

Back in Rishikesh

Now, abhi, now I am in India. Feet having touched the ground yesterday at 2 am, I slept well, once installing earplugs to kill the tic tic tic of the fan in the room next door. I only figured out that this was the likely source of the noise after turning my own fan on this morning. India always surprises me with the new strange sounds. The fan ticks are preferable to 2017's herd of mules' hooves clacking on the cobblestones at 4:30 every morning. Construction crews had to be pre-stocked daily with mortar mix, in anticipation of the workers' arrival.

So, refreshed after as good sleep as possible in a country where the science of acoustics is unheard of, I have my breakfast of four slices of whole wheat toast, butter, jelly, and tea, and head out to the Pundir General Store.

Dharmendra tells me that it is expanded and renovated since last year. There is a plentiful supply of my primary prey – Neem-Clove Toothpaste. Lots of nice ayurvedic soaps, incense, etc. My purchase adds up to 3085 INR, but when I tell the shopkeeper that this is the best toothpaste in the world, he takes the 3000 rupees, and returns the 100 rupee note, telling me “Yes, we know. That's why it's the only kind we sell. One tube free!”

Heading back to my hotel, I am aware of the order in the chaos of the street. People, in a steady stream, weave in and out between parked vehicles, passing trucks, docile cows, chunks, large and small, of broken concrete, and fruit and vegetable carts. I merge into the crowd, not just physically, but my consciousness merges with theirs. A couple passes, he wearing a Latin lettered Sochi tee-shirt, she a Cyrillic version.

Rishikesh, the holy city of yogis, has regained its status as a bustling adventure tourist destination, four years after devastating floods and mudslides.

I am aware of the order in the chaos, and accept my place in it, no longer fearful of crossing the street, or walking in it, a fact of life in the land of scarce sidewalks.



View from Hotel Shiv Vilas 2nd Floor

Hotel Shiv Vilas Impression

March 25, 2019

Having clumsily dropped the unwrapped plastic straw, he turned around, and stepped back to the welcome desk, to retrieve a replacement. All fairly unremarkable, until grimacing, he heartily kicked the first straw under the desk from which it had been removed.

Of modest height, the typically skinny north Indian 20 something, hair brushed to his left from a strongly offset part, cowlicked in the same manner my host's son's relationships were teasing him about last night, must consider himself too high in the social hierarchy to pick up what he dropped.

Another thought breaks into my consciousness. Maybe he was keeping his hands clean. But no, he returns a few minutes later, this time taking a paper napkin from the same piece of movable furniture, before turning in the same careless manner, but this time keeping a grasp on his target.

Sipping my ginger, lemon honey brew, I observe as he follows his supervisor back into the dining room, while they trade familiar chat.

Image at Right: Hotel Shiv Vilas in Rishakesh, entrance to restaurant, where I am now working, as the room I'm in has no desk!



Bhagwat: Day 1



Central dais in the tent erected for the week-long memorial ceremony for my friend's mother.

She passed away a year ago. Several other relatives are being honored alongside, and I was told my mother, who passed away two years ago, would be included if I came. That's my mom's picture second from the left, bottom row. Dharmendra is in the white hat, to the left of the priest.

"The entire week's events will cost \$13,000.00," my friend informed me. It always amazes me how Indians find money for weddings and other rituals, even when things are "very difficult." Even if he has three sisters living, and two brothers, presumably to share some of the cost. The family lost both their mother and the oldest sister in a few short months.

Well, apparently the bricks used to build the above dais aren't a big part of the cost, even though such high-quality bricks are expensive. Because? you might ask. Because my friend plans to sell the bricks that he bought, as well as return the bricks he borrowed from the new hotel construction site next door, at a good profit, because after a week of blessings by seven priests,

these bricks are going to be VERY HOLY and will bring good luck to any building into which they are incorporated.

So what else does the \$13k cover? Well, of course the seven “pandits,” or priests. Some are specialized in chanting, some playing musical instruments, some interpreting scripture, some performing ritual. I suppose it must cover the tent, and crew of people who set up the tent, and brought the 85 mattresses to line the floor, and run the electrical and sound systems. Not to mention dig the small moat that the unexpected rain storm necessitated on Day 2. The food (and cooks) for all the relatives and friends, up to 800 expected on the last of the 8-day event. The full-time sound technician. The special shawls for Krishna’s birthday that were given out on Day 1. The three copies of the giant plastic banner announcing the event. The steel structures supporting the tent itself, as well as several internal platforms. Etc.



My friend’s nephew, Mohit, sits in front of the special holy heifer (virgin cow) dung plastered brick ceremonial stand, prepared for his aunt’s memorial, before it got all the decorations shown above. Mohit is a yoga instructor....

The day started with my understanding that the some of the women standing around waiting to begin the procession to the Ganges to get the holy water were commenting on the fact that I was wearing pink. HAH! I rejoiced that my Hindi was now good enough for me to realize that’s what

they were saying. I managed to respond that “Nobody TOLD me I was supposed to wear yellow.” Which was fine. Because I don’t have any yellow Indian outfits anyway.



Mourners dressed in yellow, on the way to the Ganges from the mourners' home. Supposedly 600 meters, but at a very steep angle down. I cheated and took a scooter ride back.

The morning ceremony lasted about 3 hours, including the walk to and back from the Ganges. I was told we were to fast all day, only eating a small meal in the evening. But then, while the non-mourning guests were being fed a big meal, the fasting mourners were led into a small room and given little bowls of nuts and dried fruit. These Hindus have a different concept of fasting. Or maybe he left out the "e" and really meant feast. Who knows. Because today, Day 2, the "small meal" really was a huge feast. But I didn't have much, as I was coming for a fasting event. We'll see how long I hold out.



Half eaten "small" snack to keep us from starving during the "fast." My pink top is shown in the lower right corner, along with my purple pants!

The afternoon, 3 pm to 6:30 or so, was comprised of the main priest (shown in orange in the top photo) chanting from the Bhagavad Gita, the holy scripture of Hinduism, giving interpretive comments, and musical interludes, of course blasted at full volume on the four banks of three 4-foot speakers each. That made it easier to cover the construction noise from next door.



Women sit on left, men on right. Musician priests at right, main priest at upper left. Balloons and garlands of flowers, posters of Krishna, and other Hindu deities, decorate the tent. Note the professional videographer's rig. Gender separation is only during the public part of the ceremony, the reading of the scripture. The morning pujas are just for family, and all sit together.

Forget the Kool-Aid



Keep your eye on that little pot between the two plates.... From Left, junior priest or pandit, my friend's son, female relative, wife of my friend's older brother, my friend's older brother, who shaved his head and beard after not shaving for six months, in anticipation of this Bhagwat ceremony. The nose of my friend, Dharmendra (white scarf on his head) is poking out from behind the fancy red and tinsel shawl of his wife.

One of my current colleagues sometimes makes fun of himself by admitting he drank the Kool-Aid. Of course that was a sad time that most of us of a certain age remember, when the members of a religious cult drank cyanide laced Kool-Aid and died. Well, I am still alive to write this, so it wasn't cyanide.

But it was a bit of shock to find out what the little pot contained, after my friend, Dharmendra, who has yet to approve a single sugar cane juice vendor, after 4 trips with him over 20 years, had waved his arm at me and the other two western women attending the Bhagwat – to indicate that yes, we should be offered spoons of the blessed holy liquid. It was quite bitter. I figured it was

asofeotida (a special spice used in Indian cooking, whose name is not only casually linked with the work “fetid”). Well, ok. As I have previously noted, India is the land of surprises.

When the priest lifted the jug of golden liquid to fill the pot, the first French woman joked that it was whiskey. But no.

“C’etait l’urine de vache,” the second French woman informed me.

Really? I just drank cow pee?

Yes, it was a shock. For at least a minute. Then I remembered that my Zoroastrian friends had been discussing how the new excessively Americanized generation did not want to try this extremely healthful ritual. Mary Boyce, a reknowned, scholarly writer about the Zoroastrians, said that cow urine was the only disinfectant that the early nomadic herders had available.

Ok. Great. That really made me feel a wonderful relief.

I wonder if drinking the holy water was the cause of the very strange and vivid dreams I had last night. Not scary. Not seemingly prophetic. Just very strange and vivid. And one after another.

Well, if I am still alive to visit my Zoroastrian friends again in the future, I guess I can tell them I survived the ritual of their ancient cousins.

Bhagwat Days 2 and 3



No, that's not the remains of the deceased for whom this big shindig is happening. It's a copy of the Bhagavad Gita, or Song of God, a small, but very important part of Hindu scripture.

Having gone to bed and slept through very strange dreams, I get up and turn on the water heater before the alarm reminds me. Are the dreams a result of having earlier drunk the holy cow urine? Who knows. After discovering that I need a tool that I don't have to open my fancy organic laundry soap, I take my very nice shower, get dressed and climb the 30 degree, plus or minus 20 degree, hill to the tent, arriving 15 minutes after the end of the announced 8:00-8:30 window, to find nobody there but the sound technician. Although on day 3, I arrived at 9, and the puja was in full swing. I was belatedly offered one small drop of the blessed holy liquid, and then we walked around the dais several times for blessings. At 9:15, they took a tea break. I'm not having tea. I will plan to stick to water today.



Puja ceremony. Wives of sons of the deceased wearing fancy nose-rings and beautiful saris.

Anyway, back to Day 2, fifteen minutes after my late arrival, the priests started filing in. Maximum attendees was probably 12. So much for 40 every day. The puja started at 9:20. All was going ok until the rain started. The hired crew was set to the pick-axes and hoes, to create a moat and berm, presumably to keep the carpets dry. That wasn't going to help the roof leaks that I saw on the way out. All told, this morning's ceremony lasted a mere two hours. Dharmendra's brother gave me a few mandarin orange segments, and I braved the rain to walk the 50 meters to the house. No, I didn't run in my flip flops on the wet, intermittently muddy, rough street.



Digging the moat around the tent. Rain damage control. My purse and pillow on my chair.

Dharmendra asked if I wanted food. Definitely not a severe fast. So here I am in the kids' bedroom, staying dry, waiting to go back downstairs to see what they are eating.

It was also pakora (potato fritters), fancy spiced couscous with ghee, coconut chutney, yogurt. Served on big plates. Fairly big portions. Day 3, I will go to my room during lunch. Part of the point of coming was to remind myself that many people go hungry every day, not by choice.



I always love looking at all the different designs and colors of Indian women's outfits. Here I am after the morning puja on Day 5, with Dharmendra's sisters, wife and sister-in-law, and an aunt.

The number of attendees increased for the 3-6:30 pm recitation of the Gita. My swami friend who did the blessing ceremony for my mother when she was in the hospital dying attended. He had to be reminded of who I was. Funny, we spent 3 days together and my appearance is usually memorable to people. Well, it was two years ago. He's 72. He probably has more important things to concern himself with.



The Swami blessed the ceremony with his presence.



Beautiful Day 3 Saris of the brothers' wives



“I ate the apple sari” design. Later, through a young translator, I told her I saw her sari as saying “I’m glad Eve ate the apple” and it turns out she does know the story of Adam and Eve.

Coasting through Day 5

Yesterday was a big day at the Bhagwat. They had an extraneous celebration of Krishna's birthday. There was a big crowd of neighbors, along with a growing number of family members.

The neighbor's baby was enlisted to be Baby Krishna. He never cried during the whole ceremony, including being ogled, then carried in a basket on Dharmendra's head. Dharmendra was dressed up as Vasudeva, Krishna's father. [The story has similarities to that of Moses.](#)



Dharmendra dressed up as Vasudeva, baby Krishna's father, sitting with a very well behaved baby, for the throngs to pay their respects. Indian version of their nativity.

I told Dharmendra I was impressed that his neighbor trusted him to carry the baby on his head. He said it was only because he first had seriously asked himself if he could do it.



Little girl from Rishakesh. She was very happy to see herself on my camera.

I did manage to get a better picture of the Swami. He looked really fed up with all the commotion. I bet he was wishing he had stayed in his cave, where he lived for 20 years, some years back.



This Swami is considered to be a true Saint.

It was a long day, and when it was all over, they had dinner. Dharmendra said 8, 8:30, so I decided to stay. Of course it was 9. The food was more varied than what I would have at the hotel. The servings are always for family style. So I can't finish a serving of lentils (dahl), raita (yogurt with chopped veggies) and a chapati. I'd rather have rice to sop up the soupy dahl, but they don't serve a little dish like the Chinese restaurants in the US do. I can't finish a serving of lentils (dahl), raita (yogurt with chopped veggies) and a chapati. So I have skipped the rice. Last

night was kidney bean dahl, rice, cooked veggies, sliced carrots and cukes, and chapatis. Very tasty. I walked the 81-year-old French woman back to where she is staying at a music ashram, on the way back to my hotel, rather than staying for the kirtan. That supposedly finally got started at 10:30 pm and finished at 12:15 am. They were a little later than I was for this morning's prayers.

I have had time for relaxation. The whole week is essentially relaxation. Yesterday I worked with my Rosetta Stone Hindi a bit, and was able to use one of my new words right away! Last night I started reading Ursula LeGuin's translation of the Tao. She passed away a little over a year ago, one my last nights in Rishakesh during my January 2018 trip.

During the afternoon Bhagavad Gita readings, I have been reading the Divine Life Society's translation. I won't say following along, as I have absolutely no idea what sections the main priest is actually reading. It seems like he is giving much more Hindi commentary than doing original Sanskrit reading. And for this whole sublime message of the Gita, if you are not sitting up front, where I can't sit as the chairs are not allowed up front, for obvious reasons, you are going to hear not much, if anything. Despite that, last night as I read the Tao, I noted that both are essentially promoting the value of non-duality. Although the date of the war that is the nominal reason for the philosophical discourse that we know as "The Gita" is possibly as early as 5000 years ago, the enlightened message, that there is nothing but God, may be as new as only 2200 years old, or so. That would make it a bit newer than the Tao. On the other hand, nobody really knows. But the idea of non-duality definately seems to me to from the east. And the yin-yang symbol seems primordial to me. Of course, there are people who think it was the Egyptians who are the origin of all legitimate spirituality.

Anyway, when I first read the Gita, in 2001, I was disgusted by the emphasis of "doing one's duty," basically to maintain the social structure. As I am not a fan of the current social structure, although it is preferable to the one that held sway at the time of the Gita, I really struggled to appreciate major portions of this Divine text.

But yesterday, as I read, while listening to the goings on around me, I found myself coming to terms with the fact that I HAVE been trying my best to do MY WORK for the BENEFIT of HUMANITY in the best way I can manage. Probably, the original author(s) of the Gita would not recognize my efforts to teach critical thinking as one of the standard "jobs" allotted by the societal structure. Nor would they likely approve of my assigning this "duty" to myself. Although I do come from a family of many teachers, at least from the last four generations. But the teaching, as in my case, is nominally a sideline business of something else.

That's ok. Every spiritual text has to originate in a certain time and place. It's up to each of us to find the part of it that resonates with us. In my case, I now find hope in the message that it's better to do something, our own work, badly if that's all we can manage, and my situation often reveals my inadequacy, to myself if not to too many others, than to be slothful and set a bad example to others.

No Pix from Day 6

Today, I am staying at my hotel. The Day 4 festivities, with the Baby Krishna reenactment, were followed, on Day 5, by four other neighbor kids dressing up as later versions of a Krishna as a youthful man, his wife Radha, and two other characters. It was again very joyful, lots of music and dancing, and crushing of crowds. So these images are all from yesterday, or earlier.



Scene from life of Krishna. Everyone has to see up close and take photos of everything!

The rituals are powerful though. On the 4th day, or was it the 5th, after the morning puja, I went to personally greet the image of my mother. Suddenly, it appeared that she was there. Her face seemed three dimensional. She seemed to be watching me, smiling. I have had this experience before in India. When at the Swami Narayan Temple (BAPS) in Delhi, in 2009, the eyes of the 4th Guru, the main founder of today's movement, seemed to follow me as I passed his bust. Skillful sculpting? I don't know. Later, all of the photos of the deceased who were on the "altar" of holy cow dung covered bricks seemed to be alive to me, with the possible exception of the one photo that was really old and faded and off to the side. But some of the other photos were almost

as badly faded. Maybe this uncle has already reincarnated, and his spirit is not available for this event.



The deceased honorees of this Bhagwat Ceremony. My mom to the left of the soldier. Dharmendra's mother above the soldier, his sister to the left of his mother.

The power of the rituals must somehow be associated with the overall liveliness of the Indian people. A lot of effort goes into clothing. It's amazing to see people dressed in so many ways,

from traditional to western to some mix of odd styles that constantly surprises me. But here is another beautiful sari, just because.



Many Indians are becoming obese. But not this woman, or Dharmendra's father's sisters, shown below.

Dharmendra's father's sisters. The one on the left had a stroke a few days after returning home from the Bhagwat.



The traditional generation. Bananas were passed out as prasad, or blessed food. The bags of fruit and other items, including rice, lentils, etc. to be used in cooking later, are left in front of the

dias, under the images of the deceased honorees, to get the blessings along with the bricks and spirits of the departed.

I was told that the main priest would be reading from the Gita, and offering commentary. My Hindi is limited and my Sanskrit even more so, but as I read along in my English translation, the word husband occurs NOT ONCE. In fact, there is only one mention of family members, and it's an exhortation from Krishna to Arjuna NOT to be attached to his wife or son. Yet the word that kept coming to me in the long Hindi passages was PATI. Which is husband. Eventually I became very suspicious that the speech of the priest had ANYTHING to do with the highest spiritual message of the Gita. Which is that our true essence is not the part of us that is carrying out our daily activities. Our true essence can do nothing at all but witness the universe. There is, as I noted in yesterday's post, an exhortation to duty, repeated and repeated, but never one word about a wife's duty to her husband.

My French friend later confirmed that they are actually not reading from the Gita at all.

The whole thing is a circus of storytelling. Of course. Because the Gita basically says clearly and repeatedly that the people who carry out the old Vedic rituals have much lower merit than those who devotedly love Krishna as they go about their daily duties maintaining society. No. That would never do for the priests to read the real Gita to the simple, religious people. It could destroy their livelihoods.

The message of the Gita is to renounce caring whether you experience pleasure or pain, and simply abide as the one witnessing the experience. By ending one's identification with the body and the sensory pleasures and pains it attracts, one eventually merges with the eternal, all powerful Source. It's an inward path. Has nothing to do with hiring a band of pandits to do rituals.

But Shush. The Catholic priests for many years prevented believers from reading the Bible on their own, and I argue with a Protestant friend whenever I have the strength that he would behoove himself to make his own interpretations from his studies, instead of repeating the supposed experts'. While the Israelites, the people of THE BOOK, were encouraged to become literate and read their holy texts for themselves, the mystical traditions that teach how to merge with God have also been kept hidden from all but men over 40 who are deemed worthy.

And obviously, Hindus, Christians and Jews are not the only ones who have two religions under the same name. One that is for the people who in my Knomo Choicius novel would really like the Free Thought Church, where one is freed from the burden of having to think. And the other, the hidden tradition, is for those who have eyes to see, ears to hear, heart and feet to seek.

It is likely that my realization that the whole afternoon series of supposedly Gita inspired events is a facade for the opposite teachings was a factor in my need to stay in my hotel room today, and be an American on a spiritual path, taking a vacation from my "vacation"!

The Bhagwat is Over

Day 7 was similar to the others, with a puja, or worship ceremony, in the morning. More of the out-of-town relatives had arrived, so the group was a little bigger. Every day after general prayers, there was much handling of fruit and flower, lighting of incense, sprinkling of holy water, little kids making faces when offered the holy cow pee to drink, and walking around to each of the four pillars holding up the canopy over the dais, handling more flowers, bringing the blessings to each person and back to the deity whose pillar it was. Then a short break, and everyone had to go outside of the tent to a special pole dedicated to Hanuman, an important Hindu deity who appears in the Ramayana, the modern portion (modern = a few thousand years old, not 5000 years old like the Vedas) of the Hindu scriptures. Hanuman is often shown with his chest opened and bleeding, similar to some Catholic depictions of Jesus. We handled fruit and

I just realized I can put a color background to my text. This is the yellow color I was supposed to be wearing Day 1. I have since realized that I do have a shirt that is this color. It was even made in India. Very soft, nice cotton. But it was made for the US market, and it goes with jeans, and I didn't bring it with me.

flowers, while the sons of the deceased lit more incense, and broke some flat bread into small pieces for later consumption. We had to cross the rain control ditch, in bare feet, with multiple chunks of dirt and rocks, so that we were looking INTO the tent, while the junior priest, who did most of the chanting in the morning, fortunately, as his sense of musical tonality was better than the main

priest's, chanted the entire Hanuman Chalisa, a long story that is used as a prayer sacrifice. I definitely knew this drill by Day 7. Then when the Chalisa ([this version goes on for almost 10 minutes](#)) was over, we had to walk around the pole, again endangering my sensitive Americano feet, throwing the flowers onto the little altar at the base of the pole (no statue, as is shown in the link).

On Day 7 though, the Chalisa was followed by a procession to the house, to perform a fire sacrifice. The fire was HOT and the day was HOT and I felt sorry for the family members who were sitting right next to the fire. All sorts of things were tossed into the fire, but there was a big dish of what I presumed was pounded dry cow manure, mixed with chips of various woods and seeds. It produced quite a bit of smoke at times, and I was glad not to be sitting up close.

Well, tomorrow I am going shopping in Rishakesh for some gifts, and then I will be off to Delhi, to see the [Jama Masjid](#), a huge, old, and famous mosque which I had hoped to see last year, and was prevented from visiting by the horrible Delhi traffic. Then I have one more day in Delhi for shopping, and back home. Following are a bunch of photos. I am glad to have attended this event.



Fire Puja ...



Some years ago, I realized that the point of the animal sacrifice prescribed in the Hebrew Bible was to allow God to smell the wonderful smells of the roasting meat. On a higher spiritual plane, when we enjoy, God enjoys. Krishna explains to Arjuna that God is the one who enjoys all sensory experience. This smoke actually smelled nice from where I was sitting. I am not aware of a Christian practice that promotes human sensory pleasure for the sake of God's enjoyment.



After the fire puja, and a break for the non-fasters to have lunch, and the fasters to have a snack, back to the tent for the spiritual instruction. ...



This This woman supposedly went into a trance, or was possessed by spirit entities multiple times. I was not convinced, but the people considered her state to be holy. Right afterward, she was playing with her cell phone.



The Swami posed for me. He was waiting for his scooter ride back home. I think this shows that Dharmendra really has sway. The Swami really looked like he was ready to get back to his home. The crazy dancing, loud music, kids running around, crush of people waiting to get the blessed food (“prasad”) seemed really more than he cared to endure for longer than necessary.



Dharmendra's father suffers from arthritis or something similar and is often sitting in a chair, like others of the older people.



Dharmendra and his brother now have 7 day beards. The brother was looking forward to being able to eat ice cream again as of today. He gave up all dairy products for a year to mourn his mother. A male relative, a teacher, who told me that his son has been in Dallas for 4 years, is at right. The building under construction in the background was used as the kitchen to cook the meal for the “afterparty.”



The first group to be served appeared to number about 200. At least I counted 50 people, mostly kids, in the center row, and there were four rows. You can see some adults sitting with their backs to the kids. Everyone sits on the floor (except old people) with plates on the ground, and people come through and serve from giant pots. There is so much chaos in India, but this is one situation where everyone is disciplined, polite, and patiently awaits the food. The pale yellow drink is buttermilk.



Serving lunch for 600, 200 or so at a time. Dharmendra's brother is handing out 10 rupee notes, crisp from the bank in my case, in white envelopes. Every two days, I was instructed to give 100 rupees in such an envelope to each of the 6 assistant priests, and 200 rupees to the main priest....



Assistant priests. Second from the right did most of the chanting in the morning pujas and at the fire ceremony. To his right, in white, another primary chanter. Sound tech at far left, in Batman shirt.



One of the crazy dresses made for little girls. This one has a piano keyboard at the bottom, and cats and rabbits doing various ballet steps labeled in French. The peace sign seems to be a thing that kids do in photos these days. When I get back home in a few days, everyone's clothing is going to look REALLY BORING.