



Me and Guru Ji

The wild and free Chandra Giri.

Maori are intrepid travellers and have a knack of turning up in the most unlikely corners of the world.

One Ngati Awa woman has managed to live unnoticed and unremarked amongst India's most famous holy men. Currently she's back in Matata in the Bay of Plenty, writing a book about her experiences of living with these rather fiery men and planning her next trip back.

Dianne Sharma-Winter of Ngati Hokopu ki Hokowhitu explains that the Naga Sadhu of Nerenjeni Akhara are a military sect that has existed since ancient times.

"They are the warriors of the otherwise peaceable band of wandering sadhu - the renounced and rejected holy men of India," she says. "In earlier times, they raised armies to fight Muslim and British invaders.

"They worship the god of war and are not the kind of holy men that people in the West might imagine. In fact, for the Naga (or naked), everything is 'open'. That means scant clothes, no money, little or no personal possessions and no pretence."

The desire to travel took Dianne to India via Kathmandu some 12 years ago.

"I was a solo mother with two kids and thinking of the furthest away place I could go once I had raised my whanau," she says. "I told them that when they were 18 they had to leave home 'cos I was going to Kathmandu."

She did that when her younger child was 16 and boarding at Queen Vic. "I was 36 at the time and had been left some money."

Since then, Dianne has been back and forth between India and New Zealand as soon as she has saved the money and as whanau concerns allow. She now has four mokopuna.

"To get the money I have worked in film, hospitality and on the roadworks! My whanau are okay with this, although they would like me to be more available for babysitting," she says.

Dianne's sadhu whanaunga live mostly behind the jealously guarded thick walls of their akhara (literally 'wrestling place'), or they move endlessly from place to holy place in eternal

pilgrimage, sometimes naked except for a covering of ash. The akhara, as Dianne discovered, is not the place to withdraw from the world, but a field of combat.

“The kawa is similar to that of the marae atea where all comers are challenged and if found wanting, usually chased away with sticks.

“The legacy of their early military history is visible today in their great bellowing arguments, passionate discourses and squabbles as well as in the sword-like sweeps of their stick at anyone who may have roused their temper and in their passionate insistence on instant blind obedience of their (sometimes irrational) orders.”

So how did a lone foreign woman get mixed up with these fierce holy guys?

“The Indians say that when you are ready for your guru (teacher) he will appear,” Dianne says. “I fell into being a cheli (student) from an overdose of homesickness and curiosity. I think that God has a great sense of humour to send me to these guys, but there’s nothing like a homesick Maori and when we are far away from everything familiar, I think we search it out.

“I was looking for a change from restaurant meals when a friend suggested that I buy food and take it to a sadhu as a kind of koha. The sadhu cooks the kai on his sacred fire (dhuni) and shares it with whoever comes. They are the best cooks too, so it’s where you get the best food!

“The day of the sadhu is set by ritual, with the tikanga adhered to for centuries and a kawa fiercely enforced. Visiting a sadhu is the same as visiting a god and so the whole process is surrounded by tapu and noa which includes forms of address, how you pass things, even how you sit.

“There was so much about sadhu life that reminded me of home - the communal living, the sharing of resources, the endless cups of tea.” Dianne wisely chose to visit the sadhu who had the most visitors. In fact this sadhu was to become her ‘Guru ji’ - the wild and free Chandon Giri. “He looks like a K Road drag queen on a full moon Friday night!” she laughs. “There was never a dull moment around this guy!”

When the sadhu decided to move location, Dianne followed him to the ancient Shiva site of Omkareshwar on the banks of the sacred

Narmada River, site of a long-running controversy over a dam project that has displaced villages and will eventually render millions of people homeless.

Reducing her possessions to one small shoulder bag and a blanket, Dianne moved into a jungle temple with the guru and other sadhu and hordes of Indian pilgrims. Sleeping in the open, cooking on the dhuni, washing in the monsoon-swollen river as well as dealing with the lack of common language and chasing marauding monkeys away from their kai, life became a daily test of survival. She aroused the concerns of the local police, who had qualms about her safety.

“Basically in order to avoid a rather unpleasant situation escalating into a night in an Indian jail cell, I claimed the sadhu as my Guru ji and so became the cheli (student) of a half naked man who lives in the jungle of India! It got me out of the police station but committed me to a lifetime relationship, and with two cops and a holy man as my witness, it was pretty much set.”

Since then, she has been accepted into the akhara and into the brotherhood of the organisation of Nerenjeni. “My status is that



Dianne (centre) with Sadhus, Brahmeshwar Temple, Omakereshwar.



of a cheli; the sadhus understand that it is impossible for me to ever become a sadhu and never pressure me about that. I come and go between India and New Zealand. Whenever I turn up, they act as if I have been away no longer than a week and life just goes on," she says.

Dianne says she is clear in her own spirituality, and is not looking for a 'saviour'. She just feels a deep sense of connection with the sadhu whanau.

"I am the only foreign female cheli of any long standing - I have been their cheli for seven years now," she says.

Like any female, what to wear has always been a bit of a dilemma for Dianne especially among the lightly clad and sometimes naked sadhus.


"I've opted to wear what is known as an Indian dress - a long dress over wide pants, just to help me blend in," she says.

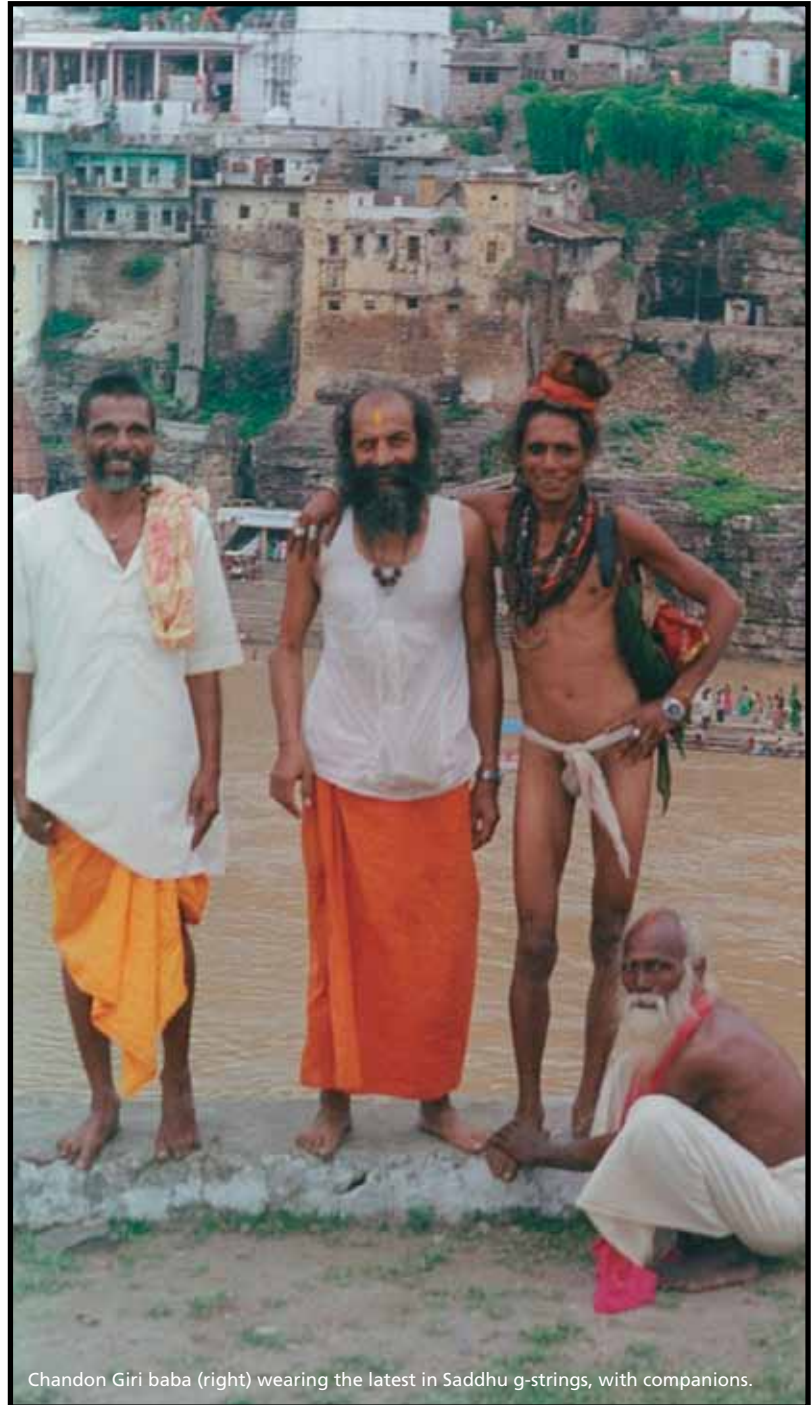
The cheli's day begins early.

"Rising before the sun, my job is to first see to my Guru ji; he is usually shouting for tea, so after washing, I milk the cow and make the tea for the sadhus. After breakfast I pick the flowers and dress the temple for morning puja (karakia) that the sadhus perform twice daily and then I have another temple to care for down the road.

"The sadhus farm the land that they hold for their organisation but it's very subsistence farming, even with their comparatively large holding of 50 acres. The day is taken up with farm business and visitors, and preparing our one meal a day which we take in the evening after puja."

Dianne admits that people may think her mad to have taken the risk of living with the sadhus. She knows of foreign women who have travelled with so-called holy men who have turned out to be criminals or hiding from the law. "It is not uncommon to see a foreign woman travelling with one of these sadhus and to hear that she was robbed, raped or murdered. I know of two such cases personally," she says. "But I had studied this guy Chandon Giri for some time and was more than confident in my own abilities to protect myself."

The Naga may have a reputation of being a fierce 'take no prisoners' kind of holy men, but for this Ngati Awa woman, they are the burning heart of Hinduism. 



Chandon Giri baba (right) wearing the latest in Saddhu g-strings, with companions.

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