



# Seven Murders Are Forgiven

## - With Holy Men In The Himalaya -

Contact [leonidplotkin@yahoo.com](mailto:leonidplotkin@yahoo.com)

4500 Words

Pilgrims and holy men, odd men, con men and cannibals all head to the Himalaya come spring.

“You horse!” said a scraggy kid, addressing me as I stood at the trailhead, buffeted on all sides by people plowing their way through a dense crowd of thousands to begin trekking into the mountains.

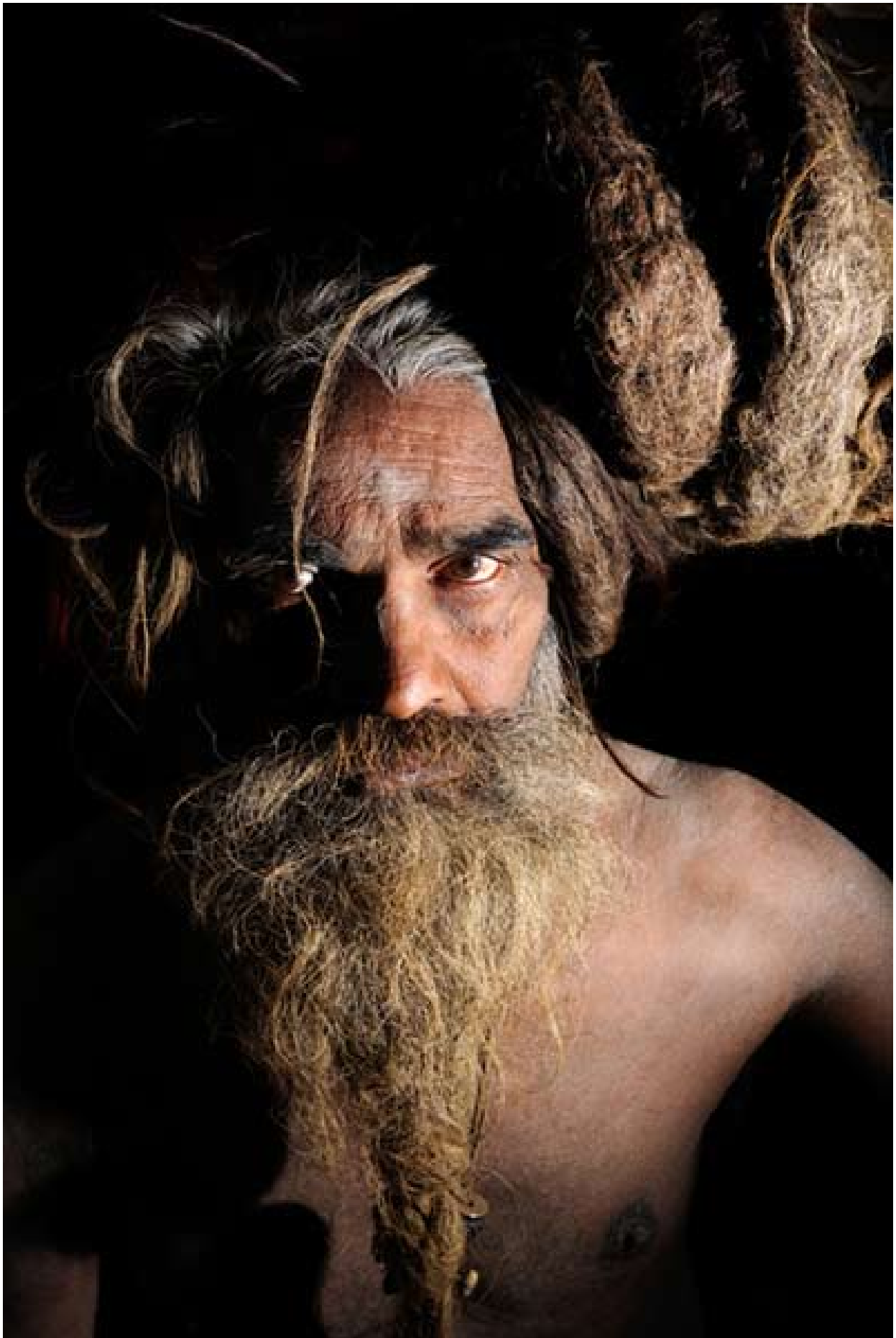
The kid wore an irregular combination: scruffy dress shoes, tattered business-casual trousers and a puffed out red jacket embroidered “Ferrari”. I saw the animal he led towards me, and I caught on straight away. He was not commenting on my resemblance to a beast of burden – loaded down with a ponderous backpack –

but offering the services of his donkey to transport me to my destination – an ancient Hindu temple high in the Indian Himalaya.

But it wasn’t just the unpalatable prospect of riding fourteen kilometers on a skinny donkey that made me decline. I wanted to walk – slowly – to meet some of the half-million pilgrims who, every summer, make their way up to the Shiva temple at Kedarnath, three and a half kilometers high in the mountains.

It was a pilgrimage such as the West probably hasn’t seen since the middle ages – a motley, kilometers-long line of the most varied kinds of people, improbably brought together by a shared spiritual quest.

There were the creeping old Gujarati women, hunched



*A Hindu Sadhu. Some consider them the holy men of the Hindu faith -- and literally kiss the ground that they walk on. Others say that the Sadhus are con men, charlatans and even worse -- drug addicts, sorcerers, child abductors and cannibals.*



*In a scene probably little changed from the middle ages two Rajasthani pilgrims pass a Hindu holy man taking a rest.*

over and draped in ground-length shawls – tribal tattoos on their faces. There were the Nepali porters schlepping large baskets, each with a person inside – usually an old-timer too frail to make the journey on foot. There were the elegant Rajasthani men with walrus moustaches – their heads wrapped in regal turbans; and the Rajasthani women – faces half obscured by a gauzy veil, one cyclopean eye showing to see where they stepped. There were the pouting,

prosperous urbanites riding in palanquins – each borne aloft by four undernourished men, walking lockstep, groaning under the weight. And there were the countless gaunt, stoic peasants, leaning on their canes as they shuffled along silently, single file. But most mysterious and most intriguing of all were the Hindu holy men – the Sadhus – lean figures in saffron colored robes, dreadlocked, sometimes barefoot, carrying not much more than a small container of



*Leaving the familiarity of their homes and routines, thousands of Nepalis migrate to India for a season's work hauling luggage and people from Gaurikund, the nearest roadhead, to the Shiva temple at Kedarnath.*



*A tribal woman with a tattooed face elated about her pilgrimage. After finishing the trek to Kedarnath many pilgrims visit other Hindu holy sites in the Himalaya before returning home.*

water, a blanket and a trident – a symbol of Shiva.

They had a dubious reputation these Sadhus. Some saw in these homeless, wandering ascetics the holy men of the Hindu faith – people existing in a highly cultivated spiritual state that many can seek but few can attain. Others said they were drug addicts, sorcerers, child abductors and cannibals. I was curious to meet some Sadhus – to see for myself who they were. But it was the bit about cannibals that intrigued me the most.

Today India presents a modern face to the world. It aspires to superpower status and celebrates its achievements in fields such as computers, biotechnology, space and nuclear power. It seemed hardly credible, then, that somewhere not far from the research laboratories and within sight of the rocket launch pads wandered men from another era – men who ate human beings. The charge seemed a slanderous myth, nothing more. But in India one comes to expect the strange and the unaccountable, and I couldn't stop musing that maybe here cannibals were more than merely specters. I wanted to meet



*Most pilgrims walk the fourteen kilometers between Gaurikund, the nearest roadhead, and Kedarnath, but the old and infirm, as well as the well-off and lazy, are carried up in rudimentary palanquins by porters.*

one. It seemed such a fascinating prospect – the possibility of encountering someone who engaged in the most ancient and primitive practices of mankind. And frightening as well, for though the probability of actually finding a cannibal in the Himalaya seemed about as likely as finding a Yeti, and any danger appeared remote; the possibility of running into a homicidal maniac certainly added an edge to the undertaking. I started speaking to Sadhus.



*Though it is less comfortable than a palanquin, some people ride in a basket carried by a Nepali porter because it is more economical.*

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“Hello Baba” I called out, approaching the first Sadhu I encountered on the trail. “Baba” means father in Hindi: a respectful term of address.

He didn’t look like a killer. He was a lean old man with a beard like Moses and bright, searing eyes – dressed in saffron robes and holding a staff. Resting on a large boulder in an Arcadian setting, he seemed an apparition from another age – a sage from antiquity who would not have looked out of place in Biblical times. In greeting he nodded to me slowly, knowingly and then, keeping his eyes fixed on mine he tilted his head sideways – motioning for me to sit next to him.

I took my place and waited for the Sadhu to speak. He did not utter a sound. Still and unblinking the sage sat staring into my eyes, and I returned his gaze. Minutes passed. Time slowed. Any moment, I thought, he would say something. But the Sadhu sat speechless, and the silence stretched and grew dilated. His eyes blazed. The silence became heavier and acquired momentum – it became something hypnotic.

I tore my gaze away from the Sadhu’s and became lost looking at the continuous stream of pilgrims that flowed just beside us. Men in monastic robes. Women in flowing saris, their luggage stacked on their heads. Anxious people – scanning the ascending trail with worried expressions. Two porters came rushing downward, bearing a sagging pole to which they had tied something heavy – the way a couple hunters might carry their quarry. The object was wrapped in a blanket, and it was not until they passed me and I saw a pair of bleached, bare feet sticking out from under



*An old Sadhu -- like a sage from Biblical times.*

the blanket that I realized they were transporting a corpse.

Shocked, I glanced at the Sadhu to see his reaction. His expression remained unchanged.

Now I sat there studying his closed lips – waiting for the slightest motion, the faintest quiver or twitch that would indicate that he was about to speak. What astonishing wisdom would issue from those lips when they finally parted!

When the first utterance came, it was not what I had imagined. Still not taking his eyes from mine, the sage smiled and sonorously intoned, “Shmoking?”

Immediately, he produced a small ball of charas, a drug like hashish, impaled it on the end of one match and then held the ball over a burning match to soften it up. With his fingers he picked off flakes of the drug and mixed it with some tobacco that he had emptied



*A woman on mule-back looks anxiously at the trail winding its way up into the mountains as she passes some tea stalls lining the pilgrim route.*



*A Sadhu smoking hashish from an Indian pipe -- called a Chillum. from a cigarette.*

I tried conversation.

“First time Kedarnath?” I inquired.

The Sadhu was now puffing away. His eyes



*Dozens of shops serving tea and simple meals line the trail. Three pilgrims fortify themselves with some tea.*

mellowed, became more good-natured.

“Me no shigarette shmoking. Only charas shmoking,” he answered.

“But you’ve been to Kedarnath before?”

“Shigarette chemical. Wine chemical. Charas natural no chemical” came the reply.

“Are there many Sadhus up there?”

“This charas very very best charas – number one best charas.”

“Om Shiva Shankar!” the Sadhu cried out. Then he inhaled deeply and let out a long column of smoke.

“Is it true there are cannibal sadhus?” I tried changing the subject.

The shmoker looked at me strangely, “Shiva shmoking charas. Sadhu shmoking charas. Same same.”

And so it went. My search for a cannibal began inauspiciously. No matter the question, he could speak of nothing other than charas. It grew tiresome, and I carried on walking.

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Govind Giri was different. He didn’t “shmoke” any less, but he was thoughtful, informative and spoke decent English.



*A waiter in a tea shop -- demented eyes and an eerie grin.*



*Govind Giri, a saffron-clad Sadhu, sits in a tea shop with two zoned-out pundits.*

I found myself sitting at the same table with him in a teashop – one of the many simple eateries lining the trail. An infernal looking cook with no eyebrows conjured curried vegetables on a blazing kerosene stove, and a creepy waiter with demented eyes and an eerie grin roamed amongst the tables.

I ordered tea; the waiter brought me a glass stuffed with napkins. “Tea!” I told him, miming a drinking motion. He delivered a plate of toothpicks.

Seeing my trouble, the Sadhu sitting across from me called out some sharp words, and in a moment the madman brought tea. The Sadhu introduced himself; we got to talking.

Govind Giri was a dark skinned man with a graying beard and black, shoulder-length dreadlocks. He had a noble, intelligent face, distinguished by kindly eyes and an inscrutable smile. Now more than fifty, he had been a Sadhu since his early twenties.

I wanted to hear some narrative of his life, to discover what had led him to the path of asceticism, but like

every other Sadhu he was evasive about his past – speaking in riddles and answering questions with questions.

“Why did you become a Sadhu?” I inquired.

“Why you become photographer?” he countered.

“But what brought you to this way of life?”

“Sometimes you have to die in order to live,” he replied.

This, at least, I found somewhat intelligible.

For most Sadhus their initiation into an ascetic order constitutes a complete break with their previous life – not just the assumption of a new identity, but a symbolic death and rebirth. They are the living dead. All Govind would tell me was that he had had no contact with his family or childhood friends since becoming a Sadhu.

He spent the cool months of the year wandering



*Above: Sadhus in the Himalaya -- on the trail to Kedarnath. Below: A Sadhu in a gesture of blessing.*

the plains of northern India visiting holy places – Varanasi, Allahabad, Haridwar. And then, when the lowland heat grew unbearable, he retreated to the Himalaya and spent the summer at Kedarnath, blessing pilgrims, asking for alms and meditating in the mountains.

“Is it true,” I asked him, “that some Sadhus are cannibals?”

Govind grimaced. He sat silently for a few moments – perhaps pondering whether or not to reply. And then he told me about the Aghoris – among the strangest of the many odd sects that one can find in India.

In India tens of thousands of men adopt the nomadic, ascetic way of life of the Sadhu. They renounce the world in order to live a more spiritual life. Their

goal is to attain liberation from the cycle of reincarnation and rebirth by cultivating their spiritual potential while suppressing their material instincts. Though the gulf between theory and practice is wide, most Sadhus preach renunciation, spirituality and purity. Of these,



ritual purity is most strictly observed; almost all Sadhus are vegetarians and shun alcohol, women, and places associated with death as polluting.



*Above: A tantric Sadhu who keeps and feeds skulls to access the power of the deceased. Below: Young Sadhu after smoking hashish.*

But there exists a small number of Sadhus who seek spiritual liberation by upending the traditional precepts of Hinduism – who seek spiritual power by breaking as many Hindu taboos as they can. Most radical among these are the Aghoris – a Tantric sect founded in ancient times.

Since ordinary Sadhus will not touch meat, Aghoris relish animal flesh, including the meat of the sacred cow. The only intoxicants Sadhus use are marijuana and hashish; Aghoris also smoke opium and consume alcohol freely. Sadhus steer clear of women; Aghoris practice free love. Sadhus avoid anything associated with death; Aghoris make their homes in cremation

grounds, keep human skulls and wear rosaries made of human bones. Most strangely, Aghoris believe in human sacrifice, engage in rituals involving

dead bodies and eat human flesh, including decomposed corpses.

“And they still eat people, even today?” I queried, incredulous.

“Sometimes,” Govind replied. “Seven murders are forgiven; that’s what they say,” he added

enigmatically. He couldn’t explain it; it was just something he’d heard.

It seemed astounding. Cannibals were more than just





*Pilgrims and porters.*

characters from overblown tales.

“Are there Aghoris at Kedarnath?” I continued.

“Not so many Aghori, but sometimes possible to find,” he replied. “But why you look for Aghori?” he asked suspiciously. “Aghori is no good Sadhu. Maybe Aghori eat you.”

He was not the first one who had tried to dissuade me. Other people to whom I’d mentioned my interest in meeting a cannibal were no more encouraging.

“There ARE no more cannibals in India!” asserted the skeptics. “You will wind up in the STEW!” prophesied the comedians. “You are LOSING your moral bearings,” warned the righteous.

Why indeed had the notion of meeting an Aghori ensnared my imagination? Certainly, I would have no desire to encounter an American cannibal in, say, New York; indeed I would be horrified to meet such a person. But in India, where the practice was part of an ancient religion and a living link to a primeval

and primitive human past, it appeared in an entirely different light. It seemed fascinating, mysterious – not merely monstrous – a connection to a world and time long gone by.

Govind and I left the teashop and walked together the rest of the way to the temple.

“Five fingers and every finger different,” he said, holding up his hand. “And you have five thousand Sadhus, every Sadhu different.”

He told many stories: of the Sadhu who spent every winter meditating naked in a cave in the Himalaya, unaffected by the cold; of the Sadhu who was arrested for running a brothel in Delhi; of Sadhus who dress and behave like women, even observing a menstruation period every month; of a Sadhu who could turn milk into liquor; and of Sadhus who attach an iron ring and heavy chain to their sexual organ to mark their triumph over sexual desire. He told me of a Sadhu who carried a revolver and was convicted of murder; of a Sadhu who spent his life standing – even while sleeping; of another Sadhu who spent months in



*Above: Sadhu Govind Giri in a mountain meadow above Kedarnath. Some Sadhus seek out isolated places in the mountains for meditation and prayer. Below: Sadhus Nandi Bharti and Govind Giri. Many Sadhus stay for weeks or even months at Kedarnath and in the nearby mountains.*

a deep spiritual trance without eating or drinking; and of the Sadhu who had ninety-nine Rolls Royces.

We continued climbing the crowded trail. A lone man with a walking stick lumbered slowly uphill, repeating “Om Namō Shivaya. Om Namō Shivaya” – “Om in the Name of Shiva” – a mantra to keep himself going. An odd fellow ran by wearing a pot on his head – a ladle tied to the pot hung like an earring next to his face. A group of Sadhus carrying barbed cudgels marched by looking menacing. Occasionally a helicopter buzzed overhead – ferrying rich pilgrims to a helipad from which Nepali porters would bring them on their backs the last few hundred meters to the temple.



The day passed quickly, and we entered Kedarnath in the evening. Govind helped me find a room and then went off to the Shiva temple.

Early the following morning we met up again. Govind had asked around; there were no Aghoris in Kedarnath. Now he was heading up to the valleys above town to meditate, and I came along. They were remote places, and it felt more secure to be in his company – on the off chance that mad man-eaters were really about.

We spent the day rambling through luxuriant meadows strewn with broken boulders left behind by retreating glaciers and golden flowers called forth by the summer rains. At one end of the valley reared up a nearly vertical wall of grey rock and glacier – the



*Above: Sadhus wait for alms near the entrance to the Kedarnath temple -- warming themselves by a fire, smoking hashish and blessing pilgrims who seek their benediction. Below: Partly as tradition, partly for ritual and partly out of sheer boredom, Sadhus smoke prodigious quantities of hashish.*

high Himalaya. Storm clouds swirled above us, alternately obscuring and revealing the mountains and threatening to enshroud us along with the entire valley. We encountered a few other Sadhus, but none of them had seen any Aghori about. The Aghori were reclusive, secretive and small in number; the likelihood of encountering one was infinitesimal, even in a place like Kedarnath where there were so many Sadhus.

As evening approached, I said goodbye to Govind Giri. He was continuing to more secluded areas higher up in the mountains, and I had to return to Kedarnath. I never saw him again.

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The next few days I spent wandering around Kedarnath, talking to Sadhus.

Hundreds of them crowded the temple grounds. Some could be seen blessing pilgrims in exchange for a small donation. But mostly they just sat around shivering in the cold, smoking hashish and begging for alms.



I joined a group of four Sadhus parked near the temple entrance – warming themselves around a brazier. They had just finished passing around

the hashish pipe, and they commenced a coughing concerto when I arrived. One was the background cougher – sounding like a car engine that turns over but won't start in the cold. Two others kept cadence – with clipped, staccato-like coughs. And the fourth

took the lead – with powerful, full-throated coughs punctuated by violent expectorations. This went on for a while. Sometimes a pilgrim approached and one of the Sadhus would reach out and put a hand on him in a gesture of benediction. By the time their coughing was dying down one of the Sadhus could be seen preparing another pipe.

This was routine Sadhu life, interesting in its own way, but I was searching for stranger encounters.

One promising character resided on a grassy meadow behind the temple.

He sat on a rug under a shelter that he had rigged up using bamboo and a large sheet of purple plastic. Stuck into the ground in front of him stood a trident – a symbol of Shiva. And around the teeth of this trident he had wrapped a large rosary whose beads were made of some sort of bone carved into the shape of human skulls. Around his neck he wore a necklace, also made of bones carved into little skulls. My heart beat faster.

“Aghori?” I asked him.

He just stared at me blankly.

“Aghori?” I tried again, pointing my finger at him.

The Baba looked away and made not one sound.

I crouched before him and for a few minutes made every effort to elicit from him an admission that his culinary tastes extended to humans.

The Sadhu remained tight-lipped. Now he regarded me with disdain.

He was a dashing fellow – a fop who clearly cared a great deal about his appearance. His dreadlocks were pulled up and then tucked into themselves so that they sat perfectly in a sort of radial on top of his head. Around his neck hung several necklaces and at least six medallions. His hands and arms were also richly adorned, with rings and all sorts of bracelets. He had wrapped a beautifully embroidered sash around his



*Some Sadhus undertake severe penances -- such as sleeping while standing or always keeping one arm raised high in the air. This sadhu is a Muni Baba -- one who has taken a vow of silence and has not spoken in years.*



*Above: Mani Mahesh -- a young Sadhu with his guru, an ash-smeared naked Sadhu. Below: Boy Sadhu Mani Mahesh.*

waist. And to top off the effect various ash markings decorated his face and his naked torso and arms.

Quickly I took a few photos, and crawling on my knees up to the Sadhu, I showed him the images on my camera's screen. The Sadhu melted. His eyes softened and a broad smile spread across his face. He loved me. He raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips and nodded approvingly – well pleased with the figure he cut in the world. Gently he patted me on the head and then struck a pose for another portrait. Still, he said not a word.

By now some other Sadhus had gathered around us to watch the photo shoot taking place.

“Why won't he talk to me?” I asked a bystander.

“He is Muni Baba,” the Sadhu told me.

“What is Muni Baba?”

It turned out that “Muni” meant mute. The Sadhu had taken a vow of silence and had not uttered a word in years.

“So is he an Aghori?” I continued interrogating my informant?

“No Aghori. Just Muni Baba.”



This was a letdown. I took a few more photos and then said goodbye. Affectionate waves and smiles from the Muni Baba accompanied my departure.

Another day I returned to the temple to meet an odd couple I had noticed before.

On the ground, next to a portrait of Shiva, sat a ghost quivering with cold – a naked man whose entire body was smeared with white ash. Nothing more than an umbrella and a thin imitation leopard-skin cloth draped over his head and shoulders protected him from the weather – though the temperature was no more than a few degrees above freezing. He was a Naga Baba – a naked Sadhu, belonging to an order of ascetics who dispense with clothing to show their lack of attachment to material things.

Near him stood a small savage – a shaggy boy of ten or eleven – a kind of boy Sadhu. He wore what looked like an orange bathrobe and flip-flops. This made it look like he was on his way to the shower and highlighted his unkempt appearance. A thicket of disheveled dreadlocks sat randomly on his head. He had lively, twinkling eyes – one of which looked lazily off to one side. On his chin bloomed a cute little dimple, and his glowing smile revealed a mouthful of chipped teeth. He stood there beaming – looking like the happiest kid in the world.

“Is he your son?” I asked the ashen-faced man.

“He is my pupil – Mani Mahesh,” the Sadhu explained.

“But is he also your son?”

“Not son! Pupil! I am guru; he is pupil,” came the clarification.

I had seen Mani Mahesh before – always animated, kinetic, romping around the temple grounds entertaining both pilgrims and Sadhus. Sometimes I spotted him intercepting pilgrims as they emerged from the temple. He would reach up toward some pilgrim’s head and make like he was blessing him – imitating the gestures he had picked up from the older Sadhus. Other times I saw him with the Sadhus, breathlessly rattling on about something in rapid-fire Hindi, his smile radiant, his hands flailing in the air, while the Sadhus giggled and sometimes bent over double with laughter. And when the Sadhus would smoke, Mani Mahesh would cup his hands in front of his mouth and pretend that he was smoking as well.

But as with other Sadhus, it proved impossible to discover anything about the boy’s past. I wanted to know where the ghostman had obtained the boy.

I tried an oblique approach: “Have you and Mani Mahesh been together for long?”

But even this proved too prying.

“You buy me seven eight blankets?” the Sadhu said irritated, without bothering to answer.

That turned out to be the end of the interview. Now, any query I put to the guru was answered with a demand for blankets.

I tried one last question: “You know where I can find Aghori?”

“No Aghori,” he replied sharply, “very cold, need blankets.”

My search was coming to nothing, and I grew discouraged. Though I had it on good authority that cannibals existed, they seemed as elusive as ghosts.

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After several days in Kedarnath I had failed to meet an Aghori. The town lay at nearly 12,000 feet, and it was too cold and damp to linger there any longer. I gave up, and one morning I shouldered my pack and set off for the lowlands.

On my way out of town I passed within sight of the Muni Baba’s purple shelter. I spotted the Baba sitting inside and waved him goodbye. I could not have expected what followed. Never had I seen the Muni Baba stand; always he sat on his carpet, looking dapper and dignified. But now, losing his cool, he sprang up and bounded towards me, gesturing wildly, pointing at something behind me.

I looked back but saw nothing unusual – just one side of the mountain valley. I had walked there with Govind Giri. A trail led up to some lakes and then on to a snowy mountain pass and into another valley. Some Sadhus passed that way heading to distant Hindu holy places.

The Muni Baba grabbed my arm and impatiently dragged me along, pointing up to the side of the valley, indicating that I should follow him there. His urgent miming left little time to consider my options. I dropped my pack in a Sadhu's shelter and hurried behind Muni Baba.

Swiftly we marched down Kedarnath's bursting

He had weary, black, bloodshot eyes and prominent cheekbones on a skeletal face – partly obscured by a thick beard. A black turban held back his coal-colored dreadlocks, and an inky sectarian mark ran down his forehead to the bridge of his nose.

I paused in front of him for a moment to catch my breath.



*An Aghori Sadhu. The Agrori are among the strangest of Sadhu sects. They are known to practice human sacrifice and engage in cannibalism.*

bazaar, crossed a bridge over the Mandakini River and breathlessly ascended a trail lined by rundown teashops and fleabag flophouses where porters rested between jobs. Now there were not many people about. We hurried on; the houses became more infrequent. Below us Kedarnath spread out on the valley floor – like a scale model of a town. Soon we approached the last few teahouses; past that the trail entered desolate, uninhabited backcountry. From a distance I could make out a few figures seated on a bench outside one of the shops. And then we drew up to the house, and immediately I understood why we had come.

Between two Sadhus characteristically clothed in saffron sat an angular figure clad entirely in black.

“Aghori?” I panted.

“Aghori,” he nodded his head.

I felt a sense of triumph; the apparition sat right before me.

I cast a glance at the Muni Baba – seeking corroboration. He stood smiling broadly – the impresario who had arranged this incredible, unlikely encounter.

The Muni Baba shooed away the other two Sadhus and we sat on the bench.



*Living links to a mysterious and remote way of life.*

It was me a mute and a cannibal.

Communication proved nearly impossible; no one spoke any English. So I couldn't do much more than stare at the Aghori Baba the same way I might have gaped at a live Pterodactyl.

I could only contemplate his eyes and the reflections they echoed and imagine the dark, primordial, savage scenes they had mirrored by the firelight of arcane occult rituals.

And that, I knew by then, was as much as one could expect. It was not just a problem of language. My conversations with other Sadhus had taught me that he would never reveal to an outsider anything about his past or his inner life. And as for the Aghori rituals, I did not have the stomach to witness them, even if it were possible. The amazing thing was just to be in the presence of someone who was a living link to the most ancient and primal rites of mankind; it felt like a kind of time travel.

The practice of asceticism, of renouncing the world to live a more spiritual life, is probably as old as religious consciousness itself. Though the practice has died out in much of the world, it survives amongst the Sadhus of India. This is what makes their company so compelling – the presence of an uninterrupted connection to a remote way of life that has existed since the early days of mankind. And it was the extraordinary opportunity to experience this powerful and strange sense of connection that had driven me to seek out the cannibal – whose way of life seemed the most atavistic of all.

We sat together for a while, but the connection proved short-lived. Growing bored of our silent staring the Aghori stood up, mumbled something and set off on the trail – ascending up to the pass.

With my eyes I followed this enigmatic black figure as he climbed, receded from view and finally dissolved in the same eternal mountain landscape where his predecessors have roamed for millennia.