

## **The Last English Saint**

An Obituary of Sri Madhava Ashish by Donald Eichert

that appeared in an Indian news magazine

The death of Sri Madhava Ashish in April 1997 after a long illness rounded off a remarkable chapter in the long story of Indian mysticism. In a convergence of fulfilled aspiration that almost defies credence the tiny hamlet of Mirtola in Almora district in northern India became the focus of no fewer than four lives of spiritual attainment. Madhava Ashish was the last in a line of gurus which can stand comparison with the Naropa-Marpa-Milarepa *parampara* of the Tibetan tradition.

His commanding presence belied a gentle nature almost feminine in nuance. When, as *rishis* must at times, Madhava Ashish displayed anger it was shadowed by a kind of sadness, as though the higher consciousness watched compassionately.

Born in Edinburgh in 1920, the great-grandson of a Scottish laird, he was christened Alexander Phipps. His mother, a Campbell, had been born in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, and had married a colonel in the Indian Army. The Phippses also had West Indian connections.

Young Phipps attended Sherborne School in Taunton, Somersetshire, acquiring the public school manner which he never quite lost in fifty years as a Vaishnav monk. When he moved on to Chelsea Polytechnic to study aeronautical engineering his accent was mocked by his fellow students.

The outbreak of World War II found Phipps a qualified engineer in a reserved occupation. He was set to supervising the construction of invasion gliders, and when it was decided to build them in India he came

out to take up the work at Dumdum, Calcutta. But the glider project lapsed and Phipps spent the war repairing Spitfire engines.

The first outward intimation of his true destiny came in 1944 when he used some leave to visit the Ramana Maharshi ashram at Tiruvannamalai. The experience that Ramana's presence gave him became the cornerstone of the young Briton's aspiration.

At the end of the war Phipps was faced with the choice of continuing in his profession in England or in India, or pursuing his now insistent spiritual perceptions. He decided to seek a guru. In this quest he received some help from Esther Merston, an Englishwoman who many years before in France had learned from the great Russian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff.

The motley pair – the six-foot-two-inch Englishman and the angular spinster – thus landed up at Mirtola, where he made the definitive decision of his life: to stay there. That was it, except for a short visit to the U.K. in 1992.

Mirtola, an improbable jewel in a rustic Kumaon setting, had been founded in 1930 by the Bengali saint Sri Yashoda Mai and her English disciple Sri Krishna Prem, the former Professor Ronald Nixon.

He was an ex-fighter pilot from World War I and a Cambridge philosophy graduate. She was the wife of vice-chancellor Dr. G. N. Chakravarti, successively of Lucknow and Banaras Hindu Universities. After several visionary experiences, she had taken *sannyas* from the *mahant* of Sri Radha Raman temple in Vrindavan. Health problems had obliged the Chakravartis to live apart thereafter and Sri Yashoda Mai had fulfilled her ambition to found a Radha-Krishna temple in the Hills.

By the time Phipps arrived on the scene in 1946 she had been deceased two years. The feminine reality was dynamically represented by her remarkable daughter, known as Moti Rani, who was nominally Krishna Prem's disciple, but in the sequel played the part of guru to both the expatriate Englishmen.

Chronically unwell and destined to die at the age of 34, Moti Rani devoted all her energy to bringing along the neophyte Phipps. 'I like him,' she told Sri Krishna Prem, whose comment was 'Poor young man!'

Being the blue-eyed boy at Mirtola was no picnic. Like Sri Krishna Prem, Phipps became a *vairagi*, and the title was no honorific. Ashramites bathed in cold water summer and winter, and at 7,000 feet winter meant snow. The austere *Vaishnav* regime was followed down to the last detail. The main meal of the day, authentic Bengali cuisine, was first offered to the deity and was often eaten stone-cold.

Sri Madhava Ashish, as he now was, knew all about the struggles of the *sadhak* to subdue the flesh and discipline the mind and channel the emotions. Many a time, desperate to leave the ashram, he would petition Radha-Krishna to make life bearable. On a famous occasion he poured out his troubles to Sri Krishna Prem, who remarked in a tutorial vein: 'I suppose people do have their problems,' and went to sleep.

They did. Because, gifted with unusual insight, Moti Rani used the last three years of her beleaguered time to make life hell for the two Englishmen-turned-Hindu monks. After she died in 1951 they found themselves firmly set on the path to attainment. There began a phase of redoubled austerity, where these two big men ate scarcely enough for one Hill man between them.

Sri Krishna Prem realized in the early 1950s, Sri Madhava Ashish in 1956 when they were staying in Calcutta. A Bengali disciple, seeing the 36-year-old yogi after a long interval, told Krishna Prem: ‘Maharaj, I am seeing a wonderful change in Ashishda.’ ‘Yes,’ said Krishna Prem, ‘what it took me twenty years to do, Ashish did in ten.’

Those fortunate to encounter this unique pair at Mirtola or strolling by the lake in Nainital were magicked. A vision in *gerua* (ochre), they radiated a kind of cool fire. People gravitated to them, usually for the wrong reasons. They were Hindu *sadhus*, they were demonstrably English (which still carried a cachet in the 1950s), they were both six-foot and handsome, and they could discourse in Hindi.

‘We pay a price for wearing this cloth,’ Krishna Prem confided. ‘Wherever we go we’re surrounded by fools.’

By the early 1960s a lot of those fools had become card-carrying disciples, but it wasn’t easy to achieve acceptance. Some followers waited for years before they got initiation. Few, when they achieved that coveted distinction, had the strength to live up to it and do their gurus credit.

Sri Krishna Prem died in 1965. By that time the orthodoxy of the ashram had considerably mellowed. The diet remained strictly vegetarian but in his last months Krishna Prem amazed his hosts on an Almora outing by once eating chicken – ‘to destroy structures’, as he said.

The teaching at Mirtola had been defined by Krishna Prem as ‘universal’. Although the Radha-Krishna temple remained the focus of ashram routine the two incumbents had long since introduced ideas from other disciplines: Freudian and Jungian psychology, dream analysis, Theosophy, and Gurdjieff’s system and example.

Alone now, Sri Madhava Ashish found himself with the responsibility of guiding nearly 100 disciples and as many more close followers who hadn't formalized the bond. After a period of introspection he set about discharging that responsibility. Not only that, he took on other work.

Where Sri Krishna Prem had hewn preeminently to the dharma of a Vaishnav monk, as though not to disturb the 'image' by which people knew him, Madhava Ashish found himself engaged in all kinds of 'worldly' projects. The farm attached to the ashram was upgraded, to become a test bed of new methods for the backward local cultivators. And the environment became a major interest.

Throughout the 1970s Madhava Ashish enlarged his acquaintance and increased the scope of his activities. He sat on the subcommittee of the Planning Commission concerned with the environment and wrote many articles. He became close friends with Romesh and Raj Thapar and contributed to their journal *Seminar* both philosophical and social comment.

None of this was allowed to interfere with the prime task of guiding the disciples and casual visitors who turned up at Mirtola in increasing numbers. From time to time disciples with a taste for voluntary suffering applied to become residents and over the years nearly a score did. Some survived longer than others.

Sri Madhava Ashish had collaborated with Sri Krishna Prem on a transcendently difficult book about the origin and purpose of the Universe, and in 1969 he produced another. Both books offered a reinterpretation of the world-picture, bequeathed by that other Russian mystic, H.P. Blavatsky, who founded The Theosophical Society.

Later Madhava Ashish reissued some of Sri Krishna Prem's articles with a biographical sketch of his guru; the book is called *Initiation Into Yoga*. During his last months he wrote a book on dream interpretation titled *An Open Window*, and a full-length biography of Sri Krishna Prem.

With this multifarious range of interests it was ironical that when he was awarded the Padma Shri in 1992 the citation was for 'scientific farming'. The most significant crop Sri Madhava Ashish raised was people.

