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Ways of Sensing the Sacred

Spirituality and praxis in North India

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Abstract

This thesis is about spiritualism in North India and how spirituality is practiced in a town of Tapovan, Rishikesh. Sadhana is a term which refers to a spiritual practice and is at the core of Hinduism and everyday lives of people. This thesis aims to communicate ways of practicing religion, or spirituality, and has its focus on singular experiences of the protagonists and their ways of being in the world.

This work is conducted within a theoretical and methodological framework of phenomenology and existential anthropology, which both have deep roots in the study of religious experience. Mircea Eliade's concept of sacred will be applied in the context of sacred place and time, by the river Ganges. This thesis is complementing a film *By the River* which the author filmed during her fieldwork. The film captures sacred objects, people, animals and gods who are gathered by the river. This thesis introduces hierophanies, manifestations of sacred, encountered by the river. In the end to argue why film and images complement textual analysis.

Religious experiences of others can't be reached by a researcher and thus the author has included her field notes, to convey how different senses are activated in ethnographic fieldwork.

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I am much thankful for the people I have had the pleasure to meet and become friends with during my stay in India. I have received so much support and shared wonderful moments with all of you. We will meet again!

Not least, for the support of my family, who took care of all the other tasks while I was traveling, filming and writing.

Namaste!

1 INTRODUCTION

I left to North India, to Rishikesh to make a film about a Hindu healer and a shaman, Anant. However, after my arrival to the field in the summer 2023, I was about to realize there was no one to heal. The spiritual community in Rishikesh had fled before the monsoon season and while rains were battering the hill stations in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, I was having hard time to re-write and re-direct a new film project. For a moment, I was stuck and surrounded by the rains and landslides in Rishikesh, and I had to switch my gaze into something new, anything that wasn't intended to become something. I turned my attention to understand gods and life by the river.

The visual is essential to Hindu tradition and culture and many attempts to understand India's divine images have been laden with misperceptions. Eck has written about the power and importance of “seeing” in the Hindu religious tradition. “Not only must the gods keep their eyes open, but so must we, in order to make contact with them, to reap their blessings, and to know their secrets” (1998:1). Moreover, Dell et al. (1977) points out that Hinduism cannot be comprehended by reading books. Jeet, a friend and an informant, tells me that even with all the time in the world, I will never get through by reading. Dell is convinced that important aspects of Hindu beliefs and practices can only be communicated by sight and sound. A question posed by Eck, what do Hindus see in the images of gods? Is the same which kept my curiosity throughout the fieldwork. I never got bored of looking at people who were looking at gods, and yet, I never really understood what people saw.

By the River is a film I made as part of my master's degree, about the river Ganges, which is a personification of the goddess Ganga. Ganges is the most holy river in India and every year thousands of pilgrimages and people arrive by its banks to pray, hope, and sacrifice to her. She is a power, a female principle who has the ability to forgive sins, to set people free from *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth and death. Reincarnation being one of the most characteristic aspects of the Indian society. *By the River* observes and explores people, gods and animals who gather by the river, from dawn until dusk. The film doesn't stay in one place for too long, neither it aims to establish a strong relation with protagonists and audience, and yet somehow along the journey, relationships are formed, and lessons learned. This conveys better a sense of moments, and unexpected encounters, which happened throughout my fieldwork.

In this written part of the thesis, I aim to communicate through field notes, but particularly place the film in the context of phenomenological approach and discussion. The fieldnotes indirectly reflect concepts and ideas drawn from visual anthropology and *Being Ethnographic* (Madden 2017). Jackson argues that a better anthropology involves apprehending other's existential concerns and ordinary as well as extraordinary experiences through fieldwork and shared practical activity, evoking in writing what one has learned (In Ram & Houston 2015).

Spirituality as discussed in this thesis is like the cycle of the river itself, conceptionally. It has neither a start nor ending. It is as old as the human experience. Spirituality is a structure within our being and cosmos, not in theory. It is in human consciousness. Time and time again, I ended up asking myself a question on the field; how can I write about my experiences in an appropriate academic manner? How to write about Other's experiences of the sacred, about the gods and the sacred places during a sacred time, when people come to meet their gods. Jackson (2015:294) writes that,

Phenomenologically, we are continually caught on the cusp, as it were, between what can and cannot be conceptually grasped, causally explained, or verbally captured. Sometimes we experience ourselves as having agency; sometimes we feel that we have none, or that inanimate objects and impersonal forces have more power over us than we have over them; sometimes we think intuitively; sometimes we have recourse to conventional beliefs.

At the end of thesis, I will illustrate some similarities between Western psychology and the teachings of my protagonists, 'gurus', of Indian spirituality. My aim is not to convey forms of Hinduism in practice, rather, represent singular experiences, which for my protagonists are at the core of what their life is about, of who they are, what they do and how do they relate to cosmos. Given the fluidity of our being in the world, "we can't justify general conclusions as to the nature or essence of the relata involved, but according to Jackson it is possible to explore subjectivity without making claims for the identity of any particular subject (2015:294).

This thesis is an effort to explain what motivates people to practice spirituality and how Hindu's relate to their gods. Moreover, to emphasize why film and images are important part of conducting research in India, as well as within the anthropology.

The work has been conducted methodologically as conceptionally within the framework of phenomenology. The research question is:

How is the everyday spirituality experienced in Rishikesh?

After the introduction to the field, narrative and protagonists, I will briefly present Mircea Eliade who was phenomenologically oriented scholar of religion but also of India, followed by introduction of existential anthropology. Chapter four will introduce the topic with an analysis what spirituality means, according to my informants. The second part of the chapter will present hierophanies, which Eliade refers to as manifestations of the sacred, encountered by the river. In chapter five, I will apply Eliade's concepts of sacred in relation to the riverbank as a sacred place and aarti as sacred time.

I use italicized lettering at the first use of an Indian-language word. Glossary is attached after the conclusion. My choice for spelling Hindi and Sanskrit words is based on how my informants would write them, or as used by the authors in referred sources.

1.1 The ethnographic field

Hinduism is not a religion as understood of Semitic religions in the West. Hinduism is “a synthesis of many different beliefs and practices, various sets of values and morals, culminating in a way of life” (Choudhury 1994). According to Jeet, term ‘Hinduism’ came from the west and placed “all Indian” under one category, which does not really exist and never did (Field discussion, February 2024). Hindu is a Sanskrit word for river, which was given by the Persian invaders in the sixth century (Huyler 1999).

Tapovan can rightfully be called as a small town in an Indian context. Tapovan is part of Rishikesh, which is one of the most sacred cities in India and the starting point for the Hindu Char Dham pilgrimage, including Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath, for seekers of spiritual salvation.

There are several sacred sites dating back thousands of years and the region is known for sages and hermits who have been meditating in the caves and temples for thousands of years. I wanted to start my film in one of those, the Kunjapuri temple, which is devoted to the goddess Durga. Being at the highest peak of Rishikesh, gives a sense of timelessness as well as some geographical perspective about the field. An excellent spot to admire the spectrum of light.

During Covid-19 when people were advised to stay at home, a new highway was built connecting New Delhi and Rishikesh. Along with the faster route, arrived also businesses and the real estates. Today, in every corner of Tapovan a new hotel or a restaurant is being built,

and old ones are withdrawing as the rents are rising. The recent development divides local people into roughly two camps. Those who favor the increasing economic opportunities and flow of the people, and those who are witnessing the sacred place being destroyed by disrespectful behavior and urban heat of the night.



(FIGURE 1)

In the map above, Tapovan is located northeast of the river. Further Badrinath Road divides the town into upper and lower Tapovan. The blue locations signs, indicate places which I visited frequently. My home during the fieldwork, Auyrpack Home Stay, as well as all the cafes and restaurants excluding Ira’s Kitchen and Shri Balak Nat temple, are located in lower Tapovan. This is the location where I spent most of my time. Going in between home, cafés, yoga classes, the temple, the river. Countless walks around this area and in the forest, up the hill. During my stay Lakshman Jhula bridge (the closest to me) was under construction and

the next closest way to get to the other side of the river was walking through Ram Jhula bridge. At times I could cross the bridge on the east and walk along the river 10 kilometers, reaching Ram Jhula from the opposite direction. I never really learned to relax behind motorbikes, so all the travel was done by feet or by rickshas. Also called as autos, these days

1.2 The protagonists and the narrative

This is a beautiful river, he said to his companion. Yes, said the ferryman, a very beautiful river, I love it more than anything. Often, I have listened to it, often I have looked into its eyes, and always I have learned from it. Much can be learned from a river.

Herman Hesse, 2020:63

Anant

I met my protagonist Anant Mathur accidentally in a café in Jaipur. It was at that time, in July 2022, he began to tell me about his life as a healer in India. He began to paint a picture, how is it like to lead a life as a shaman, life filled with prejudice and economic uncertainty. However, his profession and his way of being in the world, was his calling. His teacher, his guru, told his mother, when he was a boy of ten years, that this boy has a special gift. The destiny, according to Anant, made him to become the person he is today. Committed to follow his path and channel signs from the cosmos which he interprets in his everyday life, and shares with the people who are willing to walk with him. At times he teaches students, in other times he is focused on his sadhana, spiritual practice. Early on Anant agreed I could make a film about his healing ritual, but for my disappointment there was no one to heal when I came back to Tapovan in the summer 2023. I did not want to stage and manipulate the course of events and encounters with people. The right time and place for the ritual and performance just never came. However, Anant became a friend and a resourceful key informant who was always willing to deepen my understanding and learning processes on spirituality by the river and find the right words when I was struggling to find words for a dialogue in between Western rationality and Indian spirituality.

Jeet

Jeet doesn't make an appearance in the film, only with a brief reference and yet he and his family in Jaipur are the people who have welcomed me into their home during my three past stays in India. In 2022, I lived with Jeet's wife, parents and grandmother for two months. By now, they have adopted me into their family, and I am grateful for them that my travels have went as smooth as they have. To auntie and Jeet's wife who taught me to eat. Regardless being in two different locations, they were always there to back me up and during my third journey to Rishikesh, Jeet followed along for couple of days. We have discussed countless of contemporary issues from politics, feminism, religion to sports in India, and he is a source for inspiration with his heartfelt intelligence.

Yogi Anant

I met yogi Anant during the summer 2023. Anant introduced me to him as among his most respected and knowledgeable teachers. I filmed yogi Anant during our one visit to his yoga studio. After this we met four times and after arriving home to Tromsø, I have participated his weekly pranayama online lessons, which I continue to do as I write.

Yogi Anant has yoga schools in China, Croatia and India and he is one of the three teachers in Rishikesh who holds a PhD degree in yoga. He comes from the Himalayas and has followed his Himalayan masters. These days he meditates in his own solitude, if not with students.

Mittra

I met Mittra during the summer 2023. He is a person I run into on the streets of Tapovan regularly. His yoga studio and home are in the middle of my homestay and the riverbank. He is much respected and liked hatha yoga teacher. I filmed Mittra on two occasions in his yoga studio. We both place great value for long walks around the river, and as we walked, I learned from him. About his attitude for leaving difficulties for the universe to be solved. I learned many lessons about practicing patience, meditation, praying, always accompanied with a good laughter and sense of humor. During my second stay I practiced yoga with him every day.

Ganges



(FIGURE 2 Natesan 2021)

The myth of Ganga.

It is believed that Ganga was cajoled from the heavens to Earth by the intense efforts of sage Bhagiratha. Bhagiratha's ancestors had infuriated Sage Kapila, who had reduced all of them to ashes. Without the performance of their funeral rites, Bhagiratha's ancestors were denied their place in the realms of those who have passed from this manifested world. The only way to achieve this was to have their ashes washed by the flow of Ganga. Satisfied with Bhagiratha's penance, Ganga appeared before him and asked him what he wanted. He asked that she come down to earth and bless his ancestors. She responded that the force of her descent would plunge her from the heavens, through the earth, and into the nether world. The only one who could control her flow was Lord Shiva. (Natesan, 2021).

My first encounter with Ganges was in Varanasi, in 2014. During my short stay I don't recall doing much else than walking back and forth the riverbank. My hostel was behind the funeral ghats, and I was mesmerized by the sounds, smoke and scents of the city, the old Benares, the city of light, the Forest of Bliss. The flow of the river was calmer than in Rishikesh and its waters were dark. While in Varanasi, it felt the time and space was leaning towards the night of the day, towards the fall of human life. I don't recall sleeping much, maybe I was just dreaming the days through? In Rishikesh, Ganges is powerful and clear, just as she is depicted as young woman, out of control. Maybe the gods grow old too? (Fieldnotes, February 2024).

Narrative, storied reality

“So, what's the story”, my film supervisor asked me more often than I would have hoped for. After the fieldwork, I had no story. Just hundreds of clips and images by the river. I had

observed with my film camera for weeks and had vague ideas in my mind. However, every time I entered the editing suit, the ideas faded away and I was left with a frustration. It was not until I started systematically to go through the material, I realized I had filmed enough to represent a day by the river. The material was representative enough for what happens there. Madden refers to ethnographic accounts as storied realities. “It is the systematic and repetitious revisiting of ethnographic data that we find meaning. It is in the ordering of data in the first place that allows us to see patterns and relationships that convey meaning.” (2017:158). Yet it is one thing to answer, “what is the film about” and another, to write about the complex processes that are part of fieldwork. Madden states that “if there is one process that creates mystique, ritual and anxiety more than any other in ethnography, then it is writing” (2017:159).

2 METHODOLOGY

Winter has arrived to Rishikesh. People are warming up around the fires, burning tree branches and trash. Women have covered them with large shawls. My first night is freezing cold. I sleep with clothes on, waking up in the brisk morning air, but the sun is arising from a familiar angle, behind the mountains, which provide the setting for the river. I quickly boil the water for my tea. I can't wait anymore to meet the river after my absence. Her waters are crystal clear and powerful as always in her winter flow. I will continue taking visual notes by the river for the next 2 weeks to come (Fieldnotes, 25.1.2024)

I conducted my fieldwork in two parts, in June-July 2023 and January-February 2024. Both, off seasons so to say, and both having their specific climatic and ritualistic features, which directly impacted my work. During both journeys, I stayed in the same home stay, I ate in the same places and spent time with the people I knew from the first field visit. The purpose of my second fieldwork was a follow-up as I needed more visual material for the film. On my first 7-week field work, I filmed intensively but I also conducted several interviews with local people from Tapovan as well as with foreign visitors. All the interviews were partially filmed. I had several discussions throughout my fieldwork with these people, and with Anant, we met several times daily. During my second visit, I didn't conduct any interviews.

During my first fieldwork, I spent much time in the temples, especially in Shri Balak Nat temple. This is a temple for saint Balak Nat, and I filmed there on several occasions with a permission of the temple keeper.

My first field visit was most about establishing a rapport and getting familiar with the field. Getting familiar with the sacred calendar and sadhana of Tapovan, the everyday spiritual practices, ceremonies and rituals taking place by the river.

During my second visit, given the contacts and trust which was already established, I spent considerably more time in participating and doing, reflecting and walking. These two journeys were very different from their degree of intention and intensity. The first one hit hard, and the second was a calm contemplation. Both were needed, both complemented each other's.

My room has draft from two directions. The wind meets my bed from the bathroom and under the entrance door. It's too cold inside to write. Last summer, it was too hot and humid to think. What a convenient field for an academic venture... (Fieldnotes, 25.1.2024)

2.1 Film camera and visual notes

Indian society and culture are visual and there are scholars who shares a conviction that some important aspects of Hindu religious beliefs and practices can only be communicated by sight and sound. Further, they argue that films, videotapes, slides, and records are not merely supplementary, but are necessary for the study of Hinduism (Dell et al. 1981).

Deveraux, an ethno-psychiatrist, noted that social sciences had not yet learned how to make most of their own emotional involvement with their material. He insisted that what happens within the observer must be made known, if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood (Behar 1996). One method, I try, is to include diary notes, which were more informative some days, while other days might have only included a list of foods eaten, and music listened. Regretfully, blank pages as well when carrying out such a painstaking task as field noting was a lesser priority. Madden (2017) reminds, that repeatedly ethnographers have been told not to bring value-laden language into any part of fieldnotes, analysis and writing up. However, he does not see this as a problem, when the author is aware of this. Especially because “familiar, introspective, and value-laden judgements make for good shorthand mnemonics (2017:118). Moreover, “fieldnotes are an extension of an ethnographer’s internal dialogue. The notes are mnemonics, reminders, bits and pieces of important information, snatches of verbatim quotes, short descriptions, impressions, and feelings that the ethnographer uses later to revivify the moment and more fully describe what was occurring at the time of the observation” (Ibid.). However, Piette notes that “when returning from the field, the anthropologist retains only significant ethnographic details from the sum of his field notes, only the details that he deems worthy of the status of cultural representation” (Denizeau 2015:218).

Although it is important to be transparent with one’s intentions, emotions, thoughts, after all we write about, observe and film others. Too much attention to the anthropologists will only increase wordiness of the document and shift away focus from the intended theoretical discussion. “How do you write subjectivity into ethnography in such a way that you can continue to call what you are doing ethnography? (Behar 1996:12). Is a point I have needed to balance with, because the fieldwork I conducted was participatory and sensory. Much of the data went literally through my body, weather in practice of yoga, meditation, eating or participating the Ganga aarti. For Geertz ethnographies are “a strange cross between author-saturated and author-evacuated texts. Neither romance nor lab report, but something in

between” and Jackson doesn’t hide his personal experiences and he is open about his emotions. While living in the field, emotions cast light onto the toughness and depth of field work (Behar 1996; Kojonsaari 2018).

2.2 Participant observation

I have never conducted participant observation in the same spirit as I have conducted interviews, recorded and filmed. The last three are methods the researcher turns off and on consciously. For me participant observation has always been a way of being, which is grounded on curiosity and willingness to learn, regardless of time and space. I can’t switch it on and off. It’s a way of being-on-the-field. For Ingold (2017) participant observation is a behavior. It is true that we behave differently with different people, and we have different roles. My role on the field differs from that at home. When I do participant observation, I listen to my surroundings, I listen to my informants, and I try to grasp the big picture as well as pay attention into the smallest details. I join in the action whenever it is possible without thinking about it as a particular field method, it all supports learning regardless, it is a shared, sensory, experience. Moreover, much of ethnographic meaning makes sense only after having left the field.

Ingold is critical about the case-studies which have been incorporated in ethnographies. He states that “there is something deeply troubling, as we all know, about joining with people, apparently in good faith, only later to turn your back on them so that yours becomes a study of them, and they become a case”. According to him, the mistake is to confuse observation with objectification (2017:23). For Ingold, participant observation is not a technique of data gathering but an ontological commitment. Moreover, participant observation should be understood as educational, not ethnographic. “It is a way of learning, and that learning – as we well know – can be transformative (Ibid.). According to Ingold, “to observe is not to objectify. It is to notice what people are saying and doing, to watch and listen, and to respond in your own practice. Observation is a way of participating attentively, and for this reason a way of learning”. (Ingold 2017:23).

Attentive participation aids discussion, because while having a full focus on doing, and taking notes of action itself, it increases biases that ethnographer might have before actual experience.

2.3 Ethics of research and reflexivity

The more and the better, I get familiar with the field setting, the less my research proposal and objectives seem to be relevant in here. I´m getting rather desperate at the time being. I´m obsessively trying to think and read to find a research question which would make sense to anyone else than me alone. I don´t know, if it´s just me, but I am seriously getting irritated by the “research problem” chapters. There are no problems in here, I think. The only problem is that I can´t problematize the field...I need to get out...

Later in the afternoon I got lost in the crowds and heat of the downtown. Ordered a dish I didn´t have clue what´s in it. To eat it with a handful of burning chilis. Just for distraction and to blow my mind away. The waitress tells me, I eat like an Indian. You bet I do. (Fieldnotes, 8.7.2023).

Madden writes that, “ethnography doesn´t have an ethical element - ethnography is an ethical commitment from the very outset, and through all phases of ethnographic research and writing” (2017:176). In the same manner, as participant observation, sound ethics of research is a solid part of the work and should be embodied by the researcher. Without the protagonists, informants, field discussions and encounters, people´s consent – none of this work would exist, neither the film nor the text. This is something I wanted to point out with the starting scene in *By the River*. Without the help of a local guide, who set up my camera, there wouldn´t have been a beginning to start with. Moreover, far I am being the authoritative anthropologists on the field, I´m just a person cast out in the middle of other people´s lives, and engaging with them, learning from them. This makes more sense for me, not for them. Yet, I must be aware of my gender and power relationships which have often influence the research processes of anthropologists.

Reflexivity with film camera means for MacDougall “contextualizing the content of a film by revealing aspects of its production” (2019:154). By this he means adding voice over, interaction with the subjects and also I included shots where the subjects clearly acknowledged the presence of the camera.

Some notes about filming on the field. First, I chose a spot and sat or stood there, the camera still inside the camera bag. After some time and before recording, I had the camera out in the open directed towards the people and places I wanted to film. Like this, being transparent with my camera and the direction of the lens, I offered people the opportunity to walk away. After I was sure people around had seen the camera, I pushed the record button. This was also a method which allowed me to observe, did people change their behavior once the camera was directed towards them. Most of the cases, they didn´t. In many cases people

approached me to ask what the film was about. This is one aspect of the process which I wanted to illustrate in the film, the sociality and interaction while filming.

In cases, I went close, and people were engaged in their activities and couldn't flee in front of the camera, I asked permission. Either verbally or with a sight. Permission was never denied, only inside temples. More difficult than to get the permission to film (which was never a problem), was to answer, "what are you filming, a documentary?" For National Geographic, YouTube? Yes, it will be kind of a documentary about the river, which I would call an 'ethnographic documentary', for my university. After, I could sense, people lost interest on the presence of the camera. Which I didn't mind because like this I could better focus on filming. As those who have visited India knows, that having private space can at times be challenging, and especially when travelling as a solo woman. At times, random interruptions caused negative feelings. After some time, I gradually accepted this aspect as part of the field reality. Jackson notes that, ethics is perhaps more urgently a matter of how we react to circumstances than the circumstances themselves (2005).

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this thesis I mainly use phenomenology as a framework. However, it can be argued that phenomenology is more an approach than a theory. Phenomenological approach aims to perceive what phenomena's means for specific individuals or communities, to study the experience itself, without claiming that the concepts which are used are the essence or being. Rather concepts are merely tools to describe the experiences of others (Laitila 2004).

In this chapter I will present some concepts which will be useful to think with while by the river and observing life in Tapovan, as well as insights from existential anthropology and philosophy.

3.1 Sacred and profane

The approach by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) has been described as phenomenology. Eliade was a historian of religions but also referred to as a phenomenological philosopher. He is most known for his publications in comparative religion. Eliade asked novel questions about the relation of the Other to their own worldviews. These "others" were perceived "like us" in his hermeneutics, during the time when the world still addressed people as primitive or civilized. Interesting for him was to ask, "why should we want to know about others?" (Cave 1993).

Eliade, had a personal as academic interest in what has been called as new humanism and he wrote his dissertation followed by *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (See Cave 1993; Eliade 1954). Due to his concerns of being taken 'less scientific' he downplayed the latter two and aimed at keeping his public figure as scientific as possible (Cave 1993). There was a moment in anthropology as well when anthropologists were concerned for delivering functionalist analysis and cultural accounts according to scientific formulas and were eager to find generalizations through systematic presentation of data. Moreover, prior to "writing culture", the reflexive turn in anthropology and before blurring the boundaries in between art and science, some anthropologists had to hide their poetic tendencies (Clifford 1986).

Religion for Eliade meant situations in which groups and or individuals are alive and live their realities. Reality becomes thus a fraction of the wider abstract 'opportunity', called religion. Religion is not a rational definition. Eliade doesn't ask how we can define and classify a phenomenon, a thing or an experience. Rather, he is asking, what is the relationship

between the experiencer and experience and what is the structure of this relationship? (Laitila 2003). Larsen (2001) writes that it seems that Eliade's work was an existential response to, what does it mean to be religious? The aim of Eliade was to describe religion as a framework of choices made by individuals and groups within this framework.

Moreover, religion for Eliade means the idea of sacred. By that he refers to self-realization, becoming a human and being a human. Sacred is a precondition for being a human, in the same way as Heidegger argues that 'being' can't be defined because it is a precondition for human existence. (Laitila 2003). According to Eliade humans will become aware of sacred only when they are detached from it, and detachment from the sacred means falling into profane, unreal being. Profane being causes restlessness and because of this, a person begins to search for a center, a meaning, for his life. This state of existential restlessness has been described as *angst* for Heidegger and *despair* for Kierkegaard. Paradoxically, profane is a necessity for the sacred to become visible.

Eliade has been criticized for accepting the views of believers without criticism. That he accepts religion as if it's "a given reality". Some scholars have argued that researchers can't that readily accept the views of the believers about their own beliefs. Rather, the beliefs of others must be analyzed using theoretical perspectives and methodological tools. (). In addition, *Sacred and Profane* is written in a rather general note, which makes it challenging to apply in this work. Eliade's *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (1952) has been useful for a background study, but for this thesis it is the concept of sacredness which has been most useful. Whereas I discuss that a sense of sacredness is at the core of spiritual practice, *sadhana*. The conceptual jungle of "religion" and "spirituality" is such that I don't wish to spend time defining these, only with the voices of my informants and as I have interpreted these voices, and through my own experience.

It has been said that the entire production of Eliade, has been an effort to say that nothing can be said about the sacred, we can only refer to sacred religious experience. This connects to my research interest, on how to textualize realities which can't be verbalized and why is the images and film important to convey a sense of sacred.

3.2 Existential anthropology and phenomenological approach

Existential anthropology is part of the discipline which comes close to what has conventionally been labelled as existential philosophy, asking questions about human

condition. One of the most prominent existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre, claims that humans “create themselves” since birth. Sartre called himself as atheistic existentialist, for whom God does not exist before human reality. According to Sartre, human defines God and God doesn’t define human (Sartre 1973). This makes application of existential philosophy meaningless in the context of Indian society.

However, the aim of existential anthropology is to discover general characteristics of human ways of existing, in time, through space and with others. To describe moments of being. For Eliade some general characteristics would be sense of sacred and profane. For anthropologist, Michael Jackson, existential anthropology is radically empirical, which is less based on theoretical foundations than traditional sociocultural paradigms. When Jackson is writing, he is present in the text as well. “Writing that comes close to storytelling, where the anthropologist is the narrator of situations in which he is a character, situations where he listens to and responds to others recounting their own existence.” This is something that Kojonsaari recalls as one of the strengths of Jackson’s ethnographies (2018). According to Jackson, it is impossible to fully apprehend the complexity of existence through analytical reason alone, but it’s possible to describe “moments of being” and thereby understand existential experiences of others (Denizeau 2015:219-220). Moreover, existential anthropology’s “epistemological posture may be characterized by a withdrawal from the level of cultural representation in anthropological understanding” (Ibid.). Existential anthropologists are interested of human existence and will likely move away from anthropological praxis which involves abstractions that lose touch with actual human experience. Phenomenological anthropology is the study of lived experience of the others, and yet “the idea of the individual is impossible, because to be human is always to be with others; humans, animals, gods, spirits” (Frazer 2023).

To have a strong sense of reality is to have one’s feet firmly planted on the ground, to be down to earth. Reality is a matter of addressing the needs of income and livelihood; all else places one in jeopardy of becoming distracted, absentminded, even delusional. (Jackson 2012:146)

In the light of existential anthropology, my research question might sound counter-intuitive, in its subtle attempt ‘to reveal structures of sacredness’. But my aim is other than that, it is to illustrate how sacred, or spirituality, is enacted in moments of people living their lives. It is

not my aim to place people's actions in any paradigm, structure, or general conclusion about 'Hinduism'.

Eliade and Jackson are representatives of different schools of thought, but they share similarities. Both have been influenced by Heidegger's phenomenology and for them experience always extends beyond theory and language. Phenomenology has been one of the most influential traditions of the twentieth century and it can be said to be "the study of reality", as it is subjectively lived and experienced (Frazer 2023). Ram and Houston suggest a definition of phenomenology as "an investigation of how humans perceive, experience, and comprehend the sociable, materially assembled world that they inherit at infancy and in which they dwell" (2015:1)

In academic work, this approach is an attempt to describe human consciousness in its lived immediacy before it is subject to theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematizing (Jackson 1996). Common research themes within phenomenological approach have been about sensory perception, illness and healing, bodily-ness, intersubjectivity and senses of place, in addition to anthropology of religion (Ram & Houston 2015; Knibbe & Versteeg 2008). The diversity in India is such that having phenomenological approach, is the only way to initiate a learning process for me. In every level of life and thought, India is polycentric and pluralistic.

Diana Eck has written about visibility in Hinduism and *Darsan* (1998) aims to partially answer the question addressed in the introduction, what do Hindus see when they look at the gods? Her book takes the reader to temples, pilgrimages and in front of the gods in India. Darsan means seeing, and to see the gods' eyes is enough to reap their blessings.

Indian born author Tulasi Srinivas has written about radical hope in the context of neoliberal development. Her book *The Cow in the Elevator* (2018) is a book about anthropology of wonder. Her motivation is to learn about good life in precarious moments in Bangalore, and she ends up spending much time inside the temples with gods and priests. In addition to witnessing an inevitable change of a community, society and religious practice.

Stephen Huyler is an anthropologist and a photographer who has conducted extensive fieldwork in India, including film and photography. Film, *Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion* (1996) together with Sarah Ridley. *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (1999) have supported my discussion in this thesis. Huyler is a scholar who is fully present with all his senses while participating rituals in India to absorb the entire experience. According to him, awareness of one experience enriches another.

More than any other film has *Forest of Bliss* (1986) by Robert Gartner influenced *By the River*, and thus this thesis as well. Without this film, I would still struggle to answer what is my film about. Gartner films a riverbank and around in Varanasi (which was originally a forest sanctuary called Anandavana 'Forest of Bliss' before the city got built around it) from dusk until dawn. It provides many cues for the viewer, and it is aesthetically intriguing and intelligent. Yet, it has no dialogue, no strong protagonists, and no closed ending. At the same time, it encourages to learn, and it triggers curiosity, which are excellent merits for a film.

4 ANALYSIS

After my failed attempts to make a film about ritual healing, I felt the need to go back to the basics; to think what is spirituality? I started to ask people about their views what spirituality means for them with a follow up question: what is your sadhana? My intention was to understand how people practice intentionally and live spiritually and symbolism in their everyday lives. Another term, *puja*, which refers to ceremonial act, is also used in the everyday context. Puja is a reverence to God through invocation, prayer, song, and ritual. Through puja, connection to gods is established and often contact is facilitated through an image, sound, and scent (Huylar 1999). When devotees do puja in the morning it gives them peace of mind and people are reminded there is a sense of purposes in life, as being part of a larger whole, the cosmos (Huylar & Ridley 1996; Huylar 1999).

Hinduism is an individualistic religion, and Tarabout (2004) writes that temple devotion is relatively new in Hinduism. At the core of worship is the relationship between an individual and a God. Hinduism as a religion of thousands of gods might appear confusing, but there really is only one supreme God, *Brahma*. All the other deities are different aspects of Brahma, and people can choose themselves on which characteristic of God they want to focus on (Huylar & Ridley 1996). Many of the rituals and gods are shared within a household and a family but different members can pray for different gods, depending on how a person connects with the aspect of God. The gods have variety of characters, just like humans do.

4.1 Spirituality in Tapovan

Several of my informants made a separation in between what is perceived as religion and what is spirituality. Jeet told me that he perceives religion as a club. It is a club for people who shares similar interests and prefers to stick together. For him, religion is a name and a reason, people want to affiliate with, it is about ego and proud, about identity. Whereas spiritualism is really a way of life, and a feeling. Similarly, Mittra acknowledges the relationship between politics and religion, which is not what is spirituality for him.

I met Godmi on my first visit to Rishikesh in September 2022. She is the owner of a tearoom and a restaurant, Ira's Kitchen, which I visited daily. We had a habit of greeting each other's but once I wanted to film her as well. She gets shy in front of the camera, so after a while, I put the camera aside and our conversation got more free and intimate, after this initial question...

Spirituality is... we are born into a religion; we have a firm foundation. We have day to day practices, rituals, so we stay connected to something. Like waking up we have a daily routine in a traditional Indian family, which we call dincharya. You wake up, have a bath, you say your prayers, meditation, some people do yoga. After, you step into your work, which is also very important.

For me, when you talk about spirituality, work is what is most important... It doesn't have to be work that gives you financial returns, but it can be satisfaction, and what you're getting from what you're passionate about. It can be your day-to-day laundry, knitting, cooking, cleaning the house. If a person is passionate and does her tasks with full enthusiasm, then person is spiritual.

Vishal Gupta is a former engineer who was working in various industrial places across India. Twenty years ago, he came to Tapovan with his wife, and they built their house and homestay. According to his Vishal, as an engineer, you have nothing to do. Only follow the instructions and fix some little problems. He perceives himself more innovative and as a man who wants to do many things. He paints and makes his natural colors utilizing the plants in their garden. He writes his book on *ayurveda* and Indian politics, which he has shared with the prime minister Modi. Lately, he has begun to design clothes with natural fabric and natural colors. Vishal and Didi are a good example of how to live life according to Vedic medical system, *ayurveda*.

I'm interested of nature and to live with the nature, to live with the freedom. So, I choose this life.... For me art is freedom. Anything you do with freedom, is art. So, when you're happy, you make some flowers, trees, animals, which is creating your happiness.

What you mean by spirituality... spirituality means you are connected from inside. So, when you are happy, doing anything with creation, without any greed, without ego. Because the biggest problem is the ego. We do artwork to earn something, or maybe we want bigger name or fame. But if you do some type of artwork just for your happiness, to create some happy atmosphere, with nature. And people come to you, and you make them also happy. So that is really art. If you are away from

ego, it goes automatically to sadhana and finally you get that ultimate happiness. You know that everything is changing in a changing world, and you live in the present context, in the present state. That is the real spirituality. You live without fear, without ego, you are happy and do whatever is right... This is my sadhana.

Sadhana as a concept is complex and devoid of definitions. It can refer to a person's everyday routines, dincharya, as for Godmi, cleaning and cooking. In the case of Vishal, it encompasses "everything" which is beyond ego, greed and fear. Sadhana leads to freedom and happiness, and it happens in the present context. Puja is part of sadhana as well. In Hinduism there is no one proper way of doing sadhana and believing, eventually all the ways lead towards God. However, I believe many would agree that the aim of sadhana and puja is to offer one's ego. In puja "you offer your ego, it's put under control". It is a total surrender. Ego is perceived as a demon, the evil, which humans needs to fight against (Huylar & Ridley 1996).

For Didi, the wife of Vishal Gupta, spirituality is in the food and cooking. According to her, a wife cooking to her husband and children is a very sacred act. The wife and the mother, adds love, care and share in her food, and these are received by the family, in the food. Food and eating are a heart feeling, not a stomach feeling. It is a relationship in between wife, husband, and children. When the food is cooked with love, the brain automatically stays happy, and the person stays away from any tension. However, Didi adds if she is feeling sad, she won't cook for her family. Because the anger within her also goes to the food. During low moments in life, it is a servant or a cook who prepares the food, but this is not a heart feeling, it is a relationship with money.

While I was in Jaipur in the summer 2023, I wanted to film a group discussion with Jeet, Krishna and Sakshmi. This method turned out to be excellent for observing and filming an eloquent discussion, without my interference. We found a cozy café and I simply asked, if they could discuss how they perceive spirituality. The discussion lasted roughly 30 minutes and I filmed it entirely.

Spirituality is connecting within yourself. Because in the grand scheme of things, to put it scientifically, we are just born out of the big bang, right? We are just these small pieces thrown around from this one mass of body which was together, and now it's trying to make sense again, being together. Because big bang for some reason was being thrown in million pieces around. Now every single bit of it, is trying to find its way back. It's trying to make sense of it, that's spirituality. I'm trying to find out what is my role in here, so I listen to my inner self, connecting with my inner self is spirituality.

Yogi Anant is born and grown up in Himalayas. After his formal education he chose to follow his Himalayan masters, which included many years of meditation with them and Buddhist monks, in the mountains. For me yogi Anant is representative of “a true guru” and his speech and wisdom always come from such depths, that at times I was having hard time to talk casually with him. Yogi Anant says himself that “yoga is in my blood” and that only awareness in every single moment can bring love, peace, and health. All provided to humans by birth. At the same time, he yields away from attention and fame, with a preference of meditating in the nature or in his room. When I met him for the first time, I didn’t know what to expect. As we opened the door into his studio with Anant, at the first sight of him, I felt bowing my head into his feet. I was never comfortable to sit on the same height with him, but I preferred to sit on the floor. Filming him was challenging because I was nervous. My hands shook and I didn’t have a tripod. I forgot to adjust the camera, the focus and exposure and it shows in the footage. In case I had readily prepared questions, these became irrelevant. However, I decided to incorporate this clumsiness as part of the film. I could have edited it away, but as it is now, it is more loyal to the actual moment.

*Do you know about the pranayama?
The breath. The vital force. One is a cosmic and one is individual.
Yoga scriptures mentions the essence of the prana, the vital energy.
That’s very important for us.
I’m talking from where?
I’m thinking from where?
You know, whatever is happening, my hands are moving, my legs are moving,
I’m speaking, I’m listening, I’m understanding, I’m expressing myself
because of the prana, because of the energy.
So, once you understand the energy, once you understand the rhythm.
You understand the secret of the universe.
Because whatever you’re getting from there, any information
Without energy you can’t.
We are living in this form because of the energy.
There are many forms of energies, once we understand that energy
We can understand what pranayama is.
Pranayama is not just prana plus yama, meaning extension and retention of the
breath, holding the breath. If you dive deep and start concentrating on the prana,
If you’re going deeper, from where this energy originates, then you understand
the soul. How it comes from the soul. How it originates from the soul.*

I met and filmed a young couple from Belgium who had arrived to Rishikesh to attend Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama ashram, following ascetic ashram rules for a week. Days consisted of

waking up at 05.00 followed by morning prayer, meditation, and a practice of hatha yoga. Breakfast at 08.00 followed by karma yoga and pranayama...I was curious to hear their thoughts about how to continue to practice their sadhana, far away from the tranquility of ashram, in the middle of urban Brussel. They were not, neither their swami (teacher) overtly worried about this. All they learned and practiced, could be transferred to Belgium and incorporated as part of their lives, only more briefly. The challenge for Charli was more having had to overcome his skepticism and scientific approach to life and living. For him as a mathematician, he wasn't used to follow similar reasoning as his swamis at the ashram. However, he concluded, that after the experience of pranayama, he had to acknowledge it does good for him. The smooth and deep breath effects his entire body and mind. Both agreed that even in a crowded subway car, they can close their eyes, and breath. That should be doable, right?

On several occasions I talked with Michael, a young artist from Germany. I asked what his purposes was to come to India. At the time of our meetings, he was planning to go to further north, to spend time in the nature. He told me he feels so disconnected and he needs to get to know himself better. In addition, he needs a break from his mobile phone to which he is addicted. For him the addiction had become unbearable, and he was ready to do anything to find his way out from the addiction.

Last, I will briefly present Melani, a woman from South Africa, who came to Rishikesh after she had med people from the Hare Krishna movement in Cape Town. She told me how she was attracted by *kirtan* and the *maya mantra*, and the devotion of people, their reverence for God and nature. "I could feel the love they had for Krishna, and this made me realize that love is everywhere." God is not just one religion, neither can you claim that God can be found in a specific way, because why would God even do that? "Now I'm here in Rishikesh, and I can actually see how peaceful people are and how much reverence they have for God, life and nature.

I asked yogi Anant, that what he would tell for people who are searching for focus, connection and meaning. How there are many people who feel they don't have control over their lives. He smiles and asks, so you mean the rhythm of life? He shared a story about a monk,

So, there was a monk, who lived about 250-years and when he was old the journalists came and asked him; how have you lived so long life? Can you tell us the secret of your life?

He replied, I always follow three things in my life. They asked, what? He said, I keep my back straight. Because the spinal cord is a base of your body, where almost all organs live. So, always keep your back straight. Second, the monk master said, about breath. I keep my breath rhythmic. Yoga texts says this as well, if your breath is fast, your mind is fast. If your breath is deep and calm, your mind stays calm. Breath from the belly. Third, master said, I never allow any negative thoughts in my mind, because 80 % is related to your mind. If someone throws you carbage, don't catch that carbage. Leave it. Live with yourself, with your purity, with your love, with your happiness...

The fading of sacredness was something that came up in discussions with Anant several times. Eliade does refer to secularization of religion or loss of sacred, but he never analysis it in-depth, other than 'modernization of societies' and de-sacralization have eventually led into forgetting the sacred (See Cutaru 2016). Huyler (1999) continues that we seem to be divided in the middle: a world of empirical studies and technological wizardry and a realm of broken and forgotten images, if not sheer vacancy. For him, faith in technology and empirical methods is a myth of its own.

According to Anant, Tapovan has went through drastic changes in the past few years, something which he has observed over 14-years in town. When monsoon rains hit the region, Anant told me that Ganga is in rage. Few days after a hotel which was being built close to us, collapsed. This and many other incidents in town were because of the disrespect people have towards the sacred place. During the Covid when people stayed at home, a highway was constructed in between New Delhi and Rishikesh. The state authorities could start and finish a project which otherwise, on the busy roads, wouldn't have necessary been possible. By the road came the crowds, the weekend picnics, techno parties and businessmen. The tranquility and sense of calm was broken by loud music and consumption of alcohol, in a place where it is strictly forbidden. Anant repeats, the goddess is furious and wants to take revenge, "too much partying, too many shady men... People have forgotten the power of Ganga." (Field discussions, 2023).

Our discussion with Godmi continued...

It's just that the generation is changing and people value less what they do daily and that's why you don't feel so connected to spirituality. If you see your grandmother, and older generation, they were connected to their roots, their day-to-day life, and they were so much more spiritual than today's generation.

I can't impose, what I have learned in life, to my daughter. I'm leaning from her. We have to adapt to the new ways also, plus put in the roots we already have. So even if children have part of what you have learned, it's more than enough. Rest, we learn from them. We change as for the generation. If we are stuck in where we are, it's not going to help. None of us have changed with what our mothers have said and told us to do. But yes, we have the consciousness...

During one of the aarti at Parmarth Niketan, one ashram resident addressed in her speech the need for connection. She reminded that we could find the connection by any river “if you're in Boston go to Charles River or Thames in London.” That it is essentially the same.

Certainly, everyone cares about their health...when we leave from this place, let us not look at the broken finger, that connection, right? Which is really, let us look at the connection, that we have lost, between ourselves and that higher energy, that governs everything. Or between ourselves and mind, or between ourselves and our spirit. Somehow that connection is lost, where we might be going around the world, and we are disguised, we are not at peace (22.7.2023).

The sacred calendar

It is said there are over thousands of festivals in a year in India, and Indian festivals don't lack color, taste and sound. For me, it seems, a celebration is always going on. The Hindu calendar is prescribed according to lunisolar calendar, dating from the Vedas. Many festivals are celebrated according to specific planetary phases and astrology plays immense importance in India. In addition to the annual celebrations according to the sacred calendar, each day of a week is dedicated to a particular god. For instance, Shiva is worshipped on Mondays, and mantra 'Om Namah Shivaya' chanted continuously, and the color of the day is white. Tuesdays are devoted for Hanuman (the monkey faced God), the color of Hanuman is red. Wednesday is for Krishna and green is the color according to the sacred plant tulsi.

In Hindu thought, to celebrate one deity, one sacred place, one temple, does not mean there is no room for the celebration of another. “Each has its hour... and each is seen as Supreme in every sense”. Eck compares this to the pattern of a kaleidoscope “one twist of the wrist and the relational pattern of the pieces changes” (Eck 1998:26).

Didi, (which means 'sister' is commonly referred to any woman in India, with whom one aims to approach warmly) is a former news reporter and before Covid-19 she ran her infamous ayurvedic cooking courses in their homestay. Didi is used to the presence of camera

and our discussion with it lasted over an hour. Her speech is eloquent. Although she is an excellent informant and hostess, it turned out difficult to present her on the film, because of her fast way of talking. There are no stops, and topics run raptly and every effort in the editing room didn't really work out.

In India there are many festivals. Like for Durga. Durga is power, woman power, aggression. Nine days two times a year Devi Durga comes. One is winter and one is start of the summer. During this time, we want to call for the woman power, praying for Durga power... But our first God is Ganesha, because he is the solution for all problems. So, I pray, please take the problems out from my gate.

Moreover, a day is split into rituals, such as puja and aarti in the evenings, and more mundane, dincharya, of which Godmi speaks. I filmed both, temple puja and Ganges aarti but included only parts of aarti for *By the River*. Both rituals have particular and systematic ways of proceeding. These are repeated every day, using the same objects, scents and mantras. Puja for Shiva includes offerings of flowers and sweets, pouring milk, water and honey (using only right or both hands), massaging the god with oil, and chanting of Om Namah Shivaya.



Gradually I got familiar with both rituals, especially of the latter which I will discuss more in the next chapter. My home was conventionally located in between a temple and the river. The sunset and sunrise are marked by rituals, and I absorbed them in sound, scent and sight. The days begins at around 05.00 when temples open and ends after sunset, both beginnings start with a blow into a conch shell, heard also during the aarti, in the film.

4.2 Hierophanies by the river

Ekam Sat, Viprah Bahudaa Vadanti, Truth is one; The wise call it by many names.

(Rigveda)

Most Hindus believe that divine is most accessible through images and primary elements, such as water and fire (Huyler 1999). Fire, the sun, represents masculine energy and water, Ganges, feminine energy. Hindus believe that all water eventually originates from Ganges.

Hierophany, an object or phenomenon, is a manifestation of sacred. It is a concrete symbol which can define otherwise abstract 'religion'. According to Eliade, the symbol, the myth and the image are the substance of the spiritual life. They may become disguised, mutilated, or degraded, but never extirpated. (1961). "Hinduism is an imaginative, an "image-making", religious tradition in which the sacred is seen as present in the visible world – the world we see in multiple images and deities, in sacred places, and in people". (Eck 1998).

In this chapter I want to present some of the hierophanies, I encountered by the river. In Rishikesh there are several temples and ashrams with several floors housing dozens, yet dozens of gods, stones and shrines, posters and paintings of the gods, bells, conch shells, not least the cows, monkeys, birds. In addition to sounds and scents which also have divine origin.

The Image of a goddess

Hinduism has often been misunderstood as a religion, dominated by male deities, Vishnu and Shiva while most of the Hindus view the Divine absolute One, both as feminine and masculine. Shiva and Shakti. Together they have created the world (Huyler 1999).

The representation of the female power has shifted, and the representation of goddesses was incorporated into patriarchy and Indian nationalism (Bannerjee-Mehta 2010). According to Indian authors (See Ghosh 2004; Mehta 1993; Roy 1997) to evoke the divine power of Ganga, can also be interpreted as challenging masculinist nationalistic narratives, Indian patriarchy. In the original myth, Ganga is "unchaste, uncontainable, and ambiguous" young woman. However, the Indian patriarchy succeeded to manipulate and coerce women for their political purposes by denying female agency (Bannerjee-Mehta 2010). During the postcolonial era, the irrepressible sexual ambiguity of the divine feminine was reinvented as a

mother figure *Bharat Mata* or Mother India. The politics behind storytelling desexualized Ganga, and hold her up as a chaste, iconic figurehead of the Motherland. (Bannerjee-Mehta 2010). Yet, there are stories from the field and from the everyday...

In the mango-ripening evenings, when Ganga water would be sprinkled on the patio to cool the flagstones, my mother would tell my brother and I of how Siva offered to soften the descent of the feisty river goddess Ganga to earth so that a fatal drought would be averted. Later, I would discuss the myths with my father, a pragmatic obstetrician, and receive a scientific insight into how the myth of the Ganga might have captured popular imagination. As I read more about the Ganga, who I saw daily in that faded print on the wall, embedded in the ascetic Siva's flowing hair, she became an icon of feminism in my youth. (Bannerjee Mehta, 2010).

Mittra told us that every morning when he wakes up, he looks at his palms. On his palms lives three goddesses: Parvati, Lakshmi and Sarasvati. He says his prayer for them, and after, carries away with the duties of the day. (Field notes, February 2024).

I was having one of those long breakfasts around noon, after two hours yoga with Mittra at Ira's Kitchen. Godmi sat down and after the casual greetings we began to talk more seriously about our lives, lives of our children and past and current spouses. We realized we had gone through same experiences and in that moment, we established a trust. After this talk, we came back to the topic of representation of women. Godmi told that she is tired of the western discourse about the mission for empowering the women of India. The West spending all that money in the name of research, projects, NGO's, for what? "Women already have so much power in India" and for my surprise, she concluded, "it is rather the Indian men who needs to be empowered". She throws a telling sight, and says, "you should make your next film about Indian women. The women of a great diversity, in their professions, doing their everyday work". Godmi gets up and leaves, she has after all business to take care of, and the place is getting crowded. (Field notes, February 2024).

In our discussion with Didi, in her garden, she tells me that although historically as today, women stay mostly in the kitchen and at home and men go to earn money. According to her this is not because women somehow lack in character "No!" It is because women can handle more things at the same time, with softness and care. While men can focus on one thing at one time, thus they are better equipped to earning money, having the power of money person. She continues,

If any problems come in our house, first I tackle, then my husband and my son. Indian women are always in front of the problem, because of Devi Durga, Devi Parvati, Devi Lakshmi, Devi Sarasvati. Lakshmi is money goddess, Sarasvati study and education goddess, Durga is a power. If any problems come to my

house or my family, please first you give me the aggression and I fight with the problem. I don't want to take my husband and family disturbed...

The tree of the world



I sent a picture of a tree to Anant, the one with a sign on it. I asked him a translation what it means, “Do not trash...”. Anyways, what was important to know was that it is a banyan tree. In India there are trees and pools, deities, called as “life-cult”, *yaksas* and *nagas*. *Yaksas* are benevolent nature spirits or beneficial guardian of a place, who often live in the trees. *Nagas* are half-human, half-serpent beings who live in the underworld and can be both dangerous and beneficial and are spirits of waters and rain (Eck 1998).

The most widely distributed variant of the symbolism of the center is the cosmic tree, situated in the middle of the universe, and upholding the three worlds as upon one axis. Vedic India, ancient China and the Germanic mythology, all had different versions of this Cosmic Tree, whose roots plunged down into Hell and whose branches reached to Heaven. (Eliade 1991:44). Robertson Smith described that in the old religions in the Middle East stones, trees and other items were not sacred as such, it was because within them were living spirits, and according to Eliade these trees are manifestations of God. In Hinduism, banyan tree represents longevity and immortality, and is often planted close to temples and crematories.

The fire altar

The camphor flame is burning, and I know we are getting close to say the final last prayers, before the sun will set. The scent of camphor is intense, I have no words to describe it. For me camphor is a scent of temples, of *aarti*, *puja*, *darshan*. The scent of the sacred. (Fieldnotes 2024).

In Vedas, fire is both a vehicle and a focus of ritual activity. The construction of the Vedic fire altar is a symbolic construction of the “image” of the primordial creator and thus symbolic creation of the world (Eck 1998:33). The construction of the Vedic fire altar reproduces the creation of the world, and the altar itself is a microcosmos, an *imago mundi*. Robert Gardner filmed an ancient fire ritual, in Kerala, South India. In *Altar of Fire* (1975) it is possible to see how the altar is constructed according to the sacred geometry which pervades almost everywhere in India. In addition to listen to the mantras Brahmins are recitating. Mantras are magical words, and it is less significant who recites them, but mantras must be pronounced with an absolute detail. Just a small failure and potentially dangerous things can follow (Huyler 1999). Gardner believed during the time of filming, that it was the last time the ritual was performed due to the necessity of extreme details for performing the ritual.



In every place Anant travels to, he travels with his altar. On his table he has images of his teachers, Mooji and Sri Govinda. There is a conch shell, lingam, gangajal, prasad, herbs, *mala*, a bell... Under the table his praying mat which he enters barefoot. The altar is a cornerstone of his life which he constructs in every new place. It is the center of Anant’s world, *imago mundi*, which he pays his respect upon waking up in the morning, and before going to sleep.

Lingam



Stones, natural symbols, and earthen mounds signified the presence of a deity long before the iconic images of the great gods came to occupy the *sancta* of temples and shrines (Eck 1998:34). “The form of worship offered to these deities includes sprinkling the stone with water, making offerings of flowers, food, cloth and incense and smearing the stone with various substance” (Eck 1998:34)

Lingam is the most sacred form of representing Lord Shiva. The smooth, cylindrical stone is believed to be a natural form of Shiva, and the stone is to be found by River Narmada, another holy river in India. The lingam is considered as “self-born”. The stone is the god. (Eck 1998). Once I visited such temple with Jeet in the outskirts of Jaipur. In a low standing brick hut, which indeed didn’t look like any of the temples I had visited before with fine iconography, had earth floor and in the damp darkness of the place was a stone, which seemed to have grown like a tree trunk, from the earth. When I came out, Jeet casually asked me, did you see the *Shivling*? It’s grown through the earth... with a wonder I asked him, don’t *you* want to see it? He, replied, no, I don’t feel like. And just like that we continued our trek through the forest, while I was trying to digest what I had just heard...

When Europeans came to India what they saw was a phallic symbol and thus lingam evoked moral outrage. “It is obscene... impossible to believe that... teachers of India intended that people should render worship to objects which are an insult to decency (Eck 1998:35-36). However, it is correct that lingam is perceived as symbolizing the life force of phallus, and again, represents the male energy of the cosmos. However, this is balanced, again, by pouring water, female essence on it.

5 DISCUSSION

The all-seeing gods are said never to close their eyes... for the well-being of the world is dependent on the open eyes of the Lord. (Eck 1998:1)

So far, I have introduced my main informants and the field, represented some of the hierophanies by the riverbank, preceding an analysis what is spirituality as understood by my interlocutors. In addition, I've illustrated in few examples, how and when can spirituality and rituals be practiced. For the last part of the thesis, I need to explain what are some of the reasons why people do what they do by the river and what the gaze of a goddess can do? In the end to conclude, why this can be challenging to write about and why film and images can do it better than a text at times.

Manifestations of the sacred can only be 'seen' phenomenally, and in connection to specific geographical space or in the stories and myths about a place (Laitila 2003). As of India, the entire land is a sacred geography for the Hindus, from Himalayas to Cape Comorin (Eck 1998). Gangotri, the source of river Ganges which is under a glacier, is just one place of thousands, where pilgrims travel.

Darshan translates as 'seeing and being seen by God' and darshan it is at the center of Hindu worship (Huyler 1999). When Hindu's go to a temple, they do not say, they're going to worship. Rather they go for darshan. The central act of Hindu worship is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eye, to see and be seen by the deity (Eck 1998). "Not only must the gods keep their eyes open, but so must we to make contact with them, to reap their blessings, and to know their secrets". (Eck 1998:1) Hindus do darshan because it brings blessings and peace in addition to a hope of miracles, which do happen frequently (Huyler 1999). In addition to darshan, prasad, is at the core of temple worship. Prasad is an offering, commonly sweets and fruits, which the priest offers further to gods. The devotees receive it back, with all the blessings and good energy in it. One should never refuse accepting nor eating prasad.

Hinduism is individualistic religion, without congregations or required mass worship. Devotion is a relationship of a person to a god, or a relationship of a household and a family to gods. The task of the priests is mainly giving offerings to gods and prasad in return for the people. To make sure the rituals proceed according to the correct way, so that gods are pleased and in return give their blessings. (Huyler 1999).

Darshan of a holy person is also valued, such as teachers and sadhus (Huyler 1999) I asked Jeet is it acceptable to film sadhus, he replied, for sure. “Everyone wants to be famous.” Sadhu, an ascetic, is a living symbol of the value placed upon renunciation (Eck 1998). Many Hindus believe that Sadhus are in special contact with the Gods, and to have a darshan with the ascetic is particularly auspicious as he, in most cases, is a representative of the Divine (Huyler 1999).



Jan Gonda, in his monograph *Eye and the Gaze in the Veda*, writes about the numerous ways in which the powerful gaze of the gods was imagined, even before the images were crafted. It is known that the glance of the inauspicious is dangerous, also referred to as the “evil eye”. Dangerous, yet profitable. (Eck 1998). Can this explain why people seemed to visit temples, particularly, sanctum, in a rush. I observed on several occasions the devoted, yet fearful eyes of the worshippers as they came for darshan. I was the only one lingering around sanctum and in front of the images, studying these in detail. I really did wonder, why so fast? Agehananda Bharati writes, “There is absolutely no parallel to the conception darshan in any religious act in the West” (Ibid.).

5.1 Riverbank – Sacred place

In mythical geography, sacred space is the essentially real space, for the myth alone is real. (Eliade 1991:40)

It was one of those burning hot days and we had a plan to film Anant taking a Ganga bath in Arundhati Ghat. The place is known for a Vashistha cave in the outskirts of Tapovan. Swami Purushottamananda re-discovered it in the 19th century and today it is commonplace for

visitors due to its tranquil, intimate, atmosphere. The place and especially the interior of the cave is perceived to be saturated with good energy.

Yogi Anant had arrived before us, and he was already inside the cave. To enter the cave, I had to put my camera aside. After going through the opening, a low, narrow tunnel followed. I could sense the cool and moist of the rock. Soon after I could see a dim source of light at the end of the cave. There were other people sitting on their praying mats. Barefoot I sat down. After my eyes got used to the darkness, I saw yogi Anant sitting in front of the altar. He seemed to be in a deep meditation. Right in front of him was the rock altar, natural formation by the cave. The flame and a copper cobra, and the silence. My heartbeat rose but it wasn't for snakes, spiders or bats. I was familiar with this sensation when I had visited temples in Jaipur. Jeet told me that heart starts to beat because of the good energy inside the temples. However, what I wasn't familiar with that suddenly I started to cry. The calm, tranquility and sense of peace, went through my entire being. Tears came by instinct. What happened more, I began to pray for peace, just repeating the word 'peace' in my mind. Peace for every being on Earth while the tears fell. (Field notes, July 2023).

Peace translates as Om and the symbol of it is present everywhere in India. Yogi Anant tells me that,

In the Vedas, says, there was a vibration. The moment. With that moment came the light. With that moment came the sound, which we call Om. From there it travels, and it makes the universe in a form.

For a comparison, Huyler, an anthropologist who has studied India for decades used to pride himself of his objectivity. Being empathic for a subject, being observant and taking notes, while keeping his distance. In *Image of the God*, he shares his experience, while being part of a local, special puja,

Despite my resistance at the moment, as the fire flared brightly and the spirit of the Goddess was invoked to enter the tree and be available to the village, I actually felt her presence. I felt a change in the atmosphere: a palpable sense of power vibrating throughout the area surrounding the sacred tree. It was a type of pulsating energy, the strength of which I had never before sensed in my life... In that one moment I, who had come as an observer, had become a participant... My personal and professional life was changed. I was transformed.

Ingold agrees that participant observation can be transformative, it is a way of learning, and all learning has the potential to transform (2017). Madden writes that ethnographers body is part of the ethnographic toolkit “an organic recording device that channels and filters observations, sensations, experiences and emotions into the ethnographic account” (2017:81). Thus, knowledge becomes embodied. However, Madden continues that ethnographer's body

needs some competence which is relevant on the field (Ibid.). Similarly, in my discussion with Jeet, Krishna and Sakshmi, all agree that spirituality needs practice. Krishna emphasizes that she didn't simply woke up one day as a spiritual person. No, it took time for her, to accept and refuse in between different options and practices, until she found her focus and passion, which is art and painting.

In addition to a geographical place and a place in a myth, the inner space and the connection in between self and cosmos, has tremendous importance in India. 'Your body is your temple', is a commonly heard motivational slogan about the importance to maintain a healthy lifestyle. However, in India, this has a deep meaning. There are many who don't believe in any specific external sacred place but any place is sacred enough in which to meditate. There is only internal sacredness (Choudhury 1994).

Existence is at its core forms of energies and divine relationships. Didi exemplified this to me with few examples,

In the evening when the moon comes, the thing is that if you need husbands care and love, so then we do puja for the moon. We do puja for the moon because moon gives some romance, pleasure and happiness. So, this is puja for the husband and a moon. But if you want family and aggression and you want more energy, then we do the puja for the sun. Because sun is the aggression and energy, sun means energy, hotness. If you have no energy, how to tackle to each and every thing? First, we serve our water to sun "Oh sun give me the energy, like you have."

*But if we want children, we do puja for stars.
Because according to Indian family you have only one wife and one husband, but children, unlimited. Because all children look alike your son and daughter.
Stars are unlimited and stars are always shining. Our children are also our shining stars. So, this is a relationship between children and stars,
Relationship between energy and work with the sun.
But if you want family life, love and care, that is a relationship between husband to moon.*

Upon my second arrival to the field, we arrived together with Jeet from Delhi and spent few days together in Rishikesh. On his last night, Jeet went alone to Parmarth Niketan and wrote following,

I don't consider myself religious or spiritual, but something struck me in the moment when I gave away all my second thoughts to attend Sandhya Aarti at Parmarth Niketan, which Saara had also insisted earlier that day...It has been only couple of days past when Ram Mandir was inaugurated amid massive celebration and anyone could sense the gravity of the event through flanking the

banks of the sacred river and the sheltered market – which gives an impression of religious sights, sounds, and smells of everyday life in Rishikesh.

This market offers a similar array of goods as previously visited market, with a focus on spiritual items like singing bowls, incense, and meditation wear and a local flavor of street food. I was just on time when Vedic priest who has unique sense of calm and aura-like effect with his energetic voice was preaching on the importance of Sanatan Dharma. The young adults, who I think studying about the Vedas and might be living in the same Ashram, were already on the vast stage, placed in the middle of the river, to perform their regular ritual to initiate Aarti. Aarti starts with chanting of some mantras, singing of bhajans, prayers and sacred ritual that take place round the fire, with the aid made to Agni, the god of fire. The fire spread the positivity in the surroundings. It appears, Maa Ganga's blessings were being showered upon everyone.

The separation of sacred time and space is arbitrary and serves the purposes of structuring this thesis. These two are one in the worship in India. The reason why I am addressing these in separate chapters is that it allows me to better discuss the event, aarti, with a focus on time dimension instead of physical objects, places and images. The invisible form of the sacred apart from hierophanies.

5.2 Ganga Aarti - Sacred time

Life is a continuum that neither begins with birth nor ends with death.

(Anish 2023)

The conception of time is cultural. For many indigenous cultures people follow the annual cycles of the year. Like Inuit do, harvest from the ocean, sky and land determines the course of life, as for the reindeer herders, it's the reindeer's cycle of life which is important. In the West it is rather common to plan few years ahead, set up goals for the future.

As to India it seems many live in the moment, the present context, as Vishal says. Mittra spoke to us about the importance to live in the moment, as the past and future don't exist. He encouraged us to practice patience for the self-realization of this.

Srinivas refers to a discussion with a priest in Bangalore, who tells her that “here in our India everything is ‘moment’, love is moment, life is moment, everything happens in moment” (2018:29).

Most of my discussions with Jeet took place in his car while we were driving around Jaipur, going to temples, to eat and visit people. Once I asked him, don't people get frustrated with the traffic, floods, holes on the road, missing pedestrian lines, and the fact that 2 hours turns into 2 days just like that? He replied that of course they do, but these circumstances are also realities of life. Most Indians can't afford to think beyond, they have only the present moment, this day, time to think and act how to feed their families. Meal by meal, and yet, even in the humblest household, meal turns into a celebration, day after day.

Despite the focus on the present, people live simultaneously in time of Vedic scriptures and rituals, visiting temples and celebrating gods, as part of the everyday. Like the celebration of Krishna, whose birthday is celebrated every August. While I was in Jaipur, the residents of a vast block building organized a party for Krishna. So much dancing and loud music, before the highlight of the event, showing of baby Krishna in his cradle. The baby god was carried by the dancers and people were delighted to congratulate him. In the same block, I was invited to a neighbor of Jeet. As a first thing they wanted to show me was the altar for Krishna. How they feed, wash, and clothe him every day. Beside the father's bed was a tiny bed for the god, on the night table. Krishna also travels together with the family. At that moment I felt little obscured and didn't really find anything to say, other than thanking for an excellent cup of chai.

Huyler (1999) shares the view that in these days, it is difficult to reconcile the idea of meeting God, to encounter the Divine in a real and tangible way. These days which condemns religious' way of living and thinking superstitious, anachronistic and naïve. However, he states that trust in technology and science is a myth as well. "Science has its priesthood, and it's rituals, but the object of its worship is not open-ended. Whereas religion usually looks for an opening to the eternal and infinite. Science prefers finity over infinity" (1999:10). According to Eliade, humans are aware of several temporal rhythms, not only of historical time, his own historical contemporaneity. Sacred time is cyclical and profane time linear.

One needs to only listen to good music, to fall in love, or to pray, and he is out of the historical present, he re-enters the eternal present of love and of religion. Even to open a novel, or attend a dramatic performance, may be enough to transport a man into another rhythm of time (Eliade 1991:33).

With the help of rituals, a person can shift from the ordinary into sacred time.

Ganga aarti is an illustrative ritual where sacred time and place meets by the river.

I observed and participated in Ganga aarti, several times in Rishikesh, in three different locations: Parmarth Niketan, Ghat and by Lakshman Jhula. Aarti is a ritual which is performed for one or several gods. The most important part of the ritual is a flame, either from a wick or camphor, which is waved in front of the deity. It is believed that the flame captures the essence of God, which the devotees can apply for themselves by holding their hands close to the flame and placing their hands after on their face. Ganga aartis in Rishikesh are performed either the residents of the ashrams, students of the Vedas or priests.

When I asked Jeet to describe me the essence of aarti, he told me that, “Hindus believe that spirits of their ancestors are always between them so they should go to pilgrimage places like Haridwar, Gaya or Banaras to help that spirit to attain salvation, *nirvana* or *moksha*.

Hindu thought is based on a principle of life after death, rebirth.” (Private discussion 2024). He further referred to an article by Anis (2023) which would help me to understand.

It is believed that humans are not just the body that is made up of five gross elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether...humans also have a mind and an atman. Mind consists of a collection of all past thoughts, emotions, habits, and memories. Atman is an ever-present consciousness which we call as “the real Self (Anis 2023).

After death, the five elements merge with nature but “the mind with all its data gets attached to our Self and it lives on. When the time is right, the Self with the mind (*samskara*) takes a new body and this reincarnation is decided based on the previous *samskaras*. In between death and new birth, there is so called cooling period. During this time departed are available and the cosmic portal opens. This is time which is good for offering prayers and gratitude for ancestors. For how long time it will take in between death and birth, Anis writes, we can never know because our understanding of time dimension in our physical experience is very different from the dimension of the time for the Self in the non-physical realm of existence. This is at the core of Ganga aarti. To commemorate ancestors, to be together with them, express gratitude, and hope for the freedom of the soul.

The main difference between profane and sacred time according to Eliade, is that sacred time is reversible because it is mythical primeval time, which can be brought back to this moment. (Eliade 1991:91). Sacred time is thus returnable infinite times, in addition it has no duration. Aarti is augmented every night of the year and newly rediscovered. During celebrations, the sacred time is recovered as it occurred for the first time, when gods created it, *ab origine, in illo tempore* (Eliade 1991). Through rituals human can reconnect with the original creation and with the meaning as it was meant to be. According to Eliade, a religious

person refuses to live solely from the historical present, and he seeks for connection with eternity.

However, in the light of the discussions I have had in Tapovan, and elsewhere in India, Eliade's division of sacred and profane is not as straightforward as he seems to write about it in *Sacred and Profane*, while much of his universalism might hold true in the light of his research on comparative religion. Moore (1999) writes that Hinduism is practiced by ordinary people on ordinary days and usually in ordinary places, but all that ordinariness is transformed by an imagination for the infinite that is vivid, passionate, sophisticated, and articulated with great subtlety (12). Hinduism has its esoteric aspects, but also sacred time can be incorporated in *dincharya*, the daily routine, in case spirituality is understood as part of the sacred. Eck (1998) adds that,

While Hindu spirituality is often portrayed in the West as interior, mystical, and other-worldly...the day-to-day life and ritual of Hindus is based not upon abstract interior truths, but upon the charged, concrete, and particular appearances of the divine in the substance of the material world (Ibid.).

With these brief narratives and presentation of hierophanies and spirituality, which are in line with phenomenological approach, I have tried to capture moments in people's lives in Tapovan. Moments in which their focus is on God (s) and *sadhana*, their practice of spirituality. How they perceive aspects of their being in the world.

Although all my informants have different background, they all come from a middle-class family (which is important emic category in India) and they lead very different everyday lives but what unites them is a belief in powers which are beyond the human body and mind. In Eliade's term, all of them experience the presence of sacred and their lives are lived within the infinite, the divine, conception of time in the cosmos. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* Eliade explains that a religious person perceives injustice, terror, and individual hardships as part of a larger whole. Many teachers in India emphasizes the importance of acceptance. To accept the circumstances as they are, and yet strive for doing good, to respect *dharma*. Nevertheless, within this larger scheme of things, cosmogony, there is always hope for the better. In the West similar approach to life is known as Stoic and Epictetus encouraged people to focus on things which are in their power and by doing this maintaining their piece of mind (See Pigliucci 2017).

Srinivas, who is a contemporary Indian scholar, argues that rituals cause wonderment in devotees. In Bangalore, the priests and devotees use the word *adbhutha* to describe the emotion that rituals evoke. First Srinivas mistranslated it as “strange, odd” until she realized people meant wonder, and a pursuit of wonder, which involves creativity, experimentation, and joy (Khalikova 2019). Srinivas further continues that all religions speak about prophets and people being dumbstruck with wonder. Even modern science and cosmology, the fields of quantum physics and medical technology speak of wonders of the universe and new technologies for life and living. Srinivas says that being wonderstruck is a human condition. (Khalikova 2019).

Srinivas talks about precarious lives caused by neoliberalism, and feelings of bewilderment, confusion and loss. (Ibid.). “One can be lost in this new world that forces people into economic, social and moral precariousness”. For Srinivas to write about wonder is not only for academic purposes but she is more committed than this. According to her anthropology can teach students, not only about the crumbling of the world, but how the world could be, how it could be imagined to be. In a similar vein, Eliade wanted to write about religious people who live an existence of sacred because it makes them feel grounded and their lives meaningful.

Godmi has her daily routines, most importantly work, and these routines are all something she can influence. When we discussed about conflicts in life, she was firm that universe will solve bigger existential problems for her. She doesn't need to decide, but she is steered by higher forces. Most importantly, she has her focus on the moment, on the tasks at hand – and the rest will get solved when the right time comes.

For Anant, he wants to dwell totally in a sacred space (See Eliade 2003). Worship from dawn until dusk divides the calendar for both Anant and Yogi Anant. They say their first prayer in between 03-04 in the morning and perform puja during the sunset.

However, in the case of Michael and in his search for himself, fighting against anxiety and his addiction to his mobile phone, would be a case where person has forgotten his sacred way of being. In this thesis I haven't had my focus on analyzing the profane in Tapovan, but I suggest that for further research it could be of interest. In addition, to call psychological anthropology as part of the discussion. I will conclude this chapter with some thoughts which connects my discussions on the field and the realities surrounding my society and community. After all, anthropologists do seek to find ways in which to translate and communicate their research findings within their audience back at home. Eliade's concept of sacred place and time, neither Hindu worldview with thousands of gods, might not resonate with everyone. For

me, to have felt the presence of sacred and to encounter my inner self, I needed to participate and multiple experiences before the stories of my informants began to make sense to me. But it was one event which transformed all my previous conceptions...

We were sitting in a café, in a quiet corner and yogi Anant taught me about the difference of the mind, the Self, and time, with a simple exercise. He took a piece of paper and a pencil. He asked me to write down answers to questions, such as, what is my favorite time of the year and what is my favorite taste. Do I prefer warm over cold. He said, I must write with honesty, and not to think for too long my answers. After some dozen questions, I showed my answers to him. Yogi Anant looks at me, and remarks, I told you to be honest...

I gave a second look at my answers, and I cried out in disbelief. My answers were not correct. I wrote, I prefer cold and salty over warm and sweet. In that moment I realized that my preferences, have been reactions to past events and circumstances, emotional responses, where these choices provided a refugee, distraction or sense of relief. At times when things were out of my control. Prior to life, *ab origine, in illo tempore*, prior to memories, emotions and habits, accumulated over the years, I would have chosen differently. All my answers were in stark contrast what I prefer for Real.

Guruji knew this would happen. The following night I couldn't get any sleep for crying. I had just realized that what I had become was a reflection of other people's expectations, traumas and emotional transfers towards my direction. I had walked far away from my true self. Yogi Anant encouraged me to remember and reconnect, what did I like when I was ten years old, how was I like? In this simple way, he showed me how could I begin to re-connect with my true Self and to let go of the past (Field notes, August 2023).

Although in this work I can't discuss much further about Indian spirituality and Western psychology, there are some common features in psychoanalysis, which I accidentally noticed while I participated Anant's healing rituals in the summer 2022. He could transform traumas, leading me back to painful events and to face these moments of the past, during the shamanic journeys. During these journeys I could go back in time, to my (sub) conscious, and I was given the opportunity to finish things in a manner which gave me a sense of relief. One by one, the painful memories were settled and after the intense five days and nine rituals, I had forgotten my past, or I simply didn't connect to it anymore in any way it would trigger emotional response. Only the calm and clarity of mind was left. I felt Anant accomplished something in less than a week, what I imagine psychoanalyses would have taken for years – based on what I have heard people telling me.

Eliade acknowledges resourceful connection between psychoanalysis and his writings. When the patient is encouraged to go deep within himself, to live again his past and to face his traumas (2003) However, he also drew a boundary as how far he could go as a scholar of

historian of religions and intentionally left the discussion of human consciousness for psychologists and philosophers.

Eliade states that when a person loses connection with the sacred, he feels restless, and begins to search a center for his life. Heidegger wrote about this is *angst*, anxiety, a mood of detachment. However, Eliade argues that even the non-religious person can't be detached from his forefather's religious past totally. That the imprint of the sense of sacred which has prevailed most of the humanity, can't be rubbed away by simply refusing to believe in such things as sacred and gods. According to Eliade a modern man is an offspring of his forefathers and carries the mythical memory within. Eliade goes on writing about the rituals of the modern man, such as the celebration of New Year and the initiation ritual for a new home. For Eliade there is no such thing as human as purely rational being.

A former psychotherapist, Thomas Moore, writes that drugs, divorces, violence, suicide, aimlessness, drudgery, food problems, illness, crime, endless moving are signs of the times and rarely if ever do we consider that they may all be due to the loss of an intelligent, grounded religious way of life (In Huyler 1999). In India these are known as the consequences of losing connection to the divine, the Self. Allowing the ego, the devil, gain ground. Thus, when speaking about spirituality and well-being, all my informants emphasize the need for a connection and focus on this moment. Performing puja and dincharya are such focus. For Mitra teaching lessons from the heart, and not from the mind.

Moore is convinced that many of personal and social problems could be solved in the context of religion, because these issues are so deep that they transcend psychological and technological solutions. He calls for renewal of religious imagination, which is about heart and soul. Quoting Jeet, "religion is not spirituality, and spirituality is not religion. They can't be the same". Srinivas calls for an urgent shift on the way social scientists have traditionally perceived religion. However, as said, these are questions which can't be addressed here anymore.

5.3 Conveying sacred through images and with a film camera

To translate images into concrete terms is an operation devoid of meaning. Images by their very structure are multivalent. If the mind makes use of images to grasp the ultimate reality of things, it is just because reality manifests itself in contradictory ways and therefore cannot be expressed in concepts.

(Eliade 1991:15)

Jeet told me early on, you will never get through by reading... This is why I would like to conclude this thesis with a chapter on “what does film do better than a text?”

MacDougall refers to ‘second intentions’ as something that happens during the filmmaking process. Camera imposes special ways of engaging with the world and these often force filmmakers to step outside themselves and adopt intermediate positions, not knowing the outcome. These unforeseen outcomes are the second intentions, which might at best create new knowledge (MacDougall 2019). In science, it is first intentions that generally matter most. My first intention was to make a film about a Hindu healer and a shaman. Further, I was interested to analyze this in the context of initially colonial medical practices, and what is the relationship of these different approaches to healing. However, as I mention in *By the River*, this didn’t happen. After I lost my first research focus, I had bunch of separate ideas and too complex objectives, which I needed to narrow down, to ask one question: “What spirituality means to you and how do you do it, *practice*, spirituality?” I was by the river from the beginning and yet, without the second intentions, I wouldn’t have set up my camera, literally by the river. It was only after this; I began to understand what was happening in front of me, was spirituality in practice. By observation, participation and filming I learned more in two weeks, than I had learned in two months from the books. Also, how sensational this learning was. Rudolf Arnheim has noted what he calls as the “widespread unemployment of the senses in every field of academic study” (Eck 1998:13). “Photographic images enable us to employ senses in the process of learning” (Ibid.).

One of the most sacred mantras in Hinduism, *Maha Mrityunjaya*, is chanted by Mitra in *By the River*,

I worship that fragrant Shiva of three eyes, the one who nourishes all living entities. May he help us sever our bondage with samsara by making us realize that we are never separated from our immortal nature.

After Anant and Jeet heard that I had incorporated this in my film, both independently noted, “Oh... That’s *very* sacred...and powerful once you really understand the essence of it”. The primary mean to contact gods is through sound, sacred words or mantras (Huyler 1999).

I believe that without Mitra’s permission to film him, while he was chanting this wouldn’t simply have resonated similarly on the text.

Eck is convinced that seeing is learning and knowing. Further she states that teachers and students of India must become “seers” (1998). “Study Hinduism for years with the best of teachers, and when you raise your head, nothing they have told you quite fits” (1998:11). Eck

continues that film is important for the student of Hinduism. Through camera as a medium, one can enter a visual world, world of sense and image (Ibid.). “Raising the eye from the printed page to the street or the temple, as conveyed by film, provides a new range of questions, a new set of data” (Eck 1998:11). In India’s own terms, seeing is knowing. Eliade seems to be firm on the risk to translate images into concrete terminology by restricting them to frames of reference. According to him it “is to do worse than mutilate it – it is to annihilate, to annul it as an instrument of cognition”. (1991:15).

Ong (1977) argues that the truth of vision in Western, literate cultures has predominated over sound, touch, smell and taste. In India, although “seeing is a kind of touching”, a notion of the divine as invisible would be foreign (Eck 1998).

Seppänen writes that humans have sensations which can’t be structured along with symbolic structure of the language. For example, we can see more colors in a light spectrum that we can name. A painting can arouse feelings which are difficult to express in words. (2002:37).

Nevertheless, Eck asks, what do we make of what we see? Is a relevant question and Dell et al (1977) adds that in a study of Hinduism (religion of thousands of sacred texts) audio-visual materials can’t replace the textual analysis. After watching *Forest of Bliss*, for the first time my initial reaction was that it is too long for its genre. Without dialogue, subtitles, heroes or heroness, without the battle of good and evil and all that. However, as I watched it again (because the aesthetics and “the Indian feeling” stayed with me regardless) I could feel the place. Timelessness, focus of the people what they were doing, and suddenly I felt like lingering by the river, just like inside the temples during my fieldwork.

As students confronted with images of India through film and photography, we are challenged to begin to be self-conscious of who we are as “seers”. Part of the difficulty of entering the world of another culture, especially one with as intricate and elaborate a visual articulation as India’s, for many of us, there are no “manageable models”. There are no self-evident ways of recognizing the shapes and forms of art, iconography, ritual life and daily life that we see... (Eck 1998:15).

Those who enter the visible world of India through the medium of film, the onslaught of strange images raises multitude of questions. These very questions should be the starting point for our learning. In the beginning of her talk at Radcliffe-Institute, Srinivas quotes Socrates “Wisdom begins by wonder”. It is wonderment and awe, which makes us to ask questions about the other ways of being. Films such as *Forest of Bliss* does that.

Whereas Eliade (2003) looks at the way the modern people watch films, those “dream factories” which make use of countless of mythical themes: the battle between a hero and a monster, paradise like environments, fight and hardships which are close to initiation rituals, ideal types of young women and strong males and so forth. What people notice in the same image - be it an image of the dancing shiva or a film of a Hindu festival procession – depends to some extent on what they can recognize from the visual experience of the past” (Arnheim in Eck 1998:15). According to Gonda (1969), Vedic literature does not correspond to our words for thinking as it does to our notions of insight, vision, and seeing.

Susanne Langer has written about the integral relation of thought to the images we see in the mind’s eye. The making of all those images is the fundamental imaginative human activity. “Seeing is not a passive awareness of visual data”. One might add that it is the fundamental activity of the religious imagination as well. Images are, therefore, our readiest instruments for abstracting concepts from the tumbling streams of actual impressions. (Eck 1998:15).

5.4 Concluding notes about being-in-the-world in Tapovan

Several of my informants said that they have “chosen this life”, this applies to Vishal, Mitra, yogi Anant, Anant, Godmi... and yet at the same time they lead a life where the universe determines the course of events. One limiting factor for an individual choice is the duty to do the right thing, *dharma*. Like Vishal says, “to do whatever is the right”. What is right and wrong, are individually considered within the larger cultural framework. Yogi Anant says there is no right or wrong thing in the first place. Jackson and Piette refers this to as an unresolved tension between personal dispositions and external circumstances. Further they state that given the impermanence of any state of body or of mind, the question arises as to whether human beings exercise choice or determine their own fates (2015).

Several times Jeet told me that in case he wouldn’t need to consider his family, his choices would have been, and would be different as they are today. However, what they have chosen with his wife, and what makes them radically different from the surrounding norms of the society is that they do not want to have children. This choice in the Indian context is extreme and yet they have prioritized their own will, over the family (society) first. Jackson and Piette states that “there is always an unresolved tension between personal dispositions and external

circumstances. No individual is wholly reducible to his ascribed identity, and every experience calls the collective into question” (2015:3).

One reason I got initially interested to film Anant and learn from him was because of his refusal to live according to the norms of his society, but because of this, his hope is placed solely on the will of the supreme, and there is much financial uncertainty in his life. Unlike Mitra and yogi Anant who are rather “conventional” teachers and perceived with respect within a wider community, they are part of a collective. Godmi and Didi live according to the expectations, as women and mothers taking care of household and pujas (albeit much more than what is expected). Anant is mobile, and his life is in a constant flux, in between uncertainty to certainty. He didn’t follow his “caste order” and is thus perceived as an outcast by his family. He follows his own inner Self in a complete devotion to his daily sadhana. And yet, he can’t be called a saddhu either, although at times he has considered this option as well. Jeet’s family looks from the outset as a traditional Hindu/Jain family, and yet there are deep anticipations towards “a traditional family”. Indeed, human lives, and moments, are too complex and depends on many factors which are in a constant change, leaves little to nothing say certainties about other people’s lives. The only certain thing I can say is that these people can see, hear, touch, and feel gods. The question Eliade asked in his time was, why should we learn about the others? Today Srinivas would answer to him, to cultivate compassion towards the other (2016). By accepting different ways of being as real as any other.

Part of the phenomenological approach is to consider singular experiences, and not to contest them. Willerslev (2017) conducted his research among the Yukaghirs in Siberia. Yukaghirs believe in animism, and that humans can turn into animals, and animals into humans. Willerslev concluded that he can’t contest this. For Yukaghirs this is real. Further in his phenomenological approach he has included studies from cognitive science suggesting that concepts can and do exist independently from language (2007).

Eliade argues that concepts do not represent reality, but reality can be understood by the use of language and that the characterization that “being” is being. Likewise, sacred is sacred and it defines human, and human doesn’t define sacred. Being or sacred, cannot be reached conceptually, these can only be “seen” by collecting, assembling narratives from a specific (geographic) place and by observing particular experiences. This is what I ended up doing by the river, in between sacred place and sacred time, trying to capture manifestations of sacred and to see what the relationship of people to the sacred objects, images and phenomena was. I don’t think I can yet see the gods in the images, but I saw people who see, and it looks beautiful in every sense of the world.

I hope that without freezing the ethnographic field and identifying my informants in a case study, without trying to pursue “a cultural account” the reader has learned about how spirituality can look like in Rishikesh. MacDougall writes that anthropological film narratives have at least two useful functions, to show how complex social forces bear upon the individual and to provide explanations of social behavior (2019). I hope the viewer of *By the River* would have seen a variety, if not social forces, but the complexity and multiplicity of choices available for the individual, on how to practice spirituality. This within a larger framework, following Eliade’s understanding that religion is an abstract framework within which individuals make choices. This being Hinduism, more precisely dharma, and freedom of an individual to choose his and her path for worship and sadhana in India.

The film is not an attempt to explain religious behavior, for those purposes is the text a useful companion. There are limitations on how far research can go in explaining religious experiences of others. Hovi argues that a researcher can’t never achieve the experience of others. According to her, research which aims to communicate meanings of experiences is only possible when a researcher conveys her own experience to others, in forms of literary or in visual arts. (2004:378). This has been my intention in including field notes as part of the data.

I hope that with the help of a film camera I have conveyed manifestations of the sacred by the river, which are the reason why people arrive there. To see and be seen by gods. To pray for good life. To give and receive. To have hope.

6 CONCLUSION

Mitra told us today that then when we find calm in a chaos, we are at home. (Fieldnotes, February 2024)

Since I was child, I never thought of myths as purely fairytales. After all, I was taught that Jesus was a son of God, and of all the miracles he performed, which I believed in. I concluded that at least I can't say those *didn't* happen, because I wasn't there.

When I turned sixteen, for my mother's grief, I divorced the church. The priest said, I can't have many gods, which I did. I was willing to accept the consequences of my choice. Until this day, I haven't found meaning arguing over who's god is the right one, is there one or many. More interesting is to reflect, what does believing in god(s) make people to do and feel. What are the choices believers do in their everyday life, and how does faith increase well-being, satisfaction and sense of purposes in life. Because this is after all what people come to pray by the river, good health for themselves and for their families. People pray gods to give them enough for their needs. Even though the prayers wouldn't be answered and there are indeed many cases where miracles didn't happen, Jeet tells me that prayer and pilgrimage provide hope regardless, which is already much in itself, hope.

This information is fruitful for social analysis. Especially in these days when many feel disconnected, lacking meaning in their lives and falling into despair. It is not only an existential question but also a heavy burden for state budgets and health care system. While writing this thesis, I heard a presentation by a Norwegian psychologist in my small town in Northern Norway. The psychologist concluded her talk about feelings and the healing power of nature, by saying that it took for her 14-years of clinical practice to realize that nature does the healing, and that the way towards better mental health is to go 'back to yourself', to find and connect with the inner compass which we all have. (See Refseth 2023).

One thing I can be sure of, the images in my bible for children, were powerful. It was the images which convinced me of the powers of Jesus, he was a superhero born from a mystical woman. I don't recall listening to the words of the teachers at the Sunday school, but the feelings which the images aroused, never left me. I can't necessary explain in words, what is the relationship of people to sacred and to hierophanies, but what I can do with a film camera is to show what people do, when they practice sadhana. People enter sacred places with barefoot, kiss the feet of the respected ones. The lightning of the sacred camphor flame, or the

priests blowing into the conch shells during aarti. I can show Mitra reciting, *om tryāmbakam yajāmahe sugandhīm puṣṭi-vardhānam urvārukam īva bandhānān mṛtyor mukṣīya mā 'mṛtāt* and I can show how people treat Lingam on Mondays, how Lord Shiva gets pampered by attention and offerings. How people look at the gods in the hope for receiving blessings in return. More experienced film makers such as MacDougall and Gardner can show even better about people's ways of being in India.

Eck writes that although a picture may be worth of thousand words, but we still need to know which thousand words (1998). In this work, film and the text are complementary.

In the beginning of this thesis, I have a quotation by Herman Hesse, a German novelist, and I would like to end this thesis with a story about Siddhartha and synchronicity, an occurrence of a meaningful coincidence.

After my first yoga class with Mitra, he offered me a book, Siddhartha. I told him I had read it many years ago. During the following days, I asked myself, what do I remember about the story, other than it happens somewhere in India, by the river. The next day, I walked to a bookstore and bought it. As I step outside the store, Mitra passes me by on the street. I wave the book for him, and he says, I told you, you could have borrowed it.

As I read it, the past begins to resonate with the present, with the fieldwork and life in general. Siddhartha has a chapter By the River, which I name the film after. During my last yoga class, realization suddenly strikes me, 'the past doesn't exist'. My body starts to shake subtly, and I mumble to Mitra that I have realized something profound. I thank him for his guidance, and I say goodbye. As a last thing before taking the night bus to Jaipur, I pick up my new glasses from the Third Eye optics, just in time, I got my eyesight back. I can't help of laughing for the coincidence. And yet, Anant taught me how to activate the Third eye, right?

Several months after, when the film is submitted, I sit in the library, struggling to conclude this thesis. I feel the need to read more Michael Jackson; I venture in between the library shelves, and for my grieve, the book is not there which ought to be. Rather I find his *Between One and One Another*. I open the book randomly, and the title *Reading Siddhartha to Freya at Forest Lake*, is in front of my eyes. I'm wondrous. After reading Siddhartha together with his daughter, Jackson and his daughter has a discussion about it:

Sometimes we need to take a break from the world, like coming here to Forest Lake. But if we would live here all year round, we might get bored with it. The same with books. They can help us to understand world, but sometimes it is good to get away from books and simply experience things as they are... That was why Siddhartha could not follow the Buddha, as Govinda did. The teachings of the Buddha would have got in the way of Siddhartha understanding the meanings of those teachings in his own way, in his time. "I know that" Freya said.

"Sometimes I don't listen to my teachers or my books, but if I am interested in a

subject, I read about it in my own way and learn about it for myself” (Jackson, 2012:157).

We need science for the outer space, and spirituality for the inner space. (Last note by the river, February 2024)

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Glossary

Aarti: Hindu ceremony in which lights with wicks soaked in ghee are lit and offered up to one or more deities

Brahma: the creator god

Brahman: in the traditional caste system: a member of the highest group of castes, originally that of priests and scholars

Darshan: a sight of a holy personage

Dharma: the basic principles of cosmic or individual existence: divine law

Didi: a respectful title or form of address for an older woman

Gangajal: water from river Ganges

Kirtan: devotional singing, usually accompanied by musical instruments

Lingam: a phallus, worshipped as a symbol of the god Shiva

Mala: a necklace; a string of prayer beads

Mantra: a sacred text or passage, esp. one from the Vedas used as a prayer or incantation

Naga: a member of a race of semi-divine creatures, often part-snake, associated with rivers, rain

Sadhana: dedicated practice or learning to achieve (esp. spiritual) goal

Saddhu: a holy man, sage

Prasad: food offered to god or an image

Puja: a religious ceremony, a ceremonial offering to a god

Samsara: the endless cycle of death and rebirth to which life in the material world is bound

Samskara: a purificatory ceremony or rite marking a stage or event in life

Nirvana: the realization of the non-existence of self

Moksha: the final release of the soul from a cycle of incarnation

