

# Why I became a Hindu

Parama Karuna Devi

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# Preface

*Satyam eva jayate*

May Truth be victorious!

*Dharmo rakshati rakshitah*

Dharma protects those who protect Dharma

Why this book?

Just like all my other books, this publication is intended as a compendium of my answers to the questions that many different people have asked me at various times. Because I like to be precise, clear and exhaustive in my elaborations to avoid misunderstandings - and this is rather difficult when dealing with *impromptu* questioning - I have found that writing is a very valuable instrument of communication, as written words are less vulnerable to subjective and superficial interpretations by those who receive them.

Many people confuse race with religion. This puts them in serious disadvantage because they become surprised and confused when faced with facts that clearly contradict their prejudice, and therefore they remain unable to take proper and effective action as required by the circumstances. I understand that superficial judgment and prejudice might have caused uninformed observers to classify me as a Christian because I was born in a region and a family within a general Christian population, and because when I was an infant I was forcibly baptised. However, the definition of "religion" is based on the concepts of *belief* and *practice*, and if we automatically and unquestionably assign a particular religion to individuals merely because of their birth, the concept of religious freedom becomes meaningless. Christians certainly believe that individuals can change their religion, and this is the reason why they are so busy with conversion missions, therefore under their influence the international legislation and the general opinion at global level have come to officially recognise the principle that a person's religious identification must be based on a free choice in regard to personal religious beliefs and practices. This should work both ways.

I consider myself a orthodox Hindu because I strongly believe in the original Vedic shastra and I have dedicated my life to applying their teachings in practice. My beliefs and practices are explained in this and in my other publications and presentations.

My official conversion to Vaishnavism was solemnised in February 1979 with a public diksha ceremony and homa at the Iskcon center in Rome Italy, officiated by Somaka Swami and Bhagavan Swami, then local representatives of Bhaktivedanta Swami. After dissociating myself from Iskcon, I was given a fresh diksha into the Gaudiya Vaishnava sampradaya by Bhakti Vaibhava Puri Swami, the acharya of the Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission, during my pilgrimage to Mathura-Vrindavana in 1989. In 1998 I received important instructions and blessings from Lingaraja Swami during the

Lingaraja Ratha yatra on Ashoka astami in Bhubaneswar; such instructions were also confirmed by other religious authorities.

I have also undergone the traditional Vedic purification ceremonies known as suddhi, prayaschitta, vratyastoma and diksha under the guidance and tutelage of Bhagavan Mishra (Deula purohita of Sri Jagannatha Puri Mandir) and Jagannatha Mahapatra (Mukti mandapa brahmana of Sri Jagannatha Puri Mandir) and with the encouragement and support of several representatives of the orthodox Hindu community in Jagannatha Puri. The rituals were personally performed by Bhagavan Mishra on the auspicious Ratha yatra day in 2008, together with the *prana-pratistha* ceremony for our Jagannatha Deities in our Piteipur Ashram. Official Hindu organisations such as RSS and VHP have also recognised me as a dedicated Hindu who has been working actively since 1998 in the Hindu Resurgence Movement, and in that capacity I have been invited to participate in numerous programmes along the years.

However, my dedication and allegiance is not towards some sectarian organisation or political party, but only to Bhakti, Dharma and Vidya, and although I have always been very cooperative to any dharmic initiative and any dharmic individual or group, I believe that a partisan or sectarian mentality cannot adequately serve the need of the hour in defense and protection of Dharma, not only in India but at global level.

My conversion to Hinduism has never been motivated by any materialistic convenience interest. It is based on my personal recognition of the superior value of its principles, values and knowledge. The reasons why I became a Hindu go much beyond the reasons why I do not consider myself as a Christian or a foreigner - this book is meant to clarify any misconception in this regard. I have whole-heartedly adopted Bharata Varsha (India) as my sacred Motherland, all the dharmic people as my kith and kin, and loyal and steadfast work for the protection and furtherance of Dharma and Vidya as my highest duty.

I want to make very clear that I am a non-political person.

I am not interested in any type of position - social, academic, or other.

I do not depend on any group, organisation, institution or sect.

Similarly, I am not interested in campaigning against any group, organisation, institution or sect. When absolutely necessary I present relevant facts, but simply to clarify my position in condemning adharmic facts and dissociating myself from conclusions, policies and behaviors that are contrary to Dharma and Vidya.

I have no hidden agenda whatsoever.

My only concern is the search for truth and the establishment of dharma.

Parama Karuna Devi

14 July 2018

Sri Jagannatha Ratha yatra

## My work

In the past few years, I have chosen to live a rather reclusive and quiet life, focusing on my sadhana and my literary work, which I am hoping to complete before leaving my present body. My books have been published on Amazon and can also be downloaded free of charge in their electronic format from my website [www.jagannathavallabha.com](http://www.jagannathavallabha.com)

The present list of my publications, available in English language, is as follows:

\* *Puri, the Home of Lord Jagannatha*

printed in India, a comprehensive pilgrimage guide to the holy land of Jagannatha Puri

\* *Prasnottara ratna malika*

("The necklace of perfect questions"), a translation with transliteration and commentary to the text authored by Adi Shankara

\* *Bhagavad gita: The Global Dharma for the Third Millennium*

a strictly non-sectarian translation and commentary, in 18 volumes plus appendixes

\* *Bhagavata Purana*

an abridged translation of the original text of *Bhagavata Purana*

\* *Introduction to Vedic Knowledge*

a 4 volume presentation covering the perspectives of study, the original Samhitas, Upanishads, Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana, as well as Vedangas and Upavedas, Vedanta sutra, Agamas and Tantra

\* *The Life of Krishna Chaitanya*

first volume of a series on the life and teachings of Krishna Chaitanya

\* *Gods or Aliens? (Vimanas and other wonders)*

\* *Vegetarian World Cooking*

\* *Sustainable Development in Rural and Tribal Areas*

\* *The Power of Kalpa Vriksha*

Other books have been published in Italian language and the English version is under process:

\* *Le 108 Upanishad*

a complete translation of the 108 Upanishads

\* *Prasnottara ratna malika*

("The necklace of perfect questions"), a translation with transliteration and commentary to the text authored by Adi Shankara

\* *Bhagavata Purana*

an abridged translation of the original text of *Bhagavata Purana*

\* *Introduction to Vedic Knowledge*

a 4 volume presentation covering the perspectives of study, the original Samhitas, Upanishads, Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana, as well as Vedangas and Upavedas, Vedanta sutra, Agamas and Tantra

\* *The Life of Krishna Chaitanya*

first volume of a series on the life and teachings of Krishna Chaitanya

- \* *Gods or Aliens? (Vimanas and other wonders)*
- \* *Il Risveglio della Dea Madre: La riscoperta della Religione Naturale*  
("The Awakening of the Mother Goddess, first volume: Rediscovering the Natural Religion")
- \* *Trasforma la tua vita in 30 giorni con il Suci Vrata*  
("Transform your life in 30 days with the Suci Vrata")
- \* *Vegetarianesimo spirituale*  
("Spiritual vegetarianism")
- \* *La cucina indiana*  
("Indian cookery")
- \* *I Libretti Verdi*  
("The Green Booklets"), a series of 40 small publications printed in Italy from 1989 to 1994, covering various aspects of ethical and spiritual vegetarianism, practical recipes for all occasions, as well as study guides to concepts such as karma and reincarnation, etc

Other books in the process of completion:

- \* *Integrazione delle vite passate*  
("Integration of past lifetimes"), both in Italian and English
- \* *La Dea nella storia* ("The Goddess along history"), *Incontrare la Dea* ("Meeting the Goddess"), *Passato, presente, futuro* ("Past, present and future"), second, third and fourth volumes of the series "The Awakening of the Mother Goddess"
- \* *The teachings of Krishna Chaitanya*  
second volume of the series on the life and teachings of Krishna Chaitanya
- \* *A Puja Manual*
- \* *Sustainable Development*  
a new updated and enlarged edition of the 1995 version
- \* *The true meaning of Yoga*
- \* *The four Veda Samhitas*
- \* *The Jewels of the Bhagavata Purana*

Before 2012, much of my energy and time was absorbed by the development of a rural project for PAVAN, a non-profit Society that I founded and directed for several years engaging in social work for the benefit of the people of the holy land of Purushottama kshetra. Activities were later discontinued due to several reasons. In 1995, about one year after I settled in Puri, I had registered a Vegetarian Society based on spiritual and religious foundations; in spite of many efforts from my part, it soon became apparent that the people in Puri and Orissa were not interested in vegetarian activism or even in vegetarianism, so I focused more on social work, that was very much needed.

In 2005 I used my personal savings and the contributions of a few like-minded friends to acquire some land outside town, and I started to develop an independent ashrama for the purpose of supporting and accommodating pilgrims and spiritually-minded visitors, also offering guided tours as well as courses and seminars on Hinduism and Indian culture, and building a system of self-sufficient organic agriculture and permaculture that would best support the high level of spiritual consciousness that was to be created.

My main purpose, however, was to conduct and support research on the Jagannatha tradition and to establish a working communication, a better understanding and a beneficial connection between the local people of Puri and all those who wanted to learn and practice devotion to Jagannatha. To

develop the publication department in 1998 I started the Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Center, a non-profit structure with on-line presence, offering free assistance to all researchers and writers who want to share and publish their work, to facilitate the practical application of Vedic knowledge and ethics (vidya and dharma) to everyday's life at individual and collective level, also producing texts on sociology, economy, education and similar fields. Along the years I participated to several cultural and religious programmes in India, including the 2004 conference "Global Dharma for the Third Millennium" in Hyderabad. In 2014 I directed a Dharma Prachar Mandala programme sponsored by International RSS, to establish a Center for courses and seminars training in Hindu presentations.

Among the social work activities organised and performed between 1995 and 2012:

- \* A charitable primary school named Bhaktivedanta Siksha Niketana, started in 2006 for the children of the local villages, supported singlehandedly by my income as translator and by personal donations offered by my well-wishers at global level
- \* Experiments in organic agriculture and permaculture, cow protection and cottage level production of preserves and milk products
- \* Experiments in renewable energy based on village level technology, especially mechanical wind pump
- \* Seminars and awareness campaigns at State level about Sustainable Development, Disease Prevention, Vegetarian Nutritional Information, Environmental Awareness
- \* Social and cultural programmes for the children of the surrounding villages, especially the yearly Children's Festival
- \* Free distribution of Vegetarian Food especially to pilgrims and devotees during the Ratha yatra festival at Puri
- \* Vocational training, research and development especially on agarbatti manufacture
- \* Health camps and assistance to the local villagers
- \* Excavation of a fresh water well at a local Hanuman temple

Here is a brief summary of my activities before settling in India in 1994:

- \* Founding and directing a non-profit Vegetarian Society (ACV, or Associazione Culturale Vegetariana) based on ethical and spiritual motivations, from 1989 to 1994; this included extensive teaching in courses and seminars also in cooperation with the local government and NGOs working in the field of Vegetarianism, and participating to several international conferences on the subject organised by Vegetarian and Vegan Organisations.
- \* I translated a few dozens of books for various publishing houses on various subjects such as Vastu, New Age techniques, Natural medicine, Pranotherapy, Yoga, Buddhism, Native religions and cultures. Also translated 14 books for Centro Studi Bhaktivedanta and 5 books for the Gita Nagari Press (USA).
- \* From 1978 to 1986 I translated almost all the books written by Iskcon's founder, Bhaktivedanta Swami, for the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (over 50 volumes)
- \* From 1980 to 1984 I produced and anchored several episodes of radio programmes for Radio Krishna Centrale (the Italian Iskcon radio broadcasting studio), also working as teacher in the regional Iskcon Gurukula.

## My experience

I was born in the 1950s in a quite ordinary Italian family; my mother's side was rather attached to its Longobard (Celtic) historical heritage, while my father's side had deep roots in the rural northern province. Nobody in my environment knew anything about India or Hinduism or had any interest in them, yet from my early childhood I was telling people about reincarnation and the unity of all life, and I refused to eat meat because of ethical conscience. My family of origin was nominally Catholic but not very interested in religion - something they considered necessary mainly for social or cultural purposes, but without bothering to get any knowledge about it. On the contrary, I was always very interested in learning, and in fact I taught myself how to read when I was very young; that was another major cause of perplexity for my parents as nobody in the family had any contact with books - except for my mother's father, who had a small book-binding craft workshop, and supplied us with a few beautiful encyclopedias for interior decoration purposes. Before I was sent to primary school at the age of 5 (one year earlier than normal), I had already gone through much of those encyclopedias and I was particularly attracted by ancient civilisations and religions; my childhood readings included a text on Etruscan civilisation by pioneer researcher in the field Prof Pallottino, and *Gods, Graves and Scholars: The Story of Archeology*, by CW Ceram - whatever money I received as gift, I always tried to purchase books.

I was sent to a Catholic nun school for most of my compulsory education, to my personal annoyance and the annoyance of the good sisters, who were not comfortable with my constant questioning of doctrine and my tendency to discuss unconventional extracurricular subjects with other students. The college headmistress nun, who was also our literature teacher, wrote a comment on one of my essays, summarising her evaluation with the phrase "you are a good writer, but a big heretic". As I could see no problem with either of those tendencies of mine, in time a mutually acceptable solution was found, with me finally sitting for 3 exams at once so that I could complete my college studies 2 years earlier than normally expected. I came away with an excellent knowledge of English and French, a good knowledge of Latin and a passable knowledge of ancient Greek and other subjects, mostly history and geography. But conventional education had not given me the answers to my questions, and it was clear that it could not.

I continued to search for knowledge, especially procuring texts on unconventional subjects that my family and my school teachers would never have chosen for me, such as sacred scriptures of various religions, archeology, anthropology, psychology, and even science fiction. As Catholicism openly discourages (and forbade until 1966) the independent study of the Bible, I made it a point to read all the Bible carefully from cover to cover, and to research as extensively as possible on Christian history, theology and philosophy, especially in regard to heresies and paganism, and on all the texts that had been forbidden by the Church, including the so-called apocryphal texts. When I came across a study on the *Upanishads*, a biography of MK Gandhi and some other books on India and Hinduism, I was extremely happy because I could finally give a technical name to define my philosophical certainties. The more I read, the more it made sense.

In the 1970s I encountered the "alternative" culture revolution and explored its new ideological dimensions, ethical values and social interaction models, that offered amazing new possibilities to understand and experience life and bring theories into practice in the field of expanding awareness and communication. I participated to several experiments in smaller and larger groups, from students organisations to underground radio broadcasting, to hippie festivals and the development of the New Age culture. Unwilling to submit to the dogma, limitations, shortcomings and prejudice of the prevailing academic system, I renounced formal studies after college and instead of engaging in a regular university specialised curriculum as hoped by my family, I chose to become financially independent and obtained an office job as foreign correspondent in the commercial sector.

In 1975 I moved out of my family home to ensure a greater freedom for my personal research and life choices; I continued to support myself financially through my regular job, although I was uncomfortable with the social expectations and conventions of the grossly materialistic work environment. In 1978 I became a full-time member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCon); this allowed me to completely focus on my research and personal evolution without being distracted by other duties. At that time Iskcon was a very young and fresh movement in Europe, and many sincere and dedicated spiritual seekers were willing to live and work together to build a true practical alternative to the ordinary materialistic society based on the abrahamic paradigm. Compared to other similar groups that were blossoming in the region, Iskcon presented many advantages: they published very learned translations and commentaries of traditional Hindu scriptures such as *Bhagavad gita* and *Bhagavata Purana* with the original Sanskrit text, worshiped Krishna and the holy Names in a genuine devotional manner (instead of merely promoting a superficial personality cult for some guru), and gave great importance to regular and free distribution of pure vegetarian prasadam. No fees were charged to participate to any of the programmes, and everyone seemed to show selflessness and open-mindedness to share their resources and help each other.

I immediately took to the philosophy and to Sanskrit, so much that after a very short time I was given the service to translate Bhaktivedanta's books into Italian. In the following 8 years I engaged in very strict and intense sadhana and seva, traveling to various centers as directed by the leaders and required by my service, working in different capacities especially with the BBT (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Iskcon's primary publication department) both in Italy and in France. For a few years I expanded my service with several radio programmes, teaching in the local Gurukula and cooking for the Deities in the temple especially during festivals, which allowed me to make friends with visiting devotees from all parts of the world and learn as much as possible from them.

In 1984 I experienced a deep spiritual crisis as I had come to notice some serious problems that had become manifested in the leadership of Iskcon; this also triggered the unexpected resurfacing of memories from my past lifetimes, including new realisations in spiritual life and an even clearer understanding of the Sanskrit language and the shastra. During the following years I was able to recover and integrate a large part of my submerged memories, reaching back into a very ancient past, and more importantly I have been able to help other people to find out about their personal karmic journey and heal their ancient emotional scars. On 7th March 1984 I had the opportunity to finally go on a pilgrimage to India, something that I had intensely desired since my childhood. From the very first minute of my arrival, when I breathed the hot air on the landing field at the airport, I felt I had found my long-lost home. Our small group of devoted pilgrims arrived at Bombay with an international commercial flight, economy class, then proceeded by train to Mayapur (Navadvip,

West Bengal) through Calcutta, and finally visited Vrindavana (Mathura, Uttar Pradesh) before returning to Europe at the end of the month.

In the beginning the group was tightly packed and herded around Iskcon temples without being allowed to visit any other places or interact with local people or contact other groups or traditions, but in Mayapur we had some amount of freedom, with opportunities for personal meditation especially on the banks of the Ganga and Jalangi (Sarasvati), although the programme of kirtana, arati and lectures was still strictly inside the premises of the ashrama. When we reached Vrindavana the situation was quite different, as we were freely allowed to visit temples and holy places outside the small Iskcon campus, and each group was going around independently. The impact with Vrindavana was as overwhelming as my first contact with the Indian sky and land at Bombay, and there was plenty of time for individual chanting and meditation. Almost immediately I found a way to split from the group and I started to walk around by my own, soaking in the atmosphere and connecting with the places and the people. Then a realization came: a glimpse of the submerged and invisible iceberg beyond the visible tip above the waters, the existence of a vast and unknown continent of which Iskcon had only touched the shores. There was so much to discover, and these new places and people felt so much more genuine and deeper than the Iskcon version. I knew I had to find out more about the original Vedic system and the ancient scriptures, to better understand Bhakti and Sanatana dharma, and especially to focus on the difference between the authentic Vedic knowledge or Hinduism and the various interpretations that appeared to have been heavily influenced by the abrahamic perspective.

When I returned to Italy after my 3 weeks of spiritual vacation, my aspirations had expanded considerably, and I felt eager to re-read Bhaktivedanta's books with my newly discovered (or re-discovered) vision of the original context from which they had been written. In that light, I re-examined all the other information and understanding I had about the previous acharyas as well as Bhaktivedanta's teachings, life and activities, and especially the last period of his work and his vision for the propagation of Krishna Consciousness. I was now able to make a comparison with the teachings, life and activities of Bhaktivedanta, his predecessors and successors and disciples, many of whom had also written books, and with the policies and guidelines of the General Body Committee of Iskcon, the famous GBC. It was a substantial paradigm shift. I had already become disappointed with the leadership of the organization, and I realised that the movement was not evolving in the direction planned by the founder. In fact, it seemed to me that it had started to go the exactly opposite way. From my experience and perspective as a translator, I could see that much had been lost in the transplant of Krishna Consciousness and I started to meditate on how it could be restored, and even rejuvenated in a new effective package for the new times. I tried to bring up the issue with whatever leaders I was able to approach, asking polite questions about the meaning and application of the scriptural injunctions and Bhaktivedanta's instructions, but the results were depressing and alarming.

Although I have made deep research into the history of Iskcon, I decided against elaborating about the subject in this publication, that I am considering to present in a separate book, possibly for private circulation, in which I will also speak about why I am not a Christian, and made ideological comparisons between the history of Iskcon and the history of Christianity: the original idea was given to me by Dhanesvara Das (Dan Roussé), one of the early disciples of Prabhupada, with whom I interacted for some time in the past.

From 1984 to 1986 I made more experiments in spirituality and devotional science, continuing my personal research with some extremely important realisations and experiences. I completed the translation of all the remaining books by Bhaktivedanta, which I considered my duty, but I started to plan how to leave the Organisation, moving things around so that I could get out of the Villa Vrindavana ashrama and into a private apartment in Milan, although still officially working for the BBT, but "from the outside". I had been observing heavy tensions and a quick deterioration of the leadership, and I was expecting some serious problems; in 1986 the so-called "zonal acharya and guru" for Europe (Bhagavan Swami) resigned, dropping his sannyasa vows and abandoning his so-called "disciples", after which chaos ensued in the entire region, with many members leaving Iskcon and searching for alternatives especially in the various Gaudiya Mathas. I took the opportunity to quietly return to India, where I remained as long as possible (6 months on a tourist visa), traveling freely and independently all over the subcontinent and visiting Vrindavana, Mathura, Dvaraka, Gujarat and Rajasthan, Ranikhet and Haidakhan, Ayodhya, Varanasi, Prayaga, Calcutta, Tripura, Manipur, Orissa and especially Jagannatha Puri, Tirupati, Kanchi and Tamil Nadu, Madras (Chennai), Madurai, Kanyakumari, Trishur, Udipi, Guruvayur, Mangalore and Bangalore, living quietly and simply as a Hindu among Hindus and soaking in the atmosphere and rituals of traditional Hindu temples and holy places.

From that time I have remained situated in my personal spiritual journey, rejecting all forms of sectarianism and organised religion, but trying to understand the actual original Vedic system and the teachings of its genuine representatives, and I have always been open to cooperation with good dharmic people without depending on, or referring to any group, organisation or institution. My deep appreciation for the mission of Krishna Chaitanya brought me in contact with many extraordinary personalities, such as Bhakti Vaibhava Puri Gosvami, Gaura Govinda Swami, and Fakir Mohan Das, who confirmed my realizations and gave me blessings for my spiritual mission. I continued to engage in my personal sadhana, study, and devotional service to my Deities Jagannatha Baladeva and Subhadra, Guruvayur Bala Narayana, and Radha Krishna with Lalita and Visakha. At one time I was also gifted with a Hari-Hara salagrama sila and a Govardhana sila, and an ancient Lakshmi yantra. During the period 1987-1988 I explored various possibilities of accommodation and personal maintenance, then from 1989 to 1993 I settled in Milan, where I independently started and directed the ACV (Associazione Culturale Vegetariana, which came to have about 3,000 members and a "Green Center" open to the cooperation of all individuals and groups with similar purposes), organizing cultural and educational programmes, holding vegetarian cooking courses and writing several books on vegetarianism and spiritual culture.

In 1989 I participated to the historical event of the Maha Purna Kumbha Mela at Prayaga, with extraordinary spiritual experiences and important realisations, especially concerning interactions with Hindu sadhus of various groups. During the same journey I visited Ayodhya and Vrindavana again, where at the Seva Kunja Matha I received the special blessings of Bhakti Vaibhava Puri Maharaja. I asked him questions about the need of receiving the mantra from a realised soul and the importance of a material connection to a physically living guru for the practice of sadhana; as an answer, he simply told me to return on the next day with a new japa mala and a flower garland, and he gave me the name of Devaki. I gratefully accepted his gesture as a reassurance of protection and inspiration offered by one of the many personalities who embody and express the functions of the One Guru, the original and primary guru-tattva Mahadeva, but I did not really "join" his Matha because I did not want to be trapped into the dirty politics that were already developing there.

For a brief period I was married to a former Iskcon member, who in 1986 had offered his cooperation for my preaching projects; before joining Iskcon he had been one of the first yoga teachers in Italy, a dedicated follower of Haidakhandi Baba and a sort of Jack-of-all-trades who had managed brilliantly to live on his own means in many places including India. However, during the period of the Vegetarian Society in Milan he gradually became tired and restless, and somehow developed a longing for a carefree and lazy life in a conventional ashrama with regular temple programmes. He did not have any interest in studying shastra or understanding dharma and vidya, and under the influence of the local Iskcon leaders he developed an increasing feeling of hostility towards my work, until he started to actively sabotage it in several ways. Finally he chose to return to full Iskcon membership and allegiance, and on Iskcon instructions he claimed he wanted to take sannyasa; then I chose to become legally separated and completely sever the connection to avoid unpleasant complications, especially after I directly verified that his new guru Bhaktisvarupa Damodara Swami did not have anything to say to correct my husband's idea that as a sannyasi he would be entitled to half of all my assets and personal income for the rest of his and my life, and to my services as personal secretary and assistant "with benefits". I was rather annoyed at Bhaktisvarupa Damodara Gosvami when at some point he decided (without bothering to get to know me at all, discussing any philosophy, or even asking if I was willing to take another "initiation" from him or become his disciple) to have me corraled into the "initiation pen" for a homa ritual together with a herd of nondescript new recruits; obviously he surmised that as a wife I was nothing more than an appendix of the husband, and so did his disciples.

In 1993 I went to Kanchi to meet the then Yuvacharya of the Shankara Math on the occasion of the International Vegetarian Society Conference in Madras; during the Congress week, one Shakta devotee participating to the event approached me in a very respectful way to deliver a personal message from the Mother Goddess, instructing me to move to India and promising full protection and guidance. So as I had done many years earlier, I ventured out into the road that had been prepared for me; I returned to Italy just to close the Vegetarian Society there and organize my transfer of residence to India, specifically to Jagannatha Puri, where I wanted to remain in the association of Jagannatha and learn more from the brahmins of the most orthodox region in India, as I had found some friends there. For brief periods I went to Agartala (Tripura) and Bhubaneswar to work with the local Iskcon centers under their invitation, with yet more disappointment from my part, until I decided to drop all contacts with Iskcon members, also because Iskcon in Orissa (my residence place) had deteriorated considerably after the sudden demise of Gaur Govinda Swami.

In 1998 I attended the traditional Ratha Yatra of Lingaraja Mahadeva at Bhubaneswar, an extraordinary experience during which I received important instructions about my spiritual journey; I was told that I should not wait any longer for any spiritual guide, but I was to depend solely on my eternal Sat Guru, who would be always present to teach and protect me. From that time, my spiritual experience has increased manifold, and I have verified my Sat Guru's constant personal presence and loving guidance at every step of my life. The other part of those very personal instructions was about my future work, especially in regard to writing and publishing my own books; the same instructions and reassurances were confirmed to me a few years later by BV Puri Maharaja in front of the Deities and many people during a public meeting in his Matha at Aitota, Puri (near Gundicha). Maharaja saw me walking into the temple one evening as he was starting a *Bhagavatam* class for a large number of devotees and guests, including some Italian visiting members (I remember Golokananda, for example). Maharaja unexpectedly asked me to go and sit next to him in front of all the devotees, and he loudly declared that Krishna would bless all my writings: it was a

great encouragement, and it caused a great stirring among the "regular" devotees of the Matha, especially because I had not been attending their functions or association regularly, and I had continued to use my previous spiritual name. Again, on the occasion of his Guru puja celebration, he specifically invited me to step on the dais to personally offer him a garland of flowers.

I then started to write a translation and commentary of *Prasnottara ratna malika* (the original "Perfect Questions, Perfect Answers") of which the Kanchi yuvacharya had given me a skeleton version in 1993. Gradually I also began to write notes on *Bhagavad gita* and other texts. In the same year I started the Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Center, with the purpose of producing and publishing literary works on Hinduism and Vedic culture. As soon as the internet connection became locally available in Puri, I entered various on-line discussion groups, where I found much information to continue my studies on Indian history, literature and tradition. I also began connecting Vedic knowledge with the study of other pre-abrahamic and non-abrahamic cultures at global level, discovering important similarities and significant connections and exploring the history of the various cultures of the world, also interacting with the Resurgence movements of Ancient Religions especially in the Greek, Roman and Celtic areas.

Under the guidance and tutelage of Bhagavan Mishra (Deula purohita of Sri Jagannatha Puri Mandir), Jagannatha Mahapatra (Mukti mandapa brahmana of Sri Jagannatha Puri Mandir), Ganeshvara Tripathi and a few other members of the local orthodox Hindu community in Puri, I underwent the traditional purification ceremonies known as *suddhi*, *prayaschitta*, *vratyastoma* and *diksha*, that officialized my membership to Vedic orthodox Hinduism, sanctioning my *adhikara* to the performance of traditional ritual sacrifices and direct worship to the Deities. I also interacted and cooperated with the Acharya family (raj guru of the royal family in Puri) and with the Rathsharma family (Rabi Narayana and Surya Narayana, the sons of the famous Pandita Sadashiva Rathsharma) and I started the first website about Jagannatha and Jagannatha Puri ([www.jagannatha.net](http://www.jagannatha.net)), which was later hacked and hijacked and destroyed, although I have kept a backup copy. My book on *Puri, the Home of Lord Jagannatha* became quite appreciated and is still in demand both locally and globally, also distributed freely in its digital format on several websites.

With the help of my adopted son Raghunatha, a native of Jagannatha Puri, I developed a charitable organisation to serve the holy Dhama and its people, also running a school for the children of the surrounding villages for several years. In 1996 I was appointed as a member for the organizing committee for the Gopala Utsava at the traditional Hindu temple of Sakshi Gopala and subsequently I was invited to many academic and cultural events, by Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalana Samiti, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), Academy of Yoga and Oriental Studies, Utkala University, Jagannatha Sanskrit Vidyalaya, Karma Kanda Vedic Gurukula and Rastriya Svayamsevaka Sangha. Later, between 2014 and 2015, on the request of International RSS I went to Hyderabad to start a center for the training of activists in the movement for Hindu Renaissance.

In the course of the years, I have found more and more jewels of knowledge and realization, and I am always eager for more. I have a small number of students who reside in various countries, and I am very serious about taking good care of them. I have always been available to correspond with the public, and along the years I have helped several people to recover their own memories from past lifetimes through a specific guided meditation technique; more information in this regard is presented in my book *Integration of Past Lifetimes*.

## Why Hinduism is better

Of course we can find defects and mistakes in all human beings, belonging to all groups and religions (it is not possible to say that all those who present themselves as Hindus can be taken as ideal examples). We can also find imperfect texts in all religions, and Hindu texts can also be found defective especially when badly translated or incorrectly copied, or tampered with in some way or another. However, in the case of Hinduism (the original Vedic tradition), these imperfections are caused by a lack of personal qualifications of the involved individuals, not by the fundamental principles of Vedic Hinduism, that I find to be perfectly valid and consistent. In fact, I have directly verified that Hindus tend to become better persons the more they actually study and practice the teachings of their original scriptures, while people in some other religions who actually study and practice the teachings of their own original scriptures inevitably become proportionally worse persons from the human or ethical point of view.

My personal experience of genuine Hinduism is based on the original Vedic scriptures and knowledge (a definition that includes Yoga, Tantras etc) and I have been inspired by the examples of its application demonstrated by many great teachers, of whom I will speak later in this book. From each and every one of those teachers I have taken the best or the essence, that is consistent among them all and with the fundamental teachings of the shastra as Dharma and Vidya, and I have applied it sincerely and consistently in my own personal journey of Self realisation, and presented to my students.

It is not my work to reform Hinduism in general. There is no doubt in my mind that people will make their own choices (actively or passively, by choosing not to act), and each and every person is only responsible for his/ her own choices. I believe in tolerance and in the natural laws of karma and reincarnation, so when I see mistakes or misconceptions in others or in society in general, I believe it is my duty to simply serve the truth and offer people the opportunity to make the right choices: this is also the clear and explicit instruction of the original shastra, especially *Bhagavad gita* (3.26). I have always believed that if we present a better perspective, the worse perspectives will be automatically abandoned by sincere and intelligent people (*Bhagavad gita*, 2.59); if some people insist to choose to remain attached to misconceptions in spite of the best presentations and clarifications we can offer, our job is done and we are not responsible for what will happen in the future. So if Hinduism has developed a bad public image because of faulty presentations and applications in the past, the only thing I can do to help improve the situation is to present the original genuine version of Hinduism as it has been explained consistently in all shastra and by all the qualified acharyas.

Genuine Hinduism is based on the eternal and universal principles of natural ethics (also called *sanatana dharma*) that all psychologically healthy human beings tend to instinctively understand and follow, irrespective of the culture where they have been born and raised, provided of course that such culture has not been engineered in such a way to unquestionably present mental disease as religiousness, righteousness, morality or normality. The eternal natural ethical principles are fundamental universal values such as truthfulness/ honesty, compassion/ kindness, cleanliness/ purity, self-control/ moderation, tolerance, simplicity, etc.

The perception of dharma is innate in all human beings, because all human beings have a conscience and are naturally able to see the difference between good and evil, between right and wrong. Dharma is what supports the existence of the individuals and the universal community: cooperation, sense of responsibility, solidarity, performing one's duty selflessly and promoting the happiness of all beings. Dharma is for human beings what Ritu is for natural phenomena: it is the natural rule, the innermost nature and duty of each member of the universal community. Water has the nature and the duty to be liquid and fire has the nature and duty to be hot, so human beings have the nature and duty to "do what is right", to follow their conscience for the benefit of the universal community.

The other fundamental concept in genuine Hinduism is the natural search for knowledge of the Self (*atma vidya*) or self-realisation, that goes beyond the gross material body. Vidya is the study of the nature of the Self, God, and the world: this, too, is felt universally as a normal instinct and is actually considered the highest duty for all human beings, that leads to perfection both on the material and the spiritual levels. Knowledge also means power of choice, sense of responsibility, understanding for the problems of others and solidarity, effectiveness in action, development of intelligence and wisdom: this is exactly the opposite of the imposition of blind faith for dogma. Another important point is the recognition of the cyclical nature of time and manifestation of the universe, from the smallest atomic time to the life span of stars and galaxies, from the life of individual beings to the total extent of human history and the history of the planet itself. This means that creation and human civilisation are not linear but also follow a cyclical flow and produce slightly different versions of the same fundamental stories. For example, people discover the law of gravity and the other basic laws of physics every time that knowledge has been lost, and the law and its effects are always the same although the circumstances of their observation may vary.

Granted, genuine Hinduism is very vast, deep and scientific, and therefore it is more difficult to understand and apply than superficial, simplistic and dogmatic ideologies or religions, but if one becomes truly dedicated to its principles, s/he become a "fundamentalist" in honesty, ethical conscience, intelligence, wisdom, knowledge, happiness, love and freedom. And that in itself is a satisfying purpose for life. The teachings of *Bhagavad gita* are called Buddhi yoga, "the yoga of intelligence". The level of *vriddhatva*, or seniority, is not estimated merely in the age of the body but in the vastness of knowledge and wisdom, and *moksha* (incorrectly translated as "salvation" by some people) means freedom, or liberation from material identifications and attachments, that are our limitations and conditionings.

The scientific nature of Hinduism is due to the intrinsic value that it gives to the honest and intelligent search for knowledge, on all levels. Spiritual knowledge is freely offered to all who want to experiment and verify it by applying it scientifically (independently and directly) to their own lives; a spiritual teacher is authoritative but not authoritarian in the sense that the relationship between student and teacher is based on constant questioning from both sides. Education is always personalised for the actual potential and development of each student, and works on the personal responsibility of the teacher who has full power to freely accept or reject any student, without any interference from government, society, or politics.

The study of the Self or *atma vidya* is called *svadhyaya*, and genuine Hinduism is still the best source of information in regard to techniques and observations of the Self, pooling from thousands of years and millions of researchers who have followed the same system successfully and with

consistent results. The primary teaching is that we - as individuals - are not the body or the mind, but we are *atman*, the transcendental eternal and blissful existence of awareness, that is integral part of the *brahman*. All *jiva-atmans* are of the same nature among themselves and with *brahman*, so all life is truly divine and glorious, and should be respected as such, while the gross identification and attachment (*ahankara* and *mamatva*) to the material body is considered the root of all ignorance. However, matter itself is not condemned but rather celebrated as valuable and beneficial, and a direct energy of the Supreme Transcendence.

The theological and philosophical system of genuine Hinduism is perfect, without any flaws, and with a clear and logical classification of different levels of consciousness determining the species of birth (*jati*) as plants, animals, humans and super-human beings (*devas* or *asuras*). It perfectly and consistently explains all phenomena, natural or "supernatural", including the process of karma and reincarnation, the different dimensions, and the nature of the mind. Beyond this scientific analysis of the material world and its gross and subtle dimensions, genuine Hinduism offers a scientific analysis of the spiritual world, which includes the concepts of *brahman*, *paramatma*, *bhagavan*, *avatara*, *lila*, *shakti*, and many others, in a theology that is perfectly consistent with the concepts of absolute, omnipotency, omnipresence, omniscience etc.

The teachings of genuine Hinduism do not need any validation through historical evidence because they are perfectly valid in themselves, for everyone, everywhere, and at all times (*sanatana*). They do not need to be enforced materially, so there is no confusion between the duties of the government and the duties of the religious teachers, and the legislative system can support and promote the greatest freedom and the best opportunities for everyone to achieve perfection in the four purposes of human life: *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. Even the concepts of *prayer* and *worship* have a higher and wider value in Hinduism, and promote the healthy development and elevation of the human mind instead of debasing it.

Because it values honesty and intelligence, Hinduism gives a relative importance to relative details and encourages researchers to become *paramahamsas* - that is, to become able to take the essence or the valuable points from the presentations and the people that are limited by some defects; this is based on a sincere desire to attain a better understanding as opposed to the "cherry-picking" technique of dishonestly presenting only partial information that is taken out of context or expressed ambiguously so that people will get an incorrect impression that can be exploited politically from time to time.

In genuine Hinduism there is great tolerance for a wide range of ideologies and opinions, although each particular presentation and belief is evaluated with detachment for its own merit according to the principles of logic and ethics, starting with honesty and consistency. Genuine Hindu (Vedic) ideologists never destroy evidence or impose censorship, they never support or condone racism, sexism or prejudice based on other bodily identification factors including background or family of origin, and they never attack people based on their beliefs. Genuine Hinduism recognises the positive value of the world (matter, creation, body, nature) as a sacred manifestation of the Mother Goddess, which also entails respect and devotion to all forms of the Mother, including women, cows, Earth etc. There is no slavery, no sexual abuse, no cruelty even to animals, so naturally vegetarianism is promoted, together with all the other manifestations of *sattva* or goodness.

The beauty of genuine Vedic Hinduism is also in the open-mindedness and graduality of approaches. Anyone can participate easily without too much strain, as there are so many different

levels to personalize one's dedication in a genuine way, and so many aspects of God to choose as one's *ista devata*. There is no sectarianism in any genuine shastra or acharya, but genuine shastra and acharya train us to absorb all the various perspectives (*darshanas*) as complementary views of the same Absolute Truth, so there is place for everyone, from the most clueless neophyte to the highest siddhas. As the most ancient and deepest living culture of the world, genuine Hinduism still retains the widest *corpus* of original scriptures and an amazing variety of approaches and methods, including extremely direct paths to spiritual realisation and invaluable information about God and spiritual existence, as well as on life in this world, death and reincarnation. Hinduism is built on social cooperation, respect for life, ethics and conscience, beauty and happiness. It is scientific, mystic, emotionally and intellectually fulfilling, and has the greatest respect for freedom and for the natural goodness of human beings.

## Fundamental teachings of Hinduism

Vedic knowledge, known as Hinduism, is the most complete body of knowledge existing on the planet, and includes the complementary teachings of thousands of great realized divine souls, and the direct words of God himself as s/he manifested several times in the course of innumerable thousands of years. There is no "fixed limited knowledge", as Vedic knowledge always expands, like reality. To make an example, the *Bhagavata Purana* originally consists of 4 verses only; the explanations and commentaries of great Rishis have expanded it in the course of time and when Vyasadeva put it in writing about 5000 years ago, it had reached the number of 18,000 verses. Yet, Vedic scriptures are packed with important meaning and information: *Bhagavad gita* alone, although smaller than the Gospels, contains a much more detailed, powerful and complete body of knowledge about God and religion than all the Gospels and the Bible together.

All the elaborations compiled by Rishis ("those who see", meaning those who have a direct and clear understanding and vision of the entire greater picture) are perfectly consistent with each other, and with the original basic principles of dharma and vidya. Therefore it is quite easy for a realised and expert soul to recognise a genuine text as opposed to an imaginative speculation proposed by an ignorant or confused person. Compared to the scanty material of little spiritual or scientific value contained in abrahamic scriptures, Vedic scriptures are an ocean in front of a puddle. This enormous expanse of texts, comprising millions of verses and hundreds of books, also contains scientific references that enable us to confirm the astonishing value of such teachings not only on the spiritual platform and the subtle platform (i.e. soul and mind), but even on the physical platform.

However, Vedic tradition does not have any unquestionable dogma. Its teachings are based on the natural human ethic values we call conscience, and are supposed to be verified personally independently and scientifically by each researcher through direct experience. The Vedic system has never been organized in a church taking material power over its followers or politically motivated to control people in general and enforce one specific understanding of spirituality or religious belief.

Vedic tradition has always been extremely open and tolerant of all different approaches to God, and although the philosophical debate among schools has been lively throughout the millennia, there has never been physical violence, destruction etc prompted by religious reasons.

The fundamental principles of Vedic dharma are expounded as follows:

1. truthfulness, including honesty and straightforwardness (*satya, akapatya, asteya*, etc,)
2. compassion and non violence (*daya, ahimsa, maitri*, etc)
3. cleanliness and purity both external and internal (*saucha, saralata*, etc)
4. self-discipline, including austerity, simplicity, humility etc (*tapas, vairagya, aparigraha, santosa*, etc)
5. theoretical and practical knowledge of spiritual nature (*brahmacharya, svadhyaya, isvara pranidhana, bhakti*, etc)
6. selfless service and faith in a higher purpose of life (*yoga, seva, sadhana, prapatti, puja, dhyana*, etc)

Some people ask whether Hinduism a really a religion, because they surmise that abrahamic faiths are the standard definition of religion, and Hinduism does not seem to fit the model.

Hinduism is more than a religion. But it is also more than a way of life, and more than an ethnic tradition. Because Hinduism is legally recognized as a legitimate religion, Hindus can claim they have the legal right to practice Hinduism by conducting their rituals and festivals both in private and in public, operating their temples and holy places, and teaching and studying their scriptures and history without obstruction or restrictions.

According to the common dictionaries, "religion" is "the service and worship of God or the supernatural, commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance" or even "a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs and practices", where "religious" means, "relating to or manifesting faithful devotion to an acknowledged ultimate reality or deity", who is "the supreme or ultimate reality, the Being perfect in power, wisdom and goodness whom men worship as creator and ruler of the universe". However, this definition is strongly biased and relatively uninformed, because Buddhism, for example, is officially recognised as a religion and still does not worship a personal God or a supernatural existence, and in some sects it even denies the existence of an eternal spirit soul. On the other hand, other ideologies that are not officially considered religions present the same characteristics of fanatical and dogmatic religiousness, for example worshipping the State or Science and their ecclesiastical representatives.

Hinduism recognizes and honors the existence of God as the source and sum total of all Consciousness (Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan), that supports all life and all existence. Therefore all conscious life is directly part of God. Mainstream academics have strived to label Hinduism into one of its invented categories such as polytheism, enotheism, animism, etc, but in vain, because the original genuine Hinduism, also known as Vedic culture, incorporates and reconciles aspects of all approaches, including monotheism.

This perspective shows that all human beings are divine in their original spiritual nature, and that the purpose of religion is to revive such divine consciousness and identity; in this regard although all beings are spirit souls, the human form of life (*manushya jati*) specifically enables the eternal soul to achieve the full realisation of its true spiritual nature. Hinduism teaches that God is not only transcendental, but also immanent in creation, and is the soul of the Universal Body (in Sanskrit

*virata rupa*, described in the famous *Purusha sukta*), that human beings are called to consciously serve and worship, especially through the performance of one's duty (dharma) in the system of varnas and ashramas, by which we transform all categories of work into worship. The word *dharma* comes from the root *dhri*, meaning "to support", and it refers to the intrinsic, characteristic and positive quality of being that supports existence; by correctly engaging in dharma as per instructions of the scriptures and the gurus, every individual directly participates to the divine "job" of supporting the universal community.

Hinduism has a very broad and deep definition of God, that can be realized at different progressive levels, where each level is complementary, and not opposite, to the other levels. In each society there will be individuals who have different degrees of personal evolution, different degrees of intelligence and depth in understanding, and Hinduism has a perfect effective approach for people on all such levels. The various forms of the Godhead worshiped by Hindus constitute different aspects of the Supreme Godhead, that is one only, and therefore they are not in competition or against each other. One can choose to worship only one of these forms or all of them, but as a rule a Hindu will never disrespect any form of God. To make an example, we can compare the different forms of God to the different clothes a same person can wear at different times of the day and to relate with different people. The same person can wear the robes of a judge of the high court, the uniform of a sports team, an elegant outfit for marriage, a simple *gamcha* or towel to go to the bathroom, a heavy coat in winter, and even some theatre costume if he happens to play a role in a show, and so on. Also, he will be addressed in different ways by different people - by his mother and father, by his wife, by his children, by his students, and by superficial acquaintances. Yet, he remains always the same person.

Some people argue that karma and reincarnation are cruel concepts. In fact, it is just the opposite: by denying the concepts of karma and reincarnation, one is left with two very cruel explanations only: a) God whimsically makes good and innocent people (such as children) suffer and bad people arrogantly prosper, and b) everything happens by blind chance and there is no purpose or meaning in life, or explanation for suffering or actual connection between cause and effect.

The law of karma is a very scientific natural law that can also be called "the law of cause and effect"; like all the natural laws (such as the law of gravity), the law of karma is neutral: we can either learn how to properly work with natural laws, or hurt ourselves foolishly trying to work against them. Modern physicists acknowledge the universal validity of this law on inert matter, and they should have no difficulty in recognizing it when it works on their personal lives: after all, they can understand that "we reap what we sow". All actions create a reaction or a consequence, therefore good things can be attained by good actions, while evil actions bring about bad reactions: one who understands the law of karma will be extremely careful not to commit bad actions or cause sufferings to anyone, because everything we do will eventually come back at us, and sooner or later we will have to deal with the results of our actions, so we stop doing stupid bad things and start doing intelligent good things. In this way, each human being is responsible for his or her own actions and destiny, and this means that at all times we all have the power to change our lives for the better, to become whatever we want to be. We are not helpless miserable sinners who need some "savior" to shepherd us here and there and tell us what to think and to believe.

Still, each individual is given practically unlimited time to learn the lessons of Life and become a perfect person. The concept of reincarnation is a natural corollary of the law of karma and the

science of the soul (that is eternal and transcendental to the bodies); each new birth constitutes a new opportunity to learn, improve and evolve personally, until one attains the ultimate perfection. The concept of karma and reincarnation was common knowledge in all ancient cultures, until it was banned and actively persecuted by the Christian churches, with the purpose of terrorizing simple-minded people into submission. I am preparing another book that deals specifically about reincarnation and karma, but here I want to clear a few popular misconceptions:

### **1. Reincarnation does not mean that you become a different person in your next life.**

Our present complete personality, that we normally identify with, is actually a composite result of all the diverse material identifications we have temporarily assumed not only in the course of many lifetimes, but even in the course of this lifetime. In this lifetime itself we can change our beliefs (religious, political, social, cultural, etc), habits, behaviors, place and even region of residence, type of attire, professional position, marital position, habitual language, nationality, name and bodily appearance even to a considerable extent, and forget our previous identifications and attachments and activities, yet we still remain the same person. Similarly, each new birth comes with a package of circumstances, identifications and opportunities, but we carry over all our past experiences and realisations, usually in a subconscious form but often by displaying very strong tendencies. It is also possible to better revive and utilise such past memories to our advantage, through a process of integration of the conscious level of the mind with the subconscious and super-conscious levels, that I discuss in other publications.

### **2. Reincarnation does not mean that a different person takes over your body.**

Ignorant and misinformed films and stories sometimes show that a normal person becomes possessed by the spirit of a dead person, but that is not reincarnation. Actually reincarnation, as explained in Vedic texts, is the natural evolution of the same person through a series of bodies, just like we can see from childhood to old age. Possession by some other entity is actually possible, and generally is a sort of hostile takeover by a ghost, that is a soul who is still confused by previous attachments and identifications and is unable to move on, to progress into a new life of its own for its evolution. Generally only weak-minded persons can fall victim to hostile possession, but in any case it is always possible to get rid of the invader as it is a temporary condition.

### **3. Reincarnation is not a punishment.**

Most people believe that life is a blessing and not a punishment, and are not anxious to leave their bodies and die; birth is considered a happy event, so it is not logical for someone to think that a new birth is not a happy event as well. Taking a new birth is just like beginning a new course of study in the great School of Life: only foolish ignorant students will think that attending school or sitting for exams is a punishment; of course there is work and effort involved, but if we act in the proper manner, we can get the maximum benefit and even actually enjoy the process.

### **4. Reincarnation is not the purpose of life.**

Just like going to school is not an end by itself, reincarnation is simply a new opportunity to pursue the real purpose of life, that is, the attainment of the highest level of Consciousness. Human beings may occasionally fall to a lower level of life, but only because they developed a level of consciousness and desires that are best expressed and satisfied in a body at that lower level; for example rats, hogs, rabbits, cats and dogs have plenty of opportunities for unrestricted sex,

bickering and aggressiveness, eating things that are disgusting for a normal human being, or other basic sub-human behaviors. There is no moral condemnation in animal life: only, it does not afford much scope for spiritual or religious cultivation. In Vedic society nobody mistreats animals, just as nobody mistreats handicapped people, elderly people, women, children etc.

### **5. There is no need to remember all details from all our previous lifetimes.**

Some memories can be recovered and integrated to better understand our karmic journey in this lifetime, but not everything is equally important. For example, we know that fire burns and we are careful not to put our hand into it: this knowledge comes from a direct experience that happened some time in the past, but we do not need to remember exactly when and where and all the other details. It is just enough to remember how to handle fire without getting burned. This is an important principle also in the process to recover past lifetimes memories and integrate them into the conscious mind: usually after becoming aware of the import and meaning of a blocked painful past memory, it is very easy to let it go and forget it forever - we can compare the process to the office work consisting in processing "old pending cases" until we can finally archive them away as "resolved cases". This process has often been successfully used at medical level to heal patients from various physical, mental and emotional problems.

### **6. Birth circumstances are just a starting point.**

Often astrologers become confused when examining the horoscope (birth chart) of a person of advanced age, especially if the person examined has had a very active life, full of experiences, and has worked considerably to modify his/ her tendencies or interests. Karma is not some inescapable destiny that is already completely established at the time of our birth and simply unfolds during our entire lifetime: at any time we can change our karma and our destiny by making difficult choices, or choices that are not "comfortable" to our previous or birth nature, and if the difficulty is extreme, we can proceed by degrees with determination and patience and eventually achieve the desired results. Specifically, the Vedic system is a very progressive work-frame, where everyone is encouraged and supported in a personal evolution that includes both the material and the spiritual levels. We should never try to stop the development of other people or mistreat anyone based on birth prejudice, because each individual should be evaluated by his/ her choices, and the duty of the more evolved people is to constantly work to elevate others and help them progress and evolve. We cannot use the idea of other people's karma as a pretext to avoid doing our duty, or to justify our cruel, callous or neglectful behavior: when we behave negatively towards suffering people, teasing them by saying that "they are getting what they deserve", we are creating very bad karma for ourselves.

### **7. We do not need to wait for our next birth to improve our position in this life.**

This life is just as good as the next life, and procrastination is not a good idea. Even if we were born poor, illiterate, or disadvantaged in any other way, we still have the right and the duty to make intelligent and ethically-based efforts to acquire wealth, knowledge and any other legitimate benefit in this life, and make significant progress. If we wait for a better opportunity in a next lifetime, without *building* such opportunity now, in this very lifetime, we will be sorely disappointed. Also, artificially abstaining from healthy and ethically-based pleasures in this life with the idea of getting more pleasures or benefits in the next life is unnecessary suffering, and a waste of time.

## **8. Reincarnation is not an exceptional situation.**

Some believe that only "special people" are reincarnated souls, and they try to find some physical signs to indicate if you are one of such special people or not. The fact is that *everyone is reincarnated*, due to the normal evolution of the soul, that normally takes several lifetimes, just like any educational system has a number of progressive classes, courses, and degrees, from nursery school to specialised university doctorates. Of course, there are different levels of evolution and you may find that some people are on a more "primitive" level: these are called "young souls", and their state of consciousness is so elementary that it can be compared to the consciousness of animals (no condemnation or negative judgment here). The "signs" sometimes mentioned in connection to reincarnation are actually signs of a strong previous identification, or a memory that is trying to surface from the unconscious level because it can be of help in your current life: this could be a positive memory or a negative memory. A negative memory is usually expressed as phobias or obsessions, often connected to the manner of a previous death, by fire, drowning, falling from a height etc. "Old souls" are simply souls who have reincarnated many times, and often have started to become detached from temporary identifications and attachments, so they have a wider perspective on life, and may even display special talents or knowledge or inclination that have no other explanation.

### **Another popular misconception is that Hinduism is misogynistic in nature.**

Disrespect for women is one of the main issues that can be solved only by restoring Hinduism to its original orthodox Vedic tradition, dropping the degradation caused by distorted and deviant popular beliefs and accumulated bad habits and non-compatible adharmic influences (mostly of abrahamic origin). Unfortunately, because of hostile invasions and dominations, Indian society has been forced to assimilate negative concepts, and many people have come to believe that the ancient Hindu culture was based on bodily identification and prejudice; this problem applies both to the mistreatment of women (mysogyny) and to the general mistreatment of people based on their birth (casteism, racism etc). There are many misconceptions and misunderstanding in this regard, that can be clarified through a careful and honest study of all the Hindu scriptures and Hindu history.

Hinduism is the only surviving spiritual science or theology that recognizes the feminine aspect and qualities of God as the Mother Goddess. This is the reason why Hindus worship, respect and honor Mother Nature, Mother Earth, Mother Cow, and all women as Mothers. Even one's wife is considered a manifestation of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity. Vedic scriptures clearly teach that any place where women are mistreated or unhappy remains inauspicious and no religious worship will be successful there. In Vedic times, girl children and women were highly respected and had many opportunities for social interactions, religious life and a variety of professional careers, working together with a compatible husband but also independently. There have been many rishikas (female Rishis) who composed Vedic hymns and other famous scriptures, as well as female gurus who accepted many disciples, both boys and girls (men and women). There have been many heroic queens who ruled on their own right (and not merely as wives of kings), fought and conquered on the battlefields, as well as many intelligent business women who successfully managed great properties and enterprises, both for their own family and for others as administrators and legal representatives. There have been many yoginis and sannyasinis in the course of history, and still today many can be found, in several groups and traditions. Most disciplic lineages accept women in their succession, even when the rules of the order require celibacy.

Child marriages, forced marriages, mistreatment of widows, dowry killings, widow burning, rape, physical and emotional abuse of women, segregation of women, purdah, girl child killings, and many other similar social evils are nowhere sanctioned in any Vedic scripture or exemplified in puranic stories as acceptable human behaviors. At some point in history due to the aggressive invasions by adharmic cultures, women have needed extra protection that could be effected only by hiding them inside the home and under non-revealing clothing, and even by arranging early marriages, but such trends would have remained clearly circumstantial and reversible if Hindu society had retained a sufficient number of qualified functioning leaders. But qualified functioning leaders can still develop today, especially by acquiring sufficient knowledge and understanding of the original Vedic culture and honestly follow it, so that long-needed work can finally be completed.

### **Here is a comparison between Christianity and Hinduism:**

- \* Original sin versus the original divinity of all individuals.
- \* Identification of the individual with the body versus identification with the soul.
- \* Material concept of God versus multi-dimensional transcendental concept of God.
- \* God as a patriarchalist chauvinist male versus God as both male and female.
- \* Intolerance versus tolerance, monolaty versus pluralistic and personalised approach.
- \* Simplistic descriptions addressed to illiterate non-intellectuals, versus a vast corpus of deep and complex philosophical and theological presentations, often with several levels of complementary meanings.
- \* Blind obedience and worship to a God that cannot be named or described or seen, versus intimate descriptions and conversations and loving relationships with God as a person.
- \* Jesus as the only son of God versus the Hindu idea that we are all are children of God.
- \* Salvation by proxy through the blood of Jesus versus the evolution of consciousness and spiritual growth at individual level.
- \* Sin and redemption versus karma, rebirth and finally moksha as the goal of life.
- \* The Christian idea of the necessity of the institutional priests' exclusive power of intervention for the salvation versus the Hindu idea of direct individual communion with God, without any need of churches or religious organisations.
- \* The idea of "sin" as "disobeying/ opposing the church" versus the deliberate choice to cause damage and suffering.

### **Does Hinduism have prescriptions such as rituals and prohibitions such as dietary laws etc?**

Not really. A law is something that government or society is supposed to enforce, meaning that a person will be lawfully punished if s/he disregards it. The Vedic system is based on totally different parameters, namely dharma and vidya, meaning ethical conscience and scientific knowledge. Vedic knowledge explains that each action (choice) has a very specific effect and details such dynamics scientifically, confirming that what naturally feels bad (such as unnecessarily harming others) will indeed bring bad results to the person who has committed the bad action. The fundamental law is, "do what you will but harm none".

The kshatriya has the duty to help good harmless prajas to defend themselves from aggressions and damage, but has no business interfering in the personal choices of people. The cow is protected because she is considered a mother for all human beings, and similarly domestic animals such as

dogs, horses and elephants etc are protected as friends of humans. In general, an animal is killed only when it causes considerable damage to humans or society. Krishna himself killed asuras who had taken the form of normally pacific and friendly animals but had started to harm people.

A brahmana will only advise people about the karmic results (in this life and in the next) of specific adharmic actions. Although auspicious religious and spiritual activities can bring a benefit even when performed unknowingly (*ajnata sukriti*), any religious activity that is enforced on unwilling persons will bring adverse effects rather than positive effects. So the original genuine Vedic Hinduism does not enforce any religious or spiritual belief or practice, because it wants to support the authentic spontaneous personal evolution, by which each individual becomes responsible for him/ her self.

People who have been deemed qualified per guna and karma to work in the 3 upper varnas (*dvi-ja*, twice born) are expected to perform the *pancha maha yajnas*, but only with consideration of the circumstances and in a sustainable manner. Sudras are exempted, although not prohibited, from performing such yajnas, and brahmanas are supposed to guide and assist all members of society, but only in advisory capacity, and can never enforce or ask kshatriyas to enforce any religious or spiritual activity.

To make an example: fasting is considered a beneficial practice in all religions, and even in natural medicine. Unlike other religious systems, however, each individual, family or group is allowed to freely choose the modalities of their own fasting - from the day (ekadasi, or Monday, full moon, new moon, eclipses, special festivals etc) to the strictness of abstentions and the accompanying rituals, such as bathing, meditation, etc. The level of strictness is chosen individually from total abstinence even from water (*nirjala*) to consuming a wide variety of nutritious and delicious foods and drinks: you can easily find "fasting recipes" on many Indian cookery websites. In Puri, on fasting days such as ekadasi, traditional Hindus normally consume Jagannatha mahaprasada, that comes in 56 varieties including the regular staples such as rice, dal, sabji and sweets.

### **Can Hindus consume alcohol?**

The consumption of alcohol, like other medicinal substances, needs to be regulated responsibly by each individual, ideally under the competent advice of the teacher (guru, brahmana). While small quantities (1 or 2 tablespoons) of low grade (8%) alcoholic preparations are recommended by Ayurvedic medicine especially to help digestion and general health, recreational consumption of alcohol especially of high grade (liquors) is condemned for its disastrous effects on both physical and mental health, as well as on social and family relationships.

The same applies to smoking, whether tobacco or other substances, that should be classified as medicinal. Since tobacco and smoking were introduced in relatively recent times, Vedic scriptures do not mention them, but it is clear that any addiction can damage the physical and mental health, social and family relationships, and as a consequence also spiritual progress is hampered. This is why yoga and brahmacharya offer a very detailed and precise system of guideline rules regarding diet and lifestyle habits. One cannot expect good resulting in any type of yoga while remaining attached to bad habits and especially to the consumption of non-vegetarian foods and intoxicating substances. .

## A definition of Hinduism

According to the standard English dictionary, Hinduism is "the dominant religion of India, emphasizing dharma with its resulting ritual and social observances and often mystical contemplation and ascetic practices". In the same dictionary, the meaning of the word Hindu is defined as, "an adherent of Hinduism", and also "a native or inhabitant of India". Therefore Hinduism is the corpus of beliefs and practices based on the original native Indian culture. Although Hinduism is not restricted to the Indian territory, all Hindus honor Mother Bharata as their holy land, and this also applies to Hindu converts of non-Indian origin.

Some have derived the name "India" through the Greek *indoi*, from the word *hindu*, a mispronunciation of the name of the river Sindu, indicating the lands around and beyond that river, from the perspective of someone arriving from a western direction. However, it is a historical fact that Hinduism originally spread to cover not only the entire Indian subcontinent but many other regions, as far as Singapore (Simhapuri), Iran and Ethiopia. One of the largest and most ancient (still existing) Hindu temples, Angkor Vat, is in Cambodia and was dedicated to Vishnu. However, Hinduism was never imposed by force on any population. This cultural conquest was carried in a non-violent manner, through extensive commerce as well as teaching and worship centers opened to interested people from all backgrounds and all ethnic groups. Even under the government of devout Hindu rulers, the people always remained free to teach and practice whatever religion they wanted, build their religious places and learning centers etc, as the genuine Hindu government never interfered in matters of belief and religious practices (provided such practices were not based on violent aggression against harmless innocent beings).

The word "Hinduism" is very well known and accepted as a legal definition that applies to the international legislation for human rights, including freedom of religion. The general legal consensus at international level is that a Hindu is any person who has faith in the Hindu religion established in Hindu scriptures. As the right to freedom of religion is based on faith, by logic and definition, any person who declares s/he believes in Hinduism should be considered a Hindu to all effects.

Hinduism is also known as Sanatana Dharma ("the eternal principles of dharma"), Brahmanism ("the religion of Brahman"), Vedic culture ("the culture of Knowledge"), Yoga ("union" or "connection" to the universe), Bhakti ("devotion") and Tantra ("power"). These definitions carry different perspectives and aspects of Hinduism. Although ideally and originally orthodox Hinduism is based on the system of varnas and ashramas (not to be confused with the degraded caste system), characteristically Hinduism embraces and includes all compatible (dharmic) ideologies, cultures, faiths and practices, as it teaches that God manifests in innumerable ways. In the course of time, Hinduism has produced various offshoots, such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism etc, that have gradually acquired a separate identity, distancing themselves from the original Vedic teachings. Such religions are called the nastika darshanas of sanatana dharma, and should not be confused with Hinduism although they are fundamentally compatible with it.

In 1966 the Indian Supreme Court formalized a judicial definition of Hindu beliefs to legally distinguish Hindu denominations from other religions. This seven-point list was affirmed by the Indian Court in 1995 in judging cases regarding religious identity:

1. Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence as the highest authority in religious and philosophical matters.
2. Spirit of tolerance and willingness to understand and appreciate the opponent's point of view based on the realization that truth is many sided.
3. Acceptance of the great world rhythm, by which vast periods of creation, maintenance and dissolution follow each other in endless succession.
4. Acceptance of the belief in rebirth and pre-existence.
5. Recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are many.
6. Realization of the truth that numbers of forms of God to be worshiped may be large.
7. Unlike other religions, or religious creeds, Hindu religion is not being tied down to any definite set of philosophic concepts, as such.

The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 stipulates in Section 2 that the Act applies:

- (a) to any person who is a Hindu by religion in any of its forms and developments, including a Virashaiva, a Lingayat or a follower of the Brahmo, Prarthana or Arya Samaj,
- (b) to any person who is a Buddhist, Jain or Sikh by religion, and
- (c) to any other person domiciled in the territories to which this Act extends who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew by religion.

Madan Mohan Malwiya gave this definition of Hindu when he formed the Banaras Hindu University (BHU): "One who believes in Vedas to be God's orders and follows them".

According to LG Tilak, Hinduism is defined as *prâmânya buddhir vedeshu sâdhanânâm anekatâ, upâsyânâm aniyama etad dharmasya lakshanam*, "Acceptance of the authority of the Vedas, a pluralistic system for religious practice, no strict rules for worship".

Gandhi called himself a Hindu giving the following rationale: "I call myself a Sanatani Hindu, because I believe in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas and all that which goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in avatars and rebirth; I believe in the Varnashrama Dharma in a sense, in my opinion strictly Vedic, but not in its present popular and crude sense; I believe in the protection of cow in its much larger sense than the popular, and I do not disbelieve in idol worship."

The Vishva Hindu Parishad gave this official definition from its *Memorandum of Association, Rules and Regulation* (1966): "Hindu means a person believing in, following or respecting the eternal values of life, ethical and spiritual, which have sprung up in Bharatkhand and includes any person calling himself a Hindu."

Dr R Gopalakrishnan, Director of the Radhakrishnan Institute for Advanced Studies in Philosophy, University of Madras, stated, "As an Indian and as a Hindu, I find there is no truth in the statement that those who are born in India alone are eligible to become Hindus."

Goswami Indira Betji (the 16th descendant of Vallabhacharya) stated: "Hindus are not only Indians. Anyone who believes in the culture of the Rishis and the message of the Vedas is a Hindu. The real meaning of Hindu is one who is trying to go forward towards Godhead. Any spiritual seeker who is trying to become enlightened by means of spiritual action and who tries to lead a pure life according to the Vedic injunctions is to be known as a Hindu. Hindu dharma is not the property of one particular nation. It is meant for the upliftment of the whole world."

## The problem of castes

The legal and official definitions of Hinduism are generally accepted and quoted by various Hindu teachers and activists. However, by reading the history of the Hindu Resurgence movement and the various elaborations of its representatives, and comparing them with the general public opinion and academic versions, we inevitably stumble upon a number of "blind spots" that are still creating a good deal of confusion - not only in regard to the Hindu converts of foreign origin, but also in regard to those Indians of lower castes and tribes that actually qualify as Hindus as per the legal definitions as well as per the scriptural definitions.

The problem is essentially based on racial or ethnic identifications, although these criteria have been disqualified by many pronouncements of the Hindu scriptures and by many Hindu religious authorities. It is true that along the centuries of Indian history particularly unfavorable circumstances created increasing concerns for social purity in regard to groups of people who chose not to follow the traditional requirements for hygiene and cleanliness, excluding them from public facilities such as water wells and temples, but originally the system was flexible and any individual or group could be admitted or re-admitted into the general Arya Hindu society through the prescribed rituals. Unfortunately in some areas the system became corrupted, especially because of the clan mentality introduced by immigrating groups from western regions such as Huns, Sakas etc, who converted to Hinduism and took power in the sub-continent from the 9th century CE onwards.

Various attempts have been made by many preachers of the Bhakti movement, for example by the Nayanars and Alvars, Basavanna the inaugurator of the Lingayat or Virasaiva movement, Krishna Chaitanya, Ramananda, Jnanesvara, Ravidas, Sankardev, Tukaram, Ekanath and Namadeva from Maharashtra, Narsinh Mehta from Gujarat, and Kanaka Dasa from Udupi, as we will see in the next pages. Many references from the orthodox tradition, too, have been quoted from scriptures and history, such as the examples of Satyakama Jabala, the Rishis Parasara, Aitareya, Ailusha, Vatsa, Kanva, Kakshivar, Kapinjalada and Madanapala, and even Valmiki and Veda Vyasa: all these were born in "lower social positions" (castes did not exist then) but were recognised as great *brahmanas* due to their individual qualifications and realisations.

The basic concept of caste identification is the blood line, ethnic tribe or clan, by which only a certain group of blood clans can be considered "truly Hindus": these are the so-called "higher castes", or according to the current legislative definition, "general category". The privileges of these "higher castes" are not based on the present legislation but on social and cultural habits developed

along time (*laukika sraddha*); actually after Independence the government tried to alleviate the problem by introducing "positive discrimination" policies such as Reservation Bills, that according to several observers have actually aggravated the situation and created further divisions and hostilities among castes and groups. The interventions by which the government officially outlawed the practice of untouchability have also been largely ineffectual. Interestingly, the communities of Hindu expatriates in various parts of the world have generally dropped the caste divisions and have prospered considerably. However, birth prejudice has been a major cause for division, injustice and unnecessary sufferings for many people along Indian history, and is still very hard to eliminate.

Many people, confusing caste with *varna* and *gotra*, believe that caste is a fundamental concept in original Hinduism: this is the main argument often used by groups who are hostile to Hinduism and want to convince Hindus to convert to other religions. However, the present system of castes has quite a different origin. The first definition of the concept of caste was given by Aurangzeb (1618-1707) in his *Fatwa-i-alamgiri* according to the Islamic Hanafi law system that became the basis for the legal system in India, and was again presented by Muslim League leader Ameer Ali in 1909 for the purpose of dividing and weakening a rising Hindu cooperation front. In 1910 a circular passed by the British government officer EA Gait established that the definition of Hindu should not be based on personal religious beliefs and a direct declaration of identification by the individuals, but on whether they were considered untouchables and therefore denied entry into public temples. Furthermore, the distinction was introduced in the general Census as strictly hereditary or ethnic (racial) and fundamental for the administration system under the British regime; according to Census Commissioner HH Risley, "caste is the cement that holds together the myriad units of Indian society". Historians such as Bernard Cohn (1928-2003) and Nicholas Dirks (*Castes of Mind*, 2001), Ranajit Guha (*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, 1983) and Ram B Bhagat (*Census and Caste Enumeration*, 2006) argued that the British effectively created the caste system as it exists today through their census system and legislation.

The "grey area" of the definition of Hinduism especially affects the members of the lower castes/tribes and even more macroscopically the "untouchables", sometimes called *avarnas* ("without *varna*") but generally known today as Dalits, especially by the Dalits themselves and to the point of proposing a future independent "Dalitstan", possibly based on communist-oriented ideologies but certainly anti-Hindu. The term *dalit*, literally meaning "downtrodden, broken, oppressed", was first used by the Arya Samaj in their campaign for *dalitoddhara*, "upliftment of the downtrodden", and often replaced the definitions of Harijan ("the people of God") and Girijan ("the people of the hills") used by Gandhi to refer to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes - meaning those listed in the lowest categories of the census introduced by the British as "untouchables". The same problem has tied together the category of "scheduled castes" with the category of "scheduled tribes", uniting them in the eyes of the government.

It is not possible to deny that many continue to consider these categories of people as "non-Hindus", irrespective of the current legal descriptions and the pronouncements of the shastra, and for this reason, hostilities continue to flare up from both sides, to the detriment of everyone. A recent dramatic demonstration of the problem can be analysed in the clashes in Orissa in 2008, that have been described as "religious violence" or even "persecution of Christians", while in fact they centered around the murder of Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati and several other members of his ashrama at Chakapada in Kandhamal district of Orissa (now also called Odisha). Swami Lakshmanananda (1926-2008) was born in a brahmin family in Gurujanga village in Talcher; one

year after the birth of his son he left his family to take sannyasa in Rishikesh, then in 1968 he became associated with the Vanavasi Kalyan organisation and continued to work for the welfare of tribal people in the region since 1970, which incensed the Christian missionary group World Vision (led by Radhakant Nayak) as well as the Naxalite activists (led by Sabyasachi Panda). The Swami was attacked 8 times from 1970 to 2007, and then finally killed on 23 August 2008 (Janmashtami), together with several other devotees, in a night assault against his peaceful Kanyashrama (school for girls) at Tumudibandha, about 100 km from Phulbani, by a group of about 40 men armed with AK47s and revolvers. The assailants tied and gagged 2 of the 4 government-provided security guards, while the other 2 had "gone home to eat". The Maoist leader Sabyasachi Panda told the private Oriya channels in an interview at an undisclosed location that the Maoists had decided to eliminate Lakshmanananda as he was "spreading social unrest".

A similar story is about Guru Santi Kali or Santi Tripura, a popular Hindu teacher who was shot to death in 2000 inside his ashrama near Jirania, Khumlung, Sadar subdivision, Tripura, by 10 members of the Christian terrorist organization National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) as a punishment for his selfless work in uplifting the tribal people of the region, especially with charitable health services and primary schools. His ashrama, established in 1979, had grown to include 18 branches in Tripura and is known as Shanti Kali Mission. In the same month another Hindu leader of the Jamatya community, Jaulushmoni Jamatya, was also murdered, and less than 3 months later the NLFT raided another Shanti Kali ashrama at Chachu Bazar near the Sidhai police station; the attacks continued until 11 of the ashramas and schools around the State were abandoned.

A major effort to support tribal Hindus has been effected by the Bharat Sevashram Sangha, founded in 1917 by Swami Pranavananda, and having hundreds of ashramas and centers also in United Kingdom, United States, Guyana, Canada, Fiji and Bangladesh. However, it is a fact that Dalits and tribals have been, and still are often denied access to public temples and to the study of Vedic knowledge or even Sanskrit language. Simply browsing through newspaper articles we can find examples all over India even of very recent incidents - which are just the tip of the iceberg because the vast majority of Dalits and tribals who are actually devoted to Hindu beliefs and Hindu Deities generally prefer to remain quiet and worship at home without making news on the media or in their neighborhood.

Several Hindu groups and organisations, including the Arya Samaj (which is specifically entitled to give legal certification to Hindu converts) openly dismiss race and caste based on racial characteristics as completely irrelevant to the Hindu identity. This irrelevance is all the more evident to any non-biased observer because many people of "Hindu race" have officially converted to religions that are drastically opposed to Hinduism, such as Islam and Christianity; their racial features have certainly not changed but they have certainly changed their beliefs and practices in respect to the Vedas and other aspects of the Hindu religion - and most important of all, they clearly rejected the identification as Hindus. Racial prejudice is the reason why Christians and Muslims of Indian/ Hindu origin are still Hindus and are automatically expected to behave favorably and loyally towards Hinduism.

During the struggle for Indian Independence casteism was openly opposed by many reformers, such as Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), Thycaud Ayyayu Swamikal (1814-1909), Ayyan Kali (1863-1941), Narmadashankar Lalshankar Dave (1833-1886), Odhav Ram (1889-1957), Ramakrishna

Gopal Bhandarkar KCIE (1837-1925), Chattampi Swamikal (1853-1924) and his disciple Neelakanta Theerthapada Paramahansa, Narayana Guru (1854-1928), Narayan Ganesh Chandavarkar (1855-1923) and the Prarthana Samaj, Govindgiri (1858-1931) and his Sampa Sabha, as well as others such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Sraddhananda Swami (1856-1926) and the Shuddhi movement. There were campaigns to recognise members of the lower castes and tribes as Hindus with full rights through the prescribed initiation rituals. The Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, issued by king Chithira Thirumal Balarama Varma in the State of Travancore (now Kerala) was a major step that remained localised and is still resented by many casteist people, although not by all "high caste" people. In fact CP Ramaswami Aiyer is noted for using all his legal skills to overcome the difficulties posed by the local community before the proclamation; it would therefore be a serious mistake to present the problem as a fight between "low castes" and "high castes". Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982) the spiritual successor of MK Gandhi (1869-1948) was specifically sent to Kerala to support the campaign for gaining access to the temples for the Harijans/ Dalits. In Kumbhakonam Dr MK Sambasivan, another staunch activist for Indian independence, conducted a similar campaign. However, there seems to be still a lot of resistance, and anti-Hindu forces have been taking ample advantage of the situation.

S Rajesh, an RSS-affiliated low-caste candidate for a position of priesthood in the Shiva temple at Kongrapilly (Kerala), was rejected by the temple administration but the the Court pronounced in his favor. When the Ramakrishna Mission, in its attempt to avoid negative government discrimination as a Hindu organisation, used the argument of its professed rejection of caste as proof of non-Hinduness, the Supreme Court rejected the claim and pointed out that abolition of caste had been the explicit programme of outspoken Hindus like Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Even BR Ambedkar, who hated Hinduism and declared that the untouchables were a separate community, admitted that he was born a Hindu - albeit an untouchable Hindu - and that his community worshiped the same Gods and Goddesses, went to the same places of pilgrimage and held the same religious beliefs, and so he concluded that in order to dissociate himself from the Hindu identity he had to take formal conversion to Buddhism with an explicit repudiation of Hinduism - which he did in 1956.

## **The importance of Bhakti**

Another blurred point is the requisite defined as "acceptance of the Vedas", because most Indian Hindus have very little knowledge or understanding of the Vedas themselves and simply believe in the racial or geographical definitions mentioned above or they follow a variety of babas and gurus who never speak about the Vedas (except maybe in very vague terms). On the other hand, the racial and geographical definitions are also very weak, both because of the huge variety of racial-ethnic groups still visible within the Hindu population and because of the existence of hundreds of thousands of "Non Resident Indians" who have settled around the world during various historical periods, and who actually constitute the most prominent support and mobilisation force for the recent Hindu Resurgence movement. Furthermore, the geographical factor ignores the concept of Akhanda Bharata, meaning the original ancient extension of Indian civilisation over the entire sub-continent and beyond, including regions that are not considered "India" any more - such as

Pakistan, Afghanistan and adjacent areas, Bangladesh, Lanka, Nepal, Butan, Tibet, Myanmar, and even further in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore etc.

Still probably one of the weakest points in the legal definitions of Hinduism is due to the scarce official and legal recognition given to Bhakti, which is the most powerful aspect of the ancient Indian/ Hindu tradition, pushed out of the picture during the British regime because it appeared to be less compatible with the mainstream views of the European abrahamic-oriented academic systems and governments. This "modified" presentation of the Vedic tradition to the western world by Indian preachers started as a reaction to the denigratory comments given by a large number of the officers of the British colonial empire, Christian missionaries and European indologist scholars that visited the British colonies. To become more acceptable to the colonial regime, the "reform movement" of Hinduism (or "neo-Hinduism") represented by Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj, as well as the Advaita Vedanta school represented by the descendants of the Shankara lineage, needed to focus on an impersonal, abrahamic-compatible philosophical perspective, that officially detached itself from the general mass of Hindus and their devotional beliefs and practices, and not just from their *laukika sraddha* superstitions.

The first of these groups, the movement called Brahma samaj (1820) founded by Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), was strongly influenced by the teachings of the Christian Unitarian Church and by the syncretist concepts of Radical Universalist Christianity. Roy wrote a treatise entitled *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness*, and he learned Hebrew and Greek to study the Bible and translate it into Bengali, with the idea of "purifying" and "modernizing" Vedic tradition, by merging it with Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. This trend was soon followed by almost all his contemporary Hindu religious teachers, but today such strategy has become obsolete to the point of being counter-productive, endangering and weakening Hinduism instead of protecting and strengthening it.

The ideology of the Brahma samaj openly rejected the entire Bhakti movement, the worship to the sacred images (which they called "graven images" and "idols"), the validity of the sacred stories of *Puranas* and *Itihasas* (which they called "mythology"), the tradition of the temples and the holy places of pilgrimage (which they called "superstitions") and the multiplicity of the Personalities of Godhead (which they called "demigods") and the concept of *avatara*. It also rejected the original system of *varnas* or social categories, the offerings to the Pitris (ancestors), and whatever component of the Vedic tradition could appear as "pagan" or somehow unacceptable for the Victorian moralism of that period.

It only retained those aspects that it considered "respectable", such as the highly symbolic (and generally impenetrable and very little known) hymns of *Rig, Sama, Yajur* and *Atharva Veda* and the concept of Brahman as God or Universal Spirit. A similar ideology, albeit less openly submissive towards abrahamic religions and academic systems, was affirmed by the Arya Samaj (1875), still considered one of the most authoritative official representatives of traditional Hinduism, especially by the Indian government. Since the Arya Samaj is officially accepted as one of the major Institutions engaged in converting people into Hinduism, later on we will elaborate more on its positions and on its founder, Dayananda Sarasvati Swami.

On the other hand the so-called Mayavadi current of the so-called Advaitins merely gave Bhakti a very relative importance, claiming that all forms including divine forms are material and temporary and therefore subject to illusion - although it is not difficult to prove that this was not the original

teaching of Adi Shankara. Impersonalistic ideological positions were considered more favorably by the abrahamic-oriented regimes precisely because one of the fundamental precepts of abrahamism is the opposition to what they call "idolatry", while philosophical elucubrations on impersonal Divinity and ritual offerings to the fire were considered harmless politically and even conducive to a sort of ideological connection among Indo-European cultures through the medium of Zoroastrianism (*âtish-parast* rather than *but-parast*).

In fact such impersonal perspectives on Hinduism were, and still are, largely irrelevant to the masses of Hindus. Hardly anyone in the last few centuries has been observing the traditional *homa* or *soma* rituals in the prescribed manner, and hardly anyone is able to tell what is the contents of the Vedic hymns or has been interested in actually attaining the level of Brahman realisation, while it is not difficult to see that among Hindus there is still great interest in devotional sentiments (especially towards Rama, Krishna, Jagannatha, Shiva, Hanuman, etc), Deity worship and temple attendance, festivals (Ratha yatra, Kumbha Mela, Durga Puja, Kartika, Rama lila, etc), pilgrimages, bhajans and kirtans (even through commercial songs), readings of the *Puranas*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* (even through TV serials and films), praising *Bhagavad gita*, and so on. To the vast majority of Hindus, either by birth or by conversion, and to the public opinion in general at world level, these aspects are still the hallmarks of actual Hinduism.

Ironically, while India remained stuck in the old abrahamic-appeasement models and mentality even after Independence, the expeditions of the spiritual ambassadors of Hinduism abroad triggered some major cultural changes in western countries, the most notable being the precipitating loss of social and cultural power of the abrahamic ideologies. The trend was supported by the defeat of political colonialism, the enthusiasm for post-war reconstruction and the aspiration to a better life, the movement for human rights and values, a new generation (*baby boomers*) that could finally gain access to universal education, and a growing interest for multiculturalism: all these factors helped to transform the English-speaking society and rippled out into Europe and the rest of the world where English-speaking culture was being globalised.

From the 1960s onwards, millions of copies of Hindu scriptures (*Bhagavad gita*, *Puranas*, *Upanishads* etc) and presentations of Hinduism by prominent acharyas (Bhaktivedanta Swami, Paramahansa Yogananda, Ramana Maharshi, etc) were sold to the public. Western disciples flocked to approach any Indian who appeared to be likely to act as guru, worshiping such gurus with great enthusiasm, zeal and dedication, and embracing exactly those popular and vital aspects of Hinduism that had been rejected by "Hindu reformers" of colonial times. Easily the largest manifestation of such phenomenon was Iskcon, founded by Bhaktivedanta Swami in pursuance of the medieval Bhakti tradition of Krishna Chaitanya - who himself had been a great forerunner of the revival of Hinduism in the 1600s.

Although this new wave of the Hindu spirit still carried some abrahamic-oriented concerns in pursuance of the reformist movement, it also opened larger horizons on the more popular forms of Hinduism that had supported the Indian masses through the difficult times of foreign invasions and domination. Millions of westerners enthusiastically embraced the deep dedication to Bhakti towards the most prominent Personalities of Godhead, Deity and temple worship, bhajans, festivals, and especially the *Bhagavad gita*, that is now universally recognised as the most fundamental Hindu text (equated to the Bible for Christians), so much that in courts, Hindus are asked to swear on a copy when giving testimony.

In fact the beauty of *Bhagavad gita*, recognised as the fundamental text of Hinduism by everyone (apparently except the Arya Samaj), is about presenting the immensely powerful strength of Bhakti as the unifying carrier and platform for all the aspects of the tradition that we can call "Vedic" or "Hindu" - indeed the life and soul of Hinduism, and the safest and most enjoyable path towards perfection in the ritualistic duties and ultimate liberation or *moksha*. The Shankara lineage and most orthodox Hindu traditions consider *Bhagavad gita* as the first and foremost of the *prasthanas*, the "starting point" from which one should approach Vedic knowledge, the next two being the *Upanishads* and the *Vedanta sutra*. Adi Shankara personally praised Rama and Krishna as the "greatest *avatars*", greatly encouraged devotion to the Personality of Godhead and temple worship, and especially glorified *Bhagavad gita* as the most important scripture of all (see his *Gita Mahatmya*).

A short discourse in very clear and simple Sanskrit language, *Bhagavad gita* speaks of Hinduism as Yoga, that is the connection between the Atman and Brahman, as the ultimate purpose of all Vedic scriptures (or *Veda-anta*, mentioned in 13.5 and 15.15, and indicated in 2.46) and Yajnas (3.9-16, 4.23-33, 5.29, 7.30, 8.2-4, 8.28, 9.16, 9.24) and identifying Vishnu as Yajna, Brahman, Paramatma, Virata Purusha, Veda, Dharma, and Yoga. The central focus of *Bhagavad gita* is Bhakti, as clearly stated in verses 7.17, 7.21, 7.23, 8.10, 8.22, 9.14, 9.26, 9.29, 9.31, 9.33, 9.34, 11.54, 11.55, 12.2, 12.14, 12.16, 12.17, 12.19, 12.20, 13.11, 13.19, 14.26, 18.54, 18.55, 18.65, 18.67, 18.68.

Bhakti has indeed been the unifying and vivifying force of Hinduism especially in the last 700 years, empowering the great masses of people towards a deeply felt understanding of the *tantra* ("power") contained in the Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta traditions, and enabling true unity and cooperation among all social classes. It was Bhakti only that, overcoming casteism and gender discrimination, created the basis for true Hindu unity and preserved Hinduism even under the most difficult circumstances. Bhakti is simple for the simple-minded and complex for those who have a complex mind, and ultimately even transcends the mind, channeling the immensely powerful impetus of primal emotions towards the divine platform of Self Realisation, overcoming all obstacles and especially material identifications and attachments, that constitute the root of ignorance and illusion. And this is, as *Bhagavad gita* explains, the ultimate purpose of all Vedic knowledge.

Here are some famous scriptural quotes about the defining characteristics of Bhakti.

*Padma Purana* states:

*arce visnau sila dhir gurusu nara matir vaisnave jati buddhir, visnor va vaisnavanam kali mala mathane pada tirthhe 'mbu buddhib, sri visnor namni mantr sakala kalusa he sabda samanya buddhir, visnau sarvesvarese tad itara sama dhir yasya va naraki sah, "Only a person who has a hellish mentality can think that the Deity of Vishnu is a statue, that the Guru is an ordinary human being, that a Vaishnava can be judged based on his birth, that Vishnu and the Vaishnavas can be touched by the contamination of Kali yuga, that a sacred place of pilgrimage is just a water reservoir, that the mantras constituted by the names of Vishnu are just ordinary sounds, or that the Supreme Lord, Vishnu, is an ordinary person."*

*sudram va bhagavad bhaktam nisadam svapacam tatha, viksatam jati samanyat sa yati narakam dhruvam, "A devotee of Bhagavan may have taken birth in a family of sudras, nishadas (primitive tribes) or svapachas (dog eaters) but those who evaluate him on the basis of his birth are destined to fall into a hellish condition."*

*na sudra bhagavad bhaktas te tu bhagavata matah, sarva-varnesu te sudra ye na bhakta janardane,* "A devotee of God should never be considered a sudra, while those who are devoid of devotion must be considered sudras, irrespective of the *varna* of the family where they were born."

*sva pacham iva nekseta loke vipram avaisnavam, vaisnavo varno bahyo 'pi punati bhuvana trayam,* "If a person born as a brahmana is devoid of devotion to Vishnu, he should be avoided as a dog-eater. On the other hand, a devotee of Vishnu has the power to purify the three worlds, even if he was born outside the social system of the *varnas*."

*na me bhaktas caturvedi mad bhaktah svapachah priyah, tasmai deyam tato grahyam sa ca pujoya yatha hy aham,* "Even if he was born as a *sva pacha*, my devotee is dearer to me than one who is expert in reciting the four Vedas. His touch is purifying, and he is as worshipable as me."

*Bhagavata Purana* states:

*bhaktiyaham ekaya grahyah sraddhayatma priyah satam, bhaktih punati man-nistha sva-pakan api sambhavat,* "Only devotion enables one to attain me. The devotees who serve me with faith and transcendental attachment are completely purified through their devotion, even if they were born in uncivilized families (of dog-eaters)."

*kirata hunandhra pulinda pulkasa abhira sumbha yavanas khasadaya, ye 'nye ca papa yad apasrasrayah sudhyanti tasmai prabhavisnave namah,* "Kiratas, Hunas, Andhras, Pulindas, Pulkasas, Abhiras, Sumbhas, Yavanas, Khasas etc, even those who were born in still more degraded cultures, are immediately purified when they put themselves under the guidance and protection of those who have taken shelter in Vishnu. Therefore I offer my homage to the all-powerful Sri Vishnu."

*aho bata svapaco 'to gariyan yaj jihvagre vartate nama tubhyam, tepus tapas te juhuvuh sasnur aya brahmanucur nama grnanti ye te,* "It is wonderful to see how those who have accepted to invoke your holy name are immediately glorified as civilized persons (*aryas*) and are called brahmanas, even if there were born in uncivilized families. The very fact that they call your name qualifies them for the performance of sacrifices and austerities according to tradition."

*na vyabharati taveksa hy abhito bhagavato dharmah, sthira cara sattva kadambesu yam upasate tv ariyah,* "Aryas are those who do not hesitate to follow the Dharma established by God, and who have no prejudice towards the various types of living beings."

It is not possible to elaborate at length in this publication about the fundamental tenets of Hinduism, such as Dharma and Vidya, Bhakti, Yoga, Yajna, Sanatana Dharma, Arya dharma, Varna as opposed to caste, qualifications for the *varnas*, Karma and reincarnation, Devas, Upasana and Archana, Tantra, Sruti and Smriti, etc. I have been discussing these subjects in my other publications, so I must kindly invite the interested readers to download or obtain printed copies of my books, and as long as I am physically able to do so, I will certainly respond to all questions, objections, or other communications from readers who want to know more or discuss about these subjects.

## The need for a Guru

The definition of "guru" applies to all types of teachers, but it is traditionally used to refer mostly to religious or spiritual teachers, because in the original system there was no fracture between material and spiritual knowledge, and spiritually realised persons were considered the most suitable for the professional occupation of teacher for any subject; in the teaching work, understanding the student is much more important than merely understanding the subject to be taught, because different types of students will absorb the teachings in different ways and need different personalised approaches. The Sanskrit word *guru* literally means "heavy" but in a good sense, indicating a person who is carrying lots of knowledge, wisdom and realisation and whose words and teachings have great weight; thus a guru is someone who is not easily swayed and swept away (by illusion, confusion, etc), and has a firm and solid stand on the practical application of the shastra. Its opposite is *laghu*, "light", indicating a certain superficiality or nonchalance, a casual attitude, etc.

To distinguish more important types of gurus from the ordinary mass of variously qualified teachers in all subjects, a technical nomenclature is used: family advisors and school teachers are called *kula gurus*, while the *sat guru* is a perfectly realised soul who has attained the level of liberation from material identifications and attachments, and who takes full charge and responsibility for a student without limitations of time, with the purpose of guiding him/ her to liberation, lifetime after lifetime. The word *sat* means "true, eternal, permanent, spiritual".

What is the fundamental qualification for any guru? Adi Shankara states very clearly and simply in his *Prasnottara ratna malika* (verse 2), that Guru is "one who has personally realized the truth and who is always acting for the benefit of the disciple" (*ko gurub? adbigata tattvah, sishya bitaya udyatah satatam*).

Many misconceptions and prejudices on the idea of guru as spiritual preceptor, master or teacher, have been created by cultural and social expectations. Actually, a guru is not qualified by academic titles, by the caste or family in which he was born, by a specific gender or race, by the dress he wears or by his belonging or affiliation to a specific social order or even by a hierarchical position in a religious institution or lineage. The real definition of guru is someone who has directly and deeply realized the truth he teaches (*tattva*) and acts always in a selfless way, simply for the benefit of the disciple (*sishya bitaya*). So the first qualification is that a guru needs to know the subject s/he is teaching, not only in theory but in practice as well. Even more importantly, the Guru must be solely interested in the progress and happiness of the disciple, not in his own benefit or in the benefit of his family, community, lineage, Matha, organisation, or even in the benefit of God. One who acts purely and selflessly for the service of God is a good devotee, but not necessarily a good guru, although a good guru who is also a good devotee is the perfect choice. Therefore a Guru cannot be evaluated according to external parameters, but only by his actual knowledge and selflessness in working for the benefit of the disciple.

Of course the guru needs to be intelligent, knowledgeable and wise enough to understand what exactly is the benefit of the disciple, step after step in the journey of training. A guru who has no

understanding of the character, qualities, inclinations, habits, beliefs, and difficulties of a disciple is useless, and whatever job he can do, it can be done by the disciple him/ her self, by reading books and examining him/ her self (*svadhyaya*). If the guru does not do anything more than "giving a mantra", then whatever benefit he can give is also found in the sound recording (tape, etc) of the mantra chanted by a sincere devotee. The concept of *adbigata tattva* is very interesting because it indicates a solid understanding of the theory and practice of the knowledge of any subject: *tattva* is a word that can cover a wide variety of meanings, both material and spiritual. Incompetent and unqualified teachers who claim unquestionable authority on the strength of the competence and qualifications of a predecessor, or on the fame and official position of a lineage or organisation or some other "higher authority", are worse than useless because their arrogance confuses the public and obstructs real progress for everyone. Such impostors must be denounced and exposed for the benefit of the entire society, but the only way to really protect people from their bad influence is to offer genuine and valuable information about the required qualifications of a guru, and about the actual fundamental implications of dharma and vidya.

The original Vedic system does not have a "government board of education" controlling or appointing teachers. There is no provision for a certification and licensing system to ascertain the qualifications of a guru or any practitioner or to officially authorise someone to become a guru, and no legal censorship is enforced on faulty teachings propagated by unqualified teachers. In case such teachers are inciting people to violent aggression against the innocent and harmless, the kshatriya will closely monitor the disciples of such asuric teachers and intervene promptly to stop any violent aggression before it causes real damage.

In the original Vedic system, the mother is respected as the first guru of all children, even above the father, because the child has a much closer connection with the mother and easily absorbs from her. Until the age of 5, all children are constantly under the care and protection of mother, then they are sent to the residence of the *kula guru*, who is a qualified brahmana (a married man with wife and usually children of his own) who becomes his initiating guru, adopting the student as his spiritual son and training him to the best of his ability. At the end of his studies, the child is awarded a title suitable to his proficiency, his talents and his inclinations, by which he will be working in one of the varnas or categories of society: brahmana, kshatriya, vaisya or sudra; these are not necessarily the same as the varna of the student's parentage. There are no untouchables in Vedic society, and the children of sudras can go to school as well, if they so desire, but they are not forced to.

This system of education is free of cost for everyone, as the families do not have to pay any fee to the guru or the school, but when leaving the school after graduation students are expected to offer a gift to the guru (*guru dakshina*), and during their training period all students are expected to perform whatever task is assigned individually by the guru, including menial tasks and collecting donations from the public, because in Vedic society there is no condemnation of begging for alms, and in fact giving valuable things in charity in a respectful attitude is one of the most important "good actions" recommended to everyone to improve one's karma, on the same level of religious ceremonies (*yajna*).

Brahmana students are trained to work as teachers, scholars, writers, lecturers, consultants, advisors, both in the material and the spiritual fields, and have more duties and less opportunities for sense gratification than the other categories. Kshatriyas will be responsible for the protection of society from all types of aggressions, foreign and domestic so to speak, constantly patrolling their territory

and taking the appropriate action when needed; they also have the duty to keep themselves fit and well trained for better efficiency, and to take advice from brahmanas whenever there is some doubt. According to the capability of the individual and his immediate family members who cooperate with him, a kshatriya can protect (*traya*) a territory (*kshetra*) of various size, and even become the protector of less capable kshatriyas within a larger "circle" of land (as emperor, or *chakravarti*), but still each individual is directly responsible for his actions or inaction. In reciprocation, the protected people offer gifts or tributes as a sign of gratitude, and the kshatriya can accumulate a treasury that will be used selflessly for the benefit of the *prajas* especially in case of famine or other disasters. During his active life, a kshatriya is not required to abstain from normal and healthy sense gratification, because the satisfaction of the body and the mind promote strength and courage to perform his duties, but a qualified kshatriya will never hesitate to risk everything he has (including life) to protect the *prajas*. At the end of their active life, usually kshatriyas retire to engage in austerity, and this is also for the benefit of the kingdom.

Vaisyas are entrepreneurs, persons able to create wealth from raw resources, especially food (*annam bahu kurvita tad vratam*) and have the duty to feed the entire population, humans and useful animals; they are not required to abstain from any healthy sense gratification or to renounce family and society at the end of their active life, but remain at home as consultants for their grown children and successors. Sudras have no responsibility or duty except assisting more qualified persons in their work; they can be farmers or farm hands, skilled or unskilled laborers in various capacities, miners, foot soldiers, construction workers, house helpers, couriers, carriers, craftspeople, artists, even independently as occasional service providers. Sudras are not slaves, but if they attach themselves to an employer, the employer is duty-bound to take care of all the needs of the employee and his family, including housing, food, medical treatment, clothing, and everything else. Sudras also often receive extra gifts on special occasions, such as religious festivals, marriages, birthdays etc, and are not expected to abstain from sense gratification or to pay any taxes.

The *kula guru* has the responsibility to carefully observe the children in his care individually and nurture their talents, correct the bad tendencies, and give all the necessary training in a very personalised manner. A youngster who does not have interest for study or responsible work is only trained to behave in a civilised way, to keep cleanliness, honesty, non-violence, a respectful attitude, and to be proud of his good work; the sudra student can leave school and return home as soon as he wants to, when he feels that he has learned enough. A vaisya student will remain longer in the school, to learn everything he needs to know both materially and spiritually, but he generally goes home sooner than a kshatriya student, while the brahmana student remains the longest with the guru, and learns how to be a guru himself, because anyone working as a brahmana must be able to teach and guide others. In the end even the brahmana students will take leave from the *kula guru* and return home to make a family of their own and begin their professional duties to society, or to continue their studies with other more qualified gurus. Only very rarely a brahmana student would choose to remain in the school of his guru as an adopted son, and in that case he could also choose not to marry but remain a *naishtika brahmachari*. In any case, leaving the guru's house after graduation was never considered a disgraceful act but a normal step in a student's life, and accepting more than one guru consecutively was considered a perfectly meritorious action, demonstrating that the student was eager to learn more and the *kula guru* was wise enough to encourage him in that direction. Often the guru himself would recommend other and further teachers, because his only interest was the benefit of the disciple.

This concept of plurality is also expressed in the process of initiation by *Bhagavad gita* (4.34): *tad viddhi pranipatena pariprasenena sevaya, upadeksyanti te jnanam jnaninas tattva darsinah*, "You should learn this (knowledge) by approaching those who directly contemplate the Truth (*tattva*), asking them many questions and offering them service. Those who have the knowledge will initiate you (into this science)." The actual Sanskrit text explicitly presents these diksha gurus in the plural, and not in the singular.

Graduated students would not regularly participate to functions in the guru house or visit him, although in case of a very prominent guru such as a rishi with a large school, an hermitage or ashrama would tend to grow around his home, with several more brahmanas settling there with their own families and interacting in cooperation. Some *kula gurus* specialised in coaching the royal families would establish their residence at a short distance from the palace of their students, so the young princes would be able to avail of more facilities without imposing on the resources of the guru and without having to procure food by begging as brahmana brahmacharis are supposed to do. In that case, the *kula guru* or *raja guru* would also function as advisor to the reigning king and the other members of the royal family, and direct the religious ceremonies for the benefit of the entire kingdom.

The concept of *sat guru* is still based on the teaching duties, and the exclusive desire to benefit the disciple, but it is on a transcendental level, and therefore is not limited by any material consideration. He does not need to be a brahmana, or to have a school or ashrama with disciples, or any type of recognition from society or government; he does not need to be married, to regularly perform any religious ceremonies or sadhana, or anything else. However, s/he certainly needs to be transcendently qualified to the level of liberation from the ignorant illusion of *ahankara* and *mamatva*, identification with the body and the relations of the body, and attachment to material possessions, positions, affiliations, etc.

The duty of the *sat guru* is to train the disciple to attain the same level of liberation (*moksha*), and that can be done in whatever manner the guru feels right, moment after moment. Nobody else can interfere in the relationship between the *sat guru* and the *sishya*, for any reason whatsoever, because if that happened, the karmic consequences would be extremely severe for the arrogant fool who dared to disturb the training process and nullify the guru's responsibility; responsibility and power indeed go hand in hand. This also applies to any guru's total freedom in accepting or rejecting disciples, choosing his place of residence (*sthana*), and similar considerations. A *sat guru* can have a circle of disciples, but their number is usually limited because with the initiation the guru takes full responsibility of the individual disciples and needs to monitor them carefully. However, there is no restriction about the numbers of the disciples, and especially about the number of general non-initiated followers, who are interested in the teachings without accepting any particular commitment in the form of vows of obedience: the guru is not responsible for their training and success, and only has the duty to reciprocate any gift or service in the most appropriate manner.

Often the *sat guru* will delegate the monitoring of new students to some trusted and experienced student, and in that capacity the senior student will also act temporarily as an instructor guru for the less experienced seekers. For this reason, sometimes we find that along history there has been a tradition of rendering homage to "all one's gurus" in recognition and appreciation of their help.

## Can someone become a Hindu?

*Krinvanto visvam aryam*

"Let everyone become arya"

*Rig Veda samhita* 9.63.5

*Jati desa kala samaya anavicchinna sarvabhaumah tad mahavratam*

"This great vow is the supreme (religion); it does not depend on birth, place or time, and should never be interrupted"

Patanjali's *Yogasutra*, Sadhana pada, 31

While there is no history of conversions to Hinduism by violence or financial inducement, the Hindu religion has always accepted and assimilated anyone into its fold who has voluntarily accepted the Vedic philosophy and lifestyle. Thousands of people from indigenous aboriginal tribes of the Indian subcontinent (variously called as *vanavasis* or *adivasis*) or immigrating tribes from other regions, as well as the native populations in the Greater "Akhand Bharata" (including Bali and Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, as far as Singapore or Simhapuri) became fully integrated Aryans.

The Vratyastoma ceremony ("vow pronouncement") described in the *Tandya Brahmana* of the *Rig Veda* has been performed for millennia to welcome "outsiders" into the Hindu fold. *Devala Smriti*, another orthodox Hindu scripture, has clear rules for the simple purification of people from other communities who wish to adopt the Hindu faith, including those Hindus whose ancestors had fallen from the required religious standard or had been forcibly or deceitfully converted to other religions. The procedure requires *suddhi*, *prayascitta*, *vrata*, and *diksha*. More information is also found in the *Tantra Sara* of the famous Abhinavagupta, that gives the process of conversion in the chapter 17 (Ahnika 17) for a person previously belonging to a different religious tradition.

In south India, the conversion ritual for a king was called Hiranya garbha mahadana, in which the *prasuta* was symbolically passing through a large golden egg (as a "new birth"), which after the ceremony was distributed among the officiating priests. Among these non-aryan (foreign or tribal) kings converted to Hinduism, history remembers the Ananda gotra of Chezarla, the Vishnukundins of Srisaila, the Pandyas and the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas also known as Rajput clans. According to one inscription, the Shiva Kapotesvara temple at Chezarla (4th century) was established by "Attivarman, worshiper of Sambhu" who had performed the Hiranygarbha mahadana. Among the Vishnukundin, Madhava Varman I is credited with having performed Hiranygarbha mahadana, according to the *Arya Manjushri Mulkalpa*. Dantidurga of the Rashtrakuta clan, formerly a feudatory or Chalukyas, officially converted at Ujjain where "kings such as Gurjara lords and others were made door-keepers".

Ironically, the major factor of Hindu unity developing in the middle ages was the fact that Muslim invaders and conquerors used this definition ("Hindu") to apply to all clans, castes and groups that were not Muslim. We should probably meditate on this point, if we want to effect true unity among all Hindus.

It seems evident that a vast majority of the Indian population descends from *vratyas*, that is to say non-aryas from native and non-native tribal peoples who were converted to Hinduism through the traditional process of instruction and purification performed by *sasana brahmanas* under the protection of kings along the centuries. On the request of those kings, *sasana brahmanas* migrated from more ancient traditional strongholds of orthodox Hinduism and especially from Varanasi, and until recently they normally used to perform the required rituals to elevate *antya-ja vratyas* to the appropriate *varna* position according to the *guna* and *karma* demonstrated by each individual. Subsequently appropriate honorific titles were awarded and with time they came to be considered family names; still today many people colloquially say "title" when they mean "family name" - Upadhyaya, Acharya, Chaturvedi, Trivedi, Dvivedi, and so on. Such titles were awarded to qualified individuals because of their good work, personal realisations, talents and proficiency in knowledge.

These *vratyas* conversions were not based on dogmatic imposition, but merely on the acceptance of the general and fundamental principles of Dharma and Vidya, that could be applied variously according to the specific circumstances. Some people have spoken of "reforms" along the history of Hinduism, but we should be careful about the meaning of the definition: we can only legitimately speak of "reform" when we engage in defeating spurious beliefs and practices that are opposed to Dharma and Vidya, and that were developed because of faulty understanding and interpretations. Such spurious beliefs were never valid in themselves.

The fundamental principles of Vedic knowledge should never be "reformed" because they do not need any reform, being perfect and eternal by nature; they can be expressed and applied to particular circumstances, or adapted temporarily by privileging the spirit of the law over the letter of the law, but that can hardly be called "reformation". When adjustments are made by persons who have sufficient knowledge and realisation of Dharma and Vidya, they are not only useful but often indispensable for the benefit of individuals and society, because the "age-old tradition" is about the genuine original and fundamental principles and not about the external superficial rules, that have been constantly changing along time.

For example, Adi Shankara is rightfully considered a great acharya and a most important reference for orthodox Hinduism. Not many people, however, are aware of the huge changes that he introduced in Hinduism to revive it after the confusion and ideological distortions that had become widespread in his times. Adi Shankara's most revolutionary move was to transform the order of sannyasa into a major religious and educational force in society, giving it a position that traditional brahmanas had previously been expected to fulfill - because in those times there were hardly any qualified brahmanas left to perform the required duties. We can see from many ancient texts, such as the *Upanishads*, that sannyasis were originally supposed to simply detach themselves from any material identification, possession, residence, affiliation, social functions and connections, remain always silent and live a very solitary life shunning all forms of comforts and gratification, in preparation for death. On the other hand the Rishis, who followed the principles of simplicity and renunciation and were totally dedicated to spiritual and religious life, were brahmanas - they had ashramas, wives, disciples and they regularly performed rituals and worship.

To counteract the decline of traditional brahmanism, Adi Shankara created the concept of Matha, similar to the Buddhist idea of monastery or Sangha, and worked to streamline the Hindu-Vedic corpus of theology and philosophy so that different traditions could better communicate and cooperate together. The new religious figure of sadhu-sannyasi solidified to fill all the social gaps, from training dharmic warriors and philosophy teachers to educating and initiating disciples, even installing Deities and managing temples and ashramas - all activities that had never been associated with the sannyasi position in the past. But then again, we find in *Mahabharata* (Shanti parva, 188.10) that in Satya yuga there was one single *varna* for all human beings and the only religious practice required was meditation (that we can call yoga, tantra or bhakti). In Treta yuga ritualistic ceremonies (*homa* and *soma*) became prominent, and in Dvapara yuga temple and Deity worship were made prevalent. Before the advent of Krishna, Vishnu was worshiped popularly in the forms of Varaha and Narasimha, and before the advent of Rama and Hanuman, the devotion of most people was directed to Shiva and the Mother Goddess. However, the perspective of mainstream academics fails to understand that such manifestations are cyclical, as history is not linear.

Of course every cycle is also unique because of the different choices of individuals and the consequent variety of circumstances, but the basic script of interactions, principles and natural laws always remain the same. The continuity of this culture is perceived as Hinduism because it is not based on a dogmatic superficiality that can only apply to temporary circumstances, but it remains consistent to the basic points of ethics, conscience, archetypal symbolism and scientific truths, that can never change. Some of such eternal concepts are defined as *dharmadharma*, *vidya-avidya*, *atman-brahman*, *nirguna-saguna*, *sat-asat*, *sattva-rajastamas*, *purusha-prakriti*, *sristi-sthiti-pralaya*, *samsara-moksha*, *yajna*, *yoga*, *tantra*, and so on. The details may change but the substance remains.

The Vedic tradition claims to be eternal (*sanatana*) and therefore it contains all the possible manifestations and products of Dharma and Vidya, just like the eternal Brahman contains all the possible manifestations and products of consciousness, and gives prominence to those manifestations and products that are most suitable for the specific circumstances in time. Compatible tribal beliefs have been absorbed and integrated successfully into the orthodox Hindu system, as we can see in the brilliant example of the tradition of Jagannatha, who was originally worshiped by the Sabara Visvvasu and whose descendants, the Daitas, are still considered the most intimate servants of Jagannatha; likewise see Lingaraja Mahadeva, whose Badu pujaris are considered descendants of a Sabara woman, and the Devi at Hingula shakti pith, where the Mother Goddess is worshiped by the Dehuri and Kalisi tribal priests; the same category of pujaris perform the traditional worship to the Grama Devis in many villages. Other examples are the Shiva Simhanath temple at Baramba (Dhenkanal), Vyaghra Devi in Bhanjanagar (Ganjam), and Samalei Devi (Sambalpur).

## Historical examples

Some of the most famous tribal kings who converted to Hinduism and spread Hinduism among their subjects in more recent times were:

\* **Suhungmung** (reigning 1497-1539) a prominent Ahom (tribal Assamese) king who converted to Hinduism and adopted the title of Swarganarayana, which was passed to his descendants; he is also famous for successfully fighting back the islamic invasions in the north-east region. Other famous Hindu kings in his line were Supangmung (reigning 1663-1670) who took the name of Chakradhvaj Singha and also fought fiercely against invaders, and Susengpha (reigning 1603-1641) who popularised the worship of Mother Durga, organising the first Durga puja in the region, at Bhatiapara.

\* **Meidingu Pamheiba** (1690-1751) a native tribal king of Manipur (which then included Tripura and the Chittagong Hills), was converted in 1710 by Shantidas Adhikari and Guru Gopal Das, two Gaudiya Vaishnava preachers from Sylhet; he made Hinduism the State religion and converted almost all his subjects to Hinduism.

Along history, also Jains and Buddhists are recorded to have converted to Hinduism; among the most famous examples we may mention:

\* **Vishnuvardhana** (reigning 1108-1152) of the Hoysala Empire (present Karnataka) converted to Hinduism from Jainism (leaving his former name as Bitti Deva) and built many temples including the Vijayanarayana at Belur and Shiva Hosyalesvar at Halebidu, both proposed UNESCO heritage sites.

\* **Rajasinghe I** (reigning 1581-1592) of Sitawaka (Lanka) converted to Hinduism from Buddhism and established several *sasana brahmanas* in his kingdom. He fought against the Portuguese colonial invasion with the greatest victories in Asia against European armies ever, and he severely punished Buddhist prelates who had allied with the Portuguese.

Conversion to Hinduism was not done only for native tribal people but also for people who arrived from other regions, as recorded by historians and archaeologists along a time period of at least 2300 years. Hindu society converted and absorbed innumerable Macedonian and Bactrian Greeks, Scythians (Sakas), Huns and Kushans who were attracted by the Vedic way of life; usually the conversion of a prominent personality in their group (such as a king or tribal chief) was followed by thousands more among the ordinary people from the same group. Some of the best known historical examples are:

\* **Helen**, the daughter of the Greek general Seleucus Nicator; she converted to Hinduism in 302 BCE (Before Current Era), marrying emperor Chandragupta in a Vedic wedding.

\* **Heliodorus** son of Dion, a Greek envoy of king Antiakila of Bactria, converted to Hinduism in 113 BCE with the name of Vasudeva (Das) at the court of king Kasiputra Bhagabhadra of Videsha in the 14th year of his reign; in the inscription on his famous commemorative pillar still standing at Besnagar (Madhya Pradesh) he declares himself as a devotee of Vishnu "the God of all Gods, who rides on Garuda".

\* **Rishabhadatta** or Ushavadata, a Saka tribesman, married Dakshamitra the daughter of Nahapana and became his viceroy; he is remembered for his many acts of charity including the construction of rest-houses, gardens, water tanks and religious monuments - one of the inscriptions points to the year 130 CE (Current Era).

\* **Rudradaman I** (reigning 130-150 CE) was a Saka ruler who took the title of Maha Kshatrapa and converted to Hinduism by marrying a Hindu woman; his documents are written in perfect Sanskrit and praise him for supporting his subjects in attaining dharma, artha and kama (Junagadh rock inscription). He ruled over western and central India.

\* **Rudrasena** (reigning 200-222 CE) was another famous Saka ruler of the Kardamaka tribe, as well as Rudrasena II of the Khsaharata tribe. Both Rudrasenas were praised as supporters of dharma. It seems that starting from that time, all the western satraps (*kshatra-pa*) of Saka (Scythian) origin that settled in the region adopted Vedic culture and religion and supported the conversion of their subjects.

\* **Mihirakula**, a very important ruler of the Alchon (white) Huns in the region of Gandhara, Kashmir, northern and central India from 502 to 530 CE. He issued coins in honor of Shiva and is mentioned in the Gwalior inscription in a Surya temple as a Hindu convert.

It has been noted that still today the family name (last name) "Hoon" is very common among the descendants of the Rajputs who were originally Parthians, Kushans, Shakas and Huna tribesmen that while invading India were defeated and assimilated into the kshatriya order. Waves of Gurjars (originally Bahr-e-Khizar, Khazar, Guzar, Gujur, Gurjara or Gujjar, in Turkish language Göçer) arrived in the Indian region from central Asia starting from the beginning of the current era (CE), and settled in the region. After the collapse of the Gupta empire they established themselves as Gurjara Pratiharas (730-1027 CE), whose emperor took the title of Maharajadhiraja of Aryavarta ("Great king of kings of the lands of aryas"); by the 9th century they controlled an empire extending from the Sindh to the Ganges, the Narmada and the Himalayan foothills, and were very dedicated to defending Hinduism against aggressive Buddhism and later against Islamist raiders.

In 1192 Prithviraj Chauhan led the Rajputs against the Mughal ruler Muhammad Ghuri (d. 1206) who finally defeated them near Delhi. After that, the only Rajput kingdoms that could challenge the Mughal rule were those in the great Thar Desert; they remained independent principalities under the British but were merged into India in 1947. Maharaja Jai Singh II of Jaipur constructed the astronomical observatories in Jaipur and Delhi; the other important forts and palaces are in Jaipur, Chittor, Gwalior and Jodhpur. In general both the Rajput and the Gurjar clans worship Devanarayana (Surya Narayana), Shiva and Bhavani, but claim kinship with the Yadavas and the adopted family of Krishna in Gokula Vrindavana.

Among the 103 known Rajput clans, the most prominent are the Chauhans of Ajmer, the Gehlots of Mewar, the Rathors of Marwar, the Kachwahas of Jaipur, the Rashtrakutas of the Deccan, the Chandels of Bundelkhand, the Pariharas (Paramaras or Pawars) of Kanauji, and the Solankis (Chalukyas). According to the legendary origins elaborated for the Rajput clans by their Bhat (from *bard*, an important albeit subordinate figure in the Caucasian tribes) panegyrist, some lineages are described as Surya-vamsis or Chandra-vamsis, although the most prominent mythological genealogies call them Agni-vamsa or Agni-kula. The story says that after Parasurama had destroyed the rebellious kshatriyas, the brahmanas felt the need to recreate the royal order and therefore performed a great yajna on Mount Abu for 40 days, and at the end of the ritual the four major Rajput clans sprung from the Agni kunda; another version of the legend says that Parasurama recovered the dead bodies of some shipwrecked foreign mariners and after burning them he created the Rajput clans from their ashes.

The strong clan identification and attachment of the Gurjar continued even after joining the Hindu society and inevitably caused disastrous divisions and rivalries, and while some level of political unity was achieved, the tendency to nepotism, favoritism and discrimination strengthened the prejudice of casteism that had already started to develop in the Gupta empire due to the decadence of the Hindu society of those times. Vedic society had no castes but only *varnas*: while caste depends on seminal descent as the ethnic and racial identities of the family groups, *varnas* only refer to the particular social duties and training to engage individual qualities (*guna* and *karma*) to the best possible use. The various degrees of brahmanas for example are distinguished by the individual's development in knowledge and spiritual realisation, while *gotras* were remembered mostly to avoid the genetic dangers of endogamous marriages and perpetuate the inspiration of the great ancestors of the ancient times as well as their theoretical and practical knowledge.

Casteism, on the other hand, is more similar to the clan system of many non-aryan tribes and peoples described for example in the Zoroastrian tradition: at the top we find the royal aristocrats, who are all related among themselves by blood (*hvetu* or "princes" equivalent to the Celtic or Teutonic *thane*) or bound by an allegiance comparable to adoption. All Rajput kingdoms in Northern India were divided into a large number of *jagirs* held by the *jagirdars*, who were mostly of the same family as the Rajput chiefs: this encouraged inefficiency and corruption under the protection of nepotism. Another major problem is that their clergy was subordinate to the ruling class (unlike the brahmanas in the genuine *varna* system) and was also a birth caste, with the limited functions of officiating priests, panegyrists and oracle-readers under the command and control of their employers. Like in the Zoroastrian and Caucasian system, farmers and shepherds were semi-free commoners, subject to the families of aristocrats who owned the land and similar to the Celtic and Teuton *thrall*, while the *vaisyas* in the Vedic system were totally independent and did not owe allegiance to any land-owner, although they paid taxes to the kings in return for military protection and road maintenance. The idea of the sudra class was similarly distorted into the lowest social class of the Zoroastrian-Caucasian system: the slaves, who had no rights and were equated to cattle and sheep.

The rigid birth caste hierarchy was formed with the introduction of the "untouchable" caste that did not exist in the *varna* system; still today the general perception about castes is that there are "high castes" and "low castes", untouchables or people do not belong to any *varna* (*avarna*), a definition that does not include sudras who actually belong to the sudra *varna*. The clan model was thus replicated at the "low caste" level with a large number of "clan-castes" (sweepers, carders, weavers, smiths, brewers, oil pressers, carpenters, etc) making them "impure", segregated and strictly hereditary, while in the Vedic system there was only one general category of sudras (certainly not untouchables) and all artisans were free to work according to their individual talents and inspiration and become affiliated to *shrenis* or guilds, which were not hereditary otherwise they would have been just *jatis*. It is important to notice that a correct reform would/ should not erase the *jatis*, *kulas* or *gotras*, but simply restore them to the proper original system, with the required mobility and purification opportunities so that the cruelty of hereditary untouchability can truly be eliminated. Also, obvious nonsense should be eliminated, such as the idea that cow-herders should be untouchable, when they are the providers of the most purifying ingredients for traditional Hindu religious rituals, and that fishermen and prostitutes are untouchable but their customers are not. The disgusting practice of Bhangism (segregated and hereditary caste position for those engaged in night soil removal) was introduced in relatively recent times, as we know that flush toilets in private homes and even in public places were common in the ancient Indus-Sarasvati valley civilisation, and

in normal families all cleaning work was performed by live-in servants (who regularly bathed and were certainly not considered "untouchables") or by those same individuals who had "made the mess" and were expected to take a proper complete bath and change of clothes after the cleaning.

In the 1970s Dr B Pathak and his organisation Sulabh Shauchalaya Sansthan brilliantly launched the Sulabh Sanitation Movement to solve the night soil problem, and more recently their public toilets created especially in large cities have been equipped with biogas tank digesters that raise the level of cleanliness and purity even further, employing village-level technology to perfectly treat and sanitise the waste into clean water, bacteria-free compost of high agricultural value, and LPG gas that is totally indistinguishable from the much-valued version that is normally sold in gas cylinders and is vastly used for cooking and fueling vehicles.

It is interesting to note that the famous *pariahs* (from *paraiyar*, the name by which the entire category of Indian untouchables is known in the West, to the point that it has entered the regular dictionary of several languages meaning "unwanted people") were the descendants of one of the key accused in the political murder of Karikala, brother of Rajaraja Chola, in the 10th century: because the murderer was a brahmana, the king could not sentence him to death, but banished him and all his relatives. The Sambavar and Valluvar castes are in that line, but several families among them regained a high position in the *varna* system by settling in other places to become learned priests; the great poet and devotee Thiruvalluvar was one of them. This type of opportunity for reformation and purification from an untouchability position was destroyed by the British for the purpose of permanently dividing Indian society to weaken it.

When the British introduced feudal policies of land owning, the *pariyars* found themselves at a great disadvantage because they had no properties, so they had to choose whether to join the Madras regiment of the British army or to go to work in the slaughterhouses created in Madras to produce the meat and leather required by the British army. With their census, the British separated the "high castes" that were employed in their administration (Iyer, Iyengar, Naidu, Naicker, Vellala, Chettiyar, etc) while all the others were permanently and arbitrarily categorised as untouchables and subject to the apartheid imposed by the British regime; all the *pariyar* families fell under the same caste, including those qualified and practicing brahmanas who had absolutely nothing to do with the slaughterhouse jobs but were "of the same race" of the leather workers.

Similar examples can be traced in all the low caste communities, with the result of segregation and compulsory engagement in hereditary services such as removal of dead animals and leather industry (with products purchased also by "high caste" Hindus), manual scavenging, street sweeping and rag picking - an occupation now highly valued in the west, as recycling and repurposing is vital to protect the environment. In the original system all these activities could and would be performed by anyone, including brahmanas, with the simple *provisio* that after the task they would simply take a bath and change their sacred thread with a fresh one.

This clan division has amply been recognised as the main cause for the failure of Rajput kingdoms to stand together against common enemies. Vijayanagar and Orissa were at constant warfare with each other over territory; the four Hindu kingdoms of the south were enemies of each other and did not care about the northwest of the country falling to the islamists, allowing the occupation of the entire north India. History reports that Jaichand refused to help Prithviraj against Shihabuddin, and Ramchandra Deo of Devagiri even helped Malik Kafur to invade the south. Rana Sanga invited Babur to invade India, and Somanath, Mathura and Varanasi were defended only by a small number

of bhaktas and sadhus, while the Rajput warriors were busy fighting against each other. Constant quarreling among clans, alliance and even allegiance to common enemies for the sake of petty gains against other clans, waste of time and energy in trying to establish relative superiority in greatness above the other clans were well exploited by all invaders. Many scholars have commented that without the obsession of clan and caste division among the Rajput, the history of India would have been dramatically different.

Serious commitment to a sattvik lifestyle was not exactly uniform among any clan, with several members of the Rajput clans maintaining a certain attachment to strong liquors and consumption of meat and especially venison; these were tolerated also in the Vedic system as a special exception for active warriors during long patrolling tours (mainly in cold weather and where no other food was available) but had no justification in non-emergency times, or for the other members of the clans. Not all the Gurjars accepted to become reformed and follow some discipline and they could not be absorbed into the *varna* system as kshatriyas (much less as brahmanas), therefore bands of uncivilised Gurjars continued to engage in robberies and pillaging: some were absorbed or utilised in that capacity by the British while many became insurgents, especially joining the famous 1857 revolt of the Sepoys, which led to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1870-71. The present number of Gujjars is estimated around 1.6 crore (160 million), mostly found in the Indian states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Haryana, Punjab and Madhya Pradesh.

Rajput clans also carried the barbaric custom of the subjugation of women and introduced the glorification of widow burning, the so-called Sati (*suttee*). In Vedic society suicide of males or females was not condemned but it was certainly not forced or even glorified; in extraordinary circumstances a man or a woman could commit suicide by drowning or entering fire or by fasting, when they wanted to renounce their bodies because they considered their bodies had become useless.

There is an article written by Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar (who himself renounced his own life by fasting to death) about "Suicide and self-sacrifice" mentioning the illustrious historical examples of Kumarila Bhatta (a famous scholar), Adi Shankara (whose health had been strongly affected by an assassination attempt on his life through poison), Dnyanesvara from Maharashtra, Samartha Ramdas, Ekanath and Tukaram - but these were all men and not women, and nobody among them had any marital concern. Suicide was always considered a personal choice and respected when committed freely, while in abrahamic and post-abrahamic societies suicide is considered a sin or a crime but because the individual is not considered the free owner of his/her own body, which belongs to the church or the state, so people are effectively slaves.

In the original Vedic system it was not normal for a widow to commit suicide even spontaneously, but if she really wanted to join her beloved husband in death, her choice was considered legitimate and not condemned (unless she was thus abandoning her helpless children). To make a parallel with western mythology, we could mention the emotional and sad story of Romeo and Juliet, still today considered the epitome of unhappy love: although Juliet's suicide was not condemned by English culture, nobody has ever taken her example as signifying that all widows should kill themselves. The Rajput myth of the sati, on the contrary, appears to be more similar to the non-aryan funeral ritual that actually required the sacrifice of one woman who was not necessarily the wife of the deceased; it was an act of duty and not an act of love, as also slaves and animals were killed to "accompany" the chieftain or the king in his journey into death. There is certainly nothing Vedic there.

Of course there have been other motivations especially on the occasion of the fall of the fort of Chittor in 1303, when all the men had been killed in battle and the women chose a dignified and clean suicide rather than suffering brutal rape and torture and possibly a lifetime of slavery in the hands of the islamist invaders. The social problem developed later, when degraded people started to take advantage of the idea of "loyalty of wives" to eliminate widows from the line of inheritance in wealthy families, and even spread the confusing idea that widows were duty-bound to immolate themselves as a demonstration of sanctity and religious fervor according to the Hindu tradition.

The very definition of "sati" is misleading as it is usually taken to apply to Sati the consort of Shiva; it is known that Sati burned her own body to ashes with the inner fire of her spiritual power, as a protest against her own father Daksha who had offended Shiva in public. However, Sati's self-immolation was certainly not related to Shiva's death as Shiva had not died at all, and in fact when Shiva was informed of his wife's demise, he was so displeased and angry that he wanted to destroy the entire world - together with his companions, he stormed Daksha's assembly and even killed him. We should note that in all the stories of *Puranas* and *Itihasas*, the only example of self-immolation of a widow is the case of Madri the second wife of Pandu, and the event is not presented as a commendable action either socially or religiously, but simply as a manifestation of emotional and romantic attachment.

Another most interesting example of western converts to Hinduism is the case of the Chitpavana or Konkanastha brahmins (sometimes shortened as KoBra), who settled in Konkan, the coastal belt of western Maharashtra; the *Shat prashna kalpa latika* written in 1695 says they were of western origin, a definition that has been variously interpreted to indicate Egypt, Greece, Iran or the middle East. Recent genetic mapping (Kivisild et al 2003, Gaikwad et al 2005) shows central Asian and European descent. The Bene Israelis, a group of Jewish settlers in the Kolabam and Raigad districts of Konkan, claim that the Chitpavans migrated from the middle East around 168 BCE when the last Seleucids made Judaism illegal. More people migrated from the old Bactria (Afghanistan etc) after 630 CE, under the pressure of the islamic raids. Some Chitpavan families settled in Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu; in the period between 1713 and 1818 there were about 2000 families of Chitpavans, of which 8 had a prominent role in the government, while the others were priests or clerks or land-holders; they were clearly distinguished from the *desastha* ("local") brahmins who already lived there previously.

The Marathas were originally Abhiras, a Saka tribe that conquered Mathura and the Saurashtra in the period between 100 BCE and 30 CE. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, ruler of Maratha kingdom, appointed a Chitpavan brahmin, named as Balaji Vishwanath Bhat, as his Peshwa or Prime Minister in the 18th century, establishing him as an important figure of power in Pune. The strong sense of clan among the Chitpavans created nepotism and favoritism at social, political and financial levels, and the ensuing casteism and corruption have been indicated as a major cause for the fall of the Maratha empire; the Mahars, an untouchable caste cruelly treated by these brahmins, reacted by enlisting in the army of the East India Company fighting against the Maratha Peshwas and the battle of Koregaon in 1818 sealed their fall.

After that, the Chitpavan community eagerly approached western education, easily accepted the colonial Aryan theory (having a slightly "nordic" racial build themselves, with green or blue eyes and a whitish complexion) and produced a number of Hindu reformers in the 19th century, with a current that can easily be compared to the Young Bengal movement that developed the Brahma

Samaj and various exponents of the neo-Hindu development. Some of the famous names from these clans were Gopal Krishna Gokhale (whom Gandhi acknowledged as a preceptor) and his disciple Vinoba Bhave, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak who was an early leader of the Indian Independence Movement. Others were Nathuram Godse and Narayan Apte (who killed Gandhi), Dhondo Keshav Karve, Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade, and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar.

A very similar case is the clan of the Sakaldwipiya Brahmins (also called Bhojaka Brahmins or Maga Brahmins), who still clearly remember their Iranian roots. The name of their clan appears on the Govindpur inscription dated 1137 CE, and presently they live mainly in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar; traditionally they work as priests in Rajput families or Ayurvedic physicians.

## Hinduism in the world

Outside India, conversions of other cultures to Hinduism was always peaceful and inspired by higher spiritual and religious sentiments, and it normally integrated compatible local beliefs and practices. Apart from the nearest regions of Nepal (81.3% of the population), Bhutan (25%), Sri Lanka (12.60%), Bangladesh (presently 8.2%), Pakistan (1.85%) and Afghanistan (0.4%), we need to remember that Bali still has a 83.5% Hindu population (compared to the 79.8% in India according to the 2011 census) and the *Ramayana* is a major cultural icon in Indonesia (1.69% of Hindus in the entire region). The communities in the region called Akhanda Bharata were established in ancient times, as we can see from the great Prambanan temple in Indonesia (built 850 CE, with wall carvings of the ten Avatars of Vishnu, Hanuman, etc), and the Angkor Vat temple in Cambodia (built by Suryavarman II of Khmer kingdom in early 12th century, together with the nearby temples of Angkor Thom and Bayon).

The diaspora caused by indentured labor and occupational emigration under the British and after Independence created new settlements of Indian Hindus in Mauritius (48.5%), Fiji (30%), Suriname (25%), Guyana (24.83%), Trinidad and Tobago (22.5%), United Arab Emirates (20%), Kuwait (12%), Qatar (13.8%), Réunion (6.7%), Malaysia (6.3%), Singapore (5%), Oman (3%), Belize (2.3%), Seychelles (2.1%), New Zealand (2.1%), Australia (1.9%), United Kingdom (1.7%), Canada (1.14%), and United States (0.7%). It is interesting to note that in all these countries Hindus are presently an extremely wealthy community, very much united and open-minded towards the conversions of locals, while they are hardly bothered by caste and clan divisions.

We can mention here the great work of Bhadase Sagan Maraj (founder in 1952 of Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha in Trinidad and Tobago), Ida Bagus Mantra (founder of Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia in 1959), Gedong Bagus Oka (leader in the 1980s of Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia) one of the foremost authorities on Agama Hindu Dharma and a recipient of the 1994 Jannalal Bajaj Award, Ida Pedanda Gede Made Gunung (1952-2016) of Hindu Dharma Indonesia and lecturer at Usada Faculty at Hindu University of Indonesia, Narayan Prasad Pokharel (1958-2005) president of the Nepal branch of World Hindu Federation (killed by the Dalit Mukti Morcha, a

Maoist organisation), and other individuals and groups, such as the Global Hindu Heritage Foundation.

The numbers can change dramatically if we also include the dedicated converts to Hinduism hailing from non-Indian communities, that have been estimated numbering around 80 million individuals. The vast majority of these people are devotees who have embraced Hinduism or sanatana dharma through the books of great teachers, the preaching of other converts and attendance of temples, ashramas and cultural centers, and/or the practice of yoga to a level much deeper than the popular commercial version of physical gymnastics for fitness and mental relaxation. Many of them are assiduously practicing puja, bhajan, havan, japa, and have formally accepted an appropriate name (*nama karana*) from an initiating guru; they also seriously follow a sattvik lifestyle, with strict vegetarianism and abstention from intoxication and other bad habits, well above and beyond the general current norm among the general population of Indian Hindus abroad or even in India.

The first conversions started in USA and UK already in the last century, with a huge expansion through the dedicated work of Bhaktivedanta Swami and his disciples (Iskcon) that spread to many other countries from the 1960s. In the 1980s another major wave of expansion started in the former Soviet Union, where the first devotees of Krishna were committed to psychiatric hospitals and jails by the communist government and possession of religious scriptures was punished as a crime. A global petition campaign was organised by the underground local chapter of Iskcon, with distribution of many protest cards among the public at international level, to collect as many signatures as possible for the release of the prisoners and the annulment of the repressive laws. With the fall of the soviet regime, religious fervor blossomed again among the public and Iskcon made several thousands of enthusiastic new converts. The Russian community of Hindu converts of local origin was thrown into the limelight in 2011 with the infamous court trial in Tomsk against the Iskcon *Bhagavad gita*, accused of "inciting religious extremism and social and racial intolerance", with a proposed a ban for its printing, possession and distribution. The actual target was the Iskcon community of Hindu converts of Russian origin, numbering over 100,000 members, compared to the 15,000 members of the Hindus of Indian origin in the same region. The attack against *Bhagavad gita* however brought together the two groups in an unprecedented manner and stimulated the Indian government to action; a Hindu Council of Russia was created to protect the interests of Hindus in Russia, with the election of chairman Sadhu Priya Das, an Indian-born member of Iskcon.

On 19 December 2011 Bhartruhari Mahtab, leader of the Biju Janata Dal party, raised the issue of the *Bhagavad Gita* trial in the Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha), demanding to know what the Indian government was doing to protect "the religious rights of Hindus in Russia". On December 20 Sushma Swaraj, leader of the opposition party BJP, demanded the Indian government protest against the action by declaring the *Bhagavad Gita* a "national book". Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha K Rahman Khan (a Muslim!!), member of the Indian National Congress, said "the entire house agrees with this (protest) and joins in condemning this (attack against *Bhagavad gita*)". VHP and Bajrang Dal activists also staged protest in Chandigarh, calling on the Indian government to protect the rights of Hindus in Russia and denouncing the proposed ban. The only voice that supported the ban was the Indian Dalit Marxist scholar Chittibabu Padavala, mirroring the action of the group of Russian Orthodox Christian activists that, on 27 January 2012, barged into the Iskcon temple in Moscow and tried to deliver a box of canned beef meat to the temple authorities there.

In recent times there has been a steep increase of conversions to Hinduism also in Africa simultaneously effected by Iskcon and by the members of the Hindu Monastery of Africa (HMA), headed by Swami Ghanananda, a man of African origin who studied Vedanta at the Forest Academy of the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, India. In 2010 there were more than 20,000 Hindus in Ghana, out of whom only a little over 2,000 were Indian migrants. Besides the 7 branches of the HMA in Ghana, there are 2 more in neighbouring Togo and Ivory Coast.

In the light of these facts we can easily understand that the percentages of Hindu population in countries such as the USA, UK, Australia, Canada and several countries in Europe can easily be multiplied and strengthened (also on the social and cultural level) if we also openly include the Hindu converts of local origin. This step would bring vast benefits also for India, as many of these faithful Hindu converts would be delighted to take residence in India as their holy land also bringing considerable assets (both material and spiritual), and where they could be an important uniting force for Hinduism especially if they are encouraged to mix with native Hindus, absorb a larger variety of perspectives and cooperate with the native Hindus, for whom they have a natural sense of friendship, respect and admiration. This immense potential for the protection of Dharma and Vidya is still untapped and therefore remains exposed to detrimental influences and subject to sectarian divisions and rivalries, that inevitably weaken the common cause of Hinduism. Just like Vaishnavas, Virashaivas and Vairagis in India have come to consider themselves merely as birth castes that do not cooperate among themselves, the danger is that without a real unifying identity and motivation, the sincere and zealous interest of so many westerners towards the genuine and fundamental Hinduism as sanatana dharma will be broken and weakened by the mutually exclusive allegiance to the various clans in the form of rival Organisations and Mathas: the disastrous results have already been observed in many cases.

In ancient times there was no problem of race as all different colors of skin and hair were considered only from the aesthetic perspective as a wonderful variety, otherwise racial features were not considered relevant at all. We need to remember that the definition of *arya* in ancient Vedic texts applied to ethical and social choices and not to the race - because persons who were born in families high in *arya* society but had degraded themselves by engaging in criminal activities (and thus had become *anarya* and *dasyu*) were expected be either reformed or exiled or killed, as we see for example in *Rig Veda* 10.69.6 and 10.83.1 (as well as in many incidents mentioned in *Puranas* and *Itihasa*).

We can bring some references from *Rig Veda* (1.51.8, 1.117.21, 1.130.8, 4.16.10, 4.26.2) defining *aryas* as opposed to the *dasyus*, highlighting the fact that the *dasyus* are "hostile to Brahman" (*brahmadvishe* 3.30.17, 7.104.2), do not follow the ethical norms of civilized behavior (*avratana*, *niravratana* 1.33.5, 1.51.8, 1.130.8) and exploit others for their own selfish material advantage (*shushna* 1.51.6, 4.16.11), while *aryas* engage in sacred dharmic activities (*yajamana* 1.51.8, 1.130.8 etc). Another interesting detail is that *aryas* give great importance to settlements and agriculture, specifically to the ploughing of fields (1.117.21 and others), something that certainly does not apply to a nomadic life style, and is rather the opposite of the lifestyle of pillaging marauders. The raiders called *dasyus* ("criminals") are rather described as "hoarders" in the sense of persons who accumulate wealth without utilizing it properly for the benefit of all beings - a type of behavior that modern culture considers a sign of personal and social success and even a wise providence to ensure a better future.

The idea of the "Aryan race" was invented by French philosopher Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau (1816-1882, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, "Treatise on the inequality of human races") and French anthropologist George Vacher de Lapouge (1854-1936) in his book *L'Aryen* ("The Aryan", 1899), and later developed further by German author Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) into the Indo-European race theory ("Lectures on the Science of Language", 1861) to justify the colonisation of India by the British empire. The theory of the aryan invasion from the Caucasus into India has already been completely demolished at a professional level by mainstream academics because it has no archeological evidence whatsoever, but unfortunately the damage continued for several decades also after India obtained independence and is still perpetuated now by badly informed people.

It seems a really bad joke that "traditionalist" Hindus who boast of the exclusive religious and social privileges of the "Hindu race" (as in "Hindu/ Brahmin DNA") are using the "Aryan race paradigm" that was specifically fabricated to impose the superiority of the white race of the colonial regime over the natives of India, who were considered a degraded admixture of the original white Aryan blood with the inferior black Dravidian races. The sad results can be still seen today in the irreparable rift between north and south India and in general between regional ethnic groups based on racial and linguistic characteristics, and in the obsession for skin bleaching and "fair complexion" in perspective brides and bridegrooms, film actors and public figures in general.

The popular confusion about this issue is so widespread and deep, that even depictions of Personalities of Godhead (including Vishnu and Mother Kali) in painting, statues and cinematographic productions passively submit to the prejudice to the point of portraying them as whitish, and we can even be accused of "being racist" if we remark that according to the original shastra (and the ancient pre-abrahamic iconography), Ramachandra and Krishna had an extremely dark complexion, and Kunti, Draupadi and Yasoda were compared to "blue lotus flowers". Of course this does not mean that all Hindu Deities and avatars are black. Balarama and Arjuna are described as distinctly white in complexion, Shiva Mahadeva is traditionally described as "white as camphor" and with reddish matted hair, while the name of his consort Gauri means "white". Kapila Rishi's hair is described as golden in color, while Veda Vyasa (the compiler of all Vedic literature at the beginning of the present yuga) was extremely black, to the point of scaring people who had a superficial vision based on externals only. Among the Rig Vedic Devas, only Indra and Surya are described "with golden hair", while the vast majority of the Rakshasas is described with "reddish hair" (for example *Mahabharata* Adi parva 223). *Atharva Veda* (6.137.2-3) expresses praise for "strong black hair locks", while Baudhayana's *Dharma Sutras* (1.2) say, "Let him kindle the sacrificial fire while his hair is still black" (meaning during the vigorous years of youth).

Ancient depictions of the Sapta Rishis give them a range of very different colors of complexion, and some prominent religious figures in Puranic history are of mixed descent (some even with non-human ancestors), but the issue of color is always presented on the aesthetic level as a manifestation of the beautiful variety of the universe (*Bhagavad gita*, 11.5). The color of the skin was never considered a symptom of qualification or disqualification in regard to the Hindu-Vedic religions tradition, as eloquently stated by Ashtavakra Rishi, who condemned the grossly materialistic attitude of a group of people in the assembly of king Janaka, saying that one who judges the value of human beings by their skin is no better than a cobbler. This remarkable pronouncement is a brilliant demonstration that racism was unequivocally condemned in Vedic culture and was actually considered a demonstration of ignorance. But what is racism?

The definition of racism as per dictionary is as follows:

- \* prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior
- \* the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races

The definition of race as per dictionary is as follows:

- \* a group of persons related by common descent or heredity
- \* an arbitrary classification of modern humans based on any or a combination of various physical characteristics, as skin color, facial form or eye shape, and now frequently based on such genetic markers as blood groups.

Today all civilised countries recognise that it is offensive and illegal to state or imply that racial characteristics will or should determine the social, professional, intellectual, moral, spiritual or religious qualities (or "nature") of individuals. Persons who have the same racial characteristics may be inclined to share the same culture, but that is an individual choice and it can be changed very easily, as we can see especially by the spreading of globalisation, a definition that refers to the global imposition of one single culture based on consumerism, non-sustainable development, gross materialism, atheism, exploitation, false liberism, etc - that many Indians mistakenly describe as "western culture".

## Conversion to Hinduism in modern times

"How to become a Hindu" is the subject of chapter 13 of the book *What is Hinduism*, produced in 2007 by the editors of the international magazine *Hinduism Today*, established in 1979 by the Himalayan Academy founder Sivaya Subramuniyaswami of the Saiva Siddhanta Yoga Order. The chapter quotes several traditional Hindu leaders on the issue.

\* Swami Nischalananda Saraswati of Govardhan Math, Puri, Orissa: "All those who find their roots in the Vedas, who believe that India is a pious land, who have sympathy and believe in protecting the cow can become Hindus, while keeping others' welfare in mind."

\* Swami Asimatmananda, for Swami Ranganathanandaji, President, Belur Ramakrishna Math and Mission: "Swami Vivekananda himself gave his famous call to Hindus to broaden their outlook. There are many devotees associated with the Ramakrishna Order who were not born into the Hindu faith but have accepted Hindu names of their own accord. Scores among them have gone on to take, and faithfully keep, formal lifelong vows of brahmacharya and sannyasa."

\* Swami Satchidananda, Founder/Spiritual Head of Satchidananda Ashram: "The Hindu religion has a long history of accepting anyone and everyone who is on the path toward eternal truth. Hinduism does not discriminate against any sincere seeker. Whosoever is devoted to the search for

that Eternal Truth is embraced by Hinduism. Therefore, it is perhaps the most universal and welcoming faith of all time."

\* Dada JP Vaswani, head of the worldwide Sadhu Vaswani Mission, renowned Sindhi religious leader and lecturer, Pune: "True conversion is not a mere change of label but an inner transformation of mind and heart. The great task that lies ahead of us is that of converting Hindus - in India and abroad - into true Hindus, acutely aware of the rich heritage that belongs to them. When the Hindus bear witness in deeds of daily living to the great ideals of Sanatana Dharma, then indeed will India shine once again in the splendor of the new morning sun. Hindus have forgotten how to live as Hindus. They need to be taught the truths proclaimed by their prophets and avatars. Millions of Hindus are waiting to be converted into true Hindus. I am one of them."

Over the past 150 years, as a direct result of the distribution of Hindu scriptures, of Swamis and Yogis traveling to the West and of many Westerners journeying to India, several millions of people have converted to Hinduism. Of course, there will be different levels of dedication and competence among them, but our point here is not "how good a Hindu" someone is, but whether one considers him/her self as a Hindu as opposed to some other definition or categorisation (Christian, Muslim, Jew, atheist, etc etc) - a consideration that largely applies also to native Hindus of Indian origin.

The unprecedented expansion of Hindu religion at global level was already envisioned by several great acharyas of the past and actively supported by a number of dedicated spiritual ambassadors of India, such as Vivekananda, Yogananda and others, who even modified their presentations to suit the cultural background in other regions. These neo-Hindu Indian gurus have facilitated the creation of new generations of Hindu leaders and teachers of non-Indian origin that have become even more deeply, authentically and totally dedicated to the cause of Hinduism in its original form, as we will see especially in the sections about orthodox Hinduism and Gaudiya Vaishnavism. It is well known that converts are normally very zealous in exploring the knowledge and practice of the faith they have embraced, and in giving testimony to its superior value. Hinduism should certainly take advantage of this natural tendency, and if properly guided and coached, the new converts can definitely prove themselves extremely valuable.

Figuratively speaking, Hinduism seems to be needing some new blood to strengthen its immune system and better resist against hostile attacks. Hindu converts of foreign origin are ideally qualified for this task, because like all converts they generally take things much more seriously than ordinary people who were "just born there"... because they really believe in what they have embraced, often at great personal cost. Converts have a good thirst for proving themselves, are enthusiastic about learning and practicing (without being attached to cultural prejudice) and are easily more dedicated to the spiritual and religious life they have chosen because they have become free from material attachments, identifications and associations of their past and are not particularly interested in acquiring new material and limiting attachments and identifications.

Their example is particularly valuable for the Indian Hindu society, that is still struggling to get rid of the colonial mentality and is suffering from a lingering cultural inferiority complex as a "developing country", a concept that indicates the need to strive towards cultural conformation with the "already developed countries". Hindu converts of foreign origin coming from heavily industrialised countries, often equipped with considerable mainstream academic education and a

very wide exposure to world knowledge, but who demonstrate in all sincerity their devotion to Hinduism and friendship/ kinship to people of Indian origin and even accept to become disciples of Indian gurus, can give an enormous boost of self-confidence to insecure Indians who have been led to believe that Hinduism is just some old superstition.

In the last decades, owing to the global Hindu Resurgence Movement, widely supported by many prominent non-resident Indian Hindus, the idea of conversion to Hinduism has become increasingly popular. Of course, this development has annoyed the strategists of mainstream abrahamic religions, that consider the idea of conversion as their privileged monopoly, and there have been vicious reactions especially from abrahamic-oriented authors, such as Christophe Jaffrelot, who published in 2011 an open attack against Hindu Resurgence, entitled *Militant Hindus and the Conversion Issue (1885-1990): From Suddhi to Dharm Parivartan. The Politicization and Diffusion of an "Invention of Tradition"*. Jaffrelot (director of the Centre d'études et de recherches internationales, editor-in-chief of *Critique Internationale* and member of the editorial boards of *Nations, Nationalism and International Political Sociology*, and *The Online Encyclopaedia of Mass Violence*) is merely one of the many voices expressing the dogma of the mainstream academic and political system, to which unfortunately some Hindus give too much credit.

It is true that the aggressive and politically motivated campaigns of conversions organised by several Christian missionary groups (see for example the Thessalonica Project and Joshua Project) have stimulated a similar response among Hindu nationalist politicians, but we should not fall in the trap of confusing the recognition of a political problem with a deliberate misrepresentation of the actual facts about Vedic teachings. Hindus have all rights to defend themselves, but they need to do so in a logical, articulate and well-researched manner, and giving the priority to the correction of misconceptions within their own circles, abandoning those beliefs and practices that are sometimes presented as the "age-old Hindu tradition" but do not find any confirmation in the original scriptures or even in the fundamental principles of Dharma and Vidya, and therefore should be defined as mere popular belief or superstition (*laukika sraddha*).

Detractors of Hinduism, especially from conventional abrahamic (and post-abrahamic) biased academic circles, normally bank on presentations focusing on the worst aspects of *laukika sraddha* such as rigid hereditary caste birthright, untouchability, male domination of society and family, subjugation and mistreatment of women, child marriage, arranged marriage based on dowry payment, exploitation and mistreatment of weaker classes, social apartheid, racial prejudice, ethnic stereotyping, prudish and bigoted moralism, attachment to superstition (meaning blind faith), rigid adherence to superficial rules, uninformed dogmatic attitudes, sectarianism, laziness and fatalism, heavy restrictions in the pursuit of knowledge, opposition to scientific research, etc, that are in fact contrary to the original (truly *orthodox*) teachings of the Vedic shastra. Such *laukika sraddha* beliefs and practices have generally been absorbed from islamic mentality and customs, British Victorian mentality and legislation, and other non-dharmic influences that have weakened and discouraged faith and commitment in genuine Vedic culture.

In India some of the pioneers of *suddhi* or conversion to Hinduism were Narayana Guru and Sraddhananda Swami of Arya Samaj, already mentioned in regard to the work of the upliftment of the lower castes. Another great name in this field is Dharma Bhaskar Masurkar Maharaja, the founder of Masurashrama in Bombay, that has been very active in conversion rituals (*suddhi sraddha*), with dozens of candidates every month. One of the largest ceremonies was held in Goa in 1928 for

1150 persons belonging to the Christian community, who wished to return to Hinduism. In the same period Agamananda Swami of the Ramakrishna Mission in Kerala reconverted hundreds to Hinduism.

Two south Indian traditional ashramas, the Madurai Aadheenam and the Kundrakuddi Aadheenam, have performed the rituals for thousands of people who chose to re-convert to Hinduism. Since the 1960s the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) has reportedly re-converted about 500,000 individuals through *suddhi* ceremonies all over India. Other Hindu Nationalist Organisations such as the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), as well as the more controversial Hindu Samhati (based in Bengal and headed by Tapan Ghosh), have been making valiant attempts to re-establish a basis of self-respect and self-confidence for the Hindu community, with re-conversion campaigns under the name of Ghar Wapsi or Dharma Parivartan, to welcome back some of those individuals and small groups who had left Hinduism for other religions hoping for a better life, but had realised that no real improvement had followed.

The popular motivation for Indians to leave Hinduism is eminently materialistic, as they are usually promised freedom from caste prejudice, better social position, education, healthcare, housing and professional facilities etc. For example, it is not uncommon for Christian charities operating in India to reserve better, cheaper or even free medical treatment only to those who accept to convert to Christianity. According to the analysis published by the magazine *Hinduism Today* (February 1989), Christian missionary organisations spend an average of 6,000 US\$ on various forms of enticement *for each person* they want to convert to Christianity. However, it is not difficult to observe that social discrimination and neglect, and even caste prejudice continue unabated in the communities of converts to abrahamic religions, and in fact the lives of individuals and their families become even more difficult and subject to strict control and exploitation. Reconversion to Hinduism should therefore be encouraged and supported, but not simply out of political or demographical motivations, because such approach would have mostly temporary, superficial, cosmetical effects, which in the long run could actually be counter-productive and discrediting for Hinduism as a whole.

The movement for Hindu Renaissance or Resurgence should not forget or neglect the needy, poor and downtrodden, but it can become much more effective if it directs more significant efforts towards the educated classes of Indian society and those who desire the "development" of India, to involve them into active service and cooperation. This can be done especially by facilitating and enlisting the selfless help of dedicated individuals who, being born and raised in industrialised countries and western cultures, have acquired a good first-hand experience of the benefits and the pitfalls of the modernisation development model proposed for India. Many Indian Hindu parents aspired (and still aspire) to send their children abroad for a better education, because they believe that the knowledge and experience accumulated in this way can be very valuable for themselves and for India in general - but in the process there is a serious risk that the students will come in contact with individuals and groups that are distinctly averse to Hinduism: for this reason traditional Hindus frowned upon those who had gone "across the ocean", thus being contaminated by exposure to degraded adharmic ideas and practices.

However, trying to maintain purity by simply abstaining from dangers of contamination is not a viable system especially in the present age. Constant and active purification is required for everyone: one needs to take bath daily because simply abstaining from touching contaminating substances is

not sufficient and even not possible, as our own bodies produce such substances daily. It would be utter foolishness and ignorance for someone to decide never to take bath because he believes he is "genetically clean" and therefore he has no need to purify himself regularly. The most dangerous contamination that we need to remove is the influence of the lower gunas of rajas and tamas, manifested as attachment to ignorance and foolishness, materialistic identification with the gross body, desire for degrading sensual pleasures, bad habits in food and other basic necessities of life, and the contaminating contact with envy, malice, cruelty, greed, anger, jealousy, lust, avarice, hatred, fear, intoxication, arrogance, selfishness, egotism, deceit and ungratefulness.

The great Rishis devised the best antidote to such danger, and inspired sincere and devoted souls to carry the original pure Vedic message across the oceans and welcome those westerners who chose to purify themselves, so that they can come to India and be exemplary models of purification and even purifying teachers for those students who want to expand their horizon while still preserving their valuable tradition, in pursuance of the famous instruction from *Rig Veda* (1.1.89): *aa no bhadrah kratavo yantu visvatah*, "let good things come to us from everywhere".

We have seen how the movement of conversions towards Hinduism among persons of foreign origin was already an accepted standard in ancient times. Besides the conversions proper, there was a general favorable attitude towards all visitors and travelers, and those who wanted to acquire knowledge in various sciences (without converting to Hinduism) were welcome to stay and learn, so much that many Universities flourished with thousands of teachers and students coming from all over the known world. Commerce was also thriving, so much that some moralists in ancient Rome complained that all the gold of Europe was being sent to India to pay for the wonderful imports, from spices to medicines to textiles.

There was a hiatus with a breaking down of communications between India and the West starting with the imposition of Christianity in the old Roman Empire in the 4th century, followed by the violent expansion of Islam in the 7th century; Islamic historian Abu Raihan Alberuni, who visited India in 1017 CE, clearly stated that mistrust against foreigners developed only after the Islamic incursions and attacks. The situation became more explosive with the inevitable clashes between Christianity and Islam for the control of the old world, and the scene started to clear up a bit only around the 1500s, when the European resistance had successfully fought Islam back and a Renaissance of trade and culture enabled a new merchant class to rise above the preoccupations and mutual hostilities of Christian clergy and royalty. Outside Europe other vast regions, including India, were still under Islamic domination or threat, creating serious obstacles in traveling and commerce, to the point that European traders felt the need to discover new routes to the Indies by sea even if this meant circumnavigating the entire planet. The discovery of the Americas or "West Indies" also distracted European attention for some time, but the interest of colonial governments towards India rose again as their global power became greater than the dominion of the Islamic potentates, a position sealed by the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

## Individuals who embraced Hindu beliefs

In colonial times, the marked increase in contacts between India and Europe fostered a new wave of conversions to Hinduism.

**Charles Stuart** (1758-1828) who became known as "Hindoo Stuart". As an officer in the East India Company Army stationed in Calcutta, he openly took to Hinduism both in ideology and in practice, also adopting the traditional Hindu dress (which he recommended to Europeans settled in India as best suited to Indian weather) and bathing in the Ganges every morning. He kept a number of Hindu Deities in his home and wrote books (especially *Vindication of the Hindoos*, 1808) and several newspaper articles deploring the attitudes and activities of the "obnoxious and dangerous" Christian missionaries who deprecated Indian culture.

Another famous British man who embraced Hinduism was **Sir John George Woodroffe** (1865-1936), appointed Standing Counsel to the Government of India in 1902, High Court Bench from 1904 to 1922, and Chief Justice in 1915. He wrote several very favorable books on Hinduism, such as *Introduction to the Tantra Śāstra* (1913), *Tantra of the Great Liberation (Mahānirvāna Tantra)*, 1913), *Hymns to the Goddess* (1913), *Shakti and Shākta* (1918), *The Serpent Power* (1919), *Hymn to Kali: Karpuradi-Stotra* (1922), *The World as Power* (1922), *The Garland of Letters* (1922) and so on.

It is not possible to elaborate on all the British officers who described Hinduism in very favorable terms especially in comparison with Christianity; we can quickly mention Louis Jacolliot (1837-1890) supreme judge in the court of Chandranagar for the colonial regime, John Ovington (the king's chaplain) reporting on his visit to India in 1689, diplomat Sir William Temple, Lord Warren Hastings (1732-1818) first governor general of India (1773-1785), Sir Thomas Munro (1761-1827) governor of Madras (in 1819), Colonel James Tod (1782-1835), Sir William Wedderburn Bart (1838-1918) magistrate in Pune and chief secretary to the government in Bombay, Sir John Malcolm (1829-1896) governor of Bombay, Lord Curzon (1859-1925) Marquis of Kedleston viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905, Sir Charles Norton Edgcumbe Eliot (1864-1931), Francis Yeats-Brown (1886-1944) officer of the Bengal Lancers, and Sir William Jones (1746-1794) judge of the supreme court in Calcutta and founder of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.

We have compiled a chapter in our *Introduction to Vedic Knowledge* collecting the statements of these officers, together with quotes from ancient Greek authorities such as Xenophon and Apollonius of Tyana including many illustrious names of European philosophers and writers along history and up to the contemporary giants of modern physics and science, who deeply appreciated Hindu culture and tradition, although they did not actually convert to Hinduism - and therefore we are not discussing them in this book.

**Annie Besant** (1847-1933, née Wood) was a famous British (Irish) woman who loved India very much. She never actually converted to Hinduism as her interests were always more social and political than religious or spiritual, except for the typically atheist perspective of Theosophy. She

met Helena Blavatsky and joined the Theosophical Society in 1890 and became its president in 1907 establishing its international headquarters in Chennai (then Madras). She moved to India and adopted the white sari of a widow as a sign of mourning over the wrongdoings Britain had committed in India, and started the Central Hindu School where Sanskrit was taught together with English, with the purpose of protecting the native culture. A dedicated campaigner for human rights all her life, in 1916 she launched the All India Home Rule League along with Lokamanya Tilak, modelling demands for India on Irish nationalist activities. In June 1917 Besant was arrested and interned at a hill station; the Congress and the Muslim League together threatened to launch protests if she were not set free. Besant's arrest created a focus for protest and after 3 months she was released and became the President of the Indian National Congress for one year.

**Mirabehn** (née Madeleine Slade, 1892-1982) was the daughter of British Rear-Admiral Sir Edmond Slade, a high officer in the Royal Navy, Commander-in-Chief of the East Indies Squadron and later Director of the Naval Intelligence Division. In her early life she was passionate about music, so she went to meet Romain Rolland who had written on Ludwig van Beethoven and on that occasion she came to know about MK Gandhi; very inspired, she wrote to him asking to join his Sabarmati Ashram and Gandhi consented. She arrived in India in 1925 after spending one year in preparation in UK, becoming vegetarian, learning to spin and reading *Bhagavad gita* and *Rig Veda*. She was received in Ahmedabad by Mahadev Desai, Vallabhbhai Patel and Swami Anand, then she went to Gurukul Kangri to learn Hindi and to the Bhagwat Bhakti Ashram of Rewari established by Swami Paramanand Maharaja. In 1931 she accompanied Gandhi to the Round Table Conference in London, then she was imprisoned during 1932-1933 for her work in support of India's independence.

She traveled to plead India's case with political figures such as David Lloyd George, General Smuts, Winston Churchill and Mrs Roosevelt at the White House. She also participated to the establishment of the Sevagram Ashram, and worked among the people of Orissa to resist any potential Japanese invasion non-violently in the beginning of 1942. From August 1942 to May 1944 she was arrested and detained with Gandhi in the Aga Khan Palace, Pune, where she saw Mahadev Desai and Kasturba Gandhi pass away. After her release she established the Kisan Ashram near Roorkee, the Pashulok Ashram near Rishikesh and a settlement named Bapu Gram and the Gopal Ashram in Bhilangana. During the time she spent in Kumaon and Garhwal she observed the destruction of the forests there and the impact it was having on floods in the plains; she wrote about it in an essay titled *Something Wrong in the Himalaya* but her advice was ignored by the Forest Department. In the 1980s these areas witnessed a large Gandhian environmental campaign to save the forests called the Chipko Movement. In 1981 she was awarded the Padma Vibhushan. Mirabehn's autobiography is entitled *The Spirit's Pilgrimage*.

**Satyananda Stokes** (born Samuel Evans Stokes Jr, 1882-1946)

An American who settled in India and actively participated in the Indian Independence Movement, he was jailed in 1921 for sedition against the British government. In 1932 he officially converted to Hinduism, taking the name "Satyananda" while his wife Agnes changed her name to "Priyadevi", and built a temple for the Arya Samaj at Thanedar, which became famous as Paramajyoti Mandir. He is best remembered today for having introduced apple cultivation to Himachal Pradesh, where apples are today the major horticultural export crop. He expressed his own philosophy of life in a

book entitled *Satyakam*, explaining that he had decided to convert to Hinduism because he detested the Christian concept of eternal punishment. He wrote, "The light from the Hindu scriptures has come to fill the gaps in Christianity."

**Swami Bharatananda**, born Maurice Frydman (Maurycy Frydman-Mor, 1901-1977). He came to India in the late 1930s as a Jewish refugee from Warsaw and became a sannyasi living in the ashrama of Gandhi; he made the spinning wheel that Gandhi himself used. He was friend to Advaita guru Nisargadatta Maharaj (who sat at his deathbed) and edited and translated his tape-recorded conversations into the English language producing the book *I Am That*, published in 1973. In 1939 together with MK Gandhi and the Raja of Aundh, he drafted the November Declaration giving power to the people within the general scheme of the freedom struggle.

**Swami Agehananda Bharati**, born Leopold Fischer in Vienna (Austria) in 1923. He converted to Hinduism taking the name Ramachandra, and later entered the order of sannyasa. He taught in Delhi University, Banaras Hindu University, and Nalanda Institute in India, then moved to the USA where he died in New York (1991). He published over 500 works, including an autobiography called *The Ochre Robe*.

**Tirumati Leelawathy Ramanathan** (née RL Harrison in 1870).

She was the Australian-born wife of Ponnambalam Ramanathan, who helped establish the Hindu Education Board in 1923 and served as its president and manager of schools; he was also president of the Thiruvalluvar Maha Sabai in Madras. In 1907 Ramanathan rebuilt the Sri Ponnambala Vaneswara Temple at Sea Street in Kochchikade, that had been founded by his father. Leelawathy married Ramanathan in 1906, and when her husband died in 1924 she took the white dress of Hindu widows, built the Kurinji Andavar Temple and retired there for puja and study, writing several books.

**Indra Devi** (née Eugenie V Peterson, 1899)

Of Russian origin, at the age of 15 she read a book by Rabindranath Tagore and a book by Yogi Ramacharaka, then in 1927 (13 years later) she moved to India and acted in the earliest Indian films. After the Maharaja of Mysore spoke on her behalf, she was accepted as a student by famous Yoga guru Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, and in 1938 she was studying alongside BKS Iyengar and K Pattabhi Josi, who would become world-famous yoga teachers. In 1939 she started the first Yoga school in Shanghai at the house of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, wife of the nationalist leader, who became a yoga enthusiast, together with many Americans and Russians, who called her Mataji. She gave many public lectures on yoga and free lessons in orphanages.

**Savitri Bai Khanolkar** (née Eve Yvonne Maday de Maros, in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 1913).

She married the Indian Army Captain (later Major General) Vikram Ramji Khanolkar in 1932 and subsequently changed her name to Savitri Bai Khanolkar, became a Hindu and acquired Indian citizenship. She always claimed that she had been "born in Europe by mistake" as she was an Indian soul, and woe unto him who dared to call her a "foreigner"!

Savitri Bai continued her social work even in her later years, helping the soldiers and their families and refugees who had been displaced during the Partition. She is best known for designing the

Param Vir Chakra, India's highest military decoration, as well as the Ashok Chakra (AC), Maha Vir Chakra (MVC), Kirti Chakra (KC), Vir Chakra (VrC) and Shaurya Chakra (SC). She had also designed the General Service Medal 1947, which was used until 1965. After her husband's death in 1952, she retired to the Ramakrishna Math and wrote a book on the *Saints of Maharashtra* that is still popular today.

Another famous Savitri was **Savitri Devi Mukherji** (1905-1982), née Maximiani Portas of Greek-French origin. She traveled to India to research on the roots of aryan civilisation; in 1939 she married Asit Krishna Mukherji, a Bengali brahmin with National Socialist views who edited the pro-German newspaper *New Mercury*; together they helped Subhash Chandra Bose to get in touch with the Japanese government to support his Indian National Army in the campaign against the British occupation. She wrote, "We defend Hinduism, because it is India's very self-expression; and we love India, because it is India... Hinduism is really superior to other religions, not for its spirituality, but for that still more precious thing it gives to its followers: a scientific outlook on religion and on life... If those of Indo-European race regard the conquest of pagan Europe by Christianity as a decadence, then the whole of Hindu India can be likened to a last fortress of very ancient ideals, of very old and beautiful religious and metaphysical conceptions, which have already passed away in Europe. Hinduism is thus the last flourishing and fecund branch on an immense tree which has been cut down and mutilated for two thousand years."

**Sri Dharma Mittra**, born in 1939, in Pirapora, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

He started studying Yoga in 1958 under Swami Kailashananda and became a prominent Yoga master in south America.

**Alain Daniélou** (1907-1994) of French origin, converted to Shaivite Hinduism with the name of Shiva Sharan initiated by Swami Karpatri, of whom he translated several works. In 1935 he joined the Banaras Hindu University, where he studied Hindu music, Sanskrit, Indian philosophy and Hindu religion for the next 15 years. In 1949 he was appointed as a research professor at the same University, a post he held until 1953. In 1991 he was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship, the highest honour conferred by India's National Academy for Music, dance and Drama. In one of his books he wrote "The Hindu lives in eternity... Hinduism especially in its oldest, Shivaite form, never destroyed its past. It is the sum of human experience from the earliest times. Non-dogmatic, it allows every one to find his own way."

**David Frawley** born in 1950, also known as Pandit Vamadeva Sastri, a name he received from Avadhuta Shastri in 1991. In his book *How I Became a Hindu: My Discovery of Vedic Dharma* (published in 2000), he explains he discovered the Vedas through the work of Sri Aurobindo around 1970 as part of his research in Yoga and Vedanta under the auspices of MP Pandit, then connected with Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni, disciple of Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, and with the Indian Shaivite teacher Sadguru Sivananda Murty. Frawley's translations of hymns from the *Rig Veda* were published in 1980-1984 in the journals of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. In 1980 Frawley founded the Vedic Research Center, renamed in 1988 as the American Institute of Vedic Studies established in Santa Fe (New Mexico) offering educational information on Yoga philosophy, Ayurveda, and Vedic astrology, for which he is known as Vedacharya, Vaidya and Jyotishi.

He is also professor at the Hindu University of America in Orlando (Florida) and wrote a considerable number of books, including *How I Became a Hindu*, *Arise Arjuna: Hinduism and the modern world*, *Awaken Bharata: A Call for India's Rebirth*, *Hinduism and the Clash of Civilizations*, *Gods, Sages, and Kings*, *From the River of Heaven*, *Hinduism: The Eternal Tradition (Sanatana Dharma)*, *The Myth of the Aryan Invasion Theory*, *In Search of the Cradle of Civilization*, *The Rig Veda and the History of India*, *Yoga and Ayurveda*, *Tantric Yoga*, *Wisdom of the Ancient Seers*, *Yoga and the Sacred Fire*, *Oracle of Rama*, *Ayurvedic Healing*, *Ayurveda and Marma Therapy*, *Yoga for Your Type: Ayurvedic Guide to Your Asana Practice*, *Ayurveda: Nature's Medicine*, *Yoga of Herbs: Ayurvedic Guide to Herbal Medicine*, *Ayurveda and the Mind*, *Astrology of the Seers*, *Ayurvedic Astrology*.

In 1993 he received the title of Jyotish Kovid from the Indian Council of Astrological Sciences (ICAS) followed by the title of Jyotish Vachaspati in 1996. In 1996 he was conferred the title of Pandit along with the Brahmachari Vishwanathji Award in Bombay. In 2014 he received a Doctorate of Letters from Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana in Bangalore, in 2017 he received a second Doctorate of Letters from Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Avadh University in Faizabad. In 2015 he was honored by the President of India with the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian award granted by the Government of India for "distinguished service of a high order to the nation."

He wrote, "Hinduism honors the Earth as the Divine Mother and encourages us to honor her and help her develop her creative potentials. The deities of Hinduism permeate the world of nature... they don't belong to a single country or book only... I see Hinduism as a religion eminently suited for all lands and for all people because it requires that we connect with the land and its creatures - that we align our individual self with the soul of all beings around us."

**François Gautier** (born in 1950 in France)

He is a political analyst for the French daily paper *Le Figaro* and defender of Indian nationalism, author of *A Western journalist on India: The Ferengi's Columns*, *Rewriting Indian History* and *A New History of India*. He wrote, "Ancient Hindus were intensely secular in spirit, as their spirituality was absolutely non-sectarian - and still is today in a lesser measure... Hinduism is probably the only religion in the world which has never tried to convert others, or conquer other countries to propagate itself as a new religion... For the greatness of India is spiritual. The world has lost the truth. We have lost the Great Sense, the meaning of our evolution, the meaning of why so much suffering, why dying, why getting born... But India has kept this truth. India has preserved it through seven millennia of pitfalls, genocides, and mistakes."

He is connected with Sri Ravi Shankar, guru of The Art of Living, although he never uses his diksha name.

**Michael Danino** (born in 1956, at Honfleur, France)

From an early age he was attracted to India and especially to Aurobindo; in 1977 he moved to India, participating in the translation and publication of the works of Aurobindo and Mère. In 2001 he convened the International Forum for India's Heritage (IFIH) with the mission of promoting the essential values of India's heritage in every field of life and in 2017 he received the Padma Shri award for his contribution towards literature and education; his most popular book is *Effects of Colonization on Indian Thought* (1999).

### **Dr Ramdas Lamb**

He took diksha from the Ramananda sampradaya and lived as a sadhu in north India from 1969 until 1978, then he returned to the West to engage in the mainstream academic system, becoming professor at the Department of Religion, University of Hawaii, Honolulu (USA), and working with the Hindu American Foundation to correct the unfavorable presentation of Hinduism in school text books propagated by mainstream academic and government culture. He is president and founder of Sahayog Foundation, a USA based charity to support Hindu education projects in India, and is recipient of International Tulsi Award from the Hindu University of America in 1999 and Dharma Sevak Award from DANAM and Taksha Shila University in 2009. Co-Editor of *Asceticism Identity and Pedagogy in Dharma Traditions* (2006), he has published many articles, including *Asceticism and Devotion: The Many Faces of Râm Bhakti in the Râmânanda Sampradây* (1994), *Rapt in the Name: The Ramnamis, Ramnam, and Untouchable Religion in Central India* (2002), *Beyond Anthropology: Towards a Global, Pluralist Perspective in Hindu Studies* (2005), *Râja Yoga, Asceticism, and the Râmânanda Sampradây* (2005) and *A Casteless Hinduism: A View from Top and Bottom* (2006).

### **Dr Jeffery Long**

Professor of Religious Studies at Elizabethtown College (Pennsylvania, USA) and a practicing Hindu, he is associated with Vedanta Society, DĀNAM (the Dharma Academy of North America) and the Hindu American Foundation, with which he has worked in their lawsuit against the California Board of Education to correct unfavorable presentations of Hinduism in school text books. He has written *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (2007), *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism* (2011), and the article "Hindu-To Be or Not To Be: Three Possible Reasons for Aversion to the Term 'Hindu' among Western Practitioners".

**Han Snel** (1925-1998) was a famous Dutch painter born in Scheveningen, who moved to Bali, Indonesia in the 1940s. Snel converted to Hinduism and became a citizen of Indonesia.

This was just a very short list of prominent persons of non-Indian origin who took up Hinduism independently and remained independent in their own spiritual journey, without becoming exclusively affiliated with any particular organisation or guru. Those who joined Hindu religious organisations, mathas or sampradayas, identifying themselves solely with that particular tradition, have been listed in the next sections together with the founder of their tradition - we can mention for example the numerous western disciples of Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda and Sri Aurobindo, who carried on their mission sometimes starting their own branches, and the contemporary leaders and acharyas of non-Indian origin who are officially representing ancient Hindu traditions such as Gaudiya Vaishnavism and the Nandinatha Sampradaya.

There is also a huge number of persons of western origin who became attracted to Indian culture and embraced Hinduism in their own way, much as ordinary Indian Hindus generally do. Many of such people did not come to the point of officially converting to Hinduism, although they valued and followed its teachings - a position that we could actually compare to the stand of many Indian Hindus. Some of those people are famous in their own right because of their philosophical, scientific or cultural work, some are celebrities on a more mundane level (such as film actors), and many more will remain vastly anonymous because of their "ordinary" position in life. We can briefly mention some of the most recent celebrities among them:

- \* Julia Roberts, actress; in 2010 she told *Elle* magazine that she had converted to Hinduism under the inspiration of Neem Karoli Baba. In 2009 Swami Daram Dev of Ashram Hari Mandir in Pataudi, where Roberts was shooting *Eat, Pray, Love*, gave her children new names: Lakshmi for Hazel, Ganesh for Phinnaeus and Krishna Balaram for Henry.
- \* John Coltrane, American jazz saxophonist, in 1965 he recorded *Om*, a 29 minutes piece with chants from *Bhagavad gita* and explanation of the sacred syllable om as a cosmic spiritual common denominator in all things; his second wife Alice McLeod Coltrane, pianist and harpist, became a devotee of Sai Baba and in 1970 she changed her name to Turiya sangita ananda; their son Ravi Coltrane was named after Ravi Shankar.
- \* George Harrison, guitarist of the Beatles, introduced the other members to Indian spirituality and personally had contacts with several Hindu teachers such as Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Vishnu Devananda (founder of Sivananda Yoga), and also admired Vivekananda and Yogananda. His song "My sweet Lord" contains the Hare Krishna mantra; in 1973 he donated to Iskcon the Bhaktivedanta Manor (17 acres in Watford later expanded into 70), open to up to 60,000 visitors for annual festivals such as Janmashtami.
- \* Russell Brand, actor, connected both to Iskcon and Transcendental Meditation, in 2010 married Katy Perry with a Hindu ritual in Rajasthan.
- \* Craig Hamilton-Parker, British psychic and paranormal researcher, took the name of Paramesvaran and recorded his story in a book and a film, *Mystic Journey to India*.

Even among the Hindu converts of foreign origin who accepted a Hindu name, many use(d) their Hindu name only occasionally, either because they were/ are still interested in academic positions within the conventional system, or because their dedication to religious and spiritual pursuits was/ is limited by material and cultural considerations. Therefore we will not present them as relevant examples in our discussion, but we will rather speak of their teachers and guides of Indian origin who accepted several thousands of disciples of western origin for the purpose of introducing them to Hinduism and Vedic tradition.

Conversion from Islam to Hinduism has historically been more difficult because of the violent persecution against "apostates", so much that advertising one's conversion means attracting a death sentence. Even so, a few famous personalities have defied this danger:

- \* Kusro Khan, enslaved as a child by Alauddin Khilji; after seizing the power and becoming sultan in his own right, he reconverted to Hinduism.
- \* Bukka the co-founder of Vijayanagar empire.
- \* Netaji Palkar, general of the Maratha empire, who had been forcibly converted in prison as Muhammed Kuli Khan.
- \* Harilal Gandhi, son of MK, converted to Islam and then again to Hinduism.
- \* Nargis, 1929-1981, Bollywood actress, politician and social worker, married actor Sunil Dutt.
- \* Pt Mahendra Pal Arya, formerly Mehboob Ali, was imam of masjid for 20 years, then converted to Hinduism through Arya Samaj and subsequently converted more than 20,000 islamic scholars. In 2007 he successfully held a debate with Tariq Murtaza, professor at Aligarh Muslim University, core member of the team of Zakir Naik; in 2008 he had another successful debate with Murtaza's teacher, Abdullah Tariq of Rampur, in Bulandshahar, UP.

- \* Palakkode Hassan, trained as islamic scholar for 5 years before conversion.
- \* Ifa Sudewi, the chief judge of Bali bombing case, Indonesia.
- \* Aashish Khan, sarod player of Maiyyar Gharana.
- \* Chander Mohan, politician, had converted to Islam for marriage, then when he divorced again returned to Hinduism.

## Hindu revival

It is a fact that in the course of centuries Hinduism suffered a gradual decline, falling from the ideal implementation of the original Vedic model because of various reasons. According to the Vedic shastra (compiled at the onset of this decadence period) a major factor was the advancement of Kali yuga, a cyclical season of the universe that diminishes the good qualities of people (intelligence, health, duration of life, strength, good luck, etc) and the quality of life in general with a degradation of the environment (poverty, pollution, conflicts, oppression, injustice, etc). The influence of Kali yuga favors the worst tendencies in human beings such as ignorance (tamas) and greed (rajas), and this in turn generates all sorts of problems for the individuals and for society. The internal weakening of Hindu society produced dysfunctional divisions and lack of cooperation between individuals and groups, which in turn exposed India to invasions and wars of conquest by adharmic people, and even more degradation from the original model, in a vicious circle that has become quite visible, as pointed out by many reformers.

Since the original model is perfect, anyone who reaches far enough back to the source can find pure uncontaminated water to quench his own thirst and to bring back for the people in general. This is the symbolic meaning of the traditional journey towards the Himalayas, that Hindu yogis and sadhus have performed for thousands of years, in search of the purest sacred water. So when we speak of "reforming Hinduism" we must clearly understand that the required action is not about changing the original Vedic model into something more "modern" or "progressive", but about removing the accumulation of non-compatible cultural superimpositions and contaminating distortions, that in the view of simplistic people have come to represent the standard of Hinduism but are in fact nothing but *lankika sraddha*, or popular beliefs.

Many great spiritual personalities have taken action in the course of the centuries since the onset of Kali yuga, proposing different perspectives (called darshanas) of the same supreme natural religion of human beings that we can call Dharma and Vidya.

After the disappearance of Krishna, the next famous teacher was Sakyamuni Siddhartha Gautama (the historical Buddha) who is also recognised as one of the Vishnu avatars, then came Adi Shankaracharya, who corrected the deviations created by the unqualified followers of Buddhism. Still, Adi Shankara continued to teach that supreme religion of Dharma and Vidya, that points to the realisation of the divine nature of all life, as we can see in his famous *Manisha panchakam*. What is the concept of Advaita, if not the abolition of the ignorant illusion of duality based on bodily

identification? Narayana lives in the hearts of all creatures and always remains transcendental to their bodily conditions, and the same applies to the atman that is non-different from brahman, therefore the enlightened sage sees all beings with an equal vision of respect and affection, and works for the benefit of all beings.

Even more than that, the *jivatmas* that have attained the human form of life inherently possess the instruments to become fully conscious of their transcendental nature, therefore they are called *amritasya putrah*, "children of immortality". This is what the *Vedanta sutra* proclaims: *athato brahma jijjnasa*, "now, that you have attained the human form of life and have received the opportunity to enquire about Brahman - is the time to do so". The particular circumstances of birth for a human being can be favorable or unfavorable, but they never determine the eligibility for spiritual realisation, as we can see confirmed in many passages in the shastra presenting teachings and examples of individual stories.

In the course of centuries, tradition records the continued presence of a number of Siddhas, perfect yogis on the level of Nandi (Siva's companion), Agastya Rishi, Patanjali Rishi, Dhanvantari and Valmiki, who lived long before the beginning of the present Kali yuga. They were direct disciples of personalities considered as legendary, such as Shiva Mahadeva or Dattatreya Vishnu, Devarshi Narada, or disciples or their disciples. Because mainstream history academics are not prepared to accept the very long timeline claimed by Tradition, there is a measure of controversy surrounding the dating of the various Siddhas, but establishing a precise time frame for the eternal teaching of the eternal knowledge should not be a primary concern.

Another possible point of confusion is that existence of different lists of Siddhas, and the fact that some of these individual personalities have been described with various names in different languages, according to the ancient tradition by which names are seen as expression of qualities, attributes, or activities, rather than legal means of identification. The parameters of *desa*, *kala*, *patra*, that define the coordinates of place, time and individuality, are merely relative indications and can be applied in both directions to facilitate the understanding of unlimited knowledge to limited intellects. In other words, the consideration of *desa*, *kala*, *patra* apply both to the persons who presented the knowledge and to the persons who are studying such knowledge - that is, both to the guru and to the sisya. This is the reason why there are different presentations or perspectives (*darshanas*), although all realised teachers agree that there is no substantial difference among the various approaches and lineages that are genuinely based on Dharma and Vidya.

It is not appropriate to make distinctions among Siddhas based on time and place, but we can safely conclude that they all worked to re-establish the eternal principles of Vedic knowledge and to spread them around, accepting disciples without any discrimination of birth, and attaining the highest spiritual level without being restricted by their own birth. For example, it is well known that Valmiki was born in a non-arya community, so much that still today the family name Valmiki is used for one category of untouchable low caste clans. Apart from his birth and upbringing, Valmiki Rishi himself engaged in adharmic activities during the early years of his life, before becoming reformed by the great Devarshi Narada.

Agastya, Tirumular, Bogar and others are known to have come from north India, while Agappei Siddhar and Pampatti Siddhar are of Tamil origin, while the origin of others has not been specified. The notion that Siddhar Bogar was born in China can also be interpreted in a wider sense, because it is known that he lived and taught in China for a very long time and at some point he entered the

body (*kaya pravesha*) of a dead Chinese sage in order to continue his activities. This act obviously shatters the birth prejudices such as caste, race and nationality - all concepts based on the fundamental ignorance consisting in bodily identification, and nullifies the relevance of the debate on whether Bogar was actually born in China or not. Other examples of this yogic power of *kaya pravesha* have been demonstrated also in very recent times for example by Tibeti Baba and Haidakhandi Baba. Other yogis prefer to remain in the same body for a longer period up to several hundreds of years, as demonstrated by Devrah Baba (died in 1990), Totapuri (died in 1871) and Trailanga Swami (died in 1887) among the most famous.

The Siddha tradition is totally independent but has given origin to the currents known as Tantra, Saiva Siddhanta, Kashmiri Shaivism and others, both in the north and in the south (especially in the Tamil region) and even outside India. It is also claimed to be the basis for the work of more recent spiritual teachers, such as Paramahansa Yogananda and others, that are usually counted in the field of Neo-Hinduism.

There is some amount of confusion, even on official sites, about the definition "Neo Hinduism", as the idea of "new" can make people imagine a very recent development within their own frame of reference or even in the span of their own lifetime, so it may come as a surprise that the "new Hinduism" or "reformed Hinduism" movement started quite a long time ago. However, since historians speak of "Neo Hinduism" as the abrahamic-oriented reformist cultural trend that developed between 1830 and 1947, with the first stirrings of the nationalist sentiments that inspired the struggle for Indian independence from the British colonial empire, we will briefly study the phenomenon through the life and teachings of famous names such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay Chatterjee (1838-1894), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) and many others.

As we have mentioned, the awareness about the need of constant reform of deviations goes back a long time in history, especially in regard to overcoming birth prejudice and other social evils, but until the 1800s no teacher had felt the need to modify the Vedic presentation in order to include abrahamic concepts, which is a characteristic of the specific definition of the "Neo Hinduism" movement, because in general many people still remembered the original Vedic system in its pure form, free from such deviations. The perspective of conventional academic historians attributes the characteristics of this new movement to the influence of Western ideas and education and to a crisis of confidence in the value of Hinduism; their definition is "the adoption of Western concepts and standards and the readiness to reinterpret traditional ideas in light of these new, imported and imposed modes of thought".

We find this interpretation dangerously misleading. While it is true that western influence stimulated the concepts of political activism, associationism, a sense of nationalism based on a collective native racial identity of Indians, a crisis of confidence in Hinduism and a deep inferiority complex of Indians towards the allegedly developed and technically advanced European culture, several other assumptions of conventional academics are deeply incorrect. For example, some authors foolishly claimed that the Neo Hindu movement "placed a heightened reliance upon the *Bhagavad gita* in spite of its traditional classification as a text of lesser importance than the Veda, the ultimate scriptural authority". Obviously such authors have absolutely no idea about the position of the Arya Samaj, and totally ignore that *Bhagavad gita* was already extremely important already in the times of Adi

Shankara, who wrote the famous *Gita mahatmya*. Another ignorant misconception is that due to the influence of Christianity, Neo-Hinduism started to oppose the social injustice of caste and gender prejudice and instead became involved in practical service to humanity: such "reformist ideals" were actually the original system described in the ancient scriptures and accepted by the teachers who were truly orthodox (literally, "correctly following the original scriptures") many centuries before any contact with Christianity.

Luckily, some representatives of the Neo Hinduism movement were able to understand all this - Vivekananda for example - and therefore they used the English language, vocabulary and references to help the global public opinion to get a first measure of understanding and appreciation for Hinduism. These great personalities could see that it was essential for India to open up to the world and offer the valuable contribution of Hinduism for the benefit of the entire planet. Their wonderful work has brought considerable results, to the point that favorable interest towards Hinduism has grown exponentially over the decades, and today it is estimated that around the world there are almost 100 million practicing Hindus of non-Indian origin, and the international community has come to expect much from India as a nation.

Part of this trend has been labeled as Neo-Vedantism, also variously described as Global Hinduism or Hindu Universalism, and mainstream academics have been speculating on the differences in regard to the so-called "traditional Hinduism", even claiming that this "new style" of Hinduism is peripheral or even inauthentic, because it seems to emphasize personal consciousness rather than "traditional authorities", by which they mean the *corpus* of *laukika sraddha* based on birth prejudice, empty ritualism and social inequality that actually constitutes a serious deviation from the original Vedic system. The blame for this confusion is mostly due to the legally/ officially accepted "Hindu religious authorities" who are still failing spectacularly in their duties.

Another misleading point found in mainstream academic presentations is that Brahma Samaj, created by Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), was the main proponent of "Neo Vedantism"; even a superficial study of Brahma Samaj will show that its leaders never spoke about *Vedanta*, much less trying to give it a "new interpretation". In fact, the first point of the ideology in all varieties and offshoots of the Brahma Samaj is that it has no faith in *any scripture* as an authority. The only philosophical/ theological connection that Brahma Samaj maintained with the Vedic tradition was the acceptance of the term Brahman to indicate God, but interpreted as a monotheistic impersonal entity that was perfectly acceptable to the educated Christian missionaries. Debendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen reinforced this trend, favoring a sort of generic meditation approach that was later picked up by some prominent Yoga reformers such as BKS Iyengar.

The term "neo-Vedanta" seems to have been invented by Brajendra Nath Seal (1864-1938), who used the term to characterise the literary work of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), the composer of the national anthem *Vande Mataram*, meant to replace the popular devotional sentiments for the Mother Goddess (Durga, Kali etc) with a sort of impersonal dedication to the Nation of India; the song comes from his novel *Anandamath*, featuring an army of sannyasis fighting against the British soldiers, ultimately concluding that the British are not the enemy but friends (!!!). The definition was also used by Jesuit Robert Antoine (1914-1981) to define "dialogue partners with a broken identity who cannot truly and authentically speak for themselves and for the Indian tradition". Some credence to the definition can be ascribed to the work of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), first vice-president and second president of India, whose birthday is celebrated

nationally as Teacher's Day. Radhakrishnan went through the mainstream academic system, becoming Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford, but he was a strong critic of the interpretations of western indologists. Some academics suggested that the beginning of the trend was to be placed back to the period of islamic domination, when Hindus were somehow pushed to unity by the islamic view of giving the same label to all Indian traditions, with "a blurring of philosophical distinctions" that presented the entire *corpus* of Vedic knowledge as a consistent single whole and even created an inter-religious Bhakti movement that gave no importance to birth discrimination. These same scholars use a circular argument to "prove" that *Bhagavad gita* must have been composed after this period, because it gives so much importance to Bhakti; *consequently* in such perspective Adi Shankara who propagated *Bhagavad gita* must have been heavily influenced by islamic sufism.

Such theories are baseless. In fact we can see that all along Indian history, the desire for reform has been triggered by the observation of misconceptions and malpractices created by the decline of knowledge and ethical values, when an increased grossly materialistic and narrow-minded vision trivialised the highest concepts of *yajna* and *upasana*, separating them from the transcendental philosophical and theological knowledge and understanding, in a vicious circle of rigid superficial ritualism. Foreign invasions and dominations in relatively recent history (from 9th century onwards) played an important role in this decline, because abrahamic invaders were determined to impose their own ideologies, and their beliefs and policies normally included cruel and adharmic actions meant to destroy the Hindu sentiments, tradition and society in order to better control their population, territory and resources.

It is true that under the Islamic rule, Hinduism adapted and survived brilliantly by taking shelter in mysticism, developing a massive Bhakti movement that kept the entire sub-continent and Hindu culture united and alive in spite of incredible hardships. The preachers of Bhakti focused on overcoming the growing caste prejudice, the barriers of language and diverse ethnicities, and even the harrowing limitations of poverty, segregation and oppression, because devotional service and meditation do not need paraphernalia or temples or even physical images for the Deities, but are accessible to everyone, everywhere, any time. However, these were not new concepts, as we can see very easily if we carefully study the original scriptures especially the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad gita*, that undoubtedly preceded any islamic domination.

Under the British rule, the Bhakti approach remained extremely popular among the illiterate masses, but was generally typecast as primitive and superstitious pagan polytheism, treated as inferior compared to the supposedly superior "modern" monotheistic impersonalistic Christian culture of the so-called refined European gentlemen, officers and academicians, that were working to create a class of "brown sahibs" among the Indian "aristocracy" to support the new regime and thus created the so-called "Neo Vedantism" described above. The Christian paradigm was then hammered into the minds of all educated Indians through the indoctrination plans applied by Macauley and the English-medium schooling, and all apologists of Hinduism felt the need to use "English" definitions to explain their own religion - so much that still today Hindu activists normally use demeaning definitions such as "idolatry", "seer" and "incantation", believing these to be the correct terminology. Validating references to the Judeo-Christian tradition were considered obligatory, to demonstrate that Hinduism was "very much the same". Indian students have been indoctrinated through a very biased presentation that glossed over the unpleasantness of the actual history of Christianity and its truly fundamental tenets, as it is generally done for the less educated public at

global level even in the West. Those Indians who made efforts to learn Hebrew and Latin and Greek to study the Bible did not really have the cultural references to really understand it or did not dare to see its implications or speak of them, and simply used it as a source of quotes to support their own philosophical views.

At the same time, the original system of education of Hindu society had attained an unprecedented level of disintegration, increasing the burden of destructive *laukika sraddha* beliefs and practices and further alienating a growing number of persons even among the higher classes of Indian Hindus. Unfortunately by that time such spurious beliefs and practices had come to be considered as the actual "age old tradition" of Hinduism, therefore many intelligent and sincere people felt the need to "reform" Hinduism in a "modern and progressive" direction. Unfortunately in many cases they ended up throwing out the baby together with the bath water, so to speak.

The problem of superficial blind following also applies to the teachings and live examples of those great reformists, so that insufficiently informed people ended up either formally worshiping them as absolute authorities or condemning them as unqualified frauds or traitors, or taking them out of context to legitimise policies that can be confusing like continuing to fight a previous war that has already ended and refusing to recognise the new war with new enemies that are rampaging around them. I shall now try to present the required information to put neo-Hinduism in its proper historical and ideological perspective and especially considering the inspiration that such great personalities have given to me personally and can give to many other people to convert to Hinduism.

The order of presentation has been kept flexible because of the similar importance of the different criteria involved - historical timeline, geographical and ethnic origin, ideological positions and influence both within the Indian sub-continent and at global level. Readers can consult the Table of Contents at the beginning of the book to get a general view of the list of the personalities and groups discussed. Also, it is important to mention that it was not possible to mention too many sadhus and teachers, because a larger elaboration would have increased the size of the publication considerably.

### **Dayananda Saraswati and Arya Samaj**

Born in a brahmin family in Katthiawar (1825-1883), he was taught the *laukika sraddha* presumptions prominent in his community as the actual orthodox tradition of Hinduism, and because he was disgusted by those superficial adharmic beliefs and practices, he decided to reject everything that appeared to be connected to them - *Puranas*, *Mahabharata* (including *Bhagavad gita*), *Ramayana*, Bhakti, temple worship, etc. It is said that at the age of 13 he was observing the ritual *jagran* for Maha Shiva ratri, and saw a few rats coming out in the quiet night and running over the image of Shiva; he was so deeply shocked and horrified that God would "not even be able to protect himself from polluting rats" that he lost his faith. As his religious training had been narrow-minded, rigid and superficial (and maybe because he was too hungry and tired from the fasting) he was not able to consider that the sacred image of God is actually transcendental to material contamination and limitations, or that those rats were likely to have been (in their previous lifetimes) temple servants of the Deity who had degraded themselves yet still felt attraction to Mahadeva's image.

He then took it as his mission to emotionally condemn the "idol worship, ritualism, legends and superstitions" of the Hindu tradition, to the point that some of his more enthusiastic followers went to the extreme of deliberately defiling temples and Deities in "demonstrative raids". He felt that Hinduism must "return to the Vedas" and re-discover the deep and vast philosophical knowledge contained in the four original branches of *Rig, Sama, Yajur* and *Atharva Veda (Sambhitas, Aranyakas and Upanishads)*, also finding there evidence of the advanced scientific civilisation of ancient India, containing references to steam engines, electricity, airships, and other forgotten wonders. He rejected the later commentaries by Sayana, Mahidhara and Uvata in the smriti line, as well as the academic philological work of colonial scholars - however, he clearly stated that his reader is at perfect liberty to reject what he sees that is wrong, and to accept only what appears to him to be right. He simplified the idea of mantras through the meditation on the sacred syllable Om, considered "the real name of God", and insisted on the need of celibacy for the religious students and teachers to counteract the lusty exploitative malpractices of fake babas and corrupt temple priests.

Between 1866 and 1873, Dayananda had several meetings with Christian preachers, such as J Robson, JT Scott, Rudolf Hoernle and famous convert Lal Behari De; he then triumphed in public debates at Moradabad in 1876, at Chandpur Mela in 1877 and in over 20 occasions in Punjab, silencing preachers such as EM Wherry, W Hooper, WC Forman and Robert Clark, so that missionaries became increasingly reluctant to meet him. Dayananda also traveled to Calcutta to get to know the Brahmo Samaj, that in the meantime had split between the Adi Brahmo Samaj (with Debendra Nath Tagore and Rajnarayan Bose) and the Church of the New Dispensation (Nababidhana) of Keshub Chunder Sen, that attracted the majority of the members; the first group repudiated not only the varnashrama dharma but also the authority of the Vedas and the idea of reincarnation, while the second group was even more infatuated with Jesus Christ (as well as Mohammad and Moses) and praised the British culture of colonial times, deeply steeped in racism.

In 1875, Bombay, Dayananda Swami founded the Arya Samaj, advocating a return to "the original Vedas", encouraging conversion to Hinduism as a part of the reconstruction of the Indian heritage. Still today Arya Samaj is the most prominent Organisation recognised by the Indian government to officially and legally certify conversion to Hinduism, open to all irrespective of their birth (which includes westerners). In the preface of his book *Satyartha Prakash* ("The light of Truth") he writes: "It is a well-known fact that 5000 years ago there existed no other religion in the whole world but the Vedic."

Dayananda was the first to reject the Aryan Invasion Theory and to give the call of Svaraj, the demand for Indian independence in 1876, a call later taken up by Lokamanya Tilak; Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo called him one of the "makers of Modern India". He also gave great importance to the mission of Shuddhi, the purification of lower castes and re-conversion to Hinduism for those who had entered Islam or Christianity out of fear or compulsion or had been tricked into them. This work was spearheaded by his disciple Swami Shraddhananda (1856-1926), also known as Mahatma Munshi Ram Vij, who played a key role on the Sangathan (consolidation) Hindu reform movement from 1917, a work for which he left the Gurukul Kangri University he had established in 1902. Among the followers of Dayananda Swami who worked in this field there were also Mahashaya Rajpal, Pt Lekh Ram and many others. In 1879 Dayananda met, first at Saharanpore and afterwards at Meerut, Colonel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, the founders of the Theosophical Society; on 4th May Colonel Olcott in a public address said that he and Madame "had

come to India accepting the Swami as their guru and guide." However, it soon became evident that his so-called "American disciples" had no faith in God (as they openly declared to him) in spite of their public presentations (the word *theosophy* literally means "the science of God") and therefore they had ulterior motivations and plans, so he publicly rejected and exposed them. In much the same way, Indian philosopher and spiritualist Krishnamurti was approached by Theosophists, as we will see later on.

### **Shraddhananda Swami and the Bhartiya Hindu Shuddhi Mahasabha**

Swami Shraddhananda (1856-1926) was born in Talwar, Jalandhar district of Punjab, as Brihaspati Vij, but later he was called Munshi Ram Vij by his father Nanak Chand, who worked as a police inspector. After observing the bad behavior of so-called religious people he became atheist, and when his father suggested he attended a lecture by Dayananda Swami in Bareilly, at first he planned to go there to spoil it. However he was impressed by Dayananda's courage, skill and strong personality, and became his follower, eventually playing a key role on the Sangathan (consolidation) and the Shuddhi (re-conversion) movement in the 1920s.

In 1902 he established a Gurukul in Kangri, near Hardwar, in 1917 he established the Indraprastha Gurukula in Aravali near Faridabad, Haryana, then he took sannyasa and moved on to become an active member of the Indian Independence movement. In 1923 he founded the Bhartiya Hindu Shuddhi Mahasabha to abolish the practice of untouchability by converting outcasts from other religions to Hinduism and integrating them into the mainstream community by elevating their position. Shraddhananda's activism led to his death by assassination in 1926, but his movement continued - for example in 1928 a total of 7815 Catholics from the Goa region were converted to Hinduism in spite of the opposition of the Church and the local government.

### **Sarla Bedi**

Born as Sarla Kapila in 1925 in Sahnewal (India), as a child she moved with her parents to Kenya, then to support her family she took a teaching job in Nairobi and in 1946 she married Gobind Bedi, with whom she promoted social issues in the community. She also participated in the Indian Independence movement and became a member of the Arya Samaj. In 1972 following a political upheaval in East Africa she moved to Canada, where she established a center of Arya Samaj, and in 1976 she became the first female Hindu priest in Ontario, conducting traditional ceremonies for the Indian community there. In 1996 she built the Vedic Cultural Center in Markham.

### **Pandurang Shastri Athavale and the Swadhyay Parivar**

Also known as Dadaji, he was another prominent spiritual leader from the same background of Dayananda Sarasvati, having been born (1920-2003) in a Chitpavan brahmin family in Maharashtra, son of a Sanskrit teacher. In 1942 he started to give discourses at the Srimad Bhagavad Gita Pathshala, Madhavbaug (Mumbai), a center established by his father in 1926. In 1954 Athavale founded the Swadhyaya Parivar as a self-study process based on *Bhagavad Gita*, (but also including

*Upanishads* and *Vedas*) that spread across about 100,000 villages in India, as well as in USA, UK, Canada, and the Middle East, with over 50,000 *kendra* locations and 6 million adherents from all social backgrounds irrespective of caste.

In the same year he went to Japan to attend the Second World Philosophers' Conference, presenting the Vedic ideals and the teachings of *Bhagavad gita*; Nobel Prize-winning physicist Dr Arthur Holly Compton was so impressed that he offered support for his academic employment in the USA, but Athavale declined, saying that he had much to accomplish in his native India. Besides teaching the message of *Bhagavad gita*, Athavale and his followers also engaged in Prayog experiments on cooperative farming and tree-planting projects; its members are found in over 35 countries including Europe, America, Australia. In 1999 he received the Padma Vibhushan Award.

Dhanashree Talwalkar, also known as Didi, is the daughter and spiritual heir of Pandurang Shastri Athavale; at age 20 she conducted the first Geetatrayah, a three-day overview of *Bhagavad gita*, and she has continued ever since, also representing Hinduism at different conferences.

### **Chattampi Swamikal**

He was born (1853-1924) as Ayyappan at Kollur in Travancore, son of Vasudevan Namputhiri from Mavelikkara and Nangamma, a Nair from Kannammoola. His childhood name was Kunjan. As his parents were unable to pay for his education, he learned letters and words from children of his neighbourhood who attended schools, and Sanskrit from overhearing the classes of a local brahmin, until one uncle took him to Pettayil Raman Pillai Asan, the traditional school of a renowned scholar and writer who taught him without any fee and named him Chattampi as he was assigned to be the monitor of the class. In the 1870s Raman Pillai started a scholarly group named Jnanaprajagaram with experts on different subjects, so Kunjan was able to learn Tamil from Swaminatha Desikar, philosophy from Manonmaniyam Sundaram and yoga from Thycaud Ayyavu Swamikal. A visiting sadhu initiated him in the Balasubramanya mantra and he assumed the name Shanmukhadasa.

To support his family he engaged in manual work as a labourer carrying building materials for the construction of the Government Secretariat building in Trivandrum, then he became a document writer and advocate's clerk; he obtained the top position in a test for clerical posts in the Government Secretariat but soon left the job as he felt it was not favorable for his spiritual life. Later he met Subba Jatapadikal from Kalladaikurichin, a renowned teacher in Tarka, Vyakarana, Mimamsa and Vedanta, and went to study with him for several years, also learning Siddha medicine, music, and martial arts. He produced a Malayalam translation of the works of Kodakanallur Sundara Swamikal, then went to study also under a Christian priest and an old Sufi Muslim, and finally traveled for several months with avadhuta sadhus all over India, and stayed for a long sadhana with a sadhu in a forest in Vadaveeswaram, Tamil Nadu. In 1882 at the Aniyoor Temple near Vamanapuram, Swamikal met Nanu Asan, later known as Narayana Guru, who was in search of spiritual guidance; they traveled for many months together and Swamikal shared his knowledge, introducing him to his guru until Asan settled in Aruvippuram for his own personal sadhana.

Swamikal then returned to Kerala for his own preaching mission, denouncing the distorted interpretation of *laukika sraddha* beliefs and practices (incorrectly described as "conservative

orthodoxy"), and especially caste and gender prejudice and mechanical ritualism. He worked to promote vegetarianism and non-violence, also writing essays, critical works, translations, bhajan songs, commentaries, short notes and letters, as well as several books on spirituality and history, such as the *Pracheena Malayalam*, the *Adbibhasa* and the *Advaita Chinta paddhati* (1949), an introductory manual on practical Advaita. The most important is the *Vedadikara Nirupanam*, a strong refutation of the unjust monopolisation of Vedas, sciences and education on the basis of caste and gender prejudice. When Narayana Guru read it he said, "The words of the book are true like fire and it is our luck that these papers have not been burned".

In 1893 Swamikal met his second disciple, Theerthapada, a Sanskrit scholar and an expert in treating snake bites; Theerthapada Paramahansa also established many ashrams by his own. Other disciples were sannyasi Neelakanta Therthapada and grihasthas Bodheswaran, Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidhyan, Velutheri Kesavan Vaidhyan Kumbalath, Sanku Pillai etc. Among those who were strongly inspired by Swamikal were Narayana Guru, Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Abedananda and several others.

## **Narayana Guru**

Born (1854-1928) as Nanu, the only son of a peasant family in the untouchable Ezhava caste, in the village of Chempazhanthy near Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala), he was educated at least in part by Raman Pillai Asan, a Nair teacher from a nearby village, of whom he took the family name. At the time of his birth, Kerala was heavily dominated by the casteist mentality: the lower caste people had no access to temples, streets, educational institutions, or public water wells, and were not allowed to wear clothes on the upper body. Swami Vivekananda called Kerala a "lunatic asylum" because of those inhuman conditions.

Nanu Asan turned away from the temple rituals of his local village and travelled widely, living an ascetic lifestyle and seeking religious understanding, then he became a school teacher educating local children in religion and Sanskrit, he became a disciple of Chattampi Swami, who also introduced him to yoga guru Thycaud Ayyavu. After being initiated, he spent 8 years meditating in solitude in a cave at Marutvimalai near Kanyakumari, then moved to the jungle of Aruvippuram, where he started to gather some following. In 1888 he took his first revolutionary step by personally consecrating a temple to Shiva in Aruvippuram, against the protests of the local brahmins, then he continued to establish more temples in different parts of Kerala and introduced challenging ideas - as for example instead of installing statues of Deities he consecrated a mirror (at Kalavancode in Sherthallai) signifying that one should become able to see God in oneself, or a bright lamp which revealed the words "Truth, Duty, Kindness, Love".

He traveled all over Kerala, Madras and Sri Lanka, living with the people, preaching spiritual freedom, social equality and solidarity. His motto was, "Ask not, say not and think not (in terms of) caste". He gave great importance to education, including the learning of Sanskrit and shastra, to be available for all, irrespective of caste, and established a charitable school at Sivagiri. In 1922 Rabindranath Tagore went to Sivagiri to meet him and commented, "I have never come across one who is spiritually greater than Swami Narayana Guru or a person who is at par with him in spiritual attainment".

In 1903 his follower Dr Palpu established the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) to spread the message against the degraded caste system in Kerala, creating several educational institutes and hospitals throughout the State. At Aluva he organised the 1921 All Kerala Fraternity conference (proclaiming his famous message "One Caste, One Religion and One God for all mankind") and the 1924 Parliament of Religions to promote peace and cooperation among religious communities. In 1925 he participated to the famous Vaikom Satyagraha movement, also attended by MK Gandhi, to demand entry for lower caste people in the Shiva temple at Vaikom and all temples in Kerala. Together with Vallabhasseri Govindan Vaidyar, TK Kattan Writer, and Mooloor S Padmanabha Panicker, Narayana Guru organised the Sivagiri pilgrimage starting from 1932 to promote religious knowledge and awareness, as well as education in hygienic practices, agriculture, handicrafts, trade, and improving the quality of life in general.

The Sree Narayana Trust (SN Trust) was established in 1952 with headquarters in Kollam, by former Chief Minister of Kerala, R Sankar, to manage the Sree Narayana College, Kollam; today it manages 14 colleges, over 50 educational institutions and hospitals as well. Both Sri Narayana Jayanti and Sree Narayana Guru Samadhi are public holidays in Kerala; commemorative postage stamps have been issued in 1967 by Indian government and in 2009 by Sri Lankan government; also coins have been issued by the Reserve Bank of India in 2006 for his 150th birth anniversary. Among his main disciples, the list mentions Bodhananda Swamikal, Nataraja Guru, Kumaran Asan, Sahodaran Ayyappan and TK Madhavan.

**Nataraja Guru** (1895-1973) was born in Bangalore, the son of a doctor who founded the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (Society for the Propagation of the Religion of Sree Narayana, or SNDP) in 1903, of which Narayana Guru was the first president. He studied in Alwaye and Ooty, and became headmaster at Varkala High School, also founded by Narayana Guru. In 1924 he established the Narayana Gurukulam Movement (NGM) and University for the Science of the Absolute. In 1928, shortly before his demise, Narayana Guru instructed him to go study abroad; Nataraja then obtained a doctorate of letters from the Sorbonne in Paris while also teaching at the Quaker International School in Geneva. When he returned to India he found that after the disappearance of Narayana Guru things had changed, so he traveled again to Europe in 1949 and to America in 1951, after which he was recognised as guru. In 1963 he established the Brahmaidya Mandiram at Sivagiri in Varkala, and he completed the English translation and commentaries on all the major works of Narayana Guru.

**Navajyothi Sree Karunakara Guru** (1927-1999), was born in Chandiroor, Alapuzha; at the age of 14 he left home and joined the Advaita Ashram at Alwaye (near Kochi), a branch of Sivagiri Mutt founded by Narayana Guru. He established Santhigiri Ashram in Pothencode, about 21 km from Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala), that is still open to all without any birth discrimination although a dress code is required for visitors. Guru liberally gave his attention to many people who sought consolation and help for all kinds of personal and family problems, distributed vibhuti (holy ash) and theertham (holy water) and also promoted Siddha medicine with a Siddha Medical College and a Siddha production unit.

## **Bhoomananda Tirtha Swami**

Born in 1933 in the village of Parlikad in Thrissur district, Kerala, he went to work in Calcutta, where he met Baba Gangadhara Paramahansa, who became his guru. Together with 2 other sannyasi godbrothers he started the Vyasa College in Parlikad, then he established the Bhoomananda Tirtha's Loka-sangraha (Welfare of the World) campaign, with the first Jnana Yajna in Jamshedpur in 1964, then one in Delhi in 1965, and a series of others in Bombay, Madras and Bangalore (yearly) and in various parts of India, as well as in Malaysia and the USA. The Srimad Bhaagavata Tattva Sameeksha Satram is a 2 week programme still held in Thrissur district every year in the month of December focused on *Bhagavata Purana*, and the Gita Tattva Sameeksha is a similar programme focused on *Bhagavad gita*. Narayanashrama Tapovanam, the headquarters of Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha, is located at Venginissery near Thrissur, the Centres for Inner Resource Development (C.I.R.D) are in Delhi and Jamshedpur in India, and Vienna (Virginia, USA), and the Society for Inner Resources Development (S.I.R.D) is based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In 1968 the monthly journal *Vicharasetu* ("path of introspection") was started in English, Hindi and Malyalam. Among Swami's books, *Brahmavidya Abhyasa*, *To the Householder*, and *Genesis & Relevance of Temple-worship*.

## **Ramakrishna Paramahansa**

Born (1836-1886) as Gadadhar Chatterjee or Gadadhar Chattopadhyay in the village of Kamarpukur in the Hooghly district of West Bengal, into a very poor, pious and orthodox brahmin family. When his father died in 1843, his elder brother Ramkumar started a Sanskrit school in Calcutta (the capital of British India) and moved there in 1852, then in 1855 was appointed as the priest of Dakshineswar Kali temple built by Rani Rashmoni and took his younger brother Gadadhar and nephew Hriday as assistants. Gadadhar was given the task of decorating the Deity, and in 1856 when Ramkumar died he took his place; he developed a strong devotion to Kali as his Mother and the Mother of the universe but he was also interested in the exploration of other religions. Later Gadadhar took the name of Ramakrishna; some sources suggest that the name was given by the chief patron of the Kali temple (Mathura Biswas). In 1859 he was married to Saradamani Mukhopadhyaya, later known as Sarada Devi, who became his first loyal follower and was honored by Ramakrishna as the Divine Mother.

In 1861 Ramakrishna met Bhairavi Brahmani, a sannyasini sadhvi in a tantric branch of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and accepted her as a teacher. Then he practised *vatsalya bhava* under the Vaishnava guru Jatadhari and visited Nadia the home of Krishna Chaitanya. In 1865 he was initiated into sannyasa by Yogi Totapuri, who trained him in Advaita Vedanta. He also explored sufism with Govinda Roy and read the Bible with Shambhu Charan Mallik, but it would be incorrect to say that he embraced Islam or Christianity. In fact in 1875 Ramakrishna met the Brahmo Samaj leader Keshab Chandra Sen, who had converted to Christianity; Ramakrishna convinced him to return to Hinduism and Keshab established the "New Dispensation" (Nava Vidhan) religious movement, based on the principle of worshiping God as Mother.

Ramakrishna had several disciples, among whom the most famous is Vivekananda Swami, the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission. The prevalent cultural influence in the region in those times inspired an eclectic perspective in the Mission, with a strong tendency to choose a Christian

vocabulary and references even in the presentation of Hinduism. Still today the Ramakrishna Mission calls "abbots" its "top monks", compares its "monasteries" to the Essene communities of the times of Jesus Christ and to the Catholic monastic orders, celebrates Christmas and Easter, and does not require vegetarianism from any of its members. It teaches that God is essentially without a form, but he takes personal aspects for the benefit of mankind; however, it discourages the building of temples or altars including private altars in one's own house. It has a separate organization for women called Sri Sarada Math, because the Ramakrishna Math is strictly for men only; also it accepts western-born disciples but it does not recognise them as eligible to become authorized gurus and confer initiation in the name of the Math.

A prominent member of the Bengali Renaissance, Pratap Chandra Mazumdar wrote the first English biography of Ramakrishna, entitled *The Hindu Saint* in the *Theistic Quarterly Review* (1879), which played a vital role in introducing Ramakrishna to Westerners. Ramakrishna's talks were recorded in *The gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by his disciple Mahendranath Gupta, later translated into English by Nikilananda Swami. He accepted a small group of women disciples including Gauri Ma and Yogini Ma, of whom a few were initiated into sannyasa through mantra diksha; Gauri Ma founded the Saradesvari Ashrama at Barrackpur, dedicated to the education and upliftment of women. Some disciples, such as Vivekananda Swami and Rama Tirtha Swami, but also Saradananda Swami, Turiyananda Swami, Trigunatitananda Swami and Abedananda Swami, travelled to the West to spread the message of Vedanta.

## Sarada Devi

Born Khemankari (some say Thakurmani or Saradamani) Mukhopadhyay (1853-1920) of brahmin parents at Joyrambati (West Bengal), she became the wife and spiritual counterpart of Ramakrishna; her position was particularly important because the socio-cultural environment of the times required some measure of segregation for women, so she became the reference for the ladies who wanted to participate to the religious revolution, including western-born women such as Sister Nivedita and Sister Devamata. She was betrothed at the age of 5 and joined her husband living at the Dakshineswar Kali temple at the age of 18, but the couple lived in unbroken continence and Ramakrishna and his disciples worshiped her as the incarnation of Sri Maa Adi Parashakti, with a wealth of hagiographic stories around her birth and childhood spiritual experiences as well. As a pujari, Ramakrishna seated Mother Sarada in the throne of Goddess Kali and worshiped her in the Sodasi puja as Tripurasundari, and asked her to guide people in spiritual life. After her daily ritual bathing in the Bhagirathi-Hooghly during the *brahma muburta*, she would sit in japa and meditation, then spent most of her time cooking and taking care of everyone, as she considered all their disciples as her own children.

When Ramakrishna died of throat cancer (although he had continued to keep conversations until his very last days), Sarada had a vision in which he asked her not to consider herself a widow. She then went on a pilgrimage to Kasi Visvanatha, Ayodhya, Vrindavana, Puri, Madras, Ramesvaram and other holy places, accompanied by a party of women disciples including Lakshmi Didi, Golap Ma, and Ramakrishna's householder and monastic disciples. Then she retired to Kamarpukur, the village where Ramakrishna was born and lived alone in strict austerity for one year, after which her disciples arranged for her a house in Calcutta, known as Udbodhan House or Mayerbati ("Holy Mother's House"), where she continued to be the spiritual guide of the movement for the next 34

years, giving initiation to many people, in person and also through visions and dreams, as in the example of Girish Chandra Ghosh, the father of Bengali drama. Though uneducated herself, Sarada Devi advocated education for women, and entrusted Devamata with the implementation of a girls' school on the bank of the Ganges, where Eastern and Western pupils could study together. In 1954, Sri Sarada Math and Ramakrishna Sarada Mission (a monastic order for women) were founded in the honour of Sarada Devi.

### **Golap Ma**

Born as Annapurna Devi in a brahmin family in the Baghbazar area of Calcutta probably in 1864; after the untimely deaths of her husband, son and daughter, she was introduced to Ramakrishna in 1885 by her neighbor Yogin Ma, who also became her constant companion and together they stayed with Sarada Devi at the Udbodhan house. She was literate and besides her japa and meditation practice, she used to read *Mahabharata* and especially *Bhagavad gita*, and she often served as spokesperson for Sarada Devi. After Sarada's death in 1920, she became one of the main spiritual guides of the movement, together with Yogin Ma and Swami Saradananda, until her own death in 1924.

### **Rama Tirtha Swami**

Born (1873-1906) as Gossain Tirtha Rama at Murariwala in the district of Gujranwala, Punjab, a direct descendant of Tulsi Das the author of *Rama charita manasa*. He lost his mother when he was just a few days old, and was put by his father in the care of Bhakta Dhana Rama, a man of great purity. A brilliant student, he became Professor of Mathematics in the Lahore Foreman Christian College, but he especially developed intense devotion for *Bhagavad gita* and Krishna, and started to deliver lectures at the Sanatana Dharma Sabha of Lahore. Later he went to study Vedanta with Sri Madhava Tirtha of the Dwaraka Matha, then he met Vivekananda and decided to enter the order of sannyasa, giving up all possessions and traveling without carrying any money or luggage. His wife and two children went with him to the Himalayas, but after some time they had to return home due to ill-health. In 1902 he traveled to Japan with his disciple Swami Narayana, then he went to the USA and stayed for about one year and half in San Francisco under the hospitality of Dr Albert Hiller; while there he had a considerable following and started several societies, including the Hermetic Brotherhood, dedicated to the study of Vedanta. On his return to India he continued to lecture in the plains, but his health began to break down; he went back to the Himalayas and settled at Vasishtha Ashram, until he left his body in 1906 at the age of 33. His disciple Swami Narayana established the Ramatirtha Publication League at Lucknow.

### **Niranjanananda Swami**

Born as Nitya Niranjan Ghosh (1862-1904) in Rajarhat-Bishnupur in 24 Parganas of Bengal, he lived with his maternal uncle Kalikrishna Mitra and in his younger years he was considered a talented medium. He is not to be confused with a younger Niranjanananda, also known as Pandalai Maharaj, who died in 1972.

At the age of 18 he became a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, who called him *nityasiddha* and *isvarakoti*. Initially Niranjanananda kept an office job to maintain his aged mother, but when Ramakrishna became critically ill, he moved to Shyampukur to be the gatekeeper of his house. In 1887 he took the monastic vows and moved to Baranagar Math, although in that year he made a pilgrimage to Puri. From 1889 he traveled to Prayag, Varanasi and other parts of India and Sri Lanka, and for a period he took care of Vivekananda and other brother disciples during their illness.

### **Vireshwarananda Swami**

Born as Pandurang Prabhu in Madras (now Chennai) in 1892, after his father's death he moved to his maternal uncle's house in Mangalore. While studying at Law College in Madras he read the complete works of Swami Vivekananda; he joined the Belur Matha and was initiated by Sarada Devi in 1916, then took sannyasa from Swami Brahmananda in 1920. He stayed for some time in Varanasi and then was sent to the Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati; he became its head in 1927. In 1929 he became a trustee of the Ramakrishna Math and a member of the governing body of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1929, and in 1938 he became one of the Joint Secretaries of the Order. In 1961 he was made General Secretary of the Order and in 1966 President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. Apart from his managerial duties, he traveled extensively to preach and organise relief work, and wrote English translations of the commentary of Sridhara Swami on *Bhagavad gita*, and of the commentaries of Sankara and Ramanuja on *Brahma sutra*.

### **Rudrananda Swami**

Born Muthukrishnan (1901-1985) in Manalmedu, Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, he was a disciple of Swami Shivananda, direct disciple of Ramakrishna. He met activists from the Ramakrishna Mission in 1923 when they came to his region for relief work during the Mayavaram flood, and he helped them communicating with the local people. He became attracted by Vivekananda's work and in 1926 he joined the Ramakrishna order and became editor for *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam* magazine. He also convinced his childhood friend Kalki Krishnamurthy to translate Swami Vivekananda's book *Our Mother Land* into Tamil. In 1939 he was sent to Fiji to assist the Then India Sanmarga Ikyā (TISI) Sangam in its religious and cultural activities, and became particularly dear to the sugarcane workers there, earning the name Sarkkari Sami. He did not make any discrimination of race or caste, and made sure that the Sangam schools and Sri Vivekananda High School were open to children from all ethnic groups. He acquired land at Savusavu (130 acres) and Madhuvani, Rakiraki (1037 acres) and in 1948 he started the Sangam Sarada Printing Press, publishing *Sangam* in Tamil, *Pacific Review* in English, *Jagriti* in Hindi, and *Na Pacifica* in Fijian. During the 1943 strike the government tried to deport him to India, then he was arrested and sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour along with AD Patel the founder of the Maha Sangh.

### **Swahananda Swami**

Born as Bipadbhanjan (1921-2012) in a village near Habiganj (now in Bangladesh), he was the

youngest of 3 brothers, and his father Nirmal Chandra Goswami (who had been a disciple of Sarada Devi and had received initiation from her in 1908) died just 2 months before his birth. In 1937 he was initiated by Swami Vijnanananda, a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, then graduated in English literature in 1945, and in 1947 he joined the Ramakrishna Order, serving as lecturer at the Vidyamandir at Belur Matha for two years, before being sent to the Ramakrishna Math, Madras, where he served as pujari and editor of the *Vedanta Kesari* (from 1956 to 1962); in 1961 he went on pilgrimage in the Himalayas and stayed at Uttarakashi for some months of sadhana. In 1962 he became the head of the Ramakrishna Mission center in New Delhi.

In 1968 he was sent to USA as Assistant Minister of the San Francisco Vedanta Society, where he served for 2 years; later he was appointed head of the Vedanta Society of Berkeley, California, where he stayed for 6 years. In 1976, after the death of Swami Prabhavananda, he was transferred to the headquarters of the Vedanta Society of Southern California in Hollywood, where he remained the minister until his death. He also supervised the Vedanta Society of Greater Washington, DC, from 1997, and Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely, from 1998. In the late 1980s he also lectured in Moscow. He translated the *Chandogya Upanishad* and *Panchadasi* of Vidyananya from Sanskrit, and wrote several books including *Hindu Symbolology and Other Essays*, *Meditation and Other Spiritual Disciplines*, *Mother Worship: A Collection of Essays on Mother Worship in India*, *Service and Spirituality*, *Vedanta and Ramakrishna*, *Vedanta and Holy Mother*, *Vedanta and Vivekananda*, and *Vedanta Sadhana and Shakti Puja*. In 2012 he suffered a brain stem stroke and as his condition was deemed irreversible, then life support was removed per his wishes.

### **Narayanananda Swami**

Born (1902-1988) in Kongana in Coorg, Karnataka, he joined the Ramakrishna Mission in 1929, then after a few years he went to Himalayas for sadhana, attaining samadhi in 1933. He started to write books and saw the need for the distribution of a better understanding of the Universal Religion. So he published *The Way to Peace, Power and Long Life* (1945), *The Primal Power in Man or The Kundalini Shakti* (1950), *The Secrets of Mind-Control* (1954), *Caste, Its Origin, Growth and Decay* (1955), *The Secrets of Prana, Pranayama and Yoga-Asanas* (1959), *The Basis of Universal Religion* (1963), *The Universal Religion* (1975), *India and the Rishis* (1981), *Brain, Mind and Consciousness* (1982), *Consciousness under Different States* (1982) and several other titles, that have been collected in 18 volumes and translated into many languages, especially Danish, German and Tamil.

Swami called his teachings "the Universal Religion" and strongly opposed any birth prejudice of caste, race, gender, nationality etc. In 1971 he went for the first time to Denmark, and continued to visit this country every year for about 6 months until 1987; an ashrama was established in Gylling, Denmark (Jutland, near Aarhus) which is the main centre today, and also in various localities in India, Sweden, Germany, Norway and USA.

### **Vivekananda Swami and Ramakrishna Math**

Born (1863-1902) Narendranath Datta in a kayastha family in Calcutta, son of Bhubaneswari Devi and Vishwanath, attorney at the Calcutta High Court, and grandson of Durgacharan, a scholar in Sanskrit and Persian who had become a sannyasi leaving his family at the age of 25. From a young

age Narendranath used to meditate before images of Shiva, Rama, Sita and Mahavira Hanuman and to read Hindu scriptures such as *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad gita*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*, as well as contemporary texts on philosophy, religion, history, social science, art, literature, also studying Western culture at the Scottish Church College (known as General Assembly's Institution), and eagerly engaging in physical training as well. In 1880 Narendranath joined Keshab Chandra Sen's Nava Vidhan, established by Sen after meeting Ramakrishna and reconverting from Christianity to Hinduism, then he explored Freemasonry and Western esotericism, that were attracting a considerable interest among the educated Bengali youth.

In 1882 he met Ramakrishna at the Dakshineswar temple; under Ramakrishna's guidance he gradually abandoned his prejudice against "idol worship" and "polytheism", and even rose above his serious concerns for the financial situation of his family after the death of his father. In 1885 Ramakrishna developed throat cancer and moved to a garden house in Cossipore, where he formed his monastic order with a small group of disciples, appointing Narendra as their leader. Narendra found a dilapidated house at Baranagar for which he could pay the rent by begging alms (as *madhukari*) and established the Ramakrishna Math; on Christmas Eve of 1886, Narendra and eight other disciples took formal monastic vows. Now called Vivekananda Swami, in 1888 he started to travel around India as a homeless sadhu, carrying only a *kamandalu* (water pitcher), staff and his two favourite books: *Bhagavad gita* and *The Imitation of Christ*. He wrote, "I shall go to the Mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's Church and kneel before the Crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist Temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha, and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the Light, which enlightens the heart of every one."

In 1893 he started traveling abroad, visiting Japan (Nagasaki, Kobe, Yokohama, Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo) and China and then Canada on his way to the United States, reaching Chicago in July for the occasion of the Parliament of Religions scheduled to take place in September as a part of the Chicago World Fair. At the opening of the congress at the Art Institute of Chicago, Vivekananda gave a brief speech representing India and Hinduism, addressing the "sisters and brothers of America". These few words were saluted with a standing ovation of about 2 minutes by the crowd of 7,000, after which he greeted the youngest of the nations on behalf of "the most ancient order of monks in the world, the Vedic order of sannyasins, a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance". He then quoted two passages from the *Shiva mahimna stotram*: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take, through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to thee!" and "whosoever comes to me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths that in the end lead to me."

It was a huge success. Parliament President John Henry Barrows said, "India, the Mother of religions was represented by Swami Vivekananda, the orange-robed monk who exercised the most wonderful influence over his auditors".

The press called him the "cyclonic monk from India". The *New York Herald* noted, "Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation". The *Boston Evening Transcript* reported that Vivekananda was "a great favourite at the parliament... if he merely crosses the platform, he is applauded".

He was then invited as guest in many parts of the USA, where he spent about 2 years lecturing in Chicago, Detroit, Boston, and New York. During a question-answer session at the Brooklyn Ethical Society, he said, "I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East." He founded the Vedanta Society of New York in 1894, and in 1895 he gave free private lectures to a dozen of his disciples at Thousand Island Park in New York for two months. In 1895 he travelled to the UK where he met Margaret Elizabeth Noble, an Irish woman who would become Sister Nivedita, he then visited Germany and other European countries meeting several indologists, and he was offered a chair in Eastern Philosophy at Harvard University and Columbia University but he declined. In 1896 his book *Raja Yoga* was published, becoming highly influential in the western understanding of yoga.

Vivekananda attracted many admirers such as Josephine MacLeod, William James, Josiah Royce, Robert G Ingersoll, Nikola Tesla, Lord Kelvin, Harriet Monroe, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Sarah Bernhardt, Emma Calvé and Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz. He also accepted disciples such as Sister Christina (Christina Greenstidel of Detroit), Abhayananda Swami (born Marie Louise), Kripananda Swami (Leon Landsberg) and Yogananda Swami (Dr Street) and entrusted them to continue the mission of the Vedanta Society, still numbering many western members, and having 12 main centers in the USA, the largest of which in Hollywood, Los Angeles, having also a publication department called Vedanta Press. He was given land at San Jose, California, where he established the Shanti Asrama. Vivekananda returned to India in December 1896 from England with his disciples Captain and Mrs Sevier and JJ Goodwin; on the way they visited France and Italy, and then Sri Lanka (Colombo) and south India, delivering lectures in Pamban, Rameswaram, Ramnad, Madurai, Kumbakonam and Madras, Calcutta and Almora. He was met with such enthusiasm that during his train travels people often sat on the rails to force the train to stop so they could see him.

In 1897 he moved the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission to Belur Math, Calcutta, then he founded the monastery in Mayavati (Almora) and the Advaita Ashrama in Madras, established the journals *Prabuddha Bharata* in English and *Udbhodan* in Bengali, and a famine-relief campaign conducted by Swami Akhandananda starting in the Murshidabad district. In 1897 he sent Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939) to the USA to manage the International Vedanta Society.

In spite of declining health (asthma, diabetes and chronic insomnia, probably also due to irregular availability of appropriate food during his travels) Vivekananda left for a second tour in the West in 1899 accompanied by Sister Nivedita and Swami Turiyananda, and went to Paris for the Congress of Religions in 1900, lecturing on the worship of the lingam and the authenticity of the *Bhagavad gita*. He then visited Brittany, Vienna, Istanbul, Athens and Egypt, returning to Calcutta in December 1900, and on pilgrimage to Bodhgaya and Varanasi. The first governor-general of independent India, Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, stated that "Vivekananda saved Hinduism, saved India". Subhas Chandra Bose said that he was "the maker of modern India". Vivekananda's influence increased Gandhi's "love for his country a thousandfold".

Vivekananda wrote: "The plan in India is to make everybody Brahmana, the Brahmana being the ideal of humanity. If you read the history of India you will find that attempts have always been made to raise the lower classes. Many are the classes that have been raised. Many more will follow till the whole will become Brahmana. That is the plan. Our ideal is the Brahmana of spiritual culture and renunciation. By the Brahmana ideal what do I mean? I mean the ideal Brahmana-ness in which

worldliness is altogether absent and true wisdom is abundantly present. Formerly the characteristic of the noble-minded was *tri bhuvanam upakara sbrenibhibh priyamanab*, 'to please the whole universe by one's numerous acts of service', but now it is - I am pure and the whole world is impure. 'Don't touch me!' 'Don't touch me!' The whole world is impure, and I alone am pure! Lucid Brahma-jnanal Bravo! Great God! Nowadays, Brahman is neither in the recesses of the heart, nor in the highest heaven, nor in all beings - now he is in the cooking pot! We are orthodox Hindus, but we refuse entirely to identify ourselves with 'don't-touchism'. That is not Hinduism; it is in none of our books; it is a superstition, which has interfered with national efficiency all along the line. Religion has entered in the cooking pot. The present religion of the Hindus is neither the path of Knowledge or Reason - it is 'Don't-touchism'. - 'Don't touch me', 'Don't touch me' - that exhausts its description. 'Don't touchism' is a form of mental disease. See that you do not lose your lives in this dire irreligion of 'Don't-touchism'. Must the teaching *Atmavat sarva bhuteshu* - 'Looking upon all beings as your own self' - be confined to books alone? How will they grant salvation who cannot feed a hungry mouth with a crumb of bread? How will those, who become impure at the mere breath of others, purify others?"

### Sister Nivedita

Born Margaret Elizabeth Noble (1867-1911) in Ireland, in 1895 she met Swami Vivekananda in London and became his disciple, moving to Calcutta on his invitation and accepting the order of brahmacharya in 1889; she was the first western woman admitted to an Indian monastic order. A few weeks later she was joined by two more female disciples of Vivekananda, the Americans Sara C Bull (wife of the famous Norwegian violinist and composer Ole Bull) and Josephine MacLeod.

Vivekananda wrote in a letter to her, "Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man, but a woman - a real lioness - to work for Indians, women especially. India cannot yet produce great women, she must borrow them from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted."

Nivedita established the Nari Siksha Samiti for the education of women; it started with a rented house in Badur Bagan Road and opened 3 schools in and around Calcutta which gradually increased to 14, later most of these developed into high schools and colleges. A scheme for teachers' training was started within the premises of the organisation in 1925 and officialised in 1935, and in 1938 the Sister Nivedita Adult Education Scheme was started. She was intimate friend of Sarada Devi (Ramakrishna's wife), Aurobindo Ghosh and many intellectuals in the Bengali community, such as Rabindranath Tagore, Jagadish Chandra Bose (the Indian scientist that invented the radio simultaneously with Marconi) and his wife Abala Bose, and the artists Abanindranath Tagore, Ananda Coomaraswami and Nandalal Bose. She wrote various books, such as *The Master as I Saw Him; Notes of Some Wanderings; Kedar Nath and Bhadri Narayan; Kali the Mother; The Web of Indian Life; An Indian Study of Love and Death; Studies from an Eastern Home; Indian Art; Cradle Tales of Hinduism; Religion and Dharma; Aggressive Hinduism; Footfalls of Indian History; Civic Ideal and Indian Nationality; Hints on National Education in India; Lambs Among Wolves; On Education; On Hindu Life, Thought and Religion; On Political, Economic and Social Problems*. She wrote, "The whole history of the world shows that the Indian intellect is second to none... Are the countrymen of Bhaskaracharya and Shankaracharya inferior to the countrymen of Newton and Darwin? We trust not."

### **(Captain) John Henry and Charlotte Sevier**

They met Vivekananda in London in 1896 and immediately agreed to travel with him around Europe and then come to India for his work. They sold all their properties in England and used the funds for the service of the mission, purchasing the property of an old tea estate and establishing (in 1899) the Advaita Ashrama in Mayavati, in the Almora district of the Himalayas. Apart from taking care of the ashrama, Charlotte worked at editing the *Prabuddha Bharat* magazine and the *Life of Swami Vivekananda by Eastern and Western disciples*.

### **Sister Christine**

Born Christina Geenstidel in Nuremberg, Germany (1866-1930); her father was a Lutheran scholar who moved to USA with his family when she was 3 years old and died when she was 17, leaving her to be the sole breadwinner for her mother and 5 younger sisters. In 1883 she took a job as teacher in the public school system in Detroit. She met Vivekananda in Detroit in 1894 and again at Thousand Island Park, on which occasion she stayed for 10 days and was initiated as brahmacharini, being accepted by Vivekananda as a daughter. She continued to correspond with him until 1902, when she moved to India and started serving as school teacher and social worker, taking up the responsibilities of the educational projects when Sister Nivedita died.

### **Sister Gargi**

Born Marie Louise Burke in 1912 in USA, she was introduced to the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement in 1948 by Swami Ashokananda. In 1957 the Advaita Ashrama published her biography *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*. In 1974 she took her vows of brahmacharya, and later she took sannyasa as Pravrajika Prajnaprana. In 1983 she was awarded the first Vivekananda Award by the Ramakrishna Mission for her research work. She lived at the Vedanta Society of Northern California in San Francisco until her death by cancer in 2004. Among her books, *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work* (1997), *Vedantic Tales* (2000), *A Disciple's Journal: In the Company of Swami Ashokananda* (2003) and *A Heart Poured Out: A Story of Swami Ashokananda* (2003).

### **Swami Abhayananda**

Born in 1842 as Marie Louise in France and emigrated in the USA in 1865, she was the first woman initiated into Vivekananda's mission, in 1895 at Thousand Island Park. Later she dissociated herself from the mission, apparently because she was not submissive enough; before meeting Vivekananda she was a suffragist and had been lecturing on a number of issues such as women's rights. The *Lethbridge Herald* published her photo on August 10, 1912, describing her as a "convert to Hinduism".

## **Sara Bull**

Born (as Sara Chapman Thorp, 1850-1911) in New York as the only daughter of Wisconsin State Senator Joseph G Thorp and his wife, prominent socialite Susan Amelia Chapman, she was particularly interested in music. In 1868 she met Norwegian violinist widower Ole Bull and soon married him; her daughter Olea was born in 1871. The couple traveled frequently for concert tours and their house was the center for intelligentsia, artists and philosophers of Harvard University such as William James, George Santayana, Josiah Royce and many others. After her husband's death in 1880, Sara developed an interest for philosophy; she met Vivekananda in 1894 and was so impressed that the next year she invited him over as a guest, introducing him to many of her friends.

Vivekananda soon became her Indian "son", who called her Dhira Mata ("calm mother") and inspired her with a love for India and a strong desire to support the cause of Hinduism and Indian independence. Sara regularly contributed funds for the cause as well as supporting Vivekananda and all his collaborators personally, and she financed scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose's research laboratory. Sara left her estate, valued at approximately US\$ 500,000, to the Vedanta Society, but her daughter challenged the will and went to court to have it annulled on the grounds that "Hindus had driven Mrs Bull insane"; the settlement was most favorable to her but she died on the day of the settlement. *Saint Sara: The Life of Sara Chapman Bull, the American Mother of Swami Vivekananda*, by Prabuddhaprana, was published in Calcutta in 2002.

## **Josephine McLeod**

Born (1858-1949) in Chicago to John David MacLeod and Mary Ann Lennon, she never married but lived with her sister Besse or Betty, who also became a disciple of Vivekananda. Betty married Mr William Sturges of Chicago in the year 1876 and had a son named Hollister and a daughter named Alberta, who were also intimately connected with the Vedanta Societies and Ramakrishna order.

Josephine and Betty met Vivekananda in New York in 1895, on the suggestion of their friend R Dora Roetheslesberger; Josephine was deeply impressed and attended several other meetings in the following years, becoming increasingly involved in his mission, although she never took formal initiation. Because Josephine's efforts in the USA and the West were so strong, Vivekananda named her a "lady missionary" of the Ramakrishna Order; she generously contributed to the development of the Indian National Movement and at times she appealed to her contacts to help overcome any political crisis with the British regime in India. She was very close to Sister Nivedita and financed the establishment of Udbodhan Press to publish the *Udbodhan Patrika*, the monthly Bengali magazine of the Ramakrishna Order.

Little is known about the many other Western disciples and followers of Vivekananda, including Mary Hale, Alberta Sturges, Besse Leggett, but their contribution to the revival of Hinduism and its spreading at global level should not be forgotten.

## **Swarupananda Swami**

Born as Ajay Hari Bannerjee (1871-1906) in a Bengali brahmin family, together with his friend Satishchandra Mukherjee he started a school for Sanskrit and shastra education and later the magazine *Dawn*, which in 1897 developed into the Dawn Society. In 1897 he met Vivekananda and after a few visits he became a full time disciple, and in 1898 he was initiated into sannyasa. He was the first president of the Advaita Ashram at Mayavati and worked at the publication of the *Prabuddha Bharat* magazine together with Charlotte Sevier. He took sannyasa at Belur 4 days after Sister Nivedita, and assisted her in studying Bengali and Hindu religious literature.

He worked sincerely for the upliftment of the lower classes and the tribal people of the region, also establishing one school in Mayavati and another in Shore, and a charitable dispensary that is still active. He worked with Swami Kalyanananda begging from door to door in Nainital to serve the poor in Haridwar and Rishikesh, and went to Kishangarh, n near Jaipur (Rajasthan) for relief work during the 1899 famine. In 1902 he went to Allahabad to lecture on Vedanta and inspired the local people to start a permanent centre there. In 1905 when the Dharmashala region was hit by a severe earthquake, Swarupananda collected funds for the relief work and personally directed the operations, although his heart condition had already started to take its toll on his health. In 1906 he died of pneumonia after being drenched by rain while travelling to Nainital.

## **Mahavatar Babaji, Lahiri Mahasaya, Sri Yukteswar**

While the majority of the great teachers have been relatively independent trail-blazers, who initiated their own parampara, Paramahansa Yogananda gave the greatest importance to his spiritual lineage through Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri, Lahiri Mahasaya and Mahavatara Babaji, the original teacher of Kriya yoga in the Siddha tradition. Although these great spiritual personalities did not travel to the West and are not said to have had direct western disciples, they inspired Yogananda to do just that. According to Yogananda's autobiography, Babaji went to see him in Calcutta in 1920 on the eve of his departure for the USA and told him, "Follow the order of your guru and go to America. Fear not, you shall be protected. You are the one I have chosen to spread the message of Kriya Yoga in the West".

It is said that **Mahavatara Babaji** was born as Nagarajan in the year 203 CE in a small coastal village now known as Parangipettai, in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu, as the son of a village priest. At the age of 5 he was taken to Bengal, then at age 11 he started to travel as a sadhu; according to *Babaji and the 18 Siddha Kriya Yoga tradition* (Marshal Govindan, 2001), Babaji traveled to Kataragama, Sri Lanka, where he met Siddha Bhogarnathar and became his disciple. After a long sadhana he was directed to take initiation into Vasi Yoga (Kriya Kundalini pranayama) from Siddha Maharshi Agastya in Badrinath, Himalayas, and he remained in the region since, to learn from a number of other great Siddhas. According to Yogananda, Babaji has a sister called Mataji, who is of similar age. According to Swami Maheshwarananda in his book *The hidden power in humans*, Babaji was also a student of Sri Alakh Puri. Several persons claimed they have met Babaji on various occasions from 1861 to 1935, including Lahiri Mahasaya and several of his disciples (Sri Yukteswar, Pranabananda Giri, Keshabananda, Kebalananda Giri, Ram Gopal Muzumdar), as well as Yogananda, Shankari Mata (a disciple of Trailanga Swami), Baba Nasib Singh, SAA Ramaiah, and VT Neelakantan, who was a famous journalist and close student of Annie Besant.

**Lahiri Mahasaya** (1828-1895) was born as Shyama Charan Lahiri in Ghurni (near Nadia, Bengal) the youngest son in a brahmin family; when he was 5 their home was lost in a flood and they moved to Varanasi. He married in 1846 and had 2 sons and 3 daughters, and when his father died, he took care of the entire family. He attended the Government Sanskrit College where he studied Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Sanskrit, Persian, French and English, and obtained a job in the English government.

In 1861 he was posted in Ranikhet, where he met Babaji for the first time on a hill in Dunagiri; he was initiated in Kriya Yoga and received the instruction to initiate others to "spread Kriya Yoga sadhana through the people of the world". Lahiri returned home and started organising study groups and giving discourses at his "Gita sabha", giving initiation to sincere seekers without any discrimination of birth and background; among his disciples we can mention Sri Yukteswar Giri, Panchanan Bhattacharya, Bhaskarananda Saraswati of Benares, Balananda Brahmachari of Deogarh, Pranabananda Giri, Maharaja Iswari Narayan Sinha Bahadur of Benares and his son, Keshavananda Brahmachari, Bhupendranath Sanyal, and the parents of Yogananda. The famous yogi Trailanga Swami praised Lahiri for his unassuming dedication to the plan of the Cosmic Mother and his perfect Self realisation. He generally eschewed organized religion, but he allowed at least one advanced disciple, Panchanan Bhattacharya, to open the "Arya Mission Institution" in Calcutta to spread Kriya teachings.

Regarding Kriya Yoga, he said: "Always remember that you belong to no one, and no one belongs to you. Reflect that some day you will suddenly have to leave everything in this world - so make the acquaintanceship of God now... Through delusion you are perceiving yourself as a bundle of flesh and bones, which at best is a nest of troubles. Meditate unceasingly, that you may quickly behold yourself as the Infinite Essence, free from every form of misery. Cease being a prisoner of the body; using the secret key of Kriya, learn to escape into Spirit... Exchange unprofitable religious speculations for actual God-contact. Clear your mind of dogmatic theological debris; let in the fresh, healing waters of direct perception. Attune yourself to the active inner Guidance; the Divine Voice has the answer to every dilemma of life."

**Sri Yukteswar Giri** (1855-1936) was born Priya Nath Karar in Serampore, and studied in the Srirampur Christian Missionary College, where he developed an interest in the Bible, that he later expressed in his book *The Holy Science (Kaivalya Darshanam, 1894)*, which also shows his deep interest in astrology (especially with an original theory about the duration of the yugas). In 1884 he met Lahiri Mahasaya, who initiated him in Kriya Yoga, and often visited him in Benares (Varanasi). In 1894 at the Kumbha Mela in Allahabad he met Mahavatar Babaji, who asked him to write a book comparing Hindu scriptures and the Christian Bible. Sri Yukteswar converted his family home in Serampore into an ashrama named Priyadham, for a very small number of disciples, and in 1903 he also established the Karar ashrama in Puri; he also started an organisation called Sadhu Sabha. He developed a syllabus for schools on the subjects of physics, physiology, geography, astronomy, and astrology, and a Bengali "First Book" to learn basic English and Hindi. He was also a supporter of education for women.

The chief sannyasi disciple of Sri Yukteswar was **Swami Satyananda Giri** (1896-1971), born Manamohan Mazumder at Malkha Nagar of Bikrampur, present Bangladesh. His father Mohinimohan was one of the founding fathers of Calcutta Deaf and Dumb School, and his family lived on the school premises, across the road from the parental home of Yogananda (Mukunda Lal

Ghosh), with whom he became best friends. Another close friend and school mate was Ananda Mohan Lahiri, the grandson of Lahiri Mahasaya, with whom he later worked as teacher in Yogananda's Ranchi Brahmacharya school, taking the post of principal when Yogananda went to the USA, and donating all his income for over 20 years. He was personally trained by Sri Yukteswar at his Puri Karar Ashrama in 1919, and appointed by him as head of the Ashrama and "leader of the East"; he had over 3,000 disciples in India and abroad.

### **Paramahansa Yogananda and the Self Realization Fellowship**

Born as Mukunda Lal Ghosh (1893-1952), in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, from an early age he showed great interest in seeking a spiritual guide. In 1910 met his guru Yukteswar Giri, then in 1915 he took formal vows of sannyasa and became Swami Yogananda Giri. In 1917 he founded the Yogoda Satsanga Society of India (YSS).

Yogananda traveled to the United States aboard the ship *City of Sparta*, as India's delegate to an International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston, and he found such good response among the American people that he remained in the United States from 1920 to 1952. In 1925 in Los Angeles he founded the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) as a non-profit religious organization, devolving to the Fellowship all his assets and income from the sale of his books, writings, magazine, lectures and classes. In 1935 he made an extended journey to India to visit his guru; while Yogananda was in Calcutta, Yukteswar attained mahasamadhi in Puri (Karar Ashrama). Yogananda then returned to the USA, taking permanent residence at the SRF hermitage in Encinitas, California, where he wrote his famous *Autobiography of a Yogi*; the book was published in 1946, sold more than 4 million copies and was included in the list of the 100 best spiritual books of the 20th century, introducing millions of Indians and westerners to the teachings of meditation and Kriya Yoga.

Yogananda's approach, however, was still very eager to compromise with Christianity to become more easily accepted in the West. Although many of those pictures have been removed from the public view, he used to wear a small crucifix on a chain, and in one of his original works, *The Second Coming of Christ*, he compares the Hindu idea of the Cosmic Vibration to the Christ or the "Son" and the Cosmic Consciousness to the "Father" or God. The Self-Realization Fellowship experienced substantial growth throughout the 1920s. By the mid-1930s it had grown into a nationwide organization and started to publish its own magazine, *East-West*, which further increased SRF's popularity. In 1935 the SRF had become an active member of the Parliament of World Religions and the first official non-profit religious organization based on eastern culture. The SRF/YSS is still headquartered in Los Angeles and includes more than 500 temples and centers around the world and members in over 178 countries; only in India YSS has more than 100 centers, retreats and ashramas. Yogananda himself appointed his prominent disciple Rajarsi Janakananda to direct his mission after his death.

Here is a short list of Yogananda's most prominent disciples:

**Rajarsi Janakananda**, born James Jesse Lynn 1892 in Kansas City, Missouri. He was a self-made millionaire when he met Yogananda in 1932, and he gave approximately 6 million dollars to Yogananda's organization. Janakananda remained president of SRF/ YSS from 1952 until his own death in 1955, after which he was succeeded by Daya Mata.

**Daya Mata** (1914-2010), president of SRF and sanghamata ("Mother of the Association") from 1955-2010. Born Faye Wright in a prominent family of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, descendant of the early Mormon pioneers, she wrote several books on spiritual and religious life. She was welcomed by Bharati Swami of Govardhan Math in Puri, who personally accompanied her into the Sri Mandir for the darshana of Sri Jagannatha. After her death, Daya Mata was succeeded by Mrinalini Mata.

**Durga Mata** (since 1927), Ananda Mata (since 1931), Uma Mata (since 1947), Brother Anandamoy (since 1949), Brother Bhaktananda (since 1939), Mukti Mata (since 1945). Among the new generation of leaders we can mention Yoga Mata, Tara Mata, Gyana Mata, Sradha Mata, Sailasuta Mata and Bimalananda.

### **Kriyananda Swami**

Born J Donald Walters in 1926, a direct disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda from the age of 22, he was given charge of the headquarters of SRF in Mount Washington, Los Angeles, and asked to write articles for the magazine and to initiate students into Kriya Yoga. After Yogananda's death, he took final vows of sannyasa in 1955 from the then SRF President Daya Mata and was given the name Kriyananda; he compared his vows to the Catholic monastic orders that require poverty, chastity, and obedience to the spiritual teacher. He lectured for SRF in the United States, as well as in Canada, Mexico, England, France, Switzerland, Italy, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, and India.

Kriyananda wrote about 150 books including *The New Path*, *The Essence of Self-Realization* and *Conversations with Yogananda*, and composed 400 music pieces and theatre plays, including *The Peace Treaty* and *The Jewel in the Lotus*. He lectured in English, Italian, Romanian, Greek, French, Spanish, German, Hindi, Bengali and Indonesian. In 1962 he left the SRF and in 1968 he founded the Ananda village, a World Brotherhood Colony on 40 acres of land near Nevada City, California, that was his portion of the total 160-acre property acquired together with Richard Baker, Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg. The establishment of World Brotherhood Colonies was one of Yogananda's central "Aims and Ideals" published in his *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Kriyananda developed the idea into a global movement of spiritual intentional communities based on "simple living, high thinking", with 1000 full time residents. Similar projects were developed as Associazione Ananda near Assisi (Italy) and Ananda Gurgaon (India), and 125 centers called Ananda Meditation Groups in 19 countries. In the early 1960s, one of Kriyananda's inter-religious projects near New Delhi received personal support from India's prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1973 Kriyananda founded a schooling system called Education for Life with an ecumenical curriculum open to students of all religions, with schools in Seattle (Washington), Portland (Oregon), Palo Alto and Nevada City (California), Assisi (Italy) and Gurgaon (India), as well as the Yoga University in Nevada City. In 1981 Kriyananda married for a first time in 1981, and then publicly renounced his monastic vows in the Shankaracharya order on the occasion of his second marriage in 1985, returning to his birth name, James Donald Walters. He was later divorced and in 1995 he resumed his monastic name and vows, and from 1996 as Kriyananda, he lived and taught at the Ananda Italy center, near Assisi.

In 2003 he moved to India, where he began an Ananda center in Gurgaon, near Delhi. For five years (until 2009) he appeared on Sadhna TV and Aastha TV, broadcast throughout India, Asia, Europe, and the United States; from 2003 his disciples have been giving classes on meditation and

Kriya Yoga in many major Indian cities. In 2009 he moved to Pune to start a new community and established a new religious order, different from Yogananda's lineage in the Giri branch of the Swami order of Shankara. Kriyananda believed that in this Kali Yuga some reformation was necessary, so the rules of the new Nayaswami order allow sannyasis to be married and to be "creative" in their preaching work; also the initiation is given not by one but by three gurus simultaneously.

### **Hariharananda Giri**

Born as Rabindranath Bhattacharya in Nadia district, West Bengal (1907-2002). In 1932 he went to meet Yukteshwar Giri, in the line of Lahiri Mahasaya and Mahavatar Babaji and was initiated by him into Kriya Yoga in his Serampore ashram, West Bengal. Yukteshwar Giri taught him cosmic astrology and invited him to live in his Karar Ashrama at Puri. In 1935 he met Paramahansa Yogananda and received the second Kriya initiation from him. In 1938 as Brahmachari Rabinarayan he joined his guru's ashrama in Puri. In 1941 he received the third Kriya initiation from Swami Satyananda Giri, head of Karar Ashrama and childhood friend of Paramahansa Yogananda. He went on to establish the Kriya Yoga Institute in the USA and lived in his ashrama at Homestead, Florida (USA) for several years before his death in Miami in 2002. He was buried at Balighai, in Orissa.

### **Sivananda Saraswati and the Divine Life Society**

Born Kuppuswami (1887-1963) in Pattamadai, in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu, he studied medicine and always had an intense desire to help people. In 1924 in Rishikesh he met his guru Vishwananda Saraswati who initiated him into the sannyasa order, and the full viraja homa ceremonies were performed later by Swami Vishnudevananda, the Mandaleswara of Sri Kailas Ashram. After initiation Sivananda settled in Rishikesh and immersed himself in intense spiritual practices. In 1927 he started a charitable dispensary at Lakshman Jhula, in 1832 he founded the Sivananda Ashram and in 1936 the Divine Life Society (DLS). In 1945 he created the Sivananda Ayurvedic Pharmacy, in 1947 the All-world Sadhus Federation and in 1948 the Yoga-Vedanta Forest Academy. He wrote about 300 books and taught what he called "the Yoga of Synthesis" based on the precepts *Serve, Love, Give, Purify, Meditate, Realize*.

Sivananda's chief organizational disciples were Chidananda Saraswati and Krishnananda Saraswati. Chidananda Saraswati was appointed president of the DLS by Sivananda in 1963 and served in this capacity until his death in 2008. Although Sivananda and his successors did not put much emphasis on the idea of official conversion to Hinduism, they accepted thousands of westerners as disciples and members of their organisations, training them not only in the physical aspects of Yoga such as asana and pranayama, but also in the fundamental requirements of yama and niyama (vegetarianism, brahmacharya, etc), scriptural study and cultivation of bhakti, which are presently neglected by many yoga teachers in India.

**Krishnananda Saraswati**, born Subbaraya in an orthodox Madhva family (1922-2001), in 1944 he left home to visit the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh and spent the rest of his life in the Ashram; at Sivananda's request he wrote his first book *Realisation of the Absolute*. In 1961 he was appointed

General Secretary by Sivananda and served in this capacity until his death. He wrote more than 40 books and was President of the Sivananda Literature Research Institute and the Sivananda Literature Dissemination Committee; he also served as editor of the Divine Life Society's monthly paper, *Divine Life*, for 20 years.

Another disciple, **Vishnudevananda Swami**, established many Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres starting in 1957 in San Francisco; he was explicitly sent to America by Sivananda with 10 rupees and the instruction "people are waiting". In 1963 he went to Montreal, Canada, where his mission became very popular, ultimately creating 10 ashramas and more than 30 centers in major cities around the world, training more than 40,000 yoga teachers. He wrote the best selling book *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga* (first published in 1960) which brought credibility to yoga in the West, as well as *Meditation and Mantras* and a commentary on the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. The Sivananda Ashram Yoga Farm in Grass Valley was established in 1971 and since 1995 it has been directed by Swami Sitaramananda Saraswati, ordained in 1985 as a sannyasini, direct disciple of Swami Vishnudevananda.

Another disciple of Sivananda, **Satchidananda Saraswati** (1914-2002), was born as CK Ramaswamy Gounder, in Chettipalayam near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. He was initiated in Ramakrishna Thapovanam as Sambasiva Chaitanya, and studied for a few years under Ramana Maharshi. Finally in 1949 he took sannyasa from Sivananda Saraswati, and during the 1950s and 1960s he worked at Sivananda's Kandy Thapovanam in Sri Lanka. In 1966 at the request of artist Peter Max he visited New York, then settled in the USA where he founded the Integral Yoga Institutes and Yogaville Ashram in Buckingham, Virginia, and eventually acquired citizenship. Satchidananda came to public attention as the opening speaker at the Woodstock music arts and peace festival in 1969. He wrote several books including *The Healthy Vegetarian*, and became famous for his "Integral Yoga"; among his disciples Alice Coltrane, Shanti Norris, Laura Dern, John Fahey, Jeff Goldblum, Carole King, Sally Kirkland, Diane Ladd, Peter Max, Scott Shaw, Paul Winter.

**Jyotirmayananda Saraswati** (1931) a disciple of Sivananda Saraswati, is president of the Yoga Research Foundation in Miami, Florida. He taught for 9 years at the Yoga-Vedanta Forest Academy and at the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, and wrote over 40 books on Vedanta, Yoga and several other topics.

**Pranavananda Saraswati** (1902-1982, not to be confused with Swami Pranavananda, 1896-1941) was born as N Ponniah in Sri Lanka. He worked with several organisations such as Vivekananda Ashrama, Brahma Gyana Sabha, Arul-Neri Thirukkuttam, Theiva-Neri Kazhakam, Hindu Prachar Sabha, Pure Life Society, and received blessings from Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo, Ramadas, Paramahansa Nityananda, Gnanananda Giri, Ananda Mai Ma and Kavi Yogi Sudhananda Bharatiar, who asked for his help for the Sudha Samajam at Kuala Lumpur. In 1950 he came in contact with Sivananda and in 1953 he moved to the Rishikesh Ashrama, in 1959 he became a Committee Member of the Divine Life Society Headquarters at Rishikesh, and Sivananda conferred upon him the titles of Gurubakthi Ratna and Prachara Praveena. Later Pranavananda went to Malaysia and founded the Sivananda Ashrama on 3 acres of land at the foot of the Holy Batu Caves; the Ashrama developed 20 branches in Malaysia. Pranavananda wrote the prayer book *Bhajananjali*, published in 1967. In August 1969 Vishnudevananda Saraswati, Founder Director of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre, Montreal, Canada, invited Pranavananda to the Yoga World Brotherhood; this opportunity for *visva parikramana* took him to Hong Kong, Japan, Hawaii, United

States, England, France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, and Egypt. While in Europe he participated in the International Yoga Conference held at Brussels by the Belgian Yoga Federation.

**Satyananda Saraswati** (1923-2009) was born in Almora, Uttaranchal, into a family of farmers from a warrior clan; he received *shaktipat* from Sukhman Giri and in 1943 at age 20 he met Sivananda Saraswati and joined his ashrama in Rishikesh. He was given sannyasa in 1947, then in 1956 he established the International Yoga Mandal and went to preach around India (then including Afghanistan, Nepal, Burma and Ceylon). In 1964 he founded the Bihar Yoga Vidyalaya or Bihar School of Yoga (BSY) at Munger (Monghyr), that also attracted students from abroad. Between 1968 and 1982 he travelled abroad 26 times, visiting England, Spain, Ireland, Italy, Austria, USA, Canada, Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Chile, Panama, Argentina, Mexico, South Africa, Japan, Malaysia, El Salvador, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore, establishing yoga centers there. In 1983 he handed over the Bihar Yoga Vidyalaya to Niranjanananda Saraswati and in 1988 he left Munger to engage in sadhana at Rikhia, Deoghar, Jharkhand, where he performed the Sat Chandi Maha Yajna. His teachings focus on the Integral Yoga with a strong emphasis on Tantra, known as Bihari Yoga or Satyananda Yoga.

**Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati**, who took over the Bihar Yoga Vidyalaya from his guru Swami Satyananda Saraswati, was born in Rajnandgaon (Chhattisgarh) in 1960 and at the age of 4 he joined his ashrama in Munger. In 1971 he was initiated into dasanami sannyasa, after which he traveled abroad for 11 years, acquiring an understanding of different cultures and helping to propagate yoga in Europe, Australia, North and South America. He returned to India in 1983 to guide the activities of Bihar School of Yoga, Sivananda Math and the Yoga Research Foundation at Ganga Darshan. In 1995 he was appointed as successor to Swami Satyananda Saraswati, in 1994 he established the first university of yoga named Bihar Yoga Bharati, in 1995 the Bal Yoga Mitra Mandal, and in 2000 the Yoga Publications Trust. He also continued to travel around the world to guide many seekers. In 2017 he received the Padma Bhushan award for meritorious work in yoga.

Another famous disciple of Satyananda was **Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati**, popularly known as Swami Satsangi. Born in 1953 in the town of Chandernagore, West Bengal, she had a modern education but at an early age she chose the traditional life of sannyasa and she was initiated into the dasanami line in 1982 at Ganga Darshan, Munger. Then she traveled extensively with Swami Satyananda in India and abroad, maturing her realisations that she presented in several books on yoga and tantra, including *Sri Vijnana Bhairava Tantra: The Ascent, Karma Sannyasa, Light on the Guru and Disciple Relationship, The Descent* (a commentary on Shankaracharya's famous *Saundarya Lahari*), and *Tattva Shuddhi: The Tantric Science of Inner Purification*. In 2007 she was nominated by Swami Satyananda as the first Peethadhishwari of Rikhiapeeth, that has become a modern Gurukula and a center for the management of the Sivananda Math and Sivananda Ashrama, working as relief charities for underprivileged people in rural India.

**Swami Janakananda Saraswati** (born Jørgen Dreier in 1939 in Copenhagen, Denmark) is the oldest active sannyasi disciple of Satyananda Saraswati in Europe. He met him in 1968 and was initiated into Kriya Yoga and other tantric practices; for 2 years he lived with Satyananda in his ashrama in Bihar, India, and for several months he traveled with him throughout the country. In 1970 Janakananda returned to Denmark where he founded the Scandinavian Yoga and Meditation School in Copenhagen, that soon expanded to 12 independent branches in Denmark and Sweden

(especially the Håå Course Center, Småland), but also in Finland, Norway, Germany and France, training thousands of students each year in classical yoga and meditation. Janakananda has also been giving lectures and participating in conferences in Sydney, Singapore, Bogota, Buenos Aires, London, and several other locations. He has collaborated in scientific research into yoga with neuroscientist Erik Hoffmann and also with the University of Cologne, the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, and the Kennedy Institute in Copenhagen. His book *Yoga, Tantra and Meditation in Daily Life*, has been published in 9 languages.

### **Chinmayananda Saraswati**

Born (1916-1993) as Balakrishna Menon in the city of Ernakulam (present-day Kerala), as the eldest son of prominent judge Vadakke Kuruppathu Kuttan Menon, the nephew of the Maharaja of Cochin. He became a journalist and engaged in the Independence movement, and when his arrest warrant was issued he went undercover for 2 years, shifting to Punjab to resume activism but was arrested and spent several months in jail, where he contracted typhus. Chinmayananda also had chronic heart problems, with multiple heart bypass surgeries.

In the summer of 1936 he visited Ramana Maharshi, but he dismissed his spiritual feelings as mere hypnotism. With the intention to write an article exposing sadhus as frauds, he traveled to Sivananda's ashrama in Rishikesh in 1947 and he ended up joining the ashrama, reading shastra and taking up the task of organising a Gita Committee. On Shivaratri 1949 he was initiated into sannyasa, and with Sivananda's blessing he went to study Vedanta and perform austerities under the tutelage of Tapovan Maharaja of Uttarakashi. In 1951 Chinmayananda left the Himalayas for an all-India tour to visit places of worship and see how Hindu religious heritage was being handed down. He said of that time: "I was miserably disillusioned and disappointed about... the stuff doled out as the best in Hinduism. ... My experiences during those five months of roaming only strengthened my conviction that I must execute ... Upanishad Jnana Yajna sessions all over India, in all the great cities."

He started in Pune in December of that same year; the brahmins called to perform the rituals were shocked to see that the event was open to everyone, including men and women of all social classes. His Chinmaya Mission was started informally in 1953, and soon hundreds of small groups were set up to study *Bhagavad gita*, *Upanishads* and other *shastra*, for men and for women. In 1956, the 23rd *jnana yajna* in Delhi was inaugurated by the President of India, Rajendra Prasad; in five years, Chinmayananda instructed over 50,000 people through 25 *jnana yajnas* across the country. In 1965 Chinmayananda went for his first global teaching tour, covering 39 cities in 18 countries: Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, United States, Mexico, Spain, United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece and Lebanon. He continued to travel around the world for the next 28 years, staying about one week in each place and delivering a minimum of two lectures every day, besides a number of meetings, interviews, discussions, a great deal of correspondence and the training of many Acharyas who were sent teaching around India and to many other countries. The Central Chinmaya Mission Trust in Bombay, headed first by Swami Tejomayananda and then by Swami Swaroopananda, now has over 313 mission centers all over the world, including North America (30 centers and a dedicated Chinmaya Mission West founded in 1975), Australia, England, New Zealand, Nigeria, and South Africa.

In 1963 Swami Chinmayananda called for a World Hindu Council, inviting delegates from the entire world to discuss the difficulties and needs concerning the "survival and development of Hindu culture." The RSS pracharak SS Apte liked the idea and cooperated to organise the conference at Sandeepany ashrama in August 1964, which resulted in the founding of the Vishva Hindu Parishad; Chinmayananda was elected as its first president and Apte was general secretary. In 1993 Chinmayananda was selected as President of Hindu Religion for the Centennial Conference of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. In 2015 the Indian government issued a commemorative coin for his birth centenary.

### **Ghanananda Swami and the Hindu Monastery**

He is the first Hindu Swami of African ancestry. Born (1937-2016) in Senya Beraku, a village in the central region of Ghana (Africa) from native parents who had converted to Christianity, at a very young age he read some books on Hinduism and traveled to Rishikesh, Uttarakhand, where he studied at the Divine Life Society. He received sannyasa initiation from Swami Krishnananda in 1975, then he returned to Accra, Ghana, to establish the Divine Mystic Path Society or Hindu Monastery of Africa, that presently has 7 branches in Ghana and 2 more in neighbouring Togo and Ivory Coast, with about 20,000 Hindus of non-Indian origin.

### **Pranavananda Swami and Bharat Sevashram Sangha**

Born as Jaynath in Bajitpur (1896-1941), Madaripur district (now in Bangladesh), he was initiated as Vinod in 1913 by Yogiraj Baba Gambhir Nathji. He actively supported the Independence movement, especially supplying food and shelter to activists hiding from the British police, for which he was jailed for 3 months in 1914. In 1917 at Bajitpur he established the Bharat Sevashram Sangha; the first substantial relief action was in 1919 for the Madaripur cyclone, followed in 1921 for the Satkhira famine in Bengal. In 1923 he started a Brahmacharya Vidyalaya at Madaripur and in 1925 another at Khulna.

He took sannyasa in 1924 at the Allahabad (Prayag) Ardh Kumbh Mela from Swami Govindananda Giri, and in the same year he started to initiate his first 7 disciples into sannyasa, out of the 83 he initiated in his entire life. In the same year he also started Prachar parties, groups of volunteers who went around India to collect funds for relief work, as he believed more in facts than in sermons. He was deeply disturbed by any injustice, especially towards tribal people and backward castes, destitute people and lepers; he fought caste prejudice, illiteracy, general selfishness in people and degradation of the holy places, and faulty biased presentations of religious knowledge. He presented the ideals of the Sangh as truth, self-discipline, brahmacharya, and vowed to fight against the "real sins" of weakness, fear, cowardice, meanness and selfishness.

In 1927 Pranavananda organised the first relief camp at Kumbh Mela, Haridwar, and in 1940 he created a Rakshee Dal (Self Defence Group) for 500,000 volunteers. During the partition of India the Sangh set up refugee camps in border areas, providing shelter, food, medical treatment and public safety services, a work that is still continuing today to assist pilgrims at various places of worship and religious festivals. Relief work was conducted during the Bengal famine of 1943, the Bhopal disaster, the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, in cyclon affected

areas in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, in the Bhopal Gas tragedy, in Bihar and Kerala floods, and in other disasters.

In 1929 Pranavananda started propagating Vedic Culture overseas at Myanmar; in time the Sangh, with head office in Calcutta, opened centers in 70 cities in India and especially in pilgrimage sites such as Gaya, Varanasi, Puri, Prayag, Vrindavana, Kurukshetra, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Rameswaram, Nashik, Navadvip, Dwarka, Calcutta, Guwahati, Tarapith etc, as well as collection centers in London, New York, New Jersey, Chicago, California, Ontario, Toronto, Trinidad, Fiji, and Guyana. Missions have been organised also in Africa, Malaysia and Indonesia, and in Syria and Lebanon in cooperation with UN delegations.

### **Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (Doctorji)**

Born in 1889 in a Marathi desastha brahmin family in Nagpur, in 1902 he lost his parents to a plague epidemic, and was supported by his elder brothers Mahadev and Sitaram Pant through his education. While studying in Neel City High School in Nagpur he got in trouble with the British police for singing the *Vande Mataram* hymn, so he had to shift to Yavatmal and then to Pune; in 1910 he went to Calcutta for his medical studies and returned to Nagpur in 1915 as a physician. In the 1920s he actively participated to the Indian National Congress and associated with Dr Moonje; at the 1920 session of Indian National Congress held in Nagpur, Dr Hedgewar was appointed as the Deputy Chief of volunteers as Bharat Swayamsewak Mandal (headed by Laxman V Paranjape) introducing the famous khaki short pants uniform, and proposed the *purna svaraj* concept, but without success. He was a very sincere activist (for which he was sentenced to one year rigorous imprisonment), but soon he was disappointed by the Congress politics, especially during the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1923.

In 1925, with the support of BS Moonje and LV Paranjape, he founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) at Nagpur, and became its first Sarsanghachalak. The purpose of the new organisation was the cultural and spiritual regeneration of the Hindu community, but without involving in politics or taking any stance against the British government. In 1939, when Gandhi called for the Salt Satyagraha and started his Dandi Yatra, Dr Hedgewar dissociated his organisation from the campaign although he participated individually and suggested all others to do the same. His vision was beyond political national independence, towards the establishment of Hindutva (a term created by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, president of the Hindu Mahasabha in spite of his self-identification as a *nastika*) as a collective Hindu identity as an essence of Bharat (India).

Hedgewar recruited volunteers by assembling a group of boys in an open field every day for one hour for the Sakha programme, to play games, sing patriotic songs and tell inspirational stories, encouraging discipline and dedication, and turning youths into good swayamsevaks. In 1936 he created a female wing of the RSS, and in time an entire family of organisations (Sangh Parivar) grew around the RSS, including Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Durga Vahini, Vivekananda Kendra, Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, Ekala Vidyalaya, Bajrang Dal, Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Seva Bharati, Vidya Bharati, and Bharatiya Janata Party. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was started at a conference at the Sandeepany ashrama in 1964 by RSS pracharak SS Apte and Swami Chinmayananda, as a World Hindu Council, open to delegates from all countries to discuss the difficulties and needs for the "survival and development of Hindu culture."

After him the general secretary of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) Swami Vigyananand, is the founder and global chairman of World Hindu Foundation (WHF) and chief organizer of World Hindu Congress held in Delhi in 2014 (1800 delegates from 53 countries) and in Chicago in 2018, and World Hindu Economic Forum (WHEF) 2015 in London.

## Ramana Maharshi

He was born (1879-1950) as Venkataraman Iyer in a traditional brahmin family in the village Tiruchuzhi near Aruppukkottai, Madurai, in Tamil Nadu. At the age of 16 he attained what he called *akrama mukti*, "sudden liberation," as opposed to the *krama mukti*, "gradual liberation" as through sadhana - probably forgetting about the idea of reincarnation and the fact that spiritual evolution may take several lifetimes and is always a product of a long process even when it appears to be instantaneous. After that moment of revelation, he sat daily in the Meenakshi Temple, ecstatically devoted to the images of Shiva Nataraja and the 63 Nayanars; after 6 weeks he left his home in Madurai and journeyed to the mountain Arunachala in Tiruvannamalai, where he took the role of a sannyasi (though not formally initiated) and remained there for the rest of his life to give mostly silent *upadesa* ("spiritual instruction") to visitors, with a simple and modest attitude totally free from any trace of pretension, as he also engaged in menial activities such as cooking and stitching leaf plates for the ashrama. Ramana Maharshi died of cancer, diagnosed in 1948.

His method of instruction has been compared to Dakshinamurti Shiva's as he gave great importance to silent meditation and self enquiry (*atma vichara* or *jnana vichara*), that is the constant attention to the inner awareness of "I" or "I am"; obviously this approach was meant to shift the focus of personal religious realisation from theory to practice, but it would be impossible to really understand it without the adequate background knowledge of the shastra. In this light we can better understand why he made a distinction between "regular" samadhi and sahaja samadhi; defining "regular" samadhi as a temporary contemplative practice, while in sahaja samadhi a "silent state" is maintained even while engaged in daily activities. Ramana Maharshi also taught the importance of bhakti and self-surrender, that must be complete and desireless, without any expectation of rewards or even liberation; this is another important point indicating that previous knowledge and sadhana is required. In 1916 his mother Alagammal and younger brother Nagasundaram joined him moving to Tiruvannamalai and later to the larger Skandashram Cave, where Ramana Maharshi lived until the end of 1922. His mother took up the life of a sannyasini and Ramana began to give her intense personal instruction, while she took charge of the Ashram kitchen. Ramana's younger brother, Nagasundaram, became a sannyasi assuming the name Niranjanananda, and becoming known as Chinnaswami (the younger Swami).

In 1911 Frank Humphreys, then a police officer stationed in India, discovered Ramana and wrote articles about him, first published in 1913 on *The International Psychic Gazette*. In 1934 Paul Brunton, having first visited Ramana in 1931, published the book *A Search in Secret India*, describing how he had met his guru Ramana Maharshi under the recommendation of the Paramacharya of Kanchi, and calling him "one of the last of India's spiritual supermen". Paul Brunton's writings about Ramana brought considerable attention to him in the West; resulting visitors included Paramahansa Yogananda, Somerset Maugham (whose 1944 novel *The Razor's Edge* models its spiritual guru after Ramana) and Mercedes de Acosta. Still today many foreign visitors travel to the Ramanashramam at Thiruvannamalai. Among the visitors who became Ramana's dedicated disciples we can mention:

- Arthur Osborne, the first editor of *Mountain Path* in 1964, the magazine published by Ramanashramam,
- Major Chadwick, who ran the Veda Patasala during Ramana's time,
- S.S. Cohen, a Jewish born Iraqi who wrote the book *Guru Ramana*,
- Robert Adams, an American devotee who joined in 1946 and whose book of dialogues *Silence of the Heart* centres around the teachings of Ramana Maharshi,
- Mouni Sadhu (Mieczyslaw Demetriusz Sudowski, 1897-1971), author of several books on spiritual, mystical and esoteric subjects,
- Ethel Merston, who wrote about Ramana Maharshi in her memoirs,
- David Godman, a former librarian at the ashram, who wrote about Ramana's teaching and the lives of Ramana's lesser-known followers and devotees.

### **Sri Brahmajna Ma**

Born Kadambini Devi (1880-1934) in Bitara, Tipperah district of present Bangladesh. She married at the age of 8 and was a widow before 10. Like Ramana Maharshi she had no guru but attained enlightenment through her own efforts at self-inquiry, for which she has been called "an advaitin saint". She expressed her realisations through several poems.

### **Bhaskarananda Saraswati Swami**

Born (1833-1899) as Matiram Mishra in a brahmin family in Kanpur district, Uttar Pradesh, he received the sacred thread at the age of 8 and was married at 12. In 1851 he had a son, which according to tradition fulfilled his obligations to society, so he left home and walked to Ujjain, where he stayed at a Shiva temple to study shastra and practice yoga under several teachers including Pandit Anant Ram of Patna.

In 1869 he took sannyasa from Swami Purnananda Saraswati of Ujjain, then traveled around India before settling in Varanasi's Anandabag near the Durga Mandir. He had many disciples and followers among all sections of society including several foreigners, from the Kashi Naresh (the Maharaja of Kingdom of Kashi) to Alexandra David-Néel and Ernest Binfield Havell (1864-1937, a close friend of John Woodroffe). He was also visited by Mark Twain, who mentioned him in his *Following the Equator* (1897), and by the American explorer couple Fanny Bullock Workman and William Hunter Workman.

### **Bholanath Sarabhai Divetia and Prarthana Samaj**

Born in a Nagar brahmin family from Ahmedabad (1822-1886), he knew Gujarati, English, Marathi, Persian and Sanskrit, studied law and served in the colonial government for which he was awarded the Rai Bahadur title. He founded Dharmasabha and Prarthana Samaj, and wrote the *Ishwar Prarthanamala*, a collection of prayers designed for each day of the month, completed by his son Narsinhrao Divetia.

## Nisargadatta Maharaj

Born as Maruti Shivrampant Kambli (1897-1981) in Kandalgaon, a small village in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra; his parents were devout followers of the egalitarian Varkari bhakti tradition worshipping Vithoba (also called Vitthal, a form of Krishna accompanied by Rukmini). However, Nisargadatta cannot be classified as an orthodox representative of the Varkari movement because he established his own specific method of spiritual and religious development, that came to be known as Nisarga Yoga. His father Shivrampant worked as a domestic servant in Bombay and later became a petty farmer in Kandalgaon. In 1915, after his father died, Maruti moved to Bombay to support his family back home, following his elder brother. Initially he worked as a junior clerk at an office but then he opened a small store selling beedis (leaf-rolled cigarettes) and soon owned a string of 8 retail shops. In 1924 he married Sumatibai and they had 3 daughters and a son; his wife died in 1942, then one of his daughter died in 1948. He regularly received and taught visitors in a dedicated room at his humble apartment in Khetwadi, Bombay, that was also used for japa, bhajan and meditation. After retiring from his shop in 1966 he continued giving discourses twice a day until his death in 1981 due to throat cancer.

In 1933 he was introduced to Siddharameshwar Maharaja, the head of the Inchegiri branch of the Navnatha Sampradaya and Lingayat Shaivism, who initiated him with a mantra sadhana. In 1936 Siddharameshwar died; in 1937 Nisargadatta went travelling across India for 8 months, then he realised that "nothing was wrong anymore" and returned home, keeping one singe shop to maintain his family while he continued to teach. In 1951 on inspiration from his guru he started to give initiations. His favorite readings were *Amritanubhava* and *Dnyanesvari* (commentary to *Bhagavad gita*) by Dnyanesvara, *Ekanathi Bhagavata* (a version of *Bhagavata Purana* by Ekanath), *Dasbodha* by Ramdas, Tukaram's poems, as well as *Yoga Vasistha*, the main *Upanishads*, and the works of Adi Shankara in Marathi language.

Nisargadatta taught what has been called Nisarga Yoga, where *nisarga* can be translated as "nature" and the various Personalities of God are personifications of Nature; his practice was based on meditation on the awareness of the Self, non-identification (with the material limitations) and right understanding of the Reality, interest and earnestness towards spiritual search, "going within to go beyond", right action, attentiveness to being, spontaneity and effortlessness (meaning simplicity), friendliness and harmlessness. His disciple Sri Ramakant Maharaja (born 1941) received the nama mantra in 1962 and remained with him for the next 19 years; he claims to be the only Indian direct disciple of Nisargadatta and offers initiation into the lineage. Among the more famous disciples of Nisargadatta are Maurice Frydman, Bob Adamson, Stephen Howard Wolinsky (born 1950), Jean Dunn, Sri Parabrahmadatta Maharaja (born Alexander Smi, 1948-1998), Douwe Tiemersma (1945-2013), Robert Powell, Timothy Conway, Wayne Dyer and Ramesh Balsekar (1917-2009). The book *I am That*, written by Maurice Frydman as an English translation of Nisargadatta's Marathi talks, was published in 1973 and gained much attention from spiritual seekers at global level, attracting many westerners to India especially from north America and Europe.

## Sri Aurobindo and Auroville

Born Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) in Calcutta, son of Krishna Dhun, former member of the Brahmo Samaj who had studied in Edinburgh to become surgeon of Rangpur in Bengal; his family

was of kayastha descent from Konnagar in Hoogly District. Aurobindo's mother Swarnalata Devi was the daughter of Shri Rajnarayan Bose, a leading figure in the Samaj; she developed a mental illness after the birth of her first child. Krishna Dhun Ghose wanted his sons to enter the Indian Civil Service (ICS), for which they needed to study in England; the entire family moved there in 1879 and the boys (after their basic education in Loreto House boarding school in Darjeeling, run by Irish nuns) were tutored in Manchester by WH Drewett, minister of the Congregational Church, studying Latin, French, history, geography and arithmetics. Krishna Dhun Ghose slowly became disillusioned with the colonial regime and moved to Australia, while the boys went to live with Drewett's mother in London and joined St Paul's school there, learning Greek, English poetry and literature, as well as some German and Italian.

By 1889 his brothers changed their study courses and Aurobindo worked hard to secure a scholarship at King's College, Cambridge, as his father was out of money; however he had no interest in ICS and arrived late to the horse-riding practical exam purposefully to get himself disqualified. Henry Cotton, his father's friend in Bengal ICS, arranged for Aurobindo to meet the Maharaja of Baroda, Sayajirao Gaekwad III, who was traveling in England at that time, and secured for him a place in the Baroda State Service. Aurobindo's father was waiting for him to arrive in India but died of shock on receiving the mistaken news that the ship had sunk off the coast of Portugal.

From 1893 Aurobindo joined the State Service with a progressive career and assisted the Maharaja in writing speeches; in 1897 he started to teach French part-time at the Baroda College (now Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda) and was later promoted as vice-principal; in the meantime he self-studied Sanskrit and Bengali, wrote several articles for the *Indu Prakash* and became engaged in the politics of India's independence struggle against British rule, working behind the scenes as his position in the Baroda state administration barred him from overt political activity. He established contact with Lokamanya Tilak and Sister Nivedita and traveled around Bengal and Madhya Pradesh to rally resistance groups, banking on his studies about rebellions against England in medieval France, as well as revolts in America and Italy. He moved to Calcutta in 1906 with his young wife Mrinalini (married in 1901), who died in 1918 during the influenza pandemic. In 1907-1908 he traveled to Pune, Bombay and Baroda giving speeches for the nationalist cause, and spent a year in isolated incarceration until the death of the chief prosecution witness Naren Gosain within jail premises, which closed the case. He then started two new publications, *Karmayogin* in English and *Dharma* in Bengali; he was again imprisoned for one year during which his vision expanded beyond the political level of the Independence movement, after an astral visitation by Vivekananda whose voice "spoke to him" for 2 weeks. In 1907 he met Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, a Maharashtrian yogi, who instructed him to trust his inner guide rather than worrying too much about external gurus.

In 1910 Aurobindo withdrew from all political activities and moved to Pondicherry, that was a French colony outside British jurisdiction. In 1914, after four years of secluded yoga, he started a monthly philosophical magazine called *Arya*, which ceased publication in 1921. Many years later he revised some of these works before they were published in book form as *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on The Gita*, *The Secret of The Veda*, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, *The Upanishads*, *The Renaissance in India*, *War and Self-determination*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity* and *The Future Poetry*. Gradually he was joined by some followers, and in 1926 he established the Sri Aurobindo Ashram of Integral Yoga with his spiritual collaborator, Mirra Alfassa (the Mother, or Mère). He wrote several thousands letters to his disciples, later collected in 3 volumes of *Letters on Yoga*, and an

epic spiritual poem of about 24,000 verses entitled *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1943 and for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. He died in 1950 and about 60,000 people attended his funeral.

## Mère

Mirra Alfassa (née Blanche Rachel Mirra Alfassa, 1878-1973), is also known as the Mother, or Mère as she was called by Aurobindo and his followers. She was born in Paris in a bourgeois family to Turkish Jew Moïse Maurice Alfassa and Egyptian Jew Mathilde Ismalun. Mirra was close to her grandmother Mira Ismalum (née Pinto), who was one of the first women to travel outside Egypt alone; her mother was believed to be an atheist and in her family any occult experience was deemed to be a mental problem which had to be treated medically. At 13 Mirra had a dream about a dark figure which she used to call Krishna whom she had never seen before in real life, but she did not reveal the dream to anyone and remained an atheist for many years. In 1897 she married Henri Morisset and both worked as artists for about 10 years; her son André was born in 1898, then the couple separated in 1908 and Mirra went to live alone, often engaging in philosophical discussions in various circles. She read the book *Raja yoga* by Swami Vivekananda and a translation of *Bhagavad gita* in French, and met Louis Thémanlys the head of the Cosmic Movement, a group started by Max Théon. She then became active in the group; in 1906 she went alone to Tlemcen in Algeria to meet Max Théon and his wife Alma Théon and study with them.

In 1911 Mirra met Paul Richard, who after 4 years of army service had turned to the study of philosophy and theology; she also met Madame Alexandra David-Néel (1868-1969), a French explorer and scholar in Sanskrit and Buddhism at the Sorbonne University - the first woman to travel alone in India, who also organized tours for her friends. In 1914 Mirra and Paul sailed to India and arrived in Pondicherry, where she met Aurobindo, recognising him from her dreams; together they decided to publish a review on Aurobindo's Yoga, entitled *Arya* and issued in English and French - the journal continued for almost 7 years, starting in 1914. With the first World War in 1915, the British government asked the French government in Paris to hand over the revolutionaries staying at Pondicherry; Mirra was alerted by her brother Mattéo Alfassa, who by then was foreign minister in France and who buried the request under a pile of bureaucratic papers. Mirra and Paul returned to France; later Paul was asked to promote French trade in Japan and the couple moved there, making friends with the Indian community, then in 1920 they moved back to Pondicherry. Paul did not stay long in India, and after traveling north he divorced Mirra, returning to France and then remarrying in England and moving to the USA where he worked as a professor.

In November 1920 a period of heavy rains created difficulties to the movements up and down from the Guest House at Rue François Martin, so Aurobindo invited Mirra and her friend Dutta (Dorothy Hodgson) to move into his building; this was the beginning of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, that later developed into the great project now known as Auroville. Initially the other inmates saw Mirra as a foreign outsider, but Aurobindo explicitly praised her equal yogic stature and with a written letter he officially put her in charge of the ashrama, that had grown into a self-sustaining community of 100 members. By 1937 there was a need to expand the facilities and Diwan Hyder Ali, the Nizam of Hyderabad, made a grant to the ashrama for further expansion. In 1938 Margaret Woodrow Wilson, daughter of USA President Woodrow Wilson, came to the ashrama and chose to remain there for the rest of her life. In 1943 Mirra started a school for about 20 children inside the ashrama.

After Aurobindo's death in 1950, Mirra continued his work, but after 1958 she withdrew from outer activities to engage more fully in yoga; from 1963 she started again giving short darshanas from a terrace. In 1966 the Sri Aurobindo Society was granted support from the United Nations to begin building the utopian society envisioned by the Mother; in 1968 the city of Auroville was inaugurated with a ceremony in which young people representing 124 countries placed handfuls of their native soil in a lotus-shaped urn together with the charter of the city as established by Mother; the urn remains near the Matrimandir in the center of the city. In 1955 Nehru and his daughter Indira visited the ashrama; presently the Auroville Foundation is managed by the Indian government.

Aurobindo and the Mother accepted a great number of disciples of Indian and non-Indian origin. Among the first and foremost of such disciples of non-Indian origin, we can mention:

**Pavitra** (1894-1969), born Philippe Barbier Saint-Hilaire in Paris, who came to India in 1925 and was accepted as a sadhaka; in 1951 he was appointed director of the newly founded Sri Aurobindo International University Centre. He served in this position for 18 years, as well as being general secretary of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, until his death in 1969.

**Satprem** (1923-2007), born Bernard Enginger in Paris, who settled permanently in the ashrama in 1953; he produced a 13 volume work entitled *The Agenda*, consisting of his correspondence with Mother from 1951 to 1960, while the years from 1962 to 1973 remained unpublished.

## **Mother Meera**

Born Kamala Reddy in 1960 in the village Chandepalle in Nalgonda district of Telangana, her parents Antamma and Veera Reddy lived in Madanapalle, Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh. In 1974 her uncle Bulgur Venkat Reddy took her to visit the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, where he was a member; one year later she settled there with uncle and a friend named Adilakshmi. In 1981 she moved to Dornburg-Thalheim, Hesse (Germany) and in 1982 she married a German. For some years now she has been giving darshana at Schloss Schaumburg in Balduinstein, Germany, to thousands of visitors of all religions, also broadcast through Livestream. She visits the United States and other countries on regular basis. The darshana ritual is performed in total silence, Mother Meera touches the head of a person and looks into their eyes, thus "untying knots" in the person's subtle body. She does not consider herself associated with the Aurobindo Ashram today, she does not charge any money or give lectures, she does not claim to be a guru or have followers, but simply encourages people towards devotion to God and teaches the unity of all religions.

## **Sri Chinmoy**

Born (1931-2007) in Shakpura of Chittagong district (now Bangladesh) as Chinmoy Kumar Ghose, he was the youngest of 7 children, and lost his parents to illness in 1943. In 1944 he joined his brothers and sisters at Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry where elder brothers Hriday and Chitta had already settled. In the ashrama he practiced athletic sports and meditation, studied Bengali and English literature, and for some time he was personal assistant to the General Secretary of the ashrama, Nolini Kanta Gupta, translating his Bengali writings into English. In 1964 he moved to the USA with the help of American supporters Sam Spanier and Eric Hughes and

obtained a job as junior clerk at the Indian consulate. He started to give talks about Hinduism at universities in various States, then he established his first meditation center in Queens, New York, that remained his headquarters and his residence until his death. In 1966 he opened a Sri Chinmoy Center in San Juan, Puerto Rico, followed by several others in various cities up to 350 centers worldwide, with over 7,000 students in 60 countries. His students are required to abstain from sex as well as from meat and alcohol and similar recreational substances. In 1970 he started giving twice-weekly non-denominational peace meditations at the United Nations for UN delegates, staff, and NGO representatives; the programme continued for 37 years for a total of over 700 participants. In 1974 he gave lectures in 50 States at 50 universities, and these lectures were published as a six-part book series entitled *50 Freedom-Boats to One Golden Shore*. In the 1970s and 1980s he continued to travel lecturing at various universities, resulting in the publication of *The Oneness of the Eastern Heart and the Western Mind*.

During the 1970s Chinmoy began playing and composing music on the flute; he also played esraj, piano, cello and other instruments, wrote several books and poems (according to the Sri Chinmoy Centre, over 1,300 books including 120,000 poems) and produced a number of art paintings now in exhibition at major museums and cultural centers. In 1984 he started giving free Peace Concerts around the world, the largest in Montreal for 19,000 people, and attracted several musicians such as Carlos Santana, John McLaughlin, Narada Michael Walden, Roberta Flack, Clarence Clemons, and Boris Grebenshchikov, offering a spiritual discipline free from drugs, where music was a form of meditation. Under his tutelage, in 1971 McLaughlin formed the Mahavishnu Orchestra (after his initiation name), in 1973 Santana and McLaughlin released the album *Love Devotion Surrender*, and later Santana released 3 albums under his spiritual name Devadip: *Illuminations* (1974), *Oneness* (1979) and *The Swing of Delight* (1980).

Other spiritual researchers inspired by Chinmoy were Frederick Lenz and Lex Hixon, Olympic gold-medalist runner Carl Lewi, and Ashrita Furman who holds over 150 Guinness World Records in sports. Chinmoy was also enthusiastic about sport events: members of the Sri Chinmoy Marathon Team have swum the English Channel over 40 times, besides the mountain climbing and long-distance cycling, and the Self-Transcendence 3100 Mile Race. In 1987 he inaugurated the Sri Chinmoy Oneness Home Peace Run, a symbolic relay style marathon for peace through many countries of the world where runners carry a flaming torch representing harmony. He himself used to run daily for health and physical fitness, until at 60 he suffered a knee injury and then turned to tennis and weightlifting - lifting even people (apparently, over 7000 in the course of the years), especially famous personalities including Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay), Sting, Eddie Murphy, Susan Sarandon, Roberta Flack, Yoko Ono, Jeff Goldblum, Richard Gere, Helen Hunt, 20 Nobel laureates and a team of sumo wrestlers. Sri Chinmoy also organised several humanitarian projects and met Mother Theresa on 5 separate occasions.

### **Niralamba Swami**

Born Jatindra Nath Banerjee (1877-1930) at Channa, Burdwan (Bengal), he was the son of an official in the English government. He was especially enthusiastic about martial training and he became a bodyguard of the king of Baroda; when Anushilan Samity was formed at Calcutta, Aurobindo sent him an invitation and this is how he became a prominent member of the organisation and a close associate of Sri Aurobindo. After the Alipore bomb case and the repression

of all revolutionary activities in Bengal, Jatindra Nath returned to his village and was married off by his parents, but he was more interested in spirituality; he was especially devoted to Mother Durga Vishalakshi ("large eyes") and used to sit in her temple for hours, praying for spiritual knowledge.

Gradually he became restless and started traveling in search of a genuine guru, finally he reached Nainital and met Soham Swami, who immediately accepted him as a disciple. Soham Swami (born Shyama Kanta Bandopadhyay in 1858), was one of the main disciples of Nabin Chandra Chakrabarti, also known as Yogi Tibbeti Baba. Previously Soham Swami had been known as Bagha Shyamakanta, the first tiger wrestler of India, then in 1899 he took sannyasa and spent the rest of his life in spiritual meditation, also writing several books such as *Soham Gita*, *Soham Sambita*, and *Soham Tattva*, and also *Common Sense* (1923) in which he illustrates how to separate genuine divine realisation from mere superstitions. Soham Swami asked Jatindra Nath to stay at his Haridwar ashram, and soon he gave him the name Niralamba Swami.

After a few years of intense sadhana, with the permission of his guru Niralamba returned to establish an ashrama in his native village, where he preached to his many visitors, including his old companions in the freedom fight movement. He told them, "Wake up and realise Self-Consciousness. Know yourself. If you do not know yourself, then how can you know your country? If you want to get rid of the sufferings of your country, then you have to become strong. To make yourself strong you have to first acquire Self-Knowledge."

One of the most prominent disciples of Niralamba Swami was **Swami Prajnanapada** (1891-1974), initiated in 1924 at Channa ashram. Born as Yogeshwar Chattopadhyay near Calcutta, with a congenital heart disease, he lost his parents and 3 brothers in an epidemic when he was very young. In 1921 he met Niralamba Swami but he continued to teach in various universities including Kashi Vidyapith until 1930 when he was requested by Niralamba Swami to take charge of Channa Ashram after his death. He also established an ashrama in Ranchi, India, and initiated several Indian and non-Indian disciples, with whom he had very direct and personal interactions including psychoanalysis sessions; among them we can mention R Srinivasan, Yogendra Narayan Verma, Shailaja Devi Verma, Sumongal Prakash, Minati Prakash, Daniel Roumanoff, Pierre Wack, Frédéric Leboyer, Roland de Quatrebarbes, Arnaud and Denise Desjardins, and Olivier Cambessedes.

## **Yogmaya Neupane**

Born (1860-1941) into a brahmin family in Majhuwabeshi, Bhojpur district of Nepal, she was the eldest child and the only daughter among 3 children. According to the prevalent brahmin customs of the period, she was married to a boy named Manorath Koirala when she was just 7 years old and became a widow 3 years later; because of the mistreatment by her in-laws she returned to her father's house, only to find a similar treatment. As a teenager she found consolation in a secret relationship with a local brahmin boy and they eloped to Assam where they married, but the second husband also died after 10 years. She then married a man in Assam, who also died within a few years, so she was left alone with a daughter named Nainakala.

At that point she had enough of marriages and she decided to take sannyasa (although it was quite rare for females to do so) because she felt inspired by the teachings of Dayananda and the Arya Samaj. In 1917 she returned to Nepal, entrusted her daughter to brother Agnidhar Neupane and

sister-in-law Ganga, and started to travel around, meeting many religious leaders including Swargadwari Mahaprabhu Abhayananda, who guided her in yoga under the Joshmani lineage. Yogmaya then returned to her village to practice a very intense sadhana, sometimes fasting for weeks or meditating near fires in summer and in cold caves in winter, and started to recite poems to her relatives and other visitors; since she was illiterate, the poems were written down by her followers, especially by Chandra Bahadur Basnet, who published a small part of them in Sikkim under the title of *Sarwartha Yoghani*. The inspiring and revolutionary contents of these poems gave spiritual hope and religious validation to the oppressed such as women, lower castes and destitute people, and awakened many people in the region: visitors and disciples started to come in greater number from as far away as Darjeeling and Kathmandu.

In 1918 Yogmaya's teachings gave birth to the first organization of Nepali women, the Nari Samiti for women's rights, which led to the abolition of the Sati Pratha in Nepal in 1920. Her pioneering and courageously outspoken position against social injustice also included criticising the bureaucrats who were thriving on bribery and denying people even the basic rights; her activism soon irritated the oppressors, attracting the unfavorable attention of the Rana regime and the local feudal lords in the region, and the activities of her group were banned and persecuted with increased ferocity.

In 1931 she sent her disciple Premnarayan Bhandari (who became known as Hareram Prabhu) to Kathmandu to convince the administrators to abandon their discriminatory and corrupt policies; the prime minister Juddha Shumsher Rana met Bhandari and gave a spoken assurance that Truth and Dharma would be respected, but no improvements were applied in the following years. Again Yogmaya sent Hareram Prabhu to Kathmandu in 1936 and even went personally with her daughter later in the same year, but when she asked for "the alms of the holy order of truth and justice", she again received just empty superficial assurances. Before leaving the Kathmandu Valley, Yogmaya handed a 24-point appeal to the prime minister detailing the reforms she and her followers wanted to see in the country.

Dissent against the Rana regime was growing and Yogmaya's group became closely monitored and persecuted by the government, until Yogmaya declared that it was time to establish a new era by destroying the injustices, superstitions and corrupt practices that had taken hold of the Nepali society, and that she was going to sacrifice her own life to that purpose. She asked her followers to circulate a public appeal to collect any kind of alms people could give to the purpose of organising a collective *agni samadhi*, by which she would commit suicide with 240 willful disciples in 1938. She also sent personal appeals for alms to Juddha and Madhav Shumsher, the head administrators of Dhankuta district. Juddha Shumser ordered the disruption of the event by deploying around 500 security personnel, arresting 11 male disciples and almost all the female followers; the women were released after 3 months and the men after 3 years. A new plan for mass suicide was then prepared in secret, setting the date for 5 July 1941, Harisayani ekadasi, and choosing the *jal samadhi* instead. Yogmaya and 67 disciples jumped in the Arun river, drowning themselves.

News and materials on Yogmaya were aggressively censored by the Rana regime until the regime was overthrown in 1951; even during the first multi-party democracy era (1951-1960) and the Panchayat Era (1960-1990) mention about Yogmaya was generally discouraged by the government, yet her disciples around Bhojpur, Khotang and Sankhuwasabha continued the tradition locally through the 1990s. Some of Yogmaya's disciples, mostly females, also lived in the Manakamana Temple in Tumlingtar. Dipesh Neupane published an article entitled *Spiritualism and Religious Fervor*

in *Sarvartha Yoghani in Pursuits: A Journal of English Studies*, July 2012, and then a book entitled *The Synthesis between Social Protest and Nirguna Bhakti in Yogmaya's Sarvartha Yoghani* (2015). After travel restrictions for foreign visitors to Nepal were gradually lifted around the Panchayat Era, scholars from outside Nepal also began research on Yogmaya and after the 1980s notable Western scholars, such as Barbara Nimri Aziz and Michael Hutt, researched and published literary works on Yogmaya. In January 2016 the Nepal Government issued a postage stamp in her memory.

### **Anandamayi Ma**

Born Nirmala Sundari Devi (1896-1982) in the village of Kheora, Brahmanbaria district (presently Bangladesh) to Vaishnava brahmin couple Mokshada Sundari Devi and Bipinbihari Bhattacharya, a singer known for his intense devotion, originally from Vidyakut in Tripura. She was described by Sivananda Saraswati (Divine Life Society) as "the most perfect flower the Indian soil has produced" and she certainly contributed to the revival of Hinduism in her own way. Nirmala attended a village school for two years, then in 1908 she was married to Ramani Mohan Chakrabarti of Vikramapura; in 1913 she went to live with her husband but it remained a celibate marriage. In 1918 they moved to Bajitpur, where she stayed until 1924. On the full moon night of August 1922 at midnight, 26-year-old Nirmala performed her own spiritual initiation, with complex rituals (yantras, yajna etc) correctly corresponding to the traditional ancient ones, that were being revealed to her spontaneously and when they were called for. She explained, "As the guru I revealed the mantra; as the shishya I accepted it and started to recite it."

In 1924 her husband, whom she called Bholanath, was appointed as the caretaker of the gardens of the Nawab of Dhaka, so they both moved to Shahbag. In this period she went into ecstasies at public kirtans, and a growing number of people became attracted to this living embodiment of the divine. In 1926 she reinstated a formerly abandoned ancient Kali temple in the Siddheshwari area; in 1929 her first ashrama was built in this Ramana Kali Mandir by Jyotiscandra Ray, known as "Bhaiji," an early and close disciple who suggested that Nirmala be called Anandamayi Ma.

### **Ganeshananda Giri**

It seems that Anandamayi also had a disciple, Swami Ganeshananda Giri, also called Ganesh Baba, who took care of her ashrama for several years. Ganesh Baba, the eldest son of a wealthy brahmin land-owner who was also a magistrate and an industrialist, was born in Benares (Varanasi) in the 1880s and died of cholera at the age of 4, to be resuscitated on the way to the crematorium by Lahiri Mahasaya, who gave him his first initiation. The boy continued his academic education in Calcutta and obtained a doctorate in biology, took care of several business enterprises for his father, served his mother affectionately and saw to the marriage of all his 8 sisters, but he never married. At the age of 55 he wrote his will, disposing of the family properties in his hands, and left home in a spirit of complete renunciation. Travelling north, he arrived at Sivananda Swami's ashrama in Rishikesh, where he was formally initiated as a sannyasi. Later on he met Mahant Suraj Giri who initiated him into the Shivaite order of the Nagas, and at the death of Suraj Giri he cooperated with Datt Giri to manage the Anandakhara Temple of Bliss at Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh.

It was around the ashrama of Anandamayi that he encountered the hippie movement for the first time: he noticed a group of westerners camping along the road, dressing and living apparently like

Indian sadhus, and he was deeply intrigued. These youngsters were extremely different from the British officers and missionaries that had been in India under the colonial regime, and appeared to be sincere spiritual seekers who had embraced renunciation, free from prejudice and ready to accept Indian culture as their own. What impressed him the most was the fact that hippies were smoking hashish with the purpose of expanding their consciousness without having any philosophical, psychological or spiritual preparation for the experience of subtle realities; he commented, "To take psychedelics without having learned to meditate is like going to sea in a boat without a rudder". The purpose of meditation is to overcome the material ego and tune in with the universal consciousness, but without the proper knowledge and preparation, the bypassing of the limited consciousness of the waking stage cannot attain the super-conscious but remains stuck in the sub-conscious: thus the experiencer reinforces his/ her material ego in an uncontrolled manner instead of dissolving it into a wider awareness.

Ganesh Baba then devoted himself to the hippie movement, studying its way of life, culture and experiences from the spiritual perspective and trying to correct the most dangerous mistakes with his sharp sense of humor, his astonishing erudition, profound ease in the English language, and complete familiarity with the entire spectrum of psychedelic cosmic experiences through his Naga training. Soon he gained considerable popularity far and wide among these young psycho-spiritual explorers, and went to sit with them, often at the Assi Ghat in Benares (Varanasi) but also in Kathmandu, Goa, Darjeeling, Kashmir, and finally to America, Japan, Thailand and Europe (especially in France), like an affectionate and open-minded spiritual and philosophical grandfather - in the Baba's words, "relating to them in a way that would be unthinkable for the humdrum, mercenary, fanfaring, fantastic, and fanatic Oriental charlatans masquerading as authentic and astounding gurus who were thronging to the West".

Ganesh Baba taught "Scientific Spiritualisation", presenting Kriya yoga to hippies while supporting it with a natural vision of life and with concepts from quantum mechanics such as Bohr's Complementarity Principle. In 1980 he was invited by his closest disciples to New York, where he had a cataract surgery, and remained in USA becoming a respected lecturer at the Cornell and Syracuse Universities, and collecting disciples falling out from the Divine Light Mission of Prem Singh Rawat, when it started closing down ashramas. At his death, Ganesh Baba's body was brought from Nainital, near Almora, UP, to the Alaka Nath Temple, Bareilly.

### **Amma Amritanandamayi**

Born Sudhamani Idamannel in 1953 to Sugunanandan and Damayanti, a family of fishermen in Parayakadavu, Alappad Panchayat, Kollam district, Kerala. Deeply attracted to spiritual life, she intensely meditated on Krishna and Devi Parashakti. Since childhood and despite the opposition of her parents, she began to spontaneously hug people to comfort them in their sorrow, and this is still her most fundamental teaching. It is estimated that she has now embraced more than 33 million people throughout the world during more than 30 years, sometimes giving darshana for more than 20 hours at a time.

She rejected numerous attempts by her parents to arrange for her marriage, and in 1981 after spiritual seekers had begun residing at her parents' property in Parayakadavu in the hope of becoming her disciples, the Mata Amritanandamayi Math was founded, with Amma as its

chairperson. Embracing the World, her network of charity organisations in 40 countries, provides food, housing, education and medical services for the poor, building or supporting schools, orphanages, housing and hospitals throughout India and especially at the dedicated hospital in Parayakadavu, now known as Amritapuri. In the USA the organization has provided soup kitchens and hot showers for the homeless, books and hospital visits for prison inmates, and support for victims of domestic violence, and raised \$1 million in aid for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. In 1986, at the request of devotees, she began to conduct programs in countries throughout the world, and she continues to do so annually; many of her devotees from western countries have moved to Kerala to stay with her, leading a simple life, devoting to selfless seva, singing bhajans, chanting *Lalita Saharanama* and practicing meditation and yoga. Amritanandamayi has recorded more than 1,000 bhajans in 35 languages, and also composed dozens of bhajans and set them to traditional ragas.

In 1993 *Hinduism Today* awarded her the Hindu Renaissance Award as "Hindu of the Year", and she was elected president of the Hindu Faith at the Parliament of the World's Religions. In 2013 she was awarded the Vishwaratna Puraskar by Hindu Parliament. In July 2015 Amritanandamayi delivered the keynote address at a conference on technology and sustainable development, organised by the United Nations and Amrita University. The event was attended by delegates from 93 international universities. In the same year she donated 15 million US\$ to the Government of India's Namami Gange ("Clean the Ganges") programme for the specific purpose of constructing toilets for poor families living along the Ganges river; she also pledged to raise another 15 million for toilet construction and other sanitation efforts specifically in Kerala. She also donated 5 crore rupees (\$ 736,486) to the flood relief fund of the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and also directed 500 volunteers from the Mata Amritanandamayi Math to rescue victims and distribute food, clothing, medicines and other essentials.

**Ramdas Swami**, an associate of Amritanandamayi; he renounced material life in 1922 at the age of 38 and traveled around many holy places meditating on Sri Rama, then finally returned to Kerala and met Sri Ma in Trivandrum in 1952.

### **Matrusri Anasuya Devi**

Also called Amma ("Mother"), she was born (1923-1985) in Jillellamudi, Guntur district, in Andhra Pradesh, to a couple who had already lost 5 children. When she was 2 years old she entered what she called "*sambhavi mudra*", a deep trance in padmasana with suspended breath - the concerned members of the household imagined she had a fit of epilepsy. As she never asked for food but when receiving it, she gave it to somebody else who was hungry, several doctors tried to "cure her" of such weirdness. In 1936 she was married to Brahmandam Nageswara Rao who became later the village officer of Jillellamudi; apart from caring for her 2 sons and a daughter, she organised a grain bank to help the needy and offered simple vegetarian food to anyone who visited the village. In 1958 she established a common dining hall open to everyone and called Annapurnalayam, and in 1960 a "house for all" to provide free lodging to visitors and residents, and in 1966 a Sanskrit school - now called Matrusri Oriental College and High School.

### **Amma Sri Karunamayi**

Born Vijayeswari Devi in south India in 1958, her mother was a devotee of Ramana Maharshi. Karunamayi has a weekly television program, transmitted in India on Gemini TV and also on Bhakti TV. She established the SMVA Trust at her ashrama called Sri Manidweepa Mahasamsthanam, Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh, conducting several charitable programmes to provide free educational facilities, housing projects, clean water programmes, a free hospital, mobile medical clinics, emergency relief programs, food and clothing donations, and free housing for people who had been dispossessed of their land.

### **Malayala Swamy**

Another prominent religious leader who lived and worked in Andhra Pradesh, he was born as Velappa in a village near Guruvayur, Kerala (1885-1962). After travelling in various holy places he reached Tirumala, where he engaged in intense sadhana for 12 years, then he established the Sri Vyasa Ashram in 1926 near Yerpedu, located between the famous temple towns of Tirupati and Srikalahasti. His sannyasa name was Asangananda Swami, but he preferred the name Malayala Swami that he received from the people of Andhra as in the early days he could only speak Malayalam language. In 1927 he started a monthly spiritual magazine called *Yadirtha Bharati* and dictated several books including *Sushka Vedanta Tamo Bhaskaram*, "the sunlight that dispels the darkness of dry philosophers on Vedanta".

He dismissed the myth that Vedas and other scriptures are only for a particular section of the society and invited the common men and women to gain spiritual knowledge; he conducted Sanatana Vedanta Jnana Sabhas, as well as Omkara Satra Yagas each lasting for a week, and Chaturmasya Vratas lasting for 4 months each. His disciple Vidya Prakasananda Swamy established the Sri Suka Brahma Ashram at Srikalahasti.

### **Shivabalayogi**

Born Sathyaraju Allaka (1935-1994) at Adivarapupeta in the Godavari delta, Andhra Pradesh, the son of a modest weaver who died when the child was 3 years old. Raised by mother and maternal grandfather, at the age of 12 he went to the temple of Bhimeshwar, and after 2 years of sadhana he attained the darshana of *jangama devara* Shiva, who initiated him into samadhi - none of the other boys sitting nearby saw anything but were scared to see that their friend appeared to have temporarily lost all external consciousness. Sathyaraju became known as Adivarapupeta Balayogi, but initially he was abused by some local villagers who did not believe him, until he moved to a solitary field used for the burial of small children, where he meditated 23 hours a day for 8 years, then for 12 hours a day for another 4 years.

By 1961, when he concluded his intense sadhana, a large crowd had gathered around him and he gave a public message over radio, stating the importance of proceeding directly to the goal of spirituality and Self realisation, without being distracted by ego trips. In 1963 a small ashrama was established for him in Doddaballapura, a small town north of Bangalore, then the following year he moved to Bangalore on Bannerghatta Road. A few other ashramas were established at Sambhar

Lake, Dehradun, Hyderabad, Anantapur, Hindupur and Agra, and later in London, Portland, Oregon, North Carolina, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Australia.

From 1963 to 1987 Shivabalayogi traveled extensively throughout India and Sri Lanka, then from 1987 to 1991 he went to UK, USA and Italy, giving public programmes with dhyana diksha, samadhi darshan and kirtan, distributing vibhuti and vast quantities of prasad as blessings, initiating over 10 million people and teaching through silence. He summarised the core of his teachings on Bhakti Marga as "Dhyana, Vibhuti, Bhajan, Bhava samadhi", helped by prayers, bhajans, homa and japa. About meditation he said, "Dhyana means that a person will be sitting and closing the eyes. But sadhana can happen through dhyana, through bhakti and through seva and in so many ways when one is able to surrender to the Guru." In 1991 he developed kidney failure due to a long-standing diabetes condition, but he continued to remain in the body until 1994, working tirelessly to inspire people on the spiritual path.

### **Sadananda Swami**

Also known as Thycaud Ayyavu Swamikal, he was born (1814-1909) as Subharayan in Nakalapuram in Tamil Nadu from Rugmini Ammal and Mutthukumaran; both his father and grandfather Sri Hrishikesan were renowned scholars and experts in yoga and spiritual sciences. At age 12 Subharayan received spiritual initiation from Sachidananda Maharaja and Sri Chitti Paradeshi, avadhutas in the Siddha tradition, who used to visit his father; they told his family that his life had a specific assignment, and 4 years later they took him with them to Palani for training in yoga and siddha medicine, then to Burma, Singapore, Penang and Africa to meet many religious teachers.

At age 19 he was instructed to return home to take care of his family, and there he continued to worship the Mother Goddess and practice yoga; his biographers say he attained samadhi and developed the 8 perfections of Siva raja yoga, including astral traveling. Occasionally he went to Pazhani, Madras and other places to participate to scholarly discussions and visit temples; at age 27 he visited the Kodungalloor Devi temple in Kerala, where it is said that miraculously the temple bells rang and the doors opened by themselves to welcome him. In a dream the Goddess instructed him to go Trivandrum, where he met the king and was invited to the palace to share his knowledge. During a family gathering at the house where he was staying, a very old woman directed him to a nearby guest room, where he had the darshana of the Goddess; later a temple was built in that place. After his return to Tamil Nadu he took full responsibility for his family as his father left for Kasi (Varanasi); under the instruction of his guru he married and started a business, but continued to give spiritual discourses in Madras. During his work he met a British army officer, named McGregor, who was very impressed by his personality and became his student; when in 1873 McGregor was appointed as the government representative ("resident") in Travancore, he called Thycaud to work with him as superintendent, which was the highest position for a native. Thycaud became known as Ayyavu Swamikal and continued to take disciples and give discourses on bhakti, jnana, yoga and vedanta at Jnanaprajagaram in Trivandrum; he wrote several books in Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam and with Manonmaniam Sundaram Pillai he founded the Saiva Prakasha Sabha.

Ayyavu Swamikal was the first to challenge the casteist norms in Kerala, where birth prejudice and untouchability had become particularly deep-rooted and cruel; he had about 50 disciples from all

social layers and backgrounds and of both genders, from members of royal families to administrators, doctors, engineers, Nambuthiries, Nairs, Ezhavas, Nadars and even people born in Muslim and Christian families. Among his most famous disciples we can mention Chattampi Swami, Narayana Guru, Swayamprakasini Amma (Kulathoor), Kollathamma, king Swathi Tirunal Maharaja, and social reformer Ayyankali.

## Vallalar

Arutprakasa Vallalar Chidambaram Ramalingam (1823-1874) is one of the most famous modern Tamil saints and poets, and the leader of his *jnana siddha* lineage known as Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Sathiya Sangam. He strenuously opposed the degraded caste system, considering it a very serious deviation from the original varna system and a disastrous effect on society. He was also very strongly critical of those who consumed non-vegetarian foods, which he called "gross and vicious", openly declaring that seeing such people was giving him great pain. Over the entrance of his Sathya Gnana Sabha he put a sign warning that "only those who have renounced meat and murder should enter".

Born as the 5th and youngest child of Ramayya Pillai and his 6th wife Chinnammai, in the village of Marudhur in the old South Arcot district near Chidambaram, he had strong spiritual experiences since early childhood. When Ramayya Pillai died in 1824, Chinnammai shifted her residence to her mother's house at Chinnakavanam and then to Madras in 1826, where in 1828 Ramalingam started his studies under his older brother Sabhapati who in the meantime had married. Ramalingam however was more interested in visiting temples, until his brother objected, demanding that he remained at home to study; he then started to meditate in his own room in front of a mirror and a lamp; soon he had a darshana of Muruga and his determination became stronger.

Ramalingam's fame started when, during a religious meeting where he had taken the place of his brother as the speaker, he gave a great discourse on the 63 Nayanars. Although he was totally uninterested in family life, his brother forced him to get married and engage in professional duties. In 1858 at the age of 35 he left Madras and went to Chidambaram for a debate, after which he was invited to Karunguzhi by Ramakrishna Reddiyar and stayed at his house for 9 years. In 1867 in Vadalur he established the Sathya Dharma Salai to serve free food to anyone without any birth discrimination, then in 1872 he opened the Sathya Gnana Sabha, a highly symbolic worship hall for the meditation on the "*samarasa suddha sanmarga satya sangam*" or "society for pure truth in universal self consciousness" and the Arul Perum Jothi, the Divine light of compassion. Ramalingam composed 5818 poems collected in the book *Thiruvartupa* ("holy book of grace"), as well as the Tamil texts *Jiva Karunya Ozhukkam* and *Manumurai Kanda Vasagam*. In 1873 he gave a final lecture recommending meditation on the lighted lamp from his room, which he then kept outside; then on 30 January 1874 he locked himself inside the room, asking his followers not to open it. When the government finally forced the door open in May, the room was empty.

## Udiya Baba

Born as Artatrana at Jagannatha Puri in 1875 on the day of Krishna Janmashtami, his father Vaidyanath Mishra was a direct descendant of Kashi Mishra who lived during the time of Chaitanya.

From age 4 to 12 he studied at home, then he left in search of more knowledge and studied Sanskrit for 5 years at Balyabeda. When Orissa suffered a severe famine with thousands of people dying, he started to think about the akshaya patra also known as Annapurna siddhi, which is believed to be bestowed by Annapurna Devi, so he decided to engage in sadhana to acquire that blessing and went to Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, Assam. While there he heard a discourse on *Viveka Chudamani* and sobered up, realising that even the legendary akshaya patra could not be the supreme goal: how many people he would be able to benefit, for how long, and above all, how could mere food solve all the problems of people? So he abandoned that sadhana and left Guwahati, visited Varanasi and returned to Puri; there he requested Swami Madhusudana Tirtha, the acharya of Govardhana Peetham, to give him naishtika brahmacharya diksha, and he was named Brahmachari Vasudeva Swarupa.

Later he took sannyasa as Dandi Swami Purnananda Tirtha, and he was also called Parivrajaka Paramahansa, as he was constantly traveling especially along the Ganga. Sometime during 1937-38 he went to Vrindavana and settled in an ashrama named Shri Krishna Ashram (also known as Oriya Baba Ashram). In 1948 he was fatally assaulted by a deranged man named Thakur Das; his body was given jala samadhi in river Yamuna. Udiya Baba would teach people according to their natural inclinations, giving prominence to easy texts such as *Ramayana*, *Bhagavad gita*, *Bhagavata Purana*, and emphasizing as priority the need to understand that we are different from the physical body. When gross bodily identification has been overcome, the purpose of sadhana is to overcome the identification with the mind or subtle body, that is the preliminary requisite to realise the Self.

### **Maa Bhabamayee Paramahanssee**

Born (1932-2002) in a small village near Cuttack, Orissa, as the first child and only daughter of a brahmin family. From the age of 18 she experienced divine revelations during one entire year; she remained in seclusion totally devoted to spiritual practices, meditation and scriptural studies. She then traveled north to Rishikesh, to the ashrama of Sivananda, and after initiation she remained in the ashrama for one year; then she was instructed to settle in Puri. She started the Dibyadham Yogashram (in Chakratirtha Road) as her own bhajana kutir; it was registered in 1988 (Society Registration Act XII of 1860) and recognised as educational institute by the government of India in 1998. The sadhakas start the activities at 4 am with the mangala arati, then there is havan, puja to the Deities, chanting of *Bhagavad gita*, *Vishnu sahasra nama* and other scriptures, guru puja, then in the evening there is a sandhya arati, guru puja and satsang; every Saturday and Sunday there is a prasadam distribution. Hospitality is offered to elderly people, students and pilgrims; there are courses in Hatha yoga, Indian classical music, study of scriptures, and publications in Oriya, English, Japanese, Spanish and French languages, including a monthly newsletter. Mataji accepted disciples from all over the world; devotees have also established centers in England (Malvern, Worcestershire), Chile (Fondaciòn Dibyadham, Santiago and Vina del Mar), Japan (Satsanga Satjana, Osaka) and France. In Orissa there are also the Dibyadham Tapovan in village Motori (Puri district, about 1 hour from Bhubaneswar), Banaprastha Ashram (Lokanath Road, Puri), Satjana Sangati (Jaga Mara, near Khandagiri, near Bhubaneswar airport); Banaprastha Ashram and Tapovan Ashram also have goshalas. After her demise, the ashrama has been managed by her main disciple Swami Anandaji

## Bhagwan Gopinath

He was born (1898-1968) in a Kashmiri pandit family near Srinagar in Kashmir; his paternal grandfather was a deputy commissioner of revenue department in the Dogra regime of the then princely state of Kashmir, his maternal grandfather was an initiated disciple of a local saint and in turn he initiated his younger daughter, Zapaer Ded, into Japa Yoga. Alone or with his family he often visited local temples such as Kheer Bhawani, Ragnya Bhawani, Sharika Bhawani and Hari Parbat, Jyestha Bhagwati and Tushkaraja Bhairav at Srinagar, Jwala Ji at Khrew, Bhadrakali at Handwara, Gupta Ganga near Nishat Bagh and Amarnath. He attended bhajana mandalis and rasalila plays, and regularly studied scriptures like *Yoga Vasistha*, *Vedanta*, *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, *Bhavani Sabasranama*, *Indrakashi stotram*, *Panchastavi*, *Vishnu Sabasranama*, *Shiva Mahima*, *Shiva stotravali*, *Guru gita* and *vaaks* and especially *Bhagavad gita*.

He has been called Jivanmukta and Aghoresvara by several saints, and practised *sanatana panchang upasana* (*panchayatana puja*) in which Ganesh, Devi, Narayana and Shiva are worshiped as one's Guru. When a disciple asked him who was his guru, he pointed at *Bhagavad gita* and said that any of its 700 verses can be considered as one's guru. He did not have any birth prejudice and gave great importance to *atma vichara*, straightforwardness, honesty and truthfulness, and purity in thought, word and deed. He was an introvert, not interested in social life, and for long periods he would fast almost completely or take large amounts of foods, smoke his chillum and remain lying on his bed without bothering about the dust and cobwebs around the room. On one occasion his sister reminded him about the difficulties they were going through and he responded "our boat is in the middle of the ocean right now, either we will reach ashore safe or drown".

## Siddharudha Swami

The only information on his life is from the book *Siddharoodh Charitra* by Shivadas, that is focused on his spiritual mission; we know that he completely renounced his home and family ties at the age of 6 and joined the ashrama of Shri Gajadanda Swami in the Advaita Vedanta tradition, and later he went to pilgrimage to preach all over India but especially in Maharashtra and Karnataka, where he finally settled in his ashrama called Siddharudha matha in Cherambane village, Kodagu district. It is said he was born in 1836.

He strongly and explicitly condemned casteism, disagreeing with the common notion that brahmins were the only ones entitled to liberation or to the study of Vedic knowledge. He gave sannyasa to Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga), who remained to study under his guidance until Siddharudha's death in 1929 and then went to continue his sadhana under a disciple of Siddharudha called Muppinarya Swami at his Sri Airani Holematt in Ranebennur Haveri district. The most prominent disciple of Siddharudha was Kalavati Devi (Rukmabai Mallapur) whose samadhi is at Harimandir at Angol near Belgaum. The samadhis of other disciples Shivaputra Appaji and Gurunatharudha are also near his ashram. Other famous disciples were Iychanda Bolliappa from Devanageri and a Muslim-born devotee to whom he gave the name Kabirdas.

Siddharudha is considered an avatara of Shiva and his ashrama Siddharudha matha is a well-known holy site located in old Hubli; a popular local saying (*siddharudhara jolige jagakkella holige*) refers to the miracles associated with the prasadam food distributed at his ashram.

## **Tibeti Baba**

There are several spelling versions of his name, that simply means "Tibetan Baba". Born as Nabin Chattopadhyaya in Sylhet (Srihatta) Bengal, his father was a tantra yogi who had settled in Assam, and his mother was a devotee of Shiva. It is said that he did not remember the year of his birth, but we know that his father died when he was very young. One Shivaratri night, at the age of 13, he left home and joined a group of pilgrims who were going to Ayodhya, then from there he crossed the Sarayu river and traveled around visiting Gaya, Vrindavana and Amarnath in Kashmir, where a yogi advised him to go to Tibet through Nepal to search for a suitable guru. During his journey he found a yogi and meditated under his instructions, realising the presence of Brahman in all beings including animals. He then moved on to Manasarovara in Tibet, and he was introduced to Paramananda Thakkar, a famous Buddhist Lama who agreed to give him training, and remained there for 40 years. At length his body became weak and damaged, so he decided to enter the recently dead body of a Tibetan Lama who had attained nirvana. Then he continued to travel through the Chang Tang region of Tibet and from there to China, Mongolia, Russia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, becoming expert in many foreign languages including English, always preaching the realisation of Brahman united with the compassion and detachment of Buddhism. One of his favorite quotes from Buddha's teachings was, "As a mother protects her child even at the risk of her life, so let him who has recognised the truth, cultivate goodwill among all beings without measure."

He returned to India in 1857, the year of the Sepoy Mutiny that marked the beginning of the independence fight; he arrived in Kanpur and approached the senior British officer to ask him to release all prisoners, which he eventually obtained. On his second visit to Burma/ Myanmar he left his body to enter the recently deceased body of the royal prince to continue his mission. In 1929 he established the Tibbetibaba Vedanta Ashram at Dalal Pukur in Santragachhi, Howrah (Calcutta), by a donation from Bishnupada Chattopadhyaya (later known as Bhooan Swami). Another ashrama, named Pragma Mandir, was established at Palitpur village of Burdwan district of Bengal, on land donated by Bhootnath Ta; it was here that Baba died in 1930. Among his prominent disciples: Dharmadas Rai who accompanied him in south India, Soham Swami, revolutionary Jatindra Nath Banerjee (Niralamba Swami), Mong Paine, Dharma Das Mondal, Dwijapada and Sadhana Moitra (a female relative of Kunjeshwar Mishra). Several of the Baba's followers, including Kunjeshwar Mishra and Akhandananda Brahmachari, have written some biographic accounts and presented his particular philosophical perspective that unites Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism. His main teachings are: one must lead one's life based on truth and must not consider oneself as the body or mind, because when these identifications are overcome, fear and shame disappear.

## **Trailanga Swami**

He was born as Shivarama in Kumbilapuram, Vizianagaram District in Andhra Pradesh; disciples differ about the date but it is generally believed that he lived at least 280 years, having been born in 1529 or 1607 according to different sources. His mother believed he was the reincarnation of her own father, who had returned to complete his Kali sadhana, so she initiated him into the Kali mantra and he continued the vow in the nearby temple, always staying close to his mother until she died in 1669, then he collected her ashes which he used to wear during his strict tivra sadhana. In 1647, at his father's death, he had already renounced all wealth and family responsibilities in favor of his brother Sridhar. In 1679 he met Bhagirathananda Saraswati, who initiated him to sannyasa in

1685 with the name Swami Ganapati Saraswati. Then he went on a pilgrimage, reaching Prayag in 1733 before finally settling in Varanasi in 1737, where he lived until 1887 at different places including Asi Ghat, Vedavyasa Ashram at Hanuman Ghat and Dashashwamedha Ghat, always naked and talking very little, although he was visited by many people, including Bamakhepa, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Lokanath Brahmachari, Benimadhava Brahmachari, Mahendranath Gupta, Bhagaban Ganguly, Lahiri Mahasaya, Swami Abhedananda, Bhaskarananda, Vishuddhananda, and Vijayakrishna. He became known as Trailanga Swami and Ramakrishna referred to him as "the walking Shiva of Varanasi". Robert Arnett writes that his miracles are "well documented" and "he displayed miraculous powers that cannot be dismissed as myth". Thousands of people reportedly saw him levitating in a sitting position on the surface of the river Ganges for days at a time, while sometimes he disappeared under water for long periods without any discomfort. Once the Varanasi police, scandalised by his innocent naked roaming, locked him in a jail cell, only to see him reappear on the roof. Although Trailanga Swami ate very little and frequently fasted, his body weighed about 140 kg.

### **Bamakhepa**

A famous ascetic and ardent devotee of the Mother Goddess Tara, he was a contemporary of Ramakrishna. It is said he was born in 1837 and died in 1911. At a very young age he left his house to be trained by Kailashpati Baba, who lived in Tarapith (one of the 54 shakti pith, the most prominent holy places of the shakta tradition), then he engaged in yoga and tantra sadhana at Mouliksha, an old temple village at Maluti on the bank of the Dwarka river, and finally settled near the Tarapith temple in Birbhum, Bengal, usually meditating in the cremation grounds, where Mother Tara appeared to him and breast-fed him as his child. Many people visited him seeking blessings or cures for their troubles. His relationship with the temple pujaris was initially tense because he did not care much for rules; one day he was roughed up by the pujaris because he had taken some food meant for the offering to the Deity - however that night Tara herself appeared in a dream to the Maharani of Natore and told her that they should feed the saint first because he was her son, and this settled the matter.

### **Kururamma**

Born as Gauri (1570-1640) in the Namboodiri brahmin community in the village of Parur near the ashrama of Bilvamangala, she became known as Kururamma since she was the senior-most woman of the Kurur Illam village in Vengilassery. She became a widow at age 16 before having any children and was treated cruelly by her husband's relatives; she then moved to Guruvayur and accepted as her own son Bala Gopala in the form of Guruvayurappan, the Deity of Sri Krishna at Guruvayur temple, and many stories have developed around her devotional relationship. She was a contemporary of Bilvamangala Swami, who was very impressed by her devotion and personal relationship with Krishna. When Kururamma became older, Krishna appeared as a young brahmin boy named Unni (Unni Krishnan), to live and play with her and care for her, helping in household chores such as picking flowers for puja. The Deity of Guruvayur is a form of Vishnu as a child; according to the tradition, this Deity was given by Prajapati Brahma to Aditi and Kasyapa who wanted to have Vishnu as their child, then in subsequent ages to Sutapa and Prisni, and finally to

Devaki and Vasudeva at the end of the last Dvapara yuga. Krishna himself worshiped this family Deity in Mathura and Dvaraka, and when Dvaraka was submerged by the ocean, the Deity was salvaged by Krishna's grandson Vajranabha, who carried it around in search of a suitable place where to install it, accompanied by Brihaspati the Guru of the Devas and by Vayu the personification of the wind. When these extraordinary personalities arrived in Kerala, they received a gift of land from Parasurama and settled near the sacred lake where Shiva had personally instructed the Pracetas. This is the location of the famous Guruvayur temple, that is still a major pilgrimage place.

### **Samarth Ramdas**

Born as Narayan Suryaji Thosar on Ramnavami in 1608 in Jamb village, Jalna district, on the bank of the Godavari in a desastha rigvedi brahmin family of Jamadagni gotra. At the age of 12 he had a vision of Rama, who accepted him as disciple and named him Ramdas; he fled from home and went to the holy city Nasik, where he practiced sadhana for the next 12 years. In 1632 he started traveling around India and observed the sufferings of people due to floods and famines, social injustice, attacks and oppression from Muslim invaders and rulers, and the betrayal of Indians who sided with the invaders hoping for petty gains; he recorded his observations in the books *Asmani Sultani* and *Parachakraniroopan*.

According to the *Panjab Sakbian*, Ramdas met Guru Hargobind (1595-1644) at Srinagar in the Garhval hills during his travelling, and after returning to Mahabaleshwar he decided to revive the ancient original glory of Hinduism. He organised a great festival for Rama jayanti in Mysore, and in 1644 he installed at Chafal a temple with a statue of Rama that he had recovered from river Krishna near Angapur, and established a temple of Pratap Durga at the Pratapgad Fort, mathas in many locations and hundreds of Hanuman temples in towns and villages including Jaipur in Rajasthan, Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, Tanjore in Tamil Nadu and Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. He also established many study centers across India, accepting disciples without any discrimination of birth; he had 18 female disciples, among whom Vennabai who managed the study center at Miraj and Akkabai who taught at Chafal and Sajjangad. Once he strongly reprimanded an old man who opposed the participation of women in religious work; he said that everyone came from a woman's womb and those who did not understand the importance of this fact were unworthy of being called men. He said that respecting the role of women and giving them equal status was required for the growth of a healthy society. He was also strongly outspoken against caste discrimination. He became the guru of Pandit Raghunath and Vyankojiraje, the brother of Shivaji Maharaj the king of Tanjavar. Ramdas advised Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj not only spiritually but also about tactical and warfare strategies.

During his last years Ramdas told his disciples, "Even if my body will not be with you, I will always remain near you through my books which will guide you in every situation". Among his books we can mention *Poorvambh*, *Antarbhav*, *Atmaram*, *Chaturthman*, *Panchman*, *Manpanchak*, *Janaswabhangosavi*, *Panchsamasi*, *Saptsamasi*, *Sagundhyan*, *Nirgundhyan*, *Junatpurosh*, *Shadripunirupan*, *Panchikaranyog*, *Manache Shlok*, *Shri Maruti Stotra*, *Shreemat Dasbodha*, *Laghu Kavita*, *Shadripu Nirupan*, *Karunashtakas*, many *Abhangas* and *Ovis*, commentaries on Sunder kanda and Yuddha kanda of the epic *Ramayana*, several arati songs, and many unpublished works. The *Dasbodh* was translated and published by American followers of Ranjit Maharaj, who belonged to the Inchegeri Sampradaya.

In 1681 he entered a fruit fasting and died 5 days later, continuously chanting the taraka mantra *Shriram Jay Ram Jay Jay Ram* in front of Rama's murti brought from Tanjore. Several leaders followed his philosophy, including Nana Dharmadhikari and Bhausahab Maharaj, founder of the Inchegeeri Sampradaya, and in the 20th century Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Keshav Baliram Hedgevar, and Gurudev Ranade took inspiration from him.

One of Samarth Ramdas' disciples, **Shridhara Swami Maharaj**, became a prominent Marathi-Kannada saint and religious poet in the Hindu tradition. Born (1908-1973) in Lad Chincholi, Karnataka, as son of brahmin Narayan Rao, he lost his father at a very early age and then his mother and elder brother at the age of 10, after which he went to live with an aunt in Gulbarga to complete his education. On the advice of a school teacher he went to Sajjangad where Samarth Ramdas had lived his last 6 years, and became inspired to go on a pilgrimage tour for the next 12 years; in 1942 he took sannyasa from Sivananda Swami of Shigehalli and continued to travel and preach, then in 1967 he established an ashrama in Varadapura.

### **Jalaram Bapa**

Born in Virpur, Rajkot district, Gujarat (1799-1881), at age 16 he married Virbai, daughter of Pragjibhai Thakkar (Somaiya) of Atkot. At age 18 after returning from a pilgrimage he became the disciple of Bhoja Bhagat of Fatehpur, who instructed him to chant the name of Rama, and with the blessings of his guru he started Sadavrata, to supply all sadhus and needy people with food at any time, without any birth discrimination. One day a sadhu gave him a Deity of Rama, telling him that Hanuman would arrive soon; a few days later a Hanuman Deity was found from the earth, followed by Deities of Lakshmana and Sita. Temples of Jalaram Bapa today can be found in several towns in India, as well as in east Africa, USA, UK, and New Zealand. Millions of devotees visit Virpur on the annual festival and receive prasadam mostly of khichdi, bundi and ganthiya. A biography entitled *Shri Jalaram Bapa's Tales of Miracles* was written by Chirag and Yuvraj Sheth.

Jalaram's guru was Bhoja or **Bhojo Bhagat** (Bhakta), born in 1785 in Devkigalol near Jetpur in Saurashtra. In 1797 he met his own guru, a sannyasi from Girnar, and in 1809 he moved with his family to Fatehpur near Amreli, Gujarat. He worked as a farmer and was illiterate, but he composed poems and songs known as *Bhoja Bhagat na Chabkha* ("the lashing out of Bhoja Bhagat") condemning social injustice. He died in 1850 at Virpur, where he had gone to visit his disciple Jalaram.

### **Shivapuri Baba**

Born as Jayanthan Nambudiripad in Akkikkavu of Thrissur district in 1826, he lost his family at the age of 9 and together with his twin sister he went to live with his grandfather who was astrologer in the court of Tipu Sultan. By the age of 16 he had completed his education of four Vedas, as well as Ayurveda and Dhanurveda, then he left home and performed sadhana in Amarantaka forest of Madhya Pradesh, then he became a sannyasi in Sringeri Math and changed his name to Govindananda Bharati. His next sadhana lasted 25 years on the Shivapuri peak of Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park. John G Bennett heard about Shivapuri Baba from Hugh Ripman, a fellow student of Ouspensky, and visited him twice between 1961 and 1963, by which time the Baba was

reportedly 136 years old. Shivapuri Baba died in 1963, shortly after he had approved the draft for his biography, Bennett's *Long Pilgrimage - The Life and Teaching of the Shivapuri Baba*.

### **Sant Charandas**

He was born as Ranjit Singh in Derha, near Alwar in Rajasthan in 1706, in a family of banियar merchants, and after the death of his father the family moved to Delhi to live with some relatives. When still a child he had a vision of Sukadeva Rishi the son of Vyasa, and from Sukadeva he received at the age of 19 formal initiation with the name of Shyam Charandas, after which he practiced sadhana for 14 years in a cave outside Delhi. In 1738 Charandas began accepting followers; during his life he wrote about 20 books, including commentaries on *Katha Upanishad* and other *Upanishads*, a treatise on pranayama, as well as several poems. Two of his main disciples, Sahajo Bai and Daya Bai, both women, are also famous for their poetry. Charandas openly rejected all birth prejudice, especially based on caste.

### **Shri Kheteshwar**

Shri Kheteshwar (1912-1984), also known as Khetaram Ji, belonged to the Raj purohit community and became very popular especially in Rajasthan, where on his birth day ceremonies and fairs are still held. He became sannyasi at age 12 and preached non-violence, respect for the environment and moral values, denouncing caste prejudice and emphasizing the importance of humanity. He founded the second largest temple of Brahma at village Asotra near Balotra in Barmer district in Rajasthan, which is second only to the Pushkar temple; here Brahma is worshiped together with Savitri. At the *prana-pratistha* inauguration of the temple he decided that his task in life was completed and announced that he was going to leave his body on the next day, which he did. Later several other temples have been built in his honor in various towns of Rajasthan and also in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Delhi, Bangalore and Madras.

### **Siva Yogaswami and the Nandinatha Sampradaya**

The Nandinatha Kailasa Parampara is a Siddha Yoga lineage that extends back to Nandi and his 8 disciples Sanat kumara, Sanakar, Sanadanar, Sananthanar, Sivayogamuni, Patanjali, Vyagrapada and Tirumular. From Tirumular (around 200 BCE, author of the *Tirumantiram*) there was a series of lesser known teachers, then in modern times the disciplic succession continued with Siddha Kadaitswami of Bangalore (1804-1891), Satguru Chellappa Swami (1840-1915), then to Yogaswami (1872-1964) of Sri Lanka.

Jnana guru Siva Yogaswami of Jaffna (Sri Lanka) was the 161st Jagadacharya of the Nandinatha Sampradaya's Kailasa Parampara, in the Shaiva Siddhanta tradition. He was born as Sadasivan in 1872 near the Kandaswamy temple in Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka, and after his mother's death when he was still a child he was raised by his aunt and uncle. He had no interest in his father's business because it did not allow him time to meditate and study the shastra, and instead he found a job as a storekeeper for an irrigation project in Kilinocchi, which gave him a lot of freedom and

solitude. In 1889 he met Vivekananda, who was then visiting Sri Lanka, and was inspired by his speech and especially by his statement "the time is short but the subject is vast".

In 1905 outside Nallur Temple he had an amazing encounter with Satguru Chellappa Swami, who accepted him as a disciple; he left his job and followed his guru for 5 years of intense service and sadhana, then he was initiated into sannyasa and sent out to preach on his own. After Chellappaswami's death in 1911, Yogaswami engaged in intense meditation for several years at Colombuthurai Road on the outskirts of Jaffa, and gradually a number of sincere people approached him for instruction and blessings. In 1940 he went to India in pilgrimage to Varanasi and Chidambaram, then visited Ramana Maharshi. In 1961 he broke his hip while feeding his cow Valli, and after months of recovery he ended up in a wheelchair, but continued to teach until his demise in 1964, when he was succeeded by his disciple Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. He wrote over 3,000 poems and songs, called *Natchintanai* ("good thoughts"), compiled by four of his main disciples: Markandu Swamy, Sellathurai (Cellathurai) Swamy, Santha Swamy (born James Ramsbotham, son of Viscount Soulbury, the last Governor General of Ceylon during the British colonial period) and Srikantha, and regularly published on the *Sivathondan* ("servant of Siva"), a monthly magazine started in 1935, and as a book in 1974. Another famous disciple of Yogaswami was Pandit KN Navaratnam of Jaffna, a celebrated Vedic astrologer, who emigrated to Melbourne, Australia and set up the Sivathondan Nilayam centre in Hallam.

### **Sivaya Subramuniyaswami and the Saiva Siddhanta Church**

Born as Robert Hansen in Oakland, California (1927-2001), in 1949 he was initiated into sannyasa by Jnanaguru Yogaswami of Jaffna and was appointed by him as the 162nd head of the Shaiva Siddhanta Nandinatha Sampradaya's Kailasa Parampara, followed by 2.5 million Hindus in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Mauritius, Singapore and south India. In 1957 he founded the Himalayan Academy and America's first Hindu temple in San Francisco. In 1970 he established the headquarters of the Kauai Aadheenam as a 458-acre temple-ashrama complex on Hawaii's Garden Island, with the 2 temples Iravan and Kadavul. In total he came to oversee over 50 temples in many countries including USA, Canada, Mauritius, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Sri Lanka and several European nations. In 1979 he published the *Holy Orders of Sannyas*, defining the ideals, vows and aspirations of Hindu monasticism. In 1979 he founded the magazine *Hinduism Today*, and in the early 80s after his world tours, he focused his magazine on uniting all Hindus, regardless of nationality or sect, and inspiring and educating seekers everywhere. In 1986 he founded a branch monastery in Mauritius with the Spiritual Park-Pointe de Lascars in response to the government's request that he come there "to revive a languishing Hindu faith."

In 1991 he produced the *Nandinatha Sutras*, 365 aphorisms that outline the path of virtuous Hindu living. Especially in the early 1990s he campaigned for the fair treatment of temple priests, particularly requesting that they should receive the same respect enjoyed by the clergy of other religions. In 2000 he published *How to Become a Hindu: A Guide for Seekers and Born Hindus*, showing the way for seekers to formally enter the faith, confuting the widespread notion that one must be born a Hindu to be a Hindu. In the same year he launched Hindu Press International (HPI), a free daily news summary for breaking news sent via e-mail and posted on the web. In 2001 he completed the 3,000-page Master Course trilogy of *Dancing with Siva*, *Living with Siva*, and *Merging with Siva* as daily lessons on Hindu philosophy, culture and yoga, respectively. He officially

represented Hinduism at the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders in 1988 at Oxford, England, in 1990 at Moscow in 1992, in Rio de Janeiro in 1993 and was elected as one of the 3 main leaders at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago (the others were Swami Chidananda Saraswati and Mata Amritanandamayi). The New Delhi's Parliament of the World's Religions gave him the titles of Dharmachakra and Jagadacharya.

Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's successor (as 163rd acharya) is Bodhinatha Veylanswami (born in California, 1942), who has been awarded the title of Agamoddharaka Acharya Ratna by the Adi Saiva Sivachariyar community, because of his work in making the *Shiva Agamas* available in digital format. Bodhinatha Veylanswami was a keynote speaker at the Hindu Convocation of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne, Australia, 2009, presenting the issue "Is Yoga Hindu?" which sparked the Hindu American Foundation's "Take Back Yoga" campaign in 2010. From 1993 Bodhinatha managed the formation and development of Hindu Heritage Endowment, a tax-exempt endowment that provides income to several Hindu initiatives and institutions across the world, with 80 individual funds together exceeding 10 million US\$.

## Juna Akhara

According to Vidyananya's *Shankara digvijaya*, Adi Shankara founded the order of sannyasa called *dasanami sampradaya* (the 10 names of Puri, Giri, Bharati, Saraswati, Tirtha, Vana, Aranya, Sagara, Parvata, and Ashram) in the two categories of *shastra-dhari* and *astra-dhari*, respectively focusing on the teaching of the scriptures and on the physical defense of Hinduism. The philosophical sadhus were installed in 4 main seats: Govardhan Math in Orissa, Sringeri Sarada Math in Kerala, Dwarka Math in Gujarat, and Jyotir Math in the Himalayas; the lineages of these acharyas descend from the 4 main disciples of Adi Shankara, respectively Padmapada, Sureshvara acharya, Hastamalaka acharya and Totaka acharya. The warrior sadhus became known as Nagas (from *nagna*, "naked"), and gathered in 2 main groups: the sannyasi devotees of Shiva and the vairagi devotees of Vishnu. The Sannyasi Akhara includes Niranjani Akhara, Ananda Akhara, Juna Akhara, Avahan Akhara and Agni Akhara. The Vairagi Akhara includes Mahanirvani or Nirvani Akhara, Atal Akhara, Nirmohi Akhara, Digambar Akhara, and the Khalsa Akharas. These Naga Babas have the privilege of the Shahi Snan at Kumbh Mela and Ujjain Simhastha Mela.

The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad founded in 1954 coordinates 13 Akharas, but the Juna (meaning "old" in Gujarati language) Akhara is the largest group, with over 400,000 sannyasi members. Originally called Dattatreya Akhara or Bhairon Akhara, it was established in the 7th century, when 52 lineages of sannyasis came together to cooperate and become better organised. The present Acharya Mahamandaleshwara of the Juna Akhara is Swami Avdheshanand Giri, appointed in 1998 by its Sabha ("council"); the Akhara also has a number of office bearers, such as the Ramta Panch, and 4 groups of Mahants, Ashtakosul Mahants, Pujaris, Bhandaris and Kotharis (directors, secretaries, managers of the rituals, providers of supplies and accountants).

At Prayag (Allahabad) Maha Kumbh Mela in 1971, Hari Puri Baba gave diksha to American born **Baba Rampuri**, the author of *Autobiography of a Sadhu: An Angrez among Naga Babas*. At Hardwar Kumbh Mela in 2010 Baba Rampuri was elevated to the position of Mahant, together with other foreigners **Mangalanand Puri** (Goa Gil), and **Vasudev Puri**. There is also a dalit sannyasi (Kanhaiya Kumar Kashyap) named **Kanhaiya Shivananda Giri**, and a **Sadhvi Durga Giri** (Renu

Sharma). Another sannyasi, **Yamuna Giri** (a German born lady), performed sadhana for 12 years in a Himalayan cave and later established the Spitzberg Dhooni and Ganesh Mandir in Tübingen, south Germany. On 17 February 2018 **Swami Adhveshanand Giri**, Acharya Mahamandaleshwar of the Juna Akhara, declared "Our culture has since ancient times been a promoter of unity, equality, co-existence, and world brotherhood", and said that everyone is human by birth and great by his/her karma (deeds). It seems that the example has also inspired the Niranjani Akhara, that has recently appointed a dalit mahant as well.

### **Shankarananda Swami**

Born as Russell Michael Kruckman in the USA in 1942, he taught English Literature at Indiana University; a meeting with the American yogi Ram Dass inspired him to go to India where in 1970 he met his guru, Swami Muktananda, disciple of Bhagawan Nityananda of Ganeshpuri, within the tradition of Kashmiri Shaivism. In 1974 he received the shaktipat diksha and the order to take disciples. In 1977 at the request of his guru he was initiated into the Saraswati order by Mahamandaleshwar Swami Brahmananda; in 2007 he was appointed Mahant of the Panch Agni Akhara in Haridwar, and in 2010 as a Mahamandaleshwar of the Mahanirvani Akhara by Mahamandaleshwar Vishveshwar-ananda Maharaj in Ganeshpuri. He has directed ashramas in Ann Arbor, Los Angeles, New York and Melbourne. In 1991 he founded the Shiva School of Meditation and Yoga in Melbourne with the assistance of Swami Bhairavi Ananda (Devi Ma), who is the co-director and an experienced Gestalt therapist, and the residential Shiva Ashram (now called the Sri Nityananda Ashram) on the Mornington Peninsula. He has written *Happy for No Good Reason* (2000), *Consciousness Is Everything: The Yoga of Kashmir Shaivism* (2003), *Carrot in My Ear: Questions and Answers on Living with Awareness* (2004). He teaches a sadhana based on the lineage mantra (*om namah shivaya*), meditation, service, satsang and Self-inquiry (the "Shiva process"). Swami Shankarananda is the second Western-born Mahamandaleshwar in the Mahanirvani Akhara. At Prayag Kumbha Mela in 2013, two Croatian disciples of Mahamandaleshwar Swami Maheshwarananda Puri were also appointed as Mahants: Vivek Puri (Tino Pavlin, President of the Hindu Society of Croatia) and Swami Gyaneshwar Puri (Igor Mrkoci).

### **Ishwar Sharan**

Born in Canada in a middle class family of Protestant Christians, he chose self-education rather than the traditional academic curriculum, and studied especially religion and history, with a keen interest for the expedition of Alexander the Great in India and emperor Julian's failed attempt to re-establish freedom of religion after the Christian takeover of the Roman empire. He traveled extensively in Canada, USA, Europe, North Africa, West Asia and India, served in a kibbutz during the Six Day War in Israel and spent some months in retreat in a Franciscan hermitage near Assisi, Italy. He arrived in India in 1967 and at the Prayag Kumbha Mela in 1977 he was initiated with the name Swami Devananda Saraswati as dasanami sannyasi by a prominent Mahamandaleswar he does not name. Under the name of Ishwar Sharan he has published his impressive research work on the Christian legend of Saint Thomas in India, entitled *The Myth of Saint Thomas and the Mylapore Shiva Temple*. He also has a very active blog, *Bharata Bharati*, where many Hindu writers post their articles.

## **Acharya Ram Sivan** (Sri Rama Ramanuja Achari)

Born in south Africa from Jewish mother and Christian father, he was baptised and underwent barmitzvah, and chose to convert to Hinduism at age 15. In 1969 he emigrated to Israel, where he spent 10 years studying Judaism, Christianity and Islam, then 3 years in India studying Yoga vedanta, logic, hermeneutics, Sanskrit, astrology and tantra, in Rishikesh, Varanasi, Tirupati and Chennai. He speaks English, Sanskrit, Hindi, Hebrew, Arabic, Tamil. In 1982 he emigrated to Australia, where he has been practicing as Hindu teacher and priest for over 40 years, also traveling to USA, south Africa and Bali. He is a founding member of the Australian Council of Hindu Clergy, has written several books, consecrated several temples, and conducted training sessions in hospitals about death and dying. In 2000 he became Acharya in the Srivaishnava Iyengar line, by appointment of Sriman Varada Yatiraja Jiyar Swamigal, pontiff of Yatiraja Matham Sriperumbudur, the birthplace of Ramanujacharya, who instructed him to establish a branch in the west - a unique blend of northern (vadakalai) and southern (tenkalai) traditions of India adapted to a modern western milieu, promoting the teachings of Sri Ramanuja Acharya, who did not belong to any kalai, and all purva acharyas of both factions, as well as the vedic and pancharatrik ritual practice. The matha is totally committed to a policy of absolute non-discrimination based on race, caste, creed, sect, gender or sexual orientation.

## **Vidyaranya**

A very famous acharya in the Shankara line, he was the 12th guru of the Sringeri Sarada Pitham from 1377 to 1386, and the spiritual and religious force behind the foundation of the glorious Vijayanagara empire (present day Hampi), that became the celebrated fortress for Hinduism during the most violent period of the islamist invasions. There is some controversy about his life details and especially on whether it was the person also known as Madhavacharya and Sayanacharya, or if these two other names refer to his disciples who completed his literary and religious work. According to the records of the Sringeri Matha, he was born in 1296 in Ekasila Nagara (present-day Warangal) and was the elder brother of Bharati Tirtha, who was the previous acharya of the Matha (according to some, Vidyaranya and Bharati Tirtha were the same person). He became the guru and prime minister of Harihara I and Bukka Raya I, the founders of the Vijayanagara empire, and of the subsequent generations of kings there; the capital city had a temple dedicated to his name. The two brothers Harihara and Bukka Raya were generals in the service of the Kampili army, and when Kampili fell to the islamic invasion they were taken to Delhi and converted to islam before being sent back to Kampili as vassals of the sultan of Delhi. However, they approached Vidyaranya who converted them back to Hinduism, and in 1336 they established the new Hindu empire in Vijayanagara with the help of Vidyaranya; thousands of Hindus and especially brahmanas took shelter there fleeing the regions that had already been conquered or were under the attack of the islamist invaders, and the empire resisted for a long time against the various attempts against it. The records of the city speak of about 200 notable reconversions to Hinduism.

Apart from this extremely important role in the presevation of Hinduism in India, Vidyaranya is famous for his literary works. The *Sarva darsana sangraha* is a compendium of 16 philsophical systems known in his times, listed in increasing order of importance: the Carvaka (or Lokayata) school, Buddhism, Jainism (or Arhata), the Ramanuja sampradaya, the Madhva sampradaya (Dvaita Vedanta, also known as Tattva-vada or Purna prajna darshana), the Nakulisa Pasupata sampradaya,

general Shaivism, Kashmir Shaivism (or Pratyabhijna), the Rasesvara sampradaya, the Vaisheshika (or Aulukya) school, the Nyaya (or Akshapada) school, the Jaimini sampradaya, the Panini sampradaya, Samkhya, Yoga (from Patanjali), and the Vedanta school by Adi Shankara. The *Panchadasi* ("15 chapters") is a standard text in the Advaita Vedanta tradition, consisting of 3 sections dedicated to *viveka* (intelligent discrimination), *dipa* (illumination) and *ananda* (happiness), and explaining various concepts including the relation between Isvara, Jiva and Jagat. The *Madhaviya Shankara Vijaya* (also known as *Samkshepa Sankara Vijaya*) is about the life and achievements of Adi Shankara. Vidyananda also wrote a commentary on the *Mimamsa sutras*.

### **Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Shankaracharya**

Also known as the Sage of Kanchi or Mahaperiyavar ("venerable sage"), he was the 68th Jagadguru of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham in the Shankaracharya line. He lived from 1894 to 1994. He is mostly famous for having reconverted Indian National Congress leader FG Natesa Iyer from Tiruchirappalli, who had become a Christian at age 10 but in the course of the next 20 years had become dissatisfied with the ideology of the priests. He lived very modestly, and was affectionate and welcoming to people from all backgrounds, irrespective of their caste or race, earning the admiration of the king and queen of Nepal, the queen mother of Greece, the Dalai Lama, Paul Brunton and many other celebrities. His public speeches have been collected and published in English and Tamil as *Deivathin Kural* ("the Voice of God") by his disciple R Ganapathi.

### **Jayendra Saraswathi Shankaracharya**

Born as Subramanyam Mahadeva Iyer (1935-2018), at the age of 19 he was nominated by his predecessor as the 69th Shankaracharya Guru and Pithadhipati of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, and took the position in 1994. He rarely spoke in public but toured extensively for months and liked to meet people irrespective of caste boundaries, attracting thousands of Harijan followers and devotees. He issued certificates of Sri Tantra Vidyapeetham to trained priests from all communities to support their employment in Kerala temples, long before the Kerala government took the same initiative. He supported bhakti among people, established temples in Dalit colonies and engaged Dalits in temple rituals, and also appointed Dalit trustees in temples such as Mylapore Kapaleeshwarar.

Around 1985 he also started the charity programme Jana Kalyan Jana Jagaran, going with his band of younger devotees to visit the slums in and around Kanchipuram and all over Tamil Nadu, involving the Matha in various social activities, running dozens of hospitals, eye camps and especially the eye hospital Sankara Nethrayala between Vijayawada and Guntur in 2004. He also founded several schools and over 50 traditional Vedic pathasalas, as well as the Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Viswa Mahavidyalaya, a university established in the name of his guru. He worked for a solution in the Ayodhya issue between the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). In 1998 he visited Manasarovar and Kailash - the only Shankaracharya to do so after Adi Shankara. In 2004 he was arrested and jailed under charge of murder of A Sankararaman, manager of the Sri Varadharajaswamy temple at Kancheepuram, and the trial ended in 2013 when he was found innocent. In 2018 he asked his

yuvacharya Vijayendra Saraswathi to take over the routine puja, and the next morning he was admitted to a hospital near Kamakshi Amman Temple in Kanchipuram due to breathing problems; a few hours later the Matha announced his death.

### **Ganapathy Sachchidananda Swami**

Born as Satyanarayana at Mokedatu in south India in 1942 from Narasimha Sastry and Jaya Lakshmi Mata, who gave birth on a rock over the river Kaveri during deep meditation. He was initiated by his mother and spent 12 years in sadhana; after his mother's death in 1951 he trained under his aunt Yogini Venkamma in Proddutur. Later he went preaching in Kesare, a small town near Mysore, and in 1966 he moved to the present site of the Mysore Ashram on Ooty Road, which in the early days was only a straw hut in a field. He sang bhajans and kirtans, gave yoga classes, organised religious festivals and helped people by advising them in their material and spiritual concerns, and encouraging them to engage in social welfare. His teaching is based on Kriya yoga, giving special importance to the Nadi Shuddhi Kriyas; he has written several books including the *Raga Ragini Nada Yogamu*, *Sachchidananda Neeti Mala*, *Chutuku Sabitya*, *Vedanta Geetalu*, as well as Swarakshara Kritis, Swara Devata Kritis, Tora bandha Kritis, Vajra Bandha Kritis, and Nama sankirtan bhajans.

He personally traveled extensively around India, establishing more than 85 branches called Gnana Bodha Sabhas and 16 Ashramas dedicated to great spiritual personalities such as Swami Narasimha Saraswati, Sripada Vallabha Swamy (considered as the first incarnation of Datta in Kaliyuga) and the other 16 incarnations of Dattatreya, the 9 Kshetras and the 9 Nathas. Each ashrama has a temple for Dattatreya, Annapoorna Mandira (a free food distribution hall), a support group for women called Sri Jaya Lakshmi Mata Matru Mandali, a community hall for bhajans and meditation, and a charitable clinic with staff and support in allopathy, Ayurveda, naturopathy and homeopathy. Several health camps are also conducted for hundreds of people with specialists of cancer screening and assistance for diabetes, cardiac, dental, vision, artificial limbs, and even veterinary medicine. The ashramas also function as marriage halls for ceremonies officiated free of cost by the ashrama staff, and has extensive horticultural plantations especially of flowers and medicinal herbs; since 1986 special gardens have been created with reference to worship such as the Panchayatana Vana, Saptarshi Vana, Rashi Vana, Nakshatra Vana and Raga Vana, and Shuka Vana which is a preservation avian park for endangered species.

The Mysore Ashram, called Avadhoota Datta Peetham, has a Sumeru Dhyana Mandira, a dedicated Gurukula and the Shankara Shiva Vaidya Hari Veda Mandira teaching all available shakhas of Veda, with a Vidyadhikari, Pracharya and Adhyapakas for each shakha in addition to dedicated schools of Smriti and Agama. All ashramas and temples are open to people irrespective of nationality, race, caste and gender, emphasizing the importance of *manavata* ("humanity) and *visva manava dharma*. His organisation called SGS Vagdevi Vidya Samsthe provides help in the field of education for the hearing impaired and visually challenged students, and runs several charitable schools for underprivileged children. His mission includes over 150 Vishwa Dharma Vijaya Yatras around the world. Relief centers, Satsang groups and Datta Yoga Centers were founded by his followers around India and also in other countries such as Trinidad & Tobago, Venezuela, Peru, USA, Mexico, Canada, Australia, Russia, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, UAE, Holland, Romania, England, Switzerland, Spain, Austria and Germany. One of the most popular is in Frisco, Texas, near Dallas, with a temple dedicated to Marakata Karya Siddhi Hanuman and a prayer hall with a

seating capacity of more than 3,500. Two other extraordinary centers are the Jesus Datta Retreat in the deep green forest to the north west of Pittsburg, USA, where the focus of meditation is on the Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva Rocks, and the Euro Datta Church Center established in a former dilapidated church in central London, that is now open to all faiths.

In addition to the outreach using the various social media, Swami has been the first to utilize virtual reality, augmented reality and projection mapping. He has also founded SERVE, an Institute of Scientific Research on Vedas with the purpose to identify, classify, publish and propagate the knowledge of Vedas in simple language, publishing over 200 books and articles, and conducting dozens of seminars and workshops on the scientific aspects of Vedas. His SGS SIVA Vedic Academy works on digitizing the available Samhitas. Another field of interest is the Nada Yoga and the Raga Ragini Vidya, with Swami writing more than 2000 bhajan songs in Sanskrit, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi and producing healing music that has been favorably reviewed by independent research studies at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and the Psychiatric Research Institute Center of Arkansas, and is currently being used in several healthcare centers across the world and performed at over 250 occasions including prestigious theaters such as the Opera House in Sydney, the Lincoln Center of New York, the Esplanade of Singapore, the Royal Albert Hall in London, the LB Stadium in Hyderabad (India), the Palace Grounds in Bengaluru and Rashtrapathi Bhavan in New Delhi. Swami also established a Music Therapy center in Mysore, a 50-seat healing center with personalised pieces, and encourages students to appreciate the power of silence (*mouna*).

### **Anandashram Swami and the Chitrapur Matha**

Born as Shantamurti Haridas Bhat to one of the priests in the Chitrapur Matha by name Haridas Ramchandra Bhat and his wife Janakidevi in 1902, at the age of 13 he was accepted as disciple by Swami Pandurangashram, and only 9 days later he was ordained the 9th guru and the head of the community of the Chitrapur Saraswata brahmins with the name Swami Anandashram. In 1927 he went to the Himalayas and remained for some time with Swami Krishnacharya Saraswati to study the *Brahma sutras* and other texts; later Swami Krishnacharya continued to teach him staying at Shirali, Bhatkal Taluk in Kanara district of Karnataka. The Matha was established there in 1757 and also has branches in Gokarn, Karla, Mangalore and Mallapur. The main Deity of the Matha is Bhavani Shankar. In the early years of his administration of the Matha, Swami Anandashram faced serious financial problems due to a huge debt of 80,000 rupees (the value of the currency in the 1930s) and decreased income also connected with a severe drought in Kanara district and in the country in general, so that the annual Rathotsava (chariot festival) introduced by his predecessor had to be suspended from 1935 and replaced by a Sadhana saptaha to be held every December (starting from 1940) in various cities such as Bombay, Bangalore, Madras, Delhi and Calcutta. He also opened the temple to the Harijan (low caste and outcaste people), welcoming back the people who had been excommunicated by the previous guru, Swami Pandurangashram, because they had gone abroad (or kept contact with anyone who had gone abroad) or married outside the community. Soon the collection of funds improved, and by 1954 the Matha treasury counted 466,000 rupees. Construction and renovation programmes were done at the Bhandikeri Math in Gokarna, at Shri Ganapati Temple in Mallapur and Shri Chitrapur Matha in Bangalore, a number of books were published, and a periodical named *Chitrapur Ravikiran* ("the Chitrapur sunbeam") was

started. Many miracles have been attributed to Swami Anandashram. In 1959 at Bombay in a great ceremony attended by over 10,000 devotees he appointed his sishya Swami Parijnanashram III (born as Ravindra Shankarnarayan, son of Shankarnarayan Laxman Bhat), who succeeded him in 1966. In turn, Swami Parijnanashram was succeeded in 1997 by Swami Sadyojat Shankarashram as the 11th guru of the lineage. Swami Anandashram died at the Shri Chitrapur Matha in Malleshwaram, Bangalore, at age 64, and his samadhi is located at at Shirali within the premises of the Chitrapur Matha.

## **Nigamananda Paramahansa**

Also known as Nigamananda Saraswati Deva, he was born Nalinikanta (1880-1935) in a brahmin family at Kutabpur in Nadia district; his father Bhuban Mohan was a disciple of Swami Bhaskarananda Saraswati, and his mother Manikya Sundari Devi died of cholera when Nalinikanta was 13. In 1897 he was married to 13-year-old Sudhansubala Devi of Halisahar, but while he was away working as supervisor at the Narayanpur Estate he had a vision of the shadow of his wife, standing silent and in a sad mood. He returned home and discovered that Sudhansubala had died just one hour before his vision; this experience pushed him into research on life after death, at first with the Theosophical Society and then seeking for a guru. He met Bamakhepa, the famous tantrik of Tarapith, Birbhum, and was initiated by him; after 21 days of strict sadhana he had darshana of Tara Devi. Bamakhepa instructed him to study Vedanta and he continued his traveling; in 1902 he met Satchidananda Saraswati at Pushkar, Rajasthan, and became his disciple, accepting the order of sannyasa with the name Nigamananda. Satchidananda Saraswati instructed him to go to a pilgrimage to the Char Dham; when he returned his guru confirmed his realisations and recommended him to study yoga, so Nigamananda went to become a disciple of Sumeru Dasji, also known as Koot Hoomi Lal Singh or Kuthumi, and achieved success at Kamakhya Hill in Guwahati, Assam.

In 1904 he was in Varanasi, when he was visited in a dream by Annapurna, who instructed him on completing his realisation through bhakti; so he went to become a disciple of Gouri devi (a siddha yogini) to learn bhava sadhana. During his participation to the Kumbha Mela in Prayaga, he went to see his guru Sachidandand, who was staying with the Shankaracarya of Sringeri Matha, and on that occasion he received the title of Paramahansa. In 1905 he established his first Yoga Ashram at Kodaldhoa in Garo Hills, in 1912 he established the Shanti Ashram or Assam-Bengal Saraswata Matha at Kokilamukh (Jorhat, Assam) and the Dakhina Bangala Saraswat Ashram at Halisahar (near Calcutta), which also developed a Rishi Vidyalaya for Yoga training. He also instituted the Purba Bangala Saraswat Ashram at Moinamati (Comilla, now in Tripura), the Madhya Bangala Saraswat Ashram at Kalni (Dacca), the Uttar Bangala Saraswat Ashram at Bogra, and the Paschima Bangala Saraswat Ashram at Kharkusama (Midnapore). He started an annual conference called Bhakta Sammilani to bring together his followers to discuss and cooperate for his mission.

Nigamananda achieved siddhi in the sadhanas of tantra, jnana, yoga and prema, on which he compiled a series of books known as *Saraswata Granthavali* (*Brahmacharya Sadhana, Yogi Guru, Jnani Guru, Tantrika Guru* and *Premika Guru*), he wrote many letters to his disciples (collected in the book *Thakurer Chithi*) and published a monthly magazine entitled *Arya Darpan*. He united the jnana of Adi Shankara with the prema of Krishna Chaitanya, as true bhakti can be experienced only on the level of Brahman realisation, as clearly stated in *Bhagavad gita* (18.54). Nigamananda's teachings focused on Sanatana Dharma, to spread the "right kind of education" among people, to publish spiritual

literature with emphasis on character building and to provide service to God, who lives in all created beings. He initiated 10 sannyasis, including Swami Nirvanananda Saraswati (later known as Anirvan) and Swami Prajnananda Saraswati, and also thousands of men and women without any birth discrimination, and personalised their sadhana, encouraging them to meet periodically in groups (sangha) of 3 or more to exchange spiritual experiences, while continuing to lead an ideal householder life and study spiritual books. Nigamananda was a devotee of Jagannatha, whom he called "the symbol of Truth", and he spent the last 14 years of his life at Nilachala Kutir in Puri, also establishing the Nilachala Saraswata Sangha. During this period **Durga Charan Mohanty** became his disciple, translating his Bengali books into Oriya, writing more books (including a biography entitled *Shri Shri Thakur Nigamananda*), and establishing the Nilachala Saraswata Sangha and more than 100 ashramas in Orissa.

### **Sri Anirvan**

Born Narendra Chandra Dhar (1896-1978) in Mymensingh, now in Bangladesh, son of physician Rajchandra Dhar. By the age of 11 he had memorised *Bhagavad gita* and the *Astadhyayi* of Panini; at 16 he joined the Assam Bangiya Saraswata Math at Kokilamukh near Jorhat in Assam, where he taught at the Ashram school and edited the monthly magazine *Arya Darpan*, becoming a sannyasi disciple of Nigamananda. He was fluent in French and English and at different times he was given various religious names, such as Baroda Brahmachari, Srimat Varada Brahmachari, and Nirvanananda Saraswati. Around 1930 he took the name of Anirvan and started to travel as an ordinary sadhu (he described himself as a "simple baul") around north India, eventually returning to Assam and establishing an ashrama in Kamakhya near Guwahati. In the 1940s he lived in Lohaghat and Almora, where he produced a Bengali translation of Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine* (*Divya Jeevan Prasanga*, published in 2 volumes in 1948 and 1952) and the 3-volume treatise *Veda Mimamsa* (published in 1961, 1965 and 1970) that was honored with the Rabindra award. Madame Lizelle Reymond wrote about him in her books *My Life with a Brahmin Family* (translated from the French by Lucy Norton and published in London in 1958) and *To Live Within* (1971).

### **Ramdas Swami and Anandashram**

Born Vittal Rao (1884-1963) in Kanhangad, Kerala, to Balakrishna Rao and Lalita Bai, he married in 1908 and went to work in a cotton mill. On the instruction of his father, he started to chant the names of Rama, "*Sri Ram jai Ram jai jai Ram*" and he added the syllable *Om* to each repetition. Inspired by intense devotional feelings, he took the name of Ramdas and went on pilgrimage; in 1922 he met Ramana Maharshi and retired for 21 days in solitude in a cave in Arunachala. After living as itinerant sadhu for several years, he settled in an ashrama established by his followers at Kanhangad; the ashrama is open to everyone without discrimination of gender, caste or race, based on "a vision of divinity in all beings and creatures of the world". The sadhana in the ashrama consists in chanting God's name (nama), feeling God's presence inside one's heart (dhyana) and applying theory to practice through a life of work (seva). Among his prominent disciples there are Swami Satchidananda, Swami Muktananda and Yogi Ramsuratkumar.

## **Yogi Ramsuratkumar**

He was born (1918-2001) in Naradara, Lalganj, near Kashi, and always sought the company of holy people from his childhood. He travelled across India from 1952 to 1959 and spent time in the ashramas of Sri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharishi, where he learned respectively jnana and tapas, then he met Swami Ramdas who gave him bhakti; finally he accepted an ashrama at Agrahara. Among his western disciples we can mention Lee Lozowick, who founded "Western Baul" communities in the United States and Europe, and Krishna Carcelle (Gaurakrishna), who published the Vedantic monthly magazine *Rama Nama* and the website *Yogi Ramsuratkumar Bhavan* that offers free ebooks on Yogi Ramsuratkumar.

## **Sankara Giri**

Sankara Giri was born in 1900 in a village near Trichy; he took sannyasa at the age of 51 and spent nearly 10 years wandering in the Himalayas, then he arrived at Kambliswamy Madam in the early 1960s and became a disciple of Subramaniya Swamigal, then head of the Madam. He was a staunch upholder of Dharma (his favorite saying was "Dharma protects those who protect Dharma") and he became a well known expert in Siddha Medicine. In 1993 Shankara Giri's health deteriorated and asked Gitananda to take over the pujas that had continued for 141 years; in 1995 he nominated Gitananda as his legal heir and successor to the position of hereditary Trustee and Madathipathi of Sri Kambliswamy Madam as per the Madam tradition.

## **Gitananda Giri and the ICYER**

Born in Canada (north America) as Ananda Bhavanani in a family of Indian origin hailing from Maharajganj, Bihar, he was attracted to yoga from childhood and received his first initiation from the Bengali tantric saint Swami Kakananda Brighu, who lived in that village. Swami Kakananda (born Ram Gopal Mujumdhar) had been living in Varanasi as head of the department of Mathematics at Banaras Hindu University in the early 1920s; when his housing colony was destroyed by a fire in which his wife and infant son died, he left to become a wandering sadhu and met Swami Vividishananda, disciple of Swami Purnananda, who was part of a long line of Yoga Gurus; he engaged in intense sadhana, developing complete control over sleep and speech power.

When Swami Kakananda died in 1967, Ananda Bhavanani had already been teaching yoga for several years in Vancouver, Montreal, San Francisco, New York, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro and Caracas, but he felt the duty to return to India as his guru has requested. Searching for a suitable place for his Ananda Ashram, he arrived at the samadhi of the great siddha Jnanananda Desigar Kambliswamigal, a digambari sannyasi who had died in 1873. The place was in an empty jungle-like tract of land in Thattanchavady on the north-west side of Pondicherry, containing the samadhis of Yoga Acharya Kambaliswami Swamigal and his successors Ambalavana, Manikka, Shanmuga, Velu and Subramaniya Swamigal. The old sadhu in charge, Shankara Giri Swamigal, accepted him as a disciple and initiated him in Shiva Yoga with the name Swami Gitananda Giri. Gitananda then engaged in major restoration and rebuilding work of the holy place. In 2013 there was a serious legal battle to protect the property as the local government wanted to appropriate it and use it for industrial development. Gitananda had settled in a small plot of land in Lawspet only a half

kilometer walk from Kambliswamy Madam which he visited regularly, and already in 1968 he had started to organise residential training courses of the duration of 6 months for yoga teachers in the classic Gurukula system, assisted by his wife (American-born) Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi and later by their son Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani, both citizens of India.

Gitananda made 10 world tours and many pilgrimage tours to several holy places in India accompanied by his disciples, established many Ananda Ashrams in the USA, Canada, south America, Europe and Australia, and founded the ICYER (International Centre for Yoga Education and Research) and the Sri Kambliswamy Yoga and Cultural Arts Program, in which more than 20,000 children have studied yoga, bharata natyam and carnatic vocal music free of charge. He also supplied food, school books, uniforms and other material help for children who participated in the programme. The city center of ICYER, called Yoganjali Natyalayam, was established in 1993 to propagate what he called Rishiculture of Yoga.

Gitananda wrote 25 books on the science of yoga and published the international yoga journal *Yoga Life*. He was a popular though somewhat controversial figure in Pondicherry as his outspoken and forthright views were not always understood, and his outspoken and frank manners made many enemies along the way, especially among the politicians who were accustomed to obsequious and fawning behavior from everyone at every turn. In 1983 he was appointed as member of the Central Council for Research in Yoga, under the Ministry of Health, central government; in 1986 the President of India Sri Gnan Zail Singh awarded him the title of "Yogashiromani" at the World Yoga Conference in New Delhi. He was the sponsor of 4 World Yoga Conferences in Pondicherry and inspired the two International Yoga Festivals held in 1993 and 1994 in Pondicherry by India's Department of Tourism which attracted over 500 delegates from 26 countries. He took his teaching very seriously: he used to say, "I am not here to make money or gain your votes. Therefore, I do not have to please you. My joy is to help you grow. And to grow, you have got to shed all this false conditioning which binds you back." However, he was always very available to everyone; answering even with several pages to every single letter which crossed his desk. His method gives great importance to yama and niyama, asanas, kriyas, pranayamas, mudras, jnana and raja yoga prakriyas and laya yoga, as well as to education in yoga philosophy, history and therapy. He died in 1993, leaving Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi as director of the International Centre for Yoga Education and Research and Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani (Giri) as Madathipathy of the Sri Kambaliswamy Madam. He was laid in his samadhi next to his predecessors with a 38 hour ceremony respectfully attended by a number of the same government officers and political leaders who had fought against the Yogarishi fiercely during his life.

### **Yogananda Giri and the Gitananda Ashram**

Born Paolo Valle in in 1943 in Genova, Italy, he traveled to India in 1970 and met Svami Gitananda Giri (1905-1993) at the Kambliswamy Madam in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu, and was initiated as Yogananda Giri. He returned to Italy, where in 1971 he opened a Yoga center and in 1984 he was initiated into Saiva Siddhanta by Sivacharya VK Mangaleshvara and into the Shakta Samaya by Siddha M Booshanam Swamigal and Purnananda Swamigal of Tanjore. In the same year Yogananda Giri built the Gitananda Ashram in Località Pellegrino, Altare (Savona), where he also teaches Hindu shastra, Sanskrit, bharata natyam and classical Indian music, Ayurvedic medicine and Jyotisha (Vedic astrology). The ashrama has a temple to the Mother Goddess Lalita Tripura Sundari

and a temple to Dattatreya, and is regularly visited by the local Indian community and western followers especially on Sunday and Friday mornings and for ceremonies such as initiations, marriages etc; there are 20 resident sannyasis and 10 resident brahmacharis, with a congregation of about 100 people and about 600 regular visitors and supporters.

In 1996 Yogananda Giri founded the Sanatana Dharma Samgha ([www.hinduism.it](http://www.hinduism.it), UII, **Unione Induista Italiana** or Italian Hindu Union), with offices in Rome, in cooperation with the Indian embassy in Italy and several academic institutes; the organisation was officially recognised as religion by the government in 2003 and has now 5,000 members, about half of whom are of Italian origin. Among the organisations that participate to the Union are Centro Yogananda Ashram (Roma, established in 1979), Associazione Tripura Vidya (Saronno, Varese, established in 1995) and Centro Nisargadatta Ashram (Pisa, 1979).

In 1999 Gitananda Ashram and the UII started to publish the magazine *Sri Vidya* focusing on Hindu culture, yoga and tantra, then in 2006 the magazine was renamed *Induismo nel mondo* ("Hinduism in the world"), and in 2009 the publishing house Laksmi was established. This work inspired several small communities of Hindu immigrants in Italy; in 2011 in Pegognaga (Mantova) the Indian consul in Milan, Sanjay Kumar Verma, laid the foundation stone for a new temple, the Shri Hari Om Mandir, which includes a prasadam hall for 500 people. Other Hindu communities in Italy are Om Hindu Mandir in Rome, Geetanjali Circle or Doorga Maa Mandir and Shiv Shakti Mandir in Catania, Maa Bhagwati Jagran Committee in Valdarno, Durgamahavirdal and Bengal Culture Society in Brescia, Shree Durgama Mandir at Castelverde (CR), Shree Nav Durga Mandir at Polesine Parmense (PR), Sanatan Dharma Mandir at Arzignano (VI), Vaishno Mata Mandir at Novellara (RE), Shiv Shakti Mandir at Gussago (BS), Jai Jagadambe Maa Durga Shakti Mandir at Ponte Di Piave (TV), Shri Durga Shakti Mata Mandir at Terracina (LA), and Shri Vishnu Mandir at Corsico (MI).

### **Rama Swami and the Himalayan Institute**

Born (1925-1996) Brij Kisore Dhasmana to a northern Indian brahmin family in Toli in the Garhwal Himalayas, he studied under a Bengali Baba, then from 1949 to 1952 he held the position of acharya of the small Shankara math of Karvirpitham (also known as Karveer Peeth) at Kolhapur, Maharashtra. After leaving that position he went to create the Hansada Yoga Ashram, outside Kathmandu (Nepal) on the way to Dhulikhel on the mountain of Janagal, and then left it to Swami Vishuddha Dev; today the ashrama serves as the headquarters of the characterology movement.

In 1952 he was encouraged to travel to the United States and Europe, in 1966 he founded the Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy in Kanpur (India) and in 1969 he established a branch at Honesdale (Pocono Mountains, Pennsylvania); other centers were also established in various parts of the USA, Mexico, Great Britain, Malaysia and India. He wrote the book *Living With the Himalayan Masters*. The Himalayan Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy offers yoga retreats, residential programmes, online courses and seminars with certifications, publishes the magazine *Yoga International* and various literature produced by the Himalayan Institute Press, and also sells a line of herbal extracts.

## Sathyananda Saraswathi and Hindu Aikya Vedi

Also known as Chenkottukonam Swamiji (1935-2006), he was born as Shekharan Nair in Andoorakonam near Thiruvananthapuram. He left his post as a teacher in a high school to take sannyasa from Neelakanta Gurupadar, and after the required training he started to develop the Sree Rama Dasa Mission, that he established in 1981 as a synthesis of Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga and Karma Yoga. The motto of the Mission is "*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*", and expresses the purpose of his work for the spiritual resurrection of Hinduism by putting an end to inequalities and caste-based discrimination. The Mission opened centers in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Richmond, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles and San Jose in the USA. There are disciples and active centers also in Malaysia, New Zealand, Switzerland, the Caribbean Islands and the United Kingdom. Swamiji conducted tours all over India and countries including USA, Canada, Singapore, Switzerland, Malaysia, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Suriname.

As the president of the Nilakal Action Committee, he restored the holy place for Ayyappa devotees near Sabarimala, settling a dispute between the devotees and a Christian group. He also intervened in the protest against the Devaswom Bill in 1996 to liberate the Guruvayoor Temple. He was the founder of the Manishi Herbal Research Foundation for ayurvedic research and production, including the innovative idea for a health drink called "Herbal Cola". Swamiji also inaugurated the 2nd and 3d National Conventions of the Kerala Hindus of North America in November 2003 and July 2005 respectively. In 2000 in Thiruvananthapuram, Sathyananda Saraswathi organized and carried out the Shatakoti Archana (1 billion repetitions of the Divine Mother's Name), with thousands of participants. In his ashrama at Trivandrum he built a 108-foot-high temple dedicated to the Mother Goddess and called Jyotikshetra. In 1989 he started the Rama Navami Rathayatra that has regularly been covering the southern States of India every year; he also continued Gurupadar's tradition of *parayanam* (recitation) of entire *Adhyatma Ramayana* daily at the temple at Chenkottukonam (now going on for more than 8 decades).

## Neem Karoli Baba

While Vivekananda and Dayananda worked mainly to establish the ideological and social value of Hinduism, and Yogananda and Sivananda focused on presenting the ancient science of Yoga, Neem Karoli Baba (1900-1973) was a solid Bhakta, a dedicated devotee of Hanuman, and even more important, he never felt any need to pepper his teachings with abrahamic concepts and quotes from the Bible. Born as Lakshmi (Laxmi) Narayan Sharma in Akbarpur, Firozabad district (Uttar Pradesh) in a brahmin family as son of of Durga Prasad Sharma, he dutifully married at a very young age but was also a wandering sadhu at heart, travelling extensively through north India and engaging in austerity at Vavana Morbi in Gujarat. He became variously known as Baba Lakshman Das, Tallaiya Baba, Chamatkari ("miracle") Baba, Handiwalla Baba, Tikoniawalla Baba or Maharaj-ji. He established one ashrama in Vrindavana and another at Kainchi (a Hanuman temple with a *yajna kunda* for two local sadhus, Premi Baba and Sombari Maharaj), and in time, over 100 temples were constructed in his name, including those in Rishikesh, Shimla, Neem Karoli village at Khimasepur (Farrukhabad), Bhumiadhar, Hanuman Gadi, Lucknow, Delhi, and in Taos (New Mexico, USA). He accepted several disciples of American birth, who had traveled to India in the 1960s and 1970s, some of whom became rather famous.

One of his first Western initiates/devotees was **Bhagavan Das** (born Kermit Michael Riggs in 1945), who describes himself as a bhakti yogi, a shakta tantra adept, and kirtan singer; he lived for 6 years in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. He also received Vajra Yogini initiation from the 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje of the Karma Kagyu lineage and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche the 11th Trungpa Tulku. He wrote *It's Here Now (Are You?): A Spiritual Memoir*, and was featured in Ram Dass' book *Be Here Now*.

**Ram Dass**, born Richard Alpert in 1931, Professor of psychology at Harvard University, wrote the famous book *Be Here Now*, that became a great influence on the spiritual development of American culture. Inspired by Bhagavan Das, in 1967 he traveled to India and met Neem Karoli Baba at Kainchi ashrama as a major turning point for his personal and professional life; he then wrote the book *Miracle of Love*. In the early 1970s, Ram Dass taught workshops on conscious aging and dying all around the United States, then in 1974 he established the Seva Foundation, the Hanuman Foundation and the Human Kindness Foundation, all charitable projects for social education and service. In 1986 he established the Living/ Dying Project (Santa Fe, New Mexico and later Marin, California), the first residential facility in the USA where people came to die consciously.

**Krishna Das** (born Jeffrey Kagel in 1947), the famous kirtan singer, in 1970 he traveled to India and became a devotee of Neem Karoli Baba. He wrote *Flow of Grace: Chanting the Hanuman Chalisa* (2007) and *Chants of a Lifetime: Searching for a Heart of Gold* (2010) and released 14 albums since 1996. He performed at the 2013 Grammy Awards. In 2012 filmmaker Jeremy Frindel made the documentary *One Track Heart: The Story of Krishna Das*, with interviews on his life and spiritual quest.

We can also mention musician Rampriya Das (Trevor Hall), humanitarian Larry Brilliant (named Subramaniam) and his wife Girija, scholar and writer Yvette Rosser, film-maker John Bush, and Daniel Goleman author of *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience and Emotional Intelligence*. Hollywood actress Julia Roberts was influenced by Neem Karoli Baba to approach Hinduism. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, influenced by Steve Jobs (who along with his friend Dan Kottke traveled to India in 1974 to study Hinduism and Indian spirituality) visited Neem Karoli Baba's ashrama in Kainchi in 2015. Larry Brilliant took Google's Larry Page and Jeffrey Skoll, co-founder of eBay, on the pilgrimage. After returning to the USA, Ram Dass and Larry Brilliant established the Seva Foundation, an international health organization based in Berkeley, California. In the late 2000s the Love Serve Remember Foundation evolved, with the purpose of preserving and continuing the teachings of Neem Karoli Baba.

## **Baba Hari Dass**

Also known as Chota Maharaja (not to be confused with Swami Haridas, 1594-1691), was a spiritual poet and classical musician of Bhakti movement, known for his association with the more famous Neem Karoli Baba, for whom he supervised the construction of several buildings and maintained the ashramas in Nainital area (1954-1968) before going to the USA to become a spiritual teacher in California in the beginning of 1971.

Born in 1923 in Almora near Nainital, Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand), a region also known as Kurmachala, into the 13th generation of a Kumaoni Karnataka brahmin family, he learned Vedanta, Samkhya, Ayurveda, Tantra Yoga, Kriya Yoga as well as martial arts and performing arts, and even

temple masonry. In 1929 he met Sombari Baba Maharaj, also known as Paramanandji Maharaja, who lived in a tiny hut inside a banyan tree in the village Kakarighat by the Koshi river; 2 years later he left home to be initiated by him into brahmacharya. In 1942 he took sannyasa diksha into the vairagi/ tyagi Vaishnava order of Ramanandi sampradaya from Baba Raghobar Dass ji Maharaja. In 1952 he took *mauna vrata* (vow of silence, meant to facilitate *ekagrata*, the focused concentration of the mind) and started to communicate only in brief writing; during that period while living in a cave near Ghati, he met the legendary Kumaon yogi Haidakhan Baba. Between 1950 and 1964 he organised local followers and volunteers to build Hanumangarh and later Kainchi Ashram in Nainital, and an ashrama at Kakharighat where Sombari Maharaja lived. In 1937 while visiting villages in the Himalayan mountains he had already encountered several Westerners who were learning about yoga and remembered them as "true seekers", some of whom had taken sannyasa. In 1958 he trained several former students of the known mystic George Gurdjieff (1866-1949), then in the early 1960s more newcomers were directed to learn yoga from him - including Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky and Gary Snyder in 1962, Ravi Dass (Ron Zimardi), one Lawrie (Lawrence) who stayed for one entire year in 1964, and Ram Dass (ex-Harvard professor Richard Alpert) in 1967.

Ram Dass was impressed because Hari Dass Baba walked 16 km every morning to come and teach him yoga so that he would go back to the USA and spread the knowledge; they also discussed about opening yoga centers and publishing books and the conversation continued with a series of letters until 1969. In 1968 Bhagavan Das (Kermit Michael Riggs) was alerted during meditation that Baba Hari Dass was in danger under anesthetic confinement for undisclosed medical reasons in the hospital in Lucknow. Bhagavan Das drove from Nainital overnight and removed him from that life-threatening condition, and after few days Baba Hari Dass wrote, "You saved my life".

In 1968 Hari Dass Baba distanced himself from his close friend Neem Karoli Baba, because he found the association disruptive for his own regulated practices such as fasting or silence. In 1970 several westerners including Paul C Adams (Prem Das) and Jerry Tabachnick (Anand Dass) traveled to Haridwar to invite Baba Hari Dass to visit USA, sponsored by Ruth Johnson-Horsting (Ma Renu), a Professor of Arts at the University of California in Davis and by her students Bondana and Mahendra Mark Jungerman. Later in 1976 Baba Hari Dass directed her in forming the Sri Rama Foundation to support Sri Ram Ashram and other projects in India, USA and Canada. Ma Renu went to Shyampur, near Haridwar, and from 1984 to 1987 she established the Sri Ram Ashram, with a children's home, a school (Sri Ram Vidya Mandir, up to 12th grade standard) and a medical clinic. She also edited several published writings of Baba Hari Dass. Another prominent disciple was Jeannine Parvati Baker (daughter of a First Nation native American of Ute tribe), who was tutored during her pregnancy, resulting in the popular book *Prenatal Yoga & Natural Childbirth*, published in 1974, and a comprehensive system of asana, pranayama, meditation, Ayurveda, and mindfulness techniques for labor that formed the basis of a Prenatal Yoga Teacher Training. Several events on Yoga in general were organised at the Sea Ranch in Sonoma County, Santa Rosa in California, the Lama Foundation in New Mexico, Coconut Grove in Florida, and the Pacific Cultural Center in Santa Cruz in California; in Canada he established the Dharma Sara community in Toronto, the Dharma Sara Satsang in Vancouver BC, and the Salt Spring Centre of yoga on Salt Spring Island BC.

The connection with the Lama Foundation developed in 1971 with the publication of Ram Dass' book *Be Here Now*; the place is an eclectic open eco-spiritual community and retreat center founded in 1967 north of Taos by Barbara Durkee (now known as Asha Greer or Asha von Briesen),

Stephen Durkee (aka Steve Durkee, later known as Nooruddeen Durkee) and Jonathan Altman. It was one of almost 30 communes (intentional communities) established in the region around that time, and one of the most well-known, along with Morningstar East, Reality Construction Company, the Hog Farm, New Buffalo, and The Family. By 1973 the vast majority of these communities had closed down, but the Lama Foundation was able to continue because it had more structure and discipline than most others. In 1974 the Lama Foundation published *The Yellow Book*, a collection of aphorisms by Baba Hari Dass. Hari Dass' other books are *Known, Unknown* (published by Sri Rama Foundation, 1075), and *Silence Speaks* (1977).

Baba Hari Dass emphasized physical work and volunteer karma yoga services. In 1974 he created the Hanuman Fellowship in Santa Cruz, California, to search for a suitable land, and in 1976 a large property in the Santa Cruz Mountains was purchased on the condition to preserve its natural state; this was the origin of the Mount Madonna Center for Creative Arts established in 1978 in Watsonville. Baba Hari Dass developed a 3-tier yoga teaching schedule for beginners, intermediate and advanced practitioners, a strictly genuine system based on yoga shastra and including deity worship, reading of holy scriptures, puja and recitation of mantras before venturing into more advanced practices such as Bhairavi Chakra sadhana and Shat Chakra bedhana. In 1975 he started giving weekly classes at the University of California, Santa Cruz, based on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* as well as *Yoga Vashishta*, *Siva Sambita*, *Gherand Sambita*, *Goraksha Sambita*, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, Vyasa's *Yoga Bhasya*, Isvarakrishna's *Samkhyakarika*, Vacaspati Misra's *Tattvavaisaradi*, Vijnanabhiksu's *Yogavartika* and other texts.

A pioneer of the Ayurveda in the West, Baba Hari Dass established an Ayurvedic pharmacy and a college of Ayurveda, where he invited notable Ayurvedic teachers such as Vasant Lad, Sarita Shrestha, Professor Ram Harsh Singh, and others. There were regular classes in *Yoga Sutras* and *Bhagavad gita*, Satsangs events, *Ramayana* plays (every year in June starting from 1974), martial arts, and sport activities with annual Hanuman Olympics and retreats. In 2001 a group of several inspired students traveled to India in search of a Hanuman murti to be installed at Mount Madonna; a temple was built and the *prana pratistha* for Sankata Mochana Hanuman was performed in 2003, followed by a Ganesh temple and the Nandi-Shiva water cascade. Many visitors still arrive daily from the entire region including the San Francisco Bay Area. Bonnie Greenwell, while working on her PhD in Transpersonal Psychology (*Energies Transformation - A Guide to the Kundalini Process*) was allowed to study "the unpublished manuscripts of the Jnana yoga teacher Baba Hari Dass".

## **Haidakhan Babaji**

Also called Bhole Baba, he mysteriously "appeared" in June 1970 in a cave at the foot of the mount Kailash, across the river Gautama Ganga, near a remote village called Hairakhan, in the Nainital District of Uttarakhand, India. It is said that he was a Siddha who entered the body (*kaya pravesha*) of a recently deceased boy, in order to engage in preaching. According to his devotees, he was a direct avatara of Shiva Mahadeva. He died on 14 February 1984.

Many sincere seekers of Indian and non-Indian origin were attracted to him and became his disciples and followers; his teachings can be summarised as *Satya Saralata Prema* (truth, simplicity, love) and give great prominence to the Nama Japa and Nama Bhajan, both in Sanskrit and in Hindi. One of the first and foremost disciples was Gaura Devi (since 1972), as Shastriji was more a

companion than a disciple. Other prominent disciples were Leonard Orr (who developed the Rebirthing technique from the prayanama concept), Radhe Shyam, and David Berry. The famous pop-rock-punk singer Nina Hagen is also considered to be a devotee of Babaji. The Haidakhandi samaj has many centers in USA and Europe and residential ashramas in Germany at Windeck-Rieferath, in Italy at Cisternino (BR) and Asti (AT), in Switzerland at Brienz, and in USA at Crestone.

Haidakhand (Herakhan) Babaji clearly focused on Bhakti especially to Shiva and the Mother Goddess (Haidakhandesvari) without excluding Vishnu and especially Krishna (he built a major ashrama in Vrindavana) and regularly performed homa and other traditional Hindu practices, but he made a distinction claiming that he was teaching Sanatana Dharma rather than Hindu Dharma and encouraged his disciples to explore Tibetan Buddhism as well; also he did not discourage a sort of "Christ mystique" around his own person, connecting it to the presentations of Yogananda and Sri Yukteswar. His disciples frequently identify him with the Mahavatara Babaji of that line.

### **Sri Anandamurti and Ananda Marg**

He was born as Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (1921-1990) in Jamalpur, Bihar, on Buddha Purnima to Lakshmi Narayan Sarkar, a homeopathic doctor whose family was originally from Bamunpara (Brahmanpara) district in West Bengal. In 1944 his father died and he had to quit college and start to work as accountant; he soon found that some of his colleagues were interested in learning about ancient Tantra meditation, and this started a number of meetings. He took the spiritual name of Sri Anandamurti and started to write a collection of 250 books called *Subhāsita Samgraha*, numbering in several thousands pages, and 5018 songs in various languages collectively called *Prabhat Samgīta* ("Songs of the New Dawn").

He gave the definition of *tantra* as the fundamental spiritual science valid for all, irrespective of superficial barriers such as caste, religious sect, race, or nationality, and opposed to the materialistic or organised religious systems based on narrow-minded worldly desires. Not all spiritualists are on the same level, though - on the simplest level a disciple easily forgets the teachings of the guru, on the next one a disciple may sometimes become careless, while on the highest level a disciple works hard to put the teachings into practice. Anandamurti explained that the word *tantra* literally means "liberation from darkness" (*tan*, "darkness", and *tra*, "liberation"). His spiritual philosophy was a synthesis of Vedic and Tantric philosophies, expressing several concepts such as Biopsychology (the chakras as connected to the physical body through the nerve plexi and endocrine glands), Brahmachakra (the human body as a microcosm mirroring the macrocosm), and Microvita (spiritual consciousness and activity particles that are smaller and subtler than material atoms).

In 1955 he founded the Ananda Marga Pracaraka Samgha (generally known as Ananda Marga), dedicated to "self-realisation and service to all". In the same year he created a first group of acharyas, who by 1969 were sent as missionaries around India and other continents, including the USA. In 1963 he started the Ananda Marga schools; as Ananda Marga spread all over India in the 1960s, the scope of its social services grew to include children's homes, medical clinics, feeding programs and disaster relief teams, so AMURT (Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team) was started in 1965. The first "monk" was initiated in 1962, then the "nuns" in 1966, but the bulk of his early followers were lay members who did not live and work full time in the organisation premises. By

1970 Ananda Marga had become a global organization with branches in Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia, and by 1973 it had established about 100 centers with several thousands members living communally in ashramas.

His disciples call him Baba and address each other as Didi ("sister") and Dada ("brother"); particular importance is given to purity of life, selfless social service, and sadhana - individual daily and collective weekly sadhana called Dharma-chakra, with songs from *Prabhat Samgita*, *Baba Nam Kevalam kirtan* and the devotional dance called Lalita Marmika, then the mantras called *Samgacchadvam* and *Nityam Shuddham*, and finally the Guru Puja mantra. Sannyasins are also taught the Kapalika meditation, while the basic meditation is called sahaja yoga and consists of 6 techniques or lessons taught on personal basis (*isvara pranidhana, guru mantra, tattva dharana, sadharana pranayama, chakra sodhana, guru dhyana*).

There is a list of 42 asanas and 13 mudras and bandhas prescribed daily besides the pranayama exercises; however there is a strict warning about the risks involved in practicing them without the direct guidance of an expert teacher. Self-massage and the two dance techniques called *kaos'iki* and *tandava* are also recommended; *kaos'iki* is a series of 18 mudras aligned with 6 physical postures, each associated with a specific idea, while *tandava* (only performed by males) consists of postures and jumps associated with meditation on courage and honor, death and the fight for life. Fasting is done twice a month (on Ekadasis) and on two additional days (Purnima and Amavasya) for advanced students (acharyas); in normal days a strict lacto-vegetarian diet is followed, also excluding some ingredients that are considered unhealthy. In 1957 Anandamurti published *Yaogika Cikitsa o Dravyaguna* ("Yogic Treatments and Natural Remedies") presenting asanas and mudras, natural and traditional remedies, and various tips to keep in good health.

His idea of Neo-Humanism, expounded starting from 1982, surpasses mere Humanism because it adds a much-needed spiritual dimension to the value of human life, and extends the recognition of life to the universal level; he distinguished the universal concept of *culture*, called *humanitas* in Latin, from the concept of *customs* as local variations. His linguistic interest was so keen that he proposed a new transliteration system and wrote several volumes of dictionaries and elaborations on the letters of the alphabet. By 1959 he developed PROUT or socio-economic PROgressive UTilisation Theory, defined as a practical philosophy for the transformation of society, based on the ideals of freedom, equality and justice and elaborated in 1961 in his book *Ananda Sutram*; in 1968 he founded the Proutist Block of India, later superseded by Proutist Universal, consisting of 5 federations - students, intellectuals, farmers, labors and youth. His social model, called the Law of Social Cycle, was critical of materialism, both communism and capitalism, and focused on social service, personal development, individual needs and merits, peace, security, decentralisation and cooperation, and sustainability of development especially in regard to the eco-system.

Anandamurti's ideas and especially his criticism of the corruption in governments seem to have created lots of hostility among politicians; in 1967 the Ananda Marga headquarters were attacked by a mob; in 1971 Sarkar was arrested on the false accusation of murder of Ananda Marga members and while in prison he was poisoned by the jail doctor, apparently on orders from government - he then went on a fast for 5 years, 4 months and 2 days, until he was finally released and acquitted of all charges. On 30th April 1982, 17 members of Ananda Marga (including one woman) were traveling in taxis on Bijon Setu, near Ballygunge, on their way to a conference at the organisation headquarters in Tiljala, Calcutta, when they were dragged out from the vehicles in broad daylight,

beaten to death and burned in 3 different locations under the eyes of thousands of witnesses. No arrest were ever made. The newspapers did not show any sympathy for the victims, but rather falsely reported that "two of the nuns had been seen carrying away a child near a railway station", a rumor that was probably circulated to incite the mob. The Home Ministry reassured the Parliament that "the Government was watching the activities of the Marg (Ananda Marga members)". The National Human Rights Commission started an investigation in 1996, but the lack of results was blamed on interference from the State government. In 2012, after repeated calls for a judicial investigation, a single-member commission was set up to investigate the Bijon Setu massacre, but no results have ever been published.

Anandamurti went on world tour in 1979 to meet disciples in Switzerland, Germany, France, Scandinavia, the Middle East, Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, Jamaica and Venezuela. He was barred from entering the USA by the State Department, so instead he met his American disciples in Jamaica in 1979. He died in 1990; the presidency of his organisation was then entrusted to Acarya Shraddhananda Avadhuta.

## Ram Swarup

Together with Sita Ram Goel, Dharampal, and Subhash Kak, Ram Swarup is one of the most prominent ideologists of the present Hindu revivalist movement. Atal Behari Vajpayee spoke of him as "a representative of India's rishi tradition in the modern age." Pandit Vamadeva Shastri (David Frawley) wrote that he "is probably the most important and cogent writer on Hinduism in the last half of the twentieth century." Sita Ram Goel described Swarup as a person who "had no use for any conventional morality or code of manners and could see clearly how they were mostly used to put the other fellow in the wrong."

Arun Shourie wrote: "Ram Swarup, now in his seventies, is a scholar of the first rank. In the 1950s when our intellectuals were singing paeans to Marxism, and to Mao in particular, he wrote critiques of communism and of the actual - that is, dismal - performance of communist governments. He showed that the 'sacrifices' which the people were being compelled to make had nothing to do with building a new society in which at some future date they would be heirs to milk and honey. (...) He showed that the claims to efficiency and productivity, to equitable distribution and to high morale which were being made by these governments, and even more so by their apologists in countries such as India, were wholly unsustainable, that in fact they were fabrications. Today, anyone reading those critiques would characterise them as prophetic. But thirty years ago, so noxious was the intellectual climate in India that all he got was abuse, and ostracism."

Born Ram Swarup Agarwal (1920-1998) in Sonapat, Haryana, the son of a banker in the Garg gotra, he graduated in economics in 1941; from 1942 he participated to the Indian Independence movement and was briefly arrested. He started the Changer's Club in 1944 (the name alluding to Karl Marx's statement that philosophers have interpreted the world instead of changing it) and worked for MK Gandhi's disciple Mira Behn in 1948-1949 when she retired to Rishikesh to edit her correspondence with Gandhi. Ram Swarup saw Gandhism as the alternative to Communism, as we can see from his books *Gandhian Economics* (1977) and *Hindu View of Education* (1971, a speech given to Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad), but gradually he moved from the Gandhian version of Hinduism to a more comprehensive understanding of the ancient Hindu tradition.

Swarup joined the Democratic Research Service that was being formed by Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel as a think-tank specifically devoted to monitoring Communism, sponsored by the industrialist Birla family and initially led by Morarji Desai, who passed the job on to Minoos Masani (1905-98), a Parsi and former co-founder of the Congress Socialist Party (1934), later founder of the pro-Western Swatantra Party (1959-75). It was as secretary of the DRS that Ram Swarup prepared a *History of the Communist Party of India*, which Masani published in his own name. In fact, in his memoirs about the anti-Communist struggle, *Against the Tide*, Masani did not even mention Ram Swarup or Sita Ram Goel.

Deeply disappointed by that unethical attitude, Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel went to Calcutta in 1949 to set up the Society for the Defence of Freedom in Asia, an anti-Communist think-tank active until 1955, to raise the struggle against Communism from a military-political level to a moral-ideological level. The Society was praised by Bertrand Russell, Arthur Koestler, Sri Aurobindo, Ashoka Mehta, Sardar Patel and Philip Spratt, and vehemently denounced in the *Pravda* and the *Izvestia*. Among its first publications was Ram Swarup's book *Russian Imperialism: How to Stop It*, written during the conquest of China by Mao Zedong and very relevant to India as Jawaharlal Nehru was steering the country in a pro-Soviet direction. Ram Swarup's other main books about Communism are *Let us Fight the Communist Menace* (1949), *Russian Imperialism: How to Stop It* (1950), *Communism and Peasantry: Implications of Collectivist Agriculture for Asian Countries* (published in 1954), *Gandhism and Communism* (1954), and *Foundations of Maoism* (1956).

Along the years Swarup has written articles published on *The Telegraph*, *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Observer of Business and Politics*, *The Organiser*, *Hindustan Times* and *Hinduism Today*. By the end of the 1970s, Swarup turned decisively towards religious issues. In 1982 he founded the non-profit publishing house Voice of India, that presented works by Harsh Narain, AK Chatterjee, KS Lal, Koenraad Elst, Rajendra Singh, Sant RS Nirala and Shrikant Talageri - that some people consider controversial because of their critique on abrahamic religions. In the 1980s Ram Swarup and SR Goel were involved in a "vigorous debate" with the Christian Ashram movement represented by Bede Griffiths.

Ram Swarup was also interested in European Neopaganism and inspired other Hindu revivalists in the same direction. He wrote, "Europe became sick because it tore apart from its own heritage, it had to deny its very roots. If Europe is to be healed spiritually, it must recover its spiritual past - at least, it should not hold it in such dishonor..." He argued that the European Pagans "should compile a directory of Pagan temples destroyed, Pagan groves and sacred spots desecrated. European Pagans should also revive some of these sites as their places of pilgrimage." He advocated a "Pagan renaissance" in Europe, and corresponded with Prudence Jones (chairperson of Pagan Federation) and author Guðrún Kristín Magnúsdóttir. Christopher Gerard (editor of *Antaios*, Society for Polytheistic Studies) said: "Ram Swarup was the perfect link between Hindu Renaissance and renascent Paganism in the West and elsewhere."

## **Sita Ram Goel**

His book *How I Became a Hindu* is one of the most famous in the field, and tells the 15-year journey of an Indian-born Hindu from Calcutta, through atheism and other ideologies that had led him to develop an identity of "non-Hindu". Finally he discovered and embraced the genuine original

version of Hinduism thanks to "Vyasa, Buddha and Sri Aurobindo, as elucidated by Ram Swarup"; he said that he was also influenced by Tilak, Dayananda Sarasvati and Mahatma Gandhi. Born in Punjab (1921-2003) in a quasi-illiterate Hindu family that moved to Calcutta when he was still a child, Sita Ram Goel absorbed the simple vision of folkloristic Hinduism, tinged with sentimental devotion to a popular saint, a Sri Garibdas (*garib* means "poor"), whose teachings were similar to Sikhism. Goel graduated in history from the University of Delhi in 1944 and in that period he also learned to speak and write in Sanskrit; he engaged in the Independence movement, became a follower of MK Gandhi and worked for a Harijan Ashram in his village.

Thanks to his fluent Urdu, he (with his wife and eldest son) narrowly escaped being killed by the Muslim mob on 16 August 1946, during the Direct Action Day riots. At that time he came in contact with the Congress Socialist Party and worked with them, translating writings by Narendra Deva and Jayaprakash Narayan into English, after which he was offered a position as an editor of a CSP publication, but he was soon removed because his first editorial was deemed too favorable to Marxism; he then started to write regularly for *The Organiser*, whose editor KR Malkani was his friend. In 1961 he used the pseudonym Ekaki to write a series of articles (later collected by Vaidya Gurudatta as *Genesis and Growth of Nehruism*) criticising Indian National Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru, probably also because in 1955 his passport application had been refused and he had been told that his case was receiving attention from the Prime Minister himself. However, the articles cost him the job and disillusioned him about the RSS as that organisation had failed to support his work. During the 1980s Goel worked on a series titled *Muslim Separatism: Causes and Consequences*, but some passages from his articles were censored by *The Organiser*, as the RSS leadership did not want to alienate Muslims from the party, and Goel had to stop writing for *The Organiser* after the completion of the series *Perversion of India's Political Parlance*. KR Malkani, who had been the editor for *The Organiser* for three decades, was also sacked because of his support for Goel. Goel has criticised Indian secularism, alleging that "this concept of Secularism is a gross perversion of the concept which arose in the modern West as a revolt against Christianity and which should mean, in the Indian context, a revolt against Islam as well."

In 1963 Goel founded the publishing house Biblia Impex India (also known as Aditya Prakashan) to circulate books by Dharampal, Ram Swarup, KD Sethna and KR Malkani, then in 1982 he joined the non-profit publishing house Voice of India founded by Ram Swarup. Goel also worked as a part-time secretary for the All India Panchayat Parishad whose manager was his friend Jayaprakash Narayan. Narayan was impressed by Goel's Hindi book *Samyak Sambuddha* and said to Goel, "If Sanatana Dharma is what you say it is, I am all for it. You can count me as a Sanatanist from today. You can say to whomsoever you please that JP has become a Sanatanist."

Sita Ram Goel has been described by Koenraad Elst and David Frawley as an "intellectual kshatriya". According to Frawley, "Sitaram followed a strong rationalistic point of view that did not compromise the truth even for politeness sake. His intellectual rigor is quite unparalleled in Hindu circles."

### **Subhash Kak**

Born in 1947 in Srinagar, he graduated from Indian Institute of Technology of Delhi in 1970, where he was immediately offered a faculty position; he also worked at Imperial College in London, Bell

Laboratories at Murray Hill, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Bombay, Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, and then in 2007 he joined the Computer Science department at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater. His research is in the fields of artificial intelligence, quantum mechanics and information theory; he proposed a test of algorithmic randomness and a type of instantaneously trained neural networks (INNs) that he called "CC4 network" and others called "Kak neural networks".

In 1994 he published the book *The Astronomical Code of the Rigveda* to disprove the Aryan Invasion Theory, significantly extending the timeline of the Vedic period, and in 1995 co-authored (with Georg Feuerstein and David Frawley) *In Search of the Cradle of Civilization*. Among his other books, *The Asvamedha: The Rite and Its Logic* (2002), *Computing Science in Ancient India* (2001), *Consciousness and the universe: quantum physics, evolution, brain & mind* (with Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, 2011), *The Nature of Physical Reality* (1986), *Matter and Mind* (2016), *Mind and Self* (2016), *The Gods Within: Mind, Consciousness and the Vedic Tradition* (202), *The Architecture of Knowledge* (2004), and *The Prajna Sutra: Aphorisms of Intuition* (2007). In his writings Kak has elaborated on the history and philosophy of science, ancient astronomy, and the history of mathematics also applied to the measurement prescriptions in Vedic rituals. According to Klaus Klostermaier, "Subhash Kak, with his 'decoding of the Rigveda' has opened up an entirely new approach to the study of Vedic cosmology from an empirical astronomical/mathematical viewpoint."

### **Sitaramdas Omkarnath**

A humble sadhu (1892-1982) from Bengal, disciple of Dasarathidev Yogeswar of Digsui and also formally initiated by Swami Dhruvananda Giri, he preached the chanting of the Names of God, wrote over 150 books to promote the essence of shastra, built more than 60 temples and ashramas across India, and created free schools and charitable programmes; he started the Akhil Bharat Jaiguru Sampradaya and several other religious groups such as Shyam Sangha, Sati Sangha, Yuvak Sangha, Bidwat Sangha, Satya Dharma Prachar Sangha, and religious magazines such as *Pather Alo*, *Dejan*, *Jai Guru*, *Arya Nari*, *Paramananda*, and *Mother*. In 1918 during a midnight meditation he obtained the darshana of Shiva and Durga, then on Sarasvati puja he visualised his previous birth as a devotee of Mother Kali. While meditating in a cave at Ramashram, Dumurdaha, Hooghly, he heard the Hare Krishna mantra and was encouraged to engage more fully in bhakti. He then traveled to Jagannatha Puri, where he had the darshana of Jagannatha, who gave him the instruction to "spread the Name".

### **Muktananda Swami and Siddha Yoga**

Muktananda's birth details are rather sketchy; we know that he was named Krishna Rau and he was born probably in 1908, in a wealthy family near the town of Mangalore, after his parents had received a blessing from a holy man in the temple of Manjunath Mahadev. At his sannyasa initiation in the Sarasvata order he was given the name Muktananda, then he went to study under Siddharudha Swami at Hubli. He also studied under Muppinarya Swami and other teachers, including Siddha Zippruanna, who directed him to Siddha Nityananda. In 1947 Muktananda went to Ganeshpuri, near Bombay, to meet Nityananda, who became his *sat guru* and gave him *shaktipat*

initiation in a deeply spiritual experience; Muktananda remained 9 years engaged in sadhana at Yeola, then in 1956 he received from Nityananda a small piece of land at Ganeshpuri with the instruction to start an ashrama there.

At Bhagavan Nityananda's death, Muktananda continued the Siddha lineage and organised the ashrama of his guru under a Trust, renaming it Siddha Peeth. The ashrama was open to everyone from all castes and to foreigners as well, as the Siddha Yoga teaching was about learning about the Self and to seek God within. In 1970 Muktananda (affectionately called Baba by his followers) made his first journey to the West upon invitation of his devotees, although he did not speak any English and knew only a few people there; he was very successful especially in the USA, and in 1974 he went for a second journey and in 1978 for a third one that lasted about 3 years. In 1975 he founded the Siddha Yoga Ashram in Oakland, in the California Bay area, and in 1979 he established the Shree Nityananda Ashram (now Shree Muktananda Ashram) in the Catskills Mountains, northwest of New York City. He wrote several books on Kundalini Shakti, Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism, and a spiritual autobiography entitled *The Play of Consciousness*.

His "meditation revolution" became very popular and soon about 170 centers were opened and 8 books published. There are now about 300 centers and 2 main ashramas, one in India and one in New York. However there was some controversy as the organisation, started as a charity, apparently became rather business-oriented after collecting several followers among wealthy celebrities and increasing its assets. The organisation also became famous for its grandiose ceremonies for yajnas, with long preparations, many brahmins officiating and large quantities of food and gifts offered in the fire. Another aspect that many people found difficult to accept is the concept of guru seva, by which disciples are required to perform menial service as an aid to meditation, because selfless action purifies the mind. This is precisely the same concept of voluntary work in social organisations, but the idea that such work should be dedicated to the personal service of the guru seems to be unpalatable to some observers. The performance of the shaktipat act itself has come under scrutiny by moralistic critics, because it is described as a sort of "inner cosmic orgasm" that the disciple feels when coming in contact with the guru; of course the idea could be exploited by posers of little sexual integrity (even among disciples), but this should not exclude the possibility that the experience can be really transcendental in most cases.

### **Chidvilasananda Swami**

In 1982 when Baba Muktananda Swami died, the entire organisation of SYDA (Siddha Yoga Dham of America) passed to Swami Chidvilasananda (also called Gurumayi), who is the current leading guru of Siddha Yoga and resides in the United States of America. Born in Bombay India in 1955 as Malati Shetty, Gurumayi experienced shaktipat at the age of 14 and at age 15 began studying under her guru Swami Muktananda. She moved to the ashrama to study yoga seriously and accompanied him in many tours as his English translator. In 1982 Gurumayi was appointed jointly with her brother (Swami Nityananda) as Muktananda's successor, but in 1985 her brother stepped down and left the movement. She continues to travel around the world for events, workshops and intensives, and spends most of her time with her disciples, offering guidance and teaching, sometimes also in her subtle body as many have reported having visitations in their dreams and also in waking meditation, to receive instructions and encouragement.

## **Dhyanyogi Madhusudandas and Kundalini Maha Yoga**

Born in 1878 as Kashinath in Durgadi, Bihar, to Sampatti Devi and Ramdahin Mishra, he left home at the age of 13 in search of spiritual answers and traveled around India, learning from several gurus. In 1885 he took sannyasa and in 1921 during sadhana in a cave on Mount Abu in Rajasthan he was visited by Yogiraj Parameshwardas, who gave him shaktipat initiation, and had the darshana of Hanuman inspiring him with the qualities of bhakti, jnana, vairagya and seva. With the blessing of Parameshwardas, he established an ashrama at Bandhavad, Gujarat, then in 1960 he started to organise group meditations and teach the public about Kundalini Yoga.

In 1971, exhausted from his relief work to Gujarat famine victims, Madhusudandas had a near-death experience, later reported in his booklet *Death, Dying and Beyond*. He was taken to the abode of Rama and told that he had to return to Earth to help people; after this experience Madhusudandas redoubled his efforts and was soon able to open a hospital and a secondary school in Bandhavad. In 1976 he took his first tour abroad to expand his mission world-wide on the invitation of some American followers. He remained in the USA for 4 years, establishing many local groups and initiating thousands into Kundalini Yoga - many of these people he recognised for having seen their faces in "Rama's courtyard" during his NDE. He returned to India in 1980, at age 102, and he died in 1994. His most prominent disciples were Anandi Ma and Omdas Maharaj.

## **Gopi Krishna Yogi**

Born (1903-1984) in a small village outside Srinagar in Kashmir, he later lived in Lahore (then part of Indian Punjab), when his father had taken sannyasa leaving his 28 year old wife with little Gopi Krishna and 2 daughters. In 1923 Gopi Krishna returned to Kashmir to get a job, marry and take care of all his family; he also developed a social organisation working for the disadvantaged classes of the community and especially for the rights of women, as he was a strong supporter of the equality of men and women. In 1937 while meditating he experienced the sudden awakening of Kundalini and an out-of-body state, triggering a transformative process that lasted for 12 years, with great realisations but also difficulties and even illness. His autobiography *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* (later renamed *Living with Kundalini*) presents his personal account of the phenomenon of his awakening of Kundalini; it was published in UK and USA, and has since appeared in 11 major languages. This, and his 16 other books, have played an important role in introducing Kundalini Yoga to the western readers.

## **Thakur Anukulchandra and Satsang**

Born (1888-1969) in Himaitpur village, Pabna district of Bangladesh, as the son of Sivachandra Chakravarty, a Shandilya gotra Kanyakubja brahmin; he was married to Sorashibala (Sri Baro Ma) and later to Sarbomangala Devi (Choto Ma). After finishing medical school he started to practice in Himaitpur as physician, often providing financial help to his patients; in the meantime he formed a kirtana group that attracted many simple-minded people, and between 1914 and 1919 he sometimes went into trance and people recorded his messages in a *Punya-Punthi* ("holy book"). More people became attracted by what they perceived as a devotional ecstasy of the type previously manifested by Krishna Chaitanya, especially when he visited the ancient holy place known as Chakratirtha (in

south 24 Parganas district near Calcutta). In 1915 his mother gave the name of "Satsang" to the group of people gathering around him. In 1946 he moved with his family to Deoghar, Jharkhand, and rebuilt the Satsang there. After his death there was a difference between his sons about the control of the properties, with the eldest, Amarendranath Chakravarty, taking up the direction and development of the Satsang in several parts of India and abroad, establishing Centres in several states of India especially Delhi, Gujarat, West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, as well as in Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, USA, Canada, UK, Australia, Singapore, UAE. Presently the organisation is directed by Amarendranath's son Ashok.

### **Ayya Vaikundar and the Ayyavazhi movement**

Called by his followers with the titles of Sriman Narayana Vaikundasamy (Vaikuntha Swami) and Narayana Pandaram, he was born (1809-1851) at Poovandanthope in the Kanyakumari district of Travancore, as Mudisoodum Perumal (literally "Lord with a crown"), but the people complained to authorities about the name and they forced the parents to change his name to Muthukutty. As a boy he worked as a farm hand, especially as palm climber. At the age of 17 he was joined by Thirumalammal, who had left her husband the nearby village of Puviyur and was carrying a child.

At the age of 24 he became seriously ill for about one year and his mother took him to the temple at Thiruchendur, where he entered the sea and had a mystic experience, after which he considered himself an avatara as the son of Narayana and Lakshmi. He returned to shore 3 days later (in a place where his followers later built a temple) and started his mission to liberate the simple-minded people from the fear of black magic especially performed by the hill people known as Kanikkarar. He said that he had come to abolish Kali Yukam (*yuga*) and to usher in an age of Dharma Yukam, and that people should act as catalysts by living with self-respect, social dignity and fearlessness, and to cooperate together with a community feeling. He encouraged the general people to gather around a well for ritual purification (*thuvayal thavasi*) and dine together in his presence irrespective of caste barriers. He said that Vedic scriptures had become corrupted and distorted due to the influence of Kali yuga, and that an alternative was needed, although the basic frame of reference of dharma and shastra should be preserved.

He accepted 5 main disciples, that according to the *Akilattirattu Ammanai* had been the Pandavas of the *Mahabharata*: Dharma Citar, Bhima Citar (Seedar), Arjunan Citar, Nakulan Citar and Sakatevan Citar. Another disciple, Hari Gopalan Citar, wrote the holy book *Akhalam* (also known as *Akilattirattu Ammanai*). The other scripture of the tradition, *Arul Nool*, is believed to have been written by one inspired devotee named Arulalarkal.

Ayya Vaikundar's fame spread around Travancore and Tirunelveli, but as he was rather critical of the government, in 1838 he was imprisoned in Singarathoppu jail by order of the king of Travancore Swathi Thirunal, and released after 110 days on the intercession of Raja Guru Thycaud Ayya. He then introduced several new religious festivals and rituals, and established small shrines called Nizhal Thangals and community charity centers called Pathis. The characteristic of the Nizhal Thangals is that a mirror is installed in the shrine in place of a Deity, and that there are no designated priests or pujaris; another peculiarity meant to increase self-respect in people is the use of crowns for all followers.

The Ayyavazhi faith is accepted as a sect of Hinduism because its followers declare themselves as Hindus in the census records; the growing number of followers created a strong movement of social reform in south India, inspiring great Hindu leaders such as Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, Vallalar and Ayyankali. The main temple of the tradition, called Swamithoppepathi, is in the village of Swamithope; the present religious leader is Bala Prajapathi Adikalar (or Adigal), and the estimated number of the Ayyavazhis is about 10 million especially concentrated in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, so much that the districts of Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli and Tuticorin, and later the States of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, have accepted the day of the Ayya Vaikunda Avataram as official administrative holiday.

## **Jiddu Krishnamurti**

He was born in 1895 in Madanapelle as the 8th child of Jiddu Narianiah and Sanjeevamma; his mother had the inspiration to give birth in the puja room of their house, which was quite unusual. His father, a brahmin by caste, was employed as a clerk at the headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, where he lived in a small cottage with his family. In 1909 Jiddu, a sickly child suffering from malaria and constant pains in head and spine, and seemingly distinterested in worldly affairs but very submissive in character, was noticed by colonel Charles Webster Leadbeater, who saw him as a potential spiritual teacher, a vehicle for the manifestation of the new avatara, of whom Helena Petrovna Blavatsky had written before her death in 1891. In fact Blavatsky had stated that the entire purpose of the Theosophical Society was to prepare for the coming of this new World Teacher.

Leadbeater took the child to meet Annie Besant, newly appointed president of the Society, and entered him in their Esoteric branch. Both Jiddu and his brother Nitya were legally adopted by Annie Besant and started a rigorous training, forced to speak only English, wear only western clothes and "bathe the British way". The children were kept away from the father, who later regretted his decision and unsuccessfully tried to regain custody through courts; the two boys were sent out of India from 1912 to 1922, in which period Jiddu Krishnamurti developed a filial relationship with Lady Emily Lutyens, who introduced him to several British aristocrats. Lady Lutyens' daughter Mary later became Krishnamurti's biographer.

In 1911 the Theosophical Society had established the Order of the Rising Sun, later renamed Order of the Star in the East, as the organisational structure for the rise of Krishnamurti as the avatara Maitreya. However, the boy was not convinced by the plan and did not enjoy being used for what he considered a sort of entertainment business; he did not want any followers or churches in his name, and in 1929 in Holland he gave a speech that shocked everyone, asking "those, who seek to understand me, to be free, not to follow me, not to make out of me a cage which will become a religion, a sect". After openly rejecting organised religion, he dissolved the Order of the Star, leaving all properties and positions. He spoke of moksha as "freedom from the bondage of ignorance into the liberation that comes with knowledge of the Self or Absolute Reality", therefore Theosophist leaders accused him of having become "corrupt and incorrect", and from that moment on, he was presented as a secular philosopher hostile towards religion. Krishnamurti then started to travel on his own until his death in 1986 (from cancer), talking to people about fear, desire, love, insight, truth, intelligence, freedom, religion, conditioning, death and sorrow, giving speeches an average of 175 times a year (the transcripts were collected in books available today).

Another contemporary philosopher bearing the name of Krishnamurti was Uppaluri Gopala (1918-2007), who was not related to Jiddu but met him very often. He was born in Machilipatnam, a town in coastal Andhra Pradesh, and since his mother died 7 days after his birth, he was brought up by his maternal grandfather, a wealthy lawyer of brahmin caste, who was also involved in the Theosophical Society. Uppaluri Gopala was very eager to attain spiritual enlightenment and from the age of 14 to 21 he practiced all sorts of sadhanas and spent 7 summers in the Himalayas with Swami Sivananda. In 1939 he met Ramana Maharshi; he asked "This thing called moksha, can you give it to me?", to which Ramana replied, "I can give it, but can you take it?". This completely altered his perceptions of the "spiritual path" and its practitioners. In 1941 he went to work for the Theosophical Society in CW Leadbeater's library, he also began an international lecture tour on behalf of the Society, visiting Norway, Belgium, Germany and the United States.

In 1955 he went to USA to seek medical treatment for his son and stayed there for 5 years, then he left his family and went alone to London, where he began working for the Ramakrishna Mission, an arrangement that lasted for 3 months, then he sold his return ticket to India and went to live in Paris for 3 months, eating a different variety of cheese every day, then when the money was almost finished he left for Switzerland, where he took refuge in the Indian Consulate and was helped by a consulate employee in her 60s named Valentine de Kerven, who offered him a home. In 1967 he went to attend a lecture by Jiddu in Saanen and suddenly experienced a state of enlightenment beyond words and thoughts, triggering a transformation that lasted 8 days and culminated in what he called "calamity". From that point on, he lived in what he called "the natural state" of spontaneous, purely physical, sensory existence, characterised by discontinuity of thought. He went on travelling and giving talks to many interested persons from his unorthodox non-message philosophy and often uncompromising direct style.

He was known for his unusual good health: he never saw a doctor or took medication, believing the body would take care of itself. Often complimented for good looks in his old age, he would respond "that's because I don't eat healthy food, I don't take vitamins, and I don't exercise!" He carried a "portable kitchen" in a tiny suitcase throughout his travels, he consumed a great deal of salt and cream, and stated "no meal should take longer than a few minutes to prepare."

### **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and TM (Transcendental Meditation)**

He was born Mahesh Prasad Varma (1918-2008) in a kayastha family in central India, but other details are not known. He was a disciple of Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, a quite famous figure on his own right.

**Brahmananda Saraswati** (1868-1953) was born as Rajaram in a brahmin family near Ayodhya and left home at the age of 9 to go to Rishikesh in search for a guru; at 14 he became a disciple of Swami Krishnananda Saraswati (with the name of Brahma Chaitanya Brahmachari), at 34 he took sannyasa and at 70 he became the Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math - a position that had remained vacant for over 150 years - with the endorsement of Swami Bharati Tirtha the Shankaracharya of Puri and Svami Chandrasekhara Bharati the Shankaracharya of Sringeri. In that position he rebuilt the temple of Purnagiri Devi and the Peeth Bhawan, making several thousands of disciples and finally leaving Swami Shantanand Saraswati as his successor.

Maharishi Mahesh credits Brahmananda Saraswati with inspiring his teachings; in 1955 he started to introduce his Transcendental Deep Meditation method (later known as Transcendental Meditation or TM), which he presented as something that "has nothing to do with religion". His first global tour was in 1958, starting from Rangoon, Burma (now Myanmar), Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Hawaii, then in 1959 he moved to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, New York and London. He left one disciple in San Diego, named Beulah Smith. In 1960 he travelled to various cities in India, France, Switzerland, England, Scotland, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and Africa. In the subsequent years he continued to travel; a detailed account of his world tours is in his book *Thirty Years Around the World* (1986) and in *The Story of the Maharishi* (by William Jefferson) and *The Maharishi* (by Paul Mason). Maharishi also dictated another book, *The Science of Being and Art of Living*, published in 15 languages and sold in over one million copies.

Maharishi claims to have trained over 40,000 yoga teachers and to have about 5 million students globally, including celebrities such as the Beatles, Clint Eastwood, the Beach Boys and Merv Griffin. Each course costs around 1000 US\$. The headquarters of the organisation are at Vlodrop, Netherlands, but there are thousands of teaching centres and hundreds of colleges, universities and schools in the name of the organisation in India, Canada, USA, UK and Switzerland, as well as several charities and business enterprises including health clinics, mail-order health supplements and organic farms; the reported value has ranged from millions to billions of US dollars. Deepak Chopra was one of Maharishi's assistants before he launched his own career in 1994, and so was Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (The Art of Living).

In the late 1970s Maharishi started the TM-Sidhi programme, a special course with teachings that claim not only to reduce stress but also to enable the practitioner to levitate and to create world peace. The method does not require any lifestyle change and is based on the repetition of *bija mantras*. In 1992 he founded the Maharishi's Natural Law Party, that ran campaigns in 42 countries, and in 2000 he created the Global Country of World Peace and crowned its king or Maharaja in the person of a physician named Tony Nader, but his offer of US\$ 1.3 billion to the President of Suriname for a 200-year lease of 3,500 acres (14 square kms) of land was not accepted. Finally in 2008 Maharishi announced his retirement from all administrative activities and went into silence until his death 3 weeks later; he died in his sleep at his residence in Netherlands, but the cremation and funeral rites (with state honors and broadcast by Sadhana TV) were performed at his ashrama in Allahabad, India.

See also Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Baskaran Pillai.

### **Tirumalai Krishnamacharya**

He was born in 1888 in Muchukundapura, Chitradurga district of Karnataka, to an orthodox Iyengar family, the eldest of 6 children. His father was Tirumalai Srinivasa Tatacharya, a well-known teacher of the Vedas; he underwent upanayana at the age of 6 and under the tutelage of his father he studied Sanskrit based on *Amarakosha* and learned asanas and pranayama. In 1898 his father died and the family relocated in Mysore where great-grandfather Sri Srinivasa Brahmatantra Parakala Swami was the head of the Parakala Matha. In 1904 he dreamed his ancestor, yogi and Sri Vaishnava saint Nathamuni, who directed him to travel to the town of Alvar Tirunagari, in Tamil

Nadu, where he fell into a trance and found himself in the presence of Nathamuni himself and two other yogis; then he received the text of the *Yoga Rahasya*, a lost book written by Nathamuni. In 1906 he went to Varanasi for his university studies at Kasi Sanskrit Vidyapitha under Brahmashri Shivakumar Shastry, Brahmashri Trilinga Rama Shastri and Vamacarana Bhattacharya. In 1909 he returned to Mysore and studied Vedanta with Sri Krishna Brahmatastra, who had become the new acharya of the Parakala Matha, attended the university of Mysore and learned to play the vina.

In 1914 he returned to Varanasi to attend classes at Queens College and get a number of teaching certificates; during this period he managed to eat by begging from 7 households each day, offering prayers in return for wheat flour. Later he went to study the six Vedanta darshanas at the Patna University in Bihar, and Ayurveda under Vaidya Krishnakumar of Bengal. He was invited to the coronation of the Raja of Dikkanghat, at which he defeated a scholar called Bihari Lal in a debate, and received rewards and honors from the Raja.

During his yearly vacations he made pilgrimages into the Himalayas. As he wished to travel to Tibet to seek the famous Yogeshwara Ramamohana Brahmachari, he went to Simla to obtain permission from the Viceroy Lord Irwin, and stayed with him for 6 months to help him improve his diabetes condition; finally after almost 3 months of walking, he arrived at the residence of Ramamohana Brahmachari, a remote cave at the foot of Mount Kailash where the master lived with his wife and three children. He remained there for over 7 years, studying the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali and the therapeutic aspects of yoga; as a guru dakshina he was requested to "take a wife, raise children and be a teacher of yoga".

In 1926 the Maharaja of Mysore, Krishna Raja Wadiyar IV (1884-1940), was in Varanasi to celebrate the 60th birthday of his mother and heard about Krishnamacharya's learning and skill as a yoga therapist, so he engaged Krishnamacharya to coach him and his family. Soon he soon became a trusted advisor of the Maharaja and earned the title of Asthana Vidvan. In 1931 Krishnamacharya was invited to teach at the Sanskrit College in Mysore, in 1933 he opened the Yogashala in the Jaganmohan Palace and in 1934 he wrote *Yoga Makaranda*, published by Mysore University. However, in 1940 the Raja died and his successor showed very little interest in yoga so funds became scarce; the situation worsened after Indian Independence and in 1948 Krishnamacharya was forced to travel extensively to find paying students, until the Yogashala was closed by the order of KC Reddy, the first Chief Minister of Mysore State. After a couple of years in Bangalore, in 1952 Krishnamacharya was invited to relocate to Madras by a well-known lawyer who wanted his help in healing from a stroke. In Madras he accepted a job as a lecturer at Vivekananda College and continued to adapt his special method of Viniyoga, highly personalised, to the needs of his paying students, also getting ideas from the *Vyayama Dipika*, a Western-based exercise manual by the Mysore Palace gymnasts. At the age of 96 he fractured his hip; refusing surgery he treated himself and designed a course of practice that he could do in bed. He died 4 years later.

## **BKS Iyengar**

Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar (1918-2014) was the founder of the style of yoga generally known as "Iyengar Yoga" and has been considered as one of the foremost yoga teachers in the world; without any doubt he is the most famous. Iyengar was brother in law and student of Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, who is often referred to as "the father of modern yoga", as he he

developed a very physical and acrobatic system of asanas (the type that became particularly popular in the West), distancing himself from the teachings of his own guru Rama Mohan Bramachari. The noun "Iyengar" is defined by Oxford Dictionary as "a type of Hatha yoga focusing on the correct alignment of the body, making use of straps, wooden blocks, and other objects as aids in achieving the correct postures."

To stimulate the interest in yoga among the general people, Krishnamacharya had traveled around India giving lectures and demonstrating extraordinary abilities that he called siddhis, such as suspending (or maybe slowing down considerably) his pulse, lifting heavy objects with his teeth and performing difficult asanas. From 1930 to 1950 he remained at the Jaganmohan Palace to train the young male royals, employed by the Maharaja of Mysore, Krishnarajendra Wodeyar, who was committed to promoting the "Indian physical culture movement", encouraging physical education as well as cultural, political and technological innovations. In 1934, Krishnamacharya brought his 15-year old brother in law to Mysore to improve his health and taught him asanas and pranayama to give demonstrations at the Maharaja's court, together with other students. In the same line of Krishnamacharya, Iyengar presented Hatha Yoga as "the yoga of force" focusing on asana and pranayama to transform the body's energy and influence spiritual transformation, and also inventing several "dynamic" asanas or movement-oriented postural systems. He reduced yama to compassion towards other living beings and niyama as a state of inner peace and tranquility with the environment; similarly to him pratyahara and dharana simply consist in focusing the mind and dhyana is to attain whatever form one desires, while samadhi is to have stopped all external movements of the mind and reached a state of happiness about the physical and spiritual world.

Iyengar was the author of 14 books on physical yoga practice and general concepts of yoga philosophy including *Light on Yoga* (published in 1966, sold 3 million copies), *Light on Pranayama*, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, and *Light on Life*. He taught yoga to Jiddu Krishnamurti, Jayaprakash Narayan, famous Jewish violinist Yehudi Menuhin (that he went to meet in Bombay in 1952), novelist Aldous Huxley, actress Annette Bening, film maker Mira Nair, designer Donna Karan, cricketer Sachin Tendulkar and Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor, and even taught sirsasana (head stand) to Elisabeth queen of Belgium. Iyengar made his first visit to the United States in 1956, when he taught in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and gave several lecture-demonstrations. The Indian government awarded Iyengar the Padma Shri in 1991, the Padma Bhushan in 2002 and the Padma Vibhushan in 2014. In 2004 he was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine. In 2005, Iyengar taught a special workshop at the *Yoga Journal* conference in Estes Park, Colorado; San Francisco city's Board of Supervisors declared 3 October 2005 "BKS Iyengar Day". In June 2011 he was presented with a commemorative stamp issued in his honour by the Beijing branch of *China Post*; there are now over 30,000 Iyengar yoga students in 57 cities in China.

### **Satya Narayan Goenka and Vipassana meditation**

Also known as SN Goenka (1924-2013), he was born in a conservative and wealthy Marathi Hindu family in Burma (Myanmar). Seeking a remedy for his severe migraines, in 1955 he met Vipassana teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin and studied with him for 14 years discovering the power of silence; in 1969 he was authorised to teach by U Ba Khin (who died in 1971), so he left his business and moved to India, starting to hold classes at Kusum Nagar, Hyderabad. The method begins with the

observation of the natural breathing pattern (anapana), then moves to vipassana proper, that is the detached observation of bodily sensations, and becoming progressively more aware of the interconnection between mind and body. In 1976 he founded the Dhamma Giri Meditation Centre near Nashik, Maharashtra, and in 1985 he added the Vipassana Research Institute. In 1982 he started training Vipassana teachers (today numbering 1300) and in 2008 he built the Global Vipassana Pagoda as a tribute to his teacher who wanted to honor India as the land of origin of Vipassana and Buddhism. In 2012 he received the Padma Bhushan award from the Government of India.

He did not consider himself a convert to Buddhism, as he explained, "The Buddha never taught a sectarian religion; he taught Dhamma - the way to liberation - which is universal". His Vipassana courses are 10-days intensive meditation retreats, in which no fees are charged either for the course or for the lodging and boarding, however at the end of the course donations are accepted to finance future courses; every year there are about 120,000 students. Goenka taught several thousand westerners, including Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, Ram Dass, Daniel Goleman, and many other spiritual leaders. Today courses are held in 310 locations of which 176 are permanently dedicated centers in 94 countries - 78 centres in India and the rest in Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, Philippines, Poland, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, UK, USA.

### **Shri Ram Chandrajji and Sahaj Marg**

Sri Ramchandra, also called Babuji Maharaj, was born in 1899 in Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh. In 1824 Sri Shadi Lal the grandson of Sri Bakshi Sahib and the great-grand father of Sri Ramchandra was appointed as minister by the Nawab of Shahjahanpur. Sri Ramchandra became a disciple of Shri Ram Chandra of Fatehgarh (Lalaji), the Adi Guru of the Sahaj Marg system, based on the ancient yoga method called Pranahuti. In 1944 he traveled through south India and in 1945 he registered the Shri Ram Chandra Mission (SRCM), also called Sahaj Marg, with headquarters at Manapakkam, Madras, Tamil Nadu, and in 1965 the Sahaj Marg Research Institute at Tirupati, with the purpose of developing awareness about Raja Yoga and distributing it to everyone irrespective of gender, caste or race, and without charging any fees at any stage. In 1968 he sent Sri Lakshmi Narasimhan to Copenhagen to start preaching in Europe and in 1971 KC Narayana to the USA, then Babuji himself visited several countries. In 1976 Kanha Shantivanam Ashram was built at Shahjahanpur (on 700 acres of land), and later developed several programmes for environmental protection and reforestation. Sri Ramchandra wrote several books, such as *Commentary on Ten Commandments of Sahaj Marg* (1946), *Efficacy of Rajayoga in the Light of Sahaj Marg* (1947), *Towards Infinity* (1957), *Reality at Dawn* (1957), *Sahaj Marg Philosophy* (1962), and an incomplete autobiography.

### **Shri Sudhanshu**

Born in 1955 in Haripur, between Ganga and Yamuna in the Shivalik range, in 1975 he went to study under Shri Nandkishore in Haridwar and received spiritual instructions from Swami

Prakashananda. In 1977 he traveled to the major pilgrimage places in India, then he returned to get married and to continue his sadhana under Yogi Sadananda. On Rama Navami 1991 he established the Vishwa Jagriti Mission, that now has 65 branches, 22 old age homes and 3 charitable hospitals around the world. Sudhansu has over 10 million followers, including 2.5 million initiated disciples.

### **Shriram Sharma and All World Gayatri Pariwar**

Born in Anwalkhera, Agra district (1911-1990) in a traditional brahmin family, he received his *yajna upavita* and Gayatri mantra from Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, the founder of Banaras Hindu University. As a child he was shaken by seeing the condition of Dalits and especially of an old woman called Chapko who sometimes worked for his family and who had contracted leprosy. Noticing her prolonged absence, he went to search for her in spite of the strong disapproval and displeasure of his own family, and personally nursed her, procuring the necessary medicines, bathing and feeding her daily. In 1923, at the age of 12, he became involved in the Indian Independence movement, creating the Baal Sena ("children's army") in order to oppose the British government and help its victims; when his family tried to stop him he left home in the middle of the night and walked for 12 hours to Agra, where he joined a volunteer camp of the Indian National Congress and became affectionately known as Matta ("crazy") because of his dedication. Many of his revolutionary writings and poems were published in the Hindi newspaper *Sainik* ("soldier") under the nickname of Matta.

In 1926 he had the darshana of Himalayan Yogi Sarveshwaranand, who appeared in his astral body and instructed him to perform 24 *mahapurascaranas* (2.4 million recitations) of Gayatri Mantra each year for twenty-four years. In this period he visited the Himalayas several times, but continued to be very active in the freedom fight. After the hanging of Bhagat Singh he was arrested in 1931, and when released he organised a rally in the village of Parakhi near his home village Awalkhera, and was one of those beaten unconscious by the police. In 1933 he left for Calcutta to attend the Rashtriya Adhivation (national meeting) of Congress, but was arrested and sent to Asansol jail with other national leaders such as Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya, Swaruparani Nehru, Devdas Gandhi, etc. In 1936 he was again arrested on charges of flag hoisting on government establishments and transferred to different jails. While working hard on the practical level, at the same time he was aware that the problems of society needed to be solved at the root, by addressing the general crisis of faith, the ignorance of the power of the inner self, and the callousness against dharma, and he realised that the solution was in the deep understanding of the Vedic literature.

He then started the magazine *Akhand Jyoti* to initiate a Vichar Kranti ("thought revolution"), and by 1960 he had compiled a translation and commentaries of the 4 *Vedas*, 108 *Upanishads*, 6 *Darshanas*, 18 *Puranas*, *Yoga Vasishtha* and various *Aranyakas* and *Brahmanas* to enable the masses to understand the knowledge contained in them, disproving the distorted *laukika sraddha* - the misconceptions, superstitions and blind customs propagated in the medieval era by misinterpretations of the Vedas and other scriptures. This contribution to the world of knowledge and human culture was recognised by several scholars and leaders such as S Radhakrishnan and Acharya Vinoba Bhave, and earned him the title of Vedamurti. Shriram Sharma also wrote other books on various aspects of human life, including a *Pragya Purana* in the style of the original Puranas but applied to modern times, and a series of 40 books called *Krantidharmi Sabitya* ("revolutionary literature") about the future of the world and the dawn of the New Era of Truth during the 21st Century. To implement

his vision he established Shantikunj in Haridwar, that became the headquarters of his Gayatri Parivar, and the Brahmavarchas Research Institute for the ancient Indian Yogic Philosophy as the science and art of living.

## **Sathya Sai Baba**

Born (1926-2011) in Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh, he has been one of the most popular Indian gurus in the West since 1970; his followers call him Maha avatara or Purna avatara, and have portrayed him as Krishna, Rama, Vishnu, etc. Many books have been written on him, for example *Baba* (Arnold Schulman 1971), *Sai Baba, Man Of Miracles* (Howard Murphet 1971), *Sai Baba, The Holy Man And The Psychiatrist* (Dr Samuel H Sandweiss 1975), *Sai Baba Avatar A New Journey Into Power And Glory* (Howard Murphet 1977), *My Baba And I* (Dr John Hislop 1985), *Spirit And Mind* (Dr Samuel H Sandweiss 1986).

The Sathya Sai Organisation claims to have millions of followers with over 1200 Centers in 137 countries throughout the world and several groups of westerners have settled or regularly visit his ashrama in Puttaparthi called Prasanthi Nilayam (established in 1950). An Australian woman who calls herself "Little Heart" is officially presented by the Organisation as the "third greatest devotee of Sai Baba". More than one million people, including the President and Prime Minister of India, assembled in Prasanthi Nilayam for Sathya Sai Baba's 70th birthday celebrations; the organisation has also conducted several public programmes for the "National Unification" and the promotion of interfaith cooperation. In fact, its famous international "Sarva dharma" symbol incorporates all the major religions including the adharmic abrahamic ones. Sai Baba's inclination for ecumenism towards abrahamic ideologies is completely in line with his origins; in 1940, at the age of 14 he declared himself as the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, a Muslim fakir who had become very popular among the Hindus because of his fame of being able to bless women with a progeny.

**Shirdi Sai Baba** was a rather silent type; he lived very poorly in a dilapidated mosque with his disciple and assistant Abdul Baba but was very open-minded towards Hindus. In 1897 Gopalrao Gund of Kopergaon organised a festival for this Shirdi Sai Baba to celebrate the birth of his own son, and by 1910 there was already a considerable flow of Hindu admirers.

In 1922 Abdul Baba was denied his role as custodian of the Baba's tomb at Butiwada, that was renamed "samadhi mandir" under the control of a new official Sansthan (Trust) exclusively composed of Hindu members. In 1936 there was a further development, with the arrival of Narasimha Iyer, later known as Narasimhaswami (1874 -1956), a south Indian brahmin lawyer by profession; he became known as the "apostle of Sai Baba" as founder and president of the All India Sai Samaj, based at Madras, rejecting the general opinion that Upasni was the successor of Sai Baba.

In 1911 Shirdi Sai Baba was visited by **Kashinath Govind Upasni Shastri** (born in 1870 at Satana near Nasik), a Hindu brahmin who had established his own ashrama at Sakori (Sakuri), a few miles south of Shirdi. Due to some mistakes in the practice of pranayama, Upasni had become extremely ill and was only able to breathe, though with difficulty, if he kept massaging his stomach; he had been searching for advice and a yogi named Kulkarni Maharaja in Rahuri recommended him to see Sai Baba of Shirdi, who was known as *aulia* or Muslim saint. His breathing ailment suddenly and completely disappeared and he became a follower of the Baba, taking residence at a dilapidated

Hindu temple at Khandoba; soon the Baba started to channel his Hindu devotees towards Upasni. It seemed that women were more interested than men, so Upasni started to train a select group of Kanyadin (similar to brahmacharinis) in recitation of prayers and rituals; their leader Godavari Mataji (1914-1990) became famous in her own right and established the Kanya Kumari Sthan, that counted almost 50 "nuns" at the time of her death. That sect is presently known as **Brahma kumaris** and has elaborated its own philosophy and scriptures, mostly in Hindi language.

Another prominent disciple of Upasni was **Meher Baba** (born Merwan Sheriar Irani, 1894-1969), a Zoroastrian of Iranian origin who met Shirdi Sai Baba in 1915. Meher Baba was associated with the legacy of the Nizam Shahi kingdom of Ahmednagar, founded in 1494 and surviving into the 17th century; the dynasty was established by Ahmed Nizam Shah, a brahmin who had converted to Islam and had a strong ancestral link with Pathri.

### **Krishna Priya**

Born (1923-1987) at Parlakimidi (Paralakhemundi) to a Telugu Madhwa brahmin couple, in her childhood she excelled in studies as well as in music, paintings and sports. She worshiped the Deities of Lakshmi Narayan and Gopal, and had many visions of Raghavendra Swami of Mantralayam and Sai Baba of Shirdi. In 1936 she was married to Koduganti Sheshagiri Rao, whose family was from Vizianagaram (Andhra Pradesh) but lived in Nagpur. She had two sons and two daughters, but in 1953 she renounced family life after handing over the responsibilities of her household to her younger sister Rukmini. In 1958 Mathaji Krishnapriya asked her disciple Chandrasekhar Rao (Bandhita) and Kala Venkata Rao (then Minister in Andhra Pradesh Government) to help her build an ashrama; with the help of Bhogaraju Pattabhi Sitaramayya (the then Governor of Madhya Pradesh) a bungalow was purchased on a 4-acre compound that was renamed Shyam Vihar. In 1961 the Deities were installed, but in 1973 the ashrama was moved to Nagpur and the Deities reinstalled there.

### **Narayan Maharaja**

Another spiritual personality in the milieu of Shirdi Sai Baba, Narayan Maharaja was born in Bagalkot, Karnataka (1885-1945) and left home early due to family quarrels, taking shelter in spiritual search and traveling to many holy places such as Gangapur, Varanasi, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Nepal, Omkareshwar, Mahakaleshwar, Rameshwar, Madurai, Chidambaram, Kanchipuram, Tirupathi, Calcutta, Bangalore, Mysore, Dwarka, Somnath and Mahabaleshwar. In 1915 he met Meher Baba, who declared that Narayan was one of the Five Perfect Masters of his time. From 1942 he developed health problems and settled in Ooty, in Tamil Nadu; in 1945 he went to Bangalore to perform Ati Rudra Swahakar to Mahadeva Mallikarjuna, a ceremony that was attended by nearly 100,000 people; at the end of the ritual he retired to his chamber and left his body.

### **Rajneesh (Osho)**

Generally considered a rather controversial figure both in India and outside India, Rajneesh has recently been re-evaluated in a positive light - for example Sikh writer Khushwant Singh, former

editor of *The Hindustan Times*, has described Rajneesh as a free-thinking innovative scholar who had the ability to explain the most abstract concepts in simple language. Tanweer Alam, columnist of *The Indian Express*, called him "a fine interpreter of social absurdities that destroyed human happiness." Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also expressed admiration for Rajneesh and his entire works (more than 650 books) have been placed in the Library of India's National Parliament in New Delhi, besides having been translated into over 60 languages. In 2011 the Department of Philosophy, Mankunwarbai College for Women in Jabalpur, organised a national seminar on Rajneesh's teachings sponsored by the local government. Rajneesh's ashrama in Pune, the OSHO International Meditation Resort, is one of India's main tourist attractions, and in the USA the Osho International Foundation (OIF) presently runs stress management seminars for corporate clients such as IBM and BMW, with a reported revenue between \$15 and \$45 million annually.

Born Chandra Mohan Jain (1931-1990) in Kuchwada, Raisen district (Madhya Pradesh) in a Jain family, until the age of 7 he lived with his maternal grandparents. He was briefly associated with the Indian National Army and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and from 1951 to 1968 he participated as a speaker at the annual Sarva Dharma Sammelan at Jabalpur, organised by the Taranpanthi Jain community. In the 1960s he took the name of Acharya Rajneesh, after a childhood nickname ("lord of the night"), and started traveling around India to give discourses against religious, social and political conformism, and in favor of meditation, mindfulness, love, celebration, courage, creativity and humour. He initiated the Life Awakening Movement (Jivan Jagruti Andolan) establishing meditation centres (Jivan Jagruti Kendra) on the basis of his Dynamic Meditation method; in 1969 he was invited to speak at the Second World Hindu Conference, where he stated that any religion which considers life meaningless and full of misery and teaches the hatred of life, is not a true religion. In 1970 he started giving initiations in Bombay ordaining "new sannyasis", who typically wore red clothes of various style and a *mala* (beaded necklace) carrying a locket with his picture as "the catalyst of their transformation". He also continued to give discourses on the writings of religious traditions, mystics and philosophers from around the world, and acquired a secretary, Laxmi Thakarsi Kuruwa, who as his first disciple took the name Ma Yoga Laxmi. She was the daughter of one of his early followers, a wealthy Jain merchant who had been a key supporter of the Indian National Congress during the struggle for Indian independence, with close ties to Gandhi, Nehru and Morarji Desai. Laxmi raised the money to settle Rajaneesh down in the Woodlands Apartments in Bombay, where he gave lectures and received visitors. In 1971 he adopted the title "Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh".

In 1974 he moved to a property in Koregaon Park, Pune, purchased with the help of Ma Yoga Mukta (Catherine Venizelos) a Greek shipping heiress, and established an ashrama modeled on the community created in France by Gurdjieff in the 1930s and that attracted many Western followers, developing unconventional and experimental techniques meant to break the obstacles to the flow of natural energy, created by artificial repression. The method used breathing, physical movement, laughing and weeping and release of emotions, followed by deep meditation in silence and immobility, and including performances of theatre, music and mime, a variety of therapies as well as an arts-and-crafts centre producing clothes, jewellery and ceramics.

Due to tensions with the Indian government, the tax-exempted status of the ashrama was suddenly cancelled with retrospective effect, resulting in a claim estimated at \$5 million, and the visas to foreign disciples were also cancelled; at that time the average of visitors was 30,000 per year. In

1980 there was an attempted assassination during a discourse; the attacker Vilas Tupe claimed to be a Hindu fundamentalist and believed that Rajneesh was a CIA agent. Anand Sheela (Sheela Silverman) replaced Ma Yoga Laxmi as Rajneesh's secretary, and Rajneesh prepared to move to the USA; in 1981 he established Rajneeshpuram in Wasco County, Oregon, but tensions developed with the local County residents and State government, and some of Rajneesh's closest supporters apparently engaged in some criminal activities, or at least they were accused of such type of behavior. Rajneesh himself remained mostly in seclusion in his trailer and communicated only with a few disciples, especially Ma Anand Sheela and Ma Yoga Vivek (Christine Woolf). Discourses were given by video.

In 1985 while Sheela and her entire management team were in Europe, Rajneesh started to make public appearances again, mentioning that the management team had restricted his movements and communications and even committed illegal activities without his consent, and requesting the help of the police. He ordered the destruction of 5000 copies of the *Book of Rajneeshism*, a 78-page compilation of his teachings produced by his management team, that defined "Rajneeshism" as "a religionless religion", dismissed the obligation for dress and *mala* that had been introduced during the American administration, and returned to India to revive the Pune ashrama, welcomed by his local disciples. When non-Indians in his party had their visas revoked, he moved on to Kathmandu, Nepal, and then, a few weeks later, to Crete. In 1988 he shifted the focus of his discourses to Zen, and in 1989 he took the name "Osho Rajneesh", shortened to "Osho", and as his health continued to deteriorate, he finally gave up public discourses, simply sitting in silence with his followers.

### **Hans Ram Singh Rawat and the Divine Light Mission**

Another interesting yet controversial group that gathered a large following in India and in the West was created by Hans Ram Singh Rawat and continued by his son Prem Pal Singh, who became famous in the West as "Guru Maharaji".

Hans Ram Singh Rawat (1900-1966) was born in Gadh-ki-Sedhia near Haridwar; he visited many sadhus in the area of Sindh, Baluchistan and Punjab, then turned to the Arya Samaj and finally came in contact with Swarupanand, a guru in the Advaita school who taught Kriya Yoga in the line from Yogi Totapuri. In 1926 Swarupanand asked Hans Ram to start teaching others, then when he died in 1936 there was a succession dispute because Hans Ram was married and therefore considered unqualified. From 1930 Hans Ram continued to travel and preach especially in Delhi, accepting students irrespective of birth, background or social status, and wrote a book entitled *Hans Yog Prakash*. In 1944 he purchased a small house at Haridwar, which he named "Prem Nagar", to accommodate a number of resident students, in 1951 he started a monthly magazine named *Hansadesh*. In 1960 he registered the Divya Sandesh Parishad (Divine Light Mission) in Patna, in 1963 he organised a public programme at Ram Lila grounds in New Delhi attended by 15,000 people, then a larger event in 1964 at Gandhi Maidan, old Delhi. Several ashramas were opened, including one in Rajasthan and another called Satlok ("Place of Truth") between Delhi and Haridwar.

At his death, his youngest son Prem Rawat (then 8 years old, born in 1957) addressed the crowd with a moving and deep speech and was accepted by them, as well as by his mother (Rajeshwari Mata Devi) and eldest brother Satpal, as the Satguru or "Perfect Master" and successor to his

father's mission. Since the age of 3 he had been speaking at his father's meetings and at age 6 he had received the "knowledge" from his father. Prem, now called Guru Maharaji, was also approached by several Westerners who were visiting India in search of spiritual knowledge, and initiated them as "*premis*"; at age 12, in the presence of many of his new Western followers who had flown to India to see him, he delivered a speech known as the "Peace Bomb," which marked the beginning of his international work. At age 13 Prem traveled to Los Angeles, New York, Washington, Canada and South Africa and finally took residence in the USA, initiating thousands of disciples into his simplified Yoga Kriya method, and opening hundreds of centers worldwide, with many followers choosing to live a communal life in dozens of large ashramas, guided by DLM Mahatmas. The teachings are personalised, given individually, must be practiced internally and cannot be discussed with others, however it is known that they are based on 4 principles as light, sound, nectar and word.

In 1971 Prem returned to India with 300 Western disciples, who chartered an Air India Boeing 747 to accompany him and stayed in the mission's ashramas; in 1972 his birthday celebration was attended by 500,000 people, with 6 Jumbo jets chartered by wealthier followers who paid extra money so that less financially able could travel for free. In 1974 Prem became legally emancipated (not being a minor any more) and married an American girl, Marolyn Johnson (Durga Ji), establishing a wealthy lifestyle for his household with his wife, his brother (Raja Ji) and sister-in-law (Claudia), and an organisation with over 1,000 staff members working full time and over 7 millions of followers worldwide, of which about 60,000 in the USA. Within one year, however, Prem developed serious contrasts with his mother Rajeshwari Mata Devi (Mata Ji) and his elder brother Satpal Rawat (known then as Bal Bhagwan Ji and later as Satpal Maharaj), who returned to India claiming that Prem had broken his spiritual discipline by marrying and becoming a "playboy". Rajeshwari Mata Devi continued to control the DLM in India, with about 6 million followers, and her son Satpal Maharaj has maintained a powerful Congress Party political presence in Uttarakhand.

The Western *premis* (in 55 countries) remained loyal to Prem, but there was a considerable change of perspective, as Prem said that the organization had become an obstacle between his devotees and himself, or in other words, his mission had become a cult. He was not very interested in maintaining a large number of ashramas and started to encourage his followers to become more independent financially and emotionally, and to give less importance to Indian customs and terminology. In 1977 he acquired USA citizenship, in 1978 after a major fire in the Malibu estate he moved to Miami Beach, and by 1980 he started to drop direct references to religion in his speeches and to close ashramas; in 1983 he changed the name of the DLM into *Elan Vital* (French for "Life force"), closed the last ashramas and drastically reduced the number of the staff members.

However he continued his tour programmes, preaching in many places including New York, London, Paris, Kuala Lumpur, Rome, Delhi, Sydney, Tokyo, Caracas and Los Angeles. In 1990 he estimated to still have 1,2 million followers and in 1999 he started regular satellite broadcasts to North America and other countries - his programme "Words of Peace" is still broadcast on TV channels such as Canal Infinito in South America, Channel 31 in Australia, and Dish Network in the USA. In 2007 during a two-month tour of India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, Prem spoke at 36 events, addressing over 800,000 people, and by live satellite broadcasts reached an additional 2.25 million. In the same year he started a Peace Education Program for inmates of 25 prisons across 10 countries

A biography of Prem Rawat, *Peace is Possible*, by Andrea Cagan, was published in 2006 with a foreword by Emilio Colombo, a former President of the European Parliament and former Prime Minister of Italy. Jacques Sandoz produced the films *The Lord of The Universe*, *Satguru Has Come* and *Who Is Guru Maharaj Ji?* The list of Prem Rawat's notable disciples includes Olivia Arias the wife of George Harrison and the *premie* rock band Jiva as well as several other musicians, businessman Donald de Laski (who donated about 20 million US\$), Will Ganz (Sitaram) who later became Baba Rampuri (see under Juna Akhara), neurophysiology researcher Robert A Hallowitz, psychologist Diana Stone, Brian Kitt (Mahatma Saphlanand), Jimmie Dale Gilmore (now studying under Tulku Thubten Rinpoche of the Nyingma lineage), astrologer Jonathan Cainer, and Richard Cooper, who was the first victim of deprogrammer Ted Patrick (he was kidnapped and held for 19 days but he escaped).

## **Om Swami**

Born in north India (the details are not circulated), he left a job of editor in a weekly business publication to continue his education in Australia, where he acquired citizenship and developed a software business also expanding to USA, Canada, UK and India. After about 6 years he returned to India, acquired a healthcare company and finally renounced material life in 2010, receiving initiation from a Naga sadhu near Varanasi. After an intense sadhana in the Himalayan region, he produced several books - *If Truth Be Told: A Monk's Memoir*, *Kundalini: An Untold Story*, *A Million Thoughts*, *The Wellness Sense*, *When All Is Not Well*, *The Ancient Science of Mantras*, *A Fistful of Love: Wisdom and humor from a Monk's bowl*, *A Fistful of Wisdom: A Monk's light musings on life's serious stuff*, and *Mind Full to Mindful: Zen Wisdom from a Monk's bowl*. He writes, "Enlightenment does not mean you have to live like a pauper. It does not mean you have to subject yourself to a life of hardship and abstinence. On the contrary, to be enlightened means to live in the light of love, compassion and truthfulness".

## **Premananda Swami**

Born as Prem Kumar (1951-2011) in the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, he established an ashrama and orphanage there at Matale but fled to India in 1984 because of the civil war, together with some followers and a number of orphans. He initially opened an ashrama in a rented building in Tiruchirappalli, then in 1989 he moved to Fatimanagar to a property of about 150 acres of land with plantations of flowers, fruits, and teak wood, that served as a shelter for about 200 women and orphaned children, mostly of Sri Lankan origin. Other ashramas were later opened in the UK, Switzerland, Belgium and other countries.

In 1994 Arul Jyothi, one of the girls living in the ashrama, reported to the police that she had been raped and was pregnant; DNA samples from Arul Jyothi, her aborted foetus and Premananda were introduced as evidence, but the results first presented as positive were disproved by an expert witness from the UK, Wilson Wall, who took the DNA evidence to the UK to verify it, and concluded that Premananda was not the father. Another resident of the ashrama, Ravi, was found dead within the premises, and the murder was also ascribed to Premananda. The defense protested that the analysis by the Indian scientists had been mishandled and the accused and witnesses had

been brutalised by the police, but in 1997 Premananda was sentenced to life in prison and a very heavy fine, which he was unable to pay and turned into an additional term of over 32 years. Five of his assistants were also given life sentences, and the judge denied them any future remission of their sentences or amnesty by any state or central government. Premananda died of acute liver failure while being held in Cuddalore Central Prison. Until his death, he continued to say he was innocent.

In 2015 the Swami Premananda International Conference was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, attended by AT Ariyaratne, founder of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Sri Lankan Tamil Cabinet Minister DM Swaminathan, Chief Minister of the Northern Province CV Vigneswaran, and about 50 delegates from various countries including Argentina, Belgium, France, Netherlands, Italy, Nepal, UK, the US, Sweden, Switzerland, India and Poland.

### **Kripalu Maharaj**

Born in Allahabad (1922-2013), no details about his origin are given. In 1955 he held a religious programme inviting Mahamahopadhyay Giridhar Sharma, President of the Kashi Vidvat Parishat; Sharma was impressed by the presentation and in 1957 Kripalu was awarded the title of Jagadguru by the Kashi Vidvat Parishat. He also bears the titles Samanvaya-Acharya, Bhaktiyog-Ras-Avatar and Jagadguruttam. Presently Kripalu's discourses are broadcast daily on several Indian TV channels, including DD India, Aastha TV, Sadhna TV, IBN 7, News24 and Sanskar TV. In the United States, his discourses are broadcast daily on TV Asia.

His organisation, Jagadguru Kripalu Parishat (JKP), opened a number of teaching centres in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Fiji, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Nepal, UK, Singapore, Trinidad, West Indies and in many cities throughout India and USA, and developed four ashramas in India (Rangeeli Mahal, in Barsana; Bhakti Dham, in Mangarh; Shyama Shyam Dham, in Vrindavan and Jagadguru Dham, in Vrindavan) and one in the United States (Radha Madhav Dham, in Austin, Texas) that is considered the largest Hindu temple in north America and is directed by Canadian-born Swami Nikhilanand. Nikhilanand participated to the 6th Annual Gita conference in New York in 2008, and to the National Makar Sankranti day festivities at George Bush Park in Houston with the inauguration of the Mass Surya Namaskara Yajna. His lecture series called "Essence of the Gita" was broadcast on channel 67 and RCN in New York, and he participates to many programmes organised by the Hindu Students Council, Hindus of Greater Houston, American Telugu Association, World Hindu Council and Bhutanese Hindu groups.

### **Avdhoot Shivanand and ShivYog**

Born in 1955 in Delhi, he grew up in Rajasthan, and at the age of 8 he met yogi Swami Jagganath who inspired him to pursue a spiritual path. After visiting many sacred places, in 1990 he started lecturing on Shivyog and Advait Shri Vidya Sadhana around India. In 1995 he created the Shivyog Foundation and built Shivyog ashrams in Delhi, Lucknow and Karjat. From 2000 Shivyog programs are also conducted worldwide in around 30 countries and at more than 100 locations in India. His public discourses are broadcast on Aastha TV, Adhyatm TV and Sanskar TV.

## **Mataji Nirmala Devi and Sahaja Yoga**

Nirmala Srivastava (née Nirmala Salve, 1923-2011) was born in Chindawara, Madhya Pradesh to a Christian mother who was the first woman in India to receive an honours degree in mathematics, and a Hindu father who translated the Koran into Marathi and was a proud descendent from the royal Satavahana dynasty. Like her parents, she was involved with the struggle for Indian independence, and for some time she resided in the ashrama of MK Gandhi. In 1947 she married Chandrika Prasad Srivastava, who served as Joint Secretary under Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri.

In 1970 she visited a Rajneesh meditation camp in Nargol and experienced the "rising of the Primordial Kundalini"; soon after she started the Sahaja Yoga movement in Bombay. In 1972 she went to the USA to spread her method, and in 1979 she moved to London with her husband, who had been elected as Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), a United Nations agency based in London. There she started to work with seven London hippies who became the first Western Sahaja Yogis.

In 1980 she made her first tour to Europe, Malaysia, Australia and north America; in 1989 she also started visiting Russia and eastern Europe and in 1995 she gave a speech at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. In 2004 the official website of Sahaja Yoga announced that Shri Mataji had completed her work and Sahaja Yoga centers now exist in 140 countries around the world including Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Italy, Kuwait, Nigeria, UK and USA; the number of followers has been estimated at 10,000 core members with another 100,000 practitioners. In 2000 the name "Sahaja Yoga" was trademarked in the USA by the Vishwa Nirmala Dharma; in 2006 Nirmala was awarded honorary Italian citizenship for opening a primary school in Cabella (Rocchetta Ligure). Her meditation technique called Sahaja Yoga is described as the pure, universal religion integrating all other religions; it teaches that the awakening of the Kundalini is a natural and spontaneous process that requires no effort and produces a thoughtless awareness or mental silence, leading to a more "moral, united, integrated and balanced" personality. Participants are not required to become officially members of the organisation and no fees are charged for learning the method, but voluntary dakshina is expected.

## **Vethathiri Maharishi**

Born (1911-2006) in the village of Guduvancheri, near Madras, into an indigent weaver's family, he created a textile industry that grew to employ over 2,000 workers on a profit-sharing basis. At the same time he studied the local Siddha tradition and engaged in personal sadhana; at the age of 50 he retired to engage solely in spiritual service, writing about 80 books in Tamil and English, and over 3000 poems on philosophical subjects, such as "what is God", "what is life", and "why is there poverty in the world". In 1958 in Madras he established the World Community Service Center Trust, that presently has about 2000 meditation centres. Between 1972 and 1993 he visited USA, Mexico, Europe, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and founded over 300 yoga centers around the world. In 1984 he founded the Vethathiri Maharishi Yoga and Kaya Kalpa Research Foundation based in Aliyar, Pollachi, Tamil Nadu, and produced the theory of Universal Magnetism as an alternative to the famous Big Bang Theory.

## **Baskaran Pillai**

Also known as Dattatreya Siva Baba or Siva Baba, he was born in 1949 in Rameswaram, as son to Subramania Pillai, a painter and photographer working mostly for pilgrims. His mother Nambu Lakshmi was the daughter of the village leader; very worried about the extraordinary spiritual inclination of the child, she consulted physicians but found no medical issue. Baskaran went to the local government school and obtained a Master's degree in English literature from the University of Madurai and a Master of Letters on a scholarship to do research in Comparative Literature, writing a thesis on a parallel between John Donne's poetry and that of Kalladanar, a Tamil poet of the 10th century. At the same time he became a TM teacher under Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, spending considerable time in Rishikesh; Maharishi appointed him as the head of his organization in the State of Tamil Nadu, a post which Pillai ultimately renounced to focus on introducing the Tamil Siddha tradition to the West. Wayne Dyer was the first celebrity to follow and publicize Pillai's teachings through his book *Manifest your Destiny*.

In 1983 Pillai went to the USA to pursue his PhD at the University of Pittsburgh. His graduate work focused on the phenomenology of religion with a dissertation on the south Indian mystic Manikkavachakar. In that period Pillai taught at the University of Pittsburgh's Informal Programs from 1985 to 1989. After receiving his PhD in 1989, Dr Pillai served as the Coordinator of Indian Studies under the Asian Studies program, and as the subject editor for the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* under the Indian Heritage Research Foundation. From 1984 to 1988 Pillai taught at the Pitt Informal Program (PIP) a variety of Buddhist, Tantric and Yogic meditation courses. While working on his dissertation, Pillai lectured on Hinduism and Buddhism in and around the Pittsburgh area besides teaching undergraduate students a course on a Survey of World Religions. Finally Pillai decided to leave the academia and to teach spirituality, and accordingly from 1989 onwards he has traveled extensively, teaching spirituality and meditation. In 1990 Pillai moved to Los Angeles, California, where he began to teach meditation seminars and created the Tripura Foundation, a non-governmental organization advisory to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Tripura Foundation has charitable projects in USA, India and Mexico, which include the Million Meals Project and education schemes for underprivileged children. From 2000 to 2005 he published *Life Changing Sounds: Tools from the Other Side and The One Minute Guide to Prosperity and Enlightenment*; in that period he developed the concept of Phonemic Intelligence, the scientifically proven idea that sounds (phonemes) can modify one's intelligence. The first research study on the subject was in 2006 at the SRM University Medical School in Madras, followed in 2011 by a team at Brain Science International in San Francisco, and by World Care Clinical and Harvard Researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital. Since 2007 Pillai also produced hundreds of video clips for YouTube presenting Siddha knowledge, for which *Time Magazine* dubbed him as the "YouTube Guru". In 2013 he started the East-West Integrative Medicine Center, an educational research institute for Ayurvedic and Siddha Herbal Medicine. Dr Pillai is currently living in San Diego and has been an invited speaker in over 40 countries around the world.

## **Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and The Art of Living**

Ravi Shankar, generally known as Sri Sri, was born in 1956 in Papanasam, Tamil Nadu, and his first teacher was Sudhakar Chaturvedi, a close associate of MK Gandhi. After graduation he joined the Transcendental Meditation movement under Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, then in 1981 he created the

Art of Living Foundation, which aims to relieve individual stress, societal problems and violence by overcoming discriminations based on nationality, gender, profession, etc. In 1982 he developed a rhythmic breathing practice called Sudarshan Kriya, involving ujjayi breathing and bhastrika in vajrasana followed by rhythmic breathing in sukhasana. In 1983 he held the first Art of Living course in Switzerland and in 1986 he took it to Apple Valley, California. From 2004 he became involved in humanitarian activism, traveling through Pakistan, Irak and Kashmir, opening meditation centers in Karachi and Islamabad (which was torched by terrorists in 2014), visiting the Yazidi refugee camps and addressing the vast majority of the peaceful Kashmiri people. His organisation has also worked in other difficult regions such as Manipur, and he has personally made efforts at mediation in the Ayodhya dispute in 2017, in the anti-corruption movement in India, in interfaith initiatives (such as the Elijah Interfaith Institute), and in various issues advocating registration awareness, privatisation of government schools and protest against violence.

### **Ravi Shankar**

Another Ravi Shankar, even more famous in Western countries, is the musician who brought sitar and Hindustani classical music to the global public. He professed himself an ardent devotee of Hanuman and frequently visited Anandamayi Ma, performing for her on various occasions. Born Rabindra Shankar Chowdhury (1920-2012) in Benares/ Varanasi (then capital of a princely State), from the age of 13 he toured India, Europe and USA with the dance group of his brother Uday Shankar. He gave up dancing in 1938 to study sitar, rudra vina, rubab and sursingar, the ragas and the musical styles dhrupad, dhamar and khyal, until 1944 when he joined the Indian People's Theatre Association in Bombay, and became music director for All India Radio (AIR) New Delhi. In 1952 he met western violinist Yehudi Menuhin during Menuhin's first visit to India, and in 1955 he was invited to perform in New York City for a demonstration of Indian classical music sponsored by the Ford Foundation. After that he continued to perform and teach around Europe and the Americas, also with the help of Beatles' guitarist George Harrison, who met him in 1966 and made him very famous in pop music. It is known that Ravi Shankar's music triggered Harrison's interest for Indian culture and spirituality, compelling him to visit India for 6 weeks to learn to play sitar, on which occasion a documentary entitled *Raga* was made about Ravi Shankar. This development was instrumental to attract to India innumerable western seekers from the counterculture.

Ravi Shankar's live album from Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 peaked at number 43 on Billboard's pop LPs chart in the US. In the same year he opened a western branch of the Kinnara School of Music in Los Angeles, and in 1968 he published his autobiography, *My Music, My Life*, followed in 1996 by *Raga Mala*. His performance at the Woodstock Festival in 1969 was very successful but left him shocked about some aspects of the hippie movement and he dissociated himself from it, although he performed at the Concert for Bangladesh in 1971 at Madison Square Garden in New York, followed by a live album that won one of his 5 Grammy Awards. Shankar said that 90 percent of all the music he played was improvised; his performances began with solo alap, jor, and jhala influenced by the slow and serious dhrupad genre, followed by a section with tabla accompaniment featuring compositions associated with the khyal style, often closing with a piece inspired by the light-classical thumri genre. He continued to tour for concerts around the world and received many music and non-music awards such as Padma Bhushan and Bharat Ratna, honorary degrees from

universities in India and the United States, the title of Commander of the Légion d'Honneur of France and the title of Honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (KBE) by Elizabeth II.

### **Jaggi Vasudev and Isha Foundation**

Also known as Sadhguru, Jaggi Vasudev was born in 1957 in Mysuru (Mysore), Karnataka, and at the age of 12 he came in contact with Malladihalli Sri Raghavendra Swamiji who taught him a set of simple yoga asanas, then in 1982 he went up Chamundi Hill and sat on a rock, where he had a spiritual experience. In 1983 he started to teach yoga in Mysore and then expanded across Karnataka and in Hyderabad, without charging any fees as he lived off the produce of his poultry farm, and at the last day of the course he collected donations to be given to a local charity. In 1994 he established the Isha Yoga Center in Velliangiri Mountains near Coimbatore, and erected the Dhyanalina, a yogic temple and a space for meditation open for all; at the front entrance the Sarva Dharma Sthamba carries the symbols of all religions as a sign of universal welcome. In 2010 he also installed the Linga Bhairavi, whose image became quite popular on the Web. Jaggi Vasudev has written *Inner Engineering: A Yogi's Guide to Joy*, and received the Padma Vibhushan award from the Indian government in 2017.

In 1997 he went to teach in the USA; in 2005 he established the Isha Institute of Inner Sciences (III) in McMinnville (Tennessee), in 2008 he added the Mahima Hall - a 39,000 square foot, free-standing meditation hall. In 2011 he started programmes with large-scale attendance of up to 10,000 and 15,000 people, for a total of over 75,000 participants; especially targeted yoga classes have been offered to corporate leaders, to the Indian hockey team and to life-term convicts in Tamil Nadu prisons. It is estimated that his organisation has over 9 million volunteers, it regularly has Mahasathsangs and leads annual programmes called Kailash Manasarovar Sojourn and Himalayan Dhyana Yatra; it also engages in English-medium and computer-aided education of rural children, the Rural Rejuvenation programme to improve the quality of life of the rural poor, and environmental care programmes such as Project Greenhands and Rally For Rivers.

### **Paramahansa Nithyananda**

Born Rajashekar in 1977 in Tiruvannamalai, he is a charismatic guru who is considered by his followers as an avatara of Mahasadashiva; he claims to be an Advaita Vedanta Hindu spiritual leader and to have received the title of Mahamandaleshwara at the Mahakumbha mela in 2013 by the Panchayati Mahanirvani Akhara. His yoga method is based on the awakening of the Kundalini and the opening of the third eye, developing 60 spiritual powers such as extrasensory perception, materialisation, body scanning, distance vision and ability to find lost objects. He established the organisation called Nithyananda Dhyanapectam, regularly hosting cultural events related to Hinduism in the United States, with followers in more than 25 countries including Russia, USA, China, Mexico, Germany, France and Spain.

## Orthodox Hinduism and Bhakti

In the previous section we have examined a considerable number of teachers who could equally be listed under "Hindu revivalism" and "orthodox Hinduism" - especially in the Juna Akhada, the Shankaracharya line and the Natha sampradaya. Also, as we have already mentioned, we have not kept a straight historical timeline order but we have rather tried to keep a sort of ideological thread in the presentation of the great teachers and religious/ spiritual personalities described in the previous pages, although such a classification is extremely difficult and inevitably imprecise. Yet, we wanted to give some sort of structure to the book, without resorting to the merely alphabetical order that is characteristic of encyclopedias.

The same consideration applies to the idea of dedicating a separate chapter to the Bhakti movement. It is difficult, if not impossible or even misleading, to separate Bhakti from the orthodox Vedic tradition and from the Hindu revival movement, or to give a categorical division between these concepts or about their historical timeline or ideological approach. We also need to disrupt many expectations and projections that have been created by the "western academic approach" in the study of the history of philosophy and religions, including the classification of apparently different (or even opposed) categories that have become deeply ingrained in the general perception of Hinduism, such as vedic versus tantric, vaishnava versus shaiva or shakta, dvaita versus advaita, and personalism versus impersonalism.

Contrarily to what some people think, Adi Shankara was certainly not an impersonalist, as we can clearly see for example from his famous poems such as *Bhaja Govindam*, *Gita mahatmya* and *Jagannathastaka*. Adi Shankara was no casteist either: the very concept of Advaita means "non-duality" and is based on the idea that Atman is non-different from Brahman, and that such realisation is the true enlightenment to the genuine knowledge.

People who mistake "caste" for "varna" fail to understand the teachings of the shastra and of the great acharyas, including Adi Shankara, and even when commenting on the famous *Manisha panchaka* they fail to see the point, surmising that Adi Shankara had been entertaining birth prejudice when instead he was objectively observing the apparent display of guna and karma characteristic of a *chandala*. This can easily be understood by the fact that Adi Shankara did not have prior knowledge of that particular person and his specific birth circumstances: we are left to conclude that Adi Shankara believed he was seeing a *chandala* because that person was exhibiting a certain degree of uncleanness and disregard for social conventions in demeanor, and especially the fact that he was going around with a pack of dogs. To briefly summarise the situation: the five-verse composition refers to an episode when Adi Shankara accompanied by his disciples was walking down the street from the Ganga to the temple of Kasi Visvanatha in Varanasi, when he met a *chandala* accompanied by his dogs, and gestured him to move aside to give way to avoid the contamination of his touch. However, the *chandala* was actually a great spiritual personality (it is known that Shiva Mahadeva sometimes appears as a hunter or tribesman and as Bhairava he keeps a dog as vahana) who immediately corrected Shankara's perspective by offering solid and genuine transcendental

teachings. The person appearing as a *chandala* said, "What should move aside for you - this material body made of the same elements of your material body, or the Atman that is non-different from Brahman? The reflection of the sun appears equally on the pure water of Ganga and on the puddles along the street. So what difference do you see?"

We can see here that in the view or darshana of the genuine and original Advaita of Adi Shankara Acharya, the definition of ignorance and illusion even applies to the evaluation of the different guna and karma exhibited by an embodied beings, what to speak of mere birth prejudice that does not consider the level of transcendental realisation attained by an individual. The knowledge and awareness (applied in practice) of the true identity of any human being is amply explained in *Bhagavad gita* (Adi Shankara's favorite book) as well as in the famous *maha vakyas* ("great aphorisms") of the *Upanishads* that constitute the very root of the Shankaracharya tradition: *sarvam khalv idam brahma*, "all this is Brahman" (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 7.25.2, *Nrisimha utara tapani Upanishad*, 7), *prajnanam brahma*, "Brahman is full consciousness/ knowledge" (*Aitareya Upanishad*, 3.3), as well as *aham brahmasmi*, "I am Brahman" (*Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10), *ayam atma brahma*, "this Atman is Brahman" (*Mandukya Upanishad* 2), *tat tvam asi*, "you are that (Brahman)" (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 6.8.7) and *so 'ham*, "I am that (Brahman)" (*Narada parivrajaka Upanishad*, 6.4).

Therefore a genuine representative of Adi Shankara and a genuine orthodox teacher of Vedic knowledge will never accept a categorisation of human beings according to bodily identification, caste, gender, race, etc, but will always evaluate individuals on the basis of the level of consciousness and realisation they have attained, irrespective of their birth. Examples abound in all Vedic literature, especially in *Puranas* and *Itihasas* (such as *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* etc).

We have already mentioned that conversion to Hinduism - or we should say, to the Aryan Vedic culture - was always considered a genuine component of orthodox Hinduism. Sometimes the word "*orthodox*" is improperly used because of a negative semantic luggage acquired from abrahamic ideological superimpositions, just like the words "conservative" and "fundamentalist". The use of these terms has been borrowed from a Christian context and background, therefore it is inevitable to make connections with the abrahamic concepts, where the idea of "orthodox" is correctly applied to a rigid and narrow mentality, patriarchal values, intolerant theocratic politics, and blind resistance against progress and scientific knowledge, and even good sense. Unfortunately the definition has come to be applied to Hindu "conservatives", although the original teachings of the ancient Hindu scriptures present a very different perspective from the abrahamic concept, as we have already seen.

As per dictionary, the word "orthodox", derived from the Greek *orthos* ("correct"), applies to the correct and original teachings, expressed in the universally recognised scriptures and ancient founders of that particular ideology. As per dictionary, its opposite "etherodox" literally means "different", as in "reformed" or "modified", and applies to the subsequent transformations of the same specific ideology to which it refers, as opposed to a general universal concept of dogmatic attitude, irrespective of the ideological differences among religions. Another word derived from the Greek is *catholic*, which literally means "inclusive", and refers to the tendency to *accommodatio* (a Latin word generally translated as "inculturation") by which the official ideology of the Church is allowed to absorb and utilise concepts or symbols from other cultures to facilitate conversion to Christianity. A typical example is the work of the Jesuits.

However, the concept of *accommodatio* is different from the concept of syncretism, because the Catholic Church is strongly centralised and politicised, governed by precise dogma issued officially

through the ecclesiastic hierarchy, and considers syncretism as a dangerous heresy to be extirpated through excommunication and persecution. This is why syncretic Christian currents (which are quite rare but exist nonetheless) are not defined as "catholic" but are categorised under the "protestant" label, which includes any Christian who does not recognise the absolute doctrinal and political authority of the Pope. On the other hand, the Christian Orthodox Church is considered the "oldest/ original Christianity" still carried on in various currents through uninterrupted traditions; the most prominent group is in Russia and another is in Greece, while minor Orthodox sects from Syria, Egypt etc have been mostly eliminated through centuries of persecution by other abrahamic sects.

While it is easy to distinguish between orthodoxy, catholicism and reformism in Christianity because of their specific recorded history and theological elaborations over a very limited textual resource (the canonic Bible), in the case of Hinduism the word "orthodoxy" is often superficially used to refer to a particular *corpus* of popular beliefs (*laukika sraddha*) that we have mentioned in the previous chapter; the so-called "age-old tradition" of *laukika sraddha* presented by so-called "orthodox Hindus" is actually a relatively recent distortion of the genuine original Vedic system described in the authentic scriptures or shastra. Unfortunately because of their social and political material power and privileges, in the last few centuries supporters of *laukika sraddha* have reacted violently against any attempt to re-establish the correct and original teachings of Hinduism, as we can also see from the numerous attempts of assassination (in some cases, successfully completed) against great acharyas in the course of history.

There is no doubt that sincere and dedicated service to Dharma requires considerable sacrifices, and that the protection offered by Dharma to its protectors is not always manifested in the form of physical safety or material success in the short run. This is also shown in the stories of *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Puranas* etc. However, there is also no doubt that sincere and dedicated service to Dharma will bring some good results, in this life or in the next, and remains a decisive factor in the history of mankind even after the servant of Dharma has left this world. The cumulative effect of the work of many sincere servants of Dharma has already shown considerable results not only in India but at global level, supporting genuinely orthodox Hindus in their efforts to reclaim the authentic ancient tradition of the golden heritage of the Vedic Rishis.

Neo Hinduism tried to establish the universality and liberality of Hinduism by using typically Christian nomenclature and concepts, as in those colonial times it was necessary to gain some approval from the British government and Christian-biased western academic institutions. A similar movement had previously developed under the Islamic domination, in the form of a stark rift between some offshoots of the traditional Advaita school and the popular Bhakti movement, both of which had become rather sectarian because they had absorbed and adapted to a fundamentally abrahamic vision, albeit in apparently different ways. The Bhakti movement degenerated by becoming exclusively oriented towards a male aspect of God (Rama, Krishna, Shiva), with the female counterpart portrayed as a submissive servant, and the particular form of God chosen by the devotee came to be considered as "Supreme", instigating the growth of sectarianism to the limit of intolerance. The Advaita school was also infiltrated and shifted the concept of "absolute supremacy" (introduced by the so-called monotheism) towards the impersonal aspect of Brahman, to the point that the transcendental forms and Personalities of God came to be labeled as material - as in the notorious mayavadism school. With the advent of British colonialism, these two tendencies were exasperated through the Neo-Hinduism movement, but at that point they had

already vastly succeeded in eroding the spiritual and cultural unity of Hinduism especially in the Indian sub-continent, exposing it to all sorts of degradation and weakening its social fabric into total lack of cooperation, solidarity, or even compassion, and dissipation of actual moral and ethical values. It is extremely important to understand that such developments were deviations from the original genuine system and not its orthodox representations and applications; unless we establish this point very clearly, no improvement can be effected on Hindu unity, social harmony or even good governance.

For centuries Hinduism had remained very strong and deeply rooted in Indian culture, and several currents of truly orthodox Hinduism survived thanks to the dedicated work of great acharyas, who fought against birth prejudice and disproved the artificial separation between genuine orthodox Hinduism and Bhakti; Adi Shankara himself was a great Bhakta, as anyone can easily see not only from his wonderful devotional songs and prayers, but also from the fact that he personally gave great importance to the installation and service to Deities in all his Mathas and in many public temples. The popular development of medieval Bhakti was also supported by a strong awareness of the transcendental knowledge offered in the shastra, and successfully united all Hindus in the sub-continent, although in different vernacular languages such as Tamil, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Oriya, and so on: when the bhakti language of the heart and soul is well-known, all other language problems become irrelevant and variety can easily be maintained without any harm. Even Sanskrit, the language of *Bhagavad gita* and innumerable beautiful *stutis* in various texts, can become extremely popular without any extra effort of enforcement from the government or other officially constituted authorities. In this presentation we will start from ancient times and move to the most famous among the later representatives of orthodox Hinduism in those same lines and traditions, however it is not possible to maintain a strict chronological order because of the need to keep a clear continuum in the ideological and cultural scenario.

## **Nimbarka**

Also known as Aruna Rishi and Haripriya Acharya, Nimbarka was born as Niyamananda Acharya; the date of birth is uncertain. According to his sampradaya, it was 3096 BCE, under the reign of Arjuna's grandson Janamejaya, who is mentioned in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Of course mainstream academicians cannot accept this date, so various scholars have theorised the 12th, 13th or 14th century. Recently it has been suggested that Nimbarka's direct disciple Srinivasa was a contemporary of Adi Shankara. Nimbarka's parents were the great ascetic Aruna Muni and his wife Jayanti Devi, originally from Vaiduryapatnam (presently Mungi, Paithan in Maharashtra) and migrated to Mathura and precisely at Nimbagrama (Neemgaon), between Barsana and Govardhana.

The name Nimbarka is said to have been given because of an episode that happened when Niyamananda was still a young boy. One evening a sannyasi sadhu (considered by some as Prajapati Brahma, who wanted to test the boy) came to the house of Aruna Muni begging for food, but all the ingredients had been used for the daily cooking that had been completed and consumed, and there was no more time to prepare anything else because one is not supposed to take food after sunset. Niyamananda invoked the Sudarshana Chakra and placed it like a sun (*arka*) over a nearby neem or nimba tree to give light, while he personally went to gather roots and fruits and his mother prepared and served them to the sadhu.

After the sacred thread ceremony, his parents sent him to Rishikula (Gurukula) for his education in scriptures, and in a very short time he mastered all the teachings. Taking leave from his parents, Nimbarka went to search for a satguru and after reaching Govardhana he began meditating in strict austerity, offering bilva leaves to Shiva for 14 days (one *pakscha* or fortnight). Pleased by his devotion, Shiva appeared to him and instructed him to go to a nearby forest to continue his sadhana; here one version says that he had the darshana of the four Kumaras and received initiation from Sanat Kumara, and another version says he had the darshana of Narada and was initiated by Narada. It is not very important which version we choose, because in any case the initiation was based on the transmission of the 18 syllable Gopala mantra from the *Gopalatapani Upanishad*, and Narada is said to have received that mantra from the Kumaras, who had received it from the avatara of Vishnu named Hamsa. With his initiation Nimbarka also received the name Haripriya, a Salagrama Deity known as Sri Sarvesvara and a copy of the *Sanat Kumara sambhita*. In the same place, Nimbarka also had the direct darshana of Krishna.

Nimbarka's philosophy is known as *dvaita advaita* or *bheda abheda*, or simultaneous duality and non-duality, and identifies the Supreme Brahman as the divine couple of Radha and Krishna. In fact, the most important factor in sadhana is *prapatti*, taking exclusive shelter in Radha (*ekanta-radhikasraya*) that is the highest form of *gopi bhava*, through a humble and surrendered approach towards the guru (*gurupasatti*). This surrender and dedication carries the devotee from sadhana bhakti or apara bhakti to para bhakti or madhurya rasa. The most important holy places of the followers of Nimbarka are Vrindavana, Nandagrama, Varshana and Govardhana; other large temples of the Nimbarka Sampradaya are at Nimgram (the place of Nimbarka's birth and sadhana, which is not far from Govardhana), and Salembabad in Rajasthan, where a large temple has been built, as well in Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bharatpur, Gwalior, Burdwan and Okara. Various groups of Nimbarka followers are also found in Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa.

Nimbarka's most famous works are the *Vedanta Parijata Saurabha* (a commentary to the *Vedanta sutra*), *Sadachar prakash* (a treatise on Karma kanda), *Gita bhasya*, *Rahasya shodasi* (explanation of the Gopala mantra), *Krishna stava raja* (establishing the supreme position of Krishna), *Prapanna kalpa valli* (explanation of the Mukunda mantra), *Prapatti chintamani*, *Prata smarana stotram*, and *Kamadhenu Dasa sloki* (about the meditation on Radha Krishna).

Nimbarka taught that there are 3 categories of existence: *cit* (consciousness, or atman), *acit* (non-consciousness, inert matter or material body) and *isvara* (the Lord). Brahman is the Controller (*niyantri*), the Jiva (*cit*) is the enjoyer (*bhoktri*) and the world (*acit*) is the object of enjoyment (*bhogya*). However, *cit* and *acit* are non-different from Isvara because they cannot exist without him; their existence is separate but not independent (*para tantra satta bhava*) as they are his limbs or attributes, as opposed to the concept of independent existence (*svatantra satta bhava*) that is the Supreme Lord. The identification between the *savishesha* and *nirvishesha* aspects of Bhagavan is called *svabhavika-bheda-abheda*, "natural difference and oneness", as he sees no contradiction between the two.

The Nimbarka sampradaya focuses on the ultimate benefit of everyone - *sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarva santu niramayah* - by spreading the message of *Bhagavad gita* and *Bhagavata Purana* (*Srimad Bhagavatam*). Another important teaching is *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, signifying that all beings, and especially all human beings, are members of the same family as children of Krishna. Because it is not easy to correctly perform meditation on God, one should practice rendering selfless service to all beings as recommended by Krishna, and to practice the chanting of the holy name of Krishna as

recommended in the scriptures especially for Kali yuga. The Nimbarka sampradaya is open to everyone equally without any discrimination of gender, caste, race, nationality or other birth conditions.

The categories of *jivas* as *baddhas* and *muktas* are temporary as a *baddha jiva* can become a *mukta* through the path to realization or sadhana, which is bhakti that includes both karma and jnana. The first stage is *karma* (the ritualistic process of action through varna and ashrama), the second is *jnana* (the cultivation of knowledge, that is not independent but a support of action), the third is *dhyana* or *upasana* (meditation), and the fourth is *prapatti* (surrender) or pure bhakti. The method of meditation, performed by initiated disciples, is composed of three stages: 1. meditation on the Lord as the Inner Controller of the *cit*, the soul of one's soul, 2. meditation on the Lord as the Inner Controller of the *acit*, the soul of all atoms, 3. meditation on the Lord himself as distinct from *cit* and *acit*.

The almost forgotten disciplic succession from Nimbarka was revived in its 35th link, **Svami Harivyasa Devacharya**, who appointed 12 of his senior disciples to lead missions; the most famous being Svami Parasurama Devacharya (who received the Sri Sarvesvara Salagrama) who became based in Nimbarka Tirtha (Rajasthan) and Svami Svabhurama Devacharya who became based in Kurukshetra. The Sampradaya branched out in many groups including the Kathia Baba Sampradaya (based in Kathia Baba ka Sthana, Vrindavana), Svami Nagaji Maharaja (who started the first Vrajabhumi Parikrama), and Haripriya Sarana Devacharya (who founded the temple of Bihari Ji Ki Bageechi, Vrindavana). Svami Svabhurama Devacharya established over 52 temples in Punjab, Haryana and Vraja, and his followers are found mostly in Vrindavana, Haryana, Punjab, Bengal, Rajasthan, Orissa, Assam, Sikkim, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Nepal. Svami Parasurama's present successor is Sri Radhasarvesvara Sarana Devacharya, based in Nimbarka Tirtha Rajasthan, and overseeing thousands of temples, hundreds of mathas, schools, hospitals, orphanages, cow shelters, environmental projects, memorial shrines, scholarly and religious conferences, medical camps, etc.

Another Acharya of this lineage is **Svami Brindaban Bihari Das** residing at Kathia Baba ka Ashram (Shivala, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh), who established schools, orphanages and elderly care homes and traveled extensively in USA, UK, Sweden, Africa, Bangladesh and other countries. The Sukhchar Kathiababar Ashram at 24-Parganas West Bengal was originally established by Swami Dhananjaydas Kathia Baba and is presently headed by Swami Brindabanbihari Das. Swami Haripriya Sarana Devacharya founded the temple and Matha at Bihari Ji Ka Bageecha, Vrindavana, who was succeeded by Swami Lalita Sarana Devacharya, whose successor Swami Gopala Sarana Devacharya founded the Math and temple known as the Shri Golok Dham Ashram in New Delhi, and supported the Glasgow Hindu Mandir (Scotland, UK), the Lakshmi Narayan Hindu Mandir in Bradford (UK) and the Valley Hindu Temple in Northridge (California, USA). Sri Radhavallabha Sharan Devacharya at Baijiraj Temple in Udaipur, Rajasthan, was succeeded by Mahant Sri Mohansharan. In Abu Road, Swami Shri Yugal Sharan Brahmachari takes care of Shri Pat Narayan Dham, an ashrama worshipping an ancient Deity of Lord Visnu, and providing top level Ayurvedic care with thousands of patients visiting daily. The Mithila Kunj Ashram is operated by disciples in the tradition of Swami Shri Mukund Devacharya. Swami Uddhava Ghamanda Devacharya, another of the 12 disciples of Swami Harivyasa Devacharya established the Rasa Lila dramatic performances, which continue today and are open to devotees from all sects and folk artists; his disciples are led by Swami Roop Kishor Devacharya based at Shri Chain Bihari Ji Kunj.

## Ramdas Kathia Baba

Born sometime in the early 19th century in Lona Chamari village near Amritsar in Punjab in a brahmin family, in his youth he met a sadhu who instructed him to chant the name of Rama and gave him a copy of *Bhagavad gita*. Inspired by the verse about the failed yogi who starts his sadhana again in a next lifetime, he refused to marry and instead he started a Gayatri mantra sadhana, determined to chant it 1,00,000 times; while engaged in this way he heard a voice instructing him to complete the vow at Jwalamukhi, about 45 km from his native place. During this journey he met Swami Devdas, a guru in the line of Nimbarka, descending from the Naga Maharaj (39th acharya of the line) who started the tradition of 84 Krosha Vraja Dham parikrama. The succession line had split into 2 branches at the 34th acharya, Sri Harivyas Devacharya, with the main line continued by his eldest disciple Sri Parshuram Devacharya.

Ramdas became the disciple of Swami Devdas, cultivating Vaidhi Bhakti with the purpose of attaining Raganuga Bhakti and Isvara pranidhana. Swami Devdas was very strict and often tested his disciples to verify their patience and freedom from egotism; once he asked Ramdas to remain seated in a particular spot without moving until his return, and stayed away for 8 days. Finally he sent Ramdas to pilgrimage to Dvaraka and he personally retired to the Himalayas, where he passed away, leaving the succession to Ramdas Kathia Baba, who became the 54th acharya. Many miracles are attributed to Ramdas Kathia Baba, and he was honored with the title of Vaishnav Chatuh Sampradaya Sri Mahanta by all the Mahantas and Sadhus of the four Vaishnava Sampradayas for his role as a major preacher in the revival and mass propagation of Nimbarka Vaishnavism in Bengal.

Ramdas Kathia Baba died in 1909 in Vrindavana, leaving his disciples Swami Santa Das Kathia, Shobha Mata Ji, Swami Dhananjoy Das Kathia, and Swami Chaturbhujdas Kathia, who were succeeded by Swami Rash Behari Das Kathia Baba the 57th and present acharya of the lineage. The sampradaya has its headquarters in Sri Kathia Baba Sevashram Sridham Vrindavan, temples in Haridwar, Puri, Calcutta, Shillong, Siliguri, Guwahati, Tinsukia, Dwarka, preaching centers in Delhi, Bombay, Allahabad, and International preaching centers in Toronto (Canada), Birmingham (UK), Maryland (USA).

## The Alvars

Also known as *alvars* or *azhwars*, from the Tamil *azh*, "to immerse oneself" (in God), they are popular saints, poets and devotees of Vishnu or Krishna, who lived in south India and composed a total of about 4000 verses published in the 10th century as *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* ("divine collection") by Nathamuni. Many of these poems are in glorification of 108 Divya Desams, "divine places" such as temples. The characteristic of the Alvar was pure bhakti without consideration of social position or birth condition - this helped them reclaim Indian society for Hinduism after the spreading of Buddhism and Jainism. Their preaching focused especially on *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and they are traditionally considered as *amsas* ("parts") of Vishnu and incarnations of his entourage, so much that the images of the Alvars are frequently worshiped in temples.

The period of the Alvars is controversial: mainstream academic scholars date their tradition between the 5th and the 10th century, to fit the theory that the Indian Bhakti movement originated from Islamic Sufism, but tradition claims a much earlier time, from 4203 to 2706 BCE, if we

calculate these dates assuming that Kali yuga started about 5000 years ago. In any case as we will see from the traditional hagiographic details, the devotees in that line never cared much for historical physical limitations (but that hardly happens in any religious tradition, including the "historical" religions). The list of the 12 Alvars includes:

**Poigai** ("from a pond"), also called Ayonigi, Saro-yogi, Kasara-yogi, Poigai-piraan, Sarovara Munindra and Padma-muni. Considered an incarnation of Vishnu's Panchajanya conch, he was found in a small pond near the Yadhotakaari temple at Tiruvekkaa (Kanchipuram); according to tradition the 3 first Alvars (Mudhal, all of divine birth) found themselves together in a small dark shelter during a rain in Thirukovilur, and they perceived the personal presence of Vishnu as their companion. Poigai then composed 100 verses on Vishnu, including a famous prayer in which he meditates on the entire world as a lamp and the sun as a burning wick to remove the darkness of ignorance. His poems are in the *andhadi* style, where the ending word of each verse becomes the first word of the next verse, thus creating a sort of garland.

**Bhoothath**, considered an incarnation of Vishnu's Kaumodaki mace, it is said he was found inside a flower in Thirukadalmallai (presently Mahabalipuram); he wrote 100 verses known as *Irاندam Tiruvandadhi*.

**Pey** ("possessed, obsessed"), incarnation of the Nandaka sword, was found inside a flower in the pond of the Adi Kesava Perumal Temple in Mylapore (Manikaivaram), near Madras. He is also called Mahadahvaya and Mylapuradapadhi.

**Thirumalisai**, incarnation of the Sudarshana Chakra, born at Jagannatha Perumal temple to Bhargava Maharishi and his wife Kanakangi after an unusual 12-month-long pregnancy, and as he appeared to be dead he was abandoned in a bamboo bush, where he was found by a tribal couple who took him home and adopted him; he openly declared that he did not belong to any varna or caste. He lived up to 10 years of age. When his adopted brother and disciple Kaninannan displeased the Pallava king for failing to restore the king's youth and was therefore banished, Thirumalisai asked the Vishnu's Deity in Kanchi to leave as well, "rolling up Sesa like a mattress".

**Namm**, incarnation of Vishnu's general Visvaksena, was the son of a sudra farmer. From birth he was never speaking or eating, but remained sitting under a tamarind tree emanating a divine glow; his poems (*Thiruvaymoli* 1102 verses, *Thiruviruttam* 100 verses, *Thiru Vaasiriam* 7 verses and *Periyai Thiruvanthadi* 87 verses) were collected by his disciple Madhurakavi, who was older than him, and elaborate on the nature of *jivatma* and *paramatma*, and on the attainment of moksha. His teachings greatly influenced the Pallava kings of south India; the Garudasevai festival in Nava Tirupathi (the 9 Vishnu temples in Thoothukudi) and the Araiyaar Sevai (his ascension to Vaikuntha) during the Vaikunta Ekadasi festival in Srirangam temple are dedicated to him.

**Madhurakavi**, incarnation of Kumuda Ganesha as well as Garuda; he was the son of a brahmana and became disciple of Namm, after a pilgrimage to Ayodhya.

**Kulashekhar**a born as Sthanuravi, incarnation of Vishnu's Kaustubha jewel, was the second known king of the Chola/ Chera Perumal kingdom of Cranganore (Kerala) which also included Madurai, and the Maharajas of Travancore claimed to be his descendants. He was a devotee of Rama but in one of his poems he identifies with Devaki; he wrote *Mukundamala stotra*, *Tapati samvaranam*, *Subhadra dhananjaya*, *Vichchinna abhiseka*, and *Perumal Tirumozhi*.

**Periya** or Vishnucitta, considered an incarnation of Garuda; the adopted father of Andal, he was a brahmana who abandoned the study of the shastra and chose to serve as a humble gardener and garland maker in the temple of Srivilliputtur, as a devotee of child Krishna in the sentiment of Yasoda, meditating on the town of Tirukkoshthiyur in Tamil Nadu as Gokula.

**Andal Antal** ("who attracts") or Goda ("gift of Earth"), she was found under a tulasi plant by Periya. She has a unique position as the only woman among the Alvars, and is considered as incarnation of Bhudevi in the sentiment of the bride of Vishnu as Ranganatha of Thiruvaramangam. In this sentiment, she used to wear the flower garlands before offering them to the Deity. On the day of her wedding, at age 15, she ran to embrace the Deity and disappeared into it. She composed the poems *Thiruppavai* (30 verses in the sentiment of a gopi) and *Nachiya Thirumozhi* (143 verses, about her desire to marry the Deity, comparable to Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*). Antal Utsava is a great celebration for women, and still today the garlands (traditionally made with tulasi, sevanti and sampangi flowers) offered to Andal in Srivilliputhur temple are sent to Venkateswara at Tirupati for the Garuda seva procession. The Goda mandali was formed in 1970 and spread Andal's songs through TV and radio. The story of Andal has been told by Krishnadevaraya of the Vijayanagar Dynasty in his Telugu poem *Amuktamalyada*.

**Thondaradipodi**, originally called Vipra Narayanar, and born as the son of a brahmana, is considered an incarnation of Vishnu's Vanamala garland. The story goes that he came under the influence of a prostitute, whose mother stole all his money, then he was rescued by Vishnu. He was devoted to Ranganatha of the Srirangam Ranganathaswamy temple and worshipped even the dust from the feet of the devotees of Ranganatha. He built a big flower park in Srirangam, and his verses are sung for the waking up ceremony of the Deity. He was strongly opposed to birth prejudice.

**Thirupaan**, incarnation of the Srivatsa, belonged to a low caste of musicians, although he is said to have been found as a baby in a rice field. As he was not allowed near the bank of the Kaveri river, he used to sit playing his vina along the road; one day one pujari named Loka Saranga came to the river to draw water and as Thirupaan did not notice his request to move aside, he threw a stone at him, causing his forehead to bleed; after returning to the temple, the pujari was horrified to see blood oozing from the forehead of the Ranganatha Deity and when Vishnu ordered him to take Thirupaan into the temple (in spite of the social restrictions due to his low birth), the pujari was even willing to carry that devotee on his own shoulders. Thirupaan was devoted to the Srirangam Ranganathaswamy temple and is believed to have merged with the Deity there. He only wrote 10 verses, known as *Amalanaathipiran*, describing the body of Ranganatha.

**Thirumangai**, originally called Kaliyan or Kalikanti, and considered as an incarnation of Vishnu's Sharanga bow, was a military man of Kallar descent (*kallar* means "thief") under the Chola king and was later given a small kingdom for himself, but he openly declared he did not belong to any varna or caste. He is considered the most learned and accomplished in poetry style, and composed the largest number of verses (1361) glorifying over 40 Deities of Vishnu, from Badrinath in north India to Thirukkurungudi in the extreme south, and often expressing the sentiments of a gopi for Krishna.

### **Nathamuni**

Also known as Sadamarsana Kula Tilakar, Sottai Kulaththu Arasar and Ranganatha Acharya, he is considered the first of Sri Vaishnava acharyas (the line followed by Ramanuja). He is most famous

for compiling the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, the collection of the poems of the Alvars, arranged in four books of about 1000 verses each, which became known as the "Tamil Vedas". His life period was between 823 and 951 CE. According to the *Divya suri charita* and the *Prapannamrita*, he was born as Aranganathan in Viranarayana (presently Kattumannarkoil) as the son of Isvara Bhatta, and in the course of his life he came in contact with Namm alvar. He had a son named Isvaramuni and a grandson named **Yamunacharya** (Alavandar/ Albandru), who became famous in his own right as a religious teacher. He was the administrator at the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple, Srirangam, and he engaged there his two nephews. One of his main disciples was Pundarikaksha.

## Ramanuja

Born (1017-1137 CE) in a Tamil brahmin family in the village of Sriperumbudur, near present-day Chennai (Madras) in Tamil Nadu, he studied in Kanchipuram under Yadava Prakasha, a teacher in the Advaita Vedanta tradition, but he preferred the bhakti perspective of the Alvars, Nathamuni and Yamunacharya, and started his own lineage, reviving Yamunacharya's Sri Sampradaya, from the perspective of *visista advaita*, "oneness in variety". He approached Ghosthipurna Nambi, who initiated him into the *srimantram* (*thirumanthiram* in Tamil), the mystic 8-syllable mantra that was given only to a very small number of select candidates. However, Ramanuja impulsively ran to the top of the temple roof and cried the mantra aloud for all to hear: "Listen, o people! This is the life-transforming mantra that will give you salvation if you repeat it always by fixing you mind on God: Om Namō Narayanaya! Om Namō Narayanaya!". When Ghosthipurna scolded him for broadcasting the powerful *srimantram*, Ramanuja replied that he was ready to pay the price if he had committed a wrongful act, but he just couldn't bear to keep such a secret that could benefit the entire world.

Ramanuja founded 74 centers or Mathas, initiated 700 sannyasis, 12,000 brahmacharis and thousands of family men and women from all social backgrounds to the path of Bhakti. He became a pujari in the Varadharaja Perumal temple in Kanchi and reorganised the Srirangam Ranganathaswamy temple complex (near Tiruchchirapalli), and his teachings strongly influenced the Venkateswara Temple at Tirumala in Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh) and in some measure also the Jagannatha temple at Puri. Some biographies say that he was banished by the Chola king Hulottunga and moved to the Hoysala kingdom in Mysore for 14 years, converting the Jain king Bitti Deva to Hinduism and healing his daughter. The king then named him Vishnuvardhana, gave him some land in current day Melukote and supported the construction of the temple there. In his old age Ramanuja returned to Srirangam, where he died. He wrote several texts, including commentaries on *Bhagavad gita* and *Vedanta sutra*, the *Vedarthasangraha* ("summary of the meaning of the Vedas"), the *Nitya grantha* (a manual for daily worship and rituals) and smaller books.

## Ramananda

He was born in the 14th-century in a brahmin family and lived mostly in the holy city of Varanasi. He studied in Adi Shankara's Advaita tradition as well as in Ramanuja's tradition, and finally under Raghavananda, a guru in the Vedanta-based Vatakalai school of Vaishnavism, focused on devotion to Rama. He is known as the founder of the Ramanandi Sampradaya, the largest ascetic order in

modern times; his followers are known as Ramanandis or Ramayats, who wear the characteristic *triphala* vertical tilaka on their forehead (a red line between two large yellow lines) and necklaces of tulasi beads. The Ramanandis are divided in four categories called Achari (wearing clothes of silk or wool), the Sannyasi (wearing saffron clothes), the Khaki (going without clothes), and the Vairagi or Bairagi (also called Tyagi, Mahatyagi, Phalahari or Naga), and they generally compete with the Shaivite dasanami sannyasis for the best place at pilgrimage sites such as the Kumbha Mela. Devotees in the renounced order travel together in *kbalsas*, "traveling mathas", they do not wear colored clothes and they do not cut their hair or nails, and take vows of following various rules of renunciation or tapasya especially in regard to fasting and giving up clothing and shelter, although many habitually consume bhang or smoke ganja. Such vows are not imposed by the guru or by the group, but are freely chosen by each sadhaka in terms of duration, type and intensity, according to the particular attachments that the individual is seeking to overcome and the degree to which the individual can handle the particular form that is chosen, because restrictions imposed by others may be followed but resented, not only lacking in benefits but sometimes even becoming harmful, since they may lead the performer to resent the ascetic life completely.

Ramananda's perspective unites the tradition of Ramanuja with the Natha tradition, and he distanced himself from the Ramanuja lineage because of his disagreement towards the strict superficial rules of that line - for example the wearing of wool and silk only but no cotton, and the need to eat only food prepared personally and in private. He accepted disciples without any discrimination of birth, caste, gender or social position, including famous personalities such as Tulsidas, Guru Ravidas and his disciple Mirabai, Bhagat Pipa, Sant Kabir, Anantananda, Bhavananada, Dhanna Bhagat, Nabha, Naraharyananda, Sain, Sukhananda, Sursuri Devi and Padyavati, and influenced the development of Sikhism in the 15th century. He is often quoted as having said, "Don't ask a sadhu about his caste, ask him about knowledge instead", and "Let no one ask a man's caste or with whom he eats. If a man is devoted to Hari, he becomes Hari's own."

While Ramanuja taught the worship of Lakshmi Narayana, Ramananda's devotion focused on Rama, the perfect example of a faultless prince defender of Dharma, ready to accept devotees from any walk of life, including the non-human species such the Rakshasas and Vanaras, and even bears and birds. For Ramanandi sadhus, the ideal form of bhakti is manifested in the relationship between Rama and Hanuman, an incarnation of Shiva. Hanuman is the ideal devotee, personifying renunciation and asceticism, as well as the heroic spirit of defender of Dharma - so much that Vairagis consider themselves as belonging to the Vanara army, a concept popularised in modern times by the Bajranga Dal movement. Sadhana almost always includes the recitation of the *Hanuman Chalisa*, a 40-verse prayer written by Tulsidas, and the *Rama charita manasa*, also by Tulsidas.

### **Ravidas or Raidas**

Life details are very scarce; generally it is believed that he was born around 1450 CE (and died around 1520) in the village of Seer Goverdhanpur, near Varanasi, in an outcaste *chamar* family engaged in working with dead animals for the production of leather items; it is said that he remembered a previous lifetime in which he was a brahmin who had insisted on eating meat. Since childhood he was very attracted to the sadhu followers of Ramananda and travelled extensively to pilgrimage sites in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Himalayas. He wrote

poems in his regional language and encouraged everyone to freely engage in spiritual life without any discrimination of caste and gender; because of his straightforward preaching and frequent criticism of their malpractices, the brahmins either bowed to him or tried to create problems to him. He was the guru of the famous Meera (Mirabai), and he became popular with various Hindu groups (especially the Dadupanthi) and several books were written about him (the *Bhaktamala* by Nabhdas, the *Parvais* by Anantadas, and the *Premambodha*). His life inspired Guru Nanak the founder of Sikhism (41 of Ravidas' poems are mentioned in the *Guru Granth Sahib* and he is revered together with Ramananda), and still has a large following especially in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. In the 21st century a new Ravidassia religion branched off from Sikhism, following the murder of their leader **Ramanand Dass** in Vienna in 2009, where the movement declared itself to be a religion fully separated from Sikhism. The Ravidassia religion compiled a new holy book, the *Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji*, based entirely on the writings and teaching of Ravidas, and containing 240 hymns.

### Meera or Mirabai

One of the most famous figures in the medieval Bhakti movement, she considered herself married to Krishna in spite of the opposition of her family, and composed thousands of beautiful bhajans or devotional songs, that became extremely popular especially in northern and western India. Several temples, such as the one in Chittorgarh fort, are dedicated to her, and her personality and story fascinated and inspired large numbers of admirers and followers during her life and after her demise as well. She was born (1498-1547) a princess into a Rajput royal Rathore family in Merta, Rajasthan, and in 1516 she was unwillingly married to Bhoj Raj, the crown prince of Mewar, who was wounded in one of the wars with the Delhi Sultanate in 1518 and died of battle wounds in 1521. Both her own father and her father-in-law were killed within a few years after her husband in a war with the Islamic army of Babur, the founder of Mughal Empire in the Indian subcontinent. After the death of her father-in-law, Vikram Singh became the ruler of Mewar. Her in-laws tried many times to kill her but unsuccessfully, then she left Mewar and went on pilgrimage to Dvarakia and Vrindavana, where it is said she merged into a Deity of Krishna - her beloved lover, the wonderful black boy who lifted Govardhana hill to protect his devotees. The *Prema Ambodh Potbi*, a text attributed to Guru Gobind Singh and completed in 1693 CE, includes poetry of Mirabai as one of 16 historic Bhakti saints important to Sikhism.

### Tulsidas

Goswami Tulasi Das or Tulsidas, is the author of the famous *Rama charita manasa* (written in the Awadhi dialect of Hindi, and consisting of 7 books for a total size of about 1/3 of Valmiki's *Ramayana*) and the *Hanuman chalisa*. He was born (1511-1623) as Rambola (literally "saying the name of Rama") in a brahmin family in Sukarkhet Soron, a village along the bank of the Ganges, but according to his astrological chart his birth was very inauspicious for his family, so he was sent away with a servant named Chuniya (or Muniya) who took care of him in her village of Haripur for about 5 years before dying. After that, the child survived by begging and traveled to Varanasi, where he was adopted by Narharidas, a Ramanandi ascetic disciple of Ramananda, who gave him virakta diksha (Vairagi initiation) with the new name of Tulsidas. When he was 7 his *upanayana* (sacred

thread ceremony) was performed by Narharidas at Ayodhya and he started his studies there; after some time Narharidas took him to the temple at Varaha Kshetra Soron and narrated the *Ramayana* to him. Later the boy studied the Vedic scriptures under a friend of Narharidas, renowned guru Shesha Sanatana, who was based at the Panchaganga Ghat in Varanasi.

The other details of his personal life are controversial, as some sources insist he never married and other sources say he married Ratnavali (the daughter of Dinbandhu Pathak, a brahmin of the Bharadwaja Gotra who belonged to Mahewa village of Kaushambi district) and had a son named Tarak who died as a toddler - after which he left family life and went to Prayaga (Allahabad) where he became a sadhu and started traveling around the holy places especially in Varanasi, Prayaga, Ayodhya, Chitrakuta (where he had the darshana of Rama and Lakshmana by the blessing of Hanuman) as well as Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri, Rameshvaram and Manasarovar, where he had the darshana of Kakabhushundi. At Prayag, 6 days after the end of the Magha Mela, he had the darshana of Yajnavalkya and Bharadvaja under a banyan tree. While reading Valmiki's *Ramayana* he saw in Uttara Rama charita that Rama had instructed Vibhisana to worship Jagannatha in Kali yuga in the holy place of Sri Purushottama (Puri), so he remained sitting in meditation at Tulasi Chaura, a hut that he built at Malatipatpur a few kilometres outside Puri, and he also visited the famous Hanuman temple called Siddha Mahavira within Puri; on a sukla Ekadasi he had darshana and saw Lord Rama within Jagannatha.

Tulsidas mentions several times in his works that he directly met Rama and Hanuman. He founded the Sankatamochan Hanuman temple at the place where he had the darshana of Hanuman (in the form of an old leper) and started the Ramalila plays, a folk-theatre adaptation of the *Ramayana* story. The Tulsi Ghat on the Ganges in Varanasi is named after him, and several miracles have been attributed to him, including the resuscitation of a brahmin whose body was on its way to the crematorium, and the unleashing of an army of monkeys against Akbar when the emperor of Delhi imprisoned him at Fatehpur Sikri for refusing to perform miracles for him (the *Hanuman chalisa* was composed on that occasion).

After composing the *Rama charita manasa* he went to Varanasi to submit it to Shiva at the temple of Visvanatha; the manuscript was kept at the bottom of a pile of other writings inside the temple and in the morning it was found at the top with the inscription "*satyam shivam sundaram*" believed to have been written by Shiva himself. Among his main works, some are written in Awadhi dialect, such as *Ram charita manasa*, *Ramlala nabachhu*, *Barvai Ramayan*, *Parvati mangal*, *Janaki mangal* and *Ramagya prashna*, while others are written in the Braja dialect, such as *Krishna gitavali*, *Gitavali*, *Sahitya ratna*, *Dohavali*, *Vairagya sandipini* and *Vinaya patrika*. The *Dohavali* is a mixed collection with verses in both languages. In the *Bhaktamal*, his contemporary Nabhadhas states that Tulsidas was an incarnation of Valmiki, and several biographies have been written on him, for example the *Gautama Chandrika* composed by Krishnadatta Misra of Varanasi in 1624, the *Mula Gosain Charita* composed by Veni Madhava Das (1630) and the *Gosain Charita* composed by Dasanidas or Bhavanidas (1770). In his teachings, Tulsidas gave the greatest importance to the chanting of the Name of Rama as the only means to attain God in Kali yuga when the means suited for other ages are ineffective; for him Rama is not simply an avatara of Vishnu, but the source of all avataras. He considers the Guru as an incarnation or manifestation of Shiva, and at the beginning of his works he offers respects to Ganesh, Surya, Sarasvati, Parvati, Shiva, Ganga, Yamuna, Varanasi, Chitrakut, Guru, Valmiki, and Hanuman.

Towards the end of his life Tulsidas suffered from acute pain all over his body and a particular type of abscesses called *bartod*, caused by infection of the pores of the skin. The *Vinaya patrika* ("petition of humility") in which he begs Rama to grant him devotion, is considered as his last composition, consisting of 279 verses, of which the 45th became a popular arati song. He finally died at the Assi Ghat at Varanasi.

## The Nayanars

The Nayanars or Nayanmars are 63 Shaivite saints and devotees who lived in south India; the general consensus over their period is from 6th to 8th century. Their most important characteristic is their absolute pure devotion for God and their total disregard for any birth prejudice and material circumstances of life; some of them were very learned and others did not care for erudition, some were married and some were sannyasis, some were males and other females. Many miracles are attributed to their lives. Here is the complete list:

1. **Sundaramurthi** or **Sundarar**, one of the 4 Smaya Acharyas, the most prominent Tamil religious teachers, together with Appar, Manickavachagar, and Sambandar. His songs, called *Thevaram*, celebrate the glory of Shiva at all the sacred places, and express his *sakhya bhava* (sentiment of devotional friendship) by which he often asked Mahadeva for personal favors. It is said that he had previously been a close associate of Shiva and assisted him during the Halahala poison episode; then he was born as Nambi Arurar the son of a brahmana named Sadaiyanar and was adopted by Narasinga Muniyaraiyar (41), a warrior chieftain of the small kingdom of Thirumunaipadi. He became friends with Cheraman Perumal Nayanar and traveled with him to various pilgrimage places. During a particularly complex adventure he temporarily lost his eyesight. He lived only 18 years.

2. **Tiru Neelakanta**, a married man and a potter by profession in Chidambaram, he was happy to serve Shiva's devotees and gifted them with beautiful begging bowls. Once he displeased his wife because he had visited a prostitute, so he accepted his wife's verdict that he should not touch her or any other woman ever again - and this put him in a spot of trouble when he was asked to swear an oath by touching his wife's hand.

3. **Iyarpahai**, a vaisya by profession, he was determined to go to any length to serve the devotees of Shiva as the living manifestations of God, and was once tested by Shiva himself.

4. **Ilayankudi Mara** (or **Maranar**), a prosperous farmer, was also very serious in his service to the devotees of Shiva and was tested with a period of great financial difficulties during which he continued to sacrifice everything in his service.

5. **Maiporul** was the king of the hill tribes of Sethi and was well versed in the study of the Agamas; one rival king named Muthanathan took advantage of that devotion and attacked him after penetrating into his chamber disguised as a Shiva bhakta.

6. **Viralminda** was born in Sengunru hills from the warlike Vellala clan, and was very dedicated to the service of Shiva bhaktas. He met Sundarar at the Tiruvarur temple and reprimanded him for having failed to show sufficient respect to devotees, and Sundarar submitted to him.

7. **Amaraneedi** was a wealthy but honest merchant trading in gold, diamonds, silks and cotton., and he was devoted to the service of Shiva bhaktas. While visiting the temple of Tirunallur during festivals he developed the desire to reside there and moved with all his family, building a Math and providing the ascetics with basic needs such as loincloths. It is said that Shiva appeared personally in the form of a brahmachari to test his devotion.

8. **Eripatha**, born in Karuvur, a major city of the Chola kingdom on the river Ambiravati, that was decorated with many ashramas. He worshiped Pasupathisvarar daily and carried an axe to protect devotees. One day a Shiva bhakta named Sivakami Andar was carrying a flower basket for puja when he was attacked by the king's pet elephant; Eripatha intervened killing the elephant and the mahut, and the episode was an opportunity for the sage and the king to manifest their devotion.

9. **Enadinatha** worked as a toddy tapper in the fertile region near Kumbakonam on the bank of the river Arisol. He was an expert swordsman and taught fencing to the princes, for which some people became envious - especially one Atisura, who caused many problems to him and to all his family. His devotion covered anything that was connected to Shiva, including the vibhuti/ bhasma tilaka, the 3 lines of which purify the bad tendencies - the 3 tendencies or *vasanas* (materialism, attachment to one's body, and dry erudition), the 3 impurities (egotism, egoism, and illusion) and the 3 material desires (for wealth, descendance, and wife).

10. **Kannappa** (originally called **Tinnanar**), born and raised in a hunter tribe, was totally ignorant of any religious doctrine, but attained perfection in 6 days through his intense devotion. One day he was out on the Kalahasti hill with two companions and killed a boar; while walking around he found the Shiva linga in the temple and was overwhelmed by the desire to offer worship, which he did to the best of his ability for 5 days although the orthodox pujari, Sivagochariar, strongly disapproved of the proceedings. Shiva tested his devotion to show it to the pujari - he made the eyes of the linga bleed, and Kannappa plucked his own eye to replace the eye of the Deity and was ready to pluck the second when Shiva himself stopped him.

11. **Kungiliya Kalaya**, from a brahmin family, was supplying incense to the temple of Tirukkadevur and sold his last family possession (the sacred mangalyam necklace of his wife) to pay for the offering. According to the local temple tradition, the Amrita Ghateswar Linga there was originally a pot of nectar carried by Devas and Asuras after the churning of the milk ocean; later Markandeya Rishi worshiped Shiva here and was granted freedom from death.

12. **Manakanchara**, from the warlike Vellala clan, followed the family tradition as a general or *senapati*. A contemporary of Sundaramurthi, he was very dedicated to the service of Shiva bhaktas and was personally tested by Shiva who appeared as an ascetic.

13. **Arivattaya**, a wealthy land owner of the Vellala clan, he used to offer the Deity a special meal of red rice, mango pickle and a sauce made with a red herb. Shiva tested him with utter poverty so that he was reduced to starvation, but he was desperately determined to perform his devotional offering, to the point of desiring to commit suicide because of his failure.

14. **Anaya** was a cowherd in Tirumangalam, a holy pilgrimage site around the temple of Sama vedesvarar, where Parasurama had worshiped and received his axe. Anaya was dedicated to serving Shiva bhaktas and devoted to anything related to Shiva, especially to the *pancha akshara mantra (om namah shivaya)*; when he played his flute while meditating on this mantra all animals were enthralled.

15. **Murthi**, a vaisya by family tradition and profession, living in Madurai under the Pandya kingdom, used to offer sandalwood paste to the Deity and was very upset when the city was taken over by a king who had converted to Jainism and forbidden the sale of sandalwood. Murthi showed he was ready to sacrifice his body in the service of the Deity, and by the grace of Shiva the bad king died and the ministers chose Murthi to ascend the throne.

16. **Muruga** faithfully worshiped Shiva with the pancha akshara mantra and offering flowers and flower garlands. He became friends with Sambandar (28) and with him attained Shiva.

17. **Rudra Pasupathi**, used to worship Shiva by chanting the *Sri Rudram*, a long glorification of Mahadeva that is the center of the middle khanda of *Yajur Veda*, by standing in the river neck deep.

18. **Tiru Nalai Povar**, also known as **Nandanar**, was born in a *pulaya* (untouchable) family of leather workers and drummers in Adanur in the Chola kingdom. He often went to the holy places of pilgrimage to supply musical instruments for the temples, but out of humility he always remained outside and worshiped the Lord mentally. Once he visited Tirupunkur, but he was unable to see the Deity because Nandi's image was in the way; so Nandi moved aside to allow him to get darshana. Another time he went to Chidambaram, and Shiva ordered the pujari brahmanas to prepare a fire bath for him, after which he was welcomed inside the temple, where he disappeared. The story of Nandanar has been told many times and in various perspectives, also as an expression of protest against casteism.

19. **Tiru Kurippu Thonda**, born in Kanchi and a washerman by profession, he was very determined in his service to the devotees of Shiva and was personally tested by him.

20. **Chandesvara**, originally called Vichara Sarman, was born in a brahmin family in Tiruchajnanallur, a place famous for Vedic recitations, tapas, and Siva bhakti. One day he saw an ignorant cowherd man severely beating a cow; he rebuked him and then took the job of cowherd upon himself, making the cows much happier and willing to give more milk. The surplus of milk was so great that Chandesvara was inspired to offer abhisheka to Shiva, but the villagers did not understand his actions and reported that he was wasting milk by pouring it on the mud. His father rushed on the spot, hit him and knocked down the milk pot, then Chandesvara became angry and struck back with a stick to protect his offering, killing his father.

21. **Tiru-Navukkarasar** ("master of speech"), also known as **Appar**, was born as Marulneekiar ("the dispeller of darkness") the son of the brahmin Pulakanar. He had a sister, Tilakavatiar, who was engaged to marry Kalaipahayar, a military commander in the Pallava army, who died before the wedding. Pulakanar died and his wife committed suicide; Tilakavatiar got the news of her future husband's death and wanted to kill herself as well, but his brother pleaded with her begging her to become his mother, so she relented and remained an ascetic for the rest of her life. Marulneekiar heard about Jainism and went to Pataliputra to study and become a Jain; her sister was heart-broken and prayed Shiva to save him. Marulneekiar fell severely ill and his Jain monks could not help him, so he changed his mind and returned to his sister, dedicating himself fully to the *pancha akshara mantra* and composing a beautiful song in praise of Shiva. The Jains accused Marulneekiar of treason against the State, and the king had him arrested and tried to kill him in many ways but without success, until his heart changed and he became a devotee of Shiva himself. At Chidambaram, Appar heard about Sambandar (28) and went to Shiyali to meet him, and Sambandar came out on the road to welcome him; they went to the temple of Tirukkolaka, then continued to other holy places.

22. **Kulacchirai** or **Kulachirai**, he was the prime minister of the Pandyan king Ninra Seer Nedumara (49); on consultation with the queen Mangayarkarasiyar (50) he went to invite Sambandar (28) to the capital Madurai and defeat the Jains who had converted the king.

23. **Perumizhalai Kurumba**, he accepted Sundaramurthi (1) as guru and left this world one day after him.

24. **Karaikal Ammaiyar** or **Punithavathy**, one of the 3 women in the list of Nayanars - the other 2 being Mangayarkarasiyar (50) and Isaijnaniyar (63) the mother of Sundarar (1). She was born in a wealthy vaisya family and married Paramadattan, another merchant. One day her husband sent her two mangoes, and she gave one to a Shiva bhakta who had come as a guest; when the husband asked what happened to the second mango and rebuked her, she prayed to Shiva, and a new fruit appeared. Paramadattan was so impressed by the result that he felt it was a great sin to treat her as a wife, so he left and settled in another city, marrying another woman and naming their daughter Punithavathy after her first wife. One day the relatives of his first wife came to know about his new family and they carried her there in a palanquin; on their arrival Paramadattan came forward and worshiped Karaikal as a Goddess. Then she went on pilgrimage to Kailasa.

25. **Appuddi** was a grihastha brahmana and worshiped Tirunavukkarasar (21) as his guru. When Tirunavukkarasar (Appar) visited his town, Appuddi sent his son to the garden to get a banana leaf to use as a plate, but the boy was bitten by a cobra and died as soon he entered the house again. Noticing the absence of the boy, Appar found out what happened and brought him back to life.

26. **Tiruneelanakka** was a brahmana expert in the Agamas. One day he was worshiping the Shiva lingam at Ayavanthi-Nathar temple, when his wife who assisted him saw a spider fall on the Deity; as it was customary to treat spider bites in children with saliva, she instinctively and innocently spat on the Deity, to the great costernation and anger of the husband, who considered it a sacrilegious act. That night Shiva appeared in a dream to the pujari and showed that all his body had been affected by the spider poison except the part touched by his wife's saliva. On another occasion Sambandar visited Tiruneelanakka's place with Tiruneelakanta Perumbanar and Virali, and asked to stay for the night; as the guests were not brahmanas, they were accommodated outside the house near the yajna kunda, but suddenly the fire spontaneously appeared in the kunda, signifying that the devotional power of the visitors was stronger than any material considerations.

27. **Nami Nandi Adigal**, born in a brahmana family, he visited the temple of Tiruvarur every day. He wished to offer many lamps in the temple but the Jains denied him ghi and scornfully told him to use water instead; indeed he took water from the temple tank and kept the lamps burning with it for several days continuously. When the king came to know about that, he appointed him as temple manager. One day after participating to a public religious festival attended by many people from all social backgrounds he felt he needed to take a purification bath, but Shiva appeared to him and showed him all the devotees as having the same form as Shiva.

28. **Tiru Jnana Sambandar** was born in Sirkali as the son of a brahmana couple who resisted conversion to Jainism and prayed Shiva to give them a worthy son. One day his parents left him on the river bank while they went to take bath, and on their return they found him with a golden cup in his hands and milk overflowing from his mouth - Parvati herself had appeared to feed the child, but the parents did not realise what had happened until they heard the child singing a devotional hymn. Later during his pilgrimages, Sambandar met Tiru Neelakanta Yazhpanar, who was much older than

him, and they became friends; he also met Appar (21) and traveled together. On another occasion he healed the daughter of the Mazhava king of Tiru Pachilasramam and revived a merchant who had died of snake bite at Tiru Marugal. Sambandar then went to Madurai on the invitation of the queen (50) and the prime minister (22) and successfully reconverted the king (49) to Hinduism. Later Sambandar continued his pilgrimages accompanied by several devotees; they arrived at Bodhimangai, where they converted all the Buddhists to Hinduism. In Mylapore he resuscitated a girl from her ashes. When Sambandar attained age 16, his father decided to have him married, but on the day of the wedding he merged into the Shiva jyoti together with his bride, his friend Tiru Neelakanta (2), Muruga (16), Tiru Neelakanta Yazhpanar (61) and other devotees who were present.

29. **Eyarkon Kalikamar**, born in the Vellala clan, had criticised Sundaramurthi (1) for his apparent lack of devotion and as a reaction he started to suffer from a violent colic; in a dream Shiva told him that only Sundaramurthi could cure him, and at the same time Shiva appeared to Sundaramurthi asking him to go and cure Kalikamar.

30. **Tiru Mula** or **Tirumular** was a Shaiva Siddha, one of the 8 students of Yogi Tirunandi Devar. While on a pilgrimage, he found a herd of crying cows and discovered that their cowherd had just died, so he hid his own body into a hollow tree and entered the dead body of the cowherd, to the great happiness of the cows. However the dead herdsman's wife was not so easily satisfied, and she complained with the village elders that her husband had left her to go and sleep in a matha, but after verifying the level of spiritual realisation of the man, the elders justified his decision. Tirumular remained in that body and wrote the 3,000 verses of the *Tirumandiram*.

31. **Dandi Adigal** was born blind, but he would go every day to the temple to offer his respect and chant the *pancha akshara mantra*, and even managed to excavate a larger area to extend the temple tank. The envious Jains tried to stop him, but the king intervened and challenged Dandi to ask Shiva to restore his own eyesight and make the Jains blind - which exactly happened, resulting in the king restoring Hinduism in the region.

32. **Murkha**, born in the Vellala clan, spent all his money to give food to the devotees of Shiva, and then resorted to gambling to raise more funds for the purpose of serving the Lord, but he never used any winnings for his own expenses.

33. **Somasira**, born in a family of brahmanas, served all the devotees of Shiva without any birth discrimination. He went to Tiruvarur and lived with Sundaramurthi as his disciple.

34. **Sakkiya** was born in the Vellala clan and temporarily became Buddhist. In his peculiar mode of worship, he offered stones to the Deity, but with great devotion.

35. **Sirappuli**, born in a brahmana family, constantly engaged in the chanting of the *pancha akshara mantra*.

36. **Siruthonda** was the commander in chief of the Chola king, but he retired to engage in worship. One day Shiva appeared as a sadhu to test him, and Siruthonda showed that he was even ready to sacrifice his only son to serve the sadhu.

37. **Cheraman Perumal**, born in the royal family of Kothayars (Uthiyan) but not very interested to rule, he worshiped Nataraja every day with great devotion. He met Sundarar and together they went to Vedaranya and Madurai, visiting many shrines.

38. **Gananatha** was a pious brahmana of Sirkali, who encouraged people to engage in direct worship in the temple.
39. **Kootruva** was a warrior chieftain of Kalandai, who was crowned king by Shiva himself.
40. **Pugal Chola** was the king of Uraiyur in the Chola empire. After conquering the fort city of Adigan, he found that one of the people killed in the attack had been a Shiva bhakta, and overwhelmed by distress at that discovery, he committed suicide.
41. **Narasinga Muniyaraiyar**, an army chieftain, regularly performed worship rituals in which he would give food to the Shiva bhaktas and present them with 100 gold coins each.
42. **Adipattha** was a fisherman near Nagapattinam, who had taken the vow to offer a fish every day to Shiva by releasing one back into the sea and kept his vow even when, for many consecutive days, he could only catch one single fish and so went without food.
43. **Kalikamba**, born in a vaisya family, demonstrated great humility and devotion in serving Shiva bhaktas, including one who had once been his family servant.
44. **Kalia**, a craftsman who produced oil, expressed his devotion by offering oil lamps in the temple every day. When he went into serious financial difficulties he resorted to working as a laborer but still continued to perform his service, and was so determined to make his devotional offerings to the Deity that he was ready to give his own blood.
45. **Satti** was born in the war-like Vellala clan and fiercely defended the honor of Shiva and his devotees, stopping anyone who spoke ill of them.
46. **Aiyadigal Kadavarkon** was a Pallava king who ruled over Kanchi; after installing his son he retired for pilgrimage.
47. **Kanampulla** was a wealthy man who regularly offered service in the temple by lighting the lamps at Chidambaran; gradually he lost all his wealth and possessions and resorted to cutting kanampul grass and selling it to afford to offer the lamps. One day he was unable to sell his grass, but he was so determined that he made wicks with the grass and his own hair.
48. **Kari** was a Tamil scholar and earned money by singing poems; he used the money to build temples.
49. **Ninra Seer Nedumara**, or **Koon Pandyan**, was the king of Madurai. He was called Koon because of his congenital hunchback. He fell victim to the influence of Jainism, until he was reconverted to Shaivism by Sambandar, who had been invited by the queen (50) and the prime minister (22). He gave his permission to the Jains to attack the camp of Sambandar and his companions, but the devotees could not be harmed and the king started to suffer with a strong burning cholic that his Jain advisors were unable to cure. When Sambandar (28) chanted his mantras, the king was instantly cured not only from the burning pain but also from his hunchback.
50. **Mangayarkarasiyar**, born as Maani a Chola princess in Pazhayarai, married the king of Madras Koon Pandiyar also known as Ninra Seer Nedumara (49) and became famous as an ideal queen. A staunch devotee of Shiva, she was worried because her husband had converted to Jainism and Hindus were being persecuted, so she sent the prime minister Kulachirai Nayanar, also a faithful

devotee of Shiva, to invite the great saints Appar and Sambandar from the Vedaranyeswarar temple, who cured the king from his hunchback and other ailments that the Jain monks had been unable to treat.

51. **Vayilar**, born in the Vellala clan, Mylapore, engaged in *manasika* (mental) worship, meditating on building temples and presenting offerings.

52. **Munaiyaduvar**, also from the Vellala clan, he was a professional fighter and swordsman.

53. **Kazharsinga**, a Pallava king from the Kadavar family, was visiting the Tiruvarur temple accompanied by his queen, when the queen was attacked by Seruthunai (54), a warrior from the Vellala clan, because she had picked up and smelled a flower that was supposed to be offered to the Deity. The king confirmed the seriousness of the queen's offense.

54. **Seruthunai**, the Vellala warrior who attacked the queen of Kazharsinga (53) for her offense to the worship of the Deity.

55. **Idangazhi**, the king of Velas in Kodumbalur, supported all the Shiva temples in the region. One day a Shiva bhakta was caught entering his granary to steal some rice, and the king not only let him go but also declared that all Shiva bhaktas had permission to enter his granary and take whatever they wanted for the worship of the Deity and feeding the devotees.

56. **Pugazh Tunai** was a temple pujari and continued his service even during a severe famine when he was seriously debilitated by starvation. When he fainted while carrying water for Shiva's abhisheka, Shiva appeared to him and promised to procure one golden coin every day to buy food until the famine was over.

57. **Kotpuli**, of the Vellala clan, was the commander in chief of a Chola king. As he was leaving for military duty, he kept a stock of rice for the temple service forbidding his relatives to touch it, and punished them very severely when they disobeyed and used the rice for their own cooking.

58. **Pusalar**, a brahmana of Tiru Ninravur in Thondai Mandalam, engaged in *manasika* worship; as he did not have the money to build a temple, he meditated on the various stages of the construction with great dedication and attention, and even fixed an auspicious date for the inauguration. The Kadava king was building a temple in Conjeevaram and had fixed the same date for that inauguration, but Shiva appeared to him in a dream asking him to postpone the ceremony because on that day he had already decided to go to the temple built by his devotee Pusalar at Tiru Ninravur. The king became very eager to see such special temple and went to Tiru Ninravur to look for it; as he could not find it, he went looking for Pusalar and both were amazed by Shiva's blessing.

59. **Nesa**, a weaver by profession, constantly chanted the *pancha akshara mantra* and engaged in the service of Shiva bhaktas.

60. **Kochengat Chola** was the son of Chola king Suba Devan, who had gone to Chidambaram with his queen to pray for a worthy heir. When he became king he built many shrines in Chola Nadu and provided for regular worship at Chidambaram.

61. **Tiru Neelakanta Yazhpanar**, he was a musician expert in playing the vina (*yazh*, in Tamil), he visited many temples to sing his bhajans. Once in Madurai, Shiva appeared to the pujaris and asked them to take him in the inner sanctum and give him a nice seat. When he visited Tiruvarur, Shiva

created a new opening on the north wall of the temple to better hear his songs.

62. **Sadaya Nayanar**, Sundarar's (1) father, a brahmana descending from a family of Shiva bhaktas, he readily gave his child in adoption to Narasinga Muniyaraiyar (41).

63. **Isaijnaniyar**, Sundarar's (1) mother, also known as Isai-jnani Ammaiyar, she was born in the family of Gnanasivarcharya. She lived with her husband in Tirunavalur, in the small kingdom of Thirumunaipadi (in present Tamil Nadu).

## **Manickavachagar**

Also called Vadavurar, he is not in the popularly known traditional list of Nayanars but he is considered one of the 4 Smaya Acharyas, the most prominent Tamil religious teachers, together with Sundaramurthi or Sundarar (1), Appar (21) and Sambandar (28) in the list. Born as the son of a pious brahmana in the Pandya kingdom, he became famous for his wisdom and learning and was made prime minister by the king of Madurai, Arimardana Pandyan. His brilliance in that position earned him the title of Tennavan Paramarayar. One day he joined an expedition to acquire new horses, with the actual intention of seeking a *sat guru*, and when he arrived at Tiru Perunturai he found a brahmana sitting under a Kurunta tree near the temple, holding the book *Siva Jnana Bodam* and chanting the name of Hara. Immediately he offered himself as a disciple and took the vow of sannyasa, remaining there to engage in sadhana. After some days the king's servants came to remind him of his duties, and Vadavurar replied that he would send the horses to Madurai within one month. In the meantime he spent all his money to build a temple.

When the month had passed the king sent him an angry message, and Shiva appeared to him in a dream in the form of his guru, and told him to go back to his post and trust that the horses would reach on the day of Avani mulam; he also left a valuable diamond in his hands. When Vadavurar returned to Madurai as prime minister, he told the king that he had been waiting for an auspicious day and started to build large stables, but the king's spies informed him about Vadavurar's activities and he arrested him. On the appointed day, Shiva himself brought a large number of beautiful horses and Vadavurar was saved. The story became more complicated when the horses fled in the night, and the king's angry retaliation against his minister caused a heavy flood, which gave the opportunity for more miracles, until the king relented and allowed Vadavurar to return to Perunturai to live as a sadhu. Vadavurar then went to pilgrimage and in Chidambaram he sang his famous poem *Tiruvachagam*. While he was there, a Buddhist king arrived with the purpose of defeating the Hindus in a debate, and the brahmanas appointed Vadavurar as their representative; the Buddhist philosophers remained speechless and the king promised that if Shiva would make his own daughter able to speak, he would convert to Hinduism. The girl started to speak, even giving fitting answers to the Buddhists' questions, so the entire group was converted, recognising the superiority of Shaivism.

## **The Natha Yogis**

We have already mentioned the Juna Akhara, that is also called Dattatreya Akhara because it considers Dattatreya as its original teacher or founder: Adi Shankara simply organised pre-existent

groups of sadhus and ascetics, mostly connected to the tradition of the Siddhas ("perfect masters") who were direct disciples of Shiva Mahadeva or Dattatreya Vishnu, or disciples of their disciples, who lived long before the beginning of the present Kali yuga. The available lists of Siddhas are numerous and often slightly inconsistent, mostly due to the fact that each individual can be indicated by different names according to the language in which the tradition has been carried on, including Tamil and even Chinese, and even within the same Indian languages there is a strong tendency to inconsistency in transliteration - which makes computer engine search particularly difficult.

At the top of the list we generally find Adinatha, a general title that refers to Isvara as Shiva or Vishnu Dattatreya, then follow Nandisvara or Nandi (Shiva's carrier and companion), Devarshi Narada, Agastya Rishi, Patanjali Rishi, Dhanvantari and Valmiki. Tirumular is another extremely famous name, and although he has been placed even before Agastya he seems to have been very active for centuries. The list of the gurus in the Nath tradition also includes Jalandhar, Kanhapa, Chaurangi (son of king Devapala of Bengal), Charpath, Bhartrihari (a king of Ujjain who became a sadhu), Gopichand (son of a queen of Bengal), Ratannath (also revered by many sufis), and Dharamnath (listed as 15th in the Kutch region, Gujarat).

The Nath tradition created itinerant groups of ascetics (generally almost naked, covered with sacred ash, tying their hair in dreadlocks, and keeping a sacred fire called *dhuni*) that walked great distances to sacred pilgrimage sites and festivals such as the Kumbh Mela, and a large number of settled householders. Both groups wear a *singnad janenu*, a woolen thread around their necks with a small horn, a rudraksha bead and a ring; the horn is blown during rituals and festivals, and before eating. They greet each other by saying "*aadis*".

The movement established many temples and about 500 mathas, especially in Bengal, Nepal, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, north Bihar, Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Ladakh, Kashmir, and parts of China. In Goa the town of Madgaon was once called Mathgram as it was a center of the Nath sampradaya, and the yogis frequently went to meditate in the local caves especially on Divar island and Pilar, but the Portuguese tried to forcibly convert them to Christianity, so they distanced themselves from the persecution by abandoning the region. The Barah Panthi Yogi Mahasabha was founded in 1906 in Haridwar, and recognises 12 Panths or lineages.

The classic text *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* by Svamimarama begins by offering respects to Adinatha, and continues with the names of Matsyendra and Gorakh.

**Matsyendranath**, also called Macchindranath or Minanatha ("the fish lord"), between the 9th and the 10th century, is considered the founder of Hatha yoga. He is said to have been living in Kamarupa/ Kamakoti in Assam, although some sources place him in Bengal or at Bungamati near Kathmandu in Nepal (where a famous temple is located, connected to a very ancient ratha yatra). His association with the fish could be prosaically explained as a birth in a fishermen community, or hagiographically through a story by which he was discarded at birth and swallowed by a fish but continued to live in its belly for many years, meditating and learning about yoga sadhana by overhearing Shiva talking to Parvati at the bottom of the ocean. He wrote the *Kaula jnana nirnaya*, *Akula viratantra*, *Kulananda tantra* and *Jnana karika*, and had 8 disciples, which collectively and including him are called the "*nava nathas*". His samadhi is in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, but other temples are in Amaravati and in various places in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

**Gorakhnath**, also known as Gorakshanath ("protector of the cows/ senses"), was a direct disciple of Matsyendranath, who lived probably around the 11th century. His followers became famous as warrior ascetics to resist persecution by the Islamic and British colonial rule, developing martial arts and especially targeting their response against high officials, so much that the British India census classified them "Yogi/ Jogi" as a "low status caste" from Bengal. Gorakhnath is the author of the *Siddha siddhanta paddhati*, which among other things states that the yogi "experiences all men and women of all races and castes within himself".

It should come to no surprise, then, to find out that the Nathas did not make any difference among castes, races, gender and other birth circumstances, and easily accepted converts from other religions. The Siddha or Natha tradition is the origin of the currents known as Saiva Siddhanta, Kashmiri Shaivism, Kapalika, Kaula Shaivism and others, both in the north and in the south (especially in the Tamil region) and even outside India, and greatly influenced the Bhakti movement through many of its exponents, such as Dyanesvara, Namdeva, Samartha Ramdas, Kabir etc.

### Saiva siddhanta

The spiritual and religious tradition focusing on Shiva Mahadeva is a very vast field of study and experience, and the various attempts at categorising it could appear rather confusing, especially if we fall into the illusion of sectarianism. Shiva Mahadeva is universally accepted as the supreme and original guru of the entire universe, who is always available to everyone and particularly compassionate to those who are most simple-minded; he remains constantly manifested in the world for the entire duration of the cycle of creation, manifestation and withdrawal of the universe, and even beyond that cycle as Sadashiva, whose continued existence is identified with the non-manifested Narayana. The most popular expression of devotion to Shiva is completely free and independent from any parampara or sampradaya as it is directly inspired by the *Puranas*, collections of stories carrying deep symbolic meanings, compiled specifically for general distribution in the form of public recitations or readings. These scriptures show with many examples that it is certainly possible to directly connect with Shiva Mahadeva through the simplest sadhana, such as the chanting of the *pancha akshara maha mantra (namah shivaya)*. However, along history there have been great personalities who presented the eternal teachings in a particularly effective form, carefully training disciples to continue the transmission of the knowledge and practices they taught: this parampara or sampradaya system is also called "lineage" as it resembles the creation of a dynasty with a specific kula dharma. We should remember here that in the original and genuine form of Hinduism, there is no difference at all between a biological child and an adopted child, as both are expected to carry on the family tradition and are fully entitled to represent it; disciples are also considered children of their guru to all effects. The main schools of Shaivism in this tradition are often described as the Saiva, the Nakulisa-pasupata, the Pratyabhijna and the Rasesvara. According to another perspective, they are categorised in two main branches - the *atimarga* and the *mantramarga*, where the *atimarga* is represented by Pasupata shaivism and its subsequent expressions (Lakulisa, Kalamukha, Lingayat etc) and the *mantramarga* (or tantric tradition) is represented by the Kapalika shaivism (and its expressions Kaula, Trika, and Aghori), and the Saiva siddhanta that is vastly based on the Siddha (yoga) tradition.

Again, we should not consider these various branches as truly separate from each other, because the principles are the same, and there is no philosophical contradiction or opposition, because the

Hindu-Vedic quest for knowledge is a descending process, where the realisation is revealed in the heart by the antaryami paramatma also manifesting externally in the form of guru and shastra, and meant to contribute to the Greater Picture of Existence. On the other hand, the "history of philosophy" taught by mainstream academic institutions (and not only in the west) rejects the idea of descending process, mistaking it for the "revelation" that consists in the abrahamic dogma based on blind faith and allegiance/ obedience. For this reason, within mainstream academic circles, philosophy is drastically separated from religion (just like scientific research is drastically separated from religion), and the study of philosophy boils down to the laborious speculations of a series of "thinkers" who each started a particular "school of thought" meant to *disprove* the previous ones. Usually the process ends up creating a deep-rooted and painful cynicism in the student, who is led to conclude that there can be no objective understanding of Reality, and therefore the best option is gross selfish materialism.

Even the concept of Absolute Truth can become warped in this damaged approach, because due to the abrahamic perspective the definition of Absolute Truth applies to one's own particular truth that has succeeded, through material fighting, to *physically eliminate* all other perspectives of reality (mostly by destroying people and texts), and has therefore become established as the *only possible and admissible truth*. In the genuine Hindu-Vedic tradition, on the other hand, the concept of Absolute Truth is the expanded vision of the entire Great Picture, made possible by rising above the petty limitations of material perspectives and reconciling apparent differences. It is only in this view that we can really understand shaivism and Hinduism in general.

In regard of the historical developments of Shaiva siddhanta in the recent past, in the 7th century Sadyojyoti, disciple of Ugrajyoti, presented the philosophical analysis of the *Raurava tantra* and *Svayambhuva sutrasangraha*. King Bhoja of Gujarat (around 1018) condensed the Siddhanta scriptural texts into one metaphysical treatise called the *Tattvaparakasa*, and in the 10th century Bhatta Narayanakantha and Bhatta Ramakantha from Kashmir continued the systematic presentation of that philosophical perspective. In the 12th century Aghorasiva, head of the Amardaka order in Chidambaram, wrote a number of texts including the *Kriyakramadyotika* to reconcile the Sanskrit *Agamas* with the Tamil tradition, focusing on daily worship, occasional rituals, initiations, funerals and festivals. In the 13th century Meykandar wrote the *Sivajnanabodham* and started a lineage of disciples; Arulnandi Sivacharya and Umapati Sivacharya also contributed to the spreading of the tradition. Presently, the most prominent representative is the Shaiva Siddhanta Church established by Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, already mentioned in a previous section of this book.

At present there are still 3 major religious groups representing the Saiva Siddhanta: the Amardaka order based in the holy city of Ujjain, the Mattamayura order in the capital of the Chalukya dynasty in Karnataka, and the Madhumateya order in central India; each group has various branches and disciplic successions. The Saiva siddhanta school has been described as something between Adi Shankara's *advaita* and Ramanuja's *visista advaita*, but it is largely based on the collection of Saivite hymns known as *Tirumurai* compiled by the Nayanar Nami Andar Nambi and including the *Tirumanthiram* by Tirumular, as well as the *Thevaram* by Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar, and the *Tiruvachagam* by Manickavachagar. Other fundamental texts are the 28 *Siddhanta tantras* or Saivite *Agamas*, the *Periyapuranam* (on the lives of Saivite saints), the *Siva-jnanabodham* by Meykandar, the *Siva-jnanasiddhiar* by Arulnandi, and the works of Umapati. According to this perspective Shiva is Pati, the conditioned soul is *pasu*, and the material impurities (called *anava* or "small unimportant things", *karma* or karmic luggage, and *maya* or illusory identification) are the *pasa* or bonds. The *jivas*

can be Vijnanakalas, Pralayakalas or Sakalas - Vijnanakalas are only limited by *anava*, Pralayakalas are conditioned by karma as well, and Sakalas have all the 3 problem including maya or illusion. The discipline to remove these impurities includes *charya* (observance or proper behavior), *kriya* (rituals) and *yoga* (meditation). The activities of God are described as creation, preservation, destruction, veiling and grace, related respectively to the personalities of Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Mahesvara and Sadasiva. Compared to the 25 tattvas of Sankhya, Saiva Siddhanta speaks of 36 tattvas - beginning with Suddha Maya (spiritual energy), generating the principles of Shiva, Shakti, Sadashiva, Isvara, and Suddha Vidya.

## Kashmiri Shaivism

The development of Kashmiri Shaivism (which is also popular in Orissa and Maharashtra) is generally dated around 850 CE, when according to tradition, the *Shiva Sutras* appeared to Vasugupta in a dream, and he went to expand on the knowledge already expressed in the ancient Agama or Tantra texts such as *Malinivijaya Tantra*, *Svacchanda Tantra*, *Vijsana Bhairava Tantra*, *Netra Tantra*, *Mrigendra Tantra* and *Rudrayamala Tantra*. The *Spandakarika* is considered to have been composed by Vasugupta or by his disciple Bhatta Kallata. The *Tantraloka*, *Malinislakavarttika* and *Tantrasara* were composed by the famous Kashmiri scholar Abhinavagupta (975-1025 CE). Among the other prominent personalities of the tradition we can mention Lalleshwari (1320-1392), Bhagwan Gopinath (1898-1968) and Swami Lakshman Joo (1907-1991), whose disciple Paul Reps presented the *Vijnana Bhairava Tantra* (a chapter from the *Rudrayamala Tantra*) to the western public in his popular book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*.

**Lalleshwari**, also known as Lal Ded, is famous for her *vatsun* or *vakhs* ("speeches"). She was born in Pandrethan (ancient Puranadhisthana) about 4.5 miles to the southeast of Srinagar, in a Kashmiri Pandit family during the time of Sultan Ala-ud-din; she married at the age of 12 but she left home at the age of 24 to take sannyasa and become a disciple of the Shaivite guru Siddha Srikantha (Sed Bayu).

## Virashaivas and Lingayats

Vira shaivism is the early form of the Sharana movement, which started in the 11th century inspired by the Nayanars, emphasising personal religious experience as an alternative to the Kalamukha Shaivism of the dominant classes. Its philosophy is based on the Sanskrit text *Siddhanta Shikhamani*, and was preached by its *pancha acharyas* (Renukacharya, Darukacharya, Ekorama, Panditharadhya and Vishweswara), and first taught to Renukacharya by Agastya Rishi. The 5 spiritual centers or *pithas* are Rambhapuri, Ujjain, Kedar, Shreeshaila, and Kashi (Varanasi/ Benares). The most famous proponent of Vira shaivism in the 12th century was the religious reformer Basava or Basavanna, but the movement took inspiration from Devar Dasimayya, who had lived in the 11th century. Another major figure in the Vira shaiva movement was Neelamma or Neelagangambike, who is still remembered with one of the main festivals of the tradition, on the day after Basava Panchami.

**Devar Dasimayya** was born in Mudanuru, a village in Shorapur Taluk, Yadgir district in Karnataka. That village has a Ramanath temple dedicated to Shiva as worshiped by Rama, and he became a faithful devotee, composing *vachanas* in the name of Ramanath. He married Duggale from

Shivapura. While engaged in sadhana in the forest, he had a vision of Shiva, who told him to engage in karma yoga, so he became a weaver and inspired an entire community, presently called Devanga or Jandra Kuruvina Shetty. He also preached to the local tribal communities, converting them to vegetarianism and teaching them to press oil and sell it for a living instead of hunting. Later he became a teacher, eventually giving initiation to the wife of the local Chalukya king Jayasimha and converting him from Jainism, engaging in debates with Jains and returning many people to worshipping Shiva.

**Basava** (a Kannada version of the name Vrishabha, referring to Nandi) was born in 1105 in a Kannada brahmana family in the tradition of Shaivism, in Kudalasangama (northeast Karnataka) near the rivers Krishna and Malaprabha, and lived under the reign of Kalachuri king Bijjala II. He studied for 12 years at the Sangameshwara school annexed to a temple in the city of Kudalasangama, then he married Gangambike, the daughter of the prime minister of Bijjala, and eventually became prime minister himself. He used his position to introduce several social reforms and reviving Shaivism, especially for the protection of ascetics who were called Jangamas, and uniting the people in general, especially through the establishment of the Anubhava Mantapa ("hall of spiritual experience"), welcoming men and women from all socio-economic backgrounds to openly discuss spiritual and material questions of life. In fact he rejected all social differences of class and gender, encouraging people to replace the traditional sacred thread with the Istalinga necklace. After some time the king started to oppose the reforms and the Vira shaivas moved into a wider area in south India and finding a better balance with Hindu orthodoxy. Basava's nephew Channabasava continued in the same direction. Other important figures of the movement were Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, Neelamma and Siddarama.

**Allama Prabhu** was born in Shimoga (Shivamogga) district of Karnataka, the son of a dance teacher; he became a temple drummer and married the dancer Kamalathe, who died prematurely. Wandering in grief, he came to a cave temple where he met Animisayya and received from him a linga icon and spiritual instructions. He attained enlightenment and started to spread his spiritual message with about 1,300 *vachanas* or songs, under the pen (*ankita*) name of Guheshvara ("Lord of the cave") to emphasize Shiva bhakti, moral and ethical values, as well as criticism of defects such as sectarianism, superstitions, empty superficial rituals and social injustice. Some of his poems are written in *sandhya bhasya*, a highly mystic and condensed language based on Siddha references. Allama Prabhu was the protagonist of some important texts in the Kannada language, such as *Prabhulingalile* by Chamarasa the Vijayanagar court poet of king Deva Raya II, also translated in Tamil, Telugu and later into Sanskrit and Marathi. Allama died in Kadalivana near Srishaila.

**Akka Mahadevi** (born around 1130 at Udathadi) was particularly famous and wrote over 430 *vachana* poems as well as the *Mantrogopya* and the *Yogangatrividhi*. She considered Shiva (Chenna Mallikarjuna) as her husband, and was respectfully called Akka ("elder sister") by all her contemporaries such as Basavanna, Siddharama, Allama Prabhu, Kinnari Bommayya and Dasimayya. It is said that she refused to marry the Jain king Kaushika, after which she traveled to the Srisailam mountains; as a sannyasini she also refused to wear any clothes.

**Siddarama**, also known as Siddarameswara or Siddheshwar, was born around 1150 and he is considered the first "social spiritual guru", as well as a mystic and a poet. As part of the Sharana revolution in the 12th century he encouraged inter-caste marriages, opposed caste and gender discrimination, and undertook many irrigation projects as a form of karma yoga or service to

mankind. He is said to have written 68,000 *vachanas* (out of which only 1,379 are still available) under the pen name of Kapilasiddha Mallikarjuna, and *Threividhigalu* under the name of Yoginatha. Siddarama met Shiva Mahadeva in the form of a sadhu named Mallinath from Shrishaila, who asked him for hot fried tender barley and curd rice, but disappeared while Siddarama had gone to procure the food. Siddarama searched everywhere for him, calling his name (Mallayya), and journeyed to Srishaila but was not satisfied to see the stone linga there. While he was weeping and contemplating suicide, he saw Shiva Mallikarjun (Mallinath) who took his hands and instructed him to return to Sonnalige and work to make it the second Srishailam. There the local king Nannappa and his wife Chamala Devi gave him some land as per instruction of Shiva, and Siddarama had 68 lingas installed there by Kapilasiddha Panditardhya, and tirelessly engaged in social work, digging ponds and building temples for the benefit of people in general, and organising mass weddings. Later Siddarama went to Kalyana and accepted Chennabasavanna as his guru receiving the Istalinga initiation, making rapid progress in Shiva yoga and succeeding his guru on the Shunya Simhasana, until he retired entrusting his work to Havinahala Kallaiah, then returned to Sonnalige to meditate in a cave in the middle of the lake until his death.

In the 14th century there was a revival of the Vira shaiva movement at the court of Praudha Deva Raya in the Vijayanagar empire - a development that strengthened social cooperation and the support of the people to oppose the attacks of the Deccan Sultanate. The motto of Vira shaivas, *kayakave kailasa* ("working with one's body is to be in Shiva's kingdom"), is a major inspiration towards work ethics and social responsibility as well, and the expression *dasoba* (*daso 'ham*) goes even further in the dedication to the service of Shiva, Shiva's bhaktas and the community. The *Sunyasampadane* and the *Basava Purana* were completed under the reign of Vijayanagara ruler Bukka Raya I. In that period the Vira shaiva philosophy elaborated the concept of Sunya, very similar to what was expressed by the Oriya Vaishnavas known as Pancha Sakhas and in the more extreme form of Mahima Dharma.

The Pancha acharas include the daily worship of the individual Istalinga (*lingachara*), proper dedication to one's duties (*sadachara*), devotion to Shiva (*shivachara*), compassion to all creatures (*bhritiyachara*), protection of the community (*gamachara*), as well as abstentions - from stealing (*kala beda*), from hurting or killing others (*kola beda*), from uttering lies (*busiya nudiyalu beda*), from praising oneself (*thanna bannisabeda*), from criticizing others (*idira haliyalu beda*), from anger (*muniya beda*), and from intolerance (*anyarige asahya padabeda*). This includes strict vegetarianism and avoiding alcohol consumption. The Ashta varanas ("8 protections") include obedience to Guru, wearing the Istalinga at all times, honoring and serving the Jangama or sadhus devoted to Shiva, sipping the Padodaka water after bathing the linga, consuming Prasada, smearing the Vibhuti holy ash on one's body, wearing Rudraksha beads (seeds of *Elaeocarpus ganitrus*) and reciting the mantra *om namah shivaya*.

In the 18th century the movement became known as Lingayatism and again made efforts to distance itself from mainstream Hinduism by rejecting the authority of the Vedas and the concepts of reincarnation and karma. However in 1904 the Akhila Bharatha Veerashaiva Mahasabha confirmed that Lingayats and Virashaivas are in fact Hindus, and in 1926 the Bombay High Court ruled that "the Virashaivas are not Shudras, they are Lingi Brahmins of the highest order." More recently the Lingayat organisations have tried to differentiate themselves from mainstream Hinduism in the hope of getting some special benefits from the Government - much like the Ramakrishna Math has done.

## The Varkari tradition

The word *varkari* ("pilgrim") refers to the itinerant and renounced devotees of Vishnu-Krishna particularly in his form of Vitthoba. Within the medieval Bhakti movement, the Varkari current has been a major force especially in Maharashtra and Karnataka, and has given a very strong impetus to the social reforms meant to fight against birth prejudice, specifically caste and gender injustice. Among the 21 main saints in the Varkari tradition, 9 are non-brahmins, 10 are brahmins, and 2 are described as "caste unknown". The 4 women of the list are equally divided into the 2 caste categories ("high and low caste").

The founder of the Pushti marga, Vallabhacharya (1479-1531), visited Pandharpur at least twice and was ordered to marry by Vithoba (that he called Vitthalnath or Vitthalnathji) and have children so that Vithoba could be born as Vallabhacharya's son. After Vallabhacharya married, his second son and successor was recognized as a manifestation of Vithoba and named Vitthalnath or Gusainji.

The Varkari tradition was preceded and inspired by the Mahanubhava movement and by the Natha movement, a branch of the Siddha tradition of which we have discussed in the context of the most ancient tradition of Hinduism. Two other famous saints in the vaishnava bhakti movement in western India were **Madara Chennaiah**, a 12th century *vachana* poet and saint from Karnataka who was a cobbler by profession, and **Narsinh Mehta**, also known as Narsi Mehta or Narsi Bhagat (1414-1481), a poet saint of Gujarat who had the darshana of Shiva (receiving from him the realisation of the lila of Radha Krishna in Vrindavana), and who accepted disciples without any consideration of caste, class or gender. In Karnataka the movement took the name of Haridasa tradition or Haridasa-kuta, and was established by Achalananda Vitthala (about 888 CE) around Vitthala, the Kannada name for Vithoba. The Vitthala temple in Hampi, Karnataka, was built by Krishnadeva Raya, whose guru Vyasatirtha was a key Haridasa figure. There are also temples of Vithoba in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Goa. Vitthal is worshiped as Vitthalnath at Nathadwara in Rajasthan. There is also a temple in Madhe, where the Pandarpur Deity was moved to protect it from Muslim invaders. Among Madhvacharya's 8 mathas in Karnataka, those of Shirur, Pejavara and Puttige have Vitthala as their presiding Deity.

## The Mahanubhava movement

Also known as Jai Krishni Pantha, it focuses on the exclusive worship of Krishna and accepts followers irrespective of gender and caste, but rejects ritualistic ceremonies. Its main teachings are strict asceticism, non-violence, celibacy and bhakti in the sentiment "God is mine and I am God's". The first Acharya of the Mahanubhava sect was **Nagdevacharya** or Bhatobas, whose biography was written by Narendra and Bhaidevbas in 1308. The most famous movement leader, **Chakradhara Swami**, lived between 1100 and 1200 and although he was born in Gujarat, he chose to work in Maharashtra. His biography, the *Leela Charitra*, written by his disciple Mahimbhat (who was from a brahmana family), is one of the first literary works in Marathi language, and his followers believe it contains all the secrets of the universe. Chakradhara taught that one should meditate on Krishna only, but there have been 5 forms of Krishna (*panchakrishna*) and worship to any one of them will give *moksha*, or perfection in spiritual life. These 5 Krishnas are: 1. Dattatreya, appeared in Treta yuga at Badarikashram, 2. Krishna, appeared in Dvapara yuga in Mathura and Dvaraka, 3. Chakrapani Maharaj (Changdeva Raul), appeared in Phalatan Maharashtra in Kali yuga,

4. Govinda Prabhu (Gundam Raul), appeared in Riddhapur, Amaravati Maharashtra in Kali yuga, and 5. Chakradhara himself, appeared in Bharuch, Gujarat, in Kali yuga. Mahimbhat's second literary work was *Govindaprabhucharitra* or *Rudhipurcharitra*, a biography of Chakradhara's guru, Govind Prabhu. Another prominent disciple of Chakradhara, Mahadaisa or Mahadamba, born in Jalna district of Maharashtra, is one of the earliest female poets of Maharashtra. The subsequent movement literature includes commentaries to *Bhagavad gita*, stories from the life of Krishna and the incarnations, and the history of the movement.

## The Deity of Vithoba

The Varkari movement is essentially a popular Bhakti movement, grown around devotion to Krishna-Vishnu (Hari, Narayana), worshiped as Vithoba, Vitthal or Panduranga - a dark-complexioned boy standing on a brick, two arms akimbo, often accompanied by his consort Rukmini/ Rakhumai, in a similar position. The original Deity is more Vishnu than Krishna: there are two upper hands that hold a conch on the left and a lotus flower on the right, the chest bears the *srivatsalanbhana* and *shriniketana* (respectively a curl of hair and a ring-shaped mark), but a long stick (characteristic of cowherd men) is embedded in the ground between his legs. Separately two other consorts are also worshiped: Satyabhama and Rahi (Radha), as well as the Deities of Venkateshvara, Mahalakshmi, Garuda, Hanuman, Ganesha, Khandoba (Shiva) and Annapurna. Vithoba's main temple is in Pandharpur and the traditional story says that the Deity was brought there by his devotee Pundarika (Pundalik), who convinced the Hoysala king Bitti Dev Vishnuvardhana to build the temple in the early 12th century. However the Deity appears to be much older, and the antiquity of the worship is attested by a *Pandurangashtakam stotra* attributed to Adi Shankaracharya. The name Vitthal has been explained by Tukaram as a compound of the words *vittha* (ignorant) and *la* (one who accepts), meaning "one who accepts people who are devoid of knowledge", as in "simple-minded devotees". The name Panduranga is more difficult to explain as it means "white-limbed", whereas Krishna and Vishnu are known for their black complexion, therefore it has been argued that the name stands for Shiva (who is well known for his complexion "white as camphor"), signifying a unity of the two Personalities; this is also indicated by the fact that the main temple is surrounded by Shiva temples, also connected with Pundalika, and by the linga crown (high conical head gear) of the Deity, explicitly defined by the first Varkari saint, Dnyaneshwar, who stated that Vithoba carries Shiva on his own head. The Dhangars consider Vithoba to be the brother of Viroba, and this could be a reflection of the Krishna-Balarama pair (respectively of black complexion and white complexion) in Dvaraka as the Lords of the Yadavas, who were considered a cowherd dynasty because of the two brothers' life in Gokula-Vrindavana. This is also reflected in the idea that Vithoba has been sometimes portrayed in the place of Buddha as the 9th avatara of Vishnu (after Krishna).

The worship of Vithoba is on two levels and includes the ritual of the 5 ceremonies performed by the Badva brahmins as well the spiritual devotion of the Varkari ("pilgrims") who hail their Lord as "Pundalikavarada Hari Vitthala!" and meditate on him as the protector of the poor and the needy. Some stories describe Vitthala coming to the rescue of his devotees in the form of an ordinary person or even a *mahar* ("untouchable") or a brahmin beggar. In his work *Pandurangastrotra*, Mahipati says that Vitthoba helped Janabai in her daily chores such as sweeping the house and pounding the rice, took the place of Sena the barber to service the king, came with a bag of gold to pay for the

grains distributed freely by the minister Damaji during a famine, and resurrected Gora Kumbara's child who had been trampled into the clay. The devotees traditionally practice *nama japa* and fast on ekadasis; the two main festivals are Shayani Ekadasi in the month of Ashadha (with over 800,000 visitors to the temple for the yatra) and Prabodhini Ekadasi in the month of Kartika, when the Deity gets up from his sleep. On both occasions a top representative of the government (generally, the chief minister) performs a role in the rituals, defined as *sarkari-mahapuja*. Another major celebration is on Krishna janmastami, when devotees dance and sing in front of the Deity for 9 days.

## **Dnyaneshwar or Jnaneshvar**

Some details of his life are given superficially by his contemporary Namdev and his disciples Satyamalanatha and Sachchidananda; we know that he was born (1275-1296) as son of Vitthalapant, a desastha Kulkarni brahmin (hereditary accountant) in Apegaon village on the bank of Godavari near Paithan in Maharashtra under the reign of the Yadava king Ramadevaraya. Vitthalapant married Rukmini, the daughter of a learned Yajurveda brahmana, Sidhopant from Alandi, but they had no children and with his wife's consent he went to Varanasi where he was initiated by one Ramashrama or Ramananda (but not Ramananda the founder of the Ramanandi sampradaya). However, when his guru discovered that he had abandoned his family, he instructed him to return to his wife and fulfill his duties as a householder; after that, Vitthalapant had 4 children: Nivruttinath (1273 CE), Dnyaneshwar (1275 CE), Sopan (1277 CE) and Muktabai (1279 CE).

Because he had returned home after taking sannyasa, Vitthalapant and his children were ostracised as fallen, so Dnyaneshwar and his brothers were denied the right to the sacred thread ceremony, and eventually they moved to Nashik. One day while performing their rituals they were attacked by a tiger and Nivruttinath hid in a cave, where he met Gahaninath, who initiated him in the Natha sampradaya. According to other sources, Nivruttinath was initiated in Tryambakeshwar, near Nashik, during a family pilgrimage; also it seems that Vitthalapant's grandfather had been initiated by Gorakhnath. Later, Vitthalapant and his wife committed suicide by jumping into the Indrayani river (or according to some sources, at the *triveni* in Prayag) and the children were told by the brahmins of the community that they needed to get a certification of suddhi from the pandits of Paithana. While returning to Alandi with the required certificate in 1290, they stopped at Nevase, where Dnyaneshwar composed his commentary on *Bhagavad gita*, called *Dnyaneshwari*, that became a fundamental text for the Varkaris, also because it was in the vernacular Marathi language rather than in Sanskrit. Nivruttinath, who had initiated Dnyaneshwar into the Natha Yogi tradition sometime after the death of their parents and thus became his guru, asked Dnyaneshwar to write also an independent philosophical work, that became known as the *Amrutanubhava*.

Later Dnyaneshwar visited Pandharpur, where he met Namdev, and went with him on a pilgrimage to many holy places, initiating people into the Varkari movement. On their return to Pandharpur, Dnyaneshwar and Namadev were honoured with a feast attended by many saints such as Goroba the potter, Sanvata or Savata the gardener and Parisa Bhagwat the brahmin. Then at the age of 21 Dnyaneshwar entered *sanjivan samadhi* and was entombed in the Siddhesvara temple complex in Alandi; devotees still participate to the annual Wari festival carrying Dnyaneshwar's *paduka* in a palanquin from his samadhi in Alandi to the Vitthoba temple in Pandharpur.

At Pandharpur, the Varkari devotees of Vithoba consider Dnyaneshwar as "having laid the foundation stone" of their movement (*Dnyanadev rachila paya*). His teachings, especially as expressed in his commentary to *Gita*, emphasize humility, non-violence in action thought and words, forbearance in the face of adversities, detachment from sense pleasures, faithful performance of one's duty to family and society without egoism or egotism, purity of heart and mind, love of solitude and devotion towards one's Guru and God. The concept of humility is based on the perception of everything, animate or inanimate, as one's own Self.

Muktabai or Muktai was Dnyaneshwar's younger sister, also remembered for writing several *abhangs* poems and for accepting Yogi Changdev as her disciple. When Dnyaneshwar took samadhi she went with Nivruttinath on a pilgrimage along the Tapti River, where they were caught in a thunderstorm and Muktai was swept away. Nivruttinath took samadhi at Tryambakeshwar and left about 375 *abhangs* or poems. The other brother, Sopan, attained samadhi at Saswad near Pune, leaving the book *Sopandevi* and about 50 *abhangs*.

Some of the contemporaries of Dnyaneshwar and famous Varkari devotees of Vithoba were:

**Gora Kumbhar** or Goroba: a potter (*kumbhara*) by profession, he wrote hundreds of *abhangs*. He lived between 1267 and 1317 in the village of Satyapuri (presently known as Goraba Ter) in Osmanabad district of Maharashtra, where a temple is dedicated to him. Several films have been made about his life and teachings.

Savata or **Sanvata Mali**: his grandfather Devu Mali (a gardener and farmer by family tradition, but very religious and devoted) had moved to Solapur district and had two sons, Dongre who died very young, and Parasu who married Nangitabai and became the father of Savata (in 1250). Savata married and faithfully performed his duties, but he used to sing about the glory of Vithoba while working in his fields in the village of Aran, and according to the tradition, Vithoba himself came to see him because Savata was not able to go to the temple.

**Sena Nhavi**, also known as Sena the barber, he used to work in the service of the Muslim king of Bandhavgarh (which is 180 km from Jabalpur), but he gave up his profession and devoted himself to bhakti. According to the *Bhaktavijaya* by Mahipati (1715-1790), the king became angry as for several times Sena had refused to answer immediately after a summon to the palace because he was engaged in his morning worship, so he ordered his guards to arrest him, chain him up and throw him into the river. Vithoba himself took the form of Sena and went to the palace to give massage to the king, but revealed himself in his four-armed body in the reflection in the oil cup, and then left the shocked king to "go home". The king sent for him again as he wanted to see the divine form, and Sena explained he had seen his beloved Krishna, and finally the king became a devotee himself. Sena was described as a model of devotion by Tukaram and Ravidas.

## **Namdev**

Also called Namadeva or Namdeo (1267-1350), he is venerated not only in the Varkari tradition but also by the warrior ascetics Rajasthani Dadupanthis (who revere him as a guru, together with Dadu, Kabir, Ravidas and Hardas) and in the Niranjani sampradaya, as well as in Sikhism. According to the *Bhaktamal* by Nabhadras, he was a close friend of Dnyaneshwar. His companions during *sankirtana* included Kanhopatra (a dancing girl), Sena (a barber), Savata (a gardener), Chokhamela

(an untouchable), Janabai (a maid), Gora (a potter), and Narahari (a goldsmith). Namdev was found as a baby floating down a river (Krishna in Marathwada or Bhima at Pandharpur) by Damashet and Gonai, an elderly couple in the lowly sudra community of tailors (Shimpi, Chimpi, Chimpa, Chipa or Chimba). He was a student of Visoba Khechara, an orthodox Shaiva devotee. He was married to Rajai and had a son named Vitha, both of whom wrote about him, as did his mother Gonai. Other details of his life are unclear, although many miracles have been attributed to him. He taught that devotional meditation is much better than mechanical rituals and difficult pilgrimages. He wrote about 2500 *abhangas* as devotional songs, to be accompanied by a precise style of music, transmitted orally within *gharanas*, or family-like musical groups.

**Janabai** was born in a low-caste family, and after the death of her mother, her father took her to Pandharpur, where she worked as house maid for Damasheti, the father of Namdev. She was probably a little older than Namdev, and composed about 300 religious *abhangs* of high quality, relating to Vithoba as her mother. She died in 1350.

### **Chokhamela or Chokhoba**

Another famous devotee of Vithoba, Chokhamela was born in a family of mahar caste (untouchables) at Mehuna Raja, a village in Buldhana district, and lived in Mangalvedha in Maharashtra, with his wife Soyarabai and son Karmamela, and with his sister Nirmala and husband Banka (brother of Soyarabai) who also became famous devotees. He was engaged as a farm laborer but due to his birth he had to live outside the town in a separate settlement for members of the untouchable caste. One day, while visiting Pandharpur, he heard the kirtan of Namdev and accepted him as his guru, moving to Pandharpur and building a hut for himself on the other bank of the river Chandrabhaga as the upper castes there did not even tolerate him to stand at the door of the temple. He died with some other workers in the collapse of a wall under construction at Mangalvedha, near Pandharpur, and his bones were buried at the footsteps of the Vitthal temple. When Dalit leader BR Ambedkar attempted to visit the temple, he was stopped at the burial site of Chokhamela without being allowed to enter the temple because he was a mahar, too.

**Soyarabai**, wife and disciple of Chokhamela, wrote many *abhang* verses but only 62 of her works have survived. She expresses her loving reproaches to God for the sufferings of the low caste people. **Nirmala**, Chokhamela's younger sister, expressed distaste for worldly married life and never mentions her husband Banka in her poems, although he was a devotee, too. In her poems she condemns the injustice of the caste system.

### **Kanhopatra or Kanhupatra**

She was the daughter of a wealthy prostitute named Shyama, who lived in Mangalvedha, near Pandharpur, and was trained in dancing and singing from early childhood, but after visiting the temple she moved to a hut in Pandharpur to live an ascetic life; she sang and danced exclusively for Vithoba and cleaned the temple twice a day, earning the respect of the local people who imagined she was the daughter of a poor farmer. She gave great importance to the chanting of the Names of God and wrote many songs that are still popular among devotees and even on the radio. In her poems she recalls how the holy Names blessed Ajamila, Valmiki and Pingala. When she learned that

she was to become the concubine of the Badshah (Muslim king) of Bidar, she went to Pandharpur and gave up her life in the temple of Vithoba, where her samadhi stands, and a tarati tree grew from her grave. The *Bhaktavijaya* by Mahipati (1715-1790) dedicates one entire chapter to glorify her devotion to Vithobai (the feminine form of the name Vithoba) as she sometimes called the Deity, because she saw Krishna as her mother, as well as her husband when he called the Deity with the names of Sripati (Lord of Lakshmi) and Manmatha (Kamadeva). She attained perfection without any guru or sampradaya, simply through her pure devotion.

### **Kabir or Kabir Das**

According to the popular legend, he was born (1398-1448) from an unmarried brahmin lady in Varanasi who abandoned him at birth, and he was raised by a Muslim couple; in any case he was officially considered a Muslim and therefore an outcaste by the Hindu community. Later he became a disciple of Ramananda, but then he continued with his own Nirakari sampradaya, that also inspired the subsequent development of the Kabir panth, whose followers (almost 10 millions) are vegetarian and abstain from alcohol. His verses, in Hindi vernacular language with Awadhi and Braj influences, are included in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. He was strongly critical both of Hinduism and Islam although he adopted terms and concepts from both sides; he envisioned God as formless (*nirakari*) living within all human beings, and questioned the need for any holy book. Inevitably, he was persecuted by both sides, but after his death both sides claimed him as their own, dedicating temples in his memory.

### **Damaji Pant Deshpande**

According to the *Bhaktavijaya* by Mahipati (1715-1790) Damaji Pant ("the minister") was the Kamavisdar (main revenue official) of Mangalvedha under the Bahamani sultan of Bidar. After the 1460 failed monsoon and during the ensuing famine (later named after him to remember his generosity) a brahmana from Pandharpur came to his house to beg for food and told him about his starving family, so Damaji promised to send some grains. The carts, however, were looted by the famished people on the way, and seeing the desperate situation, Damaji decided to freely distribute grains from the royal granaries to everyone, even if the sultan would have him killed for that action. A brahmin Majumdar (deputy revenue collector) denounced Damaji to the sultan and predictably Damaji was arrested, but he asked the guard to let him stop a moment at the temple to pray. Then Vithoba himself took the form of an outcaste mahar and went to the sultan with a bag of gold and a letter in Damaji's handwriting, saying that the grains had been sold at a very high price taking advantage of the famine. The sultan was pleased and gave a receipt for the gold and also various gifts for Damaji, who on arriving on the next day was astonished to hear the story; after explaining what had happened, he retired from his service as he was now indebted to Vithoba and was bound to serve him only. Damaji has been mentioned in the poems of Eknath and Tukaram, and in the great famine of 1876-1878, Mr Grant, collector of Solapur, was compared to Damaji Pant for his efforts to alleviate the sufferings of the people.

## **Ekknath**

Born (1533-1599) to a Marathi deshastha rigvedi brahmin family that worshiped Ekvira as their family Deity at Paithan, he lost both his parents in childhood and was raised by his grandfather Bhanudas, who was a Varkari devotee of Vithoba, and was particularly respected because he was the one who had returned the Deity to Pandharpur from the Vijayanagara king Krishnadevaraya who had installed it in Hampi to save it from the Muslim invaders.

Once Eknath accepted an invitation to have lunch at the house of a mahar, quoting the *Bhagavata Purana* to the effect that a dog-eating *chandala* who has become a devotee of Vishnu is far superior to any qualified brahmana who has no devotion for God. The brahmins were enraged and imposed a penance to him, but Eknath did not bother and continued to accept such invitations. Eknath wrote several texts, especially the *Ekknathi Bhagavata*, the *Bhavarth Ramayan* and the *Rukmini Swayamwar Hastamalak*, and about 300 bhajans in bharood style. Generally he is considered as a bridge between his predecessors Dnyaneshwar and Namdev and the later Tukaram and Ramdas.

## **Tukaram**

Also called Tukoba and Tukobaraya, he was born around the year 1600 in village Dehu, near Pune in Maharashtra. His parents, Kanakar and Bolhoba Ambile, were devotees of Vithoba and although coming from the Kunbi caste, a sudra category of laborers and farm servants, they owned a money-lending business and engaged in trade and agriculture enterprises. After losing both his parents, Tukaram married Rakhama Bai and had a son named Santu, but both starved to death during the 1630-1632 famine. He then married Avalai Jija Bai, but after meeting his guru Babaji Chaitanya, he devoted himself completely to spiritual life, following the example of his predecessors Namdev, Dhyaneshwar and Eknath.

Tukaram met Chatrapati Shivaji and introduced him to Ramdas for spiritual education and helped him to rise to power. Tukaram's poems and songs in Marathi language have been collected in the *Tukaram Gatha*, comprising about 4,500 *abhangas*. He denounced the mechanical performance of rituals, vratas and sacrifices and instead encouraged direct and personal devotion to God. He considered kirtana not just a means to learn about Bhakti, but a direct expression of Bhakti itself, and he accepted followers without any discrimination of gender or social position, as he was very critical against the degraded caste system. To illustrate the point, he brought the examples of Sena Nhavi, Kanhopatra and other famous devotees. Some academic indologists foolishly criticise him for not being "systematic" because he reconciled the advaita and dvaita perspective instead of becoming a sectarian proponent of one particular doctrine rather than another.

## **Bahinabai**

One of Tukaram's main disciples, she was born (1628-1799) in Devgarh from Audev Kulkarni and Janaki of the local brahmin community. She was married at the age of 3 to a 32-year-old widower called Gangadhar Pathak, and 6 years later she and all her family had to leave Devghar due to a family dispute and wandered with other pilgrims along the banks of river Godavari. Finally when she was 11 they settled in Kolhapur, where she devoted herself to the Hari kirtana songs and the

narration of the *Bhagavata Purana*, for which she often faced verbal and physical abuse from her husband. Once he dragged her by the hair, beat and tied her up in the house, following which her pet calf and the cow refused to take food or water until the calf died. Bahinabai remained unconscious for several days and had visions of Tukaram feeding her nectar and teaching her the mantra of Hari, Rama and Krishna. As nothing could prevent Bahinabai from her devotion to God, her husband finally abandoned her when she was 3 months pregnant, but he immediately fell sick and after one month he repented and went to Tukaram's house in Dehu to offer his respect.

In Dehu she gave birth to a daughter, Kasibai, and suffered a period of deep depression because her entire family was harassed by the brahmin community. Tukaram appeared to her and dissuaded her from suicide, promising she would have a good son, and giving her the power to write poetry. After her son Vithoba was born, she moved with her family to Shirur, where she practised a vow of silence for some time, then she returned to Dehu and finally went to visit the saint Ramdas and stayed in his company until his death in 1681. She died in 1700. She wrote an autobiography known as *Bahinibai Gatha* or *Atmamanivedana*, describing her current birth as well as 12 previous births. She also wrote the *Pundalika Mahatmya* on the story of the devotee Pundalika.

## Sankardev

Srimanta Sankardev and his Ekasarana Dharma, based on *Bhagavata Purana*, represented the Vaishnava Bhakti movement in Assam and north Bengal, especially influencing the Koch and the Ahom kingdoms and their culture, introducing the *brajavali* literary language, the *borgeet* ("great songs") devotional music as well as the dancing and theatrical performance styles called *ankia naat*, *bhaona* and *sattriya* (from *sattra*, the local equivalent of *matha*). The followers of the tradition of Shankardev are called Mahapurushia, Sarania or Sankari. Sankardev's bhakti is in the sentiment of *dasya* meditating on Hari, Rama, Narayana and Krishna, but without speaking of his consorts. His most famous work is the *Kirtana-ghosha*, that is still popular in many homes in Assam, but he also wrote a summary study of 8 books of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and a collection of verses from the *Bhagavata* entitled *Bhakti ratnakara*.

He was born as Sankaravara (1449-1568) at Bordowa in Nagaon district, into the Shiromani (chief) Baro-Bhuyans landlord family of kayastha caste, devoted to the worship of the Mother Goddess; he lost his parents at the age of 7 and was raised by his grandmother Khersuti. At age 12 he began attending Mahendra Kandali's *tol* or *chatrasala* (school), studying grammar and shastra as well as learning yoga. He married his first wife Suryavati when he was in his early 20s and a daughter, Manu, was born in about 3 years, but his wife died about 9 months later; after his daughter's marriage he left the estate management to his son-in-law Hari and grand uncles Jayanta and Madhav, and left for a 12-year pilgrimage accompanied by 17 others including his friend Ramaram and his teacher Mahendra Kandali; they visited Puri (where he remained for several years), as well as Mathura, Dvaraka, Vrindavana, Gaya, Ramesvaram, Ayodhya, Sitakunda and other holy places.

When he returned home, at the age of 54 under the insistence of his grandmother he married Kalindi, but he refused to take up the position of *siromani* and built a temple on the original site of his father's house, to meditate and write, meet with people and discuss about Bhakti. In that period he wrote *Bhakti pradipa* and the play *Rukmini harana*, then from Jagadisa Mishra of Mithila he received a copy of the *Bhagavata Purana* with Sridhara Swami's commentary *Bhavartha dipika*, and his

perspective changed considerably. He then focused on the creation of a dance-drama called *Cibna yatra*, for which he produced the *Sapta vaikuntha* scene, guided the making of musical instruments and played the instruments himself. He also started to initiate his first disciples: the wife of Jayanta Dalai, a leper named Hariram (renamed Tulasiram), Ramaram, Mahendra Kandali and Ananta Kandali.

In 1509 the Bhuyans got embroiled into hostilities with their Kachari neighbours, then they were attacked by the Koch king Viswa Singha, so Sankardev and his associates crossed the Brahmaputra river in 1516 and moved to Singari and to Routa; when Viswa Singha advanced towards Routa, Sankardev moved to Gangmau in the Ahom kingdom, where they stayed for 5 years during which Sankardev's eldest son Ramananda was born. When Viswa Singha attacked the Ahoms, the Bhuyans fought for the Ahoms and the Koch king was defeated; however the situation was still precarious and Sankardev moved to Dhuwahat, near Ahatguri, where he met Madhavdev. At that time Madhavdev was a shakta; he entered a heated religious discussion with his brother in law Ramadas who had recently converted to Vaishnavism, and Ramadas took him to Sankardev, who convinced him of the power and the efficacy of Ekasarana, a development that brought a significant success in the region, also because Sankardev did not make any discrimination of caste or gender. The local brahmins were incensed and Sankardev tried to pacify them by meeting them in the house of his relative Budha Khan and asking them to install a Deity of Madan Mohan (Jagannatha) at his temple in Dhuwahat. The brahmins also complained to the Ahom king Suhungmung (1497-1539), who summoned Sankardev to his court; Sankardev was able to convince the king that he was not a threat to the social order, and the charges against him were dropped.

After the death of Viswa Singha, the Bhuyans found themselves more comfortable with the new Koch king Naranarayan (1540) than with the Ahom king Suklenmung (1539-1552); in that period a royal officer visited the region for an elephant-capturing expedition and considering himself disrespected, arrested Sankardev's son-in-law Hari and Madhavdev and took them to Garhgaon; Hari was executed and Madhavdev imprisoned for about a year. Taking advantage of the Koch army advancing against the Ahoms (1546-1547), Sankardev and his followers escaped from the Ahom kingdom; the Deity of Jagannatha was later recovered by Vamshigopaldev and installed at Deberapar sattrā. Sankardev and his followers reached Kaplabari, where Madhavdev's mother Manorama and some others died; then the group moved to Sunpora, where Sankardev initiated Bhavananda and Narayana Das (later Thakur Ata). Finally they settled at Patbausi near Barpeta, building a Kirtanghar ("house of kirtana"); among the people initiated there were people of various castes such as Govinda, Jayaram, Jatiram and Madhai, as well as the brahmins Chakrapani Dwija, Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya and Damodardev, who was entrusted by Sankardev to initiate brahmin disciples and later developed his own Brahma Sanghati sect.

Again in 1550 Sankardev left for a 6-month pilgrimage with a group of 117 disciples, under the organisation of Madhavdev. On his return Sankardev found fresh troubles as the Koch king Naranarayan had received many complaints about him, so Sankardev went into hiding to avoid being arrested, until general Chilarai, married to Kamalapriya the daughter of Sankardev's cousin Ramarai, convinced the king to allow Sankardev to explain himself. The hearing at Kochbehar went well and Sankardev was able to refute all the allegations against him, and was granted a respected position and the freedom to propagate his teachings; to reciprocate he engaged 12 weavers of Tantikuchi, near Barpeta, to create the Vrindavani vastra, a 40-meter-long tapestry panel embroidered on silk with the depiction of Krishna's lila in Vrindavana, a section of which is

presently in the Victoria and Albert museum in London. During his 20-year stay in the Koch capital, Sankardev converted Chandsai, a Muslim tailor at the service of the king, and even the king asked to become his disciple.

### **Madhavdev**

The main disciple of Sankardev and his successor after 1588, he was born in 1489 at Letekupkhuri in Assam as the son of Govindagiri Bhuyan, a descendant of Hari Bhuyan, one of the Bhuyans who accompanied Chandivara (Sankardev's forefather) from Gauda to Kamarupa Kamata. Govindagiri became a tax officer at Banduka (Rangpur district, present Bangladesh) and established his family there; on the death of his first wife he migrated to Bardowa in Nagaon district, Assam, and married Manorama of the Baro-Bhuyan clan. Due to wars between the Bara Bhuyans and the Kacharis, he had to leave his home and took shelter at Letekupkhuri where Madhavdev was born. A famine induced the family to move again to Habung in Lakhimpur district, where Madhavdev's sister Urvasi was born. After about 10 years at Habung, the family rowed down the Brahmaputra river to Rauta Tembuwani (Bordowa), where Urvasi was married to Gayapani Bhuyan, then Madhavdev accompanied his father back to Banduka (leaving his mother with his sister and brother-in-law), where he continued his education under Rajendra Adhyapak, becoming well versed in the *Tantras*, *Tarka shastra*, *Puranas* and other scriptures. After that, he returned to his sister's house and started a business in betel leaf and areca nut, but when his half-brother Damodara (who had taken up his father's position at Bandhuka) became ill, Madhavdev returned there to take up the duty, only to rush back to his mother, who had also become ill and had been forced to relocate at Dhuhahat because of the hostilities of the Kacharis against the Bhuyans. In the meantime his brother-in-law Gayapani had become a follower of Sankardev with the name of Ramadasa, and refused to procure goats for his intended sacrifice.

On that occasion, in 1522, Madhavdev met Sankardev and was convinced by him through debate and became his follower. Sankardev called him his *prana bandhava* and named him as his successor. After his conversion, Madhavdev broke his betrothal and resolved never to marry. He wrote the book of hymns *Naam Ghosa* (translated into English in 1997 by Soroj Kumar Dutta under the title *The Divine Verses*), the *Bhakti Ratnavali*, several plays and many *borgeet* devotional songs. He also introduced narrations of Sankardev's life into the kirtan meetings, which in time inspired the development of several biographical texts first by Daityari Thakur, Bhusan Dwija, Ramananda Dwija and Vaikuntha Dwija, and later by Aniruddha Das and many anonymous *Katha guru caritas*. Madhavdev died in 1596.

### **The Haridasas**

As we have already mentioned, the Varkari movement developed mostly in Maharashtra around the devotional worship to Vithoba, while a very similar movement in Karnataka took the name of Haridasa tradition or Haridasa-kuta, focusing on Vitthala, the Kannada name for Vithoba. From Karnataka the movement spread to eastern states such as Bengal and Assam over about 600 years, then during the 17th and 18th centuries the movement was revived around Raichor district by dedicated saints such as Guru Raghavendra, Vijaya Dasa, Gopala Dasa, Jagannatha Dasa, Prasanna

Venkata Dasa, Pranasha Dasa, Venugopala Dasa, Mahipathi Dasa, Mohana Dasa, Helevanakatte Giriamma and Harapanhalli Bhimavva. The Haridasa movement differs from the mainstream Madhva tradition because it branched out into two complementary categories of teachers: the Dasakuta who preached to the masses in a very simple language, and the Vyasakuta who engaged in scriptural debates.

The movement had started with Achalananda Vitthala around 888 CE, but Madhva and his successors supported it openly, so that among the 8 Madhvacharya mathas in Karnataka, those of Shirur, Pejavara and Puttige have installed Vitthala as their presiding Deity. We also mentioned Vyasa Tirtha, the guru of Krishnadeva Raya of Vijayanagara (presently Hampi), who established a famous Vitthala temple there. This Vyasa Tirtha (1447-1539), disciple of Brahmanya Tirtha, who figures prominently as an acharya of the traditional Madhva sampradaya, was also inspired by Sripadaraya (1404-1502) and Lakshminarayana Tirtha (1422-1480), who is said to have been the acharya of the smaller Madhva matha at Mulbagal, and who together with Narahari Tirtha is celebrated as the origin of the Haridasa movement. Other famous exponents of this movement were Vadiraja Tirtha (1480-1600), Purandara Dasa (1480-1564) and especially Kanaka Dasa (1508-1606).

**Kanaka Dasa**, disciple of Vyasa Tirtha, was a great poet and musician; in his *kavya* entitled *Mohanatarangini* he explored the sentiments of erotic love between Krishna and his consorts, and between Usha and Aniruddha. In spite of his deep devotion, Kanaka Dasa was not allowed to enter the temple in Udupi due to his low-caste birth and so he remained outside singing his kirtanas, until the back wall of the temple fell down and the Deity turned around to face him, to give him darshana. He was very vocal against birth caste prejudice and the superficiality of external ritualism; in his *Kula kula kulavendu hodedhadadiri* he calls on all human beings to oppose social segregation, and his *Rama dbanya charita* he presents the allegory of a controversy between millet (*ragi*) and rice, each claiming superiority over the other: the dispute was brought before Rama, and with the assistance of rishis, Rama established the superiority of millet, that was generally considered less valuable as a staple of the poor, although it has a greater nutritional value, and Ragi became blessed by Raghava.

Kanaka's contemporary **Purandara Dasa** was another non-brahmin disciple of Vyasa Tirtha, and quite vocal against caste prejudice and especially against untouchability. In his song *Holaya horagithane urolagillave* he clearly states that contamination does not depend on birth but on a degraded and unethical behavior, including the arrogance and pride of one's birth in a high family. He was a wealthy diamond merchant from Karnataka but he renounced everything to devote himself to composing and singing devotional songs that presented the teachings of *Bhagavata Purana* in a simple language for the masses, for which he came to be considered an incarnation of Narada Rishi. He is also called the *pitamaha* ("grandfather") of the Carnatic style of south Indian classical music, as he structured the gradual exercises of Svaravalis and Alankaras, beginning with the Raga Mayamalavagola, that is still used today. He composed the *Dasa Sahitya* and 475,000 devotional songs in praise of Narayana and Devas - as he came short of completing 500,000, he asked his younger son Madhwapathi to do it for him, but Madhwapathi replied that he should do it himself in a next lifetime, so it is believed that he took his next birth as Vijayadasa in the Chikalparvi village in Raichur district (near Manvi) and completed the remaining 25,000 songs.

## Madhva

Also called Ananda Tirtha, Purnaprajna or Suka Tirtha, Madhva (1238-1317) is not to be confused with Madhava Acharya, that is another name for Vidyanaraya or Sayanacharya of the Shankara line, 12th guru of the Sringeri Sarada Pitha from 1377 to 1386, who was a major spiritual and religious force behind the foundation of the glorious Vijayanagara empire (present day Hampi) together with Vyasaraja or Vyasa Tirtha from the Madhvacharya line, who became the acharya of a Madhva matha in Abbur. Another Madhava (1333-1350) was a direct disciple of Madhva, ruled the Madhva's samsthana for 16 years and then established his own matha in Majjigehalli near Mulbagal.

Madhva's followers have given huge importance to his personality and even to his physical appearance and prowess, to the point of glorifying the red color of his toenails and the "sparkling" of his legs; they claim he was the 3rd incarnation of Vayu (Mukhyaprana) after Hanuman and Bhima, and that he performed many miracles since his early childhood. He was born in 1238 (some say in 1199) as Vasudeva at Pajaka, a small village near Udupi in Karnataka, but there is uncertainty about the name of his parents as they are not mentioned in the biography of Madhvacharya entitled *Madhva vijaya* and written by Narayana Pandita Acharya; there is consensus over his mother's name as Vedavati but his father's name could have been Madhyageha Bhatta or Nadilliya Narayana Bhatta; in any case, it seems certain that at the age of 11 he took sannyasa initiation from Achyuta preksha, described by biographers as a guru in the order of the Ekanti or Ekadandi Vaishnavas.

This definition of "ekadandi vaishnava" glosses over an interesting issue that has caused considerable controversy even within the Madhvacharya tradition, because there is practically no information about Acyuta Preksha's guru, simply named as Prajna Tirtha, who seems to have been a contemporary of (or maybe connected to) Adi Shankara. According to *Mani manjari*, *Madhva Vijaya* and *Sampradaya Paddhati*, the founder of the lineage was one Para (literally, "original" or "first") Thirtha from Gujarat, whose disciple was Satya Prajna who lived in Badarikashram and was the guru of Prajna Tirtha. I apologise for the inconsistency of the spelling of these names, that is bound to cause confusion and failure in computer engine searches, and is due to obsessive attempts at anglicisation of Sanskrit words by the Madhva writers. Anyway, it seems that Prajna Tirtha engaged in sadhana in Nandigram (wherever this was), then went to Badari and finally to Puri, settling there on the order of his guru. His disciple Acyuta Preksha, also known as Purushottama Tirtha, settled at the Anantesvara temple near the Chandra mulesvara temple in Shivalli (now Udupi) in south Karnataka, probably under the protection of Hoysala king Narasimha I.

Madhva started his career in Udupi by teaching *Bhagavad gita* and *Bhagavata Purana*, arguably the two most popular texts in Hindu tradition; he is also said to have visited many holy places such as Anantasayana, Kanyakumari, Ramesvaram and Sriranga, where he gave discourses on *Vedanta sutra*. In 1262, at the age of 24, he went to Badari for the first time to present his own commentary on *Bhagavad gita*, simply called *Gita Bhasya*. He saw Veda Vyasa in a dream, after which it seems he had a mystical experience in which Vyasa and Narayana ordered him to produce a commentary on the *Vedanta sutra* to defeat all the previous (21) commentaries written by others; he then dictated it to his disciple Satya Tirtha. On his way back to Udupi, Madhva visited Prayag, Gaya and Orissa, then ruled by queen Rudrambe, and he converted the famous scholars Shobhanabhatta and Shambushastri, renamed as Padmanabha Tirtha and Narahari Tirtha. After reaching Udupi, Madhva sent Narahari back to Orissa (Kalinga) to get the *mula vigrahas* of Sita and Rama, but in the meantime he obtained the famous *vigraha* of Gopala Krishna that was installed at the main

headquarters in Udupi: it is said that while meditating on the sea shore he saw a ship in serious danger of sinking and he miraculously saved it by stopping the wind storm. The ship captain gratefully offered him a gift from his cargo, and Madhva chose a huge block of *gopichandana* (yellow clay from the Ganges) inside which the Deity was found.

In this period Madhva initiated his younger brother into sannyasa, naming him Vishnu Tirtha, and gave him the *vigraha* of Bhū-Varaha, to keep in his Sode math. He also initiated other 7 sannyasis: Rama Tirtha (worshiping the Deity of Vitthala at Shirooru), Hrishiksha Tirtha (worshiping Rama at Phalimaru), Vamana Tirtha (worshiping Narasimha at Kanooru), Adhokshaja Tirtha (worshiping Vitthala at Pejawara), Narasimha Tirtha (worshiping Kaliya Mardana Krishna at Adamaru), Janardana Tirtha (worshiping Kaliya Mardana at Krishnapura) and Upendra Tirtha (worshiping Vitthala at Puthige). He appointed Padmanabha Tirtha (1317-1324, previously known as Shobhana Bhatta, a scholar in the royal court of Warangal) as his successor in the parampara, and appointed Satya Tirtha over the matha of Acyuta Preksha, later branched out as Bhandarageri Mutt and Bheemanakatte Munivrinda Mutt. Other mathas were later founded by other sannyasis up to very recent times.

Again Madhva went to Badari to present his completed commentary on *Vedanta sutra*; he received the blessings of Vyasa and the order to write another commentary, on *Mahabharata*. On his way back Madhva visited Bengal, Kasi and Rishikesh; on his return to Udupi he was challenged to a debate by Padma Tirtha, who had succeeded Vidyashankara in Adi Shankara's Sringeri matha, and Madhva's biographies say that the "defeated mayavadi" took revenge by stealing Madhva's library. The books were recovered with the help of the local king of Tulu, Jayasimha of Kumble, who was the grandson of Kadambaraja and father of Raviverma Kulashekara Perumal. After an intense debate Madhva also converted Raja Guru Trivikrama Pandita Acharya, who later wrote the *Tattva dipika* as a commentary to Madhva's *Brahma sutra bhasya*. On Magha sukla navami of the year 1317 (Kali yuga year 4418) Madhva felt that his life work had been completed, so he started on his last journey to Badrinarayana.

The collection of the 37 books written by Madhva (called *sarva-mula*) is divided in groups as:

1. *prasthanaya*, including 2 commentaries on *Bhagavad gita*, 10 on *Upanishads*, 4 on *Vedanta sutras*, and 1 on *Rig Veda*,
2. *dasa prakarana*, 10 short books explaining the points of Madhva's doctrine; the most prominent is the *Vishnu tattva vinirnaya*, detailing the characteristics of the atman and establishing Vishnu's supremacy,
3. *smriti prasthanaya*, commentaries on *Bhagavata Purana* and *Mahabharata*,
4. poems and essays about rituals and the rules of sannyasa.

Madhva's works, however, are not free from controversy. He is said to have quoted non-existent verses from known scriptures such as *Skanda Purana*, *Padma Purana* etc, and even passages from totally unknown (possibly non-existent) texts, such as *Upagita*, *Kamatha Sruti*, *Karmaviveka*, *Kalapa Sruti*, *Tantra-prakasika*, *Kapileya Sambita*, *Karanaviveka*, *Kausika Sruti*, *Gatisara*, *Adhara*, *Aruni Sruti*, *Upanaradiya*, *Ubhayanirukta*, *Indradhymna Sruti*, *Upasana Laksana*, *Jivatattva*, *Gunaparama*, *Gitasara*, *Gitakalpa*, *Guruviveka*, *Gautamakhila*, *Jyotis Sambita*, *Tattvasara*, *Tattvodyoga*, *Tantra Bhagavata*, *Tantra Mala*, *Triyoga*, *Nibandha*, *Prana Sambita*, *Muktatattva*, *Yadavadhyatama*, *Linganirnaya*, *Mahodadhi*, *Vicara*, *Viparita Sruti*, *Visvambhara Sruti*, *Vimala Sambita*, *Vaibhavya*, *Vaisesya*, *Visva Tantra*, *Lokatattva*,

*Vayuproka, Vallabhya, Boddhanya, Pravrtta Sambita, Pavamaniya Vijaya, Paunrayana Sruti, Purusottama Tantra, Vimarda Sruti, Sumata, Sadgunya, Pippalada Sruti, Kathaka Sruti, Paingini Sruti, and Sauparna Sruti.* Nobody had ever mentioned such texts before or produced them, so naturally many scholars have expressed serious doubts about the authenticity of the quotes.

According to Madhva, only caste brahmins are eligible for *moksha*, and furthermore some jivas (*nitya baddhas*) are considered *constitutionally* incapable of attaining liberation even after any number of births. Also, Lakshmi is considered an ordinary jiva, and the worship of Radha is considered totally bogus, not only because Radha is considered an ordinary jiva and even a rather simple-minded village girl, but because only *aisvarya rasa* is acceptable, while *madhurya rasa* is considered an indecent deviation. Therefore there is no trace of intimate bhakti, and even *vatsalya* and *sakhya rasa* are not accepted as genuine relationships that a devotee can develop towards Krishna; the followers of Madhva worship Gopala alone. However, a positive aspect of Madhva's tradition is a liberal social approach, in the sense that it allows access to its temples to all, without any birth discrimination.

## Madhva mathas

The main Madhvacharya samsthana was established by Padmanabha Tirtha (1317-1324); its next "pontiff" was Narahari Tirtha (1324-1333, also known as Shamashastrri) who took that position for 9 years after serving for 40 years (since 1263) in the administration of the Kalinga kingdom. The Madhvacharya samsthana was then ruled by Madhava Tirtha (1333-1350), who left it to Akshobhya Tirtha (1350-1365) and also initiated Madhuhari Tirtha the founder of the Madhavatheertha Mutt in Majjigehalli near Mulbagal. Madhva appointed some of his disciples to be the leaders of his Mathas in Udupi: 1. Hrishikesha Tirtha at Palimaru Mutt, 2. Narasimha Tirtha at Adamaru Mutt, 3. Janardana Tirtha at Krishnapura Mutt, 4. Upendra Tirtha at Puttige Mutt, 5. Vamana Tirtha at Sirur Mutt, 6. Sri Vishnu Tirtha (Madhva's brother) at Sode Mutt and Subramanya Mutt, 7. Sri Rama Tirtha at Kaniyuru Mutt, 8. Adhokshaja Tirtha at Pejavara Mutt, 9. Padmanabha Tirtha (previously known as Sobhana Bhatta) at Desastha Mutt. After establishing these Mathas and their Acharyas, he introduced a strict code of conduct for his followers and a system of flower offerings (*pista pasu yagas*) in place of animal sacrifices during yajnas, and imposed the strict observance of fasting on Ekadasi. Other Mathas were subsequently established by his successors.

**Narahari Tirtha** lived and preached vaishnavism in Orissa and especially in Simhachalam and Kurma Kshetra (about 250 km from Puri) under the patronage of the Ganga vamsa kings Bhanudeva I (1264-1278) and Narasimha II (1278-1306). He had originally traveled to Orissa on the order of his guru Madhvacharya to obtain images of Sita-Rama, but he remained from 1264 to 1293 as regent of king Narasimha II and governor of a province in the Ganga kingdom; when the king came of age, Narahari Tirtha returned to his guru with the Deities, and thus Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were installed in Sri Kurma, where vaishnava brahmanas were also given sasana villages.

Other famous scholars and writers in the Madhva line were Trivikrama Pandita, Narayana Pandita, Vamana Pandita (Traivikramaryadasa), Jaya Tirtha (Tikacharya), Vijayadhvaja Tirtha, Vishnudasa, Vyasa Tirtha, Vadiraja, Vijayendra Tirtha, Raghavendra Tirtha, Yadupati Acharya and others. A very popular saint in the Madhva tradition, **Raghavendra Tirtha** (also known as Sudha Parimalacharya) was born as Venkata Natha in Bhuvanagiri, Tamil Nadu (1595-1671) and was the pontiff of the

Madhvacharya Math at Kumbhakonam; he died in Mantralayam where his shrine is still visited by many devotees. Several Dvaita mathas and especially Raghavendra mathas continue to be established all over India and also in US, UK and other countries.

## Puri Jagannatha

The perspective of Hinduism that I personally find most fascinating is about Jagannatha and Puri, the holy place in Orissa where I have established my residence since 1994. My book *Puri the Home of Lord Jagannatha* was published in 2009 and has been amply circulated since then also freely in the digital format; in order to avoid excessively increasing the size of the present publication with redundant repetitions, I suggest that the interested readers find more details there. For easier reference, I will give here a summary of the table of contents of that book:

- \* Introduction: The purpose of the book, Code of behavior while staying in a holy place, Basics about Hinduism (Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva, the Mother Goddess, Surya, other Devas, Dharma, Karma, Samskaras, Guru, Atma and reincarnation, Yoga, Bhakti), Vedic scriptures (Sruti, Upanishads, Smriti, the fifth Veda, Tantra, The various philosophical schools, The six Darshanas, Advaita and Dvaita, Sampradayas).
- \* The spiritual importance of Puri: The meaning of pilgrimage, Purushottama kshetra, Sankha kshetra, Jagannatha, Balabhadra, Subhadra, Sudarshana, Narasimha, Madhava, The Daru Brahman, The Tantric Jagannatha, The Mahabhava vighraha, The appearance of Jagannatha, Lalita the daughter of Visvasvasu, The Buddhist connection, A brief history of Buddhism.
- \* Great personalities in Puri: Adi Shankara Acharya, Jayadeva and Padmavati, Krishna Chaitanya, Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta, The Vaishnava Sampradayas, Ramanuja Acharya, Svami Ramananda, Madhva, Narahari Tirtha, Madhavendra, Nimbarka, Vishnu Svami, Vallabha Acharya, Ramananda Raya, Sridhara Svami, Rasikananda, Tulasi Das, Gangamata Gosvamini, The five saints of Orissa, The seven tantric maidens, Other famous devotees of Jagannatha.
- \* History of Orissa: The Vedic period, The Buddhist-Jainist period, The Gupta period, The Bhauma karas, The Soma vamsis, The Ganga dynasty, The Surya vamsis, The Chalukyas, The Rajas of Khurda, The Maratha period, The British period, The struggle for independence in Orissa, After Independence.
- \* Sri Mandira: The temple structure, External parikrama, Entering the temple, Mukti mandapa, The main shrine, *Mukti chintamani*, Jagannatha bhajans.
- \* Worsip rituals: Daily worship (Preliminary duties, The method of worship, Preliminary purification, Bhuta suddhi, Asana suddhi, Atma pitha puja, Devata pitha puja, Manasa puja, Bahir yaga, Mantra, Upacharas, Avarana puja, Naivedya, Daily worship schedule), Periodical rituals, Regular Veshas, Special Veshas, Mahaprasadam, Daily offerings and special offerings, Festivals in Sri Mandira (Chandana yatra, Snana yatra, Anavasara, Ratha yatra, Jhulana yatra, Janmashtami,

Vimala puja, Shiva ratri, Nava kalevara), The Sevakas (The Niyogas, Record of rights, The temple administration, The Devadasis), Popular festivals and Temples, Traditional festivals, Recently established festivals.

\* Temples and Deities: Bata Mangala, Alama Chandi, Gundicha, Nrisimha and Vishnu temples, Tirthas, Pancha Mahadeva and Shiva temples, Shakti temples, Hanuman temples.

\* Mathas in Puri: List of the Mathas, Participation to the rituals in Sri Mandira, Shankara or Advaita mathas, Smarta Sampradaya mathas, Ramanuja Sampradaya mathas, Ramanandi Sampradaya mathas, Nimbarka Sampradaya mathas, Vishnu Svami Sampradaya mathas, Gaudiya Sampradaya mathas, Sarasvata Gaudiya mathas, Oriya or Utkaliya Vaishnava mathas, Other Sampradayas, Akhadas, Yoga and Jaga gharas, Modern mathas and ashrams.

\*The Kingdom of Lord Jagannatha: Orissa, The district of Puri, Brahmagiri, Konark, Bhubaneswar, Bindu Sarovara, Lingaraja, Other temples, Viraja kshetra, Cuttack, Other districts in Orissa, The culture of Orissa, Vanavasis, Handicrafts, Dance traditions.

\* Appendixes: Notes on specific terminology, Glossary, The Hindu Calendar, Ready references, Maps.

Puri is one of the four main traditional ancient pilgrimage centers for Hindus (*char dham*), and is considered the main tourist attraction for the people of Calcutta. The region is also called Purushottama kshetra, which means "the holy land of the Supreme Person", and the literal meaning of the name of Jagannatha is "the Lord of all" or "the Lord of the universe". The people of Puri proudly say that pilgrims and devotees come to see Jagannatha and pay their respects not only from various parts of this world, but even from other planets as well. Orissa is thick with spiritual and religious history, still has thousands of temples of various sizes and in various degrees of functionality, and practically all the religious teachers, traditions and mathas have, or have had, a significant presence here. For me, Jagannatha and Puri are the perfect quintessence of Hinduism, the great picture that enables us to understand dharma and vidya without sectarian limitations.

The various components of the religious and spiritual culture in Orissa can be summarised as 1. Madhava (Hari-Hara), 2. Narasimha, 3. Daru Brahman (Jupa), 4. Bhairava-Bhairavi, and 5. Mahabhava vigraha. These concepts are all extremely attractive for anyone who wants to become a Hindu, also because they are based on complete openness without restrictions of bodily identification and birth, and even give special importance to the role of people who were born and lived outside the arya varna system.

Puri is also famous for its tantric significance as a Shakti pith, and Jagannatha is also worshiped as Bhairava or even Bhairavi. When the pieces of Sati's body carried by Shiva in his dance fell on earth, Puri was the final place where her feet remained - in Vedic tradition, the feet symbolise the entire person and are the part of the body of the Deities that receives the offerings, and on which the devotee is expected to meditate. Another major Shakti pith in Orissa is Jajpur, also called Viraja kshetra or Nabha Gaya, where Sati's navel fell - the navel symbolises renovation as in birth and rebirth, and is the place where the worship of Jagannatha was revived by Adi Shankara after centuries of neglect, in a sort of "new birth"; the Deities had been removed from Puri and buried under a tree in Jajpur, so Adi Shankara with the help of king Yayati Keshari dug them out and had new bodies carved for them.

The connection of Jagannatha with the Mother Goddess is also highlighted by the Madhava concept; the name Madhava applies both to Vishnu and to Shiva (as Hari-Hara) and literally means "the consort of the mother" (*ma dhava*). The term *dhava* also became popular as the etymological root of the word "*widon*" in several languages, as *vi-dhava* means "without consort". In all pre-patriarchal cultures, since the historical period called Neolithic, the supreme importance of the Mother Goddess has been made evident by the definition of the male aspect of God as "the Consort".

The importance of the concept of Hari-Hara (as the united form of Vishnu and Shiva) especially in Orissa is indicated by the prominence of the Lingaraja temple in Bhubaneswar (also called Ekamra Kanana), where the presiding Deity is worshiped with offerings of tulasi and bilva, and both Garuda and Nandi are honored as his vahanas. However, we can easily find evidence of Hari-Hara worship all over the Indian subcontinent still in recent times, and particularly in the tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Among the specific descriptions of the various forms of Vishnu or Hari, the one called Madhava holds Chakra in the back right hand, Sankha in the back left, Gada in the front left and Padma in the front right, giving particular prominence to Kamala or Lakshmi, who is seated inside the lotus flower. The worship of Madhava Hari is extremely ancient and is found all over India, in prominent temples such as Veni (Triveni) Madhava in the extremely important holy place of Prayaga (renamed Allahabad when Aurangzeb destroyed the temple and most of the city), Setu Madhava at Ramesvaram, Bindu Madhava at Kashi (Varanasi/ Benares, also destroyed and covered with a mosque), Kunthi Madhava (Pithapuram), and Sundara Madhava (Thiruvanandapuram), 5 of which are said to have been established by Indra in expiation for his killing of Vritrasura. The Madhava tradition is especially popular in Orissa, with 12 Madhava temples in Jajpur and many clusters in the Prachi valley listed in the *Viraja Mahatmya* as Adi Madhava, Ananta Madhava, Bhoga Madhava, Champaka Madhava, Rama Madhava, Prasanna Madhava, Purushottama Madhava, Sudarshana Madhava, Janardana Madhava, Narakantaka Madhava, Vasudeva Madhava and Govinda Madhava, as well as the original Nila Madhava Deity presently in Kantilo, Puri district.

In Puri, the ground level of the Sveta Madhava and Matsya Madhava temples on Svetaganga (about 18 feet below the general ground level of the city) is a witness to their great antiquity, and the Matsya Madhava and Bhuvaneshvari shrines at the Indradyumna sarovara (where the Deities are mistakenly presented as king Indradyumna and his queen Gundicha) are on the same level of the lake, which indicate they trace back to the same period, when the differentiation between Hari and Hara was minimal as Shiva is the manifestation of Vishnu that interacts with material Nature. Another Nila Madhava Deity is presently sheltered in the small Hanuman temple in the same place. Besides the main Madhava shrines within the Jagannatha temple at Puri (Venu Madhava and Nila Madhava), a Madhava Deity sits with Jagannatha on the ratnavedi and never leaves the temple; it is said that this image was installed when the worship was re-established after Kalapahada had attacked the temple. The worship of Durga Madhava is very important in the tradition of Puri, and is connected with the Navaratri celebrations. The famous poet Jayadeva worshiped a Madhava murti, and through his *Gita Govinda*, Madhava came to be associated with Radha. Krishna Chaitanya and Gaudiya vaishnavism also highlighted the supreme importance of Madhava, especially in the early bhajans and kirtans of that tradition.

More specifically about Jagannatha, we should notice that king Indradyumna of Ujjain (formerly known as Avanti) heard from Jatila Rishi about the wonderful Deity of Nila Madhava ("the black Madhava") and sent Vidyapati, the younger brother of his rajaguru, to find out that Deity. Finally,

after a long travelling, Vidyapati reached a remote tribal Sabara village near a forest, and was invited by the head of the tribe, Visvvasu, to spend the night in his house. This particular meeting is an important incident in history where two complete separate and vibrant cultures i.e. the brahminical Aryan tradition and the tribal Sabara culture joined to form the very unique tradition of the Vratyas. Still today the most intimate servants of Jagannatha, who are exclusively in charge of the Deities' personal service especially during the period of Anavasara and during the Ratha yatra, are the Daitas, the non-brahmin Sabara descendents of Visvvasu.

### Some famous devotees of Jagannatha

**Bhil Prithu** is very difficult to place within a specific time frame, as his story refers to a period when the temple of Jagannatha in Puri was deserted and in disrepair. It is said that one young man of the Bhil tribe climbed on a tree to collect fruits, and from there he saw the Deity still sitting in the dilapidated temple. Inspired by spontaneous devotion, he approached the Deity and offered some fruits, consuming the rest as prasadam. The Bhils are a tribal population in Orissa who live in a very simple and natural way, depending on the forest products and without observing the complex Vedic ceremonies or practices; *Padma purana* mentions them among the non-Vedic populations that attained the highest spiritual realization by worshipping Jagannatha.

**Dasia Bouri** is said to have been a contemporary of the Pancha Sakha and Krishna Chaitanya, but there is no clear information about the time frame of his life. He was born in a low caste family of sweepers in the village of Baligram near Puri, but he gave up the traditional occupation of his family, which he considered too dirty, and became a weaver by profession. He married but he had no children. Every evening he used to sing new songs for Jagannatha in his hut, composing beautiful poetry even if he was illiterate. Once he heard the voice of Jagannatha saying, "I have created everybody, and all are my sons and daughters. For me there is no difference between low caste and high caste, as nobody is ever separated from me".

When the Ratha Yatra day arrived, Dasia Bouri traveled to Puri with other pilgrims from his village, and reached the city when the chariots were already starting to move. So he waited at Balagandi instead of going all the way to the temple, and he remained immersed in the contemplation of the Lord, humbly feeling that because of his birth he was not worthy of getting on the chariot to embrace Jagannatha. When he came back home that night, he was so immersed in the ecstasy of love for Jagannatha that he was seeing Jagannatha everywhere, including within his bowl of watery rice, and thus he was unable to eat. In the night Jagannatha appeared to him and offered a boon, so Dasia Bouri asked to be able to offer him something personally in spite of his low social position. The next morning Dasia Bouri purchased a coconut from his landlord, then he entrusted the coconut to the head priest of his village who was going for darshana to the temple together with several devotees carrying many offerings from the village. The priest was perplexed, but Dasia Bouri insisted, saying, "Do not give the coconut to Jagannatha unless he takes it directly from your hand. Just say that I am sending this coconut. If he does not take it, bring back the coconut to me."

The brahmin decided that after all he could at least show the coconut before the Deity in the temple hall, and then return it to Dasia Bouri, so when he reached the temple he stood in a little space near the Garuda stambha holding the coconut in his hands, and mentally presenting it to Jagannatha in the name of Dasia Bouri. Suddenly the coconut disappeared from his hands, to the great

amazement of everyone, and almost immediately one of the puja pandas cried out from the altar, saying that something very strange was happening: pieces of coconut shells were falling all around there. Some time later Dasia Bouri personally went to Puri with a basket of mangoes and while standing outside the temple, he contemplated Jagannatha in the Nilachakra above the temple dome. Immediately the mangoes disappeared from his basket; some temple priests who had seen the miraculous event rushed inside the temple and found mango peels and seeds laying around the altar, and mango juice dripping down the face of the Deity. Some say that Dasia Bouri used to send a basket of mangoes every year to the temple, and that the same miracle would happen again and again. Several other miracles are also ascribed to Dasia.

It is said that once he showed his wife Malati the reflection of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra within the Gothagadia pond behind their hut; this pond is still considered sacred and nobody uses it to bathe or wash utensils or clothes or even for fishing, especially since a villager who was cooking some fish caught from the pond found his pot filled with blood. The local people also say that the pond is protected by black cobras. Another story says that once Jagannatha visited Dasia Bouri's house one night, disguised as an ordinary traveler, and asked for some food. Dasia's wife offered whatever little food she had; at the same moment the king of Puri had a dream about Dasia Bouri's bad financial condition and arranged for mahaprasadam to be sent regularly to his house. After the death of Dasia Bouri, the king of Puri granted his relatives the service of carrying the wooden horses and charioteers to the rathas for the festival.

**Karmabai**, a saintly lady from Maharashtra, came to pilgrimage to Puri together with her aged guru Indra Swami under the reign of king Virakisora, and out of devotion they decided to remain to live there in a small ashrama. One day Karmabai was visiting the temple while the priest was presenting the offering, but for some reason the food was declared unfit and discarded by the priest. Karmabai rushed to the altar, saying that maybe Jagannatha wanted to take food from her hand, and she tried to informally present Jagannatha with a pot of rice personally cooked by her, but she was stopped by the temple servants. Shortly afterwards the priests in the temple of Jagannatha found that no food offerings were accepted any more; usually it is said that the food is accepted when the priest can see Jagannatha's image reflected into a drop of water he is holding in his hand. The image of the Lord would not appear any more in the water: instead, the food became quickly rotten and had to be discarded.

Jagannatha himself appeared to the king in a dream and told him that a very dear devotee, Karmabai, was suffering because of neglect and therefore he had decided not to accept any more food from the priests until Karmabai's sufferings had been alleviated. The king sent men around to find Karmabai and one of them, called Badu, arrived at the ashrama and strongly felt the presence of Jagannatha there. Badu saw Karmabai coming out of the kitchen, where she had just finished cooking, and he took her to the king, who arranged for her maintenance from the royal treasure. Karmabai requested to be allowed to offer her khechadi directly to Jagannatha as she had desired to do, and under the king's order the priests took the pot to the altar and to their surprise they found that Jagannatha was gladly eating her offering. Still today one of the most popular items in the mahaprasada is called Karmabai's khechadi.

**Bandhu Mohanti** was a very humble and simple devotee born in a non-brahmin family in the village of Satapada, near Puri. He was always contemplating, reading and talking about Jagannatha as his friend, so his wife believed he had a local friend by that name, and resented the fact that he

was spending more time with his friend Jagannatha than with his family. One day she asked Bandhu Mohanti who his friend was, and when he replied that Jagannatha was a powerful king, living in a very large palace in royal luxury, she suggested that they go visit him and ask for some financial help. The already bad financial situation of the family and the village became worse as the 1392 harvest failed and food became more expensive, so finally Bandhu Mohanti surrendered to the repeated requests of his wife and together with her and their children he started to walk to Puri. After 3 days they reached Puri, but as it was night the temple doors were closed, so they rested at Pejarnala, on the south side of the temple, where the cows come to drink the rice water draining from the temple kitchen, and Bandhu Mohanti's wife gave her starving children some of that rice water before they all went to sleep. Suddenly the wife woke up and saw a young black brahmana carrying a heavy load of different types of delicious foods in a golden tray. The boy was walking around and calling for Bandhu Mohanti, and when the wife replied, the boy smiled and said, "Bandhu Mohanti's friend has sent this food for him, please take it". Bandhu Mohanti was in deep sleep, so his wife decided not to wake him up; she thanked the boy and gave the food to the children.

When Bandhu Mohanti woke up in the morning and was told what had happened, he was amazed at the miracle and the only sorrow in his immense happiness was the idea that he had been unable to see his Lord because he had been sleeping. He gratefully ate whatever food was left, then he cleaned the tray with great devotion and kept it hidden under his pillow, so that nobody would steal it. In the meantime the priests found out that a valuable golden tray was missing in the temple and reported the matter to king Virakisora. The police was sent to search all the surroundings of the temple and soon they apprehended Bandhu Mohanti, recovered the golden tray and prepared to punish the alleged thief severely, although Bandhu Mohanti's wife and children kept crying that they were innocent, and the golden tray had been given to them by Bandhu's wealthy friend. That night Jagannatha appeared to the king in a dream to defend his devotee, explaining what had happened and ordered him to release Bandhu Mohanti immediately. So the king did, offering great honor and apologies to him. Bandhu Mohanti and his descendants were also given the service of cooking the first meal of the day for Jagannatha, particularly the sweet rice khechedi, and present it to the Deities in that very same golden tray.

**Phalahari Baba** was a short bearded man from Romania who came to Puri in 1834 and became a Hindu, marrying the daughter of a Panda. He built himself an ashrama in Harachandi Sahi, near Svargadvara, and became famous for distributing fruit prasadam.

### **Buddhism as a Hindu movement**

Orissa is the original birthplace of Buddhism as a major and distinct religion, because it was at Dhauli, near present-day Bhubaneswar, after the ghastly Kalinga battle (272 BCE, with 150,000 prisoners and many more hundreds of thousands of soldiers killed), that Ashoka embraced the Buddhist doctrine preached by one Upagupta and successively propagated it through his newly formed empire, supporting it with the famous edicts preserved here near the Shanti Stupa, and even sent Buddhist missionaries as ambassadors in many regions as far as China and the Mediterranean. Ashoka organised 3 Buddhist councils in his capital Pataliputra and established many great Buddhist universities including those in Ratnagiri (in Orissa), Nalanda, Takshila and Pataliputra, where hundreds of thousands of students and many scholars from as far as Greece, Persia and China

flocked to study philosophy, mathematics and various sciences including medicine, engineering, astronomy, etc.

Before Ashoka, Buddhism was simply a small group of followers of the historical preacher Siddhartha Gautama the Sakyamuni (who according to Buddhist documents was born in 1894 BCE and not around 500 BCE as believed by mainstream historians), many of whom still considered themselves as ascetics within the fold of Hinduism. Like other great religious teachers before him, Buddha came to be considered one of the many avatars of Vishnu, as presented in the *Puranas* and the highly influential *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva; this popular perspective soon developed into the current called Maha-yana ("great vessel/ vehicle"), in which the personality of Buddha is worshiped at a divine level, as opposed to the Hina-yana ("small vessel/ vehicle") in which the Buddha is simply a great teacher. Parallel to the vaishnava-based perspective of Buddhism, another Buddhist current developed from the Shaiva and Shakta Tantric tradition, and came to be known as Vajrayana ("lightning/ diamond vessel/ vehicle"), as confirmed by the Tibetan work *Pag-san-jonzang* that refers to Oddiyana (Orissa) as the land of Tantric Buddhism, and by the story of Padmasambhava as the son of king Indrabhuti.

According to common knowledge, there are four main traditions of Hindu Tantra, namely Odiyana (in Orissa), Jalashaila (in Jalandhara), Shrahata (in Srihata or Sylhet) and Purnagiri (in Kamarupa or Kamakoti). The Odiyana is considered by far the most important. Orissa is also the Adi-bhumi of the Bauddha Tantra (the Buddhist Tantra) with great teachers such as Sarahapada on the *Buddha kapala Tantra*, Kambalapada and Padmavajra on the *Vajra Tantra*, Luipada on the *Samputa Tilaka Tantra*, Lalitavajra on the *Krishnajamari Tantra*, Gambhiravajra on the *Vajramrita Tantra*, and Kukkuripada on the *Mahamaya Tantra*. In the *viharas* (Buddhist monasteries) of Ratnagiri, Jayadratha started the tradition based on the *Chakrasambhara Tantra* and Pitopada developed the *Kalachakra Tantra* or *Sambara Tantra* (that gave origin to Vajrayana Buddhism or Lamaism). King Indrabhuti himself composed several texts such as *Chakra Sambara Stotra*, *Chakra Sambara Anubandha Samgraha*, *Chakra Sambara*, *Tantraraga Sambara*, *Samuchchaya Nama Vritti* etc.

All the branches of Buddhism mostly focused their preaching on simplicity and the unity of Dharma, and basic ethical principles such as non-violence and friendliness towards all beings, selflessness and introspection, opposing the increasing decadence and degradation of the original healthy *varna* system that had been turning into the birth-prejudice-based caste system, the offensive tendency to mysogyny, the lack of respect for animal and human life, the corruption and arrogance of unqualified priests and teachers, and the general loss of values in human society. Buddhism welcomed and honored people from all walks of life including women, persons from lower castes or uncivilised tribes and illiterate persons, so much that in the period around and after Indian independence from the British Rajya, many low-caste people, starting from Bhimrao Ambedkar, made the very public choice to convert to Buddhism, leaving Hinduism. The benevolence and equanimity of Buddhism was advertised by the fact that in his edicts Ashoka even legally prohibited the killing of animals for food or for religious sacrifices, and established a system of charitable medical assistance for all human beings as well as animals.

Around the 8th century this spiritual revolution received a considerable contribution from king Indrabhuti Bhaumakara of Sambalpur (in Orissa) and his sister Lakshminkara Devi Mahopasaka ("great worshiper"), who became the queen of Sonepur (sometimes called Lanka, but is in Orissa). Lakshminkara is celebrated as one of the 84 Mahasiddha Gurus in Tantrik Buddhism, especially in

the branch that she created for the general population, called Sahaja-yana. The traditions called Vajra-yana ("the path/ vehicle of the diamond/ lightning" started by Indrabhuti) and Sahaja-yana ("simple vehicle", started by Laksminkara) flourished and prospered in the Sambalpur region until about the 13th century, long after Buddhism had vanished from many parts of India. Especially the Sahaja-yana filtered into the popular bhakti movement in medieval times inspiring the "simple devotion" that often degenerated into the material simplistic and sentimentalistic faith called *prakrita sahajiya* approach.

The Vajrayana unites Tantra with some of the philosophical concepts of Buddhism; it spread especially in Tibet and the Himalayan area, where it is also known as Lamaism. It is generally known that Vajresvara, the Deity of the Vajra-yana system, is identified with Jagannatha as Hari Hara, the form of Vishnu and Shiva as one person, but exhibiting the characteristics of Kala Bhairava Shiva, with three eyes, a garland of heads and a garment made with tiger skin - the tiger being a characteristic symbol of Tantra, whereas the lion represents orthodox Vedic tradition and the elephant represents Buddhism. This same Deity, called Buddha Sambara, is (or was) quite popular in China and Tibet and is still worshiped as Budharaja by the tribal communities in the Sambalpur region in Orissa. The Vajrayana also gives definitions of Balabhadra as Vajrodaka (the manifestation of Maha Vajresvara, parallel to the concept of Maha Vishnu in the Karanodaka), Subhadra as Vajresvari, and Sudarshana as Vajra.

Other commentators have linked Buddhism with the Jagannatha tradition by explaining that Mahayana Buddhism sees Jagannatha as Buddha, Balabhadra as Lokesvara and Subhadra as Prajna paramita, while Hinayana Buddhism sees them respectively as Buddha, Sangha and Dharma (the *tri-ratna*); a deeper analysis on this notion will illuminate the equation in Vajrayana Buddhism with Jagannatha as Buddha Sambara (Hari Hara, or Kala Bhairava), Balabhadra as Shiva (Sankarshana, the param guru, the father of this material world) and Subhadra as Durga (Yogamaya, bhakti shakti) and the hidden importance of Sudarshana (sacred tree, pole or pillar).

The connection between Jagannatha, Kala Bhairava and Buddha Sambara as Vajresvara can better be understood by studying the Indra yatra (also known as Kumari Yatra or Yanya Punhi), that is celebrated annually in Nepal and is very similar to the famous Ratha Yatra or Chariot festival of Jagannatha in Puri. It is held from Bhadra dvadasi to Asvina krishna chaturdasi, for a total of about 18 days loaded with extremely important meanings - although 8 of these days are considered the core time window of the celebrations. Browsing through the traditional Hindu Odiya (Orissa) calendar, we can see that Bhadra dvadasi is marked as Sunya, the beginning of the new year of reign of the Gajapati King, and the day of Garuda parivartana, meaning the awakening of Vishnu's vahana, a figure that appears to have been connected to the ancient story of Sarabha and Narasimha. The next day, sukla trayodasi, is observed as the Lingaraja parsva parivartana utsava, or the awakening of the companions of Lingaraja Hari Hara in his Bhubaneswar temple.

The next day, sukla chaturdasi, is celebrated as the appearance of Ananta Sesa, Ananta Vasudeva vrata, and the darshana of Viraja Devi known as *abhista siddhi* in Jajpur. The next day, purnima, specifically called Indu purnima, is marked for Indra Govinda puja and is considered the day in which the *Bhagavata Purana* was first spoken - according to the local tradition, by Shiva Mahadeva to Parvati in the place that is today known as Bhubaneswar (*eka amra kanana*, "the garden of the solitary mango tree", under which Shiva and Parvati are said to have been sitting), on which occasion Sukadeva in the form of a parrot (a bird sacred to Matangi and to Radha as well) listened

very carefully to the narration. In his next lifetime, that parrot became Sukadeva Gosvami, son of Veda Vyasa, and narrated the *Bhagavata Purana* to Parikshit who was fasting to death on the bank of the Ganges; on that occasion many spiritual teachers were present, including sudra-born Suta Gosvami, who later narrated the *Bhagavata Purana* to the rishis assembled in Naimisaranya for a great yajna.

The first day of the subsequent month, Asvina krishna pratipat, is the beginning of the fortnight of Pitri sraddha, the offerings to the departed ancestors who reside in Yamaraja's abode, Pitriloka. After 7 days, on Asvina krishna astami, all Hindus all over India celebrate Mula astami, the first of the 16 days of the Saradiya Durga puja - in Orissa also called *sola* or *sodasha puja*, with the Sahasra kumbha abhisheka for Durga and the annual Durga Madhava puja. The worship to the Mother Goddess and Madhava thus significantly overlaps with the offerings to the ancestors, as the next day, krishna navami, is the anustaka sraddha ceremony that is performed at home by the family. Due to the limitations of size for this publication we cannot elaborate here about the significant connections with the Celtic festival of Samhain, that survived in a distorted form as Halloween, and is presently being revived in western countries together with many other important festivals and with the rediscovery of ancestral knowledge and traditions by the Pagan Reconstruction movement.

Interestingly in the the Hindu calendar, Asvina krishna ekadasi is called Indira sarvasammata ekadasi; 2 days later on krishna trayodasi there is a major celebration ending a long period of worship to Shiva with a parikrama in all temples. The last of the 18 days, krishna chaturdasi, is called Mahalaya sraddha, and the Odiya calendar says it is Nabhi Gaya Jajpur Viraja kshetra sraddha pinda dana, in which specifically the people of Jajpur perform the main sraddha ritual. After that, on the next day called Somavati amavasya, and the main 9 days of Durga puja (Navaratri) begin with Ratha Yatra of Viraja Devi in Jajpur. All these are not mere coincidences.

In the *Mahabharata* we read that Indra gave king Vasu a bamboo pole and instructed him to worship it as a representative *vigraha*, decorating it with cloth, scents, garlands and ornaments; during the ceremony Indra appeared in the form of a swan (*hamsa* - let's remember that Vishnu's avatara Hamsa is the source of 2 of the main 4 vaishnava sampradayas) to accept the offerings, after which Vasu, lord of the Chedis, was blessed with extraordinary powers and prosperity. This festivity was called Sakra and was expected to be observed with lavish distribution of land and wealth. The Nepali Indra yatra is clearly a ceremony in honor of Indra to thank him for the rains as mentioned in the Govardhana puja episode in *Bhagavata Purana*. Besides the episode of Govardhana puja, we find in *Bhagavata Purana* another Krishna lila episode connected to the traditional stories around this festival, namely the adventure of Krishna taking a *parijata* plant from Indra's garden after recovering Aditi's earrings that had been stolen by Bhaumasura (a direct son of Bhumi, the Earth Mother Goddess). In the Indra yatra tradition, the story says that after Krishna took away the *parijata* plant, Aditi asked her son Indra to descend to Earth and get another one so she could complete her worship to Shiva (in Kathmandu identified with the Avalokitesvara of Buddhism). However Indra was taken prisoner and bound by one Tantric, so Aditi came to search for him (*dakini* literally means "she who calls out"), found Indra's elephant Airavata waiting for his master near his capture site, and negotiated Indra's release by promising special blessings for the general people and for their deceased ancestors as well.

The first day of the festival is also observed by the Newars (the descendants of the ancient people of Nepal) as a day to remember the family members who died during the past year, by offering

small oil lamps along a traditional route covering all the parts of the old city. In Indra Chowk, the famous Akasha Bhairava bust is displayed with a decoration of flowers; every night different groups gather to dance and sing bhajans, with the *Dasavatara* representation as one of the most prominent performances. The 12 meter (36 feet) tall pole (called Linga or Yasingh), that is the most visible focus of the festival, represents Indra/ Bhairava/ Jagannatha/ Daru Brahman. The tree is carefully selected in the Nala forest in Kavre district east of Kathmandu through special rituals (called *pravesa*), installed specifically for the festival (*pratistha*) and the divine presence invoked into it (*adhivasana*). It is then decorated with colorful clothes and leaves, and mounted on a chariot for the procession. The flag on top of the structure (*indra dhvaja*) is also considered a very important part of the ritual.

At some point of the festival an image of Kala, Batuk (Vatuka) or Akasha Bhairava is worshiped at the "dhama" constituting the front base part of the chariot, and offered a garland of intestines that closely reminds us about the story of Narasimha described in the *Puranas*. This Akasha Bhairava is portrayed as wearing a garland of severed heads, much like Ugratara Kali; in this regard we may remember that the name and form of Kala as Time appear also in *Bhagavad gita*, when Krishna reveals them to Arjuna by openly stating *kalo asmi*, in 10.33 and especially in 11.32, following the amazing description from 11.15 to 11.31.

Two other chariots of the Indra yatra carry respectively Bungamati as Dakshine Devi (Aditi), who looks amazingly similar to the Jagannatha Deity in Puri, and Ganesha, apparently a relatively recent addition morphed from Airavata, a character that better fits the story in the local tradition. The procession is followed by the "living Goddess" or "living Kumari" and many dancers representing the various Devas as well as Asuras and ghosts. It is interesting to note that Kumari and Kumara are also names that refer to the main Deities traveling on the chariots. The "living Kumari" that participates on her own palanquin is a young girl considered as the bodily incarnation of Goddess Taleju Bhavani; she is periodically chosen from the Shakya clan of the Newar Buddhists and is served by a Hindu tantric priest called Karmacharya; when she grows older (at the onset of the first menstruation period) the Kumari ("young girl") is replaced by another younger girl chosen according to the same criteria. While reigning, she is considered the source of the royal power for the anointed king, signified by the *tika* she gives him ceremonially, touching him with her *khadga* sword and declaring him as Narendra, "the Indra of men" representative of Devendra, "the Indra of Devas".

The king of Nepal also plays an important role in the festival as he is considered the direct representative (or human counterpart) of God (in the aspect of Indra), with divine powers and the responsibility of bringing the rains and prosperity to the people; he participates in the procession mounted on an elephant and accompanied by his queen. We should also remember here that Adi Shankara, when he decided to re-establish the lost cult of Jagannatha in Puri, went first to Nepal and brought back a large number of salagrama silas, and maybe other things as well. In any case, still today the king of Nepal is implicitly acknowledged by the traditional brahmins and the Puri temple administrators as a very important sevaka of Jagannatha, and has the official right to personally perform worship to the Deities. A similar ritual is held annually in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) during the Sinhala month of Aesala, which marks the height of drought in the summer before the start of the rainy season. It is traditional especially in Kandy, the last capital of the Sinhalese kingdom, at the temple of the Sacred Tooth, believed to be a relic from the body of the original Buddha. The festival is called Perahera, a name that inevitably reminds us about the *chera pahara* ritual during

Jagannatha Ratha yatra in Puri. For this reason some scholars have theorised that the Jagannatha Ratha yatra might have Buddhist origins; a connection is certainly there but it appears evident that it was Buddhism to be influenced by Hinduism and not the other way around.

King Elara, who reigned for 40 years at Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) in the first century BC, was a Hindu from south India; the Buddhist monk who compiled the *Mahavamsa* records the fact that Elara was a righteous king who could and did control rain because he was totally dedicated to the protection of the kingdom. At the head of the king's bed there was a bell tied to a long rope so that it could be rung by anyone who desired justice, and the fact that the king was sincerely upholding the well-being of the subjects was sufficient to guarantee an appropriate and beneficial amount of rains exactly at the proper time. Whenever any discrepancy or problem arose in the kingdom, the king was expected to fast in expiation for his own shortcomings, so that the balance would be restored. Still in our times during the Aesala perahaera the king parades the streets, accompanied by elephants and music, and as a representative of Devendra, he re-enacts the episode in which Indra slayed the dragon Vritra thus liberating, in the form of rain, the accumulation of waters held by Vritra. A section of the trunk of the jak tree, called *kapa* or sacred pillar and representing lightning (*vajra*), is installed in each of 4 temples; for 4 nights there are processions around the *kapa*, and priests carry the bows and arrows of the Deities of the temple.

We need to remember here that the Indra yajna presented by the *Grihya sutras* prescribes oblations to Indrani and Aja Ekapada (figures of Ekapada are found in the Ananta Vasudeva temple in Bhubaneswar and also at the 64 Yogini temple near Dhauri) and that according to *Brihat samhita*, the pole worshiped in the Indra yajna (*yasti rupena*) should also be accompanied by another pole worshiped as Aditi, Indra's mother, that in Nepal is called Dakine Devi. If we accept such texts as authentic orthodox smriti shastra, we should stop superficially repeating that the worship of Bhairava and Bhairava and the tree festival are "merely a tribal cult" rather than genuine Hinduism, and we should dig a little deeper in search for genuine original knowledge to correctly re-establish or at least fully understand the proper system. It appears evident that the tribal connections are remnant memories of a very ancient past when the Vedic religion was much broader but has been amply forgotten in mainstream Hinduism, now quite incorrectly called "orthodox".

According to the official records, Indra puja was a very popular festival in ancient times not only in Nepal but also in Bengal, in the Ganga and Yamuna plains, and in other regions of India including the south. It is described not only in the Sanskrit text of *Bhagavata purana* in connection with the episode of the Govardhana hill in Mathura-Vrindavana, but also in the Tamil epics known as *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*. It is mentioned in other orthodox texts such as *Atharva veda*, *Kausika sutra*, *Brihat samhita*, *Matsya purana*, *Agni purana*, *Vishnu dharmottara purana*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and even in *Natya shastra*. The *Satapata brahmana* clearly presents a connection between the Indra pole (also called *jarjara*) and the *jupa* or *yupa shakti*, the ancient sacrificial stake that represents the Cosmic Tree. We cannot elaborate at length here on this particular symbolism, connected with the concept of Purushottama Jagannatha as Daru Brahman and the renovation of the king and the queen of May in Celtic tradition, as well as with other significant correspondences in ancient religions at global level, because the subject would require many pages by itself.

We will just remark here that it is certainly interesting that Stambhesvari or Khambesvari is the name of the Devi still worshiped in the form of a pillar in several places according to an ancient tradition of Orissa, and that such tradition also includes the tribal Odiya festival called Karam puja,

in which Karamsani Devi is still worshiped in the form of ceremonially cut tree branches. Originally this sacrificial pole (also called *laghuli*) was installed in front of the Devi temples where the rituals are performed, then the pillar (*stambha*) became a standard presence in front of most temples and was even introduced especially in Buddhist times as a commemorative mark of victory (*vijaya stambha*) by kings. It is very easy to make a connection here with the concepts of Daru Brahman and jupa shakti as the worship of the sacred tree or pole that is characteristic of many tribal traditions, and the tradition of Narasimha, who also "appeared from a pillar" and is still worshiped both in the form of stone and in the form of wooden pole. Another derivation from this concept of sacred tree is the concept of Sudarshana as the fourth vighraha worshiped on the main *ratnavedi* in the Jagannatha temple at Puri, together with Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra.

According to the orthodox brahmins in Puri, the Yupa shakti is clearly identified with the Stambha or Skambha, and is considered as an essential presence (albeit sadly neglected and forgotten by many) in the *really valid* Vedic orthodox smarta sacrifices where traditionally no particular Deity is installed as a *vighraha*; it is said that the clarified butter and other substances offered into the sacrificial fire are eaten by this Yupa (Jupa) shakti. In Viraja kshetra (Jajpur/ Yajnapura, Orissa) there is a famous Subha Stambha or Skamba rupa, marking the area where the yajnas were celebrated. We should also notice that the name of the city, Jajpur, is a derivate from the original Sanskrit *yajnapura*, "the city of yajnas", just like Prayag or Prayaga-raj (renamed Allahabad by islamists) is a derivate of the original Sanskrit name referring to the many yajnas celebrated there in extremely ancient times.

Since yajnas are traditionally celebrated in localities that are already considered auspicious and sacred, it is not difficult to understand that the religious and spiritual significance of Jajpur, vastly neglected and forgotten in recent times, was much greater than generally believed or appreciated by most contemporary scholars and especially by mainstream indologists. We can also remember that according to the officially accepted biographies of Krishna Chaitanya, during his journey from Navadvipa to Puri, Chaitanya left his companions and he went alone to spend a considerable amount of time in Jajpur, also known as Viraja kshetra and Nabhi Gaya.

According to the Buddhist tradition, Indrabuti Bhaumakara is also considered the adoptive father of Padmasambhava (also called Arunagiri Babaji and the Mahavatara, or Pe-ma lung-ne in Tibetan), traditionally equated in importance to the original Buddha and considered the foremost of the great mahasiddha gurus. Padmasambhava was born in Orissa (Uddiyana) and went to Tibet to preach Dharma and Vidya, founding many academic centers to propagate the theory and practice of the Vajrayana and starting the school of the Nying-ma-pa, or Ancient Ones, a branch of the Sarvastivada order of Buddhism. Padmasambhava had 2 leading disciples, the Indian princess Mandarava and the Tibetan princess Yeshe Tsogyal (who were also his consorts), as well as a great number of other disciples, including the Emperor of Tibet, 25 Imperial Disciples, the 80 Disciples of Yerpa who attained the "rainbow-body", the 108 Great Contemplatives of Chu-wo Mountain, the 30 Great Nagakapas (tantric masters) of Yang-dzong in the Drak Valley, the 25 female Dakinis, the 55 Realized Ones of Shel-drak in the Yarlung Valley, and the 7 precious Yoginis.

The capital of Indrabhuti Bhaumakara was Sambalpur or Shambala, also known as Samalei Pith, where Sati's head fell to bless the land; this name is obviously connected to the name of the *Sambara* or *Sambala Tantra* taught here by the Siddha called Pithopada. The Samalei Deity, still present in her temple there, is in the form of a large stone with a projection resembling a mouth and two

depressions resembling eye sockets, always covered by two gold leaves in the forms of eyes; the same form is being popularly worshipped under a tree as Grama Devi in the Samlei gadis ("worship places") in Barpali and Sonepur and in the vicinity of almost each and every village in the region. The stone and the pole are considered "twin sisters" or a complementary dual form of the Mother Goddess, as also seen in several other traditionally worshiped Deities in various regions of the sub-continent.

In ancient times Samalei was worshipped by the Sabara and Jhara tribes living on the bank of the river Mahanadi, who traded in diamonds and gold collected from the river; according to their tradition, they found a big rock under the deep water and installed it under a semel tree (*simli*, or "cotton tree", *Bomax Malabareium*) on the bank of the river. In the present temple at the Samalei pith, besides the main Deity there is a wooden post dressed with a sari and called Bhaunthi ("sister") and a *chalanti pratima* of the Goddess called Budha Raja; in the garbha griha there is also a Narasimha murti (half man, half lion, but strongly resembling Bhairava as usually depicted in Nepal). Not far from there, in the Nrusing-nath temple near Padmapur, the Deity called Girija Narasimha is traditionally worshiped by *aranyaka* ("forest dwelling") brahmanas considered the descendants of an ancient Khonda tribal woman: this is a completely lion-like form that is said to have spontaneously appeared (like a *svayambhu lingam*) from the earth, but only the head is visible for darshana; the head has silver eyes, and a nose and whiskers are applied as ornaments.

During the later period of hinduisation of the region around 1348, king Balaram Deva of the Chauhan dynasty accepted Samalei as his own Kuladevata, constructing her temple and appointing the Sabaras (tribal) brahmanas as her pujaris or jhankars, and granting them rent-free lands for their service in the villages. The jhankars traditionally do not belong to any caste but they are considered orthodox priests; besides Samalei they also worship Mauli, Budhi-Ma and the Grama-Pati. During the annual Yatra procession of the Chalanti pratima Deity of Samalei, there is usually some case of channeling or descending of the Deity into some human being to bless the devotees, answer their prayers, give them advice and answer their questions. Chaurasi Samalei is still the most important Deity for the Keuta fishermen of Bolangir, and the Parsva-Devata of Samalei called Pitabali is worshiped by the tribal Kandhas (Gondhas). Another Deity among the *parsva devata* of the temple in Sambalpur is called Pitabali, and exactly corresponds to the Goddess Kandhas worshiped by the tribal people of the area. It is also interesting to note that during the attacks of the infamous Kalapahada, the Jagannatha Deities in Puri were carried by escaping pujaris to Sonepur (Suvarnapur) near Sambalpur.

## Jayadeva Gosvami

The very famous *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva Gosvami, so dear to the heart of Jagannatha and to the people of Orissa, is the universally acclaimed masterpiece of spiritual literature, the center of innumerable artistic and spiritual expressions in figurative arts, music, dance and drama, and literature, in all the regions where Hinduism became popular, especially in Nepal and Manipur. Jayadeva's poems are also the earliest addition to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the primary scripture of Sikhism, as Guru Nanak was deeply impressed by them during his visit to Puri.

The *Gita Govinda* was Krishna Chaitanya's favorite text, and Jayadeva's village of origin, Kenduli, was regularly scheduled on the Makara Sankranti pilgrimage itinerary of Chaitanya's followers.

Kendu bilva gram is a sasana brahmana village under Adaspur Panchayat of Balipatna block, Khurda district, in the Prachi valley, about 37 km from Bhubaneswar and 50 kms from Puri. There has been some controversy raised by Bengali scholars on whether this Kendu bilva gram might be in the Birbhum district of Bengala (near the famous Tara pitha), but the testimony of Chandradutta in his *Bhaktamala* specifies that Jayadeva's village was Kenduli Sasana, a brahmana settlement in Balipatna (Puri district), between the rivers Prachi and Kushabhadra. The village of Kenduli in Orissa is indeed surrounded by a number of Madhava temples - Mudugala Madhava, Lalita Madhava, Ganga Madhava, Niali Madhava and Gupta Madhava. Also, the period of the composition of the *Gita Govinda* has been indicated as under the reign of king Kamarnava, who ruled Orissa between 1147 and 1156.

The historical time window for Jayadeva is not very precise, but generally it is believed he was born around 1100, in a period when the Buddhist influence had already started to be overshadowed by the Hindu revival movement through the two main powerful waves of Adi Shankara's advaita and the popular bhakti movements that (as we have already seen) were flourishing all around the Indian subcontinent, also supported by some deeper tantric elements and by the strong primal sentiments of tribal (non-arya) popular devotional traditions connected to nature. It is also very interesting to note that Jayadeva Gosvami was born in a traditional orthodox brahmana family and in his home he personally worshiped a Madhava Deity (we have already mentioned the great importance of the Madhava concept). Some even consider him a manifestation of Jagannatha or Krishna, and his consort Padmavati is similarly compared to Lakshmi or Radha.

It is said that his father and mother Bhojadeva and Ramadevi died when he was 17, and that until the age of 23 he lived as a beggar; as his father died leaving some debts, the creditors evicted the boy from his house to appropriate it, but as soon as he walked out the house started to burn. As soon as the boy entered the house again the fire subsided, so the creditor finally allowed him to stay. For a period, he studied and taught Sanskrit at a place called Kurmapataka, near Konark in Orissa. Then he moved to Navadvipa on the banks of the Ganga, in the company of three other panditas whose names he has mentioned in *Gita Govinda*: Sri Umapatidhara, Acharya Sri Govardhana and Kavi Kasmapati, who were his close friends.

At that time king Lakshmana Sena of Bengal, who had his capital in Navadvipa, heard about Jayadeva's fame as a great vaishnava scholar and offered him the position of minister and court pandita; however, when the king arrived with his ministers in full regalia, Jayadeva became angry as he felt that his residence had been disturbed by the intrusion, so he told him, "I am leaving Navadvipa, I refuse to stay here any longer. Because kings are always involved in so much worldly activity, my residence has now become polluted. I am very offended."

Then Lakshmana Sena paid his respects to Jayadeva and pleaded, "Please do not leave my kingdom. I meant no offence. It is true, this royal order is such a despicable occupation, as we must become involved in many undesirable activities to protect the country, but if you leave our kingdom, it will be a great loss. You have given your word and I know you cannot break it, so please just take your residence on the other bank of the Ganga and at least you will still be in our kingdom. Otherwise, if we lose the association of such a great vaishnava, this will be very inauspicious for everyone as your knowledge should be used for the upliftment of the entire kingdom." Seeing that he had taken a humble position in front of criticism, Jayadeva was satisfied that the king was not just a materialistic person who wanted to exploit him for his own name and

fame, and he agreed to become his advisor. It is said that during a poetry competition at the court of king Lakshmana Sena, Jayadeva's singing caused an old and leafless banyan tree to immediately start to sprout new leaves.

Although Jayadeva did not start any disciplic succession or establish any Matha, the admiration and respect for his name remain undying and his work is the strongest foundation of Orissa's spiritual and artistic culture. It is not easy to speak about the "teachings" of Jayadeva, as he only wrote the *Gita Govinda* (as well as the famous Sanskrit dictionary *Nirukta*) and not numerous volumes of philosophical elaborations, ritualistic instructions or ethical recommendations as the traditional Acharyas do, yet for those who have attained the realization of the transcendental form, qualities and activities of Krishna (and are therefore protected from any misconception on the nature of his loving exchanges with Radha), there is an immense symbolic wealth of philosophy and theology to be found in his beautiful songs, that unite exquisite Sanskrit scholarship with the most intimate and passionate feelings of divine bhakti. Some of his contemporaries have described him as "the incarnation of melody".

The *Madala Panji* at the Jagannatha temple in Puri says that originally its recitation was introduced by pandit Narasimha Deva (1278-1309), and it was first performed in its original choreography for the dedication of the present temple, coinciding with the consecration of Kamarnava as the crown prince in 1142, during the reign of Chodaganga Deva. It is said that Jagannatha appeared in a dream to the king and requested him to fetch a girl, the daughter of a gardener, who had been singing the *Gita Govinda* in the temple garden while collecting flowers. From the *Gita Govinda*, two main songs are most popular and regularly sung as bhajans for Jagannatha: *Srita Kamala* and *Dasa Avatara stotra*, that popularised the concept of the 10 main avatars of Vishnu including Buddha. Jayadeva also organized for 12 pieces of cloth to be woven in his village, each decorated with one chapter of the *Gita Govinda*; these red clothes are still used to wrap the Deities for the night, after bedecking them with the most beautiful dresses, ornaments and garlands.

During a pilgrimage to Jagannatha Puri, Jayadeva married a girl named Padmavati, who had been consecrated as a Mahari (Devadasi) in the temple; Jayadeva openly states that Padmavati was the revered source of his poetic inspiration (*padmavati charana charana chakravarti*). Padmavati was the daughter of Devasharma (also from Kenduli), who had prayed Jagannatha for a child, promising to offer her to the divine service in the temple; on the night of Padmavati's consecration, the head priest of the temple had a dream in which Jagannatha asked that the girl should be entrusted to Jayadeva.

While writing about Radharani as she lamented after Krishna had gone away, Jayadeva felt inspired to write a particular verse regarding Krishna becoming the servant of his devotee, but he was tormented by doubts, wondering if such description would not be inappropriate. The verse read: *smaragarala kbandanam mamashirasi mandanam dehi pada pallava mudaram*, "Please place your foot on my head, as a sublime blossom that can destroy the poison of the sufferings of love". After some contemplation, he still felt unable to decide and so he thought he should continue to write later after taking his bath; he oiled his hair as customary before taking bath, and went to the river. While Jayadeva was away, Krishna himself personally appeared in the form of Jayadeva, took his meal and then wrote down that very verse with his own hand. While writing he playfully joked with Padmavati, saying that the oil massaged into his scalp was trickling down into his eyes and he could not see very well. Padmavati lovingly wiped the oil off from the brow of her husband by using the

front part of her sari, then she left to take her own meal. Just then Jayadeva returned from his bath and asked for lunch: Padmavati was startled, as she had seen that Jayadeva had already taken his meal and gone to his room to work on his poem; she also showed the oil-stained sari and told about the little loving game they played, as she could not believe he had already forgotten about it. Jayadeva went to his room and saw the verse now composed in golden letters.

The example of Padmavati who was fully dedicated to the service of Jagannatha, dancing in the temple to the beautiful songs written by Jayadeva, is paralleled by the story of another famous Padmavati, the princess Rupambika from Kanchipuram, who had married king Purushottama Deva and also dedicated herself to the service of Jagannatha as a Devadasi. It is very unfortunate that with the passing of time the exalted position of the Devadasis was subject to abuse, gross exploitation and mistreatment to the point that the Devadasis came to be known as "low caste prostitutes" and ultimately their seva in the temples was discontinued.

The *Gita Govinda* starts with a description of the spring, the season that awakens romantic desires. In Vrindavana, Krishna plays his flute and captivates the minds of all the gopis for the rasa lila. Radha waits for Krishna on the bank of the Yamuna, and her sakhi (female companion) narrates the loving pastimes of Krishna with the gopis, and then his longing for Radha. The sakhi then goes as a messenger to deliver the lovers' requests and longings, and after a night of anxiety in separation (*viraha tapam*, considered the most intense sentiment in love) Krishna finally arrives to surrender to Radha's desire. But now Radha vents her anger and jealousy, and Krishna withdraws. Radha's friends scold her for her pride and advise that she should try to win back Krishna's attention; when Krishna returns, Radha gives in to the sweetness of love and they spend a passionate night together. In the morning Radha asks Krishna to rearrange her hair, ornaments and dress.

Gajapati Purushottama Deva composed a similar work called *Abhinava Gita Govinda* and asked his ministers to circulate it, in an attempt to make it more popular than Jayadeva's; the king's own men, however, told him that his work was far inferior to Jayadeva's poem, just like it is impossible to compare a lamp to the sun. It was decided to settle the controversy by placing both manuscripts before the Deity of Jagannatha for the night, and when the temple priests went to greet the Deities next morning, they found Jayadeva's poem clasped against Jagannatha's chest, while the king's manuscript was scattered around the floor.

Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* was imitated by many subsequent similar poems both in Sanskrit and in Oriya besides the *Abhinava Gita Govindam*, such as *Jagannatha Ballava Natakam* (by Raya Ramananda Pattanaik, also known as Ramananda Raya), *Piyusha Lahari Natika* (by Jayadeva Acharya, 1525), *Vaishnavamrita Natakam* (by unknown author), *Gopa Govindam* (by unknown author), *Mudita Madhavam* (by Satanjiva Mishra, 1650), *Mukunda Vilasam* (by Yatindra Raghunath Puri, 1670), *Shivalilamrita* (by Nityananda, 1730), *Radha Vilasa Mahakavyam* (by Harekrishna Kaviraj, 1760), *Samrudha Madhava Natakam* (by Kavi Bhusana Govinda, 1760), *Vrajayuva Vilasam*, *Sangeeta Chintamani* and *Geeta Mukundam* (by Kavichandra Kamala Lochana Khadgaray, 1780-1800).

The subject of Jayadeva's poem is a very sensitive topic because so many people, still identified with the gross material body, remain unable to contemplate how sexual attachment can apply to the spiritual and transcendental level, therefore they often slide back into the material dimension of ordinary sense gratification based on selfish and temporary attraction and rejection. However, the problem is not in the object of contemplation but in the level of consciousness and transcendental realisation of the person who meditates, hears, speaks or writes about the subject. Obviously, the

kind of kama contemplated by the true devotees of Krishna is totally transcendental, highly symbolic and substantially different from its gross material counterpart, just like the birth and death of Krishna and all the other lilas that may appear similar to material or mundane activities.

The famous 10th Canto of *Bhagavata Purana* presents the rasa lila of Krishna in Vrindavana only after thousands of verses that amply, thoroughly and repeatedly affirm and explain the completely transcendental nature of Krishna and his various manifestations and teachings, and even within the most intimate chapters, the text keeps reminding us about the actual meaning of those love dalliances. The genuine *rasa acharyas* have presented the *madhurya rasa lila* (and especially the *parakiya rasa*) of Krishna with great care, supporting it with vast and deep philosophical/ theological knowledge (*jnana*) and life rules of strict ethical behavior and selfless renunciation (*vairagya*) to distance the genuine path of raganuga bhakti from the exploitative material lust of this conditioned world.

It is very interesting to note that the Kama Gayatri in the daily *tri-sandhya* practice of all Gaudiya Vaishnavas (including the Sarasvata Gaudiyas of the Gaudiya Mathas and Iskcon) is coupled with the Gopala Gayatri mantra that is the same basic mantra used in Jagannatha temple for daily worship: *klim krsnaya govindaya gopi jana vallabhaya namah, klim kamadevaya vidmahe pushpa-banaya dhimahi tan no 'nanga pravodayat*, "I offer my worship to Krishna, Govinda, the lover of the gopis. May Ananga, Kamadeva, inspire us. I meditate on Kama Deva, who carries arrows made of flowers." It is also important to know that all the bija mantras used in all ritualistic ceremonies (including those of the Vaishnava tradition) are taken from the *Sarada tilaka Tantra*.

## The Bauls

The influence of the famous Jayadeva Gosvami's *Gita Govinda* gave a strong devotional impetus to the already existing tradition of Radha Krishna worship established mainly in the Mathura-Vrindavana region by Nimbarka, as we have already seen in a previous section. We should also remember that Adi Shankara (whether he was preaching before or after Nimbarka) gave great importance to the Krishna lila rasa especially in the playful loving exchanges with Radha and the gopis presented in the 10th canto of the *Bhagavata Purana*, traditionally attributed to Veda Vyasa. Specifically in his *Jagannatha astakam*, Adi Shankara explicitly identifies Jagannatha with Krishna as engrossed in his romantic love with the gopis of Vrindavana.

As the nature of bhakti is strongly based on the individual's sentiments of devotion and remains totally independent from sectarianism and organised religious lineages, Krishna bhakti became extremely popular at all social levels and especially among the simple sadhus who renounced all material identifications and attachments to contemplate the divine and transcendental activities of God, and lived in the rural areas among common people, in contrast with the so-called orthodoxy of the wealthier classes. Although it is certainly possible that some of such babajis and sadhus were not very qualified in their knowledge and realisation, it is unwarranted, unjust and offensive to conclude (as some sectarian people do) that all babas and sadhus were (or are) corrupt and cynical frauds, only interested in easily procuring sense gratification for themselves by exploiting gullible and simple-minded followers. The tendency of fake religious fervor covering a factual degraded and corrupt materialistic mentality is not an exclusive characteristic of any particular group or lineage or philosophical perspective, and can also be found in many self-righteous critics, sometimes at levels

that are unthinkable even for ordinary materialists. Philosophical conclusions (often defined as *siddhanta*) also can be strongly distorted by a degraded mentality, down to deeply unethical and offensive levels that go against the fundamentals of dharma and vidya: claiming "unquestionable authoritativeness" and even exclusive monopoly of interpretation based on some "historical lineage through officially recognised and authorised disciplic succession" for those who invent and try to enforce preposterous false dogma is a typical abrahamic method that is completely alien to the genuine and original Hinduism. For this reason, when we see critics speaking disparagingly of impersonalists ("mayavadis"), smartas, karmis, prakrita sahajiyas, tantrics, fakirs, babajis, apasampradayas etc, we should maintain a healthy skepticism about such superficial classifications and personally go to verify the actual facts on all sides, without relying only on sectarian rumors or slandering. Most of the Bauls could be defined as vaishnava Hindus, although their presentations are fully compatible with the Buddhist concepts and with the impersonal aspect of God considered acceptable by abrahamic mystics such as the sufis. At the same time, like Kabir expressed in his poems, the Bauls believe that both temple and mosque tend to block the path to truth, and that the search for God must be carried out individually and independently.

The name "Baul" seems to have derived from the Sanskrit *vatula*, as "lashed by the wind (*vata*) to the point of losing one's sanity" or from *vyakula*, which means "restless, agitated". The definition of Bauls as a religious or spiritual movement appears in texts as old as the 15th century, including *Chaitanya Bhagavata* by Vrindavana Dasa and *Chaitanya Charitamrita* by Krishnadasa Kaviraja (Madhya 4.103), mentioning two vairagi babajis who traveled with Madhavendra Puri from Bengal. All along Krishna Chaitanya's biographies we also find descriptions of his "divine madness", starting from his early days in Navadvip when he was even treated with medicated (*vata*-appeasing) oil, and ending with the total detachment from external reality in his final years in Puri.

The sadhana of the Bauls is initiatic and secretive, aimed at spiritualising the body (*deha tattva*) and the mind (*mana*), on the meditation techniques of pranayama and kundalini yoga, and on the concept of the universal macrocosm as contained and represented in the microcosm of the human body - something that we can also find in traditional Vedic literature including the *Bhagavata Purana*. According to Ramakrishna, the same level of consciousness defined in Vedanta as Brahman is called Alekha by the Bauls; similarly the transcendental sage defined by Vedanta as *paramahansa* is called "*koul*" ("one of the family", or even "head of the family") by the shakta tantrics, and "*sai*" (as in "Sai Baba") by the Bauls. Complete detachment from ordinary bodily consciousness is taught in Baul philosophy in a manner that is quite similar to the vama marga tantric approach or to the position of the avadhuta: in other words, the body is considered as the temple of God where the personal presence of God is worshiped and the sense pleasures are accepted as *prasada* from the "Lord of the senses" while maintaining complete detachment and freedom from all material identifications. This same concept is presented by Adi Shankara in his *Saundarya Lahari*.

The songs of the Bauls and their lifestyle strongly influenced the culture of the Bengal region (including Tripura and Assam's Barak valley) and inspired the Kartabhaja hymns that emphasise inward divinity and rebellion against the bourgeois *bhadralok* religious and social conformism. The famous Rabindranath Tagore appreciatively talked of Bauls in a number of speeches in Europe in the 1930s. In 1976 the district of Kushtia had 252 ascetic Bauls; in 1983 there were 905 and in 2000 there were 5000. In 2005 the Baul tradition of Bangladesh was included in the list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

There are two categories of Bauls: family people and ascetics. Family people live with their spouse, children and relations but in a secluded part of a village without mixing with the other members of the community, and they are generally treated as dalit ("outcaste" untouchables) or *jyante mara* ("living dead") because of their disregard for ordinary social norms; men wear white *lungbis* and long white *kurtas*, and women often wear white saris. The ascetics (*vairagis*) renounce family life, survive on alms and have no fixed residence, constantly travelling from one *akhada* (or *akhara*, religious shelter or *dharmasala*) to another, carrying *jholas* (shoulder bags for alms) and also dressed in *lungbis* and *kurtas*; those who feel closer to the inspiration of Chaitanya, Nimbarka and Ramananda wear white clothes, while those who feel closer to the inspiration of the shakta tantrics wear red colored clothes. Male ascetics often accept the company of one or more *sevadasis* as *bosh-tomi* or lifemate, with whom they practice their particular sadhana. This practice was also common among the tantric Buddhists following the Sahaja-yana tradition of Indrabhuti's sister; the word *sajahiya* applies to *saha-ja*, "born with that quality" and refers to the fact that each human being has the potential to attain the realisation of divine consciousness, afforded naturally by the particular human form of life. The Bauls believe that Goloka exists in the human body, in the innermost recess of the human heart, and can be found only through the individual effort and transformation of consciousness.

Bauls traditionally sing and play the *ektara* (a one-stringed drone instrument, carved from a gourd with the addition of bamboo and goatskin, developed in the Rahur region of West Bengal, which includes the districts of Bankura, Birbhum and Nadia), the *dotara* (a sort of long lute made from neem or jackfruit wood, with 2 to 4 metal strings) and the *kbamak* (one-headed drum with a string attached), and sometimes the *duggi* (small hand drum made of clay), *dola* and *kbola* (small drums), *kbartal* and *manjira* (small hand cymbals) and bamboo flute. The *ghunghur* and *nupur* are large anklets with many bells that ring during dancing. The Baul music or Baul Sangeet is a particular type of folk song, rich of motifs from rural everyday life and very open to syncretism and innovations, so that it has recently absorbed terminology and examples from contemporary life such as radio, television and mobile phones. However, their art is vastly spontaneous and based on immediate inspiration; the most celebrated Baul saint in history, Lalon Shah or Lalon Fakir (1774-1890), composed songs for decades without ever stopping to write them down. Bhaba Pagla (1902-1984) is another famous saint and guru of the tradition. Some of the practitioners have become musical celebrities, such as Purna Das Baul and Kartik Das Baul, a traditional folk singer who has developed a folk fusion or baul rock that is becoming popular especially in West Bengal, and that has been picked up by Bolepur bluez, the world's first folk fusion band. There are also Western Bauls in America and Europe under the spiritual direction of Lee Lozowick, a student of Yogi Ramsuratkumar; their music contains some rock/gospel/ blues elements but the information sources claim that "the essence of the spiritual practices is well maintained".

In the village of Jaydeva Kenduli in Birbhum (Bengal, also near the famous Tara shakti pitha), a *mela* is organised every year in memory of the poet Jayadeva on the occasion of Makar Sankranti in the month of Poush. So many Bauls assemble for the mela that it is referred to as "Baul Fair". A similar festival for Poush Mela is also organised every year in the village of Shantiniketan, in the place where Rabindranath Tagore founded his cultural and spiritual center, and also in the Birbhum district, neighboring with the district of Nadia, where Navadvip and Mayapur were home to Chaitanya and his companions. The Lalon Smaran Utshab (Lalon memorial festival) is held annually in the month of Falgun (February-March) in Kushtia, Bangladesh, to honor the great saint. In Shonajhuri, West Bengal, the mela is held weekly every Saturday.

## Madhavendra Puri

According to the Gaudiya vaishnavas, Madhavendra Puri was the guru of Isvara Puri, the guru of Krishna Chaitanya, Nityananda and Advaita. In his *Gaura Ganoddesa dipika* Kavi Karnapura clearly states that Madhavendra was the founder of a new sampradaya (*yab dharmo yab pravartitah*) that ideologically unites the lineage of Adi Shankara, the tradition of Nimbarka and the bhakti sentiments of the Bauls. After the time of Baladeva Vidyabhusana, Gaudiya sources started to claim that Madhavendra Puri (1420-1490) had also accepted a guru in the Madhva line of Udipi, named Lakshmiapati Tirtha (1420-1487) who was a disciple of Vyasatirtha; however this information remains seriously controversial for several reasons we will analyse later on. What is not controversial at all, is the idea that Krishna Chaitanya's feelings of separation (*viraha*) in the romantic mood (*sringara rasa*) for Krishna had developed from a single verse spoken by Madhavendra Puri: *ayi dina dayardra natha he mathura natha kada avalokyase, hrdayam tvad aloka kataram dayita bhramyati kim karoty aham*, "O Lord, protector of Mathura, you are compassionate to the suffering people. When shall I be able to see you again? My love, your absence is so painful that my mind has become restless. What am I to do?"

This verse is described in *Chaitanya charitamrita* (Madhya 4.197) as spoken by Radha and representing the *rasa kanya* (the greatest masterpiece of the Rasa literature), the kaustubha among all precious jewels, and the cause of immediate and overwhelming ecstasy in Krishna Chaitanya. Madhavendra Puri is mentioned importantly in *Chaitanya charitamrita*, *Chaitanya bhagavata*, *Chaitanya mangala*, *Gaura Ganoddesa dipika*, *Bhakti ratnakara*, *Prameya ratnavali* and in the writings of Gopala Guru Gosvami. Vrindavana Dasa wrote: "Madhavendra Puri was completely filled with divine love and so were his followers. So ecstatic was his love for Krishna, that he would lose consciousness at the sight of a dark blue rain cloud. Day and night he was intoxicated from drinking the ambrosia of Krishna prema."

Practically nothing is known about Madhavendra Puri before he arrived in Vrindavana and settled there after traveling in pilgrimage all around India, but we cannot avoid noticing that his initiation name is strongly connected to the worship of Madhava, as we have mentioned it while discussing about Jayadeva Gosvami and Puri Jagannatha. It is a universally accepted fact that Madhavendra established a Matha in Mathura and began the restoration of the places connected to the Krishna lila, a work that will be continued by Krishna Chaitanya and his followers Rupa and Sanatana. In a dream, Krishna directed Madhavendra Puri to excavate a buried Deity that had apparently been hidden from the islamist raids; accordingly Madhavendra celebrated Gopala's new installation on the Govardhana hill with a grand festival, offering a mountain of foodstuffs strongly reminiscent of the episode described in the *Bhagavata Purana*. This Annakuta festival, also called Govardhana Puja, is still one of the most important vaishnava festivals and not only in Vrindavana. That original ancient Gopala Deity, also known as Sri Nathaji, is now worshiped in Nathadvara (Rajasthan) as he was taken there by Vallabha Acharya the founder of the Pushti marga, a branching off from the Vishnusvami sampradaya. In this regard we can briefly mention that Chaitanya personally met Vallabha Acharya during his travel to Adaila grama in Prayaga (presently known as Allahabad), where the famous Veni Madhava is the presiding Deity, and that in turn Vallabha Acharya went to visit Chaitanya during a pilgrimage to Puri in 1519; on that occasion Chaitanya rebuked him for showing insufficient respect towards the *Bhavartha dipika*, the commentary to the *Bhagavata Purana* compiled by Sridhara Svami, the mahanta (head) of the Govardhana pith, the Adi Shankara Matha in Puri. It is interesting to note that Sridhara Svami, disciple of Ramakrishnananda Svami, was born

in the village of Marei or Maraigaon in the present Nilagiri subdivision of the Balasore district in Orissa, about 3 km from the temple of Kshira chora Gopinatha, around the second half of the 14th century.

The name of Madhavendra Puri is strictly connected to this temple of Kshira chora ("milk pudding thief") Gopinatha. The temple is situated in the small town of Remuna, about 9 km east of Balasore, about half way between Calcutta (Kolkata) and Jagannatha Puri. It seems that the name "Remuna" is derived from the word *ramaniya* which means "very beautiful, giving happiness". Unfortunately the Indian government has built a military nuclear missile base just near Balasore (anciently Belesvara), making Remuna a primary target in a possible atomic conflict in the subcontinent. The temple was built in the 12th century by king Langula Narasinha Deva of Utkala (Orissa), together with two *sarovaras* or pools, called Braja pokhari and Kuta pokhari, and is surrounded by other temples and mathas. The temple management welcomes devotees from all origins, including western birth.

It is important to notice that in *Chaitanya charitamirta*, the biography of Krishna Chaitanya considered as the seminal text for the Sarasvata Gaudiya vaishnavas, great prominence is given to the episode of Kshira chora Gopinatha, narrated on the occasion of Chaitanya's visit to the temple in the company of his core associates. The story tells how Madhavendra decided to travel to Puri to get some sandalwood for his Gopala Deity, and on the way, he thought he should visit the Gopinatha temple in Remuna. Previously this place had been visited by Ramachandra, Sita and Lakshmana during their exile in the forest, and it is said that the Gopinatha Deity was carved by Rama using an arrow and Sita worshiped this Deity in Chitrakuta. The nearby Saptasara ("seven arrows") river is said to have been created by Rama by shooting seven arrows into the ground to get water for Sita to take bath.

Madhavendra had heard that the pujaris of that temple prepared a wonderful rice pudding, called *amrita keli*, so he wanted to taste it and find out how to make a similar preparation for his Gopala. This rice pudding, also called *kshira bhoga* and *abadha prasad*, is still made today with rice, condensed milk, cream, sugar and raisins, and poured into earthen pots of various sizes and after being offered to the Deity is distributed to the devotees. The journey took longer than expected and it was already night when Madhavendra finally arrived in Remuna; the temple was closed and so were all the shops and houses, thus he had no other choice but skipping dinner and humbly lying down to sleep on the market square. The Deity of Gopinatha felt compassionate for his devotee and appeared in a dream to his pujari, ordering him to get the bowl of rice pudding he had kept aside under his own dress on the altar, and take it to his dear devotee Madhavendra Puri, who was sleeping on the market square. Startled, the pujari got up from his bed and went to check into the Deity's room; he actually found the rice pudding, ran out in the night calling loudly for Madhavendra Puri, and just as Gopinatha had mentioned, he found him on the market square. Madhavendra Puri became overwhelmed by devotion for Gopinatha and was greatly honored by the local people, but he decided to continue his journey as he had planned.

In Puri, Madhavendra collected about 40 kg of sandalwood and 200 gr of pure camphor; since those ingredients were used in the temple worship for Jagannatha but were strictly controlled by the Government, he also had to get all the required papers and authorizations for carrying them outside the city. Then he started his journey back, and when he reached Remuna, he visited again the temple of Gopinatha. That night Gopala came to him in a dream and said, "I am the same person

as Gopinatha, so by carrying the sandalwood and the camphor to Gopinatha's temple you have already delivered the items that I had requested you. Please grind the sandalwood and camphor and apply the paste to Gopinatha's body daily, until it is all finished."

The temple pujaris were extremely happy to hear that those valuable ingredients were to be used for Gopinatha's service, and the two assistants from Puri who had traveled with Madhavendra to Remuna were also glad to learn that their journey would not require them to go any further. At the end of the Chandana yatra period, Madhavendra returned to Puri with the two devotees of Jagannatha, and remained there until the end of the rainy season, after which he went back to Govardhana in Vrindavana to take care of his Gopala. Later on he returned to Remuna and built an ashrama there, where his wooden sandals are still honored. Also his samadhi is there, at 2 minutes distance from the temple of Gopinatha. Another prominent personality connected to the Kshira chora Gopinatha temple is Sridhara Swami, disciple of Ramakrishnananda Svami of the Shankaracharya line, who became the *mahanta* head of the Govardhana pitha (the Adi Sankara Matha in Puri) as we already mentioned. The fact that Chaitanya attributed paramount value to Sridhara Svami's commentary to the *Bhagavata Purana* seems to confirm that Chaitanya was much closer to the Shankara sampradaya than to the Madhva sampradaya, as we can also see in Chaitanya's direct and repeated explicit statements reported by his official biographies with reference to several episodes. In *Chaitanya charitamrita* (Antya 7.110-118) Chaitanya strongly rebukes Vallabha Bhatta (Vallabha Acharya) for criticising Sridhara Swami's commentary: "One who does not accept the *svami* (a term that can also mean "husband") as an authority, I consider a prostitute." (7.116). It is not easy to understand the full import of such statement in that context, but we can certainly conclude - like his immediate associates did - that Chaitanya did not wish to dissociate himself from the interpretations of that great acharya, and rejected the sectarian bias and self-aggrandizement desire showed by Vallabha Bhatta.

## Ramananda Raya

Ramananda Patnaik, also known as Ramananda Raya, was born in Bentpur in Puri district, where his relatives still live as Chowdhury Pattanaiks; he was one of the 4 sons of Bhavananda Pattanaik, one of the closest royal advisors. He, too, served as an administrator under the Gajapati Prataparudra Deva, who gave him the title of Raya or Raja, and appointed him as the Governor of Rajamahendri or Rajmundhry in the southern region of the kingdom. Ramananda had been initiated by Raghavendra Puri, disciple of Madhavendra Puri, and before meeting Chaitanya he had written the *Dandatmaka lila*, a catalogue of meditations and services to Jagannatha. He also wrote the *Jagannatha Vallabha Nataka* drama about the lilas of Radha and Krishna, that was played several times in Jagannatha temple by the Devadasis, and produced a new choreography for Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* to be performed in Jagannatha's temple

On the bank of the Godavari river, Ramananda met Krishna Chaitanya who had come to search for him on the recommendation of Vasudeva Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya; he was fascinated and inspired by Chaitanya's devotional ardor, to the point of resigning from his job to fully dedicate himself to devotional life. Together with Svarupa Damodara, Sila Mohanty, Sarvabhauma and Madhavi Dasi, Ramananda was one of the closest associates of Chaitanya in Puri, and he established his own Matha at Jagannatha Vallabha (the private gardens of Jagannatha) near the Jagannatha temple. Ramananda used to personally instruct the temple Devadasis not only in dancing and bodily

expressions (abhinaya or dramatic expressions, such as sattvika and sanchari bhava), but also in costume dressing and body decoration, down to bathing and massaging. For this reason some of Chaitanya's followers accused him of immorality and illicit association with women, but Chaitanya himself personally defended Ramananda glorifying him for his vast and deep knowledge of philosophy and his austere life. That started a rumor among Gaudiya vaishnavas suggesting that Ramananda Raya was the reincarnation of Arjuna, the dearest friend of Krishna and the recipient of the teachings of *Bhagavad gita*, connecting the devotional service in drama and dance manifested by Ramananda Raya with the episode in which Arjuna had spent one year in Virata's palace as Brihannala, teaching dance and drama to the princess Uttara and her girl companions. Although Ramananda Raya had trained the Devadasis to play feminine roles, king Prataparudra felt that it would be inappropriate for them to perform drama outside the Jagannatha temple, so he introduced the tradition of the Gotipuas (transvestite boys trained in dance and entertainment). Ramananda died at Vidanashi in Cuttack in 1572, near the Gadgadiah ghat of the Mahanadi where king Prataparudra is said to be buried.

### Oriya vaishnavism

A particular approach to the tantric worship of Jagannatha in Orissa, that contemplates the divine couple of Radha-Krishna, is represented by the famous Pancha sakhas ("five friends") named Atibadi Jagannatha Dasa, Balarama Dasa, Achyutananda Dasa, Sisu Ananta Dasa and Yasobanta Dasa. These leaders of Oriya vaishnavism followed a tradition that had already been presented by Jayadeva Gosvami; such was the popularity of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* that many imitations were composed, including one *Abhinava Gita Govinda* penned by king Purushottama Deva. As we have already mentioned in connection with Nimbarka and his preaching in the area of Mathura-Vrindavana (revived in the 19th century by Ramdas Kathia Baba), the spiritual and religious meditation on the supreme Brahman in the form of Radha-Krishna had become very popular long before the appearance of Krishna Chaitanya, although it had no place in Madhva's or Ramanuja's sampradayas. Songs on Radha and Krishna written by Vidyapati of Mithila (in north Bihar) had also become popular in Orissa, and in fact both Jayadeva's and Vidyapati's songs were deeply appreciated by Krishna Chaitanya, who had them sung again and again to him by his companions. Another similar work that enjoyed great popularity before the arrival of Chaitanya was Markanda Dasa's *Kesava koili*. Many Oriya writers such as Dinakrishna, Abhimanyu, Bhakta Charan, Baladeva and Gopala Krishna composed poems about Krishna's romantic dalliances with Radha and the gopis. Before meeting Krishna Chaitanya, Ramananda Raya had written the *Jagannatha vallabha nataka* and the *Mahabhava prakasa*, in which Kanai (Krishna) himself describes Radha as the embodiment of mahabhava.

The five Friends all came in contact with Krishna Chaitanya, who arrived in Puri in 1510, and often associated with him and his followers; in *Chaitanya Bhagavata* we see Nityananda and Ramananda Raya celebrating harinama sankirtana together with Balarama and Achyutananda. They found Chaitanya's preaching perfectly compatible with their own ideas, because Chaitanya insisted on the *nagara sankirtana* with no discrimination of caste or social class, and the songs of his kirtanas were not only in classical Sanskrit but also in vernacular languages such as Bengali and Oriya, encouraging ordinary people to participate more directly to the religious events. Chaitanya also freely accepted low-caste people as his followers, bodily embraced fishermen and honored ex-

Muslim devotees such as Haridasa, Rupa and Sanatana etc. Unfortunately it seems that at some point the Bengali followers of Chaitanya somehow developed a serious rift and even hostility towards the followers of the Atibadi sampradaya, just like they became increasingly hostile towards the Shankaracharya line, to the extreme of slandering and insulting even the original founders of those lines. Such disgraceful behavior is certainly opposed to the actual teachings of Chaitanya expressed in the famous *Sikshastaka*, and constitutes a major stumbling block to the implementation of his mission. Apart from the unjust blanket accusations of nihilism and impersonalism, some followers of the Sarasvata Gaudiya lineage created unnecessary and artificial distinctions by finding fault with marginal details such as (for example) the order of the 2 verses of the popular Hare Krishna maha mantra, as the Atibadi sampradaya (like all other ancient Mathas and sampradayas) usually chant the mantra starting with the Rama line instead of the Krishna line. Hence the ridiculous claim that such reversing the lines should be considered offensive.

The *Jagannatha charitamrita*, a biography of Jagannatha Dasa written by Divakara Dasa, states that the difference between the Oriya (Utkali) and the Bengali (Gaudiya) Vaishnavas is that the Oriyas consider Jagannatha as the *avatari*, the source of all avatars, while the Bengalis say that Krishna is the *avatari*: such idle and cavillous distinction could be easily downsized and overcome by considering that Jagannatha is non-different from Krishna, especially in the light of Chaitanya's *acintya bheda abheda tattva* perspective. Divakar Dasa wrote that the Bengalis claim that the title "Atibadi" given by Chaitanya to Jagannatha Dasa was "meant in an offensive and sarcastic way", while we know for certain that Chaitanya taught and demonstrated the utmost humility towards all groups of people, as we can see from his *Sikshastakam*. Besides, on that occasion Chaitanya not only praised him, but also presented him with a cloth as per traditional token of respect and affection. According to the *Chaitanya vilasa*, an Oriya text by Madhava Pattanayaka, who lived in Puri at the time of Chaitanya, the Pancha Sakhas were actually closer to him in his last years of his life, when he openly discouraged his Bengali followers and companions from visiting him.

The five Friends preached Vaishnava dharma and more specifically the ninefold process of Bhakti and the chanting the holy names (*harinama*), giving much greater value to self realisation rather than to the formal worship of the Deities. The most important aspect of their preaching was the abolition of all discriminations among vaishnavas, no matter from which caste or background they came. As a reaction against the excessive, mechanical and superficial ritualism of the caste brahmins and their greedy monopoly over temples and Deity worship, the Pancha Sakhas preached that Krishna/ Jagannatha can be worshiped as Sunya ("void"), a particular "non-shape" that transcends the Deity in the temple and therefore can be accessible to everyone at all times. It is very important to understand that such "void", superficially interpreted as "nihilism" by some critics, is certainly not an impersonal emptiness without sentiments, qualities and relationships - in fact it is quite the opposite, as the Pancha Sakha explicitly preached about *rasika bhakti* in a variety of approaches - Jagannatha Dasa as *rasa kerida* ("playing the games of devotional sentiments"), Acyutananda as *nitya rasa* ("eternal sweetness of devotional sentiments"), and Yasovanta as *prema bhakti brahma gita* ("the spiritual song of the pure love for God"). They believed that Radha Krishna is Paramatma and that Jagannatha is Radha Krishna as *yugala murti* or *bhava murti*, and taught that Guru is the representative of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesvara. Their view is similar to the perspective of many other groups, including the Siddhas and Natha yogis and several independent traditions of Bhakti in Bengal besides the classic Tantric tradition; they believed that the human body is a microcosm where the Supreme Lord resides and manifests his pastimes, including the most intimate lilas of Radha Krishna, where Radha represents the ideal of the pure devoted soul and Krishna is Paramatma.

Their path of sadhana bhakti included mantra, tantra and yantra, and they often demonstrated their mystic power especially by changing their body into different forms. They were also famously expert as astrologers.

The social liberality of the Pancha Sakhas inevitably antagonized the casteist brahmins, who reviled their Oriya translations of the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagavata* and *Harivamsa*. The Oriya *Bhagavatam* by Jagannatha Dasa even came to be offensively called "*teli bhagavata*" ("the *Bhagavata* of the low-caste oil-maker"), although the literary work of the Pancha Sakhas was vital not only to the protection and fostering of devotional, religious and spiritual sentiments among the general masses, but also to the development of the Oriya language and cultural identity, uniting the people and creating a feeling of solidarity that protected the region for a long time. The followers of the sampradaya from the Pancha Sakhas have been known for their work as social and religious reformers especially until the 1800s, for example Dina Krishna Dasa disciple of Madhusudhana Jyestha, Sikhara Dasa the disciple of Pradyumna (who wrote a *Bhavisya Purana*), Bali Krishna Dasa, Nirakara Dasa, Hari Dasa, Artha Dasa, Bhima Bhai, and Abhirama Paramahansa. In 1871 Bhaktivinoda (Kedarnatha Datta, the ideologist of the Gaudiya Matha movement) who was a high officer of the British government (Collector at Puri) had a clash with one Bishikishan, who claimed to belong to the Atibadi Sampradaya and was planning an uprising to drive the British out of Orissa.

### **Atibadi Jagannatha Dasa**

He was born from Padmavati Devi and Bhagavan Dasa of Kaushiki gotra, in Kapilesvarapur or Kapilesvar grama, one of the 16 traditional sasana villages of the brahmanas at the Mukti Mandapa, about 14 kms from Puri towards Brahmagiri, on Radhastami in 1487 (some say in 1490). Bhagavan Dasa used to recite the *Bhagavata Purana* in Jagannatha temple and was appointed by king Prataparudra as Purana Panda; Jagannatha Dasa was trained by his father, and one day Krishna Chaitanya while visiting the temple noticed the 18-year old boy sitting near the Bata Ganesha shrine reciting the *Brahma stuti* from the Gopa lila (10th canto), and honored him by offering him a cloth and the title of Atibadi ("very great").

Jagannatha Das often went to recite the *Bhagavatam* in the houses of people and made no discrimination on the basis of bodily identification, befriending men and women in the same way especially when such persons were spiritually advanced, as for example the famous Medha and Sumedha. Some envious people reported to the king that Jagannatha Dasa was having immoral and illicit relationships with women, but when the king had him imprisoned, Jagannatha Dasa transformed into a woman, to the great amazement of the guards and the king himself, who realized he had committed a serious offense. King Prataparudra immediately released Jagannatha Dasa, asked him to give initiation to his chief queen, and granted him a place within the palace to establish his own Bada Odiya Matha. Later Jagannatha Dasa also founded the Satalahari Matha. Under the instruction of Narada Muni, Jagannatha Dasa translated the *Bhagavata Purana* into Oriya, in a version that became extremely popular and considered on the same level as Tulasi Dasa's *Rama charita manasa*; until recently all villages in the region had special assembly halls called Bhagavat tungis where people sat together regularly to hear its recitation. Among the other works by Jagannatha Dasa we can mention *Gupta Bhagavata*, *Tula vina*, *Sola chapadi*, *Chari chapadi*, *Tola bena*, *Daru brahma gita*, *Diksa samyad*, *Artha koili*, *Muguni stuti*, *Annamaya kundali*, *Goloka sarodhara*, *Bhakti chandrika*, *Kali malika*, *Indra malika*, *Niladri vilasa*, *Nitya gupta chintamani*, *Sri Krishna bhakti kalpalata* etc. In his *Daru*

*brahma gita* he repeats the story contained in Sarala Dasa's *Mahabharata* saying that the Pandava brothers, close relatives and friends of Krishna, went to Dvaraka to recover his body and celebrate the funeral rites for him; the remains after cremation were consigned to the ocean and were finally washed ashore in Puri at Chakra Tirtha, where a Sabara collected and worshiped them. Many people believe that the "*brahma padartha*" that is moved from the old Jagannatha Deities to the new bodies at Navakalevara is actually that ancient relic from the original body of Krishna. The mula mantra Jagannatha Dasa chanted and taught was the Rama mantra. Among his main disciples were Baliga Dasa, Uddhava, Ramachandra, Gopinatha, Hari Dasa, Nandani Acharya, Vamani Mahapatra, Srimati Gaura, Gopala Dasa, Akhandala Mekapa, Janardana Pati, Krishna Dasa, Vanamali Dasa, Govardhana Dasa, Kanai Khuntia, Jagannatha Dasa and Madhusudana Dasa.

## Balarama Dasa

He was born between 1472 and 1482 in Erabanga village at Gop (near Konarak); his father was Somanatha Mahapatra and his mother was Mahamaya Devi. He was also called Matta Balarama because of his disregard for social conventions in favor of ecstatic Bhakti. He used to participate to the discussions on Vedanta at the Mukti Mandapa in the Jagannatha temple, where his strong opposition against birth prejudice caused the resentment of many caste brahmins, but his superior realisation and scholarship became very popular. One day a dumb and deaf beggar approached him and after receiving his blessings he was not only cured and able to speak, but he also started to discuss philosophy immediately; later he became Balarama's foremost disciple with the name of Hari Dasa. Balarama Dasa's residence in Puri is called Gandharva Matha; there he died in 1540. He wrote the famous *Jagamohana* (also known as *Dandi Ramayana*) and a number of other works such as *Gita Abakasa*, *Lakshmi Purana*, *Bhava samudra*, *Gupta gita*, *Vedanta sara*, *Mriguni stuti*, *Saptanga yogasara tika*, *Vedanta sara (Brahma tika)*, *Baula gai gita*, *Kamala locana chotisa*, *Kanta koili*, *Bedha parikrama*, *Brahma gita*, *Brahmanda bhubhoga*, *Vajra kavaca*, *Jnana chudamani*, *Virat gita*, *Ganesh vibhuti*, *Amarakosha gita*. In his *Abakasa* he writes that Jagannatha is served by 64 yoginis, and in *Virata gita* he describes the nirakara form of Krishna as Sunya, although his idea of Sunya is quite particular as it includes form and relationships, as we have already mentioned.

His version of the *Lakshmi Purana* is very popular in Orissa especially because of the story of Sriya Chandaluni, that was the subject of a very successful film entitled *Jaya Jagannatha*. It is the tale of devotion of a chandala woman who pleased Lakshmidēvi with her sincere offering during the traditional Lakshmi puja during the month of Margasira, for which every Thursday the women of Puri clean their houses with special care and decorate them with drawings made with a paste of uncooked white rice, then a special ceremony is held and a variety of foods are offered to the Devi. Lakshmidēvi was visiting the houses of the people in Puri on one of such occasions and saw a small humble house in the neighbourhood of the street sweepers that had been cleaned and decorated with special attention: the floor had been freshly plastered with a new coating, and in front of the door there were nice drawings of lotus flowers. The Chandaluni who lived in that house had prepared a lamp with ten wicks and an offering of ten different fruits and flowers that according to the tradition are particularly favored by Lakshmidēvi, and was offering beautiful prayers with great devotion.

Lakshmidēvi was very pleased and accepted the worship of her sincere devotee, but when she returned to the temple, Balabhadra decreed that she had become polluted because she had accepted food in the house of an untouchable, becoming an outcaste herself, and therefore she should be

banned from the temple. Enraged to see that devotion had been subordinated to blind birth prejudice, Lakshmidēvi cursed both Jagannatha and Balabhadra to remain without food or any other comfort until they accepted to take food from her hand, thus becoming "untouchables" just like her. Lakshmidēvi went to live on the sea beach (at Chakratirtha) in a wonderful palace built by Visvakarma; from there she cast a spell on Jagannatha and Balabhadra, making them fall in a deep sleep, then summoned eight Vitalas, ordering them to go and plunder the temple storage rooms, not leaving even a grain of rice. She also made sure that nobody would offer food to them even if they begged for it. In the form of two brahmin brothers, Jagannatha and Balabhadra wondered around Puri, begging unsuccessfully for the entire day, and finally a fellow beggar suggested them to try at the seashore palace of Sriya Chandaluni, that was famous for its abundance of food. After some hesitation and an unsuccessful attempt at a sort of compromise on "purity" by personally cooking the ingredients supplied by Sriya Chandaluni's servants, the two brothers gave up their pride and were served such a sumptuous feast that they immediately recognized the wonderful cooking of Lakshmidēvi. Lakshmidēvi accepted to forgive them, on the condition that in future all mahaprasada could be shared by everybody without any consideration of birth or ritual purity.

### **Achyutananda Dasa**

He was born as Agani from Dinabandhu Khuntia and Padmavati in Tilakana near Nemala, Cuttack, in 1485; his grandfather Gopinath Mohanty had served in the army of the Gajapati king. He had a mystic dream in which the Lord taught him the *Gita*, the *Upanishads* and the *Tantra*; he left home for a pilgrimage and on the way he met Krishna Chaitanya and received the holy Names from him, also becoming closely acquainted with Sanatana Gosvami (Chaitanya's follower). Later Achyutananda married the daughter of Raghurana Champati Rai and settled in Dhauligram (just outside Bhubaneswar, near the temple of the 64 yoginis), accepting disciples, of whom the most prominent was Ramachandra Dasa; at some point the king gave him some land in Puri at Banki Mohana, where he established an ashrama. Achyutananda's teachings present a fusion of saguna and nirguna worship, uniting the doctrines of Dvaita and Advaita, as well as knowledge from *Upanishads* and Kundalini yoga. The mula mantra he chanted and taught was the Radha mantra, while Balarama Dasa's was the Krishna mantra.

Achyutananda is mostly famous for his book of prophecies entitled *Achyutananda Malika*, consisting of 13 chapters about the future destruction of the town of Puri after Jagannatha has moved out and the appearance of Kalki avatara who will annihilate all the evildoers, starting from Orissa. According to this text, the city of Puri will be submerged by the ocean by about 30 feet (the water will reach up to the present position of the ratna simhasana) and Jagannatha will shift to a place called Chatiya, where a vaishnava will build a new temple. Achyutananda writes that these events will come to pass about 5,000 years from the beginning of Kali yuga, during the reign of a Maharaja Divyasingha Deva, announced by a series of ominous signs such as frequent eclipses of the Sun and the Moon (sometimes two in the same month), cyclones and earthquakes, new incurable diseases, a bright comet appearing in the sky at night, stones falling from the tower of Sri Mandira, and a great war that will start from the holy lands of the Muslims. There will be destruction and death everywhere, and scarcity of food. Varanasi will disappear. Finally a woman will take power and under the rule of the Maharani, women will get justice. The Malika says that at that time Jagannatha will appear in his Kalki avatara, a great Sudharma Sabha will be held in Virajapitha (Jajpur), and people will come from all over the world to take darshana of Jagannatha and worship him through sankirtana.

Achyutananda also wrote about the preaching mission of the Pancha Sakhas and organized a travelling sankirtana party, for which he wrote the book *Rahasa sankirtana* ("explanation of the importance of sankirtana") and several bhajan songs; he also produced translations and commentaries and various essays, including *Harivamsa*, *Tattva bodhini*, *Sunya sambita*, *Jyoti sambita*, *Gopala Ujjvala*, *Baranasi gita*, *Anakara Brahma sambita*, *Abhayada Kavacha*, *Astagujari*, *Sarana panjara stotra*, *Vipra chalaka*, and *Mana mahima*. It is said that once he was attacked by some envious brahmins and he manifested his *laghima yoga siddhi* by becoming extremely light and floating away in mid air.

### **Sisu Ananta Dasa**

He was born in Balipatna near Bhubaneswara, in 1488, the son of Kapila and Gaura Devi. In a dream he received from Surya Narayana in Konarak the order to go and meet Krishna Chaitanya, so he approached his group and took diksha initiation from Nityananda. He then settled in Khandagiri, in what is today called Gadi Tapovana Ashram; through his sadhana he attained mystic powers and he was able to change his form at will, but since he often appeared as a little child, he was known as Sisu. In this form he became the adopted son of king Prataparudra's queen, who personally breastfed him. His main disciples were Barang Dasa, Hamsa Dasa, and Sisu Dasa. He wrote the *Bhakti mukti daya gita*, one of the oldest and most important popular religious books of Orissa, and other texts like *Sisu Deva gita*, *Artha tarani*, *Udebhakara*, *Tirabbakana*, a *Malika* and several bhajan songs. In his *Udaya bhagavata* he describes Jagannatha as the combined form of Radha and Krishna.

### **Yasobanta Dasa**

He was born in 1482 near Aranga Nandi village, district of Cuttack, in a kshatriya family, the son of Balabhadra Mala and Rekha Devi. He married Anjana Devi, sister of king Raghunath Champatti of Aranga, then he took sannyasa and traveled to many holy places, he attained mystic powers and was able to change his form at will. The mula mantra he chanted and taught was the Shyama mantra. He wrote *Govinda chandra*, *Shiva sarodaya*, *Sasti mala*, *Prema bhakti*, *Brahma gita*, *Atma pariche gita*, a *Malika* and several bhajans. The *Govinda chandra* became very famous in Assam, Bengal and north India; it deals with traditional dance in the perspective of vaishnavism. His best disciple was Lohi Dasa, but it is said that also the famous saint Salabega was his disciple.

### **Salabega**

He was the son of the Muslim warrior Lalbega, who served under Raja Man Singh in the Mogul army. While he was in Danda Mukundpur near Pipili, Lalbega saw a beautiful brahmin widow called Lalita who was taking bath in the village pond; he kidnapped and married her. Her son Salabega was born on 16 September 1592 (Radhashtami), in a house that still exists in Cuttack near Lal Beg Fort, that had been assigned as residence to his mother. Lalbega remained in Cuttack for a short time and then departed, leaving behind Lalita and the child; despite her forced conversion to Islam, Lalita continued to worship Jagannatha and also raised her child in a strong sentiment of bhakti. In 1607 Lalbega was appointed the Subadar of Bengal by Jahangir and he called his son to fight besides him against the Afghans who had rebelled against the Delhi sultanate; in one clash on the battlefield, the young Salabega was wounded and his father was killed. The injury was very serious, infection spread and his condition worsened, the pain becoming intolerable; his mother called a Hindu sadhu of the name Bala Mukunda, who chanted the maha mantra near his bed for 21 days and put sacred *vibhuti*

(ashes) on his forehead. Salabega's mother also kept encouraging her son to pray Jagannatha for his recovery and in fact suddenly his health was restored; his miraculous healing encouraged him to develop an even deeper faith and devotion to Jagannatha, but this made him very unpopular with the Muslims, and finally he was driven out of his house and deprived of all rights. So he decided to walk alone and penniless to Puri, but when he reached there he was not allowed to enter Jagannatha's temple and no Matha or Hindu house was willing to give him shelter. Finally he built himself a small hut made of tala palm leaves at Balagandi (Grand Road), where he anxiously waited for the chariots to come by for the Ratha Yatra festival. To the great amazement of the people, all the 3 chariots stopped in front of his hut, one after the other, while he stood singing his famous prayers. Jagannatha's chariot could not be moved for over one hour and finally the temple priests humbly prayed Salabega to help pull the ropes of the chariot so that it would start moving again.

When the Subadar of Cuttack Mirja Ahmed Beg came to attack the Jagannatha temple in Puri, Salabega went to meet him and by his pleading averted the attack. King Narasimha Deva, grateful, gave Salabega official permission to build a permanent housing in the place of the simple hut, and people started to come from all over India to visit his Matha. His mother Lalita also came to stay with him in Puri, and when she passed away Salabega took her body to the Svargadvara crematorium in Puri for her final rites; however, the temple priests not only forbade him to access the crematorium, but also attacked his Matha to show their spite and hatred for what they considered an act of presumption and arrogance from his part. Aggrieved, Salabega went to Vrindavana, but that region had come under the attack of the iconoclast islamist emperor Aurangzeb who had set out to destroy all the temples there, so Salabega decided to return to Orissa and be in Puri for the Ratha Yatra of 1489. During his journey he fell ill and became worried about not making it in time for the festival, so he ardently prayed Jagannatha to wait for him. Meanwhile the Ratha Yatra festival started but after reaching Balagandi, Jagannatha's chariot stopped and it was impossible to move it, in spite of many auspicious ceremonies such as fire sacrifices, kirtanas, and all physical efforts including the strength of the largest elephants that were harnessed to pull it. Instead, a great flood came up and the chariots were totally blocked for 3 months. The chariot finally moved on only when Salabega arrived in Puri and came to offer his homage to Jagannatha on his chariot.

King Narasimha was now strongly convinced of the special favour of Jagannatha for Salabega and he ordered that he should be allowed to enter the temple, but the priests refused to comply; for Salabega, however, Jagannatha's personal affection was sufficient and he remained in Puri for the rest of his life. He passed away in 1646, and his body turned miraculously into a heap of fragrant flowers. Salabhega's samadhi is situated at Chatamatha in Balagandi, near the Mausima temple, and every year the chariot of Jagannatha stops there. Salabega wrote at least 150 songs in various languages on Jagannatha, Radha Krishna, Shiva, and Maa Mangala. The most famous is the song *Abe Nila Saila* ("O great blue mountain"): "O great blue mountain God, like an elephant you come out of the temple to remove the dense forest of our pain, plucking it like a small lotus in your trunk, you crush all our sorrow into the earth".

# Gaudiya Vaishnavism

Speaking of the revival of Hinduism and its propagation at global level especially through conversion, the most macroscopic phenomenon of recent times has certainly been the Hare Krishna movement, presented by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCon), starting from the 1960s in the USA. This subject is also particularly relevant to my personal experience as I was a full time Iskcon member from 1978 to 1986, and I had a very good opportunity to explore the subject in depth - through the books, the general approach especially in the leaders, the philosophy, the practice, the history, and the problems as well, as I have briefly mentioned in a previous section of this book. During those 8 years of very intense sadhana in a few ashramas and temples around Europe as directed by the leaders, I engaged in a variety of services including the translation and publication work for the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, teaching shastra and Sanskrit in the gurukula, anchoring several radio programmes, cooking for the Deities, and occasionally participating to "book distribution marathons" to collect funds. I also participated to an organised pilgrimage to India, as I already elaborated in the first part of this book (about "my experience"); I have decided to avoid elaborating here on the reasons why I am not an Iskcon member any more, which I may leave for another publication. Instead, in this section I would like to analyse the historical facts about Gaudiya vaishnavism, its origin and development, beyond all stereotyped propaganda presentations.

The definition of Gaudiya vaishnavism has become increasingly confused in time, due to historical reasons and ironically also because of several attempts by various organisations and institutions in that line to better clarify it through sectarian identifications - which proves that sectarianism is never a good approach to solve problems. The literal meaning of the definition simply indicates a tradition of Vishnu worship that is characteristic of Bengal (Gauda desa), essentially to distinguish it from parallel traditions in other regions of India, such as Oriya vaishnavism, the south India tradition of the Alvars, the Varkari tradition of the western regions, and the organised/ institutional religious lineages of Nimbarka, Ramanuja, Ramananda, Madhva etc, and most importantly, from the (previously) very powerful Shankaracharya lineage.

The last Hindu king of the Gauda/ Bengal region was Lakshmana Sena (1179-1206), who was a contemporary of Jayadeva Gosvami. The Sena dynasty (1070-1230) had been started by Samanta Sena, a descendant from generals in the army of the kings Vikramaditya VI and Somesvara III of the western Chalukyas from Karnataka, who had defeated the Pala kings of Gauda and Kamarupa. It is not possible to fully elaborate in the present publication about the history of the region, therefore I am planning to dedicate a chapter in the upcoming volumes about Krishna Chaitanya specifically. Samanta's first capital was in the Radha region of Bengal (Radhadesh - no connection with the Radha of Vrindavana in Uttar Pradesh), and from there the dynasty took over the ancient capital Gauda or Gaura, about which we can get information for example from *Gaur, The Medieval city of Bengal*, a special issue of *Pratna Samiksha*, a Journal of Archaeology by the Centre for Archaeological Studies & Training, Eastern India. Another stronghold was established in Vikrampur near Dhaka in the middle of a thick forest region, where the Senas survived after they lost west Bengal, and yet another in Navadvip (Nadia), that became an important religious and

cultural center. The Sena dynasty openly supported Hindu orthodoxy in the form of vaishnavism, shaivism and shaktism (usually called "tantrism").

The influence of Buddhism on Bengali society and culture had been always noticeable because of its deep historical roots in the region, with the famous universities of Nalanda, Paharpur, Vikramashila, as well as other centers in Bihar and Orissa (that are geographically and culturally connected to Bengal), and with several waves of Buddhist refugees fleeing from the islamist attacks that had become increasingly frequent and ruthless in the western and central region of India. As Bengal, too, came under the islamist attacks and conquest, most of those displaced monks walked further east and settled in neighboring regions such as Burma, Tibet, Indonesia and China, but as we have seen while studying the Baul movement, the influence of Buddhism and especially its tantric and mystic tendencies were absorbed into the popular culture, creating a solid alternative to the increasingly casteist and degraded "orthodox" brahminism. Buddhism itself could not be absorbed by the Muslim converts because it was openly atheistic in nature, but its mystical version, inspired by tantrism, was accepted and created the famous Sufi movement, often mistakenly credited for "starting the bhakti movements in Hinduism" (while in fact it was precisely the opposite).

The earliest origin of the Bengali people is covered by mystery, but we know that the Gaur (literally "white") or Gour Rajputs are one of the 36 major clans of Rajput vratyas in India, together with the Palas, who were rulers of Bengal before the Senas. The Gauras or Gaurs were probably a nomadic Caucasian clan similar to the Sakas or Huns, but they claimed to belong (perhaps through adoption by conversion to Hinduism) to the Suryavamsi lineage, citing Valmiki *Ramayana's* Uttara khanda, where it is said that Rama's younger brother originally established their kingdom. Apparently that dynasty had later relocated to central and northern India (Uttar Pradesh, Himachal and Rajasthan), leaving the region mostly to non-aryan peoples such as Vangas, Pundras and Suhmas or Simhas, whose languages appear to have been similar to those of the present day tribes known as Kola, Bhil, Santal, Sabara and Pulinda.

This does not mean that such peoples were primitive or ignorant, as there is evidence that they were great powerful nations with lively trade relations with Java, Sumatra and present-day Thailand: the Vanga king Vijaya Simha conquered Lanka in 554 BCE, and the name *simhala* from which "simhalese" or "singalese" derives is traced back to his times. The "tribal" classification simply means that these peoples or nations did not follow the *varna ashrama* system and Vedic knowledge, so much that Baudhayana's *Dharmasutras* prescribes purification rituals for those who have traveled in that region, thereby coming in contact with the local people and customs. The aryanisation of Bengal started around 700 BCE under the Nanda dynasty of Magadha, with settlements of *sasama brahmanas* directly supported by the kings to open free schools and perform religious rituals for the general population. In the "aryanised" zone the king's emissaries ensured the enforcement of law and order, curbing any violent aggression towards people or harmless and useful animals or property, then systematic cultivation of grains and protection of cattle, development of handicrafts and trade, and urbanization.

At the height of his power, Lakshmana Sena successfully expanded the kingdom to include Assam, Orissa, Bihar and apparently even Varanasi, but in the end (when he was over 80 years old) he was defeated by Bakhtiyar Khalji, the Turkish general of Qutb-ud-din Aybak, who in 1203-1204 attacked Navadvipa, razing it to the ground, and conquered all the western Bengal, as related in *Tabaqat-i-nasiri* written in 1259. We should notice that this same Bakhtiyar Khalji was the one who

destroyed Nalanda university (that had hundreds of thousands of students) and its library; the burning of the texts continued for several months, and the smoke "hung like a dark cloud over the low hills".

The ruthless Turkish steppe-raised professional army of horse archers with long bows and heavy cavalry had already conquered all the Hindu forts, capitals and kingdoms on their way into the subcontinent: Delhi in 1192, Meerut and Kannauj in 1193, Benares (also known as Varanasi or Kasi) in 1194, Gwalior in 1195, Badaun in 1197, Khajuraho in 1203, and Bihar in 1203. Whatever small resistance remained in the region was finally wiped out by Shamsuddin Iliyas Shah, who in 1342 established his own sultanate in Bengal after separating from the sultanate of Delhi. When Krishna Chaitanya was born (on 18 February 1486), the entire Bengal and most of India had been under islamic rule for over 280 years, with the population of the region lost in complete chaos; some of the most degraded caste brahmins had even become subservient allies of the islamist regime, while the tantric groups (*chakras* or *kulas*) were mostly disbanded, which caused individual practitioners to easily fall into degradation. Ironically, the only sane people at that point were the "mad bauls" who did not keep a fixed residence and could easily pass for Sufis and so managed to remain free from islamic harassment, and were generally protected, respected and loved by the ordinary people.

This was the scene at the time of the appearance of Krishna Chaitanya, as we can clearly see from his official biographies such as Krishnadasa's *Chaitanya charitamrita*, Vrindavana Dasa's *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, Lochana Dasa's *Chaitanya Mangala*, Kavi Karnapura's *Krishna Chaitanya charitamritam Mahakavya* and *Chaitanya chandrodaya Natakam*, Jayananda's *Chaitanya Mangala*, and from whatever quotes we can find about previous documents, such as the diaries of Murari Gupta, Svarupa Damodara and Raghunatha Dasa, that seem to be no longer available and were never really published.

Gaudiya Vaishnavism is generally identified with Krishna Chaitanya, often described as a great Bengali saint, who established a massive bhakti movement in the region, but practically all the information generally circulating until now about Gaudiya vaishnavism has been produced under a rather unilateral bias by the Sarasvata Gaudiyas (Gaudiya mathas and Iskcon), that claim to be the only true representatives of Chaitanya's disciplic lineage as a "Brahma-Madhva sampradaya", usually detailed as follows:

1. Krishna
2. **Brahma**
3. Narada
4. Vyasa
5. **Madhva (Madhvacharya)**
6. Padmanabha
7. Nrihari
8. Madhava
9. Akshobhya
10. Jaya Tirtha
11. Jnanasindhu
12. Dayanidhi
13. Vidyanidhi

14. Rajendra
15. Jayadharmā
16. Purushottama
17. Brahmanya Tīrtha
18. Vyasa Tīrtha
19. Lakshmi pati
20. Madhavendra Puri
21. Isvara Puri (Nityananda, Advaita)
22. **Krishna Chaitanya**
23. Rupa (Svarupa, Sanātana)
24. Raghunātha, Jīva
25. Krishnadasa
26. Narottama
27. Visvanātha Chakravartī
28. Jagannātha dasa babaji
29. Bhaktivinoda
30. Gaurakisora dasa babaji
31. Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvatī (also known as Prabhupada)
32. Bhaktivedanta Swami (known as Prabhupada too)

The guru in position number 21 in this list, Isvara Puri, is presented as the spiritual link that connects Krishna Chaitanya and his followers to the Madhvacharya lineage through the famous Madhavendra Puri, who is said to have also initiated Advaita and Nityananda, the closest companions of Chaitanya. However, a controversy about the historical value of such disciplic succession has been going on for over 200 years, and more importantly, the mainstream Madhvacharya sampradaya vehemently denies any connection with Chaitanya and Gaudiya vaishnavism, as we can see from the official "Position paper on Iskcon" published in May 2001 by the Poornaprajna Vidyapeetha (founded by Vishvesa Tīrtha Swami of Pejavar Matha in Bangalore) with the official approval of Vidyamānya Tīrtha of Phalimaru/ Bhandarakeri Matha, followed by the Pejavara Swami's explicit message to the followers of Iskcon, asking that "their bogus claims be withdrawn".

In the Madhva tradition as given by the mainstream Udupi Matha we find the following disciplic succession: Hamsa Paramatma, Chatur mukhi Brahma, Sanakadi ("Sanaka and the others", meaning the four Kumaras), Durvasa, Jnananidhi, Garuda vahana, Kaivalya Tīrtha, Jnanesa Tīrtha, Para Tīrtha, Satya Prajna Tīrtha, Prajna Tīrtha, Achyuta Preksha Acharya Tīrtha and Madhvacharya. Historical dates on these links of the disciplic successions are not given, but that is not particularly important. However, we remember that according to the Sarasvata Gaudiya parampara version, Madhvacharya is supposed to have taken initiation (diksha) directly from Vyasa, and that Durvasa is nowhere to be seen in the lineage, although according to some, one version (defined "non-sober") of the Sarasvata Gaudiya parampara mentions the Kumaras. On the other hand, the succession given by the Udupi Matha does not mention Narada or Vyasa at all, and there is no mention of Krishna either (but the Vishnu avatara Hamsa is clearly mentioned).

The mainstream Madhvacharya Matha in Udupi says that Madhvacharya was born around 1119 or 1239 (not sure) and he had four direct disciples who became his successors: Padmanabha (1200), Narahari (1206), Madhava (1215) and Akshobhya (1235). After the demise of Madhvacharya, the

next link in the chain of disciplic succession is Jayatirtha (1246), followed by Vidyadhiraja (1269). From Vidyadhiraja Tirtha, the mainstream official ("orthodox") lineage of the Madhva Sampradaya continues with Kavindra (1335) as well as his contemporaries Rajendra Tirtha, Vijayadhvaja, Purushottama and Subramanya, then with Vagisha (1340), Ramachandra (1348), Vidyanidhi (1377), Sri Raghunatha (1445) and Rayuvarya (1503). There is no Jnanasindhu and Dayanidhi or Mahanidhi as mentioned by the Sarasvata Gaudiyas. However, the Madhva Sampradaya recognize that at the times of Vidyadhiraja their disciplic line branched off with Rajendra Tirtha, Vijayadhvaja, Purushottama, Subramanya and Vyasa Raja from whom, according to the Gaudiyas, the lineage is said to continue with Lakshmipati, Madhavendra Puri and Isvara Puri; however Rajendra Tirtha continued to accept the previous links of the sampradaya before Madhva and up to Rajendra Tirtha himself, which makes that branch totally irrelevant to the parampara line claimed by the Sarasvata Gaudiyas (Gaudiya mathas and Iskcon).

According to the Sarasvata Gaudiyas, the Vyasa Raja of the "branched off" Madhva line (after Rajendra Tirtha) is supposed to have been the Vyasa Tirtha appearing as number 18 in their own list as the guru of Lakshmipati, a person whose historical existence is strongly denied by the Madhva sampradaya. According to the Sarasvata Gaudiyas, this Lakshmipati (1420-1487) is identified as Lakshminaryana Tirtha or Sripadaraja, presented as a cousin (son of mother's sister) of the same age as Vyasa Tirtha, and "pontiff of the Mutt" of Padmanabha Tirtha at Mulbagal as 7th descendant and successor to Svarnavarna Tirtha. We are not interested in determining exactly the lineage of Lakshmipati or Vyasa Tirtha, but there is plenty of historical record about a Vyasa Tirtha, the very famous and respected author of *Nyayamrta*, *Tatparya Chandrika* and *Tarkatandava*, who was the main religious inspiration for the Vijayanagara Hindu empire (now known as Hampi, and considered to have once been the Kiskinda forest of *Ramayana*), and according to the Sarasvata Gaudiya sources, he became known for his radical statements regarding brahmanism, vaishnavism, varnashrama, and who was worthy to worship the Lord. However, this Vyasa Tirtha was a disciple of Brahmanya Tirtha and lived between 1460 and 1539, which means that he had survived Chaitanya for more than 5 years and resided in Vijayanagara just south of the kingdom of Prataparudra, yet neither Chaitanya or his associates ever made any attempt to visit him to pay their respects, or even ever mentioned him. Even more interesting, according to the tradition of the Madhva sampradaya, a disciple only becomes initiating guru after the demise of his own guru, otherwise he is expected to bring the aspirant disciples to his own "living guru", therefore we would have to believe that Lakshmipati, the guru of Madhavendra Puri, who was in turn the guru of Isvara Puri, would only have become initiating guru 5 years after Chaitanya's disappearance.

As we have briefly mentioned in a previous section, among the macroscopic ideological differences between Chaitanya and the Madhvacharya sampradaya we need to highlight the fact that according to Madhvacharya's absolute duality (*visistha dvaita*), the Devas (including Shiva Mahadeva) are merely devotees of Vishnu and not his *angas* or manifestations, Lakshmi is an ordinary jiva, Radha should never be worshiped as she is a fabrication, and intimate love for God (*raganuga prema*) is not possible, relevant or even desirable. Even more importantly, the highest representatives of the Madhvacharya lineage express nothing less than outrage at the idea that Krishna's personality can be considered more complete (or "original") than the other Vishnu personalities, and especially resent the proposition that Krishna Chaitanya can be considered an avatara or a direct manifestation of Krishna - an idea that has even become *the* fundamental point of siddhanta for some Gaudiyas. According to Madhvacharya, only caste brahmins born "of Indian race" are eligible for liberation, while some souls (*nitya baddhas*) can never attain liberation because they are eternally conditioned by

implicit nature; in this perspective the atman is never transcendently pure but is intrinsically and constitutionally subject to the material gunas, therefore there are sattvika jivas (who can attain mukti), rajasika jivas (destined to always remain in samsara but with the possibility of making some progress) and tamasika jivas (hopelessly destined to hell or darkness).

In fact *Chaitanya charitamrita* (Madhya 9.245-278) reports that when Chaitanya visited Udupi, the headquarters of the Madhvacharya sampradaya, he heavily criticized the Madhva doctrine for being materialistic and ignoring pure love for God (*prema*). Incidentally, the current representatives of the Madhvacharya sampradaya strongly deny the accuracy of the episode presented in the *Chaitanya charitamrita*, especially in regard to Krishnadasa's claims that Chaitanya "defeated" the Madhvacharya sannyasis in the debate. It is not important to establish this particular point here because we are not interested in showing that either of the two presentations was better (more valid or more successful) than the other, but we simply want to clarify that they were two very different presentations, to the point of clashing against each other. Anyway, *Chaitanya charitamrita* reports that as a conclusion of the debate, in verse 277 of that same chapter, Chaitanya stated, "the only good thing I see in your sampradaya is that you accept the eternal nature of the Supreme Lord's form". The expression "your sampradaya" is repeated twice by Chaitanya in verses 9.276 and 277, while from their part the Madhvacharya matha sannyasis call him "a mayavadi" (9.250) as they noticed that Chaitanya displayed the characteristic attire of the sankarite sannyasis.

It is well-known that the Madhva line only uses the title of Tirtha, and never the names of Puri, Bharati or Chaitanya. Chaitanya recognised Sridhara Swami as his philosophical authority and held his *Bhagavata Purana* commentary as supreme, never even mentioning the commentaries by Madhva or Ramanuja, although he did not have any hostility towards the followers of Ramanuja as he spent about 4 months of kirtana and katha in their homes. In their own times, Madhavendra Puri, Isvara Puri, Paramananda Puri and Vishnu Puri were well-known members of the Shankara lineage, while Vrindavana Das, Krishna Das, Rupa or Sanatana never mention Madhva as the param guru in their lineage; in fact Raghunatha Dasa Gosvami even goes to the extent of using the word "hypocrite" (*ya ekam govindam bhajati kapati dambhikataya*) to describe those who worship Krishna alone as prescribed in the Madhva lineage. In *Bhakti ratnavali* by Vishnu Puri, who presents himself as a disciple of Jayadharm, whose name does not appear in any of the Madhva documents, there is absolutely no mention of Madhavacharya or Madhva in the *mangalacharana*, the opening homage to the previous gurus of the line.

In *Chaitanya charita mahakavya*, Kavi Karnapura does not even mention the name of Madhva, while in *Chaitanya-chandrodaya-nataka*, Madhavendra's name is mentioned but not connected to Madhva (CCN 1.21). Again in *Gaura ganoddesa dipika*, Kavi Karnapura states that it was Madhavendra who "started this new religion" (*yah dharmo yah pravartitah*). Kavi Karnapura's works are the standard source quoted by the Sarasvata Gaudiyas to support the direct connection of Krishna Chaitanya with Isvara Puri and Madhavendra Puri. Even the founders of the Sarasvata Gaudiya lineage, who chose to claim Madhva as their param guru, follow the example of Baladeva Vidyabhushana in offering a strong *caveat* about the huge ideological differences in the Madhavendra-Chaitanya line: in his commentary to *Chaitanya charitamrita*, Madhya 4.197, Bhaktivinoda writes that Madhavendra Puri was the first in his line to teach *prema bhakti*, and Bhaktivinoda's son and spiritual heir, Bhaktisiddhanta, writes that Madhavendra was "the first shoot in the desire tree of divine love that came out of the Madhva lineage. Prior to his appearance, there was no sign of the conjugal mood of devotion in the Madhva line".

But there is more: in the Pramana khanda of his *Tattva sandarbha*, Jiva Gosvami lists various commentaries on the *Bhagavata Purana*, beginning with the *Tantra Bhagavata*, named in the *Hayasirsha Pancharatra*, and then lists all the commentaries to the *Bhagavata Purana* he has consulted, giving no particular priority to Madhva, but stating that Madhva was originally a disciple in the Adi Shankara line. If we accept this interesting statement, we would find it easier to understand the fact that all the sannyasis in the Madhva line are *ekadandis* (that is, they carry a one-ended staff) rather than *tridandis* (carrying a three-ended staff) as the Sarasvata Gaudiyas do after the instruction and example of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati - who by the way, *initiated himself* into the order of sannyasa, having only taken diksha from a simple babaji (Gaurakishore Dasa). Compared to this amazingly creative approach to the concept of sampradaya and parampara, the present rigid and formalistic attitude of our contemporary Sarasvata Gaudiyas in regard to initiations and sampradaya lineage seems rather unwarranted and confusing, if not ridiculous.

It is also interesting to note that while the orthodox Madhva lineage has repeatedly and strongly rejected any connection with the Madhavendra-Chaitanya disciplic succession, the Shankaracharya line has absolutely no problem in accepting such a connection, as it is evident for example from the murti of Krishna Chaitanya installed in the Kanchi Shankaracharya Matha in Puri (Svargadvara) and the images of Chaitanya associated with Adi Shankara in various other Mathas in Puri (especially in the Nigamananda Matha). The official position of Chaitanya in the Shankaracharya line is also mentioned by Chaitanya himself in his conversations with Ramananda Raya (*Chaitanya charitamrita*, Madhya 8.124) and later with Vallabha Acharya (*Chaitanya Bhagavata*) and becomes even more evident from the episode of *Chaitanya charitamrita* where Chaitanya met Prakasananda Sarasvati and other shankarite sannyasis in Varanasi. There Chaitanya presented himself very humbly as one would behave with senior godbrothers, and contrarily to what had happened with the Madhvacharya sannyasis, there was no philosophical debate pointing out philosophical or theological differences, but simply a discussion about the application of philosophy and general conduct of life.

Prakasananda asked why Chaitanya had not assumed his due title of Bharati, but retained his brahmachari name. The sannyasi line of Adi Shankara is called *dasanami* ("of 10 names") referring to the 10 titles Sarasvati, Tirtha, Ashrama, Vana, Aranya, Bharati, Puri, Giri, Parvata and Sagara. The name Chaitanya is given to the brahmacharis who study under the tutelage of the Bharati, Sarasvati and Puri sannyasis, that are generally in the lineage of the Sringeri Matha. The name Prakasa is given to the brahmacharis studying under the Vana and Aranya sannyasis (at the Jagannatha Puri Govardhana Matha), while Svarupa is the name of the brahmacharis studying under the Tirtha and Ashrama sannyasis (Dvaraka Matha) and Ananda is the name of the brahmacharis studying under the Giri, Parvata and Sagara sannyasis (from Badrinath).

Chaitanya's sannyasi guru, Keshava Bharati, belonged to the Bharati lineage in the matha established in Katwa (on the border between the present districts of Birbhum and Nadia), and therefore Chaitanya should have taken the same title and accepted the respect attached to the lineage. Therefore Prakasananda perceived Chaitanya as excessively humble and even suspected he was suffering from some psychological problems, especially when he saw he had seated himself on the naked floor in the area where people washed their feet. Prakasananda rose from his own seat and affectionately went to take Chaitanya by the hand, called him "Sripada", and had him sit in a very respectable raised place, in the middle of the other sannyasis. Again, this gesture can be interpreted only as a sign of encouragement towards someone who is considered a member of a same group.

Prakasananda clearly says: *sampradayika sannyasi tumi*, "you are a sannyasi from our same lineage" (*Chaitanya charitamrita*, Adi 7.66) and asks him why he is not staying more often in their company to study Vedanta, and is instead choosing to spend his time with emotional and illiterate people who are always engaged in singing and dancing (7.67-69).

We have already mentioned Sridhara Svami, whose commentary to the *Bhagavata Purana* was considered the supreme authority by Krishna Chaitanya. An initiated disciple of one Ramakrishna Ananda Svami in the Shankara line, he was born in the village of Marei or Maraigaon in the present Nilagiri subdivision of the Balasore district in Orissa, about 3 km from the temple of Kshirachora Gopinatha (Remuna, Balasore), some time in the second half of the 14th century. In the first part of his life he was a householder and had some children, then he took sannyasa. For some time he was in charge of the Chandrashekara temple in Kapilas, then due to his vast learning and saintly character, he was selected as the Mahanta of the Govardhana pitha (the Adi Shankara Matha in Puri). He wrote a famous commentary to *Bhagavad Gita*, a commentary to *Vishnu Purana* and an extremely famous commentary to the *Bhagavata Purana* (entitled *Bhavartha Dipika*), a book that is considered very dear to Jagannatha; it is said that once the Pandas wanted to verify the value of the book, so they presented it to the Deity before closing the doors. On the next morning, the book was found on Jagannatha's lap.

So where does the Brahma-Madhva sampradaya idea come from? It seems it was created by Baladeva Vidyabhushana, for the specific purpose of reclaiming control over the Govinda temple in Galta: it was therefore a political strategy and certainly not a statement of ideological parentage, also considering that Chaitanya, who was totally non-sectarian, never gave any importance to official initiations and institutional religion. However, even Baladeva (in his *Tattva sandarbha*, verse 28) specifies that Chaitanya's *acintya bheda-abheda tattva siddhanta* neatly departs from the absolute duality of Madhva, and describes their huge philosophical and theological differences. The association with the Madhva line was highlighted by the founders of the Gaudiya Matha, Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta, and by their loyal follower Bhaktivedanta, and we can easily imagine that the reason for this policy choice was the need to distance the Gaudiya Matha from the materially powerful Shankaracharya Matha line - considered the only credible authority on Hinduism by the colonial British regime and by the western academic indologists. Also they obviously saw no opportunity or benefit in trying to associate their budding organisation to the strict Nimbarka lineage or with the unregimented Baul tradition, that were in fact ideologically much closer to Chaitanya; maybe they decided that the Madhva line would not bother to oppose their claims, or they considered it irrelevant in their planning projections towards a globalised sankirtana movement. But it is important to understand that it was a strategical policy choice, and not an expression of the established unchangeable eternal siddhanta and uninterrupted parampara system through official initiation.

These observations are not aimed at discrediting Chaitanya or his followers, but rather they want to shed a much more brilliant light on the immense importance of Chaitanya and his true mission by focusing on him only, on his own right and merit. The teachings of an acharya should be judged by their intrinsic validity and their compatibility with the overall conclusions and spirit of the Vedic knowledge in general (*dharma* and *vidya*), as well as by their fruits (*phalayam phariciyate*) in facilitating the spiritual progress and the exemplary behavior set by individuals and groups in their wake. Trying to validate Chaitanya's mission by resorting to connections to any other previous teacher or tradition seems to us an unnecessary effort, and at this point in history, even demeaning and

counter-productive. Vedic tradition also normally accepts the idea that sampradayas can start at any point in time, and the founder acharya of the particular sampradaya may well have received instructions directly from a divine source. Thus it seems totally irrelevant whether the "new religion" was started by Madhvacharya (getting it directly from Veda Vyasa or not), Madhavendra Puri, Chaitanya, or any other teacher claiming to be in their lineage, provided that the "branching off" does not carry the message and practices away from the original conclusions and teachings of Vedic knowledge and from the universal principles of Sanatana Dharma.

In this regard, it is particularly illuminating to read the text of the lecture on *Bhagavata Purana* given by Bhaktivinoda in Dinajpore in 1869 (*The Bhagavata, Its Philosophy, Its Ethics, and Its Theology*, <http://www.nbsmag.com/articles/the-bhagavata>). Here are some extracts:

"We love to read a book which we never read before. We are anxious to gather whatever information is contained in it and with such acquirement our curiosity stops. This mode of study prevails amongst a great number of readers, who are great men in their own estimation as well as in the estimation of those, who are of their own stamp. In fact, most readers are mere repositories of facts and statements made by other people. But this is not study. The student is to read the facts with a view to create, and not with the object of fruitless retention. Students like satellites should reflect whatever light they receive from authors and not imprison the facts and thoughts just as the Magistrates imprison the convicts in the jail! Thought is progressive. The author's thought must have progress in the reader in the shape of correction or development. He is the best critic, who can show the further development of an old thought; but a mere denouncer is the enemy of progress and consequently of Nature. "Begin anew," says the critic, because the old masonry does not answer at present. Let the old author be buried because his time is gone. These are shallow expressions. Progress certainly is the law of nature and there must be correction and developments with the progress of time. But progress means going further or rising higher. ... The true critic, on the other hand, advises us to preserve what we have already obtained, and to adjust our race from that point where we have arrived in the heat of our progress. He will never advise us to go back to the point whence we started, as he fully knows that in that case there will be a fruitless loss of our valuable time and labor. He will direct the adjustment of the angle of the race at the point where we are. This is also the characteristic of the useful student. He will read an old author and will find out his exact position in the progress of thought. He will never propose to burn the book on the grounds that it contains thoughts which are useless. No thought is useless. Thoughts are means by which we attain our objects. The reader who denounces a bad thought does not know that a bad road is even capable of improvement and conversion into a good one. One thought is a road leading to another. Thus the reader will find that one thought which is the object to-day will be the means of a further object to-morrow. Thoughts will necessarily continue to be an endless series of means and objects in the progresses of humanity. The great reformers will always assert that they have come out not to destroy the old law, but to fulfill it."

## **Krishna Chaitanya**

It is not possible to elaborate here with many details about the life and teachings of Krishna Chaitanya, because that would increase the size of the volume beyond reasonable limits. In this present publication I will try to present some of the points that I consider most important, even risking repetition, while I will leave other details to be researched by interested readers by consulting

the other publications that can be downloaded without any cost or formality from the website of our Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Center. I have already published one volume entitled *The Life of Krishna Chaitanya*, and I am working on a few other volumes in the series, according to these general indicative directions:

- \* *The teachings of Krishna Chaitanya*: The *Siksha astakam*, The maha mantra Hare Krishna, What is mantra japa, How to chant the mantra, The ten offenses to be avoided, The difference between mantra and maha mantra, Evidence from traditional scriptures, Quotes from other sources, Other versions of the maha mantra, Kirtanas and bhajanas, Traditional songs from Bengal, Other important teachings, The observance of Ekadasi.
- \* *Krishna Chaitanya's favorite readings*: The story of Prahlada (from *Bhagavata Purana*), The prayers of Prahlada, The story of Dhruva, *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva, *Jagannatha astakam* by Adi Shankara, *Krishna karnamrita* by Bilvamangala, The poems of Chandidas, The poems of Vidyapati, *Brahma sambita*, *Jagannatha vallabha nataka* by Ramananda Raya, The commentaries by Sridhara Svami.
- \* *The spiritual path of Krishna Chaitanya*: Chaitanya and Krishna, The story of Krishna from *Bhagavata Purana*, The mood of Radha, Chaitanya and Jagannatha, Jagannatha as the mahabhava vighraha, Jagannatha as the unifying principle of various traditions, Antiquity of the Jagannatha worship, Spiritual importance of Puri, Jagannatha in Puri, Hari Hara, The Daru Brahman and the tribal tradition, Balabhadra in Puri, Shiva as the jagad guru, Subhadra in Puri, Yogamaya and Lakshmi, Jagannatha and Nrisimha, The tantric Jagannatha.
- \* *The context of Krishna Chaitanya's mission*: A brief history of India, A brief history of Navadvipa and Bengal, A brief history of Orissa, The culture of Orissa, Jayadeva and the Devadasis, Festivals and worship in Jagannatha Puri, The Bhakti movement in medieval India, The disciplic lineage of Chaitanya, Madhavendra Puri, Madhva Acharya, The four vaishnava sampradayas, Adi Shankara, The mayavadi war, Buddhism.
- \* *The companions of Krishna Chaitanya*: The pancha tattva, Nityananda and the Jahnava parivara, Advaita and the caste Gosvamis, Srivasa, Gadadhara, Haridasa, The six Gosvamis, Rupa, Sanatana, Jiva, Raghunatha Dasa, Raghunatha Bhatta, Gopala Bhatta, The descendants of Gopala Bhatta, The Chaitanya tree, The five saints of Orissa, The women around Chaitanya.
- \* *The Sarasvata Gaudiya movement*: After Chaitanya's disappearance, The seminal sampradayas, The independent babajis, Prakrita sahajism, Bhaktivinoda, Bhaktisiddhanta, The Gaudiya matha and its branches, Bhaktivedanta, After Bhaktivedanta's disappearance, Gaudiya vaishnavism versus Hinduism, Gaudiya vaishnavism versus abrahamic ideologies, The unification of Chaitanya's followers, The unification of dharmic ideologies.

Apart from the earliest biographies, there is no solid evidence about the actual philosophy preached by Chaitanya, and different groups of his followers preached and still preach in apparently different ways, although they all agree on certain basic philosophical points. Chaitanya himself only wrote 8 verses called *Siksastakam*:

1. *ceto darpana marjanam bhava maha davagni nirvapanam  
sreyah kairava candrika vitaranam vidya vadhu jivanam*

*anandambudhi vardhanam prati padam purnamrita svadanam  
sarvatma snapanam param vijayate sri krsna sankirtanam*

All glories to the sankirtana of Sri Krishna, that cleanses the heart from all the accumulated dust and extinguishes the fire of the conditional life of repeated birth and death. The sankirtana movement is the greatest blessing and spreads its refreshing rays like the Moon. It is the life of all transcendental knowledge. It increases the ocean of happiness and enables us to constantly taste the perfect nectar for which we are always anxious.

*2. namnam akari babudha nija sarva saktis, tatrarpita niyamitah smarane na kalah  
etadrisi tava kṛpa bhagavan mamapi, durdaiyam idrsam ibajani nanuragah*

O Lord, your holy name alone can give all blessings, and you have unlimited numbers of names. In these transcendental names you have invested all your powers, and there are no rules for chanting these names. O Lord, out of kindness you allow us to easily approach you by chanting your holy names, but I am so unfortunate that I have no attraction for them.

*3. tñad api sunicena taror api sabismuna, amanina manadena kirtaniyah sada harir*

One should chant the holy name of God in a humble state of mind, thinking of oneself as lower than the straw in the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige and ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind one can chant the holy name of God constantly.

*4. na dhanam na janam na sundarim kavitam va jagad isa kamaye  
mama janmani janmanisvare bhavata bhaktir abaituki tvayi*

O Lord, I have no desire for wealth, followers, beautiful women or scholarship. I only want to engage in your devotional service birth after birth, without expecting anything in return.

*5. ayi nanda tanuja kinkaram patitam mam visame bhavambudhau  
kṛpaya tava pada pankaja sthita dhuli sadrisam vicintaya*

O Krishna, son of Nanda! I am your eternal servant, yet somehow or other I have fallen into the ocean of birth and death. Please pick me up and place me as one of the atoms of dust at your lotus feet.

*6. nayanam galad asru dharaya vadanam gadgada ruddhaya gira  
pulkair nicitam vapuh kada tava nama grabane bhavisyati*

O Lord, when will my eyes be decorated with tears of love flowing constantly when I chant your name? When will my voice choke up, and when will the hairs of my body stand on end at the recitation of your name?

*7. yugayitam nimesena caksusa pravrisayitam  
sunnyayitam jagat sarvam govinda virahena me*

O Govinda! I miss you so much that one moment seems to be longer than thousands of years. Tears are flowing from my eyes like torrents of rain, and without you the entire world is empty.

*8. aslisya va pada ratam pinastu mam adarsanam marma batam karotu va  
yatha tatha va vidadhatu lampato mat prana nathas tu sa eva naparah*

I know no one but him as my Lord, even if he handles me roughly or makes me brokenhearted by not showing himself to me. Whatever he does, he is still my life.

From these verses we can understand that Chaitanya was not interested in sectarianism or dogma, in establishing religious institutions or churches or similar other ideas. In fact he did not give official initiation to anybody and did not leave anybody in charge of his movement after his demise. In his

youth he was considered a great scholar, but he clearly demonstrated that bhakti, sincere devotion, was more important than erudition. He openly rejected formalism and pride for lineage in favor of a pure-heart approach, and at the same time he was uncompromising in regard to any materialistic concession to ego and selfishness.

His only mission was to inspire and encourage the general population, from all classes and backgrounds, to develop bhakti through the public sankirtana movement, starting with hearing, repeating and remembering everything about the Personality of God. The word *sankirtana* literally means "singing, chanting, talking together", and has a great variety of applications, not only about the innumerable names of Krishna/ Hari but also about his teachings, activities, qualities, forms, energies, etc. These also include the names and attributes of Shiva, as we can see from many practical examples of Chaitanya experiencing transcendental ecstatic symptoms while visiting Shiva temples and chanting the name of Shiva. One of the favorite kirtanas in Chaitanya's tradition is particularly interesting: *hari haraye namah, krishna yadavaya namah, yadavaya, madhvaya, kesavaya namah*, where Hari and Hara open the first line, followed by the meditation on Krishna in Mathura-Dvaraka (with the Yadus), a revealing reference to Madhava (as we have elaborated in the previous pages) and finally to Kesava, a name that has been explained with several meanings - from the praise for his killing the evil asura Kesi (also having symbolical implications) to the contemplation of Krishna's long and luxuriant hair (a popular symbol of beauty and sense enjoyment). Although Chaitanya personally focused more on Radha Krishna, he also became lost in the contemplation of various avatars of Vishnu, especially Ramachandra, and praised Murari Gupta's exclusive devotion to Rama.

Krishna Chaitanya welcomed followers from prominent brahmin families (about 70% of his companions) such as Advaita Acharya, Srivasa Pandita, Chandrasekhara Acharya in Navadvip, Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya in Puri and Gopala Bhatta in Rangakshetra, Shankarite sannyasis such as Brahmananda Bharati and Paramananda Puri, temple servants such as Sikhi Mahiti (and his sister the famous Madhavi Devi, still considered one of the most prominent poets in Orissa, and one of the 4 persons who were ever allowed in Chaitanya's room), Pradyumna Mishra and Tulasi Pariccha, government officers such as Ramananda Raya, fallen Hindus who had converted to Islam such as Dabir Khas and Sakara Malik (later known as Rupa and Sanatana Gosvamis) and embraced nameless people of very humble social status such as Kholavecha Sridhara and Ramadasa Visvasa, including "untouchables" such as fishermen, and a Muslim-born devotee later known as Haridasa, to whom he gave the title of Namacharya. His main companion, Nityananda, was an avadhuta - meaning one who, on principle, is totally uninterested in any rules or social conventions. Chaitanya only objected to meeting king Prataparudra, relenting when the king presented himself in humble attire as an ordinary devotee. Chaitanya did not make any mystery around his deep loathing for all types of politics.

In this regard we need to address the misleading rumor that blames Chaitanya's influence on king Prataparudra for the decay in his administration; some people have been saying that Prataparudra had started to neglect his duties because he became enamored with the idea of renunciation to worldly affairs and spent all his time in thinking about Krishna and Radha and the gopis in Vrindavana, sitting idly with Chaitanya and his friends. The actual fact is that Prataparudra (like most other kings of his times) was an utterly incompetent and myopic ruler, and instead of seeking alliances against the advancing islamic invasions, he constantly engaged in trying to uphold his own stupid false prestige through petty wars against Hindu kingdoms - not only the Vijayanagara empire

(the last true protector of Hinduism), but also against the Silavamsis of Nandapura, the Matsyas of Oddadi, Vishnuvardhana Chakravartin of Panchadharla, and the Reddis of Rajahmundri, Kondavidu and Telengana. One could be excused for suspecting that actually it would have been much better for Orissa and India in general, if Prataparudra had indeed taken the path of renunciation of a bhajananandi, resigning from the government position (like Ramananda Raya had honestly done) and leaving the job to someone who was better qualified. Surmising, of course, that *there was* someone better qualified, which is certainly not an established fact.

Prataparudra's disastrous failure even in training his own sons is demonstrated by the appalling episode in which Ramananda Raya's brother was arbitrarily and unjustly sentenced to death because of the arrogance and egotism of one of the princes, apparently over a disagreement about a horse. After much scheming Govinda Vidyadhara, the chief minister chosen and empowered by Prataparudra himself, finally succeeded in usurping the throne while the king was away at war against Vijayanagara (not on some pilgrimage or in his puja room immersed in some devotional ecstasy) and for good measure slaughtered all the sons of Prataparudra to avoid any further dynastic claim from the king's descendants.

Under the Bhoi dynasty of Govinda Vidyadhara, Orissa completely fell under the islamic domination and into one of the most painful periods of its history, especially because of the raids by Kalapahada, a Muslim convert (previously from a brahmin family) who served under the Bengali sultan Sulaiman Kararani. Kalapahada became the terror of the entire region: he destroyed innumerable temples, viciously looting and desecrating in revenge for having been unjustly treated by the Puri brahmins; he seized the Jagannatha temple, too, abducting and elaborately destroying the Deities, even if they had been hidden by the scared sevakas. For a long time the Jagannatha temple in Puri remained totally abandoned and inactive. New Deities were again desecrated and destroyed several times and the worship was re-established in Puri only in 1713 with the permission of the sultan, but the king of Puri had to convert to Islam before being allowed to continue to function as temple superintendent, and was forced to pay huge amounts of taxes from the temple income.

The Sarasvata Gaudiyas routinely define Chaitanya's philosophical perspective as *acintya bheda abheda tattva*, or "inconceivable simultaneous unity and diversity", a "Big Picture" concept that leaves a lot of freedom and space for philosophical elaborations but discourages idle, cavillous and dry erudition and complicated debates that usually end up just inflating egos. The emphasis is rather on love, friendliness, benevolence, tolerance, inclusiveness, simplicity, humility, and detachment from material identifications. Again, we must understand that Chaitanya never spoke of his own "lineage" (*parampara*, or disciplic succession) and he never gave official initiation to anyone but freely distributed the names of God to everyone especially in public, when he chanted and sang for the masses.

Chaitanya was very strict with his companions and followers who had accepted the formal vows of renunciation, but he never asked anyone to take sannyasa and in fact he encouraged all his grihastha companions and followers to take proper care of their families first, and perform their professional duties impeccably (somehow this idea became lost among the subsequent followers of the "lineage", often to a horrifying extent). Like Adi Shankara before him, Chaitanya was deeply devoted to his mother and always made sure she was well taken care of, even after he had taken sannyasa. He strongly instructed his followers in the same line: there are several examples mentioned in his

biographies: Gopala Bhatta wanted to go to Vrindavana to engage in bhajana but Chaitanya told him he should go back to his parents and take care of them under the guidance of his uncle Prabhodananda Sarasvati, and the same thing happened with Raghunatha Dasa (the son of Govardhana Majumdara, a tax collector living in Ramakeli under the government of the Sultan of Bengal). Chaitanya personally expressed concern for the family of Vasudeva Datta who was not very careful with money management, gave the name for Sivananda's son (Paramananda or Puridasa, later known as Kavi Karnapura, the author of the *Gaura ganoddesa dipika*, the *Chaitanya chandrodaya nataka* and other famous texts) and played with him and his brothers Chaitanyadasa and Ramadasa. Other examples are the son of Srivasa (resurrected by Chaitanya), Achyutananda (the son of Advaita), little Narayani (who later became the mother of Vrindavana Das), the youngest child of Prataparudra and the little son of some unnamed widow in Puri. He even had affectionate dealings with animals (for example Shivananda Sena's dog) and at times ate large quantities and considerable varieties of food simply to please those who wanted to feed him (to mention a few, Raghava Pandita and his sister Damayanti, Sivananda, Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, Raghunatha Dasa, and Jagadananda) although he also demonstrated several times that he was personally not attached to any form of sense gratification. Specifically, the distribution and partaking of prasadam has always been a very important concept in Chaitanya's approach, an idea that we also find in the tradition of Jagannatha at Puri and in other popular bhakti traditions.

Chaitanya received his first initiation (sacred thread) from his maternal grandfather Nilambara Chakravarti, by which he officially became a member of the traditional Vedic orthodox brahmana system; in fact he never minimized the importance of genuinely qualified brahmanas - and this point is highlighted considerably in his journey to Gaya in the episode of his fever that he cured by drinking the foot-wash water of a genuine brahmana. That was just before embarking into the totally different and revolutionary path of the mass distribution of the holy Names, with the second initiation he received from Isvara Chandra Puri based on the Krishna mantra, namely the 10-syllable Gopala mantra, *gopi jana vallabhaya svaha*.

It is also interesting to note that in the Sarasvata Gaudiya line the first initiation, the "harinama", is generally given to anyone as a sort of "admission to the school of bhakti", while the second initiation is considered the "real diksha" and consists in the transmission of this mantra within the Kama gayatri mantra: *klim krishnaya govindaya gopi jana vallabhaya svaha, klim kamadevaya vidmabe pushpabanaya dhimahi, tan no anangah prachodayat*, "I worship Krishna, Govinda, the love of the gopis; may I be inspired by Kamadeva (Ananga means "without a body" as he had been burned to ashes by Shiva when he tried to disrupt his meditation), by meditating on Kama, who shoots arrows made with flowers". While it has been ascertained that Madhvacharya and his succession reject the concepts of Krishna prema and Yogamaya, and scorn the worship of Radha (and Lakshmi as well), we can easily read Adi Shankara's *Saundarya lahari*, mentioning (verses 1.5, 6, 7, 32, 33, 2.47, 52, 58, 59, 76, 78, 80, 83, 86, 99) Kamadeva and his bow and arrows made of flowers, speaking of the "nine rasas" (1.41) in God and the love-making of Shiva to beautiful Shakti.

As we have seen by examining the list presented as their disciplic succession by the Gaudiya vaishnava followers of Chaitanya, and especially the Sarasvata Gaudiyas (Gaudiya Mathas and Iskcon parivara), Isvara Puri is presented as a disciple of Madhavendra Puri from the line of Madhva, but Vrindavana Dasa in his *Chaitanya bhagavata* clearly says that he entered Navadvip as a shankarite sanniyasi. Furthermore, if we make some research in Gaya (in Bihar, one of the major holy pilgrimage places in ancient times) we find out that Isvara Chandra Puri was the most

prominent religious personality there in those times, and had many disciples. Isvara Puri was based in Gaya, and was present when Chaitanya fell into a devotional ecstasy at the sight of the foot prints of Vishnu, the Padapadma or Vishnupada, that constitute the main center of worship in that pilgrimage place, where people traditionally go to offer sraddha (funeral oblations) for their deceased family members. At that time Chaitanya, aged 17, was traveling accompanied by a group of students from his school, to offer sraddha for his father. Isvara Puri recognised the boy as they had already met in Navadvip, and went to see him in his quarters, after which their relationship developed further. Chaitanya's third and last initiation was into the sannyasa order, received from Keshava Bharati, another shankarite sannyasi from the (relatively smaller) Shankara matha at Katwa, not far from Navadvipa, and a great admirer of Madhavendra Puri. We notice that Chaitanya himself took sannyasa in the Shankara line and accepted several followers who had done the same, but he never directed his followers to become members of that lineage or any other Matha. As we have seen, in his *Sikshastaka* he clearly says that there are no specific rules except for the practice of humility, respect, tolerance and detachment from material position and wealth, and especially from all forms of politics and hierarchies. So most of his devotees simply adopted the humble dress of a renounced sadhu (*babaji vesa*) and abandoned all social positions to dedicate their lives to the chanting of the holy names; some of them came to be called *gosvamis* ("masters of their senses") although they did not formally take the order of sannyasa.

Chaitanya had moved to Puri in 1510, soon after taking sannyasa, and remained there until his death in 1534, with some traveling in south India, Vrindavana and Bengal, after which he increasingly retired into isolation, lost in his devotional contemplation and surrounded by a very small number of his close associates, who remained in his Gambhira residence also after his disappearance. As Chaitanya's demise is concerned, there are distinctly different versions.

The most respected biographies in the Gaudiya vaishnava community especially among the Sarasvata Gaudiyas are Krishnadasa Kaviraja's *Chaitanya charitamrita* and Vrindavana Dasa's *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, and they do not say much about the passing of Chaitanya. Kavi Karnapura (also known as Paramananda Sena) in his *Krishna Chaitanya Charitamrita Mahakavya* simply says that "Chaitanya returned to his divine abode", and Vasudeva Ghosha (a resident of Navadvip and personal associate of Chaitanya) wrote a song about Chaitanya's disappearance, saying simply "I have lost my Gaurachandra in Gopinatha's house". A couple of generations later, Narahari Chakravarti in his *Bhakti Ratnakara* described his guru Narottama Dasa visiting Puri and receiving information about the disappearance of Chaitanya at Tota Gopinatha; he writes "Chaitanya entered the temple alone, then fell unconscious".

A popular tradition among the Gaudiyas says that Chaitanya appeared to have hurt his foot, then developed a fever and told his associates that he would be gone soon. On the next day he went to the temple of Tota Gopinatha and during the kirtana he entered the inner room of the Deity and disappeared into Gopinatha: still today the pujari of that temple will show the visitors a golden line in the leg of the Deity, where Chaitanya is said to have merged. A similar story is said about Jahnava Devi, the greatest leader of Gaudiya vaishnavism in the following years: she also disappeared into the body of the Deity of Tota Gopinatha.

Lochana Dasa in his *Chaitanya mangala* says that on Asadha saptami, Sunday afternoon, Chaitanya went for darshana as usual to Gundicha (during the Ratha yatra festival period) but he ran ahead and arrived before the devotees, closed the doors and merged into the body of Jagannatha by

embracing the Deity; Kashi Mishra, Govinda, Srivasa, Mukunda Datta and others saw him entering the temple but not coming out again; when they asked the sevaka to open the doors, the sevaka replied that he had seen him enter into the Deity of Jagannatha (this would give some substance to the persistent rumor according to which Chaitanya was buried inside the Gundicha ghara). When the other devotees caught up and were informed about what had happened, everyone wept bitterly and loudly; Prataparudra fainted and Sarvabhauma cried out in agony. The same story is given by Isana Nagara in his *Advaita Prakasa* (a hagiographic text about Advaita Acharya). A contemporary Gaudiya scholar, Dr Kapoor, confirms the disappearance of Chaitanya at the Tota Gopinatha temple, but he does not believe that Chaitanya entered the body of the Deity; he says that Gadadhara buried Chaitanya in the garden of the Tota Gopinatha temple but did not build a samadhi because he did not want huge crowds assembling there.

Vaishnava Dasa in his *Sri Chaitanya Gauranga Chakata* says that Chaitanya fell unconscious at the Garuda pillar inside the Jagannatha temple and was carried to the Tota Gopinatha temple, where he disappeared. Jayananda Mishra in his *Chaitanya mangala* (written in 1568) says that Chaitanya decided to return to the spiritual world on Asadha sukla saptami; according to his version Brahma, Yama and Indra went to Chaitanya to ask him to return to Vaikuntha because all the people were becoming liberated and hell was empty. So while Chaitanya was dancing in front of the chariots at the Ratha yatra on the day of Hera panchami (Lakshmi vijaya utsava, on Ashada sukla sasthi), his left toe was pierced by a brick, then on the 6th day of the festival (meaning on saptami, the day after the accident) the pain became severe and Chaitanya was carried to Tota Gopinatha, where he told Gadadhara Pandita that he would leave the world during the night. Jayananda writes specifically "the brick hit his foot", and that he returned to Vaikuntha on a chariot pulled by Garuda. He also says that at that time both Nityananda and Advaita were in Puri: in the presence of all the devotees, Chaitanya's physical body fell on the earth where it remained, and his death was accompanied by bad omens - meteors fell, the earth trembled, and so on. Some interpret this mention of the 6th day (sasthi) to mean that Chaitanya died from the infected wound after being in great pain for 6 days, but this is not confirmed by the calendar calculation.

Govinda Dasa babaji in his *Chaitanya Chataka* (composed in Oriya language) says that Chaitanya was carried unconscious to Tota Gopinatha, then regained consciousness as usual and went to see Jagannatha for the evening arati; at that time a garland fell from the body of Jagannatha and in a flash of light Chaitanya disappeared. Literally disappeared - his body became invisible. Achyutananda in his *Sunya sambhita* (Chaitanya's biography) and Divakara Dasa in his *Jagannatha charitamrita* (also Chaitanya's biography) say that Chaitanya merged into the body of Jagannatha in the presence of the king. In his *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, Isvara Dasa (an Oriya vaishnava follower of the Pancha Sakha sampradaya) says that Chaitanya "merged into Niladripati" (Jagannatha) in the presence of king Prataparudra, but his body was moved by Kshetrapala Shiva to the Ganga (some say this reference indicates Gomati tirtha). The day mentioned by Isvara Dasa is Sunday, sukla saptami of the month of Ashadha 1555.

The Oriya text *Chaitanya vilasa* by Madhava Pattanayaka (a follower of the Pancha Sakhas) says that Chaitanya was injured during the evening procession of Rukmini that is performed on Vaisakha amavasya; this version is also confirmed by Sadananda Kavisurya Brahma in his Oriya work *Prema tarangini*. Madhava Pattanayaka also wrote another work on Chaitanya, entitled *Vaishnava lilamrita* and composed only 2 years after Chaitanya's disappearance. The statement about Vaisakhi amavasya can be confusing, because this procession cannot be the Lakshmi vijaya (on Hera panchami)

traditionally held in the middle of the Ratha yatra celebrations in the month of Asadha (around July). Also, the Rukmini vivaha (marriage) procession is on Jyestha sukla ekadasi (a few days after Shiva's wedding from sukla caturthi to sasthi, and with the exact same celebrations such as the messenger delivering the letter with the marriage proposal); Jyestha is the lunar month between May and June, while Visakha is between April and May; also Rukmini jayanti is on Vaisakha sukla dvadasi.

So what is this Rukmini amavasya? To find out, we need to go back to Rukmini's father, king Bhishmaka of Vidarbha, and the story of his previous life as a pujari in a temple of Shiva; in that life he had been kind to a dog who used to come to the temple door hoping for some food, and had been blessed by Pasupati Shiva Mahadeva. The Deva of the Sun, Surya, had once visited Bhishmaka to compliment him on his devotion to Shiva, and he also recommended that Rukmini offer a special worship to Shiva (Shiva pada puja) on the day of Amavasya; Mahadeva was pleased by that worship and granted Rukmini the blessing to obtain Krishna as her husband; this vrata is still very popular in many places. The Gaudiya followers of Chaitanya only remember Vaisakha amavasya as the appearance day of Gadadhara Pandita with a festival in the temple of Tota Gopinatha, while according to the orthodox (smarta) brahmana calendar, Vaisakhi amavasya is a very good day for sraddha rituals (offerings to ancestors), in which the prasadam is given to animals such as crows and dogs because it is "too hot" to be consumed by human beings.

Pattanayaka writes that during the procession Chaitanya's left toe was pierced by a piece of brick lying on the road and there was some bleeding, the joint suffered a sprain and he fell on the ground in the presence of Kasi Mishra and some of the Pancha Sakhas - Jagannatha Dasa, Jasobanta Dasa, and Ananta Dasa. They took him on their shoulders to the northern mandapa of the temple; he developed a fever, his entire body became swollen and on the day of Akshaya tritiya (3 days after amavasya) he died apparently of septicemia or blood infection. It seems that very few Bengali devotees were with Chaitanya at that time (except Gadadhara Pandita, who was permanently settled in the Tota Gopinatha temple), which could explain the lack of consistent and precise information in their tradition about Chaitanya's demise.

Some say that Chaitanya's immediate followers did not want to discuss Chaitanya's death because his activities are eternal and can never end, because the avatara or any divine Personality never dies, or because it is too painful, or for similar reasons. Although we can certainly allow respect for personal feelings, we must notice that Krishna's disappearance is amply discussed in the *Bhagavata Purana*, universally considered the most authoritative and important sacred text for Chaitanya's followers, regularly read and recited by them. As we have seen, the circumstances of Krishna's disappearance described in the *Bhagavata Purana* are echoed in the popular tradition and in the accounts offered by the Oriya vaishnavas about Chaitanya's demise: Krishna was shot in the left foot by huntsman Jara's arrow and died as a consequence. Krishna's disappearance is also a very popular topic in Puri, with various versions stating that the *brahma padartha* (also called *nilamani*) that is inserted inside the new Jagannatha Deities by transferring it from the old Deities during the Nava Kalevara ritual is actually a relic from Krishna's body that remained after his cremation, and was either carried to Puri by the Pandavas or washed ashore by the ocean that carried it all the way from Dvaraka to Puri. The *Mahabharata* also tells the story of Krishna's disappearance, adding even more details, as for example the fact that Krishna serenely accepted to suffer the curse pronounced by Gandhari, by which he would lose all his family, too, and used it to withdraw his companions - the members of the Yadu dynasty - and conclude his presence on the planet. Furthermore, the fact that

there are 13 known accounts of Chaitanya's demise clearly demonstrate that the problem was not so much about "talking about it" but about "exactly knowing what happened". Some researchers even suggested that Chaitanya could have been murdered and his body hidden somewhere.

### **Nityananda parivara**

After Chaitanya's death in 1534, the largest part of his Bengali followers rallied around Jahnava Devi, the widow of Chaitanya's close companion Nityananda, and through her adopted son Virabhadra the Nityananda lineage (Nityananda parivara) of the Chaitanya tradition became the most prominent and respected well into the 19th century, so much that when Bhaktivinoda wanted to be accepted by the public as a genuine follower of Chaitanya, he had to take formal initiation from Sri Bipina bihari Goswami, disciple of Srimati Yajneswari, disciple of Srimati Ramamani in that line through Srimati Gunamanjari, Srimati Maheswari Thakurani, Sri Jayarama, Sri Rudreshwara, Sri Keshava, Sri Rajaballabha, and Sri Ramachandra Goswami, who was a direct disciple of Jahnava Mata. This information is offered in *Bhajana Rahasya*.

The very mysogynistic attitude of the Sarasvata Gaudiya line appears to have been inherited from Krishnadasa (as shown in his *Chaitanya charitamrita*) in an effort to minimize Jahnava's authority position and reclaim the Bengali followers for his own "rupanuga" sect. This trend appears to have intensified after the famous Kheturi conference, from which the line of Narottama Dasa became even more distanced from the Nityananda parivara, so much that the Sarasvata Gaudiyas' accounts minimize the conference reducing it to the mere installation of Deities and Jahnava's participation to the Kheturi "festival" (*sankirtana mahotsava*) to cooking a big feast and serving food to everybody. It is possible that such mysogynistic development was needed so that Gaudiya vaishnavism could become more acceptable in a society that was increasingly influenced by islamic attitudes, and under colonial times it was considered convenient to appease the Victorian British mentality; however those times are over and Gaudiya vaishnavism needs to shed this cumbersome luggage and return to the original mission of Chaitanya.

### **Sri Krishna Prem**

British-born Ronald Henry Nixon (1898-1965), he was one of the first westerners to pursue orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnavite Hinduism. He is mentioned in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, by James D Ryan as "Krishna Prem, Sri, Western-born Vaishnavite Guru"; he remained a strict orthodox observant for the rest of his life, was very respected, and had many Indian disciples. Brooks wrote, "Krishna Prem's evident intellectual and inspirational qualities gained him wide fame and many disciples in India, as reflected in numerous books on his life and teachings." Gertrude Emerson Sen wrote, "I know of no other person like Krishnaprem, himself 'foreign' to begin with, who has drawn so many Indians to himself". His biographer Dilip Kumar Roy wrote that Krishnaprem "had given a filip [stimulus] to my spiritual aspiration". Haberman wrote that Krishna Prem "was recognized as a Hindu saint by many Indians of his day." When Nixon died in 1965, he was hailed by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, then president of India, as a "great soul". In 1921, while still in England, Nixon had accepted the offer of a teaching position at the University of Lucknow, in northern India, where he established a spiritual relationship with Gyanendra Nath and his wife

Monica Devi (1882-1944), accepting her as guru. Monica Devi took vairagya in 1928 to fully dedicate to spiritual and devotional life, with the name of Sri Yashoda Ma, and in turn she initiated Ronald Henry into vairagya with the name of Sri Krishna Prem. Together with Sri Yashoda Ma, Sri Krishna Prem founded an ashrama at Mirtola, near Almora, Uttarakhand, and when in 1944 Yashoda Ma died, Krishna Prem succeeded her as head of the ashrama. He travelled little, but in 1948 he visited south India, meeting Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo and Mère.

### **Advaita parivara**

It seems that even after the disappearance of Jahnava, the Nityananda parivara was still open to welcome devotees without birth prejudice (certainly there was no gender bias against women) while the Advaita parivara seems to have fallen back to catering to the arrogance of the caste brahmins, probably with the idea of gaining a bit more social respectability to their sect. Advaita's son Acyutananda became a disciple of Gadadhara Pandit - the one who was settled in Puri at Tota Gopinatha, not to be confused with Gadadhara Dasa, who was one of Nityananda's chief preachers in Bengal. However, he seems to have maintained a strong family and caste consciousness, that was passed on to his descendants and successors. Advaita Acharya had 6 sons, of whom only Achyutananda, Krishna Mishra and Gopal Mishra are considered to "have understood the essence of spiritual life", while Balaram, Svarupa and Jagadisa apparently "did not". The Advaita Acharya parivara gradually turned into "caste Gosvamis" and had dwindled away into oblivion already in the times of Krishnadasa Kaviraja, as *Chaitanya charitamrita* describes that "branch of the Chaitanya tree" as withered and dying because it had stopped to accept the living water of Chaitanya's blessings. In his *Amrita-pravaha-bhashya*, Bhaktivinoda repeats Krishnadasa's evaluation: "At first, all of Advaita Prabhu's followers were of a common opinion, but in the course of time, some unfortunately adopted differing doctrines. Those who followed the opinions of Advaita himself are considered to be pure Vaishnavas; those who under some fateful influence rejected his teachings and invented a new doctrine are considered useless. We have no need of knowing the names of the useless sons of Advaita Prabhu, but have listed them together in order to be able to distinguish them. Just as the useful rice grain is separated from the chaff by winnowing, so have the useful sons of Advaita been separated from the useless."

### **Bijoy Krishna Goswami**

He was born in the line of Advaita Acharya (1434-1559) from Shantipur, as the second son of Ananda Kishore Goswami and Swarnamoyee; Ananda Kishore Goswami had traveled from Shantipur to Jagannatha Puri with a *dandi vrata*, which means covering the distance by prostrating on the ground with stretched-forward arms and standing up again at the point where the palms had touched the ground and prostrating again from that point and so on. When finally he arrived in the temple, he saw a light emanating from Jagannatha entering his chest and went into a trance of ecstasy, weeping blood. Bijoy Krishna (1841-1899) is said to have been born in a wild thicket of arum plants where his mother hid herself when a gang raided their house. As a child, he talked with the family Deity of Shyam Sundar, played ball with him and fed him the milk meant for himself. Both Bijoy Krishna and his mother were extremely charitable to poor and suffering people, irrespective of their caste and social position, and many extraordinary feats, miracles and symbolic

stories have been reported by his hagiographers. For example, an encounter with a blind lady is explained as his pain in seeing the prevailing blind faith and hypocrisy of society, and a row with a British teacher at the medical college in Calcutta is explained as the need to fight for the dignity and freedom of all Indians. During his stay in Calcutta he came in touch with the Adi Brahma Samaj and was initiated by Devendranath Tagore, becoming a dedicated preacher of the organisation, traveling "wide and far on foot sometimes without food and shelter and confronting tigers, snakes and malaria".

Bijoy Krishna dropped out from medical school without completing his studies and returned to Shantipur as a practicing homeopathic doctor, but charging nominal fees or treating patients for free, usually getting instructions from the ghost of a renowned homeopath, late Dr Durgadas Banerjee. According to another anecdote, once he swam through the river in spite with a glass bottle tied to his head because no ferry boats would dare to cross the current to take him on the other bank where a patient awaited his medicine, and he remained with him until he had recovered. However, his behavior and his joining the Brahma Samaj were considered unfitting for his caste and ancestry, so Bijoy Krishna and family, including his young wife Yogmaya (born in 1852), were persecuted and had to move to Calcutta where they faced extreme poverty and took shelter in the Samaj temple complex, where Bijoy Krishna worked as a priest. His hagiographers claim that he became a prominent acharya of the Brahma Samaj, organising mass prayers, opening many centers, delivering lectures, introducing devotional songs and writing books and articles for religion journals.

One night at midnight he was in deep meditation when Advaita Acharya, Krishna Chaitanya and Nityananda Prabhu personally arrived at his door; on the order of his ancestor Advaita, he took a bath and was initiated by Krishna Chaitanya himself with a special mantra. He thought it had been a dream, but he found that he had changed his clothes and there were three mats on which the three divine personalities had sat, and his wife also confirmed she had seen the scene. Some time later, while he was meditating on the formless Brahman, Shyama Sundara Krishna appeared to him and asked to be decorated with ornaments; he said that his aunt in Shantipur had hidden some gold he could use for that purpose. Bijoy Krishna went to Shantipur and the aunt was so shocked by the revelation of that secret that she gave him the gold. Some time later, again Shyama Sundara appeared to him, inviting him to come and see his new ornaments. This time the pujari at Shantipur allowed him to enter the temple, and after the darshana he realised that gold becomes brighter when remodeled in new ornaments, so he returned to the devotional path, leaving the Brahma Samaj, urged by another vision of Advaita Acharya. However, a meeting with a mysterious sadhu convinced him that the *kulaguru* cult in which he was born was a sterile path, and he needed to find a genuine *satguru*. He started roaming and approached many sadhus from various sects, such as Ramayita, Baul, Kabir, Lamas, Yogis, Tantric, Aghori - but each one of them told him "your satguru is waiting for you". He also met Trailanga Swami but could not accept him as guru as he was shocked to see him sprinkling his own urine on the image of goddess Kali saying "Ganga, Ganga". At Gaya he stayed at the foot of the Akasha Ganga hill, the ashrama of a Ramayite saint named Raghuwardas Baba, and a boy came to inform him that a special personality had appeared on top of the hill: this is how it is said that Bijoy Krishna met his sadguru Brahmananda Paramahansa and received a special mantra from him. After leaving the Brahma Samaj, Bijoy Krishna moved with his family - mother, mother-in-law, wife Yogmaya Devi, son Yogjeevan, 3 daughters and many disciples - to a hermitage in the jungles of Gendaria near Dhaka. He practiced the *ajapa japa sadhana* (not chanting mantras but merely breathing automatically) and read mainly the *Guru Grantha Shabib* and *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas Kempis, and also *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, *Ram Charita Manas*,

*Bhaktamal* (lives of saints), *Mahabharata* and occasionally *Bhagavad gita*, but never the *Upanishads* or *Brahma sutra*. His favorite mantra, called "naam brahma", was "harer nam, harer nam, harer namaiva kevalam, kalau nasteva nasteva nasteva gatir anyatha", followed by the Hare Krishna maha mantra, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare".

In 1894 Bijoy Krishna attended the Prayag Kumbha Mela, where he established the worship of Krishna Chaitanya and Nityananda as Deities, and also causing a controversy (already criticised by the sadhus in Vrindavana) with his imaginative tilaka that united not only the Vaishnava and Shaiva marks, but also the Christian cross and the Muslim crescent. To his critics, Bijoy Krishna preached about Krishna Chaitanya and Nityananda being the incarnations of Krishna and Balarama, and that Chaitanya's advent is mentioned in the shastra. Bijoy Krishna's daughter Shanti Sudha Devi, born in 1875, was entrusted with the Gendaria Ashram and asked by Brahmananda Paramahansa to give initiation to people, then after her death in 1943 the role of diksha guru passed to Yamuna Maiji, a disciple of Bijoy Krishna.

### Other companions

Like the successors of Advaita Acharya, also the successors of Gopala Bhatta similarly accepted disciples but only based on birthright guruship, meaning that the position of guru in that lineage is reserved to the seminal (*sukra*, as in "sperm") descendants irrespective of their actual qualifications and realisations; they maintain that all others can at best become disciples but never gurus, and they even discourage non-brahmin disciples from personally performing religious rituals - the guru will perform rituals for them against payment of a fee. In more recent times Padmanabha Gosvami, the descendant of Gopala Bhatta and hereditary mahanta of the Ramana Ramana temple in Vrindavana, made significant efforts to attract Iskcon members, also banking on the fact that before his fateful journey to America, Bhaktivedanta Swami had stayed in the Radha Ramana temple as a guest. Padmanabha Gosvami was also very interested in the subject of salagrama silas and wrote a booklet to that effect; his son Chandana Gosvami is now in charge of the family business as the initiating acharya and mahanta of the sect.

Gadadhara Pandit never left the Tota Gopinatha temple in Puri, that is still open to devotees from all backgrounds, and his followers focused on Deity worship, caring for the cows, reading of the *Bhagavata Purana* and quiet bhajana, offering respect to all Devas to get their blessings and accepting the babaji vesa (simple white dress). Besides the temple-ashrama in Puri, there is another ashrama in Navadvipa but the sampradaya does not advertise its presence anywhere, except for Satyanarayana Dasa, former member of Iskcon who later accepted initiation from Haridasa Shastri of Vrindavana, and wrote the famous *In Vaikuntha Not Even the Leaves Fall*, to respond to the Iskcon GBC's pontifical dogma about the origin of the jivatmas.

During his life, Srivasa became the reference head for the residents of Mayapur-Navadvip, encouraging his brothers Srirama, Srinidhi and Sripati to engage in sankirtana meetings. Srivasa's wife Malini took care of Saci, Chaitanya's mother, as Srivasa lived just 200 meters from her house. Apart from hosting sankirtana parties in his big house and being a close friend of Chaitanya's family, Srivasa did not take any official position in Chaitanya's movement, although he is included in the "pancha tattva" group and is presented as an incarnation of Narada Muni, probably due to his great renunciation and detachment from all material affairs. Apart from the episode when Srivasa's

son was resurrected by Chaitanya in the early Navadvipa period, Sarasvata Gaudiya literature makes no mention of any of Srivasa's descendants either seminally or in a discipic line, and if any exist, they are not advertising themselves in any way. However, it is not difficult to imagine that many Bengali devotees informally became babajis to take instructions (siksha) if not diksha from Srivasa, and kept his inspiration alive for several generations. Other followers from the Gaudiya group also continued to follow Chaitanya's instructions about preaching the Names of Krishna, each in their own particular way. Independent devotees also branched out in several groups and cults including Gauranga Nagari, Sakhi Bheki etc, sometimes taking advantage of the gullibility of simple-minded people and exploiting them for money, sense gratification and prestige.

## The six Gosvamis

The Sarasvata Gaudiyas, however, focus more on the "six Gosvamis of Vrindavana", namely Rupa, Sanatana, Raghunatha Dasa, Raghunatha Bhatta, Jiva, and Gopala Bhatta, who were sent by Chaitanya to excavate and revive the holy places of Krishna lila in the area of Mathura and Vrindavana. More specifically, Rupa (1489-1564) and Sanatana (1488-1564) and later their nephew Jiva (1513-1598, the son of Anupama) are said to have become important leading figures in the region, writing several elaborately scholarly books and establishing large temples for Krishna Deities. Gopala Bhatta (1503-1578) wrote some rule books about Deity worship and established the temple of Radha Ramana in Vrindavana, and at his death he left it to his seminal successors, and the line is still active till date. Raghunatha Dasa (1495-1571) and Raghunatha Bhatta (1505-1579) remained in a marginal position although they were respected by everyone for their humility and renunciation.

Rupa and his brothers were proud descendants of scholarly Sarasvata brahmins of the Bharadvaja gotra learned in the *Yajur Veda*; in his *Laghu Tosani*, Jiva reports the family history starting from one Sarvajna, a "brahmana king" who was given the title of *jagat guru*. His son Aniruddha was also an acclaimed scholar and had two sons, Harihara and Rupesvara, and at his death he gave each one half of the kingdom; Rupesvara was more interested in the Vedic literature, Harihara in weaponry and politics, so much that he ended up snatching Rupesvara's land and forcing his family to migrate to Paurastyadesa. Rupesvara's descendant Padmanabha relocated his family to Nabahatta (Naihati) on the banks of the Ganges, raising his 18 daughters and 5 sons, the youngest son being named Mukunda, whose son Kumaradeva moved to Jessore (now in Bangladesh), to avoid political and religious unrest. At Kumaradeva's death, his sons Santosha (Rupa), Amara (Sanatana) and Srivallabha (Anupama) moved to Sakurma, near to the capital of Gaudadesa, and studied *Nyaya-sastras* from the famous logician Vasudeva Sarvabhauma Bhattacarya and his brother Madhusudana Vidyavachaspati, but besides Sanskrit they also studied Arabic and Persian. Rupa became the Sultan's secretary as Dabir Khas, while Sanatana became state revenue minister as Sakara Mallik, and they nominally converted to Islam to occupy such positions. Rupa and his brothers made their residence at the state capital of Ramakeli and it was there, in 1514, that they met Chaitanya for the first time. The meeting changed their lives and they decided to leave the service of the Sultan and take up a life of renunciation in the association of Chaitanya and his followers. Rupa loaded all his wealth onto two boats and left with his brother Anupama for their ancestral home at Fatiabad in Jessore, where they distributed almost all of it; they wrote a letter to Sanatana telling him of their plans and asking him to meet them in Vrindavana, and they also told him that they had left 10,000

gold coins in case he was in need of financial help. Later, when Sanatana was thrown into prison by the Sultan for disobedience, he used this money to bribe the jailer and escaped to Varanasi to meet with Chaitanya.

In the disciplic line given by the Sarasvata Gaudiyas, we see that after Chaitanya, Rupa is considered the main successor, and this is why the Sarasvata Gaudiyas call themselves "rupanugas". However, Rupa did not give official initiation to anyone and did not establish any matha or ashrama; also the position number 23 in the presented parampara list includes not only his name but also the names of Svarupa (Damodara) and Sanatana, and all 3 of them are supposed to be the guru(s) of Krishnadasa Kaviraja, the author of *Chaitanya charitamrita*, who actually mentions only Rupa and Raghunatha at the end of each chapter of his book, and does not speak about Svarupa and Damodara at all. We therefore see that Krishnadasa appears to be the subsequent link in the disciplic succession simultaneously connected both to # 23 (Rupa, Svarupa, Sanatana) and # 24 (Raghunatha, Jiva). Obviously, this shows not a strictly formal and official matter of diksha initiation, but a demonstration of a rather well-know fact - that the Sarasvata Gaudiya line is about siksha (instruction, inspiration) and not at all about diksha (formal initiation succession).

Although Krishnadasa had settled in Braj/ Vrindavana (his *bhajana kutir* was on the bank of the Radhakunda), his book was written in Bengali language, obviously for the purpose of gaining some measure of authority over the Gaudiya devotees, and this seems to indicate that in his times the movement had already started to disintegrate and lose strength. Most important of all, it seems that there was a growing feeling for the need of a greater respectability of the movement in the eyes of the public, because the simple distribution of the holy Names appeared to be insufficient to attract the interest of people. This does not necessarily mean that Rupa and the other Gosvamis of Vrindavana and their associates were anxious to get some materialistic advantage - followers, fame, distinction, recognition, profit etc, but Krishnadasa very clearly shows from the beginning of his book that he wants to build a case for the divinity of Chaitanya, probably trying to imitate the Mahayana current of Buddhism.

In the same disciplic line presented by the Sarasvata Gaudiyas, the next link is Narottama Dasa, who wrote some devotional songs but no books, and preached mostly in Manipur; he was son of king Krishnananda of Kheturi in Bengal, and probably provided a good contrast with the non-descript general mass of babajis who focused on humility, renunciation and simplicity of life, only presenting the chanting of the holy Name as the sole purpose of Chaitanya's mission. It is also interesting to note that Kheturi was the venue of a crucial gathering of Chaitanya's followers after his disappearance and the disappearance of his closest companions including Nityananda. At that time Nityananda's wife Jahnava Devi was the most respected initiating guru in the movement, but the description of the event offered by the Sarasvata Gaudiya presentations simply mention that she cooked a feast and distributed prasadam to all the devotees. Also, such presentations completely skip over whatever philosophical or organisational discussion, and gives the impression that the entire event was limited to an installation ceremony of Deities, a big kirtana and a prasadam banquet.

Another quite famous preacher of the Gaudiya movement in the next generation was Rasikananda, a disciple of Syamananda who was a disciple of Jiva Gosvami. His life has been described by Gopivallabha Dasa in his book *Rasika Mangala*, written in 1657. Once he was travelling with his disciples to Puri for participating to the annual Ratha Yatra, but after crossing the Vaitarani river the

group of devotees had to stop at Malatipalam (Malatipatpur). During the night Jagannatha appeared in a dream to the king Nrsimha Deva, and told him to go and personally invite Rasikananda to the festival. Later the king gave Rasikananda some land in Puri at Balisahi, near Gacchakali; today his ashrama is called Kunja Matha. He passed away at Kshirachora Gopinatha temple in Remuna, near Balasore.

The subsequent generations of preachers continued the basic mission of distributing the holy Names, but the rift between groups became increasingly deeper, which makes us think that at the Kheturi festival there was much more happening than it is generally told. Among other prominent preachers of the early Gaudiya movement, we can mention Srinivasa Acharya, who wrote the *Sad gosvami astakam* (and his disciple Ramachandra Kaviraja), Syamananda, and especially Narottama Dasa and Krishnadasa Kaviraja. While Srinivasa (who took initiation from Gopala Bhatta) and Syamananda were more simple-minded and satisfied with engaging in kirtana and propagating the books written by Rupa, Sanatana and Jiva, Krishnadasa Kaviraja and Narottama seem to have had some more grandiose ideas about propagating the mission.

A disciple of Narottama was Sri Yuta Krishna Charana Chakravarti, guru of Radha Ramana Chakravarti, guru of Visvanatha Chakravarti, who lived in the bhajana kutir of Krishnadasa at Radhakunda. Another key figure in the Sarasvata Gaudiya movement is Baladeva Vidyabhushana (Sri Govinda Dasa), who was born in the 1600s in Remuna (Kshirachora Gopinatha's place), Orissa, and had been initiated in the Madhvacharya line, considering himself a great dig-vijaya pandita. In Puri he met Radha Damodara Deva Gosvami and subsequently he became a babaji under Visvanatha Chakravarti. In 1706 Vishvanatha Chakravarti sent him to Gulta (near Jaipur, Rajasthan) to help the Gaudiya devotees in a local controversy, as the Ramanandis there had denied the Bengali vaishnavas the right to worship Govinda (the ancient Deity from Vrindavana, carried to Rajasthan to escape the islamist raids) because they had no commentary on *Vedanta-sutra*. Then and there Baladeva Vidyabhushana composed the *Govinda Bhasya*, for which he became famous although he does not appear in the Sarasvata Gaudiya disciplic succession; to increase the prestige of the movement, Baladeva Vidyabhushana mentioned a connection to the Madhva line through one Lakshmipati Tirtha, presented as the guru of Madhavendra Puri.

The disciplic succession presented by the Sarasvata Gaudiyas continues after Chaitanya with the following links:

23. Rupa, (Svarupa, Sanatana)
24. Raghunatha, Jiva
25. Krishnadasa
26. Narottama
27. Visvanatha Chakravarti
28. Jagannatha dasa babaji
29. Bhaktivinoda
30. Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati (from whom the "Sarasvatas" take their name)

Some further research has shown that between # 27 (Visvanatha Chakravarti) and # 28 (Jagannatha Dasa babaji) several other names should be filled in, starting from famous Baladeva Vidyabhushana and his disciple Uddhava Dasa babaji, then Madhusudana Dasa babaji, who appears to have been the guru of Jagannatha Dasa babaji. Visvanatha Chakravarti is said to have lived from 1626 to 1708

(although the dates are not clear or sure) while Jagannatha Das Babaji was (probably) born around 1750. Two other names have been skipped between # 28 (Jagannatha Dasa babaji) and # 29 (Bhaktivinoda): Bhagavat Dasa babaji and Gaurakisora Dasa babaji - probably because Bhaktivinoda had been formally initiated by Bipina Gosvami (from the disciplic succession of Jahnava), but also received babaji disksha from Gaura Kishora Das babaji. So just like in the case of Krishnadasa, we find that one single link in the disciplic chain (Bhaktivinoda) had a simultaneous connection with 3 different gurus, 2 of whom are not mentioned officially in the Sarasvata Gaudiya presentations. In the manuscript of *Bhajana Rahasya*, Bhaktivinoda mentioned his guru parampara as follows: Sri Jahnava Mata, Sri Ramachandra Gosvami, Sri Rajaballabha, Sri Keshava, Sri Rudreshwar, Sri Jayaram, Srimati Mahesvari Thakurani, Srimati Gunamanjari, Srimati Ramamani, Srimati Yajneswari, Sri Bipinabihari Gosvami. Bhaktivinoda identified himself as Kamala Manjari, his spiritual master Sri Bipinabihari Gosvami as Vilasa manjari, Srimati Maheshwari Thakurani as Rati manjari, Sri Keshava Gosvami as Rasa manjari and Srimati Jahnava Thakurani as Ananga manjari.

### **Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta**

Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838-1914) was born as Kedarnath Datta in the ancient village of Birnagar located in the Nadia district. His family originally belonged to the village of Chadi in Orissa, about 13 km from Kendrapara in Orissa, on the bank of river Virupa. According to the *Datta Vamsavali* written by Bhaktivinoda himself in 1876, in the 149th generation of descendants from Chitragupta, Purushottama son of Shiva Datta went from Kanyakubja to Bengal under Adisura the Suryavamsi King of Bengal. Purushottama's youngest son took sannyasa as Kanaka dandi; among Purushottama's descendants, Binayaka and his son Narayana Datta became ministers of the the king of Bengal. Another ancestor, Krishnananda Datta, lived in Andul where he was visited by Chaitanya's companion Nityananda, who offered him the Hare Krishna mahamantra, after which Krishnananda handed over his estate to his son Kandarpa Dutta and accepting tirtha sannyasa he went to Puri and set up an ashrama named Andul Matha; he always remained there and silently chanted 300,000 Hare Krishna maha mantras and worshipped Radha Madhava Deities. After some years he moved to Baladeva Kshetra (also called Tulasi Kshetra, the place where Baladeva had killed the demon Kandarasura and married his daughter Tulasi). With the help of the king of Aul, who donated some land, he settled in the village of Chhoti with his Deity Radha Madhava, and after some years he also installed the image of Jagannatha.

In contrast with the humble and unassuming babajis of the mainstream Gaudiya vaishnava tradition, who lived in complete renunciation, Bhaktivinoda worked at first as a school teacher and principal at Bhadrak High School and at Midnapura High School, and later on as a Government officer. He was the first Law graduate from Orissa, having appeared at examination in Calcutta University; in 1868 he was appointed as Deputy Magistrate, the highest position that could be held by an Indian in the then British government of India, and he served in Puri for five years and later in various places of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa until 1904 when he retired. He also had a wife and many children: 8 sons (Radhika Prasad in 1870, a son who died 2 months after birth, then Kamala Prasad in 1872, Bimala Prasad in 1874, Barada Prasad in 1877, Biraja Prasad in 1878, Lalita Prasada in 1880, and Shailaja Prasad in 1892) and 5 daughters (Sandamini in 1864, Kadambini in 1866, Krishna Binodini in 1884 and Shyama Sarojini in 1888). Besides these seminal children, he had

many spiritual children like Krishnadas babaji and Bhaktipradipa Tirtha. Krishnadas babaji engaged in the service of Bhaktivinoda until his disappearance in 1914; Bhaktipradipa Tirtha took sannyasa from Bhaktisiddhanta and in 1933 he went to Europe to carry the message of Chaitanya with a group of preachers.

The writings and activities of Bhaktivinoda revolutionised the Gaudiya movement, especially because he was the first to write and mass-print in English, presenting the philosophy of Chaitanya in a form that appealed to the Western philosophers and academics and Christian religionists who dictated the cultural norms in British-dominated India. In 1881 he started to publish *Sajjana tosanī*, the first spiritual magazine in the Vaishnava society (monthly from 1881 up to 17th volume), which inspired the creation of similar publications such as *Ratnakar* in Dacca, *Hari-Bhakti-Pradayini* in Balasore and *Vaishnava* in Calcutta. He also gave several lectures (the most famous being on the *Bhagavatam* in 1869) and established hundreds of Nama Hatta groups for the free distribution of the holy Names. In 1868 he wrote the *Sac-cid-ananda-premalata*, for which he was awarded the title of Sac-cid-ananda.

He sent his book *Sri Gauranga-līla-smarana-stotram* to many universities and libraries, and he presented the manuscript of *Bhagavata Purana* with Vishvanatha's commentary to the king of Tripura, Biruchandra Manikya Bahadur, requesting him to publish it. In 1886 he installed a printing press named Chaitanya Yantra under the management of Bipinabihari, and published *Dasopanisad Charanika*, *Prema pradipa*, *Bhavavali* (in Sanskrit), *Sri Vishnu Sahasranama Stotram* with Baladeva Vidyabhushana's commentary and Bengali translation. In 1887 he received an old palm leaf manuscript of *Chaitanya Upanishad* from his disciple Madhusudan Dasa of Sambalpur in Orissa, and a *Sri Krishna Vijaya* from Gunaroy Khan, and published them. He also published *Harikatha* (1850), *Shumbha-Nishumbha yudha* (1851), *Poriade* (English epic, 1857-1858), *Mathas of Orissa* (1860), *Bijanagram* (1863), *Our Wants* (1863), *Sanyasi* (1863), *Speech on Gautama* (1866), *Speech on Bhagavatam* (1869), *Garbhastotra Vyakhya* (*Sambandha-tattva Chandrika*, 1870), *Reflections* (English poems, 1871), *Jagannath Temple in Puri* (1871), *Slokas on Samadhi of Thakur Haridas* (1871), *Akharas of Puri* (1871), *Vedanta adbhikaranamala* (Sanskrit verses with Bengali commentary, 1872), *Datta kaustubham* (1874), *Sri Krishna Sambita* (1874), *Dattanamshamala* (1876), *Bandhavijay Kanyam* (1878), *Kalyana Kalpataru* (1881), *A Review in English of Pandit Upendramohan Goswami's thesis Nityarupa Samsthapan* (1883), *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (with Vishwanath Chakravarty's commentary *Sarartha Varshini* and Bengali translation *Rasikaranjan*, 1886), *Sri Chaitanya Shikshamrita* (1886), *Sri Shikshashtakam* (with the Sanskrit commentary *Sanmohana-Bhashyam* and translation in Bengali verses, 1886), *Manah Siksha* (1886), *Sri Harinama* (1892), *Sri Nama* (1892), *Sri Nama Mahima* (1892), *Sri Nama Prachar* (1892), *Sri Nama Tattva* (1892), *Sriman Mahaprabhur Shiksha* (1893), *Tattva-viveka* (1893), *Saranagati* (1893), *Shoka shtan* (1893), *Jaiva Dharma* (1893), *Tattva Sutram* (1894), *Isa Upanishad* (with Baladeva Vidyabhushana's commentary and Bengali explanations, 1894), *Tattva muktavali* (*Mayavada Shatadushani*, 1894), *Chaitanya Charitamrita* (including the commentary *Amritaprabaha Bhasya* and smaller works of various authors, 1895), *Gauranga Smaran Mangal Stotram* (1896), *Artha panchaka* (1896), *Brahma Sambita* (Sanskrit verses with Jiva Goswami's commentary, 1897), *Sri Krishna Karnamrita* (by Bilvamangala, Sanskrit text with Chaitanyadasa's Sanskrit commentary and Bengali translation, 1898), *Sri Upadeshamritam* (1898), *Sri Madhva Bhasyam on Bhagavad Gita* (Sanskrit commentary by Madhvacharya, 1898), *Sri Goloka Mahatmyam* (part of the work *Sri Bhagavatamritam* in Sanskrit verses by Sanatana Goswami, 1898), *Sri Bhajanamritam* (by Narahari Sarkar, 1899), *Sri Nabadvip Bhava Tarangini* (1899), *Sri Harinama Chintamani* (1900), *Sri Bhagavatarka Marichimala* (important slokas arranged systematically from *Srimad Bhagavatam* according to the divisions of sambandha, abhidheya

and prayojana and their Bengali translation and commentary, 1901), *Padma Purana* (1901), *Sri Sankalpa Kalpadruma* (by Vishvanatha Chakravarti, with Bengali translation, 1901), *Sri Bhajana Rahasya* (1902), *Bijanagram* (1902), *Satkriya Sara Dipika* with the appendix *Samskar Dipika* (a book of rituals for all Gaudiya vaishnava householders, brahmachari and sanniyasis, 1904), *Sri Prema Vivarta* (by Pandit Jagadananda, 1906), *Svaniyam Dvadashakam* (incomplete). Unfortunately these volumes are not available any more. Some Gaudiya Mathas have printed an edition of Bhaktivinoda's *Jaiva Dharma* and a few other publications had been produced, but it does not seem that his enthusiasm for printing, distributing, studying and collecting books has survived among the descendants of his spiritual lineage. As we have already mentioned, Bhaktivinoda wanted to distance the Gaudiya movement from the "mayavadis", those followers of Shankaracharya who claim that the impersonal Brahman is the highest reality; in his criticism for this perspective, Bhaktivinoda explains that according to mayavadis when God descends as avatara he also takes a material body and becomes subject to material illusion (maya), thus each and anyone of us is actually Vishnu/Narayana, but "we don't remember because we are now covered by maya". This strange concept gave origin to the definition of *daridra narayana* to indicate the conditioned soul in his illusion and suffering, and the definition of *mayavada* to indicate those who consider illusion (maya) more powerful than Vishnu/Hari.

The revolutionary spirit embodied by Bhaktivinoda was carried on by Bhaktisiddhanta and Bhaktivedanta, who also introduced many changes in the Gaudiya vaishnava tradition. Bhaktisiddhanta, for example, created the Gaudiya Matha (ashramas with temples, Deities, and brahmachari students, in the same style of the Shankaracharya mathas) and also introduced the order of sanniyasa. Until that time the Gaudiya vaishnavas were just homeless babajis who lived in solitude simply chanting japa and bhajan, or at most, writing bhakti literature like the six Gosvamis of Vrindavana. Those babajis were not in the sanniyasa order, they did not belong to any institution, they did not have temples or ashramas, and they were not keeping disciples with them. In fact, if we observe the picture of the six Gosvamis, we will see that they were not dressed in sanniyasi robes (just had a very simple white loincloth) and they were not carrying dandas (neither eka-danda nor tri-danda). On the other hand, Gopala Bhatta Gosvami was married and his seminal descendants are still in charge of the Radha Ramana temple in Vrindavana and carry the family name of Gosvami. Another important innovation of the Gaudiya matha was the strict rule of non-association with women. Some babajis had disgraced the name of Gaudiya vaishnavism by freely cultivating illicit and irresponsible sexual relationships with their female disciples or the wives of their disciples, or even with common naive women among the public, and using their supposed renunciation to dump their exploited lovers when they grew tired of the relationship.

Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati (born as Bimala Prasad, 1874-1936) was the 4th son and direct spiritual successor of Bhaktivinoda. As we mentioned, Bhaktivinoda served in Puri as Deputy Magistrate for 5 years; at first he stayed in Kshetra babu's rented house on Grand Road with his mother, wife, two sons (Annada Prasad, Radika Prasad) two daughters (Sandamini and Kadambini) and two sisters (Seje didi and Nutan didi). It is interesting to note how Bhaktivinoda gave all his sons names connected to the blessings of the Mother Goddess: Annapurna (Parvati), Radha, Vimala (Durga), Kamala (Lakshmi), Varada ("giving blessing", it could be any Goddess in her benevolent aspect), Viraja (Durga), Lalita (which could refer not only to one of the two main sakhis of Krishna, but to Durga as per the famous *Lalita sahasra nama*), Shailaja ("born from stone/ mountain", another name of Parvati). When the child was 10 months old, the family moved to Ranaghata, Nadia, Bengal, where their religious activities continued.

In 1897 father and son together established the Sarasvati Chatuspati press and started publishing magazines *Jyotirvid* and *Brihaspati*, the *Surya siddhanta* (an ancient astrological text), *Bhakti panjika*, *Sri Navadvipa panjika* and *Raj ratnakar* (a history of the royal family in Tripura). From 1885 to 1905 Bimala Prasad was employed by the king of Tripura as advisor, editor, and tutor for the sons of Maharaja Radhakishore Manikya Bahadur. In 1897 he began to strictly observe the vow of chaturmasya. In 1899 he published various spiritual articles on the magazine *Nivedana*, then he wrote a commentary on *Chaitanya charitamrita* entitled *Anubhasya*, and a book about castes entitled *Bange Samajikata*. In 1900 he visited Orissa with his father, and as Bhaktivinoda decided to build a bhajan kutir in Puri, he assisted him in that work; during this period there was a controversy with Radharamana charana Dasa babaji, who had developed a new mantra and dressed his disciple Jayagopala Bhattacharya as a gopi (Lalita sakhi).

Bimala Prasad also started to compile a vaishnava encyclopedia entitled *Vaishnava Manjusa Samahriti*, published in 4 volumes and containing the history of vaishnavism, a compendium of vaishnava literature, philosophy, rasa shastra, architecture, rituals and a glossary with thousands of entries. He believed that without a vaishnava dictionary, people would not understand the meaning of the technical words in vaishnava scriptures and they could become averse to vaishnavism; he said he was determined to complete the *Vaishnava Manjusa* even if he had to take another birth to do that. On 6 February 1913 he started the Bhagavat Printing Press (Sri Bhagavat yantra) in Calcutta, which he called his *brihat mridanga* ("big drum"), explaining that an ordinary kirtana party drum could be heard for only a few blocks, but his Great Drum could be heard far and wide. In 1914 the press was moved to Vrajapattana and in 1915 to Krishnanagar.

On Phalguna Purnima, 29 March 1918, he entered the order of sannyasa with the name of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati; he gave himself initiation in front of the picture of Gaura Kisora babaji, and then he started giving sannyasa initiation to his own disciples. He decided to move away from the babaji dress tradition to establish a higher standard of literacy based on the study of scriptures and a strict moral discipline to improve the public image of Gaudiya vaishnavism; his sannyasa system was rather peculiar and revolutionary, as it was tridandi (carrying a 3-pointed staff, rather than the simple staff called ekadanda) and its members kept a sikha (tuft of hair) on the back of their head; even more interestingly, he introduced shoes and sewn clothes for sannyasis and allowed them to travel in vehicles especially in motor cars. The Math also opened temples in big modern cities in India such as Calcutta, controlled land properties and temples, utilized vehicles, machinery and western technology, printed literature in many copies by establishing printing presses, distributed books freely or at nominal cost, regularly published magazines and journals, and entertained preaching relationships with influential people and politicians (for example with the king of Tripura). All this was in stark contrast with the Gaudiya vaishnava babajis who dressed in a simple white cotton piece of cloth, had no permanent residence or ashrama, went barefoot or wore wooden sandals, travelled by walking only, subsisted by begging food, and mostly kept their philosophy to a bare minimum. The Gaudiya Math was developed as an official, socially respectable religious institution with residential ashramas, public libraries on shastra (Vedas, *Upanishad* and bhakti literature), collecting historical material, organizing festivals and parikramas in holy places as well as preaching groups and meetings from door to door and from village to village, awarding the sacred thread to his disciples, initiating disciples into brahmacharya and sannyasa. He also organised pictorial exhibits on the life and teachings of Chaitanya and stories from Vedic literature, developed a Sanskrit teaching program based on the *Hari Namamrta Vyakarana* (a Sanskrit grammar by Jiva Gosvami), introduced academic examinations on vaishnava literature and philosophy including the

history of religious sects, and established a residential English High School (Thakur Bhaktivinoda Institute).

In June 1918 Bhaktisiddhanta visited Orissa and Puri with 23 devotees, giving discourses in several places. In 1924 he established a Matha in Bhubaneswar; in 1925-1926 he spoke widely about the daivi varnashrama; in 1927 the *Sajjana Toshani* expanded its publications in Hindi and Sanskrit, and in English language under the name *The Harmonist*. In 1929 he established 108 Pada pitha memorials of the footprints of Chaitanya in various places where he had traveled and preached. In 1930 he installed Deities of Radha Govinda at Triveni, Prayag (Allahabad) Purna Kumbha Mela and established a diorama show called Sridham Mayapur Navadvipa Exhibition, then installed Radha Krishna Deities in Baghbazar Gaudiya Matha, Calcutta. In 1933 Bhaktisiddhanta sent a mission to England consisting of a group of preachers headed by Bhaktipradipa Tirtha, the seniormost sannyasi preacher of Gaudiya mission and disciple of Bhaktivinoda; several meetings were organised in universities, Students' Union clubs, the Empire Society, Buckingham Palace, the Theosophical Society of London and the Anglo-Catholic Church International Mission Council.

On 10 December 1933 the same preachers went to Germany, where they had a meeting with President Hindenburg and delivered lectures at the House of Parliament, the State Church, Bristol Hotel and Hambled House in Berlin, then traveled to various other places. As a result, a few German scholars such as Schulze, Hern Barm and Unoth came to Mayapur in India and took initiation from Bhaktisiddhanta. The preaching tour continued to Czechoslovakia and Austria before returning to India with two foreign disciples. On 14 October 1936 while Bhaktisiddhanta was staying in Tridandi Gaudiya Matha in Bhubaneswar, Orissa, another preaching party left to London with Rasabihari, carrying Gomati Sila, Salagrama and Govardhan Sila; during that mission C Bawtel, a lady from a royal family, received harinama diksha from Bhaktipradipa Tirtha with the name of Vrindavana Dasi and became the director of the London Gaudiya Matha; the two centers of London and Berlin thus became listed in the total of 64 Gaudiya Mathas together with the others in India, Bangladesh, and Rangun. In 1933 Bhaktisiddhanta published *The Vedanta, Its Morphology and Ontology*; in 1935 he celebrated the Purushottama dhama parikrama and completed his work on the *Bhagavata Purana*, with indexes, word meaning, Bengali translation and commentaries entitled *Saratha Varshini* (written by Visvanatha Chakravarti Thakura) and *Vivritti* (written by himself).

The original Gaudiya math founded by Bhaktisiddhanta was named Sri Chaitanya Math; the first members were Kunja babu (who became Bhakti Vilasa Tirtha Maharaja) and Ananta Vasudeva brahmachari; it was directed at first by BV Tirtha Maharaja, then by Bhakti Hriday Bon Maharaja (in 1948 and for 3 years). At the disappearance of BV Tirtha Maharaja the position of acharya of the Sri Chaitanya Math was taken by Bhakti Kusuma Sramana Maharaja. After Bhaktisiddhanta's disappearance, the Gaudiya Mission in Bagh Bazar, Calcutta (under Bhakti Kevala Audulomi), separated from the Sri Chaitanya Matha; gradually almost all other disciples left to start their own Mathas, the most famous were Bhakti Dayita Madhava (Sri Chaitanya Gaudiya Matha, founded in 1954), Bhakti Raksaka Sridhara (Sri Chaitanya Sarasvata Matha), Bhakti Pramoda Puri (Sri Gopinath Gaudiya Matha, Bhakti Vaibhava Puri (Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission), Bhakti Srirupa Siddhanti (Sarasvata Gaudiya Ashram), Bhakti Prajnana Kesava (Gaudiya Vedanta Samiti), Bhakti Kevala Audulomi (Gaudiya Mission), Bhakti Hridaya Bon (Institute of Oriental Philosophy). Others were Bhakti Vaibhava Aranya (Krishna Balaram Mandir in Mathura), Bhakti Saurabhi Bhaktisara (Gauranga Gaudiya Matha), Bhakti Vilasa Bharati (Rupanuga Bhajanashram), Bhakti Saranga (Gaudiya Sanga), Bhakti Aloka Paramahamsa (Paramahamsa Gaudiya Matha), Bhadri Narayana

Bhagavat Bhusana (Sri Chaitanya Bhakti Rakshaka Mandapa), Bhakti Prakasha Hrishikesha (Sri Chaitanya Mudrani Gaudiya Matha), Bhakti Abhay Narayana (Hungarian Vaishnava Association), Bhakti Aloka Paramadvaiti (Vrindavan Institute for Vaishnava Culture and Studies), Bhakti Vijaya Puri (Radha Krishna Matha), Jagat Guru Siddha Svarupananda (Chaitanya Mission), Bhakti Nandana (Chaitanya Isha Mandalam), Bhakti Sambandha Yachak (Sri Chaitanya Gaudiya Sevashrama).

These and other acharyas in subsequent generations started their own missions and mathas (often with many branches), built temples, installed Deities, restored ancient holy sites, published books and magazines, opened schools and guesthouses, started medical assistance to the public and implemented many preaching programmes. However, these activities tended (and still tend) to be very institutionally centered, scarcely even cooperating with each other, being more interested in increasing the number of disciples and the prestige of their particular matha; also there was an increase in bodily identification and prejudice, and politicised social hierarchy and power games within the matha and between branches. Married disciples and women have been automatically disregarded and sometimes even disrespected, and although Bhaktisiddhanta and Bhaktivinoda had always envisioned a global sankirtana movement, "foreign disciples" were automatically considered inferior and unqualified for prominent positions or services, especially in regard to Deity worship.

One of the foremost disciples of Bhaktisiddhanta, Ananta Vasudeva, distanced himself from the politicisation and disgregation of the Gaudiya Matha by associating with humble babajis. Another disciple of Bhaktisiddhanta - Abhay Charanaravinda later known as AC Bhaktivedanta Swami - took a rather different path and became world-famous, to the point of being saluted as a shaktyavesa avatara by Bhakti Vichar Yajavar Maharaj (founder of Sri Chaitanya Bhagavata Math) and Bhakti Rakshak Sridhara Maharaj (founder of Sri Chaitanya Sarasvata Math) due to his great accomplishments in preaching work.

### **Bhaktivedanta and ISKCon**

Abhay Charan De, born in Calcutta in 1896 from a Gaudiya vaishnava family, had been an activist of Indian independence and an admirer of MK Gandhi; he married at a very young age and after college he developed a business as a pharmacist. When he met Bhaktisiddhanta for the first time, he objected that trying to establish vaishnava dharma in India while still under the cultural and political control of the Christian British regime was going to be very ineffective. Bhaktisiddhanta replied that an intelligent and educated boy like him should take up the mission of going to the western countries and preach in English language at global level; Bhaktisiddhanta had already instructed some of his senior disciples to go to preach in Europe, but the results had not been very brilliant. Abhay Charan waited for 11 years to ask for initiation (he was initiated in 1933), and in the meantime he remained in family life and business, but he did not forget his guru's order and his request to print and distribute books.

When Bhaktisiddhanta died in 1936, the Gaudiya Matha was plunged into chaos. He had not appointed any successor or given authorisation to any of his disciples to start initiating, but he had asked his disciples to cooperate together and jointly manage the organisation with a Governing Body Committee. However his instructions were not followed and fighting ensued, with the splitting of the Gaudiya Matha into several un-cooperative branches. Abhay Charanaravinda Das, as he had been named by his guru in 1933, was watching the situation with a sad heart and tried several times to help his godbrothers understand their mistakes (see the famous *Phalguna pancami*

*address*), but without success. So he went off to preach independently, although he chose not to start a new matha branch of his own. In 1944 he began to publish a monthly magazine, *Back to Godhead*, on "topics of the Absolute Truth and Krishna Consciousness"; he wrote, printed and distributed the magazine himself for many years, all the while planning how he could create a spiritual institution through which he would accomplish the goals established for him by Bhaktisiddhanta. In 1956 he created a forerunner to ISKCON, called the League of Devotees, in Jhansi, India. However, he observed that the Indian public was more interested in imitating the West than in following traditional Vedic culture, so he reasoned that he would take his message to the Americans, and if he could convince and change them, then the world would follow.

In 1959, after completing his duties to an un-cooperative family, he entered the order of sannyasa as AC (Abhay Charanaravinda) Bhaktivedanta Swami and went to reside in Vrindavana, at the Radha Damodara temple, where he began to translate the *Bhagavata Purana* and by 1965 he had one trunk of printed volumes. He obtained a passage to USA and arrived in Butler, Pennsylvania, as a guest of the Agarwal family; he spent his first three months speaking at local gatherings, but without much success, because the people who attended his lectures were mostly academics or church goers, and their interest was superficial and merely cultural: they had no intention of changing their mind patterns and value systems, or dedicating themselves to the cultivation and broadcasting of Krishna consciousness. So he decided to move on, shifting to New York City where for over one year he struggled to survive and preach to "respectable, learned and religiously-minded people", still without much success. Then, something extraordinary happened.

Bhaktivedanta Swami started going to Thompkins Square Park, in New York, and simply sat under a tree singing bhajan and the maha mantra Hare Krishna. The strange people who used to hang around the park, mostly hippies and dropouts, became attracted and in the spirit of the cultural revolution of the 1960s (Allen Ginsberg's motto was "expand the area of consciousness!") they started experiencing the "ecstasy of the Hare Krishna mantra". This was a major turn for Bhaktivedanta's vision: he could understand that the future of the sankirtana movement was not in "respectable people" and academic or religiously inclined people, but in these homeless hippies, who were ready to experience and dedicate their lives to a new ideal. The cultural situation in the 60s and 70s was very favorable to his preaching, because many people were looking for genuine spiritual experiences; after the end of WW2, with the economic boom and the impending nuclear threat, a new generation of educated but unsatisfied young people were ready to give up everything in order to find the real meaning of life. The children of rich men were becoming dropouts and going around the world dressed in rags seeking truth and a spiritual revolution; they loved the weirdest things, including the strange sadhu clothings and their "painted noses", billowing robes, flower garlands etc. The Allen Ginsberg generation was experimenting with drugs and freedom, with their own feelings and insights, with music and rock happenings, communes and free love, and they were even attracted by Indian philosophy and music, in search of a sweeter way of living: the old generation with its worn out values and rigidity could not convince them any more. They were expecting a great change of the times announced by the rock prophets, and in the thousands they were gathering for music and love - the perfect foundations for the concepts of kirtana and prema bhakti. Those children of the flowers preaching peace and love also had a fierce revolutionary spirit, were disgusted about nuclear proliferation, racial discriminations, Vietnam intervention, family failures, violence, hypocrisy and materialistic business mentality, and they were ready to fight against injustice.

When Bhaktivedanta went to the West, he was carrying with him the pure and complete essence of Krishna Consciousness, together with its Indian roots. But his real concern was to transplant the genuine philosophy of Krishna Consciousness, the message of *Bhagavad gita*, and for this mission, Indian traditions were not so important. One of the things he was repeating more often was: we are not this body - we are not Indians, Americans, Europeans, or anything else that relates to the body. Bhaktivedanta was ready to put aside any identification (other than being Krishna's servant) and, to carry on his mission, to tolerate any weirdness, dangers, indifference, poverty, and difficulty. He was even ready to take up the hippie slang and use it to explain Krishna Consciousness to those people who used that language and its references: "Stay high forever! No more coming down. Practice Krishna Consciousness, expand your consciousness by practicing the transcendental sound vibration." Someone objected to that flyer playing too much off the hippie mentality, but Prabhupada said it was all right. He even went as far as comparing Krishna Consciousness to a roomful of LSD. (*Planting the seed*, second volume of the official Iskcon biography of Prabhupada.)

Bhaktivedanta was using many examples from the Western ways he was learning about, from the contemporary issues (space travels, scientific research, etc) and from the events reported in newspapers, and when he found something from Indian tradition that seemed to be palatable to his early disciples, he encouraged their taste so that they could become attached to Krishna. Other aspects, which could be misunderstood, were put aside as non important; following the popular western perspective, he defined them as "Hinduism" and he openly rejected such identification to avoid misunderstandings. Even much of the basic information on devotional service, like the regulative principles, the position of the spiritual master, the relationship between master and disciple, Deity worship, etc, were not the first concern of Bhaktivedanta when he was approaching his early followers. Everything came gradually, and Bhaktivedanta was very careful to give only as much as they could digest, because his aim was pulling them closer to Krishna, and not to make a show of how exalted he was or how brave or difficult was the position of a vaishnava. It was a perfect demonstration of how to apply the concept of "desa, kala, patra" expounded in Vedic philosophy. Desa is the country (or the right place), kala is the historical time (or the right moment) and patra is the person who is to receive the message. In his pure devotion and missionary spirit, Bhaktivedanta Swami transcended Indian culture and habits, following the footsteps of many previous acharyas: Bhaktisiddhanta who was famous for being a "motorised sannyasi", Bhaktivinoda who had a government job and a big family, Gaurakisora dasa babaji who used to chant sitting outside public toilets to discourage materially motivated people from bothering him.

In 1966 Bhaktivedanta Swami settled in a small storefront on the lower east side of New York city; this first center was solidly established with a core group of some 15 practitioners, young men and women, eager to carry the message of Godhead and especially the chanting of the holy Names to the streets of New York. ISKCON was incorporated as an open non-profit organization to give a legal structure to his preaching work, and not as a traditional Matha. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness was not a religious institution, but a legal and organisational structure based on purely transcendental purposes and open to anyone. Bhaktivedanta proceeded to start another center in San Francisco and celebrate the first Ratha Yatra, then he opened centers in London and Montreal, and by the end of the 1960s there were almost 30 centers in the USA alone, then more opened in Europe, South America, Australia, and back in India: his revolutionary work led to the unprecedented expansion of the Hare Krishna movement at global level, with hundreds of temples and Deities of Krishna and Jagannatha. The most famous temples he established personally in India are Sri Mayapur Chandrodaya Mandir in Mayapur, Nadia (West Bengal), Sri Krishna Balaram

Mandir in Raman Reti, Vrindavana (UP), and Sri Radha Rasa Bihari in Juhu, Bombay. He also wanted to build a large and beautiful temple in Puri to distribute freely the darshan and personal service of Jagannatha to the sincere and loving devotees coming from all around the world without any restriction.

Bhaktivedanta Swami began circling the globe to personally train his followers and deliver speeches in many places, he nonetheless carried on a disciplined programme of translating the scriptures: by 1975 he had completed the *Chaitanya-Charitamrita* and 18 volumes of the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. By 1972 the original volumes of *Srimad Bhagavatam* (*Bhagavata Purana*) had been edited and reprinted, together with a translation of the *Bhagavad gita* and several other short books on the subject of Krishna Consciousness; the *Back to Godhead* magazine he had started in 1944 became a monthly publication produced by his followers and distributed to the public during their daily sankirtana parties. At some point, the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust had published about 3,000 books and magazines in 64 languages. He also recorded many bhajans and songs, established the Ratha Yatra festival for Jagannatha in all the major cities of the world such as London, San Francisco, etc, and Pada yatra festivals, many vegetarian prasadam restaurants, gurukulas, farm communities and enterprises aimed at creating the basis for a vaishnava-oriented varnashrama system. He also created diorama exhibitions, organized free food distribution to the needy (Food For Life), and specifically targeted preaching for example to scientists with the Bhaktivedanta Institute, and to members of various religions through the interfaith preaching programs. On his inspiration, his followers also developed television and cinema productions, also training on traditional vaishnava arts including painting and drama, and other programmes.

After Bhaktivedanta Swami's disappearance in 1977, although he did not appoint any successor or even initiating guru (he had established the ritvik initiating system only), 11 of his leading American disciples were elected by the Governing Body Committee as the exclusive initiating gurus for ISKCON and legitimate heirs of Bhaktivedanta in the disciplic succession: Tamal Krishna, Kirtanananda, Ramesvara, Bhavananda, Hamsadutta, Harikesa, Bhagavan, Satsvarupa, Hridayananda, Jayapataka, Jayatirtha. In 1986, after the noisy fall of Bhavananda, Kirtanananda, Ramesvara, Hamsadutta, Jayatirtha and Bhagavan, the GBC (Governing Body Committee) started to vote in other gurus, and decided that the disciples of the fallen gurus were to be re-initiated by another guru within ISKCON. After 1986 also Harikesha left, Satsvarupa retired from the position of guru, Hridayananda entered new pursuits (in mainstream academic career) and Tamal Krishna died in a car crash; many among the newer gurus also started to leave, so some disciples found themselves getting a first initiation after the other, even several times. Since most of the original disciples of Bhaktivedanta Swami had left ISKCON, the GBC even started to elect disciples of the second generation as new initiating gurus for ISKCON, contrarily to the previous argument that one was not allowed to take disciples in the physical presence of one's own guru or his godbrothers.

At the same time a group of disciples and aspirant disciples of Bhaktivedanta Swami (called Prabhupada by his followers) protested against the GBC arbitrary ruling in the matter of electing initiating gurus, and claimed that Prabhupada had established the ritvik initiation system by which all new devotees would become direct Prabhupada disciples through the agency of a representative (or ritvik). The system had been in use, unchallenged, for several months before Prabhupada's disappearance, and Prabhupada's final order in July 1977 was to continue with that system even after his demise. This protestant group further divided into two main branches, one aimed at reforming ISKCON (Madhu Pandit, Adridharan, etc, who were the founders of IRM, or ISKCON

Reform Movement), and the other aimed at starting a "new ISKCON" (Kapindra Maharaja, Prabhupada Society and others). Another group of Iskcon members, both direct disciples of Bhaktivedanta and disciples of disciples, started migrating to Gaudiya Mathas to get shelter and instructions especially from BR Sridhara Maharaja, BP Puri Maharaja, BV Puri Maharaja, and BV Narayana Maharaja.

## Conclusion

Many people, not only Hindus of Indian origin, but especially Iskcon people of all origins, tend to surmise that I am an Iskcon member, but I need to clarify that I am not. I was associated with Iskcon from 1978 to 1986, but then I permanently dissociated myself from the Organisation. The reason is that I strongly disagree with a considerable part of Iskcon's ideological positions, both in regard to philosophical conclusions (*siddhanta*) and in regard to the practical applications in behavior and policies (*achara*). However, I still consider myself a devotee of Krishna, a follower of Chaitanya, and a servant of the mission of Bhaktivedanta Swami, but not in a blind sectarian manner.

My initial plan was to elaborate on this subject in the last section of this book, as logically the explanation why I chose to become a Hindu is connected to why I am not an Iskcon member, especially considering that Iskcon is not a Hindu organisation - it has never been, according to the clear statements of its founder Bhaktivedanta Swami, both in his books and in his lectures and in his direct instructions to disciples through letters and conversations. Of course, since the definition of "Hindu" is subject to different interpretations, there is a lot of buffer space for Iskcon members and representatives to work around it. I am not going to enter into details here as I have no interest in fighting against Iskcon or reforming Iskcon, but I will gladly answer to those who want to know privately, and I may even produce a booklet on that specific subject, as in this book I only want to present inspiring thoughts and facts.

Some of those people (who surmise I am an Iskcon member) are quite aggressive against Iskcon and especially against Bhaktivedanta Swami or even Krishna Chaitanya, blaming them for any misconduct or faulty ideological position exhibited by Iskcon people. Many people, both from the Iskcon side or from the opposition, expect me to have a similarly hostile and hateful attitude, because of the belief that "if you are against the Church, you are against God and all the saints" (so you *must be* full of hatred, or at least have some form of resentment or envy). When I have the opportunity, I explain that the policies of Iskcon and Gaudiya Mathas have degenerated considerably and are now quite different from the intentions of their founders, and that not only I have a great appreciation for the work of Bhaktivedanta, but I consider that my own work is perfectly in line with his original plan and the plan of the great devotees before him. However, I also explain that I am not sectarian, and I am not attached to the particular *desa, kala, patra* that circumscribed the work of Bhaktivedanta and other acharyas. I choose to "take the nectar or essence (*sara*), verify it carefully by cross references with shastra, guru and sadhu, experiment it by applying it sincerely and dedicatedly in my own life, and passing it on to others so they can do the same. And I think this is the sum and substance of being a true Hindu.