

A purpose of one's own

By Ruth Ostrow

IN the West we have therapists. In the East they have gurus. Gu-Ru. The word means teacher, or someone who takes us from the dark into the light.

Since the hippie '60s when the Beatles named the Maharishi as their guru, it has been popular for Westerners to go to India in search of their spiritual master. In keeping with this tradition, I've decided to make a pilgrimage through Mother India, to check out the plethora of modern gurus offering their wisdom to those drifting around the subcontinent in search of meaning.

Starting in Mumbai, I make my way south to the tip of India using the Lonely Planet tourist bible as my guide, which lists a veritable who's who of spiritual leaders and ashrams as testimony to the fact most Westerners are as keen to see them as temples and museums.

I travel by train to my first destination, Pune, pronounced poo-na, home of the famous Osho commune. Though the Bhagwan (leader of the "orange people") is long dead, his spirit is still very much alive and his teaching propagated through video clips that bring him back to life each day.

Lonely Planet explains that Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, or Osho, was one of India's most popular and flamboyant export gurus and without doubt the most controversial. What particularly outraged his Indian critics was his advocacy of sex as a path to enlightenment. Similarly his much-publicised fleet of Rolls-Royces raised eyebrows in the US where he set up an ashram in Oregon.

Finally, charged with immigration fraud, fined and deported, he returned to Pune where his commune still thrives after his death in 1990, a sort of spiritual Disneyland offering a host of New Age and meditation courses. However, courses are expensive and visitors are required to purchase three uniforms and have an on-the-spot AIDS test before entry.

Not what I'm looking for. So I end up at the nearby Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute where seekers are drawn to the serious study of hatha yoga under the watchful eye of the legendary B.K.S Iyengar. The great Iyengar, author of *Light on Yoga*, revolutionised yoga in the '50s with his vigorous physical therapies.

But the grand master, who is worth crossing oceans to see, is sadly not home. He is in Mumbai to launch a new book.

So with one guru dead, one not home, I make my way to Bangalore to locate a guru many hail as the new Jesus Christ, Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

There's no mistaking which guru we are visiting. The shops outside the ashram are filled with millions of photos of the man whose trademark is a huge halo of black, afro-style, frizzy hair and who, like Osho, has been dogged by controversy.

Those who follow him, including tens of thousands of Indians, say he can perform miracles. A video clip of Sai Baba making an endless stream of ash fall from an

allegedly empty pot is displayed by earnest volunteers to convince tourists that Baba is God.

I'm eager to witness the power of Baba in person. But alas, after the entry saga of having bags searched, shoes off, camera confiscated, I discover that he is at his Puttapparthi ashram in a neighbouring state.

Travelling by houseboat down the backwaters of Kerala, I visit the Matha Amrithanandamayi ashram, residence of one of India's few female gurus. Known as the Hugging Mother, Amma or Ammachi, she is famed for her charity work which has included providing 25,000 houses for the poor. Her followers claim she is the embodiment of Shakti -- mother goddess.

Ma is well-regarded by world bodies. Her face is kind. I'm genuinely eager to see her. But it is not to be. Mum is not home either. She's away in Europe.

And so it goes as I make my way to many places: "Out to lunch; back in five; don't call us we'll call you; now gone but not forgotten."

Finally back in Mumbai to catch my plane out, I discover one popular guru who is home. The down-to-earth, respected Ramesh S. Balsekar.

Ramesh was the general manager for the Bank of India in Mumbai. After retirement he found enlightenment through his guru, master Nisargadatta Maharaj. Since then he's been teaching inner peace.

In a modest apartment, a throng of Western disciples sit at his feet. The rickety elevator plays the lambada in piped muzak, which can be heard from inside the cramped flat every time someone comes or goes.

Grey-haired, smiling, unassuming, Ramesh tells us that everything that happens to us is the will of God. We are all just part of God's dream. Acceptance of fate, total surrender, is the only way forward.

"But if free will is an illusion, what then is the purpose of life?" I ask. He laughs heartily at my frowning face. "None. So just make one up!"

And there it is. I have journeyed far to arrive at the same place I started from. The self. The inner guru. I make up that love, friendship and family are the meaning of life and happily head for home.

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