

[Capturing India's Sadhus](#)

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Capturing India's Sadhus

Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

As many as two million television viewers in the UK and USA experienced a close encounter this year with three of India's holy men, thanks to two brother film-makers, Naresh and Rajesh Bedi. The first of their three fifty-minute documentaries focused on Sri Jayendra Saraswati, Sankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham in South India, the second on Lotan baba ("The Rolling Saint") and the third on Ram Nath of the extremist Aghori sect. They were telecast on BBC-2 (whose Multicultural Programmes Department financed the project) from London and the Discovery Channel in USA.

Hinduism Today recently spoke to Mr. Naresh Bedi in New Delhi about his life and work: "I am proud to be Hindu in the same way as others are proud of their own religions. Moreover, I find it odd that in our own country we are reluctant to call ourselves Hindus and are misunderstood for saying this," says Naresh, his voice choked with emotion. Naresh has been deeply influenced by Hinduism. His film "The Living Ganesha" focuses on various rituals and stories connected with the elephant-headed God.

"These three sadhu documentaries," Naresh recounts, "all began with a phone call in 1992. Rajesh rang me in London to say that he had shot some memorable pictures of an aghori called Ram Nath. 'Great subject for a film,' said Rajesh, and our minds started clicking. With Denis Whyte to assist in production, and the BBC as chief sponsor, we began a memorable odyssey. On one of our many journeys around Delhi we found rolling down a road Lotan Baba, 'The Rolling Saint.' With two subjects in hand, the third could be none other than Jayendra Saraswati, head of Kanchipuram Mutt and the disciple of Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi, India's greatest living saint."

"Here were truly sacred subjects," Naresh went on, "all personifying eloquently their own celibacy as a life-sustaining spiritual metaphor. But what lay before us in terms of recording and documenting would prove to be the most arduous and challenging hours we ever faced in filming. Lotan Baba was to set out on a 2,400-mile penance, rolling all the way from Ratlam, in Madhya Pradesh, to the shrine of Vaishno Devi in the foothills of the Himalayas. The crew had to keep pace with his speed of rolling. It needed not mere deftness in handling the cameras, but farsightedness in terms of angles of shoot, as well as distances with respect to the subject, who was always in motion."

The Aghori called Ram Nath provided the film-makers rare moments to recall. States Naresh, "Wading through icy cold waters in Haridwar's winter, cold beyond imagining, Rajesh would stand knee-deep, rolling his camera to catch the Aghori in a moment of midnight meditation in front of the burning pyres. The stench of dead corpses and burnt flesh is more than what was bargained for."

According to Naresh, the most difficult thing was convincing the reclusive Aghori sadhu to permit his life to be filmed. "It is tough because these sadhus just do not care. You can't offer money, and you can't say 'Maharaj ji, do this for me.' "

Naresh's father, who was himself a photographer and a writer, proved to be quite helpful to the Bedi brothers' gaining access to Ram Nath. Naresh related, "In 1978-79 when I was covering Kumbh Mela and making my first film on sadhus, many of them were not happy with films which had portrayed them as charas and ganja addicts. Some Hindi movies of that time had also not projected the sadhus well. The impression given by these movies was that all sadhus were drug addicts. The sadhu community was quite annoyed with this, and they were not very cooperative and forthcoming when we approached them for our documentary film. We had to approach Bharat Sadhu Samaj to win the confidence of the sadhu community, and here my father played an important role."

"The Living God" focuses on Jayendra Saraswati, the spiritual head of Kanchi Mutt in the Tamil heartland of India's South, and 1993 was the busiest year of his life. His guru, Sri Chandrasekharendra, was then considered India's greatest living saint and respected by millions of Hindus. 1993 was to see his 100th birthday. "The documentary on Jayendra Saraswati vividly captures the grandeur of South India, the richness and devotion of the people there," said Naresh.

When asked to narrate some of the spiritual experiences during the filming, a smiling Naresh said, "We all hear about ghosts, witches, spirits and so on. But at the end of filming of Ram Nath at least I was convinced that there are some kind of supernatural powers or wandering spirits which somehow these gurus can tackle, by which I mean they can release a person from the clutches of spirits. For instance, while we were filming, a girl came who was highly possessed by some evil spirit; she was screaming and shouting and talking. Ram Nath tackled this spirit, and when it was all over, the girl was absolutely normal. She was an educated girl from a fairly well to do family of Delhi. You cannot brush off all this as some meaningless kind of show."

"Call it adventure, call it exploration of a retrospective trail," added Naresh, "our final footage of the private lives of three living sadhus suffused our own lives with a unique sense of spirituality. Looking back on the travails and torments of waiting for hours and shooting only seconds, we now know that these three films are more than a record of a mere moment in time. They offer the intimation of the timeless, of age-old traditions where we have endeavored to bring together a wealth of detail from myths, religious rituals and the true nature of celibacy. Perhaps in years to come these will serve as milestones of history."

Video Review: India's Holy Men

By Ravi Peruman, California

"Sadhus: India's Holy Men" are three distinct films, each an individual 50-minute glimpse into one facet of our always rich, often misunderstood, sometimes stark, yet thoroughly captivating religious heritage.

"The Living God" offers a rare-even once-in-a-lifetime-look at life in and around Kanchipuram, focusing on the life of Jayendra Saraswati, 69th Shankaracharya of Kanchi Peetham in South India. Naresh and Rajesh Bedi have captured history, witnessing the kanakabhishekam (offering of gold coins) of Sri Chandrasekharendra, the 68th Jagadacharya of Kanchi Mutt on his 99th birthday, and, in the wake of Ayodhya, documenting the first face-to-face meeting of all four Shankaracharyas in 250 years. The film peeks in on life in the Kanchi Mutt, from its brahmin boys-in-training, to the devotion of the millions of Hindus for whom the Shankaracharya is divinity embodied, to the steady, daily stream of Hindus seeking a few precious seconds of darshan of "the Living God." And then, in a rare opportunity for the film-makers, the Bedis witness and record the aftermath of Sri

Chandrasekharendra's mahasamadhi, the abhishekam to his remains and preparations for his interment.

"The Rolling Saint" documents the indomitable willpower and awesome penance of Lotan Baba, a sadhu who undertakes what is eventually a 2,400-mile pilgrimage from Madhya Pradesh to the Himalayan shrine of Vaishno Devi, not by walking, but by rolling sideways. During the sadhu's six-month journey he rolls sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly and agonizingly through monsoon rains and desert heat, through blisters and ecstasy, amid adoring crowds and speeding traffic, compromising his route only to avoid the most dangerous territories of the Punjab. While his support crew squabbles, Lotan Baba blesses, embodying the determination all souls must one day demonstrate to ascend to the highest spiritual heights, and transmitting the blessed side-effect of purification for souls in proximity to a sadhu performing tapas. For Lotan Baba, his journey ends up standing humbly in the queue to enter the cave-shrine of Vaishno Devi. While an unusual portrait of sadhana and of a proven sadhu (Lotan Baba had already performed the penance of standing for seven years), "The Rolling Saint" is also an unusual opportunity for the viewer to accompany such a soul on this arduous inner and outer journey.

"Living With the Dead" is by far the most haunting, literally, of the three Bedi films. It chronicles the sadhana of an Aghori, a radical sect of sadhus. Living for 12 years among the burning bodies of India's cremation grounds is the challenge of the Aghori, eating from a human skull whatever Lord Shiva provides. Spiritually, for Aghori sadhu Ram Nath, the tantric challenge is to be reviled, to face disgust, to slay ahamkara and in so doing to become both ego-free and mystically empowered. His life of taking warmth, clothing and food from the dead, meditating in the earliest morning hours when no one else dares be among the ghosts of the burning ghats—all this and more is captured by the Bedi brothers. If disgust is what Ram Nath craves, there is ample opportunity for viewers to feel it, but through it all comes a mysterious respect for a sadhu said to be among only ten alive today who follow the extreme Aghori path. Unlike the other programs, this is not one for children.

The Bedis' trilogy is a recommended record of India's living holy men. The tapes are not commercially available yet, but inquiries can be made directly to: Bedi Films, E-19, Rajouri Garden, New Delhi, 110 027, India.