

Experiments (of the mind) in chilly laboratories

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FOR over 20 years now, a husband and wife team of psychiatrists has been travelling to the Himalayas for a month every year to interview sadhus and sanyasis.

No... the stress of the city hasn't got to them... just that, as psychiatrists, they're interested in how Indian tradition deals with mental health.

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Many, many kinds of sadhus and sanyasis and swamis... Kapur (who was Head of Department, Psychiatry, at Nimhans) even spent a year in 1981-82 at an ashram under a guru, learning yoga. Kept a diary, noted what changes he was undergoing; noted even his dreams.

Now he's ready with material for a book. "The first draft is ready," he says, at his office in National Institute of Advanced Studies, where he's a visiting professor. "But this is a process which will not stop, I can keep adding to it."

Kapur (*pic inset, right*) interviewed more than 100 sanyasis over the years. The study he conducted involved detailed interviews: Life trajectory; reasons for sanyas; details of spiritual practices; relationship

with God; relationship with other sanyasis and society; how they handle sexual needs; mental health; mystical experience; special powers, if any.

The last category is intriguing to anyone familiar with Oriental mysticism and spirituality. Could sanyasis possess siddhi powers — which supposedly help practitioners to levitate or become invisible — as the *Yoga Sutras* said?

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Experiments in chilly laboratories

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Kapur's interest in Indian spiritual traditions and higher states of mental health was ignited by two of his teachers, Dr NC Surya and Dr Erna Hoch. His exploration of Indian spirituality for over 40 years was because he believed that "Indian spiritual traditions could make a major contribution to the profession of mental health care across cultures".

As a psychiatrist, Kapur knew that "while the profession had made great advances in understanding *mental disorder*, it had little to say about *mental health*, the experience of which we all have enjoyed at rare moments and which we know

intuitively as an ideal to be reached."

"It is claimed," Kapur continues, "that Indian scriptures not only describe the state of mental health... *but also teach methods for reaching this state and holding it at will.*"

Of the many he interviewed, he found 28 of them more 'advanced' in their pursuit. These were certainly no escapists... "A person who runs away from the problems of life cannot be expected to become a sanyasi," Kapur says.

The experience has been rich and varied. (And no, he hasn't found anyone with 'special powers'.)

He was once talking to Swami Ramdas, who stays in a cave over 11,000 ft above sea level with nothing warmer than a shawl to wrap himself in. He'd just asked him: "Do you never worry, where your next meal is going to come from?"

"I challenge God not to provide me food," the swami replied.

How is it that these sanyasis manage to live almost naked in the chilly heights of the Himalayas? What kind of physiological adaptation does one need? And what about their sexual urges?

Kapur says yes, they do understand human obsession with sex, but that they have gone beyond it. "They believe

there are higher things than sex."

The daily drill of *sadhana* (spiritual practise) apparently prepares them for the harsh climate. The daily routine could include prayer, or yogic exercise, or difficult vows, or a combination. The discipline of *sadhana* and the 'pride' of keeping their vows build up their confidence.

Where does all this spirituality and mysticism leave Science? But who said they were mutually exclusive in the first place?

"You see, Science is an experimentation of the outside world," says Kapur. "The sanyasis are scientists too — they're experimenting on themselves."



A sanyasi's haunt: the cool climate helps in

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