

Mireille-Joséphine Guézennec

Following India and the Ganga passionately...

Mireille-Joséphine Guézennec, writer and professor of philosophy, has been criss-crossing India, her favourite destination for over three decades. She has just published, in India, with Rupa and Co (Delhi 2007), "Gange, l'appel aux sources", in French which has been translated by Vikas Harish into English, "Ganga: In Search of the Source". The two works are dedicated to the river more sacred of this country. In January this year, Guezennec was also awarded the national prize for the Best Foreign Photographer by the Ministry of Tourism, government of India. Lucie Simonel meets up with Himabindu, as Guezennec prefers to be called, in Paris, the day after her most recent trip to India.

Why did you choose to write a book about the Ganga?

India means a lot to me, especially on a personal front. This sub-continent, which is a living testimony of a grand civilization, so immense and so rich that more one approaches, more one feels its limits and horizons move away and become deeper. The idea initially was not to write a book on

the theme. I began by a first pilgrimage to the sources of the Ganga, to Gaumuk, at about 4000 meters altitude, up in the Himalayas. It was here that the writing just flowed, pretty much like the Ganga itself. I returned there the next year, since the first encounter had been so impressive and had left me totally awe-stricken. I needed to go back there to see the impact it had on me the second time around. Beyond the effects of the altitude, these places, loaded with the spiritual energy, also have a beauty that leaves you breathless and speechless. In between my trips, the book began to take shape, with words and with pictures. The following year, in 2005, I returned a third time, as if to thank this gift of the Ganga. A first version of my book was published in France by Cheminements, a French publisher, with the book entitled "Gange aux sources du fleuve éternel" (October 2005).

Your pilgrimage to the sources of the Ganga in the state of Uttaranchal, in the Himalayas, takes the shape of a circle. Is there a symbolic significance?

Absolutely, the theme of the circle often finds mention in the book, it is also the very

idea of the pilgrimage. In India, traditionally, one circles the temples or the fire keeping the holy object on one's right. It is this idea of circumambulation or pradakshina that is the foundation of the book. It begins at Haridwar, at the gateway to the Himalaya, and then as one goes higher towards the holy places or the Chardhams, to redescend the mountains and come to Rishikesh. The Ganga remains the guide or the guiding thread, the sutradhara.

"Going in the search of the Source", what does this signify to you?

Right from the beginning, that was the direction of my work in India. To understand the country, its culture, I needed to go to the Sources, literally and figuratively. I began by studying the original language, Sanskrit, which is the only language that allows access to the original Indian philosophical texts, which are the foundation of the Indian civilization. Simultaneously, I studied the classical dances of India, in Chennai, where I stayed for several years. It was then that I discovered a new manner of walking, of using my body for gestures, to feel the energy that links us to the Cosmos or Brahma. Of course, the yoga is also a discipline that I practice since a long time.

When you met others on your trip to the Sources, how did they receive you? What kind of contact did you have with them?

In India, it is necessary to spend a lot of time and attention to build a relation with the people. But I believe that if one is sincere about what one does, then the contacts and the exchanges are spontaneous enough. I like people and I am intensely curious or rather very good follower of their way of life. I try to understand from within, which requires an intensive preparation. It is necessary to understand what really goes on underneath, in the depths. Sometimes, Indians themselves say: "You know India better than us". One meets exceptional beings in the Himalayas, the sadhus, yogis and the sages ... who are way ahead of us on this

Evening *pūja* to Ganga with M. J. Guézennec





A votive lingam of Shiva and Mount Shivling culminating at 6542m.
-in "Ganga in Search of the Source" Rupa and Co

road. With them, one learns a lot and in a different manner. Often in India, the meetings were quite a revelation for me.

Which are the moments that left their mark on you during your trip?

It is precisely these meetings, in unforeseen places, with exceptional human beings who lead a totally different and extremely enriching life. The ceremonies of offering the fire to the Ganga or the arti are also very poetic and exciting moments.

If you had to describe your experience in a few words, what would you say?

I would say revelation and the initial voyage ... India is a very revealing country in the sense precisely in the way that photographers use light selectively to develop their pictures.

These are your photos that illustrate your book. How did you choose your subjects, the angles of the shots?

Being a photographer is of course to

have a certain view of the world. My personal perception presents the everyday scenes of India. I wish simply to testify through my photos. In India, there is so much to see, in the beauty of the shapes and colours, it the aesthetic wealth that first attracts. But it is all the sacred dimension of the elements that are essential for me. Every gesture has a special force. An intention and a symbolic load that I tried to capture in my "net" of photographer. I give a big importance to the rites, to those of water and fire.

The book has four blank pages for taking notes. Is this a novel, your trip notebook or a tourist guide for the reader?

Beyond the pictures, the text is of course very important since it allows discovering some big myths of the India that have woven themselves during the pilgrimage. I wish to share my experiences but also, if possible, show to people that which is invisible. There, my wish is that the book can be read very easily just as well by those

who have never been to India, as it accompanies those that will do the pilgrimage of the Sources. Through their notes, they will extend my narrative. I would like, in truth, that this book gives the desire to the readers to accomplish this pilgrimage. I wish that every reader can get himself this book, those that want to travel and those that want to travel internally. The teacher that I am has resurfaced with this desire to transmit which is my vocation. I like to transmit, and share this wealth, even if all is not transmittable...

You complete your book with a glossary. A word nevertheless does not there appear: Himabindu, your Indian name. From where does it come? Is there a special meaning?

When I realized that there were a lot of Sanskrit or Hindi terms in the pages of my book, I desired to explain these to a new reader. And personally, I like to read the glossaries, this is like a dense text which in reduction allows us to get to the heart of the text. As for my Indian name, Himabindu, it was given to me more than 20 years ago, by my Indian master of philosophy, I did not notice his absence in the glossary, but I about it speak in the book. This name of initiation that in the Indian tradition is given by a master, literally means "dot or flake" (bindu) of "snows" (hima). More symbolically, Himabindu is one of the names of the goddess Parvati, the "Girl of the Himalayas" and the consort of Lord Shiva.

So, Himabindu, what are your future projects?

If you talk about my personal projects, it is generally to continue to explore India more and more deeply and intensely. I feel that I have an enthusiastic and adventurous soul! But I wish also to share some of these discoveries with others who are really very interested in India. For example, since a few years, I am in charge of a project for international cooperation at the French ministry of agriculture to help students to go to India for internships in the fields of agriculture, forest, environment, ecotourism or rural development. India has given me so much that I want henceforth to be a mediator, a bridge between "my" two countries. As for my writing projects, other works that close to my heart are under progress. ■