

In Conversation

with **M. J. GUEZENNEC, 'Himabindu'**

Writer, photographer, traveller, philosopher...and now the 'National Tourism Award' winner, Mirielle Josephine brilliant works on India prove that true passion finds a way to manifest itself...

Interview translated from French by Vikas Harish



Tell us about your love for India; what is it that makes you come here unfaithfully, every year?

My love for India isn't just from yesterday... In fact, I wished to discover India when I was quite young. When I undertook study of philosophy, I decided to specialise in Indian philosophy. I found that there was an immense richness and depth of thought and an abundance of force and of beauty in Sanskrit as a language, and such magnificence in the arts that I wished to discover in this country. I came to India for the first time in 1978 and have never ceased to return since. Often I come here many times in a year as I work simultaneously on several things, my writings (reportage), photography, working with students for international cooperation with the French institutions, such as the Ministry of Agriculture (France), and India, or indeed just to sit and study at the feet of learned masters and discover ancient texts in Sanskrit, to debate philosophy, or perhaps to contemplate better the principles of *ayurveda* or simply to practice *yoga*. India is such a grand civilisation and has so many things to share!

Please tell us a little bit about this new book of yours on Gangâ. How does it feel to have written and photographed for the same?

My book on Ganga is a result of or rather I should say the residue of pilgrimages to the source of Ganges, which I undertook three consecutive years to Gaumukh (4,100m) in the Himalayas. I did not go there to write this book, but I was inspired by the beauty of the Himalayas, where the source of Bhagirathî-Gangâ spouts from the ground coming from some of the highest glaciers on Earth. I felt myself in the presence of something unique and singular. Then the book came, it flowed from the source... Initially it was published in French, 'Gange aux sources du fleuve éternel' (Editions Cheminements, October 2005) and as it was well received, we went into a reprint in fact only after two months of publication.

It is true that I 'accompany' my books with lectures and photo exhibitions. This new book that we have published with Rupa & Co., Delhi, is different in its concept from the earlier one. The

format as also the choice of photographs are not the same. A French version of the book will also soon be released in Delhi and will be primarily sold in India, to a French speaking readership.

We already had very good echoes; and that translation done by Vikas Harish is extremely beautiful and poetic. In deference to his sensitivity as a museologist and due to his 'Indian heart', it went to the embodiment of my experience and as a result of the choice of words the book resonantly weaves my thought.

RIGHT: 'Ganga in Search of the Sources' by Mireille-Joséphine Guézennec, translated by Vikas Harish, published by Rupa & Co. (Delhi 2007)



BELOW: 'Gange aux sources du fleuve éternel' by the same author, published in French by Editions Cheminements (France - October 2005).





You have officially attached 'Himabindu' to your name, it shows your extreme love and passion for our, or should I say 'your country'. What prompted you to do this, when exactly did you do this and what does it mean to you?

This name 'Himabindu' was given to me, more than 20 years ago, by my Master of Indian philosophy and Jyostish (Vedic astrology) when I lived in Madras. It was a name given as a part of my initiation, as you know in India one is given a name by the teacher in true tradition of the 'guru-sishya-parampara' (the rare teacher and disciple relationship). In fact, my guruji, who comes from the south of India, chose me a name in consonance with the Himalayas. I think with his vast knowledge he was already aware of my destiny as a voyager... or perhaps, the fact that I had been impregnated with this name propelled me to the vibratory energy of the Himalayas and towards Gangâ! It may be as it were, I dedicated my book on Gangâ to my guruji...

How does it feel to receive the National Tourism Award for 'Best photographer' by India Tourism?

Certainly I was very happy to receive it... and I would have been even happier to be present in Delhi for the investiture of this 'National Award'. I asked Poonam Chand, Regional Director of Tourism for Uttaranchal in Delhi, to receive it on my behalf. That was perhaps just to her, and to this new State of Uttaranchal because right from the creation of the state in November 2000, she has always supported my projects with the officials at the Ministry of Tourism, Uttaranchal. I owe a certain gratitude to the then Secretary of Tourism, Shri. N N Prasad and Minister for Tourism, Lieutenant General (retd.) T P S Rawat, who always encouraged me.

There is great diversity in the topics of my photographic essays on India. I have worked a lot, for instance, with majority of the renowned Indian classical dancers and choreographers, and I am also interested in the sacred arts, the architecture

of the temples and the statuary. In fact, the prestigious 'Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts' hosted two exhibitions in India, the first on the 'Sacred Dances of India', that also travelled to the network of Alliances Françaises with the support of French Embassy in India and the second on 'Eternal Gangâ'. It is, perhaps, this diversity that played in my favour, for there are undoubtedly many other excellent photographers in India! It is now essential for me to continue to work in India, to wield my glance as a photographer towards new destinations or even better to 'engrave' newer images by returning to places that are familiar and so dear to me...

What are your favourite destinations in India? What do you think of its people?

Of course, 'Himabindu' likes the Himalayas passionately! I like to say 'Himalayas'- because they are essentially plural... Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal or Himachal Pradesh, they are such different universes with several fascinating belief and traditions in the same mountains. I also have a particular attachment for Uttaranchal and the area of Garhwal where Ganga takes her source. Benares-Varanasi is a city that I have a close affinity to; I try to spend as much time there as possible, because I also concurrently teach philosophy in France. In fact I initially discovered South India as I resided in Madras for two years to study Sanskrit at the university. There are sumptuous temples and a very rich Dravidian tradition that I would like to once again lean back upon...

Where do you see India going in terms of tourism?

For the question of tourism in India, I would borrow a term from navigation - India sails 'with the winds'... it is very positive and this would give the desire and the possibility to a lot of people to discover this fabulous land that also knows an economic, technological and social effervescence. Let's hope tourism will support poorer communities that live with difficulty, as in the Himalayas, for example. There are some states that have stressed on eco-tourism, which is surely the way to go for the future.

I firmly believe that one cannot visit India only as an ordinary tourist, simply in passage or purely consumerist. I appreciate the principles of the ecotourism with their direction towards an ethic, which is not limited to only profits or the lure of gain... It is essential to prepare oneself, physically and more importantly, conceptually, before leaving on a voyage for India... It is truly a cultural shock, a singular chance to live a rich experience of the 'other'... Indeed, I believe that one can enter 'in resonance' with the country and that the imprint of India is such a powerful seal that it would compel the visitor to keep returning... It is of course my most cherished wish that I entrust to Ganga in a votive basket of flowers - the beautiful gesture of offering one's prayers with flowers and lamp to the omniscient celestial river.

