A journey outward, a deeper journey within.

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The Narmada Parikrama

A Seeker's Journey to Awakening in Sacred India

People, places and profound lessons from a life-changing pilgrimage

RONNIE MUHL



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Dedication

For Maa Narmada,

who called me,
connected with me,
carried me,

and brought me home,

anew,
transformed,
reborn.

Invocation

Maa… I pray to you to purify and spiritualise my whole life.

I have no power to do so on my own.

I am often swept along by the strong current of worldly temptations.

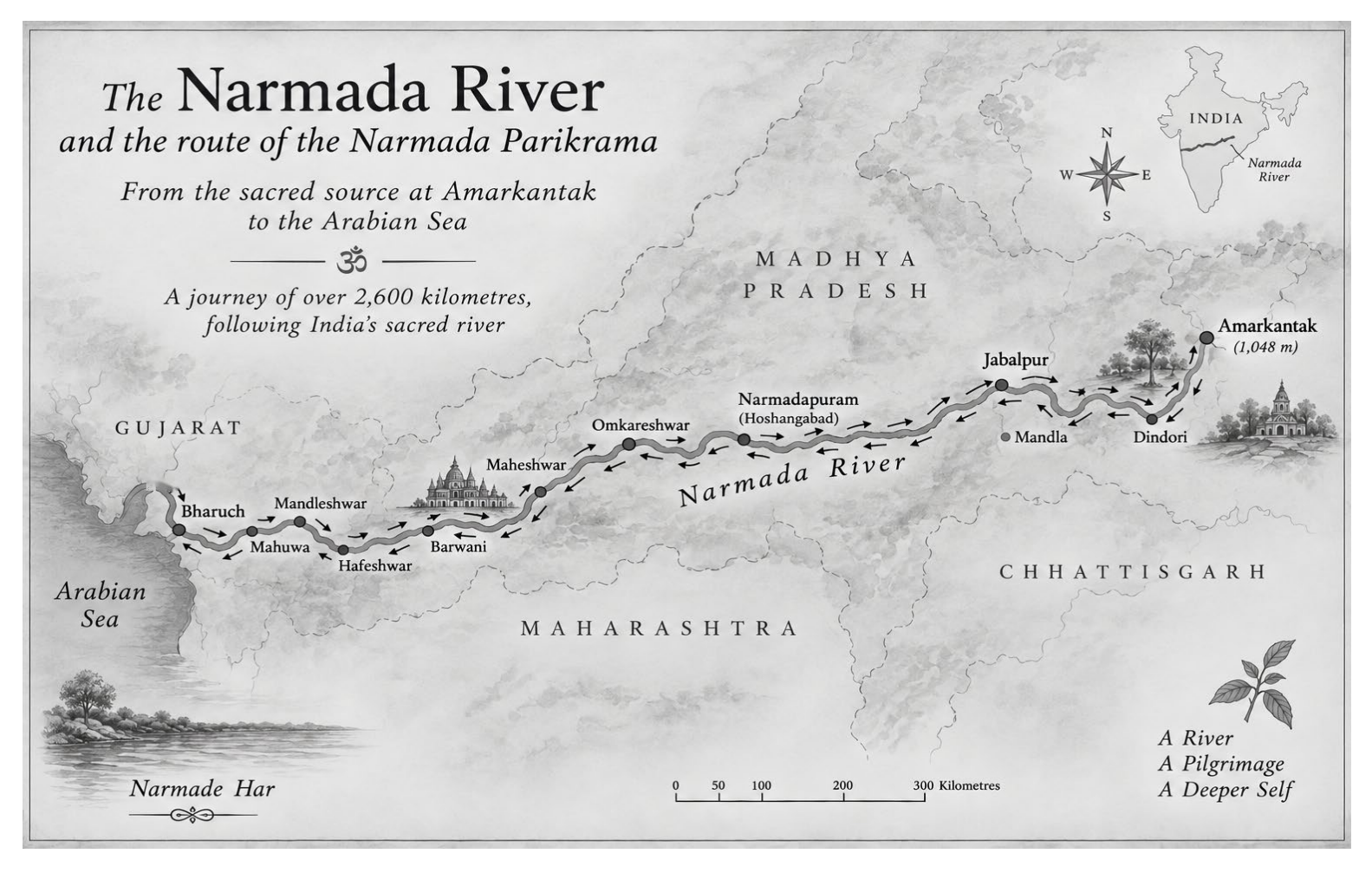
Bless me, Maa, and inspire me to noble thoughts and deeds.

Lift my aspirations and make me steadfast in my devotion to you.

Give me unfaltering steps,

so that I may never forget that you are guiding my life.

Jai Maa… Jai Maa… Jai Maa


The Narmada River
and the route of the Narmada Parikrama
From the sacred source at Amarkantak
to the Arabian Sea
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A journey of over 2,600 kilometres,
following India's sacred river
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CHHATTISGARH
MAHARASHTRA
Narmade Har
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A River
A Pilgrimage
A Deeper Self

Praise For

"From the time I found Ronnie performing the Narmada Parikrama, I felt fascinated by it, not because it was the first time this millennia-old venture was being undertaken, but because of the dedication with which it was being undertaken.

The Parikrama is not just a walk around the river. It is mingling with the people who inhabit its shores and experiencing the simple, unconditional love they radiate towards one who is daring enough to take on the arduous journey.

As Ronnie opens his heart to the unalloyed approach of these simple folk, he himself feels purified and deconditioned.

He beautifully and hauntingly describes the gentle love and adulation of the simple village people whom he met and interacted with along the way. They look upon the yatris, particularly one like Ronnie Baba who has come from afar and, as per their reckoning, does not even subscribe to their faith, as manifestations of the Divine. They treat him as such.

Ronnie beautifully and honestly describes the transformation that this generosity brings about in his own inner being. He could not have imagined an unknown person washing his feet, providing him with food and a rustic resting place, and then pressing a small amount of money into his hands as a *Dakshina*, as their contribution to his effort.

He noticed the inclusive acceptance and admiration of the simple rural people of India as he opened up to them. What a

change from the jaded urban populations that fail to notice the subtle and ennobling!

Acts of generosity towards those who undertake pilgrimages — unknown beings, but pilgrims nevertheless, bound together in their reverence for the Divine that manifests here as a river — still overflow in the minds of these simple folk. And Ronnie, by his simple acceptance, enhances those gestures.

I found it touching that Ronnie allows himself to be penetrated by the purity of the environment, as when he encounters a lotus pond out of nowhere. He surrenders, sits quietly and allows his inmost being to be touched by it. Like the flower, he feels cleansed of the mire of worldly cares. A "profound insight and awakening" takes place somewhere within him. The flower gives him deep intimations of connectedness. His *sadhana* is deepened.

There are stories of 'Miracles' as well. He sees different reasons for undertaking the *yatra*, as with Rishu and Ashu, who perform it as a thanksgiving for the miraculous recovery of one of the brothers after an accident. In hindsight, it looks like a foreboding of Ronnie's own story, when he would encounter such a situation and almost die due to an undecipherable viral infection. And now, in his 'second life', after a recovery period of more than a year, he is contemplating performing another *yatra*.

There are humorous incidents when, unable to converse because of the language barrier, he is stared at like a person from another planet, and at times admired.

There is also the case of a person of Islamic faith on his motorcycle, who kept needling him and telling him that he

was losing his way and would soon find himself in a hell of disbelievers.

Then there is a 'racist' Ayurvedic doctor who does not approve of an outsider, a 'non-Hindu', performing the *yatra*.

The book is written in a very readable style, whereby a reader can place herself in those situations and savour the experiences that this formidable yatri gained during his unusual *yatra*."

Veena Sharma — Friend and Seeker

"Fascinating stories along this path of awakening in my beloved and sacred India, this is what I find page by page… Sometimes just with gestures, sometimes without a word, sometimes just with the language of humility and kindness, but in every step that you were walking, you are showing me the beauty of the pilgrimage, the marvel of the spiritual path and the essence of life.

Thank you, Ronnie, my dearest walking Sadhu, for showing me through your words and steps, the magic of rituals and spirituality in India, and the magic of just walking to meet new fellow travellers and, indeed, walking to meet the truth.

'The Narmada Parikrama – A Seeker's Journey to Awakening in Sacred India.' It's an endless path of wisdom and awakening at every step."

Zaida Prem Samatha — Spiritual Mentor and Meditation Master

"Having overcome the physical challenges of running marathons and climbing Mt Everest, the natural question is, what next? An open and sensitive person can see that, more than external challenges, it is the internal psychological obstacles that impede one's harmony and well-being.

Ancient Indian pilgrim traditions of walking to *chaar dhams*, undertaking Narmada Parikrama while braving the elements and facing the unknown, depending on the goodwill of strangers for food and shelter, are a path of *tapas*. The long walk over the months is not just a practice of mortification of the body, it is an opportunity to live unconditionally, thinning the mind of likes and dislikes and being in the ever-present Now.

During the *yatra*, one has intimate encounters with the physical, social, religious, economic and linguistic diversity of India, yet experiences Oneness with All.

Mysterious are the ways in which Mother India's grace opens the vision to divine presence that pervades everywhere, all the time. This experience is vouchsafed to the pure in heart.

Sri Ronnie Muhl is indeed blessed to experience the inclusive genius of India; Mother Ganga and Narmada have adopted him and kept him close.

This book, containing his intimate encounters and ruminations on the Narmada Parikrama route, illumines the way of a contemplative pilgrim. I hope the book would serve as a helpful inspiration for fellow pilgrims on the path, with an open heart."

Pawan Malik — Friend

"I have been blessed to support my friend Ronnie via his thrilling WhatsApp shares during his journeys in India these past few years – I share a love and fascination for India and the Himalayas with Ronnie.

Armchair adventurers and active adventurers alike, seeking both external challenges and inner transformations, now have this story of courage and humility to inspire us all to venture forth and embrace our individual yearnings towards attaining our own summits of the spirit."

Pieter Carst — Aspirant Adventurer

"Ronnie belongs to a rare and ancient tradition of seekers who have found, in the journey itself and in the practice of silent and mindful walking, a path to knowledge. In his case, the goal is self-knowledge, which ultimately leads to an experience of the unity and divinity of all that exists.

This book offers a glimpse into that journey and into the profound encounter with oneself and with the sacred that can emerge through walking. It is a privilege to have his friendship and to consider him both a source of inspiration and a spiritual brother."

Jesús Márquez Zafra — Doctor of Philosophy, Yogi and Spiritual Brother

"Sadhu Ronnie has undertaken a great spiritual journey in pursuit of the Supreme Divine. On this incredible journey, his spiritual observations and experiences of serenity and devotion are deeply appreciable.

His profound encounters with divine beings and the natural world not only transformed his Western understanding of spirituality, but also brought him an immense sense of enlightenment and a crystal-clear understanding of Hinduism and Indian spirituality.

Sadhu Ronnie's discovery of completeness in the Supreme Divine is truly unfathomable and beyond human comprehension. Such rigorous spiritual journeys, undertaken by a human being with a genuine and dedicated thirst for the Divine, can lead towards the Supreme.

I believe that his adventurous and magnanimous spiritual journey will serve as an incredible example to future generations who seek God and truth."

Brother Shantha Kumar — Indian Christian Evangelist

"Ronnie's experience of the Narmada Parikrama has had such a profound effect on me and there is an instant urge to set forth on this divine journey all over again."

Ramnath Mallya — Fellow Parikramawasi who completed his journey barefoot.

"Ronnie Baba, your words inspire, provoke reflection, allow others to pause…to simply feel what is truly important in life."

Baba Yoli — A Yogini and Spiritual Aspirant

"Dear Ronnie,

Strange, it may seem, are the ways of the Divine. I met you in the most unexpected way, and the bond we have built in such a short time feels like much more than just friendship — possibly a continuation of something deeper, perhaps from another life.

For someone who has touched the peaks of success, quite literally, seeking oneself might naturally seem like the next journey to undertake. But the way you have chosen to embark upon that journey is truly inspiring, and I am grateful that you cared to document it and share it with us.

On the one hand, the book offers a refreshing perspective on the everyday life of rural India; on the other, your bold and engaging style of writing at times evoked profound feelings in me.

The book beautifully brings alive the rich tapestry of India's social, cultural and spiritual landscape, interwoven with your deeply personal journey in search of *Om Tat Sat*."

Jayan Thiruthiyil — A Fellow Seeker

"This is not merely a travelogue, but a spiritual book that draws our attention inward as we read the author's story along the banks of Maa Narmada and into the very heart of India.

With disarming honesty and an open heart, the author takes us not only through the moments of his journey, but also through the egoic layers that are shed as one embarks upon a pilgrimage.

I particularly enjoyed the stories 'A Mataji Washes My Feet' and 'Nothing and Everything'. The book is an inspiration for those who long to undertake a pilgrimage."

Sandeep Ganesh — A Contemporary Spiritual Teacher

"It is both an honour and a privilege to contribute a few words to this book and to Ronnie's remarkable journey. Knowing him has been a blessing, and I feel fortunate that our paths crossed. His journey around Maa Narmada is not merely a story of travel, but one of faith, determination, surrender and an earnest search for something deeper within.

The Narmada Parikrama on foot is an immensely demanding pilgrimage — physically, mentally and spiritually. What makes Ronnie's journey particularly inspiring to me is that, despite coming from a distant country and a very different background, he heard and embraced the calling of Maa Narmada. To undertake the Parikrama and see it through to completion requires extraordinary commitment and humility.

I believe this sacred journey has brought him closer to the self-realisation he seeks, while leaving him with experiences and wisdom that few journeys can offer. May Maa Narmada continue to guide and bless him on the path ahead."

Anurag Aggarwal — Spiritual Seeker and Friend

"Having walked the Narmada Parikrama myself, I found myself deeply connected to the experiences woven through these pages. What stayed with me was not simply the journey around Maa Narmada, but the quiet transformation that happens within the person who surrenders to the journey.

Through encounters with strangers, villagers, saints, nature and moments of unexpected grace, the book gently reminds us that a Parikrama is rarely about the path we think we are walking. It becomes a mirror, revealing our attachments, vulnerabilities, beliefs and, ultimately, our capacity to simply be.

There is a beautiful thread of surrender running through these stories: the understanding that Maa Narmada teaches not always through grand experiences, but through ordinary people, silent moments, hardship, kindness and seemingly inexplicable encounters. The deeper one walks, the more the outer journey begins to dissolve into an inner one.

This book beautifully captures the essence of a Parikrama — not merely as a journey around Maa Narmada, but as a journey inward, where the pilgrim slowly stops seeking answers outside and begins to recognise that the real awakening is happening within. Through surrender, observation, connection and simply being, one comes to realise that the Parikrama is perhaps not about reaching somewhere at all, but about becoming someone different along the way."

Prachi Kate — Fellow Parikramawasi

Foreword

This foreword is synchronicity at its finest. To be asked to write it feels uncanny, for my connection with Narmada Maa is known only to a few—it reaches back into a memory of another lifetime. The author, my dear friend **Ronnie Muhl**, could not have known this. Certainly not from this lifetime.

For me, Narmada Maa is not merely a river; she is a living memory carried from my life as Rani Roopmati in the 16th century. Ronnie had no knowledge of this past-life bond, yet out of the blue he sent me a message asking if I would write a foreword to his book. He knew me only as a teacher at Yoga Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, familiar with my spiritual leanings. I did not know he was writing about the rich spiritual tradition of the Narmada, nor that he would mention Rani Roopmati. Reading his request, I was stunned by the concurrence of destiny with my own life.

In that lifetime, as a young girl, I would begin each day with prayers to Narmada, sing to her, and rest only after standing at her banks to feel her embrace. The wind became my music, carrying songs of devotion to the Mother River. Writing this foreword now feels like being transported back into that era.

Ronnie's words carry a devotion that reflects the river's cultural and spiritual heritage. Narmada, one of the seven holy rivers, is mentioned in the Matsya Purana and Skanda Purana and is revered for her power to purify by sight alone—unlike the Ganga, where one must bathe. I recall vividly how, in my past life, I would refuse food until I had glimpsed her waters. Even

recently, when I visited Mandu—my abode as Rani Roopmati—I was overcome with tears of joy at seeing Narmada Maa again.

This may sound far-fetched, yet being asked to write this foreword feels like a circle completed—returning me to the devotion, prayer, and joy I carry within. Narmada is known to grant impossible wishes, especially to those who undertake her sacred Parikrama. Though I cannot recall the songs I once composed, in this lifetime I write poetry, guide meditation, and, as a spiritual coach, spread the message of love and compassion. Perhaps this ode to Narmada by Ronnie carries my love within it too.

I know Ronnie's spiritual quest to highlight the motherly nature of Narmada will be evocative and enlightening. May these pages be a darshan of Narmada Maa, carrying her song into the hearts of all who read.

Maa Narmada, flowing light,
You cradle earth in endless night.
Forgiving waters, gentle song,
Mother's embrace where we belong.

Dr. Trupti Jayin
Past Life Regression Therapist | Clinical Psychologist | Occupational Therapist

A Word from a Fellow Mountaineer

I have known Ronnie since 2005, and during the years that followed we shared some remarkable experiences, including our expedition to Mount Everest and our successful summit in 2007.

When I think of the Ronnie I knew in those days, I think of someone who lived life with considerable energy and enthusiasm. He was an adventurer, mountaineer, athlete, businessman and public speaker, and someone who was very comfortable engaging with people. He was naturally gregarious, enjoyed an audience and had an ability to make people feel at ease in his company. He was also highly determined, resilient and ambitious, and seemed always to be looking towards the next challenge, the next goal or the next opportunity to achieve success.

Many of those same qualities are still evident in Ronnie, although they now find expression in different ways and serve a very different purpose.

Today Ronnie lives in India as a Sadhu, having left behind the world of business, public life and achievement for a much simpler existence. The man who once travelled to the world's great mountains in pursuit of adventure and challenge has more recently spent six months and eleven days walking almost 3,000 kilometres around the Narmada River. In doing so, he has gained a very different perspective on life.

The pages that follow reveal someone who is now less concerned with achievement and increasingly interested in understanding himself and what the journey might reveal.

Some of the encounters he describes are remarkably simple—sharing food with strangers, being offered shelter, sitting in silence with people with whom he cannot communicate in words. Yet these experiences appear to have affected him profoundly. They have introduced him to ideas of humility, generosity, presence and inner awareness that are very different from the standards by which many of us measure success.

I recognise the sincerity with which he has embraced this journey, and the extent to which it appears to have changed his understanding of himself and the world around him.

I am pleased to have known the adventurer who set out on those earlier journeys, and privileged now to gain some insight into the very different path he has chosen to follow.

Mike Patterson

Preface

It was the 6th of July, and I had just attended the morning birthday celebrations of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in Dharamshala. I felt joyful and uplifted as I walked out of his monastery and wandered aimlessly up the hill towards the centre of town.

As I approached the square, I felt drawn to walk into a small bookshop. I am not sure why. I had no intention of buying anything, but I nevertheless felt the need to browse. I slowly scanned the rows of books at eye level and recognised many titles and authors that I had come to know during all my years of scattered and unfulfilled spiritual searching.

I had once owned hundreds of self-help books, many of them unread, and I did not want to buy another book simply to glorify bookshelves that I no longer possessed. Yet I still loved holding the printed word in my hands.

As time passed without me really noticing, I found myself raising my head and looking towards the shelves in the top corner of the bookshop. My eyes caught the words *Himalayan Master* on the spine of a book. My gaze was instantly fixed, and I was intrigued, mainly because I had recently finished reading *Living with the Himalayan Masters* by Swami Rama and had soaked up every word of this well-known spiritual classic.

It did not take long for me to remove the book from the shelf. It was only then that I noticed the full title: *Apprenticed to a*

Himalayan Master by Sri M. I randomly opened the book, and the chapter title that revealed itself was "Towards the Himalayas."

I started scanning through the pages, reading sentences here and there, and then felt something stirring inside me. Strangely, I felt captivated and intuitively knew that I needed to read this book.

As I tussled with the irrational book-lover side of my personality and my newfound frugal self, I closed the book, placed it back on the shelf where it belonged, and started making my way back to where I was staying.

It started raining, and as my pace quickened, I surreptitiously felt as though I was also hurrying to get onto my computer to see whether I could find a copy of *Apprenticed to a Himalayan Master* online. I was unable to shake the book from my mind.

Back in my room, I opened my computer, and it didn't take long to find a copy online. I felt a mixture of relief and excitement as I downloaded the book and, with eager anticipation, immediately turned to Chapter 15, "Towards the Himalayas," and began to read.

In this chapter, Sri M describes how, as a young man of twenty, he started walking from Rishikesh to Badrinath with his Guru, Maheshwarnath Babaji. I was totally enthralled as I read about his experiences.

And then it happened.

It was as though I had been struck by lightning.

The space behind my eyes suddenly became illuminated with a searing, bright light, and I could clearly hear a gentle but commanding voice say, **"This is what you must do."**

The luminosity and clarity with which this vision presented itself was instructional, intense and compelling, and I felt as though I had no choice. In the midst of this bright light within the spiritual cortex of my mind, and captured within the words that were still echoing loudly, I had a vision of myself walking like a monk, a Sadhu, in the same way the Sages, Seers, Saints and Rishis had done in the past: with minimal belongings, no money, no food, no home, no begging, only accepting what was offered.

Where on earth did this emanate from?

I had never entertained anything of this nature before. Although I had climbed Mount Everest, so adventure, trekking, climbing and roughing it were not foreign to me, this felt intimidating and frightening. At the same time, my entire being was tingling with exhilaration and anticipation beyond anything I could have imagined.

The more I read, the more outrageous this thought became. Yet, in the depths of my being, there was an excitement—a knowing.

As I finished the chapter, I closed my computer and sat on the bed in utter dismay at what had just unfolded. As I allowed the thoughts of what I had read to wash over me, I tried to comprehend what it would be like for an elderly European male to walk unaccompanied from Rishikesh to Badrinath as a Sadhu.

What did it truly mean to walk and live like an authentic Sadhu?

I knew that most people thought that to be a Sadhu, you had to leave everything behind, grow a beard, wear orange robes, renounce the world and sit in a cave somewhere in the Himalayas, meditating all day long.

But that wasn't it.

I would have to discover that for myself.

I soon realised that I had more questions than answers, but somehow I also knew that I didn't need to have all the answers. I allowed myself to let go. Within that letting go came an overwhelming sense of acceptance and peace. I felt I was being called to walk this journey by a force far greater than myself. It felt ordained and entirely within my grasp, yet completely beyond my control.

During my remaining four days in Dharamshala, a series of synchronistic events unfolded, each seeming to provide further affirmation that I was being called to return to Rishikesh and prepare for my journey to Badrinath. It was an exuberant time of outward preparation, but more importantly, a period of focused and disciplined inner preparation.

My yatra to Badrinath became the most profound spiritual experience I could have imagined. Walking like a Sadhu in the footsteps of the Saints, Seers and Rishis of old changed my life. I began to experience glimpses of something I had spent years searching for, although I could not yet fully understand what was happening.

I learned about unconditional surrender and total acceptance. These became the foundation of my journey and enabled me to cultivate an unquestionable faith and trust in the Universe. The more I allowed each situation, circumstance and experience to come into my life without resistance, the more joyful, open, content and peaceful I became.

Something else began to change. I started seeing beauty and divinity everywhere—not only in the smiles and gestures of the people I encountered, but in the plants, trees, streams, flowers, stones and rocks around me. The further I walked, the richer and more vibrant the extraordinary diversity of India seemed to become, filling me with ceaseless amazement, wonder and awe.

I was mostly alone, but I was never lonely. As I allowed stillness to penetrate more deeply into my being, something began to shift. The more I confronted my own issues and let go of what I had been carrying, the lighter I felt.

The less I resisted, the more I seemed to flow.

And the more I walked, the less separation I felt between myself and the world around me. I began to feel more whole, more complete and more at one with everything. There were moments when I caught glimpses of my true nature and felt closer to an understanding of who I really was.

The simplicity of walking as a Sadhu humbled me. It began to loosen my attachment to the carefully constructed identity I had carried for so many years and, in doing so, started to reveal how much of what I thought was "me" was simply a story I had created.

The process was only beginning.

Soon after arriving back in Rishikesh, I decided to turn around and walk to Kedarnath before the temple closed in the middle of October. I felt a deep yearning to continue the transformation that had begun in the mountains.

Then, while I was on my way to Kedarnath, I was told that Sri M was conducting a three-day Satsang in the Pench Tiger Reserve on the outskirts of Nagpur.

The moment I heard this, the same radiant light that had illuminated the space behind my eyes in Dharamshala suddenly reappeared. With it came the same gentle but assertive voice:

"And you must walk to Nagpur and go and thank Sri M personally for inspiring you to walk from Rishikesh to Badrinath."

Once again, I felt as though I had no choice.

I accepted the instruction without resistance. Somehow, I knew I was being guided towards something I did not yet understand.

On my way to Nagpur, I was forced to stay at the Kali Mata Mandir in Narsinghpur after developing a blister under the ball of my left foot. I needed five days of rest before I could continue.

I was getting ready to resume my journey when Rajesh Soni, whom I had recently met, called and suggested that we go to the Narmada River. He told me that it was a holy river and that he felt a divine urge to show it to me. He also wanted to introduce me to two babas who lived on its banks.

He suggested that we take a packed lunch and that he would pick me up on his motorcycle around midday.

I was ready when he arrived, and we soon found ourselves riding through the picturesque farmlands of Madhya Pradesh towards the Narmada. I held the bag containing our lunch with one hand while using the other to keep myself safely seated on the back of Rajesh's motorcycle. The 16-kilometre journey took about half an hour.

After arriving at an ashram on the banks of the Narmada, we made our way down to the water's edge.

I was immediately captivated by the sheer size and breadth of this holy body of water flowing gently before me. Almost instantly, I felt a strange inner yearning.

What was this deep aching feeling?

It wasn't melancholy, but there was an intensity to it that I couldn't fathom. Something deep within me shifted, as though I could hear the whisper of unspoken words.

I stood quietly with my hands clasped and my eyes closed, as if in prayer, but I was not praying.

I was listening.

I stood still for some time, waiting expectantly, but for what? I knew that Mother Nature communicates in ways that are not always fathomable to the logical mind, yet some part of me still expected her to speak in a way that was obvious.

No words came.

And yet, something happened.

A subtle but potent energetic transfer took place. It was impossible to quantify or explain, but deep in the core of my being, I simply knew that something had occurred.

At the precise moment that I sensed a heightened awareness, Rajesh broke the silence.

"It's time to visit the babas and have lunch."

His words brought me back to the water's edge with a jolt. I opened my eyes, smiled at Rajesh and said, "Okay, I'm ready to go."

Rajesh later told me that pilgrims walk around the river, following a tradition known as the Narmada Parikrama. They adhere to certain traditions, rules and disciplines, and his words immediately caught my attention.

As I pondered what I had just heard, he told me that according to ancient wisdom, the Narmada was the first river in the universe and that, from the time of creation, life had flourished under her protection. He spoke of the extraordinary spiritual power attributed to the river and of the belief that simply seeing her could bring liberation.

He told me that walking on her banks could bring blessings, healing and spiritual transformation, and that many miracles had been associated with the Narmada, which is revered as the liquid form of Shiva Shakti.

I listened, fascinated.

After enjoying our lunch and having some fascinating conversations with the two babas, we made our way back to the Kali Mata Mandir in Narsinghpur.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the Narmada.

I kept returning in my mind to that moment at the water's edge—to the strange yearning, the silence and the feeling that something had happened that I could neither explain nor dismiss.

They say that the Narmada calls you.

As we rode back through the countryside, I could feel a gentle excitement growing within me.

I knew she was whispering in my ear.

Over the next few weeks, I completed my journey to Nagpur and attended the Satsang, where I had several profound interactions with Sri M.

On the final evening, a dhuni was lit and a ceremony was held in which delegates had an opportunity to pay their respects to Sri M, offer a small gift and receive prasad in return.

As I stood in line waiting for my turn, I reflected on the extraordinary journey that had brought me there. Only a short time earlier, I had been sitting in a bookshop in Dharamshala, completely unaware of where the path would lead. Now I was standing before the man whose words had inspired me to walk from Rishikesh to Badrinath.

When my turn came, I placed my small offering in the basket beside him, then prostrated myself before Sri M and touched his feet with my hands and forehead.

For the first time, I was able to say aloud what I had been carrying within me:

"Sir, I want to thank you for your inspiration. My life has been transformed because of you. Thank you. Thank you."

I felt deeply emotional and reverent as I said these words. A profound sense of peace and contentment came over me as I accepted his prasad, stood up and slowly made way for the next person.

As I walked away from Sri M and the warmth of the dhuni, I felt that I could not have experienced a more fitting conclusion to such a spiritually uplifting and insightful Satsang.

I didn't yet understand how important this meeting would become.

Nor did I realise that my encounter with the Narmada only a short time earlier was the beginning of another journey.

In May of the following year, I walked from Rishikesh to Dwarahat in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. I eventually spent seven nights at the ashram of Swami Vedananda. Each morning and evening, we walked into the forest, where we would spend time in solitude and meditation.

It didn't take long for me to discover that Swami Vedananda had also completed the Narmada Parikrama.

The moment I heard this, something stirred within me.

By now, the Narmada had begun to occupy a place in my thoughts that I could neither explain nor dismiss. My encounter with her had lasted only a few moments, yet the memory remained vivid. I found myself returning again and again to that afternoon at the water's edge and to the strange feeling that something had passed between us.

Now, hearing that Swami Vedananda had walked around her, the whisper I had first sensed beside the river seemed to grow louder.

This time, I could no longer ignore it.

I felt that Maa Narmada was calling me to undertake the Parikrama.

There was no dramatic revelation, no voice and no blinding light. There was simply a deepening certainty within me that this was something I had to do.

I responded without reservation.

Maa Narmada also seemed to convey that I should begin at Amarkantak, the source of the river, after Dussehra, towards the end of October that year.

And so I began to prepare.

I had no idea what lay ahead of me.

I did not know how long the journey would take, what I would encounter, or how profoundly it would change me.

But I knew one thing.

I was going to walk.

From Amarkantak, I would follow Maa Narmada wherever she led me.

The journey had begun long before I took the first step.

Introduction

Standing on the banks of the Narmada River for the first time, silent and listening, was a stirring experience. During our brief time together, she touched my soul and whispered unspoken words, inviting me to come and be on her banks and in her lap. Her request was subtle, but the energetic exchange was unmistakable and overwhelming, though not as overwhelming as coming to terms with the magnitude of walking around her circumference and with the realisation that the Narmada Parikrama is considered to be one of the oldest and longest spiritual pilgrimages in the world.

Before finally accepting Maa Narmada's invitation to come and walk with her, I had undertaken four separate yatras, each averaging about 300 kilometres, with each journey taking roughly three to four weeks to complete. The Narmada Parikrama, however, would take me five or six months, and I would walk close to 3,000 kilometres—ten times the distance I had grown accustomed to.

Was I ready for a journey of this nature?

On that first day that Maa Narmada and I met, I remember Rajesh Soni telling me many things about the journey. I learned that the Parikrama is undertaken every year by pilgrims, householders, Sadhus, Swamis and Saints alike. What caught my attention was that, for the time I was walking the Parikrama, I would take on the role of being a Sadhu, whether I liked it or not.

I would be expected to adhere to traditions that had been passed down for centuries, take certain vows, follow certain principles and abide by certain rules.

In preparing for my journey, I went out of my way to familiarise myself with these protocols. As a foreigner, I did not want to offend anyone or inadvertently disregard their beliefs or customs. I also wanted to understand the geography, climate and walking conditions, as well as the culture, traditions and religious practices of the region.

Having led more than half a dozen expeditions on Everest, I was used to taking care of all the eventualities that were within my control and paying attention to the little details, knowing full well that the mountain and the weather would deliver their own challenges in their own time and in their own way.

I wanted to bring the same attention to detail to the Parikrama, knowing full well that Maa Narmada would have her own agenda.

What I didn't realise was how I would learn to communicate with her, or how she would guide and protect me. Before starting my Parikrama, I had no idea that the relationship we would develop would become so deep and profound, or that I would eventually learn to rely on her for everything. The connection we established still exists.

I eventually spent six months and eleven days walking on her banks, and she spent six months and eleven days sitting at my side, whispering in my ear and influencing, guiding and directing every word that appears in this book. This process enabled me to relive the journey that transformed my life in

ways that are still being revealed, and I am eternally grateful for that privilege.

The way Maa Narmada and I now walk through life together is unfathomable, but it is comfortable, reassuring and uplifting, and I treasure every moment. There is no doubt in my mind that she invites you to walk alongside us and experience the dynamic and transformative nature of the Narmada Parikrama through the words on these pages.

While preparing for the Parikrama, I tried to establish how many parikramawasis complete the journey each year, but I discovered that no one counts. There is no register. Only Maa knows.

Rumour has it that around 3,000 parikramawasis begin their journey sometime after Diwali each year. Those who live along her banks say that fewer than half of those who start complete the full circle in that same year.

In my heart, I knew that I wanted to be on the positive side of those statistics.

The Narmada River rises from the Narmada Kund at approximately 1,048 metres above sea level on the Amarkantak Plateau, in the Anuppur district of Madhya Pradesh. From there, it flows westwards for approximately 1,312 kilometres before reaching the Gulf of Khambhat and the Arabian Sea, about 30 kilometres west of Bharuch in Gujarat.

The river forms an estuary rather than a delta in its lower reaches, and its journey through Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat takes it through a landscape of remarkable variety. It flows through a fault-bounded rift valley,

flanked by the Satpura Range to the south and the Vindhya Range to the north, traditionally forming a boundary between North and South India.

For the people living along her banks, the Narmada is often described as a lifeline, providing water for drinking, agriculture and power.

Although the river itself is approximately 1,312 kilometres long, the Parikrama is considerably longer. Depending on the route taken, the terrain and the many deviations required along the way, pilgrims can walk somewhere between 2,800 and 3,200 kilometres.

I learned that a Parikrama can be started from anywhere along the river, provided the pilgrim walks clockwise, keeping the river on their right-hand side, and eventually returns to the exact place from which they began.

I was intuitively directed to start in Amarkantak, the source of the river. It felt like the obvious starting point to me, although many pilgrims begin at Omkareshwar, one of the most prominent spiritual centres on the Narmada.

Omkareshwar is located on Mandhata Island in the Narmada, traditionally said to be shaped like the sacred symbol Om. It is home to one of the twelve revered Jyotirlinga shrines of Lord Shiva and is a major pilgrimage destination for Hindu devotees. The temple town also lies at the confluence of the Kaveri and Narmada Rivers.

But before one commences a Parikrama, there are certain formalities to observe.

At the starting point, the pilgrim worships Maa Narmada, collects some water from the river and carries this jal throughout the journey. It becomes a physical reminder of Maa's presence, particularly on those occasions when the pilgrim has to spend a night away from her banks.

During the same puja, the pilgrim makes their Sankalp—the vows and commitments that will guide the journey. I was told that the Sankalp must be made before the feet begin to move; otherwise, the Parikrama simply becomes another long walk.

I took numerous personal vows and spoke them aloud:

"Maa, I am walking this Parikrama for inner purification and liberation. I have wronged others and, in so doing, I have injured myself, and for those deeds I do penance. I will walk every step of the way in a clockwise direction and carry my own belongings. I promise to be of service to others, particularly to young girls, who I know are a representation of you, and I vow to adhere to the Yamas and the Niyamas."

The Yamas and Niyamas are ethical and personal disciplines described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. They provided an important framework for how I wanted to live during the Parikrama.

The five Yamas govern our relationship with the world around us: Ahimsa, or non-violence; Satya, or truthfulness; Asteya, or non-stealing; Brahmacharya, traditionally associated with celibacy and more broadly understood as moderation; and Aparigraha, or non-possessiveness and freedom from attachment.

The five Niyamas turn inward: Saucha, or purity; Santosha, or contentment; Tapas, or disciplined effort; Svadhyaya, or self-study; and Ishvara Pranidhana, or surrender to a higher power.

I had committed myself to living by these principles as best I could, not simply as a set of rules, but as a way of paying attention to how I thought, spoke and acted.

I went on to vow that I would not cross over her or get onto an island and that I would acknowledge my bottle of jal whenever I spent the night away from Maa. I had already shaved my head and beard and promised not to shave again until I returned to Amarkantak.

I promised to walk as a Sadhu, to live simply, to eat only what was offered to me and to sleep wherever I was invited to lay my head. I told Maa that, unfortunately, I was not a purist and therefore could not walk barefoot. I would also carry a mobile phone so that I could remain connected to the outside world, although I promised not to allow it to interfere with the serenity and sacredness of my journey.

Finally, I told Maa that I would not carry money or food for more than two days.

I conducted this reverent puja on my own, although many parikramawasis invite a pandit to perform the ritual.

The Narmada is not simply a river.

For the millions of people who live along her banks, she is Maa Narmada—a mother, a goddess and a sacred presence woven into the fabric of everyday life.

In the Reva Khanda of the Skanda Purana, Narmada is described as the daughter of Lord Shiva. One tradition tells

that she emerged from the sweat of Shiva's brow while he was engaged in penance. The stories surrounding her are many and varied, but they all speak to the extraordinary reverence in which she is held.

It is said that while the Ganga purifies those who bathe in her waters, Maa Narmada can purify simply through Darshan—the sacred act of seeing her.

To walk the Narmada Parikrama is therefore to do Pradakshina, or circumambulation, of her entire being. For those who undertake the journey as a spiritual practice, every step becomes an act of devotion.

I heard many stories during my time on her banks. I was told of enlightened Gurus who had performed miracles, of dead creatures being brought back to life, of butter being manifested from water and diamonds from stones. I was also told that researchers had found evidence suggesting that life itself began in the Narmada Valley.

Some of these stories were extraordinary. Some were difficult for me to comprehend. Others challenged the boundaries of what I thought I knew about the world.

But I gradually realised that it was not my place to decide which stories were true and which were not.

These were the beliefs of the people whose lives had been shaped by Maa Narmada for generations. They were part of the living tradition of the river, passed from one generation to the next, and I began to listen without needing to judge or explain everything I heard.

The deeper I travelled into rural India, the more I came to understand that the Narmada is experienced not merely as a geographical feature, but as a living presence.

People speak to her.

They pray to her.

They offer flowers and lamps to her.

They thank her.

They ask her for help.

And they trust her.

I began to do the same.

I cannot explain exactly when the transition occurred. Somewhere along the thousands of kilometres of riverbank, the distinction between walking beside a river and walking alongside Maa Narmada began to disappear.

The river was always there.

Sometimes gentle and serene, sometimes powerful and imposing, sometimes hidden from view by forest or distance, but always present.

And as the days became weeks and the weeks became months, I began to experience that presence in a way that was increasingly personal.

The Narmada Parikrama was no longer simply a pilgrimage I was undertaking.

It was becoming a relationship.

And that relationship would change everything.

The diversity of situations I experienced every day of my journey was often overwhelming. Walking through the farming heartland of India, with its traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices, opened my eyes to a way of life that was very different from my own.

The simplicity of life in the small rural villages was refreshing. But it was the kindness of the people that touched me most deeply. Again and again, people went out of their way to care for me, often offering what little they had with a generosity that humbled me.

Atithi Devo Bhava—the belief that a guest is to be treated as God—was something I had heard about before beginning my journey. On the Narmada, I experienced it for myself.

I was privileged to meet some extraordinary people and to witness situations that sometimes stretched the boundaries of my understanding. Some experiences made me question what I believed. Others simply left me silent and grateful to have been there.

On the first day of my pilgrimage, I got lost in a forest.

The following day, I was rescued by what I came to think of as Maa Narmada's angels.

On the second day, a Mataji washed my feet, teaching me something about humility that I have never forgotten.

I sat quietly beside a lotus pond and discovered that stillness could reveal things that words could not. I learned to communicate with people without speaking their language, discovering that a smile, a gesture or a helping hand could sometimes say more than words.

I lived with a family for six days during Diwali and was welcomed into their home with a warmth that I will always remember. I learned something about relationships simply by watching the way they lived together.

I met a centenarian and listened to his thoughts on ageing. I drank bovine colostrum for the first time in my life. I had my palm read by a fascinating woman whose predictions proved surprisingly accurate.

I met a Saint reputed to be more than 190 years old. I spent two unforgettable nights in an old-age home and another in a Krishna student dormitory. I met a man who had spent four and a half years in a coma before suddenly waking up, and whose enthusiasm for life has stayed with me ever since.

I walked alongside many parikramawasis, each with their own story and their own reasons for being there. Some challenged me. Some made me laugh. Some taught me things without ever knowing that they had done so.

I met a Swami who had walked the Parikrama backwards. I was rebuked for not sitting properly at a meal and told to move elsewhere. I encountered traditions I knew little about and found myself learning, sometimes willingly and sometimes reluctantly, about the many different ways in which people make sense of their lives.

And then there were the dogs.

I came to know them as the Narmada Dogs. They would appear at unexpected moments, sometimes walk with me for a while and then disappear as mysteriously as they had arrived.

I became convinced that Maa sent them to teach me something I needed to learn at precisely that moment.

Whether that was literally true became less important than the feeling that accompanied their arrival.

There were many more experiences: pilgrims wearing sackcloth as an expression of tapasya, religious devotees whose beliefs challenged my own, people living lives of extraordinary simplicity, and countless encounters that seemed insignificant at the time but stayed with me long after they had passed.

I began to realise that I had entered a world where I could not always predict what would happen next.

And perhaps that was one of Maa Narmada's greatest gifts.

I had spent much of my life believing that preparation, experience and careful planning could keep the unexpected at bay. The Parikrama slowly taught me otherwise.

Every day brought something new.

Sometimes it was a person.

Sometimes a place.

Sometimes a conversation.

Sometimes nothing more than a few moments of silence beside the river.

And somewhere in that constant unfolding, I began to understand that I was not simply walking around Maa Narmada.

I was walking with her.

I don't know what you will find in these pages.

Perhaps you will simply enjoy the stories of a journey through a part of India that is still largely unknown to the outside world. Perhaps you will find yourself intrigued by the people I met, the traditions I encountered and the extraordinary situations in which I sometimes found myself.

Perhaps, somewhere along the way, one of these stories will touch something within you.

That is my hope.

I don't expect you to believe everything I experienced, nor would I want you to. Some of what happened to me challenged my own understanding of what is possible. I can only tell you what I saw, what I felt and what I came to believe.

And now, come and walk with me.

Walk beside Maa Narmada through the villages and forests, across dusty roads and rocky paths, through moments of laughter and uncertainty, kindness and discomfort, solitude and unexpected companionship.

Meet the people I met. Share some of the moments that changed me. And perhaps, as you walk, you may find yourself asking some of the same questions that I began asking myself.

Where does faith come from?

What happens when we let go of the need to control everything?

And what might become possible when we allow ourselves to listen?

I cannot promise that you will find the answers.

But perhaps the walking itself will reveal something.

In Indian culture, the suffix 'Ji' is added as a gender-neutral honorific to people's names as a term of warmth and respect. It is also used in relationships and, in some instances, in reference to inanimate objects. For example, many people would refer to the Narmada as 'Narmada Ji'.

Typically, when older people address younger people or children, they will not use the term 'Ji', whereas when younger people speak to their parents, they will often add 'Ji' to the name. Friends will generally not add the term 'Ji' to a name, as they are equals.

In this book, I have generally not used this honorific, mainly for ease of reading. In no way is this intended to be disrespectful to the seniors, elders, and prominent members of the community or teachers mentioned in the book. In some instances, its use has been unavoidable. For example, when mentioning Mahavatar Babaji, the honorific is an integral part of the name.

In terms of distances, I have used kilometres rather than miles. The same applies to other measurements, where the Metric System has been used rather than the Imperial System.

At the end of the book is a Glossary of Terms, which translates the Hindi and Sanskrit words used throughout the text.

Before starting my Narmada Parikrama, a number of people who had followed my other yatras through India suggested that I start a YouTube channel, so that they could follow my journey in real time and experience first-hand what it was like to undertake such a massive and profound spiritual pilgrimage.

I was initially reluctant to take on this responsibility because I knew that, if I was going to do it, I would want whatever videos I created to be professionally edited and of a high calibre. I also knew that this would require a huge amount of time and effort, and I did not want that to detract from the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual demands that the Narmada Parikrama would place upon me.

But I eventually succumbed and launched *Walking with a Sadhu* on YouTube. It became a huge success and a very rewarding project.

For those readers who would like to explore some of the experiences described in this book through video, I have included a list of the relevant episodes from my *Walking with a Sadhu* YouTube channel at the back of the book. I hope you enjoy the footage, voiceovers and accompanying music.

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Chapter 1

Into the Lap of Maa



"The traveler that resolutely follows a rough and winding path will sooner reach the end of his journey than he that is always changing his direction and wastes the hour of daylight in looking for smoother ground and shorter passages."

Samuel Johnson

As I slung my bag onto my back, picked up my walking stick and took that first step towards the bridge crossing the Narmada River, I couldn't help feeling anxious. I was about to walk almost 3,000 kilometres, which I anticipated would take approximately six months to complete. As I looked around at my surroundings, it felt surreal to think that I would only be back in Amarkantak in half a year's time.

It was late October, and this charming town had just celebrated Dussehra, giving a walking pilgrim like me the final permission to commence his spiritual pilgrimage. Dussehra is a Hindu festival that marks the end of Sharad Navratri. It celebrates the victory of good over evil and is commemorated by the triumph of Rama over the ten-headed demon king Ravana. In Hindu mythology, Ravana abducts Rama's wife, Sita, as recounted in the Sanskrit epic, the Ramayana.

It was most certainly my humble intention to embrace, and ultimately pacify, the ten-headed demons that I had been

entertaining and carrying around with me for many years, through tapasya and a process of inner purification. The Narmada Parikrama was about cleansing oneself from within, dissolving the ego and leaving behind all that was familiar. It was a symbolic death of the old self as I stepped into the unknown.

As I crossed the bridge and turned towards the forest, I knew deep down that my departure was a spiritual cleansing of space, a humble recognition that I was in need of renewal, clarity and divine connection. I was setting an intention that every subsequent footstep would become a prayer and a commitment to walk in the presence of the Divine.

The sand road leading into the forest was wide and smooth, and the walking was easy, but it soon dwindled into a single track that became difficult to tread. I pressed on.

By early afternoon, I found myself on the ridge of the Satpura Range and began to feel that I was lost. Not long afterwards, I saw a woodcutter with a metre-long axe hanging loosely over his shoulder. What immediately caught my attention was that he was missing a hand. I couldn't help wondering whether he had lost it while chopping wood, but he never spoke a word of English, so I was unable to find out.

I was about to discover the importance of using gestures for the first time on my journey. I held out both arms with my palms upturned, shrugged my shoulders and simply said, "Narmada", with a huge smile on my face.

I got no smile in return.

Instead, he pointed towards a narrow path leading off the ridge and in the opposite direction from where I intuitively felt

I should be walking. I thanked him and started making my way down the overgrown path. I hadn't walked very far when something in my gut stirred, and I sensed that I should turn around and go back up onto the ridge.

At that precise moment, I saw another woodcutter.

He too had only one hand.

Why were the woodcutters in this jungle region missing body parts? Was it a prerequisite for this vocation in this particular forest? It unnerved me and made me feel uneasy.

This time, my gesture coincided with one word: "Narmada."

He pointed in the direction that I intuitively felt I should be walking. By now, it was mid-afternoon, the sun was moving rapidly towards the western horizon, and I was becoming overwhelmed by a sense of urgency to get back to the banks of the river.

I walked back up onto the Satpura Ridge and looked for a path going down, but couldn't find one. So I made the decision to bash my way through the forest.

The descent was steep and slippery, and I found myself stumbling through a field of blackjacks. These prickly little plants have different names in other parts of the world, but their biological name is *Bidens pilosa*. Needless to say, my white dhoti and kurta were soon covered in their tiny black needles, and I looked as though I had most definitely come off second best in a fight with a blackjack bush.

The next few hours were tough going, but I finally arrived on the banks of Maa at about 5:00 pm.

I was thoroughly lost, exhausted and dejected.

Before doing anything else, I sat down and prayed for help and guidance. Maa and Mother Nature had tested me more than I had expected, but when I opened my eyes, I instantly knew that I would spend the night exactly where I had dropped my backpack.

So be it.

I made myself as comfortable as possible.

As I rolled out my sleeping bag, it occurred to me that in the morning I should backtrack to where the wide sand road had turned into a single track and see whether I had missed a turn. But I also knew, in the depths of my being, that I would receive all the guidance I needed, exactly when I needed it. That reassurance was comforting.

It was getting cold and dark much quicker than expected, and I needed to get warm. I put on every item of clothing I could find in my bag and, by 6:40 pm, had climbed into my sleeping bag. Without having eaten anything, I fell fast asleep to the soothing sound of Maa flowing gently by.

I slept soundly all night.

The only thing I remember was dreaming about Guru Paramahansa Yogananda. It was exactly eleven days since I had taken Kriya Diksha at his ashram in Ranchi, so feeling his presence in the dream state on the first night of my Narmada Parikrama was reassuring and comforting.

At the initiation ceremony, I had no idea how nervous I would be. I found myself comparing the apprehension to the day I first got married, and then realised that, in many ways, this was exactly what had taken place. I had entered into a

relationship of trust and commitment, placing myself in the hands of someone who would guide me.

It was an extremely cold night, but I lay in the lap of Maa and held the warm hand of Paramahansa Yogananda. I had one of the best nights' sleep of my life.

At 5:40 am, eleven hours after I had climbed into my sleeping bag, I opened my eyes and heard the birds chirping and the gentle gurgling sound of Maa still flowing quietly by. I immediately gave thanks for the wonderful night's rest and for the beginning of a fresh new day.

I was in no hurry to start walking again, so I took my time to stretch and fully wake up. Yesterday had been a tough day, and I could feel that my body needed some time to warm up. It felt stiff and weary, and I moved slowly during the waking phase.

While washing my face and brushing my teeth on a rocky shelf stretching out into the river, I noticed the movement of a light in the distance on the other side. I assumed it was someone carrying a torch.

As I stood watching, I noticed the way it zigzagged through the fields. Then I realised that with every step, it was coming closer to where I was kneeling.

It was still fairly dark, and I was convinced that the person could not see me. Within a few minutes, however, he emerged from the bushes and bent down to brush his teeth directly opposite where I was stationed.

He became startled the moment I said, "Narmade Har", and I immediately realised that this was the first time he had spotted

me. He couldn't speak a word of English, but I somehow gestured that I needed help finding my way. He kept pointing in a direction that I assumed he wanted me to follow.

I thanked him by clasping my hands together in the Namaste Mudra and saying, "Dhanyavad."

As he turned and left, I instantly knew that Maa had sent a guardian angel to help me. The thought of retracing my steps and walking back to the wide sand road disappeared from my mind.

I rolled up my sleeping bag, packed my rucksack, got dressed in my blackjack-filled clothing and started walking in the direction that the guardian angel had pointed. My understanding was to walk slightly back at an angle and find a path. The moment I found it, I knew I should turn right and that it would lead me out of the forest.

I started walking at 7:00 am.

I had only walked for a few minutes when, all of a sudden, I saw another woodcutter standing on the path. He startled me, but he had a warm smile on his face, as well as both of his hands, which gently eased my racing heartbeat.

He raised his right hand and pointed in the direction I should walk.

In my gesture of saying thank you, I pointed to the blackjacks that had invaded my clothing, and he started chuckling, which made me burst out laughing.

It was a comical sight, but I was overwhelmed by meeting a second guardian angel on the second day of my journey.

As I bid farewell to the young man and continued along the path, I couldn't help thinking about how Maa had tested me the day before, but how she had also come to my rescue.

I followed the path for about an hour and, as the forest started thinning out, I heard a motorcycle. Then I spotted a road in the distance and knew that I was back on track.

The blackjacks were really pricking me, and I needed to change my clothing. I soon found a big log to sit on, took some rest and changed my attire.

I sat for a short while and pondered the first twenty hours of my journey and could hardly believe what had already happened.

It was time to start walking again.

I joined the farm road I had seen earlier and made my way to the little village of Khannat, where I found a small roadside restaurant. The owner was extremely excited to see me and began serving me endless cups of chai.

Just as I was preparing to leave, he insisted that I stay for a meal.

I was starved.

I humbly and graciously accepted his kind offer.

I left the little restaurant just before midday and took the road towards Karanjiya. There was evidently an ashram about 5 kilometres away, and I figured that would be my next stop. I soon established, however, that the information I had received regarding the ashram was not correct.

I would come to realise that whenever I was given directions or distances to the next location, they were invariably wrong. Everyone meant well, but they were seldom correct. I soon learned to take responsibility for establishing locations and distances for myself rather than relying on local people.

It didn't take long for me to start feeling lethargic. The heat of the day, compounded by the wonderful meal I had enjoyed a little earlier, forced me to start looking for somewhere to take a nap.

I eventually found a comfortable ditch alongside some huge shady trees and lay down.

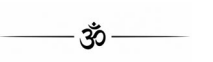
It didn't take long for me to doze off, and I enjoyed a light slumber for about an hour.

By the middle of the afternoon, it had started cooling, and Karanjiya was still about 5 kilometres away, so it was time to start walking again.

An hour later, I walked into a small village situated just before Karanjiya. I was informed that there was supposed to be a dharamsala in Karanjiya, and I was aiming to spend the night there.

A dharamsala is a shelter or rest house for spiritual pilgrims, usually constructed along pilgrimage routes to give pilgrims a place to stay for the night.

But I was in for another profound experience, and I was not at all prepared for it.



Chapter 2

A Mataji Washes My Feet



"We come nearest to the great when we are great in humility."

Rabindranath Tagore

About halfway through the little village, a woman approached me and, in broken English, said, "Where you go?" I uttered the word "dharamsala" and pointed in the direction of Karanjiya, where I planned on spending the night. In our simple and fragmented conversation, which mainly consisted of single words and gestures, she managed to convince me that I should spend the night in their home. I felt wary of this, as the last thing I wanted to do was impose on her and the family, but I followed her as she turned off the main road into a side street. A few houses up the road, on the left-hand side, was the family home. A blanket was laid down just before the entrance, and I was instructed to sit and told that some chai was being made.

A short while later, the Mataji of the family came out with a bowl of water and placed it at the base of my feet. She proceeded to take off my shoes and socks and, to my absolute astonishment, started washing my feet, one at a time. Her hands were soft and gentle, and she carried out this simple ritual with tenderness and care, an expression of admiration and divine love on her face. The last time I had experienced

such gentleness was as a newborn baby, and I felt an incredible sense of humility mixed with a sacred intimacy that was difficult to fathom. She then gently kissed my feet before lighting an incense stick and twirling it around my head. Behind her was a small bush with beautiful white flowers. She plucked two and gently placed them on top of my feet. The Mataji then picked up the bowl of water that had been used to wash my feet and sprinkled it all over herself, as though it had somehow been blessed or made holy by the Narmada and me. The entire ritual took place without a word being spoken. It was overwhelming and beyond belief, and an experience I know I will never forget.

It soon started getting cold as the sun dipped below the horizon. I was shown inside the simple family home and the place where they wanted me to spend the night. As I started laying out my sleeping bag and mattress, the Mataji sat on the mud floor, with her back against the wall, facing the small entrance to the house, but she couldn't keep her gaze away from me. She sat staring at me blankly, but with an intensity and unconditional love that pierced into the depths of my soul. I felt a humility and vulnerability that left me cleansed, open and raw. Dinner took a few hours to prepare on an open fire in one corner of the house, but what I had experienced a little earlier was beyond time and space. I came to realise that a deep and profound process of cleansing and inner purification had begun within the raw vulnerability that had been stirred and awakened by Mataji.

The simple evening meal that was served was delicious, and I put my head down at 9:00 pm. I slept soundly and comfortably

and, once again, Paramahansa Yogananda appeared to me in my dreams. I was aware of his blessings.

The next morning I got up at 5:30 am. It was crisp, and the air was clean and fresh. The eastern sky revealed that the sun was slowly making its way towards the horizon. The young man of the house then told me that their home did not have a washroom and that I should walk out of town to go and 'see a man about a dog'. I took my water bottle and started walking, only to notice that eight other people were doing exactly the same as me. I soon realised that no one was concerned about privacy. I found a bush about 300 metres down the road that I could comfortably crouch behind and that hadn't already been used by someone else. It was astounding to learn that many local homes in these small farming villages do not have toilets or washrooms. People would rather own a motorcycle than spend money on installing a bathroom.

A few hours later I was ready to start walking again, but not before having some chai, paying my respects to the Mataji and the family, and then saying my goodbyes. Mataji was gracious and unbelievably respectful, and emotional to see me leave. I had received such tender love and care from this family that, as the third day of my Narmada Parikrama began, my heart and soul were overflowing with humility and deep gratitude.

I turned right in Karanjiya and started walking in the direction of Dindori, but I simply couldn't stop thinking about the way I had been showered with blessings by the Mataji and her family the afternoon and evening before. I could feel myself walking in the presence of the Divine, surrounded by divinity, and my thoughts led me to Maundy Thursday.

As I contemplated the events that occurred on Maundy Thursday, as documented in the Four Gospels of the New Testament, Jesus shares a last meal with his Twelve Disciples. During this significant but rather simple meal, known as the Last Supper, he commands his disciples to "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." He then institutes the Eucharist, thereby establishing the sacrament of Holy Communion, which remains central to Christian worship today.

However, the component of Maundy Thursday that I couldn't stop pondering was the act of the "Washing of the Feet". According to the Gospel of St John, Jesus performed this humble act of service by washing the feet of his disciples to demonstrate the importance of humility and selfless service to others.

At the same time, I found myself mentally absorbed in the story of Mahavatar Babaji washing the feet of a devotee at the Kumbh Mela, the largest peaceful congregation of pilgrims on Earth, where many spiritual seekers hope for a glimpse of one of the great saints. According to the hagiographical accounts of Paramahansa Yogananda in his seminal work Autobiography of a Yogi, this event is often cited by disciples as a profound example of divine humility, illustrating how a being of such elevated spiritual stature would perform such a humble act of service, thereby shattering the ego of the devotee and teaching a lesson on the equality of all souls.

According to the accounts shared by Paramahansa Yogananda, a humble seeker who had been performing intense sadhana was deeply longing to see Mahavatar Babaji. As the story goes, amidst the dense throngs of pilgrims, ascetics and sages, a man

appeared who possessed a radiance and demeanour that distinguished him from everyone around him. This individual, believed to be Mahavatar Babaji, encountered the seeker and, in an act that stunned onlookers and the recipient alike, knelt down and began to wash the feet of the devotee with great tenderness and devotion.

This profound act emphasised that true spiritual mastery is rooted in humility and service rather than dominance. It has also been said that this act was not merely a physical gesture, but a transmission of grace, helping the seeker to dissolve his internal obstacles and recognise his own divinity.

The more I thought about the Mataji who had washed my feet, the more deeply I realised how she had washed away many of the impurities of my ego and, through her grace, enabled me to recognise my own divinity in a more profound way.

Along the way, a man on a motorcycle stopped and immediately touched my feet. He then took out ₹100 and an apple and offered them to me with both hands. I had no idea how often passers-by would stop, touch my feet and give me a few rupees, usually saying that I should buy myself some chai. But I was always given copious amounts of chai to drink and never needed to buy any. I walked steadily, taking frequent breaks, and by late afternoon I started walking into Gorakhpur. I had heard there was a temple along the main road where I could stay and where they would provide a parikramawasi like me with an evening meal. All my senses were on high alert as I started looking for this temple, but my attention was interrupted when I heard a Mataji saying, “Chai pillo.” I smiled and graciously accepted. It was time for a rest, and a few mouthfuls of tea would be extremely refreshing.

Her house was on the main road into town and had a spacious paved section in front of the property. I was soon sitting on a chair with a delicious cup of tea in my hand. Within a few minutes, I had half a dozen young children standing around me. They all had wide eyes reflecting an inquisitive curiosity, and I knew they were wondering what on earth this foreigner was doing walking like an Indian Sadhu in their neighbourhood.

Rishabh and Prince both spoke English quite well and led the charge in asking questions. Khemchand, the husband, arrived soon afterwards, and it didn't take long for me to realise that they wanted me to stay the night with them rather than go to the temple. I graciously accepted their offer.

After a few cups of chai and that feeling of having completed another day's walk, I enquired about taking a wash and was politely shown to the hand pump, which was right across the road. I had never taken a wash in a public place like this before, but my ego was quickly falling by the wayside, and there's nothing like doing something for the first time in your life. So I took the plunge. This kind of behaviour was quite normal in this part of the world, and no one batted an eyelid.

While dinner was being prepared, I decided to start removing all the prickly "blackjacks" from my clothing, which had been invaded on my first day in the forest. But Rishabh, Prince and all the rest of their friends insisted that they do the unpicking. I watched with humble gratitude as they laughed with joy at the fun they were having. Dinner was absolutely delicious, and soon afterwards I was shown a bed on the front porch of the house. By 9:00 pm, I was dead to the world.

The following day dawned fresh and crisp, and once again I walked out into the fields across the way from the house to take care of business. I came to learn that Khemchand and Sahu had hosted about 5,000 parikramawasis over the years, and I was most grateful for the way they took care of another pilgrim who was passing by. As I was preparing to say my farewells, Mataji Sahu started crying because she did not want me to leave. The overwhelming generosity and kindness of this beautiful couple was heartwarming, and the experience of being with them carried me for the entire morning.

On my way to Gadasarai, I was called by a Swami to have some chai and stay for lunch. The meal was extremely spicy and I really struggled to eat it, but I was nevertheless extremely grateful. I had an afternoon nap under a tree and then walked the remaining 5 kilometres into Gadasarai. I found the small ashram as I entered the town. It was being taken care of by a Swami and his 10-year-old son. The young boy's mother had recently passed away, and the Swami and his son were walking the Narmada Parikrama and were busy spending Chaturmas at the ashram. They planned to start walking again after Diwali in a couple of weeks' time, and their intention was to take 3 years, 3 months and 13 days to complete their journey.

The tradition of the Narmada Parikrama is rooted in ancient Hindu scriptures, particularly the Narmada Purana and the Reva Khanda of the Skanda Purana. The specific duration of 3 years, 3 months and 13 days is a traditional timeline often cited by ascetics and spiritual seekers. It is most definitely not a mandatory requirement, but rather a symbolic and spiritual ideal derived from ancient Vedic time calculations and the rigours of a traditional wandering ascetic life.

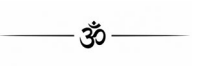
The Narmada Parikrama is considered one of the most arduous and spiritually purifying acts in the Indian spiritual tradition and is the longest pilgrimage of its kind in the world. The traditional duration is deeply tied to the observance of Chaturmas, the four monsoon months, during which traditional Vedic rules prohibit walking, requiring parikramawasis to stay in one place.

By walking the length of the river from its source in Amarkantak to the Arabian Sea and back again via the other riverbank, a pilgrim will end up walking approximately 2,800 to 3,200 kilometres. Along the way, pilgrims are expected to observe these sedentary periods, which naturally extend the duration of the journey significantly beyond a mere walking pace.

In Indian numerology, the number 13 is spiritually significant, often symbolising the end of a cycle or a transition to a higher state of consciousness. However, there is no single person responsible for implementing this timeframe. It emerged organically over the centuries as the perfect duration for a complete, meditative and peaceful pilgrimage that gives the pilgrim the ideal opportunity to fully internalise the sanctity of the river, which is personified as the Goddess Narmada, the daughter of Lord Shiva.

The 10-year-old boy had made some friends in the neighbourhood and, before I could blink an eye, I was once again surrounded by a bunch of inquisitive young men who were incredibly intrigued about why I had embarked on this demanding and challenging pilgrimage. It was a full moon, and the sound of the harmonium, accompanied by a collection of beautiful male voices chanting from the temple just down

the road, was mesmerising. It continued until after midnight and brought another day to a fitting close.



Chapter 3

Lessons from a Lotus Pond



> ***"As we approach life with the objective of learning from every situation and experience, we are able to grasp the subtle as well as the gross and then realise that we may not be right all of the time."***
>
> **Ronnie Baba**

Not long after leaving Gadasarai, I was stopped by a small restaurant owner who looked at me with curiosity and asked, "Naashta?" I told him I had only had some tea, and he very kindly offered me poha, jalebi and chai. I had never eaten jalebi before and it instantly reminded me of a sickly-sweet confectionery I had eaten back in South Africa, known as a koeksister. Both are syrup-soaked fried dough confections that will make your teeth curl.

An hour later I was on my way again and soon arrived at the Narmada Mandir on the road to Dindori. I hadn't covered much ground, but after a solid helping of rice and dal and a good early-afternoon rest, I decided to spend the night at the temple.

Before leaving Amarkantak, I had planned to walk 20 kilometres a day for six days and then spend two nights in the same location. This would give me time to consolidate my simple life, catch up with myself, wash some clothes, write in

my journal and work on videos for my *Walking with a Sadhu* YouTube channel, which I had created just before leaving Rishikesh.

Somehow, Swami Baba Pancham Nath, who ran the mandir, sensed my urgency. It didn't take long for him to say, "You must just rest and relax. No need to go fast."

He was right. I could already feel time becoming less relevant and my entire being beginning to slow down. Deep down, I knew I needed to allow things to unfold as Maa wanted them to, but I hadn't yet let go entirely. That lesson would really sink in when I arrived in Bareli just over a week later.

It was here at the Narmada Mandir that a few more lessons came my way.

In the late afternoon, I took a cold-water bucket wash and, while hanging my towel and underwear on the line to dry, one of the parikramawasis spending Chaturmas at the temple pointed at my underwear and said, "Nahi, Nahi."

I looked at him, perplexed. He pointed to his langot hanging nearby and, in insistent broken English, explained that if I wanted to walk the Narmada Parikrama as a purist and as a Sadhu, this was the underwear I should be wearing.

I smiled, shrugged my shoulders and gave him an unmistakable look that said, 'I don't understand.' Unfortunately, he didn't have the language to explain himself. But it didn't take long for me to realise that if I was going to walk as a true pilgrim along the banks of this holy river, I needed to dress accordingly — and that included my underwear.

It would take me a few months to find a tailor who could make me a few langots. It only took a few days to appreciate their benefits. They were extremely comfortable and dried quickly after washing, with no elastic waistband.

At dinnertime, I went to wash my hands but didn't dry them. The Swami reminded me not to flick the water off my hands, either before or after eating. He also stressed the importance of eating with my hands, something I had already become accustomed to doing but had never fully understood.

"Swami Ji, why is it so important to use my hands to eat? If I use my hands or a spoon, surely the food goes down the same way?"

He smiled and explained that touching food with our fingertips creates a sensory connection with what we are about to eat. It helps us engage with the food through touch, smell, sight and taste, and encourages us to eat more mindfully. He also explained the traditional Vedic understanding that our hands connect us with the five elements of nature and that eating with our hands can turn a simple meal into a sadhana, or spiritual practice.

It made perfect sense to me, and I thanked the Swami for his enlightening explanation.

In my short time at the mandir, I was taught many new lessons, but without a doubt the most important was the use of the phrase Narmade Har.

I had been on this pilgrimage for five days and, until then, had generally been using Namaste whenever I greeted anyone. Although I had already used Narmade Har on occasion, I had

not understood its significance or that, as a parikramawasi, this was the greeting I should be using.

Namaste is a profound Sanskrit greeting, expressing reverence and recognition of the divine within another person. The hands are clasped together and the head gently bowed, acknowledging that the same universal consciousness within the other person also resides within us. In this way, a simple greeting becomes an act of humility and recognition of our shared humanity.

Narmade Har carries a different quality. It is a devotional invocation.

Narmade is a respectful acknowledgement of the river, personified as the goddess Maa. Har comes from the Sanskrit root hri, meaning to take away, remove or destroy, and is associated with Lord Shiva as the remover of sorrows, sins and obstacles.

Together, Narmade Har can be understood as a prayer: "O Narmada, take away my sins, sorrows and obstacles."

For the parikramawasi, the phrase serves several purposes. It is a greeting of unity when pilgrims meet and when pilgrims encounter local people along the way. It immediately creates a bond of recognition, trust and hospitality.

It can also become a mantra, helping to keep the mind focussed and centred through fatigue, hunger and physical discomfort. And in the forests and isolated stretches of the journey, repeating the name of the river can become a source of comfort and protection.

Most importantly, Narmade Har is an acknowledgement of surrender. The pilgrim is recognising the sovereignty of the river and placing his burdens in her hands.

It is traditionally spoken with enthusiasm rather than quietly mumbled. A pilgrim may call out Narmade Har when another pilgrim approaches, or when the river suddenly comes back into view after the path has led away from her banks. The two simple words create a sense of community, turning what can be a lonely walk into a shared spiritual endeavour.

My stay at the Narmada Mandir had been both relaxing and informative. After a good night's sleep, I was ready to make an early start. I had begun to realise that most ashrams, temples and other accommodation venues would not serve naashta in the morning, although there was usually at least some chai before the day's walk. This morning was no different.

On my way towards Dindori, I came across a huge lotus pond that absolutely took my breath away. It was circular and must have had a diameter of at least 200 metres. I had no reason to stop, but I simply had to sit down and absorb the sight.

There was something about the pond that felt spiritually palpable. I could feel myself becoming renewed, energised and uplifted. I found a comfortable place to sit, closed my eyes and allowed the presence of the lotus flowers to settle into me.

The lotus is a profound symbol of purity, resilience and spiritual awakening. It rises from mud and murky water to bloom in exquisite beauty. Sitting there, I felt that the flowers were showing me something about my own life: that I could remain pure and clear while surrounded by the murkiness of worldly attachments, suffering and ignorance.

As their petals opened towards the sunlight, they seemed to suggest that I too could emerge from darkness, confusion and hardship into greater clarity and awareness.

When I gently opened my eyes, I noticed a woman nearby offering water to the rising sun. Facing east, she held a small lota in both hands and slowly poured the water while chanting a mantra.

This morning ritual, known as Arghya to Surya, is an ancient Vedic practice of honouring the Sun. As I strained my ears, I could hear her chanting, "Om Suryaya Namah."

I wasn't ready to leave. The more I looked at the lotus pond, the more I felt it had something to teach me.

Water droplets slide from a lotus leaf without leaving a trace. I saw in this a lesson in detachment: the ability to live fully in the world and engage with life without allowing material desires, ego and tangled thoughts to cling to us.

I was on this journey to deepen the simple and detached life I had been trying to live, so I welcomed the lesson with both arms.

The lotus also taught me about resilience and transformation. It thrives in stagnant, murky water, yet rises from the mud as a radiant flower. I saw my own challenges and struggles in that mud — not as obstacles to my growth, but as the very soil from which my deepest spiritual qualities could emerge.

As I gazed across the pond, I began to see a spiritual landscape that seemed to embody all of existence. A microcosm of the macrocosm.

Every lotus was at a different stage of growth, yet every flower remained part of the same pond. It reminded me that we humans are also at different stages of our own development.

Some of us are still deep in the mud, just beginning to find the path. Others are emerging from the water and starting to seek the truth. And others are already blooming in the sunlight, shining their light and becoming beacons for those who follow.

The pond also reminded me of the lotus ponds traditionally found around temples and ashrams, where the still water provides an image of a calm and meditative mind. The flower itself, emerging each morning and disappearing beneath the water at night, is a powerful reminder of renewal.

Birth, decay, death and rebirth are all part of the same cycle.

It dawned on me that perhaps existence is not meant to be a struggle against our environment, but an unfolding through experience while maintaining a lightness of being.

Eventually, it was time to start walking again. As I slung my backpack over my shoulders, I realised that the lotus pond had invited me to see the thick mud of my past — and all the trials and tribulations I had experienced since arriving in India — as part of my spiritual growth.

If these first few days of my pilgrimage were anything to go by, I was in for a time of profound insight and awakening.

I had walked for about an hour and was about to cross a bridge when I heard someone shouting, "Narmade Har!"

I turned around and saw a Swami beckoning me to cross the road and make my way up to his small ashram. I was immediately offered chai and made to feel welcome.

Swami Arjun Giri spoke good English and had walked the Narmada Parikrama before. He had a wealth of knowledge about the route and all the dos and don'ts, so it was stimulating to spend time with him.

We got on well together. He also had a beautiful five-month-old black Labrador puppy named Pero, who was unbelievably playful and a whole bunch of fun.

We had samosas for lunch and a delicious evening meal after the aarti. I slept in the temple behind the murti of Lord Shiva. It felt strange sleeping in an environment like this, but it would become something I did many times over the coming months.

The night was cold, and I could feel winter slowly making itself known. I took an early-morning wash in the river flowing in front of the ashram. It was freezing, but that tingling sensation that comes from plunging into icy water was incredibly refreshing and energising.

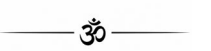
After some morning chai, I was ready to leave. Swami Arjun Giri suggested that I should not stay at the ashram in Kisalpuri but instead aim to reach the Kevlari ashram, about 4 kilometres away and situated directly on the banks of the river.

He also told me that half a dozen mobile phones had been stolen from the Kisalpuri ashram a few months earlier. I couldn't reconcile how a random act of this nature should frighten me away from staying there, but I respected his suggestion and liked the idea of being beside the river again.

As we said our farewells, Swami Arjun Giri told me that he would come and visit me on the other bank when I was making my way back to Amarkantak.

It was hard to imagine what kind of experiences I would be able to share with him when we met again.

But I was intrigued — and excited — to find out.



Chapter 4

What Maa Taught Me



"The truth cannot be found by seeking, but only Seekers find it."

Sufi Bayazid Bastami

It took me a long time to reach the Kevlari Ashram, and the heat got to me during the middle of the day, but the support I received from the local people was overwhelming. I was fed along the way and given copious amounts of chai and finally arrived at Kevlari in the late afternoon, after covering about 25 kilometres.

Swami Balak Das, who ran the ashram, observed silence from the time he woke in the morning until 8:00 pm, when the evening aarti took place. He had experienced some health issues, despite still being a young man, but he ate very little, drank an enormous amount of chai and smoked ganja continuously. Hearing that he was struggling with his health, therefore, didn't surprise me.

The amount of ganja consumed by the Swami and Sadhu community in India is staggering, and I had to constantly remind myself to remain equanimous and non-judgemental. I found that whenever I walked into an environment where a group of so-called Swamis or Sadhus were gathered together and smoking ganja, I was at odds with their behaviour. I

struggled to reconcile how a bunch of so-called 'holy men' or Sannyasis could be in any way serious about their spiritual path when they were constantly 'stoned' or in an altered state of consciousness.

But who was I to judge?

I was in no way superior to any of them and certainly not 'holier than thou'. I do believe that spiritual egotism is one of the most difficult characteristics to dissolve and eliminate from one's own personality, and I had no intention of adding to my own workload in this regard.

I had been on my pilgrimage for exactly one week and wanted to spend an extra day at this ashram. That was always part of my original plan, namely, that I would walk for six days and then spend two nights in the same place, so that I could physically rest and relax. This was a beautiful ashram and I had been given my own room, which is a rare occurrence on the Narmada Parikrama, so I asked the Swamis whether I could stay an extra night. Without speaking a word, they smiled and nodded their heads in agreement.

It felt good to wash my clothing, write in my journal, do some video editing and generally catch up with myself. I was able to spend some quiet and peaceful time down at the ashram's ghat and, in these idyllic conditions, I found myself pondering the Yamas and Niyamas, which form part of the suggested 'rules and regulations' to be observed while walking the Narmada Parikrama.

The Yamas and Niyamas are fundamental ethical principles that originated from ancient Hindu philosophy and pertain primarily to the practice of yoga, but they are also powerful

principles to live by. Sage Patanjali is credited with introducing these principles to the world through his teachings in the Yoga Sutras. They serve as profound guidelines for living a meaningful and purposeful life, while fostering harmony with oneself and others. The Yamas are the five moral restraints or ethical standards that govern how we interact with the world around us.

The first principle is Ahimsa, or non-violence, which encourages us to abstain from harm, both physically and emotionally, towards ourselves and all other sentient beings. It highlights the importance of compassion and kindness in thoughts, words and deeds.

We can integrate Ahimsa into our daily lives by becoming mindful of how we respond to people, particularly if someone has wronged us, been rude or said something that we consider unacceptable. Instead of responding with anger or outrage, we can choose to react with patience and understanding. We can also apply this principle by being gentle with ourselves, avoiding negative self-talk and practising self-compassion.

We can practise compassion by actively choosing thoughts, words and actions that promote kindness and by treating ourselves with the same care and concern that we would offer a friend. Being mindful of the words we use can also enhance this practice. Instead of belittling others, we can choose supportive language and encourage positive discussions.

The second principle is Satya, or truthfulness, and emphasises the significance of honesty and integrity. Practising truthfulness involves being truthful in all aspects of life, while also recognising when to speak the truth and when it may be wiser to remain silent.

We can inculcate Satya into our lives by committing to speak honestly in our relationships with other people. We can also aim to consistently provide constructive feedback to others, while honouring both their feelings and our truth. We can strive for transparency in our workplace, telling the truth when mistakes occur and being open in all our dealings with other people.

This principle can also be deepened by reflecting on our own commitments, ensuring that we do not overpromise or mislead others because of a fear of disappointing them. Learning to say 'No' respectfully is also a form of being honest with ourselves. Inner truthfulness is a powerful form of self-integrity.

The third principle is Asteya, or non-stealing, but this ideal goes beyond simply refraining from theft. It encompasses the avoidance of taking anything that is not freely given, whether it be time, energy or intellectual property, thereby promoting respect for others' rights and contributions.

Asteya can be integrated into our lives by giving credit where it is due for ideas that are not our own, particularly when sharing thoughts, concepts and ideas through writing, creating projects or simply by speaking. It can also mean not taking up more time in conversations than is necessary or warranted and being mindful not to use resources that aren't our own without permission.

We can inculcate this principle more fully by cultivating an attitude of appreciation for what we have, rather than coveting what others have, and we can practise this by regularly expressing gratitude.

The fourth principle is Brahmacharya, or celibacy. Traditionally, this principle was interpreted as celibacy, but Brahmacharya is now often seen as the practice of moderation in all areas of our lives, including sexuality, consumption and desire. It encourages us to find a balanced approach, so that we can prevent excess and thereby develop and maintain our focus on spiritual goals.

We can integrate moderation into our lives by being mindful of our use of technology. We can develop discipline when it comes to the time we spend in front of a screen, thereby creating space for more enriching activities, such as reading, writing or exercising.

This principle can also apply to simplifying our consumption, buying only what we truly need rather than accumulating a whole lot of unnecessary items. A balanced lifestyle can be cultivated by establishing limits when engaging in activities that we enjoy and by being mindful of our consumption, focusing on quality rather than quantity, whether it is food, entertainment or relationships. Setting clear boundaries helps us to avoid overextending ourselves physically, emotionally or spiritually.

The fifth principle is Aparigraha, or non-possessiveness, which refers to the practice of letting go of attachments and the desire for possessions. By observing this principle, we are encouraged to live with a sense of detachment from material wealth and physical accumulation, thereby promoting a sense of freedom and peace.

We can integrate this principle into our lives by removing the clutter that we have gathered around us. This can apply to

material accumulation, as well as to the mental and emotional clutter that we have accumulated over lifetimes of incarnations.

Aparigraha can be enhanced in our lives by allowing others to have their own space, without clinging or trying to control outcomes. We can deepen this principle by embracing minimalism and letting go of items that no longer serve us or bring us joy.

By understanding that freedom comes from non-attachment, living within our means and donating to causes and people in need, we create a sense of abundance rather than scarcity.

The Niyamas are personal observances that focus on our internal world. They promote self-discipline and spiritual growth.

The first principle is Saucha, or purity, and involves cleanliness of body and mind. It encourages the removal of physical impurities through proper hygiene and the cleansing of mental impurities by cultivating positive thoughts and emotions.

We can integrate Saucha into our lives by taking a bath every day, cleaning our teeth and other parts of our body, washing our clothing regularly and ensuring that our living space is kept clean and orderly. We can cleanse our minds of negativity by establishing healthy routines of meditation and mindfulness, and we can use journaling to improve our thinking and our attitude towards gratitude.

We can deepen this principle by limiting our exposure to toxic environments or media and nourishing our bodies with wholesome foods that promote health and vitality, while reducing our intake of processed foods and unhealthy snacks.

The second Niyama is Santosha, or contentment, which is about finding happiness and contentment in the present moment, regardless of what is happening in the external environment. This teaches us the value of gratitude and acceptance and encourages us to appreciate what we have.

We can integrate Santosha into our lives by practising gratitude daily, taking time to reflect on all the things for which we are grateful, irrespective of how small or insignificant they may seem. This shift in focus helps us to combat feelings of lack and appreciate our current life situation.

We can deepen this principle by avoiding comparison with others, recognising our own strengths and remembering that everyone is walking their own unique journey.

The third principle is Tapas, or discipline. Tapas is about self-discipline and the willingness to undergo hardship for the sake of our own personal growth. This principle promotes practices that build resilience and strength, whether through physical exertion or mental focus.

Tapas can be integrated into our lives by establishing healthy daily routines and practices such as meditation, yoga or physical exercise that challenge us, but are at the same time sustainable. Tapas can also be reflected in the discipline to pursue challenging goals or skills, despite the obstacles that might stand in our way.

We can deepen this principle by establishing clear, achievable goals for our personal and professional lives and then breaking them down into smaller, manageable tasks, so that we can cultivate discipline. We can also develop perseverance by

embracing challenges and dealing with them as opportunities for growth.

Svadhyaya, or self-study, is the fourth principle, which emphasises the importance of self-reflection and learning. It encourages us to study sacred texts, engage in personal introspection and seek a deeper understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe.

We can integrate Svadhyaya into our lives by dedicating time to reading, studying and reflecting upon spiritual and philosophical texts that resonate with us. Again, we can use journaling to record our thoughts, feelings and spiritual experiences, enabling a deeper understanding of ourselves.

We can deepen this principle by seeking feedback from close friends or mentors who can be honest with us about our behaviours and choices, thereby facilitating self-discovery and growth.

The fifth principle is Ishvara Pranidhana, or surrender to a Higher Power or Supreme Being. This principle involves dedicating ourselves to a higher purpose or divine presence. It encourages us to let go of the illusion that we are in control, learning to trust in the divine plan of the universe, which fosters a sense of peace and surrender.

We can integrate this principle into our lives by incorporating prayers and meditation practices that acknowledge a greater force in our lives. Simple prayers or mantras before meals or during moments of stress allow us to surrender our worries and concerns, even if just momentarily.

This principle teaches us to trust the innate unfolding of our path, especially during times of difficulty and crisis. We can

deepen this principle by reflecting deeply on trust. By considering situations where we feel anxious or need control, we can consciously practise letting go and reflect on the acceptance of life's inherent uncertainties.

Participating in community service or charitable activities allows us to connect with something greater than ourselves.

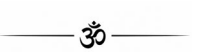
By adopting these specific practices for each Yama and Niyama, we can cultivate a harmonious and balanced approach to life. These practices not only enhance personal growth, but also contribute to fostering positive relationships with others and the surrounding world.

The rest day I spent at Kevlari was very special, and the profound reality of this pilgrimage was starting to seep into every cell, atom and particle of my being. I was truly starting to feel like a Sadhu. The simplicity of the life that I found myself now walking was magnificent, and the joy and peace that prevailed was liberating beyond words. I was loving life like never before.

On my rest day, about a dozen children came from a few of the local farms for lunch, and I later discovered that this act of kindness and generosity was something that Swami Balak Das made available to the children from the neighbourhood as often as he could. They were a lovely bunch of children who sang and chanted before and after their meal, and it was a privilege to witness.

Before leaving the Kevlari Ashram, I thanked Swami Balak Das profusely for taking such good care of me and, out of traditional respect, I bent down and touched his feet with humility and gratitude.

I walked the 4 kilometres back to Kisalpuri, turned right and made my way into a jungle region.



Chapter 5

The Beauty of Simply Being



"The very best and utmost of attainment in this life is to remain still and let God act and speak in thee."

Meister Eckhart

As I entered the jungle region, there were some very steep uphill and downhill sections, but the road was new, which made the walking easier than anticipated. In the middle of the afternoon, I arrived in a little village and found a small ashram on the side of the road. Swami Raju Das looked after the ashram and he had a serene and gentle demeanour, but couldn't speak a word of English. Nevertheless, he knew I was a parikramawasi, so he gave me a mattress and showed me a small shelter made from woven bamboo sticks with a roof. I made myself comfortable, unpacked a few things from my bag and settled in. There was no mobile network in this isolated little village in the jungle, but I somehow managed to establish that I was in Harratola and that the ashram was simply called the Parikramawasi Ashram.

Soon after arriving, two young men stopped to pay their respects to the deity in the small open temple that occupied part of the ashram grounds. As they were about to leave, they recognised me and said, "Hey, we saw you earlier walking up that long, steep hill." They then offered to buy me some fruit in Dindori and drop it off on their return. I was extremely

grateful for their generous gesture, but sceptical that they would go to such trouble for a stranger. When they asked me what fruit I wanted, I said that some bananas would be great.

I had a rest, took a bucket wash in some really cold water and, not long afterwards, the two gentlemen returned with a bag full of fruit. I was astounded by their generosity and all the effort involved in fulfilling their promise. To crown it all, they adamantly refused to allow me to pay for the fruit. Swami Raju Das prepared a tasty evening meal of chapati and sabzi, and I had some of the fruit to bring to the table. It was a wonderful meal and a memorable and comfortable stay.

The following morning, Swami Raju Das walked with me out of town and up onto a plateau a few kilometres away, where the mobile signal came back into range. He wanted to use my phone. After his call, we said our goodbyes and parted company, and I made my way to the Shivanand Ashram in Mohgaon. No one seemed to be occupying the ashram, but I decided that I would sleep on the veranda, as it was starting to get late. I had some fruit from the day before and there was fresh water in the well, so my basic needs were taken care of.

However, soon after sunset, I started receiving visitors. No one spoke English, so we simply gestured towards one another and I smiled a lot. It was blatantly obvious that I was an enigma and a real novelty in these small farming villages. Everyone was intrigued by me and simply wanted to sit, stare and be in my presence.

We were seldom able to converse, but I came to realise the importance of simply sitting and being in the company of these humble village folk, allowing the Divine presence to direct and guide the silence and the space to be filled with

unspoken words. People often feel the need to speak and fill quiet or uncomfortable spaces with words, but often that is totally unnecessary.

My comfort with emptiness and being alone was fuelling my awareness of that all-pervading consciousness and presence that is in and around everything and everyone. I was beginning to witness how this awareness was becoming acutely heightened. I felt no need to speak or communicate with anyone, but did so when necessary and out of respect and decency.

These moments of simply sitting together in each other's presence were also teaching me unruffled patience and emphasising the value of simply being.

A young man by the name of Vineet then arrived with six chapatis and a katori full of dal and sabzi. These acts of generosity, so frequently displayed by Indian people towards pilgrims and their fellow human beings alike, were deeply heartwarming and something I had never experienced while living in the Western Hemisphere.

A little while later, someone arrived with a bunch of keys and opened a small room with a bed inside. I was invited to use it and was completely set for the night. After a good, comfortable night's sleep, I was ready to leave at about 7:30 am, but not before Vineet brought me some chai.

It was a comfortable walk to the Deogaon Sangam Ashram, and I arrived around noon, just in time for lunch. The ashram had a big hall dedicated to pilgrims, and it was clean and well ventilated. There were a few other parikramawasis around who

were waiting for Chaturmas to end in a few weeks before continuing their journey.

I had managed to piece together that a pilgrim could start walking their Narmada Parikrama after Dussehra, which usually takes place a few weeks before Chaturmas officially ends. Those pilgrims who are spending 3 years, 3 months and 13 days on their Parikrama and who are strictly observing the Chaturmas dates, however, will wait a little longer before starting their journey again. This explained why I was meeting a few of these pilgrims along the way.

After some afternoon rest, I made my way down to the Narmada River and had a magnificent bath. The simplicity of this lifestyle was becoming infectious and I felt increasingly at ease and peaceful. My entire being was letting go of the stress and tension I had been carrying, and I was starting to feel lighter by the day, by the hour, by the minute and by the moment.

I was beginning to see with greater clarity and to recognise the divinity in everything and everyone around me. I was consciously starting to walk in the presence of the Divine and could feel the love in all my interactions with every living soul. I started loving myself again and loving everything that I was doing.

As this love migrated outwards, everything began to change and merge with everything else. I was no longer a separate self, but rather in union with all around me and deeply connected with everything in the universe. This feeling of 'oneness' gave me a comfort and peace that I had never experienced before, and the more settled I felt in this way of being, the more I trusted how life was unfolding.

There is a divine flow of existence pulsating through every cell, molecule, atom and particle in the universe, and I was beginning to move in sync with that flow, as well as with the gentle flow of my Maa Narmada, making her way from Amarkantak down to the Arabian Sea in Gujarat.

After my bath in the Narmada River, I sat on some steps and meditated for a while. One of the parikramawasis was busy with his evening puja ritual and chanting really loudly, but I was beginning to become more accepting and comfortable with noise around me while sitting in silence, going within and focusing on that sacred square inch between the eyes. An enjoyable meal and some reading brought another uplifting day to a close.

I was ready to leave promptly the following morning, as I needed to cross the Budhner River that flows into the Narmada River at the sangam, just a few hundred metres from the ashram. A sangam is a confluence of rivers, and the one here in Deogaon was impressive.

The 'loud chanting parikramawasi' walked with me to the sangam and spoke to a few of the local people. It didn't take long to find someone who was prepared to guide me across the Budhner River. The tributary was flowing very strongly in places because it was fairly soon after the monsoon rains, and the water level was quite high. My guide had crossed this section many times before, knew the river intimately and knew exactly which line to take for safe passage at that time of year.

I was not used to walking barefoot and my feet were tender, which made it difficult to keep up with my guide, but it didn't take long to make it safely across. I insisted on paying him for his services, but he was reluctant to accept any money from me.

This was something I was gradually learning to accept from the local people who lived and worked close to the Narmada River.

The morning's walk through some beautiful rural farmland was extremely enjoyable, despite it being really hot during the middle of the day. After walking 21 kilometres, I finally arrived in Ramnagar in the middle of the afternoon. I found the local ashram and temple and established that I could spend the night.

I took a wash at the village hand pump and bought some basic toiletries, fruit and peanuts. Word spread quickly that there was a foreigner in town, and I had a number of people coming to invite me to their homes for dinner.

Soon after it got dark, Swami Gopal came across to where I was writing and said, "Follow me, we are going for dinner." After a walk through town, we ended up at a family's home for dinner. The food was delicious and, after some chai at another family's home on the way back, we finally returned to the ashram at 10:00 pm. We sat around a small fire for a while, but I struggled to keep my eyes open. It didn't take long for me to climb into my sleeping bag and fall fast asleep.

The following day, I started walking towards Maharajpur. Along the way, I met a lovely young man by the name of Shivam, who suggested that I spend the night at the Surya Kund Ashram. None of the directions I was given along the way made any sense, but I eventually managed to find Suryakund. I was made to feel really welcome, given some chai and shown where I could spend the night.

I settled down and unpacked a few things. Just outside the hall where I was making myself comfortable was a huge loudspeaker blasting out someone chanting the Ramayana. After spending an hour relaxing and listening to the chanting, my intuition told me to investigate when the loudspeaker might be turned off or, at the very least, the volume turned down.

I was soon told that the chanting had been going on 24 hours a day for the last few months and that it would continue throughout the night at the same volume. It was obnoxiously loud, and I knew there was no way I would be able to sleep through these chanting formalities, so I immediately decided to move.

The pilgrims in the parikramawasi hall who saw me packing my bag were disconcerted and desperately tried to dissuade me from leaving, explaining why it was so important to listen to this holy text. There was no way, however, that I was going to be convinced.

I bid my farewells by saying, "Narmade Har," and made my way back in the same direction from which I had come. I found the road that led towards the point where I was able to take a boat across the Banjar River to Maharajpur.

By the time I arrived at the makeshift pier, the sun was starting to set, and I was just in time to take the last ride of the day across the river. Two other local people jumped onto the boat just as the boatman pushed us away from the shoreline with his long bamboo pole, which he used to manoeuvre us across the tributary to Maharajpur.

As we glided across the smooth, 'glass-like' Banjar River, I became mesmerised by the sound of the water gently lapping against the side of the boat and the sun slowly dipping below the horizon. This calm, beautiful scene held me captivated, and I had to be reminded to get off on the other bank.

I paid the boatman ₹30 and said, "Narmade Har," as I made my way up the sand slipway and into the small town of Maharajpur.

The first thing I came across was a market, and it didn't take long to find someone who could show me where there was a small ashram. I dropped my bag, grabbed my towel and a bar of soap, and went to take a bath in the Narmada River at the local ghat before it became completely dark.

As the lights of the town started illuminating the streets of Maharajpur, the Swami of the ashram and I sat outside on some chairs, eating shelled peanuts that I shared with him. He spoke no English, but we sat looking out onto the road and nodding at the passers-by.

We felt comfortable in each other's company, like we were old, long-lost friends, and words were superfluous and not required for us to enjoy this shared moment of companionship. Gestures sufficed, and we 'said' a lot to each other without using any words, other than a smile from time to time and the occasional chuckle or laugh.

There is no doubt that 'conversations' of this nature can be rich, meaningful and memorable, just as this one was.

He prepared *khichdi* for dinner, which was absolutely delicious. One of the ashram trustees arrived soon after dinner to stamp my journal. Most of the temples and ashrams along the

Narmada Parikrama have an official stamp, which they take pride in using, and there are some parikramawasis who go out of their way to get their books stamped, almost as though they were on a mission to collect ink stamps proving that they had, in fact, walked this way.

He was also very excited about wanting to interview me, as no doubt there weren't too many foreigners walking the Narmada Parikrama who had stayed in his ashram.

The following morning, I was able to use the public restroom facilities, which were surprisingly clean and acceptable. After a bath in Maa and some chai, I wished the Swami goodbye by saying, "Narmade Har," and was on my way once more.

I hadn't been walking very long when a gentleman by the name of Asim stopped next to me on his motorcycle, gave me ₹50 and then invited me to his house further down the road for breakfast.

Asim and his wife, Anita, were absolutely charming, and they prepared a wonderful breakfast of mixed fruits, nuts, fresh juice and tea. I was introduced to custard apples for the first time in my life. This tropical sweet and creamy fruit is characterised by its thick green, scaly skin and soft white-segmented flesh, with many dark seeds. It has a custard-like texture and a very sweet flavour, often described as a mix of banana, pear and pineapple.

After a wonderful few hours with Asim and Anita, I started making my way to the little village of Ghaga. The route took me back into rural farmland and, after a few hours of walking, I was stopped by a householder for some tea.

There was suddenly a lot of excitement when I appeared, as some of the other pilgrims he had invited for tea were the three babas that I had met on the third day of my Parikrama, somewhere around Karanjiya. They were a loud trio who made a lot of noise and smoked a lot of ganja. They made me feel slightly uncomfortable, and I questioned their authenticity.

I finished my tea before they did, thanked my host and started walking again. I wanted to try to put some distance between me and the babas, but a short while later they came riding past on the back of a trailer being hauled by a tractor. They shouted for me to hop on, but I had made a commitment in Amarkantak, before starting my Narmada Parikrama, that I would walk every step of the way. I was not about to break that promise to myself, no matter what the circumstances.

By the time I reached Ghaga, they were sitting under a tree smoking another pipe. I smiled as I walked by and then managed to establish that they were also going to the ashram in Ghagi, a small settlement consisting of a few houses and a small ashram building with the most spectacular view of the Narmada River.

Soon after we had all arrived, the three babas made chai and then started peeling and cutting vegetables for dinner. The Swami who looked after the ashram seemed disorganised and dishevelled, but he was able to contribute some rice towards the evening meal.

I was unable to offer any food and the babas didn't require any help with preparing the meal, so I went and spent some quiet time on the banks of the river. We ended up enjoying a fine meal together around the fire they used for cooking.

It soon became time for bed and the Swami showed us the room that was set aside for parikramawasis. I rolled out my sleeping bag and got myself organised, but by the time the Swami lit his second pipe of ganja, I knew it was time to find another place to sleep.

My disgruntled mumblings and moans about being disrespectful to those who were trying to sleep in the same place where ganja was being smoked made no impact on the Swami or the three babas, so I picked up my belongings and left the room. They all just smiled as I left and went back to smoking their pipe.

A few metres away, I found a covered enclosure, and it turned out to be a perfect place to spend the night.

After a good night's sleep and my usual morning routine, I said my goodbyes and made an early start without anyone in tow.

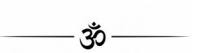
The babas had suggested that I make my way towards Kedarpur and, when I reached Ghaga once again, I was given further directions. I couldn't find any of these little villages on Google Maps, so route-finding in this region became a real challenge.

I also didn't want to rely on what the local people told me because their directions and distances were mostly wrong, but in some instances I really had no choice.

During the course of the morning, I was given directions to a shortcut through the forest and, judging by the confidence of the men who gave me these directions, I decided to follow them. I was evidently going to save about 7 kilometres of walking, which was very encouraging.

The path through this forest section was a stark reminder of my first day, when I got lost and ended up sleeping on the banks of Maa. I did not want to repeat that experience if I could help it, but I safely made my way through the forest to Batan and then on to Kedarpur.

I was given some bananas, biscuits and chai in Kedarpur, but established that there was an ashram in Bareli, which was only 4 kilometres away, so I headed off in that direction.



Chapter 6

Diwali in Bareli



"The greatest way to live with honour in this world is to actually be what we pretend to be."

Plato

As I turned into the little neighbourhood of Bareli and started keeping all my senses on high alert for the ashram that was supposedly in this little village, I was stopped by a man in a wheelchair. He had a warm and gentle smile, and his presence was powerfully serene. He politely offered me some chai, and I was very happy to accept, as it dawned on me, as I entered the village, that I had just walked 30 kilometres and was in desperate need of a rest.

It didn't take long for me to learn that the man with the disability was Purushottam Yadav, a teacher at the local school. He had incurred a spinal injury as a result of falling off the roof, but he was very accepting and understanding of his challenging circumstances. He was joyful and carefree, and very comfortable to be around.

His wife, Meena, soon brought us some tea, and the conversation that ensued was all about the Narmada Parikrama. I explained that I had just walked for a week and was hoping to spend two nights at the ashram before continuing on my journey, but it didn't take long for him to

say, "You can stay here, in that little kutir over there," and he pointed to a delightful little cottage just to one side of the courtyard.

"And you are also welcome to spend two nights with us."

I couldn't believe what I had just heard and thanked him profusely.

The little kutir had no electricity and was sparsely furnished, but it had a bed and a great ambience and energy. Their daughter, Priya, arrived back from school fairly soon afterwards. She was a mathematics teacher at the same school as her father and spoke very good English. She reassured me that her father's offer for me to stay with them was serious, which added a warm comfort to my heart.

I was told that I could use the village hand pump to take a wash. It was 100 metres away and on the other side of the main road to Ghansor. I was so excited about the little cottage that the inconvenience of the washing facilities was of no major concern to me.

Dinner was delicious and, after a long day, I finally climbed into bed in my own private space and slept really well.

This little enclave was inhabited by one extended family, with four houses facing onto an open courtyard, which accommodated various members of the family. This kind of arrangement and layout is quite common in these rural parts of India, and it was intriguing to watch all the interactions that took place amongst the family members.

I had no idea how old the Mataji of the family was, but her flexibility, fitness and energy levels were incredible. She did a

huge amount of sweeping and other physical labour around all the family houses, which faced the courtyard in the centre, and I was staggered by her workload. Everyone respected her enormously. She was in charge and ruled the roost.

Watching the way she swept and worked was inspiring, and her attitude was exemplary and commendable.

Purushottam was also incredible to observe. He had erected a handrail so that he had something to hold onto when he did his daily exercises, which involved getting out of his wheelchair and trying to walk, with his wife, Meena, assisting him in whichever way she could.

I saw how he struggled to get his two legs to move and to support his upper body weight at the same time, but he persevered and always had a smile on his face, as though nothing was getting him down. He exuded a joy that was difficult for me to fathom.

Little did I know how his example and radiance would inspire me in the future, as I would also have to learn to walk again.

Diwali was a few days away and, at dinner on my second night with this beautiful family, Meena invited me to stay for Diwali. I had intuitively felt that it would be very special to celebrate Diwali in an authentic way with these kind and generous people, so I was extremely excited to receive Meena's invitation.

The preparations for the auspicious Diwali celebrations ramped up the closer we got to the actual day. In some ways, it reminded me of how people in the West prepared for Christmas, but without all the frantic spending of money and abusive personal behaviour.

In this small cluster, the respective houses were being cleaned and painted, and the entrances were being decorated with rangoli, which is a popular tradition in India and is meant to welcome the gods and bring good luck.

Diwali is an extremely important religious festival celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs and Jains alike, and it marks the start of the Hindu New Year. Diwali, or Deepavali as it is known in Sanskrit, means 'row of lights' or 'festival of lights', and most homes celebrating this auspicious occasion will be decorated with oil lamps known as *diyas*.

Diwali honours the Hindu goddess of wealth, who is known as Lakshmi, and the lights and lamps are said to help her find her way into people's homes, bringing prosperity in the year to come. It is also a celebration of good triumphing over evil and, for many people, it represents the return of the gods Rama and Sita to the city of Ayodhya after defeating the evil king, Ravana.

This is a time of vibrant colours, amazing fireworks, twinkling lights and delicious food. It is a time to have fun with family and friends, and everything that I was witnessing was bringing all of this into manifestation.

The evening celebrations on the night of Diwali were flawless. There were reverent moments while all the lamps and candles were being lit, and then lots of laughter, frivolity, screams and shouting when the fireworks were ignited.

The celebrations came to an end with a fine meal and some *kheer* for dessert. This South Indian sweet rice pudding, with cardamom, saffron, nuts and raisins, is definitely one of my most favourite Indian desserts, and it had been especially made

for me. I was touched and extremely humbled by this kind gesture.

The following morning I got up, rolled up my sleeping bag, packed my rucksack and prepared to leave. Diwali was over and I wanted to continue with my Parikrama, but I was about to be surprised.

I was sitting on the balcony with Purushottam, enjoying some delicious chai, when Mataji marched across the courtyard, pointed her finger at me and then started conversing with Purushottam, who just smiled and kept nodding his head in my direction.

I couldn't help wondering what I had done wrong.

As Mataji turned and started walking back to her house, she was shaking her head as if she was dissatisfied with something. Purushottam, with a huge smile on his face, said to me that Mataji had conveyed the following to him:

"Today is Parma day and, in terms of old tradition, Diwali is not over yet, and you are not allowed to leave or go walking until all the celebrations are over."

He continued by saying that she was adamant about not wanting me to start walking.

I instantly knew that I was not prepared to offend her or break any old traditions, and that I was obliged to stay another night.

We both sat there chuckling at what had just transpired and, after my chai was finished, I picked up my backpack, walked across the courtyard to the little kutir that I had just spent five nights in and unpacked my bag once more, ready to spend another night with this amazing family.

Just before lunch, all the ladies of this extended family got together and performed a beautiful ritual around a pile of decorated cow dung. The Parma Puja was performed with reverence and devotion, and Mataji was at the centre of it all.

I was not invited into the puja, but was able to witness this profound celebration from the outside.

After a light evening meal, I could truly say that I had experienced a rural Diwali celebration with a family who had taken me in and treated me as one of their own.

I had originally planned to spend two nights with them, but ended up spending six, and the next day it was definitely time to start walking again.

Priya made me some poha for breakfast and gave me some snacks and leftover food from the night before for my journey. After some tearful goodbyes, I was on my way again.

As I made my way towards Ghansor, I thought a lot about the last unforgettable six days and all the profound lessons that had come my way.

I stopped in Pondi for some tea and pondered which direction I should go. Before leaving Bareli, Purushottam had painstakingly drawn a map for me, detailing two potential routes that I could follow once I reached Pondi.

One route was through a remote forest region with very few definitive markers and a high probability of getting lost, while the other involved staying on a paved farm road to Ghansor.

As I enjoyed my tea in Pondi, carefully considering these two options, something told me to take the more straightforward

way to Ghansor, and I opted for the easy way out and stayed on the paved road.

Along the way, I thought about my last six days and the special time I had spent in Bareli. It made me realise that I needed to drop the idea of walking for six days and then taking two days' rest.

I clearly saw how this routine could stifle my pilgrimage and prevent me from enjoying rich, profound and meaningful experiences.

It became blatantly clear that I should always allow Maa Narmada to dictate the pace, the direction and the profound and diverse experiences and outcomes that were manifesting before my very eyes.

I vowed not to let my plans, programme, moods or physical condition dictate any further movement or progress on this journey, and in that moment I completely surrendered once more.

As I contemplated this process of surrendering over and over again, my realisation deepened, and I knew that surrender is something that can be done continuously, by letting go more deeply and with unconditional acceptance of everything that was unfolding and coming towards me.

I arrived at the Ghansor Mandir in the middle of the afternoon and found a room with a store of mattresses that was open and decided that this was where I would spend the night.

There were no bathroom facilities, but there was a water dispenser with clean drinking water. I ended up taking what I

call a 'Ben Baba shower', which is washing using only one litre of water.

This idea was given to me by Ben Viatte, who had walked from Switzerland to Dharamsala in northern India, the town where the Dalai Lama has his monastery. Ben went on to walk from Dharamsala to Haridwar to attend the famous Kumbh Mela that took place there in 2020.

In order for a 'Ben Baba shower' to work efficiently, you need to pierce a few holes with a nail into the cap of a one-litre plastic water bottle. By squeezing the bottle, you reduce the amount of water that flows out, thereby making the use of your water and the wash more efficient.

The secret is also to make sure that you tackle all the vital parts first, and by doing so, it's amazing how well you can clean yourself with just one litre of water. And, if you are really careful, you might even have enough water left over to brush your teeth!

My evening meal consisted of the food and snacks that Priya had so kindly packed for me before leaving Bareli.

The following day I made my way to the little town of Diwari, where I was invited by Ramprakash Chouksey to stay with him and his family, and they took exceptionally good care of me.

The grandfather of the family was 103 years old and was still fit and vibrant. He was able to walk unaided and still preferred sitting on the ground in the lotus position, as opposed to on a chair.

He slept on the balcony throughout the year, and although it was covered, it was still subject to the outside air, which in winter can be really cold. He usually went to bed at 7:00 pm and slept comfortably for twelve solid hours.

When I asked Ramprakash, who is probably my age, what Dadaji's secret to longevity was, he replied by saying, "He drinks milk every day as well as cow urine."

What an astounding cocktail to consume on a daily basis.

I had explored urine therapy in my younger years, but drinking someone else's urine, or the urine from an animal or cow, was not something that I had ever entertained.

However, drinking cow urine in India is a traditional practice, which is believed to have medicinal properties and spiritual significance. This practice is part of Ayurveda and is rooted in cultural beliefs regarding the holistic treatment of the body and the mind.

There are many proponents who claim that cow urine has numerous health benefits, such as detoxification, boosting immunity and promoting healthy digestion. Cow urine, which is referred to as *gomutra*, is thought to possess antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties.

Some people advocate for its use in treating health issues such as diabetes, cancer and various skin diseases. However, the scientific evidence supporting these claims is limited, and this practice remains a controversial topic in terms of medical science and social circles.

Despite all of this, I was witnessing longevity, health, flexibility, mobility and an aura of serenity, peace and

contentment that was sublime for someone who had lived for more than a century, so perhaps the cocktail was working.

As my journey unfolded, I would frequently witness Indian people drinking cow urine, but I was never inspired to test it out myself.

Ramprakash switched the room light on at 5:15 am, and 30 minutes later we left to join the 'Prabhat Spiritual Walk and Kirtan', as it was referred to.

We walked to one of the local temples, where we met a number of other local people. We were each given a musical instrument and, within minutes, those of us who had gathered started chanting and walking to the next mandir, banging our drums, shaking our tambourines or ringing our bells.

As it slowly started getting light, the random sounds from these musical instruments and the chanting of 'Sita Ram', 'Om Namah Shivaya' and other kirtan songs echoed through the empty and quiet streets of Diwari.

This early morning ritual was only witnessed by the odd cow and stray dog, but it was heartfelt and bonding for those who took part in the cool, fresh morning.

Back at the Chouksey residence, I took a bucket wash, had some customary morning chai and said my goodbyes.

Ramprakash really wanted me to stay and spend another night with him and the family, and had I not spent six nights in Bareli, I might very well have stayed. But I definitely felt the instinctive need to be on my way again.

I had met three young men at the kirtan puja earlier, and they insisted on being my escort and walking out of town with me.

They were sprightly and energetic, and we shared a few good laughs as we walked before bidding each other farewell.

It always astounded me how easy it was to make friends in these small rural towns.

While making my way towards Bargi Dham, a man stopped on his motorcycle and pulled out a piece of paper which had his wife's telephone number on it. He said to me, "When you get to Bargi, call my wife, Sarasvati Chouksey, and she will arrange somewhere for you to stay."

I was stunned by the way the Chouksey family were prepared to look after pilgrims like me, when I later found out that they were related to Ramprakash, with whom I had stayed the previous night.

As I walked into Bargi, I stopped to take a break and call Sarasvati, but there was already a missed call on my phone from her son, whose name was Ram.

Fifteen minutes later, he came to pick me up on his motorcycle and took me to the family home, a few kilometres away.

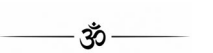
Before entering the house, Ram sat me down and prepared to wash my feet. As he did so, the other family members all gathered around in support.

I expressed my humble gratitude as I was made to feel like royalty.

We spent a wonderful evening together, and I started realising how brief moments together with strangers can be hugely impactful and bonding. It highlighted once again how bound together we truly are and that there is no separation.

We may appear to be separate individuals, in charge and in control of our own destiny, but we are in fact only aspects of a much greater whole. In truth, there is no separate self, but that perception is something that we all need to realise.

After a very enjoyable stay with the Chouksey family of Bargi, I was given an amazing send-off and spent the morning walking towards Tilwara Ghat, finally arriving at the Markandeya Ashram at noon.



Chapter 7

An Avant-Garde Room



"Butterflies can't see the beauty of their own wings, but we can. Similarly, you might not always recognise your own worth, but others see how special and incredible you truly are."

Lord Buddha

After an enjoyable morning's walk, I arrived at the Markandeya Ashram in Tilwara Ghat at about noon. The pujari, whose name was San Misra, confirmed with Swami Swastikeswar that I was welcome to spend the night. San Misra then showed me the ashram shed and said that I could stay there. The large storeroom was home to a tractor, but it also had a bed, a table and a chair, which were positioned in the middle of nowhere, with an enormous amount of space around them. The room was extremely avant-garde, and I was thrilled by the unusual atmosphere these furnishings created. I was also excited that I had permission from the Swami to spend two nights at the ashram.

The pujari and I got on very well, despite not being able to understand each other at all. I filmed him diligently doing the evening aarti, and he was very excited to see the video in which he featured. When it came time for me to leave the ashram, he couldn't stop saying, "I hope that my service was good. I am just a poor man." His humble attitude was very touching, and when I saw him holding back the tears as I

made my way towards the ashram gate, it dawned on me that, in a very short space of time, we had managed to really connect in a very special way indeed.

Soon after getting onto the Narsinghpur Road, a family who were living in the basement of an unfinished house called me over to have some chai. They were really struggling to make ends meet, but they were incredibly excited to have me in their presence and to share tea and some snacks with me. In our brief interaction, they showed me how sharing is not dependent on how much you own or how much money you have, but on the kindness that lives in your heart. Many people who have huge amounts of money and untold resources are often stingy and selfish and not prepared to share anything with their fellow human beings. But here in India, I was finding that very often it was the people who had the least who were prepared to share the most with people they didn't even know.

I was experiencing this every day on my journey, and I was finding this unconditional generosity quite unbelievable. My heart was always being filled and warmed in every sense of the word, and I was being taught lessons that I would never, ever forget.

As my day unfolded, I found myself walking to the little village of Jamuniya. I stopped at the village mandir and found an unfinished enclosure where I decided to spend the night. There was no one around, but there was clean, fresh water to drink and I could take a wash. I had some bananas and raw peanuts, which would have to suffice for dinner, so all of my basic needs were taken care of.

In the late afternoon, a pandit arrived to conduct the aarti and confirmed that I could stay where I had already laid out a few of my things. I had not asked for anyone to bring me any food, but an hour after the aarti, someone arrived with some chapati and sabzi for dinner. It never ceased to amaze me how I had been looked after on this spiritual pilgrimage.

Soon after leaving the following morning, I was shown a shortcut to Chargawan, which took me through some magnificent farmland. It was very powerful to feel such a profound connection to the earth and to Mother Nature. In Chargawan, there is a beautiful Jain temple, and after a short break, I asked a storeowner to look after my backpack while I went and took darshan in the temple.

A short while later, I was stopped by a man who insisted that I have some tea, and it didn't take much to twist my arm. I was in need of a break. Within minutes, another parikramawasi was also asked to join us, and I soon found out that his name was Ganesh Misare and that he was also walking the Narmada Parikrama. This was his fifth Parikrama. He spoke good English and, once we had finished our tea, we both started walking at the same time.

We hadn't discussed whether we were both in agreement with this move, and it didn't take long for me to reinforce in my own mind that I needed to complete this journey on my own and that I was not prepared to dilute a very sacred and spiritual pilgrimage by walking with someone else. It also didn't take long for me to realise the benefits of having someone around who could speak Hindi, someone who had walked the Narmada Parikrama before, and the comfort and security that came with having a companion.

Later that afternoon, I shared my thoughts with Ganesh about walking on my own, and he agreed with me immediately and wholeheartedly. I then shared with him that I was aiming to reach the Saccidananda Ashram in Narsinghpur in about three days' time and that we should walk together until then, and then part company and go our separate ways. He liked that idea and agreed with me, and that was the end of that conversation for the time being.

Ganesh and I walked very well together. We were usually about 50 metres apart from each other and only exchanged a few words while taking a break or drinking some tea. Our pace was similar, and we both had a sense of when it was appropriate to have a quick rest and a water break.

On the way to the little village of Baglai, a man stopped on his motorcycle and said that we could sleep at the Shiva Temple and that he would bring us some bhojan a little later. What a generous offer!

There was a hand pump conveniently positioned right outside the temple, so we could take a wash and obtain clean drinking water at the same time. As promised, the man on the motorcycle brought us some food for dinner, and once we had eaten, we rolled out our sleeping mats inside the temple, closed the steel gates, switched off the lights and closed our eyes.

The following day, we walked into Gotegaon and stopped at a small shop selling street food, which was owned by Anil Patel. Anil and Ganesh were friends, and Ganesh had stopped at Anil's shop on multiple occasions while walking his numerous parikramas. We were extremely well received and served some

freshly made samosas and jalebi. No meal is complete in this part of the world without some flavourful tea.

Anil then insisted that we accompany him to his house so that we could meet the rest of the family. The Patel family members all came out and touched our feet, and we were graced with a tilak, which one of the ladies strategically placed in the region of the ajna centre on our foreheads.

A tilak is a mark made on the forehead, and it holds significant cultural and religious importance in various traditions, but especially in Hinduism. It is a symbol of spiritual awakening and serves as a reminder of one's divine connection. A tilak can vary in design, colour and meaning, with different types representing various deities, rituals and cultural symbols.

Hindus believe that by applying a tilak, one is protected against negative energy, and it symbolises the wearer's devotion to God. It is also thought to activate the ajna centre, that spiritual 'third eye', which enhances perception and enables a deeper connection to one's inner self and to cosmic consciousness. A tilak is often applied during religious ceremonies, on auspicious occasions and during festivals.

Wearing a tilak can also foster a sense of belonging and reinforce cultural identity, reminding people of their heritage and the principles they uphold. It is a beautiful external reminder of spirituality and conscious living.

Before leaving the Patel household, we were each given bananas and biscuits to take with us for snacks along the way, and the mood was filled with an air of joy and happiness. We

rounded off our time with the Patel family by enthusiastically saying, "Narmade Har".

We then walked to the little village of Kamod, where we visited an old temple that had been in existence for hundreds of years. We had a brief rest and each ate a banana. While soaking up this old historical environment, Ganesh pointed out, in an authoritative way, that I shouldn't drink water after having just eaten a banana.

I looked at him in a stern and questioning way and then said, "Ganesh, please mind your own business and stop telling me what to do."

I had noticed in our brief time together that he would often point out what I should or shouldn't do, and although I had tolerated this characteristic of his, enough was enough. I couldn't help saying what was on my mind.

"Ganesh, sit down. Please stop telling me what to do, and here's the truth about drinking water after you've eaten a banana."

Drinking water after eating a banana is generally healthy for most people, and there's no scientific evidence to the contrary. The idea that it's bad for you comes from traditional Ayurvedic advice, which states that bananas are 'cooling' and 'heavy', and water is also 'cooling'. Combining them is said to slow digestion and cause mucus and, in some instances, even diarrhoea or acidity.

Bananas consist of 74% water. They are high in fibre, potassium and carbohydrates and contain some resistant starch. They usually take 30 to 45 minutes to digest. Water doesn't dilute stomach acid in any meaningful way, so drinking water

with food simply helps to move things along. No studies show that bananas and water cause indigestion, mucus or colds. A cold comes from a virus and not from food combinations.

For those people who have sensitive stomachs, lots of liquid after food high in fibre can leave someone feeling bloated, but that's very dependent on an individual's constitution. I went on to tell Ganesh that bananas are high in potassium and that by drinking water, you help your kidneys to use that potassium more effectively. The fibre in a banana absorbs water, and drinking water prevents constipation and helps digestion.

Bananas are actually used to treat diarrhoea because of their pectin and potassium content, so the Ayurvedic finding that bananas and water can cause diarrhoea is unfounded.

I concluded my discourse to Ganesh by saying: "There's no evidence that drinking water after eating a banana is unhealthy, so if it's not actually beneficial, then the worst-case scenario is that it will be neutral."

We spent the next few hours walking on a wide sand road, which was being prepared for an asphalt surface. The road was not smooth, and we were in the blazing sun, which made it tough going.

Some hours later, we were stopped by a family who invited us to spend the night with them in their farmhouse. It was a busy household. The ladies were preparing dinner by sitting around a fire mound made of cow dung and baking baati. Once these baati rolls had been turned sufficiently and thoroughly baked, with an adequate crust holding them together, they were coated with pure ghee and ready to be served with dal and chutney at dinner time.

The men of the household were busy cutting feed for the cows and buffaloes, who were a very important part of the family, providing milk on a daily basis and all the by-products that could be made from it. One of the teenage daughters was busy swinging a baby basket, keeping the youngest little soul of the family fast asleep.

I took a wash in the backyard and, in the process, simply couldn't imagine witnessing a more authentic farming lifestyle. Everyone was occupied and busy making their own contribution to the running and well-being of the family, and they were all happy and content doing so. Being in their presence was inspiring and uplifting.

The cows and buffaloes were all brought into their home so that they were safe and under shelter. They played an integral part in family life and were respected as much as the individual family members were.

After dinner, which consisted of the delicious freshly baked bread rolls, vegetable dal and sabzi, we sat around talking about farming life on the banks of the Narmada River. The agricultural corridor that is a natural result of this sacred river supports millions of farmers. The farming soil in this region is renowned for its exceptional richness and agricultural productivity, making it one of the most important farming regions in central India.

The soil is primarily alluvial in nature, deposited over the centuries by the river's floodwaters, and it contains a rich mixture of minerals, organic matter and an abundance of nutrients. The black cotton soil, which is prevalent in many parts of the Narmada region, is particularly valuable for

agriculture. This black soil is rich in calcium, magnesium and iron oxides, which provide essential nutrients for plant growth.

A wide variety of crops are grown in this region, and those that thrive the most are wheat, soya beans, corn, cotton, pulses and a variety of vegetables. Our hosts also told us that the soil is so clean and pure in places that various skin products are being organically made with minimal interference. These products include soaps and different kinds of creams.

Ganesh and I marvelled at these facts about farming along the Narmada River.

The following morning, a fire was made under a 44-gallon drum so that everyone could take a hot bath on the side of the road. The morning was icy cold, so having the use of piping-hot water was really appreciated. We were served poha for breakfast, as well as some chai, and by 7:30 am we were on our way again.

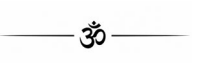
It didn't take long for us to reach the little village of Sankal, where everyone we met wanted us to spend the night, but our compromise was that we would visit all the local temples. We left our backpacks with one of the local storeowners before heading out with someone who was prepared to act as our guide.

We visited the famous Shankaracharya Diksha Mandir, the sangam and a small ashram, which overlooked the Narmada. This detour took us two hours, but it was really worth the effort.

We finally got going again in the heat of the day, and it was a long afternoon's walk to the little town of Damna. There was

nowhere for us to stay, but Ganesh managed to persuade a family to allow us to sleep on their veranda floor. The family were maize and sugar-cane farmers and had a big house, and we were extremely grateful to have a roof over our heads and a scrumptious meal.

The following morning, we walked into Narsinghpur and over the bridge to the Saccidananda Ashram, which was on the outskirts of town. It felt surreal to walk through the ashram gates having stayed here before, but this time after walking from Amarkantak and having covered 425 kilometres over the last four weeks.



Chapter 8

Saccidananda Ashram



"If you observe awareness steadily, then this awareness itself, as a Guru, will reveal the truth."

Ramana Maharshi

I had stayed at the Saccidananda Ashram the year before, and it felt surreal to enter the gates once more. This spiritual oasis was started in 1971 by two Catholic priests, Father Premanand O Praem and Father Amaldas, as well as by the Jabalpur Diocese, but it was really Swami Sadanand who brought the ashram to life by infusing his energy into the environment and by breathing life into every building, tree, plant and visitor, and by living according to his motto: 'God is the Father of all, all are brothers and sisters to each other, love is religion and service is worship'. While living and running the ashram, Swami Sadanand had a profound realisation about walking on Mother Earth and, in that instant, removed his shoes so that he could feel and connect with the earth more deeply. In doing so, he knew in the depths of his being that he would never wear shoes again and consequently spent the remaining years of his life walking barefoot. He was known for his healing abilities, and people from far and wide would visit him for advice and treatment for a wide range of complications, ranging from snake and insect bites to infections and common colds and flu. He was a very simple

monastic who would also take the time to visit the prisoners in the Narsinghpur jail, where he would sit and talk with them and not leave until he had prayed with them.

The Saccidananda Ashram is a movement for universal brotherhood, peace and harmony, and it promotes deep spiritual experience, inculturation and inter-religious dialogue. The ashram is located on beautiful grounds, which are home to various cottages among the trees. The space is quiet and peaceful and lends itself to deep spiritual practice. The Mytri Mandir is the temple of the ashram and is built in Indian architecture, with three gates representing the major religions of the world, which proclaims the fraternity of all in God. The SadGuru of the ashram is Jesus Christ, and there is a statue of him in the mandir. He is also depicted as an Indian Yogi in the gardens, where he is sitting cross-legged in meditation. In front of the Mytri Mandir is the Peace Stone, which is in the shape of a lotus, indicating that the ashram is a place for simplicity, transcendence and integration with the divine. The ashram has a library containing around 6,000 books relating to spirituality, religion, philosophy, literature and science, providing an opportunity to study, reflect and experience various dimensions of truth. The ashram also has an outdoor area where various functions can be held in a garden environment, to facilitate and promote the inter-faith activities that are so crucial to Saccidananda.

Ganesh and I ended up spending six nights at the ashram. There were a number of programmes that took place while we were guests, and it was uplifting and rewarding to participate in all of them. On our first Sunday, we attended the morning Mass and then attended a festival, which acknowledged that

Jesus Christ permeates all four corners of the Earth. It was a beautiful ceremony, with some rhythmic chanting and singing, with everyone walking around the mandir three times and finally standing in front of the murti, where Jesus Christ is depicted as a Yogi, throwing flowers over the statue.

We were also invited to the local Gurudwara to pay our respects to Guru Nanak for his Jayanti, which happened to be his 554th birth anniversary. Guru Nanak was an Indian spiritual teacher, mystic and poet who is regarded as the founder of Sikhism and is the first of the ten Sikh Gurus. Guru Nanak is said to have travelled far and wide across Asia, teaching people the message of 'One God', who dwells in every one of his creations and constitutes the eternal truth. With this concept, he would set up a unique spiritual, social and political platform based on equality, fraternal love, goodness and virtue. Guru Nanak's words are registered in the form of 974 poetic hymns or Shanda in the holy religious scripture of Sikhism, the Guru Granth Sahib. It is part of Sikh religious belief that the spirit of Guru Nanak's sanctity, divinity and religious authority has descended upon each of the nine subsequent Gurus, when the Guruship devolved onto them. Later the same day, Saccidananda had organised a programme honouring Guru Nanak and the Sikh religion. A few months before starting my Narmada Parikrama, I had spent a month doing seva at a small Gurudwara located just before Devprayag on the way to Badrinath. During this time of doing service, I learned a lot about the Sikh religion.

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion. It is the fifth largest religion in the world, with approximately 30 million adherents known as Sikhs. Sikhism teaches the belief in one supreme

God, who is formless, eternal and the creator of all. The religion emphasises equality among all human beings, regardless of age, caste, colour, gender, race or religion. Sikhism rejects all forms of idol worship, pilgrimages to holy rivers, fasting and superstitions. The core principles include living an honest life, serving others and remembering God through prayer and meditation. The Sikh scripture is known as Guru Granth Sahib Ji and is considered to be the eternal Guru. It contains writings from Sikh Gurus, as well as from Hindu and Muslim Saints, which demonstrate Sikhism's inclusive theology. The religion emphasises the remembrance of God's name and does not advocate retreating from society, but rather encourages living a householder's life and spreading goodness.

To become initiated into the Sikh religion, a person must undergo the Amrit Sanskar ceremony and fulfil certain requirements before undergoing the initiation. The requirements begin with a sincere wish and a genuine commitment to embrace Sikhism and to live by its principles voluntarily and without coercion. Secondly, the Gurus' teachings are to be understood and adhered to, which includes the importance of the five virtues, namely, truth, compassion, contentment, humility and love. Thirdly, there needs to be a willingness to follow the Code of Conduct, which includes wearing the 5 K's, which are Kesh, not cutting one's hair; Kangha, wearing a wooden comb; Kara, wearing a steel bracelet; Kirpan, wearing a sword; and Kachera, wearing special shorts. The 5 K's carry deep spiritual, symbolic and practical significance. Kesh refers to not cutting hair, which includes the head, face and body. In Sikhism, hair is considered to be a gift from God and a natural symbol of one's

spiritual identity. The Kangha is a small wooden comb, typically made from sandalwood. It is worn tucked into the hair or carried. It is a symbol of cleanliness and discipline, and its wooden simplicity is a reminder that all people are equal. The Kara is a circular steel bracelet worn on the wrist, and its unbroken circle represents the eternal bond with God, which has no beginning and no end. The Kirpan is a curved sword, typically worn in a sheath attached to a belt. It represents the duty to protect the defenceless and to stand up against oppression and injustice. The Kachera are specially designed knee-length shorts, typically made from undyed cotton. These garments represent a readiness for action, as they allow for easy movement, symbolising a warrior's readiness to act at any given moment. They also represent modesty, dignity and equality.

Our time at the Saccidananda Ashram started coming to an end, and it was time to start walking again. Ganesh and I had really enjoyed our time at the ashram. It had been a very relaxing and fulfilling time, and as our departure day approached, we stayed for lunch and also enjoyed some afternoon tea before saying our 'thank yous' and 'goodbyes' and walking out of the Saccidananda Ashram gates.

We left late because our plan was to only walk 2 kilometres to the Kali Mata Mandir, which was just on the other side of town. It felt particularly special to return to this temple. I had spent five nights here during my earlier journey from Sagar to Nagpur, and now, some time later, I was back again — this time as a parikramawasi, walking around Maa Narmada. The temple itself had not changed, but I had. What had once been

another stop on a journey had now become part of a much larger story.

That earlier journey had been undertaken to say 'Thank You' to Sri M for inspiring me to walk like a Sadhu from Rishikesh to Badrinath and then later from Rishikesh to Kedarnath. Looking back, it felt extraordinary to realise how one journey had led to another and how the seeds of my Narmada Parikrama had perhaps been planted long before I ever imagined walking around Maa.

The temple is looked after by a humble pujari who also looks after two young children who are relatives of his. It was wonderful to renew my acquaintance with the three of them, as well as with the Swami and the pandit who came to perform the aarti.

We were invited to the Rajesh household for dinner, and along the way, we ended up buying a few things for our ongoing journey. I had always suffered from getting cold feet in the winter and, with the colder weather starting to approach, I decided to buy a hot water bottle. This rubber device was heavy, and I thought long and hard about buying it, but ended up getting it nevertheless.

There was something especially delightful about seeing Rajesh again. This was the same Rajesh who, earlier in my Parikrama, had taken me on his motorcycle to see Maa Narmada. At the time, I had simply regarded him as another kind stranger who had appeared along my path. Now, weeks later, we were sitting together again, sharing a meal with his family. Once again, I was reminded of how people seem to reappear when you least expect them and how a pilgrimage has a way of bringing seemingly disconnected moments together.

We were warmly welcomed by Rajesh and his family when we arrived for dinner, which was served soon afterwards. Our time together with this warm and loving family was brought to a beautiful close when Rajesh and Ritika, the eldest daughter, sang a duet for us. I had heard the two of them sing together before and never grew tired of their voices and the way they passed the microphone back and forth to each other. After dinner, Ganesh and I made our way back to the Kali Mata Mandir, made ourselves comfortable on the mattresses that Rajesh had organised for us and both slept well.

When we woke, it was drizzling. It had been raining quite a lot in the last few days, and we had heard that the dirt roads and the bank of Maa Narmada would be extremely muddy, so instead of making our way to Baarman Ghat and back onto the banks of Maa Narmada, we decided to walk on the main road to Kareli. We sat around for an hour waiting for the rain to subside before finally leaving the Kali Mata Temple and Narsinghpur behind us.

In the early afternoon, we arrived at the Shiva Mandir, which was located in the middle of Kareli. It had a large dharamsala hall attached to it, which is where we were told we could stay. During the daytime, the hall doubles up as a school for a large number of the local children, and there were at least 100 young learners in various grades and standards being taught different subjects in this hall. It was incredible to witness the energy, exuberance and resourcefulness of the children and the school teachers alike, being taught in this open-plan environment. The excitement that echoed through the hall was scintillating and infectious. At around 4:00 pm, everything suddenly quietened down as school ended, and all

the children rushed enthusiastically out of the hall and made their way home.

Ganesh and I hadn't spoken any further about continuing to walk together, and while we were at the Saccidananda Ashram for six nights, we each had our own little kutir, weren't in each other's hair and were comfortable in each other's space. But now that our journey had begun once again, I could feel how I needed to employ more tolerance and patience than normal. I became more aware of how Ganesh loved to tell me what to do, and I knew that I would not be able to tolerate that for very much longer.

However, I was also able to acknowledge that I was learning from him and that it was comforting to have him around. I had a deep sense that we had met for a very definite reason. We had some insightful conversations and both enjoyed the companionship, but I knew that this journey was deeply personal and that true transformation could only occur if I was on my own. I knew he understood that as well.

A meal was brought to us in the school hall at around 8:00 pm by two lovely gentlemen who were associated with the Shiva Mandir, and it felt weird to sit at a school desk as an adult eating dinner, with two observers watching us eat and constantly asking us questions about our respective journeys. We were asked where Ganesh and I had met, how long we had been walking in tandem and whether we planned to finish the Parikrama together.

At that moment, Ganesh and I just looked at each other and smiled, knowing full well that there was no way that would happen. I was grateful that the question had been asked, as it

brought into full view the conversation that Ganesh and I had to have, and I felt the sooner the better for both of us.

Chapter 9

Nothing and Everything



"When I look inside and see I am nothing, that's wisdom. And when I look outside and see that I am everything, that's love, and between those two my life turns."

Nisargadatta Maharaj

The following morning, we sat around for two hours waiting for the rain to subside before making our way towards Karapgaon. After walking for a few hours, we were stopped by a farmer who invited us for lunch. While sitting around waiting for the food to be prepared, Ganesh was actively engaged in a conversation with the farmer about various things that were happening in the news programme being broadcast from an old television set hanging precariously from an old hook in the corner of the sitting room.

Their exchange was in Hindi and I was not included in the discussion, so I sat quietly to one side, simply observing how everything was unfolding. I witnessed the manner in which lunch was being prepared, the way the television was blaring in the corner and the mannerisms displayed by Ganesh and the farmer while they were conversing.

While witnessing all of this, I started having a very powerful change in perception. My awareness shifted and I sensed that I was dreaming and that everything around me was merging

into one all-encompassing ocean of consciousness. I was viewing this from a detached perspective, but at the same time I was within the ocean, an intimate part of the ocean and the ocean itself.

Although this all felt like a dream, I was in a space of acute wakefulness and heightened awareness, and everything was illuminated with crystal-clear clarity. I had no idea how long this prevailed, as time and space fell away and dissolved, and I became immersed in a void of nothing, but at the same time in an ocean of everything.

As the dream evolved, the sense of "I" started receding into an oblivious state of nothing, and I felt as though there was nothing to grasp or hold onto. But I was not afraid and instinctively knew that what was unfolding was nothing to fear. I soon came to realise that this was the very essence of life itself.

Within this emptiness there was a peace and a deep sense of joy and harmony, and the aliveness and sparkling awareness that pervaded everything was indescribable.

From the dark recesses of my mind, I heard Ganesh's voice saying, "Swami Ji, it's time for lunch." It took a minute or so before I was able to acknowledge this call to action, as I was totally absorbed within a reality that was difficult to leave. But instinctively I also knew that this was a reality that I was intimately connected to within every moment of my existence, and that I wasn't leaving anything or going anywhere.

This was my true reality and the very essence of my being, and spatial definitions, measurements of time and all concepts and constructs fell away and lost all sense of meaning.

I finally stood up, but could feel that I was still in another world and not particularly hungry.

Lunch was delicious and, after lying down for a short rest, it started raining again and it looked pretty socked in. It didn't take long for our host to invite us to spend the night.

The following morning, we set off towards Karapgaon and, just before walking into the little town, we saw the gentleman who had stopped us two days before and invited us to spend the night with him in his village. He was very excited to see us again and wanted to show us the local Shiva Mandir. After that, he invited us to have breakfast at his house.

While we were waiting for the food to be prepared, I spoke to Ganesh about the routine that we were currently following and how I felt that it wasn't working too well for me. Without any discussion and with no hesitation, he said, "We must now go our separate ways and you must walk on your own again."

I couldn't believe how adamant he was and how he had taken charge, and it made me feel rather tense and uncomfortable. But the timing could not have been better.

As soon as breakfast was over, I put my bag onto my back and, without any further conversation, clasped my hands together in the Namaste Mudra and said, "Thank you, Ganesh. Narmade Har."

I then turned around and started walking, but this time on my own. It didn't take long for me to feel a deep sense of relief and a lightness of being. As I made my way towards Koudiya, I also felt grateful for the time that I had spent with Ganesh. He had definitely come into my life for a reason and had taught me a number of lessons. In some strange way, I knew

that I would miss having someone around who could speak Hindi and, despite our differences, I knew I would miss his company.

Little did I know how mysteriously he would arrive in my life again and how we would end up spending some time together once more.

In Koudiya, I stopped at the Ram Mandir and found a corner to sit in. The temple pandit arrived fairly soon afterwards and confirmed that I could spend the night.

A young man by the name of Adarsh then arrived and invited me for dinner at his family's home. It was a remarkable evening, as his family had never heard him speak English before and they all sat around and marvelled at how their son was able to converse with me. I felt proud to be a participant in this very special occasion.

The following day, I walked to Saali Choaka and found the Shiv Mandir, where I was hoping to spend the night. On my way there, I found myself walking on the left-hand side of the road, with my back to the traffic. This was one of those things that Ganesh had told me to do soon after we had started walking together all those weeks ago.

I had noticed that all parikramawasis did this, but it was completely foreign to me and I felt unnerved doing so. Ganesh had said to me that some drivers would intentionally veer towards you if you walked facing the traffic, and this had happened to me a good few times, so what Ganesh said had sounded plausible.

However, there was no way that I could get used to this strategy, but I was prepared to make the change, as I did not

want to offend anyone. Earlier in my life, I was a road-running athlete who had run over 100 marathons and had trained most days of the week. I had always run facing the oncoming traffic, so this change felt very uncomfortable and I never got used to it at all.

I later established that the rule in India is that you should always walk on the extreme right side of the road, facing the traffic, when there is no footpath, so that you can see approaching vehicles head-on and move away if needed. If a footpath or sidewalk exists, then it should always be used. Walking on the left puts traffic behind your back and puts you at risk.

I was sorry that Ganesh was not around, so that I could share the proper rules of the road with him.

The Shiv Mandir had no space for me to sleep, but the pandit said that on the other side of the field there was a dharamsala hall and I could stay there. It was spacious and just perfect to spend the night.

Later that evening, a Swami came to spend the night. He was very familiar with the accommodation and took up residence on the other side of the hall from me. But the size of the hall meant that noises carried, so when the Swami started snoring at around 11:00 pm, I knew I was in for a long night.

The following day, I walked an easy 20 kilometres and stopped in the middle of the afternoon at the Durga Temple in Bankhedi. The temple was situated on a bend in the main road of the town, which meant that it was very visible, but it also meant that I could 'people watch' all the passersby.

Next to the temple were some government offices and, during the afternoon, one of the clerks came over to where I was watching the world go by and introduced himself as Harsh. His English was quite good, but he soon admitted to me that he had never spoken the language to a foreigner before in his entire life, and this was a momentous occasion for him.

I was so excited to be sharing this special time with him, but it highlighted how little interest there was in English in these small farming towns around the Narmada River.

After the evening aarti was performed by the pandit, he changed his clothes, hauled out a gas stove, some pots and pans, some vegetables and rice, and started preparing dinner for about a dozen people.

He couldn't speak a word of English, but I somehow managed to ask him why he was starting to prepare dinner for so many people, and he somehow managed to convey that it was because I was spending the night at their temple in Bankhedi.

I felt truly honoured.

A while later, Rajkumar Sharma, the senior reporter from a regional newspaper, arrived and wanted to interview me. We spent half an hour together; he took some photographs and then stayed for something to eat before leaving on his motorcycle again.

It turned out to be a late night, but it was a joyous occasion and a lot of fun. I had received a huge amount of attention, and it was very special for the people of Bankhedi to know that there was a foreigner in their midst who was walking the Narmada Parikrama. I could feel how important it was for me to give them the attention they wanted.

The following day, I walked to the Sita Ram Mandir, situated on the outskirts of Pipariya. I arrived in time for a late lunch and, after waking from a post-meal snooze, the Swami said, "You want room?"

I nodded with a huge smile and with gratitude in my heart, and a few minutes later I was shown an empty room, which had absolutely nothing inside it other than a single thin mattress. But I had my own space, the ashram had a good energy and I was really grateful to be accommodated.

The ashram had a large temple and the evening aarti was well attended and a very joyous occasion. The pandit who conducted the aarti was 85 years old, and the bounce in his step and his vibrancy were magnificent. It was inspiring to be in his presence.

The following day, I walked into town to buy some toothpaste, peanuts and a few other snacks. As I arrived at the counter of the general store, the shop owner took one look at me and then, with a huge smile on his face, said, "I know you."

I looked at him with a puzzled look on my face and then he said, "You are from South Africa."

How on earth did he know this?

He then reached under the shop counter and pulled out a newspaper, and there on the front page was a photograph of me and Rajkumar Sharma, along with a write-up about me walking the Narmada Parikrama.

We both had a good laugh.

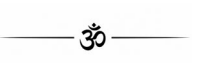
I took a photograph of the article, thanked him and left. He was unable to translate the article as his English was poor, but

I later sent the photograph and article to a friend who was able to translate it for me.

It was reasonably accurate, which I was pleased about.

Later in the day, I had a few of the ashram staff approach me with a copy of the newspaper article in their hands, and they were all very happy that I was staying at their ashram. It created quite a stir and prompted many more questions about my life and my motivation for walking the Parikrama.

I spent an enjoyable three nights at the Sita Ram Mandir and Ashram and had met some delightful people, but it was time to continue on my journey.



Chapter 10

The Feet That Carry You



"The map of the Narmada Parikrama is not just riverbanks, ashrams and temples. It's drawn with the lines of a thousand hands that washed a stranger's feet."

Ronnie Baba

It didn't take long to reach Shobhapur, where I was stopped and offered tea and delicious aloo bonda for breakfast. These popular South Indian and Maharashtrian fried snacks consist of spiced mashed potatoes formed into a ball, dipped in a thick, seasoned gram flour batter and then deep-fried until they are golden brown and crispy. They are often served with coconut chutney, but most certainly with hot chai. This tasty street food is also known as potato bonda.

A little further on, I was invited into the home of Yogini Sadhavi Shyama Devi. She was a saintly woman who had an incredibly beautiful smile and some of the whitest and most perfect teeth I had ever seen in India.

A large number of the Indian population do not take care of their teeth, and the chewing of tobacco is highly prevalent, with over 25% of the population using tobacco in various forms. The use of these products is a major cause of oral cancer, resulting in over 1.35 million people dying annually. Many state-level bans are in existence, but tobacco is still

widely used due to social acceptance and its low cost. Besides being addictive, the discolouration of people's teeth is highly noticeable everywhere.

Another foul habit that discolours people's teeth is the chewing of betel nut, also called betel quid. This product makes the mouth, teeth, lips and stool red in colour and, despite being highly carcinogenic, it is also addictive and unhygienic for everyone in close proximity to the user, as the leftover waste is usually spat out onto the ground. It really is disgusting and, although it is banned in many states, these bans are not forcefully enforced.

Sadhavi Shyama Devi and I spent some inspiring time together talking about various aspects of spirituality, and I was asked to spend the night. The conversation was very stimulating and I would have loved to stay over, but I had just spent three nights in one place and felt that I needed to push on.

A few kilometres before Sohagpur, a gentleman by the name of Chainsingh Mourya ushered me to one side of the road and then proceeded to throw flower petals on the ground in front of me as he directed me into his garden. He gently asked me to sit down, and then his wife and another family member started washing my feet.

After kissing my feet, Chainsingh's wife drank some of the water that she had just used. This was the second time on my journey that I had had my feet washed, and once again I couldn't believe what I had just witnessed. I found the experience completely overwhelming, and the sense of humility that prevailed left me feeling highly emotional and

speechless. I couldn't hold back the tears as they rolled down my cheeks.

In that moment, I realised that my feet weren't carrying me, but rather the feet of those people who were serving me. I was being carried by Maa Narmada and by the faith of strangers, and I was overcome with immense gratitude and humility.

Villagers and devotees along the banks of the Narmada River believe that a parikramawasi is not just a pilgrim, but rather someone who is walking with the holy Narmada. I had begun to understand that when someone washes my feet, they are performing 'Narmada Paad Proksalan', which is the washing of the feet of the goddess who is moving along her own banks. The dust on my feet is therefore considered to be 'Narmada ki mitti', making the act sacred and a profound expression of punya.

According to the scriptures, serving a parikramawasi by offering water, food, shelter or washing their feet gives the person the same merit as performing the entire Narmada Parikrama themselves. For householders who cannot spend six to eight months walking around Maiya, this is their way to participate in the Parikrama.

Having my feet washed was a true test of humility, and I fully accepted the act as Maiya's grace flowing through me. I also began to learn that whether someone was rich or poor, an educated professional or a simple labourer, washing a parikramawasi's feet was an act of dissolving ego and pride. No matter who you were, everyone who washed a parikramawasi's feet did so with the same devotion.

Chainsingh's wife had drunk some of the water that she had used to wash my feet, but often a host would sprinkle the water in their home, with the understanding that it came from Maa Narmada as a divine blessing.

I was then led to an outside dining area and fed a huge lunch. While being served delicious dishes of food, I asked Chainsingh's wife why she went to such great lengths to be of service to me. In broken English, she responded by saying, "To us, Maa is more than just a river – she's a sanctuary, a home where we feel protected and loved. She is, and will always be, our Mother."

I was deeply moved by her response and thanked her once again from the bottom of my heart for all that she and Maa Narmada had done for me.

I was only ready to move again in the late afternoon, and an elderly Swami who had also been part of the earlier festivities agreed to walk with me to the Sankar Temple, which was about 3 kilometres away. He introduced me to the pandit, who showed me where I could spend the night.

Chainsingh called in the evening to give me the name of someone who would meet me the following day near the little town of Semri. It was staggering how these various communities were prepared to feed and host parikramawasis.

I woke early to a cold and misty morning and started making my way towards Semri. A few hours into my walk, I was met by Shailendra on his motorbike. He was the gentleman Chainsingh had told me about the night before, and as I entered Semri, I was met by a team of helpers who knew all about me and were extremely excited to see me.

I was taken to someone's house and given a delicious lunch. As I sat enjoying the meal on my own, they all sat around and watched me eat. I was then shown a bed and invited to have a rest before starting to walk again.

I had the most gorgeous sleep for about an hour before being given a hearty send-off. I had been given directions to a farmhouse close to the little village of Gudariya, where I was told that I would be able to spend the night.

Dr Dharmendra Singh, an Ayurvedic doctor and also a biryani rice farmer, met me on my arrival. He confirmed that I could spend the night and said that he would arrange to have a delicious meal delivered for me a little later on.

He showed me around the farmhouse and then took me to where I could spend the night. On the balcony of his alternative medical practice, a rope bed stood strategically positioned and was covered with a warm duvet.

An Indian rope bed, also known as a *Charpai* or *Khatiya*, is a traditional bed frame featuring a woven lattice of rope, usually made of cotton, nylon or jute. These beds are extremely comfortable and supportive and are known for their durability and ventilation. They are used indoors and outdoors and are easy to manoeuvre and move around.

I had to draw water from the farm's well so that I could take a wash, and although the water was absolutely freezing, it was refreshing beyond words. Dr Dharmendra then went and fetched a meal from his home in Gudariya, and it was delicious.

Shailendra, who had taken such great care of me earlier in the day, arrived soon afterwards with Yeshwant, a close friend of

his. It was cold, so they made a fire, and we all sat around chatting about the Narmada River, spirituality, farming and Indian culture.

This was when I found out that Dr Dharmendra exports his biryani rice and generates a healthy sum from doing so. As the fire died down, it was time for everyone to go their respective ways and for me to get under the covers.

I lay there listening to the last few crackles of the fire, the night crickets, birds and beetles, but it didn't take long for me to fall fast asleep and have one of my best nights of sleep on the Narmada Parikrama.

The next day I made my way into the town of Babai, where I was met by a team of half a dozen volunteers who were tasked with welcoming me, and others, who were walking the Narmada Parikrama.

I was taken across the road to the Gayatri Mandir, where I was served tea and a range of different fruits. All of this attention that I had been receiving of late had been remarkable and absolutely overwhelming.

The local people who reach out to pilgrims and offer their help do so because they know that the spiritual rewards that lie in unconditional service to their fellow men and women are immeasurable, and the karmic credits that are acquired are huge.

It is truly amazing to be on the receiving end of this spiritual generosity, which I believe is singularly unique to the people living in India. This kind of thinking and these attitudes of doing spiritual service are not found among people in the West.

Chapter 11

Waiting to Meet God



"The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself."

Friedrich Nietzsche

I was then shown the best and quickest road to the little farming village of Ari, where I was met by Mahesh and offered a late lunch. Mahesh's mother, who was 88, had decided that she wanted to vacate her earthly body and meet God. She had consumed only water for the previous 22 days and, although she had lost an enormous amount of weight and was growing weaker, she was wide awake, alert and noticeably present. Members of her extended family had been visiting and spending time with her before she made the shift to another dimension. There was something profound about being in her presence, and I could sense the angelic beings that were waiting to assist her with the transition into the next realm. A calmness and peace seemed to permeate the room, which was devoid of expectancy and anxiety. I intuitively knew that she had already made herself acquainted with the next phase of life. Mahesh then urged me towards where she was lying on a couch and said, "She wants to bless you." As I moved towards her, a chair was carefully placed to one side, so

that I could sit down. The room fell silent, and she gently laid her hand on my arm. I closed my eyes and gently lowered my head. I could feel the vitality she still possessed pulsating through my being. It was a profound and powerful exchange as I responded by directing love and compassion from my heart centre towards her. In Sanskrit, the heart centre is known as Anahata. It is located in the middle of the chest and is the centre of love, compassion and emotional balance, and it serves as the bridge between physical and spiritual energy. I had no idea how long I had been sitting by her side with my eyes closed, but when I raised my head, opened my eyes and gently looked at her, she was gazing at me with a smile on her face, and I knew that she had felt our palpable energetic exchange. She then reached over to a cabinet that was close to where she was lying, pulled open the drawer and took out a ₹100 note and gently placed it in my right hand. I received it with gratitude and then bowed towards her with both of my hands placed together in the Namaste Mudra. I smiled gently and quietly retreated. It was a powerful interaction and one that has indelibly printed itself into the core of my being.

When it felt appropriate to leave, I nodded to Mahesh, who in turn beckoned me to make my way to the door. He then walked me to a rice granary, which was a few kilometres on the other side of Ari and was being used as a temporary shelter for parikramawasis. I was shown an upstairs storeroom to leave my bag and to lay out my sleeping bag. Outside the entrance to the storeroom, there was a large balcony, which provided spectacular views of the evening sunset and the morning sunrise and I was thrilled to be able to enjoy the open space.

When I was in Bankhedi being interviewed by Rajkumar Sharma, he told me about Mataji Radha, who owned an ashram in Bandrabhan, which is in the Hoshangabad District and now known as Narmadapura. He had said that I should visit her along the way and gave me her number. I had spoken to her a few days back and she was looking forward to seeing me and if everything went according to plan, I would arrive at the Gufa ashram later that day. She is of French origin and a monk from Belgium by the name of Swami Sumeru Muni helps her to manage the ashram. They had both met while walking the Narmada Parikrama and had managed to acquire the ashram, which is beautifully located overlooking the Sangam of the Tawa River and the Narmada River. The Sangam is the largest along the south bank of the river and it is a magnificent sight to behold.

I arrived at the Gufa ashram around noon and was warmly welcomed by Swami Sumeru Ji. Unfortunately Mataji Radha was in Delhi dealing with the Indian bureaucracy and I would have to wait until I had walked another 1,300 kilometres and was on the opposite bank before I would have the privilege of meeting her. Just after we had lunch together, a gentleman arrived at the ashram to meet me. He had been stalking me ever since he had read the newspaper article written by Rajkumar Sharma and published in the local newspaper in Bankhedi about a week back. As soon as he saw me he touched my feet and expressed his gratitude for being in my presence. He never spoke a word of English, but just wanted to meet me and receive my blessing. He had been tracking my whereabouts for the last six days and every time he arrived in the village where he expected to find me, I had already moved on, so he was constantly playing catch up. After six days of

stalking my movements, he had finally caught up with me. Sadly, we couldn't speak to each other, but Swami Sumeru could translate for us, although there was very little to say. After a short while of sitting together, he gave me ₹50, touched my feet once again and was on his way. I prayed that he felt as though he had received a blessing from me and that six days of hunting me down had finally left him feeling liberated, content and at peace, particularly considering all the hard work that he had put into finding me.

I spent a very stimulating three days and nights at the Gufa ashram with Swami Sumeru and we held satsang continuously. He is not only a fountain of knowledge about the Narmada River and the Parikrama, but also a wealth of knowledge about the spiritual, esoteric and metaphysical aspects that lie behind this profound journey of inner purification, penance and spiritual awakening. His enthusiasm and desire to share this wealth of information often prevented the listener from getting a word in edgeways, but I was very happy to absorb his nuggets of wisdom and keep my mouth shut.

On my last day at the ashram, we walked down to the sangam and sat on the sand watching the sun slowly drop behind the Vindhya mountain range in the west. The temperature dropped sharply as we made our way back to the ashram in the dark for the evening puja. Swami Sumeru held an aarti and kirtan session every evening at 7:00 pm, joined by a small group of young people from the little village of Bandrabhan. It was always a joyful and happy occasion.

The following morning I was up early and prepared for another day of walking. After a bowl of scrumptious warm oats, cooked with a few cashew nuts and raisins, I said my

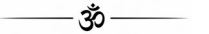
goodbyes to Swami Sumeru and a few of the other staff members at the Gufa ashram and made my way along the kinaare of the Narmada River to Hoshangabad, which is now known as Narmadapuram. I stopped at Sethani Ghat on the way through the town and rested. I had bought some fresh dates as I entered the town and they went down extremely well as an energising snack. As I sat on the steps of the ghat, it dawned on me that I was at the halfway point on the south bank of the river. I had walked 645 kilometres and the distance of the Narmada River from Amarkantak to the Arabian Sea in Gujarat is 1,312 kilometres. This milestone was encouraging and left me feeling good.

I then made my way to the Baba Balia ashram, where I spent the night. The following day I walked through some beautiful rural farmland to the Marhur Vatika ashram, which is near Talanagri. The ashram was set back from the road I had been walking on and had an attractive gated entrance, with an extremely well-kept garden and roadway leading to the ashram buildings. I was met by one of the ashram staff who managed to convey to me that the ashram doesn't normally cater for pilgrims, but that the Swami would arrive in an hour or two and confirm whether I could stay or not. He showed me a rope bed and said that I could take a rest in the meantime. I slept for an hour before the Swami arrived. He had a wonderful presence and was very happy for me to stay the night. A little while later, two gentlemen arrived and I soon realised that they were friends of the Swami and were also going to spend the night. The younger of the two was named Dharmendra and he spoke good English. At dinner, he said to me, "I have lots of questions for you. Do you mind if I speak with you after dinner?" "Of course," was my reply. After our

meal, we found somewhere comfortable to sit and I said, "Okay, what do you want to ask me?" He reiterated that he had many questions, but the two most pressing were "Don't you ever feel lonely?" and "Aren't you ever afraid?" I smiled and after a period of silence acknowledged that his questions were very interesting and realistic, and ones that I was sure would've crossed many people's minds. I had been very alone for the last few years of my life while living in India and very alone for a vast majority of my pilgrimage around the Narmada River and I had pondered and contemplated this state of being deeply, and came to realise that being alone was fundamentally very different from loneliness and these two experiences were often confused. Being alone is a physical state and it is all about being by yourself, without other people being present. It's a neutral state of being and can be chosen, just as I had chosen to walk around the Narmada River alone and without anyone else accompanying me. Alone time allows one to recharge, pursue individual interests and develop a spiritual practice and self-awareness, which often leads to inner peace.

On the other hand, loneliness is an emotional state and often brings a feeling of being disconnected and isolated. Loneliness doesn't require physical isolation. I had certainly discovered that one could feel lonely in a crowded room, even if you sense a lack of genuine connection to those around you. Loneliness is often characterised by feelings of emptiness and disconnection, and it often comes with pain. It is usually involuntary and can have a major negative effect on physical, mental and spiritual health.

Dharmendra then reminded me of his second question: "Don't you ever feel afraid?" He continued by saying "I mean here you are in India all on your own, you don't speak the language, you're nearly 70 years old and you are walking through this rural farmland without any support. Aren't you scared"? He was very surprised when it didn't take long for me to say "No." He then looked at me in such a way that made me realise he wanted more from me than a single word, so I smiled and said, "Okay, please give me a minute and I'll explain." I began by saying that feeling afraid is an emotional response to a perceived threat or danger, usually characterised by anxiety, worry or dread about something specific. I explained that I had none of these feelings. I went on to say that I had surrendered fully to Maa Narmada, Mother Nature and to Almighty God and trusted implicitly and unconditionally in the Supreme Power to guide and protect me. My faith that I would be taken care of was without question, and my acceptance of how everything in my life was unfolding was unconditional and without resistance. He sat there listening to me in awe and finally said, "I cannot do what you have just described." We both sat in silence, almost as though he needed to allow what I had just said to land and penetrate into his being. I felt that I should simply remain still and allow the presence to flow through me and guide him in whatever way was appropriate in that given moment. It was a powerful exchange, but the time soon arrived for both of us to say "Shubh Ratri," and make our way to bed. It turned cold, but I was comfortable and warm on the rope bed that had been given to me for the night.



Chapter 12

The Long Way and the Wrong Way



"The limits of the possible can only be defined by going beyond them into the impossible."

Arthur C. Clarke

The following day, I followed a dirt track that ran alongside Maa Narmada, and it was a really beautiful walk to Khoksar, where the mahasamadhi of Gourishankar Maharaj can be found.

History reveals that this saint had some interesting interactions with the British. He was reputed to have had an amazing ability to manifest substantial sums of money whenever they were required. This created a huge amount of suspicion, and many rumours circulated among the British fraternity who were in charge at the time.

He was once asked by a Royal Officer where all his money came from, and his response was, "Maa Narmada provides me with all the money I need."

He was then ordered to prove the truth of his reply.

Gourishankar Maharaj was initially reluctant to show the officer the source of his riches, but they were determined to satisfy their suspicions and establish the truth, so he was

forced to take action. He walked down to the water's edge of the Narmada River, followed by a number of British personnel.

The Maharaj got into a boat and paddled out into Maa Narmada. He sat for a while in silent prayer and then put his hand into the water and pulled out a bag of gold coins. He then paddled back to the shore and revealed his magical acquisition to the British, who marvelled at what they had just witnessed.

It has been said that this act led to his enlightenment.

I then made my way to Tigaria and, after some lunch at an unknown ashram, walked to the Kriya Kuti Ashram, which is located on the banks of the Narmada River, just to one side of Nanpa.

I was given a room that had absolutely nothing inside, but I had a sleeping mat, an inflatable mattress and a warm sleeping bag to make myself comfortable, so I was an extremely content pilgrim.

I took a wash in the river, which was surprisingly warm. Watching a flock of birds dart backwards and forwards over the water, with the sun slowly dropping behind the horizon, was really beautiful. Capturing this moment after a refreshing wash was truly magical.

The Guruji of the ashram and some of his disciples then held a kirtan session before dinner. It was reverent, devotional and heartwarming, and it complemented the birds flying in front of the setting sun that I had witnessed a little earlier in the most perfect way.

The following day, I followed the bank of the river to Nanpa and then took a small farm road to Hathanpur, where I was given some breakfast.

Anwalighat was a few kilometres away, but I felt that I should pay my respects and take darshan at the temple. After spending some time there, I walked back to an intersection and turned right towards Gwadi.

I soon caught up with a small group of five parikramawasis who encouraged me to join them. There were some shortcuts ahead, and the leader of their group knew these obscure pathways, as he had walked the Narmada Parikrama five times before.

I was very grateful that I had agreed to join them, not because I was concerned about saving time or walking less distance, but because these shortcuts were safer and kept us closer to Maa Narmada.

One of the shortcuts involved crossing a river that was about 20 metres wide. The water was a dirty brown, and you couldn't see the bottom. Had I not witnessed the others crossing ahead of me, I would have been very reluctant to try it on my own.

The water was waist-deep, but the bottom was smooth and the current was not flowing strongly, so it turned out to be an easy and comfortable crossing.

In the middle of the afternoon, we arrived at a farmhouse that had made itself available to support pilgrims. We were shown a dusty storeroom where we were told we could sleep.

At the front of the storeroom, the farmer and his labourers were grinding corn with machinery that was making a huge amount of noise and shedding an excessive amount of dust.

I was extremely grateful that someone was prepared to provide me with some shelter and, later, some food, but living in the dust in the meantime was unhealthy and unacceptable. After some rest, I looked on Google Maps and discovered that there was another ashram about 2 kilometres away.

I quietly said my goodbyes and started making my way to the Maa Narmada Seva Ashram.

I arrived just as the sun was setting and was warmly welcomed by Swami Goswami, who was happy to see me. He gave me a little room that overlooked his small temple, and it had a rope bed.

After settling in and taking a wash, I realised that Swami Goswami's phone number had been given to me a few days earlier by Swami Punyatmananda, whom I had met when I walked from Sagar to Nagpur to say thank you to Sri M for inspiring me to walk from Rishikesh to Badrinath and, in doing so, changing my life dramatically.

I had not yet contacted Swami Goswami, but now I found myself at his small home ashram.

This highlighted once more how profoundly I was being guided by divine grace.

The small ashram had a beautiful view of Mini Goa, a location along the Narmada River.

Swami Goswami was a retired Hindi and Sanskrit teacher and had built the ashram a few years earlier. He had never married,

had walked the Parikrama twice before and had written two books about the Narmada River and his journeys around her banks.

He couldn't speak English, but he smiled continuously, had really good energy and we got on extremely well.

I decided that I would spend two nights with him.

The following afternoon, two other pilgrims arrived at the ashram. One was an Ayurvedic doctor who was travelling by bicycle, while the other was on a motorcycle. I never established what he did with his life.

They were both allocated some space in the mandir to sleep, as the room I was in was far too small to accommodate anyone else.

At dinner, the Ayurvedic doctor made a statement about the Narmada Parikrama that baffled me.

He said, "Why are you doing this? This pilgrimage is a spiritual journey for Indian people only."

I struggled to understand what he meant and, after I finished chewing and swallowing the food that I had in my mouth, I looked up and smiled.

After a pause, I said, "So what makes you think I am not an Indian? I might not have been born in this country in this lifetime, but I've lived here many times in past incarnations, and I'm every bit as much an Indian as you are."

I was rather astounded that a doctor of alternative medicine, someone who was educated and, to some extent, liberated and enlightened in his thinking, would make such a comment.

It was probably the most racist statement that I had ever heard.

The more I shared what had inspired me to start this journey and revealed a little more about my belief system, the less responsive he became, and it didn't take long for him to become completely silent.

I am not sure whether he went quiet because he had nothing more to say or because he finally realised that what he had said was offensive, unkind and extremely insensitive. Either way, our conversation came to an end, and we had very little more to say to each other for the rest of our time together at the ashram.

The following morning, the Ayurvedic doctor and cyclist left before I did, without saying goodbye.

I slowly packed my things and was ready to leave at about 8:00 am.

On my way to Shivpur, I stopped for a rest and, while sitting in the shade of a large tree with my back against its trunk, the motorcyclist who had spent the previous night at the ashram came flying by on his motorcycle.

He spotted me, slammed his foot on the brakes, turned around and pulled up beside me.

Without greeting me, he said, "You are going the wrong way and the long way."

I looked at him with a surprised expression and responded, "What do you mean by that?"

Without any explanation, he simply repeated the sentence: "You are going the wrong way and the long way."

Without any further conversation, he turned his bike around and sped off, never to be seen again.

I took another mouthful of water and pondered what he had said to me quietly and deeply.

I knew that I was on the right road and was sure and convinced that this was the shortest and most direct way to Shivpur. But I instantly recognised that I could interpret what he had said in another way.

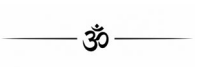
The deeper I contemplated his words, the more I realised how I had, in fact, gone the wrong way and the long way during many years of my life.

I had done many things that were wrong and had wronged many people. As a result of all the mistakes I had made, I knew that they had complicated and added to the length of my journey through life.

By not always doing the right and moral thing at every given turn, I had added length and breadth to the karma of my life.

But all of those past wrongs were now behind me.

The journey I was on was purifying and cleansing all of that negative karma, and I was now on the shortest and most direct path towards liberation and the realisation of my true Self.



Chapter 13

Nights in an Old Age Home



"No matter how isolated you are and how lonely you feel, if you do your work truly and conscientiously, unknown friends will come and seek you."

Carl Jung

After entering Shivpur, I was directed towards Bajrang Kuti, where they had been reciting the *Ramayana* 24 hours a day for eight months of the year, and had been doing so for the last 28 years. They took four months off during Chaturmas, which coincides with the monsoon season.

A young devotee by the name of Madhav took great care of me and made sure that I ate well and had somewhere comfortable to rest after the meal I was served. After paying my respects in the temple and listening to the *Ramayana* readings for a while, I was directed to Bhiladiya Ghat and the Kailash Ashram, which is right on the banks of the Narmada River.

On my way there, I was asked to join a group of six men who were all drinking chai at a small roadside tea shop. One of them was a journalist who had seen the newspaper article published by Rajkumar Singh. He wanted to interview me, but couldn't speak a word of English and I couldn't speak Hindi, so the conversation instantly collapsed.

However, among the group of six, there were a few men who could understand a few English words and somehow managed to pass some information about me on to this journalist. He went ahead and published an article in the region's local newspaper without interviewing or even speaking to me.

I later had his article translated, and none of it was true other than my first name and where I was from. He had literally created a fake story that made no sense, and all I could do was laugh.

At the Kailash Ashram in Bhiladiya Ghat, there must have been 100 pilgrims in the hall allocated for parikramawasis, and I couldn't help wondering where all these people had suddenly arrived from.

Then I remembered that they could have been pilgrims doing the Parikrama by bus. This ashram and the ghat were prominent locations on the Narmada Parikrama and were geared up to cater for large groups.

I found a corner that I thought would be quiet and made myself comfortable. Soon after it got dark, everyone started performing their own small evening puja, accompanied by a lot of group singing, which sounded very beautiful.

After dinner, groups of women continued with their kirtan sessions, and the harmonising was uplifting to listen to. I was amazed that everyone went to bed at around 10:00 pm and, besides the bodily night noises and some light snoring, it was a surprisingly quiet night. I enjoyed a good night's rest.

The following morning, I left early, before most of the other pilgrims were up and about. It was a really cold morning, so in order to stay warm, I walked briskly through some magnificent

farmland, with Maa Narmada appearing through the trees from time to time on my right-hand side.

By mid-morning, I had reached the Ganjal River, a tributary that flows into the Narmada. The only way across was by boat, and it was a smooth and enjoyable crossing.

I stopped at the Maa Narmada Temple, which is located on a small hill just outside Gondagaon Khurd. I was offered some chai and enjoyed some rest while looking towards the river in the distance.

I then made my way to the Bajrang Das Ji Kuti Ashram in the Chichot district, where I met Swami Nitya Chaitanya, who was looking after the ashram. He was a direct disciple of Swami Tilak and Swami Bajrang Das and spoke five languages fluently.

The ashram had the most incredible library, and I spent some time browsing through the English section. The ashram generally didn't cater for parikramawasis, so I was most grateful to be invited to spend the night.

The following day's walk turned out to be interesting. There were some long sections where I was forced to walk barefoot, as the path kept moving in and out of the shallows of the Narmada River.

I bumped into the five parikramawasis I had met a few days before, and it was lovely to see them again.

I had been deliberating about whether I should go back to the Saccidananda Ashram for Christmas when I received a message from Anish asking me whether I was still coming to spend Christmas in Narsinghpur. I took this as a very definite

sign that I should try to make it happen and started planning accordingly.

I had heard that the Saccidananda Ashram put together a wonderful Christmas event, and I was keen to experience this special time on the Christian calendar with them.

Evidently, the entire ashram grounds were decorated with multicoloured lights and, besides the Mass that took place on Christmas morning, about 3,000 people from Narsinghpur came to visit the ashram, enjoy the peaceful atmosphere and view the spectacle of lights.

In the late afternoon, I arrived at the Sri Harihar Ashram, which had a truly uplifting feeling about it.

I found a wonderful place to spend the night. It was open to the outside air but had a solid roof for shelter. Most of the other pilgrims who arrived after me gravitated towards a closed hall, which provided them with more warmth, but I had a warm sleeping bag and preferred the quiet and the fresh air.

Dinner was a joyous occasion, with everyone singing "Sita Ram".

I spent some time catching up on my journal and doing some video editing before finally switching off my head torch at a reasonable hour.

I was sharing this open shelter with another elderly parikramawasi, and he spent the whole night talking to himself. I called out to him many times, asking him to quieten down, but he was either deaf or in a deep sleep because he never responded, and the talking continued.

After my usual early-morning routine, I packed the last few things into my bag. As I was starting to make my way towards the gates of the ashram, the Swami in charge called out to me and asked me to stay.

He really didn't want me to leave and tried to persuade me to change my mind, but I had decided that I wanted to go to the Saccidananda Ashram in Narsinghpur for Christmas, which was only a few days away. I therefore had to make my way towards Harda rather than getting back onto the banks of Maiya.

It was a hot day, and the walk to Harda was along a straight, busy road that drained me energetically.

I finally managed to get to the Warda Ashram at about 3:00 pm, but I was soon told that I could not stay overnight. This facility catered for older people who had no family or money to support themselves, and it did not cater for transitory pilgrims like me.

They offered me some tea, but I was told in no uncertain terms that I should find somewhere else to spend the night.

After enjoying the chai on a bench, I closed my eyes, focused on my breath and quietly went within. I gave thanks for the day so far and then asked for guidance about where I should spend the night.

I had not sat quietly like this for more than five minutes when I heard someone say, "Narmade Har, Maharaj Ji. You can spend the night here."

I opened my eyes, and standing in front of me was a young man by the name of Ram. I guessed he was in his mid-thirties

and had just arrived with a whole lot of food that he was donating to the ashram.

While my eyes were closed, he had offloaded his donation, seen me sitting on the bench, and enquired as to what I was doing there.

It then took him only a few minutes to have the appropriate conversation with the right people, and he had secured a place for me to stay for the night.

I could hardly believe what I had just witnessed and couldn't stop saying thank you.

When I told Ram that I wanted to get to Narsinghpur the following day, he told me about a train called the Kolkata Mail that I could catch at 8:30 am the following morning to reach Narsinghpur by midday.

Later that afternoon, I met Mayank, whose father had started the ashram. He arranged for me to spend another night at the Warda Ashram when I returned from Narsinghpur to Harda in about six days' time.

Soon afterwards, I was shown a bed in the male dormitory, which was occupied by nine other frail and elderly men.

In many ways, I felt that I didn't belong in this facility, but I was ever so grateful for the way that Ram and Mayank had created the opportunity for me to stay.

The dal that accompanied the rice at dinner was the hottest and spiciest that I had ever tasted and, as grateful as I was for the meal, I could only eat the rice. Mayank had stayed for dinner, but he didn't find the meal too spicy, which I found really amazing.

The men's bathroom was in a shocking state, but I braved the disgusting conditions and the ice-cold water and took a wash before settling into the bed that had been allocated to me.

As I watched these old, fragile and infirm gentlemen, who were all being taken care of by the grace of God and by other beautiful souls who donated food and other resources to the Warda Ashram, I couldn't help thinking that this could be me in a few years' time.

These men were getting old and they were fragile, but they still had dignity, companionship, food on a daily basis, a bed and a roof over their heads.

I felt incredibly humbled by the opportunity to spend a night with these men in their home and truly blessed to still have my health and all my faculties.

Little did I know how quickly things would change for me in less than 11 months.

Everyone was in bed by 9:00 pm, but just before the lights were about to be switched off, members of the Harda Sikh community came bursting through the door with a few litres of hot milk.

It was poured into paper cups and offered to us with great enthusiasm and loud roars of gratitude.

As I personally thanked one of the last Sikh men to leave, he simply responded by saying, "It's all God's grace."

I slept well in the comfortable bed that had been allocated to me and only woke at 6:45 am.

The following morning, a lovely lady and her daughter arrived with some delicious home-made breakfast for the entire ashram. They served tasty poha and aloo bonda.

The Kolkata Mail train was running three hours late, so I was under no pressure to get to the railway station. I had more than enough time to say goodbye to everyone and, as I was about to leave, the caretaker came to me and said, "You are most welcome to come back and spend a night with us in a week's time."

I really felt as though I had been accepted by this old age home and all its residents.

As I closed the gate behind me and waved to all those sitting outside and enjoying the warm morning sun, I felt an acceptance and a comfort surrounding me. I genuinely looked forward to seeing all of them again in a week's time.

I walked to Harda Railway Station, bought a general train ticket and joined the throng of people travelling in that class to Narsinghpur.

It took almost four hours to reach my destination, which gave me ample opportunity to ponder the old age home experience in India.

Moving into an old age home is a significant transition for anyone, anywhere in the world, but particularly in India, where the family structure is so deeply embedded and where it intersects with cultural values, family dynamics and personal psychology.

Traditionally, multigenerational households have been the norm, with elderly parents living with their children and

grandchildren. This joint family system has meant that ageing is a communal experience, unlike in the West, where people tend to live more independently.

However, urbanisation, migration and changing family structures have gradually shifted this landscape, and the decision to move to an old age home often carries emotional baggage. It is sometimes perceived as abandonment, but it can also be considered an act of liberation.

This perception varies dramatically according to one's attitude.

A positive attitude allows elderly individuals to integrate into the community of an old age home. They become members of a community rather than residents in an institution.

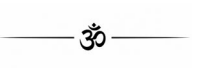
Those who have a negative attitude towards life may see old age homes as places of abandonment, while those with a positive attitude may see them as communities of peers who understand their stage of life in ways that younger people cannot.

In my brief stay at the Warda Ashram, I never had the opportunity to interact with everyone, but overall my observation was that most of the residents were leading dignified lives in their old age, despite old age homes in India not being the norm.

As I sat there on the train and contemplated the opportunity I had been given to experience an Indian old age home first-hand, I realised that in old age, as perhaps at no other stage of life, one's attitude determines one's destiny.

The mind's orientation towards life shapes not just the quality of our experience but also the trajectory of health and longevity itself.

I was hugely grateful for the opportunity I had been given.



Chapter 14

Christmas in Narsinghpur



"I believe in the fundamental truth of all the great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God given. I came to the conclusion long ago that all religions were true and also that all had some error in them."

Mahatma Gandhi

It took almost four hours to reach Narsinghpur. After disembarking, I walked to the Saccidananda Ashram and arrived just in time for tea.

Unlocking the door of the little kutir where I had spent six nights a few weeks earlier felt surreal, and I couldn't help thinking that I was coming home again.

The very first thing that caught my attention was the Christmas lights decorating the Mytri Mandir and adorning the grounds of the ashram. Thousands of beautiful coloured lights had been used throughout the grounds, creating a magnificent spectacle and a wonderful atmosphere for this auspicious Christian celebration, the birth of Jesus Christ.

Devoted ladies of Saccidananda had created some exquisite Christmas rangoli designs on the paving in front of the statue of Jesus sitting in the padmasana meditation position, where he is depicted as an Indian yogi. They had also decorated the

entrance to the Mytri Mandir, welcoming all those who entered.

Rangoli is a beautiful art form using dry coloured powders, flower petals, rice flour and chalk to decorate the entrances of homes, places of worship and other important locations. The artists at Saccidananda had created 'Merry Christmas' greetings and images of bells, angels and Christmas trees, and it was inspiring to watch them at work.

As I strolled around the grounds on Christmas Eve, soaking up the warm sun on a magnificent winter's day, I was acutely aware of all the hardworking people preparing for the festivities that were planned for later in the day.

I couldn't help thinking about the frenzy and commercialisation of Christmas in many Western countries. I remembered how often I had run around frantically trying to get everything done before Christmas Day — buying decorations, gifts, food and drinks of all types, so that on the day everything would be perfect.

But invariably there was always something that had been forgotten.

I thought about all the consumer spending in other parts of the world and how the profound religious and spiritual importance of this time had been replaced by overspending, overeating and too much drinking.

I knew that Christmas in modern times had created intense psychological pressure on individuals and families. The expectation to buy more expensive gifts, host elaborate meals, decorate Christmas trees and homes more lavishly and

maintain a veneer of holiday perfection had become all-consuming.

I had bought Father Anto and myself a mint-crisp chocolate for Christmas, and I was so grateful to be in an environment where I was not subject to all the commercialisation and spending that I had experienced for so many years of my life.

Everything at Saccidananda centred around the significance of the birth of Jesus Christ, and all the activities focused on redemption, hope, renewal and divine love. There was a strong sense of family connection, generosity of spirit, gratitude and communal goodwill.

The Christmas celebrations at the Saccidananda Ashram went off stupendously and exactly as planned.

Catholic Mass was held on Christmas Eve and was part of a bigger festival that began at 9:00 pm and continued until midnight. I was not raised as a Catholic, so I did not take part in Holy Communion, but sitting in the Mytri Mandir and observing the proceedings vividly reminded me of what had happened to me on my first visit to Saccidananda the previous year.

I had been at the ashram for a few days and felt strongly connected to the Christ Consciousness. This feeling was enhanced when I walked around the serene and peaceful grounds, sat on the bench facing the statue of Jesus as an Indian yogi and meditated.

I felt this intimate connection while in the Mytri Mandir, in my small kutir and while speaking to newfound friends who would visit the ashram from time to time.

With this in mind, but without discussing my feelings with Father Anto or considering all the implications of what it meant to take Holy Communion, I decided that I wanted to participate in this holy sacrament at the next Sunday Mass.

Although I was raised in a Christian family and had taken communion in the Presbyterian Church, I did not fully understand or appreciate the Eucharist from a Catholic perspective.

I knew that at the Last Supper, Jesus had broken bread and drunk wine with his disciples, but the full meaning behind the bread being a representation of Christ's body and the wine a symbol of his blood did not have the same meaning for me as it did for baptised and confirmed Catholics.

The Sunday arrived for me to take Holy Communion and, at the appropriate time in the service, I joined the queue and started approaching Father Anto.

I got closer and closer to him as those in front of me received communion and turned to make their way back to their seats.

My turn finally arrived, and as I stood vulnerable and face to face with Father Anto, he quietly reiterated that the round bread wafer was a symbol of Christ's body and the wine a symbol of his blood. He then asked, "Do you accept this sacrament and Jesus Christ to be the Son of God and your one and only Saviour?"

In that moment, the full impact and seriousness of that question was revealed to me with a crystal clarity that illuminated everything around me and everyone else present in the mandir.

Without a moment's hesitation, I heard myself saying, "I am so sorry, Father, but no, I don't, and I cannot go through with this."

As I slowly turned around and walked back to my seat, the luminosity that had made everything shine so brilliantly a few seconds before slowly faded.

I felt as though I had just been excommunicated, ostracised and banished, just as Jesus Christ was left alone in the hours that followed the Last Supper, when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane after praying deeply to God, the Father of all. It was then that Jesus was abandoned by his disciples and all of his followers.

As I sat there feeling unworthy and wondering what had just occurred, a series of memories flashed through my mind, as though they were my last thoughts before taking my final breath.

I clearly remembered sitting in Sunday school as an eight-year-old with a bunch of other children of various ages and listening to a prayer being given by one of the Sunday school teachers.

My eyes were closed tightly and my head was bowed. Towards the end of the prayer, I remembered him saying, "Do you accept the Lord Jesus Christ to be your Saviour and, by raising your hand, do you acknowledge that you will be saved and that all your sins will be washed away?"

At that young age, I desired to be clean and pure and desperately wanted all wrongdoing to be removed from my life, but there was something that prevented me from raising my hand.

As I thought back to that Sunday morning, I clearly remembered opening my eyes ever so slightly and looking around to see which of my friends had raised their hands.

I considered myself to be a religious young boy who read my version of the Bible, called *Good News for Modern Man*, every night before switching off the bedroom light.

There was something deep inside me that prevented me from demonstrably making that commitment and raising my hand. At the same time, I knew that in my own way I accepted everything that I knew and understood about Jesus Christ.

I found myself in similar situations over the next six years of my life and right up until the time that I was confirmed in the Presbyterian Church as a 14-year-old. Throughout all those years, I was unable to raise my hand.

I knew that Jesus was an Avatar and a very special world teacher, and I loved everything about him and his teachings.

I loved his parables, the Sermon on the Mount, and I worshipped everything that he represented and stood for.

Yet, deep down, I knew that we are all sons and daughters of the one and only Almighty God, and I felt that Jesus Christ was not the only one who had that privilege bestowed upon him.

I had many questions in this regard and wondered about all those other great teachers, such as Lord Krishna, Lord Buddha, Mahavatar Babaji, Paramahansa Yogananda, all the Self-Realised Masters, the saints and sages, the Ascended Masters, the angelic realm and all those other enlightened beings.

Where did they all fit into the divine picture?

What role did they play?

What role did I play?

How could all my wrongdoings simply be swept away by raising my hand and making a half-baked promise about something that, in the core of my being, I knew I would most probably break?

I believed in many aspects of the Bible, but also knew that there were comprehensive sections that were taken literally and often grossly misinterpreted.

I learned that there were profound spiritual teachings that were intentionally left out of the Bible and, had they been included, our planetary history would most likely have taken a different trajectory.

I did not believe in a heaven and a hell as depicted by so many theologians and religious scholars.

I witnessed countless spiritual leaders, ministers, priests, preachers and clergymen who were not truly following their own teachings and were far from being exemplary in their personal behaviour and daily lives.

Intuitively, I knew that a loving God was always forgiving and that I was always saved and accepted as a child of God, with all my defects, ignorance, suffering and wrongdoing.

Deep down, I knew that it was my birthright to ultimately merge with Divine Consciousness.

I did not need to raise my hand and make some sort of public statement. I had already taken a vow and agreed to a spiritual

contract aeons ago that I would ultimately return to be unified with divinity in its purest form.

Later in my life, I would reconnect with Paramahansa Yogananda, the great Indian Guru who founded the Yogoda Satsanga Society of India in 1917, a nonsectarian spiritual organisation.

Three years later, he founded the Self-Realization Fellowship in the USA to preserve and disseminate his teachings. He later authored the spiritual classic *Autobiography of a Yogi* and went on to write numerous other profound and insightful books.

I would eventually learn more about the Gospels of the New Testament from Paramahansa Yogananda, this man of God from India, than from any Christian priest, by reading the two volumes of *The Second Coming of Christ: The Resurrection of the Christ Within*, a revelatory commentary on the original teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

This groundbreaking work came into being through many visions and direct communication with Jesus Christ himself. I could not recommend this profound and insightful work more highly to any student of the New Testament.

On Christmas Day, about 2,000 people visited the ashram, and many stayed for the programme that took place in the afternoon. It involved singing, traditional dance and numerous speeches given by prominent people in the community.

I was asked to say a few words about my experience of celebrating Christmas at an interfaith gathering in the middle of India.

Prasaad and cake were served at the end of the formalities. They were delicious, and I ended up eating far too much.

I planned to leave Saccidananda a few days after Christmas and, on 28 December, caught the train to Harda at 5:00 am.

On the train, I met a fellow parikramawasi by the name of Mohan, who was busy walking his second pilgrimage and was also getting off at Harda station.

I am not sure why he caught the train, but he was planning to make his way to an ashram in Handia, which is on the Narmada River.

The train stopped in Harda at 12:30 pm and, after disembarking, I walked to the Warda Ashram and was once more welcomed with open arms.

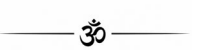
The afternoon passed peacefully, and I was able to have some heartfelt and meaningful conversations with some of the residents.

Early the following morning, one of the residents in the dormitory decided that he was going to play his music long before everyone was due to get up. This naturally woke everyone in the process, but nobody said a word and everyone silently tolerated the situation as though nothing had happened, which was an interesting lesson for me.

Chai was served as soon as everyone got up.

I packed my few things, said my farewells and heartfelt thanks, and was on my way.

The old age home experience had touched me deeply and exposed me to a way of life that I could easily consider and embrace in the years to come.



Chapter 15

Bovine Colostrum and a New Year of Light



"Nothing exists except atoms and empty spaces; everything else is just an opinion."

Aristotle

After leaving the Warda Ashram in Harda, I took the road towards a town called Mandla. Along the way, I was given packets of biscuits, a bunch of bananas and four guavas. I had also started the day carrying some oranges and peanuts, so it didn't take long for me to feel my legs buckling under the weight, and I needed to take frequent rests.

At one of these rest stops, I was suddenly surrounded by an entourage of young men and a retired English Literature professor by the name of R. K. Yadav, who had arrived on the back of a scooter.

I am not sure if the young men were students of his, but they hung on his every word and were clearly under his intellectual spell. Evidently, one of these young men had spotted me earlier in the day, informed the professor of my whereabouts and aroused his curiosity. He was very keen to interact with me.

The very first thing he did after saying, "Narmade Har," was to give me a small plastic bottle containing a strange, off-white milky fluid and say, "You should drink some of this."

I gazed at him reluctantly because what was in the plastic bottle looked as though it had been discharged by a male member of the human race, and it did not look at all inviting.

He smiled when he saw the look on my face and then said, "This is bovine colostrum and it comes from my cow, who has just delivered a calf two days ago."

He then added, "It is very precious and extremely nutritious, and you should have some."

I couldn't believe what I was doing as I reached out and took hold of the bottle. While all these thoughts were bouncing around inside my head, he continued by telling me that this special fluid was the first milk from the cow after she had given birth.

He went on to say that once the newborn calf had had its share, the remainder was collected and gently transformed into a pudding known as Poss or Kharvas, but that he was giving it to me in its purest form.

I felt extremely uncomfortable and unsettled as I raised the bottle and cautiously poured a small amount of the liquid into my mouth. But I wanted to experience the taste, and I didn't want to offend him in any way by refusing to drink this elixir.

As the soft, creamy liquid fell onto my tongue, my taste buds went into a frenzy, and I had a sense that I was drinking the very essence of the cow itself.

This act felt primal and was something I had never experienced before.

Colostrum is rich in antibodies, immunoglobulins and other growth-promoting properties that help the calf fight bacterial and viral diseases and assist in the development of the young cow.

The professor wanted me to spend the night at his farmhouse, but it was a few kilometres off the road I was on. I kindly explained that I needed to continue towards Mandla, and I finally reached the Hanuman Mandir in the middle of the afternoon.

I made use of the public hand pump to take a wash and then Kamlesh, whom I had never met before, came to fetch me something to eat at his home.

After dinner, I sat on the temple floor talking with four young men about the Parikrama, spirituality and Indian culture. We held a profound satsang on the floor of the Hanuman Mandir, and the English-speaking men in attendance hung on every word I said.

They unanimously agreed that I was like a messenger sent from God.

I was truly humbled by those words and could only acknowledge that it was the Divine presence working through me and that I was merely the conduit and the instrument.

The day had started early, had been full of diverse experiences, my backpack had felt extremely heavy, and I was getting tired very quickly. I therefore informed my new friends that,

unfortunately, it was time for them to leave because I needed to sleep.

The Hanuman Mandir was located right on the road, and Kamlesh had suggested that I lock the steel gates when I was ready to go to sleep. I did exactly that, but the road was busy all night, so I did not sleep well.

I was woken by a devotee at 5:00 am when he switched on all the temple lights, turned up the volume of the music he was playing while he swept the floor and then performed his puja.

All of this was done as though I did not exist and was not in his presence.

The situation was redeemed when the man living across the road from the temple brought me a bucket of hot water for a wash, as well as some early-morning chai.

What a thoughtful and generous thing to do for a pilgrim and a stranger.

On my way out of town, I stopped at Kamlesh's house to say goodbye, but he would not allow me to leave without first having another cup of tea with him.

I then made my way to the town of Chhipabad, where I was met by Ramesh, who was expecting me. He gave me a delicious lunch and then offered me a bed to rest on for a while before continuing on my journey.

It never ceases to amaze me that I could have a meal in someone's home and then be offered a bed to have a sleep, almost as though the two activities came together in a package.

After waking up and refreshing myself, Ramesh walked with me to the road that led to Pokharni and the Sudhir Soni

Ashram. He indicated that I should simply follow the road he had brought me onto and that I would see the ashram on the right-hand side of the road.

The following day happened to be the last day of the calendar year, and I struggled with a heavy bag, the heat of the day and a feeling of lethargy and fatigue as I continued on my journey.

I would often find myself uncertain about what day of the week it was, as the days would morph and merge into one another, despite being overloaded with diversity and unique experiences.

In the middle of this day, I stopped walking on one occasion for no apparent reason.

I had no need to take a rest, drink any water, tie a shoelace or adjust my backpack. I just stopped on the side of the road as though someone had poured lead into my shoes.

I wasn't thinking about anything or experiencing any specific sensation, but something stopped me as though I was being acted upon by an outside force.

After stopping, I stood still for 30 seconds and then looked left, not out of my own free will but as though I was being guided to do so.

It was then that I saw a man waving his arms, as though he was beckoning me to walk towards him. I couldn't hear what he was shouting, but then noticed a building situated behind him.

As I started walking towards him, he quickly made his way towards me, and then I could hear the words "Narmade Har" and "ashram".

I was absolutely startled by the way this place of refuge was pointed out to me. Had I not been deeply guided to stop and look left when I did, I would have continued walking for who knows how long before finding somewhere to stop and spend the night.

After being given something to eat, I grabbed an ashram mattress and lay down to rest, with a feeling of awe and humility at the remarkable way in which I was constantly being led and guided on this journey.

As the sun started dropping below the horizon, I reflected on this being the last day of another year.

I thought about my life in India, how I had been inspired to start this life-changing pilgrimage and how I was entirely on my own and about to spend a night on the floor of an ashram, in a sleeping bag, in rural India, without any friends or family around me.

I thought about how many times in the past I had celebrated the arrival of a new year in fine style, and how I had spent hours reviewing the previous year and planning for the coming year that was about to arrive.

In the past, there would have been family, friends, music, lavish dinners, champagne, wine and other alcoholic drinks, and lots of raucous, loud and unconscious behaviour.

But I had left all of that behind me many years ago.

There was something very special and profound about being on my own and on this journey of inner purification and penance, in an ashram along the Narmada River in rural India.

Everything I needed for six months of my life was being carried on my back, and life could not have been simpler.

I had no incentive to review the past year and no goals for the coming year, other than to complete the Narmada Parikrama and realise my true nature.

In that moment, I could not have been more fulfilled, at peace, content or awake to the present moment.

As another calendar year got off to an early start, it turned out to be a longer day than usual.

I walked a total of 29 kilometres and crossed a portion of the Narmada Dam at a place called Butterfly Park, ending up at the Hanuman Mandir in a village called Mandla.

The temple was full of pilgrims, but I managed to find somewhere to lay out my mat.

A young teacher by the name of Gopal came to speak to me after the evening aarti. He spoke good English, and we had some insightful conversations about various spiritual matters.

Just after midnight, a few young men came into the temple making a huge amount of noise. I wondered whether they were intoxicated and, when I sat up and asked them to quieten down, they responded by saying that they had heard that I was staying in the temple and had wanted to come and talk to me.

I looked at the time on my phone and told them that it was late and that we could talk in the morning.

They walked out rather disgruntled, got into their car and drove away, never to be seen again.

The following morning, Gopal, the young teacher, came to ask me whether I would come and speak to his class, but the school was in recess and I needed to continue on my journey.

I agreed that I would come and have chai with him once I had packed my bag and was ready to leave.

We sat on the balcony of his parents' home and held satsang while a dozen people stood in the road listening to us.

Once we were done, I made my way through some beautiful cotton fields towards the temple of Sant Singhaji Maharaj.

It was a cool and misty morning, which created a magnificent ambience and perfect walking conditions.

Sant Singhaji Maharaj was a revered 16th-century saint, poet and folk deity, originally from the Nimar region of Madhya Pradesh. He was born into a pastoral family in 1519 in Khajoori village and is widely worshipped as a protector of animals and a spiritual guru.

Although uneducated, he taught through more than 800 poetic and inspiring bhajans. It is believed that he possessed supernatural and spiritual powers and frequently performed miracles to protect the innocent and promote righteousness.

He had a very special relationship with cattle, and wherever he went, the animals thrived and remained healthy.

He took voluntary mahasamadhi at the age of 40, and his permanent resting place is located in a temple 4 kilometres out in the massive Sant Singaji Reservoir, which is also home to a large power plant and bears his name.

I took the detour to his mahasamadhi and took darshan.

After completing the detour, I made my way to the Hanuman Mandir in Mohad.

The aarti was memorable, with some really beautiful singing.

Dinner of baatis and dal was prepared by some of the devotees from the temple.

At 3:40 am, a devotee started sweeping just outside the entrance to the mandir and, if that wasn't enough, another man came into the temple at 4:15 am, put on all the lights and started ringing the temple bell.

I got up and moaned in English, but that didn't help at all.

I was going to switch the lights off, but soon realised that I was the guest in this temple and that this was his time and place to start worshipping.

So I quietly lay down again, but could not fall asleep. I therefore started packing up my things so that I could make an early start.

The walk went very well, and I started sensing an amazing lightness within my being, accompanied by a perception that everything was luminous and made of light.

With this awareness, I felt incredible joy and inner peace.

I noticed that this all-pervading light and luminosity permeated everything — the filth and the flowers — and there was a merging of all forms of sentience.

There was no separation and no duality existed. I found myself experiencing oneness with everything and a deeper connection to life in all its forms.

In the evening, four of us were invited to have dinner at the home of someone down the road from the ashram.

The hospitality was absolutely amazing, and the food just kept coming.

Indian people are some of the most generous hosts I have ever met, and they will keep filling your plate with food until you firmly say that you have had enough or place both hands over your plate, clearly conveying that you do not want any more food to be added.

The following day, I received a message from Mohan, whom I had met on the train while travelling from Narsinghpur back to Harda.

He was staying at the Kameshwar Dham Ashram and invited me to come and stay over.

I opted to stay for lunch only, and it was good to see him again.

I got some good general information from him about the route from Omkareshwar, which was a few days' walk away, on to Ankleshwar and then on to Vimleshwar, which is where I would take the boat across the Arabian Sea to Mithi Tilai and on to the north bank of the river.

I had planned to spend the night at the Hatiya Baba Ashram, but came across a home ashram just a few kilometres before and knew that it would be much quieter, so I stopped.

The following day, I started making my way towards Sulgaon and joined a small group of parikramawasis whom I assumed were walking to Omkareshwar.

However, when we arrived in Sanawad, I realised that something had gone wrong.

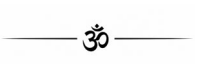
After consulting Google Maps, I soon realised that we had bypassed Omkareshwar entirely, and I then managed to establish that they had never had any intention of going to Omkareshwar.

This highlighted, once again, that I always needed to take responsibility for my own route-finding and for where I was going to stop, eat and rest.

I became rather disgruntled with myself for making this mistake, mainly because Omkareshwar is such a prominent location on the Narmada Parikrama.

It is located on an island called Mandhata in the Narmada River, which is shaped like the holy 'Om' symbol. It houses one of the 12 revered Jyotirlinga shrines of Lord Shiva, making it a major spiritual destination for Hindu devotees.

This temple town rests at the holy confluence of the Kaveri and Narmada Rivers, but sadly, I would have to wait for another time to visit this sacred location.



Chapter 16

A Magical Gift from a Master



"Spirit is the ultimate reality; naught else. When you connect with that power, all your desires become fulfilled; all your thirst for knowledge becomes quenched."

Sri Paramahansa Yogananda

As soon as I realised that I had probably saved myself a few extra days of walking, my bitter disappointment started falling off me like an unwanted cloak, and I continued on my way with a newly found spring in my step.

After a long day of walking 27 kilometres, I finally arrived at the Gautameshwar Mahadev Gaumukh Ghat Ashram in Toksar.

It had been an arduous day and I was tired. After finding a place to sleep, I settled down, unpacked my sleeping items and sat with my back against a pillar, looking around at the ashram grounds and the campus that housed this beautiful sacred facility.

Not long afterwards, a lady parikramawasi arrived and spread her things out not too far from where I had settled myself. We struck up a conversation and began talking about our respective journeys.

Her plan was to complete the journey as conveniently as possible. This meant that she would hitch a ride on a bike or in a car whenever she could. Otherwise, she would use public transport or walk when that was the only option.

This was certainly one way of completing the Narmada Parikrama, but it did not appeal to me.

Our lively conversation then embraced spirituality, Indian culture and numerous other fascinating subjects, and she had some interesting thoughts, ideas and points of view.

I introduced myself and soon learned that her name was Shiv Shankari. She intrigued me, but little did I know how our paths would cross in the future and how she would intrigue me in ways that I would find unbelievable.

Some time passed, and I felt the urge to write.

I reached into my backpack and grabbed hold of my diary. As I opened my hard-covered journal and started to flick through it, I was astounded to see a dried red rose petal fall from one of the pages.

When I took Kriya Diksha at the ashram of Paramahansa Yogananda in Ranchi, just before starting my Parikrama, I had collected and dried a number of red rose petals that had been scattered around the meditation hall at the time of the initiation ceremony.

They were very special to me because I knew that they had all been blessed on behalf of the revered Indian Guru in advance of the ceremony.

Seeing this single red rose petal really surprised me, as I had fastidiously removed all the dried rose petals from my journal

months earlier and placed them in a small plastic container specifically designed for their storage and safekeeping.

As I held the dried petal in my hands and looked at it with a deep, sincere gaze and with love in my heart for my Guru, it suddenly dawned on me that today was 5 January and the Jayanti of Paramahansa Yogananda.

The more I looked at this rose petal, the further I was transported back to my initiation ceremony, and I started reliving all those precious moments.

I remembered that towards the end of the ceremony, the Swami who had presided over the proceedings had started scattering fresh red rose petals over all the devotees who were in attendance, to the chanting of the words, "Roses to the left, roses to the right, roses front and behind…"

Like a bolt of lightning out of nowhere, I immediately knew that this was no coincidence.

Paramahansa Yogananda had orchestrated the delivery of this red rose petal, and this was his way of revealing to me that he was all-pervading and constantly present, that we were inseparable and that he was accompanying me on this incredible spiritual journey, every single step of the way.

The profound sense of connection that permeated through every cell in my body left me feeling completely overwhelmed.

I then remembered that it was also my late father's birthday, and I felt a tinge of sadness that I had not seen more of him in his latter years and that there was so much that I still didn't know about him.

After waking the following morning and taking care of my early-morning routines, I felt the need to meditate for a while before starting the day's walk.

I found a chair, sat down and made myself comfortable.

Within a few minutes of closing my eyes and focusing on my breath, I felt inspired to speak silently with Paramahansa Yogananda about the rose petal that he had delivered to me the previous afternoon.

It was a loving conversation with an intimate friend whom I had known for aeons, and it felt easy, comfortable and heartwarming.

I thanked him for placing the rose petal between the pages of my journal and for revealing himself to me in that way.

I then started to express my love, appreciation and gratitude for his guidance, his protection and all his teachings, when suddenly the delicate floral fragrance of a bunch of fresh red roses filled my nostrils, as though someone was holding a beautiful collection of these magnificent flowers just a few centimetres from my nose.

The deeper I breathed in this refreshing fragrance, the more prominent the layered scents of these flowers became. Every cell in my body became alive and began to tingle with a vibrancy and an energy like I had never felt before.

I could clearly see Paramahansa Yogananda sitting in front of me, holding these magnificent blood-red roses beneath my nostrils.

As that image penetrated into my being, tears of joy and intimate connection began to roll down my cheeks, and in the

stillness of my mind, all I could say was, "Jai Guru, Jai Guru, Jai Guru."

Slowly, the fragrant aroma began to fade, the tingling started subsiding and I was left with a reassuring warmth that was unforgettable.

When I left Toksar in the morning, I got onto some single tracks that made their way through some magnificent rural farmland.

I arrived in the early afternoon at the Maa Narmada Seva Sadawrat Ashram, near Sanawad, which is well known for the samadhi of Shrimant Peshwa Bajirao, who was the seventh Peshwa of the Maratha Empire.

He was appointed to this prestigious position at the young age of 20. He was an unparalleled military genius, credited with fighting over 40 battles without losing a single one, thereby vastly expanding the empire's territory across the Indian subcontinent.

He learned the art of war directly under his father and was known for his lightning-fast cavalry tactics and strategic brilliance.

He was directly responsible for pushing the Maratha borders northwards, bringing vast territories under the Maratha sphere of influence and weakening Mughal authority.

Military historians, such as British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, have cited Bajirao as one of the finest cavalry generals in history.

He died in 1740 at the age of 39 in Rawekhedi, Madhya Pradesh, while on a military campaign.

When I arrived at the ashram, there was no one else around, but I was soon joined by a large number of parikramawasis.

I had positioned myself on the veranda and under cover, but there was not enough room for everyone to be sheltered, and most slept on the paving under the stars.

When it started raining at 4:00 am, there was a mad scramble for cover, and everyone gathered under the roof of the veranda, jostling for a suitable position without being on top of someone else.

Once the rain had stopped at about 8:30 am, I left and made my way towards Bakawan, which is the only village in the world that creates and shapes Shivlings from the pebbles, rocks and stones that come straight out of the Narmada River.

These Shivlings are known as Narmadeshwar Shivlings and are considered extremely holy, sacred and divine.

These Shivlings can vary in size, with some being only a few centimetres tall, while others stand as high as four metres, or 15 feet.

Many of these Shivlings are self-manifested and are not shaped by machinery.

A Shivling the size of a rugby ball and with ingrained markings can easily fetch up to 2.5 lakhs, or approximately USD 3,400.

The Shivlings that are self-established are thought to be miraculous in their makeup and do not need to be consecrated. It is believed that those devotees who worship a Shivling of this calibre will be rewarded with extremely fruitful results.

It is believed that the Narmadeshwar Shivling is the real form of Lord Shiva and that the virtues attained by worshipping this Shivling are a thousandfold.

By installing one of these Shivlings in your home, there will always be an atmosphere of peace, positivity and happiness, and the family will always be blessed.

After leaving Bakawan a lot more informed about the Shivling than when I arrived, I walked through some beautiful farmland to the Sant Siyaram Ashram.

This highly revered Hindu saint and ascetic was known for his deep devotion to Lord Hanuman, his selfless service and his incredibly austere lifestyle on the banks of the Narmada River in the Khargone district.

He lived to be 100 years old and passed away in December 2024.

This Baba gained widespread fame for his strict policy of accepting a maximum donation of ₹10 from devotees.

Over time, these modest collections generated crores of rupees, which he directed towards the building and maintenance of temples and religious institutions.

Throughout his life, he wore minimal clothing, spent hours immersed in the recitation of the *Ramcharitmanas* and remained connected to his spiritual practice regardless of weather conditions and outside circumstances.

The parikramawasi hall was noisy and the temple was packed, with queues of people lined up to take darshan.

My preference was always to try and find an overnight stay that was quiet and peaceful, so I decided to walk out of town

to the Swami Samarth Ann Kshetra, which was a short distance away, and I spent two nights there.

I then made my way to a village called Lepa, where I rested for a couple of hours before walking to the Sanstha Ram Kuti, which was just on the other side of the Beda River.

The ashram had a lovely, peaceful feeling, and I was happy to get there early so that I could enjoy the atmosphere.

The last few days, I had been dealing with a sensitive stomach and a touch of flu, so I was happy to arrive early, find a comfortable place for the night and get some rest in the afternoon.

The following day, I walked to the Mandavya Rishi Gufa Ashram, right on the banks of Maa Narmada.

I hadn't covered too many kilometres since starting the day's walk, and I stood at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the ashram, deliberating whether I shouldn't just continue walking.

But the still, small voice in my head told me to make my way up the stairs and perhaps just have a cup of chai.

At the top of the stairs, I met a young man by the name of Shivananda, and it didn't take long for him to convince me that I should stay the night.

Shivananda spoke good English, and he had walked the Narmada Parikrama with his father the previous year.

The ashram had a great energy and a young Guru as its spiritual head. The environment was extremely peaceful, and I was given a room of my own.

Taking all of these things into account reinforced my decision to stay over.

I soon found out that Rishi Mandavya, also known as Ani Mandavya, was a revered sage in Hindu mythology, best known for his immense spiritual power and his wrongful impalement by a king, followed by his subsequent curse on Yama, the god of death, which led to the birth of Vidura, as outlined in the epic *Mahabharata*.

In the late afternoon, I joined a few of the ashram staff down at the ghat, where we fed the fish with some dried rice flakes.

It was a fun and relaxing activity that left everyone feeling uplifted and joyful.

The weather was absolutely beautiful, and watching the sun slowly drop into the gently flowing Narmada River was a meditation practice all on its own.

I quietly sat to one side and said the following prayer:

"Maa, you are the Indweller in my soul.

Holding my hand, lead me on the path of discrimination and devotion from the unreal to the real, from the ephemeral to the permanent, from mortal life to immortality.

Bless me, Maa, that by detaching myself from all worldly attachments, I can reach my ultimate destination and dwell in your compassionate realm and be with you forever and forever.

Jai Maa, Jai Maa, Jai Maa."

The ashram had a very joyful kirtan and aarti, and after an enjoyable dinner, another wonderful day came to an appropriate end.

The following morning, I started preparing to leave when Shivananda came to me and again asked me to reconsider my plans.

He then dangled an enticing carrot in front of me by offering that I move to a little kutir tucked away from the main ashram buildings and spend some time there in solitude and without any interference from anyone, particularly because there was a large group of Brahmin devotees coming to the ashram to celebrate Makar Sankranti.

I was told that these devotees would be conducting a havan ceremony for three days and three nights and that the proceedings would be very colourful, informative and powerful to witness.

Makar Sankranti is one of the most auspicious and widely celebrated festivals in India.

It marks the transition of the Sun from Sagittarius into the zodiac sign of Capricorn. This astronomical event signifies the end of the winter solstice and the beginning of longer, warmer days, symbolising a transition from darkness into light and the commencement of the harvest season.

This auspicious time is celebrated annually in the middle of January and is unique among Indian festivals, as it follows the solar calendar as opposed to the lunar one, which ensures that it almost always falls on 14 or 15 January.

This festival finds its roots in the ancient Vedic period.

The Sun, known as Surya, is revered as the ultimate source of energy and light. Makar Sankranti is dedicated to Surya,

acknowledging his role in providing life-sustaining warmth and nourishment for crops.

A central theme of this festival is charity and purification, where millions of devotees flock to holy rivers, like the Narmada, to take darshan and to take a dip.

It is believed that bathing on this day cleanses sins and grants liberation.

The consumption of sesame seeds and jaggery is scientifically and culturally significant. Sesame seeds provide essential warmth and immunity against the lingering winter chill, while jaggery acts as a natural sweetener and energy booster.

The festival fosters community cohesion, and people visit neighbours and friends, exchange gifts and participate in community feasts.

It is a time when the agricultural community breathes a sigh of relief as the hard work of harvesting crops comes to fruition.

The act of kite flying, particularly in the northern and western states, is more than just recreation.

It represents reaching out to the Sun God and celebrating freedom from the gloom of winter.

Makar Sankranti is a profound spiritual time, and it celebrates life, growth and the universal hope that accompanies the lengthening of days and the abundance of a fresh harvest.

The three-day havan ceremony lived up to my expectations, and I was extremely grateful that I had accepted the invitation to stay.

The kutir, tucked away in one corner of the ashram grounds, also turned out to be a real bonus.

On the second evening of the Makar Sankranti celebrations, all the devotees gathered after tea down at the ghat for the candle ceremony.

As dusk began to absorb the late afternoon, thousands of votive and tealight candles were placed alongside the stairs leading from the ashram down to the ghat, and thousands were floated down the river in an act of devotion and reverence.

It was very beautiful to witness and a magnificent manifestation of fairytale magic, which left everyone feeling mesmerised.

This total absorption was slowly diffused as one of the devotees felt inspired to start chanting the Gayatri Mantra and, gently, one by one, everyone picked up the words and started participating in the most beautiful mantra.

As the fading light of dusk turned to the dark of night, all that remained was the glow from the thousands of candles floating down Maa Narmada and lighting the way back up to the Mandavya Rishi Ashram.

On the last afternoon of the festivities, the intensity of the chanting around the dhuni was stepped up a couple of notches, and proceedings became more festive than during the previous few days as the celebrations started coming to a close.

The final ritual, known as 'Guru Tula' or 'Tula Daan', then commenced.

This is when the devotees perform a ceremonial weighing, where the Guru sits on one side of a large scale and, on the other side, offerings are placed until balance is achieved.

The items typically include food grains such as wheat, rice and pulses; fruits and vegetables; fabric and clothing; jaggery and sesame seeds; and sometimes money and donations.

I had never witnessed a Tula ceremony before, and it was most intriguing.

It symbolises the devotees' gratitude and devotion to their spiritual guide, and by matching the Guru's weight in offerings, followers express that their teacher is as precious to them as the combined value of their gifts.

It represents a form of 'Guru Dakshina', or offering to the teacher, which is performed during the auspicious period of Uttarayan, when the Sun begins its northward journey.

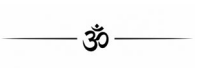
This is considered to be a highly auspicious time for charitable acts and spiritual practices.

The Tula Daan tradition has deep roots in ancient Hindu scriptures and has evolved throughout centuries of devotional practices in India.

As everything came to an end, all of us who had been staying at the ashram were also showered with gifts and garlands of flowers.

My six days at the Mandavya Rishi Ashram had been restful, sacred and extremely informative, but I was itching to get moving again.

I started preparing to leave my little kutir and the wonderful people of the ashram behind, as my firm intention was to commence walking the following day.



Chapter 17

A Cup of Chai and Other Lessons



"Learn to accept blame, criticism and accusation, silently and without retaliation, even though untrue and unjustified."

St Francis of Assisi

After six days of not walking, it felt really good to be on the move again.

My first stop, after leaving the Mandavya Rishi Ashram, was an ashram in Balgaon, where I met Prachi.

She was a young, attractive single woman who spoke really good English and was bravely walking the Narmada Parikrama on her own.

She had stopped at the Mandavya Rishi Ashram for a rest, and we had briefly acknowledged each other's presence at the Makar Sankranti celebration meal, but we had not spoken.

It was good to make her acquaintance because, little did I know, our paths would cross many times in the weeks to come.

After an enjoyable lunch and a rest, I made my way to the Sant Ramanand Ashram in Khalghat, where I was able to spend the night.

There were a few babas staying at the ashram, and one of them was engaged in a spiritual sadhana that I had never seen before.

He was writing out the name 'Ram' in extremely small red letters in Sanskrit, hundreds of times during the day.

This practice is known as Likhit Jaap, which means 'writing meditation'. It involves writing sacred names or mantras repeatedly as a form of meditation or devotion.

Writing the name 'Ram' in red can enhance the vibrational energy associated with the practice and can symbolise strength, energy and auspiciousness, which are important aspects in many spiritual traditions. Different colours can also be used, influencing the sadhak's emotional and spiritual connection to the mantra in different ways.

The name 'Ram' is deeply significant in Hinduism, representing Lord Rama, an avatar of Vishnu.

The practice of Likhit Jaap often involves creating a tranquil environment, focusing the mind and maintaining a deliberate and respectful intention while writing.

I sat watching this baba from a distance.

The reverent expression on his face made me realise that this was a very important part of his daily spiritual practice, and intuitively I sensed that this devotional writing was deepening his connection to the Divine.

I also knew that he was purifying his mind and increasing his focus and concentration.

I am not sure how long he sat engrossed in this practice, but he eventually came over to show me his work, which he was very proud of.

It was difficult for me to come to terms with the size of the letters and, after complimenting him, I asked him a few basic questions. He started opening up about his practice and then gave me a few more details.

He began by saying how important it was for him to find a quiet place, free from distractions, so that, in a sacred and meditative way, he could focus solely on his writing.

He went on to say that he used a type of writing paper specifically designed for this type of practice, and the pen he used contained a particular red ink.

It was important for him to set a clear intention before beginning to write. He told me that he always took a few moments to meditate before starting, so that he could ask for guidance and clarity throughout the writing process.

He continued by saying that he focused carefully on each stroke of the pen and was very clear about how many times he would write out the name in one sitting, which varied from 108 to 1,008 times.

He concluded by saying that, once he had completed his practice, he would sit quietly with his eyes closed and reflect on his writing, then give thanks for the practice and for any insights or guidance he might have received.

As I pondered this amazing spiritual practice, I realised that this devotional writing not only deepened one's connection with the Divine but also helped to purify the mind and

increase concentration, ultimately enhancing one's spiritual journey.

The following day, I made my way towards Brahman Ghat.

Halfway through the morning's walk, I came across a magnificent resting place beneath a huge tree. The ground had been swept and a tarpaulin had been laid down so that pilgrims could lie down and make themselves comfortable without getting their clothes dirty.

There was no one around when I arrived at this peaceful place, but the coals from a fire were still hot, and there was a strong smoky smell of smouldering wood in the air.

I needed a rest and knew that the big, beautiful tree would provide perfect shade.

I was busy taking off my backpack when I heard someone shouting something about "Baba Ji, Baba Ji".

I looked around but couldn't see anyone.

Then I heard the words, "Baba Ji, chai", but this time a little louder.

It was then that I spotted a woman running through the fields towards me, waving both arms as though she was really trying to get my attention.

She finally arrived a few minutes later, out of breath but with a huge smile on her face.

I greeted her with "Narmade Har", and her response was "Narmade Har", followed by, "Baba Ji, chai?"

I nodded affirmatively with a huge grateful smile on my face and my hands clasped in front of my chest.

She made her way to the smouldering fire and stoked it back to life. With an enormous amount of enthusiasm, she made sufficient tea for both of us, which ended up having a delicious smoky flavour.

As I sipped the piping-hot chai, I couldn't help thinking about the selfless service she was providing. The attitude with which she went about giving so freely was admirable, noble, inspiring and heartwarming.

When another parikramawasi came along and joined me under the big tree, it was no problem for her to make me a second cup of chai.

After some rest, I prepared to leave and made my way to the Shiv Mandir in Vishwanath Kheda.

On my arrival, I was told that I could stay on the veranda of the house next to the temple and that the family would also provide me with a meal.

The following day's walking took me through some magnificent farmland and then onto Road 347B, which was the direct route towards Barwani.

I stopped at the Shivalay Mandir on the outskirts of Mandawada and decided to spend the night there.

The temple was shaped like a gigantic dome, which created incredible acoustics and sound resonance and supported some beautiful chanting and singing during the early-evening aarti.

In the morning, I continued on the tedious and uninteresting road towards Barwani, but stopped in the small town of Kari and spent the night in a roadside ashram.

Just before walking into Kari, I had an intense desire to eat some papaya.

I could sense the cool texture of the fleshy fruit, and the fresh smell was overwhelming.

I entertained these powerful thoughts for about ten minutes as I started entering Kari.

As I approached the middle of the small town, a lovely old gentleman called me over and gave me a fresh papaya.

I couldn't believe the power of manifestation that I had just witnessed and immediately acknowledged and thanked the Divine and Maa Narmada for providing the delicious fruit.

I found some steps in the shade to sit down and pulled out my knife to cut and peel the wonderful gift that had just manifested in my hands.

The following day, I made my way into the municipal town of Barwani.

I was heading towards the road that would lead me into the Shoolpane Forest when a man with a gentle and serene demeanour approached me and said, "Narmade Har".

Without any hesitation, he bent down and touched my feet.

Instinctively, I bent down and did the same, but he grabbed both of my arms, broke into a huge smile and lifted me up, preventing me from honouring him in the same way.

He then reached into his kurta pocket, took out a 27-bead homemade Tulsi Mala and insisted that I take it from him, but I was unable to accept his generous gift.

The Tulsi Japa Mala is used in spiritual practice and holds a revered place among followers of Hindu tradition.

I knew that his mala was made from the sacred Tulsi plant, known for its purifying and protective properties.

Tulsi is often associated with Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi, making it a cherished element in various rituals.

A Japa Mala, in essence, is a tool for meditation, helping practitioners focus their minds on the recitation of mantras or prayers.

The Tulsi wood beads are believed to ward off negative energies, calm the mind and foster a sense of spiritual grounding.

While Japa Malas traditionally contain 108 beads, shorter options, like the 27-bead mala, offer distinct advantages. The number 27 divides evenly into 108, allowing users to repeat cycles four times to reach the symbolic 108 recitations.

This shorter mala size is especially convenient for those who want a compact, portable tool for meditation.

I later discovered that there are numerous benefits to using the Japa Mala.

Firstly, it helps to enhance focus and concentration. Using a Japa Mala creates a focal point for the mind, especially during meditation or prayer. Each bead represents a mantra or an intention, which helps keep the mind from wandering.

For beginners, using a 27-bead Tulsi Mala allows manageable rounds of mantra repetition, improving concentration with each use.

Secondly, the natural properties of Tulsi are believed to bring calmness and peace to the user. A 27-bead mala allows you to perform quick meditation sessions, which are useful when you need to reduce stress.

Holding each bead and moving to the next with each breath can help quieten the mind, ease anxiety and foster emotional balance.

Thirdly, Tulsi is known for its purifying qualities, both physically and spiritually. Holding the Tulsi Mala during meditation is thought to protect the wearer from negative energies, creating a shield that fosters a sense of peace and security.

The 27-bead Tulsi Mala used for spiritual cleansing is especially popular among those who believe in the protective properties of Tulsi.

Fourthly, the 27-bead mala is compact and easy to carry, making it perfect for those who travel often or want to integrate meditation into their daily routines.

This shorter mala can be used discreetly, allowing you to bring spirituality into everyday life, whether you are at home, work or on the go.

Lastly, in Hindu numerology, the number 27 is significant, as it is closely linked with the cycles of time and cosmic order.

Using a 27-bead Tulsi Mala for meditation is believed to enhance one's connection with the universe's cycles, making it a powerful tool for those interested in aligning their energy with natural rhythms.

He tried hard to give me his special tool, but his English was limited, and I kept saying, "Dhanyavad, Dhanyavad", while gently refusing to take the mala from him.

We finally both smiled and said, "Narmade Har", and I turned and took the road that led towards the Shoolpane Forest region.

I stopped at the Gayatri Mandir and Ashram.

It was here that I met Shri Hari and a young man by the name of Yogananda. They had met along the way and had decided to walk together.

Their intention was to walk from temple to temple and ashram to ashram, irrespective of how close or far these venues were from each other.

Their plan was to spend at least one night at every possible venue on the Narmada Parikrama.

They were both following a strict spiritual path and allocating multiple hours each day to their studies, meditation practices and other pujas and rituals.

At the ashram, I also met a young Swami by the name of Sadanand.

All three of these pilgrims would later play a role in my life.

When it came to bedtime, I made my way to the room where all the other parikramawasis had retired.

I had already laid out all my sleeping items, and all that remained was for me to switch off the light, which was directly above my sleeping place.

There must have been about 20 of us in the sleeping quarters, and most of the parikramawasis seemed to be fast asleep, barring one or two pilgrims.

Before switching off the light, I whispered to whoever might still have been awake, "Do you mind if I switch the light off?"

I wasn't too sure whether anyone understood me, but I didn't receive any obvious request to leave the light on, so I pulled the cord that turned the light off and used my head torch to help me find my way into my sleeping bag.

I was just settling down when I heard some scuffling and suddenly the light was turned back on again.

I mumbled something about it being bedtime and that we didn't need the light on while we slept, but my murmurings seemed to be ignored.

So I got up and turned the light off again, saying, "If you need to see what you are doing, please just use your torch."

One or two people then muttered something in Hindi, which I couldn't understand, but the tone sounded aggressive.

Swami Sadanand, whom I had met earlier in the evening at the aarti, then uttered a few words.

He understood English and was able to pacify whoever was annoyed with me, switching the light off and suggesting that a person's torch be used instead.

I had come across lights being kept on at night in ashrams, temples and other parikramawasi venues more often than not while walking the Narmada Parikrama, and later established that it is a fairly common practice in India for people to sleep with at least a night light burning throughout the night.

I determined there wasn't a single explanation, but rather a mixture of cultural, practical and psychological factors.

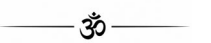
There is the obvious reason of safety and practicality in terms of using the bathroom at night, but some people believe that darkness attracts negative energy and that a dim light at night can help keep a home protected.

The idea of keeping a flame or light burning also comes from worshipping in temples and other similar venues, where light is associated with auspiciousness, purity and the presence of divinity.

It didn't take too long for things to quieten down and for everyone to fall asleep, but the mumblings occurred again at 2:00 am and at 3:00 am, for reasons that I was unable to establish.

When I finally got up and started preparing to leave, I realised that most of the parikramawasis who had stayed over were walking in one big group, led by one gentleman.

Before I left, I received a lot of disgruntled and hateful stares from this group, and little did I know how they would have it in for me over the coming days.



Chapter 18

The Shoolpane Forest



"Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for the insect as well as for the star. Human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper."

Albert Einstein

When I left the Gayatri Mandir and Ashram, I knew that I would be getting really close to the Shoolpane Forest. Although I was filled with excitement about my upcoming sojourn through this jungle region, feelings of anxiety and trepidation also plagued me.

This extremely remote section of the Parikrama is occupied by Adivasi tribes, who are known for their unique culture, traditions and languages. Historically, they have practised a way of life that is deeply connected to nature, relying on the forest for sustenance and shelter. Their relationship with the land is symbiotic. They gather food and medicinal plants for personal consumption and use natural materials to construct their homes. The rumours I had heard about the Adivasi people made me anxious about this section, which I had been told would take about seven days to negotiate.

In the past, there had been many recorded incidents of pilgrims being terrorised and injured, and there had been a few deaths as well. There were stories of pilgrims being robbed, stripped of all their clothing and left to fend for themselves in rough and dangerous territory.

These actions were often driven by a desire to protect their land and way of life from pilgrims and outsiders, whom they perceived as encroaching on their territory.

Over time, the portrayal of the Adivasi tribes has evolved. Initially, they were depicted in a negative light because of these actions, but there have been many individuals and groups who have worked towards fostering greater understanding and cooperation between the tribes and outsiders.

Today, many groups work towards highlighting the rich cultural heritage of the Adivasi communities and the historical context behind some of their negative actions, thereby preserving their identity and history.

The Adivasi communities in India have a long and complex history that has shaped their interactions with outsiders, including parikramawasis.

In the past, many Adivasi groups faced encroachment on their lands and resources as pilgrimage routes became more established and popular. This created a sense of vulnerability among these indigenous communities, leading to defensive actions against perceived threats.

Historically, as pilgrimages increased to sacred sites within territories inhabited by Adivasi tribes, conflicts arose.

The fear of losing their lands, cultural identity and way of life often led some Adivasi groups to take drastic measures. These included ambushing pilgrims, raiding their supplies and enforcing territorial boundaries to maintain control over their ancestral lands.

These actions can be understood in the context of a struggle for survival and an attempt to protect their heritage.

Some accounts also suggest that the spiritual beliefs and practices of the Adivasi tribes played a role in their conflicts with pilgrims. To them, the forest was sacred, and the arrival of large groups of outsiders could be seen as a desecration of these sacred spaces.

This conflict around differing points of view often led to hostile encounters, as indigenous communities sought to assert their rights over the land and its sanctity.

I later found out that not all Adivasi groups participated in these conflicts. Some tribes chose to engage with pilgrims in more peaceful ways, recognising the economic opportunities that pilgrimage activities could bring.

However, those who resisted saw their actions as a form of resistance to development, exploitation and the loss of their cultural identity.

Over time, as awareness of indigenous rights has increased, many modern Adivasi communities have advocated for their rights, striving for a balance between protecting their heritage and engaging with the outside world on their own terms.

The narratives surrounding Adivasi actions against pilgrims have evolved, moving from portrayals of perceived savagery

towards an acknowledgement of their complex social and political circumstances.

After two hours of leaving the Gayatri Mandir and Ashram, I arrived in the village of Bawati, where I was offered some chai.

I then made my way to the little village of Morkata.

I could feel the remoteness beginning to settle in around me as the road narrowed and started twisting and turning amongst the hills, with spectacular views of the Narmada backwaters.

I stopped at a small ashram in Borkhedi, where I was offered some delicious *khichdi* for lunch.

After a rest, I tried communicating with the young man who was looking after the ashram, but he was constantly on his mobile phone and totally disinterested in anything I asked him. He hardly responded, other than with the odd grunt, which made no sense.

The negative energy this behaviour created left me with the intuitive feeling that I should leave and find somewhere else to spend the night.

But it had started getting late, and I was concerned about getting caught out after dark.

However, I had learned to always trust my intuition because I knew that Maa Narmada communicated with me in that way. My faith and trust in her guidance and protection had grown stronger by the day since I had started my journey almost three months earlier.

It was almost 4:00 pm and not the ideal time to start walking, but the atmosphere around the ashram and my strong

intuition directed me, and I started packing up the few things that I had unpacked earlier.

I respectfully thanked the young man for the enjoyable meal.

He hardly looked up from his phone and never asked me why I was leaving or where I planned to spend the night, but I knew I was making the right decision as I slung my bag over my shoulders and started walking towards Kuli.

After a few hundred metres, the narrow tarred road turned into a dirt track, and I knew that I was entering the Shoolpane Forest.

Just after 5:00 pm, I came across a group of young Adivasi men sitting on the curb of a bridge. I tried to communicate with them about where I might find the next ashram, but their only response was to point me in the direction I was already walking.

So I continued across the bridge and in the direction of the setting sun.

It was getting late, and I was starting to feel uneasy when I heard someone shouting something from a distance.

I stopped, looked around and saw a small building diagonally behind me on a small hill, with someone waving and shouting at the same time.

Then I made out the words, "Narmade Har."

I waved my arms in response and shouted back, "Narmade Har", knowing that those words meant so much, so late in the day.

I felt a tremendous sense of relief as I made my way back along the bridge towards the young men who were still sitting on the curb.

Before going up the narrow track to the ashram, I tried asking these Adivasi men why they had encouraged me to continue when they must have known about the ashram on the hill above them.

I am not sure whether they understood me, but they all smiled and then burst out laughing.

At that moment, I couldn't help wondering whether this wasn't a modern method of intimidation and terrorisation by the Adivasi people of the Shoolpane Forest.

As I made my way up the steep, narrow pathway to the small, quaint ashram, I recognised the young Swami Sadanand, whom I had met the night before at the Gayatri Mandir and Ashram.

He acknowledged that it was he who had called me a few minutes earlier.

The Swami who owned the small Hira Mama's Parikramawasis Sewa Ashram came out and greeted me, but he only knew a few English words, so Swami Sadanand translated for us.

Most importantly, I was invited to stay, and I felt a huge sense of gratitude for having responded to the intuitive direction delivered to me by Maa Narmada when I was in Borkhedi earlier that afternoon.

I took a wash under a hosepipe in freezing-cold water, just as the sun started dipping below the horizon.

I felt refreshed, serene and at peace. It was magnificent to watch the orange glow of the sky turn to pitch black.

There were no village lights around, and the moon hadn't yet risen, so the night sky became alive with billions of stars that sparkled like diamonds above me.

Sitting on the Swami's favourite rock outside his primitive ashram, with the scintillating night sky above me, created the perfect ambience to reflect on the day's activities.

While enjoying some rice and dal for dinner, the Swami suggested to Swami Sadanand that we should start walking together the following day.

He explained that we were about to enter the remotest part of the entire Parikrama and that it would be safer for us to stick together.

He also stated the obvious, which was that I didn't speak Hindi, while the Adivasi people spoke a language of their own.

I was unable to fathom how that was an issue, but it definitely felt comforting to know that I would have the company of a young Indian Swami throughout the next week or so.

Swami Sadanand spoke good English, he was strong, and it seemed like we could get along together and support each other through the Shoolpane Forest.

When I finally climbed into my sleeping bag at a reasonable hour, I slept well with the knowledge that I would have a walking companion for the next while.

We made a casual start the following day, as the plan was to walk only as far as the Lakam Giri Ashram, which was 6 kilometres away.

The going was really tough, with some steep hills and extremely slippery paths, all with very awkward gradients.

The last section to the ashram required a boat ride, and we had to shout "Narmade Har" across an expanse of water to catch the attention of the boatman.

He eventually arrived and paddled the two of us across the water for ₹50.

We were warmly welcomed at the ashram and extremely well looked after.

Lakam Giri was one of those mediators who had done an enormous amount of work with the Adivasi tribes in the region and had later established his ashram in the hills amongst the backwaters of the Narmada.

The ashram had incredible views, and although it was fully established, there were no charging points for mobile phones or other devices and no mobile signal.

Before any meal was served to any parikramawasi at the ashram, the Swami in charge would take the long walk down to the edge of Maa Narmada with a plate full of food.

He would make an offering to the holy river by taking handfuls of food from the metal plate and reverently throwing them into the water.

It was a solemn and sincere offering, done with reverence and devotion, and I was grateful to be a witness to this ritual.

Later in the day, he told me that he performed serious and committed sadhana to invoke the finances and supplies needed to support the ashram and that he did this regularly, as the

ashram required thousands of rupees on a daily basis just to make ends meet.

I immediately thought about Gourishankar Maharaj, who had to prove to the British officers that he received all his money from Maa Narmada by going out into the river on a boat, putting his hand into the water and pulling out a bag full of gold coins.

The Swami concluded by saying that, through the grace of Maa Narmada, he miraculously received all the help and support required by the ashram.

I marvelled at his faith and trust.

The Swami and I had connected really well. He spoke good English, and I enjoyed the conversations that we had.

The next topic that came up for discussion was smoking ganja.

I mentioned to him that I had noticed how many Sadhus, who considered themselves to be 'holy men', smoked cannabis continuously in the belief that the habit was opening their minds and making it easier to connect with the Divine and their true selves.

This was a topic that was close to the Swami's heart, as he smoked ganja on a fairly regular basis.

As our conversation unfolded, I realised that there were positive and negative points of view surrounding the subject.

I tended to have a negative attitude towards smoking ganja and wanted to maintain an open mind so that I could converse with understanding about this controversial subject.

The Swami began by telling me that when he smoked ganja, he was able to tap into a different, altered state of consciousness, which enhanced his meditation practice and deepened his connection with the Divine.

He argued that the use of ganja assisted him in disengaging from the physical and material world and from societal distractions, which he felt allowed for a more profound quest for spiritual truth.

I had noticed how those who smoked ganja were able to foster a sense of camaraderie amongst themselves and how they could create friendships and bonds, with strong feelings of unity amongst each other.

The Swami went on to tell me how ganja had historical and cultural importance in certain Indian traditions and how it was often viewed as a gift from Lord Shiva.

There is no doubt that this cultural connection can make its consumption more meaningful for those people who smoke ganja.

The Swami then told me something I had never really thought about: that smoking ganja was a wonderful way to relieve physical ailments and chronic pain, which enabled Sadhus to endure the hardships of their ascetic lifestyle with more ease and comfort.

All these positive reasons for smoking ganja still didn't convince me that it was a habit worth pursuing.

I felt convinced that, even though Sadhus use ganja for spiritual purposes, there is a huge risk of developing a dependency on it, and that this addiction can lead to major

distractions from the primary spiritual goals that Sadhus pursue.

I am also sure that some individuals misuse ganja under the guise of spiritual practice, using it as an excuse to indulge in irresponsible behaviour or circumvent their responsibilities, which can negatively affect their reputation and spiritual journey.

Although many Sadhus claim that ganja provides pain relief, I also believed that smoking it could lead to major health issues, including respiratory problems and potentially cancer.

I was also of the opinion that smoking ganja could attract societal stigma, and that the perceived sacred use of the substance could sometimes lead to its abuse, where some individuals might treat the drug casually rather than with respect, diluting its so-called sanctity and spiritual value.

As our conversation on this topic started coming to an end, the Swami agreed with me that smoking ganja didn't ultimately serve those who were on a spiritual path.

While the smoking of ganja has spiritual significance for many Indian Sadhus, he felt it was important to balance its use with an awareness of all the potential negatives.

The context of its usage, intention and effects all play crucial roles in determining whether it contributes positively or adversely to one's spiritual journey.

Our time at the Lakam Giri Ashram had been enlightening, informative and inspiring, but it had also been restful.

We then made our way towards a small village by the name of Semlet.

Along the way, Swami Sadanand showed me how to identify and collect wild amla berries from a particular tree.

These pale-orange berries are also known as Indian gooseberries and are filled with vitamin C, antioxidants and other nutrients. This fruit has anti-inflammatory properties that support immunity, digestion, hair and skin health.

In Semlet, there was a small ashram.

Across the road was a tiny store that gave us a few lunchtime supplies so that we could prepare a meal for ourselves.

We were given some potatoes, as well as the ingredients to make chapatis.

Swami Sadanand made a fire, baked the potatoes on the edge of the flames and made some chapatis for our meal.

The large group with whom I had had an altercation regarding the switching on and off of the light at the Gayatri Mandir and Ashram just outside Barwani arrived soon after we did, and the atmosphere in the ashram changed immediately.

As a group, they could not get over what had transpired between me and their leader, so I stayed out of their way.

We had been seeing them along the way for the last few days and had been trying to avoid them.

But as we were about to eat our baked potatoes and chapatis, they offered us some of their *khichdi*, which they had made on an adjoining fire, and it complemented our meal extremely well.

This small act of kindness went some way towards healing our differences.

We spent a few hours in the coolness of the ashram and then continued on our way to another little village called Bhabel, where a farming family offered us a place to sleep.

The following day, we had numerous river crossings and a lot of steep hills to contend with, but eventually arrived in a little settlement called Dadi.

There were many sections through the Shoolpane Forest that were on rough single tracks, and the directions weren't always obvious or well marked.

This made the walking tough and demanding and, with no mobile signal to check our whereabouts on Google Maps, we felt extremely remote and isolated.

After arriving in Dadi, we were offered some chai, which eventually turned into lunch.

I caught up with Prachi, whom I had first met at the Mandavya Rishi Ashram many days earlier, and her pilgrimage was going well.

After lunch, we got onto a tarred road and started the long, steep climb up to Kappermal, which was about 1,000 metres above sea level and the highest point on the Parikrama since leaving the holy town of Amarkantak and the source of the Narmada River, at an elevation of 1,048 metres above sea level.

The climb up the tar road was a distance of 5 kilometres, and the walk took us an hour and a half.

The views from the Kappermal Ashram of the Satpura mountain range, with the Narmada River weaving its way through it, were exquisite.

The following morning, we left the Kappermal Ashram and walked downhill for about two hours.

Along the way, we were stopped by a farmer who invited us for tea.

We were introduced to his father, who was 100 years old but looked a young 80.

We continued through the little village of Bhamni and then on to Tavariyadigar, where we boarded a small ferry and were paddled across the Udaya River.

On the other side was a small ashram, where we were offered something to eat.

It was hot, and we had walked about 22 kilometres up to this point. I felt extremely weary and was starting to run out of steam.

The Shoolpane Forest was tough going, and I was really starting to feel the effects of the rough terrain, the steep hills and the long, hot days, during which we had limited support from the local people.

We were told there was an Adivasi school about 2 kilometres away in a town called Bhilgaon and that the school was geared up to accommodate pilgrims.

We arrived at the school in the late afternoon and watched as the school day finally came to an end at 5:00 pm.

The school was home to over 100 Adivasi children from all the farms in the vicinity, with the majority of them being full-time residents.

Swami Sadanand and I took a wash in the river behind the school grounds and were then shown a classroom that we could use as our sleeping quarters for the night.

We woke at 4:30 am, thanks to one of the Sadhus who had spent the night with us in the classroom, starting his loud puja ritual and chanting.

It always baffled me that some parikramawasis showed so little regard for their fellow pilgrims when it came to their religious rituals, irrespective of where they might be.

Today was Indian Republic Day, and we made an early start.

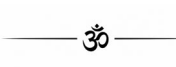
It was very beautiful walking through the Bhilgaon region in the early morning, and we stopped at a small school for some chai and stood around a fire, trying to warm ourselves.

We then took part in the flag ceremony along with all the school children.

It was inspiring to witness how patriotic everyone was and beautiful to hear everyone singing the national anthem.

Just before reaching Dhadgaon, we stopped at an ashram and were offered some lunch.

Dhadgaon, which was only a few kilometres away, marked the end of the remote part of the Shoolpane Forest, and it was a tremendous relief to have reached this point in our journey.



Chapter 19

The Palm Reader and a Mysterious Departure



"The eye with which God sees me and the eye with which I see God, are one eye. One Seen. One Love."

Meister Eckhart

After lunch at the ashram just before Dhadgaon, I was extremely surprised to see Shiv Shankari, the lady I had first met three weeks earlier at the Gautameshwar Mahadev Gaumukh Ghat Ashram in Toksar.

That was where I had received the red rose petal from Paramahansa Yogananda and then had the magical experience the following morning, during meditation, of smelling a bunch of fresh red roses that he had presented to me after I had thanked him for giving me the rose petal the previous day.

Shiv Shankari and I had eaten dinner together at the Gaumukh Ghat Ashram, and I had found her to be an extremely fascinating pilgrim.

She was doing the Narmada Parikrama by whatever means possible. She had walked through most of the Shoolpane Forest region, but otherwise she was hitching rides on the back of motorcycles and in motorcars whenever she had had enough of walking and a ride came her way.

After lunch, she came over to me and said, "Would you like me to read your palms?"

I knew that we had had some fascinating conversations three weeks earlier, but this was not territory we had covered.

It didn't take long for me to reply, "Absolutely. There is no doubt that will be intriguing."

We found a quiet, comfortable place in the shade, sat down and began the reading.

She took both my hands and placed them on my knees with both palms facing upwards. She examined each palm carefully and it didn't take her long to say a few incredible things to me.

She began by telling me that I had three children and that two of them were married.

She confirmed that I had been married twice and that I was a heart patient who had undergone open-heart surgery.

She said that this had been an extremely difficult incarnation, but it was comforting to hear her say that I was now receiving God's richest blessings.

She went on to tell me that my palms revealed that I should take sanyas, open an ashram and teach meditation.

She paused for a long while and seemed to look at my palms with even greater intensity, slightly tilting her head in the process.

It was almost as if she was pondering how to reveal what she saw.

During her long pause, I pondered all that she had already told me and was staggered by the accuracy of what she had said

about my children, my marital status and past health challenges.

She then broke the silence and concluded her reading by telling me that I potentially had a major health crisis coming my way in a few years' time and that, once I had recovered, all would be well after that.

What on earth was she saying?

I pressed her for more information about her last prediction, but she had nothing more to add.

I reached for the zip on the pouch I wore around my waist so that I could give her something small for her services, but she saw what I was doing, shook her head and said, "It's all God's gift. I don't want anything from you."

I thanked her profusely, wished her the best of luck for the remainder of her Parikrama and said that I looked forward to perhaps seeing her again along the way.

Little did I know at the time how accurate her reading of my palms would be and where else she would mysteriously appear.

Swami Sadanand and I both took a rest, and he then revealed that he also knew something about palm reading and asked to see my palms.

It didn't take long for him to confirm the major health crisis that Shiv Shankari had referred to, but his interpretation was that it would probably occur sooner than she had suggested.

He went on to tell me that a person's dominant hand represents the present and future, as well as the active choices that person makes, revealing how we are using our inherent potential.

He said that our non-dominant hand represents our past, our inherited traits and our subconscious mind, revealing the foundational potential and talents with which we are born.

We then walked the remaining few kilometres into Dhadgaon.

Soon after entering the centre of town, we were called over by a man called Raju, who was the local tailor. He offered us some chai and then told us that we should stay at the Hanuman Ganesh Mandir.

After a warm conversation with Raju and a delicious cup of tea, we made our way to the mandir, which had a large downstairs section for parikramawasis.

We hadn't been there for very long when a Sadhu who had been staying at the temple for a while came over to me and, without introducing himself, asked, "Do you want to experience God directly?"

I looked at him with a smile on my face and, without hurrying my response, answered, "I experience God directly every moment of every day, so thank you, but all is taken care of."

He looked at me rather perplexed and somewhat disappointed and, with nothing further to say, turned and walked back to his sleeping mat.

Swami Sadanand and I were getting on well and had spoken openly about many aspects of our lives. We had also shared a profound time of walking together through the Shoolpane Forest.

We were now through the remote section and had originally agreed that we would accompany each other until this point and then go our separate ways.

But we were compatible in many ways and, without discussing the situation any further, both seemed to assume that we would keep going until one of us had had enough of the other.

Raju had said that before we left Dhadgaon, we should visit his house for a typical Maharashtrian breakfast and chai, and we made sure to honour our commitment before making our way to Kundal and then on to the Maa Narmada Seva Ashram in Kuntamodi.

We decided to spend the night there.

The Swami looking after the ashram was really good to us and suggested that we sleep in the same room that he occupied.

It was certainly big enough to accommodate the three of us with ease, so we had no difficulty accepting his suggestion.

It turned out to be such a good arrangement that we ended up spending two nights at the ashram.

After leaving the ashram in Kuntamodi, we made our way to a rustic ashram just outside Molgi, where we had lunch.

We were going to spend the night at another Adivasi school, but decided to push on to the Hanuman Mandir and Ashram in Pimpalkhuta.

We arrived late in the afternoon, and soon afterwards Vinubhai from Gujarat arrived.

He had taken on the responsibility of providing all the funding for the temple, as well as the small ashram attached to it.

He spoke good English, was very likeable and we connected instantly.

He later shared with me that he funded three other temples and ashrams.

He also told me that although he was employed by an organisation, his primary vocation was working as a Hindu spiritual teacher and that he regularly held satsangs several times a week.

He was insistent that I come to his ashram on the north bank of the Narmada River, in the little town of Diver.

He went on to say that he would be organising a big celebration at his Diver ashram in the middle of February for Maa Narmada's Jayanti, and said that he would be truly honoured if I could attend the function.

I agreed to do my best to join him at that auspicious gathering.

Swami Sadanand helped the resident Pujari with preparing dinner, while I continued conversing with Vinubhai.

We all ate together before preparing for the night's rest.

The following morning, we were all up early, preparing for the day ahead.

Vinubhai had brought a healthy supply of food for the temple and ashram, and he was preparing to make his way back to Gujarat.

Swami Sadanand and I had both packed our backpacks and were busy enjoying some chai when Swami Sadanand came over to me and said, "I am going to catch a ride with Vinubhai all the way down the long hill to the next little village, which is about 15 kilometres away."

He looked extremely embarrassed and then said, "Would you like to join me?"

I couldn't believe what I had just heard.

I had always thought that Swami Sadanand was totally committed to walking every step of the Narmada Parikrama, and I was at a complete loss for words.

I looked at him with a confused expression and then became aware that I was shaking my head from side to side.

I felt distraught and let down, not because Swami Sadanand wanted to go his separate way, but rather because we hadn't spoken about this mysterious departure and, all of a sudden, he wanted to catch a ride in a motorcar.

For the first time, I questioned his authenticity and my own assessment and judgement of character, and I didn't know what to think.

Perhaps this was his way of telling me that our time together had come to an end and that he wanted to be on his own again.

I felt so disappointed but, in some strange way, had no will to persuade him to change his mind.

In that instant, I knew that our time had come to an end, that the next phase of my adventure was about to begin and that it was going to be on my own.

As I gathered myself together, I finally responded to his question by looking directly into his eyes and saying, "Swami Ji, I made a promise to myself that I am walking every step of this Narmada Parikrama."

I bent down, picked up my backpack, slung it over my shoulders and reached for my stick.

Once again, I looked directly at Swami Sadanand and said, "Narmade Har."

I turned and started walking in the direction of the Gujarat border, and once again I was on my own.

The good tarred road wound its way through the Shoolpane hills, and it was all downhill for a few hours of walking.

The views of the surroundings were absolutely stunning.

I caught up with the two young Sadhus whom Swami Sadanand had introduced me to at Kappermal, and we had bumped into them a few times along the way.

They had also stayed in the classroom with us at the Adivasi school in Bhilgaon, and it was one of them who had started his early-morning puja ritual at 4:30 am and woken the rest of us with his loud chanting.

They gave me some mungfali and jaggery for a snack as I joined them for a short rest.

They had previously walked with Swami Sadanand for a few days, and they knew that we had walked through the Shoolpane Forest together.

They were staggered when I told them what had transpired a little earlier.

Soon after I started walking again, Vinubhai came driving past and stopped as soon as he saw me.

I was looking forward to seeing Swami Sadanand's face in the passenger seat, but the car was empty apart from a few things lying on the back seat.

When I asked Vinubhai what had happened to Swami Sadanand, he grinned and said that he had evidently changed his mind and decided to walk.

I just smiled and shook my head in dismay.

I was keen to hear more from Vinubhai about what had made Swami Sadanand change his mind, but I soon realised that he didn't want to speak about it and was in a hurry, as he had a long day ahead of him.

A few hours later, I crossed an impressive tributary that ultimately flowed into the Narmada River and also formed the border between Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Immediately after the bridge was an exceptionally steep, winding path up to the Shree Guru Vindhya Giri Sharad Ashram, beautifully located on the top of a hill, looking down onto the river I had just crossed and surrounded by the magnificent Satpura and Vindhya hills.

I was warmly welcomed by a Swami who was almost completely blind, but he had an extremely cheerful countenance and couldn't stop talking.

I was happy to engage with him, but for a short while after arriving at the ashram, I wanted to sit quietly, soak up the view and enjoy the delicious chai that one of the ashram staff had given me soon after I arrived.

As I sat staring at the magnificent scenery surrounding the ashram and the river below me that I had just crossed, I saw a person starting to make their way across the bridge.

As they came closer into view, I saw that it was Swami Sadanand.

We had walked for many days together, and I recognised his gait immediately.

He was walking quickly, and I felt apprehensive about engaging with him. I felt that we had not parted company in a friendly or comfortable way, and I had a heavy feeling thinking about our mysterious departure earlier in the day.

He made good time climbing up the steep incline to the front of the ashram where I was sitting, soaking up the views and still enjoying some tea.

The moment he saw me, the relaxed look on his face gave way to embarrassment and, without missing a step, he said, "You got here quickly."

I immediately responded by saying, "And so did you."

He then asked the Swami, whose vision was impaired, a question about the next ashram, which was only one kilometre away, and then left without having any chai or saying another word to me.

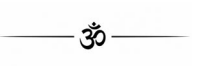
As he walked down the sand road in the direction of Khanji, the next little village, I couldn't help wondering what had really gone on in Swami Sadanand's mind to enable him to consider catching a ride in a car and then what had made him change his mind.

What had I done to contribute towards his behaviour?

Had I offended him in some way?

What could this situation teach me?

I had been living my life in such a way that I was extremely conscious of how every situation and interaction with another person was teaching me something, and that nothing was simply happening around me without consequences or lessons to be learned.



Chapter 20

Tiger Baba and the Halfway Point



"I was once asked, 'Why do you always insist on taking the hard road?' I replied, 'Why do you assume I see two roads?'"

Ronnie Baba

As I pondered all the questions floating around in my mind about Swami Sadanand, the partially blind Swami couldn't stop talking until lunch was served. It was absolutely delicious. I found a place to lie down and took a short nap after lunch. I started stirring just as the two Sadhus I had seen earlier in the day arrived. Hot on their heels was Shiv Shankari, the palm reader, along with another Sadhu I had seen before.

As they all began taking up residence in the sleeping area of the ashram, I realised that it was becoming crowded. I also wasn't in the right frame of mind to confront the one Sadhu about his obnoxiously loud morning puja at 4:30 am, and knew that I needed to leave. It was 4:00 pm, but the next ashram was only 1 kilometre away, so I packed my things, thanked the talkative Swami for the tasty lunch and started walking, despite his repeated requests that I stay.

It didn't take long to reach the ashram in Khanji, where I had been expecting to meet Swami Sadanand. Instead, I met a really colourful parikramawasi by the name of Tiger Baba.

When I arrived, he was busy doing japa and his afternoon puja, so I suggested that we talk later, when he had finished. In the meantime, I took a wash at the village hand pump.

I was keen to spend some time with Tiger Baba. He had completed the Narmada Parikrama numerous times and knew the pilgrimage extremely well. His plan was to complete his current journey in 108 days, which meant walking in excess of 25 kilometres a day without taking a single day off.

I could not envisage walking the Narmada Parikrama in this fashion. I genuinely felt that those who raced around the river were missing out on a much deeper experience, one that could only be gained by slowing down. We may be able to discern relative truth amidst the noise and chaos of life, but it is only in quietness and stillness that ultimate truth can be revealed.

A small farmhouse across the way from the ashram prepared a meal for us, and afterwards Tiger Baba and I spent some time talking. He spoke good English and was incredibly knowledgeable about all aspects of the Narmada Parikrama. He had a wonderful zest and enthusiasm for life, and he laughed easily. I felt that this revealed an energetic lightness of character, which made Tiger Baba extremely likeable and easy to get along with.

Little did I know how much time we would spend together in the weeks to come.

Tiger Baba said that a long, tough day lay ahead of us, so we wished each other *Shubh Ratri* and made sure to get a good night's rest.

I started walking later than planned the following day, but the first few hours to the ashram in Mathasar went well, despite

some tough hills on a dirt road through a forested area. Tiger Baba had left earlier than I had and was already at the ashram when I arrived.

We sat around chatting when, a moment later, I heard a woman on the back of a motorbike shouting, "Narmade Har!" As the bike went screaming past, I realised it was Shiv Shankari, who had grabbed a lift for the next section of her Parikrama.

Just before lunch was served, a group of wealthy young men arrived with a huge supply of rice, grains, pulses, tea and sugar. I discovered that they were donors and had already delivered similar quantities to four other ashrams in the vicinity.

When I expressed my gratitude for their incredible generosity, I realised that they were all well-educated business owners who spoke exceptionally good English. They were adamant, however, about remaining anonymous and would not reveal who they were or what businesses they were involved in.

I was intrigued by their noble gestures and philanthropy, but couldn't help wondering whether everything was legitimate.

I knew there was still a lot of walking to do that day and decided to get going soon after lunch. Tiger Baba planned on taking a rest, so we agreed to see each other later.

I realised that he was fiercely independent and entirely happy to walk on his own.

The road was brand-new, which made the walking comfortable, but some of the downhill sections were really steep and my left knee started to get sore. My shoes had lost

most of their cushioning and were in serious need of replacement.

About 7 kilometres from Gora, I was stopped by Harsh Jani, who worked for the forestry department and was managing a small checkpoint. He offered me some fruit, samosas and chai, which went down extremely well.

A few minutes later, Tiger Baba arrived and joined us for some snacks and chai. Harsh invited me to stay at his house for the night, and I agreed to meet him in Gora once his duty was over for the day.

Tiger Baba and I then walked the last 7 kilometres into Gora.

Along the way, I noticed a large and impressive statue that appeared intermittently through the trees and around almost every bend. When I asked Tiger Baba about the massive structure, he explained that it had been built to honour the 'Iron Man of India', Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the first Home Minister of independent India. He had been responsible for uniting all 562 princely states and helping to create the Republic of India as we know it today.

The Statue of Unity was inaugurated on 31 October 2018. Standing 182 metres tall, it towers over the Narmada River, with the dramatic Satpura and Vindhya Hills creating a spectacular backdrop. The statue stands on Sadhu Bet Hillock and overlooks the Narmada River and the sprawling Sardar Sarovar Dam. A 300-metre-long bridge connects the statue to the mainland.

As part of an outreach programme for the project, the state government encouraged Indian farmers to donate their used farming equipment to help collect the iron required for the

statue. Eventually, about 5,000 tonnes of iron was believed to have been collected.

Tiger Baba and I finally walked into Gora after covering 26 kilometres for the day, and we saw Maa Narmada close up for the first time in 8 days.

I was surprised by the feelings of sincere devotion and divine romance that she provoked in me as I realised how much I had missed being in sight of her and in her lap. We had established an intimate relationship over the previous 3 months, and this had given me a great deal of comfort and support.

I was surprised by how much I had come to depend on her guidance and rely on her protection, but it warmed my heart in the most profound way.

Harsh Jani saw us as he rode into town on his motorcycle, but he had some things to take care of. In the meantime, Tiger Baba introduced me to pani puri at a small local food stall.

I had never eaten pani puri before and was overwhelmed by the way the flavours exploded in my mouth. I'm not sure how many we ate, but I couldn't remember when my mouth had last experienced such an extraordinary variety of flavours.

During this eating frenzy, a fellow parikramawasi named Vinay Sharma arrived. He knew Tiger Baba, but we had never met before. I was about to introduce myself when he said, "I know who you are. You are the 'Walking Sadhu' who runs the YouTube channel by the same name."

I was astounded to hear this and thrilled that he was already a subscriber. Little did I know how our paths would cross later in the journey.

Harsh Jani then picked me up and drove us to his parents-in-law's home. I managed to have a shower before we attended the big aarti and light show held every night on the banks of the Narmada River.

We had dinner back at the house and I insisted on sleeping out on the balcony. I was given a rope bed, and it was wonderful to fall asleep to the sounds of night birds, crickets and other insects.

The following morning, Harsh Jani dropped me back where he had picked me up the previous afternoon. I thanked him and said my farewells, and Harsh agreed to meet me on the other side of the Narmada River once I had crossed over to the north bank.

I spent the day walking to Rajpipla.

A few kilometres before the town, a lovely gentleman stopped on his motorcycle and insisted on buying lunch for me. He told me to meet him at the next dhaba, a few hundred metres further along the road.

An Indian dhaba is an informal roadside eatery, usually found along highways. I had first eaten and stayed at one when I walked from Sagar to Nagpur to thank Sri M for inspiring me to walk from Rishikesh to Badrinath — a journey that transformed my life and ultimately led me to walking the Narmada Parikrama.

It was a wonderful meal and a very gracious offer.

As I entered Rajpipla, I saw a shoe shop and immediately knew that I needed to stop and buy a new pair of shoes. I had walked exactly 1,324 kilometres in the shoes I was wearing since starting my journey in Amarkantak. They were the same pair I had bought brand-new in Dehradun while walking from Rishikesh to Yamunotri, so they had covered in excess of 1,600 kilometres and had served me well.

They were, however, most definitely in need of replacement.

I had always had difficulty finding my shoe size in India, so when the salesman confirmed that he had UK size 12 walking shoes in stock, I immediately became a keen buyer.

I bought the new pair for ₹700.

As I laced them up and put them on, I placed my old shoes outside the shop and gave thanks for the way they had served me so faithfully. I concluded my little prayer by asking that they serve their new owner just as well.

I then made my way to the biggest temple in Rajpipla, known as the Harsiddhi Mata Mandir and Ashram.

It had a large campus, and as I walked around the grounds, I was called over by a caretaker who asked me to sit down in front of his desk, as though I was about to be interviewed.

It didn't take him long to ask whether I wanted a room for the night, and I'm sure he didn't expect the enormous smile and expression of gratitude that followed.

As I made my way upstairs to Room 10, I couldn't quite believe what was happening. I had my own bed, bathroom and toilet, and I had not enjoyed this level of comfort since staying at Saccidananda Ashram for their Christmas celebrations.

After a cold-water wash in a bucket, I sat on a bench in the courtyard, watching devotees reverently pay their respects to the deity in the temple, while I caught up with my journal.

Above me was a beautiful tree densely covered in bright green leaves, with hundreds of birds screeching at one another among the foliage.

I felt extremely grateful and unusually satisfied with the way the day had unfolded. My heart was full.

I attended the evening aarti and then had dinner in the simple dining area. I felt so comfortable and at peace that I went back to the caretaker before he went off duty at 8:00 pm and arranged to spend another day at the ashram.

Before falling into bed, I sat on the metal bench outside my room and watched the full moon rise. It was a beautiful way to end another day filled with diverse experiences.

After two very enjoyable days at the Harsiddhi Mata Mandir and Ashram, I started walking towards Ankleshwar.

It was a hot day, and just before arriving at the Hanuman Mandir in Raisingpura, I could feel the ball of my left foot starting to hurt. This concerned me because I was wearing my brand-new shoes and they felt extremely comfortable, so I wondered what was causing the problem.

When I took off my shoes at the temple, I saw a split in the skin behind my left big toe. I realised this was causing the pain and knew that it would require some attention with anti-crack cream before I started walking again the next day.

On the way towards Jhagadia, a gentleman named Kamlesh called me over to his small shop, which was part of his home.

He was a charming man who immediately gave me a chilled Fanta Orange, some strawberries and a guava and insisted that I stay for lunch.

We sat around chatting about the Parikrama and what it was like for a foreigner to be walking along the banks of this holy and sacred river while lunch was being prepared.

The food was delicious, and by the time I was ready to leave, it was boiling hot, so I sat around for a while waiting for it to cool down.

I walked another 11 kilometres before arriving at the Gumandev Hanuman Mandir in the late afternoon. I had covered 26 kilometres and it had been a long day, but my toe had coped well with the anti-crack cream, which I was extremely grateful for.

The parikramawasi hall was dusty, with very few windows, poor ventilation, and a washroom and toilet that were absolutely disgusting, but I had no choice and was forced to use them.

A dozen parikramawasis arrived soon after I did. They were noisy and rude, and when one of them lit a beedi and blatantly ignored me when I politely asked him to smoke outside, I realised it was time for me to move.

A similar situation had happened with the Swami at the ashram in Ghagi two weeks after I had started my Parikrama, and I had moved then as well.

I had come to realise that pilgrims who walked in groups were often loud, disrespectful and seemed to have the opinion that they owned the environment made available for them to rest

and recover. Their behaviour could be obnoxious, with very little regard for their fellow pilgrims.

It was already late, but I was not prepared to tolerate their selfish behaviour, so I grabbed my backpack and sleeping things and found a covered balcony where I could lay everything out once again.

I then made my way to Ankleshwar along a hot, straight and dirty road.

Ankleshwar was a large, sprawling and rather ugly city, with an unpleasant smell, and I didn't like it at all. I made my way through the city to the Ram Kund Mandir and Ashram, situated on the outskirts of town in a quiet and pleasant spiritual environment.

The *goshala* was home to 120 cows, bulls and calves, and the ashram staff who cared for these beautiful animals were extremely proud of their work.

The space allocated for parikramawasis was dusty and dirty, but the washroom and toilet facilities were surprisingly clean. There were a few permanent Sadhu residents at the ashram, and one of them told me to be cautious with my phone.

I appreciated the warning, but I always wore my waist pouch, which held my phone and whatever small amounts of money I had been given, so I wasn't overly concerned. My valuables were well taken care of.

The following day, I made my way towards Harsot, which was only a day's walk from Vimleshwar — the village where I would catch the boat to cross from the south bank to the north

bank of the Narmada River, marking the halfway point of my Parikrama.

It was surreal to think that I was getting close to completing half of this journey. I could feel the excitement starting to mount as I drew closer to Harsot.

Just before the little town, however, I came across a small home mandir that looked really quaint, and I asked whether I could stay.

Every member of the family gave me a big smile, so I assumed it would be no problem.

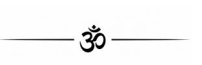
The temple had been built in honour of the father and mother of the family, although I was unable to establish anything more about their status or spiritual lives.

After an enjoyable night on a rope bed on the balcony of the temple, I woke to the most incredible sunrise.

The entire sky was an exquisite painting, with purples, reds, oranges, yellows and pinks merging into a kaleidoscope of breathtaking beauty. Against that fading backdrop, I started towards Vimleshwar.

This would be my last day of walking on the south side of the Narmada River and would officially mark the halfway point of this transformational journey.

But I would not reach there without an interesting interaction with a Muslim man.



Chapter 21

The Muslim, a Manifestation and Mithi Tilai



"The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained liberation from the self."

Albert Einstein

On the other side of Harsot, a gentleman called me over for chai. After thanking him and putting on my backpack, I was about to start walking again when he said, "That will be ₹20."

I could hardly believe my ears. I looked at him with an alarmed expression and said, "But you invited me for chai. I didn't stop of my own accord. I think it's a bit cheeky that you're now asking me to pay."

I had been on this journey for just over 3 months and had been invited for copious amounts of chai, but this was the first time I had been asked to pay for tea.

He did not back down, and I wasn't going to argue over ₹20, so I gladly paid him. As I was about to leave, I asked him one question.

"When you invite a friend to your house for dinner, do you expect them to pay for the meal?"

Then I smiled and said, "Good luck with your business. Narmade Har."

I wasn't sure how I had attracted the chai interaction into my life or what it was meant to teach me, but my next encounter was far more fascinating.

A few hundred metres from the chai shop, a man stopped next to me on his motorcycle and, without any introduction, said, "You are going the wrong way."

I stopped immediately, looked at him in dismay and responded, "But there is only one road to Vimleshwar, and that is where I am going."

"No," he replied. "Unless you find Islam and Allah, you will not go to paradise."

I was astounded and perplexed by what I had just heard. He must have seen the confused and bewildered look on my face, because this seemed to inspire him to reinforce what he had said.

"If you continue on this path, you will not find paradise."

He had no idea who I was or what my beliefs were, but no doubt he assumed that I was a foreigner aspiring to be a Hindu and that perhaps there was still time to convert me to Islam.

I took off my backpack, as I thought our conversation might continue for a while, and began my response.

"I am already in paradise."

He looked at me as though I was being both ignorant and arrogant, and I could see how this combination disturbed and insulted him.

I went on to explain that I wouldn't be transitioning to some land called Jannah, consisting of beautiful gardens with huge trees providing an abundance of cool shade, with rivers of water, milk, honey and non-intoxicating wine.

Throughout everything I had to say, he kept repeating himself like a stuck record.

"Unless you find Islam and Allah, you will not go to paradise."

It didn't take me long to realise that our debate was entirely one-sided. I still had a long day ahead of me and needed to bring our discussion to an end.

In a gesture of peace, friendship and openness, I extended my right hand.

"I'm sorry, but I must continue walking."

We shook hands and, before releasing his hand, I looked him in the eyes and said, "May you go in love, peace and joy, and I will see you in paradise. I promise you that."

I could feel that I had disarmed him ever so slightly and that he had softened, but he was not prepared to let go of what he truly believed.

As I released his hand, put on my backpack and turned towards Vimleshwar, instead of saying "Narmade Har", I said, "Salaam Aleikum."

As I was about to start walking again, he responded, "Wa Alaikum As Salaam."

A few metres further on, I once again heard, "Unless you find Allah, I will not see you in paradise."

That was the last I heard from him.

A few hours later, I stopped at a temple along the way and had some chai. When I started walking again, a dog joined me and kept me company all the way to Vimleshwar.

Soon after we arrived, he simply disappeared.

Little did I know how often this would happen to me on the north bank.

When I arrived at the Mahadev Mandir just after 2:00 pm, it was buzzing with activity. I was informed that the next boat to Mithi Tilai, the spiritual checkpoint on the north bank, would leave at 1:00 am.

The boat crossings of the Gulf of Khambhat were all dependent on the tides, and the journey usually took about four hours.

I had some time to kill, so I found a mattress in the large ashram and lay down for a while. Ek Nath took up residence next to me soon afterwards. He had completed the Parikrama numerous times and, in his broken English, insisted that I go with him to the boating point so that he could take care of me.

I tried to convey to him that I was quite capable of managing on my own, but I was nevertheless flattered by his generous offer.

There was only one electrical charging point for mobile phones and other devices, located outside the boat ticketing office. It was not easy or convenient to find somewhere to plug in a charger or adapter.

By carefully positioning and balancing the array of devices, as though performing a circus act, it was possible to charge about six phones at one time.

What added to the complexity of this juggling act was the constant coming and going of pilgrims, who kept upsetting the precarious balance of the mountain of devices, invariably arranged with great care by one bored pilgrim.

But a fascinating bunch of people had gathered around the electrical point, and everyone had the opportunity to share the most interesting story they had experienced on their journey so far.

It was at this time that I met Kuldeep Bhati, one of the most enthusiastic pilgrims I had ever encountered. He was doing his Parikrama on a two-wheeler and engaged with anyone who came near him.

Every now and then, he would shout, "Narmade Har!" at the top of his voice. This usually produced a variety of responses, from people shouting it back to others simply laughing and sharing in his exuberance.

I also met a lovely old man who asked if he could read my palms.

I couldn't believe this request.

Over the previous few weeks, I had met Shiv Shankari, the palm reader who kept popping up along the way, and walked with Swami Sadanand for 8 days. He had been able to confirm her readings.

I smiled and said, "For sure, please go ahead," as I extended both hands, palms facing upwards.

His reading was very basic, and he said nothing about the potential health crisis referred to by Shiv Shankari and Swami Sadanand.

He did say that my 'good luck line' was long and healthy and that, with my current simple lifestyle, I would be taken care of.

He concluded by saying that I was a plain and simple guy, which in many ways mirrored his reading — plain and simple.

While standing around talking to all these interesting people and waiting for my phone to charge, Ek Nath arrived and joined the throng.

Soon afterwards, I witnessed three magical acts of manifestation, which left me with an unusual feeling of awe, wonder and immense gratitude.

This trifecta began when I had a strong, penetrating thought to go and buy some fruit as soon as my phone had finished charging.

10 minutes later, some people who knew Ek Nath came to pay him a visit before he boarded the boat later that evening. They brought with them two bags of fruit, containing oranges, apples and grapes.

Without introducing themselves, they handed me one of the bags.

"That's for you."

I thanked them profusely as I pondered how this fruit had just appeared out of nowhere.

Had Ek Nath told them that he had expressed his wish to take care of me on the journey to Mithi Tilai? Did they know that we had only recently made our brief acquaintance?

Still feeling rather stunned, I decided to put the bag of fruit with my backpack in the ashram and, at the same time, take ₹500 from the hidden pouch in my bag so that I could pay for my boat crossing when the office opened at 7:00 pm.

I had been told that the ticket would cost ₹250.

No sooner had this thought entered my mind than one of Ek Nath's friends came over to me and put something into the top pocket of my kurta.

When I looked down, I saw that it was money.

My initial reaction was to resist and say that I didn't need any financial assistance, but I had learned that behaviour of that nature could be spiritually disrespectful. So I refrained from saying anything other than clasping my hands together in the *Namaste Mudra*, bowing my head in gratitude and humility, and softly saying, "Dhanyavad."

What I had learned about passers-by stopping and making an offering to a pilgrim was that walking on pilgrimage is often seen as a holy act that benefits more than just the person walking.

In Hinduism, giving to someone on a spiritual journey is *daan*, and it is said to earn spiritual *punya* for both the giver and the receiver, with the pilgrim carrying the prayers of the donor.

For the pilgrim, accepting money while walking is a practice in humility and dependence on divine providence and is considered a sacred act.

In India, the phrase *Atithi Devo Bhava* — 'the guest is God' — extends to pilgrims as well. The person walking is seen as carrying a special sanctity at that moment.

I had also learned that the intent behind the giving matters more than the amount given, and in many traditions, giving in order to boast or show off cancels the spiritual benefit.

Most traditions also assume that a pilgrim is either in genuine need or has taken a vow of divine dependence. Behind the gesture, the pilgrim offers prayers and effort, while the giver offers material ease. In the process of giving and receiving, both believe that the act weaves them into something much bigger than themselves.

I pondered how often I had been treated 'as God' when invited into people's homes as a guest and marvelled at the tradition of *Atithi Devo Bhava* — 'the guest is God' — and how deeply I had experienced the kindness and generosity of the Indian people.

At an appropriate moment, I peeped into the top pocket of my kurta.

There were two ₹500 notes, not one.

The third act of manifestation unfolded when the serving hatch of the boat ticket office opened and everyone started shoving and pushing their way to the front of the line in true Indian style.

This self-centred and selfish behaviour, which bordered on blatant rudeness, was something I had always struggled to come to terms with during my years in India.

As I stood back observing all the bumping and elbowing, I tried to manoeuvre myself into the semblance of a queue that had begun forming.

Suddenly, someone grabbed me by the arm and pulled me forward.

Not to the front of the queue, but through the door that led straight into the ticket office.

I stood there bewildered for a few moments and was then asked to show the clerk a copy of my passport. He scribbled something into a large black register and then, to my dismay, handed me a ticket and told me that I could leave.

I didn't fully understand what was happening.

"But surely I must pay you ₹250?"

With a wry smile on his face, he responded, "You can go. All paid."

I said, "Narmade Har," and made my way to the door without knowing who had paid for my boat ticket.

I was nevertheless extremely grateful, humbled and in awe that I had once again experienced what felt to me like divine intervention and manifestation, and with it, *Atithi Devo Bhava* — 'the guest is God'.

I went back to my mattress in the ashram, which had now filled with rows of hundreds of people, all intending to catch the boat at 1:00 am.

A meal was served soon afterwards. We took a nap for a few hours and then, just after 11:00 pm, walked the 2 kilometres down to the boating point.

We sat around in the darkness with hundreds of other parikramawasis, most of whom were doing their journey by bus, car or motorcycle. Only a small handful of us were walking.

Eventually, the time came for us to board, and once again there was a mad, selfish scramble as 300 pilgrims tried to cross the metre-wide gangplank and board the boat by torchlight.

How no one fell off the boarding bridge into the muddy water below was an absolute miracle, and how everyone managed to find a place aboard the small seagoing vessel was equally astounding.

Everyone was told to sit down on the deck of the boat, but I knew I would not be able to last for hours in such a squashed position.

I squeezed my way to the stern and decided to stand with my buttocks resting against the far end of the boat. The position felt comfortable and I had a good view of all the passengers seated in front of me.

I was, however, extremely nervous about falling off the back because I knew that if that happened, I would never be found in the inky black waters of the Arabian Sea.

After boarding, we sat around for about 45 minutes before the captain fired up the engines and we slowly began manoeuvring our way out of the shallow tidal waters of the Vimleshwar region and into the deeper waters of the Arabian Sea.

Throughout the boarding process and the delays, we were enthusiastically entertained by Kuldeep Bhati.

He was raucous in the most jovial way, constantly shouting, "Narmade Har!" and encouraging everyone to sing, "Sita Ram, Sita Ram."

He seemed to have endless energy, and his boisterous voice kept everyone amused and engaged as we moved into the early hours of the morning.

After chugging through the shallows for a good few kilometres, the captain applied pressure to the throttle and increased the speed as we entered the deeper waters of the Arabian Sea.

Kuldeep Bhati gradually quietened down, and everyone followed his lead.

The hours passed slowly.

The bright marine lights from the mast cast a circle of light onto the dark, murky waters surrounding the boat. Above us, however, the night sky was black and the stars were absent.

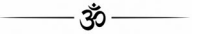
For a few hours, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Khambhat felt eerie.

Then lights from the shoreline slowly began appearing, and I felt as though they were inviting me onto the north bank of the Narmada River.

Three hours after leaving Vimleshwar, we approached Mithi Tilai.

At 4:30 am, we finally docked.

Once again, there was a mad scramble to disembark in the darkness, but it was a huge relief to stand up and finally start walking again.



Chapter 22

Waking Up from a Long Sleep



"There is no way to freedom and happiness.
Freedom and happiness are the way."

Ronnie Baba

Ek Nath was waiting for me on the dock and was quick to tell me that he knew of an ashram where we could spend a few hours before the sun rose and gave birth to another day.

As we started walking towards the ashram in the darkness, I felt disoriented and tired as we moved through the dockyards of Dahej and Mithi Tilai. Everything felt industrialised in the dark, and I had no idea where I was going, so I simply tagged along behind Ek Nath and trusted him to find the way.

After walking a few kilometres, we finally arrived at the Mithi Tilai Ashram. I found a secluded balcony outside the entrance to the monks' rooms, laid out my sleeping things and slept solidly for an hour and a half.

Mithi Tilai is not really a port town in the commercial sense. It is a coastal spot in Dahej, in Bharuch District, Gujarat, where the Narmada River meets the Arabian Sea at the Narmada Sagar Sangam on the north bank of Maa Narmada.

It is a pilgrimage hub and spiritual checkpoint, marking the point where the Narmada River merges with the Gulf of Khambhat. Dahej, on the other hand, is a major industrial port, and Mithi Tilai sits close to this infrastructure.

The backdrop is unfortunately ugly, and the mechanical hum of industry overwhelms the sounds of nature that I had grown so accustomed to on the south bank.

When I surfaced, I was still tired and grumpy and not in a particularly good mood. Beneath the discomfort, however, an excitement about being on the north bank of the Narmada River was bubbling away.

We were offered some breakfast and then made our way to the Shree Shingnath Mahadev Ashram.

As we started walking, I immediately noticed that I was now walking towards the rising sun rather than away from it. Having moved from the south bank to the north bank overnight, I found that everything seemed different, particularly the way the sun presented itself.

Unfortunately, everywhere I looked I was surrounded by oil refineries, terminals and shipyards, and the industrial noise was awful for about 10 kilometres. It finally receded out of earshot around the time we arrived at the ashram, where we had lunch and decided to spend the night.

I had a growing sense that Ek Nath was keen to continue walking with me. He was very kind, generous and thoughtful, but I had my reservations.

We struggled to communicate because of our language differences, Swami Sadanand's mysterious departure was still

fresh in my mind, and I genuinely wanted to walk on my own again.

The following morning, Ek Nath saw me packing my bag and asked in his broken English, "What time to leave?"

I responded gently but firmly, making it clear that I needed to walk on my own and that I would see him along the way.

He was gracious and understanding in accepting what I had said.

I thanked the Swami of the ashram and was on my way.

As the morning's walk progressed along sandy farm tracks, I was happy to leave the industrial factories behind me.

The route took me to Kaladaka, Beshli and then on to Keshrol, where I bought a few snacks but was not allowed to pay for them. I walked through the little village of Eksal and then through some beautiful cotton fields on my way to the picturesque fishing village of Bhadbhut.

The parikramawasi hall at the Bhareshwar Mahadev Mandir was small and started filling up fast. I suspected it would be stuffy and noisy at night.

Across the way, I spotted a gazebo and decided that was where I would spend the night. But then someone showed me the balcony above the temple and said I could stay there instead.

It had the most beautiful view of Maa Narmada, plenty of fresh air, privacy and, best of all, peace and quiet.

It was just perfect.

After a refreshing bath, I walked down to the water's edge and watched the fishing boats unload their catches as the sun

began to set, painting the sky with the most magnificent array of colours.

The early-morning sunrise from the balcony was even more spectacular. With the fishing boats moored in the foreground, the photographic opportunities were endless.

These beautiful scenes inspired me to spend another day in Bhadbhut.

At breakfast, I met two brothers, Ashu and Rishu, and their mother, who were walking the Narmada Parikrama together as a family.

Their father had passed away fairly recently, which had inspired them to come together, support one another and undertake something that would help them heal and deal with their grief.

However, I soon discovered that there was another reason for them to tackle this journey together.

15 years earlier, Rishu had been involved in an extremely serious motorcycle accident that resulted in him falling into a coma for four and a half years.

Then, one day, he miraculously woke up, as though he had simply been sleeping.

Moments after opening his eyes, he saw Ashu sitting at his bedside and, with great difficulty and slurred speech, managed to utter the words:

“What happened to me?”

The joy and ecstasy experienced by his family, friends and members of his community must have been indescribable. It was certainly very difficult for me to comprehend.

After years of therapy, he learned to walk and talk again and, slowly and step by step, began putting his life back together.

Rishu's enthusiasm for life was infectious. He had developed a charisma and self-confidence that left me in awe. He was engaging, had a wonderful sense of humour and carried a lightness of spirit that was impossible to miss.

I was deeply moved by his story and by the way his remarkable family had helped and supported him throughout his healing and 10 years of therapy.

I wanted to get to know them more intimately, so when I heard that the three of them were also planning to spend another day at the mandir, I was overjoyed and immensely grateful for the opportunity to spend more time with them.

It didn't take long for me to realise that what this family had been through was not easy to talk about. They were still dealing with the grief of losing their father, the anchor of the household.

I realised that I needed to proceed slowly and diplomatically when asking about Rishu's accident and recovery.

I began to appreciate that waking up after being in a coma for four and a half years is a rare and extraordinary event, and nothing like the way it is portrayed in the movies.

The reality is usually a gradual, messy and highly individual process. After years of being in a coma, people do not simply flip a switch and return to full consciousness.

There are often various stages. A person may move from having little or no wakefulness or awareness into a vegetative state and then into a phase of minimal consciousness, where there are inconsistent but definite signs of awareness. During this stage, a person may be able to track movement with their eyes or follow very simple commands.

The final stage of emergence begins when communication becomes more consistent, but it can still take weeks or months for awareness to become fully integrated.

After years of immobility, the physical body is also profoundly affected. Muscle atrophy can be one of the biggest challenges, and rebuilding lost muscle mass and strength can take years of therapy.

Joints can stiffen from the prolonged lack of movement, and in some cases the hands, feet and knees can become fixed in particular positions. People who wake after years in a coma may need to learn how to swallow again, and the risk of aspiration can be high.

Speech is often limited. When I listened to Rishu speak with such enthusiasm and energy, I could still hear that he struggled with certain words and had a slight speech impediment.

Bladder and bowel control can also be lost and need to be retrained, while sensory overload can become a major challenge. Lights, sounds and touch can feel overwhelming after years of little or no sensory input.

Cognition and emotional processing can also be profoundly affected. Confusion and memory gaps can be extremely

difficult to deal with, and the brain has a great deal of catching up to do.

There can also be a huge identity shock. The face in the mirror has changed, and so have the people and world around the person, all of whom have aged by the number of years they have been unconscious.

In Rishu's case, the changes around him were enormous and dramatic. There were feelings of frustration, fear, anger and depression to overcome, and every tiny step in his recovery took longer than anticipated as his brain slowly adjusted.

After years of therapy, love and support from his family, Rishu had recovered sufficiently to find full-time employment, become independent and return to an active role in society.

And now he was walking around 3,000 kilometres along the Narmada River.

To be with him was to witness a miracle in action.

Ashu was a little more reserved and revealed how difficult it had been for the family to cope while his brother was in a coma and during the years that followed, as he underwent intense therapy and treatment.

I came to understand that all this stress had contributed to the death of their father earlier than expected.

The love these two brothers had for each other was tangible, powerful and beautiful to witness.

Their mother never spoke a word of English, so unfortunately I could not have a meaningful conversation with her. But witnessing the love, respect and support that Rishu and Ashu gave her was admirable and exemplary.

I spent my rest day in Bhadbhut catching up on my journal, doing some clothes washing and spending heartfelt time with Ashu and Rishu.

The following day, we decided to start walking slowly together, as none of us was in a hurry to reach Bharuch.

Once we got moving, I noticed that Rishu walked with a slight gait, influenced by his muscle strength and coordination. He was a little slower than the rest of us, but always smiling and joyful, reflecting his light-heartedness and contentment with life.

The route took us along the banks of the Narmada River, which was extraordinarily beautiful.

The way the silver shafts of early-morning sunlight reflected off Maa Narmada created a sparkling brilliance that was breathtaking.

We stopped many times simply to absorb the magnificence of Maiya, who was always there, guiding every step we took with unconditional love and protection.

Maa Narmada induced in me a peace that was truly magnificent, and walking with Ashu, Rishu and their mother contributed to a wonderful sense of relaxed joy.

We stopped at the Trigunatit Dyan Seva Mandir for a break and then had lunch.

We were 3 kilometres from Bharuch, so after resting for a while, we decided to walk on to the Kamnath Mandir, where we planned to spend the night.

Along the way, we were offered some *kacha doodh* at a small roadside chai shop. It was chilled and, being a hot day, went down exceptionally well.

As I watched Ashu and Rishu taking such dedicated and loving care of their mother through the busy streets of Bharuch, I found it heartwarming and very touching.

The ashram was busy and packed with pilgrims, and it wasn't easy to find a quiet, secluded place to lay out my sleeping things, but the view of the Narmada River below was magnificent.

Rishu and I took *darshan* in the temple and then spent some time sitting on a bench overlooking Maa Narmada, talking about the miracle of being alive and the simplicity of life while walking the Narmada Parikrama.

For the first time, I noticed that Rishu had some difficulty pronouncing certain words. But the fact that he could walk and talk was an incredible miracle.

Rishu knew that he had been given a second chance to live life to the full and to be of service to mankind.

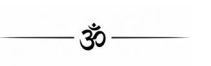
I shared with him how many times I had been given a second chance, without knowing that my biggest test and challenge was still waiting for me somewhere in the future.

The evening aarti was vibrant and well attended, and then dinner was served, but not before the pujari encouraged all of us to sing, "Sita Ram, Sita Ram."

It was a hot night and the mosquitoes were ferocious, so I did not sleep well. I was up early and ready to leave before everyone else.

I still felt overwhelmed by being in the company of Ashu, Rishu and their mother, but I needed to start walking on my own again.

I thanked them profusely for the time we had spent together, and we all agreed that it would be wonderful to see each other again somewhere along the way.



Chapter 23

An Indian Yogi in a French Body and 'Shirdi Sai Baba'



"If you are humble, nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know who you are."

Mother Teresa

After leaving the Kamnath Mandir, I made my way through the old town of Bharuch. It was early, the streets were unusually quiet and empty, and it was a pleasure walking through this ancient 2,000-year-old port city in Gujarat and one of India's oldest cities.

It was known as Bhrigukachchha in the ancient texts and Barygaza to the Greek and Roman traders. It was a major port on the Silk Route for spices, textiles and other trade with the Middle East, which accounts for the mixed culture of Gujarati, Parsi and Muslim communities.

Today, Bharuch is an industrial hub and home to a huge chemical industry, including petrochemicals, but it is also known for peanuts, bananas and the salty-sweet confection called Bharuchi Sukhdi.

It is also known for its many sacred sites and for the Golden Bridge over the Narmada River, built by the British in 1881. I would not attempt to cross the bridge on this journey, however,

as I had taken a vow in Amarkantak not to cross the Narmada River or get onto an island while walking the Parikrama.

Slowly, I started entering the newer part of Bharuch and made my way to the Nilkanteshwar Mandir, where I stayed for lunch.

Ashu, Rishu and their mother arrived about an hour after me, and it was heartwarming to see them again.

After resting on a bench under a tree, I donned my backpack, picked up my stick and started walking in an easterly direction. After numerous wrong turns and dead ends, I eventually arrived at the Panch Devi Mandir in Tavra, where I spent the night.

The following morning, I left Tavra and found the road towards Nikora and Nand. Soon after setting off, I was given biscuits and two bowls of fresh, hot milk. It made for a delicious breakfast.

I walked through the village of Shukla, expecting to find a mandir where I could have something to eat, but to no avail, so I continued towards Nikora.

When I was in Bandra Bhan, Swami Sumeru had told me about Swami JayRamdas, a French-born spiritual teacher and author who had adopted Indian spiritual culture and established an ashram in Nikora. I was very keen to meet him.

Swami JayRamdas was born into a French Catholic family in France in 1954. He left for India at the age of 19 after having had various psychic experiences.

He travelled to Rishikesh in 1974, where he met his first guru, Dhyanyogi Madhusudandas. He then undertook five years of

intense sadhana in North Gujarat before receiving instructions from his guru to go and teach meditation in France and England for several years.

He returned to India in 1990 to settle permanently.

He first lived in Karnali, right on the Narmada River, and then established his small ashram in Nikora.

He is the author of numerous books, including a two-volume study on the 51 letters of Sanskrit as natural forces, titled *Matrika Vilas*. Another of his signature works is *About Sadhus, Sannyasis and Gurus*, in which he reflects on Hinduism and spiritual seekers based on his four decades of living in India.

He is described as an 'Indian Yogi in a French body', which is also the title of his autobiography.

Everyone in Nikora knew Swami JayRamdas, so I had no problems obtaining directions to his ashram.

I was greeted by his female assistant, who informed me in the most unfriendly manner imaginable that the Swami had gone to Bharuch for the day and might not be back until the following day.

I was hugely disappointed, as I was not sure whether I would be able to make it back to meet him the next day.

His ashram was situated right on the banks of the Narmada River, and the view was magnificent. I sat beside his *havan* fire pit overlooking the river and rested for a while before continuing along the *kinaare* to the magnificent Madhusudandas Temple, which was only 1 kilometre away.

I later found out that Swami JayRamdas's second guru was Dr Ravindra Bhatt, a Shri Vidya master from Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

After his first guru, Dhyanyogi Madhusudandas, passed away in 1994, Swami JayRamdas was inspired to take initiation into Shri Vidya. He had received his first guru's blessing to do so just before his passing.

Dr Ravindra Bhatt then initiated him and guided him for 10 years in all the elements of Shri Vidya. After that decade of study, Swami JayRamdas received *Purnabhishek Diksha*, which was described to me as the highest level of initiation that could be bestowed on a disciple.

Shri Vidya itself is considered a *Moksha Shastra* — a science of liberation. The initiation is not simply a ritual; it is considered the beginning of a methodical path towards realising non-duality through the worship of *Shri*.

I stopped at the Madhusudandas Dhyanyogi Temple, an amazing pyramid-style structure, and spent some time walking around the outside of the mandir before going inside to meditate for a while.

The inside of the temple contained a striking murti of Dhyanyogi Madhusudandas, and the meditation hall could hold thousands of meditators.

The temple had been precisely constructed as a Shri Yantra — the geometric symbol of Divine Mother energy in the Shri Vidya tradition — and was also known as the Lotus Mandir.

Another 1 kilometre further along the Narmada River was the Swami Manishanand Ashram, which also had a fascinating

structure. I began to understand why Swami JayRamdas had positioned his ashram in Nikora.

I then made my way back through some beautiful cotton fields to the Shukla road and stopped at the Swayam Sai Sadguru Ashram at the intersection, where I was offered a late lunch.

I was hungry, and the meal went down extremely well.

I was soon asked whether I wanted to spend the night and gladly accepted the kind offer.

It had been a fascinating day visiting some incredible temples, and I was very happy to take a wash in the canal behind the ashram and sit quietly in meditation beneath the stunning banyan tree.

When I emerged from my quiet time of self-reflection and meditation, the Baba who had established the small ashram had arrived.

He had undoubtedly modelled himself on Shirdi Sai Baba. He was dressed in white and wore the distinctive Shirdi Sai Baba bandanna.

He had evidently walked all over India and had completed the Narmada Parikrama three times, but always walking backwards.

I found this hard to believe, but later came to learn that there was also a baba who was attempting to complete the Narmada Parikrama by walking on his hands.

I had met many people in my life who had turned the impossible into the possible, so I knew that almost anything could be achieved with the right mental attitude and focus.

In my conversation with the Baba, I mentioned that I had tried to visit Swami JayRamdas earlier in the day, but that he had gone to Bharuch and was unavailable when I arrived.

His face lit up with delight, and he suggested that we immediately go and visit him, saying that he knew the Swami was back at his ashram.

I wasn't sure how he could be so confident, but I never questioned him and jumped into the passenger seat of his car.

As we drove to Swami JayRamdas's ashram, I sat and marvelled at the way Maa Narmada had orchestrated so much of what had happened on my journey to date.

When we arrived at the ashram, the same female assistant was there to meet us, but this time she seemed much more friendly and accommodating.

We were directed to sit down in the Swami's lounge, which was beautifully adorned with large framed photographs and pictures of all the saints, sages and spiritual leaders and teachers that India had delivered to the world — Mahavatar Babaji, Lahiri Mahasaya, Sri Yukteswar, Paramahansa Yogananda, Ramana Maharshi, Anandamayi Ma, Shirdi Sai Baba, Neem Karoli Baba, Swami Sivananda and so many more.

As Swami JayRamdas came down the stairs to meet us, his first words to me were, "I saw you walking on the road near Shukla as I was driving to Bharuch. I was curious to know who you were, and now you are here."

It was only then that he greeted 'Shirdi Sai Baba'.

We were offered tea and ended up having an informative, inspiring and heartwarming conversation that lasted for a few hours.

We exchanged phone numbers, agreed to stay in contact and then drove back to 'Shirdi Sai Baba's' small ashram for dinner and a good night's sleep.

The following day I made my way towards Nand.

Just on the other side of the small village, I came across the Yogananda Ashram, run by Jyoti Mai Giri. The ashram was a beautiful home that also catered for pilgrims.

I had only walked 7 kilometres, but the atmosphere at the ashram was magnificent, so I decided to spend the night.

At lunchtime, Tiger Baba arrived, and it was wonderful to catch up with him again. So much had transpired in both our lives since we had last seen each other in Gora, only two weeks earlier, yet it seemed so long ago.

The ashram played the Gayatri Mantra 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and the *dhuni* was also kept burning continuously.

Jyoti Mai Giri seemed extremely serious, unemotional and cold for someone who was a disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda, which I found rather strange.

Ever since I had joined the Yogoda Satsanga Society of India and taken Kriya initiation at the Ranchi ashram of Paramahansa Yogananda, I had only ever met other disciples who were cheerful, friendly, joyful and interested in the well-being of their fellow human beings.

I therefore felt that something was rather strange in this ashram.

The following morning I made my way to the Karkateshwar Mahadev Mandir, which the caretaker said was almost 2,000 years old.

The oldest functioning Hindu temple in India is the Mundeshwari Devi Temple in Bihar, which was built in 108 CE, making it just over 1,900 years old, so I suspected that the pujari at Karkateshwar was being rather optimistic about the age of his temple site.

Nevertheless, it was a beautiful old structure, and I could feel its historical energy.

I was grateful to be invited for breakfast and chai.

I then made my way to the Shree Girnari Ashram, where I was invited for lunch.

I sat around for an hour and a half, but no meal was served, despite being told that lunch would be ready in minutes.

I did not want to seem ungrateful, but I still had 14 kilometres to walk before reaching Vinubhai's Ashram in Diver and could not sit around waiting any longer.

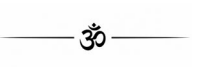
I bid my farewell and, on an empty stomach, walked for another four hours before arriving in Diver at 4:30 pm.

Just before arriving, I was met by a young man on a motorcycle at the archway marking the entrance to the village. He drove me to the ashram.

I was exhausted, having covered 25 kilometres with very little food in my system. The blister under the ball of my right foot and the split behind my right big toe were becoming unbearably painful.

I was starting to realise that the new shoes I had bought in Rajpipla were not supporting the kind of walking I was doing. They had been a bad purchase, and I knew that I would need to replace them again as soon as possible.

I was extremely grateful that I could spend a few days at Vinubhai's Ashram so that I could heal the wounds on my right foot and catch up on some much-needed rest.



Chapter 24

Maa Narmada's Jayanti



"The reality of who we truly are is not something to be achieved, but a realisation of what we already are."

Ronnie Baba

Soon after arriving at Vinubhai's ashram and unpacking my bag, the family in the house across the street brought me a much-needed cup of chai.

They were very intrigued by a foreigner moving into their midst and struggled to contain their curiosity. I couldn't stop smiling as the different members of the family took turns walking out onto the balcony for a sneaky look at me.

I managed to take a hot shower, which was not something I had enjoyed since leaving Harsh Jani's home in Gora 15 days earlier, and it was an absolute treat.

This journey constantly reminded me never to take the simple things in life for granted.

After cleaning myself up, I realised I was starving, which sent me into the kitchen area of the ashram. It didn't take long to find a bag of potatoes, and soon I had some of them boiling.

I was so grateful that Vinubhai had told me to make myself at home in the ashram and use whatever I could lay my hands on.

Soon after filling myself with a plate of soft jacket potatoes, Pravinbhai arrived. Vinubhai had asked him to come and take care of me, and a little while later, a friend of the ashram arrived with a tiffin full of delicious food for both of us.

All of this attention was astonishing.

After walking 25 kilometres, a plate of boiled potatoes and a tiffin full of delicious home-cooked food ensured that I slept like a dead man.

When I woke, I soon realised that it was Maa Narmada's Jayanti, and I felt delighted that I could fulfil Vinubhai's wish.

When we had first met less than 3 weeks earlier, he had insisted that I join him at his ashram in Diver and that we celebrate this auspicious day together.

And here I was.

He had invited many family members and close friends from all over India to join him, and I felt honoured to be included.

Narmada Jayanti is the birth anniversary of Maa Narmada, one of the seven sacred rivers of India. It is celebrated every year on Magha Shukla Saptami — the seventh day of the waxing moon in the Hindu month of Magha, which usually falls in late January or February.

On this auspicious day, Hindus believe that Maa Narmada emerged from Lord Shiva's body at Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh, where the river originates.

It is said that at this time the Narmada River is at its most 'alive', that blessings are multiplied, and that many people offer coconuts, jaggery and sesame to the river.

Most rivers in India flow east, but the Narmada flows west and is considered to be self-purifying. It is said that simply taking *darshan* of Maa Narmada will cleanse you and remove your sins, and that there is no need to take a bath in the river.

The day is also celebrated by taking *snan* in the holy water, with millions of people doing so at famous locations and ghats such as Amarkantak, Omkareshwar, Maheshwar and Bhedaghat.

The occasion is celebrated with chanting, lamps and flowers, while the evening aarti on the ghats can be enormous. It is also considered appropriate during this period to give food, clothes and money to Brahmins and the needy.

Many temples along the river hold melas, bhajans and community meals.

Before Vinubhai arrived at the ashram, a fellow parikramawasi by the name of Naman Chander-Shekhar arrived looking for medical assistance. He had fallen somewhere and cut his arm, and Pravinbhai immediately jumped into action.

While waiting for Pravinbhai to find some first-aid supplies, Naman saw me and, without addressing me directly, said, "This Maharaj is everywhere."

It was clear that we had definitely seen each other along the way.

Pravinbhai patched him up as best he could and sent him on his way.

Something told me that we would bump into each other again.

I was looking forward to the celebrations that Vinubhai had put together.

He arrived soon afterwards with an entourage of people who had come to prepare lunch and the evening's dinner on the banks of the river.

It was wonderful to see him again, but we agreed to catch up later, as he was extremely preoccupied with all the preparations.

After a wonderful lunch, everyone rested before making their way down to the banks of the Narmada River, where the festivities were being prepared.

As Vinubhai's guests arrived, they first submerged themselves in the holy and healing waters of Maa Narmada.

Various rituals were then performed, each driven by the way the energy and spirit moved the individual devotees.

I was particularly moved by what is known as *Vastra Arpan*, the practice of floating a new yellow or red pure-cotton sari in the river.

The ritual is performed as a symbol of respect. Clothes are offered to Maa Narmada in much the same way that we would offer clothes to our own mother, with the same reverence and care as though we were dressing her.

The offering is also made with enormous gratitude, giving thanks to Maa Narmada for providing life, water and sustenance throughout the previous 12 months.

Offering your best cloth is a way of surrendering the ego and praying for purity in life. Married women especially perform this ritual for their husband's long life and for the well-being of the family.

The belief is that Maa accepts the offering and that the sari eventually reaches the sea, carrying the prayers with it.

Another ritual that I never grew tired of was *Deep Daan*, which I had witnessed all over India, particularly on the Ganga in Rishikesh.

This ritual involves floating a lit candle surrounded by flowers in a small leaf container known as a *Pattal Dona*. These containers are usually made from leaves stitched together.

Small diyas, votives or tea lights may be placed inside a small clay container known as a *Mitti Ka Diya*. The traditional light is a dough lamp made with ghee and a wick, known as an *Aata Ka Deep*.

The significance of the ritual is that the diya represents the removal of darkness and ignorance from life. By floating the diya, we are sending good wishes and prayers downstream to all other beings.

Many people perform *Deep Daan* in memory of ancestors and those who have passed on. The light from the diya is believed to bring peace to souls.

A puja of this nature also honours the five elements and translates into a complete offering to the river.

Since Narmada Jayanti is her birthday, flowers and light truly seem like the most appropriate way to celebrate any divine birth.

On Jayanti night, at places such as Amarkantak, Omkareshwar and Maheshwar, the whole river can look like a stream of stars as thousands of diyas are floated downstream.

Many of the larger ashrams now encourage devotees to use biodegradable *pattal* and *mitti diyas* and attempt to remind everyone of the principle:

"Whatever we take from Maa, we must give back with devotion and without polluting her."

Vinubhai had demarcated a space for everyone to gather on the banks of Maa Narmada. Once the guests had performed their various rituals, they were summoned to join the formal proceedings.

In the distance, I saw Naman standing on his own, staring out over Maa Narmada.

There was a sadness and loneliness about him.

Perhaps the wound on his arm was troubling him?

I walked over to where he was standing and said, "Hey, Maharaj, why don't you join us?"

He smiled with gratitude and later revealed to me that my simple act of kindness had meant more to him than I would ever realise.

I was immensely grateful that, unknowingly, I had been able to be of service to him and Maa Narmada.

Vinubhai ran the celebrations with charm, confidence and humour, and it was clear to me that he was loved by his family and all his invited friends.

I later discovered that he held *satsang* on a weekly basis, taught many aspects of Hinduism and did an enormous amount for his community.

Various people were invited to speak, with their contributions interspersed with lively bhajans and chanting.

The sun slowly began making its way towards the horizon, and the sky turned a brilliant orange as the golden ball dipped towards the Narmada River.

The sight was breathtaking.

Finally, Vinubhai introduced me as the only pilgrim in attendance at the Jayanti. I immediately pointed to Naman and said, "I'm not alone."

He then asked me to say a few words.

I shared how I had developed a romantic relationship with Maa and how this communion had deepened and become more intense the further I walked along her banks.

I told everyone how she held and protected me like any mother would, and how we communicated with each other throughout the day like old friends.

I concluded by saying that at night I lay in her lap, where she comforted and consoled me.

Many of those in attendance smiled and nodded in acknowledgement and approval, but I could see that others were moved by the romantic and heartfelt feelings I had for Maa Narmada.

A blanket of darkness soon surrounded us on the sandy banks of the Narmada, and it was time to pack up and head back to the ashram.

About 70 people were fed a scrumptious meal before they gradually went their separate ways.

As the evening proceedings drew to an end and everyone began bidding their farewells, a woman came up the stairs to where I was sitting.

She was beaming from ear to ear, and I knew she had something exciting to share with me.

She asked if she could sit down and then told me how much inner peace and joy she was finding through writing out the *slokas* of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Her bubbling excitement and exuberance were infectious, and I felt honoured that she was so compelled to reveal this newfound joy and peace to a complete stranger.

Perhaps she was one of those who had been moved by what I had said earlier on the banks of Maa Narmada.

As she thanked me for my time and started making her way down the stairs again, I could see how she was glowing with pride, positivity and peace.

Her practice reminded me of the Swami I had met at the Sant Ramanand Ashram in Khalghat, who was writing out the name 'Ram' in extremely small red Sanskrit letters, hundreds of times a day in a single sitting.

This practice is known as *Likhit Jaap*, which means 'writing meditation'.

I decided to spend one more day at the ashram, and knowing that I would be entirely on my own engendered a feeling of tangible excitement.

The split behind my big toe had not quite healed, so a little more rest would also come in very handy.

Riddhi and DD Patel, both family members of Vinubhai, rode 7 kilometres on their motorcycle to bring me some lunch.

What an incredible gesture.

I would have been very content with some boiled potatoes, but they were having none of that. They repeated the same kind act again at dinnertime.

Vinubhai called me during the day and suggested that I spend the following morning at the ashram before taking a slow walk to his *annakshetra* in Awakhal.

I spent the morning working on some video editing, and then Riddhi came through once again and brought me some lunch.

The *seva* Vinubhai and his family had shown me was an expression of unconditional love and generosity, and it was absolutely stunning.

I left the Diver Ashram in the middle of a hot afternoon and made my way towards Awakhal.

The split behind my toe had healed reasonably well and I was rested, but I felt weary as I started walking, and it took some time to get into my stride.

Just before arriving in Awakhal, I saw DD Patel standing on the side of the road waiting to greet and welcome me.

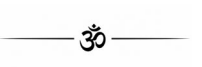
He saw that I was hot and sweaty and bought me some chilled orange juice.

I had not consumed a sweet, fizzy drink in months, and it went down so exceptionally well that DD insisted on buying me another.

I could see how much pleasure he was getting from watching my starved appreciation of this simple fizzy drink.

He then walked with me to the Awakhal Ashram, beautifully located in the farmlands about 1 kilometre outside town.

He opened up the ashram and helped me to settle in.



Chapter 25

Reunions, a Smoking Swami and Caste



"Spiritual life is being empty, totally empty. No opinions, no beliefs. It is only when you become empty that you become filled."

Robert Adams

Dilip, whom I had met some years earlier at the Yoga Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, had been living and working in Gujarat and arranged to come and visit me at the Awakhal Ashram.

It was wonderful to catch up with him again, and we had much to talk about, as so much had happened in both our lives since we had last seen each other.

Riddhi arrived to establish what I wanted for dinner. I was astounded that she took the trouble to ask.

As a Sadhu walking the Narmada Parikrama, I was never asked what I wanted to eat. I was simply grateful for whatever meal I was given, irrespective of what it was.

She insisted that Dilip and his driver friend stay for dinner as well, and I was grateful to have more time with him.

The dinner was delicious and the conversation stimulating and inspiring.

Eventually, the time came for Dilip to leave.

As we stood facing each other and saying our farewells, he reached forward, delicately took hold of my right hand and gently placed a large bundle of rupee notes into it.

I looked at him with quiet gratitude.

"Thank you, Dilip Ji, but you know that you don't need to do this."

I knew that wasn't the ideal response to his incredible generosity. The only thing I could think of to make up for my clumsy reaction was to reach forward, put both arms around him and give him a warm and loving hug.

I could feel the genuineness of our embrace, which was filled with unconditional love and gratitude.

Our heartfelt gesture touched DD Patel and brought tears to his eyes.

It was a powerful moment that I will never forget as I watched Dilip and his driver friend leave the ashram.

DD Patel, who was 77 but looked 57, insisted on hanging around until I was completely comfortable with the layout of the ashram and my sleeping arrangements.

He continued to fuss over me as though I were his youngest son, and I eventually had to insist that he return to his family.

After he finally left, I drew water from the well so that I could take a wash.

The temperature dropped, and I dressed warmly as I planned to sleep outside beneath the extended balcony roof.

I had a bed, and the rest was absolutely marvellous.

At 6:30 am the following morning, DD Patel arrived to show me the way to his house for breakfast.

After a delicious meal, it was time to say my goodbyes to Riddhi, DD Patel and his lovely family, who had been so generous to me during my stays at the Diver and Awakhal Ashrams.

When Patel became tearful, I realised how much they had valued being of service to me and how much they had enjoyed having me around.

As I started walking again, I pondered how I could ever repay the incredible generosity, kindness and care that had been bestowed upon me by so many individuals and families like Vinubhai, DD and their respective families.

I walked to Segava Chokadi and then made my way towards Chanod via a shortcut.

Later that afternoon, I arrived at the Shree Madhavanand Ashram, which was huge and situated on a sprawling estate.

The ashram's *goshala* was home to 300 cows, and dinner was served at a table with chairs. Copious amounts of milk were served as well.

In the evening, Vinubhai arrived with a friend, which was a complete surprise and gave me another opportunity to thank him for his unbelievable generosity over the past few days of my Narmada Parikrama.

The following day, I walked to Karnali and intentionally visited the mandir

This was where Swami JayRamdas, the Indian Yogi in a French body, had spent a number of years of his yogic life before establishing his ashram in Nikora.

The temple was superbly located, with exquisite views of Maa Narmada.

I took *darshan* and started heading towards Moriya.

Along the way, I stopped at the Pipaliya Ashram, which was fairly new and had been established by a young couple who were extremely enthusiastic about their noble project.

They provided a few of us with a delicious lunch and went out of their way to ensure that everyone had whatever medical supplies they needed, as they had numerous free samples available.

I showed them the crack behind my toe, which was healing really well, but they insisted that I take some anti-crack cream with me.

After an inspiring time with this vibrant young couple, I walked to Moriya and decided to spend the night at the ashram.

Just before the aarti, I was invited to meet the old Swami and patron of the ashram in his private kutir.

He was probably around my age and, after paying my respects and exchanging a few pleasantries, he took hold of a *chillum*, lit a match and inhaled repeatedly, puffing away like an old steam locomotive until the front of the pipe was glowing like a red-hot coal.

He looked at me with a smile that seemed to indicate that he was very proud of his efforts.

Then he handed me the pipe.

"Smoke."

I clasped my hands in front of my chest and respectfully said, "No, thank you."

He had no resistance to my refusal. He simply took the pipe back in both hands, held it in a way that allowed him to get the maximum draw from each inhalation and took a few more solid puffs before putting it down beside him.

He then took several deep breaths, as though he needed to get some clean, unpolluted air into his lungs, before turning to me and smiling.

He had no more to say.

I sat in his company for a few more minutes, but realised that our interaction had come to an end.

I nodded in his direction, stood up, said, "Narmade Har," and left.

As I left his kutir and prepared for the evening aarti, I couldn't help wondering why a Swami in his late 60s was still smoking ganja.

Surely there comes a time in life when you drop a debilitating habit of this nature.

Or was his addiction simply all-consuming?

Later that same evening, he meandered over to the main ashram building and conducted a *satsang*.

A number of disciples sat at his feet, hanging on to his every incoherent word, and I couldn't help wondering how much his

teachings had been affected by the ganja and how any disciple could take him seriously.

The following day, I walked in the direction of Tilakwada and made good progress.

I stopped at the Hanuman Mandir and had some dry rice snacks for breakfast, along with some chai.

On the way to Garudeshwar, I stopped at a temporary ashram on the side of the road and was given some black tea and two glasses of delicious cold milk.

After resting, I walked for another hour to the Agateshwar Mandir and Ashram in the little village of Akteshwar.

The ashram had a breathtaking view overlooking the Narmada River, and watching the sun go down in the west was absolutely spectacular.

I had been in communication with Tiger Baba, who had spent the night with Vinay Sharma just 2 kilometres away at the old temple and ashram in Garudeshwar.

I had first met Vinay Sharma in Gora, when Tiger Baba introduced me to pani puri and my mouth exploded with some of the most amazing flavours imaginable.

We had agreed to meet and walk together for the next few days, as the upcoming section would take us towards the Shoolpane Forest on the north bank.

This section of the forest was not as remote as the corridor on the south bank, but Tiger Baba nevertheless felt that it would be prudent for me to have some company through this region.

I respected his opinion and really appreciated his care and concern for my well-being. I was also extremely grateful and excited to see him and Vinay again in Garudeshwar.

Tiger Baba was his usual charming and cheerful self, and I was looking forward to getting to know Vinay Sharma, who was quiet and slightly reserved but confident and strong, with focused intentions and steadfast opinions.

I was introduced to Paresh, who had been walking with them for the previous few days.

He was a wealthy diamond dealer from Gujarat who had taken time out of his busy and demanding schedule to walk the Narmada Parikrama.

He didn't speak English as well as the other two and consequently kept a respectful distance from me.

After catching up on all the Parikrama news, we had a few cups of chai and eventually got into our stride.

After a few hours of walking, we stopped at an unoccupied Hanuman Mandir, which had made some lunch supplies available for parikramawasis like us.

We simply needed to make a fire and prepare our own meal.

Vinay immediately volunteered to be the chef and was adamant that he didn't need any help.

He cooked rice and dal while the rest of us waited patiently.

It took some time to prepare, and while he was busy, we all had a sleep.

The ball of my right foot had been bothering me for the previous few days, making the journey increasingly uncomfortable and something of a grind.

I was still days away from any town where I might be able to buy a new pair of shoes, so I had resigned myself to grinning and bearing it.

After enjoying Vinay's delicious meal, we rested and waited for the weather to cool down before heading off again in the late afternoon.

We made our way to the Nani Ambaji Temple and Ashram, located in the little village of Jivanpura Tankhala.

The temple was really beautiful, and the space allocated for pilgrims was acceptable, but the washrooms and toilets were absolutely disgusting and none of us had the nerve to use them.

We had arrived just as it was getting dark, and after inspecting the facilities, Tiger Baba shared a very valuable tip.

"When you arrive at an ashram or temple, always make sure that you visit the bathrooms and toilets while there is still daylight. That way you can inspect their access and cleanliness and avoid being shocked and horrified when you may need to use them at night."

Needless to say, I took a wash outside the washrooms under a tap and was grateful for Tiger Baba's advice.

After dinner, the four of us went and had some chai at a little tea shop just outside the temple complex.

It was a stimulating time, the conversation was inspiring, and I enjoyed the camaraderie and rich sense of humour that everyone shared so openly.

We held good *satsang* and covered many interesting topics, from washing your hands after urinating to the unity and oneness of all souls, and even the reasons why a pandit would not clean the washrooms and toilets of his own temple.

This introduced the caste system as a topic, and I was intrigued to hear what my intellectual Indian friends knew and felt about this ancient social structure that had influenced Indian life for centuries.

This was not the first time I had encountered the caste system at a temple or while walking the Parikrama, but I was keen to deepen my understanding.

They began by telling me that the traditional framework is known as *Varna-Jati*, with *Varna* referring to four broad categories described in ancient texts.

Brahmins are traditionally the priests and teachers, Kshatriyas the rulers and warriors, Vaishyas the traders and farmers, and Shudras the service providers.

Jati refers to thousands of community groups based on occupation, region and family, and this is what people usually mean when they use the word 'caste' today.

For centuries, *Jati* often influenced occupation, marriage circles and social interactions.

Over time, some groups experienced discrimination and restrictions, particularly around temple roles and ideas of 'ritual purity'.

The Constitution of India banned caste-based discrimination in 1950, and subsequent laws and social reform movements have focused on equality.

Yet caste still influences certain aspects of daily life, particularly marriage and community relationships, while its significance varies considerably by region, age, family and social environment.

It is therefore a complex mixture of ancient texts, historical social structures and modern laws and reforms.

I then turned to Tiger Baba, Vinay and Paresh.

"But why does a priest not want to clean the toilets of his own temple?"

I had often noticed how a pandit would make sure that every part of his temple was shining and polished. He would spend hours ensuring that everything was spotless, but the washrooms and toilets, sometimes only 10 or 20 metres away, were filthy and appeared not to have been cleaned for years.

"So, guys, can you tell me why? I have struggled to understand this dichotomy, and it has confused me for a long time."

After some discussion in Hindi between the three of them, they explained that this behaviour came from the mixing together of ritual roles and historical caste practices.

They told me that, in many older temples, duties were traditionally divided.

Brahmin pandits were responsible for pujas, mantras and handling the deities and murtis, while other temple workers handled cleaning, cooking, prasad, maintenance and gardening.

This was treated as a system of job roles, somewhat like a medical doctor not normally undertaking hospital housekeeping.

In traditional practice, before performing puja, priests would take a bath, wear clean clothes and avoid contact with things considered impure so that they could enter the *Garbhagriha*, the innermost sanctuary of the temple where the principal murti or sacred emblem of the main deity is housed.

Cleaning toilets was historically associated with work considered impure, and because of these old ideas of ritual purity, many pandits were taught not to perform such tasks.

It was not necessarily because the work itself was considered worthless, but because of the social and ritual boundaries that had developed around it.

Many temples are now rejecting such distinctions. Today, you will find priests, trustees and devotees of all backgrounds cleaning temples, washrooms, toilets and other parts of the premises as *seva*.

Many temples and religious organisations actively teach that cleaning can itself be a form of the highest *seva*.

The next day, we started entering the more remote part of the Shoolpane Forest area on the north bank of the river.

It was very beautiful, although the walking became strenuous and my right foot was seriously starting to plague me, particularly as the temperature rose.

In the middle of the day, we stopped in a small village where there was a tiny ashram set up for us to prepare our own lunch.

Once again, Vinay offered to cook.

This time he was able to use a gas cylinder, but couldn't get it to ignite.

Tiger Baba got involved and eventually managed to get the cylinder to burst into flame, almost setting his long beard on fire in the process.

It was a timely reminder to be extremely careful when using gas cylinders that don't belong to you.

Vinay did a fine job of preparing delicious potatoes, rotis and sabzi.

When Tiger Baba started his pilgrimage in Amarkantak, he had committed to completing his Parikrama in 108 days, and he felt that we were slowing him down.

He therefore declared that after lunch he would leave us and start walking on his own again.

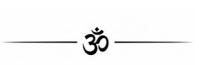
We finished our meal and wished Tiger Baba good luck for the remainder of his journey.

As I watched him leave the ashram and increase his stride, I knew that I would miss his enthusiasm and incredible zest for life.

I also knew that a journey around the Narmada River is a deeply personal one and that every pilgrim ultimately needs to follow their own heart and complete their pilgrimage in their own way.

Of all the pilgrims I had met on my journey so far, I knew that I would miss Tiger Baba a great deal.

He was undoubtedly one of the stalwarts of the Narmada Parikrama.



Chapter 26

The Hafeshwar Temples and an Obnoxious Swami



"I don't like that man. I must get to know him better."

Abraham Lincoln

The three of us washed up, filled our water bottles and made our way towards Moti Kadai. Along the way, we found a street vendor selling ice creams, which were absolutely delicious. We walked the remaining 5 kilometres to the Ram Dev Nilgiri Maharaj Ashram in Moti Kadai.

The facilities were immaculate. The ashram was situated in the middle of the Shoolpane Forest and formed part of a farmhouse that was in pristine condition. After a substantial evening meal, we watched the full moon rise over the Satpura Mountain Range on the other side of the Narmada River. Witnessing this magnificent sight inspired me to sleep on the outside balcony, where I could absorb the full impact of the amazing energy being transmitted by Earth's sister.

When we left in the morning, we came across a multitude of Gulmohar, or Royal Poinciana, trees. These flamboyant trees go by various names, with the most common being the 'Flame of the Forest' or simply the 'Flame Tree'. Their botanical name is *Delonix regia*.

These trees burst into a riot of vibrant, flame-red flowers in the peak of early summer, usually between April and May. They are not indigenous to India and were first introduced to Mumbai around 1840 from Madagascar. The Gulmohar is culturally significant in India and holds the esteemed position of being the official state tree of Delhi.

After making our way through a spectacular display of these fiery red trees, we stopped at the Shankar Das Giri Ashram in the little village of Chodwani. The Swami in charge of the ashram was just as flamboyant as the trees we had so recently had the privilege of walking through. He enthusiastically insisted that we stay for something to eat, and we were served *makki di roti* with mouth-watering *sabzi* and very flavourful chai.

Makki di roti is a traditional Punjabi flatbread made from yellow corn flour. It is gluten-free, slightly coarse in texture, thicker and yellow in colour, and generally considered a healthier alternative to regular wheat-flour rotis.

While we were enjoying our meal, we discovered that Tiger Baba had spent the night at the ashram. The Swami, who did an enormous amount for the local community, then sent a disciple to call a young teacher who taught English at the small local school in the village and ask him to come and talk to me.

He was shy, and I gathered that he seldom had the opportunity to speak with someone whose mother tongue was English. I could see that he felt self-conscious and humbly awkward, but our engagement was rich and fruitful. I was able to learn more about this vibrant little village through the precious time we spent together.

When we left Chodwani, we walked up a steep and winding road until finally arriving at the very top of a range of beautiful hills, where we were rewarded with magnificent views and a lovely temple where we stopped to rest.

Vinay and I had started getting on really well and ended up having some good *satsang* together in the shade of the temple. Paresh, however, was constantly on his phone, which started irritating both Vinay and me immensely.

I am not sure whether his diamond business back in Gujarat was demanding a great deal of his attention, but I felt that his attachment to his mobile device was out of control. Besides the impact it was having on us, I imagined that the psychological effect it must have been having on his own well-being and peace of mind was equally intolerable.

Technology of this nature is influencing people's lives on an almost catastrophic scale, and I do not believe that we have even begun to scratch the surface of the disorders that are being manifested as a result.

Paresh left before us while Vinay and I were still engrossed in our thought-provoking conversation. It was hot when we started walking again, which made it tough going, even though it was all downhill.

We made our way to Khasra, where we were stopped by a gang of young boys and given some chilled cola, which was absolutely delicious. I got some good video footage of the young crowd chanting and cheering us on.

When we started walking again, we bypassed Moti Chikhli and headed directly to the temple in Kadipani, which had a small ashram adjoining the mandir. The ashram had a few

beds inside and was in close proximity to the ablutions and washing area, which were reasonably clean.

By the time we had arrived and settled in, my foot was really sore from the day's walking, and I had started contemplating whether I should take a few extra days of rest. After a reasonable evening meal and another long, hot day of walking, we were all exhausted, and it was lights out by 10:00 pm.

Early the following morning, I woke when Paresh switched on all the ashram lights and started chanting "Om Namah Shivaya" repeatedly and out loud.

I could hardly believe my ears. When I looked at the time and saw that it was 4:00 am, I was extremely disgruntled.

At first, I rolled over and pulled my sleeping bag over my head, but that only removed the interference from the lights, not his loud chanting. The more I tried to tolerate his behaviour, the more inconsiderate and selfish I thought he was being.

I lasted about five minutes and then, in an abrupt but firm tone, said, "Paresh, will you please put off the lights and chant your mantra silently?"

He listened and complied with my kind and reasonable request, but I struggled to fall asleep again because of the sharp influx of adrenaline into my body so early in the morning.

By the time Vinay and I got up, Paresh had already packed his bag and, without saying goodbye, walked out of the ashram door. We never saw him again.

I am not sure whether my request had provoked his untimely departure or whether he thought he would still see us along

the way, but either way, Vinay and I were both relieved that he was gone and that he had taken his phone with him, which would not be missed.

Intuitively, I still felt that I should take a rest day and give my foot some extra time to heal itself. But when Vinay said that he was planning to visit Hafeshwar, which was only 6 kilometres away, and asked whether I wanted to join him, I immediately agreed.

He then told me that there were two Hafeshwar Temples.

The original ancient and historic Shiva temple had been built on a hillock and, for most of the year, would become submerged in the waters of the Narmada catchment area whenever the levels rose, first because of natural flooding and later because of the Narmada Dam and reservoir catchment area being established.

Only the flag of the temple could be seen above the water.

Naturally, it became increasingly difficult for devotees to perform *darshan* and *puja* regularly. Because of this submersion problem, it was decided to relocate the temple to a higher and safer position.

The relocation and construction were undertaken by BAPS Swamis and volunteers at the request of the government and the temple trustees, and with the involvement of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

After the new Hafeshwar Mahadev Mandir was completed, it was consecrated with Vedic rituals on 24 April 2002. Then, on 20 February 2022, Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the Vedic *pujan* and consecrated 18 Shivlings on the site.

The new temple is still situated near the river, but on elevated ground, allowing devotees to have *darshan* throughout the year. The old temple still exists beneath the water and emerges only when the water recedes.

Like Nilkantheshwar and other Shiva temples on the banks of the Narmada River that go underwater when the levels rise, devotees believe that the submersion represents Shiva entering deep meditation, while his re-emergence represents his awakening and his blessing of the world.

I was excited by what Vinay had shared with me and thought it was a brilliant idea to visit Hafeshwar. Google Maps seemed to indicate that it was right on the backwaters of Maa Narmada and almost directly opposite the Lakam Giri Ashram, where I had stayed with the young Swami Sadanand when we had first started walking through the Shoolpane Forest together on the other side of the river.

I looked forward to seeing the terrain from a completely different perspective.

We spent a relaxed time packing and then took an easy walk down to the Hafeshwar Mandir and Ashram, which we reached in a couple of hours.

The hall allocated for pilgrims was completely empty and devoid of any furnishings. The ambience, atmosphere and energy in the building felt empty, cold, dark and uninviting.

At first, I thought I should have stayed back in Kadipani. When I mentioned this to Vinay, he agreed and said that perhaps we should walk back after having something to eat.

Before lunch was served, we took *darshan* in the new temple, which was exquisite. The spiritual energy was vibrant and tangible, and the visit was well worth the journey.

While soaking up the surroundings of the temple, we met a young Swami who informed us that we could take a shortcut from Hafeshwar and that it was not necessary to walk back to Kadipani and continue from there.

The route was evidently very scenic and quite remote, which sounded just perfect. So, we chose to ignore the energy in the pilgrims' hall and decided to stay the night.

When the bell rang, we knew that lunch was about to be served. As we prepared to sit on the balcony floor for lunch, the Swami in charge of the ashram addressed Vinay.

He told him that in his ashram everyone ate using their right hand and that it was not permissible for the left hand to touch any food.

As Vinay was busy conveying this to me in English, the Swami looked across at me and, in a stern manner, said to me in Hindi, "You must sit properly with your legs crossed in the proper way if you want to have lunch at this ashram."

I had no idea what he had said to me, but his tone, the severe look on his face and the perplexed expression on Vinay's face made me realise that something was definitely wrong.

I had never had the flexibility to sit cross-legged in such a way that I could place my tin plate in front of me to eat. I sat awkwardly with my plate at my side and my knees uncomfortably raised.

Vinay responded respectfully to the Swami on my behalf and briefly tried to explain that I was complying as best I could, but the Swami was unsympathetic.

Vinay was distraught when he finally managed to explain to me what the Swami had said. With disbelief, dismay and utter surprise, I looked directly at the Swami, smiled, slowly stood up, picked up my tin plate and proceeded to leave.

One of the young monks had been witnessing the interaction. He went and fetched a plastic chair and placed it to one side, indicating that I should make use of it to eat my lunch.

Sitting away from everyone made me feel as though I was an outcast, and I felt ridiculed for not being able to sit in *padmasana* and eat lunch like everyone else.

The Swami carried on with his meal and everyone followed, but I could see that Vinay was totally riled by what had just unfolded. After lunch, he wanted us to leave and walk back to Kadipani.

We spoke about this unfortunate interaction after lunch. He conveyed his annoyance and disgust at some of the beliefs, dogma and rituals that still exist and are adhered to in India.

I was less annoyed and more forgiving, and able to see the situation for what it truly was.

What I saw was a so-called religious person who had lost sight of the wood for the trees: someone who was totally caught up in behaviours that were meaningless and irrelevant.

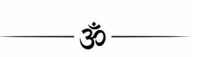
When Vinay said, "Let's go," I reminded him of the shortcut that we could take in the morning and soon managed to

persuade him that we should stay and simply forget about what had happened earlier.

After an afternoon sleep and some tasty chai, we took a walk down to the water's edge.

It was surreal to see the flag from the old temple sticking out of Maa Narmada and flapping in the wind, knowing that beneath the shimmering water was a complete temple building that had been totally consumed by the holy waters of the Narmada River.

We stayed there until the sun finally dropped beneath the horizon, allowing Maiya to wash away all the irritations of our lunchtime saga.



Chapter 27

The Unexpected Goodbye



"The nearer a man comes to a calm mind, the closer he is to strength."

Marcus Aurelius

We had briefly heard about a shortcut that would take us back onto the banks of Maa Narmada, so before leaving Hafeshwar, we made sure that we got detailed directions from the young Swami.

After packing up and having some early morning chai, we made our way towards the ashram gate, where we met the young Swami, who was there to show us how to get onto the path leading to the shortcut. He told us that the next ashram was in the little village of Mathwad, 15 kilometres away, and then gave each of us ₹10, said "Narmade Har" and waved us goodbye.

The views of the Narmada backwaters were absolutely exquisite, and the walk was exactly as described by the young Swami.

The first few kilometres were on single tracks through some hilly farmland, which eventually emerged onto a paved road. This road was flat for about 2 kilometres until we started approaching the big hill, which lasted for about 5 kilometres.

Vinay was walking strongly and went ahead. The hill was a stark reminder of the steep climb up to Kappermal, which Swami Sadanand and I had tackled together while walking through the Shoolpane Forest just over a month earlier.

As I thought back to that time, I could hardly believe how much had transpired in the five weeks since then.

After an hour and a half of steep uphill walking, I finally reached the crest of the big hill, where Vinay was sitting quietly waiting for me. He told me that the Hanuman Mandir in Mathwad was about 5 kilometres away, and we agreed to meet there.

It was a gradual descent all the way, and when I finally arrived, it was just after 1:00 pm. We were given lunch by a family who lived across the way from the small temple, which had an enclosure next to it made from mud and grass.

It was extremely rustic, but I was quite happy to consider spending the night there, not knowing that Vinay had other ideas.

After an enjoyable meal, we both took a nap in the basic shelter. The foot that had been bothering me for many days felt absolutely fantastic, and I was enormously relieved that the problem had been alleviated.

When I woke from a wonderful afternoon sleep, I noticed that Vinay was rolling up his sleeping mat and immediately asked, "So where are you going?"

Without any emotion or explanation, he simply replied, "I am going to Attha," which was about 8 kilometres away.

I was astounded. We had been getting on really well, and I naturally assumed that we would have at least discussed his plan to continue and not spend the night. But, for reasons unknown to me, that didn't happen.

The Narmada Parikrama is a solo journey, and as much as I had enjoyed walking with numerous individuals in the past, I was starting to learn not to become attached to any one companion.

As Vinay slung his bag onto his back and grabbed hold of his stick, I made my way to the entrance of the small rustic shelter and waited for him to leave.

I wished him a safe journey and, without any further discussion, said, "Narmade Har."

He returned the greeting and started walking away from the temple and out of town.

I stood watching him for a while, realising that I was on my own again. In that moment, I savoured the realisation that throughout the eons of time, I had always been on my own.

In the core of my being, I knew that I was a drop in the vast and unfathomable ocean of cosmic consciousness. I knew that I existed, that I was conscious and that I was blissful. I also knew that I was formless, changeless and pure awareness.

I had never been born, and I would never die.

As I stood staring down the road, watching Vinay get smaller and smaller, I pondered this realisation deeply. An overwhelming sense of peace shrouded my entire being, and I knew that, in that moment, everything was just perfect and all was unfolding without blemish.

As the local school finished for the day, many of the young children came to know that there was a stranger in town, and throughout the afternoon, many of them came to visit me.

They would say "Narmade Har" and then peep inside the mud-and-grass shelter to satisfy their curiosity about where I was planning to spend the night.

In the early evening, I took a wash at the village hand pump alongside a number of ladies who were there to fill their water pots for their household needs.

At dusk, the same family from across the way called me over for something to eat. They served me some *makki ki roti* and *sabzi* for dinner. It was delicious and left me completely satisfied.

It was a windy night in the rustic shelter, but I was warm and comfortable.

I was up early and ready to leave, but not without first having some herbal tea.

I walked to Bamansher and then passed Kosariya on my way to Attha. Most of the walking was on single tracks and through some very beautiful farmland, and it didn't take me long to cover the 8 kilometres to the Attha Ashram, which was where Vinay had spent the previous night.

It was mid-morning, but the Swami insisted that I stay for lunch, which he was busy preparing. After an enjoyable meal, I walked another 6 kilometres to Umrath.

Along the way, a schoolteacher by the name of Tikamsingh Solanki stopped on his motorcycle and invited me to spend the night at his house, but I respectfully declined.

I had been in contact with Kuldeep Bhati, who had been making all sorts of plans to visit me at the Umrath Ashram later in the day.

Kuldeep, whom I had met in Vimleshwar and who had kept everyone entertained while we were on the boat crossing the Arabian Sea to Mithi Tilai, was in the area. When he knew where I intended to spend the night, he was adamant that he would meet me there.

When I arrived at the ashram, there were a few other parikramawasis around, including Prachi, whom I had last seen in the Shoolpane Forest five weeks earlier.

She was walking with a farmer by the name of Mohan, and her journey was going well. So much had happened since we had last seen each other, and we had a lot to catch up on.

Soon afterwards, Kuldeep Bhati arrived in a car with a few friends. He brought a flask full of fresh tea, a large bunch of bananas, flowers and other fruit and snacks.

He had also managed to buy me some insoles for my shoes, which I was extremely grateful to receive from him. I was very confident that these would definitely prevent my foot problem from reappearing until such time as I could buy a new pair of shoes.

Kuldeep then stopped a bunch of people on motorcycles who were busy doing their Narmada Parikrama a lot more easily than I was.

One of those motorcyclists was Gopal Manve, a businessman from Maheshwar. He owned a hotel called Sakshi Palace, which had a space allocated for parikramawasis, and he

extended invitations to everyone at the Umrath Ashram to come and stay with him when we arrived in Maheshwar.

Kuldeep Bhati was still as loud, boisterous and funny as ever. He was not only the life and soul of the party, but also extended an enormous amount of hospitality, warmth, laughter and generosity to all of us pilgrims.

He did so by interacting with everyone in such a joyous and light-hearted manner that it was impossible not to join in.

We all celebrated being together, and numerous people made speeches. I was also asked to say a few words.

It turned out to be a very festive afternoon, enjoyed by everyone.

As the sun started dipping beneath the horizon, some volunteers from the village came to the ashram to prepare dinner, which was good, despite all the tasty snacks and fruit we had consumed earlier.

I was given my own room in the ashram, which brought another wonderful day to a comfortable close.

Soon after starting to walk the next day, I faintly heard someone shouting, "Narmade Har!"

I stopped in my tracks, looked around and saw someone standing on a hillock and waving like mad at me.

I shouted, "Narmade Har!" and waved back, but continued walking.

The greeting continued, and so did the arm waving. Then I realised that it was Tikamsingh Solanki, the schoolteacher I had met the previous day.

Five minutes later, he pulled up next to me on his motorcycle and insisted that I come and meet his family and have some chai.

I had just got into my stride and rhythm and was reluctant to get onto the back of his motorcycle, but he twisted my arm and said that he only wanted 15 minutes of my time. He assured me that he would drop me back at the same place when we were done, so I obliged.

He was proud to introduce me to his family and then served me hot roasted *mungfali* and chai for breakfast.

It was delicious, and I ended up spending 45 minutes with him. I became slightly irritated, however, when I ended up walking back to the road instead of him dropping me off where he had picked me up, as promised.

I walked to the ashram in the little village of Temla and was given some chai.

My foot felt fantastic. Kuldeep Bhati's insoles were an absolute godsend, and I was extremely grateful for his kind attention.

The walking from Temla was on single dusty farm tracks and through some very dry and desolate hills.

Along the way, I came across a shaded thorn tree with a water container beneath it, filled with cool, fresh water for parikramawasis to drink.

There was no one around to thank for this selfless service, but the hard work and responsibility involved in keeping the container topped up without expecting anything in return was astounding.

I stood there mesmerised, looking at my remote surroundings, then at the water container and back again, before taking a drink.

The care and concern displayed by the local communities living around the Narmada River never ceased to amaze me.

I topped up my water bottle, quenched my thirst and started walking towards Kulwat on a paved road.

At one point, I randomly looked up and, in that very moment, saw an arrow pointing diagonally away from the road and onto another single track.

I immediately felt that I had been guided to see this shortcut marking.

Guidance of this nature is happening to all of us all of the time, but most of us are caught up in a clutter of thoughts that dominate our minds. We are never still and quiet enough to recognise the subtle pointers that are being gently revealed to us every moment of the day.

As I made my way onto the narrow pathway, I acknowledged this guidance and gave thanks for the way it had been given to me at just the right moment.

The remainder of the walk to Kulwat was absolutely beautiful, with some breathtaking scenery.

Just before reaching the Kulwat Ashram, I crossed over the Hathni River, which is one of the major tributaries that flows into the Narmada River.

I had something to eat at the ashram and then took an afternoon nap. I was very keen to spend the night, but all of a

sudden a group of parikramawasis arrived and filled the hall. The atmosphere became very noisy.

So I packed my bag and moved on.

I established that there was a Hanuman Mandir in Kevada, which was 4 kilometres away, and I made my way in that direction.

I arrived in the late afternoon and met the two chillum-smoking Swamis who were in charge. They confirmed that I could stay over.

The Sita Ram Mantra was playing loudly through the mandir speakers, and after dinner I asked when the music was going to be turned off.

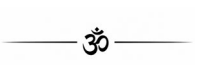
The answer I received was that it would continue throughout the night.

So I grabbed my torch and started walking through the ashram grounds, trying to find a quiet place to lay out my sleeping things.

The older Swami saw me traipsing through the gardens in the dark and came over to find out what I was doing.

When I told him that there was no way I would be able to sleep with the loud Sita Ram chanting, he took me to a round *kutir* located in one corner of the ashram grounds and said that I could spend the night there.

Maa Narmada had once again taken care of my needs, and I went to sleep with a feeling of intense gratitude.



Chapter 28

Sacred Chanting and Barefoot Walking



"Something very beautiful happens to people when their world has fallen apart: a humility, a nobility, a higher intelligence emerges at just the point when their knees hit the floor."

Marianne Williamson

The following morning, I started walking towards Dahi, but not before having two delicious cups of tea.

Just before walking into Dahi, Devendra Trivedi pulled me over and asked if I wanted to have breakfast. Someone had sent him a few photographs of me that had been taken the previous afternoon at the Hanuman Mandir, so he knew who he was looking for and was waiting for my arrival in his small village.

This was absolutely amazing, as I certainly couldn't remember anyone taking my photograph the previous day.

He served me rice and curry for breakfast, and we ended up having some good *satsang*. He suggested that I make my way towards Dharmrai, which was close to the Narmada River, and I was happy to receive that news.

As I made my way through Dahi, a young man pulled up next to me on his motorcycle and said, "Don't trust anyone. This is India."

I smiled and nodded at him and said, "Thank you, but I am well protected and guided, so I have nothing to worry about."

I could see the perplexed look on his face as I thought about the way Maiya held me in her lap. Deep down, I knew that I had nothing to ever be concerned about.

After arriving in Dharmrai, I came across an ashram that was still under construction. It was an amazing structure and would undoubtedly be stunning once it was completed, but it didn't look liveable in its present state.

However, I was invited to stay in the foreman's storeroom and informed that someone would give me an evening meal.

This all sounded wonderful. I had stayed in dusty storerooms before and thought nothing further about the inconvenience.

A little while later, I established that the Falhari Baba Ashram was 2 kilometres down the road, so I packed up my few things once more and headed in that direction.

This proved to be the perfect decision. There were a number of local people hanging around, all intrigued by my presence. We enjoyed numerous cups of chai together and shared a lot of laughter and frivolity.

Just as I was about to get into my sleeping bag, a crowd of young men arrived carrying a range of different musical instruments.

After greeting the Swami, they proceeded to plug some of these into amplifiers and other sound equipment.

I couldn't believe what was happening so late in the evening and, when I enquired what the gathering was all about, I was told that the group met at the ashram once a week to perform *kirtan* and sing *bhajans*, and that the performance would be over by 10:00 pm.

I sat around watching all the preparations until the singing and chanting began.

It was a magical experience.

At the end of the evening, I sat chatting with some of the young men while they packed up their equipment. I never really knew the difference between *bhajans* and *kirtan*, so I asked them to explain the two forms of devotion in a little more detail.

They began by telling me that the word 'bhajan' comes from the Sanskrit root *bhaj*, meaning 'to share' or 'to serve'. A *bhajan* is therefore a devotional song that expresses love and devotion towards a deity, saint or spiritual concept.

Bhajans are deeply personal. Each one tells a story, conveys an emotion and creates an intimate connection between the singer and the divine.

Bhajans are historically rooted in the Bhakti movement and emerged as a democratic spiritual practice accessible to people from all social classes. They replaced the rigidity of temple rituals with a more accessible form of emotional devotion through music.

Some of the most beloved bhajans have been passed down through the centuries, having been composed by enlightened

saints and philosophers such as Adi Shankaracharya, Tulsidas and Narsinh Mehta.

These bhajans aren't just songs but spiritual transmissions carrying the wisdom and realisation of enlightened masters.

The young men went on to explain that modern research into ancient wisdom converges on the profound benefits of bhajan practice.

They told me that the sophisticated lyrics help listeners work through complex emotions and spiritual questions, while the framework creates a psychological container for inner exploration and aids the practice of meditation and contemplation.

Classical musical patterns can activate the parasympathetic nervous system and help reduce stress. Bhajans cultivate spiritual depth by connecting us to centuries of devotional wisdom. They are intellectually engaging and can enhance philosophical growth.

When bhajans are sung using proper vocal techniques, they can improve lung capacity, posture and overall health. Unlike passive listening, learning and singing bhajans creates active engagement with the practice and, they believed, can bring about lasting transformation.

These smart and intelligent young men then explained that the word 'kirtan' comes from the Sanskrit root meaning 'to praise' or 'glorify'.

A *kirtan* is a call-and-response chanting practice in which a leader sings a mantra or devotional phrase and the community responds in unison.

It is participatory, joyful and designed to create a collective spiritual experience.

While bhajans emphasise individual artistry, kirtans celebrate collective consciousness. A kirtan without an audience is like a fire without oxygen — it loses its transformative power.

The group energy is not incidental; it is essential.

Kirtans are built on accessibility and repetition and include mantras such as 'Om Namah Shivaya', 'Sri Ram Jai Ram' and 'Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare'.

While bhajans developed through the Bhakti movement, kirtans have evolved from Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the 16th century through the Hare Krishna tradition and into the modern day with artists such as Krishna Das, Jai Uttal and Snatam Kaur.

Today, kirtan is commonplace in yoga studios, ashrams and meditation centres around the world.

Modern neuroscience is finally catching up with what the yogis have known for centuries. The young men told me that research was affirming that chanting stimulates the vagus nerve, which in turn regulates the parasympathetic nervous system.

They explained that group chanting can synchronise participants' heart rhythms and create a profound sense of connection. Mantra repetition can shift brainwave patterns towards meditative states, potentially reducing anxiety and depression.

The group experience can also combat isolation and loneliness and promote social connectivity.

Kirtan is accessible to everyone, and no previous spiritual or musical training is required. The effects can be felt immediately and can provide a safe avenue for emotional release.

My stay at the Falhari Baba Ashram had been joyful and informative, and my next destination was the Meghnath Ghat Ashram, which was only 13 kilometres away.

It was a cool and cloudy morning, and I reached there in no time. The ashram was beautifully positioned overlooking Maa Narmada, and the sleeping place I was shown was clean and quiet.

I was the only parikramawasi staying over for the night, so the ashram was quiet and serene.

The old Swami in charge of the ashram only ate one meal a day, but he made a point of always sitting with whoever was staying at the ashram during meal times, which I thought was really special.

I decided to spend an extra day at the ashram, as I needed to catch up with some clothes washing and, more importantly, with myself.

During the morning, a few other parikramawasis arrived, including Prachi. She had teamed up with a farmer by the name of Mohan, and they were walking together.

Our paths had crossed a few times now, and her journey was still going according to plan.

I also met Baba Ramnath Mallya, who was walking barefoot.

I thought about how my feet had struggled in old shoes and found barefoot walking difficult to comprehend.

I knew that walking the Narmada Parikrama barefoot was one of the most important austerities. Walking barefoot is the ultimate form of surrender and humility and means that you come to Maa Narmada with nothing between you and her earth.

It is an act of *samarpan* and states, 'I am yours, step by step'.

Walking barefoot keeps you in constant touch with her banks, forests and villages, and each step becomes a mantra.

I had not seen many other pilgrims walking barefoot and was really impressed with Baba Ramnath's fortitude.

He also had a great command of the English language and a wonderful sense of humour, and we connected immediately.

I decided to move to the open hall to spend the night because the room was starting to feel claustrophobic with so many people around.

But I still slept badly because there was a pack of dogs roaming around that were constantly barking and wailing, which was really disturbing.

The morning sunrise, however, soon dispelled the irritation of a poor night's sleep.

After some chai, I set off in the direction of Koteswar but decided not to visit the temple because it was out of the way.

When I met up with Baba Ramnath later in the day, he confirmed that I had made a good decision, saying that the temple was run-down and not worth a visit.

At lunchtime, a gentleman by the name of Suresh insisted that I have lunch at his house, where he served me three *baatis* and a delicious sauce to go with them.

I left his home feeling extremely well satisfied and was immediately on the lookout for somewhere to take an afternoon rest.

I found a shelter hidden from the road and slept soundly for an hour or so.

Soon after I got going again, I came across the Siddha Ashram and decided to spend the night. The ashram was a modern home that had been converted, and the amenities were brand new, clean and well looked after.

I had been in contact with Baba Ramnath, who joined me at the ashram later in the day, and we spent an enjoyable evening together.

The following morning, Baba Ramnath and I headed towards the Neelkanteshwar Mandir, which was evidently steeped in history.

Along the way, we stopped for chai and were joined by a few other parikramawasis soon afterwards, including Naman Chander-Shekhar, whom I had met in Diver and invited to join Maa Narmada's Jayanti, which had been organised by Vinubhai.

The Neelkanteshwar Mandir was built around 1080 CE during the time of King Udayaditya, and the main deity is called Udayeshvara.

It is believed that at this sacred place, Lord Shiva meditated for 60,000 years after drinking the Kalkut poison from the Samudra Manthan.

The temple is situated on the banks of Maa Narmada and is surrounded by small hills, dense greenery and silence. It is home to intricate stone pillars, sculptures, friezes and motifs.

We ended up staying for lunch, and then Baba Ramnath and I walked to another small temple and took a rest for a few hours before walking another 4 kilometres to the Ram Mandir in Gopalpura, where we spent the night.

Baba Ramnath and I spent the next day walking to an ashram in Karoli, where we had a spicy lunch before walking to Ajanda and the Panchmukhi Hanuman Mandir.

We were the only two parikramawasis staying over and were allocated a unique room with a tree growing in the middle of it.

The following day, we made our way towards Bakaner and crossed the Maan River before finding the ashram.

We had lunch together and then parted company.

Baba Ramnath had made the decision to go up to the hill station known as Mandu, where there is a kund that is believed to be a part of Maa Narmada and therefore important to walk around, so as to honour the rule of not crossing Maa Narmada while walking the Parikrama.

Rewa Kund is in the small town of Mandu, which is the new name for Mandav.

It is a historic fort town situated on a plateau, and the kund sits directly in front of Baz Bahadur's Palace and Rani Roopmati's Pavilion.

The kund was built by Sultan Baz Bahadur for his beloved Rani Roopmati, who was a great devotee of Maa Narmada. The water for the kund was channelled from the Narmada River, and Rani Roopmati would bathe in the pond and worship Maiya on a daily basis.

Due to this direct link, many devotees believe that the water carries Maa Narmada's sanctity.

The kund is approximately 480 vertical metres above Maa Narmada and about 22 kilometres away. Interestingly, in the dry season, it never dries up when all the other ponds in the area do dry up.

When the water of Maa Narmada gets muddy during the monsoon season, the water in the kund gets muddy as well.

This adds to the belief that the kund is physically connected to the Narmada River.

In many scriptures and in local tradition, 'Rewa' is another name for Narmada, and the 'Rewa Kund' is seen as a symbolic extension of the river itself.

This is one reason why some parikramawasis consider circumambulating Rewa Kund as equivalent to performing *pradakshina* of a Narmada *tirtha* — the sacred act of walking in a clockwise circle around a deity, temple or holy object.

It is also believed that where Narmada's water has been brought with devotion, the goddess's presence remains.

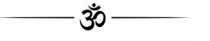
The love and devotion of Rani Roopmati for Maa Narmada adds to the spiritual energy in Mandu, and people say that her worship is invited to the town.

Nowadays, bathing in the kund is not permissible, but people take *darshan*, perform other *pujas* and rituals, and do a *parikrama* of the kund.

It is also believed that walking the Narmada Parikrama isn't just about walking the riverbank, but also about following the 'spirit' of the river through places that have been touched by her.

That is the reason why *tirthas*, *kunds* and temples connected to Maa Narmada, by legend or by water, are included by many parikramawasis, even if they are a few kilometres away from the main river.

When I had last been with Tiger Baba, we had discussed the significance of making the detour to Mandu or not. He informed me that many of the *mahatmas* walking the Parikrama do not follow the rule, and I based my decision on our discussion, as well as on my own intuitive feelings.



Chapter 29

The 190-Year-Old Saint



"Forget the past. The vanished lives of all men are dark with many shames. Human conduct is ever unreliable until anchored in the divine. Everything in the future will improve if you are making a spiritual effort now."

Swami Sri Yukteswar

After saying farewell to Baba Ramnath and wishing him well on his journey to Mandu, I walked into Bakaner and stopped to buy a few pairs of socks.

When I tried to pay for them, I was told that they were a gift from Maa Narmada.

As I made my way through the town, I was showered with numerous other gifts. I was given packets of biscuits, peanuts, bananas, washing powder, carrots, Vaseline, and some fresh mango and sugarcane juice.

It was astounding to be given such an array of things within the boundaries of a small town, and I never grew tired of these kind gestures from the people who lived and worked around the Narmada River.

I also felt more pleased than ever that I had decided not to go up to Mandu with Baba Ramnath.

On the way out of town, I stopped at a small temple to take a rest. It was a hot day, and I needed to escape the heat for a while.

As it started cooling down, I walked another 6 kilometres to Tavalai Bujurg. The mandir was on the main road, and I was informed that I could spend the night and that one of the local shop owners would ensure that I got something to eat.

There were no bathroom or toilet facilities attached to the temple, so I took a bucket wash at the hand pump in full view of all the passers-by and used the bushes behind the mandir to relieve myself. It was pretty disgusting, but I had no other choice and was told that this was the protocol.

The local shopkeeper who was supposed to provide me with something to eat forgot all about me, but three kind gentlemen later brought me some *roti*, *sabzi* and chilled buttermilk for dinner, which went down exceptionally well.

I was up early and made a start to Dharmpuri, where I met a lovely schoolteacher by the name of Suresh.

He served me *poha* and chai for breakfast and then called all of his students out of the classroom to come and meet me.

They were all bubbling with excitement and enthusiasm at the sight of this foreigner dressed as a monk and couldn't stop giggling as we all shouted out, "Narmade Har!"

As I made my way through Dharmpuri, I was given bananas, oranges and grapes. I was extremely grateful to be given all this healthy food, but the increased weight in my bag slowed me down and made my journey towards Khalghat more tiring than I would have enjoyed.

Google Maps showed me that the Dandi Swami Ashram was located just before Khalghat, and I made my way straight there.

The ashram had a beautiful view of Maa Narmada, but when I arrived at the front door, a large flat-screen television was blasting at full volume, and no one seemed to be around.

I called out, "Narmade Har!" for a good while until eventually Swami Dandi arrived and gestured to me without using any words.

I said, "Narmade Har!" and stepped inside.

He appeared to have been sleeping, and I assumed he hadn't heard my greeting. He showed me a chair and gestured that I should sit down.

He went and turned off the television and then came and sat opposite me and simply stared at me as though I had just arrived from outer space.

I'm not sure how long we sat there without a single word being uttered, but it made me feel very uncomfortable.

As the minutes passed, the situation started to feel very weird and unusually strange, and I didn't know what to make of it.

Eventually, the Swami stood up, walked over to a sturdy table standing in the middle of the room and proceeded to climb onto it.

He then positioned himself in the lotus posture and began chanting and reciting a range of different mantras, using laminated cards as prompts.

All of this behaviour made me feel very uneasy, and in my gut I knew that I couldn't stay in this ashram with this very odd monastic.

So, while he was still busy chanting, I walked out through the door I had entered, put on my shoes, lifted my bag onto my back, took hold of my stick and started walking towards Khalghat.

About an hour later, I found the Narmada Mandir and Rewa Ashray Ashram on the other side of town.

I was met by Swapnil Manwatkar, who immediately offered me some tea. He was looking after this ashram, which had a stunning view overlooking Maa Narmada.

The ashram was small and cosy, and it had a good energy. After a wash, Swapnil and I sat outside looking at the river and talking about the Parikrama until the sun went down.

Swapnil spoke perfect English. He had walked the Parikrama once before and was very knowledgeable about all the historical, cultural, philosophical and spiritual aspects of the pilgrimage.

The following day was Mahashivratri, and Swapnil asked me to stay, as there was going to be a huge celebration down at the ghat and he wanted me to participate.

I told him that Maa Narmada would make the decision and that I would inform him of her plans in the morning.

Above the main ashram building was a covered shelter where I spent the night with one other Swami who was walking the Parikrama.

The mosquitoes were a real nuisance, which made me think that I would not stay for Mahashivratri but rather continue walking.

But when I saw the early morning sunrise, Maa Narmada changed my mind.

I spent the day catching up with myself and then, in the late afternoon, went down to the ghat and found a quiet place where I was able to take a ceremonial dip.

As I submerged myself in the cool waters of Maiya, a deep sense of reverence, peace and connectivity came over me.

With every step of my journey along the banks of Maa Narmada, my relationship with this holy river had deepened, and it was a very beautiful thing to witness.

In the late afternoon, a few more parikramawasis arrived, including a pilgrim by the name of Swapnil Joshi.

He was a retired banker who planned on completing his Parikrama in 108 days, and he was on track to finish his journey within that time.

After dinner, we all went down to the ghat and joined thousands of local people who had turned up for the celebrations and the *aarti*.

Mahashivratri is often referred to as 'The Great Night of Shiva' and is one of the most sacred nights in Sanatan Dharma.

It generally falls on Phalguna Krishna Chaturdashi, which is around February to March.

This is the night when Shiva and Parvati got married, so it represents the union of *purusha* and *prakriti*, which are consciousness and energy.

Devotees keep *jagran* to witness that cosmic marriage within themselves.

This is also the night that Shiva performed the cosmic dance of creation, preservation and destruction and appeared as an infinite pillar of light to Brahma and Vishnu, showing that there is no beginning or end to him.

This is a time for inner transformation.

Yogis say the planet's energies are in a special alignment on Mahashivratri, so staying awake in stillness and meditation helps the energies in the *sushumna nadi* to rise more easily.

Mahashivratri provides an opportunity to overcome darkness, and it symbolises moving from ignorance to awareness.

Fasting and chanting 'Om Namah Shivaya' are also considered appropriate ways to purify the body and mind during these festivities.

There is a very special connection between Maa Narmada and Shiva, as it is said that the Narmada emerged from Shiva's sweat during his *tapasya*.

Mahashivratri isn't just about worshipping an outside God. It is also about remembering that we too have that still, 'destroyer-of-illusion, yogi nature' within us.

It is also believed that one night of awareness can burn away years of karma and, for many parikramawasis doing the 3 year, 3 month and 13-day Parikrama, Mahashivratri is the day to renew their *sankalp*.

An appropriate way to do this would be to take three dips at midnight in Maa Narmada: one for past karma, one for the present and one for future karma.

Many devotees believe that one dip in Maa Narmada on Mahashivratri is equal to 1,000 dips elsewhere.

At one point during the proceedings, all of us who were staying at the Rewa Ashray Ashram were invited onto the platform to perform the *aarti* alongside the pandit.

We were all honoured in the process, which made the evening a very special and memorable occasion.

The new day arrived with another beautiful sunrise and, after a casual and relaxed start, I only began walking at 8:45 am.

On the way to Maheshwar, I stopped at the Rewa Shree Ashram in Jalkoti and was served the most delicious Maharashtrian thali for lunch.

Thali is a mixture of Indian food, usually served on a round platter with rice or *chapati*.

I started walking again in the heat of the day and realised that summer was firmly establishing itself.

In order to avoid the midday furnace, I knew I would need to start adjusting my walking schedule. I had to avoid walking from 10:30 am to 3:30 pm and only walk before and after those hours.

The remaining few hours of walking to Maheshwar went well, and I easily found Gopal Manve's Sakshi Palace, where I was given a very warm welcome.

Prachi and Mohan had arrived a few hours before me and had already settled in.

Maheshwar is a historic temple town situated right on the banks of the Narmada River and is famous for its fort, sacred ghats and handwoven Maheshwari silk saris.

The handloom tradition was revived in the 18th century by Rani Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore. She invited weavers from Gujarat, Maharashtra and South India to settle in Maheshwar and created the Maheshwari sari as a blend of cotton and silk, with temple-inspired borders.

As a result, the craft has deep ties to the river, temples and royal patronage.

The handloom industry in Maheshwar is run by a cluster of families and cooperatives, and thousands of people in Maheshwar and nearby villages depend on it.

This beautiful and unique craft is a part of the town's identity, along with the Narmada Ghats.

After refreshing myself, Gopal took us to his home for chai and then showed us his handloom factory, situated above his home.

This lucrative business had 40 handlooms, with each loom producing one sari per day.

Watching his craftsmen and women operating their handlooms was fascinating and mesmerising, and it left me feeling totally transfixed.

Each sari was sold for approximately ₹5,000, generating some serious cash flow on a monthly basis.

Prachi, Mohan and I then walked down to the famous Maheshwar Fort overlooking the river and featuring fine royal residences and Maratha architecture.

While walking along the ghats, we bumped into Naman and Raghu and ended up enjoying some ice creams and having some profound *satsang* with them about the Narmada Parikrama and Indian spirituality.

On our way back to the Sakshi Palace, I was ecstatic to find a shoe store where I was able to finally buy myself a new pair of walking shoes.

This was the third pair of shoes that I had bought for the Parikrama, and I felt very confident that these would see me through to the end of my pilgrimage.

Gopal took the three of us to a Punjabi restaurant close to his hotel for dinner, before we got to sleep at around 11:00 pm.

I was ready to leave the next day just before 7:00 am.

I said my goodbyes to Gopal and to Prachi and Mohan, who were off to take a ceremonial dip in Maa Narmada before commencing their day's walk.

I made my way to Marbleshwar and then on to an ashram in Sulgaon, which was run by a Mataji.

I had some lunch, a rest and then, later in the afternoon, walked to Pathrad, where I stopped at the Hanuman Mandir and was able to spend the night.

Numerous devotees came to the temple for the *aarti* and then stayed for *kirtan*, *bhajan* and other devotional chanting.

It confirmed for me once again what an integral role the village temples play in the lives of the local people.

Many folks simply come to the temple to meet friends and hang out, which is a lot healthier than going to have a drink at the local pub, as many people do in other parts of the world.

A group of men then arrived to read the *Ramayana*, and by the time everyone left and went home, it was 11:00 pm.

After leaving Pathrad, I walked to the Muni Baba Ashram, where I stayed for lunch.

After a rest, I made my way towards the Dhureshwar Mandir, but not without first crossing a river that flowed into Maa Narmada.

It was around this time that I met Swami Satiananda from the Chinmaya Mission, and little did I know how our paths would cross over the next few days.

In the late afternoon, I stopped at a home ashram in Ramweshwar, which was right next to the Ram Mandir.

It was a good place to stay.

I started walking earlier than usual because of the summer temperatures, and on my way met up with Raghu, Harsh and Naman.

I had bumped into them many times over the previous few days. They were a very likeable bunch of young men who were mostly walking together, and I enjoyed their company.

I joined them for chai, and then we walked together for a few hours.

We stopped at a temporary ashram that had been established on a farmer's land for the sole purpose of being of service to pilgrims walking the Narmada Parikrama.

They served us chai, as well as some buttermilk, which was extremely delicious.

After resting for a while, we walked together until we reached the Barfani Baba Kriya Yog Ashram.

We were thrilled to hear that Barfani Baba was in residence, and we were very excited to meet this Himalayan saint that we had heard so much about.

After arriving at the Barfani Kriya Yog Ashram, we sat around chatting with some of Barfani Baba's closest disciples.

We were very keen to hear all about this respected mystical Himalayan saint and couldn't wait to meet him.

We heard that he was in excess of 190 years old and that he had spent 60 years of his life living in a cave in the Himalayas.

He would evidently spend four years in *samadhi*, two years out of *samadhi* and then go back into *samadhi*, alternating between these states of consciousness for years at a time.

One of the disciples then said that when Barfani Baba calls Mahavatar Babaji, he comes and visits him.

I knew there were numerous accounts of Mahavatar Babaji visiting renowned spiritual gurus such as Lahiri Mahasaya, Sri Yukteswar and Paramahansa Yogananda, but these visitations were few and far between and usually very brief.

This left me feeling somewhat sceptical about what I had just heard.

Barfani Baba eventually arrived, just like a gentle breeze that quietly touched your skin.

There was no procession and no announcement, but suddenly, there he was.

His presence was powerful, but it was also gentle and childlike.

One of his disciples helped him into a chair, which was placed in front of us, and one by one we went and paid our respects by touching his feet.

He never spoke a word of English, but Naman, Raghu and Harsh took turns to share with me the essence of what softly flowed from his mouth.

He praised the practice of Kriya Yoga and meditation, the Himalayas and Maa Narmada.

He emphasised the importance of doing *tapasya*, *seva* and being silent for extended periods of time, and stressed the importance of simple living.

The name 'Barfani' means 'of snow or ice', and in the Himalayan tradition, the name is associated with ascetics who practise intense *tapasya*.

Many saints take this name to signify purity and *vairagya*, and his devotees here at the ashram associated him with that same spirit of detachment and inner coolness.

At one point during our time together, Raghu said to me that Barfani Baba spoke simply and used words similar to those of a child.

This immediately reminded me of what Jesus had said to his disciples when asked the question, 'Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'

Jesus responded by calling a little child and placing the child among them and saying:

'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'

As the disciples focused on what constitutes 'greatness' in heaven, Jesus provided a new perspective: namely, that the way 'up' is 'down', indicating that meekness is required.

Jesus tells his disciples to seek and possess a childlike modesty in addition to their faith.

Those who willingly take the lowest position are the greatest in heaven's eyes.

A young child is destitute of ambition, pride and haughtiness and is therefore a good example for us.

Children are characteristically humble and teachable and aren't prone to pride or hypocrisy.

Humility is a virtue rewarded by God.

We had been invited to stay for lunch.

Before moving into the dining room, we all had our photograph taken with Barfani Baba, but I was still pondering Barfani Baba's age.

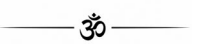
I knew that Paramahansa Yogananda had described the founder of Kriya Yoga, Mahavatar Babaji, as being about 2,000 years old, and that many saints who take the name 'Barfani' or 'Babaji' are linked in the minds of devotees to that lineage of immortal Himalayan masters.

I then realised that none of these numbers truly mattered.

Whether Barfani Baba had done six years or 60 years of *tapasya* in the Himalayas, whether he was 90 or 190 years old, was known only to himself and to Maa Narmada, and was totally irrelevant to me.

What was important to me was that I felt uplifted, inspired and lighter for being in his presence.

His childlike demeanour left a lasting impression on me.



Chapter 30

The Suitcase Lady



"For the faults of many, judge not the whole. Everything on earth is of mixed character, like a mingling of sand and sugar. Be like the wise ant which seizes only the sugar and leaves the sand untouched."

Mahavatar Babaji

After leaving the Barfani Baba Kriya Yog Ashram, I walked to the Charukeshwar Temple and Ashram, arriving just in time for chai.

Charukeshwar is home to a beautiful temple where they have been reciting 'God's name' in the form of 'Sita Ram' 24 hours a day, seven days a week, since 1991, without a single break.

On the campus of this temple was the biggest and most impressive banyan tree I had ever seen. The moment I cast my eyes on its magnificent branches and canopy, I knew that I wanted to spend some time in its presence.

The banyan tree is a very unusual-looking tree. Its botanical name is *Ficus benghalensis*, and it is part of the fig tree family, which has more than 750 species worldwide.

Banyans are strangler figs. They grow from seeds that land on other trees, and the roots they send down smother their hosts and grow into stout, branch-supporting pillars that resemble new tree trunks.

Each tree is pollinated by its own species of tiny wasps that only breed inside the figs of their partner trees.

Banyans are the world's biggest trees in terms of the area they cover, and the biggest one alive today is in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. It covers 1.9 hectares, or 4.7 acres, and can shelter 20,000 people.

Banyans are ecological linchpins. They produce vast crops of figs that sustain many species of birds, fruit bats, primates and other creatures, which in turn disperse the seeds of hundreds of other plant species.

The first Europeans to encounter banyan trees were Alexander the Great and his army, who reached India in 326 BCE.

The notes they took back to Greece informed Theophrastus, the founder of modern botany, and this ultimately led 17th-century English poet John Milton to write in *Paradise Lost* that Adam and Eve made their first clothes from banyan leaves.

Many Hindus believe that a banyan tree at Jyotisar is the one Lord Krishna stood beneath when he delivered the sermon of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

For thousands of years, people have used banyans as sources of medicine. In Nepal today, people use banyan leaves, bark and roots to treat more than 20 disorders.

Hindu texts written more than 2,500 years ago describe a cosmic 'world tree' as a banyan tree growing upside down, with its roots in the heavens and its trunk and branches extending down to earth to bring blessings to humanity.

During India's struggle for independence from Britain, British officers hanged hundreds of rebels from banyan trees, and this contributed to India making the banyan tree its national tree.

After a few refreshing cups of tea, I was shown around the temple complex and then given a room for the night, which pleased me no end.

The evening *aarti* was a very joyous affair and lasted for an hour, before dinner was served at 8:00 pm.

After an enjoyable meal, I sat outside on a bench listening to one of the monastics reciting 'Sita Ram' in the temple as part of his compulsory two-hour duty.

I was so enjoying this calm and peaceful environment, and the privacy of my own room, that I decided to spend an extra day at Charukeshwar. I was extremely grateful and relieved when I was given permission.

Spending one extra day in the same location is always special. It allows the body to get some rest and the soul to quieten down from all the diversity, sensory stimulation and range of experiences that overwhelm it on a moment-to-moment basis throughout a day while being constantly on the move.

These special rest days also enabled me to wash my clothing, write in my journal and do some video editing, which was a wonderful change from walking.

On my last morning at Charukeshwar, I walked down to the banyan tree to do my morning meditation at 5:30 am.

As I approached the tree, I heard someone disturbing the peace and quiet of the early morning by screaming at the top of their voice.

I couldn't make out the words or where the shouting was coming from, but then realised that it was coming from the vocal cords of the old *sadhak* who was reciting 'Sita Ram' in the temple.

Eventually, I made out the word 'chappal'.

I was still wearing my sandals and, as far as he was concerned, this was inappropriate.

I hadn't yet reached the meditation area beneath the banyan tree and genuinely felt that it was still appropriate to be wearing my footwear, but clearly, in the old *sadhak's* eyes, I was wrong.

I immediately stopped, turned around and took off my sandals, attempting to apologise by using various gestures.

This was not the first time I had bumped into the problem of not being sure where the threshold was for taking off my shoes, and it would not be my last either.

I had been in India long enough to know that the 'shoes off' rule is everywhere: at temples, ashrams, gurudwaras, homes and most dining areas.

I had learned that it's not just a custom, but that it has three layers to it.

The first element is purity and respect.

In Sanatan Dharma thought, the ground is sacred. When you walk into a temple, you're stepping onto *Devbhoomi*, the 'Land of the Gods', or the 'Land of the Divine'.

The floor where the deity sits is considered pure, while the shoes or sandals we wear carry dirt from the outside. Taking

them off prior to entering a sacred space is saying, 'I'm leaving the outside world here and entering with a clean body and mind.'

The place where we eat and sleep should also be free from what we have walked through on our way to our homes.

Secondly, in terms of yoga, the soles of the feet have energy points, and walking barefoot on stone, mud or temple floors helps us to ground ourselves and connect to the earth's energy.

The floors of temples and ghats are often made of stone, which is cold, and that coolness is believed to calm the nervous system during *darshan* and *dhyan*. Shoes are seen as a barrier between ourselves and that energy.

Thirdly, we bow down to take off our shoes, and this is a subtle act of surrender.

Before we bow to the deity, we bow to the custom.

It's a simple practice, but it trains us daily in respect, cleanliness and humility.

Bare feet on cool stone do something else as well. They remind us that we are on sacred ground.

The floor here is not just a floor. It is where saints have walked, where prayers are whispered and where Maa Narmada has touched the land.

Shoes carry the road with them. They carry the dust of the marketplace, the hurry of the city and the weight of 'I' and 'mine'.

To leave one's shoes outside is the first act of surrender. It says, 'I am not bringing the outside in.'

It also says, 'The shoes come off outside and the ego comes off inside.'

Over time, I began to learn that before I saw the deity, before I heard the bell and before I even stepped onto the threshold, I would take off my shoes.

After gathering my few things and having some breakfast of *poha* and chai, I made my way along the canal to Barwaha.

The route to the next ashram, which was in the jungle, was not straightforward, and I needed to ask for directions.

I eventually found my way into the jungle and, after a good few kilometres, saw a small, insignificant sign that directed me to the Chyavan Rishi Ashram.

It was in the middle of nowhere and completely isolated.

I had something to eat, took a rest and then left again for Kundi Gaon, where I ended up spending the night in a half-built farmhouse along with five other parikramawasis.

This farming family had made themselves available to take care of pilgrims walking the Narmada Parikrama and were subsidised by the government for doing so.

The place was dusty and chaotic, and every member of the household kept shouting at one another. I really questioned why I had left the Chyavan Rishi Ashram in the first place.

Before dinner was served, the farmer hosed me down with a hosepipe.

The water was absolutely freezing, but at least I was able to clean myself.

The following day, I was up early, and it didn't take long for me to start walking again.

After about 3 kilometres, I stopped in Kundi to ask for directions and, coincidentally, stopped right outside the Kundi Ashram.

It was so much nicer than where I had spent the previous night, but the previous day had been long and I wasn't sure I would have walked the extra 3 kilometres.

I had some chai and biscuits and then made my way into the forest.

The terrain was absolutely beautiful, and after crossing a major river, which was fortunately shallow, I continued through the forest to the little village of Pipri, where I stopped at the Narmada Mandir.

The space allocated for parikramawasis was a huge hall located beneath the temple, and I was pleasantly surprised to see Swami Satiananda from the Chinmaya Mission, who had arrived a little while before me.

We were of a similar age, and he had an uplifting energy and a warm and friendly smile.

Soon after I arrived, a young woman from Hyderabad arrived dragging a suitcase on wheels behind her.

She positioned herself in the hall fairly close to me.

She spoke good English and, when I asked her about her journey and the suitcase, she informed me that she intended to complete the Narmada Parikrama by walking and dragging the bag behind her.

I asked her whether she had just come through the forest in this manner, and she responded by saying that someone on a motorbike had given her a lift.

I thought she was crazy.

We spoke at length about her dragging a suitcase behind her, but everything I said to her about buying a rucksack and carrying her possessions on her back fell on deaf ears.

So all that remained was for me to wish her good luck on her journey.

At midnight, a bus arrived at the ashram gate with about 50 noisy parikramawasis, who walked into the hall, switched on all the lights and proceeded to spread themselves out and make themselves comfortable.

There are facilities on the Narmada Parikrama that cater specifically for large groups completing the journey by car, motorcycle or bus, and Pipri was clearly one of those.

The following morning, I left early and walked to the ashram in Ratanpur, where I was given *khichdi* for an early lunch.

After some rest, I made my way into the Lakkadkot Jungle.

It was absolutely exquisite, and I stopped on numerous occasions just to listen to the variety of birds and absorb the serenity and silence.

Just before I arrived at the Jayanti Mata Mandir, I had to cross a 15-metre-wide river on a rickety wooden bridge, which added an element of excitement to the day's journey.

When I arrived at the ashram, I was astounded to see the young woman who was dragging her bag on wheels behind her.

It didn't take long for her to tell me that all the wheels at the bottom of her bag had seized and were no longer functioning, and that she didn't know how she was going to get to the next ashram.

Someone had given her a ride to the Jayanti Mata Mandir and Ashram, and no doubt she would charm someone to give her a lift to the next destination.

I could hardly believe that she had made it this far.

Swami Satiananda arrived a little while later, and it was good to see him again.

I enjoyed his company and attitude about this profound journey that we were both undertaking and looked forward to getting to know him better.

At dinner time, we were told that no one would be allowed to leave the ashram before 7:00 am the following morning.

The jungle was also home to many wild animals, and it was emphasised that we should all be mindful of that danger.

The new day dawned crisp and fresh, and I was ready to leave by 6:30 am. But I waited to have some *poha* and chai and for the curfew to end at 7:00 am.

I left promptly and walked steadily through the jungle.

I was so grateful to be wearing new shoes, which were serving me really well on the sand roads.

There was no support through the Lakkadkot Jungle, so I needed to make sure I had sufficient water for the 20-kilometre stretch.

The scenery was breathtaking, and I loved every minute of the peace, quiet and solitude.

Along the way, the young woman with the suitcase came by on the back of a motorcycle, and all I could do was smile and shout, "Narmade Har!" as she sped by on the sand road.

Halfway through the jungle was a tiny Hanuman Mandir, and I stopped for a rest.

There was also a hand pump close by.

When you pumped the metre-long lever, the water that came out was clear, but it soon turned orange.

This made me very wary about filling my water bottle, but I was rather low on the clean, fresh water that I had brought from the Jayanti Mata Mandir, so I topped up just in case.

I was fortunate to be able to cover the remaining 10 kilometres without having to resort to drinking any of the 'orange juice', which I was very happy about.

By the time I arrived at the Seva Ashram in Pamakhedi at noon, it was very hot and I was dry.

I had walked just over 20 kilometres with very little water and was parched.

After quenching my thirst, having something to eat and taking an hour's rest, I left for the Dharmeshwar Mandir.

I was surprised that the 12-kilometre stretch went so well.

Swami Satiananda was just ahead of me, and we found a place on a quiet balcony to position our mattresses, which is where we spent a quiet and peaceful night.

After getting up early, taking care of the morning routines and drinking some chai, Swami Satiananda suggested that we walk together, as he knew about a shortcut.

When we arrived at the place where we were meant to turn off towards the shortcut, Swami Satiananda spoke to a few of the local passers-by, who all discouraged us from taking the so-called shortcut.

So we continued on the paved road to Golpura.

In this small enclave, the Datuni River flows into Maa Narmada, and the setting is stunning.

We had something to eat at a small ashram and then took a boat across the Datuni River to the opposite bank, a distance of about 100 metres.

After climbing up the bank on the other side, we were able to continue walking towards Narmdeshwar.

Along the way, we stopped at a small ashram for a break and were given watermelon, *ladu*, buttermilk and other snacks.

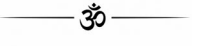
These delicacies all added a huge amount of pleasure to our journey.

As we continued through the farmlands, we came across some farmers who were taking a chai break, and they asked us to join them.

They had made a small fire to boil the milk, tea leaves, ginger and green cardamom and brewed up some fine-tasting chai, which was not only delicious, but an experience that could not have been more authentic.

When we arrived at Narmdeshwar, I was stunned to see the 'Suitcase Lady', who had managed to catch numerous rides to the ashram.

She remained vague about her future plans, and when we left the next day, I wondered if I would ever see her again, or whether she ever completed her journey.



Chapter 31

The Navel Point and the Holi Full Moon



"An ocean of eternal power is around you and within you. Just as a corked bottle floats in the ocean, so you are surrounded by God and peace. Wherever you float in the ocean of life, you will always be immersed in that Great Power and Life. Realise that!"

Paramahansa Yogananda

Swami Satiananda was ready to leave promptly the next day, but I needed a little more time to get myself organised.

It was a surprisingly hot morning as we made our way to Mandleshwar, where a large farming family invited us to have lunch. I had been suffering from an upset stomach, so I did not have anything to eat but enjoyed the rest.

We were in the second half of March, and the days were starting to get very hot much earlier. I knew that I would need to change my walking schedule so that I could cover a reasonable distance before taking a break and having something to eat.

We finally started walking again at 3:00 pm and covered another 8 kilometres before reaching Nemawar, where we were directed to a large storeroom that was part of a hotel.

We were informed that we could spend the night there and that we would be given something to eat within a few hours.

Nemawar is a small town in the Dewas District of Madhya Pradesh and is situated opposite Handia, which is on the south side of the river.

It is often referred to as the 'Navel Point' of Maa Narmada and is considered to be the halfway mark on the north side of the Narmada Parikrama.

It is home to the Trikal Choubisi Jain Temple, as well as the Siddhanath Temple, which is located on the banks of Maa Narmada.

The hall that we had settled ourselves in was a storeroom for various brand-new household appliances, so we found ourselves amongst washing machines, water coolers, fridges and tumble dryers.

The ambience was cold and clinical, and the environment was not particularly friendly. But we had been promised a simple meal, had the use of ablution facilities and had a roof over our heads, and I was grateful for all of those conveniences.

While writing in my journal, I realised that I had covered 637 kilometres since arriving on the north bank of Maiya and that I had been on this journey for the last 145 days.

The following day, Swami Satiananda and I walked to the Karuna Dham Ashram, which Swapnil Joshi, whom I had met in Khalghat, had told me about.

When I called him to tell him where I was, he was very happy for me and extremely excited to tell me that Gurudev Shri Sudesh Shandilya Ji Maharaj, Swapnil's Guru and the patron

of the ashram, would arrive there the following day and that I should stay over and meet him.

I agreed to do exactly that and took up residence in a small hall overlooking the impressive ghat.

The ashram was beautifully located on the banks of the Narmada, and the views of the wide expanse of the river were truly breathtaking.

Gurudev Shri Sudesh Shandilya is a contemporary spiritual teacher based in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. He is known for talks on youth, mental health, money versus peace and practical spirituality rooted in Sanatan Dharma.

He speaks in a very direct and practical way, connecting dharma to the daily issues, concerns and problems of life.

People address him as Gurudev, and he guides devotees on issues such as anxiety, career confusion, relationships and overthinking.

The Karuna Dham Temple complex in Bhopal consists of the Mahalakshmi Temple, which is the main sacred temple, but there are also temples dedicated to Hanuman and Ganesh.

The temple is a renowned spiritual and humanitarian centre in Central India and does an enormous amount of *seva* in terms of free food distribution, free ambulance services, educational support for underprivileged students and other social and charitable welfare activities.

I was really looking forward to meeting him.

Swami Satiananda said that he was not going to stay over and, just after some chai at 4:00 pm, he continued on his journey.

I was sad to see him leave.

After the *aarti*, a delicious dinner was served.

I woke early the next day to a sunrise that was absolutely breathtaking.

Watching the fishermen paddle out slowly into the golden light of the early morning, and hearing the splash of their nets hitting the still, gently flowing water, was magnificent.

I spent the day catching up with myself and, at about 5:30 pm, a reporter by the name of Punit arrived. He wanted to do an interview with me for a local TV station and had brought a cameraman with him.

I was unable to find out how Punit had tracked me down, but I knew that news in these rural parts of India travelled quickly.

I later established that he had travelled for many hours to finally connect with me, so he was very committed to getting this interview done.

It was professionally conducted and fun to be a part of.

It was special to meet Gurudev, who had a very warm smile, and with a great energy field around him. It was very comfortable to be in his company.

He had become the spiritual head of the Karuna Dham Temple Complex, with all of its subsidiaries, after his late father had passed away.

His father and mother are both honoured in the temple of the Karuna Dham Ashram on the banks of the Narmada River, with their *murtis* displayed prominently.

Swapnil Joshi had shared with me that Gurudev's father was known for his spiritual powers and was reputed to have performed many incredible miracles.

After another pleasant night's sleep on the steps outside the small hall above the ghat, I packed up and made my way towards Seelkanth, where I arrived at the temple and ashram in the late afternoon.

The parikramawasi hall was dirty and unswept, but the location overlooking the river was superb, and after some watery dal and roti, I got an early night.

The following day, I started walking at about 7:00 am, and after about 10 kilometres came across a signboard that seemed to indicate a shortcut through the farmlands.

As I was standing looking at this marker, a young man by the name of Maniss pulled up next to me on his motorcycle and discouraged me from taking it, suggesting that I continue to the little village of Chhidgaon Kachhi.

A few hundred metres further on was a small rustic shelter, and I stopped for a water break.

A short while later, a young man by the name of Sunil arrived on his motorcycle and invited me to the family farmhouse for lunch.

I then discovered that Maniss and Sunil were brothers, and that their family owned 1,000 acres of farmland in the region where they cultivated moong dal.

Sunil then rode off on his motorcycle, and I continued walking into Chhidgaon Kachhi, where I was met by Sunil, who was standing on the side of the road waiting for me.

I was served a delicious lunch and then shown a bed where I was told I could take a rest.

I must have been really tired because I slept solidly for two hours.

Afternoon chai was served, and I was invited to spend the night.

The rest of the afternoon was spent chatting to all the family members and meeting the five brothers who owned the farm and the business associated with it.

I took a cold-water wash in the cowshed alongside Nandi, who was a stunning young calf with big eyes and beautiful soft ears that invited you to gently rub them.

After another delicious evening meal, Sunil dragged a rope bed out into the courtyard for me and positioned it alongside the tractors and a range of other farming implements.

This is where I slept, alongside many of the other members of the family.

It was a beautiful night under the stars, and I never woke up once.

The following day, I made my way to Dimarwar and then on to the Shakti Punj Ashram, where I met a really pleasant Swami who invited me to come and spend *Chaturmas* at his ashram when my Parikrama was complete.

I then walked to the Anjani Ashram, which was run by two Matajis.

They couldn't speak a word of English but welcomed me for lunch.

I waited for the temperature to drop a little before walking to the Mamleshwar Mandir and Ashram.

I had not seen another parikramawasi all day, and there was no one staying over in Mamleshwar either.

While taking a wash at the water tank, I accidentally broke the tap, which infuriated the old Swami looking after the ashram. He screamed at me as though I was a schoolboy who had just committed a crime.

I had not been shouted at like that for as far back as I could remember.

After apologising most profusely, I made it very clear that he should refrain from screaming at me in the way he had.

Soon after this incident, the Swami left the ashram.

But when I saw him returning with a bag full of vegetables for dinner, I realised that he had put the tap debacle behind him.

The Swami prepared a very enjoyable evening meal, which he served to me with kindness and grace.

In the evening, some young girls came to talk to me, and they brought with them some Indian sweets for Holi, which was being celebrated the following day.

Holi, otherwise known as the Festival of Colours, is celebrated by Hindus at the end of winter and the beginning of spring, and it invokes a good harvest.

The day is marked by the lunar calendar and falls on the full moon day of the month of Phalguna, which is usually in March every year.

It is one of the most vibrant and joyful festivals in India and celebrates the triumph of good over evil.

It also acknowledges the love between the deities Radha and Krishna.

Many people believe that a young Krishna was worried that his dark skin was different from Radha's fair skin, and his mother then told him to colour her face.

By doing so, he encouraged people to start playing with colours, and now people celebrate the occasion by throwing *gulal*, splashing water, dancing and enjoying a variety of good food.

It is also a time to ask for forgiveness, and people visit elders, take blessings and mend relationships.

It is a time not only to spring-clean the house, but also to purify the heart.

When I woke up, I realised that I had been on this journey for five calendar months and, judging by the way my pilgrimage was progressing, I probably had just over one month still to walk.

The Swami gave me some chai and rusks for breakfast and a few snacks to take with me for the day's walking.

I thanked him for taking such good care of me and apologised once again for breaking the tap on the water tank.

He expressed no emotion and simply said, "Narmade Har."

After about 5 kilometres of walking, I reached Anwalighat.

It was surreal to be on the north bank, looking across the Narmada River at the large statue of Lord Shiva on the other

side, and thinking how much had transpired since I had visited the ghat on the south bank three months and eight days earlier.

It seemed like a lifetime had passed.

I spent some time at Anwalighat and visited the old temple.

After taking *darshan*, I walked along the banks of the Narmada until I found a small, unoccupied ashram.

I took a rest and ate the Holi snacks that had been given to me by the girls and the Swami from Mamleshwar.

They went down really well.

I was soon joined by a noisy crowd of 15 young parikramawasis, who really disturbed the peace and quiet.

One of the local villagers arrived to say that someone was going to prepare lunch for all of us, but that it was only going to be ready in two hours.

I declined to wait and made my way to the next little village, where a young man offered me lunch.

I left later in the afternoon but kept bumping into the 15 parikramawasis I had met earlier.

I desperately wanted to find somewhere to spend the night that didn't include them as well.

At one point, we stopped at the same place for chai, and I established that they were aiming to stay at an ashram that was 4 kilometres away.

So I stopped at a small, unoccupied farmhouse 2 kilometres before it, so as to avoid them.

It had a hand pump and a small temple with a roof covering, and I figured that was where I would sleep.

I took a wash at the hand pump and sat on the steps of the farmhouse, enjoying the early evening sunset and the sounds of the birds flying to their nests for the night.

At about 7:00 pm, the owner arrived and was rather surprised to see me.

He confirmed that this was his ashram and that I could spend the night.

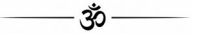
He prepared some dal and roti for dinner and then served me some hard mango and guava for dessert.

After dinner, we both sat outside and watched the Holi full moon emerge from the other side of the Narmada River.

It was calm, peaceful and really beautiful.

The ashram owner then dragged a rope bed outside for me and gave me a pillow to use.

I fell asleep to the sound of Maa Narmada in the distance and enjoyed a beautiful night under the stars and the full moon.



Chapter 32

Stubborn Buffaloes and the Art of Surrender



"Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared scars."

Khalil Gibran

I was up at 5:00 am and, after an enjoyable cup of chai, was on my way an hour later.

One kilometre further down the road was a beautiful ghat, and I stopped there to watch the sunrise over Maa Narmada.

It was breathtaking.

I spent the morning walking through some lush and fertile farmland, and on a few occasions the farmers had to turn off their sprinkler systems so that I could pass by without getting soaking wet.

At one point, I had to make my way over a precarious wooden bridge that straddled a river flowing into the Narmada.

5 kilometres before Budhni, I stopped at a small ashram sponsored by Karuna Dham and Gurudev Shri Sudesh Shandilya for some chai and dry snacks.

The Swami whom I had met at the Rewa Ashray Ashram in Khalghat arrived soon afterwards, and we caught up on how our respective journeys were unfolding.

We then went our separate ways.

I walked into Budhni, bought some fruit and peanuts, and then made my way towards Ramnagar.

Part of the morning's walk was on a motorway, which was hot, noisy and polluted and not an enjoyable experience.

I stopped at a dhaba for a rest, but the proprietor insisted that I have a lunchtime meal as well.

The fresh, cold tomato that came with the meal was delicious.

I left again at 2:00 pm and turned down towards Ramnagar and the Shani Mandir, which Swami Sumeru had stressed that I should visit.

I arrived in the late afternoon and was warmly welcomed by the Swami.

He couldn't speak a word of English, but by now I was so used to gestures and sign language that it was no problem to make myself understood.

I took a wash at the outside tap and then walked down to Maa Narmada, where I sat on some rocks and enjoyed the early evening.

I reminisced about the three days I had spent with Swami Sumeru at the Gufa Ashram in Brandabhan three and a half months earlier.

It was quite bizarre to think that it was directly opposite me on the other bank of the river.

Swami Sumeru said he would visit me the following day, and I was really looking forward to seeing him again.

While sitting on the bank, thinking about all that had transpired since the start of this journey, I was kept amused by a farmer trying to get his buffalo out of the Narmada River.

This huge animal was clearly enjoying the cool, refreshing water and was simply refusing to move, blatantly ignoring his master.

Swami Sumeru and Mataji Radha arrived the following day at 10:30 am and were in the mood to celebrate Holi.

Without any hesitation, they began painting my face, as well as the faces of the few ashram staff, with coloured powder before sprinkling us with flower petals.

It was a fun and joyous welcome.

Swami Sumeru brought me some of his special oats and milk for breakfast, knowing full well how much I had enjoyed it while staying with him at the Gufa Ashram.

It was also the first time that I had met Mataji, despite speaking to her on numerous occasions on the phone.

We had lots to catch up on and spent a very enjoyable, festive and memorable morning together before they departed.

After an afternoon sleep, I went down to the banks of the river and, once again, the buffaloes were cooling themselves in the water and refusing to obey their masters' commands to come out.

The farmers tried everything to entice the beasts to move, but nothing seemed to work.

I could see how the farmers were getting visibly angry, but at the same time, I could see the enormous love they had for their livestock.

As soon as they got one animal to move, the others seemed to follow soon afterwards.

The following day, I left early and walked along the banks of the river to Brandabhan Ghat, where I witnessed the most beautiful sunrise before making my way towards Shah Ganj.

Along the way, I was given chai and *poha*.

Just before Shah Ganj, I turned right and walked to Baneta and then on to Sudania, where I stopped at the Shri Siddhi Vinayak Ganesh Mandir, arriving just in time for lunch.

Later in the afternoon, I made my way to Sagar Nagar and the Shri Ram Janki Ashram.

I positioned myself on the rooftop of the ashram, which had a magnificent view of the river, and the cool breeze contributed to the superb location.

The ashram was reciting the *Ramayana*, but fortunately it stopped soon after dinner time.

Unfortunately, the mosquitoes spoiled what would otherwise have been an awesome night.

At 4:15 am, the speakers came alive with the reciting of the *Ramayana* once more, and I had no choice but to get up.

I had tried on numerous occasions to be more accepting and tolerant of the use of loudspeakers to broadcast religious chanting or readings, but with minimal success.

On the contrary, I found it obnoxious and selfish and usually found myself staying out of earshot as much as possible.

I left the Shri Ram Janki Ashram early without waiting to have chai, but after an hour of walking, I came across a large flask of tea sitting on a cement slab beneath a beautiful shady tree.

The flask had a chain around the handle so that no one could remove it, but it was filled with litres of hot, freshly brewed chai, which was absolutely delicious and a wonderful gift to a parikramawasi like me.

I took a rest and enjoyed more than one cup of tea before walking to the little town of Jain.

Just on the other side of Jain, I stopped at a young Swami's small ashram.

He made me some delicious tomato *poha* over an open fire, which I was able to wash down with some smoky-tasting chai.

This meal turned out to be one of the finest simple breakfasts I had enjoyed on my entire journey.

I then walked to Dehri, where a shop owner gave me three glasses of chilled, homemade *lassi*, which were the best I had ever tasted.

This refreshing drink originated in Punjab in about 1000 BCE and is made from plain yoghurt blended with water, ice or milk, with different herbs and spices added.

It can be sweet or savoury, but the three glasses I had just consumed were a real gift to my sweet tooth.

I then walked down to the Satyanrayan Mandir, which was extremely colourful and had a beautiful view of Maa Narmada.

I decided to spend the night, but only after having to tell the Swami to give me some space.

He had more than a casual interest in everything I was doing, and it made me feel very uncomfortable.

The evening *aarti* was followed by a *bhajan* and *kirtan* session led by the Guruji, who was unhappy that I was not wearing a long *lungi* for the occasion.

I excused myself, not wanting to be disrespectful or offend anyone.

The chanting and singing went on for ages, and observing everything from the sidelines confirmed for me once again that I am not really a *bhakti* person.

The kitchen staff only started preparing dinner after all the singing and chanting was done, so we only ate at 10:00 pm.

This resulted in a late night, but the hot milk that was served after the meal was really delicious and made up for the delay.

All the lights, as well as the music, came on at 5:30 am, which got me going and ready to leave an hour later.

I had chai with a family after two hours of walking and then continued on to the Biahi Mata Bhrigu Ashram, which was extremely basic, but the lunch that was served was very tasty.

Later in the afternoon, I walked to the Narmada Mandir and Bankhandi Ashram in Bagalwada, finishing the day with a total of 28 kilometres.

The following day, I walked to the Maa Narmada Temple, where I arrived at noon and decided to spend the night.

The ashram was run by two women, and the meals they prepared were outstanding.

The next day, I walked to Aliganj, where I broke away from the Narmada Parikrama for a period of 10 days and caught a train to Ranchi so that I could attend a five-day *Satsanga* at the main ashram of Paramahansa Yogananda.

Parikrama purists usually frown upon leaving the banks of the river for a period of time, crossing the river or walking back on yourself, but I was unsure how I felt about these purist rules.

What I was sure about was reuniting with my Guru's ashram and with his disciples, who were all like-minded people and always a joy to be around.

After a very inspiring and uplifting time in Ranchi, I got back to the banks of Maa Narmada and to the same place in Aliganj where I had caught a local bus 10 days earlier.

The bus dropped me off on the side of the road in Aliganj at 9:30 am, and I walked straight down to the Sita Ram Ashram, where I stopped for some chai and breakfast.

The temple was busy feeding about 20 young girls from the surrounding farms, and they were all very intrigued at having a foreign Sadhu in their midst.

After breakfast, I started walking down to the ghat, but I was soon approached by a man who invited me for tea.

He had walked the Narmada Parikrama three times before and was very excited about making my acquaintance.

I was very keen to get walking again but agreed to join him for a short while.

We walked to his house, where he introduced me to all of his family members.

We had chilled watermelon and tea, and everyone wanted me to stay over, but I had to get going again.

Later in the day, I ended up at a very basic ashram in Mohadkala, where I spent the night.

The following day, I left early and walked to an ashram near Dharamraj Ghat.

The Swami of the ashram was totally blind and had two young men who were his permanent assistants.

Despite his disability, he made a concerted effort to come and speak to me.

He smiled continuously, and a wonderful aura of warmth, friendliness and enthusiasm emanated from his being.

He was excited and engaging about my journey and wanted to hear all about it.

His assistants later told me that he spent many hours a day sitting in his room meditating.

The two young assistants served me a wonderful breakfast of *poha* and fresh fruit.

After leaving the ashram, I walked for a while before finding a tree with a large canopy, where I lay down and took a rest for a few hours.

Soon after I got going again, I met two babas who were living on the upper bank of the river.

They had created their own little temple inside a round metal hut and were very proud to show it to me.

After having some chai with them, I made my way to Anghora, where I stopped at the Mahakal Mandir.

Here I had a heated exchange with the pandit about carrying my sandals from where my bag was positioned, down the stairs to where I was going to take a wash at the hand pump.

I was not wearing them but rather carrying them, and I took offence to being reprimanded for doing so.

This situation reminded me of the incident that had occurred under the banyan tree at Charukeshwar a month earlier.

The following day, I made an early start and walked to the Sokalpur Ghat Mandir, where I was invited by Ramkumar to stay for lunch.

It ended up being a huge meal.

I then walked to the little village of Timrawan.

I managed to find the ashram, but it was closed.

Situations like this, which were imbued with uncertainty, no longer bothered me.

I had surrendered entirely to Maa Narmada and trusted her guidance and protection implicitly. I knew that she would take care of the situation, so I sat down on a nearby log, took a few deep breaths and sat looking at my surroundings.

I was in a small village, and there weren't too many people around.

But after a few minutes, a man approached me and said, "You walk Parikrama?"

I said, "Yes."

With a smile on his face, he said, "Come, we look after you."

I followed this man to his farmhouse, where a wonderful farming family welcomed me and took great care of me.

Once again, Maa Narmada had taken care of my every need, and I could feel her presence in everyone in this household.

There were a lot of young people around who wanted to test their English-speaking skills, so I was kept busy throughout dinner and until bedtime.

I was given a rope bed to sleep on, positioned on the balcony of the farmhouse, which was where most of the adults spent the night.

It rained for a short while during the night, which really cooled things down, and I enjoyed a good night's sleep.

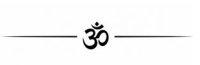
After waking and having some chai, the same man who had met me the previous day said that he would show me a shortcut.

We started walking at 6:30 am, and after a few kilometres I was shown a straight-line shortcut across a large bend in the river, which evidently saved me 3 kilometres of walking.

I eventually got back onto the bank of the river and stopped at the Rajeshwari Mandir, which was extremely colourful,

displaying some exquisite pillars and a variety of other stone decorations.

I spent an hour soaking up this magnificent temple and, after some tea, continued on my way.



Chapter 33

A Garrulous Swami and a Dog Called Babu



"Let the boat be in the water, but let there be no water in the boat; let an aspirant live in the world, but let there be no worldliness in him."

Sri Ramakrishna

About half an hour after leaving the Rajeshwari Mandir, I heard someone shouting very loudly and enthusiastically.

I could clearly hear, "Narmade Har, Swami Ji, Narmade Har!" and then I saw someone on the banks of Maa Narmada waving both arms vigorously.

There was only one person who ever called me Swami Ji, and that was Ganesh Misare.

Could that be him?

The person was half dressed, and I thought they were probably busy taking a morning wash in Maiya.

I kept walking in his direction and then suddenly realised that it was indeed Ganesh Misare, whom I had spent 11 days with four and a half months earlier.

He had just finished bathing in the river, and it was surreal to see him once again.

So much had transpired in both of our lives since we had parted company at the Shiva Temple in Karapgaon, and it was difficult to know where to begin trying to catch up.

He invited me to walk with him to a friend's rural farmhouse, where he mentioned that he had been promised lunch.

The farmer's wife prepared a wonderful meal for us, and we then took a rest under a huge tree just behind the house.

By 2:45 pm, it had cooled down sufficiently for us to start walking again.

Ganesh knew of another farming family in the little village of Jhiri and asked if I wanted to walk with him to their home to spend the night, and I agreed.

It was supposed to be 8 or 9 kilometres to the farm, but it turned out to be 14 kilometres away, and we only arrived at 7:00 pm.

It had been a long and tough day, but Ganesh's friends were very hospitable and gracious and served us a wonderful evening meal.

We both slept outside on a large cement slab overlooking the cows and buffaloes, beneath a magnificent, star-studded sky.

The following morning, we were invited to spend the day at a small *kutir* used by members of the Jhiri farming community for some of their farming activities.

It was only 3 kilometres away, so we got there in no time.

The *kutir* overlooked Maa Narmada, had one rope bed and was equipped with some basic food supplies and its own cooking utensils.

Below the *kutir* were rows of fresh vegetables, which we were invited to pick for our meals.

While Ganesh made tulsi tea, I went and picked fresh tomatoes, carrots, cauliflower and chillies, so Ganesh had everything he needed to start preparing a delicious lunch.

It was a hot day, but there was plenty of shade around, so we were able to stay cool.

We spent a wonderful, relaxing day on the banks of Maa Narmada, and I marvelled at the simplicity and authenticity of the life I was enjoying.

Before the day came to an end, Ganesh informed me that he was going to stay at the little *kutir* the following day and that he would not continue walking with me.

I had no issues with his decision.

But when we both stirred at 5:00 am, Ganesh told me that he had changed his mind and would join me on my walk to Baarman Ghat.

We dealt with our respective morning routines, and Ganesh made some tulsi tea, which was absolutely delicious first thing in the morning.

We started walking at 7:30 am.

The first part of the morning's walk was along the bank of the river before veering off into a small village, where we had some buttermilk and chai.

The same family invited us to stay for lunch, but it was still early in the day and Baarman Ghat was 13 kilometres away. I

declined, but said to Ganesh, "If you want to stay, then please go ahead."

Our relationship was totally honest and beyond pleasantries, so I felt perfectly comfortable saying that to Ganesh.

But he decided to join me, and we continued on our way.

It started getting very hot, and we needed to find some shade for a few hours.

We soon managed to find the Mahadev Mandir, which housed a very basic statue of Lord Shiva but no other facilities.

However, we needed some shade and decided to rest there for a while.

Within minutes, a man on a motorcycle stopped and gave us a small amount of *sabzi* and a few *chapatis* for lunch, which went down really well.

While resting at the Mahadev Mandir, Ganesh had been in contact with someone who really wanted him to attend a wedding.

He was very reluctant to make the journey, but his host persuaded him to make the effort.

As soon as we started walking again, Ganesh began raising his thumb and hitching a ride to the nearest railway station so that he could make his way to the wedding.

We hadn't been walking for very long when a motorcycle stopped and offered Ganesh a lift.

Without emotional goodbyes or any formalities, we simultaneously said, "Narmade Har!" and he was on his way.

I was on my own again.

The afternoon heat had hardly dissipated, and it was still very hot as I made my way towards Baarman.

On the outskirts of the town, I was offered some black tea by three elderly men who were busy smoking *chillum* in front of their small grandchildren.

I couldn't believe what kind of message they were sending to these young and innocent little beings.

In the heart of the town, a lovely old gentleman invited me into his home for some chai and snacks.

During our conversation, he asked, "Are you keeping a journal?"

"I am indeed," was my reply.

He then asked, "Can I look at it?"

I was very surprised by his question, and my initial thought was to say no, but I didn't want to be rude.

So I took it out of my backpack and handed it to him.

I had nothing to hide, but these were my own personal thoughts and ideas, and it made me feel very uncomfortable as I watched him flicking through the pages and reading the odd passage.

After what seemed like a long time, he handed my journal back to me and said, "Dhanyavad."

I simply smiled as I took the book from his hand, not saying anything in return.

He gave me directions to the Sidhheshwar Mahadev Mandir and Ashram, and I thanked him for the tea and snacks before walking the last kilometre to the ashram, where I arrived at 5:00 pm.

Baarman is an auspicious point on the Narmada map, as the river splits and creates an island at this place.

There are numerous junctions of this sort along the river, and all of them are considered holy places, with Omkareshwar being the most famous.

The first parikramawasi I met at the ashram was a man whom I had bumped into on numerous occasions before.

He always expressed an interest in walking with me, but he smoked a lot of *ganja*, didn't speak English and we didn't have much in common.

I had always discouraged and ignored his requests because I just knew that we would quickly get on each other's nerves.

The view from the ashram was beautiful, and the environment had a very special feel about it. I enjoyed my brief stay.

The following day, I made my way along the banks of the river to the Ghoorpur Waterfalls, which were absolutely spectacular.

This section of the route was tricky and precarious in places and was not easy to negotiate.

But the view and sound of the water cascading over the rocks was captivating and kept me totally focused.

As I made my way towards Gursi, I had many undulations to deal with, and it was exceptionally muddy in places.

The weight of my shoes seemed to double as the mud stuck to the soles like vows to the riverbed — quiet and stubborn — and only washed off when Maa Narmada decided it would.

I arrived in Gursi and stopped at an ashram where a group of ladies were preparing to feed a bunch of young children from the area.

Listening to the ladies singing and chanting as they made *chapatis* was melodic, heart-warming and really beautiful.

Their sweet melody was something I could have listened to all day.

After an enjoyable meal, I walked to Rampura and arrived at the Seva Ashram at around 5:00 pm.

The ashram was being run by a lady who was sleeping when I arrived, so I sat around for a while.

But then I noticed that the ashram was unswept and dirty and that it did not have a good energy, so I picked up my backpack and started walking again.

Google Maps indicated that there was another ashram 3 kilometres away, so I made my way in that direction, eventually arriving at an ashram run by Swami Ramhanumunt.

It was extremely basic and located close to seven magnificent trees that looked like giant oaks.

The way they towered over me in the late-afternoon sun left me feeling humbled and in awe of their magnificence and size.

I couldn't stop marvelling at the energy they emitted, which conveyed a sense of strength, stability and splendour.

Swami Ramhanumunt was a bundle of exuberant energy who couldn't stop talking.

He was a Swami with a vow of speech, and the only thing he ever seemed to have renounced was a quiet room.

The way he spoke was like the way the Narmada River flows during the monsoon — continuous, loud and convinced that it was a blessing to us.

I couldn't get a word in edgeways.

After a simple evening meal, we laid out our sleeping mats on the raw earth in front of his small temple and spent the night under the stars.

In the early hours of the morning, the temperature dropped quite sharply, which was rather surprising for the middle of April.

But I thoroughly enjoyed being able to cuddle up in my warm sleeping bag.

After an early morning wash and some tulsi tea, the garrulous Swami insisted on walking with me to the village of Kirpani, never allowing me to utter a single word.

With every step, he felt compelled to say another word and never allowed silence to reign for a moment.

In fact, he seemed to mistake silence for a cue to speak.

Throughout our walk together, I couldn't stop smiling at Swami's compulsion.

As we parted company, I felt compelled to say a few words to him.

"Swami Ji, your enthusiasm for life is inspiring and your smile is infectious. Thank you for showing me the way to Kirpani. May you stay blessed with universal energy for all your remaining days. Narmade Har."

For just one moment, he was quiet.

All he could do was smile as I turned and continued walking.

Soon after we parted company, a stray dog started walking next to me.

Along the way, he made a nuisance of himself by having numerous fights as we moved from one territorial location to another.

He would trot ahead, the neighbourhood dogs would bark and growl at him, and then he'd lie down panting under a tree until I came along.

As soon as I came into view, his tail would wag like mad, he would jump up and jog beside me, and this continued all the way to the Dongargaon Ashram, where I decided to spend the night.

The ashram was still under construction, but it would be absolutely stunning when completed.

I found a place on the balcony to lay my things before taking a wash and having a rest while dinner was prepared in the old ashram building below the new structure.

Dinner was simple but filling.

I took a few extra *rotis* for the dog, whom I had decided to call Babu.

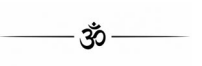
As I walked back in the dark, I thought about Babu and wondered whether he had managed to get something to eat.

As I made my way onto the outside balcony, where I had laid out my sleeping things, I saw Babu lying just to one side.

When he saw me, he couldn't stop wagging his tail, as though I were his long-lost owner.

This affection brought tears to my eyes, and I was so happy to be able to give him something to eat.

He ate slowly, which made me think that he had already found something to eat along the way.



Chapter 34

The Narmada Dogs and the Fall of Smoke



"The way to the truth is not that of progress, but that of return."

Swami Dayananda

I was up at first light and, after some chai, left at 6:20 am.

Babu was nowhere to be seen, and I assumed that he had left with the five parikramawasis who had also stayed at the Dongargaon Ashram the night before. They had left in the dark and were well on their way before I had even got up.

The start of the morning's walk was along the banks of the river until the *sangam* where the Hiran River flows into the Narmada.

The last time I had seen the Hiran River was five months earlier, when Ganesh and I were walking together on the other side of the river in the Narsinghpur District.

I clearly remembered Ganesh commenting on having to take a boat across the Hiran River during one of his previous *parikramas*.

As I approached the Hiran, I didn't see any boats, but I did notice that the path had been built up in such a way that it clearly demarcated the place to cross the river.

I could also see where I had to remove my shoes and start wading across.

I walked to this point and, as I was busy taking my shoes off, I heard some loud barking.

Then I saw Babu.

He came running towards me with his tail wagging with a great deal of excitement and delight.

He had clearly reached this point but, for reasons unknown to me, had not made it across the Hiran so that he could continue with the other parikramawasis.

I wondered if he had been waiting for me.

I had heard many stories about how dogs around the Narmada River would randomly appear, walk with a parikramawasi for days at a time and then magically disappear as quickly as they had arrived.

They would stand guard at a temple or ashram, eat the *prasad* that was left for them, sleep on the ghats and then vanish in the strangest of places.

Many pilgrims believe that Maa Narmada sends them to walk with you, keep you company for a while and test your *seva*. When they feel that their duty is done, they simply disappear.

As I started wading across the Hiran River, Babu started wailing as if to say, "Please don't leave me behind."

I was torn about what to do, but the water was waist-deep and I needed to focus very carefully on placing my feet securely so that I didn't fall over and get all my gear completely soaked.

Babu's wailing continued throughout my crossing, but it didn't take long for me to emerge on the other side as soon as I reached shallower ground.

When I was safe and on dry ground, I stopped and took off my backpack.

As I turned around to see where Babu was, he started wagging his tail once again, as though he had just seen his long-lost owner for the first time.

Then he started precariously walking into the water.

It reached his chest, and he began paddling with his front paws with all his might.

His jaws were open and he panted profusely, but his gaze was fixed on me as though I were the magnet pulling him across the river.

His focus and effort were intense.

I called out to him in English, saying, "Okay, Babu, you can do it. Come on, Babu. Keep it up. You can do it."

After a few minutes of frantic paddling, he emerged victorious and ran over to me with his tail wagging.

As he shook himself dry, he drenched me in the process.

But we were together again.

On the opposite side of the Hiran River is the Jogpira Dharamsala, but I didn't stop there and continued on to Pawla, where I found an *annakshetra*.

The five parikramawasis who had left earlier than me in the morning were also there, and we all had lunch together.

The thermometer rose to 43°C during the middle of the day, and it was prudent to stay in the shade after lunch.

The five parikramawasis left before me, and Babu must have left with them because, sadly, I never saw him again.

I left at 3:30 pm and walked to Barbati, finding the ashram two hours later.

The Swami looking after the ashram wasn't particularly friendly and gave me the feeling that I was invading his space.

At the back of the ashram, a bunch of people were busy setting up a tent and preparing for a celebration. There were loads of children running around excitedly and making a huge amount of noise.

I took a wash in Maa Narmada and then sat and watched the preparations unfold.

I then found out that it was a wedding celebration.

The guests started arriving in their droves, dressed to the nines.

When the blaring music started, I knew that I would have to move, knowing full well that Indian weddings can easily go on all night.

I was busy getting my backpack organised when the Swami brought me a huge plate of wedding food.

As I thanked him, I also explained that I would move down onto the bank of Maiya and out of earshot of the wedding music.

He smiled and nodded his head, completely understanding what I meant.

I finished the meal, slung my backpack over my shoulders, grabbed my stick, switched on my head torch and made my way down the path onto the banks of the Narmada River.

It didn't take me long to find a soft, grassy patch.

I laid out my sleeping things and had a wonderful night under the stars, with the music vaguely pumping away in the distance.

It cooled down quite substantially in the early hours of the morning, and a lot of dew fell, which left most of my gear rather damp.

But I woke to a magnificent sunrise and knew I could dry my things later in the day.

The wedding did not cater adequately for ablution facilities for all the guests, and at least 40 or 50 people came down onto the banks of Maa Narmada looking for a place to do their early morning business.

It was unbelievable and rather disgusting to witness, and I was very relieved to be on my way by 6:30 am.

I walked along the bank of the river for a good few hours until I arrived at the Ram Janki Mandir and Ashram, which was really colourful and a very beautiful temple.

The facilities were extremely clean and the environment immaculate, and I decided I would spend the night.

The temple manager insisted that I write something in his guestbook, and it was astonishing to see that Swapnil Joshi, whom I had met at the Rewa Ashray Ashram in Khalghat, had written a few thoughtful words of gratitude in the same book a few weeks earlier.

I enjoyed a good meal at the ashram and had a refreshing night's rest.

The temple manager put the lights on at 4:40 am and made enough noise to force me to get up very soon afterwards.

He made some chai, and I was on my way at 6:00 am.

I walked on the bank of Maa Narmada for the first few hours of the morning before getting onto a road.

After walking 17 kilometres, I stopped at an ashram on the main road that led to Jabalpur.

I was given some lunch and took a rest before walking another 10 kilometres to Ramkhiriya, where I ended up spending the night in the workers' restroom of a steelworkers' factory called 'Soni Engineers'.

The factory was greasy and chaotic, and the washrooms were filthy and smelly.

But when it started pouring with rain, I was very grateful that I had a roof over my head.

Two of the factory workers were also staying over in this restroom, and they made dinner, which was only served after 10:00 pm.

The rain must have awakened the mosquitoes because they arrived in force and ate me alive.

Needless to say, it was far from an enjoyable night's sleep, but I had a roof over my head.

I got up at 5:00 am, took a wash and was on my way an hour later.

There was still a lot of moisture in the air, and it drizzled for the first few hours of my walk, which kept things really nice and cool.

I arrived in Bhedaghat late in the morning and was shown to a small ashram run by a Swami and a Swamini who both knew Swami Sumeru and Mataji Radha.

They phoned the Gufa Ashram, and they were both very excited to speak to me.

I was served a delicious lunch and spent an enjoyable few hours with the Swami and Swamini, but soon realised that this small ashram was not equipped to accommodate me for the night.

When I was about to leave, the Swami told me that I should walk to Gopalpur, which was supposedly only 3 kilometres away, where there was supposedly a really clean ashram.

Once again, I got caught being gullible about the distance to an ashram.

I often found that when a local person spoke with conviction about how far away a facility was, I would believe them, without checking the distance for myself, and I got caught out as a result.

In this instance, the ashram the Swami referred me to ended up being 10 kilometres away rather than 3 kilometres.

On my way towards Gopalpur, I stopped at a Krishna Ashram, where I wanted to take a rest.

But an old Swami literally kicked me out by aggressively telling me to leave and not to come back again.

He then closed the sliding steel trellis gates behind me and locked them in a very aggressive way, sending a very clear message in the process.

I was astounded by this treatment, but never reacted.

I simply smiled at him as though nothing had happened and said, "Narmade Har."

A few kilometres further on, I heard her before I saw her.

A roar rolled up the marble gorge like drums from inside the earth, and then the mist hit me.

It was cool and sudden on my hot and tired body.

The Narmada River, who had been so gentle with me, was squeezing herself through an 18-metre gap in the white marble and throwing herself down 30 metres.

She didn't fall.

She broke into smoke and into a million droplets that hung in the air and caught the light.

People call it the "Fall of Smoke", and that's exactly it.

You can't tell where the water ends and the air begins.

The rocks were wet and shining as I approached the Dhuandhar Waterfalls, mesmerised as I stood there for 10 minutes, allowing Maiya to wash the dust of the road off me without actually touching me.

Sadhus stood on the viewing platform laughing as they got soaked by the heavy mist and water vapour.

Children screamed and ran through the spray, lapping up every moment.

After so much silence, this was her *shakti*, and it was loud, untamed and purifying.

She took my breath away.

This was the one place on my Parikrama where I couldn't hear my own thoughts, and that was her blessing.

After a profound experience at the Dhuandhar Waterfalls, I walked through Gopalpur and down to the Paramahans Ashram, where I arrived in time for afternoon tea.

I was met by Ashutosh Baba, who warmly welcomed me and gave me my own room.

My first impressions of the ashram were that it was beautifully laid out and immaculate.

Ashutosh Baba was 30 years of age and spoke good English.

After qualifying as an engineer at the age of 23, he renounced everything and came to the ashram.

He was an intelligent young man who was wise beyond his years.

As a monk, he had walked the Narmada Parikrama, so we had a lot to talk about.

No one knew the name of the Swami who started the ashram more than 50 years ago.

He started with nothing and painstakingly built the ashram brick by brick and stone by stone.

He is an elderly man who seldom meets anyone from the public and is reputed to be a spiritual master.

He is looked after and taken care of by two disciples, and I was disappointed that I never had the opportunity to at least cast my eyes on his being.

I asked whether I could spend an extra day at the ashram so that I could catch up with myself, and Ashutosh Baba gave me a thumbs up.

The following day, I visited the ashram ghat, which is superbly positioned right on the Narmada River.

It was very quiet and peaceful just being able to sit and watch the fishermen slowly manoeuvre their boats and their nets through the still parts of the river.

It was surreal to think that just a few kilometres downstream, Maa Narmada plunges through a narrow gorge, creating the furious Dhuandhar Waterfalls.

I spent the rest of the day catching up with myself and having *satsang* with Ashutosh Baba.

It was a magnificent stay.

I was up the following day at 5:00 am and, after some chai, ready to leave at 6:15 am.

While saying my goodbyes, one of the senior Swamis invited me to come and stay at the ashram for an extended period of time.

I left with a bag full of food and fruit, as well as a warm invitation to return, and felt comforted and blessed.

After leaving the ashram grounds, I made my way along a farm track to Tilwara Ghat.

While standing on the steps of the ghat and looking across the river to the other side, I could clearly see the large Shivling in the front portion of the Markandeya Ashram grounds.

I had stayed there with the humble Pujari San Misra for two nights in a large avant-garde storeroom, sharing the space with a tractor.

I thought I would surprise him by giving him a call, and it was really wonderful to speak to him again.

I could hear the emotion in his voice, which was very precious, and it reminded me of the wonderful time that I had spent with him.

I started heading into the city of Jabalpur, with one objective in mind: to find somewhere to spend the night on the other side of the city.

It was extremely busy, noisy and hot, and I had to rely on Google Maps the entire way through the city.

At one point, a man stopped his motorcycle and gave me a bag of food containing *chapati*, *sabzi* and some uncooked rice.

He seemed to magically arrive out of nowhere and randomly disappeared as quickly as he had arrived.

In the middle of the afternoon, I stopped at a Shiva Temple and lay down for an hour or so before finally getting onto the NH 45, which was the right road to take to Kundam.

Chapter 35

The Art of Trusting Maa



"All know that the drop merges into the ocean, but few understand that the ocean merges into the drop."

Kabir

It was an absolute relief to have finally found the NH 45, knowing that the day's route finding through the large, populated city of Jabalpur was finally behind me. I couldn't wait to leave the outer city limits and start walking on some quieter roads towards Dindori.

I had become spoiled by being on the serene and peaceful banks of Maa Narmada and was not used to the hustle and bustle of a big city like Jabalpur, where the wider district is home to just over three million people.

In the late afternoon, I was stopped by a group of young engineering students from the University of Jabalpur, who invited me to have some sugar cane juice with them.

They were an enthusiastic and intelligent bunch of young men who were all devotees of Lord Krishna, and we had some profound *satsang* and discussions about spirituality, the profundity of undertaking a long pilgrimage on foot and student life in general.

As our conversation started winding down, a young student by the name of Prabhat turned towards me and asked, "So where are you planning to spend the night?"

I responded by saying, "I have no idea at all. I guess I will keep walking out of town and hopefully find a temple somewhere that will allow me to stay."

His response was very kind.

"You can spend the night with us students in one of our dormitories in the Hare Krishna building."

I was overwhelmed with this offer and graciously accepted.

Once again, Maa Narmada had taken care of my needs, and my heart was filled with gratitude.

I followed Prabhat to the Hare Krishna building, where he showed me a vacant bed that I could use. After a shower, we visited the small Krishna Temple and then went to the student canteen for an evening meal.

I was very grateful to have been granted these facilities, but it was extremely hot, even with the fan blasting, and the mosquitoes ate me alive, so unfortunately I did not have a restful night's sleep.

The following morning, I realised that I had been on my pilgrimage for six calendar months.

This was a real milestone, and it was strange to think that I had come around the final bend and was now in the final straight of this remarkable journey.

I had earmarked an approximate finish date, which I knew would probably induce some subtle pressure. But I had needed

to book a train ticket out of Pendra Road back to Rishikesh, and if I didn't do that early enough, I could have found myself stuck in Amarkantak for longer than I had hoped.

I was sure that I had given myself ample time to comfortably complete the journey, but this last week had been tough, with some difficult terrain and some long days, and it was starting to take its toll.

Before leaving the Hare Krishna building at 6:30 am, I was given some *ladu* and a *japa* bag.

I had come to know that committed followers of Lord Krishna usually have a strong *bhakti* disposition and love to do *japa*, so their generous gift did not surprise me, but I was nevertheless hugely grateful.

I said my farewells and started making my way out of Jabalpur.

I passed through a military zone and eventually stopped at the Jhiria Mandir, where I was given some black tea.

Continuing on my journey, I reached the Banjari Mata Mandir just before midday.

It was a swelteringly hot day, and I needed to get out of the sun and take a rest.

The Swami and his friends were all smoking *chillum* in a room earmarked for parikramawasis, and I was not prepared to inhale their stale *ganja* smoke, so I found a resting place next to the temple's deity.

The monkeys in the area were a real pest, and I needed to keep chasing them away, as they were clearly on a mission to snatch anything that resembled food.

A few hours later, I left and walked to Pidariya, which was 4 kilometres away.

As I entered the town, I was given some chai by a roadside tea stall, and then someone walked with me to the Hanuman Mandir, where I could spend the night.

The temple was off the main road in a quieter part of town, and I was very grateful for the silence.

I took a wash at the town's well before catching up with my journal.

In the early evening, someone doing *seva* in the community brought me a meal, which was simple, but I was hungry and extremely grateful for something to eat.

After dinner, a van with loudspeakers attached to the roof drove up to the open space in front of the temple and immediately turned on some loud music.

Within minutes, loads of people from the neighbourhood started gathering around.

Fortunately, this entourage moved on within half an hour, gathering additional supporters along the way as they made their way through all the backstreets of the town.

As I started preparing to go to sleep, a very inebriated man came to the temple and, with every slurring word, tried to interact with me.

He made a complete nuisance of himself, but fortunately the temple had been fortified in such a way as to keep the monkeys out, and I was relieved that it could keep drunk people at bay as well.

The temple had no toilet facilities, so I needed to walk out of town to take care of business.

I packed up my few things and was about to start walking when the same gentleman who had shown me the Hanuman Mandir the day before came to invite me to his home for breakfast.

We walked to his house, where I was introduced to everyone, and then we sat around for ages while the food was being prepared.

I knew that with every passing minute it was getting hotter and hotter and that I should have been walking instead of sitting around.

In the end, however, I was very grateful for an enjoyable meal that kickstarted the day just perfectly.

I eventually got going at around 8:00 am, and after a couple of hours, I felt really tired.

All I wanted to do was lie down and sleep, so I walked off the road and into the forest, where I found a shady tree that looked like an ideal place for a nap.

I took out my sleeping mat, lay down and had a good sleep for a few hours.

While resting, a monkey quietly stole a few of my snacks.

I never heard him grab the bags, but later saw him in a tree with a bag of snacks that looked very familiar and then realised where he had acquired them from.

These creatures can be very devious, and sometimes it helps to have eyes in the back of your head.

It was early afternoon when I got going again, and after a few hours of walking, I arrived in Kundam, where I was directed to the Hanuman Mandir.

The facilities at the temple were absolutely disgusting, and the mound of filth and garbage that had been deposited behind the mandir was unbelievable.

It was staggering to fathom how long that place had been used as a rubbish dump.

How is India ever going to change people's mindsets and behaviour when it comes to the way in which they deal with their waste?

I had pondered this question at length ever since I had been in India, but I couldn't find any answers, and I hadn't heard any plausible answers from anyone with whom I had had this discussion either.

Soon after dark, a man by the name of Shivanshu came to the mandir and invited me to get onto the back of his Royal Enfield motorcycle and ride with him to the source of the Hiran River.

I was excited to see where the Hiran River emanated from, and my thoughts immediately went back to Babu, the Narmada dog who had walked with me and then swam across the narrow section of the Hiran River in order to reunite with me.

I wondered where he was at that moment and who he had latched onto.

After visiting the temple dedicated to the source of the Hiran River, Shivanshu took me to his home, introduced me to his wife and showered me with gifts.

The couple were very happy to have me in their home and very generous in the way they treated me.

I was dropped back at the Hanuman Mandir in time for the evening *aarti* and a late meal.

The mosquitoes were really vicious, which was not surprising considering all the rubbish that lay strewn everywhere in the vicinity of the temple, but I managed to get a reasonable night's sleep.

I was up early and on my way just after 6:00 am.

It clouded over, which made it feel cool, and the walking went well.

But I soon realised that the next ashram was a long way away, and I was doubtful that I would get there before dark.

When I arrived in the village of Deori Kalan, my feet were really sore, and I felt incredibly tired and in desperate need of a rest.

It was monthly market day, so I bought myself an ice cream, found a shady tree to relax under and watched all the excitement of the buying and selling that was taking place.

I enquired whether there was a temple or an ashram close by, but I was told in no uncertain terms that there weren't any such facilities available nearby, so I carried on watching people.

It can be such an entertaining pastime, but I was also doing more than that.

I was consciously allowing Universal Presence to guide me.

By letting go of the uncertainty and attachment to where I was going to spend the night, I opened myself up and made space for Presence and for Maa Narmada to guide my next moves.

It didn't take long for me to know exactly what needed to be done, and it felt as effortless as though I was walking through a doorway from a dark room into one illuminated by a blazing, bright light.

It was as though I was being shown exactly who to approach, what to say and how things would unfold, and it was surprisingly uncomplicated.

I am always astounded at how simple the truth really is, and when confirmation is obtained, the resulting peace and joy are felt in a deep and profound way.

In that moment, I just knew what the right action was to take.

I immediately stood up, walked over to a man selling his wares and asked him what options were available to me in order to spend the night in Deori Kalan.

Without any hesitation, he took me to a family who had taken it upon themselves to support parikramawasis like me.

I was shown where to put my bag and where I would be able to sleep, and the young mother of the household told me that they would provide me with an evening meal.

In that moment, I knew I was being guided, protected and blessed in a most profound way.

The market started packing up soon after it got dark, and the young father of the household returned with his son.

His business was selling brass and silver pots of various shapes and sizes, and he was excited about the day's sales.

He later revealed to me that he had sold enough pots to meet all the family's expenses for the next four weeks, which was an exceptional day's trading.

None of the family members spoke English, but everyone was kind and caring, and they looked after me exceptionally well.

I slept in the front portion of the house where all the pots were stored.

When I got up at 5:30 am and walked into the main part of the house to use the bathroom, I saw that the young husband and wife of the household were sleeping on the concrete floor of the living room.

There was no mattress, pillow or blanket.

I was always amazed at how Indian people could sleep anywhere and without any form of convenience or comfort, and this young couple had once again confirmed my previous observations.

I was ready to leave at 6:30 am.

I thanked my hosts profusely and, after saying "Narmade Har", was on my way.

It rained for a short while in the early morning, which kept things nice and cool, as I made my way to the Bakteshwar Mandir and Ashram, which was looked after by Bacho Baba.

I took a rest, had some chai and paid my respects to the Gurudev before walking to Shahpura, where I was given three delicious samosas by a very enthusiastic restaurant owner.

I then walked the remaining 7 kilometres to the Maa Narmada Parikramawasi Seva Samiti Ashram in Bargaon, which is situated on the banks of the Silgi River.

I had walked 24 kilometres for the day, and I could feel that my legs were tired.

In the early evening, some volunteers came to the ashram to prepare an evening meal for myself and two other parikramawasis who had arrived after me.

One of the same volunteers arrived just after 4:30 am to make some chai, which went down really well.

It was a cool morning, and I made good progress.

I spent most of the day walking to the little village of Vikrampur Ryt, where there was a small *dharamsala* next to the temple.

I took a wash at the hand pump in front of the *dharamsala* and in full view of all the passers-by.

But by now I was used to this kind of arrangement and not at all self-conscious, so it didn't bother me.

In the early evening, a car stopped and five teachers disembarked.

They were returning from a conference in Dindori and were excited to engage with me.

Before leaving, they bought me 12 bananas, three mangoes and three apples.

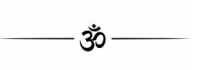
I had earlier bought myself four apples, so I now had enough fruit to feed an army.

I was very grateful for all these wonderful gifts, but it must have weighed 3 kilograms, and I wasn't sure how to make the space for all of it.

At 8:00 pm, two young men brought me some dinner, which included chilled milk and curd.

It was delicious.

This venue did not have a cooler or fan, so it was a hot night.



Chapter 36

The Invisible Threshold and the Sack Cloth Baba



> ***"Your heart is God's Temple. Your Self, which is God, is dwelling therein. Let the river of your devotion flow. Bathe in such a river and realise Him, within and without. He is yourself."***
>
> **Swami Ramdas**

The following morning, I made another early start, this time for Jogi Tikariya, which is in the Dindori District and on the banks of Maa Narmada.

After a few hours of walking, I was stopped by a lovely lady who had a very beautiful smile.

She reminded me of the saintly woman by the name of Sadhavi Shyama Devi, whom I had met in Sohagpur five months earlier.

It was the last time I had seen a woman with such white teeth and such a beautiful smile.

She invited me for lunch and took me to her *Annakshetra*, where she made me some chai and then prepared a delicious lunch.

I took a rest and then walked the remaining 8 kilometres to Jogi Tikariya, where I found a small, cosy ashram at 5:00 pm.

The ashram was right on the ghat, and it was absolutely wonderful to be in the lap of Maa Narmada again.

I had missed walking alongside her and being in her presence.

It was staggering what a powerful influence she was having on my life.

I could tangibly feel how she provided for my needs, guided many of my decisions and protected me in every sense of the word, and I wanted for nothing.

The small ashram was being looked after by a Swamini who warmly welcomed me.

I took a wash in Maa Narmada and then sat on a bench overlooking the river and listened to the loud chanting of 'Om Namah Shivaya' coming from the ashram on the other side of the river.

The chanting, which had begun 15 days earlier, would continue throughout the day and night in remembrance of the Swami's wife, who had passed away.

This ceremonial chanting would continue for a number of days.

Although it was loud, it was also melodic, and the repetitiveness tended to soften the loudness as the words fell on my ears.

Swami Arjun Giri came to visit me from the other side of the river.

I had met him way back in October of the previous year, on the sixth day of my Parikrama, and had spent a night at his ashram, which is located just before Dindori.

We had agreed then that he would come and visit me when I reached the north bank opposite his ashram.

Back then, I had a shaved head and no beard.

Now, after six months and with only another six days to walk before reaching Amarkantak, my final destination, my hair and beard were both long, and I was deserving of the name 'Ronnie Baba'.

It was surreal to see him, and very difficult to comprehend everything that had transpired during the previous six months.

We drank some chai together, exchanged pleasantries and took some photographs, but it was very difficult to know where to begin having a deep and meaningful conversation.

I had a good night's rest at the small ashram in Jogi Tikariya, despite the loud chanting throughout the night.

As I made an early start, I was full of mixed emotions as I began realising that I was embarking on the last week of my walk around the Narmada River.

Depending on the route I took, Amarkantak was just over 110 kilometres away.

I had recently been walking steadily and covering a reasonable distance on a daily basis, so I estimated that this last section would take me about five or six days to complete.

The walk took me along the banks of Maa Narmada into Dindori, which spans both sides of the river.

This section of the Parikrama was dry, open and exposed, and a strong wind blew from east to west, which made the walking tough as the sun made its way into the mid-heavens.

I arrived at Shesh Ghat and the Dudhi Ashram just after midday.

I was hot and tired and had just covered 20 kilometres in about six hours.

As I approached the ashram, I stopped, put my stick down against the wall, took off my backpack and was busy untying my shoelaces when a Swami started shouting at me about taking my shoes off.

I stood up from my crouched position and, with a glaring look on my face and a raised voice, replied, "Swami Ji, stop shouting at me. Can you not see that I am busy taking my shoes off?"

Perhaps he thought that I had already crossed over the invisible threshold which he had invented in his own mind and only he knew where it existed.

But I found his reprimand unnecessary, offensive and uncalled for.

I had just walked for half the day in a dry, hot wind and was parched and weary.

I was not in the mood for a sanctimonious Swami who was caught up in rules and dogma rather than expressing true devotion.

The real threshold on the Narmada Parikrama isn't at the doorway to a temple.

It's every time you choose humility over ego and every time you bow when no one is watching.

I had just missed lunch, but someone from the ashram brought me some *chapati* and tomato *sabzi*.

It wasn't much, but it was delicious and filled the hole in my stomach.

After a well-deserved rest, I took a wash in Maa Narmada and sat on the bank and watched the sun go down.

It was quiet and peaceful, the sunset was exceptionally beautiful, and it was a magnificent time to reflect on another incredible day.

The following day, I made an early start and walked through some undulating farmlands with no markings or clear directions.

But I always knew that Maiya was on my right-hand side, and that acted as my reliable compass as I made my way towards Amarkantak.

Soon after starting in the morning, I was accompanied by another Narmada dog.

I liked the name Babu and decided to call this dog by the same name.

In the middle of the morning, I arrived at the Sharda Dham Ashram, which was run under the auspices of Swami Satyananda Saraswati, and I was just in time for a late breakfast consisting of hot potato chips.

They were unusual for this part of the world and delicious.

Babu had walked into the ashram grounds with a nonchalant attitude, as though he belonged, but was soon chased away by the ashram staff.

I observed the way he slinked away and found a shady tree where he lay down, making sure that he kept me in sight.

Every time I moved, he perked up and prepared himself to move, but otherwise kept hovering in the background, out of earshot and harm's way.

I found a mattress on the balcony and took a rest before enjoying a really good lunch.

At 2:30 pm, it was time to leave, and before I had even exited the ashram gate, Babu was at my side.

Before we continued, I gave him a few *chapatis* that I had grabbed for him, and he finished them in no time.

He was clearly rather hungry, so I gave him some plain biscuits that I had been carrying as well.

I walked for another four hours before arriving at the Shivalay Ghat Mandir and Ashram, having covered 27 kilometres for the day.

As I reached the ashram steps, I saw the baba who was wearing sack clothing sitting quietly to one side.

Our paths had crossed on a number of occasions over the previous few weeks, but we had never interacted.

He was always elusive, never conversed with anyone and always kept to himself.

I had never seen him use any of the parikramawasi facilities and had never seen him eating.

On my way up the steps, I looked at him, smiled and said, "Narmade Har."

He acknowledged me by nodding his head, but he never said a word or showed any emotion or expression.

I was grateful for our brief interaction.

Nowadays, most parikramawasis wear white or saffron.

White is representative of purity and surrender, and it says, 'I have come to be cleansed.'

Saffron represents renunciation and states, 'I have left the world.'

Sack clothing is something else entirely.

It is something old, very, very old and reveals an intentional humiliation of the ego. It says, 'Let the world leave me.'

It is a vow of poverty.

The cloth is itchy, rough and very ugly, and one cannot feel superior in any way whatsoever by wearing it.

No one will ever praise how you look.

It is the absolute opposite of spiritual fashion.

It makes a huge statement by saying, 'I am nothing, and let me walk as nothing.'

In old traditions, wearing sack clothing was a way of fulfilling a vow by stating, 'I will not wear good clothing until I have completed the task I have set out to do.'

On the Narmada Parikrama, some parikramawasis wear sack clothing when they walk for a loved one who has passed on, or for a sin they want to wash away, not as punishment but as remembrance.

Someone who wears sack clothing is intentionally making their body feel uncomfortable so their soul can stay uncomfortable enough to remember why they're walking.

The discomfort they experience is the very prayer itself.

Babu took up his position on the steps of the small parikramawasi hall as if he were a guard dog, while I took a wash at the ashram's hand pump.

An old Swami served me a very basic meal of rice and aloo *sabzi* for dinner.

I was hungry, so it went down well.

I laid out my sleeping things very soon afterwards.

My body was exhausted, and I desperately needed some good sleep.

Soon after waking, I realised that Babu had gone.

It made me realise that these Narmada dogs can be just as elusive as the parikramawasi wearing sack clothing, who was also nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps Babu knew that our brief time together was done and that he needed to walk the next phase of the journey with the Sack Cloth Baba?

I walked along the banks of Maa Narmada to the Shankar Puri Ashram and arrived in time for some black tea and *poha*.

There was a Swami standing under a large oak tree chanting some beautiful, rhythmic words and sounds.

There was a feeling of eeriness about them, but they held me captivated and mesmerised as I stood listening for some time.

I continued on my way towards the Seoni Sangam, and the going was very tiring due to the unceasing undulations and ploughed land that I needed to negotiate.

I stopped at a small farmhouse for a rest, but the farmer kindly offered to give me some rice for lunch.

This was the most basic meal I had ever had on my Parikrama, but it was all I needed to sustain me and give me some fuel for the afternoon's walk to Tika Thola, where I found a small mandir.

I took a wash in Maa Narmada, and a pandit brought me some chai, followed by some dinner.

After a good night's sleep, I left early and made my way to the Bim Kundi Ashram, where I had some tea.

The difficult walking along the bank of the river continued, and it didn't take long for me to feel I needed a rest.

The Narmada River had narrowed substantially in this area, and at one point it funnelled itself through a narrow gorge that was no more than a metre wide.

It was possible for me to stand with one foot on the north bank and one foot on the south bank.

But I resisted doing this, as I would have been breaking a fundamental rule: not to cross over Maa Narmada at any time while walking the Parikrama.

It was uncanny to see this situation.

I needed a rest, and close by was a beautiful big tree, so I rolled out my sleeping mat and took a rest for two hours.

Later in the afternoon, I walked for a few more hours until I reached the Bel Ghat Mandir, where I planned to spend the night.

I had only walked 15 kilometres, but I felt absolutely exhausted.

Even though I wanted to cover more ground, I simply couldn't.

After the *aarti*, the old pandit made me some rice and potatoes for dinner and then left the temple, and I was entirely on my own.

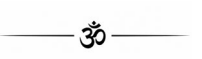
I was very happy about this, considering that this was probably my last night on the Narmada Parikrama.

From what I was able to glean from the pandit and from Google Maps, I was about 30 kilometres away from Amarkantak.

What an incredible thought.

I climbed into my sleeping bag at 8:45 pm, which was much earlier than usual, but I needed to get all the rest that I possibly could.

I needed as much energy and vitality as possible for the new day, so that I could enjoy my final day with relish and awareness.



Chapter 37

Amarkantak and the Journey Continues



"Strive ardently, dear Friend, and burn. In your quest to find the truth, remove and then purify every last layer of dross. The gold of your true Self must pass through a crucible in order to be refined before it can be revealed in all its truth, beauty and goodness."

Ronnie Baba

After a good night's sleep at the Bel Ghat Shiv Mandir, I woke at 4:30 am and was ready to leave an hour later. If everything went according to plan, this was probably going to be my last day of walking the Narmada Parikrama.

It was a crisp, fresh and rather cold morning. I could feel the temperature dropping as I approached the higher altitude of Amarkantak, at 1,048 metres above sea level. I made good progress as I walked towards a beautiful sunrise along a wide sand road.

The road seemed to peter out as I approached the forest. I stopped and stood looking around for a Narmada Parikrama sign or a path heading into the trees, but there was nothing.

A farmer noticed my confusion and came to my assistance. He explained that there was no path for a few kilometres, but kindly agreed to walk with me for a short while until he could

show me exactly which direction to take. We struggled through some ploughed farmland for a few hundred metres before he stopped and pointed eastwards.

"If you keep walking in that direction," he explained, "you will eventually reach a gravel road. Turn right there and follow it all the way to Amarkantak."

I was extremely grateful for his help. We greeted each other with "Narmade Har" and went our separate ways.

It was an enormous relief to leave the ploughed farmland behind and finally reach the gravel road.

It was still early in the day, but my legs felt as though they were filled with lead, my backpack seemed to weigh a ton and I was extremely tired. I had been pushing hard for the previous two weeks and was very conscious of how exhausted my body had become.

The Narmada Parikrama was taking everything from me, and I sensed that this final day was going to be similar to my first.

On that first day, I had become lost in the forest and ended up sleeping on the banks of Maa in freezing conditions, only to be rescued the next morning by a few guardian angels she had sent me.

It started warming up quickly, and I found myself stopping more often than usual to rest. I had heard about the Neelkanth Ashram along this section of the route, but somehow I could not find it. Instead, I found myself in a small settlement called Dhamgarh.

A little further on, I found the Ram Kuti Ashram in the forest at around midday. A few other parikramawasis arrived soon after me, and one of them kindly prepared lunch for us.

I was exhausted and slept before eating, and then slept again afterwards.

I started walking again at 3:15 pm. As the path left the ashram, it became a single footpath through the forest, almost identical to the one I had walked along when I became lost on my very first day.

It was supposedly only 8 kilometres to Amarkantak, but I was finished. I made slow progress through the forest.

After about an hour, I arrived at the Kapildhara Waterfalls and joined the throng of people on the viewing platform to take a look. There had not been much rain and the monsoon had not yet arrived, so very little water was flowing over the falls. I did not find them particularly impressive, although that may have had more to do with my frame of mind than the waterfalls themselves.

After a few more kilometres, I began seeing more houses. There was an unmistakable increase in civilisation, and I knew I was approaching the outskirts of Amarkantak.

A plethora of emotions started welling up inside me as I recalled that six months and 11 days had passed since I had started my Narmada Parikrama.

It all felt strange because, in many ways, it seemed as though I had always been on some kind of journey.

Throughout my life, I had been searching and seeking, although I was never quite certain what I was looking for or

what life was expecting of me. I had always stretched, strived and reached beyond what was sustainable, and I was seldom true to myself.

My huge, selfish ego had driven almost every aspect of my life. This had resulted in financial commitments that were often difficult to manage. I missed deadlines, felt constantly stressed and was always searching for some elusive balance in everyday life.

What followed was addictive behaviour, poor decision-making and a downward spiral that led to catastrophic loss in almost every department of my life.

And yet, throughout all of that turmoil, deep down I knew that I was more than the sum total of the life I was leading on the outside.

Despite all the dysfunction, dissatisfaction and unhappiness, I knew that I was eternal, although I had little understanding of what that truly meant.

During the previous six months and 11 days of intense inner purification and penance, those feelings of uncertainty had begun to dissipate. I was starting to see myself for who and what I truly was — not who I thought I should be, nor what I wanted others to think of me, but who I was after every last layer had been peeled away and the dross had been burnt off, revealing only the pure, unblemished gold of my true Self.

The diversity of my daily experiences, together with the constant uncertainty of where, when and what I would eat and where I would sleep, required surrender on a very deep level, from one moment to the next.

The result was an unconditional acceptance of all that is, together with an ever-decreasing resistance to the divine flow of life.

With each passing day of the pilgrimage, I witnessed how meticulously, carefully and superbly I was being taken care of in every sense of the word. This reinforced my faith and trust in the Universe and in the cosmic consciousness that pervades every living particle within me and around me.

The inner sense of joy, peace, contentment and wellbeing that had begun to permeate every simple aspect of my life was magical and liberating.

There were simply no words to describe it.

The sun had already started to bleed away by the time I approached the centre of town.

It was 6:30 pm when I took my final few steps into Amarkantak.

I had left the Bel Ghat Shiv Mandir 13 hours earlier and had walked 30 kilometres that day, on top of the thousands I had walked during the preceding months.

My body was finished.

My legs and feet no longer felt like my own.

And there was nothing.

No finish banner stretched across the road.

No clock stopped for me.

No one was there to welcome me, pat me on the back or say, "Well done."

No one knew me and no one cared.

I was simply another Sadhu on the road. Another man in dust-coloured clothing, carrying minimal belongings and no money. A Sadhu carrying only sacred vows and a small bottle of water I had collected from the Narmada Kund all those months and so many days ago.

I had carried it with me the whole way around so that Maa would always be with me. On the days when I felt lost, uncertain or afraid, it reminded me of the Mother who had guided and protected me all the way around her holy banks.

To many, this might have seemed like the ultimate anticlimax.

It was a far cry from what I had known.

For more than 20 years, I had competed in races with 20,000 other people, where every participant received a medal simply for completing the race. Television cameras broadcast our efforts to the world. Press photographers captured us mid-stride. Everyone was hailed and celebrated as a hero simply for taking part.

I had also stood on the summit of Mount Everest.

From the roof of the world, I made a satellite telephone call to a radio station in Cape Town, South Africa, a call that was heard by four million people.

When we came home, we were treated as heroes.

Arriving in Amarkantak was nothing like that.

There were no heroes here.

And that was why it was different.

That was why it was real.

That was why it was true.

On Everest, the world watched.

On the Narmada Parikrama, only Maa watched.

On Everest, they gave me applause.

On the Narmada Parikrama, she gave me silence.

And in that silence, I finally understood.

I had not come to be congratulated.

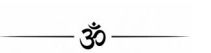
I had come to be completed.

I had closed the circle and arrived back where I had started, but I was not the same person who had left.

I was a transformed human being who could never return to my old Self.

With every ardent step on the banks of Maa, every last layer of the old Self had been peeled away, removed, fired and burnt in the crucible of inner purification and penance.

The refined gold of my true Self lay bare in all its truth, beauty and goodness.



Epilogue

The following morning, I woke before the sun rose.

Amarkantak was cold. Surprisingly cold.

I took the small bottle of water from my backpack.

It was the same bottle I had filled on my first day at the Narmada Kund. I had carried it 2,776 kilometres for the last 193 days, through forests, over mountains, across highways, through villages and along the banks of Maa herself.

I had carried it when I was lost, tired, hungry and thirsty, but I had never drunk it.

I walked to the Kund.

There was no one there.

I stood quietly, prayerful and reverent, just as I had done when I first met Maa all those months ago, when she had stirred something within me that was powerful and unfathomable.

That particular morning, I had no expectation of whether I would hear her speak.

We were deeply connected. Our relationship had become established, intimate and personal, and there was no longer any need for words.

But in that silence, I knew that she had given me a new life.

I had been reborn, transformed and made anew.

I knelt and poured the water back into the water.

There was no sound.

No mantra.

No one watching.

Water returning to water.

I thought I had carried Narmada with me.

That morning I understood — she had carried me.

The circle was closed.

The Parikrama was complete.

But inside, something had not closed.

Something had opened.

I did not know it then, sitting at that Kund with an empty bottle, but the real walk had not ended.

It had only just begun.

Maa called me again.

I would have to come back.

And on that second Parikrama, she would take me somewhere I could never have imagined.

She would take away my strength, my sight and my ability to stand, until there was nothing left to carry at all.

I had walked around her to find myself.

She would have to take me through something far more difficult to teach me how to truly see.

She had to break me completely, because I had not yet learned how to be held.

That is another book.

It begins where this one ends.

At the water.

With Gratitude

A spiritual pilgrimage around the Narmada River would not be possible without the invitation and consent of Maa Narmada herself. She needs to call you to be in her presence and in her lap. I will always be indebted to her for calling me, for guiding and protecting me, and for providing me with food and shelter throughout my journey. Thank you, Maa, from the bottom of my heart, for this privilege. Being close to you has totally transformed my life.

A huge big 'Thank you' to all the ashrams, temples, annakshetras, farmhouses and private homes that accommodated and fed me while walking the Narmada Parikrama. Your generosity, care and concern were overwhelming. Nothing was ever too much trouble, as you went out of your way to ensure that I was always looked after in terms of 'Atithi Devo Bhava' — 'The guest is God', the traditional principle of treating guests with the highest respect and hospitality.

Thank you to all the small chai shops, food stalls, and fruit and vegetable sellers that provided unlimited amounts of delicious Indian tea, street food and fruit to a hungry Sadhu. I was constantly amazed at how it was never too much trouble to make sure I was well fed and hydrated.

I am extremely grateful to all of you who stopped to give me some financial assistance. These amounts varied, but no contribution was ever taken for granted. These sums of money helped me to buy basic toiletries, washing powder, some peanuts, jaggery and the occasional piece of fruit. Those who

gave so graciously would often say, "This is something small towards chai," but in reality, I never ever bought chai, because so many generous teashop owners always ensured that I had more than my elegant sufficiency.

A special and heartfelt 'Thank You' to my dear friends, Dr Trupti Jayin, for writing the Foreword, and to Mike Patterson, who wrote 'A Word from a Fellow Mountaineer'. Your contribution means the world to me.

A cherished word of thanks to those of you who read excerpts from various chapters prior to publication and wrote words of praise for the writing and stories that appear in this book. I am truly grateful to you for your kind and complimentary words.

If you have been mentioned in this book, then I owe you huge big words of thanks and gratitude. There are so many of you, but unfortunately, due to limited space, I am not able to mention you by name.

However, there are some people who I believe need to be named. Your support came to me in many different guises, and from the bottom of my heart, I want to say a huge big 'Thank You' to Stiggs Muhl, Jayan Thiruthiyil, Dilip Kumar Jha, Sudhakar Komaravolu, Anurag Aggarwal and Monty Singh. Your contribution was above and beyond, and I am eternally grateful to you.

And last but not least, to those of you who have acquired and read this book, I say, 'Thank You, Thank You'. I pray that Maa Narmada has touched you in some small way and that she inspires you to recognise the profundity and sacredness of the journey that you are on, as you travel towards awakening and the realisation of your 'True Self'. May God bless each and every one of you.

A Glossary of Terms

A

Aarti — A Hindu ritual of worship in which light from a lamp or flame is offered to a deity.

Aata Ka Deep — A small lamp made from flour dough, used for devotional offerings.

Adivasi — A term meaning "original inhabitant", commonly used by many of India's tribal communities as a name for themselves and their distinct cultures and communities.

Ahimsa — Non-violence; the principle of causing no harm.

Ajna — The sixth chakra, located between the eyebrows; often called the third-eye centre.

Aloo — Potato.

Amla — Indian gooseberry, a sour fruit widely used in Indian food and traditional medicine.

Annakshetra — A place where free food is provided, particularly to pilgrims, travellers and those in need.

Aparigraha — Non-possessiveness; freedom from excessive attachment to material things.

Ashram — A spiritual hermitage, monastery or place of retreat and religious practice.

Asteya — Non-stealing; refraining from taking what does not belong to you.

Atithi Devo Bhava — "The guest is God"; the traditional principle of treating guests with the highest respect and hospitality.

Avatar — A divine incarnation or manifestation, particularly of a deity appearing on earth.

B

Baati — A round, baked ball of wheat dough, traditionally associated with Rajasthani and North Indian cuisine and often served with dal.

Baba — A respectful term for a holy man, ascetic or spiritual teacher.

Beedi — A small hand-rolled Indian cigarette, traditionally made using tobacco wrapped in a tendu leaf.

Bhajan — A devotional song expressing love or devotion towards a deity, saint or spiritual principle.

Bhakti — Devotion or loving surrender to God.

Bhojan — Food; a meal.

Bonda — A deep-fried savoury snack, usually made from a spiced filling coated in batter.

Brahmacharya — A principle of disciplined living, traditionally associated with celibacy, self-control and the wise use of energy.

Brahman — The ultimate, universal and eternal reality in Hindu philosophy.

Brahmin — The traditional priestly and scholarly varna in Hindu society.

C

Chai — Tea, usually prepared with milk, sugar and often spices.

Chai Pillo — "Drink tea."

Chakra — An energy centre in the subtle body according to yogic and tantric traditions.

Chappal — Sandal or open footwear.

Charpai — A traditional woven bed or cot.

Chaturmas — A four-month period traditionally associated with the monsoon and a time of spiritual retreat and disciplined practice.

Chela — A disciple or student of a spiritual teacher.

Chillum — A traditional conical pipe used for smoking, especially associated with Sadhus.

Crore — Ten million in the Indian numbering system.

D

Daan — Giving, donation or charitable offering.

Dadaji — A respectful term meaning grandfather or an elderly male.

Dal — Pulses or legumes prepared as a cooked dish.

Darshan — The act of seeing and being seen by a deity, saint or sacred object; a spiritual viewing or blessing.

Deep Daan — The devotional offering or floating of lamps, particularly on sacred rivers or bodies of water.

Devbhoomi — "Land of the Gods" or "Land of the Divine"; a sacred place or region.

Dhaba — A simple roadside restaurant or eatery.

Dhanyavad — Thank you.

Dharamsala — A resting place, shelter or lodging house, traditionally provided for travellers and pilgrims.

Dhoti — A traditional Indian garment worn around the waist and legs.

Dhuni — A sacred fire traditionally maintained by Sadhus or in an ashram.

Dhyan — Meditation or contemplation.

Diksha — Spiritual initiation or formal acceptance of a disciple by a guru.

Diya — A small oil lamp, traditionally made from clay.

Doodh — Milk.

Dussehra — A major Hindu festival celebrating the victory of good over evil, commonly associated with Lord Rama's victory over Ravana.

E

Ekadashi — The 11th day of the waxing and waning lunar fortnights, traditionally regarded as an auspicious day for fasting and spiritual practice.

F

Falhari — One who follows a diet of fruits or fruit-based foods, particularly as a form of spiritual discipline.

G

Ganja — Cannabis, particularly the flowering tops of the plant.

Garbhagriha — The innermost sanctum of a Hindu temple where the principal deity is installed.

Ghat — A series of steps leading down to a river, lake or other body of water.

Ghee — Clarified butter used extensively in Indian cooking and ritual.

Gomutra — Cow urine, traditionally regarded in some Hindu practices as having purifying or medicinal properties.

Goshala — A shelter or sanctuary for cows.

Gufa — Cave.

Gulal — Coloured powder traditionally used during Holi.

Guru — A spiritual teacher or guide.

Gurudev — A respectful term meaning "revered spiritual teacher" or "divine teacher".

Gurudwara — A Sikh place of worship.

Guru Granth Sahib — The sacred scripture and eternal Guru of Sikhism.

Guru Tula — A ceremonial weighing of a person against an offering of an equivalent weight of food, grain, money or another substance, which is then given in charity.

H

Havan — A sacred fire ceremony in which offerings are placed into a consecrated fire while mantras are recited.

I

Ishvara — God or the personal aspect of the Divine in yogic and Hindu philosophy.

Ishvara Pranidhana — Surrender of oneself to God or the Divine.

J

Jaggery — An unrefined form of sugar, usually made from sugarcane or palm juice.

Jagran — Staying awake through the night, often for prayer, chanting or devotional observance.

Jal — Water.

Jalebi — A sweet made from deep-fried coils of batter soaked in sugar syrup.

Jannah — Paradise or heaven in Islamic belief.

Japa — Repetition of a sacred mantra or divine name, usually with concentration and devotion.

Jati — A traditional hereditary social group or community within the broader structure of Indian society.

Jayanti — A birth anniversary or festival commemorating the birth of a revered deity, saint or spiritual figure.

K

Kacha Doodh — Raw or unboiled milk.

Kamandal — A small water vessel traditionally carried by Sadhus and ascetics.

Katori — A small metal or earthen bowl.

Kharvas — A traditional Indian milk pudding made from colostrum milk.

Khatiya — A traditional woven bed or cot.

Kheer — A sweet milk-based pudding, usually made with rice and sugar.

Khichdi — A simple dish made primarily from rice and lentils, often cooked together.

Kinaare — Banks or shores, particularly the banks of a river.

Kirtan — Devotional chanting, often performed in a call-and-response style.

Koeksister — A traditional South African sweet pastry, usually fried and soaked in syrup.

Kshatriya — The traditional warrior and ruling varna in Hindu society.

Kumbha Mela — A major Hindu pilgrimage and festival held at sacred river sites at astrologically significant intervals.

Kund — A sacred pond, tank or water reservoir, often associated with a temple or pilgrimage site.

Kurta — A loose-fitting traditional Indian shirt or tunic.

L

Ladu — A round Indian sweet, usually made from flour, gram flour, semolina or other ingredients and formed into balls.

Lakh — One hundred thousand in the Indian numbering system.

Langot — A traditional loincloth worn by wrestlers, ascetics and some practitioners of physical disciplines.

Lassi — A traditional drink made from yoghurt blended with water or milk and often flavoured with sugar, spices or fruit.

Likhit Jaap — The devotional practice of repeatedly writing a sacred name or mantra.

Lingam — A sacred symbolic representation of Shiva.

Lota — A small rounded metal water vessel traditionally used in India.

Lungi — A long piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and legs, commonly worn as everyday clothing in parts of India.

M

Maharaj — A respectful title meaning "great king" or, in spiritual usage, a revered or respected holy person.

Mahasamadhi — The conscious or final departure from the physical body by an advanced spiritual practitioner.

Mahashivratri — "The Great Night of Shiva"; a major Hindu festival dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Mahatma — A "great soul"; a respectful title for a spiritually advanced or highly revered person.

Mahavatar Babaji — A revered Himalayan spiritual figure associated particularly with the tradition of Kriya Yoga.

Maiya — An affectionate and reverential term for "Mother", often used for Maa Narmada.

Makar Sankranti — A Hindu festival marking the Sun's transition into Capricorn and traditionally associated with the beginning of the Sun's northward journey.

Mala — A string of prayer beads used for mantra repetition, meditation or devotional practice.

Mandir — Temple.

Mantra — A sacred word, phrase or sound repeated in prayer, meditation or ritual.

Mataji — A respectful term for a mother, older woman, female spiritual teacher or female ascetic.

Mela — A religious or cultural fair, gathering or festival.

Mitti Ka Diya — A traditional clay oil lamp.

Moksha — Liberation from the cycle of birth and death; spiritual freedom.

Mudra — A symbolic hand gesture or bodily gesture used in yoga, meditation and ritual.

Mungfali — Peanuts or groundnuts.

Murti — A sacred image or embodied representation of a deity used for worship.

N

Naashta — Breakfast or a light meal.

Nadi — A subtle energy channel in yogic philosophy.

Nahi — No or not.

Namaste — A respectful greeting, traditionally accompanied by bringing the palms together.

Nanak — Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism.

Narmada Purana — A sacred Hindu text associated with the Narmada River and its religious traditions.

Narmade Har — A traditional greeting among Narmada pilgrims, expressing reverence for Maa Narmada.

Navratri — A nine-night Hindu festival dedicated particularly to the Divine Mother in her various forms.

Nirvana — Liberation from suffering and the cycle of rebirth; ultimate spiritual release.

P

Padmasana — The lotus posture, a seated meditation position with the legs crossed and the feet resting on the opposite thighs.

Pandit — A learned Hindu scholar or priest, often responsible for performing religious rituals.

Pani Puri — A popular Indian street food consisting of small crisp shells filled with spiced water, potato, chutneys and other ingredients.

Parikrama — The sacred act of circumambulating a holy person, deity, temple, river or sacred site.

Parikramawasi — A person undertaking a Parikrama of the Narmada River.

Pattal Dona — Traditional disposable plates and bowls made from leaves.

Peshwa — A title historically used for a chief minister, particularly the hereditary leaders of the Maratha Empire.

Poha — Flattened rice, usually cooked with onions, spices and other ingredients.

Pradakshina — Walking clockwise around a sacred object, temple, deity or holy place as an act of devotion.

Prakriti — Nature, matter or the dynamic creative principle in Hindu philosophy.

Prana — Vital life force or life energy.

Prasad — Food or other offering that has first been offered to a deity and is then distributed as a blessing.

Puja — A ritual act of worship or offering to a deity.

Pujari — A priest or person who performs worship and ritual in a temple.

Punya — Spiritual merit or beneficial karma resulting from virtuous or devotional actions.

Purana / Puranas — A large body of ancient Hindu religious and mythological literature.

Purusha — Consciousness, spirit or the witnessing principle in Hindu philosophy.

R

Ram — The name of Lord Rama, commonly used as a sacred name or mantra.

Rama — Lord Rama, a major deity and central figure in the Ramayana.

Ramayana — One of the great Hindu epics, telling the story of Lord Rama.

Rangoli — Decorative patterns made on the floor, traditionally from coloured powder, rice or other materials.

Ratri — Night.

Reva — Another traditional name for the Narmada River.

Reva Khanda — The section of the Skanda Purana associated with the sacred geography and traditions of the Narmada.

Roti — Indian flatbread, usually made from wheat flour.

S

Sadhak — A spiritual aspirant or practitioner engaged in disciplined spiritual practice.

Sadhana — Spiritual practice undertaken with the aim of self-realisation or spiritual development.

Sadhavi — A female ascetic or spiritual renunciate.

Sadhu — A Hindu ascetic or renunciate who has devoted his or her life to spiritual practice.

Salaam Alaikum — "Peace be upon you"; a traditional Muslim greeting.

Samadhi — A state of deep meditation and absorption in which ordinary awareness is transcended.

Samarpan — Complete surrender or offering of oneself to the Divine.

Sanatan Dharma — "The eternal dharma"; a term often used for the Hindu spiritual tradition.

Sankalp — A solemn intention, vow or spiritual resolve.

Santosha — Contentment; acceptance and inner satisfaction.

Satori — A sudden experience or insight into spiritual reality or enlightenment, particularly a term associated with Zen Buddhism.

Satsang — Spiritual companionship or discussion in the presence of truth, a teacher or fellow seekers.

Saucha — Purity or cleanliness, both physical and mental.

Seva — Selfless service performed without expectation of personal reward.

Sevak — A person who performs seva or selfless service.

Shabda — Sacred word, sound or spiritual utterance.

Shakti — Divine energy or power; often personified as the feminine aspect of the Divine.

Shivling / Shivlingam — A sacred representation of Lord Shiva.

Shlokas / Shloka — Verses from Hindu scriptures, often recited or chanted.

Shubh Ratri — Good night.

Shudra — The traditional service and labour varna in the traditional Hindu social system.

Skanda Purana — One of the major Hindu Puranas, containing extensive sacred geography and traditions concerning pilgrimage sites.

Snan — Bathing, particularly ritual or ceremonial bathing.

Surya — The Sun; also the Hindu deity associated with the Sun.

Sushumna — The central subtle energy channel described in yogic philosophy.

Swami — A title used by Hindu monks, renunciates and spiritual teachers.

Swamini — A female renunciate or female spiritual teacher.

T

Tapas — Spiritual discipline, austerity or heat generated through disciplined practice.

Tapasya — Intense spiritual discipline, austerity or penance undertaken for purification or spiritual attainment.

Thali — A meal consisting of a variety of dishes served together, traditionally on a large round platter.

Tiffin — A packed meal or light meal, often carried in a metal container.

Tilak — A mark worn on the forehead as a religious or cultural symbol.

Tirtha — A sacred place of pilgrimage, often associated with a river, temple or other holy site.

Tula Daan — A ceremonial act of charity in which a person is weighed and an equivalent weight of a chosen offering is donated.

Tulsi — Holy basil, a sacred plant in Hindu tradition.

U

Uttarayan — The Sun's northward movement, traditionally associated with the period beginning around Makar Sankranti.

V

Vairagya — Detachment from worldly desires and possessions.

Vaishya — The traditional merchant, agricultural and trading varna in Hindu society.

Varna-Jati — The traditional Hindu framework of social classification, comprising the four broad varnas and the many hereditary jatis or communities.

Vastra Arpan — The devotional offering of clothing or fabric to a deity.

Vishnu — One of the principal deities of Hinduism, traditionally regarded as the preserver of the universe.

W

Wa Alaikum As Salaam — "And peace be upon you too"; the traditional response to "Salaam Alaikum".

Y

Yatra — A pilgrimage or sacred journey.

Yogi — A practitioner of yoga or a spiritually advanced person who follows a path of disciplined spiritual practice.

About the Author

As a young boy, **Ronnie Muhl** grew up on the west side of Johannesburg in South Africa. He was born into a poor but very loving family who did everything possible to provide for his needs. Those circumstances and that environment cultivated in him a strong desire to strive, to reach and to achieve. He excelled throughout his schooling, achieving success as an all-round student, both on the sports field and in the classroom.

But he failed at university, dropping out after his first year. He worked as a clerk for a number of years before leaving South Africa. He travelled to Europe, eventually living and working in London for three years. After returning home, he got married, started several businesses, and had three magnificent children, whom he still considers to be his finest achievement.

During this time, he became an elite athlete and marathon runner, completing more than 100 marathons and ultra-marathons, with numerous records and top-ten finishes to his credit. In his quest for achievement, he went on to climb six of the Seven Summits, eventually becoming the seventh South African to summit Mount Everest via the North-east Ridge.

Throughout his working adult life, he had an overwhelming desire to achieve big things, constantly searching for happiness and material success. In this striving, he attended every self-development course he could find and bought every 'self-help' book that appeared on the shelves, hoping to use whatever

tools and resources he could find to achieve success and balance.

But all of this simply forced him to run faster and faster on the treadmill of life. During that time of excess, chaos and stressful living, he struggled to remain true to himself. Eventually, everything began to crumble and collapse — his relationships, businesses, health, wealth and finances — ultimately resulting in the loss of all that he had built.

And, if that wasn't enough, he was eventually brought to his knees by losing his dignity, reputation, trust, peace of mind, faith, perspective and identity.

When he came to India, he was a broken man in every sense of the word, firmly entrenched in the most terrifying place of his life — the 'Dark Night of the Soul'. But deep within that pit of immense pain, loneliness and complete isolation, he clutched blindly onto a thin thread — the very essence of life itself.

In utter despair, powerless but with the gift of desperation, he went back onto his knees and surrendered fully to a Power greater than himself.

At this time, he realised that throughout his life he had been avoiding the most important thing of all — the search for the authenticity and essence of his Being and his True Nature.

This blinding realisation led him to begin walking as a monk through the sacred land of India, carrying only the bare essentials, no money and a stick, relying entirely on God's grace for food and shelter.

Over time, these journeys brought deep inner purification and penance, intense healing and profound personal transformation. He was able to let go of shame, guilt, pretences, false perceptions and all the illusions with which he had become identified for most of his life — illusions that had shaped his old character, beliefs and preconceived ideas.

Dropping those mistaken identities, negative emotions and false pretences was a mammoth task, but the results have provided the foundation for a life of absolute truth, freedom and spiritual awakening.

Through this process of letting go, together with a life of austerity and simplicity, he has found a new way of being and a life of freedom and liberation — something that is everyone's birthright, but is adopted, lived and enjoyed by very few.

Ronnie Baba currently lives in an ashram on the banks of the Ganga River in the foothills of the Himalayas and, through Divine grace, is no longer striving, searching or seeking for anything. He is at peace with himself and with the world at large.

Over the years, he has had many opportunities to face his own mortality on every conceivable level, but a few years ago he was given another chance to do exactly that.

This revealed that there is still more to be done in this lifetime, and he has responded to that call to service and contribution with commitment, enthusiasm and joy.

By the Same Author

Inspiration—A Treasury of Wisdom to Help You Live an Authentic and Inspired Life—Book One

Inspiration—A Treasury of Wisdom to Help You Live an Authentic and Inspired Life—Book Two

Everest—Surviving the Death Zone

Videos from the Narmada Parikrama

The episodes are listed in the order in which they relate to the chapters and events described in the book.

Chapter 1 — Into the Lap of Maa

Episode 1 — Amarkantak, Preparations and the Start of the Journey

Episode 2 — Rules and Regulations

Episode 3 — Amarkantak to Kevlari Ashram, Kisalpuri

Chapter 2 — A Mataji Washes My Feet

Episode 3 — Amarkantak to Kevlari Ashram, Kisalpuri

Chapter 3 — Lessons from a Lotus Pond

Episode 3 — Amarkantak to Kevlari Ashram, Kisalpuri

Chapter 4 — What Maa Taught Me

Episode 2 — Rules and Regulations

Episode 3 — Amarkantak to Kevlari Ashram, Kisalpuri

Chapter 5 — The Beauty of Simply Being

Episode 4 — Kisalpuri to Bareli

Chapter 6 — Diwali in Bareli

Episode 5 — Diwali in Bareli

Episode 6 — Bareli to Jamuniya

Chapter 7 — An Avant-Garde Room

Episode 6 — Bareli to Jamuniya

Episode 8 — Jamuniya to Narsinghpur

Chapter 8 — Saccidananda Ashram

Episode 8 — Jamuniya to Narsinghpur

Episode 7 — Guru Nanak Dev Ji Jayanti celebration in Narsinghpur

Chapter 9 — Nothing and Everything

Episode 9 — Narsinghpur to Koudiya

Chapter 10 — The Feet That Carry You

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Episode 11 — Sohagpur to Brandabhan

Chapter 11 — Waiting to Meet God

Episode 11 — Sohagpur to Brandabhan

Episode 12 — Brandabhan to Nanpa

Chapter 12 — The Long Way and the Wrong Way

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Episode 13 — Nanpa to Mini Goa

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Chapter 13 — Nights in an Old Age Home

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Episode 15 — Bhiladiya Ghat to Harda

Chapter 14 — Christmas in Narsinghpur

Episode 15 — Bhiladiya Ghat to Harda

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Episode 16 — Mandla Village to Sanawad

Chapter 16 — A Magical Gift from a Master

Episode 18 — Sanawad to Bhatyan Bujurg

Episode 19 — Bhatyan Bujurg to Mandavya Gufa Ashram

Episode 20 — Mandavya Ashram and Makar Sankranti

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Episode 22 — Barwani to Kuli

Chapter 18 — The Shoolpane Forest

Episode 22 — Barwani to Kuli

Episode 23 — Kuli to Bhabel

Episode 24 — Bhabel to Kappermal

Episode 25 — Kappermal to Dhadgaon

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Episode 28 — Interview with Harsh Jani Ji

Episode 29 — Gora Colony to Raisangpura

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Chapter 21 — A Muslim, Manifestation and Mithi Tilai

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