

## COLIN TURNBULL

The following is an extract from the biography of Colin Turnbull, originally from England, who spent the years 1949-1951 at Sri Ma's ashram at Varanasi, whilst also studying for a Masters at Benares Hindu University. He was 25 at the time, and later became one of the most well-known anthropologists of the 20th Century. It is reproduced by kind permission of the author, Roy Richard Grinker, who is Professor of Anthropology at the George Washington University- a position once held by Colin. (In the Arms of Africa - St Martins Press, New York.)

Colin found the approach to Anandamayi's ashram far from prepossessing, but when he got into the main courtyard he quickly understood why ashrams were places for enlightenment, peace, and self-discovery. He later remembered, "From the narrow main street leading from the university down to the city center, a series of alleys ran off to the right, down towards the river. These alleys were only a few feet wide, and were as much frequented by cows as by humans. The result was that it was both wet and messy underfoot. And it was quite a long walk to get to this particular ashram.

However, once there, stepping through a large but otherwise unimpressive archway, you came into an absolute haven of peace and beauty and cleanliness. A great terrace, lined with flowering trees and shrubs, overlooked the sacred Ganga River, and if Anandamayi was herself in residence—as often as not she was away visiting one of her many other ashrams—the terrace was crowded with people of every class and caste imaginable, the poor jostling the rich, the Sudras the Brahmins, to get close to this famous teacher and hear what she had to say.

Colin went there with two Americans. In the courtyard, Colin and his friends searched for Anandamayi Ma but everyone was wearing white and to Colin they looked alike. Colin delighted in the uniformity; after all, he detested the markers of class and status in England. When Colin and his friends finally figured out who she was—a middle-aged Bengali woman sitting on a small carpet with long black hair falling carelessly over her shoulders—they walked toward her and sat down. An hour later Colin would write in his diary that when he saw her face everything vanished from his mind except a profound tranquility.

Colin asked Anandamayi Ma if she believed that by going to India he was rejecting his parents. He clearly believed that there was at least a kernel of truth in this proposition, but she put him at ease. Although one's highest duty, she said, is to one's parents, even that should not come before one's duty to seek truth. With these simple words, Anandamayi Ma perhaps said more than she intended, for Colin not only left his parents physically; by embracing Hinduism, he was also repudiating his parents' religions.

Of the three American visitors, only Colin returned the next day. Nearly fifty women were having a lively discussion with Anandamayi Ma in Bengali, a language Colin did not know. "I thought this was really rather a waste of my time and was about to leave, but some intuition made me stay, telling me that something important was going to happen. Then Anandamayi Ma started singing a lovely little song, still in Bengali, and looking directly at me. I felt a net closing in around me, a net of utter serenity and charm, and resistance was impossible.

Anandamayi Ma was inviting, powerful, and full of love. One of Colin's most salient memories was of her maternal love and, like all her devotees, Colin would call her Ma, or Mataji, meaning mother. He recalled of their first meeting that "A little boy came and curled up beside her, and Anandamayi caressed his long black hair until he fell fast asleep. Sometimes powerful, almost frighteningly so, [she] was now a fragile mother; but a mother with the magic of the moon and the stars and the whole universe within her, and within the child on her lap.

That vision of the boy, perhaps a vision of himself, compelled him to be with her, and in the coming weeks Colin went to the ashram every day.

Anandamayi Ma then informed Colin that she had a room ready for him. If he was to live at the ashram, she wanted to know two things. First, what could she call him? Second, what yoga or spiritual path would he like to follow? He answered the second question first—" Gyana Yog, the path of the intellect"— and waited for Anandamayi to answer the first.

"What about Shuddhananda? (lover, devotee of purity)?" "Whatever Mataji says."

"Or Premananda (lover of love)?" "Whatever comes out of your mouth." "Premananda!"

All who knew him during this time would in future years call him Premananda.

Anandamayi Ma told Colin he could never become a Hindu, there was no reason for him to change his identity. She argued that everyone in the ashram was identical no matter what they called themselves. In sending this egalitarian message, however, and by allowing Colin to live there, Anandamayi was downplaying one of the most significant features of her ashram; despite her distaste for hierarchy, the ashram was a place exclusively for Brahmins, members of the highest caste in India, and remains so to this day.

In India, generally, Europeans have had an elite status, but within ashrams such as this one they were likened to Untouchables. Europeans followed no caste regulations, would touch anyone and eat with anyone, regardless of their caste, and were therefore polluted and polluting in the eyes of Brahmins. As a result, although there were many Europeans who became devotees of Anandamayi Ma, few Europeans are known to have actually lived at her ashram. A young writer named Lewis Thompson, Colin Turnbull, and an Austrian pianist and schoolteacher named Atmananda (whose European name was Blanka Schlamm), lived at the ashram, ate the same foods and wore the same clothing as the other devotees, but by permitting them to live there Anandamayi Ma heard many complaints. Some scholars of India find it curious that she had such great power and such strong convictions about inclusion, yet for the most part she complied with the Brahmins' wishes.

On December 19, 1949, Atmananda wrote to her diary: "Spent the weekend at the Ashram. [Ma] definitely tries to wean me from being too attached to Her. I asked Her about Premanand who had written to me. She said to tell him: 'That which is most dear to you with that remain always. And this is also for you.' I started crying when I heard this."

Atmananda agreed to look after Colin. She would remain with him during most of his stay at the ashram, and because he spoke neither Hindi nor Bengali she was the interpreter for all of his exchanges with Anandamayi Ma. Yet Colin makes no mention of her in his long manuscript, "Flute of Krishna" or in his other recollections of Anandamayi Ma published in India.

The next month, Atmananda wrote:

January 29, 1950

. . . No sooner has [Lewis] gone than She provides me with another sensitive young Westerner. She seems to want me to be in touch with at least one other foreigner. I suppose I need that. He is a nice fellow. When he talked to me yesterday, suddenly for a second, I noticed his beautiful blue clear eyes. There was a sudden instantaneous recognition. He told me some incidents from his life that are strangely parallel to mine: How he went fishing, and when seeing the first fish caught with the hook violently stabbed through its mouth, he threw down the rod and ran away in terror. Just like, [with] the chicken I had looked after...

12 February 1950

Yesterday translated a private [meeting] for Premananda [and Ma]. I find myself becoming fond of him. It started the other day when he talked to me. Yesterday when he laid his soul bare before Ma I found him delightful, so pure and fresh and sincere and full of joy. He is simple and not at all complicated like Lewis was; he seems much healthier and there is not so much conflict in him. Ma

evidently wants me to have some human relationship as She always gives me someone to look after, perhaps to counteract my tendency of being too cut off.

At the ashram and with Atmananda's help, Anandamayi Ma taught Colin important lessons about humanity that, he believed, framed his future intellect. Anandamayi Ma taught him that there was a universal humanity but that human beings had the capacity to shape their existence in myriad ways. In future years, Colin would quite consciously try to become the people he studied, transcending boundaries most people thought were impassable. She also taught that being born into high status, whether Brahmin or Brit, was not necessarily desirable, for we are all humans and therefore subject to the same afflictions. On several occasions, apparently to emphasize her disapproval of social status, she had the Brahmins in her ashram feed everyone else, thus having them act as servants to those who, outside the boundaries of the ashram, would have been their subordinates.

Once Ma showed Atmananda and Premananda a door leading from the terrace to her room made especially for them, all the while insisting that there was not a hair's difference between them and the other Indian devotees. But beyond this, she did little to change the ashram's attention to hierarchy, and one could well argue that by constructing the special door she was acknowledging the need to isolate her relationship with Colin and Atmananda from the rest of the ashram. We do not know what Anandamayi Ma saw in Colin. He does not even hazard a guess as to why someone in such demand would spend so much time with him. It may have been because he was British. It may have also been the strength of Colin's desire to learn her art, or even perhaps his willingness to see her as a mother and her ashram as the site of a second adolescence. But it may also have been all of these reasons combined with Anandamayi Ma's desire for Atmananda to have a western, male companion. She believed in marriage, and she herself was married, though she also believed in complete celibacy.

Like her other students, Colin found his own way. India, she said, was about self discovery. There was no real Anandamayi or Durga or Colin Turnbull. Anandamayi Ma taught him that there was only that which Colin made real for himself. She also taught him that something beautiful and pure can emerge from something ordinary, inconspicuous, or ugly, like a lotus growing up from the mud, its beauty and purity unsullied by its origin. Truth could be found in the most unexpected places, in the mountaintops of India or in temples and ashrams, but perhaps just as likely on a river bank, a city slum, or a farmer's field. It might even be found in one person—someone who Colin might someday meet—in whom, deep inside, there was a brilliant light, an inner truth, struggling to blossom.

Colin would keep a photograph of Anandamayi framed on the nightstand in his bedroom until his death. It stood right next to a photograph of his mother. In 1989, nearly four decades after he left India, he would place a second photograph of Anandamayi Ma in a Hindu shrine he constructed in his living room, amid icons and relics and silk.

Between 1949 and 1951, Colin spent brief periods of time with other teachers, such as Swami Sivananda, Krishnamurti, and Sri Aurobindo, but none influenced him as powerfully as Anandamayi Ma. He felt that his relationship with Anandamayi Ma was intimate, as it is supposed to be between teacher and disciple. The ultimate goal of the disciple is to put himself in the hands of a single guide, to find one's self through the being of the other. Reflecting on his teachers, Colin wrote "The relationship and the conscious effort to dispel the duality between (teacher and student) is all the more powerful when there is only one teacher and one student. In the tradition of the guru-student relationship, it is felt to be essential for those who in childhood or early adolescence, have consecrated themselves directly and entirely in the hands of one spiritual teacher."