

## Interview : Mireille-Joséphine Guézennec



# INDIA : « singular and plural »...

Mireille-Joséphine Guézennec, Himabindu, is a multifaceted personality who also works as a professor of philosophy. Her personal career has been enriched by teachings of great masters and sages as well as studies of various Sanskrit epic texts. Her experience got enriched further through numerous voyages that she undertook to India for several professional engagements, travels that permitted her to develop exceptionally strong links with India. She received the honour of Chevalier des Palmes Académiques in January 2009 and is the author of books on Ganga, published by Editions Cheminements (France-2005) and Rupa & Co (Delhi- 2007). In an interview with Christine Nayagam, Mireille-Joséphine Guezennec, takes us once again through her adventures in an India that both singular and plural, as the title of her latest book reveals. 'Inde singulière et plurielle' as she describes so well in her latest book which was released in November 2009 by Editions Cheminements.

*Can you tell us about the reasons that inspired you to write your latest book, INDE singulière et plurielle?*

After having consecrated a book to Ganga in Uttarakhand, this Himalayan state where the sacred river originates, I wanted to write about Important places in the

country that carry a lot of history and feed with imagination. Hence, I looked to impregnate myself in some important sites in India that I visited for the first time or which I had been to earlier to prepare for reportages in various French and international magazines, including yours for example, as well as for professional missions. So many itineraries that came about slowly and began to look like a network drawn from the North to the South and East to the West. I wanted to write about the richness and the beauty of some of these spots and I don't talk only about the beauty of landscapes such as in the Himalayas, be it in Ladakh, Sikkim or Uttarakhand or in the South when we stand facing the confluence of three oceans. I wanted to also write about the spiritual strength of these spots and the spirit of the people living there. I hence connect these spots with their histories and the numerous myths that surround them and which are still very much alive.

*Spirituality and philosophy have always been at the heart of your career and which gives a very unique style to your texts. What is the main thread of your book and which are the principal themes?*

Over the last four years, I have been on numerous trips to India to go deeply into the immense and varied cultural realities of

this country. Along with the key spiritual centres to which I was always attracted, the theme of artistic heritage is also very present since art, as a spiritual expression, is at the centre of the Indian Thought. Whatever be the form of expression, art is considered as a kind of yoga in India. I also attach a lot of importance to spectacle of everyday life. There are also chapters on the nature and the efforts being made to preserve and conserve this other form of heritage. The first part of the book is titled "With waters for traditions" and it deals with an issue that is eminently at the foundation of the Indian civilization, that is the crucial question of water and the genesis of the universe through the churning of the Cosmic Ocean, the Ganga, the Monsoons where the questions of the traditional rites is very much present even today.

*Your book has received the patronage of the French National Commission of UNESCO and I see that there is an important part of the book is dedicated to the pictures, which number about 500, I believe?*

Yes, indeed. I always had the desire to associate the text with the pictures but if the text is fundamental to the message that I would like to give then the photo becomes its necessary auxiliary tool. It adds value by giving a certain vision of the places. Being a

photographer in India is a matter of great luck and joy, moments of trying to capture certain splendours through light and colours or the ephemeral moments or moments of intimacy. If writing is essential for me, I can not disassociate the photos from it, pretty much like an eye donation to be able to give view of and a feeling of the soul of India.

*For someone like you who has travelled all over India, from the North to the South, do you prefer a particular part of the country?*

Like all self-respecting travellers, I began by discovering some of the very famous and touristic destinations such as Rajasthan or Varanasi, this spiritually-charged city left a profound mark on me right in the first voyage that I undertook, nearly 30 years ago. As I was studying Sanskrit, philosophy and the texts of traditional sciences, I found several knowledgeable persons or pundits as we call them in India who were going to help me in a profound and subtle understanding of the Sanskrit texts. Then I stayed for three years in Chennai where I discovered the Dravidian

India, with its exceptional art and very unique and ancient traditions of the South. Tamil Nadu is a very attractive and warm place. But there is always the call of the mighty Himalayas – from Sikkim to Ladakh and Uttarakhand where I went again last summer. One has to really go far away from the crossroads of cities and the effervescence of the cities for discovering the authentic India to really meet the inhabitants who live in the mountains in high altitudes or in isolated villages.

*Amongst all these voyages, is there one that impacted you more than the others?*

The discovery of South India, with its villages, its markets and the lively atmosphere of its vast Dravidian temples was something that I really very strong and magical. Then there are places which represent anchorages for me, intellectual and spiritual, where I told myself that I needed to return. For instance, last summer, I returned to Ladakh after a gap of 3-4 years and I was able to plunge once again into some of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions in the monasteries where I stayed for sometime,

such as at Kazok at an altitude of 4800m. Imagine at 4 am, in the infinite serenity of the vast and spacious altitudes, on the banks of Lake Tsumoriri, an absolute blue, hearing the rhythmic sounds of percussions and the lamas, deep in meditation in the gompas, reciting the mantras in the cool hours of dawn. A sacred and sublime experience.

*A few words on your memories from these voyages? What impression would you like to pass on to our readers?*

What I would like to transmit is a bit of my passion and my profound reasons for the love of India which lie at the heart of my various journeys to India and of course at the heart of my life. It's like an internal passion nourished by philosophy, a way of life and thought, of a prodigious knowledge and wisdom which make for the strength and grandeur of this country. India, as we know, today is in the midst of a major economic change but its spiritual resources and its multicultural anchorages continue to survive and thrive pretty much like a precious and fertile root about which there is still a lot to say. ■

