

SADHUS OF INDIA

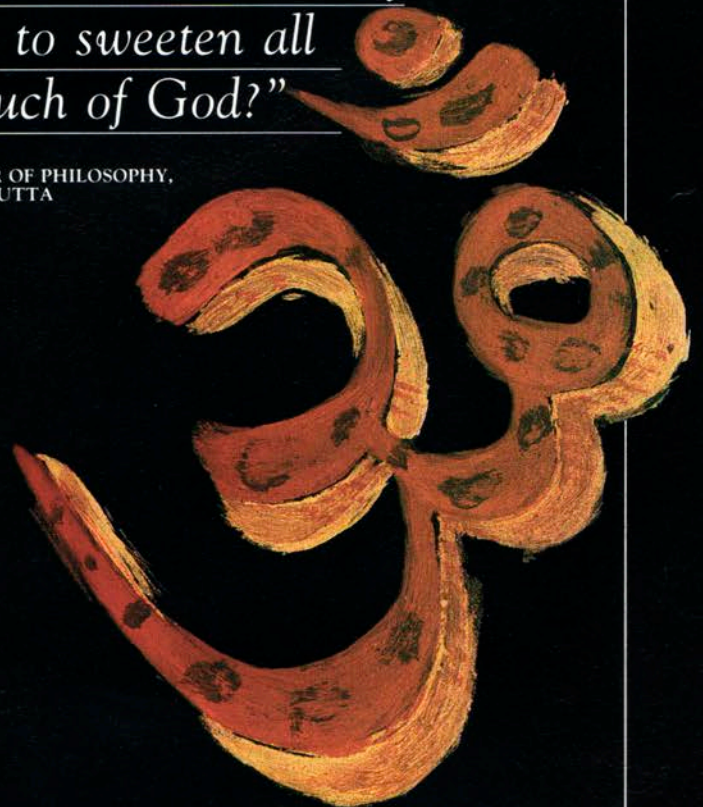
Seekers of emptiness



WRITTEN BY TIM MALYON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROLAND AND SABRINA MICHAUD

“What have you gained if you have not gained yourself, the immortal, the infinite? What have you gained if you have never tasted in your life the deep longing for deliverance and supreme emancipation? And what have you gained if you have not tasted the joy of self-surrender, if your heart has not longed to make of you a flute in the hands of Krishna, that master musician of the universe, and if you have not been able to sweeten all your miseries with a touch of God?”

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Throughout India, holy men or sadhus wander without destination, seeking self realization and release from the eternal round of life, death and rebirth. Financially supported by the charity of the Hindu society, samnyasins, 'ones who have renounced the world', offer guidance to others who seek self realization. Yoga – union – and other spiritual practices, help the samnyasin attain this liberation.



Having decided to renounce all worldly possessions, samnyasins are homeless and legally dead. Once taken, this decision is irreversible, since if a samnyasin reneges on it he and his family will be outcast. On renouncing the world, samnyasins generally cut off their last lock of hair – although certain sects let it grow as they roam. Facial decoration in part denotes devotees of different gods.



He sits crosslegged in a low rush hut at one corner of a rectangle of tents. This is his encampment amidst the teeming throng. Before him burns a tidy wood fire. Inexorably my eyes wander to the wide wooden hoop which encircles his waist, bolted shut with brass. Short chains hang back and front, holding a bulge of wood that completely encloses his genitals. It's hard not to stare at this immense male chastity belt.

People come and go, touching his feet, leaving gifts, money, food, wood. From his presence they receive blessing, *darsana*. He answers questions.

"If you are restless you have a thousand questions so you have to find a thousand answers. We have only one question."

"What question?"

"What is I?"

"And the answer?"

He grins. "He – He in everyone, He everywhere, one in the universe, one in existence."

"So who is He?"

The grin widens and a great hoarse chuckle breaks loose. "He is You, You-in-You, U-nion. That is He."

"Sometimes we hold our body in one position, sitting with that

thought. Then we do practice, following the breathing, deeper and deeper. Then everything stops – that is realization. Everything comes to a point. Usually everything is moving, but if you are thoughtless, if there is no question in the body anymore, then there is no breathing, – nothing."

He picks up his *chillum*, a four inch long hollow stone cone used for smoking the holy *charas*, cannabis resin. The *charas* is mixed with tobacco, tamped down into the pipe, and lit by placing a great live ember from the fire directly on it. He draws repeatedly, fast and deep, like an inward-breathing trumpet solo, then slowly exhales. A huge cloud momentarily obscures his laughing face.

"We have no father, no mother, no money, no home, no shelter, no cares. We have nobody, no doctor, to check our body. *Charas* maintains us, helps us to live without mother, doctor and home. It is not a way of becoming realized. But the fire and smoke maintain the body for practice."

This man is a *sadhu*, a 'holy man'. Muslims would call him a *fakhir*, which is the Arabic word for 'poor man'. Above all he is a *samnyasin*, 'one who has renounced the world'. All his worldly goods have been given

away, his marriage dissolved and his heirs have taken their inheritance. As a Hindu householder his duty was always to keep the sacrificial fire burning. Now he has inhaled the last smoke from the fire and extinguished it for ever.

Legally he is dead, barred from appearing in court as a witness, free of all debts and legal obligations. Nine times he has made offerings to the dead, the last time for himself. And three times he has uttered the irrevocable oath *samnyastam maṣā*, "I have renounced." There is no way back. If he returns to the world, he and his whole family will be outcasts. So he takes up his staff and begging bowl and treads the road.

"We live and roam. We never go. We roam. We have no destination. You go. We roam."

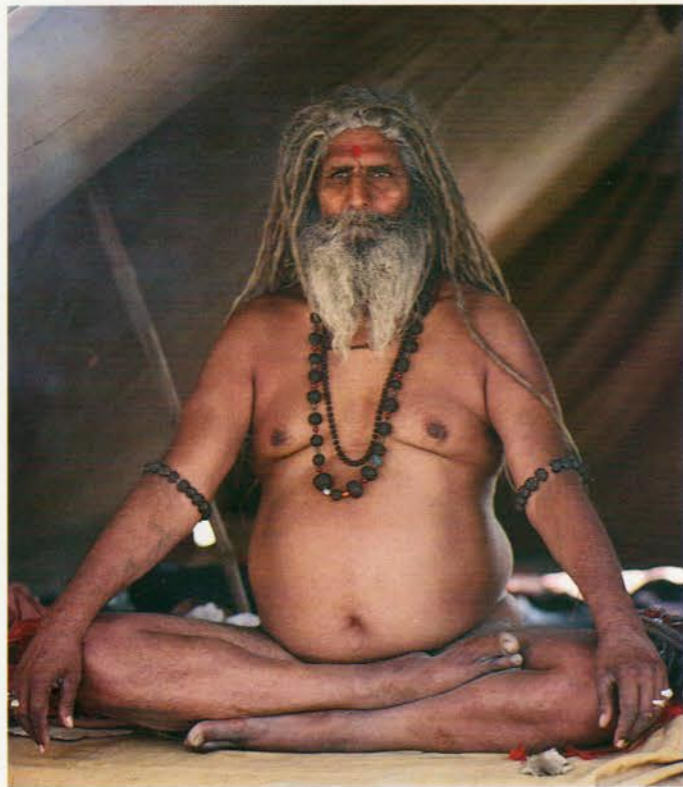
"So why roam to this spot here?"

"This is our fair, our home, our cave." Once again that infectious, gravelly laugh breaks loose.

Some home is this teeming city of tents this sacred *Mela*, this fair on the banks of the Ganges. Beyond all its myriad deities and holy places the Ganges exerts the deepest hold on India's Mind – *Ganga Mata*, Mother Ganges, flowing embodiment of fertil-



DIMPLE



When Jupiter is in Taurus and the sun and moon in Capricorn, a Khumba Mela or festival takes place at Prayag (Allahabad) where the Ganges joins the Jamuna and the mythical Saraswati. This year the celestial conjunction was particularly special and will not be repeated until 2233. 15 million pilgrims are drawn to the sprawling city of tents, seeking blessings from the holy men who congregate there. Many family heads usually have a samnyasin or guru whom they go to for guidance, giving alms in return.

Only a hair's breadth separates paradise from hell, and when you're in there it can be hard to see the difference.

ity, purification and realization. And here at Allahabad the Ganges joins two other sacred rivers, the Jamuna and the mythical, hidden Saraswati. This Prayag, this fluid 'conjunction of three' pulls the world's largest collection of pilgrims, 15 million people. Here they immerse themselves, cleansing the sins of lifetimes in their mother's waters.

There's a story behind this Mela: a creation story. And like so many creation stories the world over – in the beginning was water.

It was a fathomless ocean, and God, Brahma, the indivisible essence of all, floated on it, in a trance. When he awoke he created heaven and earth from the waters, and he created the realms of the gods and demons.

Brahma is paramount. He is the great ineffable power, 'that one thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature,' as an ancient Vedic text puts it. The gods are subordinate.

"The gods are later than this world's creation," says the *Rgveda*.

In the Mela story the gods and demons decided to do some creating for themselves. So they took the mountain and the python, fashioning of them a paddle and rope to churn the darkest depths.

At first there was a terrible smell. Lord Shiva dealt with that by inhaling the fumes. Then forms started to emerge, the cow, the lyre, a flying horse, a siren, then Dhanvantari, physician to the gods. He was carrying a pitcher containing Amrit, the sacred nectar of immortality. When they saw this the gods and demons fell to fighting over it.

One of the gods, Jayanta, took the pitcher and ran, chased by the demons. Twelve nights and twelve days he ran with the demons at his heels. These were divine days and nights – twelve years of our mortal span. The moon protected the nectar, Amrit, from flowing forth; the sun kept the pitcher from breaking; Jupiter protected Jayanta from the demons; and Saturn protected him from his own fear.

During the chase four drops of nectar fell on earth, at Prayag (Allahabad); at Hardwar where the Ganges emerges from the Himalayas; at Nasik, in Maharashtra state; and at Ujjain on the sacred River Sipra. Eventually Jayanta reached paradise, and the nectar Amrit was safe – for the moment.

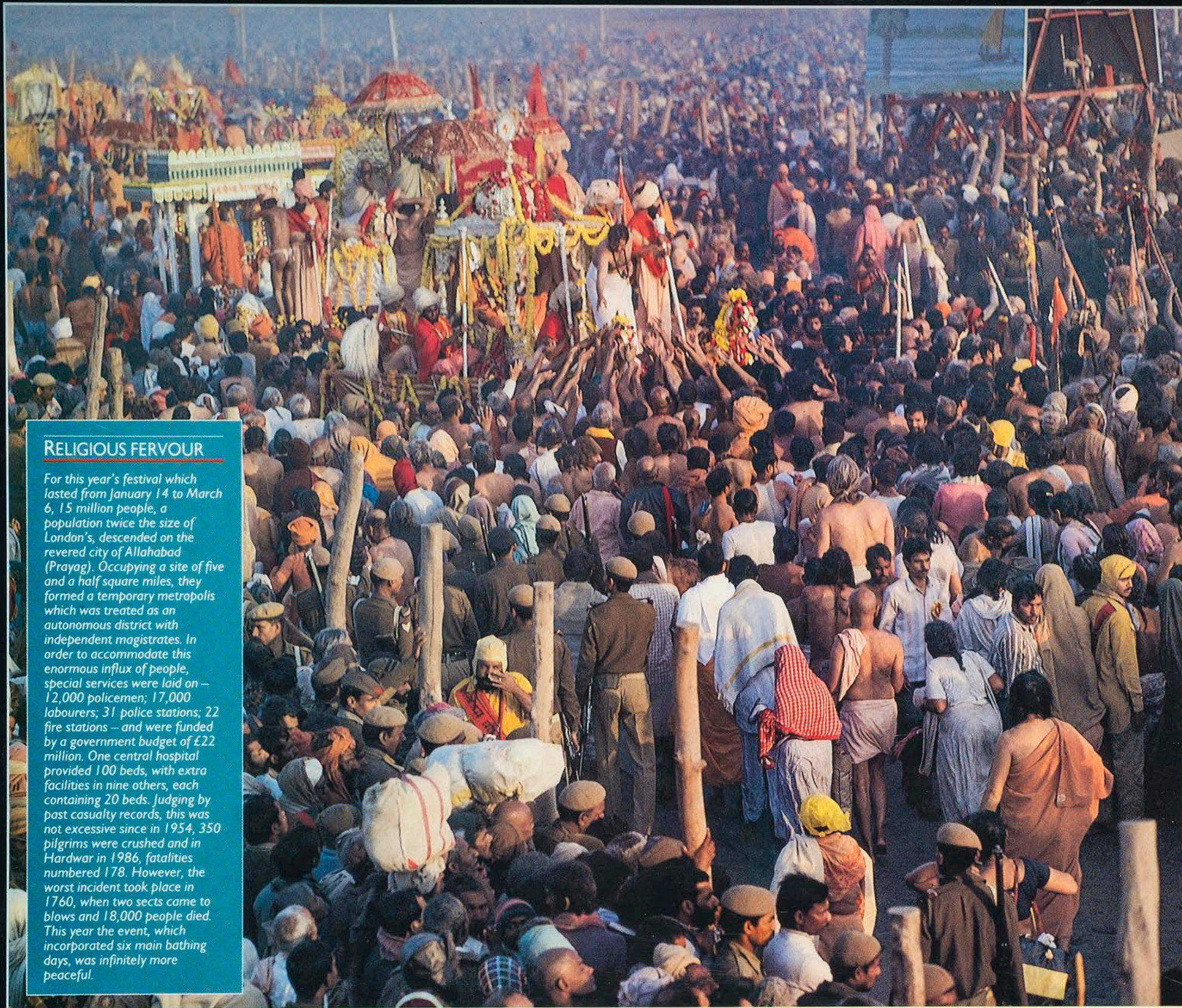
Khumba means 'pitcher', mela means 'fair' or 'festival'. Every twelve



years when the sun, moon and planets are in just the right positions a great Khumba Mela is held at Prayag. This year the conjunctions were very special, not to be repeated until 2233.

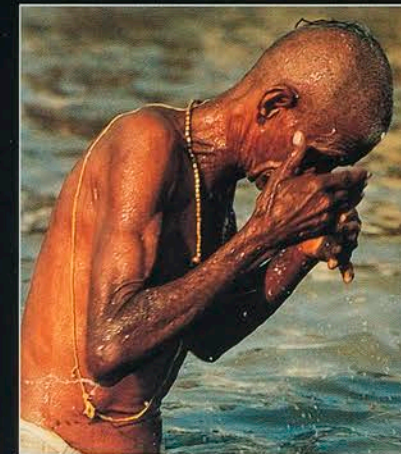
Every three years between the Prayag festivals a Khumba Mela is held on the other spots where the drops fell, Hardwar, Nasik and Ujjain. This simple story generates a massive movement of peoples – and a question: what do the nectar of Immortality, Amrit, and the pitcher represent? Some suggest Brahma and human consciousness, although the meaning is more intuitive than restrained within definitions.

The samnyasin's goal is liberation, moksā, mukti, 'release' – a central



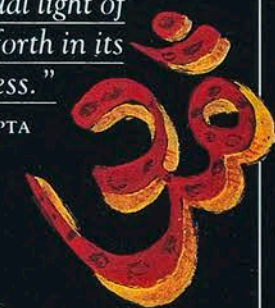
RELIGIOUS FERVOUR

For this year's festival which lasted from January 14 to March 6, 15 million people, a population twice the size of London's, descended on the revered city of Allahabad (Prayag). Occupying a site of five and a half square miles, they formed a temporary metropolis which was treated as an autonomous district with independent magistrates. In order to accommodate this enormous influx of people, special services were laid on – 12,000 policemen; 17,000 labourers; 31 police stations; 22 fire stations – and were funded by a government budget of £22 million. One central hospital provided 100 beds, with extra facilities in nine others, each containing 20 beds. Judging by past casualty records, this was not excessive since in 1954, 350 pilgrims were crushed and in Hardwar in 1986, fatalities numbered 178. However, the worst incident took place in 1760, when two sects came to blows and 18,000 people died. This year the event, which incorporated six main bathing days, was infinitely more peaceful.



“And when one comes face to face with the highest reality, or Brahma, he is lost in it like rivers in the sea. No one can describe what that existence is. One can only say that it is ‘being’, nothing more. Here all the knots of the heart are untied, all doubts are dispelled, and there is one spiritual light of unity that shines forth in its serene oneness.”

DR S.N. DASGUPTA



theme of the *Upanishads*, sacred Hindu texts written around the same time as another *samnyasin*, the Buddha, was discussing very similar ideas. Both Hindu and Buddhist renunciators search for release from the eternal round of life, death and rebirth, driven by *karma*, the momentum of acts, good and bad, in previous lives. Release dispels ignorance and illusion, brings union.

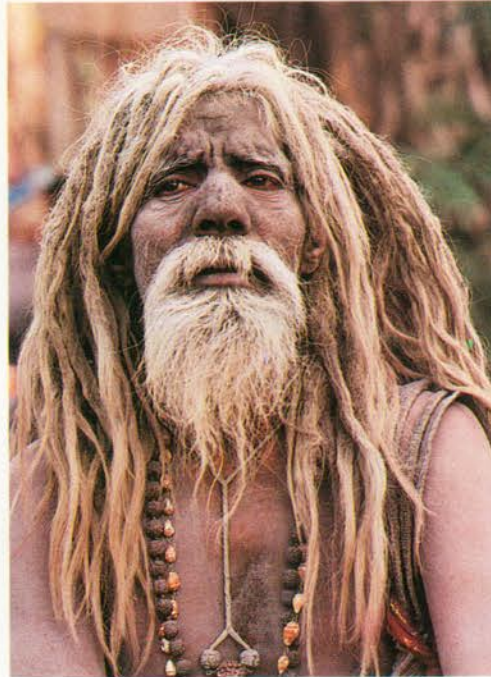
The *samnyasins'* methods are many and varied: bodily subjugation, breathing and body *yoga*, meditation and visualization, intellectual and emotional insight, and *bhakti*, ecstatic devotion to and immersion in such godheads as Lord Shiva. These naked or saffron-robed practitioners, painted and wild, may seem bizarre, even frightening to the outsider. But their methods, developed over centuries, are of increasing interest to the West.

Consciousness-raising groups are spreading fast. Psychotherapeutic experiences offering release from unconscious drives are no longer the reserve of the so-called sick. Buddhism, with its essential goal of realization, is a fast-growing religion. And psychologists have been studying the experience of 'oneness', the 'ahaah' experience. Most famously Abraham Maslow coined the phrases 'peak experience', 'being-cognition' and 'being-at-oneness'. Nothing buys a 'guaranteed ticket to such sensations, but techniques like meditation can make them more accessible and frequent. And such experiences once they occur seem to be psychologically healthy, even foils against depression, leading to intense feelings of optimism and life-affirmation.

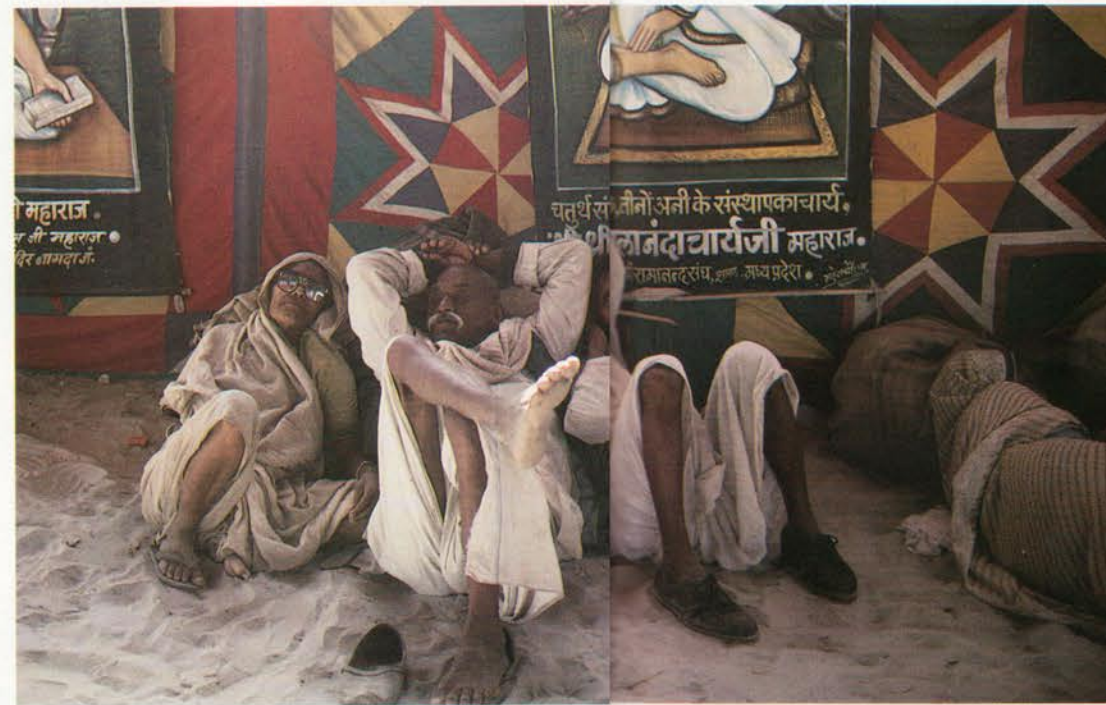
But then, if the demons grab the pitcher containing the *Amrit* of immortality, all hell breaks loose. Hindu culture is a highly structured system, with little room for individuality. Hindus have strict duties like marriage and childbirth – even priests, as opposed to *samnyasins*, are usually married. Renunciation is a structured alternative, a safety valve, a socially acceptable path by which the individual can forsake the strict confines of society and single-mindedly seek self-realization. The *samnyasin* must find a *guru*, a realized person who will lead him in the path and help him become 'realized' himself. So a teaching tradition is passed down.

Hindu society also supports the *samnyasin* economically. It is 'good *karma*' to give alms, either to a single

'Everything stops – that is realization. Usually everything is moving, but if you are thoughtless, if there is no question in the body anymore, then there is no breathing – nothing.'



The Ganges is sacred to the pilgrims (right) who trek to Prayag believing that they will cleanse their sins in her waters. According to Hindu mythology, Prayag is one of the spots where the god Jayanta spilt a drop of Amrit (the sacred nectar of immortality) as he was chased by demons. On dying a *samnyasin* is not given a funeral as he is already officially dead. Instead his body is released into a river, preferably the Ganges.



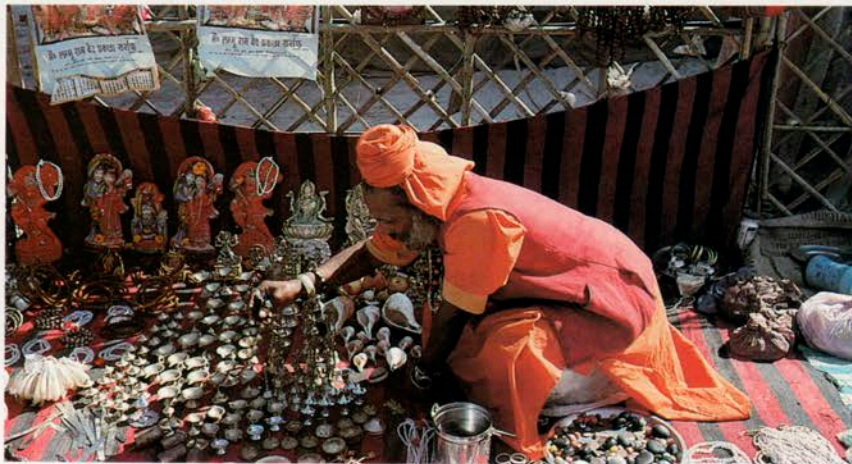
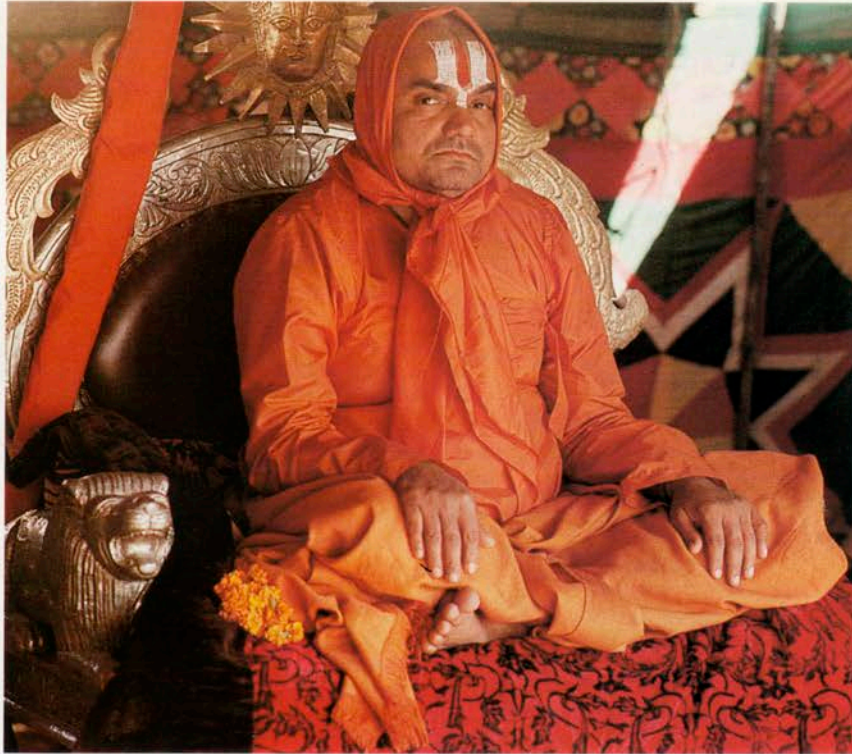
samnyasin on the road, or to *ashrams*, 'hermitages', where famous *gurus* teach.

The Buddhist *samnyasin* tradition has evolved similar structures – accepted teachers within ancient traditions, strict rules which determine when pupils are ready for certain teachings and initiations, and a vow at the beginning and end of all practices, dedicating them 'to the good of all sentient beings'.

In the West we have for so long denied the reality of the path to 'peak experiences' that no widely accepted social structure remains to accommodate them. Consequently it is currently open season for charlatans. The oneness experience is so intense that it inevitably creates a powerful bond between pupil and teacher. Some 'teachers' exploit this bond to their own selfish and lucrative ends, safe in society's ignorance of the origins of

their power. Helping someone widen their reality so they can more fully realize themselves, and helping them change their realities so as to brain-wash them to your side, are two processes which employ similar techniques – often only the motive is different. Only a hair's breadth separates paradise from hell, and when you're in there it can be hard to see the difference.

The East also accepts that acquiring true understanding requires many years of dedication, even though a single peak experience may be easily achieved. In the West many want their instant paradise easily attainable, ready-wrapped and off-the-peg. They seek only to constantly repeat the peak experience, become dependent on it, and invariably harm themselves, friends, family, lovers. The kick of first balancing a bicycle is mistaken for the skill of the trapeze artist.



Symbolically dressed either in white representing purity, saffron indicating transcendental knowledge, or wearing nothing at all, the samnyasins are often dismissed or criticized. However, in the more materialistic West, many of their methods are increasingly being practised and studied.

Change is constant. Even in India materialism and the cult of the individual are becoming increasingly acceptable. A painted body covered in ash hangs suspended in a wood and rope frame. Its owner has vowed neither to speak nor sit nor lie down – for twelve years. Next to this image of *samnyasa* another group huddles round a fire. Several wear watches. One owns a motorbike. With 15 million devout *Khumba Mela* pilgrims here, holy beggary becomes profitable.

The tension is palpable. There's a Westerner in the group, Paul, who has spent many years living amongst *samnyasins*. And there are rumblings

about money, especially from Westerners with whom Paul is the contact. A young *samnyasin* squatting opposite him toys threateningly with a heavy iron fire tong, then angrily lashes out, cutting him across the hand. The contest for that *Amrit* of immortality continues.

Great *yogins* still exist, human beings who devote their entire existence to the task of union and the transcendence of opposites. Just by asking the question 'What do you want?' they open you to the depths of your very being – then go on their way, itinerant, homeless, oh seekers of emptiness. ■