

ICWA LETTERS

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SOUTH ASIA

Pramila Jayapal is an Institute Fellow spending two years living amid and writing about societal issues in widely diverse regions of India.

Pilgrimage

BADRINATH, U.P. India

June 1996

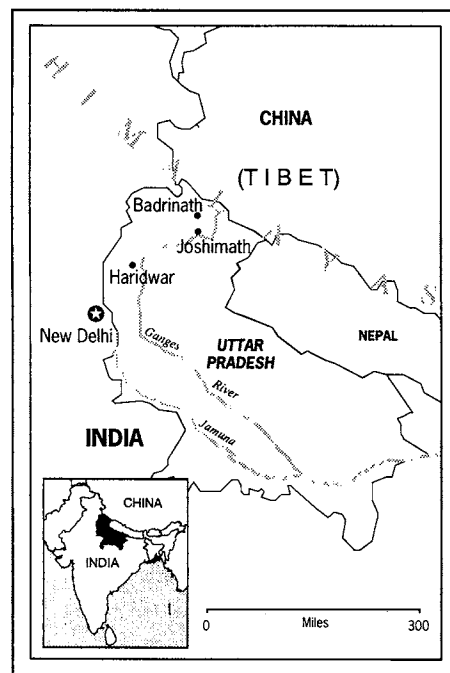
By Pramila Jayapal

Our ten-day trek in the Garwhal Himalayas took us up and down mountain ranges, over lush high altitude meadows, among shepherds and their hundreds of grazing sheep, and finally to the amphitheatre of majestic Kuari Pass, where the rising sun throws a circle of red and pink across the top of dozens of Himalayan peaks.

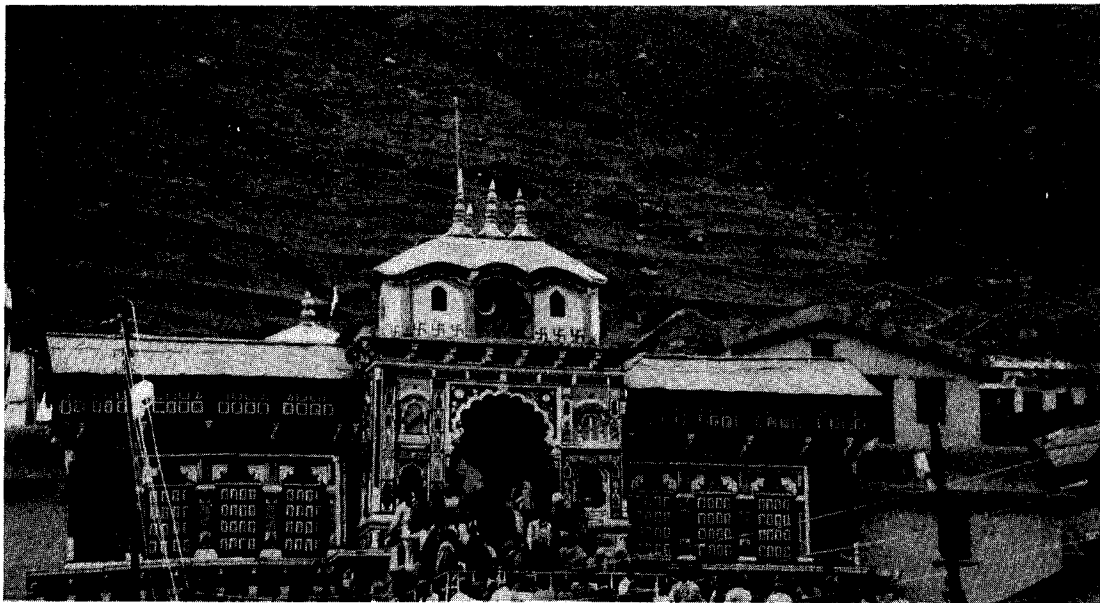
Until you reach tree-line, you walk on broad paths, often made of inset rocks, paths similar to what you might find in a landscape architect's garden. As you walk, your feet crunch on pine needles, releasing the pure fresh fragrance of nature.

Kharsu trees abound along the sides of the paths. Scattered in with rhododendrons, the local *kharsu* tree (part of the oak family) fascinated me. It is a gnarled tree, its sturdy branches curling outward in seemingly unnatural curvatures. Its leaves are spiky, clumped and dark green. But what mesmerized me about the *kharsu* tree were its roots. Like dozens of long, clingy talons, they held to the sides of the hills. Sometimes, pushed apart by wind, rain and erosion, they had spread themselves out over 20 feet. The trunks of these trees bent over toward the plunging valley below, but the roots held them in place. Without the roots, the *kharsu* would have fallen, head-first, and all its branches and spiky clumpy leaves would have shattered into countless shards on the green fertile ground below.

We finished our trek in Joshimath, and took a two-hour bus ride up to the Hindu pilgrimage town of Badrinath, at an altitude of 10,300 feet. The bus had originated at Haridwar (in the plains) the day before, and was filled with *yatris* (pilgrims) from all over India. Most of them had traveled between 18 hours and three days to come to Badrinath. Many of them were doing the *char dham yatra* (pilgrimage to the four Uttarakhand religious pilgrimage sites: Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri). We hopped on the bus at the last minute, so I was squashed in the front "cab" of the bus next to the driver, sitting on the hot engine plate, my back against a big burlap sack the driver had kindly pulled out for me. When I did not have to concentrate on making sure the driver's hands avoided contact with my body every time he switched gears, I could marvel at the scenery. It was truly the valley of the Gods, a sacred place, pristine in its beauty. The narrow road wound up through giant cleavages



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Badrinath Temple. The temple is freshly painted every year in bright colors before it opens and after the last snows have come and gone.

of rain-stained granite slabs, below the blinding snowy summit of 19,500-foot Neelkanth Peak, and past rivers that had turned to ice on the way down and now lay on the rock like fanned tresses of a woman's hair.

When the bus pulled into the carpark, there was a sense of excitement as the pilgrims raised a cry of "Jai Shri Badrinath!" (Hail Shri Badrinath!) They piled out of the bus toward *dharmshalas*, *ashrams*, and rest-houses. No matter how old or young they might have been, they carried their possessions effortlessly in bundles on their heads or over their shoulders.

According to the Hindu *Shastras* (texts or treatises, considered to be of divine origin), no pilgrimage is complete without a visit to Badrinath, one of the four abodes of Lord Vishnu: "There are many shrines on earth, heaven and hell, but none has been, nor will be, like Badrinath." Badri is the wild fruit that Vishnu is said to have existed on while doing penance in the area, and Badri Vishal is another name for Vishnu. Badrinath is a place of significance: it is where Lord Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu) commanded his disciple Uddhava to go and meditate on him; it is one of four centers of God established by the great South Indian monist philosopher, Shankaracharya, in the four cardinal directions of India (the other three being Pure in the East, Dwarka in the West, and Shringeri in the South). Most all encompassing, it is *Tapobhumi* —

the ultimate place for meditation and penance.

In spite of — or maybe because of — Badrinath's importance, I was reluctant to enter Badrinath Temple. Those we met could not understand this. Most pilgrims stop first at the temple; without that, there is no purpose to a visit. After taking *darshan*¹, they often turn around the following day and head for the next destination on their *yatra*. It is no wonder, then, that they could not understand why I did not set foot inside the temple for three whole days.

I loved walking toward the temple and standing outside. The road from Badrinath town led down a small hill through a narrow alley lined with *prasad* (offerings)² shops, stalls selling devotional videos, books and other trinkets. Jostled between the *yatris*, and the *sadhus* and *sanyasins* clad in faded orange clutching their alms canisters, I would make my way to the bridge. The bridge crossed the Alaknanda River to the east bank, where Shri Badri Vishal resides in his brightly painted temple. To the east of the temple rises Neelkanth Peak, said to be the face of Lord Shiva in the changing light of sunrise. To the west, toward the Indo-Tibetan border, other pointed peaks guard the temple and its valley.

The temple stood out clearly among its immediate surroundings: hastily constructed buildings with low roofs of red corrugated metal, crumbling blocks of ce-

1. *Darshan* is the act of seeing, or having an audience with a deity (in its symbolic form). As Roger Housden describes in his book *Travels Through Sacred India*, it is not "the physical eyes, so much as the inner eye, or the third eye, that receives darshan...In the meeting of eyes, devotee and lord become one."

2. *Prasad* is the offerings of food which have already been offered to the deity. Blessed by the deity, the *prasad* is then distributed among devotees. Although, technically, offerings become *prasad* only after they have been blessed, most of the shops that sell offerings call them *prasad* even before blessing. *Prasad* ranges from simple foods like puffed rice and sugar balls, to expensive ones like cashew nuts, dried coconut, and raisins.



A prasad shop

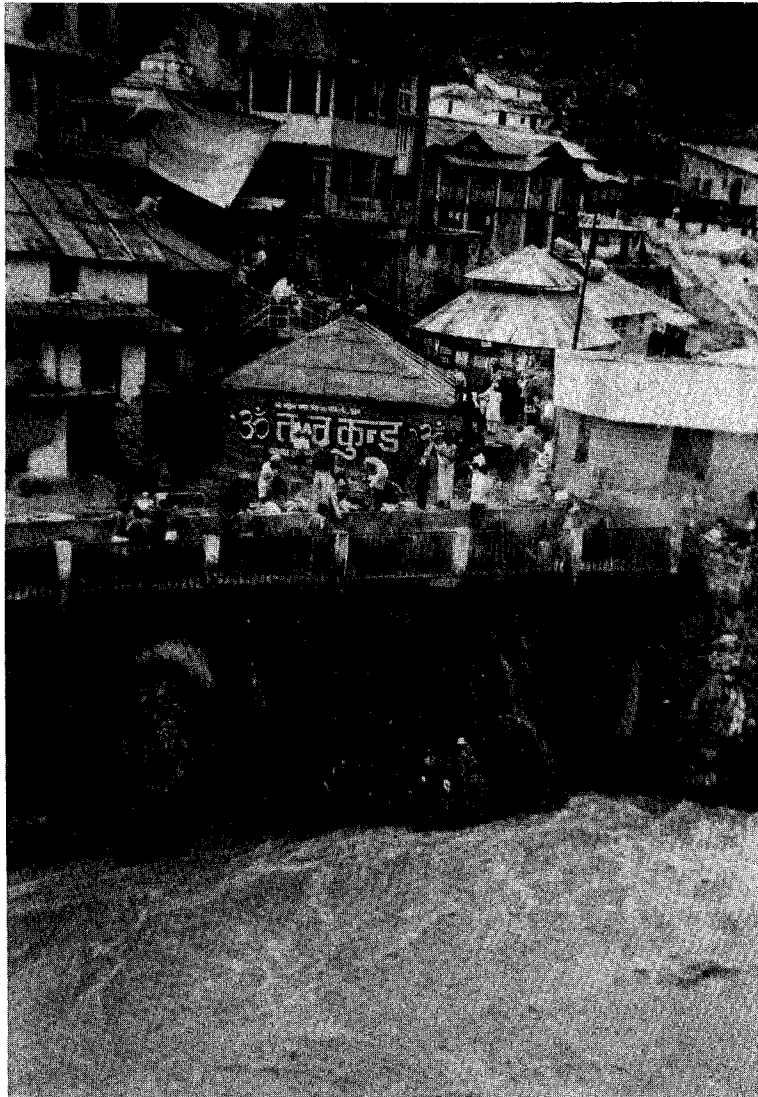
ment and black plastic sheets stretched tight against rain and snow. From the far bank of the bridge, just below the temple, are the *Tapt Kund* — hot springs — where pilgrims bathe before entering the temple. Men and women, both bare-chested, bathed next to each other, engrossed only in cleansing what can be cleansed with water, leaving the rest to be cleansed through worship and *darshan* with Badri Vishal himself. Twisted white spires of heat rose from the springs into the cold morning air, and the water itself gushed down onto moss-covered tall rocks, and then ricocheted into the river below.

I would walk across the bridge, sandwiched between the hundreds of young, old, decrepit, cane-leaning bodies. Halfway across the bridge, I would slip to the side, standing among a few squatting, alms-seeking *sadhus*, and look down into the river, the brown swirling waters that disappeared into fast-turning eddies and were swallowed in the next rushes of rapids. I would turn back to watch people set foot on the bridge, getting their first unfettered view of the temple. "*Jai Badri Vishal!*" The cry went up and was echoed by hundreds, as they touched their hands to the bridge's cold, stony surface and to their foreheads, then raised their hands in a high *namaste*.

They would continue, the pilgrims, up the steps past more alms-seekers, past the men who give coin change

for rupee notes so that temple-goers can have access to easy change for distribution, to the end of the long, already-formed queue of people waiting to go to the temple. I would follow them, but only to the small square in front of the temple where photographers lingered, with big impressive cameras hung around their necks and photo albums in their hands to prove the quality of their work. For Rs. 15 (50 cents), they would take photos of pilgrims in front of the temple — even loaning stainless steel *thalis* (plates) of *prasad* to hold for the photo to those pilgrims who could not afford to buy them. Mailing addresses would then be given to the photographer, usually with some concern on the customer's part that the photo should reach, and the standard reply would return from the photographer: "*Pukka, saab, phikre mat karo.*" (Sure, sir, do not worry.)

From this vantage point in the small square, I could watch the variety of people who had come to worship: the young woman in a hunter-green raw silk *salvaar kameez* with a black L.A. Raiders cap; the group of fragile, tiny-boned grandmothers squatting, petticoats hitched up to their knees, saree *pullaus* (the part that is thrown over the shoulder) pulled over their heads; the brightly turbaned men who balanced *thalis* of offerings on their turbans. The two silver-painted lions on either side of the temple entranceway gleamed in the sun, and the green-uniformed guard at the top almost blended into the green-blue-and-red painted windows of the temple.



The Tapt Kund — hot springs. The water is piped up to the platform above the springs where pilgrims bathe before entering the temple.

The best thing about my chosen spot was that it was outside the temple. From there, I could get lost in watching and analyzing others, and avoid confronting my own reluctance to enter. I could just observe, create stories, draw conclusions about the pilgrims and still remain detached myself, removed from the personal feelings of distaste that temples aroused in me. The initial idea I had — to do an article on why these pilgrims had come here, what they were getting from this *yatra*, was like a crutch that I could lean on while precariously balanced on a slippery rock in the middle of the Alaknanda River.

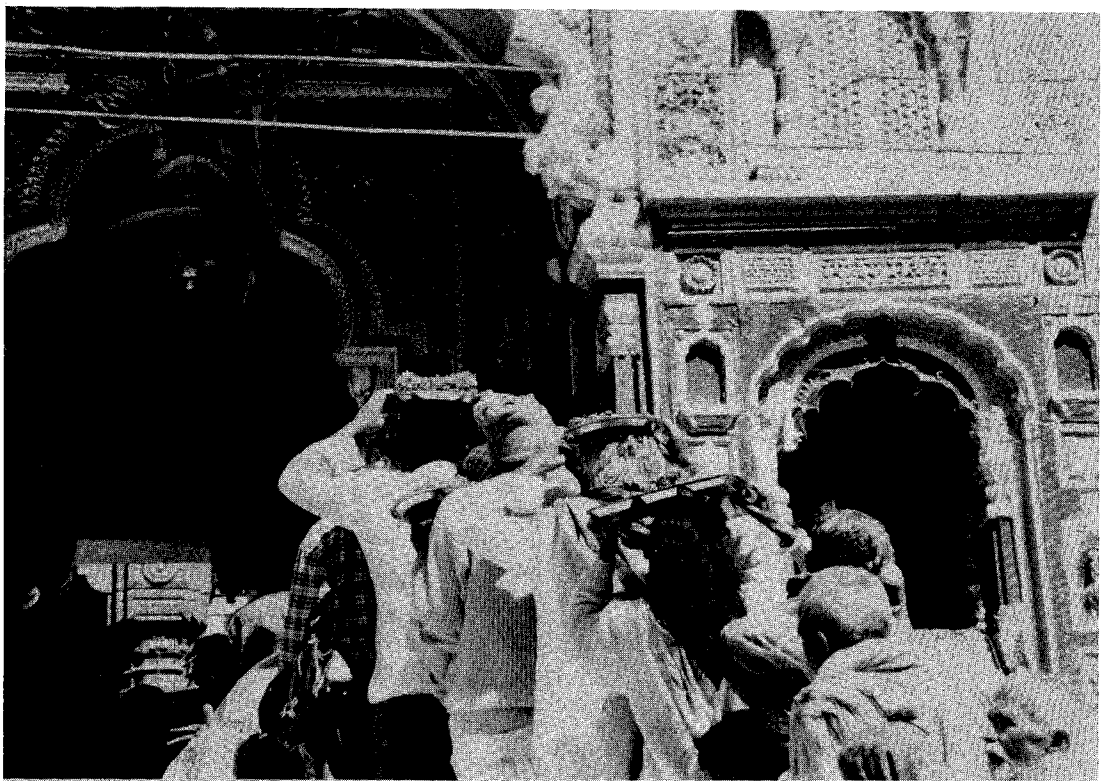
It was in temples that I felt like a *kharsu* tree whose roots had let go. In temples, I felt as if I had fallen and shattered into a thousand pieces because I could not believe the same devotion that the millions of people who come to Badrinath feel, the devotion that I thought every “true” Hindu Indian should feel.

The Honorable N. Vishnu Namboodiri is the 33rd Rawal (Head Priest) of Badrinath Temple. All the Rawals of Badrinath have been from this particular sect of Namboodiri Kerala Brahmins, the same family from which Shankaracharya hails.

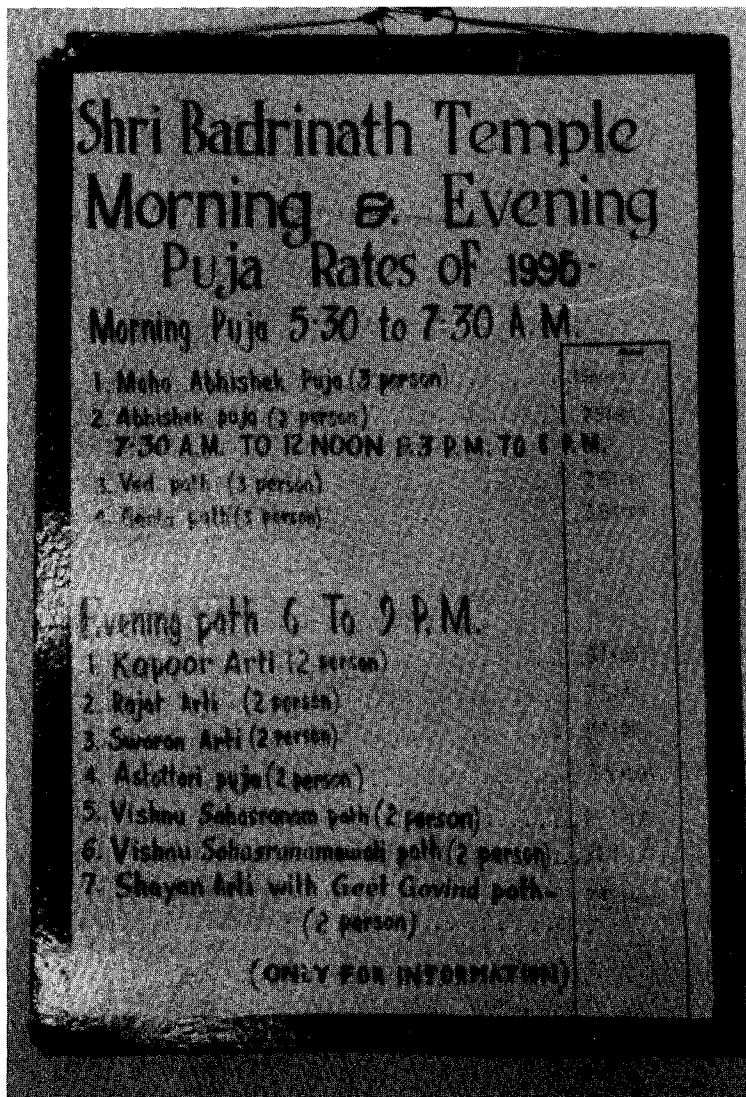
Steps led down from the temple to the Rawal’s unpretentious entranceway. The main room where he sees people was dominated by a platform on which were two beautiful statues, one in pure ivory of Badrinath, and the other a silver idol, so heavily garlanded and dressed that I could barely see the face. The platform was covered with an intricately woven golden cloth. *Agarbati* (incense), flowers and eternally-burning lamps filled the rest of the platform. The room felt cozy, infused with the warmth of the thick red woolen rugs that covered the floor, the sense of peace



Men with piles of 10- and 20-paise (100 paise is 1 Rupee) coins. They will give change for Rs. 5 and 10 notes to the temple-goers who want to distribute change to the rows of alms-seekers outside the temple.



Pilgrims, many with plates of prasada on their heads, stand in line to enter the temple.



A list of Badrinath pujas. Everyone can watch any of these pujas from outside the temple, but because of big crowds and the small viewing area, people are rotated through quite quickly and cannot observe the puja in its entirety. By paying for a puja, you are allowed to enter into the small room directly in front of the idol of Badri Vishal, and remain for the entire puja. The Maha Abhishek and Abishek pujas are the most expensive (Rs. 1500 and Rs. 751, approximately U.S.\$50 and U.S.\$25) because they are performed first thing in the morning, and devotees are allowed to see the idol of Badri Vishal clearly before and while he is bathed (with coconut milk, water, soap) and dressed. The pujas usually sell out.

and serenity, and the aroma of incense.

The Rawal entered, greeted us and went to sit on the floor next to the window, leaving empty the quilted cushion in the middle of the room that is his formal "seat" (I never saw him use this in the time we were there). He seemed to love that place next to the window; he would lean his head against the baby-blue painted shutters and gaze out at the mountains, into the valley, or at the hundreds of people scurrying across the bridge. As Rawal, he was allowed to be only in the temple or in his house, but never to go outside; perhaps this was what created that wistful look, that desire to fill his head with what he could see, but not touch or feel, of the outside.

I had written out a list of questions to ask him, questions about the history of Badrinath, the differences between various types of pujas, the apparent commercialization of religion, and the connection between religion and development. In preparing to develop an article on

the role of religion in society today through a series of interviews, I was falling right into the mistaken assumption often made by researchers and academics: that questions and answers will reveal "the truth." Among hundreds of other complicating factors is that the truth revealed through answers is almost always affected by the biases of both questioner and answerer.

Within half an hour of being with the Rawal, I realized that I was not yet ready to hear the answers to my questions. What I heard would be filtered through the armor of bias that shields my own doubts and confusion about religion and its role in *my* life. As I sat there, I felt my years of experiences with religion, my own personal convictions, resentment, anger with what I saw as today's masquerade of religion, wash over me. In this flood, I also saw that what I had been doing in commenting on the role of religion in society was merely looking for reasons to validate my own biases.

"Namō Shivaya, Narayana aya nama, Achutha aya nama,

Anand aya nama, Govind aya nama, Gopal aya nama...” The prayer from childhood that I had been taught by my grandmother echoed in my ears. I had stopped saying it every night some five years back because I felt it was a ritual for me with no meaning. Who were these Gods whose names I was chanting? What would this do for my life? I saw no logic, no reason to chanting. My rejection of rituals was almost absolute — it would have been absolute except that, every once in a while, either when I really wanted something or when I felt alone, I would secretly say my childhood prayers at night. With the prayers, I recreated my grandmother’s *puja* (prayer) room where we used to sleep as children. I generated in my mind the smell of sandalwood soap, coconut hair oil and sweet talcum powder that permeated the room when she finished her customary pre-*puja* bath. I remembered the pleasure I got as a child when she would allow me to pick jasmines from the vines outside and string them with needle and thread into long garlands that we placed around the pictures of the deities that hung in the *puja* area. The prayers and the memories offered me a sense of safety, of companionship that I could not reconcile with my simultaneous need to adhere only to those things I understood, those things that were “controllable.”

In America, I was not forced to confront my discomfort with religious rituals: there are no Hindu temples in Seattle where one sees hordes of people worshipping. I did not need to examine the relationship between my distrust of religion, as I see it today, and my own inner belief in some universal power. It was only when I came to India that I found myself face-to-face daily with the gap between what I felt and what seemed to be the “blind faith” of those around me. I became brutally harsh in condemning the “business” of religion, indicting not just those who profit from its power and wealth, but also the customers of religion, the frail old men and women who travel hundreds of miles to visit India’s sacred pilgrimage sites before they die. I saw only people being “used” by religion, people too weak to question what they blindly worshipped, people who used the idea of a greater power as a crutch.

I did not realize, until that day with the Rawal, that it was my own aborted religious journey I returned to each time I watched or spoke to someone about *their* journey. In talking to people about Hinduism and its meaning to them, I was not really listening to what they were saying. I was unable to rid myself of my own stained notions of the corruption of religion; through these lenses, no matter that people said, my vision was tainted by my disdain for what I felt Hinduism has become today.

My list of questions for the Rawal, and those I had made to interview pilgrims, may as well have been torn into shreds and dropped out of the window into the rushing Alaknanda. They had no relevance because until I understood my own pilgrimage, my own search, I could not understand others’.

The Rawal was probably in his late 30s, the same age as the Mahant of Kashi-Viswanath Temple in Benaras whom I had met, but a completely different type of person. The Mahant only corroborated my ideas of the usurpation of power by the religious elite. In contrast, this Rawal seemed uninterested in power or in emphasizing his own enlightened status. The Rawal wanted us close to him, where he could watch us intently as we spoke. He forbade us to take notes, unlike the Kashi-Viswanath Mahant who preened like a peacock in delight when I produced a tape recorder to record our interview. This was not an interview with the Rawal. It was a personal quest, an attempt to understand what was and was not holding me to the religious or spiritual part of India.

The Rawal alternated between intimidating and humorous, child-like and sage-like. He displayed his humility in various ways, often leaning forward to bow before those who touched his feet in respect, once even touching the feet of a child who folded his hands in *namaste*. He downplayed his own knowledge (“I’ve done some reading on this subject of *dharma*”) and acknowledged his own weaknesses. He was approachable and human, something I had never expected from someone of his stature.

Over the course of two days, he must have spent almost 8-9 hours with us, letting us sit with him as he received people who had come to pay their respects. He would leave us in between to go and conduct *pujas* at the temple, instructing us when to come back. At our next session, he remembered exactly where he had left off and would begin by questioning us on what we had understood of the last question. He would often click his tongue impatiently if we did not give the answer he was looking for, once even cutting me off mid-stream when I was getting long-winded. But, always, regardless of how long it took, he made sure that we understood the concept he was explaining.

Nothing I said went unquestioned, and for the first time, I found myself trying — rather unsuccessfully — to define words like “man,” “service,” “religion,” and “Hinduism.” Though it might sound like a philosophic discussion, it was not. The Rawal was interested in placing people on the practical path of the ancient Indian concept of *Sanatan Dharma* — of right living.

Surprisingly for a Kerala Namboodiri, the Rawal spoke limited English, and my Hindi — although now significantly better than my scant Malayalam — was usually not enough to grasp and express some of the complex ideas we were discussing. For some of the discussions, Krishnan would sit in and translate. Krishnan, a scientist and doctor originally from Madras, has settled in America but is still searching for something.

Having taken a one-year sabbatical from his teaching post in America and his distinguished service on the National Science Commission, he was living in India —

talking, watching and enquiring. When Krishnan was not there, the Rawal spoke with us in Hindi, interspersing several clever examples to illustrate points.

If he sensed that we did not fully understand his words, the Rawal would look around, his eyes scanning the room for something he could use to demonstrate his ideas. One of our first "lessons" was devoted to the idea of the essence of man. He had brushed away my simplistic explanations of the physical being of man. Man is *nash*, he said, except for the service he renders to others. We could not understand the meaning of *nash* and *anash* (its opposite), so he gave us several examples. You eat food and it is *nash*. Ah, we said: gone, finished. Not quite. A few more verbal examples, and then he thought of something. He leapt up excitedly, and pulled out from a cupboard near the *puja* platform a box of incense sticks. He lit them and told us to ponder the burning incense. He then dipped his finger in the fallen ash and smeared it on his forehead, and waved his hands to indicate the sweet fragrance of incense floating through the room. Incense is *anash*, he explained, after taking us as far as we could go ourselves. It gives pleasure through its sweet smell, and service through its fallen ash used to bless those who come to do *puja*. This is its significance in the *puja* rituals. It is eternal. *Nash* and *anash* — transient and eternal. Man, the physical being, is transient, but the service he does is eternal.

The Rawal refused to comment on Hinduism, saying it was just a name. Instead, he distinguished religion as the path of *sanatan dharma*. "This [*sanatan dharma*] is the way of our ancestors, of this country, what is written about in the Puranas. The essential elements of right *dharma* are truth, good intention, and non-violence.³ If we carry out all our actions based on these three principles, we will be on the path of true *dharma*."

It is difficult to find a translation for *sanatan dharma* that does it justice. Simply, it is the Eternal Way, the Way of Truth, or the path of perennial wisdom. *Sanatan* has the broad meaning of "eternal," while *dharma* (although often translated as "religion") is the law of truth, the law of nature that guides the cosmos, the idea that each object in the universe has its own intrinsic nature. Housden in *Travels through Sacred India* speaks about it this way:

"[*Sanatan Dharma*]...is in essence defined by no outer ritual or even religion: it represents a natural way of living in harmony with life. At the very heart of its ethos is the principle of sacred relationship. Everything in the universe is related, and the divine, rather than being somewhere above and beyond life, is right here in the middle of it." (p.xiii)

The Rawal liked to emphasize the similarities between different religions, often bringing in Christianity — I think for my husband's benefit. He seemed not to fully understand that Alan — although white — was

not Christian, and that Alan had read far less of the Bible than had the Rawal. The Rawal's point in these comparisons was only to show that all religions seek one-ness with a universal power, and that the path toward that one-ness is essentially the same.

"There are many 'isms,'" he said, "but underneath them all, there is only one *dharma*, one universal truth. Think of electricity: in one form, it lights a light-bulb, in another it activates a refrigerator, and yet in another, it makes a radio work. Three different manifestations of electricity, but underneath, it is only one power driving them all. *Dharma* is the underlying power of all religions; it does not belong only to Hindus, it is for everyone. They," (motioning to Alan as a representation of foreigners) "do not know less about *dharma* or *sewa* (service) than Hindus. In fact," he said, rising to his knees in front of me with a twinkling challenge in his eyes, and referring to a particularly eloquent comment Alan had just made, "he knows a little more about *sewa* than you do."

The Rawal's words about the similarity between religions took away some of the bad taste that had been left in my mouth by discrimination and fanaticism propagated by so-called "religious" people. I was reminded, too, of how early my own non-denominational views on religion were formed, how my distaste for religious single-mindedness was born.

I was in the 7th grade in Indonesia, a twiggy, friendly 11-year old whom everyone liked and who wanted to be liked by everyone. Eric was the son of Baptist missionaries, a few years older but in the same grade, who I thought was the cat's meow. One day, Eric — with a bluntness and a narrowed focus that I now recognize as the foreseeable product of his home and upbringing — came and told me that if I did not convert to Christianity, I would burn in hell.

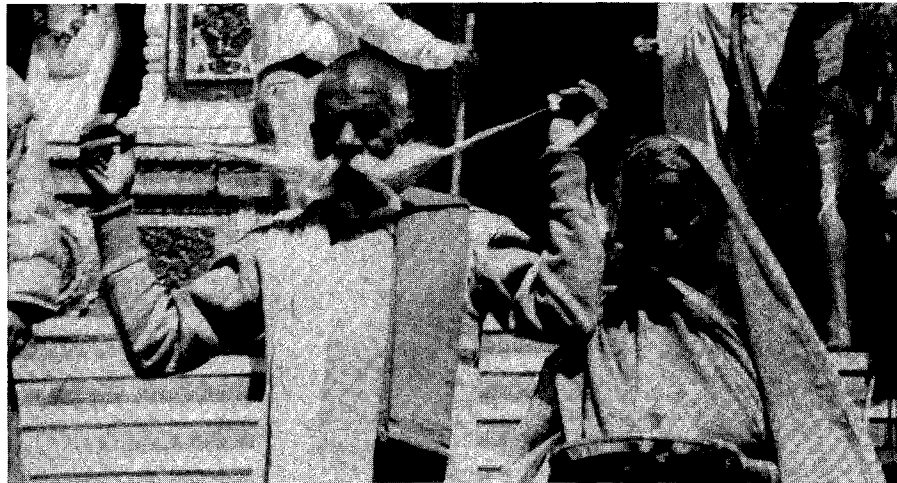
Eric's words terrified me, conjured up pictures of red demons with horns and pitchforks, of flames that would devour me limb by limb, hair by hair. It was another friend's father, who was ironically a pastor but of a totally different view from that of many of the Baptist missionaries, who finally consoled me. He viewed religion, he told me, as a big mountain with God at the top. Depending on where you stand at the base, the top and the paths to it look slightly different. "This is like various religions," he told me. "But all the paths lead to the same place. They just look different."

I never converted to Christianity. I ended up choosing Kali Mata (the Hindu Goddess of death and destruction) over the red, horned devil. Although I later substituted the idea of a universal power for that of God, the analogy of the mountain stayed with me.

The Rawal's description of the concept of *sanatan dharma* as true religion was also a salve to the soreness

3. The Rawal was careful to point out that violence didn't necessarily just mean physical wars or fighting. Today's politicians, he had said, were committing *himsa* (violence) against people every day.

A yatri — pilgrim — and his wife in front of the temple. He readied himself for this photograph for at least five minutes. His mustache was about a foot long, and he would smooth the two sides out, wrap them behind his ears to curl them, and then pull them straight out sideways and tightly twist them into coils. He wanted to be sure that he looked appropriately distinguished in Lord Badri Vishal's presence.



left by the commercialization of Hinduism I saw in Varanasi and other places. It did not — could not — erase the distasteful aspects of the Hinduism that is often practiced today, but it offered a way to distinguish between that kind of Hinduism and the idea of some kind of conduct of life that was *sanatan dharma*. It allowed me to see that not all who call themselves Hindus practice *sanatan dharma*, and not all who practice *sanatan dharma* are Hindus. For the first time, I understood that by reacting to the corrupted part of Hinduism, I had denied myself the wisdom of the ancient Indian concept of *dharma*, an all-inclusive, tolerant, practical notion. With this distinction, I was able to relate *dharma* to my own experiences of Indian generosity, hospitality, kindness and *sewa*. This was not the Hindutva of the BJP, nor the fanatical Islam or Christianity ravaging the world in the name of religion. This kind of selfless focus, of interdependence among individuals could hold societies together if it were allowed to thrive.

The Rawal was careful to emphasize the need for understanding what we did. He believed in thinking and questioning those things that were done just because “they always have been.” We were discussing this very topic when a large family entered the room. They had just had *darshan* at the temple, and had come to pay their respects to the Rawal. They were obviously quite wealthy, the mother (perhaps in her mid-30s) wearing a beautifully embroidered *salvaar* and heavy gold bangles, the father and brother-in-law in starched *khadi* kurtas, their hair slicked back with copious amounts of Brillcreme. The children — several of them — were dressed in the Indian equivalent of designer clothes: jeans, t-shirts with some English slogan emblazoned across the front, and tennis shoes.

The Rawal went around the room asking each one individually how they had felt about their *darshan*. One by one, they replied: mostly with “*bahut accha*” (very good), and one with “*bahut sunder*” (very beautiful). Af-

ter they had all answered, the Rawal looked around at them and repeated, almost musingly, “Very good, very beautiful.” He became stern. “Food is very good; a flower is very beautiful. How can you use these words to describe your experience in *darshan*? *Darshan* is to find joy, true joy (*sach anand*) in yourself through being with God. If you do not get this from *darshan*, there is no benefit. You have walked away from the temple empty-handed.”

The Rawal fixed his gaze on the mother, who was clutching a *mala*, a string of brown wood Rudranath beads. “What is that?” he asked. “A *mala*.” “What do you do with it?” he asked. “I chant.” And then getting no response back, she quickly continued, “*Hare Ram, Hare Krishna*, like that. I do three rounds.” “Tell him the whole thing you chant,” piped in her husband, a little anxiously. She complied, repeating a string of prayers. The family waited expectantly. The Rawal was still not speaking. He looked into the distance. “But *why* do you do it?”

The mother looked at him, almost resentfully. I could tell she was nervous, and thought I even saw tears forming in her eyes. She had probably never been questioned like this before. “It makes me feel good,” she finally said. He moved his head slightly. “You need to know why you do things, where it comes from, what it means. Everything has a meaning, comes from somewhere. Without this understanding, the action is nothing. Do you understand?” The group nodded, uncertain of what to do. The father broke the awkward silence that followed by rising and offering several Rs. 50 notes to the Rawal that he tossed unceremoniously into the small silver dish sitting on the platform next to the silver idol.

After they left, the Rawal turned to us and said, “Did you understand?” We said we did. “What did you understand?” he asked in his usual penetrating manner. We talked about how meaningful actions become ritu-

als when not accompanied by understanding, and about the lack of willingness to question why. I could certainly relate — this was the story of the first 25 years of my life we were talking about, all those years of lighting lamps for *puja*, saying prayers, asking God for whatever I wanted, as if this was *the* reason that this great power existed.

The Rawal was satisfied with the answer. “I did that questioning of them for you. They did not understand anything. So many people — they come here, talk, ask. Many never understand.” He sounded almost wistful. He leaned his head against the shutter, and looked outside. “I often find that Westerners are more willing to question than Indians.” He fixed me with his piercing gaze. “Even you — you are not as open as he is [pointing to Alan]. He speaks freely. You still have Indian in you. You sit too quietly. What will I do to you if you speak?”

His frankness caught me off-guard, his prescience amazed me. More than anything, his words stung. I had always prided myself on *my* frankness, my ability to talk to anyone courageously, and this made me sound like a timid wallflower.

I stewed over his words all that day and that night. Even in my anger, my unwillingness to believe him, I recognized that he was right. For all that being in India gives me, it also takes away some of my freedom to be, to ask questions of anyone, especially those who are “above” me in the social hierarchy. Being in India makes me feel at home and as if I belong, but it also restricts me, draws me back into old rigidities of social hierarchies, of norms, of ideas of individual rights that depend on others’ perceptions of appropriate rights and roles. Even in America, I sometimes fell into the same trap, but much more rarely. American society, I realized, was not formed around such rigid hierarchies as exist here. Students were meant to question their teachers; children — rudely and respectfully — challenged their parents; everything was up for scepticism and doubt.

In spite of my seeming irreverence for the reverent that the Rawal represented, I found myself unable to speak my mind to him, to question and argue the way he wanted me to. With all my rejections, there was still an overwhelming reluctance to challenge the basics with a man so much more enlightened than I. If I, with my Western, “logical” training, still felt bound by certain structures, then why should anything different be expected of those devotees who believed in religion in a way that I did not? What was it — if anything — in Indian society that created this dynamic of accepting, of unwillingness to push the limits of understanding?

Perhaps it was the Rawal’s critical words to me that prompted me to ask him a question that was at the core of my reluctance to go into the temple: is full acceptance of the path of *sanatan dharma* he had been talking about

contingent on some form of worship and *puja*?

He clearly did not expect the question. He looked down and thought for a minute, but his answer came distinctly. “Yes. Definitely.” Silence from all of us. The Rawal himself did not say much more, except that *puja* and worship were important disciplines that had to be maintained. He then excused himself to go to the temple for his nightly service, and the rest of us sat quietly. Krishnan, sensing that the conversation was far from over, gave us his own interpretation: that the Rawal knew we were not at a stage where he could just tell us to drop *puja*, that there were certain techniques of worship — like mantras — that were known to invoke the sense of oneness, of respect for that universal power, within one’s own soul.

“It may not be for you to go the temple and pray,” Krishnan said to me later. “I go, but only with appreciation for its history, its significance in the lives of so many of our enlightened sages. You may find your own way, your own acts that create meaning for you, your own methods of discipline. Go to the temple, take what you can, and then create something for *you*.”

It was after that session that I finally went to the temple. It was drizzling, so the line that normally stretches up to half a kilometer long was relatively short. We wound our way around the iron bars, looking expectantly up at the tiny covered rectangle where people peered in to get a glimpse of the black stone Badri Vishal in the inner sanctum. I was being pushed with the crowd, but I kept remembering the Rawal’s words: that a certain amount of pushing and rubbing shoulders was good. When I got to the front, I saw the Rawal inside conducting the *puja*, plucking and throwing flower petals on the idol. It flashed through my mind that by questioning the need for rituals, I was in essence challenging what *he* does, what he stands for.

The Rawal’s words did change the way I looked at the temple and the pilgrims who came to worship. The wonderment I had about how this kind of *darshan* could create in some people that kind of from-the-bottom-of-the-soul emotion, tears, overwhelming happiness — this time it was not a wonderment of dismissal. It was true wonder, perhaps even a little desire to feel that kind of emotion myself. For the first time since being in India, I felt I could catch a glimpse of the kind of joy in a pilgrim that the Rawal had talked about as the goal of *darshan*. I felt privileged to see this, because I realized it was this kind of seeing that broke through the limitations of looking at religion as an academic exercise. The sense of joy that comes through — at least in part — in songs, clapping, excitement of the people who waited in line, cannot come through in words, explanations, or one-dimensional definitions of Hinduism or *dharma*.

Rituals are rituals only when they become habits, actions that are not accompanied by meaning or understanding. To me, all that I saw — pouring milk on a Shiva-*lingam*, giving offerings to an idol, saying prayers



An old yatra pilgrim.

— were rituals because *I* did not understand them, because they had no meaning to *me*. However, I forgot that the key person in the picture who needed to understand the rituals was not me; it was the person who was performing the actions. To that individual, those very actions that I called rituals might have produced the kind of joy that the Rawal had been talking about; it might have been accompanied, at least for some, by the actual practice of *sanatan dharma*.

I did not see the Rawal again. We left suddenly, without even thanking him. I was as reluctant to see him again as I had been to go into the temple, though for completely different reasons. I did not know how I would thank him, what I would say. He had given me a new way to look at what religion means not just to people, but to me; an insight into the kind of effusive joy that can fill a devotee who comes in the presence of something that reminds him of that universal power. He showed me that the essence of Hinduism — indeed,

of religion — is the path of *sanatan dharma*, a *dharma* that embodies concepts I believe in, concepts that I can feel proud to have passed on from my heritage, my ancestors, those wise men and women who spoke not of Hinduism but of what were the seeds of Indian spirituality.

The Rawal gave me back my roots, my sense of connection to the Indian philosophy of *sanatan dharma*. He gave me the ability to begin to look at the actions of those who are worshipping in a different light, to understand that the role of religion in people's lives is intensely personal and cannot always be expressed in words. The Rawal opened a pathway for me to create actions for myself that complement my own belief in spirituality, actions that I may have thought of as rituals before, but now I understand can be a genuine part of acknowledgment, respect and self-expression.

I no longer felt like a *kharsu* tree about to fall. My roots had dug themselves in and were holding me — however tenuously — to the hillside. □