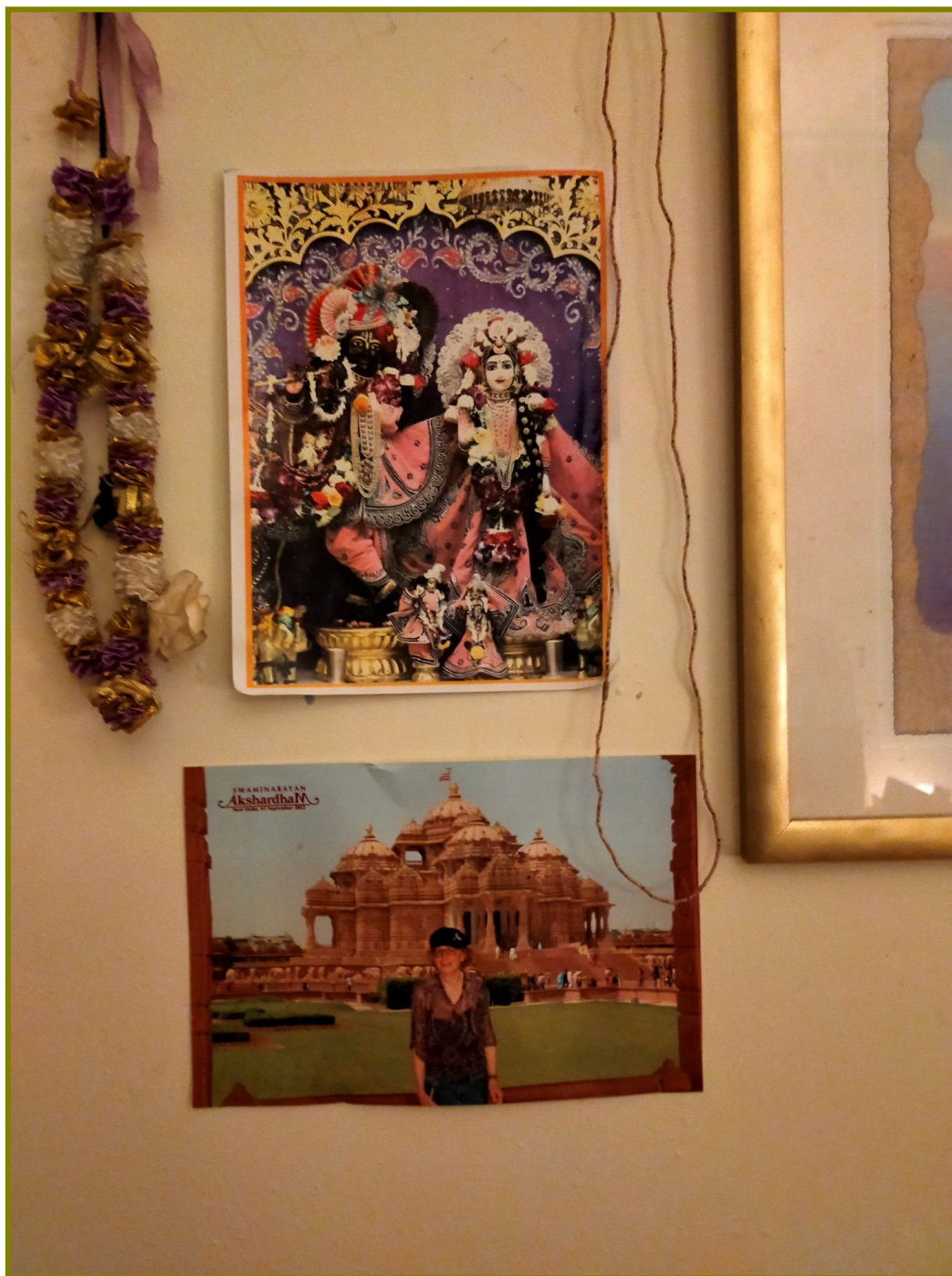
The photos from the trip adorn my room, my own spiritual haven with the magnificent plant which gives life and energy.



Dhanvantri is gracing Baliga Ayurveda Studio.

And there are the dreams and planning for the next trip in February, if it pleases the cosmic. Remember Anju's words: "You don't decide, God decides." Indeed he does. Am re-reading *Autobiography of a Yogi* with pictures of the masters in my room.

The necklace which tells the world I am a vegetarian is hanging next to the picture of Krishna.



And the poem from Yogananda:

The storm of *maya* stilled  
By the magic wand of intuition deep  
Present, past, future no more for me  
But ever-present all-flowing I, I everywhere