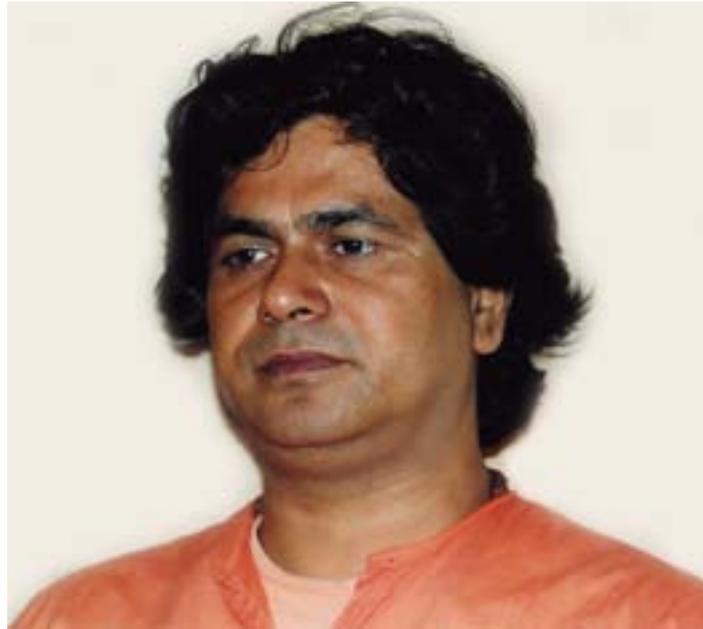




# The Mt. Tron Mail

SPECIAL EDITION No. 14

Week 39 \* Mt. Tron University of Peace Foundation \* 2021



*Swami Paramananda, Shantibu, Norway 1993. Photo: BP.*

## IN SEARCH OF TRUTH

MY EXPERIENCES WITH  
SWAMI PARAMANANDA

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A YOGI IN THE WEST

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# TRANSCENDENCE

## Baul in the Himalayas

On Friday June 2<sup>nd</sup> at eleven o'clock at night I left Howrah Station in Calcutta on the "Himgiri Express". Sobbo, his younger brother Nachiketa and Babu, and a couple of other friends, Papu and Arun, had all followed me to the station to see me off. It was a very long, unbroken train journey across all of India from East to West, and I did not reach the rail terminus at Jammu in the state of Jammu & Kashmir until the middle of the day on Sunday June 4<sup>th</sup>. From that point the railway ended and one had to take a bus to travel to Srinagar in Kashmir.

But I was not going there. Paramananda had given me the address of the Kaushal family in Jammu who received me very nicely and I stayed with this hospitable family for two days to rest after the tiring train journey and to regain strength for the upcoming bus ride up into the Western Himalayas. It also took some time to arrange for the bus ticket. But early morning on June 6<sup>th</sup> I took the bus via Pathankot and drove up the dangerous roads where in many places we were delayed by recent landslides. In some places it was so terrible that they had had to make an entirely new road where huge parts of the old one had completely disappeared in the abyss below.

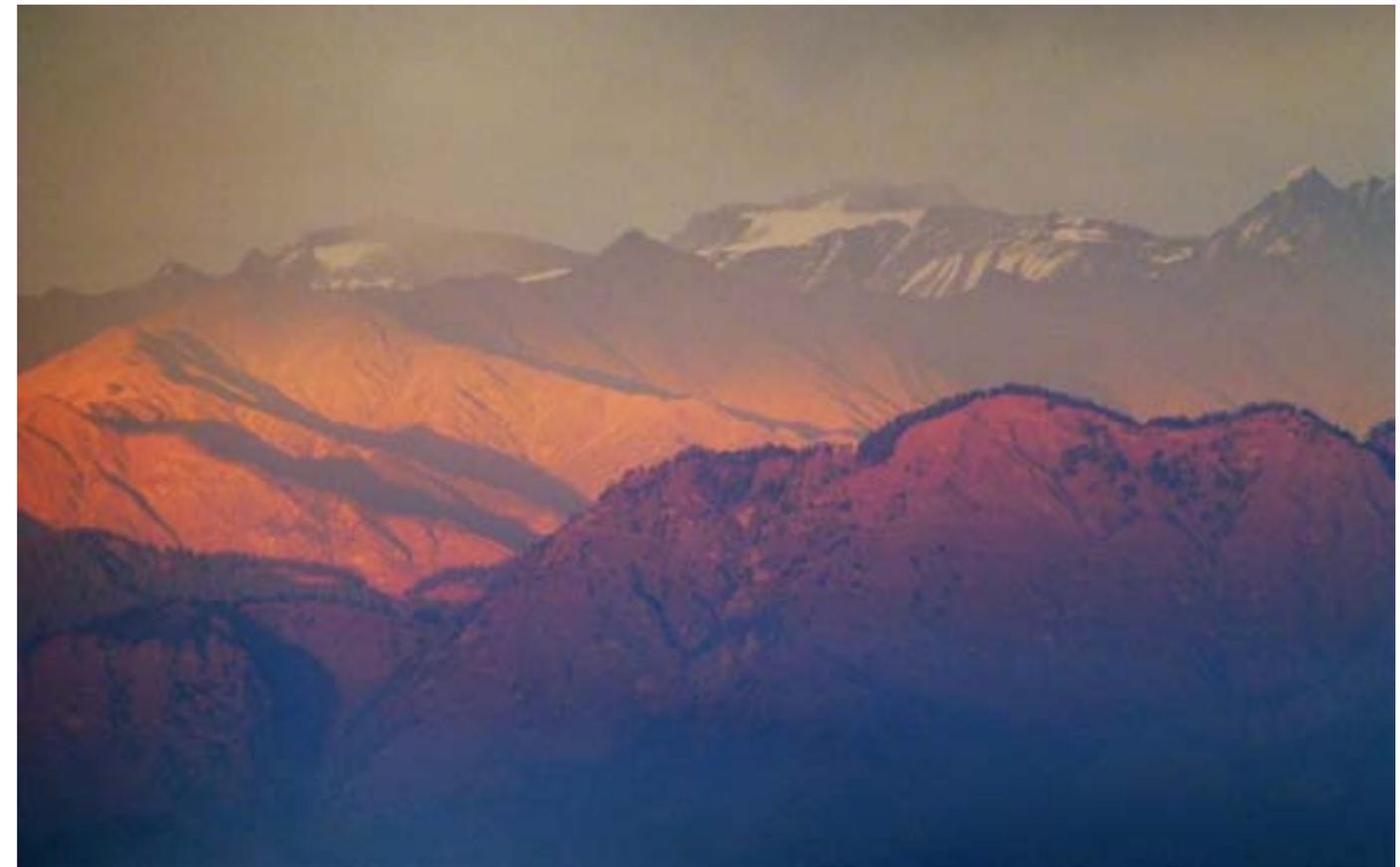


View at Baniketh. Photo BP 2012.

After eight tense hours in the bus I finally arrived at the small village of Baniketh, situated a little less than two thousand metres above sea level and a couple of kilometers before the well-known old English mountain resort of Dalhousie where the road ended. After a little while I found my way to the ashram gate, just beside the main road, and once again met Mihir (Swami Prajñananda) and also Swami Shankarananda, who was visiting there at the time. Mihir was the only resident sannyasi in the ashram, and he made my bed beside his in his own room. The other room was occupied by Shankarananda. The ashram was quite small with only two proper rooms. The building was made partly of wood, partly of whitewashed mortar, in the same manner as the rest of the buildings in the area. It was situated on a south facing hillside with no special view, but only a few minutes walk from there, at the top of the hill, a most magnificent view opens towards the north-east to the mighty, snow-clad Lahul-Spiti Range, which is one of the seven great ranges of the Himalayas.

The first day I went by myself to this viewpoint and could only stand and look and look, fully static and ecstatic – literally captivated by the dazzling sight! It was one of the most sublime and wonderful things I had ever seen. I stood like that, static, without moving so much as a finger, for at least half an hour, fully absorbed in the beautiful and exalted vision. Here one would really have the help of nature for concentration of mind and absorption! But it was something more than just what I was seeing – it was also a faint, distant, undefined memory in me which was brought to life by this fantastic view.

The surrounding nature consisted of a very lush and beautiful type of forest in the zone between subtropical rain forest and high alpine pine forest, so that it was a mixture of several types of forest. From Dalhousie there was only pine forest up to the timber line. Everywhere there were lots of rodhodendron, and birds were abundant and colourful, with the same mixture of species from a variety of altitudes and biotopes. Bears and other wild mammals were also found in the surroundings, and sometimes bears would visit the garden of fruit trees in the ashram at night. The ashram had a small garden of apricot trees which bore ripe fruits at the time of my visit, and it was a great pleasure to taste them. The air was clear and fresh with high temperatures during the middle of the day, and rather cool at night – almost exactly as I was used to from good summer days in Alvdal. Almost daily there would be a shower of rain as the monsoon was now approaching. During winter a little snow would usually fall which would melt away during the day.



View at Baniketh sunset. November 21st during my second visit to "Prem Ashram". At the time of my first visit in June 1989, more than 23 years earlier, the highest mountains in the background were completely covered by snow. Photo: BP.

During the nights Mihir and I meditated in the room. One morning as we sat and relaxed after a night in meditation, I became aware of something crawling on the wall near my back. At that time I was leaning towards the wall for relaxation. When I took a closer look I saw a scorpion with its tail raised high coming towards me at top speed. I managed to escape and grabbed a pair of tongs with which I captured the scorpion by its tail, took it outside and threw it far down the slopes of the ashram garden. These scorpions were plentiful there. Later I have found them all over the Himalayas but never found even a single one in the plains.

Otherwise, Mihir and I had lots of fun during these days. Mihir was of rather short stature and with a pretty dark complexion. He was a little squint eyed with a charming and disarming, mischievous, lurking smile. He possessed lots of humour, was very intelligent, quick witted, full of pranks, loved to tease and could even be mean at times. Shankarananda, who was big and bulky and at least 20 years older than Mihir and me, had to suffer, poor man! Mihir got annoyed by almost everything Shankarananda said or did, so he frequently played some pranks on him. Sometimes I felt that Mihir perhaps went a bit too far, but mostly I could only see the comical aspect of it and just laugh. At a certain point Mihir decided that Shankarananda had been there long enough, and he had a plan of action ready, because from

previous experience he knew exactly what he had to do. He told me that Shankarananda's great passion was eating food and that he was extra fond of much chili. So one day he announced that he would make a feast for Shankarananda with lots of good, heavy food with lots of chili, and Shankarananda cheered like a child when he got the news. The food was served and Shankarananda was allowed to eat an unlimited amount of the delicacies. Secretly, Mihir had at least tripled the amount of chili in Shankarananda's food but to him it was so tasty that he couldn't resist. The result was, of course, that the big belly of Shankarananda was greatly upset, and when this occurred Shankarananda would always leave the place – he would never stay anywhere when he got diarrhoea. Of course, Mihir knew this very well and gloated greatly that his plan had worked – that Shankarananda literally had taken the bait once again.

But the truth was that eating food was also a great passion for Mihir, and he possessed a special power regarding this because he could digest almost anything without any problem, and often in incredible quantities. Once he told me that one time in his childhood, he and two friends had found a dead, rotten and stinking cow by the roadside. As usual, Mihir was quite bright and adventurous, and saw there a fine opportunity of finally getting to taste cow meat, which otherwise is impossible for Hindus. They therefore found a knife and cut pieces of meat from



The entrance to “Prem Ashram” lies just by the road to Dalhousie, with steep steps down to the ashram building. Early in the morning the ashram lies in the shadows. Photo: BP, 22.11.2012, 05:17 hrs.

the rotten cow and ate it, lots of it, and raw. The result was, of course, that both his playmates were hastily brought to the hospital with severe food poisoning, while Mihir only made a long and loud burp, and felt that it had been a very good meal! At all festivals when there were unofficial competitions among the boys as to who could eat the most *luchis* or *rasagullas* or other heavy or sweet delicacies, Mihir always won by a mile. One time he had managed to eat a whole bucket of *rasagulla* alone – more than a hundred pieces! Once Paramananda remarked upon Mihir’s colossal power of digestion to me and said: “Mihir has this advantage over me that he can digest anything”.

But for a sannyasin it is often problematic to be fond of food. In the eyes of the common people of India it is not accepted for a sannyasin to eat meat or fish, especially so if it happens in an ashram. Traditionally the sannyasins of India are expected to be strict vegetarians. One day Mihir longed to eat some meat, so we agreed to take the bus to Dalhousie where no one knew him, so that I could buy him a non-vegetarian dish at a restaurant. And so we did, and Mihir was satisfied. Once he visited Sobbo while I was there for a few days to relish in the eating of fruits, and he wanted to eat eggs – lots of hard boiled eggs. I felt it quite funny and teased him a little, asking him why he should eat the dry eggs when instead he could eat delicious and juicy fruits with me. But Mihir always had a ready answer and while one hard-boiled egg after another found its way down his throat in rapid succession, he most elegantly replied: “Egg is also fruit – the bird’s fruit!” Many great stories are circulating about Mihir, and he was indeed very special and interesting in many ways, but above all he enjoyed great respect among all of Paramananda’s disciples as a great yogi with very powerful abilities. He was also the very first of the “inner circle” to come to Paramananda, before Trishan or any other. He was also the most free, unbiased and broadminded of all of Paramananda’s sannyasins, and in addition a good baul singer.



The whole ashram seen towards west. A Nepali family lives in parts of the building further behind and takes care of the ashram. Tripti Ma can be seen outside on the lawn. Photo: BP, 22.11.2012, 05:49 hrs.

On Thursday June 15<sup>th</sup> Paramananda arrived at the ashram alone just before noon. As soon as we had finished eating lunch, Paramananda sat down outside on the grass in the garden to relax. He called me and asked me enthusiastically with a loving smile:

“Bjørn, how do you feel here?” “Oh, I feel absolutely fantastic here!”, I replied fervently. “After coming here, I feel strongly never to leave from here again! Now I cannot understand at all what I have been doing all these years down there in the chaos and mess of the plains – I could just have come here at once! The life down there seems quite distant and unreal to me now, and I absolutely don’t feel like going back there!” Paramananda beamed like the sun and looked as if he greatly enjoyed himself, and then he made a little comment that struck me dumb, and which halted our further conversation for a while: “Yes, you see, in a distant, very, very remote past, you and another came here through the jungle – there was no road or settlement here at that time – and established an ashram just on this spot, and stayed here for the rest of your life. This was a rishis ashram.”

As mentioned I became utterly speechless, but very thoughtful. His statement explained my unusually strong feelings for the place, my recognition when I beheld the Lahul-Spiti Range, and my general well-being staying there. And then, of course, it was quite captivating to think of the reality of such a story of perhaps thousands of years back – thoughts that gave a new perspective on myself as an individual identity. But it wasn’t my habit to dwell much on the past or on the future, or on myself as an individual identity, so very soon I was back in the present, which, to the very highest degree, was exciting and interesting enough to me.

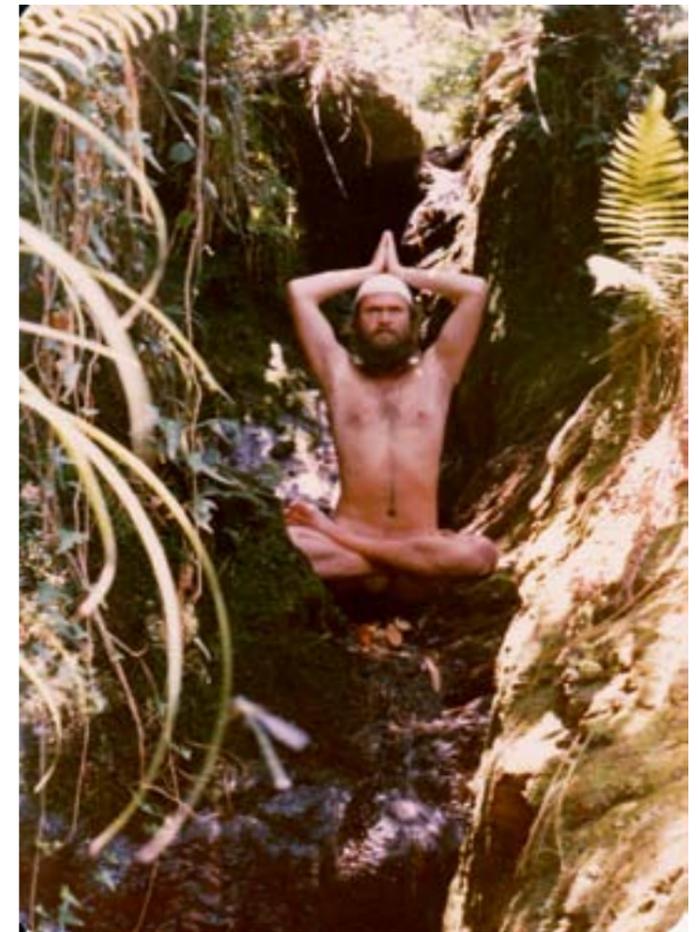
In the afternoon several friends and devotees from far

away showed up to spend some time with Paramananda, two families had even come all the way from Bengal, but otherwise they came from all over North India. The Tyagi family, the Gaur family, the Kaushal family, Sri Bhagavan and many others came, and soon every room and every square metre of floor space was taken up. Also several people from the surrounding areas came, and Paramananda spoke the national language Hindi, which, according to several competent North Indians, he mastered skilfully. But, as a rule, he could speak the local language wherever he went in India. In all he spoke at least 15 different Indian languages.

When we went to rest for the night, Mihir moved out from his room and let Paramananda have his bed, so that he and I were the only ones in that room, and I had never before been in such a close and intimate situation with him. The following nights alone with Paramananda were completely unforgettable and he started by saying: “Bjørn, you are really a sincere truth seeker – you are not like all these others”, and then he continued with teaching me about *baul* and *baul sadhana*, which was entirely new to me. He said it would be the teaching of the coming age and presented it firstly as tantra + *jñana*, which would be especially suitable for the people of the West:

As many as 90% of all sadhus, sannyasins and monks of the Himalayas in reality have a schizophrenic mind because they have such an unnatural and abnormal relation to sex and sexuality. The common Indian tradition about this is completely suppressing, and that leads to perversions of various kinds. But we have the teaching of Tantra, which is fully open and inclusive, and very brave. It accepts the human being fully as it is, with all its different natures, faults and vices. Tantra is never cowardly nor tries to escape from the problems, no, Tantra always bravely faces all problems and accepts the challenges there and then as they appear. *Baul* actually consists of three parts and unites the three main currents in the Indian spiritual tradition, namely the *Shaktas* (tantra), the *Vaishnavas* (*bhakta*), and the Vedantins (*jñana*). For the individual human being it means that it includes body, emotions, and intellect – so the whole human being.

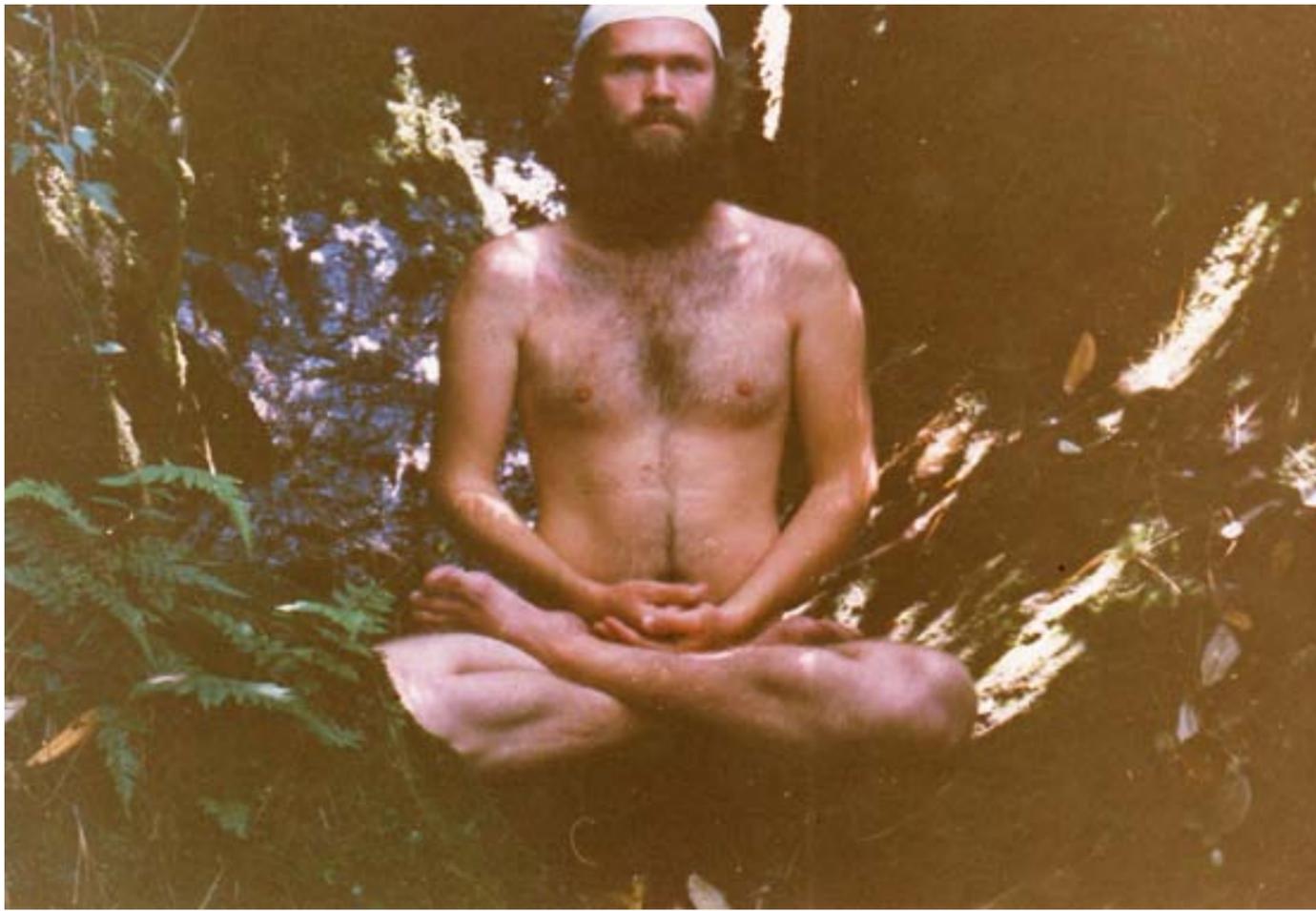
And thus he continued to tell me about *baul* and tantra, and concluded by suggesting that I could start to practise *baul sadhana*. To me it was like a revelation and exactly what I needed to hear then. For, as soon as I had left Banagram ashram or otherwise come outside the physical aura of Paramananda, I had very soon felt my old problems of sexual consciousness, also there in Baniketh. But now, finally, it seemed I would be able to confront my old problem and hopefully come to terms with it. And there was nothing more I wanted in my life than that, because, as my situation had become, with my consciousness



Bjørn near the Baniketh ashram on June 24th 1989. Photo: Saurabh Pundhir.

moving up one day and down again next day, and then up and down again, it was becoming more and more exhausting. Even if I had *atmajñana* and had trained my intellect to discern between illusion and reality, in no way could I manage to ignore the strong sex impulses that I often felt and which time and again arrested me.

Paramananda stayed for seven days and departed on the eighth. The day before his departure we had planned an excursion for all to go to the Khajiar Nature Reserve some distance away elsewhere in the Chamba District, but it was cancelled due to the sudden death in an accident of the driver. Just before his departure, when Paramananda was to eat his meal, a wandering sadhu unexpectedly dropped by and Paramananda at once gave him his own food, took care that the sadhu ate everything, and then left the ashram without eating anything himself. The next night I had a dream about Paramananda and felt that *baul sadhana* was the right thing for me. And the following day Saurabh Pundhir from Lucknow, who was a new and positive acquaintance, came for a short visit. Saurabh was tall with a fair complexion, very intelligent, open, friendly and unbiased, and appeared more “Western” than most Indians, so we quickly became good friends. And together with Mihir the three of us had a lot of fun.



Above: Bjørn in the jungle above the ashram, on June 24th 1989. Photo: Saurabh Pundhir.  
Below: "Prem Ashram" at Baniketh, November 22nd, 12:51 hrs. Photo: BP.



However, Saurabh had to leave after only two days, and after two more days I also left the ashram. That was Tuesday June 27<sup>th</sup> and I had been there exactly three weeks. Even if I had no wish to leave Baniketh and the Himalayas to come down to the chaotic plains again, I knew that I had no choice both in relation to Paramananda, who was going with me to Norway, but also because I just had to learn more about *baul* from him. The downhill bus ride to Pathankot passed quickly and that it went well was in no way due to the driver's common sense. Downhill bus rides in the Himalayas are nightmarish! From Pathankot I went by train to Delhi and then on to Faridabad.

Five days later, on Sunday July 2<sup>nd</sup>, Paramananda also arrived there with Saurabh and several others. In the mean-

time I had managed to arrange for Paramananda's visa at the embassy, so that finally both the entry permit and the residence permit were in order. However, there were lots of problems about the air tickets with Aeroflot. On July 6<sup>th</sup> we left Faridabad and went to Tyagiji's Brij Bihar where we put up for the rest of the remaining days in India. After many trips to various offices in Delhi and lots of difficulties, the air tickets were finally ready. And then Trishan turned up a couple of days before the departure for Norway, so now everything was ready for the big trip. Paramananda and I took leave of all the friends and our plane took off from the Indira Gandhi International Airport just before midnight on Monday July 10<sup>th</sup> destined for Moscow. Finally we were on the way to Norway!



View from the area just up from Dalhousie, which lies above and about two kilometres from Baniketh. Both photos: BP, 22.11.2012.





*Parts of the Lahul-Spiti Range, as it can be viewed near Dalhousie in the Chamba District of the Western Himalayas.  
Photo: BP, November 22nd 2012.*

## GLOSSARY (simplified)

**ashram** – spiritual centre or community.

**atmajñana** – ‘knowing the Self’; Self-Realization.

**baul** – philosophy with man at the centre, physically, emotionally and spiritually; practitioner of *Baul* philosophy; wandering, mystical truth-seeker and musician/singer in Bengal.

**baul-sadhana** – *sadhana* or truth-seeking with a partner of the opposite sex, mainly following tantric principles.

**bhakta** – a follower of the *bhakta* tradition, with love, idols and devotion.

**jñana** – ‘wisdom,’ ‘knowledge’ (‘gnosis’).

**luchi** – Bengali thin, flat, round, deep fried flatbread made of wheat flour, often served on festive occasions.

**rasagulla** – ball-shaped Bengali sweetmeat, made from fresh curd in syrup.

**rishi** – ‘seer’; Self-Realized sage; the highest level attained by humans through evolution, who manifests love and wisdom; (in plural) ‘the seven (original) rishis’ did not come through evolution, but by divine incarnation, and are the mind-born sons of *Brahma*, who were created for the protection of all living beings, including gods and men, and who are always living among the people on earth (through continuous rebirth) to fulfill this task.

**sadhu** – a person who performs *sadhana*; respected and revered, wandering holy man or woman in India.

**sannyasin** – a dedicated truth-seeker who wears saffron coloured robes (*gerrhua*), usually with the title *swami* and *ananda* as suffix in the name, who has renounced family happiness and personal career to help people wake up spiritually.

**shakta** – a worshipper of *Shakti*, and a follower of tantric philosophy and practice. See *tantra*.

**tantra** – ‘liberation through attraction’; spiritual system and method which fully accepts the human being as it is, and offers spiritual development from the human’s most basic level – its sexuality.

**vedantin** – a practitioner of Vedanta.

**yogi** – one who masters yoga; practitioner of yoga.

Continuation follows in the next number next week.