

BY MIRA MADDRELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOGESH THAKAR

Romancing A River

*When a river becomes your best friend,
you learn a lot about life's impermanence*

Mira Maddrell, 55, set out on pilgrimage along the sacred Narmada River in India, in November 1998. Her journey ended more than three years later in February 2001. She went with no food, clothes, money or shelter. But ended up rich in devotion. This is her story.

All religions have special holy places to which people make long journeys, traditionally on foot. Nowadays people can hop on a plane to go to Jerusalem or Mecca, but the real pilgrimage is a journey into the unknown, in the geographical and social, as well the spiritual sense. When I decided to go into this remote part of India, I thought there would be the possibility of meeting hostility, robbers, or falling ill with no one to care for me, or even death. People have died on this pilgrimage. But I knew that what I was setting out to do was auspicious — because I wanted to purify myself — and it can be just as dangerous to stay at home.

For me, these three years and three months were just one step in a very long process of self-purification, a process lasting many lifetimes. I'm not sure that most



The author finds union with the Narmada River.

people understood that: they have the idea that going on a journey is something you get something out of. I didn't want to get anything out of it — except perhaps spiritual purification — so consequently what I did get was immeasurable riches of experiences, good and bad. You can suffer with anything, and be crying with pain, but it's part of the process.

Living with a river for so long you become close to it — like a best friend. You see how it changes every minute. You feel yourself flowing with it and changing, changing, changing. The river kept changing its character — sometimes it was rocky, flowing fast, sometimes very slow and placid, like a lake, sometimes deep or shallow, sometimes silent or singing. My job was to watch the changes, and see how my mind was reacting. So it's a constant lesson in the impermanence of life.

FRIENDS ALONG THE RIVER

Ever since reading "A River Sutra," by Gita Mehta, I had longed to journey along the Narmada. It is a great, winding river, which flows west through central India, emptying into the Arabian Sea. It runs about 820 miles (1,312 kilometers) long, but when you travel along its banks, in a clockwise direction, it comes to twice that. Just as in the Tibetan *khorma* (devotional journey), I chose to keep the holy place – in this case the river – on my right. Both banks of the river are holy and there are many temples and other sacred sites along the way. Legends of the great heroes of Hindu scriptures abound along the way.

A great number of poor people take this journey every year. You don't need money. In fact, you are supposed to beg your way, taking only the bare

earth floor and sometimes two, three or four sides were provided free for all travelers. If I came to a village where there was nothing like that, some kind family would invite me to stay, because a woman traveling alone was no threat, and no one was afraid to invite me.

Because of this tradition of support for pilgrims, there was always somewhere you could get basic food, even if it was the next village or temple. Generally, all pilgrims are given the basics of wheat flour and uncooked *dahl* (lentils), perhaps a twist of salt, turmeric, and a little red chili. Or sometimes uncooked rice and vegetables from farmers in the field. Sometimes the *ashrams* (Hindu temples) had a huge kitchen with lots of food, and everyone who turned up got fed.



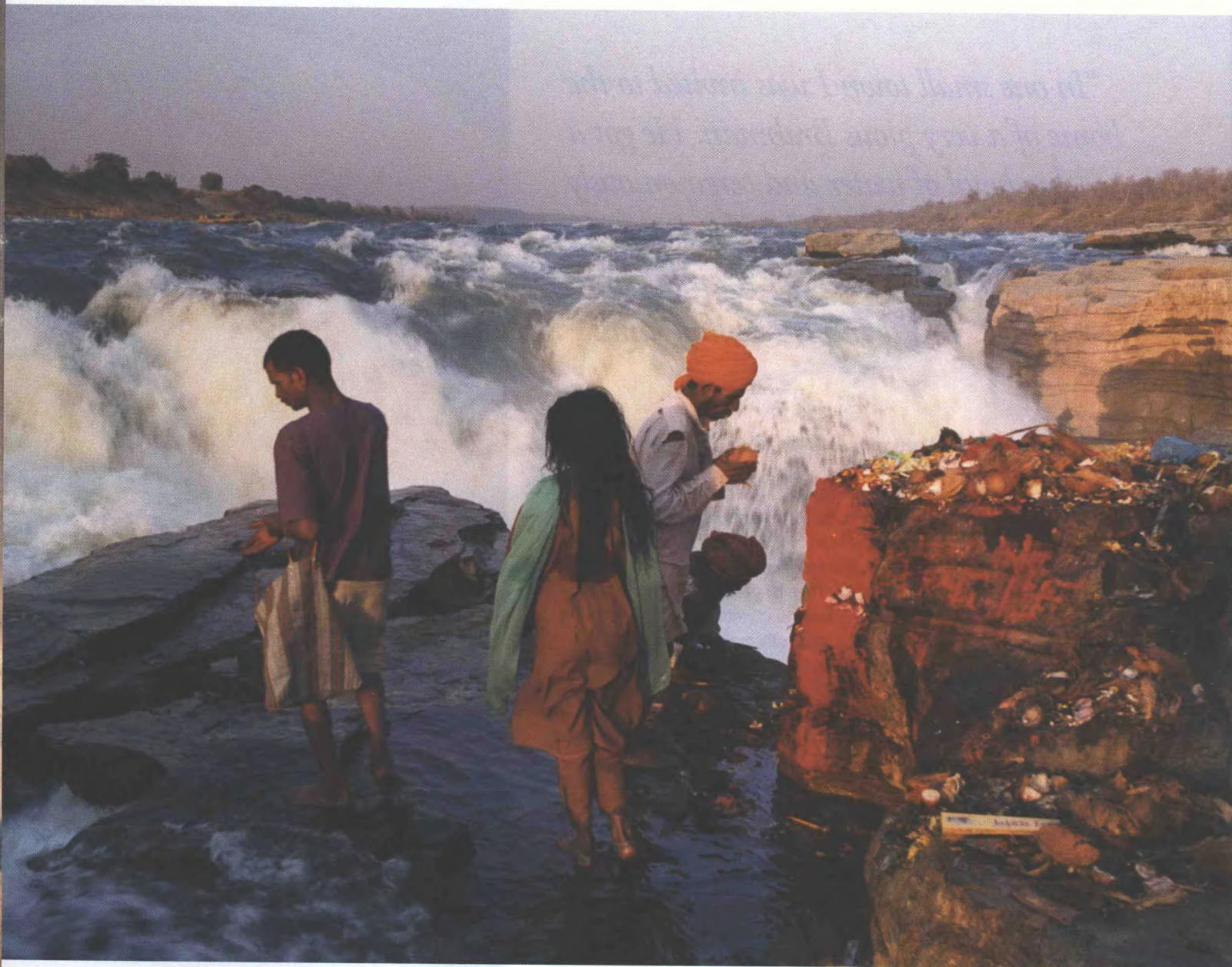
necessities. In many parts of India foreigners are regarded as "money on legs," but this didn't apply here. Local villagers can't do enough for someone who has traveled a long way to do this pilgrimage. They'd say, "Look at us, we live right here on the bank of this river, yet we don't do this pilgrimage." Most of the people I met had never seen or spoken to a non-Indian, yet they took me into their hearts. They were unbelievably kind – even though sometimes they themselves were very poor.

When I was traveling alone, I didn't sleep outside even though I wanted to, because whenever I lay down to sleep some kind person would come and say, "You can't do that! You are a woman alone, you have to come to the village." When I was traveling with other pilgrims, it was a great pleasure to be able to sleep outside. Otherwise, I would sleep in a village or a temple. In some places, basic shelters with an

During one period, I was going through a bad patch of not enough food. Unfortunately, a diet of only *chapattis* (flat bread) and *dahl* does not suit me very well. I got illness after illness. After a while, I couldn't tolerate oil at all, but they didn't have any other way to cook.

Then I asked the river to please help. Shortly after, I met a good cook who prepared delicious food. Sometime later, I entered a Brahman village where they cook with *ghee* (clarified butter). Brahman meals are very delicate, and served with great love and respect.

The villagers believe you are going to get enormous spiritual benefit by doing the pilgrimage. So to support a pilgrim is an act of merit. Out of their kindness, superstition and willingness to see the best in people, the villagers often regarded me as a very saintly person. I would say I wasn't, and they'd say,



Far left: Fishing families call the Narmada River home, along with fish, turtles and crocodiles. Above: Pilgrims give offerings to Lord Shiva, considered the father of Narmada River. Left: The river water is important for drinking and bathing.

"In one small town I was invited to the home of a very pious Brahman. He got a big bowl of water and ceremoniously washed my dirty feet. Then he drank the water! They consider it an honor to drink the dust of saints."

"When you say that, it just proves you are." So what could I do?

In one small town I was invited to the home of a very pious Brahman. Several of us crowded into his front room, where there were many holy pictures of Hindu gods. He received me with tea, fruit juice and delicate snacks. Then he got a big bowl of water and ceremoniously washed my dirty feet. Then he drank the water! And some others eagerly did too! They consider it an honor to drink the dust of saints.

But I was not comfortable being treated as a saint. One of the spiritual dangers is that you might get fooled into believing others' image of you. I made up silly prayers like: "Help me to become the saint — they think I am — I know I ain't."

ILLNESS

I got very sick three times, but each time, somehow things worked out. The first time I lay in a village with high fever for two days. My left leg was red and swollen — blood poisoning from a thorn — but I had some strong antibiotics with me. A family of two parents and six children cared for me lovingly, for a whole week in their tiny house. The second time, I caught malaria, and I was really ill. The doctor was in the next village, and there was a big flood, so we were cut off. I stayed in a cottage, where people didn't know what to do with me. It was a week before I could get any medicine.

The third time it was typhoid. The homeopathic doctor in the village said we'd have to go to the city hospital. But that meant crossing the river — and on this pilgrimage, one is not allowed to cross the river. I said, "If you think it's typhoid, you treat me for it." He did. And I recovered.

OTHER PILGRIMS

A number of people who go around the river circuit have made a bargain with the Goddess of the river. "If my son recovers from his illness, I'll go on the pilgrimage." Hindus themselves have told me that

once they get the result, they complete their side of the bargain in a perfunctory way, without much religious feeling. It's not as wholehearted as someone who sets out to do it out of pure devotion, without asking anything at all. But for the *sadhus* (wandering ascetics), it's part of their general spiritual exercises and not for any particular payback.

Many people, both lay and *sadhus*, have been told by their gurus to do pilgrimage for purification reasons. Many of the young *sadhus* do it as quickly as possible — both as an austerity and to prove how tough they are. Some do the entire river in 108 days, which is really pushing it. You can't take a rest day, and you have to cover 20-30 kilometers a day. *Sadhus* go barefoot too, while most lay people wear shoes.

From my point of view, the slower you go, the





more you learn. Let's say you have to fulfill 30 kilometers a day – you can't appreciate all the gorgeous temples and bathing places along the way, or chat with two or three holy people you might learn something from – you're in a rush! Whereas at my speed, you might walk four kilometers, then stop at a beautiful place. Or a villager invites you for tea. You can't possibly go on.

All pilgrims going round this river have enormous trust that the river will take care of them. I also caught onto this feeling. In the middle of winter, I gave away my warm shawl to another pilgrim, because I knew I'd be given another one soon. I gave away my money because I knew I'd get more. I didn't cook for myself, and yet I always got fed. I gained in hope, confidence and trust.

And there were the unexpected joys of river life: the beautiful landscape; women gracefully carrying tiers of water pots on their heads; extraordinarily beautiful Hindu devotional songs; bird songs; the sounds of the river; and the unexpected fragrance of wild jasmine.

Bare floors and magnificent views are typical of accommodations for pilgrims traveling along the Narada River.

Mira Maddrell, a longtime Vipassana meditation student, is based in India. She told her story to Julia Hengst and Thorhalla Bjornsdottir, during a visit to Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamsala, North India.