

From the Life of Sri Anandamayi Ma

Volume One

Bithika Mukerji



SHREE SHREE ANANDAMAYEE CHARITABLE SOCIETY
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of
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*To the memory
of
my father*

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My first contact with Anandamayi Ma was more than a quarter of a century ago when she paid a visit to the School at Rajghat, Varanasi. There was a large crowd of devotees that had gathered in the large hall of the Children's School. When she was leaving I asked her if she had any message for us. The answer was characteristically swift and spontaneous: "Pitaji, you have chosen a very fine place for your work. Many saints have lived here in the past. But you know how Mother Earth produces sweet fruits as well as poisonous ones. You must be like that, Pitaji."

This cryptic remark left a deep and unforgettable impression on my mind. In any organizational work, is it possible not to judge, not to evaluate? Right appraisal of performance is essential for efficiency. But it has to be completely free from praise or blame of the individual. To judge is to condemn those whom we judge.

Is it possible to transcend good and evil? What is the state of mind that makes it possible to rise above this duality? The apparently common saying, "There is nothing good or evil but thinking makes it so," has far deeper implications than we realize. The function of the mind is to evaluate, to judge what is beneficial and what is destructive to the individual or to the group. It is an indispensable factor in the evolutionary process. There is, however, a stage reached by a few rare individuals where action is no longer dictated by thought or individual feeling. Ma calls this *kheyala*. When the individual self or ego is silent, then the 'Universal' acts. The state of mind that is completely silent is the state of love. It is in this condition that Ma continually and effortlessly lives.

Light is invisible, but makes all things visible. Its function is to reveal the structure and beauty of things. We do not know what Light is; we can know its existence by its effects. Likewise Love is invisible. It can be known only by what it reveals to us—the beauty hidden in the heart of man.

People are amazed and ask, "How is it possible for Ma to love and understand thousands of her devotees?" Truth is simple. Normally we do not see each other as we really are; the barrier of the separate self obscures our vision, and we create a world of our own, darkened by the shadow that the self casts upon every thought and feeling. Ma lives in a world where there is no darkness at all. One has only to stand in the radiance of her Love to realize that, though it is a mystery that baffles the mind of man, it is an intense reality. To be within her presence is to know that one is understood and forgiven. Love is everlasting forgiveness.

This seems to me to be the secret of her marvellous, but often unintelligible ways of responding to the needs of her numerous devotees. She undertakes apparently purposeless journeys, but when closely examined they are an answer to the call of devotees who need her presence. She lives only for the world; she has few needs of her own, if any. In that state of mind she becomes the pure channel for the descent of grace. The process may be conscious or unconscious.

The study of such a life is fascinating, of absorbing interest not only to the devotee, but to the student of the psychology of spiritual genius. Mystics have often been the products of apparently unfavourable environments. What is the nature of the soil, the climate that produces goodness and love and the subtle wisdom that sweetly ordereth all things? Formal education, the development of the conceptual mind does not seem to be a necessary factor in the efflorescence of spiritual genius. There is an intelligence that has no relation to the logical intellectual mind, but which is able to pierce through error and falsehood, and directly perceive Truth.

To relate any individual to our personal well-being is false love. Such personal love is the basis of all social and family traditions. True love comes into being, the moment we become aware of the falseness in our 'loving'.

The perception of Truth is not a function of the conceptual mind. Error creeps in when we view a fact or an event from a personal point of view. Party loyalty is the normal discipline of political life. But the moment we subordinate the welfare of the larger group to party interests, it introduces conflict and error in our life. Every happening or event has a place in the scheme of things. We can perceive its significance when we do not relate it to our personal benefit. The moment we are aware of this falseness in our thinking there is the perception of Truth.

The intelligence that is behind Love and Truth is essentially the same. It is the capacity to see things in the context of the whole. It is the wisdom of the spirit.

Ma has met many of the most subtle and learned intellects of the world. She tackles all problems with an effortless ease that is amazing, and people ask : "What are you ? Who are you ?" Her answer is simple : "I am whatever you think me to be", a perfectly correct statement.

Dr. Bithika Mukerji's book is a record of Anandamayi Ma's early life which was spent mostly in Bengal. The narrative of events is largely derived from the diaries of her devotees. They are authentic descriptions of happenings. The interpretation of their significance demands extraordinary spiritual and psychological equipment. In fact Ma herself is the only person competent to evaluate such experiences.

The book is a valuable document recording the authentic experiences of devotees at different levels of intelligence, leaving the interpretations to psychologists of the future.

201, Habibullah Road
Madras
June 1965

B. Sanjiva Rao

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Mataji or Sri Anandamayi Ma occupies a unique position in the contemporary cultural milieu of India. She has not inaugurated any new movement of thought or religion; she has no messages to give or missions to fulfil. Yet, she attracts to her people belonging to all faiths, coming from all walks of life and of all age groups. Her acceptance of those who come in quest of her has limitless dimensions. Very humane in her concerns, yet she is supremely unconcerned. Her uninvolvedness is simultaneous with a zest in all kinds of human endeavour. No aspect of human concern is without interest for her. Since no parallels of this unique blend of characteristics can be drawn, it is not possible to say what or who she is.

During the years 1924-32, Mataji attracted a lot of public attention as a young housewife, who was in a state of constant spiritual exaltation. She was variously understood by people according to their own degree of understanding. Some thought her to be a great *sādhaka*, living in a state of God-intoxication. True though it was, it did not seem to accord with her supremely normal behaviour, her participation, albeit in her own unique way, in all mundane matters requiring her attention. It may be said that she transformed and enriched trivialities into phenomena of beauty. Besides, it became obvious to the devotees very soon that there was no question of a life of *sādhana* or spiritual endeavour as far as Mataji was concerned. So the various conceptions had to yield to a more comprehensive and deeper awareness of her true stature which comprised all that her devotees saw in her and also transcended it.

Mataji's extraordinary personality first gained public recognition in Dacca (now in Bangla Desh) during the years 1924-32. The present account of her life seeks to fulfil a demand for information regarding these early years.

The sources of information for this book are mostly verbal accounts from people who knew her in Dacca or even earlier. Many of these early devotees and their families left Dacca before and after partition in 1947 and are now settled in Varanasi.

Mataji's parents came to Dacca frequently during the years 1924-32. From them the devotees of Dacca came to know about Mataji's childhood. Subsequently many of these people visited Mataji's birthplace, Kheora, and also Atpara, Bajitpur and other villages where she had spent her childhood. They heard from the local people about Mataji's way of life at these places.

Sri Gurupriya Devi (Didi) has done a great service to the devotees of Mataji by maintaining a diary from the year 1926. Didi is quite incapable of exaggerations or sentimental outpourings. She is a very prosaic person (she would consider this a compliment) and her accounts of Mataji's life are factual to the last degree. She, however, was not always in a position to know the variety of Mataji's activities. Therefore, the diaries are incomplete sources of information, although they are valuable records of Mataji's general way of life.

The incidents narrated at some length in the course of this book are common knowledge for those who have been associated with the Ashram. Most of the persons referred to or their friends and relations are still alive. Many of the incidents, as for example, the death of Vinodini Devi, I have heard from Birendra Chandra Mukherjee, Didi's eldest brother. I have also heard these accounts from Sm. Hiranbala Ghosh, Brahmachari Kamalakantji, Jogeshdada, and others.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

It is needless to add that the incidents reported herein are as authentic and credible as any account can be, related by intelligent, educated men and women who can look at things with an open mind. It goes without saying, however, that this account illuminating the multisided personality of Mataji, is a poor substitute for her living presence. It is indeed a very inadequate account of the participation of an ever increasing number of people in a continuing scene of remarkable beauty, spontaneity and other-worldliness. I have tried to present facts without apology or advocacy. My hope is that out of these materials some future artist may fashion a work which will be worthier of the subject.

August, 1970

Bithika Mukerji

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

During the last half a dozen years we have witnessed the publication of a spate of literature pertaining to the spiritual life of India. The words, 'yoga', 'āsana', 'cakṛa', 'samādhi', etc., have acquired common usage in English. Modern leaders of spirituality are not difficult to seek out; their ashrams are now well-known resorts where men and women may take up residence from time to time, as part of their general way of life. Yoga has become a relevant feature of modern life.

Sri Anandamayi Ma is very well-known now. She needs no publicity and her devotees are no longer required to render accounts to their friends and families for their allegiance to her. It must be stated immediately, that this book is not a biography as such. It has been my endeavour to bring out incidents in her life which illustrate her statement about herself: "I am always as I am; to you it seems that this body has grown from childhood to maturity and old age. I am always the little child which is entitled to the love of all."

To my way of understanding, there is a very obvious and striking feature of Sri Anandamayi Ma's personality which requires understanding and as much elucidation as possible. She has said again and again that she has no mission to fulfil or duties to discharge in the world. This, seemingly runs so counter to our own way of being in the world that the greatest effort is required to grasp the meaning contained in this language. If from reading this book one were to understand why Sri Anandamayi Ma should be sufficient as she is and why by her very presence she should fulfil the deepest aspirations of a yearning mind, then the purpose of writing it would have been served. To pay attention to the presence of

Sri Anandamayi Ma in our modern world is an undertaking which is undeniably rich in promise.

In response to the one common criticism of the book I have added a few explanations to the text of the first edition.

August, 1978

Bithika Mukerji

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My list of acknowledgements will be long. First of all Atmanandaji has the not entirely unquestionable merit of encouraging me to write and publish this work.

I have great pleasure in acknowledging with gratitude my debt to Professor J. N. Chubb whose frank criticism of the first draft of the biographical account helped me to write it in the form of a book¹. I am grateful to Miss Melita Maschmann for her suggestions regarding the reorganization of chapters. My thanks are also due to my friends and colleagues, Dr. Miss Padma Misra, Miss Hiran Malani and Dr. K. Sivaraman, who read the book and made several valuable suggestions for improvement.

I wish to take this opportunity of expressing my appreciation of the help given me by Sri S. Dutt. I have no words to express my gratitude to Sri Anil Chandra Ganguli and to Atmanandaji who, by agreeing to see the book through the Press, shouldered the most wearisome burden of the whole enterprise.

I should like to express my appreciation of the great courtesy extended to us by Sri Baidyanath Dutt of The Eureka Printing Works Private Limited. His tolerance of our erratic method of working has been phenomenal. My thanks are also due to the General Secretary of the Sangha for his continued support and encouragement. I am indebted to Sri V. P. Tyagi for his faultless typing of my chaotic manuscripts.

To the memory of B. Sanjiva Rao, I can only pay my homage. I am glad that because of the book, I am now in

1. Professor Chubb, incidentally, was one of the group of people who met Mataji in Dacca during the Annual Philosophical Congress of 1929.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

possession of a series of letters which express the innermost thoughts and philosophy of one of the great savants of our times. He received the typescripts of the book at a time when he was full of thoughts of Mataji. He wrote to say, "I am very pleased to have lived in the memory of Ma", during what turned out to be the last days of his life.

Bithika Mukerji

Chapter One

CHILDHOOD : 1896—1909

In the heart of rural Bengal, in district Tripura, now in Bangla Desh, there is a small village called Kheora. At the close of the last century, it was simply a hamlet consisting mainly of a few thatched cottages. The villagers were mostly Muslims with a fair sprinkling of Hindus. Being far removed from the marketing centres it had remained a serene haven of peace where the noise and clamour of the rapidly changing world did not penetrate. The cottages nestled under groves of plantains and shady mango trees. Tall palms etched a picturesque skyline against the expanse of blue skies. As far as the eye could see, the undulating harmony of the surrounding green meadows was broken only by ponds, full of pink and white lotus flowers, and meandering waterways.

In one of the little cottages of this village lived Sri Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya with his wife Srimati Mokshada Sundari Devi. The traditional *tulasi* in the courtyard of the neat and clean house indicated that it was the residence of a Hindu and the *Nārdīyapa Śilā* within the cottage, that it was the home of a devout Brahmin.

Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya, by all contemporary accounts, was an extraordinary man. He came of the distinguished *Kāṣṭhīya* clan of Brahmins of Vidyakut, another village in the same district of Tripura. In his own village and in Kheora, where he had inherited the property of his maternal grandfather, he was highly respected and loved for his honest upright nature and his other-worldliness. Much of his time

was taken up with the worship of Nārāyaṇa, the presiding deity of his family. His favourite occupation, however, was the singing of devotional songs. He was gifted with a fine musical voice. His inspired singing could always move his audience. The villagers would compare him with Ramprosad, the well-known saintly poet of Bengal who, it was believed, could invoke the presence of God by his devotional songs.

There was a strong streak of asceticism in his character which would not permit him to become absorbed in his family affairs. After the birth of his first child, a daughter, he brought his family to Kheora to stay with his mother. His restless spirit sought freedom from all ties. People were not very surprised when they heard that he had left home to become an ascetic and lead a life of renunciation. Unfortunately the child died very soon. The mute anguish in his young wife's face touched the hearts of neighbours and friends. They took it upon themselves to look for him. Eventually they sought him out in his place of retreat and with much difficulty persuaded him to return after an absence of nearly three years. Although he assumed the duties and responsibilities of a householder once more, a spirit of detachment was noticeable in his personality throughout his life. He would sometimes join the parties of wandering minstrels who occasionally visited the village, and accompany them on their peregrinations, singing *bhajanas* and *kirtanas*.

His mother, very much concerned because of his way of life, went on a pilgrimage to a famous Kālī temple at Kasba, a town nearby, to pray for a grandson. But strangely, at the time of uttering the prayer, she found herself saying, "May a daughter be born to Bipin and his wife."

Bipin Bihari's wife Srimati Mokshada Sundari Devi was one of those rare personalities who exemplify all the gentler human virtues. She was full of the wisdom which is the

heritage of our village folk. The patience, dignity and fortitude with which she endured all the hardships of her life distinguished her from other women. She passed through the difficult years and later, comparatively easier years of life, with unchanged calmness of spirit and dignity of behaviour. From the point of view of material needs, the family was quite poor. Nevertheless there was an abiding sense of contentment and sufficiency in the household. She was never known to be slovenly or bitter. Her meagre possessions were always in order, her cottage neat and clean and presentable. The most unexpected guest was sure to find a warm welcome and, if nothing else, a few sugar puffs for his refreshment. She was incapable of anger or even a harsh word even under considerable provocation. Later years brought out her qualities of compassionate understanding and intelligent appreciation of the radical transformations which swiftly overtook her household. Remaining unchanged herself, she sometimes assessed the changes with a sense of humour which surprised and delighted her companions. If it can be said of any human being that his or her life was one of gracious giving only, it can be said of Srimati Mokshada Sundari Devi.

Bipin Bihari was a musician. His wife had a poetic soul. In the privacy of her cottage, she composed many songs and lyrics, full of gentle wisdom and spiritual aspiration.¹ On April 30, 1896 (19th *Vaisākha* 1303 B.S.) a second child was born to this couple, a daughter, who is known throughout India as Sri Ma Anandamayi or simply as Mataji.

Immediately before and after the birth of this child, Mokshada Sundari had frequent dreams of gods and goddesses. She saw them coming to her humble cottage, filling it with radiance and she, overwhelmed by awe and

1. Some of these lyrics have been set to music and are sung occasionally at religious meetings.

wonder, was worshipping them. At the time of the birth of this child she hardly suffered any pain. Another unusual feature, remembered by the attending women, was that the new-born child could not be made to utter any sound. Their apprehension that there was something physically wrong with the baby, however, proved groundless. The infant began to thrive steadily and normally.

In due course, the Naming Ceremony took place. The happy couple, looking upon their daughter's tiny but perfect form, named her Nirmala¹ Sundari² Devi.

Mokshada Devi, mindful of the death of her first-born, used to place her infant daughter every day under the *tulasi* plant to evoke God's blessings on her. As soon as little Nirmala was able to, she toddled off by herself and performed this ritual under the holy plant, much to the relief of her hardworking mother, for whom it was difficult to spare even the few moments necessary for this purpose. This incident provides a clue to the little girl's behaviour in general. Her characteristic of acting according to the wishes of the people around her, became more evident as the child grew up. When asked later, her mother could not recall that Nirmala had ever expressed a wish or desire for anything for herself.

As soon as she was old enough, she started fetching and carrying eagerly not only for her mother but for her mother's friends also. Nirmala grew up to be a very happy and cheerful little girl. Her sunny disposition earned her many nicknames, such as *Hāsi* (smiles) and *Khuilē Ma* (the happy one). She was a general favourite not only among her family but also with the neighbours, Hindus as well as Muslims. She could always be counted upon to cook, look after young children or help the neighbours in their times of need. She was made

1. The immaculate.

2. The beautiful.

welcome in every home. If any woman of the village happened to prepare a special delicacy she would keep a little of it apart for Nirmala. She endeared herself most naturally to her family, friends and neighbours.

Another prominent feature of the little girl's personality was her unquestioning acceptance of the biddings of elders. Many incidents are related to illustrate this characteristic of absolute obedience, which sometimes could become very disconcerting. Once Nirmala was asked by her mother to go and wash an agate cup in the pond. Mokshada Devi saw that she was holding the cup a little negligently. Wishing to draw her daughter's attention to this, she said, "You may as well drop it." The next moment the cup lay shattered on the ground!

Once, as a child, Nirmala was taken to a fair by a relative, who put her down before a Śiva temple, told the little girl to sit quietly until her return and moved away with her other companions. Unfortunately, the aunt, enjoying the various attractions of the fair, forgot all about her charge and did not return for a long time. At last, suddenly reminded of the child, she in great trepidation hastened back, only to be reassured by the sight of Nirmala sitting like a little statue, motionless and staring into space. She had not moved an inch.

Bipin Bihari giving his little girl lessons in reading, had pointed out that she was to pause only when she came to a full-stop. If Nirmala came across a long sentence, she would twist and contort her little body in the effort to arrive at the full-stop in one breath. If she was forced to take a fresh breath in the middle of a sentence, she would start all over again. Such extreme obedience naturally annoyed her mother at times, but she could not scold her, as the child's good intentions were so obvious. In fact, Nirmala's docility came

in for much adverse criticism from her elders. They thought her to be simple-minded or even a little idiotic. She was saved from any unkindness on this score by her active and bright deportment. People thought that she would improve and left it at that.¹

Nirmala's education was quite elementary. For a short while she was a pupil of the local school. But since she helped her mother with the housework she could not attend school regularly. Three brothers were born after Nirmala but they passed away in childhood. Two sisters, Surabala and Hemalata, were born after the brothers and lastly a brother Makhan. Nirmala was extremely good with the children and they were very fond of her, but this meant that she did not have much time to devote to her studies. There were other difficulties too. The school was at some distance from her home. If Mokshada Devi was unable to find an escort for her, Nirmala had to remain at home. Her outfit for school consisted of a broken slate only. In spite of these obstacles, Nirmala always secured a good position in her class. After a visit by the Inspector of Schools, she, along with three other little girls, was chosen to be promoted to the Lower Primary School. The Inspector had found her as well prepared as some of the bright and regular students of her class.

This fact has been explained by Sri Anandamayi Ma herself. Referring to this phase of her life, she laughingly said, "Somehow or other, I invariably happened to look up the very questions the teacher would ask and consequently he always found me well prepared even after long absences. The meaning of unknown words would occur to me spontane-

1. The will in total abeyance is not a phenomenon which can be understood easily by anyone. It is not to be wondered that the villagers did not recognise it as such. To this day it comes as a surprise to many and causes problems in communication.

ously. Supposing I came across the word '*hasti*', I would ponder for a while and it would occur to me that it meant 'elephant'. My parents hardly ever found time to help me with my lessons. So, actually my education is extremely rudimentary."

As far as religious practices are concerned, the instructions received by her were equally elementary. Her mother allowed her to help with the preparation for the daily worship of the *Nārāyaṇa Śīla* and her father taught her to sing devotional songs. His teachings were simple enough. He would say, "Come and sing with me. We shall sing the praises of Hari."

"Who is Hari?"

"The Lord of the Universe. He is very big and great. We are all His children."

"How big? As big as this meadow?"

"Much bigger. We must worship Him and call down His mercy upon us. He is very kind and takes care of us all. He has many names. Hari is one of them."

This sufficed for Nirmala and she became her father's regular and faithful companion whenever he engaged in this form of worship. Sometimes she would wander off alone and sing by herself. The sentiment of the lyric would bring tears to her eyes. Once a cousin, seeing her in this mood teased her by splashing water in his own eyes to simulate tears.

Nirmala's childhood was spent mostly in Kheora. She occasionally visited Sultanpur, which was her maternal uncle's village. There she had a number of cousins to play with. One of them, Sushila, relates that one day they had been out for a ramble in the fields. In the narrow village lane they came face to face with a herd of cows returning home from the pasture. The children ran off. From a distance they looked back and saw Nirmala standing very still in the middle of the

lane surrounded by the cows. Some of them had lowered their heads and were rubbing them against her body and licking her gently. When the herd moved away, Nirmala ran to join her friends. Throughout her life, it has been noticed that animals are attracted to her and will follow her about in a docile manner, sometimes quite unaccountably.

It has already been said that Nirmala was a child with a very happy disposition; but there were a few occasions when she did cry. The three brothers who were born after her died at the ages of seven and four, and one after six weeks only. While they were alive, Nirmala looked after them devotedly, missing school and play in order to take care of them. When they passed away, she not only accepted their loss without complaint, but never let her mother have the chance to indulge in her grief either. Whenever she saw her much-enduring mother mourn the death of her children, she broke out into such a torrent of heart-rending sobs that Mokshada Devi perforce had to forget her own sorrow in order to quieten the little girl. Mokshada Devi says that these were the only occasions on which Nirmala cried during her childhood.

Nirmala apparently had no desires of her own, so the incentives to her behaviour took shape out of the wishes of her companions. Perhaps this is how the following incident may be explained. There is an auspicious day during summer on which people abstain from cooked food and eat parched rice mixed with thickened milk and seasoned with ripe mangoes. One year, Mokshada Devi unable to afford mangoes had to prepare the meal for her children with milk only. She wistfully thought of all the other village children enjoying the much loved summer fruit. Suddenly Nirmala ran in from outside and gave her a large ripe mango. Mokshada Devi

asked her sternly, "From where did you get this? You must go and return it at once." Nirmala explained that she had found it lying in the field near the cottage as if someone had very carefully put it just there. The clean and unmarked skin of the mango bore out this statement. Mokshada Devi then felt obliged to accept and use it, because she knew that Nirmala was an exceptionally truthful child.

Thus, Nirmala grew up in peaceful surroundings as an endearingly winsome little girl. Much later her people came to understand that she was, even in the first years of her life, much more than just the simple child they had taken her to be. Incidents were recalled which admitted of a deeper significance than was realized at that time. Anandamayi Ma herself describes on occasions many events from this period of her life which show that she was a keen observer with a good deal of understanding and sense of humour far beyond her years. For example, she once related the following incident, "One night my father saw a snake curled round the rafters of our cottage. It was raining outside and, in the uncertain light of the oil-wick lamp, he did not like the idea of disturbing the reptile. Still less did he feel inclined to go to sleep, in view of the hazardous possibility of the snake dropping on us during the night. So he constructed some sort of a barricade with the beds and put us all behind it. Then, having made sure of our safety, he himself took refuge behind some other shelter. The thought occurred to me at that moment, that man was helpless indeed. He, who would protect us, could not protect himself, but needs must seek the protection of someone or something else."

She at times illustrates a point by saying, "People complain that distracting thoughts become more insistent at the time of meditation than at other times. I tell them that even this is as

it should be. When I was a child, I used to see my mother pour lime-water on the ground all around our cottage. This would bring all the earth worms creeping and crawling out of the ground. Then she would sweep them away and the surroundings would be clean and fresh for walking and playing. Meditation is like the lime-water. It brings out all the hidden uncleanness inside you."

A few years ago, Anandamayi Ma was one day discussing with some women the different ways of cooking a particular vegetable. Mokshada Devi was also present. Anandamayi Ma said smilingly, "Do you know how mother used to cook for us? She would stop the mouth of the bottle of oil with her finger and then turn it upside down on the cooking pan. Have you ever heard of such a method of pouring out oil?" Mokshada Devi, not at all disconcerted, joined in the general laughter and said good humouredly, "Well, I could not afford to waste even a drop of oil. Had it been your will, I dare say, you could have been born in different circumstances and been well provided for in your childhood." Mataji quickly responded, "No, No, I do not mean to say that we were ever in need of anything. We always had enough; actually it is only when I grew up that I understood from what I heard people say that we had been poor. Mother was a very thrifty and careful housewife. We children were always well looked after."

It must have come as a surprise to Mokshada Devi that her small daughter had taken cognizance of her careful habits; at the time, however, she was a little afraid that the child was lacking in normal intelligence. Nirmala was subject to unaccountable fits of absent-mindedness. In the midst of work or play or at meal-times, the little girl would become inert and with a fixed gaze stare into space. Mokshada Devi would shake and scold her or call her loudly by name as if calling her

from a distance. It would be some time before the child could be brought back to the consciousness of her surroundings. Her mother, not unnaturally, thought that this could be a sign of a weak mind only. Nirmala was not at all naughty or mischievous like other children. This factor also leant support to the misgivings about her mental capacities, but as stated earlier, everybody loved her for her sweet nature and radiant smiles.

Nirmala perhaps quite enjoyed the situation. Returning from the pond one day with a pitcher full of water balanced at her waist, she stood in front of her mother and said, "All of you say I am a simpleton. Am I not crooked now?"

Chapter Two

WITH RAMANI MOHAN'S FAMILY : 1909-1918

In accordance with the ancient custom of rural India, Nirmala's parents began to look for an eligible bridegroom for her even when she was little more than a child. Friends and neighbours also took a hand in this. As everyone spoke well of the family of Sri Jagatbandhu Chakravarti of Atpara¹, his third son was approved of as a suitable match for Nirmala.

Accordingly, on February 7th, 1909 (25th Māgha, 1315 B.S.), at the age of twelve years and ten months, Nirmala was married to Sri Ramani Mohan Chakravarti. In villages, the bride after the marriage ceremony either goes back to stay with her parents or lives with her husband's family as another daughter of the house till she attains maturity. In any case the bride is allowed to visit her own family very often as she may feel homesick, and it also gives her time to adjust herself to her new environment. Thus Nirmala remained with her parents for some time after her marriage. Ramani Mohan was told that she had been a student of the Lower Primary School. This encouraged him to write to her, which created a great sensation in the village where the arrival of a letter was a rare event. Everybody came to know of it. Mokshada Devi propped up the letter in a prominent place so that her daughter could take it without embarrassment of being given it by an elder. The letter remained where it was for days because Nirmala, not being told to take it, did not do so. Her mother then drew Nirmala's

1. Atpara, District Dacca, Vikrampur, now in Bangla Desh.

friends' attention to it, who in their turn obliged her to open and read the letter. Amidst much laughing and teasing Nirmala and her friends sat down to compile an answer to it. This joint literary effort was painstakingly copied by Nirmala in her own hand and mailed.

After about a year or so, Bipin Bihari escorted his daughter to the house of Ramani Mohan's eldest brother Revati Mohan. Ramani Mohan's mother, Srimati Tripura Sundarī Devi, had passed away before his marriage. So his eldest brother's wife Srimati Pramoda Devi had assumed the position and responsibilities of her mother-in-law. Nirmala stayed with this family for nearly four years. Before coming away Bipin Bihari drafted a few letters for her in suitable respectful language, which she could copy out in answer to Ramani Mohan's letters. He knew that unless specifically told to do so she would most probably neither read nor answer his letters.

Ramani Mohan had two elder brothers, Revati Mohan and Surendra Mohan, and two younger ones, Kamini Kumar and Jamini Kumar. The youngest brother was a school-boy. Kamini Kumar had gone away from his village and they knew nothing about him except that he had been converted to Christianity and had become a clergyman. Ramani Mohan had five sisters.

Revati Mohan was working in the Railways as a Station Master. He used to be posted at various stations on the Dacca-Jagannathgunj Line. At the time of his marriage Ramani Mohan was working in the Police Department. About seven months later he lost his job and failed to secure another for some time. He then left his village home and went to Dacca to look for work. He occasionally visited Revati Mohan's family and sometimes brought simple presents for his wife. Recalling the early days of her marriage Anandamayi

Ma says, "In the beginning Bholanath¹ used to buy me one or two books. One night he asked me to read aloud to him while he settled himself down for rest. After I had read a few passages in my usual laboured style, he asked me to stop. Then turning over to the other side, he muttered to himself 'Lower Primary, indeed!'

After Nirmala went to live with Bholanath's family, Bipin Bihari and his wife with their remaining three children namely, two daughters Surabala and Hemalata and one son Makhan, left Kheora and returned to their own village, Vidyakut.

Nirmala embarked on her new life with Bholanath's family. From the very beginning, she took upon herself the duties of her brother-in-law's entire household. Her work included fetching water from the pond, helping with the cooking, looking after the children and running errands for her somewhat exacting sister-in-law. Those who saw Nirmala work in the house later testified to the quickness and neatness of her movements. She seemed to get a lot of things accomplished within the least possible time. Her obedient and gentle nature pleased her husband's family very much. Indeed they thought that the young bride was a little stupid because such simplicity could only be unnatural! It was the custom in conservative households for a young married woman to cover her head and face with her *sâri* before strangers and senior members of the family. Nirmala had been instructed to do this at the time of her marriage by the elders of both families. When her face was covered her movements became very restricted because she could see a small bit of ground at her feet only. Further she would not raise the veil to take a look at her surroundings or try in any way to circumvent this restriction, consequently

1. In later years, Anandamayî Ma referred to Ramani Mohan by this name, which has been used in this book.

she would not understand such injunctions as "bring it here", or "take it away". She would have to be told in words what was to be brought and where etc. This uncompromising obedience exasperated her new family at first, but the exasperation turned to indulgence as soon as they realized that Nirmala was absolutely consistent and sincere in her obedient attitude towards her elders and that it was not any kind of passive resistance to authority.

Revati Mohan's children became very attached to Nirmala. The eldest daughter Labanya was inseparable from her aunt. The child told her one day, "I feel like calling you mother and not aunt. Shall I do so?" Her mother, overhearing this, scolded her daughter for this absurdity. Labanya's brother, Ashu was also very fond of his *Kākimā* (aunt). One day Nirmala was getting him ready for school. All of a sudden he started creating a fuss saying that he would not accept food from his *Kākimā*'s (aunt) hands anymore. As his mother knew that he liked nothing better, she came to investigate and found that Nirmala's hands were in a deplorable condition. Continuous washing and scrubbing had corroded the skin and there were wounds round the bases of her fingers. Everyone was appalled and demanded to know why she had not said anything about it. As a matter of fact, Nirmala's tranquil deportment had prevented them from gauging the amount of work she had been doing. She had never appeared tired or overstrained, and in any case nobody could understand that a person in physical pain would not complain about it. Nirmala now accepted the treatment for her hands just as naturally as she had accepted the slow eating away of the flesh by unremitting hard work.

Many years were to elapse before Anandamayi Ma's companions began to get an inkling of her equable acceptance

of 'pains' and 'pleasures'. Had she not displayed other qualities of the mind, the charge of simplemindedness would have clung to her; because how could anyone understand a total disregard of discomfort in one so young? Moreover Nirmala carried her load of work very lightly: it was seen that she even found time to learn various arts and crafts. During her short hour of leisure in the afternoon, when the men were out at work, she would visit the houses of neighbours. Her sweet disposition made her welcome in every home. Although she was shy and retiring as befitted a newly married girl, she had a friendly and pleasant smile for other young women of her age. During these enjoyable sojourns in neighbouring houses, amidst friendly talks, Nirmala learnt needlework, canework, the spinning of fine threads, and other handicrafts. She displayed a keen interest in anything new and was quick to learn. She could spin thread so fine that she was able to put a whole length of the sacred thread (about 6 yards) inside the empty shell of a cardamom. She used to present such threads, packed in this manner, to various members of her family.

One of Ramani Mohan's sisters, later known as Matori *Pisimā* (aunt Matori), came to stay with them for some time. She was about the same age as Nirmala and the two girls became very friendly. Matori *Pisimā* was a very jolly person with twinkling eyes, full of humour. She would suggest all sorts of mischief, as for example, sampling the preserves and pickles while their sister-in-law was enjoying her siesta in the afternoon. Even this harmless prank was quite foreign to Nirmala's nature. Being the taller of the two, she brought the jars down for her friend, yet she herself never ate from them.

It has been mentioned above that Nirmala was subject to spells of absent-mindedness in her childhood. At this time

also, sometimes in the midst of work, she would unaccountably become inert as if sleeping. Once or twice, Pramoda was attracted to the kitchen by the smell of burning food. She found her young sister-in-law lying motionless on the floor amidst the litter of cooking utensils. When shaken and aroused, she would appear to be embarrassed at the damage caused, and quickly set about repairing it. Pramoda thought that she had been overcome by sleep and left it at that.

Revati Mohan and his wife came to love Nirmala as their own daughter. A few years ago, Anandamayi Ma went to Calcutta to grace by her presence a big function organised by the devotees of the town. Pramoda Devi, a very old lady at that time, came to visit her sister-in-law. But circumstances were changed beyond her imagination. It may be surmised that Pramoda must have felt bewildered and lost amidst the great concourse of devotees. Anandamayi Ma had a very crowded programme, and was almost always unapproachable.

One night after the visitors had all departed and the Ashram settled down to rest, Anandamayi Ma or Mataji as she is better known to-day, quietly came out of her room. As it was long after midnight, a few close companions only were awake. Followed by them, she came to the bedside of her sister-in-law and very gently woke her up. Sitting close beside her she clasped her hands and gaily started conversing with her in the village dialect. She forthwith plunged into a sea of reminiscences, talking of old friends, familiar places, and reminding her of old stories and incidents. Although, taken a little aback at first, Pramoda quickly regained confidence and looked happy. She was particularly pleased to see how well Mataji remembered the old days. She seemed to be able to recognize in the august personality of these days, the well-beloved girl who had served her so faithfully in the past. The hilarious laughter had woken up all those who were sleeping

nearby, and the room was now crowded with women. Everyone joined in the conversation and Mataji was making them all laugh by her funny stories of village life. Mataji turned to her sister-in-law and said laughingly, "Look, all these housewives think that they are great experts in household work. Tell them whether I too did not look after your house satisfactorily?" Pramoda considered the question for a while and then quite seriously told the ladies, "You cannot imagine how sweet and good she was. She not only did my entire work, but I will acknowledge that she never gave me any cause for dissatisfaction throughout the years that she was with me. Truly, such a spirit of service (*sevābhāva*) is rare nowadays."

To a few of the onlookers, what appeared to be more wonderful than this ungrudging testimonial, was Mataji's look of absolute gratification. Modest as she is, she appeared to be very pleased to have her services recognised and appreciated.

In 1913, about four years after Nirmala's marriage, Revati Mohan fell ill in his place of posting. Ramani Mohan and the other brothers came to see him. Ramani Mohan brought medical help from Dacca but Revati Mohan passed away plunging his family in grief. The widow, his children and Nirmala came to live in Atpara, their village home. Nirmala was with them for about six months, while Ramani Mohan was away working in Ashtagram.

Nirmala looked after the needs of the newly bereaved family and worked for the entire household. Ramani Mohan's sisters were all married, and his brothers were working in different places. They had looked upon Revati Mohan as the head of the family. His death deprived them of a home where they could come and meet one another. Gradually they drifted apart and it was a long time before they were brought together again by their young sister-in-law, Nirmala Devi.

From Atpara Nirmala went to Vidyakut to stay with her parents for a while. She remained with them for about six months and then came to Ashtagram in 1914 to look after the household of Ramani Mohan. Bidding a tearful farewell, Mokshada Devi gave her daughter the following instructions regarding future deportment : "Now you must look upon your husband as your guardian and obey and respect him, just as you did your own parents."

Nirmala followed this advice implicitly and completely, as was her wont with all instructions received from elders. Later on Ramani Mohan became better known as Bholanath, a name given to him by Anandamayi Ma. It may be definitely stated that throughout the lifetime of Bholanath, Mataji never did anything without his consent and permission. Regarding her marriage Anandamayi Ma has said, "They told me at the time of my marriage that I should respect and obey Bholanath. Consequently, I gave him the respect and obedience due to my father. Bholanath from the very beginning was just like a father to me. He had implicit faith in me and appeared to be convinced that whatever I might do would be right."

Bholanath was a simple villager, not possessing anything beyond the usual elementary knowledge of religion and the ways of *sādhana*. At the time of his marriage, he naturally could not foresee the extraordinary events that would radically change the tenor of his life. Yet he was not found wanting when confronted with the unusual consequences of this marriage. It was he who first bore the impact of the revelation of Anandamayi Ma's unique personality. Bholanath alone was privileged to witness the wonderful *kriyās* of *sādhana* at Bajitpur and it was he who threw wide open his doors to the world, in spite of Mataji's warning that he was engendering something which would get out of his control very soon.

Bholanath, although self-willed and proud, was also extraordinarily kind-hearted and generous. Childlike in his sudden flares of temper, he could always be easily mollified. Among Mataji's close companions he occupied the most anomalous position. On the one hand he looked upon her as his Guru or spiritual preceptor, and on the other, he received from her the untiring and selfless service of a devoted and dutiful wife. How he reconciled these two positions we do not know. He did not appear to suffer or feel any misgivings. His self-confidence and zest for life could not but affect all who came in contact with him. Anandamayi Ma's other close companions looked upon him as their guide and well-wisher and as the head of the small group of devotees.

The members of Bholanath's family, however, were not very easily reconciled to Nirmala's way of life. With the gradual unfolding of her personality, it became clear to them that it would never be possible for Bholanath to lead a conventional home life with her. Although Nirmala had endeared herself to her husband's family, they naturally had his interests at heart. Consequently, they thought it their duty to urge Bholanath to separate from her and marry again. Those who have known Bholanath, will readily understand that he could not have given any serious thoughts to this suggestion. So, it may be said that the question of leading a conventional married life just did not arise for this couple. When the time came for them to make their home together, the young husband found a spiritual aura round his wife which precluded all worldly thoughts from his mind. He accepted her as he found her: gentle, obliging and hardworking but without a trace of worldly feeling or desire. One of Mataji's typically humorous statements regarding this aspect of her life, was, "In the beginning he used to say, 'You are very young and childlike—it will be all right when you grow up'—but it seems I never grew up!"

At Ashtagram Bholanath was the tenant of Sarada Sankar Sen whose wife readily took upon herself the task of looking after the comforts of the new household. Charmed by Nirmala's bright and happy demeanour, Srimati Sen named her *Khusir Mā*, which had been one of her pet-names in childhood.

Nirmala Devi was about 18 years old at that time. She was a little taller than average and very slim. She had a very fair complexion and striking features. Her long black tresses reached almost to her knees. Her hands and feet were exceptionally small and delicately formed. Her whole personality radiated a joyousness which commanded the attention of all. Attired in a red *sārī*, she was one day going to visit a neighbour's house when one of Bholanath's friends, Kshetra Mohan, was so awed by her appearance that he spontaneously prostrated himself in front of her in obeisance, exclaiming, 'Devī Durgā.'¹ Nirmala's young friends at Ashtagram called her '*Rāngī Didi*' (beautiful sister). Srimati Sen has said, "When *Khusir Mā* came to the pond, the *ghāts*² would be lit up by her radiant beauty."

At this time Hara Kumar Rai was staying with his sister, Srimati Sen. He was educated and well employed, but at times would be carried away by religious fervour; during such spells it became impossible for him to work normally. Hara Kumar's mother had died in the room in which the young couple were staying. Either because of this or for some other reason best known to him, he at his very first encounter with Nirmala prostrated himself before her and addressed her as 'Mother'. He began to look for opportunities of being of service to her. This was difficult because Nirmala, as befitted a young married woman, did not speak to men who were not members of her

1. The Divine spouse of Śiva who is described in the Scriptures as clothed in red garments.

2. The banks of the village pond, where women forgathered for washing and cleaning and also for an exchange of news and light-hearted gossip.

family. He would, however, bring vegetables for her and worry if the firewood was damp. Somehow he would procure dry wood for her. As may be imagined, all these unsolicited attentions were not approved of by the neighbours. Hara Kumar, however, did not care and defying custom, visited her every day to do *prāṇama*¹ and also to ask for a little *prasāda*.² With her *līlā* drawn well over her face, Nirmala would stand at a distance, quiet and unresponsive. She could not prevent him from doing *prāṇama*, but she certainly would not give him *prasāda*. In despair, Hara Kumar appealed to Bholanath, saying that his entreaties which left her unmoved, would have melted the heart of a statue. Bholanath impressed by his sincerity, asked Nirmala to give him a little of the rice from her plate. Nirmala always obeyed Bholanath and so Hara Kumar's wish was fulfilled. He used to say, "Now it is only I who call you Mother. The day will come when the world will recognize you and call you Mother."

By common consent Hara Kumar was considered an eccentric person. Had he been a fully responsible member of society, his words would have made a greater impression on people. Evidently the time for publicity had not yet arrived, so Hara Kumar's prophecy was not appreciated. Hara Kumar played the role of pioneer in another field as well. He was instrumental in drawing attention to the ecstatic states (*bhāvanāsthā*) of Anandamayī Ma which as yet had not been recognised as such. It came about quite naturally.

* The inhabitants of Ashtagram had to contend with sudden cyclones. During one such onslaught Bholanath and Nirmala

1. There are various types of prostration. The common method is to kneel and then bend down on the ground with the head towards the Deity.

2. A particle from the left over food partaken of by some respected person, as for example, the Guru or spiritual Guide. Great importance is given to *prasāda* in Hindu Scriptures. It is no longer food but a direct medium of transference of power from the Guru to the disciple.

had to remove to a safer place. They returned home after some days. Bholanath undertook such repairs of his house as were necessary. During the cyclone, the cane-work matting used for various purposes around the house had been blown off. A few of these sheets lay on the ground nearby. When Nirmala picked them up, she was interested to find the ground underneath free of the dreaded weed which was the bane of life of the people of Ashtagram. This quick-growing grass defied control and was forever encroaching upon the ground surrounding homes. Nirmala now collected all the discarded mats and spread them around her house. This worked beautifully. The neat and tidy area of her house acquired a distinction by contrast to other weed-choked homes. The clean courtyard with its presiding *tulasi* gave Hara Kumar the idea that a large number of people could assemble there and perhaps listen to good devotional music.

He invited the well-known party of Gagan Rai to come and sing for them. Nirmala, along with all the other women of the neighbourhood, sat nearby to listen to the singing. After a while her body became still and inert like a statue. For a long time she neither answered to the calls of her friends nor responded to shaking. Nirmala was now a grown-up young woman. People could not pass off this condition of her body as sleep, as had been done by her husband's family earlier, neither as a fit of absent-mindedness, nor as a sign of a weak mind, as had been assumed by her own family during her childhood. They did not know what to make of it. After the *kirtana*, however, Nirmala was again her normal, cheerful self, and so all queries were stilled in their minds.

After a year and four months of her stay in Ashtagram, Nirmala fell ill. When she recovered after some time, she went home to Vidyakut for a rest. Referring to her life at

Vidyakut, Mataji has said, "At that time there was not much housework to be done as my sisters were old enough to help mother. I had plenty of leisure which I spent in calling on friends and neighbours, or just strolling around by myself. In the dark, I sometimes perceived a strange effulgence enveloping my body, and that light seemed to move about with me."

In her parents' village, Nirmala could dispense with her heavy veils and move about freely. Mokshada Devi relates that Hindu and Muslims alike loved to have Nirmala visit their homes and talk to them. Nirmala and her friends were great enthusiasts for the game played with *courie* shells. Bholanath had not liked this game and had asked her not to take part in it. Now at Vidyakut, when other young girls played, she would not participate in their games. Her friends told her that her husband would not know anything about it if she played in Vidyakut only, but Nirmala smilingly declined.

An interesting incident took place at this time. One of Nirmala's young cousins, Annapurna, had recently been married. She was living with her parents in their village. She began to show signs of abnormality—she would fall into a trance-like state for hours together. The village people, awed by this unusual phenomenon, would collect round her and watch over her reverently. During one of these states, Nirmala happened to be present. She went up to the girl and whispered into her ear. Thereupon Annapurna regained consciousness and was not overtaken by these strange fits again. Subsequently, she went away to her husband's village and led a happy married life.

The magic words which Nirmala had whispered into her ear were: "Don't be upset. You will receive a letter from your husband very soon." Mataji humorously recalls that the village-folk thought that she had used some spiritual powers to cure the girl. She related this incident to show that

ordinarily it was difficult to distinguish between a genuine *māva* and other apparently similar conditions of the body.

While Nirmala was at Vidyakut, Bholanath was transferred to a town called Bajitpur. For some time he could not arrange to take her there, so she remained with her parents. In the beginning of 1918, he found a house in Bajitpur. Nirmala was now able to join him. From Vidyakut she first went to Atpara and from there to Bajitpur.

Chapter Three

BAJITPUR : THE LILA OF SADHANA : 1918-1924

Bajitpur has acquired special significance for the devotees of Anandamayi Ma as the place where she went through the various processes of intensive *sādhana*. She has not performed *sādhana* in the ordinary sense of the word, yet her knowledge regarding these matters is direct and profound. In answer to puzzled enquiries pertaining to her awareness of spiritual matters to which she had no visible access, she has said, "One day in Bajitpur I went to bathe in a pond near the house where we lived. While I was pouring water over my body, the *kheyalā* suddenly came to me, 'How would it be to play the role of a *sādhaka*?' And so the *līlā* (play) began."

Our knowledge of Anandamayi Ma's play of *sādhana* is based upon what little she herself has disclosed and on the testimony of Bholanath and a few others who were fortunate enough to witness those practices.

The change in her way of life came very gradually. As before, Nirmala performed her housework with scrupulous care. She continued to take interest in her surroundings and fellow beings which is apparent from the following incident which took place because Bholanath was a sociable person and liked to invite people to his house. Nirmala was a good cook and took great pains to prepare imaginative meals for his guests. She also had a lively sense of humour. One of Bholanath's friends happened to mention in her hearing that he could eat everything but radish. Some days later he came to their house for dinner. After enjoying a hearty meal he was

not a little staggered to discover that he had eaten nothing but radish from the beginning to the end of the meal, including the sweet dish.

Bholanath was working under Bhudeb Basu who was the Assistant Superintendent of the estate of the Nawab of Dacca at Bajitpur. His wife and children became very fond of Nirmala. Another family closely connected with them was that of Janaki Guha and his wife.

One day Bhudeb Basu arranged for *kīrtana* at his house. Nirmala was sitting in an inner room with one of the children who was ill. After some time she felt that her body was entering into a *bhāva*. At her request Bhudeb's wife arranged to have her taken home, which was nearby.¹ Bhudeb, on being informed that Nirmala had gone home, because she felt 'affected' by the *kīrtana*, came to the conclusion that she suffered from some nervous disorder. His wife went to see Nirmala a few days later and advised her to exercise more control over herself and not to give way to nervous reactions. Nirmala smiled and kept quiet.

As related above, she had the *kheyālā* to perform *sādhana*. She had never acquired proficiency in reading and had not learnt from religious books or scriptures how *sādhana* might be practised. Thus Nirmala went about her *sādhana* as she had seen her mother and grandmother and various other devout women perform their evening rituals. After the day's work was done, she would carefully clean and sweep her room and the surrounding area till not a speck of dust was visible

1. In later years, also when these states of *bhāva* became better known as such, it was seen that Anandamayī Mā made attempts to check them. She would walk about or talk to her companions about ordinary matters; sometimes the state of exaltation could be constrained and sometimes, if her *kheyālā* to control it was not fully evoked, it would permeate her body after all.

anywhere. Then she would burn incense, and in the quiet of the evening the whole atmosphere would be impregnated with the pure fragrance of sandalwood. She would then seat herself in one corner of her room and orally repeat the names of the Lord. After a few minutes her limbs would adjust themselves to the postures of *padmāsana*, *śiṭhāsana* or some other *āsana*. Needless to say, Nirmala at that time did not know the names of those meditative poses. She merely watched her body assume them.

Yogic *mudrās* and *kriyās* manifested themselves on her body during this time of evening worship. Bholanath resting on his bed after his meal, would lie awake and watch her spell-bound until late into the night ; or sometimes, overcome with fatigue after the day's work, he would fall asleep while Nirmala sat absorbed in a world of her own. A few of these *kriyās* he recognized for what they were, but most of them in their variety were beyond his comprehension. It was apparent to him that these motions were gone through as if they were happening to her naturally.

Nirmala used to repeat the name of Hari for no other reason than that her father had taught her to do so. After a few days, Bholanath, a devout *Śākta*, became a little perturbed by this. He asked her, "Why do you repeat the names of Hari? We are not *Vaiṣṇavas*, we are *Śāktas*." Nirmala said "What shall I do then? Shall I repeat the names of Śiva?" Considerably relieved, Bholanath agreed that she might do so. It was all the same to her. Besides, the *kriyās* which manifested themselves in her body, did not appear to be affected by this change of names.

Generally, these *kriyās* took place after nightfall, but there was no definite time for them, and they would occur during the day as well. The external stimulus of *Nāma-japa* also was not always necessary to bring them about. Some of the

neighbours happened to see a few of the *kṛiyās* through the chinks in the cane-work fence. The simple villagers were at a loss to account for such strange behaviour. Nirmala did not appear to be ill or abnormal but completely lost in a world of her own. Not having come across this phenomenon before, they thought that she had become possessed by evil spirits. Nirmala appeared a changed person even during the hours when she was not actually engaged in *sādhana*. She seemed withdrawn and there was a far-away look on her face. The erstwhile popular young girl began to be shunned by her neighbours. Her companions and friends, puzzled and mystified, tended to avoid her. Nirmala, on the other hand, welcomed this solitude. Now that she was left severely alone, she had more time to devote to her *sādhana*. She recalled this stage of her *sādhana* later, in order to stress the point that solitude was necessary for a seeker after spiritual wealth.

Many came and suggested to Bholanath to take the help of *ojhās* to cure her of evil spirits. The educated among his friends advised him to consult doctors, as they were convinced that she was suffering from some unusual form of hysteria. Although loath to do either, Bholanath felt rather helpless in the face of strong adverse criticism as well as sincere friendly advice. Finally he called in one or two *ojhās*. But they could effect no cure. One of them was specially well-known for his powers to expel evil spirits. When he came, Nirmala was sitting in a corner, seemingly oblivious of her surroundings. The man pronounced his exorcisms, and then sat down to watch the effect of his performance. All of a sudden, uttering loud groans, he rolled over on the floor in a spasm, as if he were in great pain. Bholanath tried in vain to bring him round. Then, thoroughly alarmed by the man's groans and writhings, he suddenly bethought himself to appeal to Nirmala. Accordingly, he implored her saying, "What has

happened to this man ? Do put him right again." Bholanath, apparently was convinced that she could do so at 'will'. The man did regain consciousness. When he had fully recovered, he prostrated himself before Nirmala who had sat throughout with unchanged demeanour. He said, "She is the Devī. It was foolish of me to have had the audacity to try my powers on her."

Anandamayi Ma's life is singularly devoid of any conspicuous use of supernatural powers. They are neither deliberately kept concealed nor are they displayed voluntarily. Perhaps the incident of the *ojhā* was necessary to put Bholanath's mind at rest and strengthen his belief and faith in her. He luckily had a friend in Dr. Mahendra Nandi who, in addition to being a good physician, was a wise and intelligent man of the world. After observing Nirmala for a few days, he said to Bholanath she was in an exalted spiritual state and should on no account be exposed to the gaze of common people. Bholanath was only too glad to follow this advice.

Nirmala had a friend Usha who visited her regularly. Usha's mother-in-law did not approve of this friendship with a girl who was so strange in her behaviour. Once Usha's son was taken ill. She brought him to Nirmala secretly for fear of her mother-in-law and was convinced that the child's recovery was due to the fact that Nirmala had touched him. Usha would say to her, "Do you know, although you are so much younger, I feel like calling you 'Mother' !"

The unaccountable urge on the part of comparative strangers like Hara Kumar and Ushadidi to address Nirmala as 'Mother', can be understood in the light of Mataji's oft repeated statement that she has remained as she always is. After she became well-known, much of the earlier accounts

of her life acquired a significance which was not obvious at the time. It is a remarkable fact that all incidents added to the understanding of Mataji's personality and none appeared to be such as would be discordant with later events. The lack of normal human traits such as naughtiness, temper, desires, or needs of food, drink, sleep, bodily comforts and so on, was put down, at the time, to congenital deficiencies. The fact that this explanation did not take into account her total personality, which in intelligent adaptability was far beyond her years, is only to be expected from the people amongst whom she lived for the first years of her life. This is also in keeping with the mode of the unfolding of her personality as experienced by her companions. There never was a sharp rupture or startling change which would create a sensation amongst the members of her family and friends. The most awesome of events took place in an atmosphere of easy normalcy. The way in which Mataji glided into and out of exalted states of *samādhi*, inevitably created the impression that for her there was no unsurmountable difficulty to be overcome or even a line of demarcation between the two states. The natural and the supernatural were so intermingled in her that her gentle everyday manner itself radiated an attraction which has remained uniformly irresistible and yet totally enigmatic down the years, and which still holds in thrall countless men, women, and children from all over the world.

At Bajitpur, in the privacy of her cottage Anandamayi Ma enacted the role of a *sādhaka* to perfection. It is to be called a role because even in this she remained self-sufficient, looking to nothing or nobody outside herself. It was in the nature of a manifestation rather than an achievement. This *līlā* which is so crucial for all those who would follow the same path, was merely suffered or even indulged by Bholanath. As

mentioned earlier her friends tended to avoid her at that time and thus lived in ignorance of the mine of spiritual wealth being uncovered in their midst by the young housewife who dutifully went about her usual chores as well, day after day.

Anandamayī Ma has said that during the month of May 1922, her *sādhana* became more intense and continued thus for three months. Further that in the night of *Rākhi Pūrṇimā* (August 3) she went through the gestures of a formal ceremony of spiritual initiation or *dikṣā*. These dates were calculated much later, when she had occasion to recount these incidents in Dacca. Her reference to the night of *Rākhi Pūrṇimā* helped to fix the date because in the year 1922 this happened to be on August 3.

Anandamayī Ma sometimes explains the significance of spiritual initiation in these words, "You want to call somebody you can see, but you don't know his name; so you somehow or other try to attract his attention by beckoning or calling out, using any words which occur to you. He comes over and says, 'Were you calling me? My name is such and such'. Similarly God himself in the role of the spiritual preceptor (Guru) discloses His name to the pilgrim wandering in search of a guide. After initiation, random efforts are over for the disciple (*śiṣya*). He has touched the lifeline which will lead him to the goal. In the ultimate analysis, the disciple realize that the Supreme Being is one with the Name and the Guru. And how can it be otherwise? He alone can impart the gift of this Name and none but he himself can sustain the knowledge of His name."

Matajī had no Guru in the ordinary sense of the word. On the night of *Rākhi Pūrṇimā* she, as usual, cooked and served the evening meal to Bholanath at about 9 p.m. Her

own food she used to keep aside and eat only late at night when she got up from her *sādhana*. Indeed, for months she had only this one meal daily at midnight or later and frequently none whatsoever. Earlier that evening her neighbours had come to invite her to go with them to see the special decorations in the temples, but she had declined to accompany them. When Bholanath had retired to rest, she sat in her corner for her daily worship. After some time she watched her finger draw a mystic design (*yantra*) on the floor. She herself became the Guru; a *bija-mantra* (name of the Lord in the form of a syllable) came from within her, as it were. This mantra she wrote with her finger inside the design already drawn on the floor; she now started repeating it. She realized that the mantra was not separate from her and that Guru, mantra and *Iḥa* were One.

For the next five months her *sādhana* assumed a more concrete form. After the *līlā* of spiritual initiation, mantras and hymn-like compositions in Sanskrit would at times spontaneously flow from her lips, generally preceded by the utterance of the syllable OM. Needless to say, she had no previous knowledge of either Sanskrit or these compositions. One night Bholanath woke up to find her doing *japa* counting with her fingers. Nirmala had seen her grand-mother do *japa* in this manner, and now she watched her own fingers keeping count in a similar fashion.

During that time her days were not divided into mornings, evenings and nights—there was only one prolonged period of indescribable bliss. Sometimes, while engaged in performing an intricate yogic *āsana*, her long black tresses would get entangled with her limbs and the hair was torn out by the roots, but she had no sense of bodily pain. Hunger, thirst, sleep or other demands of the body remained

in total abeyance for days. She has said that there would be the flavour of a honey-like substance in her mouth which came from within and which became so profuse at times that she would have to swallow it, yet it left no bad after-taste in her mouth as is usual with sweet things. Sometimes she felt that her body had become as light as a feather and had risen from the floor or again that it had become as heavy and immovable as a rock. Both these conditions of her body have been physically observed by many in later years.

During these months Nirmala could not attend to her housework. Bholanath watched over her to the best of his ability at the time he could spare from his work. It is not known what he made of the phenomena taking place in front of his eyes. It is certain, however, that he was neither afraid nor sceptical of what he witnessed. His total acceptance of her way of being is not to be gainsaid. At that time as in later years, he shielded her from the gaze of the curious, kept vigil over her inert form lying in *samādhi*; he looked after her much as an adult would take care of a helpless child. There was another person who was not put off by Nirmala's changed condition. This was the young maidservant who came to help daily with the house-work. She quietly shouldered all the extra work which her young mistress could not do at this time. Devotees have heard of her loyal service from Mataji herself on many occasions. Many of them were able to meet this girl when Mataji revisited Bajitpur after a few years.

Referring to this period of her life, Mataji has said that the question of *sādhana* did not arise for her, since there was nothing that had to be attained. There was, however, no element of pretence or make-believe in this.

For the time being she was a real *sādhaka*, undergoing all the experiences of spiritual life.

Anandamayi Ma has said that the *sādhana*s by which man endeavours to attain Self-realization are of endless variety, and each has innumerable aspects. All these became a living experience to her when she played the role of a *sādhaka*. During this period she went through countless forms of worship, not only the various Hindu forms, but other non-Hindu rites and ceremonies as well. Mataji does not talk about the experiences of spiritual life easily, and very seldom before the general public. But there are men and women in India and abroad, belonging to different religions, who can testify to her profound understanding of their particular problems and who have derived hope, solace and encouragement from her.

On rare occasions, Mataji does relate something about her life as a *sādhaka*. When people express their astonishment at the variety and wealth of her experiences, she says that what she has so far disclosed is not even one-thousandth part of what was revealed to her.

Bholanath's *dikṣā* :

During this period of intensive *sādhana*, one of Mataji's cousins, Nishikanta Bhattacharya, came to visit them. He was amazed to see Nirmala's condition and strongly disapproved of Bholanath's tolerance of it. One day, when Nirmala was sitting in a yogic posture, he entered the room with the intention of expostulating with her about the matter. Normally, in accordance with village customs, Nirmala kept her face veiled in his presence. On that day her demeanour was quite unusual and she did not attempt to cover her face. Moreover, when Nishikanta addressed her, she looked straight at him and spoke with such a

strong voice that he was taken aback and became silent. Then Nirmala said in a milder tone, "Don't be afraid. What is it?"

Nishikanta asked: "Why do you perform all these *kriyas* and *sanas*? Have you been initiated into spiritual life?"

"Yes."

"Has Ramani also been initiated?"

"No, but he will be after five months."

She then specified a particular day and date with its presiding auspicious star.

"I do not understand what you mean by the star."

"Go and ask Janaki Babu who is fishing at the pond. He will understand."

Now, Nirmala had no way of knowing Janaki Babu's whereabouts, especially as he should have been in his office at this time. Janaki Babu was, however, found near the pond and on being fetched was able to explain what she had meant by the star. He also was struck by her extraordinary appearance. It was obvious to them that they were in the presence of a personality who was far removed from their ordinary world.

When Nishikanta had recovered somewhat from the first impact of her changed personality, he said, "Give us some proof of your spiritual powers." Nirmala beckoned to Bholanath to approach her and sit down near her. She then touched him. He immediately became still and seemed absorbed in deep meditation. Bholanath's little nephew Ashu was staying with them at that time. Bewildered by all these unusual activities he began to cry. Nirmala looked at the crying boy and again touched Bholanath. He seemed to awaken as if from deep sleep. He could not describe in

words what he had experienced but for some time remained in an ecstatic condition.

It is generally seen that the slightest sign of distress or rejection is enough to deflect Mataji's *kheyāla*. Even that which is good and desirable for man, is never imposed on anyone by her if it is not totally acceptable to the person concerned or to those close to him.

The next morning, Nirmala, much to the relief of Bholanath, reverted back to her normal ways and even went about her work as usual. The day that she had specified for Bholanath's *dikṣā* drew near. Although she had not mentioned the matter again, he remembered the date, and on the particular day, with a vague idea of avoiding anything that might happen, he hurried off to his office without taking his breakfast. The disciple is expected to keep a complete fast until the initiation is over. Unintentionally Bholanath fulfilled this condition. At the appointed hour, Nirmala sent for him. Bholanath replied that he was busy and could not leave his office. Nirmala then had the message conveyed that, if he did not come immediately, she would herself go to the office. Not daring to risk this, Bholanath came home. Nirmala handed him fresh clothes and told him to bathe and then sit down on an *āsana* which she had kept ready for him. Bholanath seated himself and composedly awaited further developments. By this time Nirmala was in an exalted state of *bhāva*. Sonorous mantras were spontaneously pouring forth from her lips. A little later Bholanath heard her repeat just one mantra softly to herself. He leant forward, and bringing his ear close to her lips, managed to catch the sound of the mantra. He concluded correctly that it was meant for him.

When the exalted mood had passed, Nirmala gave him detailed instructions how to use the mantra he had heard.

With her, mantras and ritualisms were self-revealed. That they were perfectly correct and in accordance with relevant scriptures was borne out years later when she came in contact with people who were well-versed in these matters.

One other person only, Sri Jyotish Chandra Rai, had the rare distinction of receiving a mantra from Anandamayi Ma in a similar manner.

From the month of December 1922, Nirmala became *mauna*, that is, completely silent. This state, like all other changes, came about spontaneously. The special feature of Nirmala's *mauna* was that it precluded not only speech but also gesture of any kind. Even her facial expression did not change to indicate approval or disapproval. During this time Bholanath's youngest brother Jamini Kumar came to Bajitpur for a short visit. He was then a young boy already saddened by the death of his mother a few years earlier. He was very depressed to find his sister-in-law observing silence. He would follow her about imploring her to talk to him. One day Nirmala was, as usual, sitting in a yogic posture. With the index finger of her right hand she drew an imaginary circle (*kunḍali*) round herself twisting her body at right angles, first to the right and then to the left, so that the imaginary circle met at a point behind her back. After this, some mantras were uttered by her. Then, with an indistinct voice, which gradually became stronger, she spoke to her young brother-in-law, while sitting inside the *kunḍali*. After a while she wiped off the circle in the same manner, got up and was silent again.

During the three years of her *mauna*, she sometimes broke her silence in a similar way and talked to people if necessary. There were, however, no rules nor fixed times for these occasional breaks in her silence.

While in Bajitpur, Bholanath one day expressed a wish to own a house where he could perform the annual *Vāsantī-Pūjā* of Goddess Durga. Nirmala answered spontaneously, "Why, you already have a house. Gokul Thakur's house in Dacca is yours." Bholanath, naturally could make nothing of this at that time. But the name lingered in his memory and he was reminded of it years later in Dacca.

It became evident to Bholanath very soon that Nirmala had a vision which transcended the limitations of time and space. One day she remarked, "I hear the voice of Hara Kumar."

Bholanath was sceptical about this because they had not heard about him for years. Sure enough, after some time Hara Kumar and Kshetra Mohan of Ashtagram were seen approaching their house. Hara Kumar was singing as he came along. After this meeting they did not see Hara Kumar again.

On another occasion Nirmala asked Bholanath, "What is Arabia?" He told her that it was the name of a country. She then said, "I saw two *fakīrs* from Arabia, a guru and his disciple. I saw them so vividly that, had I been an artist, I could have painted their portraits." A year or so later Nirmala had occasion to visit the graves of two *fakīrs* in Dacca. Her description of their appearances was confirmed by those who had seen the holy men. Sometimes Anandamayi Ma indicates the future in this manner. She 'sees' people or places she is going to meet or visit. She, however, always awaits these events and never tries to bring them about.

Chapter Four

DACCA : LIFE AT SHAHBAGH : 1924-1926

The affairs of the Nawab of Dacca were not running smoothly. His agent in Bajitpur, Bhudev Basu, went back to Dacca. Bholanath lost his post in April 1924. His employers, for reasons of economy, were winding up their business in Bajitpur. Hoping for better employment in a bigger town, he came to Dacca with Nirmala on April 10th, 1924. In spite of his best efforts he was unable to find work immediately. He decided to send Nirmala to his village home and stay on alone. She asked him to let her remain for three more days, saying she would go home if he did not get a job within that time. Bholanath found work on the third day. On April 17, he secured a post as the Manager of the extensive Shahbagh Gardens belonging to Nawabzadi Pyari Banu. He was appointed by Rai Bahadur Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, the Trustee of the Nawabzadi's estates in Dacca. Jogesh Chandra Ghosh had heard a little about Nirmala from his son-in-law, Bhudev Basu, who had known her and Bholanath in Bajitpur.

The gardens were very extensive, filled with a variety of fruit-trees and also seasonal flowers. In one corner of the big estate, adjoining an artificial swimming pool, there was a small building for the Manager. The entire property was enclosed by a high wall, because ladies of the Nawab's family sometimes came to visit the garden and bathed in the swimming pool. The property was so large that much

of it had remained unkept and overgrown with wild shrubberies and creepers.

The Manager's house consisted of three rooms only. There was a beautiful hall nearby, used by the owners for dances and other cultural programmes.

It was Bholanath's job to supervise the work of a gang of labourers and to look after the property. After they had settled in, Bholanath's nephew Ashu came to stay with them.

Nirmala was still observing silence. For the greater part of the day she would be in an exalted state, absorbed in a world of her own. Even so, she would somehow manage to get up early in the morning to prepare a meal for Ashu. After sending him off to school she would take the used utensils to the pond, clean them and again cook for the mid-day *bhoga*.¹ It is not unusual for people to consecrate food at their own convenience rather than at the proper midday hour that is, as soon as it is ready for partaking by the family. Nirmala, however, would not think of doing this. Neither could she serve Ashu with the left-overs from a previous meal. True to her nature, she accomplished all the housework competently and gracefully.

The exalted moods and states of *bhāva* became more frequent and of longer duration since the days of her *līlā* of *sādhana* at Bajitpur. While serving food, her hand would stop midway; while cleaning utensils at the pond, she would fall into the water and lie half-immersed in it for a long time; she would get scorched by the fire of the kitchen oven or imperil herself in other ways.

1. Food consecrated to the family deity. If there is no family deity installed in the house then the food is dedicated to God. (Brahmins are expected to eat only consecrated food.)

Bholanath was away from home for long hours every day. He began to worry about her physical well-being. He decided to ask his widowed sister Matari to stay with them. Matari *Pisimā* (Aunt Matari) had visited Revati Mohan's family before and was very friendly with Nirmala. She was a short and slender person with a cheerful smile. It was a wonder to see her manipulating cooking utensils which were heavy and big enough to suffice for preparing food for fifty people or more. An enduring bond of friendship developed between the two sisters-in-law, which lasted till Aunt Matari's death in Varanasi in 1949.¹ Many devotees cherish grateful memories of Matari *Pisimā*'s wonderful cooking and affectionate way of serving food. The little family at Shahbagh was thus augmented by two new members, Aunt Matari and her son Amulya. Nirmala now had a companion who lightened her work considerably and Ashu had a friend to play and go to school with.

Janaki Babu and Bhudev Basu had also come to Dacca. From them and other chance visitors at Shahbagh people began to hear about Nirmala. Some inquisitive souls who came to see her with their own eyes were attracted to return again and yet again. All that the men could see, and that from a distance, was the figure of a veiled young woman. The cross section of society that Nirmala now entered, consisted of educated men and their families. Religion did not play too important a part in their lives. Some of the families had never heard a *kirtana* or seen a ritualistic worship of a deity (*pājā*). However, it remains a fact that many people paid homage to her and behaved as if they were in the presence

1. By this time Matari had become very well-known and was often too busy to speak more than a few words to the inmates of the Ashrams. Even so, there would be a quiet exchange of jokes in dialect between them not understood by many of Matari's companions of those days.

of a personality of great spiritual eminence. She was now generally referred to reverentially as "Ma" (Mother).

The fact that Mataji exercises a very powerful attraction on young and old alike has to be accepted, because it is evident. Those who have seen Mataji, realize that she makes a tremendous impression on people without uttering a single word or without even looking directly at them. Mataji is now 84 years old, but this feature of her personality remains unchanged. The old, the young and even children find it difficult to tear themselves away from her presence. There are now hundreds of families comprising two or even three generations who are completely devoted to her. Mataji herself sometimes explains this phenomenon in these words : "Is it not natural to love one's own ?"

The early devotees, however, had to run the gauntlet of criticisms that ranged from sheer indifference and disregard to sneering insinuations. Nirmala was young and beautiful. This for some time acted as a barrier for men mindful of the opinion of society. Women, on the other hand, had free access to her presence. Her charm and winsomeness captivated their hearts.

Prominent among her early visitors was Hiranbala Ghosh,¹ known to all as Hirandidi. It became Hirandidi's daily practice to visit the '*badhu*' (young wife) at Shahbagh. Her mother-in-law was not happy about this. "Why do you need to go to Shahbagh every day? Religion can be practised at home also", she would say. How could Hirandidi explain to her mother-in-law that she had no religious aspirations, but simply could not rest at home till she had seen Mataji at least once daily? She humorously recalled that her first impression of Mataji as related to her family

1. The late wife of Sri Prafulla Chandra Ghosh and daughter-in-law of Rai Bahadur Jogesh Chandra Ghosh.

was, "She is such a beautiful, charming girl. What a pity, she is dumb. But she smiles so sweetly and is marvellously neat and efficient in all her work. If only she could speak",¹

Some of the other regular visitors were Sri Pran Gopal Mukherjee (the Deputy Post Master General) and his family; Sri Nishikanta Mitra (the Zamindar of the village of Shamshiddhi) and his family; Sri Baul Chandra Basak (Lecturer in the Vakil Institution), a boyhood friend of Bholanath, and his wife, and Sri Nani Gopal Banerjee, Professor at Dacca College.

Bholanath liked to entertain guests to meals. These early devotees quickly acquired a taste for Mataji's cooking. They would bring fish, vegetables and other things to Shahbagh. It was Mataji's practice to use up every day whatever had been brought by them. She would keep nothing for the next day, not even a green chilli or a piece of ginger. But the meal also had to be balanced and tasty. Mataji with her imaginative ideas would prepare delicious dishes from the materials at hand and win the admiration of the womenfolk who were frequently at a loss to understand how this was done. Not the least remarkable feature about these meals was that invariably the food would be just sufficient for the number of participants. Nothing would be wasted and nobody would go away disappointed. This sort of coincidence or concurrence of incidents and timings is a very regular feature of Mataji's life even today. Anybody who stays with her for some time, may see one or two instances of it.

Baul Chandra used to bring cleaned and powdered spices to save Mataji the work of grinding them for the day's cooking as is the practice in Indian households. One day, while Mataji was arranging these packets, Bholanath was

1. Mataji was observing silence at that time.

tempted to ask her, "It makes no difference to you what you eat. Can you eat some of this chilli powder?" Mataji took a handful of the red powder and put it in her mouth. Even a pinch of the raw powder burns the tongue and palate of ordinary human beings, but there was no change of expression on Mataji's face. After a little while she got up and went about her normal housework. The same day Bholanath had an attack of acute blood dysentery. He suffered terribly for a couple of days. Mataji nursed him day and night indefatigably, not leaving his bedside for more than a few minutes at a time. One day Mataji said to him, "I have requested you so many times not to test me like this." Bholanath answered humbly, "I shall not do it again." Responding to Mataji's treatment and nursing, he slowly recovered from his illness.

The few people present at that time at Shahbagh conjectured that Bholanath must have previously expressed his desire to witness some miraculous power which he knew were as natural to her as other normal functions. It is conceivable that he wanted to impress his childhood friend Baaul. He would take a childlike delight in Mataji's seldom displayed yogic powers. Nobody knew better than he that she was disinclined towards any startling behaviour; in this instance he must have succumbed to a sudden temptation. In answer to a query regarding this incident, Mataji has said much later that there could be no question of punishment, but even ordinarily speaking, every action, speech or gesture brings about its own consequences.

Walking through the Shahbagh gardens one day, Mataji came across a small mausoleum. She was informed by the labourers that many years ago two *sakirs*, a guru and his *chela*, had come to Dacca from Arabia. The Nawab and his family respected them deeply and had asked them

to make Shahbagh their home. After their death their remains had been interred at Shahbagh itself and the Nawab of Dacca had constructed the mausoleum to house their graves. It seemed that Mataji had arrived at the place where they had lived years ago. It may be recalled here that while in Bajitpur, Mataji had asked about an Arab *fakir* and his disciple. She had had a vision of a tree also and it had occurred to her then that it was called the '*Siddhesvari*' tree. On coming to Dacca, she had once enquired of Bholanath if he had heard anybody mention a '*Siddhesvari*' tree. He had replied in the negative and offered to make enquiries. Mataji had told him it was not necessary.

The Shahbagh gardens were situated near the huge race course and polo grounds of Ramna. Mataji frequently walked across this sea of green grass to a *Kālī* temple on the opposite side. With a few companions she would sit on the veranda of the temple for many hours. Baaul Chandra sometimes accompanied them on these visits to the temple. On their way back, late at night, he went off on a road, which was hardly more than a rough track. These places were very lonely and unfrequented at that time. One day, out of curiosity, Bholanath asked him, "Where do you go at such a late hour"? Baaul answered "There is a *Kālī* temple at Siddheshwari, a little distance off. It is a very ancient and beautiful place. I should like to take you both there some time." Mataji signalled to Bholanath not to say anything to Baaul about her 'vision' of the *Siddhesvari* tree, and so Bholanath kept quiet.

A few days later, they went to Siddheshwari with Baaul. There was no proper road. The rough path that led there had neither been cleared of the encroaching undergrowth nor repaired for many years. A thick cluster of trees smothered by wild creepers made the place look like a jungle.

In the midst of this wilderness, they came to a very ancient temple of Kālī. In front of it they saw a huge fallen *peepal* tree. Mataji recognised it as the tree of her 'vision'. She put her hand caressingly on it. Baul told them a little of the history of the place. It was a *siddhapīṭha*, that is, a place of great sanctity, where *sādhakas* had performed vigorous asceticism and had attained *siddhi* (literally, success) or Self-realization. According to local tradition, there was a *panchamuṅḍī āsana* somewhere near the temple. The local people associated the place with Sri Sankaracharya (788-820 A.D.) also. Hundreds of years ago there had been only three trees to which the place owed its other name '*Tintiri*'. Now there was just this one fallen tree. According to the legendary history of the place the temple had been constructed by a *sahayāsī*, named Samvarvan. A story was also related about the tree, namely, that when it had fallen, a light had emerged from it and had entered the image of the deity inside the temple.

It had become dark now. They examined the temple and its precincts by the light of the lantern they had brought with them and then returned to Shahbagh.

After a few days, Mataji again came to Siddheshwari, but they were disappointed to find that the temple had been locked up for the night. Mataji went to the door and touched the lock; it came off in her hands. The temple doors stood open. They perforce had to stay there all night, because they could not leave the temple unlocked and unguarded. When the caretaker returned early next morning, they left for Shahbagh.

In August 1924, Mataji's younger sister Surabala was taken ill at Jaidevapura, a town nearby, where she was staying with her husband's family. Surabala was greatly attached to

her elder sister. Mataji and Bholanath visited her for one day. Mataji's parents also came from Vidyakut to see Surabala. Surabala's last conscious thoughts were of her sister. She was sixteen when she died.

At Bholanath's invitation, Mataji's parents came to stay with them at Shahbagh after the tragic death of the young girl. Bholanath thought that it would be a change for the parents to stay with their daughter and that it would be a preoccupation for Mataji also. Bholanath had yet to learn a lot more about Mataji. He had surmised that she would be overwhelmed with grief, because he knew her to be very fond of her younger sister. The realization that health or illness, life or death meant the same to her, came to him gradually. Indeed, it was after many years that Bholanath and Mataji's other companions began to get an inkling of the absolute self-sufficiency of her personality. It gradually became clear to them that Mataji's actions arose out of the needs of the people around her, that she had no chosen companions or special habitations. One was as good as the other. All this is encompassed in her oft-repeated expression '*jo ho jāye*' (whatever comes about, let it be so).

It was not Mataji's way to do anything spectacular which would arrest the attention of people around her or create a distance between her and her companions. It is one of the most remarkable features of her personality that extraordinary events acquire a normalcy where she is concerned. She brought about radical changes, complete metamorphoses in the lives of some of her companions, without striking a single jarring note against any susceptibilities. Her appeal was always to the individual. She never sought to pluck him out of his background for a different way of life. It has been her method to help a man to make the most of his opportunities and capacities.

In her proximity there is no room for apathy or despair. A divine presence seems to permeate the atmosphere. The life of religious endeavour appears to be the normal way of life rather than a turning away from the world.

The devotees had to go a long way before even partial understanding of this personality came to them. For the time being, they were happy to have her parents stay at Shabbagh, who came to be known as *Didimā* and *Dādāmajī*. *Didimā* was eagerly questioned regarding Mataji's childhood and early years. Subsequently many of these devotees visited Kheora (Mataji's birth-place), Vidyakut, Ashtagram and Bajitpur and derived much pleasure from listening again to accounts about Mataji from local people.

Siddheshwari

In the beginning of September 1924, Mataji asked Bholanath to purchase some rice, pulses, potatoes and a cocoanut. One day she and Bholanath went with these articles to Siddheshwari. She cooked the foodstuff she had brought with her, consecrated it to the Deity and then shared it with Bholanath. She then told him that it was her *kheyāla* to stay at the temple for some days. Bholanath at first demurred since he could not leave her alone in such a lonely place. Ultimately, it was decided that *Dādāmajī* would be asked to stay at Siddheshwari during the day and that Bholanath would return there every evening from Shabbagh after work. Thus, in this most natural way both Mataji's father and husband came to be staying in a temple for a few days in the manner of homeless ascetics. Unknowingly, they had started on a new career.

Mataji took up her abode in the small back room of the temple. She would bathe and change her clothes early in the morning and then enter this room. Throughout the day she

never came out. There was no question of cooking or partaking of meals. Bholanath's friend Baaul Chandra came to Siddheshwari in the evening with fruit and sweets. Mataji would emerge late at night and they would all share the fruit brought by Baaul. Both friends were courageous men. They came and went through those lonely unfrequented places often in total darkness. Bholanath stayed in the main temple, sometimes doing his *sādhana*, sometimes just resting. Baaul posted himself at the main entrance of the temple. He had a feeling that something miraculous was going to take place, and in order not to miss it, he would keep awake the whole night. In this manner they spent a week at Siddheshwari.

The following incidents may best be related in Mataji's own words. "On the eighth day, it was drizzling at dawn. Beckoning to Bholanath, who was awake, to follow me, I¹ stepped out of the temple. We almost had to walk over Baaul Babu, but he did not wake up. Tired out by his night-long vigil, he had fallen asleep at the break of day."

"Although we were not familiar with the surroundings, I unhesitatingly advanced in a northern direction from the temple. Walking a little distance through the wilderness we came to a small clearing. I seemed to have arrived at my destination and walked round that particular plot of ground thrice in the manner of *pradakṣiṇā*.² Then, drawing a circle, I sat down where I was standing, facing south. What you call mantras were then pronounced. In the meantime, I had placed my right hand on the ground and was leaning on it. The ground had looked solid enough but my hand went down into the earth unresisted. It felt as if layer after layer of the

1. When referring to herself, Mataji generally says, 'This body', meaning there is no act of will to motivate her action. In these accounts the personal pronoun has been used.

2. The ritual of walking round a Deity or temple three times.

solid earth was sliding off, like the shifting of curtains and my hand and arm went down unimpeded right up to the shoulder. Bholanath got frightened and pulled out my arm, saying, 'Let us go away from here'. At the same time, warm reddish water spouted forth from the hole thus made in the ground. The water was so red that my white conch bangle had become red. This colour lasted for many days.

"I then asked Bholanath to put his arm into the hole. At first he felt a little reluctant. I said, "Don't be afraid, it is necessary for you to do this". Thereupon Bholanath also inserted his arm, and the warm reddish water again welled forth from the mouth of the hole. We stood there for some time watching the water trickle away on the ground. Then, after stopping the mouth of the hole, we came away."

Baaul was very sad when he realized that he had after all missed witnessing this strange incident, but took it upon himself to clear a space all around the spot and later thoughtfully planted a few flowering shrubs and a *tulasi* to mark the place. Pran Gopal, on hearing of this incident, contributed towards the upkeep of the place. With this money a brick platform (*vedi*) about 23' square¹ was constructed over the hole. A light bamboo fence marked off a piece of ground, five yards square, with the *vedi* at the centre.

Mataji paid frequent visits to Siddheshwari. She would sit on the *vedi*, surrounded by her companions. Sometimes they were so carried away by feelings of exaltation that they passed whole nights in this fashion, returning to Dacca at dawn. Pran Gopal said that a few months earlier, he would not have believed it possible for him to spend such sleepless nights in the open, with no adverse effect on his health.

1. The unit of measurement in rituals is the arm of the *yajimāva*, that is, the man who is performing the ritual. This *vedi* was one and a quarter arm square.

The educated people of Dacca were experiencing a new kind of life. Religion was mostly looked upon as a duty or a worthwhile value in life, and nothing more. A new vista of joy and beauty in religious endeavour now opened out for them.

Although there was no *purdah* in Bengali society, the custom obtaining in genteel households was of restrained behaviour. Men and women if not related by family ties, would not ordinarily speak to each other. At Shahbagh, it was Bholanath who received the men and ushered them into the presence of Mataji. They saw a quiet young girl, her face, half-hidden by the wide border of her *sârf* pulled forward over her head. The wives of the visitors however could go in directly to her and were welcomed by her. It is related that she would give them mats to sit upon and offer betel-nuts and betel-leaves or some seasonal refreshments. Without quite knowing why or how, a nucleus of devoted families began to gather at Shahbagh, just to sit with Mataji or go to the Kâli Temple at Ramna with her or even to Siddheshwari.

The quiet life at Shahbagh, however, was about to undergo a change.

Chapter Five

GATHERING OF DEVOTEES

The number of visitors increased steadily at Shahbagh. Some were known to Bholanath as friends and relations of people already coming to Shahbagh, others were total strangers. If Bholanath asked Mataji to speak to the men, she would do so, but not otherwise. Bholanath was a large-hearted person. He saw the sincerity of these devout men and women, and it was not in him to disappoint them for the sake of conventions.

Mataji told him one day, "You must think twice before you open the doors to the world in this manner. Remember that you will not be able to stem the tide when it becomes overwhelming." Bholanath did not heed this warning. Or perhaps, who could know better than him that Mataji's personality was not meant to be hidden within the four walls of his home? So, acceding to Bholanath's request, Mataji now mixed more freely with people.

One day, the Rai Bahadur's son Prafulla spoke to Bholanath disapproving of the large number of visitors inside the Shahbagh gardens. Bholanath was greatly angered by this unmerited rebuke, because he was very conscientious about his work and took good care of the property under his management. He was ready to hand in his resignation but was dissuaded from doing so, for the time being, by Mataji. Meanwhile Prafulla reported to his father that a number of unauthorised persons were coming to Shahbagh every day and creating a disturbance. He had no doubt heard of the

singing of *kīrtana* and *bhajans* which occasionally took place at Bholanath's quarters.

A few days later, the Rai Bahadur came to Shahbagh to see for himself what the report was about. He did not say anything about this to Bholanath but invited him and Mataji to his house for a meal. Bholanath accepted the invitation because the Rai Bahadur evidently had not been influenced by his son.

At this time, the Nawabzadi Pyaribanu, the owner of the estate of Shahbagh, was in Calcutta. She had not come to Dacca for many years due to personal reasons. She was engaged in a lawsuit concerning her estate in Dacca. The day Mataji came to the Rai Bahadur's house, he heard some adverse news about the case. He appealed to Bholanath to request Mataji to ascertain for them details of the case that was being conducted in Calcutta and also prayed that the Nawabzadi might win it. It has already been said that Bholanath was a very kind-hearted man. He could not remain indifferent to the agitation and perturbations of this family. Even strangers could nearly always prevail upon him to ask Mataji to cure illnesses or redress other ills. He could never remain deaf to a tale of woe. Mataji did her best to obey him, so now at his insistence, she described the events taking place in Calcutta and said that they would win the case. Before answering their questions Mataji had, unknown to others, placed a live coal on the back of her hand. Much later, she explained the reasons for this deliberate infliction of a wound in the following words: "Well, it is possible to do a certain action (*kriyā*) which will have some concrete effect in some other sphere. Or again, it is also said that if yogic powers are used deliberately, then the *sādhaka* has to perform penance (*prāyaścitta*) for it. This body sometimes had the attitude of a *sādhaka*. I do not say

that this was so in that particular case but these or other explanations also are possible."

What Mataji had said about the lawsuit was fully confirmed later on. With Mataji's visit, a new influence began to permeate the household of the Rai Bahadur. A subtle change was effected which became noticeable as time passed.

The number of visitors to Shahbagh started swelling into crowds now. Pran Gopal Mukherji had been transferred from Dacca. His successor to the post, Pramatha Nath Basu, also became one of the regular visitors. Pran Gopal's friend, Girija Shankar Bhattacharya who was a Professor at Rajshahi College and his wife came to Dacca to see Mataji. In his turn he invited his friend and colleague Atal Bihari Bhattacharya with his wife to Dacca. This couple became closely attached to Mataji. Atal Bihari had a very open-hearted, childlike nature full of fun and mischief. His conversations and, later on, letters to Mataji became a source of enjoyment to her other companions.

Dr. Shashanka Mohan Mukherji and his daughter Sm. Adarini Devi (now known to all devotees as Sri Gurupriya Devi or *Didi* (elder sister), met Mataji for the first time either in the last week of December 1925 or the beginning of January 1926. Dr. Shashanka Mohan Mukherji, a retired Civil Surgeon of Dacca, was then an old man of sixty, of a very fiery temperament, held in great awe by the Dacca Medical School. Yet, in Mataji's presence he was like a tongue-tied child. His is an untarnished record of selfless devotion and unquestioning obedience to Mataji from his first meeting to the moment he breathed his last.

Didi was his third child. She had protested against getting married, but her parents had not attached much importance to this reluctant attitude. She was married to Upendra Nath

Banerji of Calcutta. But when the time came for her to go to her husband's house, her disinclination became convincing to both families. She wrote to her husband requesting him to marry again. Both families agreed to respect her wishes. Didi stayed on with her parents. She was fond of reading and divided her time between the study of religious literature and helping her mother to look after the large household. Ordinarily, it was inconceivable that a young woman of a respectable family would leave home to follow a religious life. There were no suitable places for sheltering women who did not want to follow either of the beaten tracks of marriage or a career. So she remained at home.

Didi recalls her first meeting with Mataji in these words : "I was very shy by nature. It was extremely difficult for me to talk to strangers or even to come out before visitors at home. My parents would scold me for this, but I could not get over my timidity. Yet I did not feel shy before Mataji. I approached her confidently and stood near her as if I had always known her. It is beyond my power to describe the personality I saw. One look at that radiantly beautiful form, and my head, of its own accord, bowed down in adoration."

Mataji smiled a welcome and said familiarly : "Where have you been all this time ?" Mataji's *mama* had come to an end after about three years and she now spoke in a soft voice to the people coming to visit her.

Didi used to go to Shahbagh every day with her father. She would eagerly wait for his return from the Medical School in the evening. If he was delayed, she would be in an agony of suspense till she saw his carriage. The time she had to spend at home away from Shahbagh seemed meaningless to her. She gradually began to assist Mataji in looking after her ever-expanding household. She would help with cooking, serving food or guarding the person of Mataji when in an

exalted state. In time she became a member of the household at Shahbagh. Didi recalls that she had no interest in cooking. In Mataji's company she learnt to look upon this art as something more than a means of keeping body and soul together.

Thus, many families in Dacca became very attached to Mataji. Whoever came first, wanted others to share in the joy of this unparalleled experience, and so entire families, including the old and the young, would gather at Shahbagh. The men would sit with Bholanath. Sometimes Mataji, accompanied by their wives and daughters, would sit in the same room and talk to all of them.

The joyousness which had characterised little Nirmala and the hardworking young girl of later years remained unchanged in the Ma of Shahbagh. Her gentle humour, her ready appreciation of the ridiculous delighted her visitors. Her compassion and her understanding of human needs and aspirations knew no horizons. In her proximity solemnity and joy flowed into each other creating an atmosphere only to be experienced but impossible to explain. The time, however, was fast approaching when Mataji's circle would expand beyond the imagination of this exclusive group of people.

On the occasion of the solar eclipse on January 26th, 1926, the devotees wanted to perform *kirtana* on a large scale. Bholanath welcomed the suggestion and enthusiastically set about making arrangements with the help of Baaul, Atal Bihari and others. The dance-hall was made available to them for this purpose. A large number of people were invited. Everybody who came to the *kirtana* would partake of *prasāda* at night.

The *kirtana* started at about 10 a.m. Mataji, with her women companions, sat in a room nearby from where they could watch and hear the *kirtana*. Mataji's state of ecstasy on hearing the *kirtana* may best be described in Didi's words :

"At one moment Mataji was sitting like one of us. The next moment she had changed completely. Her eyes were closed and the entire body swayed to the rhythm of the music. Her *śāri* fell back from her head. With her body still swaying, she stood up or rather, was as if drawn upwards on her toes. It looked as if Mataji had left her body which had become an instrument in the hands of an invisible power. It was obvious to all of us that there was no will motivating her actions. Mataji was evidently quite oblivious of her surroundings. She circled round the room as if wafted along by the wind. Occasionally, her body would start falling to the ground—but before it completed the movement it would regain its upright position, just like a wind-blown leaf which flutters towards the ground and then is uplifted and blown forward by a fresh gust of wind. It seemed her body had no weight nor substance. Moving in this manner, Mataji crossed the veranda and entered the *kīrtan* hall, her face glowing with a wonderful light, her gaze unblinkingly fixed in an upward direction. Before the crowd had time to realize that she was in their midst, she fell to the ground from an upright position but did not appear to be hurt at all. Like a leaf in a whirlwind, her body started rolling at a tremendous speed while she was lying prostrate. Some of the women tried to hold her, but it was beyond their power to check even a little of that force.

"After a few moments, her body, of its own accord, stopped moving and Mataji sat up. Now she was still like a statue. Just as the tremendous motion of her body had been awe-inspiring, now the utter quiescence was likewise wondrous to behold. Her face was flushed and radiant and there was an effulgence all around her."

After some time, Mataji began to sing a few lines of a *kīrtanā*—

"Hare Murāre, Madhukaiṭabhāre,
Gopāla, Govinda, Mukunda, Śaure."

Mataji's wonderful voice and melody made the *kīrtana* sound celestial and thrilled the hearts of the congregation, already overwhelmed. People were standing with folded hands as if in the presence of a Deity. Many were reciting hymns to Devī Durgā.

After a few moments, Mataji's body slumped down in a heap on the floor as if lifeless. She lay in that condition for a long time. Bholanath roused her with great difficulty. He called her loudly as if summoning a person from a distance: following his example, the women also tried to awaken her. Mataji's eyelids opened a little and then again closed. By and by she was roused; she sat up although it was clear that her limbs were not yet under control. She said something to the ladies around her. Her words were indistinct and slurred and could hardly be made out, but her ineffable smile was never absent for long from her face.

Evening drew near. At Bholanath's request, Mataji and Didi brought the *bātālās* (sugar puffs) and fruit for the *kīrtana* to the hall. Placing these offerings near the pedestal of the *kīrtana* Mataji, surrounded by the women, sat in one corner of the room.

After some time, Mataji again got up and moved into the midst of the *kīrtana* party. A variety of *bhāras*, all marvellous to behold, manifested themselves on her body. Now it seemed that she was engaged in a great battle—the expression on her face was fierce and even her complexion had darkened—then it appeared that she was performing *ārati* with her entire body. The fierce expression of a moment ago changed into a beautiful gesture of supplication. The *bhāras* were too numerous and

changing too rapidly to permit more than a glimpse of them.

Later, Mataji sat down in one corner of the room. Although she was perfectly quiet, it appeared that something was trying to find expression from within her. After a few moments, mantra-like verses flowed from her lips spoken in some beautiful language that sounded like Sanskrit. The congregation listened spell-bound to the sonorous tones, but the meaning was beyond the grasp of anybody. Then the voice became silent and once more Mataji's body lay in a heap on the floor.

It had already become quite late. The *kirtana* was over. The devotees were waiting to take *prasāda*. Bholanath and the women tried to rouse Mataji, calling her repeatedly and rubbing her hands and feet. She got up with an effort after a little while and said softly to Bholanath, "Please collect everybody, we shall serve the food." After some time Mataji proceeded to walk through the rows of people, serving them food neatly and efficiently. One could hardly imagine that this was the same person who had been in an ecstatic state earlier in the evening. Or rather, they were reassured to find her once again approachable and doing ordinary things.

A great concourse of people partook of the *prasāda* that day. They went away with full hearts feeling that they had been vouchsafed a glimpse of a wondrous world, unutterably beautiful and ennobling. Didi records that she had read about the *mahābhāvas* of Sri Gouranga and Sri Rama krishna, but she could never have imagined anything so awe-inspiring and enthralling as what she had seen that day.

It was almost dawn by the time the last visitors left.

The musical instruments which had been procured for the *kirtana* remained at Shahbagh for some time. Mataji one day suggested that they might as well be utilised for the performance of a brief *kirtana* every evening. Matori *Pisind's* son Amulya and Ashu took up the suggestion with great enthusiasm, and with the help of Bholanath they formed the nucleus of a *kirtana* party which kept on swelling steadily.

Almost every day innumerable states of *bhāva* manifested themselves in Mataji's body. The external stimulus of *kirtana* was not necessary to bring them about. As a matter of fact, Mataji was more often in an exalted than in a normal state. Or, rather, it would be more correct to say that the exalted and the normal were one in her. As before in Bajitpur, her days were not divided into mornings, evenings and nights. Sometimes she would stay awake the whole night and with the coming of dawn curl up in a corner of the room on the floor. She very rarely used her bed. She would more often lie or sit on the bare floor. Sometimes she would lean against her cot and spend the whole night in that posture.

On the day of the solar eclipse and after, many people got the opportunity of witnessing these *bhāvas*. The eye-witnesses say that Mataji's *bhāvas* cannot be described in words. The shape and substance of her body, the colour of her skin and the expressions on her face underwent incredible changes. Her countenance would be flushed and glowing. At times, her body would move at a tremendous speed and then again be immovable like a rock. Actions, gestures and facial expressions would change so rapidly as to defy observation. Her movements were like swift flashes of lightning. It was well-nigh impossible for anyone to keep track of her progress through the crowd. Even a brief view of the matchless beauty of this display of ecstatic moods held the devotees enthralled.

The onlookers were lifted out of themselves as if in the presence of a mighty phenomenon.

Not only during the *kirtana* but anywhere and at any time Mataji would enter into a *bhāva*. Her body seemed to get in tune with motions in her environment. The rippling waves in the wake of a boat drew her irresistibly to them, so that her body would appear to flow towards the water. The climbing of stairs would give her body a buoyancy which seemed to be soaring upward. If caught in a sudden storm, her body seemed like a wind-blown cloth. Sometimes it became still and immobile on hearing the deep notes of a temple conch; the rhythm of an inspired *kirtana* would move her to an ecstatic dance.

After a *bhāva*, Mataji would sometimes lie in a heap for hours together. People conjectured that this was the state of *samādhi*. Not only after a *bhāva* but in the midst of conversation or work, her gaze would become fixed, and her body rigid and statue-like. Or, her eyes would close and the body sink down to the floor. Like the slow setting of the sun, all bodily functions would gradually disappear as if withdrawing inwards. Breathing would slow down and finally stop altogether. Her limbs occasionally became rigid like wooden appendages and then again limp like cloth. Her entire body would become luminous and there would be an expression of indescribable peace on her face.

After ten, twelve or twenty-four hours of a state of this kind, people would try to rouse her but mostly to no effect. An eye-witness¹ says, "I myself rubbed her hands and feet and sometimes struck sharply against them, but elicited no response. Many doctors tried to feel her pulse or locate signs of respiration, but apparently both functions were absent for hours together."

1. Sri Jyotish Chandra Rai.

Mataji would rouse as naturally as she entered *samādhi*. Her breath would come back faintly and then more vigorously. There would be some slight movement of the muscles of her limbs. But, after a little while, she would again settle down into immobility as if going back to the previous state. At this stage, she would respond if people called her or spoke to her. She would drag open her eyes with an effort and whisper a few words that sounded faint and indistinct. But her peculiarly own bewitching smile would comfort her companions and reassure them of her conscious presence in their midst.

Didi writes that the difference between Mataji's normal state and the state of *samādhi* was one of degree only. Even in the midst of ordinary housework, she seemed in a beatific atmosphere of her own. If not spoken to for any length of time or made to answer questions, her speech would become indistinct and lisping as if she had to make an effort to use her vocal chords. One day, Didi came to Shahbagh and found her lying in *samādhi*, on the bare floor, her clothes and face covered with red ants. Although Shahbagh was more often than not filled with visitors now, close companions who could look after Mataji's person were few in number. Didi writes, "It amazed me that Mataji should be so naturally in a permanent state of God-intoxication, a state which is coveted by *sādhanaks* of all times. No, not God-intoxication—her state could not be called that—I do not know how to describe a state which was at once sublime and yet normal."

It would, however, be wrong to suppose that there was any element of pretence or make-believe in these *bhāvas*. It was apparent to the onlookers that Mataji was not performing a series of actions but that they were happening spontaneously. A devotee asked Mataji one day, "Do you have visions of gods

and goddesses during these *bhāvas*?" (Mataji was sometimes seen in the postures of various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and perhaps others, not recognized as such by those who watched.) Mataji answered, "It is not necessary because I do not aspire to any goal or ideal." She meant, probably, that in this process there was no intention to concentrate on the form of a god or goddess and to have such visions. "All of you want to see these manifestations and, therefore, they now and then occur of their own accord. For me, the states that you call *bhāva*, are not different from what you call a normal state."

About *samādhi*, she said one day, "The consummation of action and feeling may be called *samādhi*. It is a state where the question of knowledge and ignorance does not arise. A stage comes when the *sādhaka* realizes that he is one with his object of contemplation. From that plane he may again come back to the ordinary level of self-consciousness. This type of *samādhi* also must be transcended. The ultimate state, being unparalleled, cannot be explained or expressed in any language. It is solely a matter of direct experience."

After about a month of the *kīrtana* on January 26th, came the day of the annual Sarasvatī-Pūjā. The students of the Medical School wanted to invite Mataji to their function. But Dr. Shashanka Mohan refused them permission, thinking that if Mataji had *bhāvas* during the *kīrtana*, it would become a matter of public discussion. From this it might be surmised that Mataji's companions at that time fought shy of publicity. They had as yet no conception of Mataji's unique personality.

Various theories were advanced, contested and held in Dacca about her during these years. The simple people believed her to be an incarnation of the Goddess Kālī, the



presiding deity of Bengal. She was known as 'Mānuṣa Kālī', that is, 'Kālī in human form'. The more sophisticated opinion was that she was either a *sādhikā* of great spiritual powers or had attained Self-realization and elected to remain in the world in order to help other pilgrims on the way.

Mataji herself had nothing to say about such speculations. She continued to cook and clean and to look after Bholanath and her nephews to the best of her ability. The fact remained that there was a spiritual aura round her which affected all her companions and visitors, at least temporarily, and in some cases permanently. In her presence the adventure of the spiritual life acquired new dimensions and a unique significance. For many it became the most worthwhile pursuit of human existence.

Pramatha Nath Basu and his wife were constant visitors at Shahbagh. They were a devout couple. One day his wife came and said to Mataji that she wished to observe silence on Mondays and devote some time to her religious practices. Unless she made some such rule, it was difficult to snatch even a few moments from her housework. Mataji approved of this resolve. As soon as Pramatha Nath heard of it, he came to Mataji and said, "I can't allow my wife to forge ahead in religious matters and leave me behind. Please permit me to observe silence one day ahead of her. If she keeps silence on Mondays, I shall do so on Sundays." Mataji smilingly agreed and told him the *kriyā* for becoming *mauna*.

On Monday morning, his son Protul came to Shahbagh with a message from his father that he could not speak! It was time for him to go to office. A whole day's work lay ahead. His staff were waiting for him and he was

unable to utter a word ! Mataji went to their house and communicated to him the *kriyā* for breaking silence. She said to him, "What can I do ? You only asked me to tell you how to become silent ; you did not ask me how to terminate it."

Pramatha Nath continued observing silence regularly after this incident, a practice which he had started almost as a game of competition with his wife.

After some time, Pramatha Nath was assailed by doubts. He bethought himself, "Everybody says that she is the Devi Kālī, but I personally have not seen anything which might confirm this." He secretly made up his mind that he would believe in Mataji only if she appeared to him in the form of *Cinnamastā*, that is, the most distinctive of the ten forms of *Mahāvidyā*s of the goddess, described as being headless.

It so happened that on that particular day, Mataji, accompanied by Bholanath and Pramatha Nath, went to Siddheshwari, as she frequently used to do. Bholanath was lying on the temple veranda. Mataji sat close by. Pramatha Nath and his very devout orderly sat near them, both doing *japa*. Suddenly Mataji stood up. She was in a state of *bhāva* and the two men gazed at her with folded hands. They were not perturbed because whatever be Mataji's physical condition, she never evoked anything but reverence in the onlookers. There was always beauty and grace in the most startling of her states of *bhāva*. Now her complexion appeared very dark, her black hair fell all around her in a cloud ; her eyes were huge and unblinking like those of a statue ; her tongue hung out over her chin. In an instant, her head bent completely back to rest between the shoulder blades. The body appeared to be headless. A moment later, she sat down and was her normal self. When Pramatha Nath had recovered a

little from the impact of this vision, he looked round towards his orderly and asked him if he had seen anything unusual in Mataji. He also, obviously overwhelmed, was sitting with folded hands. "Yes, Sahib", he answered, "I saw the forms of the *Mahavidyās* in Mataji when she stood up just now." Pramatha Nath got up and embraced his orderly, "You are luckier than I", he exclaimed.

Each family has its own treasured memories of similar experiences in Mataji's presence. They have kept in touch with Mataji. She is occasionally visited by their children who are grown up and have children of their own now. She is kept informed of all important (and not so important) changes and incidents connected with their lives. Mataji has become the centre of an ever expanding family of devotees.

Chapter Six

THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE MIRACULOUS

Mataji's life, during that time was full of extraordinary incidents. Manifestations of yogic powers became the norm rather than otherwise. It would be wrong, however, to draw lines of demarcation between stages of Mataji's life. She did not become different from what she had been, but there was, at that time, an accentuation and proliferation of what ordinarily is called the miraculous. Mataji has said, "I had the *kheyāla* to be like a *sādhaka*, so it was but natural that the characteristics attending intense *sādhana* should occur spontaneously. The earnest *sādhaka* does not attach any importance to these powers which develop in him. He may not make any deliberate use of them. But all the same people may derive great benefit from the abundance which overflows his conscious efforts at *sādhana*."

People from far and near came to Shahbagh to beg her to cure physical ailments. Healing would be effected by a glance, a touch, the gift of a flower, or in a hundred other ways. Instances of such cures are too numerous to be recorded in this volume. In fact, every devotee will be able to relate from his own experience one or two or more of such examples. As in all other matters, Mataji's way of helping people was unspectacular but real.

One day a very sick child was brought to Shahbagh. The child had lost the use of her limbs and could not move by herself. Mataji was chopping betel-nuts. She tossed one of the pieces a little in front of the child saying 'catch'. The

little girl with great difficulty made an effort and picked up the piece of nut. After some days the mother came and reported gratefully that her daughter had recovered and was slowly regaining the use of her limbs.

Ordinarily, Mataji did not attempt to heal anybody. On the contrary, she would say, "Pray to God. He will do what is best for the patient. You cannot know if physical recovery is desirable for him. The only thing for you to do is to get the best medical advice available and look after the patient as well as you possibly can. For the rest you must put your trust in God." Mataji would sometimes be compelled to do or say something because of Bholanath who was always greatly moved by the suffering of people.

On occasions someone insisted on her visiting the patient, in the belief that he would recover if she did so. In such cases Mataji had her own way of prophesying the future. She would look about her and ask her companions, "What do you say? He is asking me to go because he thinks the patient will pull through. Will it be so?" The companions would naturally answer in the affirmative emphatically. She would then continue, "Who knows, since all of you say so, perhaps he will recover." In such cases it was seen that the patient invariably got well. Didi says, "Although we had all come to know Mataji's peculiar way of foretelling the future, we would, at times, unaccountably hesitate, stammer and fail to give an emphatic reply in the affirmative. Mataji would observe, 'Why are you hesitating like this? Then perhaps the patient won't regain health.' And so it happened invariably."

One day, a lady¹, who was a frequent visitor, came to request Mataji to pay a visit to her son who was seriously ill.

1. The wife of Atul Datta.

Mataji continued with her usual pursuits, seemingly not paying any attention to what was being said to her. The lady, therefore, appealed to Bholanath, knowing that Mataji would not disoblige him. When Bholanath spoke to Mataji about it, she at once declared, "What is the use? The boy won't recover." On hearing this, another devotee, who was present, remarked, "In that case Mataji need not go. The family should be told what Mataji has said."¹ Nobody liked to tell the parents what Mataji had said. Bholanath had already promised the lady that he would bring Mataji; so they went to see her son. After a few days, the lady again came to Mataji to beseech her to save her child. Mataji replied, "Even if I tell you what to do, you will not be able to carry it out." The mother promised to follow instructions faithfully. The simple instructions were, not to allow the boy to get up from bed for a certain number of days, probably eighteen. Immediately after this, the boy started improving slowly, but all of a sudden his illness took a turn for the worse. On seeing the mother again, Mataji said, "What is to be done? He got up on Monday." The mother however insisted that the boy had not left his bed at all. He died a few days later and his mother lost all faith in Mataji. After quite some time she came to know that on the specific day the boy had actually got up from bed and had come out on the balcony to see a passing procession. Full of remorse, the bereaved mother came to Mataji who now had to comfort her in her double sorrow.

On occasions, Mataji, of her own accord, would go out of her way to cure people. One day she was strolling about in the field outside Shahbagh. A cab drove by, Mataji asked her companion to signal to the driver. When he drew near, she

1. He was actuated by the thought that people would later say that the patient had died in spite of Mataji's visit. Needless to point out that neither Mataji nor Bholanath were concerned with this aspect of the matter.

climbed in. The cabman asked, "Where will you go?" Mataji answered, "To your house." The man was a Mohammedan. Without saying another word he drove to his home. On arrival, they found an old man lying on his death-bed. The relations were weeping. Mataji asked her companion to fetch some sweets. These were distributed amongst the family and neighbours. Mataji then came away. Mataji's companion took pains to find out that the old man had recovered from what appeared to be his last illness.

At times, Mataji would take upon herself the illness of others. The person who had asked for a cure would recover, but Mataji would suffer from the disease for a few days or a few hours.

Didi one day came to Shahbagh to find Mataji suffering from a sudden cold and cough. On enquiry, she discovered that Pramatha Nath's young son Pratul, who was due to appear for an examination, had felt a severe cold coming on and had prayed to Mataji to prevent it. On that occasion Pratul escaped from any inconvenience due to a cold.

Such incidents taught Bholanath and others not to ask Mataji to cure sick people. They found that to her, life and death were the same. She would say, "Don't ask me to cure anybody. Do you ever pray that somebody should fall ill? Everybody must work out his own destiny. If obstructions are deliberately placed in his path, the results may be anything but beneficial. I myself have no objection to paying a visit to anybody. Perhaps the dying need this (that is, Mataji's presence) just as much as those who may survive."

In this connection, an incident may be related illustrating Mataji's attitude towards physical pain. This happened much later, in 1954. "A lady from a distant country", writes Atmananda¹, "came last summer to see Mataji in Almora.

1. *Azanda-Varta*, vol. III, no. 2, p. 151.

One of the questions she asked was, since ailments are the results of our actions in this or in former lives, was it advisable to consult doctors and take medicines? Rather was it not more appropriate to bear whatever came to us without interfering with its natural course? Mataji replied that it was right to do everything in our power to keep our bodies fit and healthy, for an ailing person could hardly expect to engage in *sādhana*. All the same, it was certainly necessary to learn to endure pain, since suffering cannot always be avoided. In such cases, we should accept it as one of the ways in which He manifests Himself.

"Several months later the same lady badly fractured her ankle. This happened in the mountains, miles away from a doctor. To make things worse, heavy rain set in and she had to wait for three days before she could be carried down in a *dhooli*. The pain was acute. The lady kept awake all night but, remembering what Mataji had told her, she concentrated on Divine Love in the form of Christ and Mataji. To her own amazement she forgot all about her pain and felt well and refreshed the next morning. She remained in a state of bliss throughout those three days. Later she declared that she would not have missed this experience for anything in the world. Was this what Mataji had meant, when she said, we had to learn to endure suffering when it came?

"After that whenever she felt any pain, the lady tried to concentrate in a similar manner, but was never able to get again into that elevated state of mind. On meeting Mataji this year she wanted the cause of her failure explained. 'Your pain was not severe enough', said Mataji with a smile."

Devotees relate many instances of inadequate quantities of food, clothes and flowers just sufficing for the congregation amongst whom they had to be distributed. Many instances

are heard about calamities having been averted and cherished desires fulfilled in spite of seemingly impossible conditions. Several volumes may be filled with the narration of such events. It is a favourite topic of conversation with devotees, not merely to harp on the yogic powers of Mataji, but also to strengthen each other's faith and share the joyful experience of receiving her *kṛpā* (grace).

"The atmosphere of the miraculous", writes Vijayananda (Dr. A. Weintrob), "around Mother has impressed me ever since the very first day that I met her. It is a daily experience in our relationship with the Mother."

"Mother can call down or stop rain at will. When she toured South India in 1952, Madras Province had been suffering from acute scarcity of rain for a prolonged period. I was present when a delegation came and prayed to Mother to bring about rainfall. Subsequently, abundant rainfall was reported in the newspapers as due to Mataji's *kṛpā*."

Many who come in contact with her have been impressed by the fact that Mataji is able to answer an unspoken thought or desire. A typical personal experience may be recorded here¹. "It was in Solon, near Simla, where we had been invited to take part in a *Nāma-yañña*² in the presence of Anandamayi Ma. We went in a batch from Simla on a Saturday and did our best till about 9 o'clock in the night. We felt tired and moved into a room situated at some distance from the temple of Śiva where the ceremony was being held. There we spread ourselves out to rest our aching limbs. It was a dark night and the sky was overcast with clouds. Soon a very heavy downpour followed. We were smoking and talking

1. The narrator is late S. Sarkar, J.C.S., who at that time did not know Mataji well.

2. A function devoted to singing of *kīrtana* according to the rules and directions laid down in *Chaitanya-Charitāmṛta*, a Vaṅṇava scripture.

and our talk naturally centred round Anandamayi Ma. One of our party wanted to convince us that she had supernatural powers. A disbeliever in miracles, I jeered at him and blurted out, 'Better keep your cock-and-bull story to yourself. If your Anandamayi Ma is anywhere near about the position you ascribe to her, let her appear before us here and now, and I shall then believe your stories.' I had hardly finished when we heard a bang from outside. The door, which we had closed to prevent rain-water coming in, fell ajar and, believe it or not, there appeared before us a figure robed in white, thoroughly drenched from head to foot. We were startled by a loud laughter which we knew to be Anandamayi Ma's. Before we could collect our wits, the figure had vanished into the darkness! It was still raining cats and dogs, but we did not mind. We sprang to our feet and ran out in the torrential rain to the temple, to be told that Anandamayi Ma had gone out unnoticed and had just returned, thoroughly drenched."

This aspect of Mataji's life has been expressed very clearly by Vijayananda: "Something that has struck me from the very first day is the atmosphere of the miraculous in which one moves when one is with her. Let me explain: In Europe (and no doubt here also) by the word 'miracle' one conceives of a breaking away from the laws of nature, something that strikes one as impossible, as absurd. But this is only its crude objective side. Its subtle, subjective aspect is quite different. What does it matter to me if a certain yogi has walked across the waters or flown through the air? The real miracle is, when that which one needs, which one desires keenly or feebly, comes at the very moment it is needed. And still better when it comes, not only as one desired it, but as one would have loved to see it in the innermost depth of one's heart. . . 'Coincidence!' I thought at first. But a coincidence that goes on repeating itself daily cannot be called so anymore. And all

this happens without apparently violating the laws of nature—for the Lord has no need to break any laws: He is the Law. Should I give examples? No, for those who do not know her, will not believe me and those who have lived near her have already understood.”¹

1. *Mother as Seen by Her Devotees*, 2nd ed., p. 46.

Chapter Seven

MULTIFARIOUS WAYS OF THE SADHAKA

Since the time of the *līlā* of *sādhana* at Bajitpur, Mataji hardly ever ate a full meal. When she came to Dacca in April 1924, she was twice a day taking three mouthfuls of food including water. When Didi first met Mataji about a year and a half later, she was eating even less. On Mondays and Thursdays she would partake of three mouthfuls, and on the other five days of nothing but nine grains of rice. There was, however, no rigid rule for her. She broke it now and then in response to the importunities of members of her family or of devotees. Thus, at the insistence of Pramatha Nath's son, Pratul, she once agreed to take a full meal on the day of the new-moon (*amāvasyā*). Other devotees quietly turned this into a regular feature at Shabbagh. They would organise a *kīrtana* and everybody would partake of *prasāda*, thus ensuring that Mataji also would have a proper meal.

Bholanath's nephew Amulya took up service at about that time and with his first earnings he arranged a special *pūjā* on a full-moon night. This also was adopted as a permanent practice. Thus, Mataji ate proper meals, twice a month.

At about this time it was noticed that Mataji could not anymore raise her hand to her mouth. Her hand would stop midway, and she would bend her head to take food from her hand. Sometimes, instead of eating, she would smear the earth with the rice. None knew better than Bholanath that all phases in Mataji's life came about naturally and spontaneously. It would be as futile to remonstrate with her as with

any other onlooker. So he took it upon himself to feed her like a child. Didi was pleased to be given the opportunity of rendering this service to Mataji, when she came to stay with them at Shahbagh.

Mataji explained this phase of her life in these words : "Once this body lived on three grains of rice daily for four or five months. Nobody can live for so long a time on such a meagre diet. It looks like a miracle. But it has been so with this body. It has been so, because it can be so. The reason for this is that what we eat is not at all necessary for us. The body takes in only the quintessence of the food, the rest is thrown out. As a result of *sādhanā* the body becomes so constituted that, though no food is taken physically, it can imbibe from the surroundings whatever is necessary for its maintenance. In three ways the body can be maintained without food : One way has just been referred to, namely, the body can take from the environments the nourishment necessary for its maintenance. Secondly, one can live on air alone. For I have just said that in everything there are all other things, so the properties of other things are in the air in some measure. Therefore, by taking in air alone we get the essence of other things. Again, it may so happen that the body is not taking anything at all, yet it is being maintained unimpaired as in a state of *samādhi*. Thus you find that as a consequence of *sādhanā* it is quite possible to live without what we call food.¹

"At one time I had the *kheyāla* that I was one with everything. At that stage I would give food to whomsoever and whatsoever was in front of me. Sometimes I even smeared the earth with rice and vegetables. When Bhola Nath saw me doing this, he removed the food in front of me and

1. From the article by Sri A. K. Dasgupta in 'Mother as Seen by Her Devotees', 2nd ed., 1967, pp. 117-118.

fed me like a child that had not learnt to use its fingers for eating."

Mataji abstained not only from eating but also from drinking on two occasions—once for thirteen days and the second time for twenty-three days. During this fast she did not even rinse her mouth with water. On the 24th day she asked for a sip of water saying, "I wanted to see what it would be like without drinking but the very necessity for water is becoming extinct. This will not do. As a matter of convention, a semblance of normal behaviour must be kept up."

For some time Mataji followed the rule of eating only fruits found under trees in Shahbagh. Now the fruit-trees in Shahbagh were mainly mango and leechi. It was not the season for either, so Mataji lived on practically nothing. She would sometimes take fruits if brought by somebody of his own accord. But her companions were strictly forbidden to make any arrangements for procuring them. On the other hand, if they were plentiful one day, she would not allow them to be stored for the next day. It almost seemed that Mataji did not require food, but just wanted to keep up the habit of partaking of something or other.

At one time she did not eat any cereals for about six months. Then, one day she happened to come into the room where Bholanath was taking his midday meal of rice and vegetables. She asked Matori Pisima to fetch for her all the rice that had been cooked. Mataji, on that occasion, had a meal which would have sufficed for seven or eight people.

There were other instances of consuming enormous quantities of food. During the Christmas holidays of 1925, one of Bholanath's sisters, Mokshada Devi (wife of Sri Kali Prasanna Kushari of Salkia, Howrah), had come to stay with them. She was very fond of Mataji and treated her like a younger sister. She felt greatly concerned to see that Mataji was

eating next to nothing. She planned to cook *khîr* (thickened and sweetened milk with rice boiled in it) from 40 lbs. ($\frac{1}{2}$ maund) of milk because there were always guests at Shahbagh. She depended upon Bholanath to persuade Mataji to partake of a little of this. Although as a rule, Bholanath did not interfere with Mataji's ways, he could not say 'no' to his sister. He asked Mataji to have some of the *khîr* that day. So Mataji sat down to her meal. After finishing her first helping, she asked for more. Highly pleased, her sister-in-law hurriedly brought a larger second helping. Mataji got through this very speedily and would not pause till she had eaten up the entire quantity that had been prepared. In the meantime, fresh milk had been put on the fire, but it takes a long time for milk to thicken. Like a hungry child, Mataji was quite inconsolable till the yet only half-cooked and boiling hot *khîr* was brought to her. The women fanned the *khîr* to cool it. By the time Mataji had finished this, everybody was thoroughly alarmed. Mokshada Devi, who was a very devout lady, scraped a little of the *khîr* from the bottom of the serving dish, and pronouncing a mantra, placed it on Mataji's head. Mataji immediately stopped eating and everybody heaved a sigh of relief.

Didi relates that once a devotee, seeing Mataji's lack of interest in food, implored her to take a full meal. Acceding to his request, she sat down to eat. Didi was feeding her. Mataji seemed to be swallowing the food at double the normal rate. She impatiently remarked, "You are not quick enough. Call someone to help you." But even two people could not keep pace with her that day. The devotee, now quite frightened at the unexpected result of his request, with folded hands implored her to desist from eating. Mataji said plaintively, "First you ask me to eat, but no sooner do I start, than you tell me to stop. Now, what am I to do?"

Didi relates that while eating, Mataji did not seem to pay attention to the food in front of her. She recalls, "Once when I did not know Mataji so well, I thought I would take advantage of this absent-mindedness and feed her as much as possible. In my enthusiasm I fed her more than a normaly big meal and yet Mataji did not object. Finally, I was obliged to stop of my own accord. Mataji seemed to awaken from a dream and said, "Why, have you finished?"

If not watched carefully and told not to do so, Mataji would swallow the pips and peels of fruit. If one expostulated with her, she would say in a surprised tone, "You asked me to eat fruit, so I did. You did not tell me that I had to choose and reject also."

As in everything else, Mataji remains unchanged in this pattern of behaviour. A few years ago in Dehradun, a gentleman brought *khîr* for Mataji, prepared with much loving care. He then asked to be allowed to feed her himself. He was an addict to *pān* (betel leaves) and also very fond of talking. After Mataji had finished, she asked him smilingly, "Pitāji, have you put saffron into this?" The gentleman answered in the negative and following Mataji's gaze glanced at the left-over *khîr* in his hand. How great was his embarrassment and remorse when he saw the white surface coated with red dots!

Another incident may be cited here which was related by Mataji, because the person concerned did not know about it. At that time Mataji was moving about in the hills of the Himalayas. Her only companions were Bholanath and Sri Jyotish Chandra Rai, more commonly referred to as *Bhaiji* (brother). *Bhaiji* used to go to neighbouring villages once a day and beg for food in the manner of a *sahayāsī*. He would bring back whatever he was given, mostly *ājā* (wheat flour) and cook for her. They had no cooking utensils. *Bhaiji*

would, therefore, choose a rock near a stream, clean it with the flowing water and knead the dough on it. Then he would light a fire, built up with dry sticks and twigs, and somehow bake the *chapṛīṣ* on it. Mataji relates: "One day, when Jyotish lit the fire I saw that particles of refuse matter¹ still adhered to the minute crevices of the rock. When the rock had been washed and was wet, it looked clean enough, but the heat had made the dirt visible. I saw that Jyotish had not noticed anything and that the dirt was getting kneaded up in the dough."

On hearing this story, the very first horrified question was, "But why did you not tell him?" Mataji answered calmly, "Why should I? It was all the same to me, and Jyotish in any case was doing his best."

A few years ago at Raipur, after she had finished her meal one day, she asked the person who had fed her, to taste a little of the *kheer* she had been given. Accordingly, the girl took a mouthful of the *kheer*, but it was so hot that she could neither swallow it nor retain it in her mouth. In spite of Mataji's presence she had to spit it out. Mataji smilingly opened her mouth and showed her the scalded red patches in her throat. Mataji suffered from these sores for months.

Didi has always maintained that it is easier for people to worship Mataji than to render her personal service. She makes no demands, shows no preferences and accepts everything, or the lack of it, with the same calmness. Mataji's tranquility remains unperturbed even under severe provocations. Not only so, but she has, more often than not, to console and relieve the mortification of the devotee concerned. Her graciousness is unwavering and all-inclusive. The stranger may think that the persons surrounding her are intimate with her.

1. The hill people of India have no lavatories. Rocks and streams suffice for them.

That is not really so. It is a fact that she is as close or as distant with a stranger as with a constant companion. Mataji herself has emphasized this point many times. One of her own favourite stories may be cited here, which she narrates in other contexts, because she would never refer to herself as a sage, *sādhū* or *mahātmā*. "A large lotus was growing in a pond. A wanderer passed by who had never before seen a flower of this kind. Struck by its beauty, he stopped to admire it. He noticed a frog and a fish just below the lotus. 'What is this wonderful flower right above you?' he asked the frog. The frog's answer was: 'Well, why this question? It is just a common thing!' and it turned away to hunt for insects. Disappointed, the man addressed the fish who replied, 'Did you not hear what my friend the frog said? It's just a common plant of the pond!' At that moment the wayfarer saw a bee flying swiftly towards the lotus. He wanted to address it, but the bee would not stop for him. It alighted on the blossom and drank deeply of the honey in it. Then it flew back to the man and said, 'What did you want to ask me? Speak now'. The man repeated his question. 'Don't you know', said the bee joyfully, 'this is a lotus full of marvellous honey. I am replete with it and am a transformed being now.'

"It is quite possible to live for a long time in the close proximity of *sādhūs* and *mahātmās*, sages and saints, without being able to recognize their true quality. Whereas, one who has the insight may come from a great distance and within a minute know the Great and Holy for what they are—it depends on one's capacity to penetrate to the essence of things."

Mataji was at Solon (Simla Hills) during the summer of 1946. Revered Haribabaji Maharaj of Vrindaban and Swami Sharananandaji were also staying at Solon at that time. Haribabaji would read a book in the *satsang* and there would

be discussion on it afterwards. For some days he read about the early life of Mataji. In answer to questions Mataji touched on some phases of her life described in the previous chapters. "After the *śikṣā* of initiation," she said, "for five months, there was hardly any time for me to take food. My body was like an automaton. I went through the motions of my daily routine of housework like a machine. I would light the fire not thinking about what I could want it for — then like an onlooker I would go through the actions of cooking and serving."

In a different context, she explained this phenomenon in these words: "Lack of food did not have any adverse effect on my body. As a matter of fact, at that time the necessity for food itself vanished." Mataji laughed and said. "You are told that people have to abstain from the pleasures of life, but in this case everything was the other way round — I saw that I had to partake of food — sometimes less than a mouthful, so that I did not get the *kṛheyā* of doing without it altogether.

"Sometimes this body would be affected by the reading of religious books, just as it used to be by the strains of devotional music. Then again, there was a time when the words of the book were not important at all — they would appear to be of little significance — whatever had to be known was already there. After this came a time when it was realized that everything is THAT only. Just like sparks of fire, where each itself has all the characteristics of the whole.

"The variety of experiences at the time of *sādhana* can hardly be enumerated exhaustively. A stage comes when everything becomes clear to the vision, just as when you light a lamp, the house, trees, bushes, people around you, everything becomes visible at the same time. There may be another way of looking at things, namely, what is there to visualize? After

all, there is nothing which is to be known further—whatever is, is THAT only." An idea of this comprehensive vision may be formed by anyone who takes an interest in Mataji's ways of dealing with people.

Some years ago, in a general *satsang*, Mataji was answering questions put to her by various members of the congregation. People who were familiar with the general trend of her answers to typical questions, were surprised to notice that she was branching off into new channels and using unusual phrases and terminology. The difference was not so much in the quality of her answers, as in the way of expressing them. So much so that people, at a loss to follow her thoughts, desisted, thinking that she must be in one of her cryptic and unfathomable moods. Mataji, on her part, went on elaborating her points, giving a wealth of detail. At the end of the meeting two men came forward and bowed to her saying that they were Buddhist *bhikkhus* (monks) who had come for her *darśana* from afar. They were specially gratified to find her elaborating on the very problems which had been exercising their minds for long. They went away, convinced that Mataji had an extensive knowledge of the Buddhist Scriptures, for she seemed to know the minutest details of their faith.

Once a *haṭhayogi* came to see Mataji. She asked him numerous questions regarding his way of life. Thus encouraged, he related the story of his life to her. He and a few friends, had started to practise *haṭhayoga* at an early age. By and by they had become so filled with enthusiasm that they had renounced the world in order to devote themselves fully to this way of *sādhana*. They were determined to attain the goal of Self-realization, but it did not seem to have worked out that way. Although to the best of their knowledge they had done nothing but what seemed right, they had met with

disastrous results. One had died young and two had fallen victims to incurable ailments. He himself was suffering from severe stomach trouble. After twenty-two years of *siddhanā* they did not feel that they had attained anything, rather were they feeling disillusioned and frustrated. He was weary of the whole thing and thought that it was merely habit that was holding him to the path of renunciation.

Although he did not ask for a private audience, Mataji called him aside and talked to him for more than an hour. At the end of the interview, the air of desolation seemed lifted from his face. He said that he had received inspiration to continue on his chosen path. On being asked, Mataji said that she had questioned him in detail about his practices, pointed out where he had gone wrong, and told him how to proceed in the right manner.

Quite recently a young girl from a foreign country asked Mataji for initiation. On being told that Mataji does not herself directly initiate anybody, she asked, "What *japa* can I do?" Mataji asked her, "Are you a Christian? Do you believe in Christ?"

"Yes".

"Meditate on the form of Christ surrounded by heavenly radiance, and await His guidance."

"What can I do to rid myself of this fear I have?"

"Fear of what?"

"I don't know. Just a terrible fear."

"Meditate on God. Fill yourself with the presence of God so that there is no place for fear. Imagine that God is with you and that there can be no place for fear at all."

From these random instances it can be seen that Mataji's aim is to enkindle hunger for the Divine in man. All methods conducive to this aim are acceptable to her. She does not encourage any talk which is not concerned with religious

endeavour. Gently but invariably she will guide a conversation back to considerations about a life of *sādhānā*.

All this knowledge about her personality was acquired by her companions gradually by a method of trial and error. At that time in Shahbagh they were far too overwhelmed by the extraordinariness of the entire experience. The impact of Mataji's personality was too new to be put in any sort of proper perspective. They could hardly believe in their good fortune and there was always a fear in their minds that Mataji would not be with them for long. After a state of *bhāva* or *samādhi*, they would try their utmost to recall Mataji to her surroundings. They spoke to her about everyday affairs, sought to engage her attention in daily problems, and in other ways endeavoured to dispel her moods of exaltation. It was like trying to restrain a powerful motion with cobwebs. Mataji herself had the *kheyāla* to be where she was and therefore these attempts met with success. Mataji at that time had no need to eat, drink, sleep or cater to any other needs of the body, but she kept up a semblance of normal behaviour, or rather a shadow of it, because it was her *kheyāla* to remain with the people.

Chapter Eight

VĀSANTĪ-PŪJĀ AT SIDDHESHWARI

In April 1925, Mataji suggested to Bholanath that a covering should be constructed over the *vedi* (platform) at Siddheshwari. Shashanka Mohan offered to get this done. Mataji said, "It is all the same. Either you or Bholanath may arrange for it. But try to get it completed within seven days." Shashanka Mohan purchased a little land in Siddheshwari, including the site of the platform, and constructed a mud-walled hut around it. An unexpected hitch occurred when the workmen unaccountably felt hesitant to demolish an ant-hill within that plot of ground. At Mataji's word, Bholanath went and broke up the ant-hill for them. The platform was left as it was, so that when the plinth of the room was constructed it became a hollow square in the floor of the room.

On the seventh day, Mataji and Bholanath, accompanied by many devotees, went to Siddheshwari and the night was spent in singing *kīrtana*. Mataji sat on the platform, that is to say, inside the hollow. Sometimes she would manage to lie in it also. People who have seen her do so have felt that unless she exercised some yogic power, it was not physically possible for her to curl up in the confined space as she did.

After a few days, the devotees heard that Mataji had suggested that *Vāsantī-pūjā* might be performed at Siddheshwari. The devotees took up the proposal joyfully and preparations went on with great vigour. Many friends

and relations came to Shahbagh to join in this festival. Didimā and Dadamafai were already there. Amongst others Bholanath's eldest brother-in-law, Sri Sitanath Kushari, along with his family and his eldest sister-in-law Pramoda and her family, arrived for the occasion. Bholanath's other elder brother, Surendra Mohan and his wife, lived in Dacca and had already become frequent visitors at Shahbagh. Mataji treated this sister-in-law with as much respect as she had shown to Pramoda before. Bholanath's family priest came from Vikrampur to perform the *pūjā*. Prof. Atai Bihari Bhattacharya arrived from Rajshahi. Jogesh Banerji was entrusted with the task of providing food for the large party.

The day before the beginning of the *pūjā*, they came to Siddheshwari. Now the place was not as lonely or desolate as when Mataji had first visited it. The road was more negotiable. Some houses had been built near about the temple. Many of those who lived in them were devoted to Mataji. It was arranged that the women would stay in one of these houses, and the men on the open veranda of the Kālī temple. The temple was in good repair now.

Mataji said that *prasāda* should be distributed to all who came, but *bhoga* be cooked once only. That is, *bhoga* would be prepared in accordance with the *pūjā* rules and no meals cooked separately for the people. Since nobody felt competent to make an estimate of the amount of cereals to be required every day, Mataji herself came in the morning and decided on the quantities to be used. The cooking of the *bhoga* was entrusted to Bholanath's sisters and their daughters-in-law. Chintaharan was in charge of the store-room. Everybody was busy arranging and preparing for the *pūjā* in some capacity or other.

As the *pūjā* started, Mataji took her seat in the hollow which was very near the *āsana* of the priest. She sat there the

whole of the first day. In the evening, the sky clouded over and strong gusts of wind presaged a violent storm. Bholanath and others felt afraid that some harm might come to the image since the hut had a thatched roof only. He quickly came to Mataji and said, "You must see that nothing happens to the *Pratimā* (image)."

Within a few minutes a tempest raged round the small building. The kitchen shed was blown off. With some vague idea of protecting the image against the downpour all the people gathered together in the *pūjā*-room, dreading its collapse at any moment. Mataji seemed to find the inclement weather quite exhilarating. Her demeanour underwent a swift change, and she seemed to have become one with the very spirit of the storm. She got up from her seat in the hollow swaying to the rhythm of the raging hurricane outside. Pramoda's daughter Labanya had never seen her aunt like this before. "What has happened to *kākimā* (aunt)", she cried and rushed forward, putting both arms round Mataji. She fell away almost at once and thereafter nobody noticed her in the crowd. By this time people had begun to sing *kīrtana*. Mataji stepped right out into the lashing rain. Followed by the *kīrtana* party, she first visited the Kālī temple and from there went to the house where the women devotees were staying. Gradually the strains of the *kīrtana* rose above the howling storm and then as suddenly as it had arisen, the gale subsided. The people dispersed to change into dry clothes and repair minor damages.

Shashanka Mohan returned to the *pūjā*-room alone and was astonished to hear a clear and beautiful voice repeating the name of the Lord in the manner of a *kīrtana*: '*Haribol, Haribol*'. The utter beauty of this sound held him spellbound for some moments. As he could see no one, he almost believed that it was an ethereal voice. Then, following the

direction of the sound, he found young Labanya lying on the ground in a pool of mud and water. She was so covered with mud as to be almost indistinguishable from the ground. When he picked her up, she seemed quite oblivious of her surroundings. There was an ecstatic expression on her face. She went on repeating the Name of the Lord in an enthralling tone and voice. She was taken home to her mother, bathed and made to put on dry clothes. But there was no change in her manner. She seemed bewitched by the Name that she uttered. Her mother became very perturbed and alternately scolded her and remonstrated with Mataji to restore Labanya to her normal condition. Labanya was not affected in the least. She smilingly said to Mataji, "Look aunty, have I gone mad that mother should behave in this manner? What else is there in the world except this Name?"

Her mother did not understand anything of this. She kept on insisting that Labanya should be brought back to normalcy. She went on scolding her daughter, "I won't ever again let you go to your *kāklmā* if you behave like this."

Mataji then took Labanya with her to another room. Didi also accompanied them. Mataji told Didi that this ecstatic state had come about after Labanya had touched Mataji when she had stood up on the platform at the commencement of the *kīrtana*. She further said, "Look, this state of bliss is coveted by *sādhakas*. She has come by it so naturally, but what can I do? Her mother is so determined not to allow any of this." Mataji then touched Labanya and seemed to perform certain *kriyās* on her body. Labanya's manner underwent a change temporarily. She would quieten down for some time and then again revert back to her ecstatic state. Mataji commented, "Do you see? It is like putting out a large conflagration. You control it at one end, yet the fire bursts out with greater vigour at the other end."

After some time Labanya came back to her normal condition. She had been in that blissful state of ecstasy for three days. All those who saw her, wondered and marvelled at it. Mataji had told Didi to remain near her and check her if she showed signs of reverting to the supranormal state. Once Labanya said to Didi, "See, the Image looks just like *Kākimā*." Didi answered, "What nonsense! The Image has ten arms. Does your *Kākimā* have ten arms?" Labanya replied with simple conviction, "Yes indeed, but she does not reveal herself to everybody and that is why people do not see her as she is."¹

On *Mahāṣṭamī* day a crowd of people arrived late in the evening from Dacca to see the Image. Nobody remembered Mataji's injunction that no extra cooking was to be undertaken for visitors. A few pots of rice were quickly put on the fire. Didi said to Mataji, "Some visitors have come, but there is hardly anything left of the *prasāda*." Without turning her face, Mataji answered "Give them whatever you have. Don't cook anything." Strangely, it was seen that the left-over *prasāda* not only sufficed for the new arrivals but was also enough for the workers who had not yet eaten, and to spare.

On *Mahāṣṭamī* day one of Bholanath's elder sisters, Mokshada Devi, the wife of Sri Kali Prasanna Kushari of Salkia, performed *pūjā* at Mataji's feet with 108 lotus flowers. Evidently she no longer looked upon Mataji as her young sister-in-law.

Thus Bholanath's *Vāsanti-pūjā* came to a successful end. According to custom, the clay Image was immersed in the pond nearby on the fourth day. The entire party then returned to Shahbagh. Mokshada Devi said, "I had not seen

1. Labanya died a few years later. Perhaps she had glimpsed a world which was not compatible with the mundane world she had to live in.

my relatives for so many years. After the death of our eldest brother Revati Mohan, we had all become separated. Now *badhūphakurāi*¹ is making it possible for us all to meet again and come together as a family."

Bholanath's eldest sister had come with her son Mangal, his wife, and a small grand-daughter Maroni. Two of Maroni's brothers had died in childhood when they were about her age. Her mother and grandmother now appealed to Mataji to keep Maroni with her in the belief that this would give her long life. Bholanath agreed to assume charge of this small child. Maroni stayed on at Shahbagh after her family left for home.

BHĀIJĪ

All devotees at present fully agree in believing that *Bhāijī* (Sri Jyotish Chandra Rai) came nearest to understanding Mataji's personality. Other people have served Mataji with perhaps equal devotion and as complete a lack of ostentation as *Bhāijī*. But he alone of all the early devotees had to fight many obstacles to come to Mataji, or rather he was tested very severely before he acquired his position of honour among devotees. At his death in 1937, Bholanath and all devotees felt that a bulwark had fallen and they experienced a sense of irreparable loss which has yet to be overcome.

Bhāijī's official designation was Personal Assistant to the Director of Agriculture, Government of Bengal. He was a man of great dignity and very reserved temperament. During his life-time very few people had any inkling of the thoughts passing through his mind. He was a man of few words but always ready to help others.²

1. A term of endearment connoting respect as well as affection used for young wives of the house.

2. After his death, a book called 'Matri-Darshan' was published posthumously, compiled and edited from his manuscripts by his uncle Sri Ganga

In 1908, Bhaiji had been initiated into *Sakti*-mantra by his family guru. But he was ever in search of a living personification of this mantra. He had roamed all over India, visiting holy places and saints, yet his quest remained unfulfilled till his *daršana* of Mataji. He writes, "Through the kindness of Bholanath I had the good fortune to see Mataji. I was startled to perceive the blending of a great yogic state of perfect equanimity and that of a retiring young wife. I also realized that I had come to the end of my search."

After his first meeting with Mataji in 1924, he did not go to Shahbagh for almost a year. He did not doubt that she was all that he spiritually aspired to, but as far as he was concerned her position of a young housewife was an unsurmountable barrier. To him it appeared to be an effective disguise. He would think to himself, "If that is her will, be it so. Evidently she does not want us to approach her now. It will be time for us when she emerges from her retirement."

Sometimes he would thus debate in his mind. At other times the wish to see Mataji was so strong as to be almost uncontrollable. He tried to concentrate on philosophical works and devoted himself to writing something about the religious way of life. A small book, which he named '*Sādhana*', took shape out of his meditations. He sent a copy of it to Mataji. The messenger who had delivered the book came back to say that Mataji had asked to see the author. Thus Bhaiji visited Shahbagh again after a year. By then Mataji's silence had come to an end (probably, December 1925). Mataji and Bholanath came and sat near him. Mataji praised his book. Bhaiji experienced an

Charan Dasgupta, Retired Principal of the Baroda College. It has also appeared in Hindi, Gujarati and English translations in several editions. The English book is called "Mother as Revealed to Me".

indescribable sense of joy and security, as if he were a child in the presence of his parents.

Bhaiji wanted his wife to share in his joy as well; so he asked her to go and pay her respects to Mataji. Accordingly, after a few days, his wife took a small diamond ornament, a silver dish of sweets and some flowers to Mataji. The people at Shahbagh were interested to see the silver dish. There was a story about it. Bhaiji's wife was told that since the last month or so, whenever Mataji ate anything, she would not use any metal dishes. Bholanath had said, more in despair than in real inquiry, "If you won't use bell metal or brass, will you have your food served on silver?" Mataji had answered, "Yes, I will, but you must promise not to buy any or to tell anyone about it for the next three months." This stage lasted for a few days only.

It was Mataji's custom to give away after a few days or even immediately whatever was brought for her. She would distribute clothes, ornaments, of which she was given quite a good number, and other offerings. Sometimes she would return them to the person who had brought them, saying, "Now it belongs to me. Please keep it for me."

When Bhaiji started going to Shahbagh regularly, he ran the gauntlet of public criticism and his own family also objected. His elder brother, for whom he had great respect, wrote him a letter, saying, "I do not understand what has come over you. Do you hope to get spiritual guidance from a woman?" Bhaiji felt at a loss as to how to reply to his brother, because he himself was not sure what he hoped to gain from Mataji. He decided once more to control his strong desire to surrender himself at Mataji's feet and took up the study of the philosophical treatise *Yogavallīkha*.

After a week of his sanctuary in the temple of Reason, a stranger called on him, who turned out to be an old Brahmin

gentleman by name of Kalikumar Mukherji. He said to Bhaiji, "I have heard that you are one of the devotees of Mataji. I went to see Niranjan Babu and Shashanka Babu, but they were not at home. Can you tell me what Mataji is like?" Bhaiji was unable to utter a word but looked at his visitor with eyes suddenly brimming over with tears. For a few moments the old man watched him fighting for control over his emotion, and then said quietly, "You need not speak. I have been answered. Please take me to Mataji now, if you will." Later, the old man told him, "My own mother died many years ago. To-day I feel like a child who has found his long-lost mother."¹

Bhaiji's concentration was so deep that he would often see Mataji while he was at home or even in his office. One day he was pacing up and down the open veranda of his house. The world was flooded with moonlight. He suddenly saw Mataji walking beside him like a shadow. He had returned from Shahbagh a while ago. Mataji appeared dressed differently from when he had seen her there. When he saw her next, she was dressed as seen in his vision. On being asked about his vision she smiled and said, "I went to see what you were doing." He had similar experiences on other occasions also. Mataji would appear before him and seem to say, "You called, therefore I came."² Bhaiji was by no means a credulous man. So, whenever Mataji appeared to him he would note down the time and verify the accuracy of his vision later on.

Ever more people eagerly sought Mataji's *darshan*. At times, many days would pass before Bhaiji was able to talk

1. While this is a most natural form of the expression of love and devotion, it is obviously not without its cultural colouring. Indian culture is parent-oriented, and to be more specific, mother-oriented. This is especially true of Bengal where the presiding deities are Kālī and Durgā.
2. Many other devotees have had similar experiences. Such occurrences are quite well-known as, for example Jiten Datta's and Soporybhai's.

to her. One day in a fit of depression he remained in his room instead of going to Shahbagh. Suddenly he saw Mataji's face in front of him, but with an unusual expression of sadness. He turned round and saw Amulya standing with his hand on the back of his chair. Amulya said, "Mataji has sent me to fetch you." When Bhaiji reached Shahbagh, Mataji said, "I have noticed your restlessness. It is all to the good. There can be no tranquillity without restlessness. Fire must be kindled somehow. It is immaterial whether you do it with clarified butter or sandalwood or even with twigs and straws. Once kindled, it has the power to burn everything."

One afternoon, when he was working in his office, his assistant Bhupen came and told him, "Mataji wants you to go to Shahbagh just now. I told her that the Director was due back from leave and would take over charge from you, but she asked me to convey the message all the same."

Bhaiji left the files and papers as they were on the table, and went to Shahbagh. Mataji said, "Let us go to Siddheshwari." As soon as Mataji, Bholanath and Bhaiji arrived there, Mataji sat in the hollow, her usual seat. Looking at her radiant countenance, a name came spontaneously to Bhaiji's mind. He turned to Bholanath and said, "We shall call her Sri Sri Ma Anandamayi from now on." Bholanath smilingly agreed to this.

On their way back Mataji remarked, "You were cheerful enough so far but now you look worried." Bhaiji answered that he was reminded of his office. No doubt the Director would be amazed at his irresponsible behaviour. But he need not have worried. On his return he found that the Director surprisingly had not even noticed his absence. Later, Bhaiji asked Mataji, "Why did you send for me like this?" Mataji answered smilingly, "I wanted to see how far you had pro-

gressed in these months. Besides, how else would I have got my name?"

Bhaiji had a devout Muslim friend, Maulavi Zainuddin Hussain. One evening, Bhaiji, Niranjan Rai¹ and the Maulavi went to Shahbagh. They found that *kirtana* was in progress in the hall. They stood outside, watching it. All of a sudden Mataji came out of the room followed by a few of the people. Somebody brought a lantern. Mataji was in an exalted state of *bhāva*. She walked straight to where the three friends were standing in the dark. She lightly touched the Muslim gentleman with her right hand and walked on without pausing. The three friends followed. Mataji went to the small mausoleum of the Arab *fakirs*. To the amazement of the assembled people she started to perform the *namāz*. After a few seconds the Maulavi stepped forward and joined in the prayer. After completing the *namāz*, Mataji returned to the *kirtana* hall. The Maulavi also entered the hall with her and joined in the *kirtana* clapping his hands to the rhythm of the music. By a coincidence, the man who was supposed to offer a light and a few *bādsās* (sugar-puffs) at the grave-side had not come that day. Mataji asked the Maulavi to perform this duty. He was given a plate of sugar-puffs for the purpose. After offering the sweets at the grave, he had a strong desire to give a few to Mataji. When he reached the hall, Mataji of her own accord took one of the sweets. At the end of the *kirtana* he partook of the *prasāda* that was distributed amongst the people. He was a very staunch Muslim. After this incident Bhaiji noticed that many of the Maulavi's ideas about his own religion had undergone a change. He became as devoted to Mataji as any of her Hindu devotees.

1. Sri Niranjan Rai, Assistant Commissioner of Income tax. He was Bhaiji's friend. He and his wife Srimati Vinodini Devi were devoted to Mataji.

In the beginning, when he did not know Mataji so well, Bhaiji felt anxious to see her eat so little. He quietly sent a small quantity of fine flour and *ghí* to Shahbagh and asked Matori Pisima to fry a few *puris* for Mataji every day. This arrangement had to be kept secret because Mataji did not approve of storing. For a few days she did not seem to notice this sudden appearance of *puris* at mealtimes. Then, one day, she sent for Bhaiji and asked Matori Pisimā to fry *puris* from all the remaining flour. Nearly seventy were made. When Bhaiji came, she ate up all the *puris* and then said to him smilingly, "Had there been more I would have finished them all. If I start eating, none of you will be able to provide for me, however rich you may be. I tell you, do not make such arrangements for me."

Bhaiji and his close friend Niranjan Rai went to Shahbagh one day to find that Mataji had just finished drawing some diagrams on the floor with a piece of coal. Bholanath remarked with a smile, "Your mother has been drawing the *satcakras*." Mataji commented, "This afternoon I sat in an *āsana* and measured with my fingers the distance from the centre of the head to the middle of the eye-brows, then to the neck and down to the end of the spine. I have a *kheyāla* that there are centres at these specific spots within the body. From the lowest to the highest they range from gross to refined. I have not drawn these diagrams deliberately, but they have drawn themselves as it were. These centres are formations of nerves only. The aptitudes and propensities of the human being, determined by the experiences of his sense organs, are located in these centres. The stream of vitality flows through them slowly or fast, determining the emotions and actions of the individual. Just as the world has different strata, such as earth, water, the void and so on, the human

body also has different levels. The vital force lies as if somnolent at the base of the spine. By perseverance and faith thought and action are purified. The vibrations engendered by the action of inner and outer purity shake this sleeping power into motion. When this power moves upwards, penetrating level after level, the *sādhaka* feels freed from many ties." Mataji went on describing the various *cakras*, their inner significance and some of the experiences that may come to a *sādhaka* who treads this path. Bhaiji had read of these things in treatises on yoga and tantra, but he now realized that what Mataji was describing from her own direct experience, was so much more vivid and meaningful than the mere diagrammatic representations given in books.

One night Bhaiji was thinking of Mataji's oft-repeated saying, "The name purifies". He was doing japa, and now began to feel an unutterable joy in this occupation. He would doze off at times, but whenever he woke up he was blissfully aware of the mantra going on within him. This continued throughout the next day. He had to make an effort to pay attention to the outside world. At night, he did not feel at all sleepy. He spent long hours sitting motionless, suffused by a joy that overwhelmed him. The next day he told Mataji of his experience. She smiled and said, "You have tasted a fallen drop of honey. Now imagine how sweet the entire honeycomb would be."

Both Bhaiji and his friend Niranjan Rai were men of reserved temperament. They could not appreciate *kirtana* very much. One evening, after the *kirtana* at Shahbagh, they were taken aback to hear Mataji say, "All those who did not join in the *kirtana* today, must sing now." Bhaiji, Niranjan and a few other culprits, to the amusement of the people present, then very sheepishly sang *kirtana* for a little while. When everybody had gone away, Bhaiji felt inspired to sit

alone during the long hours of the night, singing *kirtana*. He now understood the ecstasy that people feel when they hear or join an inspired *kirtana*. He resolved not to look down upon *kirtana* as a very inferior mode of *sādhana*.

Once he was tempted to ask Mataji, "Please tell me who or what you are!" Mataji laughed aloud and said, "What a childish question to ask! People have various visions of gods and goddesses (in me) according to their own conditioning. What I was before, I am now, and shall be hereafter. I am also whatever you or anybody may think I am... why don't you look at it this way: That the yearnings (of seekers after Truth) have brought about this body. You all have wanted it and so you have found it. This is all you need to know."

"But this is not a very satisfactory answer....." Before Bhaiji could complete his sentence, Mataji's face took on an effulgent expression which did not belong to this world. With a voice which struck fear in Bhaiji's mind she said, "What more do you want to know, tell me, what more do you want to know?" Bhaiji's words faltered into silence and he did not have the courage to pursue the topic any further.

Chapter Nine

THE BEGINNING OF CEASELESS WANDERINGS

Pran Gopal Mukherjee had, after retirement from the post of Deputy Post Master General of Dacca, settled in Deoghar to be near the Ashram of his Guru, Sri Balananda Brahmachari Maharaj. He had repeatedly invited Mataji to visit Deoghar.

Some time in May 1926, Mataji and Bholanath, accompanied by Shashanka Mohan, Didi, Atal Bihari and his wife, and a few others set out for Deoghar via Calcutta. This was Mataji's first visit to the capital of undivided Bengal. They had been invited to stay with Pramatha Nath, who was now posted in Calcutta. Pramatha Nath was overjoyed at Mataji's *daršana* in his own home. After a couple of days in Calcutta, they went on to Deoghar where Pran Gopal Mukherjee was eagerly awaiting their arrival. The next day he took Mataji to his Guru's Ashram. The Brahmachariji said, "I have seen you before in visions. Now you have come to give *daršana* in your concrete form."

The following day Mataji had beautiful *bhāvas* during the *kīrtana* at the Ashram. She stood upright on her toes with her arms raised and for a long time danced to the rhythm of the *kīrtana*. The Brahmachariji was awe-struck at the scene. After the *kīrtana* the Brahmachariji conversed with her on spiritual matters.

Mataji and her party stayed in Deoghar for a week. Many people came to know her and she was held in great esteem by the inmates of the Ashram.

An eye-witness account of this visit is given by Prof. N. K. Brahma¹ : "I had the good fortune of seeing Mother next in the summer of 1926 at Deoghar.....She sang in such a sweet and melodious voice that it seemed to all present that she could not be any human being but must be a goddess in human form. Sri Brahmachari Maharaj was very much impressed by Mataji and it was at his special request that she agreed to stay for a week changing her original programme of remaining at Deoghar for three days only.

"I asked Mother what I could do for my spiritual advancement and was told in reply that what I did was all right and that nothing further could be done even if she instructed me to do so. I betrayed signs of doubt. Mother noticed it and said, 'Very well, I am telling you a very simple thing. Do not worship the portrait of a man who is alive.' 'I never do so, why should I', was my answer. Mother merely smiled and said, 'Very well.'

"After two years and a half I met her in the house of her husband's brother at Calcutta. I remember two or three missionary gentlemen coming to see her that evening and she was busy with them. As soon as I approached her, she said, 'Well, you do not worship the portrait of any living man, do you?' I was bewildered. During the interval of these two years and a half I had got a bromide enlargement of a saint who was then alive. I kept it in my *prayer*-room and was worshipping it every day. She did not wait for an answer and said to me, 'You see, then, that what is ordained to happen, happens ; nothing but that'."

On their return to Calcutta, Mataji and her party put up at Surendra Mohan Mukherjee's place. He had not seen Mataji before but had agreed to receive them as guests.

1. Mother As Seen By Her Devotees, pp. 39-40.

After this first *daršana* he and his aged mother became life-long devotees of Mataji.

On the day of her departure from Calcutta, Mataji visited Pramatha Nath's house also. Many people who were to become devotees later came to see her there. It was arranged that she would go to the station from Pramatha Nath's house. At the time of her departure, Pramatha Nath sat in meditation in a corner of the room. Mataji approached him to bid farewell. Without saying a word he prostrated himself before her and thus prevented her from moving away. Many people had come bringing food for the journey. There was a heap of fruit, sweets, *sāris* and flowers at her feet. It started raining heavily. The assembled people standing about in the rain began to sing *kīrtana*. Strangers became friends. Amidst an air of great rejoicing and festivity a meal for everyone was improvised out of all the eatables brought for Mataji and her party. Mataji missed the train, much to the joy of her new acquaintances in Calcutta. She returned to Dacca the next day.

Soon after, Mataji went one day to Siddheshwari, as she often did, accompanied by a small group of people. She sat in the hollow surrounded by the others. Mataji no longer covered her face with the folds of her *sāri*. It was left drawn up on her head only. There was no shyness or restraint in her manner now. Mataji looked about her and spoke in a firm voice, "All of you must endeavour to mould yourselves. You must strive to overcome anger and jealousy. This is merely the beginning. You will have to endure much. Storms will arise and sweep away many from amongst you." Once more she spoke in a very forceful voice, "Look, people mostly ask me about their worldly problems. I have nothing to say about such matters, but I tell you that when I come and sit in this hollow, I shall answer whatever questions you choose to ask, but not at any other time."

There was silence for a while. The women took the initiative, asking Mataji about their personal problems pertaining to daily affairs. Mataji smilingly answered these questions and suggested solutions to problems presented to her. Strange as it may seem, nobody had the wit to ask a single question of any significance. After some time, irritated by the petty questions, the men started to sing *kirtana*. Mataji stood up inside the hollow and very strange and awe-inspiring *bhāvas* began to manifest themselves on her body.

Didi knelt in front of Mataji reciting aloud the hymn to Durgā, a demonstration which was entirely foreign to her nature. Many other people also seemed overwhelmed and stood gazing at Mataji with folded hands.

Mataji stepped out of the hollow and walked very rapidly through the surrounding darkness to the Kālī temple. She lay down in front of the image. Bholanath and Didi gently massaged her hands and feet. Mataji said something indistinctly. With great difficulty Didi managed to catch the words by bending her head. Didi turned round and said to the assembled people, "Mataji says that none of you should disclose or discuss whatever you may have seen today." It was almost dawn by the time they came back to Shahbagh.

This incident may be related in the words of one of the eye-witnesses: "Mother sat upon the platform that *Ambuvāchi* day and the change that came over her person was simply astounding. Her whole body seemed afire—but it was a fire that emitted the sweetest, the most comfortably cool rays that you could imagine. She shone gloriously but did not cause any pain to our vision. To this day I have a vivid recollection of this transfiguration She called one by one the four or five persons who had then gathered there, except only one. She had, I should say here, not yet 'come out' and very few people had any knowledge about her. I remember Mother

called Rai Bahadur (Pran Gopal Mukherjee) first and said in an admonishing tone: 'You are publicising me'. Rai Bahadur smiled and replied; 'Yes Mother, I am'. She then said something to him which I cannot remember. The next person to be called was myself and Mother in a deep toned voice said to me: 'I know but One'. Then she launched into a *stotra* the like of which used to gush forth from her on many an occasion in those days. It was not possible to follow her in it, so rapid was the stream of words welling forth, but it was clearly understood that she was speaking of the unity of all things, and I seem to remember the word *Abrahmāstambapary-antam* occurring in it. Thus, even at the beginning of my acquaintance with her, Mother spoke of Unity in Diversity—the truth, which has been so forcibly borne upon me by her utterances and conduct subsequently ...¹

The one person left out was Atal Bihari Bhattacharya and this became a turning point in his life. He was grief-stricken at this apparent neglect and his yearning for Mataji's grace became overwhelming. Subsequently he and his wife felt amply recompensed by Mataji's care and concern for them.

Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, a professional photographer from Chittagong had come to Dacca during the Pujā vacation of 1926. He was very anxious to take a few photos of Mataji. One morning, accompanied by Bhaiji he visited Shahbagh. Mataji was lying in one of the rooms in *samādhi*. Shashi Bhushan, who had to leave the same evening, sought Bholanath's permission and help. Bholanath, assisted by Bhaiji, guided Mataji's steps to a sunlit spot outside. Shashi Bhushan exposed eighteen plates. When he developed them he was amazed to find that the first seventeen were totally blank. The last one showed the sitting figure of Mataji, but

1. Girija Shankar Bhattacharya: *Mother as Seen by Her Devotees*, pp. 104-105.

there was a shadowy form at her back. In great haste he printed this negative and to his amazement found that the form was that of Bhaiji. Actually, Bhaiji had been standing beyond the range of his focus while he took the photos. There was also a semicircular mark on Mataji's forehead.

Questioned about this phenomenon, Mataji later said, "When Bholanath and Jyotish (Bhaiji) came to take me outside, I had the *kheyāla* that my body was surrounded by a very bright light. This may have spoilt the first few plates. This light began to diminish gradually until it remained concentrated on the forehead only. I did not see Jyotish but I had a *kheyāla* that he was standing at my back."

Another similar incident occurred in Dehradun much later. The picture of a child was superimposed on the subject of the photograph. But, as written earlier, these phenomena never acquired a prominence over and above the miraculous personality of Mataji. Mataji's *kheyāla* was synonymous with accomplishment. Yet the fruition of her *kheyāla* was so integrated with the ongoing course of events that only a few perceptive people could become aware of this remarkably constant feature of her way of life. So much so that it was years before Mataji's companions learnt to abide by her *kheyāla*. That this knowledge dawned on them only very slowly was due to the fact that Mataji was always ready to conform to the wishes of others rather than impose her own. She would ordinarily (unless her *kheyāla* was otherwise) concur with the general opinion in matters requiring decisions. She would ask for the opinions of elders round her and would take up their suggestions for execution.

Mataji herself ordinarily never sets about doing anything towards an end. Therefore, devotees consider it a rare honour and a matter of good fortune if she makes any suggestions which can be carried out by them. Incidentally, it may be

said that her characteristic of simply abiding by the arrangements made by her companions or accepting the decisions taken by them, leads to strange results just as her unquestioning obedience did in her childhood. An example may be given: Once an air-conditioned coach had been reserved for her in the Bombay Mail. Mataji does not even use an electric fan during summer. The fans in her rooms are used for visitors only. It could be seen that she was extremely uncomfortable in the air-conditioned coach. But she would not allow anybody to make alternative arrangements because she was going to be the guest of the gentleman who had arranged for the railway journey. She remarked ruefully, "He has done the best he could. It is not his fault that his mother (meaning herself) is a complete rustic!"

During the same vacation of 1926, many newcomers had Mataji's *darlana* in Dacca, among them was Shashanka Mohan's eldest son, Birendra Chandra Mukherjee, Professor of English at Agra. Late at night, when only a few close companions remained at Shahbagh, he and Atal Bihari would engage Mataji in conversation. One day he asked her, "What do you think of all these new people coming to see you almost daily?"

"Nobody is new. They all appear familiar to me."

"Do you always know the thoughts of others?"

"Not all the time. I see clearly the things which are within the focus of my attention. You know the letters of the alphabet, but without keeping them constantly in mind, you can read when you want to. This is one aspect of the matter. Actually, even when knowledge is all-comprehensive a mode of behaviour is possible which shows that the person has ordinary comprehension."

"What is the difference between a *sadhaka* and a Divine Incarnation?"

"A *sādṛhaka* is restricted by many self-imposed rules and regulations. An incarnation is above such limitations, although he may adhere to them at his will. It is difficult for ordinary people to distinguish between the two. Men of discernment only may know the difference. But it is also true that unless He Himself reveals His identity, nobody can recognise an Incarnation for what He is."

Chapter Ten

THE KĀLĪ OF RAMNA ASHRAM AT DACCA

The annual Kālī-Pūjā drew near (October/November 1926). Kālī was the presiding deity of Bholanath's family, who were expected to perform the annual *pūjā* wherever they might be. Bholanath and his brothers had to move from place to place on account of their various occupations, and it was not always possible for them to get together for this festival. The brothers, therefore, decided to perform this duty by turns. Bholanath had once celebrated the *pūjā* while at Bajitpur. After coming to Dacca Mataji had, at the request of Bholanath and others, herself performed the *pūjā* in 1925. This was the first time that Mataji had performed a *pūjā* publicly with the assistance of outsiders and in accordance with scriptural rules. On both these occasions some miraculous incidents had taken place. The enlarged number of devotees were keen to see Mataji do the *pūjā* again. The year was marked by many changes in her life. She had gradually come to be exempted from housework which was carried out by other members of the family or by close friends. She had become very widely known and Shahbagh was swarming with more and more people every day.

Not daring to ask Mataji themselves, the devotees requested Bholanath to plead with her on their behalf. Mataji said to him, "Do not request me to do these things anymore. You can see for yourself that I am unable to do any type of work now." Bholanath did not want to persuade her against her *kheyālā*, and as it was not his turn to celebrate the *pūjā*, he dropped the idea altogether.

Just one day before the *pūjā*, late at night, Mataji asked Bholanath, "What was Bhudev Babu talking to you about?" Bholanath told her that he and others had been trying to persuade Bholanath to arrange for the annual festival. Mataji said, "Why don't you perform the *pūjā*?" Bholanath interpreted this to mean that Mataji now had the *kheyālā* for this *pūjā* to be celebrated. He went out and gave the good news to Baul, Suren and others who were just about to go home. Since time was so short the image had to be procured that very night and all arrangements expedited. Baul and a few others went to town to fetch the image. They found that all images but one had been sold out. The colour of this image was somewhat unusual being more bluish than black. When Mataji saw the image the next day, she said, "Well, evidently Kālī had decided to come to us this year and so things have arranged themselves in this manner. I saw an image of Kālī of exactly this shape and hue, wearing a garland of red hibiscus flowers, coming down from above as if to fall into my arms. The image was so vivid that I lifted my arms to take it. Now that she is here, you should make arrangements for the *pūjā* to the best of your ability."

Perhaps it will not be out of place to give here a few details of these forms of worship. The presiding deity of Bengal is Durgā or Vāsantī, the personification of the Divine Mother. According to scriptural stories, although the daughter of a king, she chose for her husband Śiva, the embodiment of the very spirit of renunciation. To his abode of utter desolation on the snow-clad mount Kailāsa, she brought the magnificence and grandeur of a princely household. For three days every year¹ she comes to visit the earth, her

1. Durgā-Pūjā takes place in September or October and Vāsantī-Pūjā in March or April. The former is more commonly celebrated.

erstwhile home. Bengal prepares for her advent with hectic enthusiasm. She is worshipped with flowers, fruits, sweets, clothes and music. For three days Bengalis can think of nothing else. Then wiping off the festive mood, as if by magic, the Goddess departs to the abode of her consort burying the whole countryside under a pall of gloom.

The Divine Mother in the form of Durgā or in various other forms is worshipped in all parts of India. The worship of Kālī, however, is peculiar to Bengal. According to the Scriptures, Kālī is the destructive aspect of Durgā. Durgā is beautiful to look at, Kālī is fearful. The golden image of Durgā is clothed in shining garbs and the light that flashes from her ornaments fills the universe; Kālī's dark hue mingles with the black waves of her hair cascading down all round her. As Kālī is the reigning deity of the battle-field, she is bespattered with human blood. She has four hands. The left upper hand holds aloft a *kharga*,¹ while the left lower hand grasps a human skull; the right upper hand carries the message of *abhaya*—'do not fear', while the right lower hand is held out in a gesture of benediction. She is so bent upon her devastating course of the slaughter of evil-doers that she inadvertently steps on the prostrate form of Śiva, and then bites her tongue in confusion at what she has done. It is thus that the artist likes to create her image for the annual *pūjā*. The inspired songs of Ramaprasad invoke an image of beauty and benign presence rather than the apparently repellent form of Kālī. More modern poets of Bengal, such as Atulprasad Sen and Kazi Nazrul Islam, have sung songs of praise about Kālī as the most compassionate Mother. Proper appreciation of the conflicting appeal of Kālī is not possible without some orientation in culture and tradition. Durgā-

1. A short broad sword with a curved tip.

Pūja is a festival for the masses. Kālī-Pūjā is for the *sādhaka*. It takes place in the stillness and quiet of midnight.

Bholanath himself was a Śākta and a staunch believer in ritualism. Many of the early devotees of Mataji were familiar with this form of Kālī-Pūjā since their childhood. Preparations went on in full swing. Shahbagh was crowded with people. Midnight drew near. There was not an inch of space to spare in the *pūjā*-room. Mataji was sitting in her own room in a state of *bhūva*. Bholanath somehow guided her steps to a tank nearby. Didi and others helped her to take a bath and change into a new *sārf*. Bholanath then brought her back to the *pūjā*-room and seated her in front of the image. In the adjoining room people were singing *kīrtana*. The atmosphere was suffused with the fragrance of flowers and incense. The congregation waited with full hearts to see Mataji invoke the presence of the Goddess.

Mataji started performing certain *kriyās* with her left hand. After a few moments she stood up and said sharply to Bholanath, "I shall sit in my place, you can do the *pūjā*". Like a flash of lightning she went through the crowd and sat down near the image. Bholanath thought that she had asked him to do the *pūjā* because she herself would not do so and that she was going merely to sit with the other ladies. He had hardly begun to say, "No, no. I told you before, I will not do the *pūjā*" when he saw a living Kālī in place of Mataji. Mataji's fair complexion had darkened, her eyes became fixed and enlarged like those of the goddess Kālī in her clay image. Bholanath without more ado occupied the seat of the priest and filling his hands with flowers started offering them to Mataji reciting mantras of the Devī-Pūjā. The next instant Mataji bent forward, so that the entire upper part of her body was flat on the floor. This limp pliable posture was peculiar to Mataji. Without raising herself she said, "Close your

eyes." Everybody obeyed. But Mataji again said, without changing her posture, "Mahadeiya has not closed her eyes". Then on looking around, people found that Mahadeiya, the wife of one of the gardeners, was standing under a tree outside and looking into the room. On being told, she also shut her eyes.

All this happened within a few seconds. The people sat in silent meditation. After some time Bholanath asked them to open their eyes. Mataji was sitting up, covered with flowers of different colours. The ineffable beauty and majesty of her countenance filled every heart with awe, wonder and homage. They believed sincerely that they had a vision of the Goddess in Mataji.

Bholanath had sensed during the *pūjā* of the previous year that Mataji was not in favour of offering any animal for sacrifice. So, an alternative form of worship was devised and performed. The last ritual of the *pūjā* is supposed to be the *yajña* (kindling of sacrificial fire) completed by *pūrṇāhuti* (final oblation). But on this occasion *pūrṇāhuti* was withheld at Mataji's instance. The *pūjā* was concluded, but the fire was not extinguished.

The congregation took their share of the *prasāda* and went home talking to each other of their own impressions of a unique experience.

In the early hours of the morning, a few close companions sat with Mataji and Bholanath discussing the Kālī-Pūjā just completed. Somebody remarked that the image was lifelike and that he would be afraid to sit alone in the *pūjā*-room at night. The others concurred that the image was quite extraordinary. Suddenly Mataji asked Didi to fetch a little of the fire from the bronze receptacle (*yajña-kunḍa*) in the *pūjā*-room. Didi put a few pieces of live coal in a vessel and brought it to Mataji. Mataji took it in her hand and shaking it fully

remarked, "The fire of a *Mahdyajña* will be lighted from this fire."¹ After a short pause she spoke again, "Who can undertake to maintain this fire in Kālī's room?" Nobody said anything immediately because the question was fraught with difficulties. The daily worship of Kālī is meant for ascetics only as she is supposed to destroy all bondage. Some people are even afraid to keep a picture of Kālī in their homes. Maintaining the fire would entail the offering of daily oblations for its worship and constant vigilance. In short these things could not be done by a man leading a householder's life. So, expressing the general opinion about it, Didi's brother Birendra Chandra answered, "No, Ma, I cannot. I have my wife and children to look after." The others merely kept quiet. But Mataji repeated again, "Who amongst you can do it?" Shashanka Mohan had been dozing a little. He heard the question now and probably believed it to be in connection with the previous topic of conversation, namely, about being afraid of the lifelike image of Kālī. He said emphatically, "I can. What is there to be afraid of?"

Mataji promptly replied, "Very well. Ask the permission of your sons." Birendra, his eldest, and Nandu, his youngest sons were present. Birendra said, "If father can do it, it will be highly meritorious for us all." Nandu had some grave objections but did not speak. Mataji then entrusted Shashanka Mohan with the maintenance of the fire which was destined to have a momentous future. Without another word he went away to begin a vigil which is still being kept

1. A chain of fortuitous circumstances led to the performing of a *Mahdyajña* at Varanasi from 14th January 1946 to 14th January 1949. Arrangements for kindling the fire were made according to strict Vedic rules. The priest-in-charge of the proceedings was not a devotee of Mataji. But at the last moment (again due to unforeseen circumstances) he had to take the help of this fire which had been burning for twenty years at that time. Thus Mataji's words were fulfilled although personally she did nothing towards this end.

up in several places. It was quite characteristic of Shashanka Mohan that he did not draw back, when he realised what was in fact required of him. It may also be said here that no better person could have been entrusted with the sacred fire.

The general custom after a *pūjā* is to consign the image to the waters of a river. Some rituals are performed by ladies before the image is taken away. The next day Niranjan Rai's wife Vinodini Devi, said, "Ma, the image is really extraordinary. It is a great pity to send it away for immersion." Mataji said, "Let her remain if you are feeling so sad about it. We did not ask the Goddess to come. She came of her own accord. Let her remain as long as she wills."

A young boy called Kamalakanta who had just passed his matriculation examination had come to Shahbagh. He had fallen ill some time ago and was cured. He attributed his recovery to Mataji's grace and would not return to his village home but stayed on at Shahbagh. Mataji assigned to him the duty of looking after the image of Kālī. There would be no *pūjā*, but he was told to garland her every day without fail with a *mālā* (wreath) of red hibiscus flowers.

One day Mataji asked some of the men to remove the image of Kālī to another room of the house. With great care the clay image was shifted to the new place. A storm arose that night and the door of the original *pūjā*-room crashed down on the very spot where the image had been; it would have been smashed had it not been removed in time.

The visitors to Shahbagh got into the habit of paying homage to Kālī. Two of them dreamt of her also and wished to perform *pūjā*. Accordingly, arrangements were made for worship. At that time animal sacrifice to Kālī was a common practice. Bholanath had, as already mentioned, sensed that

Mataji's *kheydla* was against this feature of the *pūjā* and so he had dropped it from all the *pūjās* organised by him. But this particular *pūjā* was being performed by outsiders and so provision for the sacrifice of a goat was included.

Mataji happened to be lying in a state of *bhāva* while the *pūjā* was being performed. She suddenly appeared at the time of the sacrifice and placed her hand on the neck of the animal. Bholanath immediately had the goat released from the sacrificial post.

Mataji asked Ashutosh, a young boy, to pick up the goat in his arms and follow her. She came to a tank outside Shahbagh and told Ashutosh to release the animal. Many persons had followed them with lanterns in their hands. When they started walking back to Shahbagh the kid also followed Mataji. When she came and sat near the *pūjā*, it lay down near her. The *pūjā* was completed. The devotees partook of *prasāda* and dispersed. In this way, Mataji brought about a major change in the ritualistic worship of deities. The practice of animal sacrifice was thereafter discontinued effectively. The goat remained at Shahbagh. It would either be under Mataji's wooden bedstead or would sit with its head on her lap during *kīrtanas*. It gradually became very big and robust. One day, when Mataji was not at Shahbagh, it jumped over the wall and disappeared.

The subsequent history of the goddess Kālī is as interesting as her advent at Shahbagh. The image had to be shifted five times before it could be installed permanently. Images for annual festivals are made of ordinary clay and not processed for durability. Whenever the devotees were obliged to move the image, they would be apprehensive about its safety, but nothing untoward happened. In spite of so much handling, the image remained intact. An anecdote relating

to this goddess Kālī will perhaps not be out of place here. Some time after the Kālī-Pūjā described above, Mataji happened to be travelling in Uttar Pradesh near Mirzapur. Bhaiji was also there. Leaving him at Mirzapur, Mataji and Bholanath went to Rajasthan. Bhaiji came to the station to see them off. Mataji told him, "On your way back, look for a garland of hibiscus flowers on the hillside of Chunar (a village nearby) and keep it with you."

Chunar is situated in an arid hilly region where a type of thorny bush is the only vegetation. There are absolutely no hibiscus shrubs for miles around. On his way back from the station, Bhaiji kept a sceptical look out for a garland of flowers. He, however, saw the garland quite easily and clearly. It was a bright red spot visible from afar against a uniform drab background. The flowers were fresh and glowing.

Bhaiji wrote to the devotees in Dacca to enquire if anything unusual had happened on that particular day. He heard by return of post that Kamalakanta had forgotten to garland the image of Kālī that day, and that all were remorseful for the omission. Bhaiji now saw a meaning in this incident. He realized that Mataji's *kheyālā* of the daily offering of a garland had been fulfilled in spite of Kamalakanta's forgetfulness.

Incidentally, another interesting event may be related here. In 1929 an Ashram was built for Mataji by the devotees of Dacca, near the Ramna polo-grounds. More particulars about this Ashram will be given later. At Mataji's suggestion the image of Kālī was installed in a small temple in the Ashram. A few months after the ceremony of installation, Mataji happened to be in Cox's Bazar, a coastal town in district Chittagong.

On a new moon day Mataji, while walking back from the house of a neighbour along the beach, suddenly started

twisting one arm with the other. There was a smile on her lips but her eyes were full of tears. The whole night she did not rest and would twist her arm at intervals. Didi felt quite desperate, not knowing what to do. The next morning also, Mataji's eyes would fill with tears, although her expression remained normal. After a few days, a letter from Bhaiji conveyed the astounding news that thieves had broken into the Kālī temple at Ramna on new moon night and had removed the gold ornaments from the deity, damaging one of the arms of the image in the process.

This created a problem because a damaged image cannot be worshipped but has to be immersed in a river or lake. Mataji asked Bhaiji to write to the *paṇḍits* at Varanasi to find out what according to *tāstīc* rules could be done about the damaged image. Mahamahopadhyaya Annada Tarkachudamani wrote back to say: "This image, I see, has been preserved for daily worship, although intended for the annual *pūjā* (*Naimittika Pūjā*) only. This arrangement was made by a person of great spirituality (*Mahāpuruṣa*). In such a case, ordinary custom may be set aside and such arrangement be made as is directed by the *Mahāpuruṣa*."

Mataji was approached for guidance. She said, "Since an arm has been broken, let it be repaired. An accident of this kind would not prove fatal to a living person. If a beloved person meets with an accident, we don't throw him away. So why should we throw the image away? It would be different if it had been damaged seriously." So it was decided by the devotees that they would await Mataji's arrival in Dacca for further instructions in the matter.

Later, when Mataji returned to Dacca, the image of Kālī was repaired and installed in its original place. It was known that Mataji herself had given specific instructions regarding this matter to Bholanath who was always very meticulous in

ritualistic observances. The devotees were planning to build a bigger temple to house the images of Annapūrṇā, Śiva and Viṣṇu. Under Mataji's guidance a new temple was constructed around the small shrine of Kālī. The Kālī temple was left undisturbed. The foundation was laid around it and the temple was erected, leaving some space between the original shrine and the new walls. The floor of the new room came up to more than half of the Kālī shrine, which resembled an underground cell inside the room. A door and a flight of steps led down to this inner sanctum. The deities—Śiva, Annapūrṇā, Kālī and Viṣṇu—were installed on the roof of this original shrine which was now like a platform in the new temple.

Mataji suggested new rules for the worship of Kālī. The door giving access to the Kālī temple would remain locked. It would be opened once every year and *pūjā* performed before the image. The following day the door would remain open for all devotees irrespective of caste, creed and religion. In the evening, after *abhiṣeka* and worship, the door would be locked again for one year. A photograph of Kālī was taken and hung over the temple door. Instead of the image, this photograph was decorated daily with a garland of red hibiscus flowers. Jogeshdada was put in charge of all these arrangements.

Something must be said here about Jogeshdada. Sri Jogesh Rai was a bachelor working in Dacca before joining the Ashram. He used to visit Shahbagh, attracted by the music rather than the religious activities. One day, during a *kīrtana* Mataji touched him while she was in an exalted state of *bhāva*. Sri Jogesh Rai was a quiet type of man. He would remain unobtrusively at the fringe of the crowd of devotees. Mataji at that time did not speak very freely to people visiting Shahbagh. Yet this did not prevent her from conveying her *kheyālā* to Jogeshdada, as he is called now.

Mataji asked Bholanath to tell Jogeshdada to take one year's leave from his service. He was to leave Dacca and go on a pilgrimage to distant places where nobody would know him. For one year he was not to make himself known to anybody. He was to inform his mother only, before leaving.

The friends and family of Jogesh Rai were surprised to learn of his sudden and unaccountable departure from Dacca. Mataji had told Jogeshdada to take no money with him and to beg for food. He did not know how to do this. He would stand near a house and repeat the names of the Lord. Mostly, people did not heed him. He did not look like a beggar or a *sādhū*, so this was also a handicap. Jogeshdada recalls humourously that it became slightly easier for him when he grew a beard and his hair became matted and his clothes shabby. He met Mataji unexpectedly in Hardwar during this year of pilgrimage. He was surprised to see her and her party walking along the road. Nobody except Bholanath recognised him because he was greatly changed in appearance. He looked like one of the *sādhūs* to be met with so frequently in that part of the country. Since he was not supposed to make himself known he did not approach them. He was not sure whether Mataji had recognised or even noticed him. He stood and watched the whole party walk past and go on ahead. After a short distance the road had a sharp turn. When Mataji passed this turning, she looked back at him standing by the wayside, and he knew from her expression that she had recognised him.

After completing one year Jogeshdada returned to Dacca. Mataji asked him to resume his service saying, "This is enough for the time being." Off and on Mataji would entrust him with various duties. By 1931, he was staying at Ramna as an inmate of the Ashram.

The new arrangements for the Goddess Kālī were carried out for about seven years. The devotees of Dacca would gather in the Ashram for the opening of the door once a year. It has already been mentioned that Mataji had the *kheyālā* that everybody irrespective of caste and creed could enter the temple and have Kālī *darsana*. For one day every year there was no restriction for anyone.

The annual *darsana* of Kālī came to an end in 1938. The intervening years had brought about many changes in Mataji's way of life. In 1938, Bholanath passed away, much to the grief of all devotees. Didi and her father came to Dacca to attend the *pūjā* celebrations on Mataji's birthday. Mataji herself was away in Dehradun. On the specific day the door of Kālī's shrine was opened. The devotees were filled with sadness to see that one of the arms of the image had fallen from the body. It will be remembered that this had happened once before. Under Mataji's guidance the arm had been repaired. Bholanath had performed the *abhīṣeka* and *pūjā* of the deity and had reinstalled it in the shrine. Now Kulada Babu, who was in charge, did not feel equal to performing what Bholanath had done. He was afraid to touch or perform *pūjā* of the broken image. He decided to leave it alone and performed the ceremony of the annual worship on the *yantra* (symbol of the Goddess).

A telegram had been sent to Mataji for her instructions. A reply was received in due course to the following effect: "Let this image of Kālī disappear from view. There is no need to perform *pūjā* to the broken image."

The telegram was rightly understood to mean that the time had come for the small shrine with its presiding deity to be completely sealed up. Mataji had previously told Didi how to do this, should such a contingency arise. Now that, by a strange coincidence(?) Didi happened to be present in

Dacca, she could give the necessary directions. The shrine was already more than half underground and so there was no need to undertake any major construction. The simple blocking up of the inner passage left the main temple undisturbed and accomplished the complete sealing of the temple of Kālī.

The Goddess Kālī had been with the devotees of Dacca for nearly twelve years. Some asked themselves if it was a coincidence that Kālī became invisible to them only after Bholanath himself had passed away.

Referring to this Kālī, Mataji had said, "I saw a moving image of Kālī, with no Śiva under her feet. Now why should there be no Śiva as is usual? Why should such an image take form? Whatever attitude of the mind all of you have, is reflected here. It was time for the annual Kālī-Pūjā. All of you were eager for the performance of the worship—that is why *Devī* herself appeared in the form of Kālī. Since the image was a personification of *Ādyā Śakti*, there was no need for Śiva under her feet."

The Ramna Ashram at Dacca is at present unoccupied. By courtesy of the Government of East Pakistan, it remains as it was. A *bhātravī* (a woman ascetic) looks after the images in the temple.¹

1. This was so when this book appeared first. Subsequently at the time of the great disturbances, when East Pakistan became independent, all the buildings were destroyed. Even the famous and ancient temple of Kālī at Ramna was razed to the ground. Presumably the little shrine of Kālī at the Ashram has remained undisturbed underground and it is now not possible to locate its site.

Chapter Eleven

MATAJI'S FIRST JOURNEY ACROSS NORTHERN INDIA : 1927

Already in 1926 the devotees had seriously started thinking about an Ashram for Mataji. Bhaiji said to her, "We need an Ashram where we can assemble and sing *kirtana*. It will not be possible to do so always at Shahbagh." Mataji answered, "The whole world is an Ashram. Why do you need a special one?" But Bhaiji insisted on having a place which they could call their own. Mataji answered, "If you feel so strongly about it, then try to acquire the plot of ground that contains the ruins of the Śiva temple at Ramna." Ramna was a vast property, formerly used as a polo-ground. Mataji disclosed that she had 'seen' many saints and ascetics who had lived in that place in the past and had practised rigorous *sādhanā*.

Bhaiji found that the property was owned by the priest of the Ramna Kālī temple and had originally belonged to one Gokul Thakur. Bholanath now recalled that Mataji had mentioned this name to him at Bajitpur. The priest wanted a very large sum of money for the plot and so nothing could be done about it at the time. The Ashram was subsequently built in 1929.

Bhaiji was keeping indifferent health all this time. On January 4, 1927 he became completely bed-ridden, having developed tuberculosis of the lungs. During this severe stage of his illness Mataji did not go to see him. He would pine for her *darśana*, but she did not come, at least not physically.

In other ways, he continued to receive many tokens of her grace. One day at Shahbagh Mataji said to Bholanath, "I see blood on everybody's lips." Bholanath immediately connected this with Bhaiji and went to see him. He found Bhaiji in the grip of an attack of severe haemorrhage.

Pondering over this phase of his illness, Bhaiji later realised that even Mataji's absence had been a blessing in disguise. He was so preoccupied with thoughts of Mataji and her desertion of him in his hour of need that he had no time left to worry about his illness or the future. He also recollected an experience which recompensed him for all the hours of anguish he had suffered. "One night", he recorded, my condition was very serious. The doctors had looked despondent. It was raining monotonously. The night was made hideous by howling dogs. Uncontrollable tremors shook my body in fear of the unknown. At that moment I saw Mataji sitting at my bedside. When I was about to exclaim in surprise at this unexpected visit, she seemed to place her hand on my head. I was at peace."

The devotees of Dacca were becoming accustomed to Mataji's frequent absences from Shahbagh. Accompanied always by Bholanath and such others as were free to join her, she paid many visits to neighbouring towns at the requests of family or friends. In the first week of April 1927, Mataji left Dacca again to attend the *Pūrṇa-Kumbha*¹ at Hardwar. Her party included Shashanka Mohan and Didi, Rajendra Kushari and his wife, Matari Pisima, Didima, Dadamañai and Bholanath's youngest brother Jamini Kumar. This was Mataji's first long journey.

1. An ancient religious festival occurring at twelve years' interval in four holy cities: Hardwar, Prayag (Allahabad), Nasik and Ujjain.

They made a brief halt in Calcutta where they put up in an unoccupied house, thinking it would be inconvenient for anyone to accommodate such a large number of guests. Rai Bahadur Jogesh Ghosh, the trustee of the Shabbagh gardens, was in Calcutta at that time. He was now very devoted to Mataji. Many of the members of his family had travelled abroad and had adopted westernised ways of living. Nevertheless, they arranged for the *pūjā* of Kālī so that they would have an occasion to invite Mataji to their home.

Mataji had been to Paruldia, his village home, in December 1926 to attend the *śrāddha* ceremony for Jogesh Chandra's mother. At that time Mataji had assembled the girls of the house and said, "You have no specific duty to perform in the *śrāddha*, but you can all sing *kīrtana*." The eldest granddaughter, Bhramara, who could sing beautifully, led the *kīrtana* and within a short while the entire household gathered round them. This was something quite unheard of in this house. There were many who had never witnessed a *kīrtana* before. Mataji moved about gracefully all over the house surrounded by the girls. Some Mohammedan workmen were standing on one side. She went up to them and asked them to sing the name of Allah, which they did with her. Some very extraordinary states of *bhāva* happened to Mataji on this occasion, even now recalled with awe and reverence by eye-witnesses.

The Rai Bahadur was very keen to bring about a meeting of Mataji and his employer, the Nawabzadi Pyari Banu. Mataji could be invited to a religious ceremony only, so he arranged a *kīrtana* at Pyari Banu's house and brought an invitation from her for Mataji and her companions. The Nawabzadi was very pleased to see Mataji. Although a Muslim, she with her son and daughter joined in the singing of the *kīrtana* with Hindu devotees.

From Calcutta Mataji's party came to Varanasi. It was arranged that they would put up with Kunja Mohan Mukherjee, the younger brother of Shashanka Mohan. Didi's eldest sister and her husband Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee who had seen Mataji in Dacca previously, were at the station to receive her. Kunja Mohan met her for the first time.

The next day a *kirtana* was organized at his residence. Mataji in an exalted mood, went all over the house swaying to the rhythm of the music. This accorded an opportunity to the inhabitants of Varanasi to witness this phenomenon.

The following day the entire party, augmented by a few from Varanasi, proceeded to Hardwar. After bathing in the holy Ganges, they visited places of pilgrimage in the neighbourhood: Lachmanjhula, Hrishikesh and Bhimgoda. As mentioned earlier Jogesh Rai met Mataji quite unexpectedly while she was touring around these places. They also visited Agra, Mathura and Vrindaban on their return journey.

On the eve of her departure from Hardwar, Mataji asked Shashanka Mohan and Didi to remain there for three months and practise *sādhanā*. She said, "It is necessary for everybody to do his own work (*sādhanā*) in solitude, if possible." After the Kālī-Pūjā Shashanka Mohan had stayed at Shahbagh for five months. He used to go to the Medical School once a day. On his way back he would visit his home and then return to Shahbagh. It was natural for Didi to come and stay with her father so that she could look after his needs. Since she had his escort, her relatives could not object to her living with such strange people as Mataji and her family. Thus Shashanka Mohan had embarked on a career which culminated in the highest renunciation. In his old age he was getting used to all sorts of hardships which ordinarily he would not have considered possible for him to bear. Walking long distances in hilly regions, bathing in cold

water, eating at irregular times or fasting for many long hours, all such things had now woven themselves into the fabric of his daily life. Yet, he seemed to be gaining in health. However, *sādhanā* and health were not the main considerations for Shashanka Mohan or Didi.

They had been in Mataji's company almost constantly for one year and four months. They were now taken aback at the prospect of being deprived of her *dariana* for three long months. Didi perhaps learnt her first lesson in unquestioning obedience from her father. Shashanka Mohan was an old man, more used to issuing commands and taking decisions than playing a subordinate role. But even he did not protest against Mataji's *kheyāla*. He and Didi somehow reconciled themselves to this parting. It is interesting to record that they were recalled to Dacca by Mataji already after a month and a half.

In the meantime, Bhaiji had recovered to some extent and was staying in one of the Government quarters in Ramna, near Shahbagh. This year Bhaiji, Niranjan Rai and other devotees decided to celebrate Mataji's birthday at Shahbagh. It was the first celebration of this kind. Mataji and Bholanath had just returned from Hardwar. The devotees gathered at Shahbagh in large numbers to perform *pūjā* and *kirtana* in commemoration of Mataji's birth on April 30, 1896. She was now 31 years old.

Bhaiji was still quite ill. Mataji and Bholanath went to see him almost daily. Bhaiji once told Bholanath that he sometimes had a longing for a cool and refreshing bath. Mataji said, "Why don't you have one? There is a pond nearby."

Without any hesitation Bhaiji got up, although he was under strict medical orders not to leave his bed. Bholanath

helped him to walk the distance of 60 to 70 yards to the pond to take a bath. Bhaiji was usually closely watched over by his wife, son and daughter and his faithful servant Khagen. But by a coincidence nobody was nearby at this particular time. His daughter, who was in attendance in case he wanted anything, had fallen asleep. She woke up to find Mataji sitting close beside her, and her father lying in bed as usual. The next day Bhaiji's wife complained to Mataji, "Look, Ma, he is supposed to be strictly confined to bed. But as soon as he gets the slightest opportunity he evidently goes out." She pointed to the burrs stuck on one of his dhotis, which showed that he had walked in the field. It was only after Bhaiji had recovered a few months later that he related the incident of the bath to his wife. She would not believe him at first, arguing that he could not have survived such an exertion. But he confirmed in all seriousness that it was true and reminded her of the burrs she had found on his clothes. Thereupon she had to accept the statement.

Crowds were still on the increase at Shahbagh. Besides, many persons would arrange for *kirtana* at their homes, and invite Mataji and Bholanath. Wherever Mataji went, a large multitude would follow, invited or not. Different people had different reactions towards this phenomenon. According to their temperaments, some would deem it their good fortune that the dust of the feet of devotees was purifying their homes. Others would be annoyed at the presumption of an uninvited crowd trampling down gardens and making themselves at home wherever Mataji might be. Even ladies belonging to conservative families followed her about without any restraint. Men who could not have imagined themselves running after a 'woman saint' were now jealous of the woman-folk when the latter surrounded Mataji while they themselves could catch



Ma with her Parents

only a glimpse of her from a distance. A glance, a word, a smile would throw out of gear the standards of behaviour of a lifetime. The customs and conventions of a whole community were, as it were, set at naught. It must be stated here that this participation in a joyous unconventional activity was experienced as an exhilarating enterprise rather than a flouting of the social regulations. As stated earlier Mataji at no time disregarded, or permitted the disregard of conventions prevailing in the societies in which she happened to be moving. This was seen more forcefully when she travelled to distant places like Gujrat, Madras and the Northern districts.

The devotees of Dacca at that time could not imagine a future without Mataji residing at Shahbagh like the presiding deity of the town. They had yet to learn that Mataji would not settle down anywhere and still be completely at home wherever she might be.

One evening in July, Mataji had the *kheyāla* to visit a number of houses including those of Didi and Bhaiji. From Mataji's manner both Didi and her father concluded that she was about to leave them again. Bhaiji also had a similar premonition. He sent his servant Khagen to Shahbagh but was told that both Bholanath and Mataji were there. Shashanka Mohan who was once more staying at home felt very restless. It was then past midnight, yet he went to Shahbagh on foot. Mataji and Bholanath were surprised to see him at that hour. He said, "Ma, I cannot reassure myself that you will not suddenly go away without informing us." Mataji smiled and said, "You will come to know of it if I leave, won't you?" This answer was far from satisfactory; but he could not do anything more and so returned home.

Next morning he went to Shahbagh only to find that Mataji and Bholanath had already left for an unknown destination. In great distress he came to Bhaiji, who also did not know

anything about Mataji's departure. Later in the day they heard from a messenger that Mataji and Bholanath had gone to Narayangunj, and from there intended to visit other places. Mataji had been obliged to send a message because she had told Shashanka Mohan that he would be informed if she left Dacca. The devotees of Dacca gradually were beginning to realise that Mataji's *kheyāla* for travelling was not to be upset with impunity. Mataji did not stay for long in any place. From Narayangunj she went to Rajshahi (Atal Bihari's house), Calcutta and Deoghar.

Bhaiji in the meantime had been asked to have a change of climate. He had arranged to go to Vindhyachal in Uttar Pradesh, which is a health resort as well as a place of pilgrimage. On reaching Vindhyachal, Bhaiji felt depressed. How great was his joy when a few days later Mataji and Bholanath arrived at Vindhyachal and stayed near his house. Kunja Mohan's family came from Varanasi to spend a few days with Mataji. His younger sons were little boys of about nine and seven years of age. One evening the entire party went for a walk. The region is hilly, the footpaths at places strewn over with rocks and boulders. Coming to a narrow track Mataji went ahead and outdistanced her companions. She stopped suddenly and signalled to others not to advance. Bholanath, however, ran forward and found a cobra with raised hood near Mataji's feet. Mataji said she had stepped on it. Without answering the question whether it had bitten her, she again started to walk ahead. The snake slipped away before they could do anything about it. The younger of the two boys suddenly said to his mother, "Isn't it written in my brother's horoscope that he will die of snake-bite? Mataji has made the snake bite herself today instead of my brother." Everybody was surprised that the child should remember about the horoscope of his brother and remind his parents of it.

When Bhaiji heard that Mataji had stepped on a cobra, he hurriedly procured all sorts of medicines and rubbed them on her foot. Late at night two bluish fang marks became visible on her left foot. Everyone was highly amused at Bhaiji's expense, because he had applied the medicines on Mataji's right foot.

After visiting Chunar and other places in the neighbourhood Mataji returned to Dacca. A few days later, Mataji and Bholanath, accompanied by a huge party, went to Vidyakut. Mataji's parents also were with them. Vidyakut was full of Mataji's relatives and friends. They all came to see her and Mataji had to visit their homes. Didi was introduced to Mataji's playmates and much time was spent in pleasant recollections of her childhood.

Mataji's visit to Kheora

From Vidyakut they went to Kheora by boat on August 3, 1927. The cottage where Mataji was born was now in the possession of a Muslim family. Many of the Muslim neighbours whom Mataji had called uncle, brother and so on, diffidently came forward trying to recognise in Mataji the bright-looking little girl who had won their affection. The devotees asked Didima to point out the exact spot where Mataji had been born, but the surroundings were so changed that Didima felt rather bewildered. Mataji was strolling about, talking to people. She went round the cottage and stood still near a place where a heap of cow-dung had been stored. She picked up a little of the earth from this place and was seen to cry violently. Didima now recognised many of the landmarks and stated definitely that this was the spot where Mataji had been born. It had then been enclosed by sheets of cane-matting and had had a temporary roof.

Bholanath was upset to see Mataji weep and wanted to leave immediately in order to dispel this mood. Mataji wiped her tears and said to the owners of the place: "It will be beneficial for all of you if you use this place for prayers and meditation only." They all readily agreed to do so. Shashanka Mohan wanted to give them some money towards the upkeep of the ground, but they would not accept it, saying that they themselves would do whatever was necessary. Didi brought away the clod of earth that Mataji had picked up.

The party then started for Vidyakut. In this short time many people had not received the news of Mataji's visit. When the boat was about to draw away from the bank, many people were seen running towards Mataji. Mataji's playmate and namesake Nirmala Devi came up now. Shirish Chandra who had been like a son to Didima when she had lived in Kheora also stood on the bank. They wanted Mataji to stay for a few days, but she in her own charming manner bade them farewell and came away.

They spent a few days in Vidyakut. On the day of departure Mataji caught hold of the arm of one of her old cousins and started weeping in the manner of a young woman going away from the village of her parents to her husband's home. The cousin placed his hand on her head and attempted to console her. All the relations and friends who had come to see her off, now started weeping with her. Mataji stepped into the boat. There were tears in her eyes and a smile on her lips. Biren Chandra said, "Mataji wanted the others to cry for her and remember her. That is why she started them off by shedding a few precious tears herself."

Didi and the other devotees from Dacca were amused and charmed to see Mataji in the role of a married village maiden bidding farewell to her people after a visit.

Chapter Twelve

FAREWELL TO SHAHBAGH

Mataji did not stay in Dacca for long. She again left Shahbagh for Calcutta at the invitation of Nawabzadi Pyari Banu to attend the weddings of her son and daughter. The Nawabzadi asked her children to make obeisance to Mataji before the beginning of the marriage ceremonies.

After the ceremonies were over, the Nawabzadi told Mataji that for many years there had been a misunderstanding between her and her mother-in-law. She was now going to meet her for a talk and requested Mataji to be present with them. "If you sit with us," she said, "I am sure, we shall arrive at a solution of our difficulties." Mataji conceded to her request and the Nawabzadi's expectations were borne out. The longstanding differences were smoothed out and she and her mother-in-law became reconciled after many years. The Nawabzadi announced her intention to come to Dacca now, which she could not do earlier because of her estrangement with the Begam.

On the occasion of these marriages, many notable people of Calcutta had been invited, including Aparna Devi, the daughter of Deshabandhu Chittaranjan Das. When Aparna Devi saw Mataji she related that many years ago her mother Vasanti Devi had dreamt of a lady in white telling her to beware of an approaching calamity. From the description her mother had given, Aparna Devi thought that the lady in white must have been Mataji. Her father had passed away shortly after the dream. This dream had a sort of

confirmation not known to Aparna Devi. A few days before the death of C. R. Das, somebody had shown Mataji a photograph of Vasanti Devi and her husband. Mataji without knowing anything about them had at that time said spontaneously, "This lady is facing a bereavement. She will be a widow soon."

Aparna Devi now sent a message to her mother. Vasanti Devi came and looked long and earnestly at Mataji. She then said slowly, "It was so long ago, I do not remember clearly but I think this was the figure I saw." She, her daughter and other members of her family became very attached to Mataji. They would come to see her whenever Mataji visited Calcutta.

Soon after Mataji returned to Shahbagh, Pyari Banu with her son and daughter also arrived in Dacca. They expressed a wish to partake of a meal cooked by Mataji because they had heard a lot about her culinary arts. Mataji invited them to Shahbagh one day and cooked an elaborate meal with the help of Didi and Matari Pisima. The Nawabzadi and her children found all the preparations most delicious. The Nawabzadi made an offering of a gold necklace to the image of Kālī. They had heard that Mataji had once performed the *Namāz* like a Muslim at the graveside of the Arab *fakirs* and requested her to do so again in their presence. One day they took Mataji to the mausoleum and sat near the grave in silent meditation. After some time Mataji in an exalted mood began to speak in a strange language. Pyari Banu's daughter exclaimed: "She is reciting a passage from the Quoran." Mataji, however, did not perform the *Namāz* that day.

Mataji was constantly invited by the new devotees to visit their towns and villages so that others might also share in the unique experience of Mataji's *daršana*. One of them, Dinesh Chandra Rai, the Munsif of Pirozepur had invited her to visit that town. Another devotee, Girija Shankar

was pressing her to come to his village, Baishari. It was arranged that Mataji would go to Gauhati on pilgrimage to Kamakshya and on her way back visit Pirozepur and Baishari. Many accompanied her from Dacca. Some devotees came from Calcutta to join her at Gauhati. In the meantime, Dinesh Rai sent a telegram saying that he had been transferred from Pirozepur and was therefore obliged to go away, but Mataji should not change her plans because the whole town was looking forward to her arrival. Many from Dacca were also waiting for her at Pirozepur.

On arrival, after disembarking from the steamer, Mataji and her party had to come a little way by boat. Before the boats drew up at the bank, they heard the sound of melodious *kirtana*. A huge crowd was approaching with flowers, garlands and incense to welcome Mataji. Mataji became one with the spirit of the *kirtana*. She walked along with the *kirtana* party swaying to the rhythm. Looking at her flower-decked, radiant form, the people were transported into a world of indescribable joy. In this joyous mood they reached the house where Mataji and her party were to stay. With the exception of one old woman who was unable to walk, everyone in Pirozepur had come to see Mataji. The local people took Mataji to the house of this woman later on.

Girija Shankar came to take Mataji to Baishari. Here also Mataji had beautiful *bhāvas* during *kirtana*. Wherever Mataji went, *bhoga* was cooked on a large scale and the entire assembly partook of the *prasāda*. It seemed as if the whole countryside were celebrating a festival. Mataji went on to the village of Sohagdal. Transport was mostly by boat. Mataji would sometimes walk long distances with the *kirtana* parties from village to village. The entire population would accompany her, singing *kirtana*. They had a

simple faith that if *kirtana* could be kept up without interruption, Mataji would not be able to leave them.

The devotees experienced a sense of togetherness and belonging. Strangers became friends, differences of position, caste and creed became meaningless. All of them mingled together to make up a throng of happy people. The continuous *kirtana* was creating an atmosphere not of this world; but departure could not be postponed indefinitely. The festivities came to an end. Mataji had to return to Dacca. Everyone sadly bade farewell to her, imploring her to come again.

Meanwhile the mud hut at Siddheshwari, built as described earlier, was falling into disrepair. Shashanka Mohan came forward with the suggestion that a *pucca* building should be constructed in its place. Mataji said, "I realize that you will not be able to preserve the sanctity of 'the hollow' in future. Well, things must take their own course. If you must build a concrete building, then first brick up the hollow and make a platform on it, so that nobody can step on it inadvertently."

Shashanka Mohan was willing to pay for the entire construction of the new building, but as other devotees wanted to share in the cost, it was decided to accept voluntary contributions. The room was completed in the beginning of the year 1928. This may be called the first Ashram.

Bhaiji was at Giridih, a health resort, because he was still far from well. He had improved a little but not entirely recovered. Perhaps, in response to his mute prayers, Mataji again prepared to leave Dacca with Bholanath, Maroni and a few others.

Prafulla Ghosh's wife Hirandi said jokingly, "You must come back soon, otherwise we shall close the gates of

Shahbagh and not let you in." Mataji smiled and merely said, "Is that so?" On the day of her departure from Shahbagh, Didi saw Mataji walk round the extensive gardens in a particular mood of her own. Here and there she would touch the walls caressingly as if bidding farewell. Her expression was remote and inscrutable and Didi did not dare to ask her why she did so on this particular occasion.

On her way to Giridih, Mataji halted in various places. Bhaiji had written some songs and a *kirtana* containing the word 'Ma'.¹ He had always felt that, if at all *kirtana* was necessary, it should contain this word along with the Names of the Lord, such as Śiva, Viṣṇu and Hari. He himself had not been very fond of singing *kirtana* and used to be amused at the sight of people singing and dancing with abandon. However, now *kirtana* came to his mind spontaneously. He showed the hymn to Mataji and Bholanath and with their approval sent it to Kulada asking him to add it to the list of *kirtanas* sung daily at Shahbagh. This hymn touched the hearts of people, especially because Mataji was then away from Shahbagh. Much of the pain of separation was assuaged by singing this hymn every evening.

Mataji left Giridih for Calcutta and then started for Vindhyachal, Chunar and Mirzapur. She was constantly on the move. This time they went as far as Jaipur and Bharatpur.

While Mataji and Bholanath were travelling in Rajasthan, the estates of the Nawabzadi Pyari Banu were handed over to the Court of Wards. As a result, Rai Bahadur Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, Bhudev Basu and Bholanath lost their jobs. Shahbagh had to be vacated and the image of Kālī had to be removed. The devotees gathered together and rented a house in the city. Exercising great care they brought the image there. Didima, Dadamañai, Makhan, Amulya, Matari Pisima and Kamala-

1. 'Jaya hṛdayavāsinī.'

kanta also came to stay in the rented house in Tikatuli, a locality of the city.

Mataji's birthday drew near and the devotees decided upon the new room at Siddheshwari as the venue for the celebrations. Mataji returned to Dacca in the last week of April 1928. Niranjan Rai's wife was very ill. From the station Mataji went straight to see her, and then came to the rented house in Tikatuli.

Hirandi's words spoken in jest had proved prophetic. Mataji had stayed for four years in Shahbagh. She told the dejected family of Jogesh Ghosh not to worry about lost jobs; what had happened was for their future good. Much later they realised the truth of this statement.

This time Bhaiji had returned to Dacca with Mataji and Bholanath. Bhaiji was still far from well. The doctors in Calcutta had advised him to give up his work and lead a retired life of complete rest. He told Mataji that he had understood from the doctors that he had only a few months to live and must not do anything to shorten that time. Mataji answered, "Nothing will happen to you for the next few years. Come back to Dacca and rejoin your service. Then we shall see."

On the day Bhaiji rejoined duty, Mataji and Bholanath went with him to his office and saw him seated at his desk. He as well as everybody else were convinced that he had received a new lease of life due to Mataji's grace. Mr. Finlow, the Director of Agriculture, Government of Bengal, had great regard and affection for his subordinate. He asked Bhaiji one day, "How did you cure yourself of this terrible disease?" Bhaiji answered unhesitatingly, "I have been cured by the grace of Mataji. She did not give me any amulets or charms, I have been under medical treatment, but the doctors said that the disease was incurable, and I too know that without

Mataji's grace it would have been so." Mr. Finlow answered quietly, "I do not disbelieve you. We have heard of similar cases of Divine Grace in our country also."

One evening Bhaiji was asked by an old gentleman, Sri Shyama Charan Mukherji, "Is it possible that somebody's span of life can be lengthened?" In the middle of the discussion, the visitor suddenly fell silent and went away after a little while. Next morning he came again and said to Bhaiji, "Do you know why I left you so abruptly yesterday? While we were talking, I suddenly saw a bright light behind your chair, enveloping you in its radiance. I looked about but could not see any visible source of the light. There was no light from outside either. I thought I would ponder about this in solitude before telling you anything about it. Last night I came to the conclusion that everything is possible by Divine Grace. You are to be congratulated on the fact that you live under the protective grace of Mataji."

The celebrations on the occasion of Mataji's birthday in May 1928 were held with great festivity at Siddheshwari. Mataji was ever ready to help or, if asked, to give advice in all matters pertaining to religious practices. This fact became the mainstay of the celebrations. The devotees arranged for *akhaṇḍa japa*, *kīrtana* and various *pūjās* to fill up the days between the two dates of Mataji's birthday, one according to the usual Calendar and the other according to the Lunar Calendar. In this way the devotees made sure of Mataji's presence and participation in the festivities. The devotees were desirous of worshipping Mataji by a proper *pūjā* between 3 and 4 a.m. (the exact time of her birth) as the culmination of the functions.

So, on the final day, Bholanath was requested to perform the *pūjā* on their behalf. The people gathered round Mataji

who was lying in an inert heap on the ground in a state of *samādhi*. The devotees arranged the accessories of the *pūjā* in front of her motionless body. They sat around in silent meditation or singing *kīrtana* or doing *japa*, each according to his own aptitude. In deep devotion the assembly watched Bholanath offer *pūjā* to the deity most dear to their hearts. The devotees of Dacca believed that Bholanath's dedicated worship could invoke the presence of the Divine in clay images. At this instance such an invocation was not necessary as Mataji's presence had already filled the hearts and minds of the congregation with love and devotion. Her motionless body was covered with flowers, garlands and new clothes.

Dawn was breaking by the time the *pūjā* was over. This early pattern for the celebrations of Mataji's birthday has remained unchanged. It is essentially a celebration of the advent of Mataji in our midst; devotees had come from far and near. People from Calcutta, Varanasi and other towns arrived to join in the festivities. This occasion gave them a unique opportunity of coming together as a family.

A few days after the *janmotsava* (birthday celebrations) Mataji with Bholanath and Bhaiji went to Tangail in District Mymensingh. During her absence from town, another house named 'Uttama Kutir' was rented by the devotees of Dacca, as the house in Tikatuli had proved to be not very convenient. Mataji came to Uttama Kutir on her return from Tangail in June 1928. She again left Dacca to visit Barishal, Vikrampur and Munshiganj at the invitation of devotees. She had the occasion to go to Atpara, Bholanath's home, during the course of these travels. Her sister-in-law, Pramoda Devi, was living in their home. She wanted Mataji, who was putting up in another house in the village, to stay with her. Mataji very humbly sent back a message to say, "She knows that I have never disregarded her slightest wish or command.

But now I am unable to comply with her request. Please ask her to forgive me."

Mataji returned to Dacca for a few days. In the meantime Kunja Mohan had been repeatedly inviting them to visit Varanasi. It was decided that they would go there and also visit Dinesh Rai at Tangail. Whenever Mataji went on a journey, she would take with her one or two of her old relatives who wanted to see holy places. In this way many who ordinarily would not have dreamt of moving out of their houses, had travelled to distant places of pilgrimage. This time also one of Mataji's aunts accompanied them, besides Didi and her father.

At Tangail Mataji had beautiful *bhāvas* during the *kirtana* at Dinesh Rai's house. His wife had arranged for *pūjā*, and the entire household warmly welcomed Mataji and her party, striving to be of service to them in every possible way.

At the time of departure, the festive mood was disturbed by an unfortunate incident. For some reason, Bholanath lost his temper. Dinesh Rai and his family were full of remorse and felt very unhappy that such a thing should have happened.

On reaching the boat, Mataji lay down in an inert heap. After a few moments she raised herself and her face assumed a terrifying expression. Bholanath immediately calmed down and started to plead with her in his own characteristic manner, which was a nice mixture of coaxing and scolding. He was by no means humble by nature but on such occasions would do anything to appease Mataji. (This was not the first time that Bholanath's anger had brought about such a change in Mataji's demeanour. Perhaps Mataji found this the most effective way of teaching him to control his temper.)

In response to Bholanath's entreaties Mataji finally said in an indistinct voice, "Let us go back." The boat had now almost reached the steamer. It was turned around and they

went back to their host's house. The whole family were beside themselves with joy to see Mataji return to them and to find that Bholanath's anger had evaporated completely and that he was his usual cheerful self. The festive mood thus restored, Mataji left for Dacca the next day.

Chapter Thirteen

THE DEVELOPING PATTERN OF FUTURE LIFE

In September 1928 Mataji came to Varanasi. Kunja Mohan had arranged for an elaborate programme of *kirtana* and Mataji passed through ecstatic moods. Her whole countenance radiated an effulgence beautiful to behold. Kunja Mohan had invited many persons to come and have *daršana* of Mataji. There were large numbers of visitors daily and Mataji had to sit in the open every evening. People from the audience asked questions and she replied in her own characteristic way. She never paused to think or reflect, the answers seemed to come spontaneously to her. This was the first occasion in her life when she sat in an open gathering talking freely to a large congregation of strangers. It was during this visit to Varanasi that Mahamahopadhyaya Sri Gopinath Kaviraj, who was then Principal of the Queen's College, saw her for the first time. He listened to her answers and remarked: "Wonderful, this far exceeds anything of a like nature I have ever heard before." Many persons such as Nepal Chandra Chakravarti (now Narayan Swamiji) and Swami Shankaranandaji met her then and became life-long devotees.

From early morning till late at night, there would be a constant stream of men and women passing in and out of the house. Nobody cared to find out who the owner was. The people came singly, in family groups, or in crowds, bringing offerings of flowers, garlands, sweets, fruits, incense and clothes. They would besiege Mataji so uninterruptedly that she did not have time to wash, eat or change her clothes.

Days and nights passed as if in a dream. Bholanath wanted to stem the tide of ever-increasing multitudes of strangers of all types. The situation was getting out of hand. He tried in vain to persuade Mataji not to go on giving unstintingly of her time and energy. But Mataji remained firm: "Now you are not to say anything to me", she said, "when there was yet time, I warned you, but you did not heed my warning. Now you cannot turn the tide back." Bholanath's misgivings were temporary only and the general air of great rejoicing was not marred in any way.

Late one night a few members of the family were sitting with Mataji on the open terrace. She suddenly said, "Death is coming." Kunja Mohan's wife, a fond mother of many children, said, "Ma, let it come to me alone." Mataji looked at her and smiled a little, not saying anything more. In the general mood of joy and festivity, this slight note of discord was soon forgotten by everybody.

On the day Mataji was due to leave Varanasi, she said to Didi, "Today is full-moon day,¹ but I feel like eating rice with boiled potatoes. All of you, however, must observe the rule of fasting. I do not eat on so many other days when you eat. So my example need not be followed by you today." Didi was amused and astonished because the previous night her aunt, Kunja Mohan's wife, had said to her, "There is such a crowd always. I don't seem to get close to Mataji at any time. One day I want to feed her in my kitchen boiled rice and potatoes in big mouthfuls like one of my children." Didi had not said anything to Mataji knowing she would not eat rice on a full-moon day.

Kunja Mohan's wife was overjoyed when she heard that Mataji herself had asked for rice that day. Mataji ate an

1. Since Shahbagh, Mataji and others were fasting on full-moon and new-moon days, partaking of *prashada* after *bhoga* at night.

unusually hearty meal from the hands of her hostess before her departure to the station.

The family bade her a sorrowful farewell. Mataji returned to Dacca via Calcutta. While in Calcutta, news was received by telegram of the sudden death of Kunja Mohan's wife. This lady's strong attachment to Mataji may be gauged from the following incident. Didi relates : "It so happened one day in Varanasi that Mataji was at my sister's place. My aunt could not bear this separation from Mataji while she was in the same town. Almost everybody was with Mataji already. My aunt was alone at home to look after the needs of her family. When her children had settled down for the night, she quietly donned the clothes of a man. She wound a turban round her head to hide her hair. Then with a stick in her hand, looking like a villager, she came to my sister's house walking through the lanes of Varanasi at dead of night. Everyone marvelled at her ingenuity and courage." Now hearing of her sudden death, Didi understood why Mataji had gone out of her way to fulfil her aunt's wish.

At the invitation of Prafulla Ghosh, the Rai Bahadur's son, Mataji went to Comilla for a few days. From Comilla she proceeded to Calcutta. The Rai Bahadur and his wife were also there. The Rai Bahadur was greatly changed in his ways of living. Although outwardly he did not appear to be devout, he had the heart of a devotee. One day he told Mataji, "I had a dear friend in my college days. He went away to become a *sannyāsī*, and look what a life I have led." Once, when Mataji was partaking of some fruit and sweets, he said "I wish I could feed Mataji a little of this. But I have never observed restrictions in matters of food. Will Mataji allow me to feed her?" Mataji said, "It does not matter. If you wish to do so, you may feed me something." After she had taken a little fruit from his hand,

she said to him, "From now on, whatever you eat, you must offer to God first." He demurred, saying, "I eat all sorts of things." "Never mind, whatever you eat, you must first mentally dedicate to God." This method effected a radical change in his eating habits.

Mataji returned to Uttama Kutir in Dacca. Bhaiji one day said to her, "Apparently heat and cold are the same to you. Would you not feel the heat of a live coal if it were placed on your hand or foot?" Mataji answered, "Why don't you try and see?" Bhaiji hurriedly changed the topic because he knew that if Mataji's *kheyāla* was drawn to it, she would ask him to try the experiment at once. It appeared, however, that Mataji did have the *kheyāla*, for a few days later, when she was alone, she placed a live coal on her foot. When it was burnt out, somebody entered the kitchen and was horrified to discover deep burn marks on her foot. Mataji said, "I did not feel anything. First I saw the fine hair curl and singe off. Then the skin crinkled and blackened, then the flesh started burning and emitted a smell. Now the coal has exhausted itself and is lying quite still in the burn it has created." Bhaiji was mortified to find a bad sore on Mataji's foot due to this experiment. Through his ministrations the sore healed up gradually.

At about this time Niranjan Rai's wife fell seriously ill. Mataji went to see her every day. If the patient saw clouds in the sky, she would worry desperately lest it might rain and prevent Mataji from coming. But it never happened that Mataji could not visit her. Mataji's companions were very fond of this devout couple and felt concerned about her illness. One day Didi's eldest brother, Biren Chandra, sat in Mataji's room praying fervently for the recovery of the patient. When he opened his eyes he found Mataji looking at him with very bright eyes. He had a strong feeling that

his prayer had been heard and the lady would recover. However, a few days later (26th November, 1928) she died. Biren Chandra felt deeply upset. His conviction that Mataji had granted his prayer had been very powerful. One day while sitting in Mataji's room he fell a prey to all sorts of mutinous thoughts. Mataji suddenly looked at him and said, "Didn't you ask me to make her well? Recovery of the body is not the ultimate welfare. I have made her well." Biren Chandra was amazed to hear this answer to his unspoken question and bowed his head in penitence.

As in Shahbagh, so also now at Uttama Kutir, people flocked to visit Mataji and Bholanath at all times. As written earlier, Bholanath was a warm-hearted person. His friendliness and affectionate nature quickly dispelled the diffidence of newcomers. Uttama Kutir became a venue for the gathering of friends and acquaintances. But Mataji, in a way which is so peculiarly her own, broke up this atmosphere of a home very soon.

One day in December, she walked out of Uttama Kutir with Bholanath and came to the temple of Dhakeshwari. From there they proceeded to Siddheshwari. Mataji expressed a *kheyôla* not to return to Uttama Kutir. The devotees came to know of this sudden decision to leave the house in Dacca. One by one they collected at Siddheshwari. Beddings and utensils were brought over from Uttama Kutir. The image of Kâli also had to be fetched. This was the fourth time that it had to be moved. The *yajña* fire was being kept alive by daily oblations. Along with the image of Kâli this also had to be shifted with every change of residence. Didima and Dadamashai left for their village Vidyakut and Makhan went to stay at Shashanka Mohan's house. Bholanath's nephews were now in service in other towns.

In the light of later events Mataji's sudden *kheyāla* to exile herself and Bholanath from the comfortable house in Dacca becomes understandable. As pointed out earlier, Mataji did not ordinarily plan ahead. She accepted changes as they happened. Her enthusiastic participation in anything and approval of any place contrived for her by the devotees was unstinting. Yet no one could feel secure in the thought that his arrangements were such that she would not have the *kheyāla* to have them changed. It goes without saying that the inhabitants of Dacca had been greatly pleased to have made good arrangements for the little family living earstwhile in Shahbagh. No doubt they were puzzled in the extreme to find Mataji, suddenly electing to live at Siddheshwari, in considerable discomfort, rather than allow them to do their best for her in Dacca. Perhaps this was necessary for Bholanath. Although he had a great predilection for the ascetic way of life he could not tear himself away from the company of fellow men which he enjoyed immensely. It is possible that by choosing to retire to the solitude of Siddheshwari, Mataji gave the initial impetus to Bholanath because we find that here he started seriously on his quest for enlightenment.

Bholanath's *Sādhana*

Following Mataji's instructions, Bholanath occupied the small room of the Kālī temple at Siddheshwari and became engaged in *sādhana*. Mataji stayed almost alone in the single room of the Ashram. Kamalakanta cooked for her. Kulada, as usual, came every day to offer oblations to the sacred fire. The devotees were asked not to stay for more than ten minutes during their visits to Siddheshwari. This rigour was not necessary for Mataji, but probably it was for Bholanath. Moreover, to her the crowd was as acceptable as the loneliness of Siddheshwari. The devotees of Dacca without quite under-

standing why she forbade their visits, were obedient to her *kheylla*.

One evening Mataji told visitors who had come from Dacca that Bholanath was going away the following day and that all of them could go and see him off at the station. She did not disclose his destination. Bholanath was observing silence for the last few days, so he also could not say anything.

The next day Mataji, Didi, Bhaiji and others went to the station to see him off. Jogeshdada was to accompany Bholanath. They took a portion of the *yajña* fire with them. Breaking his silence Bholanath talked to everyone bidding them farewell and then embarked on his journey with Jogeshdada.

Mataji and Bholanath had so far always travelled together. This was a departure from the usual practice. The devotees returned with Mataji to Siddheshwari. Kamalakanta and a widowed lady were to stay with Mataji. Since Kamalakanta was merely a boy, it was decided that Shashanka Mohan would spend the nights at Siddheshwari. The other devotees, following the rule of 'ten minutes', returned to Dacca. Deprived of the presence of Bholanath, the devotees were at a loss to know how to look after Mataji. They had so far been guided by him. By common consent Shashanka Mohan, the oldest and the most respected of them, was given the privilege of staying at Siddheshwari as Mataji's guardian.

After a few days, Surendra Mohan Mukherji arrived from Calcutta with a letter from Bholanath who had written from Tarapeeth in Birbhum district, directing Surendra Mohan to go to Dacca and to escort Mataji to Tarapeeth. He had also written to Mataji.

Arrangements were made for Mataji's departure. She put one or two old blankets and a few articles of clothing in a bundle and that was all she took with her. She had no

proper bedding as she hardly ever used a bed. Her method of resting was to wrap herself up in a sheet and lie on the floor. Mataji never permitted herself more than the bare minimum of personal effects.

At the station a large crowd had collected to see her off. When she was seated in her compartment, she took off two of her gold bangles and gave them to Bhaiji, saying, "Get five gold rings made out of these and give them to Jotu, Amulya, Sitanath, Makhan and Subodh." These boys had almost constantly been with Mataji and were great enthusiasts for singing *kirtana*.

Mataji had left Dacca many times before, but never in this strange manner. Tarapeeth was known to be a desolate place meant for ascetics only. It was famous for its cremation ground of great sanctity, but it was not a location where people ordinarily lived. Besides, Mataji would be practically alone. Didi was overwhelmed with worry about Mataji's welfare. Mataji had to be fed, looked after when in exalted moods and reminded of so many daily routine affairs. So, Didi was grieved that Mataji was going to stay alone in an unknown place, although she could have stayed in comfort in Dacca surrounded by a host of devotees. But Mataji's *kheyāla* had to be obeyed.

Just before the train started, Mataji began to weep in a most touching manner. The devotees who had so far with great difficulty held their emotion in check, now broke down completely. The released flood of tears somewhat lightened the sorrow that had threatened to overwhelm them. The train moved off. Didi and the other devotees returned home with heavy hearts.

After a few days Shashanka Mohan received a letter from Bholanath asking him and Didi to join them and to bring Matori Pisima and Maroni.

When Didi and her father arrived at Tarapeeth, they found that many devotees from Calcutta were already there. At night, Didi and Shashanka Mohan heard from Bholanath the reason for his coming to Tarapeeth. While practising *sādhana* at Siddheshwari, he had had a vision of a headless Kālī after which Mataji had suggested that he should go to Tarapeeth, although she herself was not in a position to know anything about the place. Accordingly, Bholanath came there and took up his abode on the open verandah of the temple of Tārā Devī (a form of Kālī). Bholanath failed to understand why he had been directed to come to Tarapeeth because he could not see any resemblance between the image of Tārā and the image of his vision. However, he stayed on practising his *sādhana*. In a few days he became well-known to the priests. One night while he was sitting in the temple in meditation, the priests came to make arrangements for the night.¹ They were now acquainted with Bholanath and treated him with respect as an ascetic. So he was not asked to leave the temple. The priests took off the ornaments, and Bholanath was amazed to see that the head itself was removed from the body. Before opening the temple doors in the morning, the head was replaced and the image decorated with ornaments, flowers and garlands. Only the priests and their families knew that the image of Tārā had a headless body.

1. Worship is 'āramat', that is, as one would do for oneself, taking for granted the fact, that nothing at all is necessary for God. The image is given meals, bathed, clothed, laid down to rest for the night and aroused in the morning. All this is done by meditation accompanied by relevant mantras and *mandrās*. The image actually does not have to be moved. Worship with external accessories is of secondary importance. Every deity is symbolised by a *yantra* — a small mystic diagram which is the real object of worship in front of the priest. The image is the concrete and solid form which the pilgrims see from a distance. This is the general practice. Every temple, however, may have its own tradition which is handed down from generation to generation of the priests.

Didi and her father were thrilled to hear all this from Bholanath. Bholanath had obviously attained a high spiritual state at Tarapeeth. Throughout the day and night he would remain seated on the open varandah of the temple. He did not feel the cold. His face would be covered with flies but he would not notice it. Formerly a very heavy smoker, he did not smoke at all now and, furthermore, ate very little. It was obvious that he was absorbed in a blissful state.

Tarapeeth was sparsely populated by the families of the priests. Mataji used to roam around by herself during the day and sleep in the Śiva temple at night. The wives of the priests would invite her to their houses and entertain her with sweets and other simple refreshments. The day Mataji left, they were all very sad. One of them said, "We are poor people. We can give you a poor man's fare only." Another said, "As soon as I heard the horn of the car, I felt depressed thinking that the car had come to fetch you, even as Akrura had come to take away Śrī Kṛṣṇa."

Mataji laughed and said, "Why are you saying such things? I am just like one of you. I have been here for such a short while. It is because of the goodness of your hearts that you have been so kind and loving to me." The woman answered, "We are the people of Tarapeeth which is a *Siddhasthāna*. We can recognize people for what they are. We see so many sādhus and ascetics. Some are genuine and some are not. You are the Goddess Incarnate. Why do you try to hide yourself from us?"

Didi realized how foolish and unnecessary had been her fears concerning Mataji's welfare. Even in this remote and desolate spot Mataji was cherished and had been looked after as well as anywhere else. In a few days Mataji had endeared herself to those simple people and permanent bonds of love and loyalty had been forged between them.

Mataji and her companions came to Rampurhat by car and then entrained for Calcutta. There they put up at Bholanath's sister's place at Salkia. Jogeshdada went to stay in an abandoned derelict house with the sacred fire which, Mataji said, was not to be brought inside a residential home. Bholanath, who had received some instructions at Tarapeeth, carried on with his *sādhana*. He had also been told to visit Tarapeeth for one day every year for the next three years.

At Birendra Chandra's invitation they now paid a short visit to Agra, in quite another part of the country.

Chapter Fourteen

MATAJI'S KHEYĀLA TO LEAVE DACCA

On their return to Calcutta Mataji received a telegram from the students of the Medical School at Dacca asking her to permit Shashanka Mohan to return to Dacca for a few days. They had not written to him directly assuming that he would not go without Mataji's permission. Thereafter, Didi and Shashanka Mohan went back to Dacca, while Mataji and Bholanath left for Puri whence they proceeded to Vidyakut. Now that Bholanath had no job, there was no particular need for them to return to Dacca. When Shashanka Mohan and others realized that Mataji might not come back to Dacca at all, he, accompanied by a few others, went to Vidyakut. They persuaded Bholanath to come to Dacca a few days before the celebrations of Mataji's birthday in May 1929.

In the meantime the efforts of Bhaiji, Niranjan Rai and others had borne fruit. The plot of ground indicated by Mataji at Ramna had been procured and a small mud-hut constructed for Mataji's use. Mataji had expressed her *kheyāla* not to stay in a brick-building. Arrangements were made for her to come to the new room after the *Janmotsava*.

The *Janmotsava* (celebrations of Mataji's birthday) was held again at Siddheshwari with great enthusiasm by the devotees of Dacca and of other places.

Mataji was invited to enter the precincts of the new Ashram at Ramna in May 1929 amidst great rejoicing. Baaul Chandra had brought ornaments made of flowers for Mataji. She sat on the steps of the new Ashram, dressed in a red-

bordered *sāri* and decked with beautiful ornaments made of flowers. There was a glow on her face. Mataji looked like a luminous image of indescribable beauty, or rather for the Bengalis like the personification of the human concept of the glorious and majestic form of the Divine Mother.

The devotees were offering *prāṇāma* one by one. Mataji looked at Bholanath with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes and said, "Won't you also offer *prāṇāma*?" Bholanath smilingly shook his head. Little Maroni¹ who was standing nearby piped up, "I have seen grandfather doing *prāṇāma* to grandmother." Everybody heartily enjoyed this disclosure from an unexpected source. The happy throng of devotees kept awake the whole night; in fact they hardly realized that the night was over and Mataji had not even entered the new room. In the morning she was still lying outside under the canopy put up for the celebrations. The *kīrtana* that had continuously been sung for many days was concluded. Many devotees partook of *prasāda* that day also. *Bhoga* was ready, Mataji was roused, helped to get up, wash and change. Mataji sat near Dadamañai at the time of the midday meal and he fed her a few morsels. A little later she sat with her mother and ate with her also. By this time it was nearly evening. Everybody was tired after the prolonged festivities. Some came to say good-bye. Mataji said, "Why do you go now? Won't you sing *kīrtana*? Ask father also." Thus Dadamañai went and sat with his *kīrtana* party under the canopy. He was never too tired to sing *kīrtana*.

Bholanath had gone to visit Niranjan Rai's son who was ill. He had planned to go to Didi's and Bhaiji's houses also. Mataji went round the Ashram, sometimes touching the boundary walls. Didi, suddenly and a little apprehensively,

1. Bholanath's sister's grand-daughter, who had been left in his care by her parents.

was reminded of how Mataji had touched the walls of Shahbagh before leaving it for what turned out to be the last time. However, she did not have the courage to say anything to Mataji. Mataji's close companions know that there are times when the boldest among them dare not say a word to her. Not that she looks grim or forbidding, but absolutely remote and unapproachable. It does not seem at such times that she knows or recognizes anybody or cares in the least about their opinions. As a matter of fact everybody guessed that Mataji would do something which would be difficult for them to accept, but nobody spoke. She went and sat with her father, singing with him for a little while. After some time, mantras spontaneously poured from her lips in a stream. The music and sound of that ethereal language held everyone spell-bound. Shashanka Mohan had always wanted to write down a few of the mantras she sometimes uttered. Mataji now looked at him and said, "You may write if you can." He and a few others noted down some of the mantras as best as they could.

After some time Mataji moved round with the *kirtana* party for a few minutes. She halted abruptly and said, "All of you must allow me to go away now. I shall leave Dacca today."

"Ma, how can we do that !" The exclamation was wrung from the people around her.

Like a small child in anguish, Mataji appealed to her companions ; "Please don't put obstacles in my path, otherwise I shall leave this body here with you and go away."

There was a hush of silence now. Everyone looked at her with tearful eyes. Shashanka Mohan offered to fetch Bholanath, but Mataji said it was not necessary. Then she said, "Please explain to Bholanath when he comes. Tell him not to say, 'no' to me."

"But who will go with you ?" somebody asked.

"As far as I am concerned", answered Mataji, "I do not need anyone. But if you think that I should be escorted, then I can ask father to come with me."

Dadamañai went in to pack a few things and got ready to leave with her. Mataji packed nothing for herself. She sat out in the open, the people forming a silent group around her.

"When is the next train?" Mataji asked after some time.

"At midnight", somebody answered.

"Please arrange for me to leave by that train."

Shashanka Mohan had sent word to Bhaiji. Bholanath was with him at the time and they both came over.

Mataji asked Bholanath for permission to leave Dacca with her father. Before Bholanath could express his displeasure, Mataji said, "If you say, 'no', I shall leave this body at your feet just now."

Bholanath was silenced. He was the last man to call into question the truth of her statement. Mataji had never before expressed her *kheyala* so forcefully. Perhaps he found himself helpless in the face of this quality of her *kheyala* and was reconciled to its acceptance. In great dejection he said, "Very well, I am not withholding my permission." After some time he added, "People will speak ill of you if you go about without me."

"I shall not do anything," said Mataji, "which will invite criticism. My father will be with me. Even so will people speak ill of me?" She looked enquiringly at her companions. Many hastened to re-reassure her: "No Ma, nobody will speak or think ill of you."

A car was sent for but Mataji did not use it. She walked to the station with all the people. Many carried lanterns and torches. Sitanath wanted to go with her and she agreed to it. Bhaiji had been standing at the fringe of the crowd. He had

not approached Mataji. After some time he and Bholanath with a few others came to the station. Many devotees, knowing that this parting would be very hard for Didi, said to Mataji, "Ma, take Didi with you." But Mataji smilingly declined. Money was collected from those who had come to see her off. Mataji said that she would go to Mymensingh and put up with Bholanath's nephew, Kalipada. She had at first suggested going to Ashu, but nobody knew his exact whereabouts. The train arrived. At the last moment, Bhaiji got into Mataji's compartment. She looked enquiringly at him. Bhaiji explained, "Baba (father — meaning Bholanath) has asked me to go with you." Mataji made no comment. The train sped away into the night, carrying Mataji to new places and new people.

Mataji had not taken anything at all with her not even a change of clothes. The next day Shashanka Mohan took a couple of blankets and a set of clothes for her and went to Mymensingh. But he was not encouraged to stay or accompany her. He had to return to Dacca the same day. Mataji went on to Cox's Bazar and then to Mount Adinath, an island off the coast in the Bay of Bengal. After a week Bhaiji returned to Dacca to join his service. Ashu had come to Dacca on being informed that Mataji had made enquiries about him. Bholanath, learning from Bhaiji that Mataji was at Adinath, left immediately with Ashu to join her there. From Adinath they came on to Chandranath, another place of pilgrimage in Chattagram. Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta (the photographer) acted as an escort and guide for them at these places.

On looking back at these events, it becomes quite obvious that Mataji at that time had the *kheyāla* to move away from Dacca and freely wander around other parts of the country. It is equally clear that the people she was surrounded by

(excepting perhaps Bhaiji) had not the imagination to rise beyond the limitations of their own way of life and grasp the significance of Mataji's total personality. She herself, moved by compassion, could not shake off these bonds of allegiance and devotion and returned again and again from her sojourns out of Dacca. It took her many years to instil the thought in her people that she belonged as much to others as to them. Had she not moved among strangers and visited totally unknown places, the limitless dimensions of her influence would not have become a thing of reality for them. They gradually came to understand that although she recognized their claims on her she was not to be bound by any ties not forged on the anvil of *sādhana*. She asked everybody (including Bholanath) to occupy themselves totally with spiritual practice but the lure of the magic of her presence was greater than the attractions of a life of *sādhana*; consequently nobody is to be blamed in the least for trying to follow her around on her travels rather than carry out her gentle suggestions regarding personal *sādhana*. That she was not here to teach people in spite of themselves, became clear when it was seen that she would rather adjust herself to the wishes of the people, than cause them any inconvenience. She did not take anybody to task for not obeying her expressed *kheyāla*, so, in no time at all a crowd again collected wherever she happened to be.

Mataji and Bholanath came to Calcutta to Bholanath's sister's place at Salkia. Mataji persuaded Bholanath to remain at Salkia with Sitanath, while she went on to Hardwar with her father and Ashu.

From Hardwar she proceeded to Dehradun and the hot springs at Sahasradhara. After a few days, she had a sudden *kheyāla* to visit Ayodhya, another holy place in Uttar Pradesh. She and Ashu were walking along the banks of

the Ganges at that time. She asked Ashu to fetch their few belongings, and they started off towards the station without informing anybody.

Mataji and Ashu did not know anything about Ayodhya. But they experienced no difficulty. The ticket collector at the Railway station came forward and invited them to his own house. Mataji did not stay long. For two days they roamed round the holy places in the town and then returned to Hardwar and went to the Ashram of Bholagiri Maharaj. Sri Gopinath Kaviraj was staying there. He now sent word to Dadamafai. Knowing that Ashu was with Mataji, Dadamafai had not worried too much about her but naturally he was now relieved to get news of her arrival in Hardwar. He and Kunja Mohan, who had come from Varanasi, came to the Ashram and were glad to see Mataji's usual radiant smile. Kunja Mohan soon fell ill and had to remain in Hardwar while Mataji proceeded to Varanasi.

There Dadamafai caught fever. So he was left with Didi's sister and brother-in-law while Mataji started off with Ashu, Nani (Kunja Babu's fourth son) and Manik (a young student). Mataji had no particular destination in mind. Arriving at Moghalsarai, Nani said, "Let us go to Vindhyachal." Mataji agreed. In the meantime, Didi's sister and cousin, who had gone to Hardwar to fetch Kunja Mohan, returned to Varanasi and were greatly disappointed to find that Mataji had left. Taking a chance they came to Vindhyachal where Mataji had stayed before. They in their turn persuaded Mataji to go back to Varanasi.

Mataji at this time expressed her *kheyala* to stay at a place where nobody would recognize her. Kunja Mohan's eldest son escorted her to Calcutta and arranged for her to put up with his friend, Dr. Girin Mitra. Dr. Mitra had previously met Mataji at Pyari Banu's house, and considered it a great

honour to be entrusted with the guardianship of Mataji. Mataji had once been to Navadweep, a famous place of pilgrimage in Bengal, and had been taken to see a sādhu who was observing total silence. One day it so happened that a reference about that sādhu was made by someone at Dr. Mitra's house. This roused Mataji's *kheyala* to go and see the sādhu again. Accordingly, they proceeded to Navadweep and put up at the sādhu's āsrama. Dr. Mitra left his widowed sister-in-law with Mataji and returned to Calcutta.

Mataji and her companion took up their abode on the verandah of the house. An old woman was looking after the sādhu. She did not like the idea of these two ladies staying on the premises. Mataji assured her that they would not disturb her in any way. They lived very simply; Girin Mitra's sister-in-law would prepare a few chapatis. Edible green leaves plucked or gathered from the unkept courtyard sufficed for vegetable. The sādhu used to sit still like a statue, not even blinking his eyes. The attendant told everybody that he was a person of great spiritual achievement and that he did not move from his seat at all. On their previous visit, Bholanath and others had been of the opinion that it was a clay figure rather than a human being.

Gradually Mataji, in her own inimitable way, penetrated into the secret of the sādhu's uncanny stillness. He did move and eat but secretly during the night. He confessed to her that he did not like the idea of duping the public, but the old woman had a hold on him and would not allow him to go away. Mataji talked to him for some time before leaving Navadweep. Later on it was reported to her that one morning the people of Navadweep were astonished to see the seat of the sādhu unoccupied and the āsrama vacated. Nobody knew when or where he had gone.

Mataji's *kheyala* to stay away from the towns where she was well-known continued. So, Dr. Mitra took her to his village home in Akna, Bihar. He did not inform the local people, otherwise a crowd would have collected round her in no time even at that place.

After some days Dr. Mitra¹ heard that Bholanath was not keeping good health. Bholanath had been on a pilgrimage to neighbouring *pīṭhassthānas*. On becoming indisposed, he had gone to the Chandpur house of his nephew Dr. Girija Shankar Kushari. Dr. Mitra now informed Mataji about Bholanath's illness and escorted her to Calcutta. Bhaiji was in Calcutta at that time on official business. He arranged for Mataji to stay at the house of his friend Gyan Sen. Kamalakanta was sent for from Dacca. Other devotees in Calcutta were informed about Mataji's return to the city. A wire was sent to Bholanath, who came to Calcutta and to Gyan Sen's house. He was quite displeased to have been left without information of Mataji's whereabouts. His anxiety made him express himself with unwanted sharpness. Mataji kept quiet, not trying to explain why she had moved about so erratically without plans and preparations.

From Gyan Sen's house Mataji and Bholanath went to Surendra Mohan Mukherji's residence. Surendra Mohan's mother was arranging for some *pūjā* at her house and had, accordingly brought sweets and fruits. It occurred to her that Mataji's presence in the house was in itself the fulfilment of her *pūjā*. Now there was no need to offer formal *pūjā* to the deity. But could she hope to offer these sweets to Mataji? For the last two years Mataji had not been taking any milk products and in any case she always ate

1. For many years Major Dr. G. K. Mitra, generally known as Girinda, stayed at the Sri Ma Anandamayi Ashram at Puri. He passed away in Varanasi in 1979.

next to nothing, so that the old lady had so far not been able to feed her at all. But now, Mataji said to her, "You have always wanted to feed me with your hands. So far I have not been able to oblige you. Today you may give me whatever you like." The old lady in great joy fed her curds, sweets and fruits procured for her *pājā*. It is to be remembered that in India children are generally fed by hand till they are old enough to manipulate with their fingers. This turned out to be this lady's last meeting with Mataji. She passed away soon after.

Bholanath expressed his intention of going back to Chandpur. The devotees of Dacca, who were eagerly awaiting Mataji's return to the city, were disappointed to learn that she and Bholanath had gone to Chandpur, accompanied by Kamalakanta only. Bhaiji, Shashanka Mohan and Nishikanta went there to request Mataji and Bholanath to return to Dacca. They conveyed the prayers of the devotees, to which Mataji had nothing to say. Bholanath was a little undecided but agreed to return to Dacca after some time.

Chapter Fifteen

BHOLANATH

Mataji and Bholanath came to Dacca this time in an atmosphere of sadness. Niranjan Rai, who had taken the initiative in building the new Ashram at Ramna, had passed away on June 15, 1929, about a month after Mataji had left Dacca. He had taken his wife's death very much to heart. He would often slip away for many hours to the cremation ground. His friends were powerless to alleviate his sorrow. He had just one interest in life, namely the construction of the Ashram for Mataji at Ramna. Mataji had stayed in this Ashram for twenty-four hours only. Now that she returned to Dacca about three months after leaving it so abruptly, he was no more. Everyone was keenly aware of the tragedy of his death and his absence from their midst.

Bholanath and Mataji came to Ramna, but they did not occupy the new Ashram. Bholanath preferred to stay at Siddheshwari. Didima was with them and also Matori Pisima and little Maroni. They were accommodated in the house of Aswini Kumar, a devotee at Siddheshwari.

Mataji and Bholanath did not encourage the devotees of Dacca to visit or linger at Siddheshwari. Mataji did not look well. This was a novel feature because so far, even if physically ill, she had never seemed to be so. Didi and the others were very much concerned about Mataji's wan looks, but were not permitted to do anything or even stay with them as in Shahbagh.

Mataji herself now tried to cook meals and attempted other housework with the help of Didima and Pisima, but was unable to do so. Mataji had said to Didi in Shabbagh one day in a different context, that human beings do not have to forsake anything wilfully. When the time comes all distractions fall away by themselves. Didi saw for herself the truth of this statement because now when Mataji tried to help with the housework, she would not be able to clasp or hold things. Her hands were unco-ordinated like those of a child. She had, at one time, accomplished single-handed the entire work of a large family—the same hands seemed now powerless to do anything.

The reason for this change in Mataji's way of life was not understood by the devotees at that time. They were saddened at her withdrawn mood. Bholanath also seemed unusually aloof. They missed his easy camaraderie and were at a loss.

Since their marriage Bholanath had never interfered with Mataji's way of life or her movements. During the last two months he had been advised by many members of his family to lead a normal life and not roam about like an ascetic or allow Mataji to do so. Bholanath who was staying with his family at that time probably did not altogether ignore this advice. He spoke to Mataji about it. What happened between them on that occasion was described by Mataji to Didi much later, that is, after Bholanath's death in 1938, as follows: "After almost three years Bholanath wanted me to cook his meals for him and look after his household as I used to do before. Do you remember, I tried to cook for a few days with mother's help at Siddheshwari? I had no objection and it made no difference to me. Since he asked me, I made an attempt but evidently it was not to be. Bholanath fell ill after a few days and then I myself was ill. So it did not come to anything after all.

"There never was any shadow of a worldly thought in Bholanath's mind. He made no difference between me and little Maroni when we lay near him at night. You will remember that many times when you were going away at night, you laid me down near him when this body was in a *bhāva*. He was never troubled by any selfconsciousness. In Bajitpur, as well as in Shahbagh, he guarded and looked after this body most confidently and unselfconsciously. Once or twice, when there was an inkling of a worldly thought in him which was so unformed that he was not aware of it, this body would assume all the symptoms of death. He would feel frightened and do *japa*, knowing that he could re-establish contact with me by that method alone. You will remember that once or twice he called you in and asked you to do *japa* near my inert body in Shahbagh and elsewhere.

"Bholanath's self-control and sense of dignity were always extraordinary. I have never known him to make a light or frivolous remark or an improper joke. All the years I was with him I did not have an inkling of the desires which trouble mankind. I now realize how effectively shielded I was from the knowledge of the weaknesses in character which create such unhappiness in the world. It is now that I hear about this side of human nature, when people tell me of their troubles and sorrows.

"Bholanath was very fond of his family also. At that time he came under the influence of his worldly-minded relations. He always had great faith in me, but he was at times blinded by his anger which clouded his judgment. But as you know, this mood of house-keeping lasted for a few days only."

Mataji added : "All of you know that Bholanath was prone to fits of great anger. It is said that even *Ris* were subject to the emotion of anger. Not that I am saying Bholanath was a *Ris*. If I did, people would think I was praising my

husband. But you have all seen for yourselves that he led an extraordinary life of self-denial and rigorous asceticism."

Didi found this defence of Bholanath very charming. Mataji is so completely beyond the comprehension of even her most constant companions that these revelations of a compassionate understanding are eagerly treasured. This analysis of the situation at Siddheshwari is also very typical. Mataji emphasizes the good only. She never underscores the weaknesses or failings in her companions. As usual she found no fault with anybody and blamed no one for unsettling Bholanath's mind even for a few days.

The conflict in Bholanath's mind was short-lived. While it lasted, Mataji looked very ill. Her normal glow and radiance vanished. She, moreover, observed silence although she would say one or two words to Bholanath and sometimes to the others in an indistinct voice. Nobody, however, at that time, knew the reason for this change in her demeanour.

A few days after coming to Siddheshwari, Bholanath was taken violently ill. Mataji kept a lonely vigil by his bed-side till people came to know about it. The devotees arranged for medical aid and took turns in nursing him. Mataji herself was in constant attendance. Bholanath was removed to Aswini Kumar's house for facility of treatment. Mataji, with Bholanath's permission, sometimes went to the Ashram and stayed alone in the room.

In the month of August, Mataji started running a temperature which developed into high fever within a few days. But a chart could not be maintained; the temperature would suddenly shoot up to 106° and after a few moments come down to 100°. A little later again, the thermometer would record 104° or 105°, although there was no change in Mataji's outward appearance. With her illness Mataji appeared to have regained her cheerfulness. She would smile, talk and

behave like a healthy person, even when she had very high fever. So, Didi and others stopped using the thermometer as serving no purpose. After a few days of the fever, Mataji's body became absolutely limp. She could not use any of her limbs and had to be picked up and carried. Even so, the smallest part of her body that was left unsupported would hang limp in a disjointed fashion. Bholanath now permitted Didi to stay at Siddheshwari to look after Mataji. Aswini Babu's daughter Chana and other local people came to help Didi. It seemed like a stroke of paralysis, except that Mataji spoke and laughed in a normal manner. Mataji herself would say, "Why do you lift the body so carefully? It has become like a bag of flour. You can shove it around." Didi in sheer desperation appealed to Mataji, "We are unable to look after your body in this condition. Please get well now." Soon after this desperate prayer Mataji was seen one night to lift her hand without any aid.

This was the first voluntary movement of her body after four or five days. The next day, she walked a little by herself and then slowly regained the use of her limbs. But the fever persisted and symptoms of dropsy began to appear besides blood dysentery. Her cheerfulness, however, remained unmarred. Bholanath thought that if she continued to enjoy her illness like this, she would never have the *kheyāla* to get well. So, he said with a show of impatience, "Illness is nothing to be so cheerful about. Get well now."

After Bholanath's scolding, Mataji's expression became that of a seriously ill patient. She would keep quiet and not talk to anyone. Many devotees from Dacca were now staying at night at Siddheshwari and the local people also were in constant attendance. Siddheshwari was quite populated now. Housewives would leave their homes and gather round Mataji for long hours. If the devotees asked her to get well, she

would say, "I don't ask all of you to go away when you come. Why should I send away illnesses? They will leave in their own time." Indeed, diseases took their own reluctant time to go away from her. The fever continued for many days after the other symptoms had vanished.

A young boy named Atul had come in search of Jogeshdada from his village. After passing his Matriculation examination he had felt like following in Jogeshdada's footsteps. He now came to Siddheshwari and became one of Mataji's ever-increasing family. He was given the task of cooking *bhoga* and looking after the image of Kālī.

It will be recalled that the image of Kālī and the sacrificial fire had to be moved with every change of place of installation. Some time after the Kālīpūjā in 1926, under Mataji's instructions, a hollow had been made near the pond in Shahbagh. After consecration of the ground, the sacrificial fire was established in this *kuṇḍa*. Kulada Banerji, a new-comer at that time, was put in charge of this *yajña-kuṇḍa*. He was temperamentally suited for these forms of *pūjā*. For many years he remained in charge of Kālī and the *yajña-agni* in Dacca.

At Siddheshwari, the fire had been placed under the *peepul* tree. Mataji did not permit it to be taken to any home. Whenever necessary, she gave suitable instructions for its preservation and maintenance.

The devotees were now desirous of establishing the image of Kālī and the *agni* at the Ramna Ashram permanently. Mataji suggested that the Goddess Kālī might be installed where a broken *Śivalinga* had been found. A pit for the sacrificial fire was also constructed according to Mataji's instructions.

Meanwhile, the devotees wanted to enlarge the Ashram at Ramna. Nagen Babu took charge of the building programme.

Several graves were uncovered when the earth was dug up for laying the foundation. Some were in a good condition of preservation. Skeletons, ashes from sacrificial fires and earthen lamps were disinterred. People now recalled what Mataji had said about this site, namely, that many ascetics had lived there and practised *sādhana* in the past. At Mataji's *kheyāla* the graves were left undisturbed. Three of the main *samādhis* were below the big room of the Ashram. Another became the foundation of the Śiva temple, yet others were under Mataji's room.

On *Mahālayā*, 1336 B. S., that is some time in October 1929, Mataji and Bholanath came to Ramna. Both were ailing and confined to bed for several days. It took a long time for Mataji to get back to her normal behaviour. For 15 days she hardly left her bed. She would get up for a few minutes only, otherwise she would lie or sit on her bed all the time. One day, Bhaiji came early in the morning and persuaded her to take a walk in the Ramna Polo ground. This started off another reaction. She began walking for three or four hours every day.

One morning she did not get up at all. Two days passed, Mataji remained lying inert on her bed. Bholanath was at his wit's end. He assembled the devotees for a *kirtana* which was kept up throughout the night. The next afternoon, Mataji sat up and slowly resumed her activities of daily life. She would say in answer to inquiries, "This inert condition is the same to me as an active condition. I feel no difference whatsoever, so what is there to explain?"

During this time Mataji in her own unobtrusive way brought about a major change in Bholanath's life. Bholanath was not indifferent to creature comforts. He had a soft and comfortable bed, whereas Mataji had a blanket only. One night Mataji roused Bholanath from his fine bed and expressed

a *kheyāla* to recline on it. Bholanath being deprived of his bed had to roll up some clothes to serve as a pillow and use Mataji's blanket for the night's rest. After a few days Mataji rolled up Bholanath's elaborate bedding and had it put away. She took another blanket for herself.

Mataji's reputation was spreading day by day. Many came to talk to her about their personal problems or to discuss philosophical questions. The Indian Philosophical Congress was held in Dacca in 1929. Some of the delegates came to see Mataji and had a long talk with her with the help of a translator, because at that time she did not know Hindi. One of the delegates asked her, "If the human character changes and everybody becomes unselfish, will the world then become perfect?" She at once replied with a smile, "But such it is already." It was evident to the delegates that she was speaking from the standpoint of her experience in which everything is the perfect expression of the perfect Being.

Dr. Mahendra Nath Sircar, recalling the same meeting, writes, "All the delegates assembled in Ma's house. A professor of the Wilson College led the discussion that lasted for three hours. All sorts of questions were put, mostly philosophical, and Mataji was ready with answers spontaneously and immediately. There was no hesitation, not the least conscious thinking, nor the least sign of nervousness in her. Her answers hit directly the point, free from metaphysical technique." He added that all who were present were impressed by "the profundity of her wisdom, the fluency of her expression and the luminosity of the smile on her face."

In the beginning of 1930, Mataji asked Bholanath to practise his *sādhana* at Siddheshwari. Atul or some other young *brahmachārī* would stay at night at Siddheshwari with him, to

look after his needs, if any. Otherwise he was practically alone. Here also, as in Tarapeeth, he attained the capacity of deep concentration. He would sit for hours together in one posture. Some of the brahmachāris took spiritual initiation from him at that time.

The *panchavaṭī* at Ramna was planted by Bholanath. It is usually a grove of five trees, namely, *banyan*, *peepul*, *āmalaki*, *aloka* and *bel*. A *panchavaṭī* is considered to be conducive to meditation and, therefore, a good place for *sādhana*. Bholanath had obtained from within himself the mantras for planting each tree and was altogether in an exalted condition at the time of the ceremonies. When the saplings were unpacked it was seen that the *aloka* tree had no ball of earth to protect its root. Somebody remarked: "Probably this won't survive." Bholanath, overhearing this, said forcefully, "Of course, it will survive. It cannot die."

After a few days, this particular sapling dried up completely. Kamalakanta, whose foolhardiness earned him many reprimands from Bholanath, uprooted it and threw it aside. Bholanath on his next visit to Ramna from Siddheshwari was furious to see the uprooted plant. He put the dead sapling again in its original place saying, "It cannot die."

A few days later, Mataji, while strolling near the *panchavaṭī*, said, "Look here, you can do one thing. Bring a fresh sapling and plant it together with this one." Strange as it may seem, this novel treatment revived the dry tree, and within a few days both saplings began to throw out green shoots and became healthy-looking plants.

Mataji's birthday celebrations of 1930 were held at the Ramna Ashram and the *pūjā* was performed in the *panchavaṭī*. A small platform had been constructed for Mataji in the

middle of the enclosure. Bholanath came to Ramna to perform the *pūjā*.

Shortly after the birthday celebrations, Mataji remarked one day, "I hear the sound of weeping from every house." This prophecy became an actuality within a few days. The communal riots in June 1930 brought about a reign of terror. Curfew was clamped on the city. For some time, nobody dared to stir out of his home. Only Bhaiji came daily to the Ashram as usual. His neighbour told him one day, "I watch you passing by every day and I cannot rest until I see you return. This has become almost a vigil with me now."

Chapter Sixteen

THE WIDENING CIRCLE

In August 1930, Mataji and Bholanath, accompanied by Didi, Shashanka Mohan, Jogeshdada, Ashu and a few others, started on a tour of South India. They spent three or four days in Waltair and from there went to Madras, where they stopped for about a week. Then they visited Chidambaram, Srirangam, Kanchipuram and Madurai. They stayed for a week in Rameshwaram and for about fifteen days in Kanya Kumarika.

The beautiful temple of Devi Kumari captivated their hearts. In the evening, young girls from the families of priests sang and danced inside the temple. Mataji had picked up one or two words of their language. They sometimes came to the *dharmaśālā* to sing for Mataji. They would hold hands and form a ring around her. At Mataji's *kheyālā*, the priests and these young girls were entertained to *bhoga* on two days. The children were each given a set of clothes, garlands and sandalwood.

When Mataji was about to leave, the little girls stood around her and tried to talk to her. But the barrier of language was insurmountable. Mataji and the girls communicated for a while by gestures alone.

Shashanka Mohan had a wonderful experience in the temple of Kumarika. One day, when sitting in meditation inside the temple, he was suddenly impelled to open his eyes. He saw a small beautiful girl standing inside the door. As soon as he looked at her, she retreated into the inner

temple. He was greatly surprised because no girl ever entered the inner temple. He kept on gazing at her while she was moving backwards till she reached the image of the Deity, and then he saw her no more. Shashanka Babu was a very reticent person. It is not known what exactly this incident meant to him. It was related by him many years later.

After Kanya Kumarika they visited Trivandrum and Mangalore and proceeded to Dwarka via Bombay. Mataji took keen interest in all the temples and cities they passed through. She noted the different dresses, customs and appearances of people belonging to the various provinces. She would point out to her companions the peculiarities of different temples with regard to their architecture as well as ritualistic observances. She would note the different styles of decoration in different temples. People were attracted by her radiant personality. Although she could not speak their language, she found no difficulty in establishing contact with them. She seemed completely at home in all these new places.

Just before the annual Durgā-pūjā in October 1930, the travellers arrived at Vindhyachal from Dwarka. Many devotees from Varanasi had come to Vindhyachal. A small building on the top of Ashtabhujā hill had been purchased by Shashanka Mohan and Durgā-pūjā was performed at this site. The lonely surroundings came to life. The whole neighbourhood rang with the sounds of conch shells and bells, *kirtana* and the play and laughter of children.

From Vindhyachal, Mataji proceeded to many other places and then went to Jamshedpur. Jogeshdada's younger brother, Krishna Chandra, was working in that town and he had made arrangements for Mataji and her party. He had organised a *kirtana* during which, after quite an interval, Mataji had beautiful *bhāvas*. Jamshedpur is an industrial

town. The people were not particularly interested in religion ; in fact, many of them had never before heard of a *kirtana*. This *kirtana*, which centred round Mataji, opened up for them a vista of a new world wonderful in its possibilities.

Next day, Krishna Chandra's house was teeming with visitors. Till 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, people would sit round Mataji and listen to her talk. After she left for Calcutta, the people of Jamshedpur organised themselves trying to keep up the atmosphere created by Mataji's visit. They would meet in one house every week to perform *kirtana* and to talk about Mataji. To this day, the organisation formed by them is doing commendable work. Many of them later on took initiation from Bholanath. Mataji does not visit Jamshedpur as often as she visits other towns, yet the devotees with mutual help and goodwill keep up a good standard of *satsang*.

In Calcutta, the number of devotees now was legion. Jyotish Guha and his two brothers Nitish and Khitish, who had recently become Mataji's ardent devotees, had a house at Ballygunj. They converted one big room into a *pūjā*-room, where *kirtana* was performed on many occasions. The entire family could sing well and the family group itself would be a *kirtana* party. The devotees of Calcutta made this house a sort of headquarters for news of Mataji when she was away from Calcutta.

Jyotish Guha's father-in-law, Pran Kumar, and his wife became devoted to Mataji. A more devout couple dedicated to the service of Mataji would be difficult to find. At their invitation, Mataji went to Pabna for a few days.

A young *sādhu* had attached himself to the throng of devotees. One day, a woman came to Mataji in Calcutta and introduced herself as the *sādhu*'s wife. She begged Mataji to persuade her husband to return home. Mataji spoke to

the sādhu in these words: "If you want to follow the path of renunciation, you should go home and talk it over with your family. Your decision should be acceptable to them." But on arrival in Pabna, Mataji found that the sādhu had accompanied the big party of people from Calcutta. She did not say anything more to him.

Pran Kumar joyfully welcomed the entire party and took great pains to look after their comforts. Days and nights slipped away like short-lived dreams. Mataji one day entered the store-room of the house and brought out baskets of fruit which had been stored for the use of Mataji's party. Amidst general merriment, Mataji distributed all the fruits saying, "Hoarding is bad. One should be content with things as they come or are available."¹

The sādhu now fell ill. Pran Kumar arranged for medical treatment. He was left in Pran Kumar's care when Mataji started for Cox's Bazar. She had once before visited Cox's Bazar. This time one Dinabandhu Chakravarti invited Mataji to his house and made arrangements for her stay in his seaside bungalow.

A few days later, Didi found Mataji making a hollow in the sand of the beach. In answer to her question Mataji said, "I am digging my grave (*samādhi*)."¹ Didi drew Mataji's hand away and took her to the bungalow. A couple of days after this incident, a message was received from Pabna to the effect that the sādhu, who had been left behind at Pran Kumar's house, had passed away. He had died on the day Mataji was digging a hollow in the sand at Cox's Bazar. In this way sometimes Mataji gave indications of incidents taking place far away. Sādhus are buried and not cremated.

1. Pran Kumar's widow or Banidi's Didima, as she is known to devotees, was living in the Ashram at Varanasi for many years and died only very recently.

As related earlier, Mataji during her stay in Cox's Bazar also experienced the breaking of the arm of Kali at Dacca.

After about six months when Mataji returned to Dacca, news about Bholanath's fourth brother, Kamini Kumar was received from a devotee in Calcutta. It will be recalled that his family did not know Kamini Kumar's whereabouts for over twenty years. They had heard that he had adopted Christianity and was a clergyman. It transpired that he was living in Calcutta. He had heard about Mataji. Wanting to meet his family, he had gone to the house of Charu Ghosh to get news of his brother and sister-in-law. Bholanath was very pleased with this information. He immediately went to Calcutta with Mataji and Ashu to meet his brother and his family. Reverend K. K. Chakravarty (as Kamini Kumar was now called) and his wife became very attached to Mataji. They, in their turn came to Dacca after some time and met Mataji's large family of devotees.

In Ramna Ashram

In the evening, Mataji would stroll in the extensive green fields of the polo grounds surrounding the Ashram. The men would stand about or sometimes sit on the grass and have discourses on philosophical topics with Mataji. One day, a gentleman said to her, "You were lying in a state of *samādhi*. You were evidently in communion with God. Now you have to descend to our level and talk to us for our benefit."

"Are you all apart from God?" Mataji smiled, and said, "I do not see any ascending or descending. To me it is all the same. Only the bodily reactions seem to be different."

The annual birthday celebrations of 1931 drew near. It was decided to install the images of Śiva, Annapūrṇa and Viṣṇu in the newly constructed temple in the Ramna Ashram. As mentioned above, the image of Kali had been repaired

under Mataji's instructions and installed again in its original place.

The birthday celebrations started with great enthusiasm among the devotees. Many arrived from Calcutta and other towns nearby. One day Mataji said, "Why should *kirtana* be sung by men only? We, women, shall keep awake one night and sing *kirtana*." Her suggestion was carried out with so much enthusiasm and success that when other ladies heard about it, they asked to be allowed to arrange for another night-long *kirtana*. The ladies were not free during the day, but in the evening, nearly 150 of them collected for this purpose. Mataji asked all men to go home. She nominated a few elderly men like Shashanka Mohan to act as guards since the function would have to be in the open. It was typical of Mataji to make proper arrangements and take all precautions against any untoward incident.

The women decorated themselves with flowers, garlands and sandal-wood paste. The fragrance of incense permeated the atmosphere. Quite a few among the ladies were good musicians and had beautiful voices. They made the night melodious by their inspired singing. This was how a formal *kirtana* party of women was first formed in Dacca, which acquired great proficiency and fame later on. It encouraged the ladies in other towns to form similar parties. At that time, it was an unheard-of event for ladies to stay in an ashram among strangers for a night-long function. But impossible things were made possible by Mataji.

The birthday celebrations of 1931 were concluded amidst an atmosphere of great festivity and rejoicing. It was an occasion for many people to come together and become, as it were, members of one large family. The devotees of Dacca welcomed the devotees coming from outside. Bholanath's brother, Rev. K. K. Chakravarty arrived with his family and

was introduced to everyone. In keeping with the Indian custom, he came to be known as 'kakābābū' or uncle. Atal Bihari and his wife from Rajshahi, Jyotish Guha and his entire family, Pramoda Devi's family from Salkia and many others arrived, creating an atmosphere of family reunion. The red brick-building of the Ashram was surrounded on all sides by the vast greenery of the Ramna polo grounds. The devotees no doubt congratulated themselves on having at last secured a place, fit for Mataji and her ever increasing congregation of devotees, not knowing that Mataji would leave it for good the next year.

After the birthday celebrations of 1931, Mataji left Dacca for Darjeeling. On her way she visited Bajitpur. Many of the ladies who had come to see her off, at the last moment climbed into cars and joined Mataji's party, amidst much laughter and teasing that they would be considered mad by their people and severely taken to task on returning home. But nobody was willing to think so far ahead, and they adventurously went along with Mataji's party to Bajitpur. (Incidentally, it may be recorded that such last-minute augmentation of Mataji's party is not a rare phenomenon. The truth of the matter is that nobody finds it easy to tear himself away from Mataji's presence. Everyone experiences this wrench, so, the impulsive ones were not taken to task by their families).

A tide of festivity passed over Bajitpur for a couple of days with the arrival of the cheerful throng of devotees. Mataji pointed out old landmarks. Her cottage was still there, but its roof had fallen in and the walls were crumbling. From the local people who collected round them, Didi and others heard accounts of Mataji's life during that time. The girl who used to work for Mataji came and shyly stood near them. She was so happy to see Mataji again. Didi collected a

little of the earth from the corner of the room where Mataji used to sit during her *līlā* of *sādhana*. This was subsequently placed under the platform of the *pañchavati* at Ramna.

The impromptu party returned to Dacca, while Mataji, with her usual companions, went on to Darjeeling. They did not know anybody there and were sitting at the station, discussing where to go, when they were suddenly accosted by Biren Maharaj, an old acquaintance. He was overjoyed to see Mataji, and took them to his house. From Darjeeling Mataji came to Calcutta. After visiting various places they went to Puri to attend the annual festival of *Ratha-yātrā*.

Chapter Seventeen

THE LAST YEAR IN DACCA, 1931

Ratha-yātrā or pulling of the chariot of Jagannāth is an annual festival at Puri. Many friends and devotees had come with Mataji to join in this festival. A few days before the *Ratha-yātrā*, Mataji said, "I see an impending calamity. Take what steps you can." Bholanath conjectured that some sort of accident would occur during the great rush hour of the festival and wanted to leave Puri at once, but his companions were eager to see the *Ratha-yātrā*, and so he was persuaded to stay on. Nirmal Chandra, Didi's brother-in-law, who had come with his family from Varanasi, left after spending a few days with Mataji. His eldest son, Santosh, and his daughter, Tarubala, remained at Puri because the boy wanted to be with Mataji's party. Mataji said, "Are they staying back? In that case, all of you must look after them." The mother of Santosh, however, told Mataji that she was entrusting her son and daughter to Mataji's care. There was reason for some concern about Santosh. He was subject to epileptic fits and had to be watched constantly. A week passed. Then, one day, Santosh was suddenly missing. After a frantic search, his dead body was discovered in the well behind the house. The shock of this discovery nearly paralysed everybody. Only Mataji remained sitting quietly in her room. Bholanath and Shashanka Mohan, who was Santosh's grandfather, with the help of others brought the body to the house. Mataji's calm demeanour had a salutary effect on everyone. Many persons who had come to visit Mataji were on the point

of turning back at the gate, thinking it would be improper to intrude on her grief. When they were told that Mataji was her normal serene self, they took heart and went in to see her.

Death by accident is, in some cases, considered inauspicious. Therefore, the body is sometimes not cremated but has to be buried. Apart from the tragedy of death, this was an additional problem that had to be faced. The local people rallied to the help of the bereaved family and with the permission of the pandits the body was cremated.

Throughout the day Mataji sat quietly attending to people as they came, with no sign of perturbation. Late at night, she talked about Santosh to Didi and Tarubala, who were sitting up with her. Throughout the night she spoke of nothing else. Didi and Taru, who had considered Mataji quite beyond their level of worldly feelings, were vouchsafed a glimpse of a heart overflowing with compassion and sympathy for the bereaved.

The next day at dawn, Mataji went to the well, trying to reconstruct the actions of Santosh. He had been intelligent enough to know that he was not supposed to go near wells because of his disability. Why he went there remained a mystery.

On the night of the *Ratha-yātrā*, Mataji and her companions left Puri and went to Vindhyachal. While at Vindhyachal, Mataji came to know that an unexpected hitch had occurred regarding the *śrāddha* of Santosh. The pandits of Varanasi had refused to perform the *śrāddha* ceremony, which is held on the 13th day after death. They declared that his death was by mischance and should be treated as such. Mataji now took the matter in her own hands. She sent telegrams to Puri and to many of her companions at Varanasi repeatedly. After prolonged consultation between the pandits of Varanasi and Puri, the former gave them permission for the ceremony

to be performed as usual. Without Mataji's personal intervention, the bereaved parents would have been denied the solace of performing the last rites for the departed soul.

Jyotish Guha's family from Calcutta was with Mataji. At their request Mataji accompanied them to Varanasi. The day on which she arrived at the house of Nirmal Chandra happened to be the day of the *Iraddha* of Santosh. Nirmal Chandra greeted Mataji with composure, saying, "Ma, I gave you two of my children. I see, you have given sanctuary to one of them." Mataji looked at his calm face and started weeping in a touching manner. Santosh's mother, who was crying silently, now took Mataji into her arms like a child and tried to console and quieten her.

Mataji stayed with them for another fifteen days. It did not appear that this was a house of mourning. Santosh's parents were busy looking after Mataji and the cheerful throng that always surrounded her wherever she went. One day the bereaved father asked her, "Ma, why did you weep on the first day?" Mataji answered, "Because you did not. I wept to lighten the burden weighing on your heart."

From Varanasi Mataji again returned to Vindhychal. One day, from the verandah of the Ashram, Mataji saw a few men climbing up the hill. They were carrying some refreshments with them and were evidently on an all-day expedition to various places of interest on Ashtabhuja hill. On arriving at the hill-top, they hid their basket under a bush and went away. Mataji asked Didi to fetch the refreshments. On their return, the gentlemen were non-plussed to find their cache missing. After a few moments Mataji sent someone to invite them to the Ashram. They were highly pleased that Mataji had taken away their food and congratulated themselves on getting her *darśana* in this unexpected manner. One of them, Dr. Upendranath Banerji of Mirzapur, invited her to

his place. The next day, he came with his wife to renew his invitation. Mataji thus visited Mirzapur and then paid a short visit to Ayodhya before returning to Dacca.

Mataji was gradually effecting significant changes in the lives of many of her close companions. As written earlier Shashanka Mohan in his old age was acquiring new habits and learning to do without many comforts of everyday life. Mataji had some time back obtained a *kamanjalū* (water vessel made of a pumpkin carried by *sahayāsīs*) which she had given to Didi to keep for her. This *kamanjalū* had been taken to Siddheshwari, but thereafter Didi forgot all about it. One day, in Siddheshwari she was suddenly reminded of it. She went to ask the *bhadravi* of the Kali temple about the *kamanjalū* because in their absence the *bhadravi* used to look after the premises. When Didi came near the temple, she saw a man swimming in the pond. As she approached the pond, the man brought out a blackish object which had struck his foot. He asked if it belonged to anyone. Didi recognised the *kamanjalū* which had come back to her in this accidental manner and almost as soon as she had thought of it. Mataji subsequently got it cleaned and kept it by her bedside. She would drink water from it. One day Shashanka Mohan and others were discussing the advantage of drinking from a receptacle with curved edges from which water can be poured into the mouth without the lips touching the vessel. Shashanka Mohan said, "I cannot do it. I can only drink from a glass." Mataji promptly handed him the *kamanjalū*, saying: "Try to drink water from this from now on." Shashanka Mohan accepted the gift and with great perseverance acquired proficiency in the art of drinking from a *kamanjalū*. In this slow but steady fashion Mataji was carving out new ways of living for Shashanka Mohan and Didi and many others. Shashanka

Mohan had almost become an inmate of the Ashram. In his old age, he started practising such rigorous *sādhana*, which would be beyond the capacity of even younger people. He would sit in deep meditation for about eight to ten hours at a stretch. He was the head of a large joint family, almost a clan. He discharged his duties but was slowly becoming unattached to the claims of this family.

Perhaps it will not be out of place to mention an incident which occurred much later. Shashanka Mohan was a taciturn man. His stern expression, however, disguised a keen sense of humour. He would sit quietly in one corner of a room, while Mataji talked to visitors. One day Mataji, in the course of conversation, referred a point to him for clarification. When he did not answer, the entire congregation turned round to look at him. Shashanka Mohan said to Mataji, "I am sorry, I did not realise that Mataji was speaking to me — I am so used to being overlooked by her now." Then he added with a faint smile, "No good mother has any time for grown up children who can fend for themselves."

Wherever he was, poor people would come to him for medical aid. Although he did not practise his profession after leaving Dacca, he generally kept a supply of medicines for indigent villagers, and he was always accessible to them. He was a source of great strength and support to Bholanath. As in his own family, so also in this new family knit together by spiritual ties, he was like a revered elder.

Mataji was constantly on the move. At the invitation of devotees she visited various towns and villages. After the annual Kāñ-Pūjā of 1931, she went to Cox's Bazar and stayed at the seaside bungalow of Dinabandhu for more than one month. Dinabandhu's wife expressed a desire to visit some holy places. Although now quite old, she had not travelled at all. Mataji persuaded Dinabandhu to allow his wife to

accompany her to Calcutta. From there a huge party of devotees went with Mataji to Tarapeeth for one day. Mataji took Dinabandhu's wife also to Varanasi and Vindhyachal and then proceeded to Jamshedpur. The devotees of Jamshedpur had organised themselves for looking after the comforts of Mataji and her whole party. Everyone wanted to have his home graced with her presence. They themselves made arrangements for these visits and prepared a list of houses and the order of procedure. At every home Mataji found people awaiting her with offerings of fruit, flowers and other gifts in accordance with their personal preferences. Didi, knowing that people were disappointed if Mataji did not eat what they had to offer, fed her a little more than her usual quantity. When the visits were over, Mataji asked Didi gravely, "You have fed me more than I usually eat, haven't you?"

Didi answered: "Ma, people do not believe that you eat as little as you do. They think I do not give you enough; they suspect that I am not in favour of your taking food at all the places to which you are invited. So I have tried to give you a reasonable amount at each house."

Mataji answered, "You should do your duty regardless of what people may think of you. If you are influenced by praise or blame, how can you keep your mind on your duty?" Didi was remorseful because in order to please devotees she had failed in her service to Mataji.

From Jamshedpur Mataji returned to Dacca in the beginning of the year 1932. Crowds of people would come to the station to receive her and to see her off. Mataji stayed at Ramna for a few months this time. Shashanka Mohan and Didi were at Siddheshwari. Didi would come early in the morning and leave late at night with her father. Shashanka Mohan used to rise before dawn and sit down for

his meditation. He would get up for a few minutes in the afternoon. At about 6 in the evening he would go to Ramna and take *prasaḍa*. After returning, he would again sit in meditation till 2 or 3 a.m. He would rest for an hour or so and then it was another day for him. Some nights he did not rest at all. Once at midnight while sitting in meditation he had a vision of Mataji at Ramna. He saw her coming out of her room and then going back after a few moments. Next day he asked Bholanath if Mataji had gone out of the room at night. Bholanath answered, "Yes, at midnight, for a few moments."

In the month of April 1932, Mataji came to Calcutta after visiting many places round about Dacca. This time she stayed with Kākābabu's (Bholanath's Christian brother) family. Days and nights merged into one another. The unending stream of people eager to have a glimpse of Mataji did not allow her a single moment's rest. Kākābabu and others decided to fix definite times for *darśana*. At noon everybody was requested to leave so that Mataji could relax for a little while. After people had reluctantly gone, Mataji was asked to rest in one of the inner rooms which was cool. April is a hot month. The sun was blazing mercilessly and in the open the heat was quite unbearable. Bholanath, Kākābabu and others were occupying another room. After a short while Mataji got up with a mischievous look in her eyes. She entered the room where the men were enjoying their siesta, and asked Kākābabu to come out for a walk with her. Kākābabu protested, "Now, what is all this? I sent away everybody so that you could rest, and you want to go out in this scorching heat! What will people think of me?" Mataji did not listen to his protests. She smiled and said, "Don't you know that there is something wrong with my brain? Alas, I am disturbing your rest also." Mataji roamed

around, sometimes stopping at shops to bargain for some articles. In this manner she arrived at the house of Pashupati Babu. His wife was ill and had not been able to visit Mataji, so she was overwhelmed with joy because she had been praying deeply for Mataji's *darlana*.

In the evening, Mataji returned to Kākābabu's house. At 9 p.m. Kākābabu again requested people to leave. He was determined to ensure Mataji's rest at least during the night. But he had reckoned without Mataji. She stayed awake with the result that her companions could not sleep either. People who have seen Mataji will know that it is not possible for anybody to tear himself away from her presence unless compelled to do so. When Kākābabu protested, she started teasing him in the manner of a privileged elder sister-in-law. The whole night was spent in this hilarious and wakeful manner. The next morning the devotees heard how Mataji had 'rested' during the day and night. Kākābabu gave up his attempt at organising Mataji's programme.

Didi recalls an interesting incident which occurred at his place. Kākābabu's wife, Kākimā, was a Punjabi lady, very proud of her athletic figure and physical strength. She would say that she was more than a match for any Bengali girl. In friendly trials of strength she would defeat Didi and others. Mataji one day playfully caught hold of her arm with three fingers only. Much to the amusement of all, Kākimā was unable to loosen this slender hold on her arm.

From Calcutta Mataji went to Atal Bihari's house at Rajshahi. At night, Mataji and her party were invited to a *kirtana* at a neighbour's house. Atal Bihari stayed at home. On her return Mataji found that he had retired for the night. He got up when his guests returned. Mataji said "You are a fine person. Your guests have not dined as yet and you have had your food and are sleeping comfortably." Atal

Bihari said, "A mother is satisfied if her son is well fed and rested. My dinner should suffice for you." Mataji said, "Indeed! All right, don't forget what you have said now." When some light refreshments were brought for Mataji, she pushed the dish in front of Atal, saying, "It should suffice for me if Atal eats. Let him eat this." Atal smiled and polished off the plate. Mataji then said, "I do not need to lie down because Atal's rest will be my rest." Atal answered, "All right, you can sit up. I am going to sleep," and with that he marched off to his bed.

The next morning Mataji said, "Atal's stay in the house will be my stay. Let us now go somewhere else." Accompanied by Didi, Atal's wife and others Mataji walked to a riverside temple nearby. She said, "Cook the midday meal over here." Bholanath and Shashanka Mohan fetched the necessary commodities from the market. Didi and Atal's wife cooked a simple meal in the open, consisting of rice and *dāl* cooked together with vegetables, and a sweet dish of milk with rice (*khīr*). When the meal was ready, Didi poured a little of the *khīr* into a glass and offered it to Mataji. After swallowing the first mouthful, Mataji asked Didi to taste a little of the *khīr*. Didi obeyed, but had to spit it out immediately because it was still scalding hot. Mataji's smile somewhat lessened her discomfiture and remorse. Atal Bihari's wife said, "I have also learnt my lesson. Very often I offer hot things for *bhoga*, not bothering to ascertain whether they are fit to be eaten or not."

Mataji then returned to the house of Atal Bihari. It was not in her nature to walk away with a victory over her host. So she went back to relieve him of his anxiety and remorse at carrying his playfulness too far. Mataji returned to Dacca a few days before the birthday anniversary of 1932.

Chapter Eighteen

FAREWELL TO DACCA, 1932

Bhaiji had been asked to arrange for the remodelling of the deities in the temple at Ramna Ashram. They were made out of an alloy of eight metals and beautifully executed. Mataji had donated a major portion of her ornaments and the gold was used for this purpose. For many years she had worn only a thin gold chain given to her by Bholanath. In deference to convention she kept one pair of conch-shell bangles on her arms and a gold-plated iron bangle worn by all married women of Bengal. She still wears this single bangle, a gift from Srimati Vinodini Devi.

Mataji continually received offerings of flowers, sweets, clothes, ornaments and money and untiringly she would go on distributing these amongst the people around her. She also received a lot of jewellery from devotees and relatives, but she never kept anything for herself for long. This distribution of gifts is a singular feature of Mataji's personality. Even after years she can tell the name of a person who has given her a particular gift. Didi and her other companions are frequently at a loss to know how to accommodate this mountain of offerings which accumulates wherever Mataji happens to be. But Mataji always finds suitable recipients for every kind of article ranging from a priceless gold embroidered velvet carpet, or a sandalwood throne, to cheap oddments. Incidentally, the monetary worth of an item is the least important aspect for Mataji's consideration. She tries to find a suitable place or person for every present she receives.

To everything she devotes the same degree of care and concern. Wherever Mataji is, there is an abundance of goods. But she never encourages neglect, wastage or even taking of things for granted. This appreciation of even slight pecuniary offerings, or, for that matter, physical or spiritual efforts, is Mataji's own peculiar characteristic.

This time the birthday celebrations continued for 21 days and during the entire period uninterrupted *kirtana* was kept up together with other religious functions. As in previous years, devotees flocked to Dacca. Day and night the small red building amidst the green expanse of the polo grounds swarmed with men, women and children. On this occasion yet another facet of Mataji's personality was revealed. It was she who with unerring judgement advised how to keep them usefully occupied. Now that the devotees had gathered at one place, she suggested the celebration of various religious functions. Everyone would joyfully take part in them. She was everywhere at once, advising, taking decisions and making suggestions whenever help was needed. The highlight of the occasion was the installation of the deities in the various temples. Under Mataji's instructions Bholanath performed all the necessary rituals.

As mentioned earlier, a platform had been constructed covering the hollow at Siddheshwari temple. At this time a *Śivalingam* was installed on this platform at Mataji's suggestion. So it was no longer possible for anybody to use it as a seat or in any other way.

Throughout the twenty-four hours Mataji used to be surrounded by large numbers of devotees. Yet she found time to instruct the brahmachāris of the Ashram in detail concerning the worship of the newly installed deities, and regarding the maintenance of the sacred fire. There are methods of preserving fire under ashes for some time. Knowledge of such

things is spontaneous with Mataji. That her instructions were correct and strictly in accordance with *sāstric* rules was borne out later when she came into contact with pandits at Varanasi at the time of the *Mahāyujā*.¹ Necessary guidance was given by Mataji to the person immediately concerned whenever the occasion would arise. At the same time each individual received personal instructions from her concerning his spiritual life. Mataji had such an easy way of accomplishing her object that there was no fuss or ceremony about these matters. She would not disclose to anybody else the advice she gave to any particular person. Mataji would say, "The efforts you make for your spiritual welfare are to be carefully hidden. Guard them as closely as a miser guards his wealth. You do not have to advertise the fact that you are engaged in *sādhana*. It is between God and you only. Do not neglect your duties at home or at your place of work. You may do your work with your hands, but nobody can prevent you from keeping your mind on God."

Mataji seemed always in the midst of a crowd of devotees and admirers and did not apparently single out anybody for individual attention. Yet, after Mataji had left Dacca, the devotees realized that she had not forgotten anything or anyone. As occasions arose they found themselves fortified by Mataji's instructions. At the time of the festival, however, nobody could guess that Mataji was about to leave them very soon.

Towards the close of the prolonged celebrations, Mataji was one day invited to the house of a devotee whose daughter was getting married. This could have brought about the *kheyāla* for little Maroni's future. On returning to the Ashram, Mataji sent for Bholanath and talked to him for some time. After this she conversed with Kulada Charan

1. See page 114, footnote.

and his wife. A little later Mataji went to the *pancharaji*, asking everybody to join her. Kulada Charan, his wife and their son Chinu were present. Bholanath came with little Maroni, dressed in silk clothes and decked with ornaments. She was eight years old. At Mataji's suggestion, an engagement ceremony was performed between Maroni and Chinu. Bholanath was very fond of Maroni and was somewhat overcome at the thought of this early betrothal. Mataji said, "Do not be sad. It is all for the good of everybody concerned. At the proper time, God willing, Maroni will be married to Chinu."

The festival of twenty-one days was rounded off by the performance of *pājū* in the new temple. The devotees congratulated themselves on the completion of a faultless ceremony. They all felt rather exhausted but extremely happy.

A few days after the celebrations Mataji went to see one of the devotees. The lady of the house gave Didi a small quantity of a special brand of pulses and some vegetables for Mataji. Didi tied them up in a corner of her outer garment as she had no bag or receptacle with her. At the next house Didi said jokingly to the housewife, "Look, we are out abegging today. What will you give us?" The lady offered some more pulses, rice and vegetables. Mataji visited many houses that day. Bhaiji and Bholanath also had to carry the offerings that were thus collected. Ultimately, a separate carriage had to be engaged to transport the food-stuff. All these householders were invited to take *prasāda* at the Ashram that day. *Bhoga* was cooked from the eatables received by begging and a host of people partook of the *prasāda* in great joy.

The same day, Mataji visited Siddheshwari for a short while and before her departure touched caressingly the image of Kālī and also the peepal tree in front of the temple.

In the evening, she sat on the veranda of the temple at Ramna Ashram. Only a small group of devotees were sitting around her. At about 11-30 p.m. she got up, remarking in a soft voice, "I shall go now." Didi's brother Biren, who was present, was unpleasantly struck by these words. He hurriedly said, "Yes, go and lie down. It is late." He gave this meaning to her words in order to deflect her *kheyala* which had sounded ominously like the prelude to a farewell. As Mataji did not say anything, Biren and the others made obeisance to her and went home. When everybody had left, Mataji asked Didi to fetch Bholanath. Tired out, he had fallen asleep. Didi roused him and gave him Mataji's message. Mataji and Bholanath talked together for some time and then Bholanath came out and started putting on his travelling clothes and shoes. In the meantime, Mataji had sent Jogeshdada to fetch Bhaiji from his home, while she herself sat on the platform within the *panchavati*. Kulada Charan, Atul, Kamalakanta and other *brahmacharis* were called and she talked to them for some time. Didi suddenly heard Mataji calling her by name. She ran to the *panchavati* and found Mataji seated on the platform. Mataji said to her, "Look, fortitude is the prime characteristic of a *sādhaka*. Fortitude is required (of you)." At these words Didi's apprehension increased a thousandfold. Mataji continued, "Do not be agitated. I have left Dacca so many times. But because all of you feel so upset at my departure I have to come back again and again. Let me move about according to my *kheyala*. I cannot do so if all of you put obstacles in my path." Mataji went on in this strain for some time, asking Didi to set an example for others. But these words fell on temporarily deaf ears. Didi could not envisage a future without Mataji. She was overcome with grief. Mataji then called out to Manoramadidi and sent for Girin Mitra who had

come from Calcutta for the celebrations. Nobody except Bholanath and Didi had any idea of Mataji's intention. After some time Suren, who had been working late in the Ashram, came to do *pranāma* before going home. Mataji said, "Are you going? I am also going out of station to-night." Suren Babu said, "Where are you going? When will you return?" To both questions Mataji answered, "Nothing is certain as yet."

Shashanka Mohan was sent for. He was not surprised to hear of this sudden decision. He had already guessed that Mataji was preparing to leave Dacca again. Whenever Mataji had left Dacca, she had usually said, "I am going for an outing" or "I shall be here when you want me" or similar words. This time she did not say anything about returning. The handful of men and women in the Ashram had by now collected round her. Nobody knew what to say. Bhaiji arrived from home. Mataji said to him, "You will have to come away with us tonight."

After a pause, during which Bhaiji kept silent, she said, "What is it? Won't you be able to do it?"

We do not know what thoughts came to Bhaiji's mind. It was obvious to everyone that Bhaiji was required to take the most crucial decision of his life. He answered with composure, "I shall go home first and get some money for the journey." "No, you cannot go home," said Mataji, "collect whatever amount some of these men over here may have with them."

Bhaiji made no answer to this and quietly walked away by himself towards the temple. Those present formed a silent group round Mataji. She then sent word to Didima and Dādāmañai. Didima came, but Dādāmañai, displeased at this sudden decision, did not come. Mataji, as usual, prostrated herself at her mother's feet and then walked out of the new Ashram. She had not allowed anybody to send for a

car. She went on foot to the station, accompanied by a small number of people. Didi and her father stayed back at the Ashram at Mataji's request.

Thus, on Thursday, June 2, 1932, Mataji with Bholanath and Bhaiji finally left Dacca.

Mataji sometimes describes herself as a bird on the wing. This comparison is very apt. The free bird soaring in the blue vault of the skies, alights at random and takes shelter at will. Mataji had the *kheyāla* to wander around freely. She now embarked on a course of travel which took her right across the plains of Northern India. Travelling in a haphazard manner, Mataji at last reached Dehradun, accompanied by Bholanath and Bhaiji. From the town they came to Raipur, a village in the hills nearby, and took up residence in a dilapidated Śiva temple in the vicinity. The ancient temple belonged to a local man of some status. His family fortunes had dwindled and he was no longer able to maintain the temple in good condition. It was in ruins. There were crevices in the walls. The surroundings were overgrown with weeds and choked by tangles of wild shrubberies. Snakes and scorpions abounded and there was no electricity or water.

Bholanath settled down to his own *sādhanā*. Mataji would sit or walk about by herself. They lived like ascetics. No arrangements for water or light were made. Bhaiji would fetch a little water and some wheat flour from the village. This, or some boiled vegetables sufficed for their food. They arose before dawn and retired at sunset. The villagers conjectured that Bholanath was a *sannyāsi* who had renounced the world; his wife, unable to stay at home without him, had followed him to this desolate place; Bhaiji was looked upon as their family servant. Bhaiji's unassuming ways and rough clothes no doubt lent colour to this supposition.

After some time, when the educated among them heard from the local postmaster that Bhaiji received many important looking letters with the seal of the Government of India, they revised their opinion about him. Out of curiosity people began to visit them and so learnt a little about Mataji. She already knew some words of Hindi and could talk to the villagers. Soon, they got into the habit of visiting the Śiva temple in order to see her and talk to her.

By and by people from Dohradun started trekking along the lonely road to Raipur for *daršana* of Sri Anandamayī Ma from Bengal.

The 'Ma' of Dacca became 'Mataji' for everyone.

In a language peculiarly her own, Mataji answered the queries put to her by new-comers. The substance of her exposition was not very different from what she had been saying all along. Some of it may be stated in the following words :

"An eternal relationship exists between God and man", Mataji would say, "but in His Play it is sometimes there and sometimes severed, or rather appears to be severed ; it is not really so, for the relationship is eternal. As such, you may begin from anywhere.

"If you say you have no faith in such things, you should try to establish yourself in the conviction that you have no faith. Where 'no' is, 'yes', is potentially there as well. Who can claim to be beyond negation and affirmation ? To have faith is imperative. The natural impulse to have faith in something, which is deep-rooted in man, develops into faith in God. This is why human birth is such a great boon. It cannot be said that one has no faith. Everyone surely believes in something or other.

"A man's belief is greatly influenced by his environment ; therefore you should choose the company of the holy and the

wise. Belief means to believe in one's Self; disbelief means to mistake the non-Self for one's Self.

"The light of the world comes and goes, it is unstable. The Light that is eternal can never be extinguished. By this Light you behold the outer light and everything in the universe; it is only because it ever shines within you, that you can perceive the outer light. Whatever appears to you in the universe is due solely to that great Light within you, and only because the Supreme Knowledge of the essence of things lies hidden in the depths of your being is it possible for you to acquire knowledge of any kind.

"Indeed the whole world is yours, of your Self, your very own, but you perceive it as separate. To know it to be your own gives happiness, but the notion that it is apart from you causes misery. Is it not true that when you are occupied with congenial work you do not feel tired, but if you are required to be busy with uninteresting things then you soon feel weary of the occupation?

"Try to grasp the significance of 'all is His' and you will immediately feel free from all burdens. None will seem alien, all will be your very own, your Self.

"Either melt by devotion the sense of separateness, or burn it by knowledge—then you will come to know your Self.

"By virtue of the Guru's power everything becomes possible; therefore seek a Guru. Meanwhile, since all names are His Name, all forms His Form, select one of them and keep it with you as your constant companion. At the same time, He is also nameless and formless; for the Supreme it is possible to be everything and yet nothing. So long as you have not found a Guru, adhere to the name or form of Him that appeals to you most, and ceaselessly pray that He may reveal himself to you as the *Sadguru*. In very truth, the Guru dwells within and unless you discover the inner Guru,

nothing can be achieved. If you feel no desire to turn to a Guru, bind yourself by a daily routine of *sādhana*, as school children do, whose duty it is to follow a fixed time-table.

"When prayer does not spontaneously flow from your heart, ask yourself: 'Why do I find pleasure in the fleeting things of this world?' If you crave for some material thing or feel specially attracted to a person, you should pause and say to yourself, 'Look out, you are being fascinated by the glamour of this!' Yet, is there a place where God is not? Family-life, which is the *drama* of the householder, can also take you in His direction, provided it is accepted as such. Lived in this spirit, it helps man to progress towards Self-realization.

"Nevertheless, if you hanker after anything such as name, fame, or position, God will bestow it on you, but you will not feel satisfied. The kingdom of God is a whole, and unless you inherit it in its entirety you cannot remain content.

"Apply your reasoning power, your intellect, to the quest for Immortality—all else will follow as a matter of course. It is just like watering the roots of a tree. The tree grows by its own power, throws out branches and leaves, gives forth blossoms and fruits at the proper season.

"The supreme duty of man is, therefore, to undertake the quest for his true Being. Whether one takes the path of devotion, where the 'I' is lost in the 'Thou' or the path of Self-inquiry, in search of the true 'I'—it is He alone who is found in the 'Thou' as well as in the 'I'."

GLOSSARY

- Abhiṣeka*—Ceremonial bathing in water or milk of the emblem of a deity.
- Ādyā Śakti*—Primordial energy.
- Akhaṇḍa japa*—The uninterrupted repetition of one of the names of God or of a mantra for a fixed period of time. Usually people take turns of one or two hours each. To this day *akhaṇḍa japa* is performed day and night throughout the celebrations of Mataji's birthday.
- Ambivāci*—The three days of the month of *Āṣāḍh* from the 7th to 9th (June-July), when widows are not allowed to touch fire and have to subsist on raw food.
- Annapūrṇā*—An aspect of the Divine Mother. *Annapūrṇā* is the giver of food, physical as well as spiritual.
- Āsana*—(i)—Yogic posture. Every posture corresponds to a particular state of mind.
(ii)—A small mat or carpet used as a seat by each person individually.
- Bhairavi*—Sādhika worshipping *Śiva*.
- Bhajana*—Devotional song.
- Bhāva*—Spiritual ecstasy, generally emotional in nature. *Bhāvas* usually occur at elevated stages of the path of *bhakti*.
- Bhoga*—Food offered to a deity.
- Cakras*—The seven psychological centres in the subtle body.
- Cela*—Disciple.
- Chinnamastā*—"Devi, as Umā, Pārvatī and Gaurī, is the spouse of Śiva. It was as Sati prior to Dakṣa's sacrifice (*Yajña*) that the Devi manifested Herself to Śiva in the ten celebrated forms known as the *daśa-mahavidyā* Kālī, Bagalā, Chinnamastā, Bhuvaneshwari, Mātangini, Shodasi, Dhūmāvatī, Tripurāsundarī, Tārā and Bhairavi. When,

at the Dakṣayajña She yielded up Her life in shame and sorrow at the treatment accorded by Her father to Her husband, Śiva took away the body and, ever bearing it with Him, remained wholly distraught and spent with grief. To save the world from the forces of evil which arose and grew with the withdrawal of His Divine control, Viṣṇu with His discus cut the dead body of Sati which Śiva bore into fifty-one fragments, which fell to earth at the places thereafter known as the fifty-one *mahā-pīṭhasthāna*, where Devi with Her *Bhadrava* is worshipped under various names."

Introduction to *Tantra Śāstra*, by Sir John Woodroffe ;
Ganesh & Co. (Madras) Pvt. Ltd. 1960, pp. 15-16.

Dādūmalai—Grandfather.

Darīana—Sight, vision. One speaks of having *darīana* of a saint, sage or deity, which means to be blessed by his sight and presence.

Devī—Goddess.

Didīmā—Grandmother.

Dīkṣā—Initiation into the spiritual life, effected through the grace of the Guru who represents the Divine. During *dīkṣā* a mantra or one of the potent names of God is usually communicated to the disciple, who is asked to repeat it regularly and in a specific manner. This name or mantra is the representation of the deity (*Ītā*) of the disciple.

Durgā—An epithet of *Pārvatī*, the consort of Śiva. The Divine Mother as Fosterer and Protector.

Fakīr—Mohammedan religious mendicant or saint.

Ghī—Clarified butter.

Guru—Spiritual guide and teacher. According to Hindu tradition, the candidate for admission into the spiritual life has to place himself under the guidance of a competent teacher, who usually gives him initiation by mantra.

Hari—God. A name of Viṣṇu, the sustainer and preserver of

- the universe, who is worshipped by the *Vaiṣṇavas*.
- Iṣṭa*—Literally 'Beloved'. The chosen deity one worships. *Iṣṭa* is the particular aspect of the Divine with which the disciple will have to be in perfect communion before the Supreme Divine Gnosis becomes possible.
- Japa*—The practice of repeating a mantra or the Lord's name as a means of the continual recollection of His presence. The repetition may be for a fixed or indefinite number of times. *Japa* may be vocal, semi-vocal or mental. It may be done either without rhythm or following the natural rhythm of the breath. The counting during *japa* may be done with the help of one's fingers in the prescribed manner or with the help of a rosary.
- Kālī*—A name of the Divine Mother. *Kālī* is the destroyer of evil. In Bengal *Kālī-Pūjā* is celebrated during the dark night of the *Diwali* Festival in the month of *Kartika* (October-November).
- Kamanḍali*—Water vessel made of a pumpkin, used by *saṅghyāsīs*.
- Kharga*—A short broad sword with a curved tip.
- Kheyāla*—Ordinarily a sudden and unexpected psychic emergence, be it desire, will, attention, memory or knowledge. Mataji, however, has given the word a much wider meaning. She describes as *kheyāla* the incomprehensible acts of the Supreme, as for instance His dividing Himself in creation, etc. In Mataji's case there is no ego to account for her movements, feelings and thoughts. When she uses the word *kheyāla* with reference to her person, it must be understood to denote a spontaneous upsurge of Will, which is divine and therefore free.
- Khīr*—Milk boiled to consistency and sweetened.
- Kirtana*—The chanting or singing of the names or glories of God. It may be performed by one person or by a group

of people to the accompaniment of musical instruments, chiefly cymbals and drums.

Kriyā—Yogic or ritual action.

Līlā—Literally 'play'. Movements and activities of the Supreme Being that are free by nature and not subject to laws. *Valīṇavas* explain the creation as *līlā* of God.

Mahālāya—The day of the new moon preceding the festival of *Durgā Pūjā*.

Mahāstamī—One of the main days of *Durgā Pūjā*.

Mahāvidyā—See *Chinnamastā*.

Mantra—A series of sounds of great potency. It is the sound representation of the *Iṣṭa Devatā*. Name and form are inseparable. If therefore the name is instinct with life, the form that it represents is found to reveal itself, provided the practice is intensive enough.

Mauna—The practice of silence. It may either mean to abstain from speech; or to abstain from signs, gestures and writing as well as from speech; or the complete stilling of the activities of the mind as well.

Mudrā—Particular pose of the body as a whole or of its parts, representing the expression of a particular *deva śakti* (higher natural force). Without that pose the particular *śakti* cannot function. The performance of these *mudrās* produces necessary changes in the mind or character. In Mataji's case these *mudrās* came spontaneously.

Namajapa—See *japa*.

Nārāyaṇa—A name of *Viṣṇu*.

Nārāyaṇa śilā—A special kind of small stone regarded by Hindus as an emblem of *Nārāyaṇa*.

Ojhā—Exorcist of evil spirits.

Padmāsana—Lotus pose. One of the meditative yogic postures.

Panchamuṅḍī Āsana—A particular type of seat for meditation in a lonely place far removed from human habitation,

- meant for *tantric* ascetics only.
- Panchavaṣṭī*—A grove of five sacred trees, namely, *pīpal*, *banyan*, *ashoka*, *bel*, *amlaki* with a platform in the middle. A *panchavaṣṭī* is considered a congenial place for meditation.
- Paṇḍit*—One who is learned in Sanskrit and in Hindu Scriptures.
- Pīpal tree*—The holy fig tree. The Lord Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment sitting under a *pīpal tree*.
- Pīṭhasthāna*—One of the 51 places, each rendered sacred by the falling of a part of *Satī's* (*Durgā*) body, when cut into pieces by *Viṣṇu's* disc. (See also *Cīnamastā*.)
- Prapñāma*—Obeisance. An act of surrender, indicating the sense of one's own smallness in the presence of the one to whom obeisance is offered. There are various ways of doing *prapñāma*; the most common is to kneel down and touch the ground with one's head.
- Prasāda*—Food offered to a deity or saint becomes *prasāda* when it has been accepted and blessed. It is then partaken of by the devotees. Great importance is given to *prasāda* in Hindu Scriptures. It is no longer food but a direct medium of transference of power.
- Pratīmā*—Image of a deity.
- Pūjā*—Ceremonial worship of the Hindus.
- Pūjā-room*—Prayer room.
- Puri*—A thin flat cake of wheat flour fried in clarified butter or oil.
- Rākhi Pūrṇimā*—The full moon day in the month of *Śrāvana* (August-September).
- Rathayātrā*—The car festival of *Jagannātha Puri*.
- Roṭī*—Unleavened bread, usually made of wheat flour.
- Ṛṣi*—Seer. *Ṛṣis* are said to be that class of beings, distinct from gods, men, demons, etc., to whom mantras are revealed.
- Sādḥaka*—One who practises *sādhana*.
- Sādhana*—Spiritual practice for the purpose of preparing one-

- self for Self-realisation.
- Sādhika*—Female *sādhaka*.
- Sādhu*—One who lives free from family and business entanglements and dedicates his life to spiritual endeavour.
- Śakta*—Worshipper of *Śakti*, Divine Energy. *Śakti* means power that is eternal and supreme and of the nature of consciousness. It is the moving power of Nature and Super Nature. In Hinduism *Śakti* is usually symbolised by a divine woman.
- Śakti mantra*—The sound representation of the Goddess of the Universe or World Mother.
- Samādhi*—A state in which the mind is completely concentrated on its object of contemplation (*savikalpa samādhi*) or ceases to function and only Pure Consciousness remains revealing Itself to Itself (*nirvikalpa samādhi*).
- Saṅnyāsi*—One who has taken *saṅnyāsa*. The *saṅnyāsi* has to renounce family, caste, social position, possessions, earning a livelihood, rites and ceremonies, etc., and surrender himself entirely to the Divine.
- Sāri*—Length of cotton or silk wrapped round the body, worn as main garment by Hindu women.
- Śāstras*—The sacred Hindu Scriptures.
- Satcakras*—See *cakras*.
- Siddhāsana*—The perfect pose. One of the meditative yogic postures.
- Siddhasthāna*—A place of great sanctity where ascetics have performed austerities and attained to Self-realisation.
- Siddhi*—Realisation, fulfilment. Also an occult power gained by yoga. *Siddhis* are of many types. A person may become *vāksiddha* (whatever he says will come true) or attain any of the eight *siddhis*, namely *anīmā*, *mahimā*, *laghimā*, *garimā*, *prāpti*, *prakāmya*, *ījitava* and *vaśitva*, that is, the powers of becoming small, great, light, heavy etc. The true

sādhaka does not get ensnared by these powers which come automatically to him, but proceeds onwards to the goal of Self-realisation, which is the highest *siddhi*.

Śiṣya—Disciple.

Śiva—Literally 'Good'. A form of the Supreme Deity: the aspect of the Divine Personality that is associated with the dissolution of the universe. The destroyer of that which is unreal. Śiva also stands for the Supreme Being Itself.

Śrāddha—Rites performed for a departed soul.

Stotra—Hymn in praise of God.

Tulast—A variety of basil with very fragrant leaves and flowers, considered holy by Hindus.

Viṣṇu—Worshipper of *Viṣṇu*, the Preserver and Sustainer of the universe.

Vānaprasthī—According to the Hindu system, human life is divided into four successive stages or *āśramas*, looked at from the viewpoint of the pilgrim on the spiritual path. A *vānaprasthī* belongs to the third stage at which he is expected to relinquish family life and worldly pursuits and dedicate himself to the search of God. It is preceded by the second stage of the married householder (*grihastha*) and the first stage of the celibate student (*brahmachārya*).

Vāsantī Pūjā—Durgā Pūjā in spring.

Viṣṇu—The aspect of the Divine Personality that is associated with the preservation of the universe.

Yajña—Fire sacrifice.

Yajña agni—Sacrificial fire.

Yajña kuṇḍa—The pit in which the sacrificial fire is kept.

Yantra—Geometrical diagram of different patterns, representing the action and expression of different supernatural forces and intended as a representation of a particular form of the Supreme Divine Power. Every force, every mantra has its corresponding *yantra*.

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