

## **Holy River, Holy Men, and Holy Shit**

Rishikesh. Lower Himalayas, India

Eons ago, an Indian king petitioned the goddess Gunga to descend from the heavens and share her waters with humanity. Impressed by his many prayers and severe penances, she agreed. The force of her descent, however, would have destroyed the land had Lord Shiva not saved the day. He let her waters fall on his head and disperse through his matted hair, easing their way to earth and creating the five sacred rivers of India, of which the Gunga is primary.

The place where the Ganges tumbles out of the Himalayas and onto the populated plains is the area around Haridwar, one of Hinduism's most holy cities, as well as a few miles upriver at Rishikesh, yoga and guru capital of the world. Many Westerners got their first glimpse of Rishikesh when TV cameras followed the Beatles there in the '60's as they found their guru and pursued Transcendental Meditation.

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In Rishikesh, temples and ashrams line both sides of the river, and hills tuck this town in on all sides, making it one of the most pleasant places in India. The ashrams are large compounds, some almost park-like, that usually have a resident guru and a schedule of classes, talks, yoga sessions, chanting, and worship times. I chose to stay at the Green Hotel and not bind myself to a fixed schedule.

The whole town is strictly vegetarian. Not even eggs are available. Luckily I like vegetarian Indian food, but many Westerners are baffled by the menu. Though printed in

English letters, the menu uses only Hindi terms. How would a newcomer know that “mutter paneer” is “cheese cubes and peas in a tomato sauce”?

One night I stepped into a restaurant to find only one other person there, a woman from Brazil, and waiters who spoke almost no English. After overhearing her frustrated attempts to order food, I came to the rescue and fixed her up with “mutter paneer” and steamed rice. I then gave her a tour of the menu (she spoke English as all Westerners traveling alone in India must) and wrote down key words on her notepad. She practically cried she was so grateful, for she had subsisted on greasy fried rice, the only thing she knew how to order, for the last three days while taking classes at the Divine Life Society’s ashram.

She told me that my kindness had just lopped off one nasty life for me from the turning of the Great Wheel. I know I could use that indulgence. I ran into her the next day and she, in turn, went out of her way to show me a very peaceful place to meditate along the busy river. A life off the Wheel for her, I hope.

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Yes, holy cows do roam the streets, block traffic, and yield products from their posteriors to be used as fertilizer and fuel. All over India, people seize upon this material, shape it into nice patties and plaster it on walls to dry. The more shit you have, the better off you are.

There remains, however, that period between bovine gift giving and the trip to the drying wall that proves a bit treacherous for us pedestrians. I thought I had mastered the art of hop-scotching through Rishikesh’s narrow streets, but alas, I am imperfect in that skill. After an unfortunate foot placement one night, I observed irritation arising in me (note the Buddhist outlook in this Hindu town). Damn! I could hardly truck through the

hotel lobby like that, but, what to do? There were no grassy areas to serve as scrubbing mats and no water faucets nearby.

But there was one big source of water at hand—the River. Under cover of darkness I crept down to its edge, but hesitated to ease my shoe in. The river was holy; would my action be desecration? Is disrespect only in the mind? If so, I was home free for I meant no affront. But the shoe was made of leather! Holy Dead Cow! What if I were caught? (Seriously, five Untouchables were lynched recently because they had slaughtered and butchered a cow – sold to them by Hindus.)

Well, something had to clean the shoe, and it might as well be the Ganges. Besides, it was only one shoe.

After cleansing the shoe, I snuck back to the roadway and blithely headed toward the hotel. But as I eyed glistening peanut brittle at a bazaar stall, retribution struck and my other shoe found its way into holy mess. This time I shook most of it off and did the thorough cleaning in my hotel bathroom, for I dared not perturb Mother Gunga again.

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I found my spot. Just five minutes away from my hotel and bazaar busyness, cement benches sheltered by shade trees line the river's edge. It is there that I daily read, write, stare blankly into space, and breathe fresh mountain air. For variety and exercise, I stroll the pathways along the river, visit the next town, and return. A sadhu sits/lives just behind "my" bench under a large tree, and periodically we have a brief conversation in English.

Let me say a bit more about sadhus, the men who seek the Divine directly on their own and hope that their hard life will gain them great merit. They're everywhere in this area. In orange robes they walk the forest paths, line the streets of the town, squat in front of temples, and occasionally a few of them offer chillum for sale. The word

chillum, which technically refers to a type of pipe, is used here also as what the sadhus actually smoke - a combination of tobacco and hashish or marijuana. I am not tempted. Signs in English and Hindi warn visitors to avoid such sadhus, adding that a number of people have been murdered or gone missing after associating with them.

There are surely more sadhus here per lotus pad than any place in India. I have a sneaking suspicion that foreigners and Indian pilgrims who come to Rishikesh are more generous in alms-giving than elsewhere. Generally the pilgrims are on a spiritual quest, and giving to the poor is a time-honored practice for acquiring good karma (Catholics, read “indulgences”). Somewhere I read that it is especially beneficial to give to the beggar who irritates you the most. I think certain beggars have read the same literature.

Actually, I take that back, about Rishikesh anyway. Most sadhus here don't actively beg, but sit with their palms open waiting for food or coins. Everyday at noon, 20-30 of them line up near one particular temple for a free lunch of rice and lentils. There is another way to get food too. Traditionally, an “educated” sadhu will be an itinerant preacher who teaches the wisdom of the ages in return for his meals, though not for shelter. They sleep outside, sometimes on “my” bench!

The other day the sadhu behind my bench called to me and asked if I would sit under his tree and ward off cows that might disturb his belongings while he went to the river for water. My first thought was, “But I might lose *my* bench spot.” Pettiness hovers ever so close. Of course I obliged him after my initial hesitation. I received my share of stares from both Indians and Westerners alike as I sat on the sadhu's blanket under his special tree. I tried to look serene and enlightened (a Westerner who had made it!) but mainly I shooed cows away.

The sadhu returned with an Evian bottle full of Ganges water, and I asked him about his chosen spot. He had been living under that particular tree for twenty years, and

at an earlier location for seventeen, with only his bedroll and a few clothes. Each morning, he would get up, do his toilet, bathe in the lime-green Ganges, exercise (he didn't say what that meant) and return to his tree to seek God (he didn't say what that meant either). Why did he leave his other tree of seventeen years? "Too many money-hungry sadhus around that place. I don't like that. I trust only in God."

A few moments later as I stood to return to my bench, he added, "I could use thirty rupees for sandals." He was barefoot so I gave him fifty rupees (one dollar) and told myself that whether it was for sandals or chillum was none of my business. Once a gift is truly given, we have no say over it.

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Yesterday an Australian girl, probably in her early twenties and traveling alone, sat down on a rock next to me. She ostensibly wanted directions to the post office but didn't seem concerned about getting there. After several minutes of desultory conversation, I guessed something. She simply wanted to be around someone safe, someone who wanted nothing from her, and possibly someone who might have a bit of advice.

"There's just so much to see and do in India," she said wistfully. "I'm afraid I'll miss something."

"You will, and that's ok. You'll get what you get this time, and it'll be just right for you," I replied.

Later: "I think I'm being rude when I ignore the vendors and men on the street who keep calling to me."

"You're not. This is survival. Everybody wants you. If you've said 'no thanks' politely, it is they who are rude when they pester you."

"Some men truly leer at me and I don't know what I'm doing to invite that."

“You’re not doing anything. Some Indians think that all Western women, especially those traveling alone, are ‘easy.’ Try to remember, it’s not about you.”

Some time later, she rose and said, “Thanks for your time. I’ll go to the post office tomorrow.” She headed off to the ashram where she was staying, slightly lighter in her step I like to think.

The psychologist James Hillman once said something like, “If today you (middle agers and older) have not encouraged at least one young person, you have missed your calling as an adult.”

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On my last day in Rishikesh, I collected all my loose coins and dropped them one by one into the hands of the sadhus along my street. Next, I headed for a peaceful, sandy beach area along the Ganges. There I mustered up my resolve, stepped into the icy waters, and finally took the ceremonial plunge. In Rishikesh, one must do that.