

SADHUS, HINDU HOLY MEN

SADHUS

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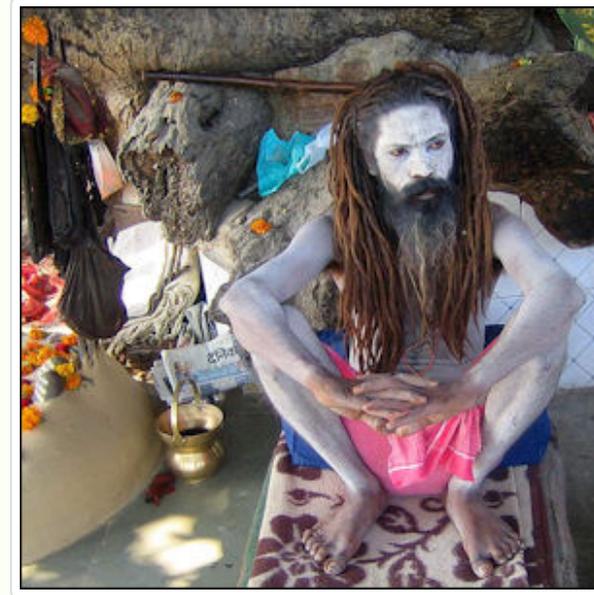
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SADHUS

- *Sadhus* are wandering ascetics affiliated with a wide range of Hindu religious orders and schools. Found throughout India and Nepal, they are seen in towns and cities and walking along roads with begging pots and staffs. They are respected by Hindus and given food in return for their blessings and prayers. They are also known as babas. A fakir is a holy man who lives by begging.
- Sadhu have been around for at least 2000 years . They were called "the silent ones" or the "the long haired ones" in ancient Vedic verses. In ancient times sadhuism was regarded as the highest form of religious life and the power of sadhu penance was such, it was said, that the gods unsuccessfully set down cosmic beauties to try to seduce them and generals laid down their arms rather than wage war against a city protects by a *sadhus* .
- Originally only Brahmins were allowed to become sadhus. Now members of any caste can become one. They take vows of chastity and poverty, adopt ascetic practices, observe certain religious regulations, survive on charities, and provide religious services to those in need. They are expected to sever ties with family or

home and wear markings and clothes associated with the sect they belong to.

- There are believed to be around five million sadhus belonging to several thousand schools or sects in India. Most sadhus are males. The few females ones are called *sadvin* (the feminine of sadhu). The most conservative sadhus, the *nagas*, wear only a loin cloth and have long stringy locks of hair that resemble dreadlocks. Some have nicknames like "Long Haired Man" in honor of locks that if uncoiled would reach the ground.
- Sadhus are revered by Hindus as representatives of the gods. Being a sadhu is one of the stages of life a person is expected to pass through. Even so in the caste system sadhus often occupy a position roughly equal to that of domestic servants.



Sadhu In Haridwar

Websites and Resources on Hinduism: heart of Hinduism hinduism.iskcon.com/index; India Divine indiadivine.org; Hinduism Today hinduismtoday.com; ; Religious Tolerance Hindu Page religioustolerance.org/hinduism; Hinduism Index uni-giessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism; Hindu Universe hindunet.org; Wikipedia article Wikipedia; Oxford center of Hindu Studies ochs.org.uk; Hinduism Home Page uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/religionet/er/hinduism; Hindu Website hinduwebsite.com/hinduindex; Hindu Gallery hindugallery.com; Hindusim Today Image Gallery himalayanacademy.com/resources/books/wih/image-library; India Divine Pictures of Hinduism indiadivine.org/pictures

Sadhu Customs and Duties

- In India of the 1990s, several hundred thousand Hindu and Jain sadhus and a few thousand holy women (sadhvis) live an ascetic life. They have chosen to wear other robes, or perhaps no clothing at all, to daub their skin with holy ash, to pray and meditate, and to wander from place to place, depending on the charity of others. Most have given up affiliation with their caste and kin and have undergone a funeral ceremony for themselves, followed by a ritual rebirth into their new ascetic life. They come from all walks of life, and range from illiterate villagers to well-educated professionals. In their new lives as renunciants, they are devoted to spiritual concerns, yet each is affiliated with an ascetic order or subsect demanding strict adherence to rules of dress,



Sacred charas

itinerancy, diet, worship, and ritual pollution. Within each order, hierarchical concerns are exhibited in the subservience novitiates display to revered gurus. Further, at pilgrimage sites, different orders take precedence in accordance with an accepted hierarchy. Thus, although sadhus have foresworn many of the trappings of ordinary life, they have not given up the hierarchy and interdependence so pervasive in Indian society. [Source: Library of Congress]

- Hindus Sadhus and Buddhist monks have some similar customs. Both wander from place to place, surviving off alms and the goodness of others. In India it is a tradition for old men to leave their families and seek salvation. This is rooted in the Hindu belief in four stages of life: 1)

studentship; 2) becoming a householder; 3) retiring to the forest to meditate; and 4) becoming a mendicant (*sannyasi*).

- During the third stage a man is expected to move into a hut in the forest with his wife and perform religious exercises. During the fourth stage a man is expected to renounce all his worldly possessions and become a beggar and devote himself totally to religion. According to the Laws of Manu: *He should not wish to die. nor hope to live. but await the time appointed as a servant awaits his wages... Rejoicing in the things of the spirit. calm. caring in for nothing. abstaining from sexual pleasure. himself his only helper. he lives in the world. In hope of eternal bliss*
- Some sadhus wander and travel a great deal. Others are more sedentary. Their religious duties include acts of self purification, worship, participation in religious discourses, making pilgrimages and studying religious texts. They also preach, teach religious doctrine, help the poor and troubled, and open schools and hospitals.
- Many sadhus are Shaivaites. See Sects
- A shaved head is a sign of penance. Many devotees have shaved heads this when they first become sadhus. The offering of water is considered a sign of respect. A water pot in some sects is the only possession a sadhu is allowed to own. It is the equivalent of the begging bowl of a Buddhist monk.

Sadhu Clothes and Markings

- Sadhus generally identify which sect they belong to by clothing color, symbols on specific parts of their body and possessions such as a rosary, water pot or staff. Sometimes body adornments are expressions of sadhus individuality and artisanship rather than symbols of a sect.
- Some Hindu holy men wear saffron robes, holy beads and have a vermillion and ash spot on their forehead. Others wear only a loin cloth. Some wear only a loin cloth and a gold chain or a gold bracelet. Some wear nothing at all. Nagas are known for walking around completely naked.
- Many sadhus follow rules in which they are allowed to grow hair in five areas: their head, their upper jaw, their chin, their armpits and their pubic areas. Some sadhus shave their entire bodies. Brahmin sadhus are identified by a sacred thread that runs diagonally from their left shoulder to their waist under their right arm.
- During important festival sadhus cover their bodies with paint, sandalwood ash, and even sequins. On holy days some loin-cloth-clad sadhus wrap flowers around the top-knot in the their hair and smear their bodies with ashes. Sometimes their outfits can be quite elaborate. One mendicant was observed in a Mysore village with more than 100 different items on his body. It took him a couple of hours to dress and put on all his religious markers.
- Some sadhus cover themselves with the ash of cremated bodies. Some tikkas are made from the ash of incense. Others place the mark of Vishnu on their brow or tattoo their forehead with mantras of Lord Rama and his wife Sita. In Pushkar, one journalist saw holyman with no arms or legs.



Sadhu Lifestyle

- Sadhus generally are not part of any distinct community. They either live in monasteries (called *ashrams* , *matha* or *mandira*), if they have chosen a sedentary lifestyle, or take up temporary residence in pilgrimage



shrines, if they are on a pilgrimage. Each sect has its own monasteries and pilgrimage shrines. Many monasteries and shrines are supported by lay people who receive spiritual counseling in return for their support. Many sadhus camp out at night when they are wandering around or are put up by almsgivers.

- The sadhu lifestyle places a premium on austerity, discipline and self-control. A sadhu's daily routine includes exercise intended to purify the physical body and elevate the mind, reading sacred verses, and attempting to reach levels of ecstasy through prayer. Generally, the only possessions owned by holy men are a wooden staff, an aluminum begging pot and a cloth bag slung around the neck with a few possessions, such as maybe a spoon, some scriptures and religious mementos. Holy men are supposed to beg only for food, discarding items given to them, saying "I never touch money. It buys only trouble. I would have to fight off thieves. Please, all I want is world peace."

- Sadhus are almost totally dependant on the generosity of others for their subsistence. Some supplement what they receive in alms from begging by serving as spiritual mentors, manufacturing

amulets, tickling people with feather dusters, fortunetelling, performing exorcisms, singing, juggling, selling medicinal herbs, tattooing, interpreting dreams, reading palms, casting spells and making potions. Many make and sell talisman known as *kavacga* which are supposed to attract good spirits and repel evil ones.

- Many sadhus smoke marijuana and hashish. Some sadhus sit in their huts and smoke hashish all day in water pipes. Others smoke chillums and joints full of hashish.

- Some sadhus have never been married. Other remain married while functioning as sadhus. Many leave their families. It has been suggested that unhappy family lives and marital collapse is the reason that many men decide to become sadhus. Some are orphans or runaways that were adopted by a sadhu order. These generally receive some kind of training that can last months or years before they begin wandering the countryside. Some become sadhus by following the Vedic progression of life stages. They often go through an initiation process and change their names when they become sadhus. Many sadhus have university degrees and families that miss them.

Sadhu Religious Activities

- It is difficult to generalize about the religious activities of sadhus because they are a diverse group and the sects they belong to have many different traditions, customs, practices and beliefs. Their activities are directed at different gods. Many sadhus light sacred fires when they camp in the monasteries and pilgrimage shrines they stay in. Before sadhus are initiated into a higher level they are symbolically cleansed by clay oil lamps.
- Some sadhus spend their entire lives on pilgrimages or even a single pilgrimage. Indra, the god of travelers, once said: "All his sins are destroyed by his fatigues and wanderings." Others sit in the lotus position on a pair of stacked stones in a cave. As an act of devotion some sadhus put a lime at the end of a spear and then dip the spear in the Ganges. Others chant the name of the monkey god Hanuman a thousand times before a holy fire. After giving advise many sadhus give a banana, a sweetmeat, and a spoonful of Ganges water.
- When asked why he spent the winter in a cave at 13,000-foot-high source of the Ganges with two meters of snow around him a sadhu told National Geographic, "God wanted me to do this spiritual work, to meditate and introspect on the spiritual truths of the scriptures. Why, for instance, is it written, and what does it mean, that the Ganges washes away sin? Can I give any scientific interpretation? Only by committing my own body and mind to this research can I hope to find the answer. Often when I sit by the Ganges I slowly open my heart and pour one after another my doubts. Mother Ganges always answers." [Source: John Putman, National Geographic October 1971]
- Some sadhus are fierce Hindu nationalists involved in anti-Muslim activities (See Ayoda Temple). Others are involved in environmental activities. Sadhus have demonstrated in Allahabad, for example, demanding that the Ganges be cleaned up.



Sadhu Feats and Acts of Penitence

- Hindu ascetics do things like spend years with their left hand raised into the air, standing on one leg or lying on



a bed of cactuses. Often have a blanket next to them to collect coins or food. Some bury themselves neck-deep in sand, pierce their tongues with spikes, stare at the sun, sleep standing up, meditate for hours while suspended from a rope, lay between fires, live in trees and refuse to talk for years. Hindus believed that severe penance will liberate them from the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Many of sadhus smoke marijuana or hashish to ease their suffering.

- Sadhus sometimes bury their head, a feat of breath control that requires mastery of yoga techniques. In 1837, a yogi named Hari Das was buried alive without air, food, liquid or any attention. After being excavated he was easily revived and went on to live a long life.

- One sadhu at the Pushkar Fair became

famous for lifting a 35-kilogram brick with his penis. Some sadhus are said to have the ability to talk with monkeys. Sometimes they are sought out by people for help keeping monkeys from raiding their gardens.

- According to the Guinness Book of Records, the silent Indian *fakir* Mastram Bapu stayed in the same spot by a road in the village of Chitra for 22 years, from 1960 to 1982. Swami Maujiri Maharaja stood for 17 years (from 1955 to November 1973) performing *Tapasya* (penance) in Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh. When sleeping, he leaned against a plank

- According to the Guinness Book of Records, Radhey Shyam Prajapati stood motionless for world record of 18 hours, 5 minutes and 5 seconds in January 1996. Rajikumar Chakraborty did the static wall sit (Samson's chair) for 11 hours and 5 minutes at the Panposh Sports Hostel in April 1994.

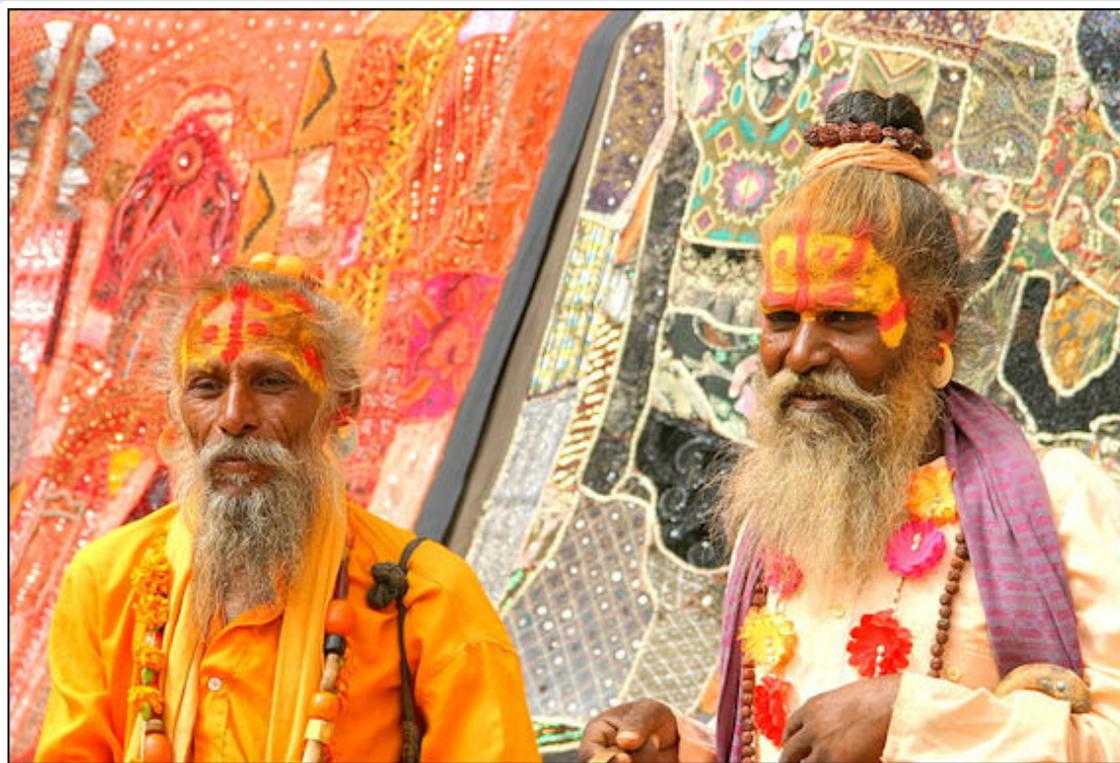
Rolling Baba

- To gain merit Hindus sometime roll sideways through the dirty, cobblestone streets of Kathmandu while in a praying position. Followed by a procession of saffron-robed devotees the rollers sometimes keep it up for hours."
- Mohan Das, the Ludkan Baba ("Rolling Baba"), drew international attention in 2004 when he rolled over 1,300 kilometers between Agra and Lahore to promote good relations between India and Pakistan. He wore bandages on his legs and sweat bands on his arms and was able can move at a fast walking pace and cover 30 kilometers a day. On a typical day he rolled from 7:00am to noon and 3:00pm to 7:00pm, stopping occasionally for a rest or to give blessings. On some down hill sections he said he reached speeds of 15mph. Devotees swept glass and other obstacles out his way but he rolled through cow dung and garbage. One of his biggest obstacles was pavement that melted in the 50 degree C heat. At night he slept in camps with his devotees.



at the Kumbh Mela in 1998

- Nick Meo wrote in the Times, "Rolling Baba's matted dreadlocks slap against the sweltering tarmac of National Highway No. 2 as incredulous drivers beep and swerve to avoid him. Every few miles traffic comes to a complete stop when villagers swarm on to the road to seek the holy man's blessing, forming a chaotic scrum with an entourage of hymn-chanting pilgrims trailing in his wake." Paul Watson wrote in the Los Angeles Times, "He lies flat on the ground, turning himself over and over like a runaway log, limbs flailing as he bumps across potholes, splashes through mud puddles and falls deeper into a spiritual trance."
- Rolling Baba said he became a sadhu at the age of 12 after he touched a dying boy and saved his life. He said he lived for several years in a cave and ate nothing but grass and spent seven years standing up, leaning against a swing when he slept. He began rolling in 1983 as a way to earn more merit by making his journeys from one pilgrimage site to another more demanding. In 1994, he rolled 2,500 miles across India. By 2004, he figured he had rolled more than 320,000 kilometers.
- On his trip to Lahore, Das often rolled with cigarette in his mouth. He smoked five packs of cigarettes a day and got energy from drinking countless cups of tea. He told the Los Angeles Times, "I move during cyclones, during blazing summers and cold winters. I think of God. I think of Mother Earth and then I roll and roll and roll. I don't get dizzy. I don't consume any food just tea and cigarettes. At night I eat fruits, roti, whatever I can lay my hands on."



Sadhus in Rajasthan

Extreme Sadhus and Eating the Dead

- The most extreme sadhus, the aghoris, turn normal rules of conduct completely upside down. Rajesh and Ramesh Bedi, who have studied sadhus for decades, estimate that there may be fewer than fifteen aghoris in contemporary India. In the quest for great spiritual attainment, the aghori lives alone, like Lord Shiva, at cremation grounds, supping from a human skull bowl. He eats food provided only by low-ranking Sweepers and prostitutes, and in moments of religious fervor devours his own bodily wastes and pieces of human flesh torn from burning corpses. In violating the most basic taboos of the ordinary Hindu householder, the aghori sadhu graphically reminds himself and others of the correct rules of social behavior. [Source: Library of Congress]
- Holy men of the 1,000-year-old Aghor sect of Shiva worshipers in Varanasi drink whiskey from human skulls, have sex with corpses and eat the charred remains of the dead from funeral pyres on the banks of the Ganges. They eat corpses in the belief that ingesting dead flesh will make them ageless and give them supernatural

powers. By breaking humanity's strict taboos they claim to transcend society and come closer to enlightenment. They say human meat tastes good and identify the brains as the best part. [Source: Richard Grant, Washington Post, July 30, 2008]

- In a story on "Feeding on the Dead," a 10-minute documentary about the Aghori sect by director Sandeep Singh, Associated Press reported: There are about 70 Aghori sadhus at a given time, and they remain with the sect for 12 years before returning to their families. Unlike other Hindu holy men, most of whom are vegetarian teetotalers, the Aghoris consume alcohol and meat. But it is their consumption of human flesh — a practice whose origins remain a mystery — which has earned them the condemnation of other Hindus and relegated most Aghori sadhus to living around crematoriums in the hills around the holy city of Varanasi. [Source: Associated Press, October 27, 2005]

- Singh and three cameramen waited with an Aghori sadhu — whose name is not mentioned in the film — for 10 days in June before finding a floating corpse. Hindus generally cremate the dead, but bodies are sometimes ceremonially disposed of in the Ganges. "The body was decomposed and bluish in color, but the sadhu was not afraid about falling sick," Singh told The Associated Press in an interview Wednesday. "He sat on the corpse, prayed to a goddess of crematoriums and offered some flesh to the goddess before eating it." Singh said the sadhu ate part of the corpse's elbow, believing the flesh would stop him from aging and give him special powers, like the ability to levitate or control the weather. Singh did not see any of those powers on display.

Book: "Among the Cannibals: Adventures on the Trail of Man's Darkest Ritual" by Paul Raffaele (Smithsonian, 2008)]

Image Sources: Wikimedia Commons

Text Sources: *World Religions* edited by Geoffrey Parrinder (Facts on File Publications, New York); *Encyclopedia of the World's Religions* edited by R.C. Zaehner (Barnes & Noble Books, 1959); *Encyclopedia of the World Cultures: Volume 3 South Asia* edited by David Levinson (G.K. Hall & Company, New York, 1994); *The Creators* by Daniel Boorstin; *A Guide to Angkor: an Introduction to the Temples* by Dawn Rooney (Asia Book) for information on temples and architecture. National Geographic, the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Smithsonian magazine, Times of London, The New Yorker, Time, Newsweek, Reuters, AP, AFP, Lonely Planet Guides, Compton's Encyclopedia and various books and other publications.

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