

# On a Journey...

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By Susan Griffith-Jones, Exclusive

We have to wait around a while before Pujya Swami Chindanand Saraswati, better known as Muni-ji by his disciples, who's the current head of the Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, arrives in the meeting area they've created outside his lodgings at the Kumbh. I'm asking him some questions concerning the spiritual meaning of the confluence point at Prayagraj, when an elaborately dressed group of individuals sidle up next to him. He asks me to switch off my video recorder. The guy is someone in politics from Brindavan and a fairly heated, albeit cordial discussion ensues in Hindi. Again, during the conversation, he turns to me to confirm that my camera is indeed, switched off. In the meantime, I reflect over what he's been telling me about the meeting of 3 separate streams of water at the confluence point. Ganga and Yamuna, which are 2 massive rivers coming along their various courses from their sources in the Himalayas, physically meet there, but there's a third, mythical river, called the Saraswati that is also meant to join them there, yet it cannot be seen. He tells me that it descends underground very early on in its course near Badrinath up in the Himalayas and it's at the confluence point of Ganga and Yamuna at Prayagraj that it reappears from within the riverbed, so that it's technically invisible. As I understand it, the joining of these two streams may be an allegory of the place where our most essential energies meet within our inner energy system, the third being the union of those two, within which we attain much higher consciousness, beyond the world of duality. I've already insinuated as such and he was just about to answer my question when the Brindavan guy had appeared, and when he's finished with him, it's now time for us to wander over to the shore of the river, to perform the evening Aarti ceremony.

We all troop out there with

him, along with a large number of young acolytes who must be from the school for boys training to become Hindu pundits that's situated behind the Parmarth Ashram in Rishikesh. As a group, we sit on the stage with Muni-ji, but I roam around to video the scene. The Aarti is always an incredible event to go to. As an offering of light to one or more deities, there are various sections of it that for me, are its highlights; the chanting of 'Om Jai Jagadish Hare' that takes place



Our group, Muni-ji and his spiritual consort, Aarti, Kumbh Mela, Prayagraj, India

along with the swaying of multi-tiered bronze lamps looking like small Christmas trees decorated by candles of fire, accompanied by the ringing of bells and bodies swaying to the overall sensation. But it's towards the end when they sing the Indian National anthem that I really get goose bumps. One can feel the fervency of national pride here and sincerity towards the country. Afterwards, we gather again in the meeting area of Muni-ji inside his camp, but he doesn't attend this open session, which is hosted by his spiritual consort. I am given the floor and invited to ask her about Ganga, which I do, but with something else entirely in mind. I want to test the waters here and purposefully design my question to see how she will answer it. I let her speak without interruption, my feelers

right out, because I want to understand what's going on here. My suspicions are heightened the next morning when everyone, except Jamyang and I who have one more day here, is preparing to leave. Since yesterday evening, a strange shift of energy has taken place in the group and the calm, ease, spontaneity and fluidity that had existed til now has been replaced by an air of tension. We're meant to be visiting the inside of the old Allahabad (now Prayagraj) fort this morning, which is an icon of the city. Built by the Mughal Emperor Akbar there's a tree inside its walls that Lord Rama is said to have sat under after he was banished from the kingdom of Ayodhya, on his journey into exile. It's quite difficult to get into the place, but somehow we've auspiciously managed to find someone to allow us in through an entrance on the far side. However, we are absolutely prevented from reaching it, as the traffic is absolutely horrendous. Today, some 'high ministers' are coming to Swami Chindanand Saraswati's camp and there's going to be a huge political rally there, so traffic has been diverted to allow the elite to glide in unheeded, leaving the rest of us to suffer the hell of heat and dust on the roads, trapped as we are for several hours in nose-to-tail traffic. Sincerely wishing to visit the place, we try one more attempt to get to the fort by boat from the opposite bank of the river, but end up skipping it, as we've apparently now been invited to lunch at Swami-ji's camp, but then that too goes pear shaped, as those in our group who need to get out the airport are worried about the traffic and catching their flight on time.

At the Parmarth Niketan camp itself, there's a huge array of press at the entrance to the large hall and the arrival of a recently deposed Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, who's been in power for decades, along with a melee of clicking photographers and videographers who hover like flies within the aura of the big guys. I stand apart watching the drama, seeing straight through the illusion of it all. It is a relief to



Susan and the group near the banks of Yamuna, Kumbh Mela, Prayagraj, India



Susan at Aarti with Muni-ji, Kumbh Mela, Prayagraj, India

be able to do this, as tension is so high by the time the others leave for the airport, that I've been doing nothing but try to knit back together the otherwise easygoing, fun and pleasant relationship that's been building between us all over the last 4 days. My instinct is to get the hell out of there, but it is not correct to leave until our hosts have gone off to the airport and I myself am undergoing 'human' research here! I am absolutely enthralled by how just a little whiff of the world of 'power', just a tiny rubbing of shoulders with it, even if one is not attempting to enter it as such, can bring down a whole bonded unit, just like a snort of a chemical drug infusing the brain with a sense of deranged surrealism. Honestly, I see that flirting with 'this world' is simply dangerous. Political speeches ensue, then when the rest of our group moves off, we too leave, but it's to face the hell of the traffic once again and it takes us three gruesome hours to get back to Modi Camp, where we can still hear the same political rally going on in the Parmarth Camp, which is being blasted throughout the entire mela, on loudspeakers placed on each corner of the camp.

This is when I realize the underlying nature of this whole Kumbh. The show-off of cleanliness, the pristine organization of the event, the politico-religious indoctrination going on through the loud speakers etc... is a grand campaign for the right-wing Hindu party just ahead of the national elections that will take place a couple of months from now! With half a billion people passing through, this is a really good opportunity for those in power to gain the popularity of the masses, based

on spiritual premises. Indeed, as we are leaving to catch our train back to Chandigarh the next day, again the roads are upset by a right hand aide of the Prime Minister himself coming to speak at the mela, again from inside the Parmarth camp. I understand that they have their reasons for doing this and obviously believe that whatever they are doing is the right way, but from what I have just experienced firsthand, plus the shift that our little group went through as it was tossed through the turbines of the religious power machine just by coming into contact with it, I can see how the spiritual essence that is our natural birthright can be so easily tainted by just a touch of the sense of power. More to the point, we are simply being fooled by images of our own perceptive creation! In the more holistic sense of our daily lives, in the 360 degrees of appearance that is arising around us at any moment, we can only ever focus on one thing at a time. But then, because we do not have the patience to remain with that one thing and like rabbits in headlights are bedazzled by myriad colours, lights, sounds and images appearing here, here and here, we hop, hop, and hop again and again until we fall exhausted in a heap at all the leaping we've done across the surface, never ever piercing the meaning, unable to see and rest in the essential place where all of it arises from, and where we can find the peace we all so desire.

To be continued...

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Politico-religious meeting at Parmarth Niketan Camp, Kumbh Mela, Prayagraj, India