

ashram lit



marcus boon & christie pearson visit five ashram libraries to document a history of sacred publications. their research takes them on an unexpected pilgrimage. photos by christie pearson



Several thousands of pamphlets, leaflets, instructive messages, Yogasan chants, placards of spiritual mottos, are printed for FREE distribution, for the Society strives to transform the outlook of the masses from the material to the spiritual by flooding the world with continuous streams of spiritual literature in all important languages.

—from an ad for the Divine Life Society at the back of *Swami Sivananda's Guide to Mount Kailas*

Ashrams are often thought to be places of silent retreat. People go there to escape the noise of this world and their own internal chatter, to find peaceful, joyful silence beyond language and its endless ambiguities and obscurations. At the same time, the great yogis and saints were teachers who sought to communicate the path that leads to this place of peace. After their deaths, texts were a way of preserving the memory and the living transmission of these teachers.

In both India and the West, there is a long and rich history of ashram literature, which attempted to document the Divine. The history of relations between Asian religions and the West is revealed in these publications. They also reflect the complex history of European colonialism in Asia, which imposed itself as much through language and culture as by guns and armies. English was the language of colonial power in India, and thus today we have the strange paradox that an ashram library in the middle of Tamil Nadu is full of books written in English.

The resurgence of Hinduism in India in the nineteenth century involved an explosion of magazines, tracts and books in many languages. These writings were aimed at both Indians and

non-Indians, since most of the great teachers were universalists seeking to spread a spiritual message to the whole world. The teachers who brought Vedanta, as well as Buddhism and other Asian traditions, to the West at the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth often started publishing houses linked directly to their ashrams and organizations. Writing, translating, editing, printing and distributing texts were devotional acts done by disciples, devotees and often the teachers themselves.

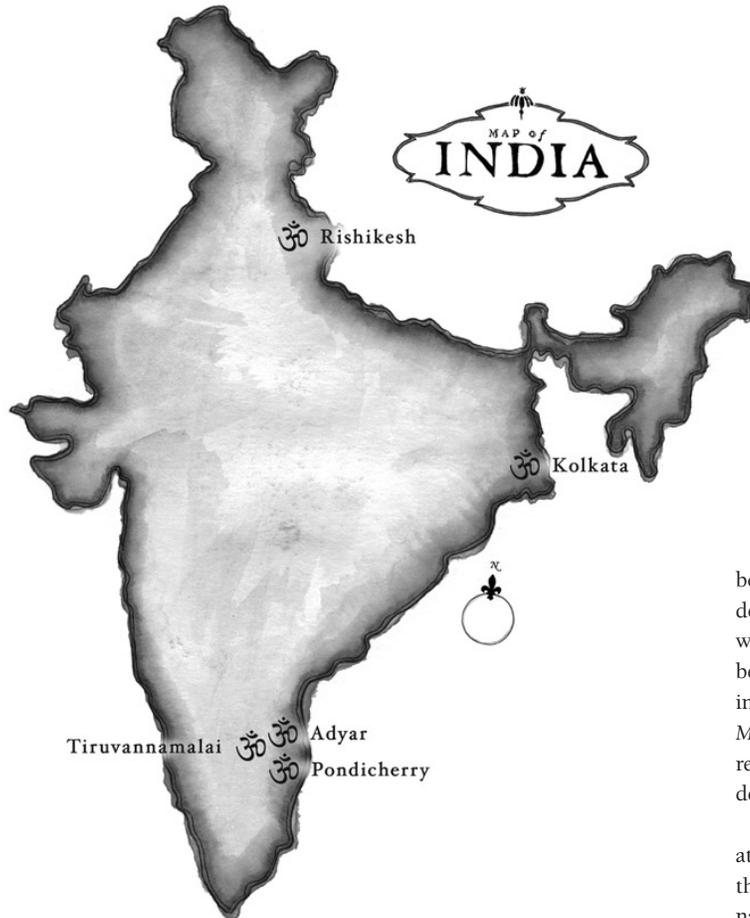
Last winter, we traveled to India to explore and research the history of ashram publications in English, as part of our work on a book about Asian religions and twentieth-century literature. We chose five of the most famous and venerable institutions—all of which have long histories of engagement with Western students and devotees. The work was complicated by the fact that we are both involved with some of the spiritual communities that we were studying. We knew from our visits to ashrams in the US and Canada that books are an important part of the culture, and that most ashrams have libraries that stock the works of the teachers associated with the ashram. These libraries also hold a much broader selec-

tion of religious publications and books on science, economics, novels—most of the types of books you would expect to find in any community library.

aurobindo ashram pondicherry

Our work begins at the home of the great Bengali saint and Indian independence hero, Sri Aurobindo. A prolific writer and editor, in his youth Aurobindo produced pro-Independence newspapers that gave a powerful political meaning to the message of Vedanta before building this spiritual community with his partner, Mira Alfassa, a French woman who came to be known as The Mother.

Aurobindo Ashram has taken over a good portion of the buildings in downtown Pondicherry. The library at the ashram is housed in a gorgeous old French colonial mansion. We rent bikes from the Aurobindo guest house and quickly become part of the non-stop ringing jingle of Indian traffic as we ride through the colonial town to the library each day. The opening hours of the library are precise and strict, but inside all manner of activities are possible. Old men with thick spectacles slumber in dark rooms of musty books.



Eager young students pore over thick philosophy texts. The librarian tries to play records from his fifty-year-old collection but is missing a part for his turntable; he wonders if we can get one from Canada.

The journals produced by the ashram tell their own story, from the fabulous Victorian-era political broadsides of *Bande Nataram* to the dense scholarly journal *Arya* from the 1920s and 1930s, to the multicoloured psychedelic covers of the 1960s. Innovations in magazine design, the ups and downs of the ashram itself and the visions of particular editors all coloured the journals in particular ways, registering periods of expansiveness and inclusion as well as returns to core values.

ramanashram tiruvannamalai

Sri Ramana Maharshi was known for the penetrating power of his silence, which was capable of pacifying tigers, new age Englishmen and just about everybody else. After a near death experience as a teenager, he discovered the Self and became a hermit living in a cave on Arunachala, a red rock mountain in Tamil Nadu said to be a manifestation of Siva.

Over the years, an ashram grew up around Sri Ramana, who continued to live a profoundly simple and mostly silent life. While the heart of the ashram experience is to feel this silence in one of the places Sri Ramana resided, four

bookcases in the library are full of wonderful accounts of devotees' encounters with Sri Ramana. Many of these have been reprinted by the ashram publishing house, which also publishes *The Mountain Path*, a very elegant pan-religious journal started by English devotee and writer Arthur Osbourne.

The small and beautifully curated library is across the street from the ashram, and is well used by international devotees. Hand-painted signs on the bookcases indicate a whole history of Indian and other religions translated into English, as well as other languages. The librarian tells us that he no longer accepts new books, unless some extraordinary development (such as the Internet) requires a line to be added to the categorization scheme.

Each issue of *The Mountain Path* is a trip. Here are the teachings of Sri Ramana interpreted as a map, as a concrete poem, as a psychedelic painting, by devotees from all over the world. Here are images of new centres set up in New York City in 1965, in Nova Scotia in 1972. We try to capture something of the energy of the aspirants of the 1960s and 1970s. They seem so wild, fearless and full of humour. Today, the journal continues to be full of life, with essays on globalization and Vedanta, and Advaita resources on the Internet.

the theosophical society adyar

The beautiful treed grounds are vast, and we wander for a while before we locate the famous research library in the suburbs of Chennai. It was here that the Theosophists made their home in India, after Colonel Olcott, partner of the famous Madame Blavatsky, declared himself a Buddhist in the 1880s—arguably the first Westerner to convert to an Asian religion in this way.

A man with an ex-military demeanour stands at the gates and tries to drive us away, telling us that the library is shut to visitors. We insist that we have been invited and are there to do work, but he challenges us to name the librarian who invited us. When we answer, he tells us we are wrong; we argue with him until he grows bored and lets us through.

There is a similar kind of indifference at the library desk until we produce a letter of introduction. Before leaving, we meet Parvati, the librarian who invited us by email—she is an elegant old woman with a very gracious manner and luminous blue eyes.

The library is spacious, holding only stacks, a large card catalogue, and a computer with an incomplete digital index stored on an enormous external hard drive. We spend most of the day looking through the card catalogues, but most of the older books we ask for are damaged and unavailable. The card catalogue looks as though the librarians had given up adding systematic-

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ally to the collection at the beginning of the 1980s. The library is empty except for a couple of schoolchildren—given the hours, the difficulty getting in and the obstacles to finding books, it could hardly be otherwise.

Since it's such a challenge to look at the books, we restrict ourselves to the journals in the collection. They tell a tumultuous story of Westerners who played a huge part in awakening cultural and spiritual pride in India and Sri Lanka in the early twentieth century. The mix of science, psychic powers, libertarian thought and freely interpreted ancient teachings seems incredible to us now, confounding our understanding of colonialism, West and East, just and unjust. The more we read, the messier it all gets.

the divine life society rishikesh

Writing and publishing were extremely important parts of Swami Sivananda's spiritual practice, beginning in his early days as a doctor when he published his own medical journal *The Ambrosia*. Later, from his

Divine Life Society ashram on the banks of the Ganges in Rishikesh, Sivananda purchased his own printing presses and flooded the Indian mail system with inspirational pamphlets. The ashram still has its own post office.

Sivananda's presence as a historical figure with a variety of political and social agendas slowly starts to emerge through our daily forays into the ashram journals, filled with his articles on child-rearing, diet, education, the place of women, medicine and meditation. The illusion of a guru who exists completely outside of space and time is challenged by a survey of periodicals that span decades. The struggles between worldly and spiritual truths during the world wars and India's independence are especially moving, with the charged emotions of the times expressing themselves unexpectedly in the graphic imagery.

The library, with its towering glass-covered bookcases, is an impressive place. Earlier materials from the ashram are not available, and we are told there is no archive. The librarians tell us to go see an old man named Nara Simha (Lion Man), a devotee who knew Sivananda and now lives in a room at the

ashram. We are puzzled at first as to why, but when we visit him he receives us generously and when he opens up a large steel cabinet in his room we begin to understand.

The cabinet overflows with precious books and journals, a secret, private archive in the very heart of the ashram, curated quietly by this devotee. He gleefully shows us many treasures, such as classic old pamphlets including Sivananda's message to the yogis of Canada, and then gives us a copy of Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*—a ghostly, timely reminder in this “Hindu” town of our own modernist heritage.

ramakrishna institute kolkata

The buildings of the Ramakrishna movement are spread out across Calcutta, and to get to them all, we have to make the same journeys that Ramakrishna himself made by horse-drawn cab, as described in the *Gospel of Ramakrishna*. We make a pilgrimage to the Kali temple at Dakshineswar, where Ramakrishna lived for most of his adult life and we have a chance to meditate in Ramakrishna's room. The atmosphere in the room is electric, and it is moving beyond all belief to sit on the same floor on which Ramakrishna stood and danced ecstatically.

The vast grounds of Belur Math, founded by Ramakrishna's disciple and Indian nationalist hero Swami Vivekananda, are across the river from Dak-



detail of the Aurobindo Ashram library's international art history collection



shineswar. Vivekananda lived here in the years after he brought the message of Vedanta to America for the first time, appearing at an international conference of religions in Chicago in 1893. The library at the movement's "cultural centre" is in the Ramakrishna Institute in the south of the city. It's an elegant place complete with air-conditioning and a computerized book catalogue, and we are generously given rooms at the Institute's attached hostel.

We try to interview Sankari Prasad Basu, the director of the archives and the producer of a series of collected newspaper accounts of Swami Vivekananda from the 1890s. Basu conducted this heroic feat of research by traveling to regional Indian newspapers in the 1960s, when there were no photocopy machines or digital cameras to easily produce accurate copies. A somewhat ominous essay called "Misrepresentations of Hinduism in America" sits on his office desk. After a couple of attempts at conversation, Basu insists that we must write down anything we have to say to him, and that he in turn will write down his response. We have no idea why, since Basu's English is excellent, but he finally suggests we go to an affiliated ashram with its own rich library documenting the history of the Ramakrishna movement.

Back at the Institute, we are assigned a librarian to help us with our research. We give her requests for books. The library is a treasure trove, and we are able to find many obscure and interest-

ing periodicals dating back to the end of the nineteenth century. At times it is difficult to tell whether the journals, which often have Sanskrit names, are written in English, Hindi or Bengali, and this appears to irritate our helper. She starts to ignore our requests and brings us random dusty tomes from the vaults, saying with a smirk, “Old! Old books! Very old!”

epilogue

We come to feel that the librarians have a highly ambivalent attitude toward us, and to the English language materials in the libraries, which are indeed a reflection of both India’s and the ashram’s history, as well as British colonialism. Just as the British imposed names on Indian cities, many of which are now being renamed with “Indian” names, so British missionaries imposed their proselytizing pamphlets, language and religion on India. The great Indian religious traditions practised in the West today are a reflection of this colonial history with all of the shame attached to it—Indians writing in the language of the colonizers, Westerners using Sanskrit terms of which they have only the barest understanding.

At the same time, these traditions involve the transformation and overcoming of this colonial history, one that encompasses everything from the most belligerent fundamentalism or nationalism to cheesy global guru branding to the impossibly possible flowering of the

living Divine. We do not read Sanskrit or Hindi or Bengali or Pali the way the academic Orientalists do—and it is for this reason that the librarian at the Ramakrishna Institute mocks us! Yet this vast body of English language texts has been a part of the transmission of the wisdom of Vedanta for more than a century, and it deserves to be celebrated and explored in all its complexity.

Sometimes, it feels as though we have hit a wall: we have expectations that a library is a place of public record, where we have a right to access history. But as we work, we start to realize certain older materials are missing from the libraries, and we discover that in many of the ashrams, the library gives access to some materials, while the more precious items are stored in separate archives. Somehow, we never actually make it into an archive on our trip. Again and again, we find that the earliest issues of journals, the first editions of certain books, are not to be found in the libraries. Sometimes we are told there is no archive; at other times that we are not allowed to go into it; at other times our questions are deflected.

Although we came to India to do research, we soon discover that a visit to the library can be a pilgrimage. It is tough work, and we feel that we are in a hall of mirrors: never sure whether we are inside or outside, looking at a history to which we are completely peripheral, or hypnotized by our own ghostly distorted reflections. The brutal colonial legacy in which we inevitably partici-

pate is also acted out upon us. Our own devotion to the traditions that we are studying falls apart and rebuilds itself anew each day in the libraries, through a sentence in a book or a photograph of a teacher. At times the pain is so great all we want to do is jump on a plane and leave.

One afternoon in Rishikesh, when we are feeling particularly overwhelmed by the difficulties of doing research at ashrams, a swami at the Divine Life Society tells us the story of his own study with his guru, a brilliant but harsh teacher who continuously demanded a perfection bordering on the impossible.

After years of trying to live up to the guru’s demands, the young man decided that he had had enough and he was ready to leave. He packed his bags and left the humble room that he had been renting in the guru’s town. On his way to the bus station he met his guru and, ashamed, he tried to hide from him but there was nowhere to hide. His guru saw his suffering and embraced him with tears in his eyes. “I am doing all of this for you,” he said, and they both wept.

The swami looks at us with radiant eyes, and we all begin to cry. ☸

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