

UK students at the Rishikesh Camp (14-28 March 2009)



The party from the UK broke the record for being the largest group from a single location to attend a study camp conducted by Pujya Sri Swami Dayananda Saraswati. On the 13th of March, twenty-seven people – students of Swamini Atmaprakasanda in London (with three friends from Spain) – clambered out of the afternoon heat at Delhi Airport into a waiting AC coach to make their way to Rishikesh.

For some, this would be their first introduction to a camp conducted by Pujya Swamiji. For some, this would be their first introduction to India! And India delivered! Hot, exotic, welcoming, chaotic. (And, by way of proving it, one lady's luggage didn't arrive with the rest at Delhi Airport!)

Nine hours later, after dodging trucks and bicycles, bullock carts and lazy goats, the coach pulled up outside the cream-coloured gates of Arsha Vidya Pitham. It was like landing on a different planet. The crowds, noise and dust gave way to space and order and tranquillity, dotted here and there with the orange robes of resident sannyasis. Rooms were allocated and orientation established. And then the group had their first glimpse of Ganga by moonlight.

The next morning the camp kicked off in earnest. The regular programme was to be: 5.30am *puja*, then meditation, breakfast, followed by the first study session on Rama Gita unfolded by Pujya Swamiji, yoga/ Sanskrit/chanting, second Rama Gita session, lunch, afternoon break, more

chanting/Sanskrit, third Rama Gita session at 5pm, *puja*, dinner, *satsang*.

As many as 250 people attended from all over the world – from Australia to Argentina, Spain to Norway, Canada to Chennai. And even though more than the registered number packed the meeting hall, Swami Aparokshananda and Swami Suddhananda, who were responsible for running the event, took everything in their easy stride.

The profound message of Rama Gita was expertly unfolded over fourteen days. "Through the presence of the guru and the great Vedic statements, immediate knowledge of Brahman is born. Having recognized in one's own mind one's self as pure consciousness devoid of *upadis*, one may set aside the entire inert world which is available for objectification (as *mithya*)."
What a rich daily diet for the mind!

The two-week camp delivered additional delectations. The first was the feeding of 250 sadhus at a *bandhara*. They all came with their hand-delivered invitations and were seated under a red canopy erected in the courtyard. They ranged from the very ancient to the 15 year old; some with matted locks, others with shaved heads. It was a gathering of proud giants. And then, barely half an hour after they arrived, the meal over, with the call of *Hara, Hara Mahadev*, the group rose as one body and vanished into the back streets of Rishikesh, leaving not a trace behind – just a few palm plates and the very aged slowly making their way back to their places. A few days

later we were privileged to witness a second *bandhara*.

The next special occasion was the initiation of two new sannyasis. Both looked impossibly young, yet self-composed and bright. They had spent the previous night in prayer and meditation on the banks of Ganga and were ready for the ceremony the next day. After their initiation by Pujya Swamiji, they threw their *purva ashrama* clothes into Ganga and were led back into the cave under the ashram where they delivered their first address to Swamiji and the resident sannyasis.

The nourishment of the daily advaita teaching was complemented by the nourishment from the kitchens under the watchful guidance of head chef Subramanyam, regular Ganga dips, shopping trips to Ram Jhula, Telegu New Year celebrations with wonderful *rangoli* patterns created by the ladies, the cable car rides to Mansadevi and Chandidevi temples, the spectacle of Ganga *arathi* at Haridwar, the intimacy of Ganga *arathi* performed by the priests at the Dayananda ashram, the daily chanting led by Brahmachari Ram, the unflappable Gunananda in the office, the quiet dedicated service offered by Kayesh and team who recorded the daily talks and stayed up till midnight each day editing them in preparation for delivery before final departure.

This is India at its finest. For all delegates from the UK the visit has been inspiring, for some it has been life-changing.