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John Muir of the Himalayas

Over the past thirty years Swami Sundarananda, now 63, has been photographing the central Himalayan environment with his old, beat-up Nikon camera. Like

John Muir - founder of the Sierra Club - who 100 years ago galvanized American concern for wilderness preservation with his memoirs, the swami is hoping his collection of 50,000 slides will motivate the Indian public. Spending six months in a hut at Gangotri above Rishikesh and six months on the road with his slides, he's earned a reputation as a sincere sadhu, mountaineer, photographer, naturalist and spokesman for conservation in the Gangotri region.

In late 1987 Lee and Rebecca Meyers, associated with the University of California at Berkeley, spent six months with the swami at Gangotri and Rishikesh. A plan was developed to bring the slide collection to America for preservation and cataloging. In a lengthy interview at the Meyer's home, HINDUISM TODAY explored their encounter with the swami, and the slide project.

Hinduism Today: How did you meet the swami?

Meyers: We went to India in connection with my wife's Sanskrit studies in June 1987. She felt she was deficient in pronunciation, so she wanted to find a Shastri to teach her. We arrived in Delhi and it was so hot we left for Rishikesh thinking it would be cooler. It was still between 118-120 degrees, so I said 'I'm going higher.' I went with a Norwegian mountaineering team up to Gangotri where they thought they had accommodations at the tourist guest house. The place was full. Their

guide said he knows a yogi - Swami Sundarananda - who is a mountain climber and he's got a little hut and maybe he will put us up. We stayed there for three days. He singled me out. He formed some kind of response to me because I meditated with him. After helping the Norwegians set up a base camp at Gomukh ["cow's mouth," the glacial origin of the Ganges River] I spent a few more days with Swami. He said we could come back and we're always welcome. We did go back for ten days during the trekking season that fall.

HT: What was it like at Gangotri in the hut?

Meyers: Gangotri is the only place in the entire journey of the Ganges where there is a falls. Swami's hut is directly across from them. When you stand on his property you feel the spray from these falls. This is the part of the Ganga that is frozen solid at winter time. It is the perfect Himalayan alpine hut. The Gangotri opens the first of May and he is there. And he is on the last bus out at the end of October. There were a few photos on the walls of the hut, but we didn't even know they were his.

HT: What is the sadhana he practiced?

Meyers: I observed about 3 hours of meditation during the day, and he likes to meditate at night in the early hours. This is the most important part of his life - meditation, japa and pranayama. As a younger man he was a stupendously accomplished hatha yogi. He mastered 300 postures. He had no teacher. He has always been self-taught. He still does a half hour of hatha yoga a day. His ritual in the Gangotri before he goes to bed at night is a beautiful sight. He sings and chants and walks around his hut and kisses all the trees. He is very devoted to the ecosystem in which he has lived for forty years. Across the street [from Meyer's home] is a friend who is a tenured professor of forestry. A lot of these academics have come to realize that indigenous naturalists like Sundarananda can be very helpful for them. The thing that fascinates me is that this is a man who worships an ecosystem.

HT: How else does he contact this ecosystem?

Meyers: He has an intimate connection with the Himalayas that few others have. He is a mountain climber. He has climbed dozens of peaks in the Himalayas, several over 21,000 feet. He's lectured at Tensing's Himalayan Institute [a famous mountaineering school]. He is just a fabulous naturalist. He is intimate with thousands of Himalayan plants and knows a tremendous amount of lore and medicinal uses of these species. His perception of nature is acute. You can walk with him and his eye is so special. His ideas about weather patterns are so clear.

HT: What are his ecological concerns?

Meyers: His main concern over ecological degradation in the Himalayas has to do with the people who set up so-called ashrams in the Gangotri/Gomukh region. These are really just tourist hotels, and they are devastating the forests for their commercial interests. About halfway between Gangotri and Gomukh there was a huge birch forest named bhojvasa ["sea of birches"] by Swami Tapovanam in the 1920's. Birches are very sacred trees. Scribes used to use them to write their manuscripts. If you go to bhojvasa today, it is a moonscape. It is beyond conception that this could have been a bhoj tree forest. Since nature is God in Sundarananda's view, to violate or destroy God in His highest order of physical manifestation is overwhelmingly sad to him.

HT: What brought Swami to the Himalayas?

Meyers: He said from the time he was a little child he had this idea of being a sadhu. So when he was a teenager he ended up running away from home. He wended his way through India and met various teachers. Finally he ended up in Rishikesh and heard about this great scholar in the Himalayas, Swami Tapovanam. So he thought maybe he's the man. He went there and Tapovanam - who had a policy of shooing disciple candidates away - shooed him away. Sundarananda then lived in a cave and Tapovanam found him and told him he could come and be his servant. He lived with him for ten years in total devotion, cooking, carrying water, chopping wood. When Swami Tapovanam became terminally ill, he wanted to stay at Gangotri and Sundarananda would care for him. Then one night he died and left him this hut on the Gangotri. People often come to worship at the hut. They also talk to Sundarananda, but I doubt that few know what he is really about.

HT: How did photography enter his life?

Meyers: About thirty years ago he was guiding an expedition across a glacier. He was at the rear and just as everybody got across there was a cracking sound and the swami dropped into a crevasse. When the party rushed over, they found him dangling, holding himself by his arms. A Swiss took a photo and Sundarananda asked to be sent a copy of the shot. He never received a copy so he vowed to get a camera himself. He bought his first camera for 25 rupees. His photo guru was a famous photographer in New Delhi. He does not have a lot of fancy equipment. Many American tourists have more than he does. He uses an old Nikon, but he would like to eventually acquire a Hasselblat. Film and lenses and such come his way through admirers. He never begs, not even for food. He thinks a sadhu should just wait. He has a rule that if gifts have exceeded US\$200, then he will give the excess away. His life is very simple. He is like an Indian John Muir and his journal is photographic rather than written. A few of the photographs nobody but a sadhu with a camera could get. During the winter season he will give 6 slide shows a day in a town. For 11 years he's gone on the road to bring awareness of the degenerating conditions in the Himalayas.

HT: When did he introduce you to his slides?

Meyers: After our ten days at Gangotri with him, he said he would be at the Bharat Mandir in Rishikesh in October and we should look him up. We did meet him and he arranged a lovely apartment for us at the Mandir. The mahant of the Mandir said we could stay for one year, then quickly said, "Make that two years." We did in fact stay for six months and Swami lived in a small room just down the hall from us. Sometime after about four months he started to show us his slides. He puts up these slides and they were fantastic. It turned out he had 50,000 slides of mountainscapes, plant species, sadhus, rare Hindu rituals, architecture and statuary, taken from all over India. But there was also a recent theft, lost negatives and a fungus was growing on about 3-5% of the slides. He says he wants me to take these slides to America. So we chose 2-3,000 and cataloged about 800 - which took five weeks - to bring here.

HT: What is the status of the slide project now?

Meyers: I started calling universities. Everybody said the same thing: we can't handle 50,000 slides. Finally I was led to the geography department of University of California at Berkeley. They can digitize the slides which would permanently preserve the collection and allow them to digitally correct the fungus infestation. Another thing is that it would make the collection accessible anywhere over university computer networks. Originally, we planned to bring the swami and the 50,000 slides here to Berkeley for the cataloging. But a much better arrangement has developed where the slides will go to the Center for Art and Architecture of the American Institute of India at Benares, India. The slides will be cataloged there and stored in air-conditioned facilities. Later they will go to Berkeley for digitizing. I am going to India on Sept. 14th [1989] to talk to swami about these options.

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