

## **Foreign Swamis at Home in India: Transmigration to the Birthplace of Spirituality**

**Meena Khandelwal**

Department of Anthropology and Department of Women's Studies, University of Iowa

*This essay examines the lives of non-Indians who live as monastics in Rishikesh, India. As transmigrants, they cross-national borders and occupy transnational social fields. However, they neither maintain a home outside of India nor use the language of displacement to describe their experience. They speak instead of feeling “at home” in India and of finally finding their place, thus unsettling the emphasis on displacement in models of transmigrant identities. I explore how Foreign Swamis experience India as home and point to certain characteristics that make India eligible to become “home” to non-Indians: discursive constructions of spiritual India, low cost of living, institutional support for the monastic life, and the Hindu doctrine of transmigration of the soul. Foreign Swamis are unusual, even radical, transmigrants in that most move from rich to poor country, with ascetic rather than worldly aspirations, and after renouncing family, employment, and country. Yet their narratives may prompt us to ask new questions about other kinds of transmigrants: What other kinds of people might find home through migration? What makes a place eligible to become home to what kinds of people, and, finally, what other kinds of homes might be possible?*

*Key Words: Hindu renunciation, migration, religious travel, India*

This essay considers the religious lives of unusual migrants—non-Indians who live as Hindu monastics in Rishikesh, India—to raise new questions about transmigrant identity. In earlier migration scholarship, the concept of “immigrant” assumed a framework of distinct nations, evoked sudden and permanent rupture with a natal place and culture (with place and culture presumed to be isomorphic), and prompted questions about degree of assimilation. In the last three decades, this immigration paradigm has given way to transnationalism. Glick Schiller et al (1995) suggested the term “transmigration” to situate contemporary migrant experience in the changing conditions of global capitalism; transmigrants create social fields that link their countries of origin and settlement and construct complex, multiple identities. Recent ethnographic research attests that many transmigrants maintain intense emotional, social, and economic ties with their place of origin and openly acknowledge multiple loyalties (see, for example, Constable 2003; Raj 2003).

Identities of migrants in the contemporary era of globalization have been generally understood as displaced and often as diasporic. The term “diasporic” suggests the experience of dispersal, uneasy relationship with place of settlement, orientation towards homeland, and transnational social connections<sup>1</sup>. However, the narratives of some foreign sadhus who live in India reveal the possibility of transmigration without displacement. They are transmigrants in the sense that they have migrated from one nation-state to another and maintain social relations that embed them in two or more nation-states (Glick Schiller 2003: 105). Although they have ritually and literally renounced attachments to natal families, national identities, and hometowns, they nevertheless host visitors from their country of origin, engage international audiences,

and may travel abroad themselves to teach yoga, lecture, or play music. While some meet natal kin from time to time, they prioritize relationships with spiritual peers from India and elsewhere and often maintain these networks by email. These Foreign Swamis are transmigrants, but do not use the language of displacement to describe their journey.<sup>2</sup> Instead, they speak of finally finding their place. Migration, for them, has meant finding a home, and this sense of homecoming reflects their specific positionality as transmigrants, for it is not how Indian-born sadhus describe their spiritual journeys.

The phenomenon of Foreign Swamis in India unsettles familiar models of migration that are grounded in a framework of labor and overlook religious migration to sacred places. My observations are based on research in Rishikesh in 2005.<sup>3</sup> The three people whose lives I highlight here left Europe and North America to settle permanently in India. Swami Chetan Jyoti's description of receiving her citizenship papers exemplifies the cognitive dissonance created by the very thought of a Canadian citizen moving to India and aspiring to acquire Indian citizenship.

"The day I got my citizenship certificate," ~~she recalls,~~ "I was called to Delhi. I was delighted, thrilled, and waltzed into the office... there were maybe six people in the office, and it was like a funeral. They were all just sitting there, staring at me sadly. There was dead silence."

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Why are you doing this, Madam?" implored one man.

"You should be *proud*. I want to be an Indian!"

The officials were not convinced, perhaps because she had to relinquish her Canadian citizenship in the process. The office head handed her the certificate; shaking his head sadly, he said “I don’t know why you are doing this. I just don’t understand.”

Foreign nationals living in India not only retain the option of return to their place of origin but can also count on assistance from their consulate in emergency situations.<sup>4</sup> The Indian government does not make it easy for those of non-Indian ancestry to obtain citizenship. Swami Chetan Jyoti described the tiny office as strangely devoid of the stacks of papers that clutter busier government offices and was certain that the officials knew each applicant personally<sup>5</sup>. It is revealing too that in everyday conversation, at least among Americans, Euro-Americans living for years in India are considered perpetual “ex-pats” while Indians in North America are more likely to be called “immigrants” from the moment of arrival.<sup>6</sup> The assumption may be that no Canadian would choose to relinquish her Canadian passport for an Indian one, but that any Indian would settle in Canada if given the chance.

Current understandings of transmigration as displacement arise in part from the fact that most research examines populations who move for reasons of economic and educational opportunity. Even as scholars of transnationalism expand their early interest in political economy to include questions of culture, and identity as a new way of thinking about culture (Kearney 1995: 557), most analyses nevertheless remain focused on populations who cross national borders for reasons of war, poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunity. The term “religious migrants” brings to mind those fleeing persecution, but here I draw attention to voluntary migrants who might experience their

place of settlement as home. As pilgrims, they seek truth some place other than where they are (Bauman 1996: 20).

The situation of foreign sadhus who settle in India may be unusual among migrants. They move from rich to poor country, and with ascetic rather than worldly aspirations. Moreover, classical Hindu renunciation idealizes an itinerant lifestyle, for renouncers aim to transcend attachments to people, places, and things that result from sedentarism.<sup>7</sup> Malkki (1992) argues that uprootedness is pathologized in arborescent conceptions of nation and culture that underlie both scholarly work and everyday language, the language of soil, roots, seeds, natives, and “indigenous” people. Her critique of the taken-for-granted quality of botanical metaphors arises from a consideration of refugees, but it reveals a more general necessity to critically analyze connections among migration, displacement and identity. The migration of Foreign Swamis involves deliberate rejection of attachments and nostalgia. Their radical act of “walking away from it all” for a monastic life in India may prompt us to ask new questions about other types of migrants: What allows a place to become home and for what kinds of transmigrants? Thus, in addition to questioning the presumption of displacement in migration theorizing, I also consider India’s eligibility to become home. Although evidence from biographical accounts suggests that this notion of homecoming is widespread among foreign ascetics in India (Tillis 2004: 45, 112, 166, 278), I do not aim to generalize from three cases to all foreign sadhus.<sup>8</sup> Rather, my purpose is to ask new questions about transmigrant identity.

### **Foreign Swamis and global monasticism**

Those who have migrated to Rishikesh as Hindu monastics are often called “Foreign Swamis”. “Swami” (lit. “lord”) is a title given to Hindu initiates of various ascetic orders, and the three people whose lives I highlight here prefix their name with the title Swami. “Swamiji” is a respectful way to both address and refer to a female or male sadhu. The term “foreigner” is commonly used in Rishikesh to identify people who are foreign-born and not of Indian ancestry; it is used interchangeably with “Westerner” and includes the many Israeli visitors in town. The prototypical foreigner in Rishikesh is white, although I also met people living in Rishikesh in 2005 who are African-American, African, and Japanese. The elision of Foreignness and Whiteness is not surprising, for during the colonial period and at least a decade following India’s Independence in 1947 foreigners in Rishikesh would invariably have been White, and this only began to change in the 1960s and 1970s. “Indian” is opposed to both “Westerner” and “Foreigner” and is commonly used to identify people of Indian origin, whether born in the United States, Trinidad, or South Africa. The geopolitical and cultural categories of East and West are now widely recognized as historical constructions with specific discursive power (Said 1978).<sup>9</sup> In Rishikesh, the salient categories are India and West. Following Strauss (2005: 11) and Moran (2004: 2), I retain these essentializing terms in order to draw attention to their matter-of-fact usage by my interlocutors. Thus, the prototypical Foreign Swami is a white Euro-American, but this category proves elastic when Japanese or African Americans are also included.

The three Foreign Swamis whom I consider here currently live independently of any monastic institution. Swami Bodhichitananda from North Carolina has been initiated

into the Saraswati Dashnami Order by Swami Chidananda and now lives in a cottage he has built with his own hands on the banks of the Ganges. He teaches yoga in a small clearing beside his cottage, mostly to local Indian men. Swami Chetan Jyoti from Toronto is initiated into the Udasin Order by Sri Swami Chandra Swami; she now lives in her own *kutir* (hermitage) overlooking the Ganges. She has gained a reputation for composing and performing religious songs, many in Hindi, and travels to remote parts of the Himalayan region (and, as of 2005, internationally as well) to perform. Like Bodhichitananda, she is celibate. Swami Amrit Mahamedha was born in Baku (in what is now Azerbaijan), but lived in Germany for years before finding his way to India. Initiated into Kashmiri Shaivism by Lord Shiva himself (in a vision), he shares a rented house with his “shakti” (a Japanese woman); his Tantric path does not require celibacy. Here he paints religious visions on canvas and teaches yoga. All wear the ochre-colored robes of Hindu renunciation.

Although belonging to different Hindu *paramparas* (spiritual lineages; religious orders), they all adhere to vegetarian diet, yoga, meditation, survival by charitable donations, and the Advaita Vedanta philosophy of absolute monism.<sup>10</sup> At the time of writing, all three lived independently of any monastic institution. I choose these three because all were born elsewhere but had settled more or less permanently in Rishikesh and are thus identifiable as transmigrants and because all spoke to me about their migration as a spiritual homecoming.

### **Rishikesh as the center for transnational ashrams and swamis**

Rishikesh is an ideal location in which to explore the identities of Foreign Swamis who settle in India.<sup>11</sup> This pilgrimage town is in the mountain state of Uttarakhand, known for its hill stations and natural beauty.<sup>12</sup> Straddling the Ganges River, Rishikesh boasts a landscape defined by the river as center and mountain views on all sides. As a gateway to the Himalayas, it is the point of departure for many pilgrims on the Char Dham route of four mountain holy sites; most of these pilgrims are Indian.<sup>13</sup> Rishikesh also attracts increasing numbers of tourists, both domestic and foreign, who come for trekking and river rafting.

More than simply a place of natural beauty or starting point for other destinations, Rishikesh is imbued with the holiness of the larger Himalayan region. The rivers, forests, and mountain caves of this area are home to major deities and sages mentioned in Hindu scripture.<sup>14</sup> Both foreign and Indian ascetics in Rishikesh stress that these associations with religious and especially ascetic activities assist those engaged in such practices today. A mantra chanted in Rishikesh is said to be far more efficacious than the same mantra chanted in Delhi or Chicago. Many renouncer-gurus with global reputations have a base in Rishikesh, and people travel from around the world to sit at their feet. If Banaras is a center for Sanskrit learning, Madurai the city of temples, and Vrindavan the place where devotion to Krishna is most highly cultivated, then Rishikesh is associated with renunciators who attract foreign disciples. Haridwar, just a few miles south of Rishikesh and the site of my previous research on women renunciators (Khandelwal 2004), is also a hub of ashrams in North India. Haridwar, where Hindi predominates, attracts Indians of various socioeconomic backgrounds. Rishikesh, in contrast, caters to foreigners and middle-class, English-speaking Indians.



The modern town of Rishikesh can be traced back only 150 years but has grown steadily since the 1930s. The state economy is oriented toward tourism, which has expanded from pilgrimage to include mountain trekking, river rafting, village tourism, and “spiritual tourism.” Tourism officials and business owners I spoke with distinguish between “pilgrimage,” which is assumed to draw primarily Indians (domestic and diasporic), and “spiritual tours,” which highlight yoga and meditation and attract foreigners and a few elite Indians. The town became well known outside India in the 1960s when the Beatles traveled to visit their guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in Rishikesh, thereby initiating a steady stream of foreign visitors. It is today a cosmopolitan center of monastic life. One can hear discourses on Vedanta given in French by a Canadian swami, eat apple pie at the German bakery, and attend a yoga class in which an African American woman teaches postures and accompanying Hindu practices to women from France, Germany, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States.

### **The landscape of foreign spiritual seekers in India**

Foreign Swamis share some experiences and characteristics with spiritual tourists and sojourners, new age seekers generally, indigenized missionaries, and other categories of non-Indians engaged with Hindu ascetic practices. Here I highlight the specificity of their experiences in order to question assumptions of displacement in transmigrant identity.

#### *Spiritual tourists and sojourners*

~~Mythologized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century counter-culture as a spiritual utopia, India is both a site of longing and a popular destination for North Americans and western Europeans (and~~

~~increasingly people from Japan, China, and various parts of the colonized world) interested in yoga, meditation, or gurus. Western interest in Hindu sadhus predates the Christian era, as travel between India and the Greek world occurred in the third and second centuries B.C.E. following Alexander's Indian expedition (Sedlar 1980: 79-85). However, the site of Rishikesh was only popularized in the 1960s.~~

Mythologized in the twentieth century counter-culture as a spiritual utopia, India is both a site of longing and popular destination for North Americans and western Europeans. Thus, Foreign Swamis live alongside spiritually-oriented foreigners who spend a few days in Rishikesh and others who visit periodically and stay for months. Unlike conventional tourists, spiritual sojourners tend to stay in ashrams or guest houses rather than hotels, wear Indian clothing, and have a (usually Indian) guru. They participate in a tourist economy, but tend to arrive at the Delhi airport and make a beeline for Rishikesh, without stopping to shop in Delhi or making a detour to the Taj Mahal. They come on tourist visas and have the resources to leave whenever they wish. In contrast, Foreign Swamis have no home outside India and no return ticket in their bag. They have made a long-term commitment to remain in India, and the very steps that secure their future in India require abandonment of financial resources or employment opportunities, family ties, or citizenship that would allow them to leave at will.

Foreign Swamis, unlike many sojourners, eat simple Indian food, and do not seek out the costly imported foods sold in the tourist market. Many sojourners I met found ordinary Indian food too spicy and thus consumed the foreign foods sold in shops and cafes that cater to foreigners. One couple (a U.S. man and European woman) spent several months in Rishikesh each year and in 2005 had carried two suitcases full of

canned tomatoes, pancake mix, maple syrup, and even frozen organic foods which they packed in dry ice for the journey and then transferred to a freezer (which they had purchased on their previous trip and stored in Rishikesh). Foreign Swamis have neither the resources nor the desire to live like this. A former Scottish Nationalist turned disciple-of-a-British guru, in an interview with Tillis, recalled some early difficulties in adapting to India and then a transformative bath in the Ganges: “[F]rom that moment I’ve never had typhoid or those things. I’ve had immunity—psychic immunity. You can’t stay in India on boiled water; you have to come around to the Indian way—if you get a bug, it’s for a purpose. It’s easier to live that way too” (Tillis 2004: 84-85).

Unlike tourists and sojourners, most Foreign Swamis I met spoke Hindi with various degrees of skill, and some fluently.. They participate in a community of sadhus (Indian and foreign) by attending religious events at other ashrams and cultivating ties with lay Hindus. Swami Bodhichitananda, for example, regularly visits a nearby village where he assists a family of impoverished orphans. Unlike tourists and sojourners, these Foreign Swamis participate only marginally if at all in Rishikesh’s tourist economy and have made a life-long commitment to their vocation and to India.

Reflecting on the project of identity, Bauman (1996: 25) argues that pilgrimage aims to construct and fix an identity and is thus the ideal metaphor for a modern life, while tourism is a more meaningful metaphor of postmodern life in so far as it both rejects long-term commitments and fragments time into distinct episodes. If we accept Bauman’s distinction between tourists and pilgrims, then Foreign Swamis are most aptly understood as pilgrims. The memories of past lives that draw them to India result in commitment to guru and place and enable this movement to become part of a continuous,

unfragmented story. However, the religious migration I describe cannot be understood fully through conventional ideas of pilgrimage.

### *New Age Seekers*

The New Age movement is associated with faddish interest in spiritual practices and objects, which are extracted from their cultural context, commodified, and combined in ways often jarring to anthropologists. The eclectic sampling of esoteric phenomena associated with New Age subculture is often dismissed as a passing fashion, but its core set of beliefs, including reincarnation and the mind's power to transform reality, have been enjoying a steady expansion (Lewis 2004: 12). Heelas and Woodhead (2005) identify a major shift in Britain from traditional forms of "religion" to new forms of "spirituality." In this "subjective turn," sensitivity to personal experience becomes more important than conformity to external obligations. It means turning away from external roles and being attentive to "states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, inner conscience, and sentiments..." (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 2-3). Advaita Vedanta proposes that the very purpose of life is knowledge of the self and thus may be particularly suited to this growing emphasis on spirituality in new religious movements.<sup>15</sup>

To peg Foreign Swamis as New Age seekers would be to miss what is most interesting about their lives. New Age seekers dabble in a variety of religious techniques, and India figures prominently in the New Age imaginary long before the first visit. Many foreigners who migrated to India during the twentieth century were involved in New Age practices, but, in a different trajectory, the three Foreign Swamis described here were

neither seeking an Indian guru nor cultivating a romance with India. All had decidedly non-religious upbringings, but are now deeply immersed in a particular Hindu tradition, cultivate knowledge about the spiritual lineage or scriptural tradition of their ascetic practices, identify as Hindu (or as simply spiritual), and speak of a deep and permanent connection to India.

Moreover, if the New Age movement is an attempt for middle and upper class people to pursue well being while leaving intact first world privilege, middle class security, and material comforts, then Foreign Swamis who have made India their home do not fit this category. In explaining yoga's popularity in the West, Strauss argues that it allows practitioners to pursue modern values of freedom and health without succumbing to material excess, and to foster community without disrupting the lives of the already-fortunate to whom it appeals (2005: 12, 31). Foreign Swamis do not meditate for stress relief, physical health or professional success. They renounce employment, family, and country for an ascetic life in India, and their goal is nothing short of enlightenment. Most foreigners who live permanently in India come from affluent or middle-class backgrounds (Alexander 2004: 7). Privilege enabled them to travel to India in the first place, whether airfare was obtained via family, a comfortable salary, or a temporary job. Many live comfortably by Indian standards, and the privileges of being an English-speaking white person do not vanish after *sannyasa*.<sup>16</sup> However, these Foreign Swamis have renounced opportunities, comforts, and long-term financial security by their decision to migrate. In this decision to make India home, they are unlike most New Age seekers.

*Christian Swamis*

As early as 1606, an Italian Jesuit priest, Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) traveled to India as a missionary and aroused the ire of his contemporaries by adopting the orange robes and practices of a *sannyasi* and by allowing his Brahmin disciples to retain their sacred thread; he was mocked by fellow missionaries, Church authorities, and Indian observers (Cronin 1959). As Waghorne (1999: 100-1) summarizes,

De Nobili began his mission in the city of Madurai in 1606 and within a few years settled in a small thatched hut near the famous Meenakshi Temple. He quickly realized that no high-caste Hindu would convert to a religion that at the time was associated with the Pirangi (foreigners)—an unflattering term for the meat-eating, unwashed, and thus virtually untouchable Portuguese masters of Goa. He adopted *sannyasi*'s clothing, a vegetarian diet, and upper caste rules of ritual purity, and composed discourses in both Tamil and Sanskrit.

Cronin reports that he left behind 4,183 converts and that, until the end, Nobili's goal in taking on the lifestyle and look of a Hindu renouncer was "to open the door of India to Christ" (1959: 263).

During the twentieth century, two French monks followed in De Nobili's footsteps. Jules Monchanin (1895-1957) left France for South India in 1939. His days in India were filled with preaching, ministering to the sick and dying, and other pastoral work for the Church, but he longed for the Hindu renouncer's life of solitude (Stuart 1995: 12-14). Although he took the Sanskrit name of Swami Parama Arubi Anandam, his goal was "to prepare for the awakening among Christians of the contemplative life in

an integrally Indian form” (Stuart 1995: 13). Henri Le Saux (1910-1973) was a Benedictine monk who joined Father Monchanin in India in 1948 and, soon after, adopted the garb of a *sannyasi* and the name Swami Abhishiktananda. In 1950 the two men established a simple ashram Shantivanam in Tamil Nadu and adopted as their emblem the cross of St. Benedictine with “Om” at the center.

Despite years of effort, their work only achieved success when they passed their mantle to a British Benedictine monk named Father Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) in the 1960s. According to Rajan, Bede Griffiths had already studied Indian and Chinese religious traditions when he arrived in India in 1955, and by the time he arrived at Shantivanam in 1968 he was wearing the orange robes and was known by the Sanskrit name Dayananda. Bede Griffiths contributed to the development of an Indo-Christian *sannyasa* and Christian ashrams (Rajan 1997 [1989]). De Nobili, Monchanin, Le Saux, and Griffiths developed a deep interest in Hindu monasticism, read Hindu scriptures, took Sanskrit names and were known as swamis, but they remained monks in the Catholic Church. Efforts to “Indianize” the Christian message has provoked an angry response from some Hindus who view these efforts as predatory, as deception in the interest of conversion (see, for example, Goel 1994 [1988]).

Even in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, a handful of primarily European foreigners migrated as individual spiritual seekers, rather than as missionaries, and were initiated into Hindu monasticism. They exemplify the subjective turn described by Heelas and Woodhead (2005). Mirra Alfassa, who came to be known as “The Mother,” was born in Paris in 1878 where she cultivated interests in painting, occult practices, and eastern philosophies; she met English-educated Sri Aurobindo on a trip to

Pondicherry in 1914 and migrated permanently in 1920 to be his spiritual collaborator (Wilfried 1986). Swami Atmananda, born in Vienna in 1904, was a musical prodigy. She became involved in Theosophy in the 1920s, first visited India in 1925 and finally migrated in 1935; after following Krishnamurti and then Ramana Maharishi, she spent most of her life as a disciple of Anandamayi Ma (Alexander 2000). Swami Jnanananda was born in Switzerland and migrated in 1953 (personal communication).<sup>17</sup> Since the 1960s, however, the numbers of North Americans and Europeans interested in Hindu monastic traditions has increased.<sup>18</sup> They arrive in India with subjectivities and institutional paths different from the Catholic monks who preceded them. They do not agonize over religious loyalties or promote inter-faith dialogue. While considering earlier figures like De Nobili cautions against exaggerating the newness and globality of movement itself (Tsing 2000: 345-46), they were indigenized missionaries, not the spiritual transmigrants I consider here.

*Magnetic forces and religious transmigrants as pilgrims*

Foreign Swamis in India are atypical migrants. Many middle-class transmigrants carry financial and cultural capital that gives them access to educational and employment opportunities in their place of settlement. This is the case for most post-1965 South Asians in the United States, even though the model minority stereotype erases the role of U.S. immigration policies and middle-class origins in their professional success. Other transmigrants may renounce capital or opportunities in their home country in the hope of regaining it elsewhere, as may have been the case for Indians who went to other parts of the British empire during the colonial period. Refugees of conflict and natural disasters



may have everything wrenched away from them, as did Hindus and Muslims who fled their homes during Partition. In contrast, foreign sadhus have chosen to jettison what they had—and what they might have acquired—to move to India.

What is most remarkable about the three Foreign Swamis presented here is that none had any familiarity with Hinduism in their early years, knowledge of things Indian, or a highly cultivated spiritual imaginary with India as center, yet as adults they found themselves magnetically drawn to Rishikesh by forces beyond their control. They would not view these forces as sociological, for Advaita philosophy subsumes rather than denies sociological reality. Hence, the circumstances of birth and memories of past lives that pulled them to Rishikesh are presumed to be Divine in origin. As Swami Mahamedha put it, after he landed in South India for the first time, he made his way instinctively “moving like an animal” to Rishikesh in the North. Memories and impressions of past lives prompt Foreign Swamis to make decisions that most people in their countries of origin would find incomprehensible.

These days, metaphors of transport and boundary crossing figure prominently, as scholars write of traffic flows and time-space compression. Here magnetism is more helpful in thinking about a subtle force that is neither visible nor concrete, a core spiritual center that pulls everything to it, and a power that engages an interior self without necessarily referencing the material body. Renunciation is thought to be inspired by turning inward, not by peering out over the horizon. In Malcolm Tillis’ interviews with fifty westerners following spiritual pursuits in India, several describe being “pulled” to India. Tillis himself refers to an electro-magnetic field that remains intact in India and that interacts with the individual psyche in ways that are not possible in the West (Tillis

2004: 7). This kind of magnetic attraction, combined with memories of lives previous, serve to *bind* these Foreign Swamis to their new home.

As actual places become less bounded under current globalization, constructions of distinct places may become even more salient (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 10). While Hindu renouncers have spread their messages and their institutions around the globe, India is where spirituality is said to exist in its most potent and genuine form. Thus, many are drawn to visit, and sometimes they stay. Swamis Bodhichitananda, Chetan Jyoti, and Mahamedha imagine Hinduism as substantially and historically rooted in India generally and the Himalayan region in particular and understand *their* renunciation as a journey that spans multiple lifetimes.

### **Finding one's place in geographies of memory**

Swami Chetan Jyoti, the 62-year-old Canadian, had no apparent connection to India before meeting an Indian guru in Toronto in 1963, but ten years later she moved to India with no intention of ever leaving. Although at the time she considered this meeting with the Indian swami to be a “chance encounter” she now sees this event as part of a Divine plan. She was not a seeker, she insists. “It just happened.” She came from an upper middle-class home and was the only daughter of two actors with a jet-set life. She herself was a performer, a singer, a poet, and part of the artsy community of Toronto in the 1960s. She stresses that when she met Swami Devananda in 1963, she was neither seeking a guru nor interested in visiting India. “Once I met my first guru—and I just mean *met*—and got just a *glimpse* into spiritual life of which I knew nothing about before that... my mother and father, this was not part of their life. There was *no* discussion. I

had no relatives who talked about spirituality or were a minister...none.” She said she had a fascination to attend Sunday school and church when she was very small and was totally discouraged from doing that, so she gave it up. “There was just zip,” she concludes. “So when I met that Indian swami and he began to speak first hand of spiritual experience, it was a revelation to me.”

Soon after meeting her first guru, she moved into his ashram in Canada. At the age of 20, she bowed out of her life with family, friends and the art world, and has never left ashram life since. “I did it very, very willingly. As soon as I heard about that life, as soon as I even got a glimpse of it, I was desperate to go into it. This is proof of *samskaras* of previous lives, because I recognized that life immediately with just a slight glimpse of it. I could only adjust because I knew it from other lives, for it was a pretty strict ashram.” She kept her job as a librarian’s assistant for a few years. Although she had no desire even then to visit India—that was not part of her spiritual life—her guru insisted, and so she went with him for the first time in 1963. She accompanied him to India four times in the next ten years. Visiting various holy sites in India aroused memories in her. She was particularly moved by Haridwar and resolved to return and live there. This desire was finally fulfilled when she moved to India in 1973. As a member of a Commonwealth country, she did not require a visa to visit India, but she sold everything she could and entered the country as an immigrant with no intention of returning. Arriving as an immigrant meant that she could bring household goods and her pet dog. It also helped later when she applied for citizenship, which she finally obtained in the 1990s.

Even though her first year in India proved to be a dramatic test of her faith, she still speaks of feeling at home. Her guru knew that it would be difficult for her to live as a single woman in India and thus suggested she marry her guru-*bhai* (guru-brother, or disciple of same guru) to avoid stigma, which she did. Within several weeks of their arrival, her husband almost died of hepatitis and she, penniless after paying for his treatment, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Through a series of dramatic events too complex to recount here, both recovered. After rejecting the pleas of her parents, friends and guru to return to Canada for state-of-the-art medical treatment and admitting herself instead to an Indian public hospital, she accepted both the likelihood of her own death and the truth she had learned from Hindu scriptures: that only the Creator can decide if you will live or die. “These are dramas,” she reflects. “India is such a place. India is the mother, so I feel safe in India. I believe that if you put your faith in India, in Indians—and don’t try to get away—she will take care of you appropriately. So here I am.” She is certain that if her cancer had been diagnosed in Canada, she would have died from strong chemotherapy treatments and from the fear surrounding cancer.

Not only did Chetan Jyoti feel at home in India, but she also described a familiarity only explicable by the experiences of past lives. This familiarity may be experienced in early visions or memories that only later come to be identified with an Indian guru. Chetan Jyoti described the first time she saw her guru in a vision but did not recognize the man in robes as her guru—indeed she had no concept of a Hindu guru.

I had a vision, in a moment of great despair when I was about 17 years old and never heard of Indian spirituality or yoga, of my Sat Guru Sri Chandra Swamiji whom I was not to meet for another 13 years or so! The strange thing is that he looked like he did at the

time when I met him, not as he looked when I was actually having the vision of him. I was so innocent that when I saw the vision of his long flowing hair and long orange robes, I thought he was a woman even though he had a beard!

Although Chetan Jyoti did not recognize the man in the robes as her guru at the time she had a vision, Bodhichitananda saw a photo of Swami Chidananda in a California ashram and knew immediately that this person was his guru. This kind of visual, remembered connection with the guru is common in Hindu accounts (both Indian and foreign) and is typically followed by an actual encounter with the guru days, or even years, later. Inevitably, in these accounts, the guru has been waiting expectantly for the aspirant to show up. Such experiences are offered as evidence of the existence of a hidden reality that becomes known through ascetic practice.

Swami Mahamedha also describes how his guru, Lord Shiva himself, came to him in a vision. One night, he was riding a train from Latvia to Moscow. He usually never slept on train rides, but that night he slept and had a dream which was the turning point in his life. He was surrounded by dark smoke and felt his body being pulled and pulled—arms in one direction and legs in the other. He felt his bones beginning to crack and was sure his body was about to be ripped in two. In his pain, he cried out to god. The moment he started praying, the smoke began to transform into laughter. Everything was laughing. He awoke and his entire bed was soaked as if a bucket of water had been thrown on him. His body was trembling and shaking for about twenty minutes. After waking, he looked out the window to a beautiful black-blue sky. There was a tower in the distance with three lights on top, which he envisioned, and later painted, as the face of his guru with two eyes and a third eye in the center. Much later he came to recognize this

image as the blue face of Shiva. This vision was his initiation into Kashmiri Shaivism, for in it he acquired a guru, a mantra, an ability to pray, and the key to sublimate the power of fear and awaken the *kundalini*. “The *parampara* chose me,” he said, “I did not choose the *parampara*.”

In general, he stresses that his deep relationship with Indian culture began “through images... memories and recognition of previous lives.” Sufism was the religion of his ancestors, but his father gave up this religion to join the Soviet Army. Swami Mahamedha’s family had no connection to or knowledge of Hinduism. The unusual, contorted positions in which he habitually sat during childhood had no meaning to those in his family or school, and it was only later that he realized these were yogic postures. He spent five years in a Soviet jail for teaching yoga and for his paintings, because communist authorities considered his work religious. Upon his release, he went to Germany on a refugee visa. Even in Germany he had little exposure to Indian culture. When he later began to study Sanskrit at the University of Tartu in Estonia, and was exposed to Hindu scripture, then he finally gained the confidence that his memories had some concrete reality.

Swami Mahamedha describes his current yoga practice as “coming *back* to yoga *sadhana* after years of surreal experience of socialist life” and his arrival in India as “coming *back* home [emphasis mine].” “I never had any problem adapting to Indian culture,” he explained, “for I *again* got that deep feeling of harmony and balance between inner disposition and outer environment [emphasis mine].” Reference is to an inner self, not external circumstances or social position.

Similarly, Swami Bodhichitananda's early predilection toward itinerancy and renunciation is in his view evidence that he was a monk in a previous life and solidifies his connection with India. He told me of growing up in a "straight 1950s middle class family" but then reading Gurdjieff with a friend in college and concluding that "the only way to find out who we are is to give up our middle-class values."<sup>19</sup> The two friends walked away from architecture school in 1977 without money or suitcase and started begging their food. They made their way on foot to the Florida Everglades, where they lived only in makeshift shelters (because they believed buildings to have negative consciousness) and ate leftover food from the plates of restaurant patrons for several months. Swami Bodhichitananda continued this life of wandering alone for several years and encountered various spiritual fringe groups along the way, including the wandering and celibate Christ Brothers led by Lightning Amen. He eventually found his way to the Paramhansa Yogananda Ashram in San Diego, where he was employed for a few years before requesting monastic training. Although these were the *circumstances* that led him to an ascetic existence, the actual *reason* had to do with the searching questions that arose within him (Who am I? What is this world?) and the answers that came. The fact that these questions came to him at an early age and unprompted by any particular life experience, and also that his meditation techniques first appeared to him and were later confirmed by his guru, convinces him that the *samskaras* were strong, so strong, in fact, that he knows he was a monk and a yogi in a previous life.

Swamis Chetan Jyoti, Bodhichitananda, and Mahamedha described particular memories and events as *proof* of the unfolding of the *samskaras* or *karmas* of previous lives. The path they had chosen had so little connection to the family and social

circumstances into which they were born that this was the only way they could explain their current lives. Such memories suggest an *already existent*, if only now perceptible, connection with an India that is not national or ethnic, but spiritual.<sup>20</sup> These narratives of the memories of previous lives always refer to a previous life *in India* (never the United States or Holland!), such that India becomes the place of origin. Familiarity and recognition are articulated through the Hindu notion of *samskaras*, or memories of past lives. Transmigration, as in reincarnation, means that each person has propensities, impulses, talents, likes and dislikes that are the result of their actions and experiences in previous lives. It transforms a disparate set of life experiences in distant parts of the world into a journey that is both continuous and mystical.

### **The Swami as transnational figure**

Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Indian swami has come to be transnationally constructed in ways peculiar to modernity. Kirin Narayan (1993) notes that Western accounts of Hindu holy men became increasingly negative as Britain consolidated its colonial relationship with India in the eighteenth century. In the United States, she observes, the holy man's body became a site of exaggerated difference for both Christian missionaries and popular entertainers. However, from the eighteenth century, an alternative romantic image of Hindu renunciation emerged. In the United States, these positive images created fertile ground for a sympathetic reception when actual holy men began visiting America from the late nineteenth century (Narayan 1993:



478-90). Today the figure of the Indian swami is regularly invoked in mass culture, including feature films, talk shows, ads, and even children's cartoons.<sup>21</sup>

Most accounts of Hinduism's encounter with the West begin with Swami Vivekananda's appearance at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. His charisma, good looks, anti-colonial fervor, and message of Hindu religious tolerance made him a phenomenal success (Roy 1998: 104). Vivekananda was the first to articulate—eloquently, in English, and for American and British audiences—a modern vision of Hinduism that addressed an agenda set by Western dissatisfaction with Christianity, materialism and capitalism (Killingley 1998: 156).<sup>22</sup> Many followed in the footsteps of Vivekananda, including Swami Abhedananda who lectured to audiences of over 500 during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Jackson 1994: 50-51) and Swami Yogananda who spoke in Boston in 1920 and later at Carnegie Hall (Yogananda 1974 [1946]: 345-48). Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* is considered a spiritual classic and has been translated into over a dozen languages. Beginning in the 1960s, many more gurus have established ashrams and followings in the United States. Most have shared a modern message of "Hindu spirituality" that upheld sadhus—not priests—as its spokespersons and helped popularize Hinduism as a world religion with something to offer non-Indians.

Swami Chetan Jyoti was inspired by reading *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which her guru gave her in 1964, and is certain that this book influenced all Western swamis of her generation. Today, however, there are thousands of such first person spiritual accounts. It is because of her serendipitous encounter with an Indian guru and access to this widely circulated book that this young woman from Toronto who had never thought of visiting

India could suddenly imagine living as a Hindu swami (see Appadurai 1991). Tillis' interviews with foreign spiritual seekers in India suggests that most read books by and about Hindu religious figures such as Aurobindo, Krishnamurti, Yogananda, Ramana Maharishi, Anandamayi Ma, and Rajneesh. The importance of such texts in the lives of Foreign Swamis exemplifies the global circulation of Hinduism through the literary language that Aravamudan (2001) calls Guru English. This genre of spiritual accounts now includes books by and about European and North American sadhus, including *The Ochre Robe* by anthropology professor and swami Agehananda Bharati, and these titles are prominently displayed in Rishikesh's many book stalls.<sup>23</sup>

### **India's eligibility as home**

Understanding how foreign sadhus might find themselves at home in India requires attention to their religious experiences and desires, even while asking critical questions about what makes India the kind of place that becomes home to certain kinds of non-Indians? While Appadurai's notion of ethnoscapes (1991) is helpful in understanding the role of particular gurus whose teachings are globally disseminated via books, visual media and now the internet, Tsing reminds us that "[i]maginative landscapes mobilize an audience through material and institutional resources" (2000: 345). Regarding the French woman who came to be known as The Mother, her birth in Paris enabled her to travel to Pondicherry, which was part of French India in 1914 when she set sail to meet Sri Aurobindo. Even though foreign sadhus living in India today have forgone opportunities and securities, the fact remains that most come from relatively (or very) affluent backgrounds and were, at some point, able to obtain a ticket to *get* to India in the first

place. However, India's appropriateness as spiritual home is not simply about colonial privilege and contemporary inequalities. The spiritual imaginary in which India becomes an ideal—and affordable—destination is also shaped by Orientalist tropes of Indian wisdom, modern longings for authentic spirituality cultivated by literature available in European languages, institutional and wider social support for ascetic life, and memories of lives past.

Colonial discourses constructed India as a mystical place of immense spiritual riches—and material poverty (Singer 1972). Anti-colonial nationalists, including nationalist swamis like Vivekananda, embraced India's status as a place of unsurpassed spirituality (Chatterjee 1997) and systematically grounded this notion of Indian spirituality in the ancient Upanishads (Veer 1994: 69-70). The state now commodifies this spirituality by promoting India as a place to find mind-expanding experiences, though it discourages visitors from staying too long or seeking Indian citizenship!<sup>24</sup> The notion of India's spirituality attracts foreign tourists, scholars, and people with ascetic leanings.

Actual material poverty (or “simplicity”) not only makes India an affordable place to pursue a renunciant life, but also authenticates this vision of Indian spirituality. In Western modernity, authentic spirituality, like true love, is presumed to exist only outside the market. Peter Moran's (2004) ethnographic study of Western Buddhists in Nepal illustrates this dynamic: while many Westerners equated pure spirituality with anti-materialism, Tibetans neither dichotomized economics and religion in this way nor saw the presence or absence of wealth as an indicator of the quality of a lama or monastic institution. Western Buddhists donate far less money to monasteries than overseas

Chinese, and are dismayed when the political economy of a monastery is made explicit by, for example, the public announcement of a donor's name and amount of monetary gift (Moran 2004: 63-78). Unlike spiritual tourists, foreign sadhus adopt a lifestyle that explicitly rejects ordinary market relations for a life supported by alms. The pursuit of renunciant life is enabled by general societal support and by a low cost of living.

India's appropriateness for being home is not only enabled by Orientalist discourses, modern ideas of authentic spirituality existing outside the market, and low cost of living, but also, and more emically, by the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation. Thus, the second and older meaning of "transmigration"—reincarnation of the soul in new bodies, times and places—is equally central to understanding the sense of homecoming felt by these Foreign Swamis. They experience their travel to India as return, and this is explicable by Hindu ontologies of the self that assume movement and continuity of the soul (*atma*) through multiple lifetimes. When foreign sadhus speak of origins and home (which is often) they assume an expanded view of themselves not bound by the circumstances of birth in a particular location and time. They thus reflect simultaneously on the transmigration of their embodied selves across the globe *and* on travel of their inner selves through time, space, and body. A world hospitable to pilgrims, argues Bauman, in one in which one can imagine life as a continuous story, such that each event is the effect of the event before and causes the event after, "each age a station on the road pointing toward fulfillment" (1996: 23). In this sense, the world of Indian sadhus is one that still welcomes pilgrims.

### **No place like home**

Rishikesh is considered to be a unique place, and the only true home, for the people whose lives I have described here. For them and for many Indian-born renouncers as well, Rishikesh is metonymic of the Himalayas, and ultimately India itself. India is imagined in terms of a spiritual center, the Himalayas, not in terms of the territorial boundaries of a nation-state.<sup>25</sup> India is considered not only spiritual, but is both the birthplace of spirituality and the place where it remains most potent today. In the words of Swami Mahamedha,

India is the beginning and end of life. You can get direct experience of cosmic existence. It is possible to get it elsewhere in the West, but here there will be no environmental disharmony. The Himalayas have a deep meaning for me and also a deep archetypal meaning. It activates our universal memory. “Himalaya” as a mantra—it is the source. It is a unique place on this planet... the source of spiritual *parampara*. It will affect everyone; no one who visits this place can remain neutral... with its energy of yogis and rishis. It represents the last stage before Samadhi—mountains are symbolic power of human life. It represents the power of yogic experience; it is the top of spiritual journey, linga, Shiva.

The aim of his spiritual practice is to help bring artistic creativity back to its spiritual force. He wants to remove the creative work of painting, dance, music from the “chewing gum world” of the market and bring it back to its magic, its spirituality. “All art has spiritual origins,” he concludes, “and India is the homeland.”

When Swami Vivekananda and other modern Indian gurus described “spiritual India” in terms of the opposition between Spiritual East and Materialist West, they were also concerned to establish its compatibility with science. Thus, they tended to emphasize yoga as technique, Vedanta as philosophy, and spiritual practice as experiment rather than blind faith. Foreign Swamis living in India today need not take colonial officials and missionaries as their interlocutors; they emphasize the miraculous and seem unconcerned that their experiences can be validated by science. What they point to as evidence of India’s superior spirituality is the miraculous and paradoxical, and the epistemology of Western modernity is deemed incapable of understanding mystical reality. Those I spoke with tended to emphasize mysticism as the essence of India. Swami Chetan Jyoti, for example, noted that many people complain that Rishikesh has become crowded and polluted, but she feels that India is alive and well, that it has not changed too much.

Last year I was in the bazaar buying groceries at a store. I am walking back to my car, and my eye happens to catch a swami... a young sadhu in orange. Our eyes meet for a moment. There are so many swamis here. I glance away and am headed toward my car. But suddenly he is brushing by me. I can sense it is the same sadhu, so I glance up. He just looks at me sideways with a little mischievous smile, completely turns into a woman with a sari, and stops. The woman gives me a little mischievous smile, a knowing look, then turns back into the swami and walks on by. Who he is—who knows? Just happened. You want to tell me India is not the same India. For you who have the eyes to see, it is all there. You’ll have a hard time getting me to say that it has all gone to the dogs. It is just buried under more stuff, because there is more population. When we read

about the rishis in the good old days, they lived in the jungle. Well, the jungles have been raised to build cities... but the rishis are still there.

Chetan Jyoti admits that today media and advertisements of barely-clad women make it harder for young men to maintain celibacy. She also feels that renunciation is losing some of its sacredness, and that as renouncers spend more time in social work and less in prayer, they forget that mantras can be more effective even than medical treatments. Yet, she insists that it is not possible to take the spirituality out of India—“it is so deeply enmeshed.” Referring to a 2005 MTV interview, she said young Indian college students may have spiked hair and looked like they could be at Berkeley or Columbia, but when asked whether they believe in god or do any spiritual practice, almost all responded affirmatively. The trappings of modernity, she insisted, have not changed the essence of India.

For Swamis Chetan Jyoti, Bodhichidananda, and Mahamedha, India’s uniqueness also implies absolute difference from the West. Swami Chetan Jyoti narrated to me an incident to illustrate the difference between India and Canada. Her bank manager in Rishikesh told her one day he just could not understand her account:

“Me neither, but it is okay,” she soothed.

“Things are just coming and going, and I don’t know what is going on,” he said.

“The Divine,” she replied. “He is doing it. Running the account.”

He was so touched. He bowed and said “Mataji, you are great.”

“This is what I love about India. In Canada, if the bank manager does not understand your account, he’ll probably arrest you... thinking you are a terrorist or something! But

here he could appreciate that. He can accept it, and be inspired by it. How could I live this existence in Canada?”

Swamis Bodhitananda and Mahamedha also insist they could not live in the West easily. They need to live in India and especially Rishikesh, which is the essence of India and the origin of spirituality. The longstanding belief that, after the Crucifixion, Jesus and Mary wandered for several years and then ended up in Kashmir where both are now entombed is held by many in Rishikesh and cements India’s position as the birthplace of a spirituality that transcends any particular religion.

This difference is understood as epistemological in that Indians acknowledge a multiplicity of realities and levels of perception. In elaborating his critique of the West, Swami Mahamedha pointed to the insistence on ordering everything and described an incident when two cows wandered onto a German road—and were immediately surrounded by police cars and helicopters—“It is ridiculous!” The West is not only too orderly, he felt, but sterile, both literally and emotionally. He described one leper-swami who wears black, sits on the roadside of Rishikesh, and eats rubber tires and another who drinks filthy water from the gutter as a kind of spiritual practice. “This is living in another dimension. It is the true Vedanta or non-duality.” Swami Bodhichitananda insists that “Indians have heart. They feel. They feel life.” Alienated from life in the West, these Foreign Swamis share a sense that (permanent) return is hardly imaginable now that they have found their place.

Practically speaking, of course, it is hard to live as a swami in the West. India offers practical support to full time spiritual aspirants, for Swami Bodhichitananda receives one meal each day from the ashram of his guru, even though he no longer



resides there. India also offers respect for the vocation of a swami, as Mahamedha remarked when he said his ascetic attire elicited respect from immigration officials.<sup>26</sup> One American guru who has a base in Rishikesh told me that she cannot ask her followers in Germany to go about their lives in silence for ten days, because no one will understand or support their efforts. Swami Bodhichitananda commented that it is easy for him to live as a monk in India, while in the United States it was never respected. “India is the spiritual democracy. America is a material democracy. In the West, I cannot live as a monk. People will not give *bhikksha* (alms) or charity. They cannot understand anything other than a career and material oriented pursuit.” Also, Rishikesh offers him constant reminders of why he is here. “It doesn’t mean I’ll be a good *sannyasi*,” he laughs, “but I have a lot of reminders of what I am supposed to be doing.”

The essential difference between India and the West is also posited in the cautionary tales regarding westward travel for sadhus. Scandals involving Indian swamis in the West have received widespread media attention. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Rajneesh, Omkarananda are a few of the well-known Indian gurus whose careers in the West were plagued by scandal. Swami Mahamedha spent some time in Pune with Rajneesh. “In the 1970s,” he explained, “Rajneesh was brilliant. He had incredible power to speak on anything. But when he went abroad he became weak. He lost his ability to speak on anything. He was naïve. He went to the West and lost his *shakti* (power). Sai Baba is smart. He has had many good offers to go abroad, but he knows his *shakti* will remain only as long as he is in India.”

Memories of past lives and mystical orientation offer a uniquely Hindu time-space compression for Foreign Swamis living in India. Unlike many other spiritually-

inclined visitors in India, and many of the foreign sadhus interviewed by Tillis, Swamis Chetan Jyoti, Bodhichidananda, and Mahamedha did not come to India after years of cultivating a spiritual imaginary of India and thus seem less prone to disillusionment when the real India does not live up. They stumbled upon a guru, or a god, and came to India, without keeping an escape route open. They feel at home in Rishikesh and seem prepared to accept whatever obstacles come their way.

Although the feeling of “coming home” to India resonates with sentiments expressed by other spiritually-inclined Westerners in India (Strauss 2005: 44,84; Moran 2004: 111; Brooks 1989: 33), it is strikingly absent in the spiritual narratives of Indian swamis as found in hagiography and ethnographic accounts. “Home” is precisely what Hindu renouncers abandon, because it is a symbol for all the desires, attachments, securities, and comforts that are inimical to renunciant life, and “leaving home” is a common metaphor for renunciation. For some Foreign Swamis “home” signifies a place of intense familiarity, a place where one’s identity is in sync with one’s surroundings and where one returns after being away. For Swami Chetan Jyoti, home is also the nurturing and protective mother who knows what one needs. Rishikesh is literally “home” but it is also a sign that evokes recognition of an inner Hindu identity, “an ultimate home in the world” (see Moran 2004: 111). What gives it emotional salience? There is no nostalgia for childhood and family—mere circumstances of life—or longing for the paths not taken. Rather, Rishikesh is the place where they were formed, where they found their identity with the help of a guru. Discourses of spiritual India, material conditions, institutional and wider social support for ascetic practice, and the Hindu doctrine of transmigration make India uniquely qualified to play this role. Religious narratives of

Foreign Swamis can help us understand transmigrant experience for a particular class of people who voluntarily and radically reposition themselves in another part of the world for spiritual reasons. Rather than being displaced, these Foreign Swamis have finally found their place.

~~Although their journeys seem unique, what other kinds of persons might find a home through migration? Foreign Swamis offer an example of voluntary religious migration, a phenomenon too often overlooked in the literature on transmigration. Might they share an experience of voluntary exile from home territory with others who have undertaken religious travel, such as early Christian itinerant ascetics (Adler 2002)? Or might they share an experience of “homecoming” through migration with others who feel magnetically drawn to a sacred land, such as Blacks of the New World who were inspired to repatriate Africa, either as Christian missionaries or Jamaican Rastafaris (Wilmore 1972)? It is important to explore identities of displacement, but let us also ask what it takes to find a home after migration. What makes a place eligible for being “home” and what other kinds of homes are possible besides spiritual homes?~~

## Notes

Date received, accepted?

Address correspondence to Meena Khandelwal at [meena-khandelwal@uiowa.edu](mailto:meena-khandelwal@uiowa.edu)

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1. Diaspora, as Cohen has noted (1977), can be a site of both oppression and creativity.
2. I use the more general term "swami" rather than the Hindi "sannyasi" here, because the former is more familiar to non-specialist readers. "Swami" is a common term of address and reference for Hindu renouncers. "Foreign Swami" is often used as a term of reference in Rishikesh, as is "Foreign Sannyasi" and "Foreign Sadhu".
3. During three months in Rishikesh during Spring 2005, I conducted ethnographic research on transnational aspects of Hindu renunciation. I stayed in a guest house and three different ashrams that regularly host diasporic Indians and people of non-Indian origin and met with some prominent Indian gurus, foreign spiritual seekers who stay for varied lengths of time, and local residents of Rishikesh.
4. One official at the U.S. consulate in Delhi told me that his office may see about twenty-five Americans each year who have exhausted financial resources and alienated family members in the United States. If the person wishes to return home and the family is unwilling to help, the consulate will purchase a return ticket for the U.S. citizen and may arrange for them to be met at the airport by someone in social services.
5. The U.S. government, I was told by an official, keeps no statistics on the numbers of Americans who obtain Indian citizenship, for this is considered to be a matter between the individual and the Indian government. Surprisingly, the Bureau of Immigration for the Government of India considers statistical information on immigration classified.
6. I thank Nisha Agrawal for this observation.

7. See Khandelwal (2004) for a fuller explanation of renunciant aims of cultivating emotional detachment.
8. In *New Lives*, Tillis (2004) offers biographical accounts of fifty foreigners who have made India their literal and spiritual home. These accounts suggest that notions of “homecoming” and references to past lives in India, articulated by the three figures discussed here, are common, although many interviewed by Tillis also reflected on initial experiences of culture shock or hardship in adapting to Indian ways of life and religiosity. Abu-Lughod (1991) has written eloquently about the need to be wary of generalization that produces homogeneity and coherence. My aim here is to produce an “ethnography of the particular” that heeds her call to write against the culture concept.
9. Indeed, even the cartographic mapping of East and West, Asia and Europe, has shifted according to historical period and political agenda (Lewis and Wigen 1997).
10. Many Hindu renouncers, and especially those initiated into the Dashnami Orders of *sannyasa* reputedly founded by the eighth century saint Shankaracharya, accept Advaita Vedanta as truth (see Khandelwal 2004; Dazey 1990; Gross 1992; Ghurye 1964). Advaita is a philosophy of absolute monism. It holds that the true aim of human beings is to attain liberation by realizing that the individual self (*atma*) and Ultimate Reality (Brahman) are and have always been one and the same and that, ultimately, all else is illusory. Hindu traditions offer a wide range of ascetic practices and philosophies. However, both Orientalists and Hindu reformers, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, increasingly emphasized this “mystical” philosophy by reference to the Upanishads (King 1999: 119). The Vedanta promoted by Orientalists, and later by Indian gurus in the United States, was ascetic, spiritualized and non-activist (Dhar, cited in 1999: 130-31), but Vedanta offered a different, activist message in India where it helped to unite Hindus in their anti-colonial struggle (King 1999: 133). Advaita Vedanta acknowledges social differences such as male and female, or rich and poor, but insists that they are ultimately transient and unreal. Most modern gurus continue to

embrace an Advaita-inspired spirituality in the contemporary era in their attempt to envision a global Hinduism (a world religion) that can not only link Hindus living in diaspora, but also more readily incorporate non-Indians. Scripturally-speaking, Vedanta represented the perspective of ascetic sages rather than priests, and as Vedanta came to stand for Hinduism, renunciators became the ideal representatives of “modern Hindu spirituality.”

11. A fuller understanding of *sannyasa*'s transnationalism would require multi-sited research, which is beyond the scope of this project.
12. This area was formerly part of Uttar Pradesh, but a movement for independent statehood achieved its goal in 2000 when Uttaranchal became its own state.
13. However, in 2005, foreign devotees from Australia, Poland, Austria, Switzerland, Japan, Indonesia, and Italy outnumbered Indian visitors to the ashram of Siddha Mahatma Hedakhandi Maharaj in Nainital. D.S. Kunwar. “Foreigners flock to Hedakhan Ashram” *Times of India*, New Delhi, 17 April 2005.
14. According to the *Skanda Purana* and *Varaha Purana*, it is the place where Lord Vishnu resided with his consort Lakshmi, and legend has it that both Ram and Lakshman performed austerities here in order to wipe away the sin of slaying the demon Ravana (Keemattam 1997: 24-26). The region is also associated with Lord Shiva, heroes of the epic *Mahabharata*, and the great sages Vyasa and Vashistha (Strauss 2005: 24).
15. Not all foreign ascetics residing in India are followers of Advaita Vedanta or the Dashnami renunciant orders. Brooks (1989), for example, has written about non-Indian followers of the Hare Krishna movement who live in Vrindavan. Advaita Vedanta is not the only Hindu philosophy that attracts foreign adherents, but I suggest that this philosophy may be particularly compatible with the turn away from conventional religion and toward spirituality.
16. For example, when Chetan Jyoti arrived destitute at a public hospital in Delhi after her diagnosis of breast cancer, she received unusual attention and care because the Indian doctors were so moved that a Canadian would trust them with her treatment. Similarly, foreign male

sadhus seem to be able to interact with women without criticism more easily than their Indian counterparts.

17. In the early 1920s, Sri Krishna Prem (born Ronald Nixon) migrated to India and paved the way for acceptance of foreign devotees of Krishna in the Vaishnava tradition (Brooks 1989: 98-101).
18. For example, Swami Sivananda, founder of Divine Life Society, sent many disciples to the West, which then prompted more travel to DLS headquarters in India. Brooks writes that the founder of International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Bhaktivedanta Swami, left Calcutta for New York in 1965 and returned with his first foreign disciple in 1967. This American was soon initiated into *sannyasa* and became Kirtanananda Swami. His Vaishnava message of devotion to Krishna in the tradition of Chaitanya appealed less to American elites and more to those in the bohemian or hippie subcultures. His first temples were established in the East Village community in New York and San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. In 1967, Allen Ginsburg and the San Francisco devotees organized a "Mantra-Rock" concert in which the swami shared the stage with such bands as Jefferson Airplane and Grateful Dead (Brooks 1989: 76-81). This Vaishnava tradition of devotional temple worship is associated with Vrindavan and is much more concerned with brahmanical notions of ritual purity, in contrast to Rishikesh which is associated with hatha yoga and meditation, although both are places where one finds foreign swamis. A detailed consideration of these sectarian differences is beyond the scope of this paper.
19. Gurdjieff (1877-1949) was a mystic whose ideas influenced such people as Katherine Mansfield, Aldous Huxley, and Frank Lloyd Wright (Thomson 2003). Born near the Persian border of Russia, he traveled throughout the Middle East and Tibet and then developed teachings that became popular in Russia and later in Western Europe and the United States.

20. These sadhus dismissed the activities of Hindu nationalist sadhus as politics, and did not condone violence, but their reification of Hinduism could be compatible with less virulent strains Hindu nationalism.
21. For example, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was interviewed on Larry King show. One regular character in the “Little Bear” cartoon for children is a frog who sits, cross-legged with eyes closed, on a lilypad and serenely chants “Om.”
22. Attentiveness to the context in which he articulated this message of Hindu spirituality suggests how different it was from the more iconoclastic critiques of Hindu orthodoxy that he delivered in India: The larger aim of the 1893 event was to display the achievements of Western civilization and religion, and the missionary presence was a constant reference point for Vivekananda’s comments; it was in this context that Hinduism emerged as a cultural system of thought that would be comprehensible to Western critics (Chowdhury-Sengupta 1998: 20-23, 34).
23. They include *Death Must Die* by Alexander (2000), *New Lives* by Tillis (2004), *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* by Sharma (1997), and many other recent books.
24. Some foreigner visitors obtain five year visas with a letter from their guru, but those I met who wished to stay beyond the six months allowed by a tourist visa expressed anxiety about obtaining permission. Claude Apri, born in France and living in India over 30 years, notes the hypocrisy in India’s treatment of NRIs (Non-resident Indians) and FRIs (Foreign Resident in India). *Newindpress*, Thursday, 17 March 2005. In 2005 the Government of India decided to grant an OCI (Overseas Citizen of India) passport to PIOs (Persons of Indian Origin) from select countries in order to facilitate travel (no visa necessary) and permit business investment. Apri finds it unfair that FRIs must struggle to renew their Residential Permits, even after living in India 40-50 years, simply because they do not represent investment potential. Swami Mahamedha, when I asked him about this, was unconcerned. The Indian government must be cautious, he said, because many foreigners who wish to remain in India



have uncertain incomes and employment—many are involved in drugs and contribute little to the country. There seems to be a general anxiety about renewing visas and obtaining citizenship (see Brooks 1989: 103 and Tillis 2004).

25. Tomasi notes the importance of mountains in pilgrimage across religious traditions (2002: 10).
26. However, one American sadhu expressed anxiety about whether his visa would be renewed. He felt that it all depended on the person sitting at the desk on the day he showed up, and if the person happened to be Muslim, his visa would likely be refused.

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