

## RISHIKESH: SILENT HUM OF MYSTERY

*Ambika Talwar\**

### EDITOR'S NOTE

*Ambika Talwar is an educator, published author and artist, who has written poetry since her teen years. Her style is eclectic and ecstatic making her poetry a "bridge to other worlds." She has also won an award for a short film at a festival in Belgium. She practices IE: Intuition-Energetics™, a fusion of modalities, goddess lore, sacred geometry and creative principles for wellness and wholeness. In this essay, she narrates experience of her journey to Rishikesh in the sacred Himalayas and pleads against reducing pristine places of the sacred landscape into tourist hubs.*

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### INTRODUCTION

With mild trepidation and a touch of enthusiasm, I agreed to write this story of my visit to Rishikesh some years ago. Moments after, it dawned on me that I could not recall much about my days in this august city of pilgrimage. I smiled: so typical of me to jump into the ring of fire and wonder what happened. *Déjà vu!* Not the visit but my habit.

So I called my mother in Delhi to ask what she recalled. Neither of us could even remember which year it was. But she tuned in and started talking. She recalled how fantastic it was that we had the darshan of Swami Chidanand Saraswati of the Divine Life Society where we had stayed. She said this was a rare thing. I recalled being ushered into the visiting room. I remember Swamiji looking at us, gesturing that I move closer... then handing me some pamphlets.

Mother spoke about the Lakshman jhoola, the temples along the River Ganga, the Shiva statue. Then she laughed saying, "That's it. No more."

Visions came alive in my mind's eye in an eidetic train of possibilities. The statues made by a German devotee for the temple, life size statue of Vishnu and Lakshmi in Vaikuntha, the divine Ganga where boats are held in place by strong iron chains, shops selling items for *puja* in temples, restaurants...

1. I remember how much I had wanted to visit Rishikesh among other cities. Having lived away from India for a number of years, I had developed a longing to connect in ways I hadn't when I was a child. The old wanderlust was stirred. The sacred was dancing. When I arrived in New Delhi, I insisted that we three travel north. Father loved to travel, but said no, take mother with you. Mother was keen. We left by train one early morning.

The train pulled out of Delhi station, then stalled, stopping amid fields on the outskirts of the capital. After a long hour or so torrid with smells and indecision, mother and I decided to leave the train. We found a three-wheeler, which took us to the bus stop. We reached in time for a bus towards Haridwar – the door of God.

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Getting to Rishikesh would be a further challenge as finding a connecting bus was not easy. If I recall, we hired a taxi. In the eyes of the divine, what would it matter how one arrives at a destination. We might each have been told at some point that the destination is never the goal. It is something far deeper, even if ephemeral; far more poignant, even if it calls for one to be stoic.

Journey is a celebration, a dance. It is an answer to a longing of the soul; is this not Love in all its forms? I smile for I recall being told there is something inherently poetic about being Indian, that we philosophize every little human act or decision. I have not a response.

I imagine mountaintops with wild hair of *rishis* and Mothers fanning the winds. For in the head is glowing fire.

2. Our supposed destination is this beautiful place by the foothills of the Himalayas. We are here. I feel physically charged and excited and wish to begin my exploration of holy sites and treasures. I think: I am here! I am in Rishikesh.

*Call me not tourist*

*in search of fame*

*take away even my name*

*or what's a river for?*

Mother and I arrive at the ashram and are shown our room. One rule mother lives by is to clean the room and bathroom wherever we land. This is a way of making it one's own. My eagerness to get out borders on impatience. Finally, we leave and walk down the slope back towards and past the *langar* (where food is served) to the temple of many rooms. The main room of this temple has statues of Mother Durga and Saraswati, each made by a devotee, who had lived here for many years. These are exquisite expressions of love. How the lines flow with dynamic grace of the Mothers who are the center and electrifier of all cosmic expressions.

The goal of journey is to find this mystery. There is much more to discover.

As we go towards the gate, a man from the temple calls out to us. We wait. He comes to us calling, "Ma." He wants to know who I am, where I am from. I feel a little shy. He brings us mangoes, my favorite fruit. His name is Dushrath. I feel his adoration and wonder about it. As we are leaving, he will hold the fruit for us. He tells us he had run away from his home in Orissa when he was around 14 years. Difficult life struggles led him here where he found peace and self. Thinking about this moment itself triggers my body with vibrations, which have become now very frequent in the last two years.

From here, we head out to town. Up and across the road, we visit the main center of the Society. Here we meet with Swamiji. Poignant moments with him go with us to the narrow streets with vendors lined by temples and the river. How beautiful is this Ganga; this is the closest I have come to our ancient waters, source of a trillion legends.

*how fast she flows*

*cold rush of wild*

*knowledge*

Mother and I cross the Lakshman Jhoola to find narrow lanes, which take us to other temples. On this first day, we stay close to the central areas. But we get a wondrous view of Lord Shiva's statue, elegant against the blue sky. For a short while, we walk along the river and watch the boats neatly secured. They have to be, for the water rushes at a phenomenal speed. Swimming in here is prohibited. One has to enter the wild river holding on tightly to the chains held fast by solid iron posts, or be carried away by her passionate love.

I remember the smell of the air lifting over the river. Then I wonder. How does a mythos smell— one that has cradled a civilization for thousands of years; one whose breath has spawned poetic utterances now caught amid sheaves of paper; one that continues to inspire right thinking, one that will maintain harmony and love? I am caught in these musings again even as another devastating war is causing a deeper wound in our hearts and psyches and all life is on the alert.

How shall a timeless mythos continue to birth its new ways in the midst of uncertainty of the survival of the very species that is causing its own demise? It is not that wisdom cannot pour through technological junk as is surely evident by the diverse texts on the web, myriad impressions on film, and ways of calculations. It is the alacrity with

which corrupt beings distort the power of innovation that speeds our end and that of all species on this glorious planet.

Somehow, mother and I find our way to a temple within the confines of a wall, which is painted pink and decorated with a *swastika* at regular intervals. The boundary wall has the familiar look of cracks and mildew, which is somehow comforting. We enter through the white metal gate contained by a white wall with a scalloped arch above which is a sign in *Devanagari* that says Mani Kuta Dham. The temple inside is lovely, but I cannot recall who the deities were. What I remember are small altars on the first floor with different deities: we love our diversity of form, symbol, and attributes. The silence is sweet; one can always hear the birds. We linger inside here for quite a while.

When we depart, we see a young man sitting beside one of the *swastikas*. Curious, I begin a conversation with this traveler from Israel in search of his peace. I ask how it feels to sit by a *swastika*. He smiles for he understands its real meaning, a meaning distorted for gain and loss, a meaning that reveals ultimately harmony of the cosmos through the revolution of planets around the sun in a symbol also of the Celts, the Greeks, and indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Mother and I walk back to the ashram. She has hurt her foot, so we go slowly.

As we return to the ashram, Dushrath who had been awaiting our return brings us the fruit. He walks us back to our room and waits outside to walk us to the *langar*. Inside here, we find our plates and sit on the floor. We are served rice and vegetables. When we eat, we wash our plates in the community washing space, which is all wet and not so clean. Unfortunately, in the framework of making spiritual offerings, people have forgotten the care of the vehicle. Surely, body, mind and spirit must be in balance and equally cared for. Also the body outside us, the places we inhabit. But that cleaning is always left to someone else.

### 3. *black night lingers in dreams*

*let birds waken us*

*to majesty*

*of loving kindness.*

After a strange waking, I step out to find a bowl of fruit left at the door. Dushrath and his devotion touch me endlessly.

When we leave to eat at the *langar*, he waits to walk us there. He is again excited to see me and he shows us around the temple again. He shows us his simple home. He assures me he will bring me mangoes the following day. My heart falls for we have little time in Rishikesh.

We begin our adventure along the slopes of these winding roads amid mountains whose mystery and rough beauty invites. We stop at a jewelry shop and buy *sphatic malas*, necklaces made of naturally occurring crystal beads. We stop at another shop where sits a palmist. He asks to see my palm and then makes a strange look. Mother says, we should never show our hands to strangers. I don't know what he saw; I know what I am becoming.

We continue to discover more and more temples along the river and among rich diversity of trees, wild fauna. It is their breath too that marks the walls of temples and houses. It is not uncommon to see a new baby tree growing out of a wall. Innocently life expresses itself in myriad places where the sun shines.

Far from the main walkway amid huge trees and houses are small *kutiyas* here and there: homes for the *sadhus* whose lives are spent in prayer. Somehow holiness or a sense of it marks the bricks that walls are made of. Holy men with dreadlocks and red turbans sit on steps or by tea stalls; homeless men lie in slumber and rest under trees. Temple bells stir the air every so often. I hope commerce will not take away the rhythm of this town.

Local folk watch us with interest. Dressed much like them, I wonder why we are the cynosure of curious eyes. The chatter of people walking and temple chanting weave the spaces in which we walk.

*we are that weave*

*always that sings*

*in chaos...*

*a riot of colors*

*splinters hearts*

*open amid falling fruit.*

We visit old temples, some are part of old houses: it is a way of life. Just as there is no separation in true heart and mind and we (might) live in concert with nature, so, too, in the old structures that emerge one from the other set amid trees. Yes, monkeys, too, are part of the scenario. How can we be separate!

River Ganga calls us to sit beside her, but not for long. Once evening changes color, we are asked to move away from the edges. The rhythmic lapping of water by the shore and the rushing of the river remind us to honor the silence. Mother and I wonder at the difficulties of our family: why is this condition of the whole world? Our last evening here is wrought with bitter-sweetness as we reflect on passages in our lives and what yet we desire, so be fulfilled.

4. We carry our bags outside where Dushrath waits loyally for us. I feel already his sadness at our leaving. He insists on carrying all our bags down the street to the bus-stand. He wants to know when we will return. His tear-spiked eyes won't let go of my gaze. I do not know which Mother he saw in me. But my feeling of my own journey is renewed.

*mango is an endless road  
kissed in this air  
a pathless path  
of devotion...  
remnants of time  
point to that other road  
where points meet  
a luminous eye.*

In a few hours we reach Haridwar. Such a crowded place that walking through the milling throng is a challenge I had not experienced in some years. In a tiny cab jostling on narrow roads in this ancient Door to God, we reach the river. Of course, it is the river where much happens. In a few hours will be the *aarti*, waving of lights and song for blessings.

This time, I hold the chains and step into the river. Delicious and cold, the water wraps round my slender body, I breathe in a taste of glory, I feel sated now. Cold water always brings me to serenity. All around me people are waving these lights made with small *atta diyas* placed in banana leaves. These are then let go of in the river, so the blessings go far and wide. Bones of the cremated are cast in the water further downstream. Mine are still living bones, but living and dying are concurrent streams.

I come out of the water soaked to the head, wave my own *aarti* and set my desires free into the river. What will I manifest? What will I become?

5. I return with longing for all that was stirred in me, the days when Mother sang her primordial sounds into the weaves of my body, perhaps, before I was born — this body in my own mother's womb taking on her unsung songs. My own mother who traveled with me to these shores has been wistful with her own longing.

What if we erase old symbols, icons, and tools and began anew! What if we return to our primal sound and sense and rewrite our longings with the silent hum of light and dark: pure, ineluctable, and ubiquitous.

*dark eyes of Dushrath  
remind I am  
kiss of simplicity  
interwoven mesh  
of timeless wonder;  
  
SHE dances in me  
and I must be as She*

*wild whole potent*

*love is devotion!*

In just three days, a bite of Himalayan air brings me to my hidden self. The wild hair of the sages will carry secrets of such seeds in the wind, the fires, the water, and the mountain gaze stolid in the far distance. My hair wet with Ganga water frames my face as I gaze at the flame winking in a *diya* on a banana leaf in my hands.

Now 20 years later when I look through the internet for pictures of places my mother and I had visited, I find a wild splash of tourist attractions: water sports, beautiful yoga on the banks, eateries. Someone got it wrong. Someone wrote the wrong contracts. I wish some of these are just tags for other places, that Rishikesh still has a magic that lured me into its heart.

That which is pristine must remain so.