

From the Life  
of  
Sri Anandamayi Ma

Volume Two

Bhakti Mukherji



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**Sri Anandamayi Ma**

Volume Two

**Bithika Mukerji**



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## PREFACE

In following Mataji on her course of ceaseless and unplanned wanderings across the length and breadth of India, we begin to see in greater relief her mode of relating to hosts of people. We see that she made no choice of places or companions; that she showed no preferences regarding programmes or engagements. Her own saying '*jo ho jaye*' describes very well her approach to her environment. On coming away from Dacca in 1932 to the northern districts of India Mataji met with people of varied cultures. It is not the least remarkable feature of her personality, that neither she nor the crowds among which she moved seemed aware of any feeling of unfamiliarity. Mataji was received spontaneously as the one most dear to the heart (*Iifa*) by everyone who came under her influence. She did not invite anyone; neither did she turn anyone away; she made no promises and imparted no messages and yet by her very presence she seemed to fulfil the deepest yearnings of the human heart so that everyone who saw her seemed to have found a treasure beyond the imagination of man.

The one characteristic which emerges distinctly is that apart from her own personality there was nothing in her behaviour to mark her out from the ordinary person. She made no extraordinary claims for herself. On the contrary: She would laugh off paeans of adoration or she would at times smile and lighten the atmosphere of emotional devotion. She did not trivialize the grave questions of serious minded people but somehow in a manner which is very typically her own, she would keep everything on an even keel. With



miraculous ease she maintained a balance between that which lifts men out of themselves to an awareness of a spiritually wonderful dimension and their own sphere of mundane activities. As an example one may choose any incident at random from the innumerable ones which occur in her vicinity all the time. In recent years Mataji often attends big congregations where well-known ascetics are invited to talk to people on religious topics. Since she, in general, does not speak unless asked questions, this is arranged for by the organisers in order that the congregation may have the benefit of her inimitable style of discourse. On one such occasion (Bangalore, May 1979) after a prolonged evening of speeches on religious subjects, the time came for conversation with Mataji. After a few questions had been answered, one man asked "how can I control my outbursts of anger?"

"By immediately drinking a glass of cold water!"

After a while, when the spontaneous laughter from the assembly in which she joined had subsided, Mataji said, "Pitaji, I understand what you say but I have taken this opportunity to lighten the atmosphere. All of you have been attending closely all evening to profound subjects and so I made you laugh a little so that it may not become too strenuous altogether. But to answer your question: reflect on the causes of your anger. Is it that the cause is unbearable or is it that your reaction is uncalled for? Since you ask, it must be the latter. In this lies your answer as well." Mataji then went on to describe how with the help of *japa* and *dhyāna*, one may gain control over oneself.

The early devotees in Dacca had been struck by this meeting of opposites in Mataji: this confluence of a sense of humour which belongs so typically to the world and a profundity which lies beyond the grasp of human effort. When she came to Dehradun and later to Gujrat the new devotees

were again impressed by the same characteristic of Mataji's way of being in the world and yet beyond it simultaneously. It should be borne in mind that the miraculous states of *bhāva* or *samādhi* were hardly witnessed by the visitors here, and yet they did not doubt her spiritual eminence.

This brings us to another characteristic in Mataji's behavioural pattern. There are no lines of demarcation from one stage to another in her life. It is only that some aspect is accentuated at times. In following Mataji's life we find that since the very beginning she had the *kheyāla* to separate from her companions at times and wander off with one or two persons to new places. This trait is still visible in her. The odd rhythm of her intake of the very minimum of food is a constant feature which by itself is an extraordinary characteristic quite impossible for anyone to imitate or understand. Mataji's illnesses seem also to follow the usual pattern of sudden appearances and disappearances. Her close companions have come to rely on her own *kheyāla* for recovery. A number of times it has been seen that Mataji's body undergoes yogic *kriyā* for a short while and after this she 'recovers'. It is obvious that her body can rid itself of diseases at her own *kheyāla* but while she is ill the reality of the symptoms cannot be doubted.

In short the mingling of opposites in her personality has become more and more apparent with the passing of the years. She has now acquired a large family of devotees who do not know "what she is" or "who she is," or what or even if anything she may do for them, and yet they believe that life would be insupportable without the constant remembrance of the endearing and bewitching smile of welcome from the Mother who is Joyousness itself.

The second volume covers the period 1932-39. Within this time Bhaiji and Bholanath passed away, bringing out



## PREFACE

Mataji's attitude toward the death of her close associates. It is to be seen that her loyalty to the memory of the departed shines undimmed through the years although she obviously does not grieve their loss. Nobody is indispensable to her and yet while they are with her it would seem that she could not do without them. For the expanding circle of her devotees, these years accentuated the fact that although Mataji was nearer to them than their nearest and dearest, yet she herself remained so untouched by the world as to be beyond the comprehension of the most competent amongst them. But it is not necessary to understand what Mataji is ; she only demands a place in one's heart claiming to be a little child although old in years, and thus entitled to the love of all.

May 1981

Bithika Mukerji

## Chapter One

### MATAJI IN UTTAR PRADESH : A WANDERER AMONGST FRIENDS

From the vantage point of the eighties, it appears comparatively easier to recover the meaning of Mataji's way of life of nearly fifty years ago. At the time of occurrence, the men and women closest to her could not understand why she would not remain in places where she was assured of the fullest loyalty and devotion to her interests. Moreover, it was never the case that she was dissatisfied with anything or with any specific place. The early followers had seen for themselves that Mataji was at home wherever she went no matter for how little she stayed. Added to this, when we consider the random manner in which places were chosen for a short visit we seem to lose sight of even the most tentative of causes for this ceaseless wandering over the face of the entire country.

Mataji's own words deepen the mystery of this phenomenon. In answer to questions and also entreaties to stay longer, Mataji has answered variously, 'I am always with you', or 'I do not go anywhere; I am always at the same place', or 'When you go from one room to another in your house, do you call it a journey? So am I walking around in one house only'.

Whatever the reason may be, the fact remains that Mataji has travelled far and wide meeting people in remote parts of the country who in the ordinary course of events would never have had the opportunity of seeing her. When coming to a place, she did not announce her arrival, but invariably her

presence was, as it were, felt, and soon a crowd would gather round her. The barriers of language or customs never prevented Mataji from communicating with people of distant regions; hardly any records of such rewarding encounters have been kept because nobody really wondered or was surprised that this should be so. There is another reason for this lack of information regarding Mataji's relationships with multitudes of people. None of her usual companions felt that he or she had a privileged position and that it was any part of his or her duty to record or take notes of striking incidents; they were as much or as little involved as the merest stranger. The milieu in which Mataji moved, is still not very different, although it may look so from a distance. It remains a fact that the closest of her companions are not really familiar with her. No one assumes the authority to arrange her schedules; all arrangements for travel, meetings, etc are tentative depending on her *kheyāla*. It is difficult to analyse this situation because it needs so many qualifying statements for clarification. Mataji is not erratic in her behaviour; if something is expected of her, namely that she should meet people or travel to some place, she, in general will carry out these plans as arranged. Nobody, however, can give a promise on her behalf because she herself always says "*jo ho jai*". This phrase really sums up her mode of being in the world. 'Whatever takes place, is all right', or 'Whatever happens (or goes wrong, for the matter of that!) is equally acceptable', or 'Whatever transpires, is as it should happen and not anything else'. It is not either the case that Mataji makes no suggestions about programmes, but this is so tenuous as not to belong to the category of plans or schedules. An abiding by whatever presents itself characterises her movements; this is not, however, a fortitude in the face of adversity or unwelcome incidents but a graceful mastery over all situations.

It may be said that it took some of her discerning companions many years to come to a realization that although Mataji was in fact completely free of the demands of the world, she obviously observed a semblance of ordinary behaviour, so as not to make others feel uncomfortable with her; this was not a matter of planned campaign but the natural expression of her compassion for those involved in the world, and her complete understanding of their predicament. To those who sought her help she was as if grace personified. To those who were indifferent to her, she forbore to make herself understood. She did not invite anybody, neither did she reject those who came. This freedom from all inhibitions, not being met with in the world, was naturally hard to understand. In her own unobtrusive way she went from place to place, bringing about tremendous changes in the hearts and lives of countless men, women and even children. It was true, as she says herself, that she had no mission to fulfill or message to give to the world; on the contrary she had only to make a place for herself in hearts that yearned for spiritual grace, and perhaps that truly means everyone.

Seen in this perspective, we may understand Mataji's *kheyāla* to leave Dacca and Bengal and to move to different parts of the country. Bhaiji recorded for us the account of Mataji's coming to Uttar Pradesh where she spent most of her time for some years to come.

On leaving the Ashram at Dacca on June 2nd, 1932, Mataji, accompanied by Bhaiji, Bholanath and a few others came to the Railway Station and found a train on the point of departure. On being asked where she would like to go, Mataji suggested the terminus of the train standing on the platform. Thus, the next day, Mataji, Bholanath and Bhaiji arrived at Jagannathgunj. Again at Mataji's suggestion they crossed over to the other side of the station. The question



of the next destination was solved in a similar manner, namely, by buying tickets for the last station of the train they boarded. This happened to be Katihar in Bihar. Bhaiji's small stock of money was dwindling fast but before he could feel alarmed it was replenished in an unexpected manner. He met a friend at Katihar who lent him sufficient money and gave them plenty of sweets and fruits<sup>1</sup> for the next phase of the journey. Following the same mode of travel Bhaiji purchased tickets for Lucknow which was the terminus for the metre-gauge line by which they had travelled from Katihar. On the way they stopped at Gorakhpur to visit the temple of Gorakhnath.

At Lucknow they found the Dehradun Express about to leave the station. Boarding this train they arrived the next morning in Dehradun, the terminus of the Railway Line. Dehradun is at the foot-hills of the mountain range of Mussoorie. The climate is mild compared to that of the plains in hot June. The view of the surrounding mountains was unusual and fascinating; the people and the language they spoke stirred the interest of Bhaiji. To his remark that everything about the place was strange, Mataji responded, "To me everything is familiar."

From the station they came to a *dharamśālā*.<sup>2</sup> In the afternoon Bholanath and Bhaiji walked a little way into the city trying to find a place for themselves. They found their way to the Kalibari, where they were told that a few miles away from Dehradun, in the village of Raipur, there was a small *dharamśālā* attached to an ancient Śiva Temple which would perhaps suit them as they were looking for a secluded spot. Coincidentally, they met a resident of Raipur, who

1. People following an orthodox mode of living do not buy cooked food. If there are no facilities for cooking for themselves they like to live on fruit or milk-products like sweets, etc.

2. Rest-house for pilgrims.



offered to take them there. Next day Bholanath and Bhaiji went to Raipur and the former immediately fell in love with the place. On their return they consulted Mataji; she said, "Both of you decide. Just anywhere is good enough for me."

Thus, on Wednesday morning, June 8th, 1932 Mataji, Bholanath and Bhaiji took up residence at Raipur. As stated earlier<sup>1</sup> Raipur was in those days a very small village in the interior of thickly wooded hills. A little distance from the village the ground rose sharply and on top of this hillock was situated a small Śiva Temple. The Temple was surrounded by a big and open paved courtyard; there was a mango tree in one corner with a raised platform around it. Everything was almost in ruins. From the courtyard on top of the hill one could command a view of high mountain ranges, across valleys glistening with wide and shallow mountain streams.

While Bholanath and Bhaiji were settling down to a routine of daily life in the manner of ascetics, the devotees left behind in Dacca were suffering from the painful loss of Mataji's presence. They sometimes foregathered to exchange memories and experiences connected with Mataji. During these impromptu meetings, it transpired that everyone had been fully instructed by her about his or her way of life. Nobody had been forgotten or overlooked. It amazed them that without appearing to make an issue of the matter, Mataji, evidently, had taken pains to speak to everyone who depended on her for guidance.

Shashanka Mohan and Didi were living at Siddheshwari. Once a week Shashanka Mohan visited the Ashram at Ramna. Apart from this weekly visit, Didi and her father lived like ascetics in solitude. Shashanka Mohan had given up wearing tailored clothes and shoes. He would sit in meditation for long stretches, on many occasions as long as twelve hours and

1. Volume I, p. 197

at least once for thirty-six hours. During the evenings and nights his body would be covered by mosquitoes, but this did not disturb him. He was now able to practise breath control and to live a life of intense *sādhana*. In his old age he had learnt to practice a rigourism which could be the envy of many a younger man.

Mataji continued to stay on in Raipur. While Bhaiji and Bholanath followed their own routines of *sādhana*, Mataji as often as not lay inert on the floor of the little room of the *dharamśālā* in a state of *samādhi*. Sometimes she walked about by herself in the courtyard. Bhaiji, not used at all to any of the chores he was required to do now, did his best. He procured vegetables, milk and flour from the village. The vegetables could be simply boiled in water but the wheat flour had to be kneaded and made into *chapatis*. Bhaiji's inexpert efforts were sometimes guided by Mataji and thus he learnt to be self-reliant in the matter of personal care and food.

In time, the people of Dehradun heard from chance visitors to Raipur, that a Bengali Mataji of great spiritual eminence was living in the *dharamśālā* of the Śiva Temple. A few venturesome spirits made the journey of four and a half miles through dense jungle and over shallow or dry river-beds to Raipur to have a *darśana* of Mataji. They saw a young woman of striking appearance, not so much in her physical aspect as in her expression of radiant and serene joy. Bholanath received the visitors and made them welcome; he introduced Bhaiji to these newcomers as his 'spiritual son' (*dharma-putra*). Very shortly Bhaiji won a place in the hearts of the early devotees of Dehradun. It is they who conferred on him the affectionate sobriquet of 'Bhaiji' (which means 'respected brother'). Bhaiji could talk to these visitors in English and so they learnt a little about Mataji. It was

always his endeavour to bring people to a greater understanding of her. He would encourage the visitors to ask her questions and helped them to articulate the yearning for spiritual solace which was experienced by many. He would interpret for them Mataji's words. To a great extent he was able to bridge the gap between what Mataji is and what people could make of her.

It must be remembered that in Dehradun the people had not witnessed any of the marvellous incidents which had captured the imagination of the people of Dacca. It seemed that such miracles were not necessary to add anything to Mataji's personality which in its impact was felt equally powerfully by this new community of people, who in the beginning could not even talk to her directly. Mataji, however, picked up Hindi very quickly and very soon was able to converse easily with the newcomers to Raipur.

Bhaiji had applied for four months' leave some time before he had come away from Dacca so abruptly; but in August he was recalled to his office for some urgent work. He did not like to leave Mataji and Bholanath quite unattended and so wrote to Dacca directing Kamalakanta Brahmachari to join them at Dehradun. On Kamalakanta's arrival Bhaiji returned to Dacca. He immediately called on all the devotees eagerly awaiting news of Mataji and for long hours described to them her way of life at Raipur.

In the meantime Mataji in her own inimitable way had endeared herself to the villagers as well as to the visitors from the city. Seeing that Mataji's hair had become hopelessly matted due to several months of neglect, one of the village women offered to cut it off for her. The coils of matted hair which surrounded her head like a crown\* were painstakingly

\* This crown of hair was carefully put away by Kamalakanta and is being preserved in the Ashram at Varanasi.



and gently removed from her head almost like a cap. Now the roughly cut short hair was just long enough to frame her face. Since coming from Dacca Mataji had taken to wearing a *dhoti* (the white cloth worn by men) instead of her usual broad bordered *saris*. Over this she used a shawl as a wrap-around. Her head remained uncovered. In this garb she looked like a young brahmachâri boy. Mataji did not keep more than two sets of clothes ; the spare one also served her as a pillow at night.

In late November or early December, 1932 Mataji with Bholanath and Kamalakanta travelled to Tarapeeth in accordance with Bholanath's resolve to visit this holy site at least once a year for three consecutive years. This was the place where he had previously practised intensive *sâdhanâ*. Mataji did not have the *kheyâlâ* that people of this part of the country should flock to Tarapeeth, so a message to this effect was sent to Calcutta, Dacca and other nearby towns, much to the severe disappointment of devotees waiting for news of her. Nobody thought of disregarding Mataji's message, with one exception ; Didi's youngest brother Nandu not only went to Tarapeeth himself but implored Mataji to give permission for others to visit her. Within a few days Mataji and her companions came to Nalhati, another holy site which Bholanath wished to see. This happened to be the time of the yearly winter vacation for schools and offices. Nandu, with Bholanath's support obtained Mataji's permission to send word to the devotees that they were allowed to visit her at Nalhati. Nandu sent a wire to Dacca and on his return to Calcutta carried the joyful tidings to every home.

Groups of people began to arrive from all nearby towns. Didi and her father came from Siddheshwari, Manorama Devi from Dacca. She asked Mataji's permission to leave her home in order to lead a life of renunciation. Mataji knew

that Manorama had been preparing herself for this step for a long time and that everybody in her family in a way expected it, yet she asked her to talk to her husband and get his acquiescence. Manorama Devi did not wish to return home, so she asked her husband's leave in a telegram. He was not unprepared for this situation and his consent was received by wire as well. Manorama Devi went to Varanasi and entered upon a course of *sādhana* which subsequently became the very way of life with her. This is how Maunima\* started on the road to *saṁnyāsa* and lived a life of unremitting dedication to the search for Truth. Many will remember that she had a special place amongst Mataji's devotees till her death in the Varanasi ashram in 1969.

Mataji remained in Nalhati for about a fortnight. She and Bholanath were putting up at a temple. Bholanath looked like an ascetic now. Mataji was also looking different. The erstwhile house-wife could hardly be recognised in the young boyish-looking pilgrim dressed in white. The change was only in her appearance however; to the devotees she remained as she had always been. Bholanath also was very pleased to see all his friends and made concerned enquiries about those who had not been able to come to Nalhati. After this brief interlude the visitors, saddened at the inevitable parting, left for their various homes. Didi and Shashanka Mohan went back to their life of solitude at Siddheshwari.

Mataji, Bholanath and Kamalakanta returned to Dehradun in the beginning of January, 1933. Bhaiji remained in Dacca. Unobtrusively, he was engaged in winding up his affairs. From the day of recovery from his illness, which he believed to have been made possible by Mataji, he had been convinced from something she had said at the time that he had only a

\* Manorama observed silence for several years and thus became known as "Maunima".



few more years to live. Quietly he had been arranging to discharge his duties and obligations toward his family; so at this time, his only daughter was married with all due ceremonies. His son was now old enough to understand what his father was doing for them.

In March, 1933 Bhaiji again took leave and left for Dehradun. His friends in Dacca surmised that this leave was preparatory to retirement and that he would not return to his home again. This turned out to be correct as Bhaiji devoted these last four years of his life to the service of Mataji. Looking back on those times, the role of mediator that Bhaiji played for the people of a different culture seems very significant. The cross section of society that Mataji now entered was not quite like the 'Kālī-oriented' community of Bengal, although all sections of the Indian population understand the importance of ritualistic worship of deities. The newcomers were attracted by Mataji's personality but were too much in awe of her to speak to her or behave easily with her. Bhaiji made this possible for them although he did not permit any ordinary worldly talk in her presence or the asking of superficial or thoughtless questions. The image that he projected may be gauged from the following account written by Hari Ram Joshi, one of the earliest devotees in this part of the country :

"It was on the memorable Jhanda Mela (Annual Flag Hoisting) day in March 1933, just four days after the Holi festival, that I decided to go to village Raipur with a couple of friends for the *daršana* of revered Mataji and Pitaji\*, who had been staying there since about ten months.....In front of the Sivalaya there was a cemented raised platform under a mango tree. We saw a grave,

\* Pitaji in Hindi means 'father'; this is how Bhola Nath came to be known in Uttar Pradesh.

fair, and saintly looking person sitting on that platform reading a book. He wore spectacles and was dressed in a white dhoti and a white woollen shawl. I took courage and enquired from him about Mataji who was reported to be mostly in *samādhi*...As I found out later, he was popularly known as Bhaiji."<sup>\*</sup>

Hari Ram Joshi writes further that on the occasion of his first *darśana*, Mataji's enchanting and smiling expression transformed his mind completely and convinced him that he was in the presence of a *Sthitaprajña* (perfect sage) as described in Chapter II of the Bhagavad Gītā. He had hitherto not believed that this exalted stage could be achieved by anyone.

Mataji, thus, at first was taken to be a great *sādhaka*, who had achieved fulfilment. Later, the new devotees came in touch with the people of Dacca and Calcutta and were obliged to revise their views regarding Mataji, because they learnt that her state of fulfilment was entirely spontaneous and that she had not practiced any *sādhana* to achieve it. In this context Bhaiji is reported to have said, "In my eagerness to make people realize their good fortune, I interpret Mataji's personality to them and seek to place her on the highest pedestal. But no matter how high I look up, she remains yet higher and beyond my comprehension."

It cannot be said, therefore, that the new devotees penetrated the enigmatic aura of Mataji's personality any better but certainly they were attracted to her just as much as those who had known her for many years. In the meantime, Mataji became conversant with Hindi and thus could talk to the men, women and children who flocked to her in distant Raipur.

In April 1933, Mataji, Bholanath, Bhaiji and Kamalakanta went to Mussoorie. Here, unexpectedly they met Hari Ramji

<sup>\*</sup> From Memoirs of Hari Ram Joshi P. 29.

who had come on official work. On learning that Bholanath wished to go on a pilgrimage to Uttarkashi, he asked a friend of some standing in Mussoorie, Jamna Datt Sanwal, to make all arrangements for their journey. At the time of seeing them off he made Bhaiji promise that he would inform Hari Ramji of Mataji's return to Dehradun.

Hari Ramji's very first *darśana* of Mataji had wrought a great change in him. Having lost his wife two years earlier he was doing his best to look after his two small sons with the help of his mother. This tragedy had left its mark on him and had made him turn away from all talk about God. He was so overwhelmed by the magnetic personality of Mataji that his previous mood tending toward unbelief totally vanished. He knew he had discovered a treasure beyond the imagination of man. He was very active by nature and now was burning with eagerness to see the whole world transformed by Mataji's divine presence. Subsequently he brought his friends to Mataji and especially those who were notable figures of importance in the country at the time; yet he was not a man of compromise. If he felt the slightest reluctance on the part of the visitor, he would scold him mercilessly for not realising his good fortune. He brought his whole family and all his relations to the feet of Mataji. The regions of Almora and Nainital became full of devotees within a very short time. It was by his untiring efforts later, that the Ashrams in Kishanpur, (Dehradun) and Almora came into being.

## Chapter Two

### MATAJI IN ANANDA CHOWK IN DEHRADUN

The fortuitous nature of Mataji's presence in different places becomes clear if we follow closely the incidents shaping her travels. If Hari Ramji had not insisted on being informed, may be Mataji would have passed through Dehradun as through many other places; but this one thing led to others and so on and Mataji came to stay in and around Dehradun for a long time. There was another reason for her prolonged sojourn. Bholanath was so fascinated by the entire region of the Himalayan foothills that he decided to trek to different places of pilgrimage, making Uttarkashi his main base. His time was taken up more and more by *sādhana* and in every way he was becoming an ascetic. His food habits had undergone radical changes. He was now a strict vegetarian and ate very little. He had given up smoking and was leading a life of exemplary discipline. Leaving Mataji under Bhaji's escort, he spent a few months in these hills trekking to remote places or staying in Uttarkashi. Brahmachari Kamalakanta remained with him.

It is now known that Bholanath had requested Mataji to stay in Dehradun, till his return. This demonstrated that he could not take it for granted that Mataji would not wander off to distant places and that he had a real fear that he might lose track of her. If Mataji stayed in Dehradun, he could moreover be in constant touch with her as many pilgrims came to Uttarkashi via Dehradun and Mussoorie. At this time he received many communications from home, remons-



trating his and Mataji's way of life. He replied to everyone in very clear and firm words that Mataji had his full approval in whatever she did and that nobody should think to the contrary. We may see from all this that a new image of the little family from Dacca was emerging slowly and steadily. Bholanath was definitely on the way towards a life of *sādhana*; he accepted Mataji's guidance for his spiritual discipline and depended totally upon Bhaiji to look after her while he himself was elsewhere.

During this time devotees from Calcutta and Dacca, once or twice found their way to Mataji and stayed with her for a few days. One such person was the Gujrati Vijay Ratanji Vyas, a young medical student from Calcutta. He told the present writer that during the summer vacation he had come to Uttarkashi to see Mataji. She had not been there, so he had walked from inn to inn making enquiries about the Bengali Mataji till he had found her and Bhaiji in one place of pilgrimage. Bhaiji was not too well at the time. Seeing that Mataji alone had to cope with cooking simple meals for him, as well as doing the cleaning and washing up, Vyas offered his help. Mataji smiled and said that he could fetch milk for them in the morning. Vyas was very willing but there was a slight difficulty. He confessed to Mataji that he was a late riser and so, if she would wake him up in the morning, he would very gladly go to bring the milk. Vyas recalls with wonder now, how Mataji came and woke him up every morning for this little task, and the graciousness with which she served the simple meals she had contrived for them.

They walked the mountain paths in great enjoyment, stopping wherever they felt inclined. Mataji never was at a loss or put out by the lack of facilities in various inns or by other inconveniences. Vyas recalls with amazement that he



himself never felt the oddness of their haphazard days. In Mataji's proximity he had experienced a sense of belonging unmarred by the barriers of language or customs. Incidentally, it may be recorded here that Vyas has the distinction of being one of the six people who were initiated by Bhaiji.<sup>1</sup>

About three months or so later, Mataji and Bhaiji returned to Mussoorie in the first week of July while Bholanath and Kamalakanta stayed back in Uttarkashi. When travelling they carried the minimum of baggage; in fact nothing more than what Bhaiji could carry himself. He begged food for himself sometimes and Mataji would take a little of whatever he had procured. Sometimes he managed to boil a few vegetables and prepare some *chapatis* but this was rare. As he did not look like a beggar and neither knew how to raise his voice in supplication, his begging expeditions remained mostly abortive; but as Mataji had the *kheyala* at this time that he should live a life of mendicancy he did his best in this direction. In this manner they walked down from Mussoorie to Tapkeshwar Mahadeva and took shelter in the cave of the temple. As they had come close to Dehradun Bhaiji sent a note to Hari Ramji informing him of Mataji's arrival near the town. Hari Ramji with his friend Hansa Datta Tiwari immediately went to Tapkeshwar Mahadeva and requested Mataji to come to the town and stay there for some time at least.

After visiting many temples and holy sites in the company of these two devout men, Mataji and Bhaiji late in the evening came to the Manohar Temple at Ananda Chowk in the town proper. Mataji settled down on the open verandah of the temple. Hari Ramji obtained permission from the manager for Mataji to stay in the small room attached to the temple.

1. The other five are, Sadhan brahmachariji, Sevaji and her sister, Maharajaji and Ranadeva Ghosh of Delhi.

The next morning the wives of Kashi Narain Tankha and Dwarka Nath Raina came to the temple for their morning *pūjā* and saw Mataji sitting quietly on the verandah.

This was the unremarkable beginning of the most dramatic era in the lives of these women, their families, friends and acquaintances. This locality of the town was mostly peopled by Kashmiris. Within a very short time almost all these families began to foregather at Mataji's feet, and Ananda Chowk became another Shahbagh. People congregated sometimes for the *kīrtanas* or *yajñas* which somehow took place frequently; or they would sit quietly with Mataji, spellbound by her magnetic presence. Many Bengali families from the area of Karanpur also became close companions of Mataji from this time onwards. Ananda Chowk experienced the magic of sleepless nights spent in meditation in Mataji's proximity. Household routines went haywire. Wives did not return home on time from the temple; children and their fathers in their turn hurried to the temple as soon as they came from schools and offices. The ladies took it upon themselves to bring food for Mataji. Mataji partook of very little, the rest being distributed amongst the fast expanding gathering of devotees. The air of festivity which is ever the hallmark of all congregations surrounding Mataji, was evidenced here also.

The present writer, one day a few years ago asked the wife of K. N. Tankha, Mahalakshmi, who has been close to Mataji for more than forty years now, to account for the fact of the powerful attraction they had experienced at the time which has remained undiminished down the years. They had not been able to talk very well with Mataji in the beginning, neither did Mataji give religious discourses nor announce herself as a spiritual preceptor. She performed no miracles nor did she draw attention to herself in any

visible way, so why did they all flock to sit with her, mingling days with nights in such unprecedented fashion? Mahalakshmi brushed aside 'miracles' saying, "That's a stupid question. Why should we look for miracles or religious discourses? Mataji herself was the greatest miracle to us—what more can anyone want than her presence? To see her welcoming smile was more than enough for us."

Thus Mataji endeared herself to the hearts of these new devotees by her delightful smile and her inimitable glance of compassionate understanding. This quality of attraction did excite some adverse criticism also in the town. It is generally believed by the simple in western India that Bengal is a land of magic, probably because of the prevalence of *tantra* as a mode of worship amongst Bengalis. An opinion gained ground that Mataji possessed hypnotic powers and also that many miraculous events took place in her vicinity and that she could be seen floating in the air at night without support of the ground!

The following story has been related by Mataji herself at times and exemplifies her own keen appreciation of the ridiculous: There was a lady in Dehradun known to Mataji's circle as *Barik Mai* (She was very bulky and hence this sobriquet given to her in jest by friends meaning "thin one"). Barik Mai in those days was a redoubtable lady, a staunch freedom fighter in the ranks of the National Congress of the pre-independence days. She had been jailed once but the Magistrate was obliged to release her speedily because she made life unbearable for everyone around by her raucous voice raised in loud and unending songs. She had even been incarcerated in her own house by her family to prevent her from going away to address public meetings; but in spite of her considerable bulk she had jumped down from a window and gone to the Congress Office.



This public spirited woman took it upon herself to keep a close watch on Mataji, eager to see for herself the miraculous things which were reported to happen at night. The secret of her constant attendance on Mataji was not known to anybody at the time. There was no formality in the way of life followed by Mataji. People came and went as they liked ; there were no doors to be closed because she was staying most of the time on an open verandah. At night, one or two of the group would stay back, sometimes to sit in meditation near her or even to lie down on a blanket close by. Barik Mai became a regular inmate of the temple keeping wakeful vigilance when Mataji lay down on her simple bed-roll on the floor. She was, at this time eating on alternate days only. *Barik Mai* said she would also do the same. She would not heed the many requests not to undertake this rigourism so new to her. A few nights were spent in this manner, Barik Mai discovered nothing more unusual than the fact that Mataji apparently did not sleep like others. She was always found to be fully alert if spoken to at any time during the night ; moreover she herself would say something at odd times to her companions if they happened to wake up. In Mataji's words :

"This vigilance and lack of food naturally put a great strain on Barik Mai's health. One night she collapsed in a fainting fit. Jyotish sprinkled water on her face and fanned her till she revived a little. I could see that Jyotish was simply petrified with fear. He felt that if the lady were to be really ill, her family and friends would think we had done something to her. Much to his relief nothing untoward happened and Barik Mai recovered soon. Jyotish then gave her a couple of ayurvedic pills for strength which had been given to him for his own use by Gopalji.<sup>1</sup>

1. Dwarkanath Raina.

In the morning I explained to her that lack of proper nourishment and normal sleep had brought about her collapse and if she insisted on continuing in this manner, she could not stay with us. So she promised that she would eat and sleep normally.

After a few days, Barik Mai stopped visiting me. Everybody was puzzled because they knew that she had become rather attached to me. After a long time, suddenly one day, she came to see me. At that time I was staying at a *dharamshala*. As soon as I saw her, I said to her, 'What is the latest about your magic pills?'

Barik Mai was taken aback and asked me if I had heard anything from anybody about her difficulties. On my answering in the negative she came out with the story of her secret search for miracles. She told us that her friends and family had indeed persuaded her that Mataji had fed her some 'magic pill', so she had suffered a change of heart and had given up her visits to the temple. She was now very penitent for harbouring such thoughts regarding us and had to be coaxed back to good humour."

Barik Mai later confessed to the other devotees that Mataji had not only penetrated the secret of her visits but also knew the reason for her prolonged absence; it was true that her superstitious relatives had overpowered her own judgment for a short while, but now she realized how foolish she had been.

From such incidents and many others of a similar nature it can be seen that Mataji always knows to a nicety the effect she has on her surroundings; she realises that many times people come to wrong conclusions regarding her, but it is rarely her *kheyda* to give explanations or set right a mistaken impression. She does not reject calumny or welcome devotion; she accepts both as offerings from people who give only



what is in their power to give. This does not mean that she reduces them to the same order, which would be absurd ; rather, she understands why people act as they do and mostly she does not interfere in their way of behaviour. So, in Mataji's circle, an opinion has gained ground that it is a very lucky person who is taken to task by her, or *commanded* towards a particular course of action. In general, it is not her way to find fault with anything or anybody. It goes without saying that this does not mean that Mataji countenances wrong-doing. In fact her way is so exemplary and so unique that it will always remain a difficult task to express it in ordinary language which imposes its own limitations of meanings.

It may not be out of place here to say a few words on the various *pūjās* and religious festivals which acquired such popularity in Mataji's vicinity. It is common knowledge that a Hindu by his culture and family tradition is born to the worship of particular deities. All Hindus understand that the different deities are concretised images of the same Reality. Since it is difficult to contemplate abstraction, the easier method of meditating on a chosen image of God is adopted. In this particularity lies hidden the universality of the all-encompassing Reality for the Hindu and he sees no difficulty in visiting all temples or trekking to all pilgrimages. Just as one may have an appreciation for all flowers and gardens but relate with a special attachment to one's own, so does a Hindu cherish his own family deity although he is ready to bow his head in obeisance to all others.

The ritual of *pūjā* is basically structured on the mode of hospitality toward a very special guest who has chosen to visit one out of the very goodness of his heart. The mantras in Sanskrit begin by seeking to purify all the ingredients for the worship : flowers, garlands, fruits, sweets, new cloth,

lamps, incense, the *āsana* or square of carpet on which the *pūjārī* (worshipper) is seated, then his own body and mind. He prays to all the presiding deities of the stars, the planets, the moon and sun, the ten directions in the centre of which he is, etc. etc. to help him in his effort to invoke the Deity in the clay image in front of him, or instead of the image, may be a mystic symbol, or simply a flower which for the duration of the *pūjā* symbolises for him the concrete presence of God. He then proceeds to pronounce the solemn and beautiful mantras of invocation. After this the *pūjārī* must contemplate that the *Iṣṭa* in his heart is now in front of him, so that he may worship him with flowers, incense etc. What can be offered to God in welcome? There is nothing which He requires or alternately all belongs to Him alone. So in this instance the worshipper must do the best that he can, not because that is what is required but because knowing no better he can only do his own best and pray to God to make complete his own short-comings. The concluding mantras are to the above effect. After which the *pūjārī* meditates that the Divine presence withdraws from the Image and re-enters his heart, its permanent abode. This is the mode of *pūjā* for special occasions at different times of the year when various festivals are celebrated. *Srī Krishna Janmashtami* (Birthday of *Srī Krishna*) falls around August, *Śivarātri* in February, *Durgapūjā* in October and so on.

The mantras being in Sanskrit are not, in general, understood by the ordinary person, so all *pūjās* are relegated to the professional priest who is authorised to perform *pūjā* on behalf of the householder. *Pūjā* of the various deities follows a very similar pattern although there is variety as regards elaborations. The daily worship of the Images in temples also is of the same mode, that is a loving and worshipful personalised service (*seva*), as it were, to a most cherished guest in the house.

In Mataji's presence the mechanics of the rituals assumed new meanings or rather, the significance of this mode of relating to the Divine was rediscovered by many. Apart from *pūjā*, groups of people can easily participate in kirtan. Kirtan is the easiest and the only mode of congregational prayer for the Hindu, because Hindu dharma is essentially individual-oriented. Thus we see that through the medium of kirtan and *pūjā*-festivals large gatherings became welded together into homogeneous groups.

Another major point in Mataji's priorities gradually became clearer with the passing of years. As regards these *pūjās* and other modes of ritualistic worship, such as *yajñas* etc., Mataji always advised scrupulous adherence to scriptural texts regarding rules and methods of procedure. She showed her appreciation of those who had knowledge of the *Sāstras* and those who took scriptural injunctions seriously. On occasions of doubt or ignorance regarding the correct mode, she would advise that the matter be referred to the pandits at Varanasi. Although there is no centralised institution for Hindus, there are competent scholars, well versed in Scriptural literature who may guide the laity. Thus we see that a large section of the people who had lost touch with their own heritage and traditions came to a richer understanding of it. Most of the devotees saw their way to a revival of the worship of family deities, and were engaging in other forms of *sādhana* as well.



### Chapter Three

#### THE SPREADING OF THE MESSAGE OF JOY BY RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS AND PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSES.

While Mataji was wandering about in the foothills of the Himalayas, the Ashram at Ramna wore a deserted look. The devotees would meet from time to time to talk about their beloved Ma. Occasionally somebody would bring a letter received from a relative who had been fortunate enough to visit Mataji. One such letter was from Nirmal C. Chatterji, Didi's brother-in-law in Varanasi. He had gone to see Mataji during the summer months and wrote to Shashanka Mohan at Dacca: "Mataji is wearing *dhotis* only. Her head is uncovered. Her hair just reaches her shoulders. The local devotees have prevailed upon her to use sandals because it is impossible to walk barefoot on those hill-tracks. With her wrapper thrown over her shoulder she looks like a young brahmachâri. She freely moves about on the roads. She has no settled programme for staying anywhere. She comes to a place or leaves it at any time of the day or night according to her *kheyâlo*. Many people are very devoted to her and ready to fulfil her slightest behest."

Nirmal C. Chatterji wrote further that Mataji had made enquiries about everyone and had remarked that Baba (meaning Shashanka Mohan) had never expressed a desire to come and see how she did in her new surroundings.

Shashanka Mohan had been patiently awaiting her instructions, never deeming that he was at liberty to express



his desire to leave the place where Mataji had asked him to stay. Guessing that perhaps this was one of Mataji's ways of voicing her *kheyāla*, Shashanka Mohan now wrote asking permission to visit her at Dehradun. Thus Didi and Shashanka Mohan came to Dehradun in December 1933 and stayed with Mataji for a month. Didi saw for herself the many changes in Mataji's way of life. She met the new devotees and observed how eager they were to carry out the slightest *kheyāla* of Mataji and how close they had become to each other, just like the family of devotees in Dacca or Calcutta or in other big towns in Bengal. All this was strange but Didi and her father experienced a widening of horizons regarding their understanding of Mataji and yet recognised in her the same person of their own acquaintance and felt no cause for worry or fear of alienation. On the contrary: here again was an ever-expanding family, all moved by the same spirit of being held in thrall by Mataji.

Mataji's presence and Bhaiji's guidance regarding the understanding of her teaching opened up a new dimension in the lives of many serious-minded people. Hari Ramji's enthusiasm brought not a few to the little temple in Ananda Chowk. He was instrumental in putting in touch with Mataji many prominent people of the time. It was his conviction that if the national leaders could see their way to being guided by Mataji, the future of the country would be assured. To this effect he brought Kamala Nehru<sup>1</sup> to Mataji, thinking that she would talk to Gandhiji about Mataji. It was his ambition to bring Gandhiji and Mataji together so that the former would be blessed by her in his crusade against foreign rule. This meeting did take place later on; but Hari Ramji had to

1. The wife of Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru was in jail in Dehradun at that time. His wife and his mother Smt. Swarnam Rani Nehru were in town also.

go a long way before he began to appreciate the mysteriousness of Mataji's aloofness from all involvement in the world together with her full understanding of its demands upon men and women engaged in living with these demands.

Kamala Nehru, inspite of Hari Ramji's persuasive words at first did not wish to come to Mataji as she knew that her husband did not like her to associate with religious personalities. Thus it happened that although she went to the temple in the car with Smt. Swarup Rani, she did not get down; after dropping her mother-in-law, she and her daughter Indira drove on to the city. Hari Ramji could not countenance such behaviour because he never compromised on the question of Mataji's status of commanding the utmost respect. No matter how great the personality of the leader, he or she was not left in doubt for long regarding his or her duty towards Mataji, by this stern stickler for correct observances.

Hari Ramji paid a visit to Kamala Nehru again and this time she did come to see Mataji and the very first meeting proved to be of great moment in her life. Kamala Nehru, mindful of her own position, used to come to the temple late at night and once or twice stayed with Mataji, going home before break of dawn. Mataji unlike Hari Ramji quite understood her predicament and herself discouraged Kamalaji, saying that she should not come if it was not thought proper for her to do so; further Mataji dissuaded her from seeking permission from Gandhiji to withdraw from public life and be allowed to stay with Mataji. The fact that Kamala Nehru was thinking of Mataji constantly and that she attained a high degree of meditative one-pointedness of the mind could be seen by all who were around at the time. She corresponded regularly with Bhaiji and occasionally 'saw' Mataji when the latter was not physically present in town. She wrote: "Bhaiji, you never write enough letters to give me

news of Mataji. But I 'see' her sometimes. Last night I 'saw' her wearing a sari with a wide red border ....."

Bhaiji wrote back from Kankhal to say that indeed on the evening mentioned by Kamalaji, some devotees from Calcutta had made Mataji put on a red-bordered sari, such as she had been in the habit of using before coming to Dehradun. The Bengali devotees wanted her to wear the dress familiar to them while the people of this part of the country had never seen her in anything but the pure white of a plain *dhoti*. Evidently Kamala Nehru was one of those very few fortunate ones who could thus 'see' Mataji at times. Kamalaji passed away in Switzerland after about three years. Till the very end she had kept in touch with Mataji. It is true that Hari Ramji's dream of great events of political moment was not realised from this meeting, but who can say if what actually took place was not of greater importance in the lives of the people concerned.

Mataji and Bhaiji left the temple at Ananda Chowk after a few days and went to Lakshmana Jhula and Rishikesh across the Ganges from Hardwar. The little room where Mataji had stayed seemed deserted. All those who had got into the habit of visiting her felt bereaved. Hari Ramji and Prakash N. Tankha, as soon as they were sure of Mataji's exact whereabouts, went to see her and requested her to return to Ananda Chowk on the occasion of Sri Krishna Janmashtami (Sri Krishna's birthday).

Thus it came about that the interested residents of Dehradun participated in a religious festival which was made memorable for them by Mataji's presence. She always imparts to these rituals a marvellous aura of reality and authenticity; every detail of the mode of worship is seen in its true significance, and makes for a rewarding experience for the devout congregation. At Mataji's suggestion a *yajña* also



was performed at this time. In subsequent years *yajñas* and *pūjās* were performed by the devotees of Dehradun in commemoration of Mataji's visit and presence in the year 1933. On another occasion Mataji initiated the *Kumārī Pūjā* also for those who were as yet unfamiliar with these ways of *sādhana*. Within a few months a regular gathering of devotees took shape. Bhaji taught the new members the prayers which were sung at Dacca every evening; so this became a permanent feature of the evening meetings at Ananda Chowk as well as in Ramna in far distant Bengal.

Another great religious festival was celebrated in Dehradun in Mataji's presence that year, this time by the community of Bengalis mostly residing in Karanpur. This was the annual Durgā Pūjā in October to which were invited all the non-Bengali devotees as well. The puja was performed by Manmatha N. Chatterji.

In Mataji's presence the worshippers of Kālī, Durgā, Krishna and Rāma mingled their efforts towards service of God. The fluidity with which Mataji would pass from detailing an aspect of ritualistic worship to the teaching of the One-without-a-second brought the different modes of *sādhana* to the same dimension of spiritual yearning. The fire from a *yajña* performed during Kālīpūjā was brought to light the fire of a *yajña* on the occasion of Sri Krishna Janmasthami. It can certainly not be said that Mataji had planned these occurrences; as can be seen very clearly, they happened just naturally because of her own personality. In her presence, nobody could think in terms of one sect, one deity or any other limiting thought. She herself being free of all limitations, such narrow determinations imposed on the Divine tended to dissolve into nothingness.

Bholanath in the meantime was settled in Uttarkashi engrossed in his own *sādhana*. In Uttarkashi there are small



huts and caves near the quick flowing Ganges. The water remains icecold even in summer. It is a place meant for ascetics only. Under the orders of the Raja of Tehri-Garhwal, no householder could stop in Uttarkashi for more than three days. It is also the base camp for trekking to Gangotri and Gomukh; thus teams of pilgrims are always passing through Uttarkashi. Bholanath acquired a reputation amongst the ascetic community as well as among local inhabitants for his self-discipline and rigorous *sādhana*. The people developed profound regard and respect for him.

Some time in the summer of 1935 Bholanath wrote to Mataji that he was undertaking the construction of a small Kali-Temple in Uttarkashi. The people of the region were keen that he himself should perform the installation ceremonies. At Hari Ramji's words many people became interested in this project. He did not have too difficult a job since Mataji had become quite well-known by now. Bholanath had a natural predisposition toward the ritualistic worship of deities, so his enthusiasm communicated itself to all who came in touch with him.

The installation ceremony was scheduled for August 1935. This occasion may be called a landmark in the lives of Mataji's devotees. The new congregation comprising people from Nainital, Almora, Dehradun, Mussoorie, etc. organised themselves as hosts for the invited devotees from Dacca, Calcutta and other towns in Bengal. The guests were received at the Railway Station and directed to places where arrangements had been made for their stay. Thus in the month of August a big crowd of men, women and a few children as well started on the trek to Uttarkashi, a distance of about 60-65 miles from Mussoorie. Mataji was at the head of this miscellaneous group of Bengalis, Kashmiris, Punjabis, as well as people from U. P. and the hill towns. Many of the

Easterners had never before seen mountains, and were quite unused to climbing. The winding uphill road resounded with many exclamations of wonder and awe in various languages as well as with gasps and groans. *Dandees*, mules and *rikshas* had been hired for those who were unable to walk. Quite a few of the party could not understand each others' languages. Many became footsore; some found it difficult to breathe and others were overcome by nausea. But nothing mattered very much because Mataji was constantly moving amongst them. Sometimes she would walk with the stragglers. If her *dandee* at any time outdistanced the main party, she would get off and await everybody's arrival. At every camp-site she would ask about the arrangements and everyone lay down to rest in the happy knowledge that Mataji was in effect looking after all of them.

One day this motley crowd was required to cross a mountain stream. The shallow streams sometimes can be treacherous because they flow over beds of slippery rocks. Mataji, seeing the predicament of the women in the party, stood in the middle of the stream to see that everyone crossed over safely. One member was so struck by Mataji's presence in the role of a guide at this juncture that he wrote about this incident later, saying, 'may Ma take us across the river of life (*bhavanadi*) in a similar manner'. By slow marches the tired but happy and exhilarated throng arrived at Uttarkashi after five or six days.

Bholanath with great care and circumspection installed the deities in the temple. The ceremony performed with due solemnity in a place which by itself produced an exaltation of the spirit, became an experience to be remembered by the participants for ever after. Bholanath had sent word to his family priest whose son had come in response to his invitation. After completing the work of the temple, Bholanath, accom-

panied by this young man, Atul Brahmachari and went on a pilgrimage to Gangotri, the visible source of the Ganges.

Mataji and her large family started on the return journey to Dehradun. By now the crowd had become a homogeneous group. Gurupriya Didi came to know many of the newcomers as for example, Maharatanji, Sevaji, Mahalakshmi, Hari Ramji, and a host of others. The new devotees on their part were eager to hear about Mataji's earlier life in Dacca. Didi learnt a little Hindi amongst these friends and was impressed by their spirit of dedication to the service of Mataji. She saw that devotees of more than ten years' standing were not any closer to Mataji than many of these men and women who had known her for only one year or so. Some of these became life-long followers of Mataji, as for example the wife of Sardar Balwant Singh, Maharatan (a name given to her by Mataji), Sevaji and many others who were happy to have come under the magic influence of Mataji.

Lakshmi accompanied by a few of her friends and relations went ahead to Dehradun to make arrangements for the new friends. The travellers were charmed by the hospitality of the people of Dehradun. Mataji's family had increased tenfold cutting across barriers of language and provincial cultures. This manner of impromptu gatherings and hospitality accorded by residents of a town toward visiting devotees, became the pattern for future congregations collecting round Mataji. Wherever she happened to be staying, the hosts would automatically take upon themselves the job of providing for the board and lodging of guests coming from other towns. Since Mataji herself does not organise anything, some functions turn out to be well planned and well executed, and others not quite so well, in accordance with the organisational powers of the people concerned. This may possibly be one of the many practical reasons why Mataji does not stay



long at any place. Not many people can entertain a large number of devotees indefinitely. Mataji is always as greatly concerned about the comfort and well-being of visitors as the convenience of the hosts. Expenses are met by whatever is given voluntarily by the visitors as financial aid to the organisers. This rather haphazard mode of operation has so far worked quite well. Mataji is never troubled by the problem of money. It will be remembered that many a time she has wandered about without making any kind of provision for sustenance even for the next day. It has also been experienced that if she has a *kheyāla* for a certain *pūjā* festival or *yajña*, then enough is received, often from unexpected sources. So in Mataji's vicinity there is always a kind of order amidst seeming disorder.

After the visitors had dispersed Mataji again resumed her travels accompanied by only a few at a time. She always came back to Dehradun where she was joined by Bholanath on his return from Gangotri. Not many people had met him so far. Bhaiji took him and Mataji to the houses of some of the devotees and introduced them to Bholanath. His outgoing personality immediately made him welcome to all the devotees in Dehradun. They received him with respect and began to address him as 'Pitaji' (father). Very soon he acquired a position of great affection in their midst as a dear friend and well-wisher.



## Chapter Four

### DACCA REVISITED

In the meantime, Mataji was being constantly invited to return to Dacca. In the winter of 1935, Mataji and Bholanath, accompanied by a few only went to Tarapith for some days. From Tarapith Mataji at last came to Dacca in December 1935. She had been away for nearly three and a half years. The devotees were beside themselves with joy and Mataji was given a tumultuous welcome. The precincts of the Ashram overflowed with people and more and more came to swell the crowds surrounding Mataji.

After many years Mataji again sat out in the fields of Ramna talking to the visitors. The transition from a housewife to a recognised Teacher who spoke unhesitatingly about spiritual matters had been so gradual as to be quite unremarkable. She was the same Ma who enquired about the well-being of everybody, talked about old incidents and appeared so much at home that it was difficult to remember that she had not been present physically for more than three years in Dacca.

After a while, a discussion arose about man's strivings for God-realization. Somebody remarked that although men are constantly urged to practise *sādhana*, it is also maintained that no human endeavour can bring about Realization. Mataji being appealed to, said : "Yes, this is quite true. And it is right also because you see, men are all the time involved in the many affairs of life. This active participation comes naturally and spontaneously and can be directed towards spiritual endeavour.

"Since striving lies in the nature of man, he should strive for Realization ; as long as he is engaged in other pursuits of life, and has a sense of obligation towards the world, he should not give up efforts for self-improvement either. Relentless striving brings about *suddha bhāva*, a pure and unsullied attitude towards everything. This cannot be described in language. As soon as it comes about one understands also that no action is self-justifying. He ceases to strive with his will and becomes, as it were, a tool in the hands of God. There may not be any visible change in his mode of activity, the change occurs in his attitude of mind.

"Actually, any path may be followed to awaken this awareness. Whether the path begins from an acceptance of the doctrine of duality or of non-duality is not important. Either 'you are everything', or 'there is but one Reality', will suffice if practiced whole-heartedly, unremittingly and with complete faith. The knowledge that there is no duality will dawn as a Realization. Either there is just 'I' or just 'You'—and nothing else. Everything is submerged in one Existence. This realization can of course not be expressed in words. Even the word 'realization' is inadequate. As soon as words are used, limits are imposed. That is why it is said that while one is a *jīva* (finite being) he is not Śiva (Infinite).

"What after all is this finiteness? Suppose a field is enclosed by a fence. If the fence is removed the field is one with the surrounding meadow. There is thus no question of the attainment of a state. The *jīva* is in truth Śiva. Only because of his limitation he is called *jīva*. As soon as these limitations are dissolved he exists in his infinity.

"Moreover, you may consider the question in the following manner also : Does not the so-called 'finite being' possess the characteristics of the Infinite? Consider the saying, 'the One, the Infinite, the Indefinable'. Even if we try very hard,

we cannot enumerate all that has gone through our minds within a few minutes. We can register a small number of items only. The depth and breadth of the darting thoughts defy exhausting recording. Do we not encounter the Infinite here? There is 'Oneness' also. We never rise beyond the One—we have to walk step by step, speak word by word and write one letter after another. Our unit is one. Then, think of the indefinable quality of our minds. We exclaim, 'how beautiful the flower is!' but we cannot express entirely this awareness of beauty. We may use any number of words but they can never fully express the experience of beauty.

"Besides there is another characteristic in the *jiva*, namely *ānanda* (bliss). It is the nature of the *jiva* to look for happiness. Everything in creation desires happiness and tries to avoid pain. Even the lower animals will seek the shelter of trees from the blazing sun. Similarly man, scorched by the anguish of mind, body and spirit, tries to cover himself with the mantle of peace. This *tapa* (heat) is to be conquered by *tapasyā*. (The hardship is to be overcome by a greater rigourism).\*

"It is man alone who seeks God. There is a cover of nescience cast over man but it is pierced in places by slits of knowledge—like a dark room which is lit by rays of sunlight coming through windows and doors. If we make the effort, we can walk out of the room and stand in the full sunlight. In order to attain God, you have to strive and rise above both, ignorance as well as knowledge, then alone all duality dissolves into One Supreme Existence.

"I am not saying anything new. Whatever the Scriptures teach is right. Do you know what the Scriptures are like? They may be compared to a staircase for ascending to the roof

\* A pen on the word *tapa* which means burning, hence the necessity for an effort of will.



of a house. The panorama that reveals itself to the gaze of the man who has reached the topmost terrace does not need to be nor can it be described by any Scripture. The *Śāstras* are, however, indispensable guides regarding routes to be followed, they are for the benefit and encouragement of the wayfarer. For this reason the experiences which come to the seeker after Truth, are not to be denied and yet they are necessarily one-sided also. Moreover all experiences can be surpassed by other experiences, just as the lower rungs of a ladder do not disappear totally but they are as if non-existing to the person standing above.

"What is true and what is false after all? If you touch any finger—you touch me; if you touch my clothes—you are in touch with me—but just as I am my hand or my foot or my clothes, so I am also myself in entirety. Similarly God is One, yet is many. He is as complete in a grain of sand as in man, and also in Himself."

While Mataji was talking in this strain to the people around her, the Vice-Chancellor of Dacca University, Khan Bahadur Nasiruddin Ahmed, was seen to be out on his usual constitutional in the fields of Ramna. Some of his acquaintances went up to him and invited him to come and be introduced to Mataji. As he approached the group, somebody said to her, "Ma, he is a Mussalman." Mataji smiled and said, "So am I a Mussalman."

After greetings, the Khan Bahadur asked one of the devotees: "If Mataji has attained peace why does she keep wandering about?" Probably he did not think it polite to accost her directly but Mataji answered the question herself, "If I stayed in one place, the same question could arise, could it not?" Then she smiled her smile of inimitable grace and beauty and said gently, "Baba, don't you know, I am a very restless little girl. I cannot stay in one place. This is one



answer. From another point of view, I may say, it is you who see me travelling from place to place. In reality I do not move at all. When you are in your own house, do you sit still in one corner? No, you freely walk about in the whole of it and yet remain in your house. Similarly I also wander around in my own house—I don't go anywhere—I am always at rest in my own home."

"You have found Peace. We are at the mercy of innumerable distractions. Why don't you be generous and communicate some of your Peace to us?"

"The moment you exclaim in desperation, 'O Lord, how to find Peace?' You are already on the path to attaining it!"

Mataji said this so spontaneously and humourously and with such an eloquent gesture of her hands that everyone burst out laughing. Then Mataji said seriously, "If you live with things unpeaceful, how can you hope for peace? People are affected by things in their vicinity. If you sit near a fire, you feel the heat, if you approach something which is very cold, you feel it also. If you choose to live amidst distractions, how should peace descend on you? This does not mean that everyone should retire from the world and stay in forest retreats to find peace. But what you can do is to live with something which is of the nature of peace. Wherever you are you must live in the company of that which gives peace. I say to you, keep in mind always, God; God alone is Peace. Whether you call Him Khuda or Kali is immaterial, because there is One only. The really important thing is to persevere. Relentless perseverance brings about the change in perspective which will establish you in Peace.

"Peace can be attained anywhere in the world or away from it. You say that I have found Peace and should distribute it to others. I say to you that I am a little child and you are my parents. Accept me as such and give me a place

in your hearts. By saying 'mother' you keep me at a distance. Mothers have to be revered and respected. But a little girl needs to be loved and looked after and is dear to the heart of everyone. So this is my only request to you, to make a place for me in your hearts."

Mataji's words spoken lightly and yet solemnly touched everyone. After a short while Mataji got up and so the session came to an end. She stayed in Dacca for about a week this time. The happy throng surrounding her at all hours tried to recapture the spirit of the days at Shahbagh. Many of the women did not return home at all, but stayed in the Ashram while Mataji was there. The small Ashram could hardly contain the swelling crowds, so Mataji again and again went out and sat in the open so that everyone could sit around her.

Bholanath, in the garb of an ascetic met his many friends and followers. He was observing silence but his pleasure in meeting old acquaintances was evident to all. Bhaiji remained quietly at the Ashram although he visited his home. At Mataji's suggestion he invited his wife to come away with him so that both of them could adopt the *vinaprastha* ashram, that is, lead lives like hermits in suitable retreats; but apparently his wife was not prepared to leave home at this time, so when Mataji and her companions left Dacca he once more went without his wife.

Slowly but steadily it became clear that Mataji was adhering scrupulously, in effect, to one of her own sayings: 'Talk about God alone is (worthwhile) talk; all else is vain and full of pain'.<sup>1</sup> She entered into the feelings of everybody regarding their problems in the world, their difficulties concerning human relationships, and also their puzzlements about their own spiritual life; but like the underlying, un-

1. 'Hari Katha Katha aur sab vricha, vyatha.'

varying resonance of the *tanpura* which accompanies every other instrument of music, she brought everybody round to the awareness of the supreme duty of man, which is to strive for Self-realization. That she gave the highest priority to the path of renunciation became gradually clearer as the years went by. All her answers veered round to the same theme again and again. She would deal with all kinds of questions but her reply would be a variation of the thought that the supreme duty of every human being is to strive for the realization of **THAT WHICH IS**. She knew no compromise regarding this ultimate quest. All other obligations, namely, towards family, society, country, humanity she wove around the one supreme duty towards God-realization. She would say, "To aspire for the realization of Truth is alone worthy of man," or "It is man's duty to bear in mind that he exists for God alone—for His service and for the realization of Him."

Mataji never encouraged anybody to set aside or neglect his worldly commitments, but it was very soon realized by her companions that she had nothing to say regarding those affairs. They were assured of her loving-kindness and the giving of compassionate hearing to their worries but her grace lay not so much in warding off the evils of human life, like sickness, accidents, misfortunes or death, but in endowing the sufferer with strength and fortitude so that he would be at peace with himself amidst the inevitable changes to be constantly encountered. In Mataji's presence the world was seen to emerge as the necessary ground from where the search for Self-realization could begin for man.

Mataji's first 'choice' for holding aloft the ideal of renunciation as a meaningful way of life fell upon the oldest amongst her followers. In retrospect it seems that she could not have made a better choice. In April 1934 she had a

*kheyāla* that Shashanka Mohan should become a *sahnyāsi*. The *sahnyāsi* ceremony of Shashanka Mohan was the first event of this kind in Mataji's entourage. A detailed account is given in the next chapter, since this incident seems sufficiently definitive in its nature for the understanding of Mataji's teaching.



## Chapter Five

### THE EMERGING PICTURE OF PRIORITIES IN MATAJI'S TEACHINGS

#### **Shashanka Mohan's Saṁnyāsa**

Mataji's wanderings had taken her to a wayside temple in Salogra near Solan in late March 1934. There is a small cave attached to the temple. It is so small that nobody can lie straight or stand upright in it. Mataji accompanied by Bhaji and Hansa Datt from Dehradun occupied this cave, a few miles beyond Solan and a little way below the main motor-road between Kalka and Simla. Hari Ramji's brother Madan Mohan Joshi was a doctor in Solan. He already knew about Mataji and came to pay his respects to her. He found Mataji sitting in this cave, looking completely at ease and her usual radiant self. Recently there had been a snowfall in the hills and it was bitterly cold in the cave but Mataji did not seem to feel any discomfort. Solan is the capital of Baghat State. H. H. Raja Durga Singh was known to be a Prince of many sterling qualities and also of a religious nature. He was very devoted to a sage called Sogi Baba who was residing in Solan at the time. Although the Raja had heard about Mataji, he, in the beginning was not keen to have *darśana* of 'a woman saint'.

Mataji was invited by Dr. Joshi to come to Solan but after a few days at Salogra Mataji travelled to Hardwar. She sent word to Shashanka Mohan at Dacca to join her in this hill town. She also sent a message to Swami Sankaranandaji, a new devotee in Varanasi, inviting him to come to Hardwar.

There was need for Sankaranandaji because Mataji had a sudden *kheyala* that Shashanka Mohan should enter an ascetic order. Sankaranandaji was a *sahnyāsi* and it could be presumed that he would know about the ceremonial act of renunciation to be undertaken by those who wished to enter an ascetic order.

The organisation into ten ascetic orders of *sahnyāsa* is traditionally ascribed to Adī Sankaracharya (8th century A.D.). Before the advent of Sankaracharya, the Hindu ascetics were not organised into orders with specific mantras, imparted and received in a ritualistically specified form. The candidate for renunciation has to apply to a guru; if the latter is satisfied then alone he may be initiated and received into the brotherhood of that order. The disciple has first to make up his mind to dissociate himself completely from the world; to relinquish all ties of family relationships, all sense of obligations and duties. In short it is a new life begun in complete freedom in order to make an existential reality of this freedom so that he may attain the Self-fulfilment stated in the *Upanisads*.

Mataji was full of enthusiasm for this project and was very pleased when Shashanka Mohan accompanied by Didi arrived in Hardwar in answer to her letter. She was staying at a *dharamśālā* and everyone gathered there in response to her summons. She said to Shashanka Mohan, "Some arrangements had been made at Solan for us, but I had this sudden *kheyala* and so we came away to Hardwar instead. These holy places are conducive to *sādhanā* and attract devout and holy men. I have already suggested to Sankarananda that he should look for a suitable Guru for you. *Chaitra Sankranti* the last day of the Bengali year (13th or 14th of April) is an auspicious day. Time is short, so all arrangements must be expedited."

Shashanka Mohan was taken aback at these words. He was not prepared for this radical transformation of his life; moreover it was unthinkable for him to bow his head to some, to him nameless, Guru at this stage in his life. Rather unhappily, he answered, "I cannot think of any other Guru. I do not think I can commit myself to anyone else. I have always believed and hoped that you will guide me. Why do you now ask me to accept another Guru?" Mataji answered gently, "you know that I cannot confer *sahnyāsa* on you," to which he unhesitatingly replied, "But I have no need of *anything* that you may not do for me."

Mataji then said quietly, "Well, in that case, there is no necessity for these arrangements. Nothing need be done after all." She became grave and said no more. The cheerful look with which she had opened the conversation vanished completely.

It was evening. Shashanka Mohan withdrew from Mataji's presence and was seen to go out and sit on the bank of the swiftly flowing Ganges for many hours. On the other side of the river wooded hills rise to great heights. What thoughts did he grapple with? He was a proud man, more accustomed to command than to obey. The prospect of giving up every prop and support of a long and familiar way of life and to have to embark on a voyage into the unknown must have shaken him to the core of his being. He was the head of a large family, almost a clan. Perhaps he debated whether it would be right to put himself out of their reach for ever. He would have no duties towards anyone anymore. He must have thought about his daughter also. He could not be a guardian to her and thus she would be alone in the world in the way of life she had chosen for herself. These however are conjectures. He did not share his thoughts with anybody. What happened was that he came to Mataji late at night,



touched her feet and said quietly, "I blurted out the thoughts that came unbidden to my mind. I am now ready to carry out your *kheyāla* and to do as you say."

Mataji's countenance shone brightly; she was immediately full of plans for the important event. She told him, "you have no reason to think that you will have another Guru. There is but One Reality."

Sri Mangal Giri Maharaj, a *sahnyāsi* of great eminence in Hardwar, agreed to initiate Shashanka Mohan into the order of the Giris. The disciple is required to perform the last of the ritualistic *yajñas* renouncing connections with the world. In the sacrificial fire is consigned all modes of understanding of oneself as an individual, his society, family and even his own caste and creed. The "I" is sought to be set free from all limitations so that it may seek to identify itself with the One and thus with the whole world. A *sahnyāsi* belongs to no one and to no place and therefore to everyone and everywhere.

Mataji and a handful of her companions watched this solemn ceremony, the highest pinnacle of achievement for a man born and bred in the Hindu tradition. Shashanka Mohan after leading a full and useful life in the world, was eminently fitted now to renounce it for its greater benefit. In the Indian tradition it is believed that there is a suitable time for different tasks in human life. The role of the ascetic is not less important than that of the teacher or the householder or the student. Mataji, by her *kheyāla* for Shashanka Mohan, seemed to have endorsed the ancient tradition. So on Chaitra Sankranti 1934, Shashanka Mohan was initiated into *sahnyāsa* by Sri Mangal Giriji Maharaj of Kankhal. His new name was Swami Akhandananda Giri. When, dressed in ochre robes, he came to make his obeisance to Mataji after the ceremony, she said to him, "you have so far rendered



constant and unremitting (*akhyāda*) service to your family and to your profession. From now on devote yourself with the same constancy to Self-realization."

It can be seen easily that Mataji accords the greatest respect to anyone who wants to be an ascetic. However she does not encourage people to give up their duties in the name of religion. In this context an incident may be recorded here which took place in Dehradun some years later : While Mataji was walking down the road from Mussoorie, she saw a man, obviously an ascetic, standing quietly on one side of the gate of the Kishenpur Ashram. She spoke to him in Bengali and when he answered it was realised that he was a Bengali although in appearance he did not look like one. She invited him in and asked him to have his evening meal in the Ashram. After the meal he came and sat with the handful of other people near Mataji. Mataji asked him,

"Are you a *sādhya*?"

"No."

"Then why are you dressed like one?"

"For all practical purposes I am. I have renounced the world."

"In order to carry on your *sādhana* for Self-realization?"

"I have not thought about it. For the present I wish to have nothing to do with the world."

"Does it mean that you have left home for personal reasons and do not wish to go back?"

"Yes."

"In that case you are practising a grave deception on the public and doing no good to yourself either."

"I have nothing to do with anybody; it is nobody's concern what I do with my life."

"That is not correct. Your appearance as an ascetic means something to the people. It is our tradition to support

a man engaged in intensive *sādhana* because he has no other means of support. He has given up his own will toward self-support, depending solely on the Divine Will. The people choose to support him as they would any other who was selflessly engaged in some activity for the benefit of the entire society. This garb is not to be adopted to solve personal problems or to escape from difficult situations. If you are not engaged in *sādhana* to the exclusion of all other concerns, you have no right to accept food and shelter from the lay public who seeing your robes will give automatically without judging your bonafides."

The young man, who seemed to belong to middle class society and to be educated, kept quiet. Mataji said to him that he could stay in the Ashram as long as he liked, but it would be better for him to go home and face whatever situation he had run away from. The next morning the young man was not to be seen, so probably he had chosen to follow Mataji's advice.

On another occasion, a young man belonging to one of the most well-known industrial families of the country, came to ask Mataji about his future way of life. At that time he was the disciple of one of the very respected *sādhus* of Varanasi, and had lived like an ascetic for many years with his Guru. He had been asked by his Guru to take up the duties of a householder, so he was faced with this problem of giving up his chosen way of life after almost twelve years. He wished to know from Mataji his duty under these peculiar circumstances. Mataji said to him, "I see no problem. At all times you are required to obey your Guru, if you know him as such. If he has asked you to get married and work in the world, that is what you should do. Where is the scope for hesitation?"

After some time the young man went away obviously not quite satisfied by Mataji's words. Mataji in a tone of

reflection said to the small group of people who had witnessed this scene: "You see, this path of spiritual endeavour is difficult and full of subtle pitfalls. This is the reason why a guide is required at all times. Sometimes, when one is engaged in *sādhana* one begins to enjoy the many benefits which accrue from it; the subtle hankerings after name and fame as a *sādhu* may also cloud the judgment of a disciple and prevent him from seeing his duty clearly."

Mataji at all times is very discriminating about recommending renunciation to those who seek her advice and permission for it. A few of her answers may be referred to here to understand the place she gives to this highest stage in *sādhana*.

"If you ask me whether you should or not, I shall say that the time has not come for you to do so since the question arises in your mind whether you should or not."

"The call of renunciation must be felt as a compulsion. A man who hears this call leaves all behind even as a dry leaf falls from its branch. Renunciation is not for overcoming a sense of duty or for entering a different kind of world. Renunciation must come spontaneously. Does a man debate whether he should escape from a house on fire?"

Thus we see that although Mataji gives the greatest priority to a life of *sādhana* she does not advocate it by extending the possibility of it indiscriminately. When her *kheyāla* came that Shashanka Mohan should be initiated into *sannyāsa*, a more suitable candidate for this high status could not have been chosen. He had rendered exemplary service as a doctor all his professional life; he had shouldered ably the burden of his family for many years and yet, when he came under the influence of Mataji late in life, he started on a course of *sādhana* which required concentration, fortitude and above all perseverance. His complete reliance on Mataji



and his obedience to her *kheyāla* belong to a category by itself. He was not a man without a sense of humour. His grave countenance hid a very buoyant spirit. In his last years he saw many changes in Mataji's life and the number of devotees increasing beyond anyone's wildest imagination. He was never out of his depth in the new situations and till the last days of his life stood steadfast in the service of his Guru as he knew her to be.

Perhaps it will not be out of place to record here what he once said to the present author a few years before his death in Varanasi, "Stay with Ma in your thoughts, do not forget her. You are a child and so you may not know and understand what Ma is, but we have had the privilege of seeing her in her divine form, so I tell you that she is the One to be worshipped." These words spoken lightly enough by the solemn looking old man, who as a rule confined himself to stories for the young who surrounded him, made an impression which has lasted to this day.

After the *sahayāsa* of Shashanka Mohan, Mataji again started on her wanderings in and around Dehradun. She would come and go as freely as a bird; whoever happened to be near her would suffice as an escort. She did not travel alone, more out of consideration for the feelings of her people than for any other reason. If she had walked out alone from a place, they would have been anxious and worried about her well-being and safety and she would have invited undue attention as well. It is never Mataji's way to flout the proprieties obtaining amongst the people who surround her. Within this framework of conventionality she follows her own unpredictable *kheyāla*. It also must be said that Mataji's behaviour never was such as to be doubtful, displeasing or objectionable in any way; if this is a limitation then so it must be named; the good alone is always exemplified in her



behaviour. If she is a *sthitaprajña*, then to be beyond good and evil (as we understand these terms) is to be established in good only.

All this while Mataji met many people and visited various new places. She paid a visit to Baijnath near Yogendranagar, to Almora, Etawah, Ayodhya, Fyzabad etc. In October 1935, on her way to and from Almora, she went to see Kamala Nehru at Bhowali where she was staying for treatment. In Etawah Mataji met Dr. Pitambar Pant, a friend of Hari Ram Joshi. In Ayodhya, which she had visited previously, and in Fyzabad she met the relations of the Tankha family of Dehradun. At the request of Sevaji she visited her sister at Sultanpur.

There is an estate called Doonga near Dehradun. The zamindar of Doonga, Chaudhuri Sher Singh and his family received Mataji a number of times at Doonga during this period. Their property was like a forest retreat. Quite a number of people had the opportunity of staying there with Mataji and listen to her quiet talks. Mataji visited Solan also and was received by H. H. Raja Durga Singh. Previously, Mataji had come from Salogra to Solan for a day to see Sogi Baba but nobody at that time knew about this visit. The Raja Saheb also had gone to the cave at Salogra to see the 'woman saint', and had tried to introduce some modicum of physical comforts for her and her two companions but Mataji had suddenly left the place for Hardwar as already related.

The names of the above mentioned people subsequently became well-known in Mataji's circle. They differed very much in style of living, temperaments, cultural backgrounds and religiousity as well. In Mataji's vicinity the heterogenous group became as well knit as a family unit. Probably they



Raja Durga Singh of Solan

were united so closely by according to Mataji a place in their hearts and by cherishing her undemanding and yet so richly rewarding presence in their midst.

During this time a greater unity was created between the devotees of Bengal and those who had come to know Mataji since her moving to Uttar Pradesh. Very shortly this community would be augmented by people from the Himalayas, Gujarat and South India as well.

### Maroni

Mataji and Bholanath had visited Tarapeeth in the winter of 1935 before coming to Dacca. From Dacca they went to Paruldia, the village home of Jogesh Chandra Ghosh who used to be the Trustee of Shahbagh Gardens in Dacca, where Mataji and Bholanath had lived for four years. A huge crowd of men, women and children went along with Mataji. Like in old times, there was kirtan and much festive activity to welcome the concourse of devotees. From Paruldia Mataji proceeded to Calcutta. The jubilant mood of the devotees of this town which Mataji was visiting after many years was dimmed by the illness and death of Kshitish Guha. He and his two brothers had been foremost amongst the people attached to Mataji from the earliest times. Their house in Ballygunge had long served as a headquarters for news of Mataji and also as a meeting place for Satsang and Kirtan for the devotees of Calcutta. The depressed atmosphere was dispelled by Mataji's presence yet the sense of loss was keenly felt by everyone.

Mataji returned to Tarapeeth. As mentioned earlier, Tarapeeth is famous for its cremation ground of great sanctity. It is a desolate spot not frequented by ordinary travellers but Mataji was quite well-known in this temple-town. Hindu as well as Muslim villagers crowded round

her wherever she happened to be. An old Muslim peasant seemed specially close to her. Whenever she visited his hut he would call his two wives, saying, "Come outside and receive my daughter." They would then with great satisfaction and pleasure make arrangements for Mataji to sit and talk with them.

For some time past Mataji had had the *kheyāla* that Maroni and Didi should be invested with the sacred thread. Girls are not initiated like boys in Brahmin families. There was no precedent in this matter. Enquiries about scriptural injunctions regarding this matter had been made in Varanasi; the pandits had said that although no such tradition prevailed, there was no injunction to the contrary either. Pandit Gopinath Kaviraj, when appealed to, declared that Mataji's *kheyāla* itself was enough, no further corroboration about its legitimacy was required. Thus, according to Mataji's *kheyāla*, the sacred thread ceremony for Maroni and Didi was performed on January 14, 1936 at Tarapeeth. They were initiated into the exclusive *Gāyatri mantra* of the brahmins. Maroni's initiation was done by Bholanath, because traditionally the father is the *dikṣā-guru* for the sacred mantra. Since Didi's father was now a *sannyāsi*, his privilege was given to Sri Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya a revered old Brahmin, devoted to Mataji.<sup>1</sup>

Mataji also suggested at that time that Maroni's long standing engagement to Chinu should be brought to a conclusion by their marriage. Bholanath had just returned from a pilgrimage to Gangasagar. He was a little saddened at the prospect of the marriage because it meant that Maroni would go away to her husband's place. He was very fond of her and looked upon her as his daughter. He felt a trifle disturbed also, not knowing how all the requirements of a traditional marriage ceremony could be contrived in such

1. In subsequent years several other girls have received this status of the twice-born. An obsolete tradition was revived by Mataji.



a remote region. But he need not have worried because by a concurrence of events the marriage actually came to be performed with every kind of elaborate pomp and ceremony dear to the heart of the womenfolk of Bengal. Some ladies from Calcutta were present who with great enthusiasm undertook the toilet of the bride and the decorating of the place of the *yajña*. Since in the Indian community marriages are by arrangement the ceremonies are more a social festival and religious commitment rather than of a contractual nature. Everybody participates in an Indian marriage in some role or other. The bridegroom is to be received by a group of men and made welcome; much help is needed to make arrangements for the *yajña* which is performed to confirm the marriage vows, and then the newly married couple are to be entertained by members of the family and friends and thus a hilarious and wakeful wedding night is ensured. The tradition of wide participation and extensive celebrations is perhaps necessary to confirm the news of the particular marriage and make it socially acceptable.

Maroni was duly married to Chinu amidst an air of gaiety and rejoicing; the mood of aloof asceticism which characterises Tarapeeth was completely submerged under the auspicious sounds of the conch-shell and repeated *ulu-dhvani*.<sup>1</sup>

The inevitable day of parting came. Bholanath gave his blessings to the young couple and sadly bade them farewell. Many of his relations had come to Tarapeeth specially for this occasion. In the perspective of later years, it seems that Mataji by her *kheyāla* helped Bholanath in discharging his obligations before resuming again his life of *sādhana* in the northern district of India.<sup>2</sup>

1. A kind of sound produced by the tongue moved inside the mouth by Bengali women on all auspicious occasions.

2. Maroni has been widowed recently. She has now chosen to stay with Mataji in the Ashrams.

In February 1936, Mataji left Tarapeeth to its silent contemplation of death, and departed with her devotees in a convoy of fifteen to twenty bullock-carts to the nearest Railway Station of Rampurhat. The slow journey through the moonlit night was made memorable by the melodious singing of Bhramara. Mataji herself joined in the kirtana at times. At Rampurhat Mataji and her companions boarded the train for Serampore. From Serampore Mataji travelled in quick succession through Navadweep, Bahrapur and Tatanagar. All these towns saw Mataji after a long time and tumultuous scenes of welcome were repeated everywhere.

On the way to Vindhyachal from Tatanagar, Mataji stopped for a few hours only at Howrah Railway Station. Calcutta was already notorious for its unmanageable crowds and now that Mataji was not staying in the city, everyone had come to the station. Only Jatish Guha (the elder brother of Kshitish Guha who had passed away) was conspicuous by his absence although the rest of the family was there. His grief over the untimely death of his brother had alienated him a little from Mataji. Just before the train started he came up to Mataji and after doing *pranāma*, moved aside in a very uncharacteristic grave and aloof manner. Mataji looked at him with great understanding and said very gently: "Don't forget that Jyotish (Bhaiji) at least is your friend. Continue to write to him and give him news of yourself and your family." Mataji meant that if he could not bear to hold communication with her, he should at least keep in touch with Bhaiji. Jatish Guha could not nurse his hurt after these words and came and wept near Mataji like a child and thus was able to lighten the burden of his grief.

After leaving Calcutta, Mataji spent a couple of days at Bethia, the village home of Dr. Girin Mitra. From there she passed through various towns, stopping for a while in

some of them as her *kheyāla* arose. She visited Vindhyachal, Allahabad, Chitrakoot, Agra, Mathura, Vrindaban and Delhi before coming back to Dehradun.

In the meantime an Ashram for Mataji was being constructed in Kishenpur, about five miles away from the city, on the road to Mussoorie. Hari Ram Joshi, Hansa Datt Tiwari and other people of the region were keen to have a place for Mataji to stay in. They pressed Bholanath and Mataji to come to the new Ashram where they wished to perform the *pūjā* for Mataji's 40th birthday. In the previous year the birthday celebrations had been held on this piece of land by the devotees of Dehradun. This year they had the pleasure of seeing Mataji in an Ashram where she could stay in some comfort for as long as she liked. The inns attached to temples as well as *dharamśālās* expect pilgrims to move on after a few days; they are not used as permanent residences by anyone.

Mataji and Bholanath were welcomed in the new Ashram in May 1936 amidst a festival of great rejoicings. Manmatha Nath Chatterjee, performed *tithi-puja* in Dehradun for the first time. This year the birthday celebrations were observed in Calcutta as well and in Dacca it had already become a tradition. Dehradun also experienced the flocking together of a crowd of men, women and children from remote towns who became one big family. Bholanath assisted by four others performed a *yajña*. In Mataji's proximity such religious rites easily came within the reach of the ordinary man. Rites which people had read about in books only or even never had the occasion to think about, now seemed a natural and rewarding activity. Hindu festivals in all their colourful details came to be as much part of Mataji's way of communicating with the people who crowded round her day and night as the philosophical discourses by which she would gently engage the attention of those who had questions in their hearts.



## Chapter Six

### KIRTAN AT SIMLA KALIBARI

The people of Dehradun had a taste of the experience of the devotees of Dacca, when Mataji announced her *kheyāla* of proceeding to Solon, almost before they had time to congratulate themselves on the success of the much awaited function. Mataji said she would take with her only Didi, Nepalda<sup>1</sup> and Bhramara; the rest of the party should follow with Bholanath. Bholanath was a little indisposed and undergoing treatment. Many people who had come to spend their summer vacation with her, were considerably put out by Mataji's *kheyāla*. Birendra C. Mukherji<sup>2</sup> said, "why do you leave us like this? I see no reason why you cannot wait for Bholanath to recover so that we may all go together."

Mataji had already taken permission from Bholanath, so she said smilingly but firmly, "I cannot give an explanation. Let me go today. All of you will join us as soon as Bholanath is ready to travel."

Raja Durga Singh of Solon received Mataji and made suitable arrangements for her. He was already very devoted to her and ready to carry out her slightest *kheyāla* if he came to know of it. Baghat State was small but beautifully situated. The princely treatment accorded to all who gathered round Mataji impressed them. The lavish arrangements were perhaps routine in such households but the quality of the

1. Now Swami Narayananda Tirtha of the Ashram.

2. Didi's eldest brother who was Professor of English in Agra College, Agra.



spirit of service in servants, the decorum of behaviour of all attendants and their devotion testified to the loyalty and respect they felt for their own Prince. In fact, the whole of Jogibhai's<sup>1</sup> entourage became very close to Mataji and to the Ashram over the years. The Rani Sahiba, as was the custom then, observed purdah. So for a couple of hours in the evening the approach to Mataji's residence would be screened off for the Rani's daily visit. The Raja Sahib's mother also came at that time. This stratum of society was beyond the ken of the ordinary person, but in Mataji's vicinity the mingling of different cross sections of society was as unremarkable as it was varied. It is not the least outstanding feature of Mataji's personality that she is at home with everyone. Not that she makes an effort or rises to occasions—her response comes naturally and she always strikes the right note for all people, be it a group of children, ascetics, business magnates, housewives or even a mixed gathering. It may be said that she belongs so much to everyone that it could not be otherwise.

After a fortnight in Solon, Jogibhai heard that Mataji wished to go to Simla. Although saddened at this *kheydla* he did not attempt to dissuade her but made arrangements for her to stay at Simla *Kalibāri*.<sup>2</sup>

This was Mataji's first visit to Simla, where subsequently she became so well-known. She arrived at the beautiful hill-station in the evening and at once proceeded to Kālthāri. Here they found some unusual activities going on. They were informed by the Secretary, Sudhir Sen, that a *Sādhu*, known as 'Dayal Baba', had just passed away. As a matter of fact, Dayal Baba had enquired only a short while ago if

1. Mataji said that the Raja Sahib was a prince of yogis 'Yogiraj', so he came to be known as 'Jogibhai' in the Ashram circle.

2. Temple of Kālthāri. All such temples have rooms for pilgrims where they may stay for a few days.

Ma Anandamayi who was to have come, had arrived or not. Mataji now went to the room of the *sādhu* and stood near his body for some time. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Then she came away to her own room. Dayal Baba had been held in great esteem by the Bengali population of Simla. They came to pay their respects to the departed soul and thus learnt of Mataji's arrival at the Kālībārī. Some of them went to her room and told her a little about Dayal Baba.

Simla used to be the summer Head-Quarters of the Central Secretariat of the Government of India, so the town at this time was at the peak of its summer season. The Bengali population consisted mostly of the officers of the Secretariat who every year spent six months in Simla along with their offices.

The next morning Mataji went for a walk. Small groups of people came up to her and introduced themselves. More gathered in her room in the evening. One of them said, "Ma, we were greatly attached to Dayal Baba. We should have been plunged in sorrow, but somehow, now that you are here, we are not suffering from a sense of bereavement."

Mataji's response to these newcomers was as if she were amidst people well-known to her. Within a few days Mataji's small room began to overflow with visitors. Many of the new acquaintances came to the Kālībārī straight from their offices. Much fun and good-natured teasing was occasioned by this because some of them would find their wives already with Mataji instead of awaiting them at home. Household routines were thrown overboard. Men, women and children began to crowd round Mataji. One lady, expressing the views of her companions said, "Ma, every day we impatiently wait for the office and school hour. No sooner are our husbands and children out of the house than we simply rush here."

Mataji at this time was accompanied by Bholanath, Didi, Didi's father, Swami Akhandananda, and one or two others. Didi had been with her since Tarapeeth. She was amazed that within a few days Mataji so endeared herself to the people that from morning till night she was the centre of an eager throng, talking to her, listening to her or sometimes just gazing at her with rapt attention. One lady asked Mataji: "Ma, what *sādhana* can a housewife do?"

"*Seva*<sup>1</sup> and *japa*<sup>2</sup>". All duties can be performed in a spirit of service and dedication. God himself appears to you in the guise of your various obligations in the world. If you sustain the thought, 'this also is one of the many aspects of the Divine', then there need be no conflict between what is worldly and what is called religious. More specifically, one should devote as much time as possible to *japa*."

"Ma, on some days the mind is at peace and I can do *japa* but often the mind is so restless that nothing can be done. Why is this so?"

"There are many influences operating on the mind, perhaps unknown to you. Your way of life, the food you eat, the people you mix with and many other things. But the remembrance of God will help you to overcome all this. Don't you see that in spring when new leaves begin to sprout, the old ones drop off by themselves? They fall to the ground and are reabsorbed as manure and nourish the tree. Nothing is wasted in the Divine scheme of things. Sustained effort is required of you. The rest will follow."

### Nāma Yajña

The Bengali officers at Simla were mostly members of the *Hari Sābhā* or attached to it. This Society owes its

1. *Seva* Service.

2. *Japa* Repetition of one of God's names or a mantra.



allegiance to the *Vaiṣṇava Sampradaya* of Sri Gaurāṅga Mahāprabhu of Bengal. Sri Gaurāṅga is acknowledged to have been the propagator of the mode of *kīrtana* performed by a congregation which has assembled for that very purpose. In one of the books which is held sacred in this sect, the festival of *nāma-samkīrtana* is described in great detail; a circular altar is to be erected in an open space; it is to be decorated with flowers and leaves and pictorial representation of Lord Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa and others of the Vaiṣṇava pantheon; all those who are good singers and drum players are to be invited. In this assembly of devout men the names of the Lord are to be invoked and a resolution taken regarding the dawn-to-dusk kīrtana on the morrow.

In Matajī's circle, kīrtana had been sung in an informal manner. Nobody so far had witnessed this ritualistically formal *samkīrtana* which is called *nāma-yaṅga*, that is *yaṅga* in the form of singing Names of the Lord. The Bengali officers had built up a tradition of *Nāma-yaṅga* every year during their sojourn in Simla during summer. This function was to take place on Tuesday, June 23. The new devotees of Simla requested Matajī to stay till then.

A big concourse of people assembled in the Kālībārī on the eve of the *Nāma-yaṅga*. The temple, the hall in which the *kīrtana* was to be performed and the adjoining raised verandah around it were tastefully decorated with flowers, leaves and lights. Garlands were festooned round the altar erected in the middle of the hall. The fragrance of sandal-wood permeated the atmosphere. The participants, Haran Banerji, Charu Banerji, Durgadas Banerji, Deben Chatterji, Manoj Lal Chatterji, Sudhir Sarkar, and many others, assembled in front of the altar. Matajī surrounded by women sat on the verandah. Bholanath, always a great enthusiast for kīrtana, was happily participating in the function.



First of all the altar was sanctified; the musical instruments were acknowledged with gratitude as it were, for contributing to the invocation of the Names of the Lord and decorated with garlands and sandalwood. The participants also were garlanded and a mark of sandalwood put on their foreheads to welcome them. The evening began with the sounding of the musical instruments in unison in rhythmic cadences. At the conclusion of this an invocation to Sri Gauranga and Sri Nityananda was sung in a very solemn tune, praying to them to grace the kirtana with their divine presence. Other deities of the Vaisnavas were also invoked to bless the function. Thereupon the men stood up carrying their musical instruments. They solemnly walked around the altar singing the main tunes of the *kirtana* for the morrow. With this the invocation ceremony known as *adhivāsa* was concluded.

Early next morning everyone gathered again for the commencement of the dawn-to-dusk kirtana. This time, because of Mataji's presence, even those late-risers who were never known to attend before noon, had come. From sunrise to sunset the same mantra would be sung by relays of singers accompanied by players. Each leading voice is allowed to introduce variations in the tune but the continuity of the singing remains unbroken. Mataji again sat on the verandah. The kirtana right from the beginning created an unusual atmosphere which was felt by everybody. Didi, Bholanath and Akhandanandaji realised suddenly that after almost five years or so, Mataji's body seemed to respond to the rhythm of the music. They had not seen her in a *mahābhāsa* since she had left Dacca, but now her face was flushed and there was a look of withdrawal from the world of everyday affairs and a complete submergence into a mood of inner radiant joy. Didi who was closest to Mataji noticed that Mataji

herself was trying to keep in check the tides of this *bhāva* which were surging over her body, as it were.

She would talk desultorily with her companions. Once she went out for a walk away from the Kālībārī. Then again she would retire to her room and lie down for some time. Bholanath, realizing Mataji's condition, came to her room and asked her to check the *bhāva* if possible. The function was a public one. Bholanath was not happy at the idea that Mataji should be seen in *bhāva* by comparative strangers who may not understand the phenomenon. Moreover Mataji's *bhāva-samādhi* could last for any number of hours, even days, and none knew better than he how difficult it was to recall her to her surroundings. A nameless dread of losing her while she was in one of those states of complete withdrawal from the world, made him anxious. He also knew that his words would be obeyed by Mataji if they were not swept aside by the force of her *kheyālā* to the contrary. In this case Mataji's *kheyālā* was also towards checking the manifestations of *mahābhāva*, may be because she had anticipated his reaction to it. The whole day was spent like this. A restlessness marked Mataji's actions. It appeared as if she were trying to check a terrific force which would otherwise engulf her body. Didi has said, that at this time her ordinary conversation and behaviour was shot through as if by streaks of lightning. A look of intense divine effulgence would come and go in a flash on her face; Suddenly her gaze would assume a fixed withdrawn look and as suddenly be replaced by her glance of recognition.

Evening drew near. The kirtana was reaching its climax before its conclusion at sun-down. Mataji once again came away from it to her room where the strains of the music could be heard just faintly. Here her body was seen to roll swiftly and sway up to a standing posture in one fluid

movement. Didi stood behind her stretching her arms out in case Mataji should suddenly drop to the ground but actually, as Didi knew from her experience, no support or help was needed when Mataji entered into *mahābhāva*. Didi and others have said that Mataji's body is very light on these occasions. Even if her body is seen at times to lean against that of a companion, the experience of impact is very slight. Mataji now moved out of her room and entered the *kirtana*-hall. The men of Simla had never seen anybody in an exalted state of *bhāva* before. Nearly all of them were Vaiṣṇavas, well versed in the literature of their own *sampradaya* (sect). They realised immediately that they were witnessing the manifestations of *mahābhāva* as described in their texts and which they had believed upto now were possible only in the divine body of Sri Gaurāṅga.

It is very difficult to give a description of Mataji's *bhāva*. If she falls to the ground and rolls over, then nothing actually is seen but a blur of white; she is upright in almost less than a second. She is 'like a wind-blown cloth', or 'like a dry leaf blown along the ground by gusts of wind.' Her passage through the crowd is so swift that hardly anybody can be said to have a full view of her at any time. One may get a glimpse of a radiant countenance or of a hand raised in a graceful movement, or a beautiful posture of the body for a split second and that is all, but that is more than enough also. Bholanath need not have feared that the people of Simla would not appreciate or understand. They were enthralled and overwhelmed.

As before in Dacca, after a few minutes of terrific movement, Mataji sat in utter stillness on the floor. The *kirtana* in the meantime had been concluded. The silence was broken by Mataji's voice pronouncing mantras in a beautiful language which sounded like Sanskrit. After a while she



sat motionless with her eyes closed. To this divine image, as it seemed to the congregation, they now bowed profoundly and with full hearts. Some of them hurried home to fetch other members of their family so that they should not be deprived of this unique opportunity. Mataji's body was limp. Didi with the help of others gently brought her back to her room and made her sit on her own bed. Mataji's gaze tended to be unfocussed and she seemed to be on the brink of sinking into a state of *samādhi*. Didi asked the assembled people to call her and talk to her. She knew from her experience at Dacca that Mataji could be recalled to her surroundings at this stage; if she entered into *samādhi*, then it would be more difficult for her to be aroused from it. In response to repeated calls of "Ma, speak to us", Mataji was seen to drag open her eyes again and smile and speak a few words.

Bholanath himself had stayed with the kirtana the whole day without rest or breaking his fast. All the participants had greatly enjoyed his encouraging presence and involvement in the kirtan. Altogether this *Nāma yajña* seemed to mark a turning point in the lives of the people of Simla. One of them summed up the general feeling by saying: "We have been performing this festival for many years. Our prayers have been answered. Blessed indeed are we, the people of Simla."

The next morning it started raining heavily. Some of the women came to the Kalibari notwithstanding the rains. They also wanted to sing *kirtana* near Mataji. They had been inspired to this project after experiencing the exaltation of the previous night's festival. Mataji encouraged them and kirtana was begun at noon. At first the novelty of the situation acted as an inhibitory force and they could not quite get into the rhythm of group singing which is led by a single voice. Then Mataji joined them and started walking with



them around the altar (which was still standing in the hall), clapping her hands to the beat of the music and sometimes singing a few lines herself. Within a few minutes the singing was unified into enthusiastic kirtana and joyfully taken up by all bystanders as well. Several of the women had good voices and the playing of instruments was performed by some of their young brothers or sons who had stayed away from school for this day. The young boys who had not had the opportunity to play in the men's kirtana were more than happy to be able to accompany their mothers and sisters. Thus a kirtana party of women was inaugurated by Mataji, as she had done previously in Dacca and Calcutta. When the men came to the temple in the evening they were informed of this proud achievement by their women-folk. A few were sceptical about the future of this programme because they thought it would be beyond the physical strength of women to stand and sing for a number of hours at a time. Mataji smiled and said, "Do not keep your women folk away from this aspect of your lives. Encourage them to join their efforts with yours, otherwise you may face quite unnecessary obstacles."

After a few days Mataji left Simla and returned to Solon. The new devotees, loath to allow her to go away, accompanied her to Solon as it was a Saturday, spent the whole night in singing *kirtana* and returned to Simla the next day. Mataji had now come into contact with an entire new cross-section of society. At Solon, Raja Durga Singh's great courtesy and hospitality captivated the hearts of the officers. They promised to perform *nāma-yajña* in Solon as well in the near future.

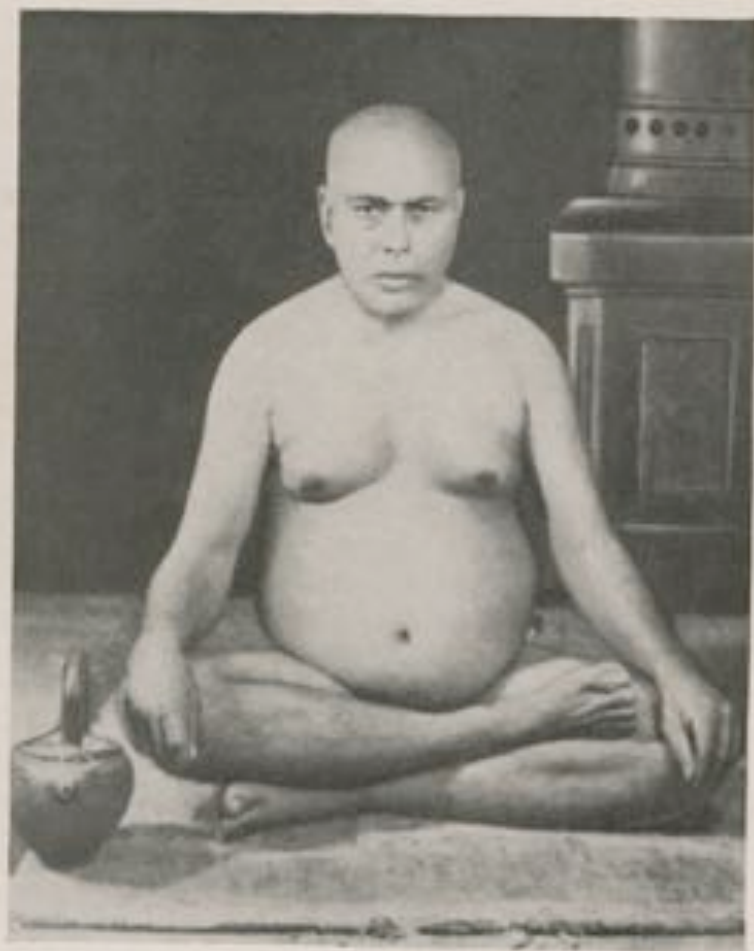
Mataji returned to Dehradun where Bhaiji had stayed all this time undergoing treatment for an indisposition. Before she left Solon, a few officers had come down again from Simla

to invite her to another *nāma-yajña*, this time to be performed in honour of Mataji herself. Since she was ready to leave for Dehradun, Mataji did not change her programme but it was arranged that she would go to Simla later. Thus Mataji, accompanied by Bhaiji as well, returned to Simla on July 5, 1936, this time.

The *kirtana* was already in progress when Mataji arrived. She and her companions were made welcome and received with great ceremony. The preparation for the *nāma-yajña* and its execution was in all details as perfectly done as for their annual *nāma-yajña*. Mataji had been accepted and given as important a place in their hearts as their own beloved deity.

Next day the devotees of Simla were ready to relax and enjoy Mataji's presence in the Kālibāri. When they assembled in Mataji's room, many topics were broached for her advice and guidance. For almost two years now, Mataji had been in the habit of eating on alternate days. One gentleman said, "Ma, you are looking weak because you have not eaten today. Please do eat something." Mataji said, "If you think I am looking weak, it is not due to lack of food. You can ask these people (she pointed to Bholanath, Didi and Bhaiji) whether I have not subsisted on less food at times. My 'health' does not depend upon food. I used to be in very good health on almost next to nothing at times." "Even so, why should you undertake these fasts? Fasts etc. are for us not for you and we are not at all keen on rigourisms. You do not need to undergo any kind of asceticism."

"If you are not keen then, may be, I should do it for your sakes. But why do you call it a fast? Don't you have gaps between your main meals? You have a gap of twelve hours, so consider that I leave a gap of forty-eight hours and that is



Swami Akhandananda

all. Nevertheless since you say so, I shall keep your words in mind and this rule may be changed in good time."

Jogibhai, Dr. Joshi and others had come to Simla on this occasion. Much to the disappointment of the people of Simla and to the joy of those from Solon, Mataji chose to go down to Solon after a couple of days. It was apparent that she had no *kheyala* to stay there either. One day she asked Bholanath, "Where shall we go now?" He had no suggestions to make, so she said, "In that case I shall follow my *kheyala*." Then she asked Bhaiji, "Where would you like to stay in the meantime?" The question made it clear that he was not to accompany her on her travels. Since he also had nothing to say to the question, Mataji arranged for him to remain in Solon until further notice.

Mataji with her depleted party arrived in Vindhyachal. More drastic changes were made by her. She sent Swami Akhandananda to stay in the new Ashram at Kishenpur, while Didi was put in charge at Vindhyachal. This was a new experience for Didi. Since leaving home she had never stayed alone or been without the guardianship of her father. Mataji now said to her, "You must learn to be independent and also to travel alone and without escorts. You have chosen this way of life, so you must get used to being on your own." Mataji, however, somewhat softened the impact of the changes by arranging that a reliable family servant would stay at hand, in case Didi were obliged to undertake a journey later on.

In the last week of July 1936 Mataji and Bholanath left for Calcutta. From there Mataji paid a short visit to Rajshahi. Bholanath had been suffering from a pain in the stomach for some time. Mataji prevailed upon him to stay at his sister's place and get himself examined and treated properly by the doctors in Calcutta.



Mataji then went to Serampore accompanied by a large crowd of devotees. She asked everyone to return to Calcutta the same evening. Only Kamal (Atal Behari Bhattacharya's nephew from Rajshahi) and Virajmohini<sup>1</sup> remained with her. Kamal was a newcomer. Virajmohini had been travelling in Mataji's company for some time. She was a widow and since the marriage of her two daughters considered herself entitled to a life of renunciation. She wished to devote herself to *sādhanā* and had come to Mataji for this purpose. Virajmohini was a woman of good sense and dignity of manner. Her ready appreciation of the unusual must have stood her in good stead because Mataji now started on a course of incognito travel accompanied by Virajmohini only, as Kamal also was sent back after a few days. Bholanath wrote to all concerned that it was Mataji's *kheyāla* to move about by herself and that nobody should try to find out where She was or go and join her in case anyone learnt about her whereabouts accidentally, and that she would come back to them in her own time. Mataji left Serampore with Kamal and Virajmohini on August 3, 1936.

1. Many people will know her better as brahmacharini Visuddha's grandmother.

## Chapter Seven

### MATAJI TRAVELS INCOGNITO

Mataji had twice before travelled incognito, so although this *kheydla* was inexplicable to everyone, yet they were getting accustomed to it. Didi, living in solitude on top of the Ashtabhujā Hill in Vindhyachal, had plenty of time to meditate on this phenomenon. She came to know that Mataji had left Calcutta without even a change of clothes or a tumbler for drinking water. It almost broke Didi's heart to think that Mataji should again and again go away from the midst of an eager crowd who were ready to serve her to the best of their ability, and that she should dispense with such elementary comforts as a change of clothes and equipment.

If Mataji chose to wander around in the guise of a mendicant, then there was nothing for any of them to do, but simply devote their entire energy to the way of *sādhana* taught by her. Perhaps Mataji acted in this way to bring to the fore the mood of detachment from the world for all who wished for spiritual guidance from her. It was unbearable to think that Mataji might perhaps be in need of money or shelter or food or possibly even some little personal service. A prey to such disturbing thoughts, Didi spent the few months of her exile patiently and with fortitude. At the end of it she even felt that Mataji knew best because Didi had not had a very difficult time after all. As a matter of fact she had begun to experience a kind of joy in her lonely, out-of-the-way retreat for *sādhana*.

After three months Didi and also others who were waiting for news of Mataji received the glad tidings that she was in Tarapeeth and everyone who wished could join her there. Within a couple of days Tarapeeth saw the multitude of devotees arriving from far and near. With great eagerness they made enquiries from Virajmohini about Mataji's travels during the preceding months. How did they manage, who gave them money, where did they stay, were they put to any difficulties; these and many similar questions were asked from all sides. Virajmohini tried her best to satisfy everyone. Although she had not had much money with her when they started she never ran short of it; there had been invariably someone who would purchase tickets or buy fruits etc. for them. She had always managed to prepare their simple meals, at times nothing more than some boiled vegetables and most often a little milk and fruit. Mataji had been recognised in a few of the towns, but she would then immediately leave. From Virajmohini's accounts the following itinerary was pieced together by the listeners :

Mataji's first destination had been Puri. Triguna Chakravarty, not being reconciled to Mataji's adoption of complete destitution, quietly gave Virajmohini a blanket and a dhoti for Mataji. At the Railway station another devotee presented a beautiful sari which Virajmohini bundled up with her own meagre effects. In Puri they put up at the Goenka *dharamidhā*. The rooms being occupied, they stayed on the open verandah. At the time of going out to visit the temples, Virajmohini left her few belongings with a family in a nearby room. When on their return she went to collect her things, the lady asked if she would sell the sari to her. Since both Mataji and Virajmohini were dressed in dhotis, she thought the sari would be of no use to them. Virajmohini, however, refused the offer, saying it was a gift and could not

be sold. Thereupon Mataji herself entered into the spirit of the discussion and with some difficulty persuaded the lady to accept the sari as a gift from her. She became their daughter and said that a daughter had every right to present a sari to her mother. Next day Mataji's new mother brought her a dhoti as a gift, so that now Mataji had a change of clothes.

While she was strolling on the beach, a young boy recognised her as the 'Ma of Dacca,' and ran off to inform Makhan Babu of Jatia Baba's ashram. On her return to the *dharamśālo*, Mataji remarked, "I see Makhan Babu with a lantern in his hand, looking for me." After a while Makhan Babu arrived carrying a lantern; he had gone to the beach to look for Mataji and had been wandering around in search of her. He was joyful at having found her at Goenka's.

At Puri, the meeting of Shyamdas Babaji and Mataji was of some significance. Shyamdas Babaji was an old man, devoted to his *sādhana* and had been living in retirement in Puri for a long time. A few months earlier he had suddenly become very keen to have *darśana* of Mataji. Although his health was not good, he had made enquiries about Mataji's whereabouts with a view to going to Dehradun if necessary. One of his acquaintances seeing this uncharacteristic agitation on his part remonstrated with him saying, "How is it that you have become so disturbed about this *darśana*, you who are so steadfastly established in your own way of life? If Mata Anandamayī is all that they say she is, then, I am sure she will come to your hut to give you *darśana*." Now this is exactly what happened. Mataji went to see this old man on the brink of death. His urgent desire for *darśana* was fulfilled through the most unexpected concurrence of events. May be Mataji had gone to Puri for this reason alone?



From Puri Mataji went to Bhuvaneshwar. After visiting Gomoh, Adra and other nearby places Mataji undertook the long journey to Agra in Uttar Pradesh.

At Agra Mataji asked Kamal how much money he had. On learning that he had Rs. 10/- only, she told him to purchase a ticket for Calcutta and return home. He tried to plead with her to allow him to stay on but all to no purpose. With Kamal was sent back the surplus baggage which they had acquired en route, because Virajmohini had purchased one or two small utensils at Puri. Mataji cut a piece of about 5½ feet in length and 2 ft. in width out of the blanket which had been given her. She kept this piece of blanket, one dhoti and a loṣa; Virajmohini was similarly equipped. Leaving them in this state of freedom from encumbrances, Kamal departed for Calcutta from Mathura, where they had gone from Agra. He was able to inform everyone at Calcutta about Mataji's welfare up to the time he had left her.

Mataji and Virajmohini, after seeing off Kamal at the Railway Station, returned to the city and sat on the river bank. As they had already stayed in the *dharamśāla* for three days they had vacated it as is the custom for pilgrims. N. P. Chatterji, the only son of Manmatha N. Chatterji of Dehradun, was in Mathura at this time but Mataji did not have the *kheyṛā* to inform him of her presence in the city. Virajmohini purchased some fruits and after washing them in the river, gave them to Mataji to eat. It may be recalled that for many years Mataji had not eaten with her own fingers; somebody else fed her like a child. In general Didi performed this service when with Mataji or anybody else did. The passersby, seeing a grown-up person being fed by another stopped to watch the spectacle and a few were highly amused. Mataji laughed to see their amusement, and so they went away thinking that she was a mad woman. When it became dark Mataji

asked Virajmohini if she would not be afraid to spend the night in the open. Before she could answer, a Kashmiri gentleman who happened to pass by, was thunderstruck to see Mataji and Virajmohini. He was known to Mataji. He congratulated himself again and again on this chance encounter and wished to take them to his house. Since leaving Dacca Mataji had not entered any living quarters but had always stayed in inns, temples or open verandahs. So for this night also Mataji was accommodated in a temple nearby. Next morning she proceeded to Vrindaban and put up at the Burdwan *dharamsalla*, whose manager Jogendranath was well-known to her. The very next day she started for Agra but on the way decided to go to Etawah. At Tundla Junction, a young man said to her, "Ma, I have seen you in Sultanpur. Please come with me to Sultanpur now." On learning that they had tickets for Etawah, he went to the Ticket Office and got them changed for Sultanpur.

At Allahabad they changed trains for going to Sultanpur. Mataji and Virajmohini were in a ladies' compartment. A Muslim woman got in at Pratapgarh. In the time-worn fashion of Indians she immediately wanted to know everything about her fellow travellers. She asked Mataji, "How many children do you have?" Mataji replied, "I am myself your child (*bacchu*), how should I have children?" The woman appeared much struck by this answer and within a short time they were deep in conversation about many matters. Virajmohini had purchased a toy for Mataji from one of the vendors. Mataji had been fiddling with this for some time. Now she gave it to the woman saying, "Keep this toy safely for me." The woman started shedding tears when her station came. She gave her address to Mataji and requested her to meet her again. Within this short time Mataji had acquired another 'parent'.

In Sultanpur Virajmohini got in touch with Dr. Rama Sharma, Sevaji's sister, who was naturally happy to get this unexpected visit from Mataji. The next day while walking toward the river they saw a passenger bus. On enquiry they were told it was bound for Ayodhya; so Mataji had the *khepila* to go there.

In Ayodhya Mataji stayed for a week in a temple, before her presence became known to the host of devotees living in the town. The elation of the devotees was short-lived because Mataji almost immediately left for Lucknow. In the train a lawyer from Barabanki came to know her identity and requested her to come to Barabanki. She said she would keep it in mind. From Lucknow Mataji went to Etawah where she remained for nearly twenty-five days. Dr. Pitambar Pant being informed of her arrival, made available to her a newly built room near the temple of Daooji. Every evening he and some of his friends would visit her and listen to her answers to their questions regarding spiritual life. In Etawah Mataji very often used to go and sit with a gypsy family living on the bank of the river. They were extremely poor. They would spread a papaya leaf for Mataji to sit on. Within this short time they became very attached to her.

As soon as crowds started assembling, Mataji left Etawah. She went to Naimisaranya, and then to Lucknow. After eight days in Lucknow, a few people came to know about her presence there. She then went on to Barabanki, and Virajmohini contacted the lawyer who had invited her. He was extremely happy to make arrangements for her. He and his friends had many philosophical discussions with Mataji during the four days she remained there.

From Barabanki Mataji and Virajmohini proceeded to Bareilly. They put up at the *dharamidala* which is situated very close to the Railway Station. Virajmohini, then set out to



locate Maharatan who embraced her warmly for bringing not only news of Mataji but Mataji herself to Bareilly.

Maharatan could not be reconciled to Mataji's *kheyda* of living a life of mendicancy. She immediately purchased a number of woollen clothes as well as blankets for Mataji and Virajmohini. Bareilly being near the mountains is a bit cooler than other cities of the plains. Mataji however did not give up her piece of blanket which she would spread underneath the new bedding. After a few days she said, "Now that we have so many warm clothes and blankets, let us make use of them. We shall go to Nainital."

At Nainital they were met by Krishnaram Panth at the bus-stop. By the merest chance he happened to be present there and was amazed to see Mataji getting off from the bus. This time Mataji stayed at the temple of Naina Devi. Since this was the time of the annual Durgā Pūjā (Navarātri) many people who visited the temple, came to know about Mataji. One day Mataji made Virajmohini perform *kumārī-pūjā* there. Just on the eve of Durgā Pūjā Mataji left Nainital and went to Agra passing through Bareilly again. While she was riding in a tonga from the station to a place called Shyamakutir, Birendra C. Mukerji's son saw her from a distance. He was on a bicycle; catching up with her he said, "Now at last you are caught. I shan't let you out of my sight. Twice it seems you have come and gone away without informing us."

He was then persuaded to go home and inform his father. Thus Birendra C. Mukerjee, Dr. Bhargava and many others got the opportunity of enjoying the presence of Mataji in their midst. Mataji did not stay more than two days. She went on to Delhi and then to Lahore. After one day in Lahore, where she visited the *Kālībārī*, Mataji left for Amritsar, and from there went to Garhmukteshwar via



Meerut. Mataji had allowed a young man, Manik, to accompany her on this tour but he was sent back from this town where she stayed for fifteen days. From Garhmukteshwar, Mataji went to Sultanpur, Ayodhya and Fyzabad. As previously, she would leave a place as soon as the local devotees came to know of her presence and started clustering round her. From Fyzabad Mataji came to Deoghar. Although Prankumar Babu was in Deoghar and would have been beside himself with joy to see Mataji, she stayed quietly in a *dharamsalā* without informing him.

In the next room of the *dharamsalā* a woman had a sudden attack of some kind of seizure. The manager, sympathising with the husband in this trouble, advised him to approach 'a Mataji' who was staying in the next room. The man came and knocked at the door. When Virajmohini understood his request she answered with some annoyance that Mataji was not a doctor and would say nothing about such illnesses. The man thrust past her and falling at Mataji's feet prayed pitiously to her to do something for his wife. Ma said to Virajmohini, "Let us go and see what the matter is." The woman in the next room appeared to be very ill. Her lips were bluish and her hands and feet cold. She was trembling uncontrollably. After watching her for some time Mataji asked Virajmohini to prepare some fruit juice for her which the woman was given to drink. Mataji had the window opened and after seeing the patient lying comfortably in bed she came away to her room. The next morning the woman was quite normal and well, much to the surprise of Virajmohini who had not expected her to recover so soon.

From Deoghar Ma had gone to Tarapeeth. Mataji had travelled without a retinue for about four months; now she was surrounded by a huge entourage but it was all the same to her. Like an expert general she moved her army of

devotees from place to place travelling lightly. The midday meal was cooked in one big pot which contained every kind of vegetable and rice and pulses. This meal could be served and consumed quickly and the cleaning up accomplished easily. Eddies of people surrounded Mataji. Some were newcomers greeting her on arrival; those who had stayed for a day or two were going away and bidding her farewell.

In this manner, Mataji moved towards Assam in the beginning of December 1936. They crossed a river by steamer and boarded a train at Pandughat for Dibrugarh. This time Didi, Akhandananda and Bholanath travelled with Mataji in addition to Virajmohini. Didi was happy to receive back her right to perform little personal services to Mataji.

While the train was standing on the platform, Mataji looked out of the window and saw a young boy walking along the railway track with books under his arm. She asked him to come into her compartment. He was a very well behaved child and seemed to be intelligent also. Mataji entered into friendly conversation with him. His name was Mukul Datta and he was the son of a Railway worker. He and other boys and girls of the Railway yard went every day to their school in Gauhati by this train. Now his friends seeing him in the compartment had climbed into it and all of them were conversing with Mataji as with a friend of long standing. After a while she said to them, "All of you must think of God every day for a while. He has many forms and many names. You can choose any one you like. Tell me, which Name do you like best?" Many names were mentioned; Hari, Rama, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Siva, etc. Two of the boys turned out to be Muslims and said "Allah". To all of them Mataji said, "Take a new copy-book. Write the name of your choice five times, ten times or twelve times (in accordance with their age) every day. This you must do the first thing in the

morning after you wash your hands and face, etc. When the copy-book is full, consign it to the river in the name of God and start another one. Can you do this ?”

All the girls and boys readily agreed and as they got off the train at Gauhati they asked Mataji to let them know when she would return. They said they all lived near the station and would hear if called aloud by name. Mataji asked Didi to note down their names and keep the list with her.

Mataji's tour of Assam took the usual form of travels undertaken by her. People gathered round her, sometimes there would be kirtana ; at other times Mataji would answer questions for long hours. Didi would cook large meals for impromptu gatherings and everybody would feel uplifted out of their ordinary way of life and glimpse a new dimension of worthwhile endeavour to undertake. In Dibrugarh also Mataji addressed a group of girls and boys and told them to write the names of God in new copy-books. At Mataji's suggestion Didi purchased a dozen such note-books and wrote the name of the child on the book given to him or her. They in turn asked Didi to write Mataji's name as the first name in their books, which she did as well. Since Mataji was staying in Dibrugarh, the children brought their copy-books to her next day to show her the written Names.

Mataji went up to Shillong visiting many places en route. She returned to Pandughat after a week or so. Virajmohini had left Mataji's party to be with her daughter and son-in-law at Nougaoon for a couple of days. She was already awaiting Mataji's party at the steamer-ghat. On seeing her the school children came running, thinking Mataji had come with her. When they heard that Mataji was expected by the motor route they ran off to the bus stand and eagerly scanned the faces of the tourists as they descended from cars and buses. It was late when Mataji arrived. The disappointed children



were not there. On hearing from Virajmohini that they had been looking for Mataji the whole evening, Akhandananda and Bholanath went to the Railway yard and tried to find them, but Didi had unfortunately mislaid the list of names and they could not be located. It was time for Mataji and her party to embark on the steamer so they could not devote more time to the search. Just before they left Mataji beckoned to a young man standing at a distance. At his approach she asked him if he knew a boy called Mukul Datta, the son of one of the Railway workers. He replied that he did. Mataji then left a message for the children saying that she had come and looked for them but because time was short she had had to leave without waiting to see them.

From Assam Mataji went to Rajshahi and from there to Calcutta where she remained at the Railway Station to wait for the train to Navadweep. From all those who had gathered round her two young girls, Kamala (Jogesh Brahmachariji's widowed niece) and Juthika (Bunidi), at the very last moment boarded the train to go with her. They had no change of clothes or baggage with them, but were quite carefree knowing that somehow everything would turn out just right if they were with Mataji. Innumerable times dozens of people have travelled like this with Mataji, taking a last moment decision to go with her. It cannot be said that anybody has been put to any inconvenience on this account and thus the families of the travellers do not think that this should cause any anxiety.

Mataji stayed in Navadweep over the Christmas holidays. Groups of families could gather there because it was vacation time for everyone. They accompanied her to the temples, sometimes they went down the river singing *kirtana* in a fleet of boats. The evenings were spent in holding discussions on many subjects, everyone waiting to hear how Mataji



would resolve the questions. Mataji also visited many of the religious personalities of the town and received many of them in her turn. Breaking up this joyous congregation after a fortnight or so, she again started on her travels. In answer to many appeals, Mataji once again visited Dacca on January 7, 1937.

## Chapter Eight

### "SACCIDĀNANDA"

Ramna Ashram came alive. It had been decorated to welcome her. As before, the people of Dacca surrounded her at all times and it seemed they could not gaze their fill at her. One lady, referring to Mataji's short visits and long periods of absence, remarked sadly, "Ma you do not love us anymore." Mataji laughed and said, "Is that so? The truth is that whether you love me or not, I cannot do without you."

The lady said, "Ma, how can that be. I have so many sufferings to endure."

"That is very good indeed!"

"Why, is it your wish that it should be so?"

"To be embodied means to endure the good as well as the bad. So whenever you encounter diseases, bereavements or ills you should remember that you are being cleansed of *saṁskāras*. Suffering is inextricably mixed up with life. It is necessary to 'burn'<sup>1</sup> in order to be purified. When a thing is burnt through it becomes fire and even that is changed into ashes. If you put ashes on your body they become one with the body. If you sprinkle them on water they mingle and become identified with the water. What does this mean? That there is no more tension or straining after incompatible things. Being one in spirit with the world one is at peace. Whatever comes about is to be accepted without violent reactions. That is why I say suffering is good."

1. A pun on the word '*jwala*' which means pain as well as a burning sensation.

Mataji's perpetual travels had at least taught her people one lesson; they neither expected her to stay for long wherever she was, nor did they try to restrain her when she was ready to depart. So after a few days the devotees of Dacca bade her a sad farewell. Mataji went to Vindhyachal and then to Varanasi. By this time she could converse quite well in Hindi and answered many questions put to her by the people of Varanasi. One young student asked her: "Mataji, is it not true that Tulsidas was a great *bhakta* (devout person) as well as a *jñāni* (man of wisdom)?"

"Surely."

"It is related that when God appeared to him as Krishna, he said, 'I don't want to see you as Krishna but as Rama.' What kind of wisdom is this? Are the two not the same?"

"Exactly. Tulsidas would not have said what he did had he thought otherwise. Moreover as a devotee he expressed his yearning for the vision of the form which he adored. So you see he was both a *bhakta* and a *jñāni*." This answer greatly satisfied the young scholar.

From Varanasi Mataji again went back to Bengal, or rather what is now Bangladesh. She travelled through Chandpur, Chattagram, Seetakund, Cox's Bazar, etc. At this time She became widely known in these places. She had been there previously but then she had not been so well known. People from all strata of society flocked round her day and night wherever she was. When the men and children went away to their offices and schools, it was time for their wives and mothers. In every town a similar pattern would be repeated. Often Mataji would be sitting in one place for long hours, just because nobody realised that this was so. One set of people would be replaced by another. The newcomers would think that they were lucky to find her sitting outside. Since Mataji was still eating on alternate days only,

her attendants had no occasion to break up the meetings even at mealtimes on her days of fast. It must be said that nobody could be blamed for being thoughtless because Mataji never looked tired or fatigued; so they had no way of knowing if they were imposing on her.

Talking to a group of men, she said one day, "The money that you earn has a way of getting spent as well. That which remains forever inexhaustible is real 'wealth'. Therefore *sādhana* alone is true wealth."

An eminent lawyer of this town said, "I think I have lost completely the secret of this 'wealth'."

"The feeling that you have lost it, shows that it is not so. That which is all-comprehensive cannot be lost. The fact that we are not happy with partial truth shows that we yearn for complete Truth. You must put your trust in somebody and surrender yourself to this undertaking. There is not much time to lose."

"The ego is a great obstacle. I do not think I can surrender to anybody. I don't find anybody to whom I can surrender. What is to be done?"

"If God alone is the one true Reality then it matters not in whom you place your trust. It is given to God alone."

"It is too late for me. There is no time for me now to render full account."

Mataji sat up and said forcefully, "Do not say, 'It is too late'. It never is. Why do you despair? Who knows at what moment in one's life one may encounter the Divine? Why do you say, 'I cannot'? Why don't you say, '*I shall do it; I take hold of this here and now.*' Grasp something firmly and stay with it steadfastly. Nothing at all is impossible in God's creation. Take heart and start now."

In such simple words as these Mataji instilled into the hearts of the people a desire for spiritual upliftment. Those



who had never thought of *sādhana*, now found their attention drawn to it. In Mataji's presence the finding of God's grace in human life seemed an easy accomplishment.

There was a school in the vicinity of Mataji's house in Cox's Bazar. The children, whenever free (before or after school or during tiffin-break), would come running to Mataji. They would walk with her on the sea-shore and gather cowrie-shells for her. Mataji, one day, said to them, "Let us play a game with these cowrie-shells. The name of the game will be *Saccidānanda*." The rules of the game were formulated by Mataji herself. There would be two teams of equal numbers of players, sitting alternately in a circle. Each player was entitled to a throw of seven cowrie-shells. If there were three facing up then the score was '*sat*'; if five then '*cit*' and '*ānanda*' would need all the seven cowries facing up. The team which arrived at *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda* in this order would win. If one gained *ānanda* before *sat* and *cit* or *cit* before *sat* then it would stand cancelled. The team to win would sing *kirtana* and the losing one would sit aside and do japa 108 times before joining in the *kirtana*.<sup>1</sup>

Usually Mataji and Bholanath would be the two team leaders. Counts would be kept very carefully. Sometimes grave controversies arose which needed to be settled by the team leaders. Even grown ups became like children when they participated in the game. As soon as neighbours heard the sound of singing they would know that the children were playing '*Saccidānanda*' with Mataji on the seashore.

Mataji stayed over a month at Cox's Bazar. Then, travelling through nearby places and via Calcutta, she alighted

1. This is from my recollections of the game which we as children played with Mataji and Bholanath. It is possible that it may have had more rules which were needed to settle disputes or proper reckonings.

in Bareilly, in Uttar Pradesh on April 2, 1937. Mataji had become quite well-known there. The pattern of social life was a little different in the towns of the U.P. The women had clubs of their own, and some of them drove their own cars. They took Mataji to their gatherings and these visits were great festivals for the whole community. Dressed in bright clothes and decked with flowers they would sing and dance around Mataji to welcome her. The men would come to the *dharamśālā* in the evening after office hours.

A new devotee, Bindu's mother, would be with Mataji the whole afternoon and return home just before it was time for her husband and children to come back from the office and schools. One day Mataji said to her, "One should try to keep one's mind constantly on God, just in the way your eyes return again and again to the clock on the wall. The mind also must be brought back repeatedly to the same point whenever it is distracted away from it." Bindu's mother was a little embarrassed but also very happy that Mataji had taken notice of her in the midst of a throng of women. It may be said that these words were carried out by her faithfully in later life and acted like a sheet-anchor through many vicissitudes.

Mataji proceeded to Nainital from Bareilly. There she put up in a *dharamśālā*. All visitors along with the inevitable crowd of children were introduced to the game of *saccidānanda*. Many adults who had never before repeated the Names of God aloud in song or silently in japa, were initiated into these rituals through the medium of the game.

At Nainital Mataji had a visitor from the U.S.A., Mrs. Jennings<sup>1</sup>. This lady had written for an interview and had

1. Mrs. Jennings had come to attend the International Parliament of Religions, held under the auspices of the Sri Ramkrishna Centenary Committee, on March 1-8, 1937 in Calcutta.

been asked to come to Nainital. Mrs. Jennings soon became quite attached to Mataji. Bhaiji interpreted for her and she would hold long conversations with Mataji about her spiritual life. In the company of Mrs. Jennings, Mataji travelled to Almora and back to Nainital in a bus hired for the purpose by the American lady.

In Almora Mataji stayed at the temple of Nanda Devi. On her arrival a group of young girls introduced themselves as students. From far-off villages in the Himalayas they had come to Almora to study. One or two girls came from a village at the foot-hill of the sacred Mountain Kailasha. In a few minutes they became great friends with Mataji and invited her to come to Kailasha with them. Now Bholanath had for long entertained a wish to undertake this most hazardous of pilgrimages. He became so fired by enthusiasm that he was ready to leave the same night. He was, however, prevailed upon to abandon the scheme, as roads remained unnegotiable before June. It was decided to take up the matter again after the celebration of Mataji's birthday in May.

The group of girls became very close to Mataji. They called themselves '*sakhis*' or '*sahelis*' (friends) of Mataji and were known as such to other devotees. Because of their number they were called the *ashta-sakhis* (eight-friends) of Mataji. They had a special song for doing *arati* to Mataji which is now sung in all the ashrams by everyone, although many may not know from where the song originated.

Mataji returned to Nainital and then to Bareilly. From there Mrs. Jennings left for her country. Before her departure she tried to communicate her own thoughts to the other companions of Mataji :

"I am not able to talk to you about Ma. But it is my personal experience that Ma knows our innermost thoughts. If we can attain one-pointedness towards her in our hearts,



then we are sure to feel her response. I am convinced of this because I have, as I say, experienced it. Whether I am in India, America or England, it matters little. I believe that I shall never be separated from Ma." The barriers of language, culture and religion had not been unsurmountable. She had become identified with the motley group which was Mataji's family.

Mataji did not stay long in Barcilly this time. She left for Calcutta on May 2nd, on her way to Jamshedpur. Many of the towns people stayed awake the whole night at the *dharamiālā* to see her off at the station at dawn. In those days Mataji did not have any special room or even place to herself. Didi would spread a folded blanket in one corner of the main hall for her to sit on. At night Mataji would lie down on this narrow bed-roll. She was nearly always surrounded by women who, unable to tear themselves away and go home, would improvise mats or some such things, and lie down near Mataji for the night. The men followed a similar pattern, trying to sleep on the verandah or in nearby rooms. Travellers kept coming and going (as this was a *dharamiālā*), picking their way between the sleeping forms. Everybody in India is familiar with this scene.

From Jamshedpur Mataji went to Calcutta and then to Dacca on May 19, 1937. This was Bhaiji's and Bholanath's last visit to Dacca, although nobody could foresee this at the time. Mataji's birthday celebrations were observed with as much ceremony as could be contrived by the devotees of Dacca. After five years they had the opportunity of celebrating this festival of all festivals for them in the presence of Mataji.

On leaving Dacca Mataji travelled back towards Nainital and Almora because it had been decided that they would undertake the pilgrimage to Kailasha. The girls from the



Himalayas were waiting in Almora to accompany them. This was the last pilgrimage for Bhaiji who passed away in Almora on their return from the journey.

At that time Kailasha (22,000 ft. above sea level) was still accessible from India. It is located in what then was independent Tibet under the rule of the Dalai Lama. It is approximately 240 miles from Almora. The journey was considered arduous because for people of the plains to walk on great heights without training and habituation was difficult in the extreme. Kailasha for all Hindus is the visible emblem of the abode of Siva. The pilgrimage consists in going round the Mountain in a *parikrama* (approximately 60 miles) and then bathing in the waters of the lake Gaurikunda (18,400 ft.). Kailasha lay 20 miles beyond, towering over the famous lake Manas-Sarovar (approx. 15,000 ft.). This beautiful site has inspired the imagination of poets and the admiration of travellers ever since the time of the ancient epics. This location is sacred to the Buddhists also; as such it has been the habitation of ascetics of both faiths for the last hundreds of centuries. Every year a few hardy and venturesome pilgrims undertook this pilgrimage to the snow-bound Himalayas for a *darshan* (sight) of the Holy Mountain.

This journey, ordinarily, would not have entered the consideration of Mataji's companions, but for the coincidence of her visits to Almora at that time. As written earlier many young people from the hinterland of Almora came to the town every year to pursue higher studies. Some of these students had become very attached to Mataji and Bholanath. One such student, a married young woman, Parvati, was specially devoted to them and had broached the idea of a journey to Kailasha, promising to escort them since her own home was not distant from the Holy Mountain. Other

students belonging to Garbyang, a wayside station of some importance, lent their support to the scheme. The young people would be returning home in June and enthusiastically promoted the idea of the pilgrimage, so they too would have the chance to accompany Mataji for at least part of the way.

In response to all these circumstances Mataji returned to Almora on June 10, 1937. The students from the villages in the Himalayas were eagerly awaiting her. Many devotees from Calcutta, Dehradun and Delhi came to Almora with her to see her off on this venture. Everybody had some advice to give on equipment and other necessities for the journey. Clothes suited to riding on mountain-ponies were ordered. All manner of miscellaneous items were piling up in Didi's baggage.

The details of this remarkable journey made especially memorable for the devotees by the event of Bhaiji's death at the end of it, have been preserved in Didi's diary, which she contrived to write even under very trying conditions. It was a task of love and devotion with Didi to write every day regarding Mataji's activities, thus these valuable records have been made available to us. The only drawback is that Didi was not always in a position to be near Mataji, thus much of what happened, occurred outside her ken. This was so because on Didi's shoulders fell the task of cooking and serving food to Mataji's party. It should be stated here that in Mataji's following all orthodox rules of cooking and serving food are observed. This naturally took up much of Didi's time. Ordinarily, pilgrims eat at wayside taverns and carry food with them as well, but this was not feasible for Mataji's party.

Whenever possible Didi cooked for the entire party which (in addition to Mataji and Bholanath) consisted of Swami Akhandananda (Didi's father), Bhaiji, Dasudada from

Varanasi, Tenu from Calcutta and Swamiji's attendant, Keshava Singh. Although Didi received help from everybody she was, so to say, in charge of this aspect of the pilgrimage. In spite of this preoccupation, Didi has written a comparatively full travel account of this pilgrimage. For the next four chapters therefore, Didi's language has been rendered into English so that the reader may approach as close to the events of the time as possible.<sup>1</sup>

Didi's accounts, as always, are prosaic and down to earth. Reading her refreshingly fast moving travelogue one cannot but get the impression that Mataji was still looked upon as the centre of a special group. It was true that the circle of Mataji's family had expanded many times since the days at Dacca yet the miracle of her presence continued to be novel and mysterious for these early devotees. They would have thought it a presumption to offer explanations of Mataji's way of life and so, they made no move to communicate with outsiders. Didi views with interest and understanding the attraction others feel for Mataji but there is here no attempt at guiding them to a better appreciation of her personality. Didi was content to be in a position to serve Mataji and be an onlooker of her "Jñā", as it were.

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1. The translation is close but not verbatim. I have heard about these incidents many times from Didi, as well as from Mataji herself as have others. Also I have read the painstakingly written pages of the Diary and transcribed some of them for publication in Bengali.

## Chapter Nine

### THE PILGRIMAGE TO KAILASHA

#### From Didi's Diary

Thursday, June 10th : We have arrived in Almora.

Arrangements are being finalised for our journey to Kailasha. Nagenda from Calcutta, Narendra and Juthika from Delhi and also Mrs. Dwarka Prasad from Bareilly are here to see us off. Hari Ram Joshi and Manik are also with us. The Bengali devotees are not at all happy with this scheme and are expressing doubts about its feasibility ; whereas the people of this region are very enthusiastic and encouraging. Parvati and the other girls from the mountains will accompany us.

Friday, Saturday, June 11th, 12th :

I feel dizzy to look at the pile of necessities which are accumulating as our baggage. Water proofs, rubber sheets, snow glasses, warm clothes, torches, lanterns, all kinds of antidotes for breathlessness and dizziness and also dry fruits and other food stuff for days on which no cooking will be possible—and a hundred other things—the list seems unending. For many years now I have been used to carrying the minimum of personal belongings only ; I could not see how I could deal with the pile of luggage. Moreover all these things have to be organised into portable weights. Each coolie (porter) would carry not more than 25 seers (approximately 50 lbs), so the boxes and knapsacks have to be weighed very carefully. At my wits' end with this problem I requested Ma to come and sit in the room where we were doing the



packing. Following her suggestions, we accomplished the task in no time at all, it seemed to me, and none of the boxes had to be repacked when they were weighed. The job I had been dreading was not so difficult after all.

Sunday, June 13th.

To-day we started on our pilgrimage to Kailasha. The devotees who had travelled with us from Calcutta, Varanasi, and others who had come to see us off, bade Mataji a sad farewell. Our party consisted (apart from Ma and Bholanath) of Swamiji<sup>1</sup>, Bhaiji, Dasu Babu from Varanasi, Tunu<sup>2</sup> and Keshava Singh, our servant. There are about a dozen porters to carry the baggage. It was considered advisable for us to engage a few *dandees* as well. There is one old man (Swamiji) in our party and Bhaiji is not enjoying good health, besides none of us is used to mountain-climbing, so it was felt that *dandees*<sup>3</sup> should be at hand in case they were needed. There are 25 coolies for the five *dandees* as each crew of four is accompanied by a fifth man as relief. The porters are to be paid Re. 1/- per day.

Starting at 8 a.m. we arrived by 11 o'clock at Barchhina, a distance of about 8 miles only. The natural scenery is very beautiful. After resting for a while, we proceeded further for our overnight's stay to Dhawalchina, which is about five and a half miles from Barchhina. I cooked a meal in the open and we spent the night on the open verandah of the Dak-bungalow.<sup>4</sup>

1. Swami Akhandananda, Didi's father.

2. Prankumarbahu's son, who may be better remembered by some as Bunidi's uncle.

3. A sort of chair of canvas and wood, swinging freely between two shafts carried by four coolies on their shoulders.

4. There are Government quarters all along public roads in India called Dak-bungalows. These are meant for Government officials travelling on duty. Sometimes other travellers are permitted to stay in them as well.

Monday, June 14th.

We made an early start at 5 in the morning. We had found the sun too hot for walking in comfort and wanted to avoid the afternoon heat. We made midday camp at Sheraghat, a distance of about eleven miles from Dhawalchina. The river Saraju flows alongside the road. The surrounding scenery is picturesque. Tall trees provide plenty of shade. So we cooked and ate under the trees and rested there in the afternoon. The coolies also cooked and ate their meals and rested for a while.

We had occasionally come across small shops where we could buy pulses, rice, ghee and salt. We are told that none of these things will be available as we climb higher. We have brought with us dry fruits, black pepper-powder, tamarind, pickles, roasted gram powder and other items that various knowledgeable people advised us to keep with us.

Bholanath seems full of energy and has walked ahead of the party most of the time. Ma and Swamiji also have walked some miles. Only Bhaiji and I have used our *dandees*. Our concern for Swamiji because of his age, seems unfounded. He is so far quite equal to the slowly climbing walk.

We started again at 3 p.m. and at sundown camped at a place called Ganoi, about 7 miles from Sheraghat. We have brought with us permits for staying at dak-bungalows along this route, so we could put up at the official quarter here and have a comfortable night's rest.

Parvati told us today of a dream she had almost five years ago and of which she was reminded now. She had dreamt that she was going on a journey in the company of strange people. Only one figure of this company had been clear to her. She also had had the impression of one lady dressed in white but she had not seen her clearly. When Parvati first met Bholanath in Almora, she had at once recognised him as the

clearly seen person of her dream. She had been in Almora for five years, and now on the completion of her schooling, was on her way back home in the company of Ma and Bholanath. Mataji smiled at her and said, "It seems you came to Almora so that your dream would be fulfilled."

While we were on our way up to the Bungalow, an old gentleman approached us and enquired about Mataji. When she was pointed out to him, he bowed to her and placed some flowers and fruits at her feet. He came again at night to the dak-bungalow bringing fresh milk and vegetables for us. We were surprised that he knew about Mataji's visit to that part of the country and asked him about it. He said, "It was in our local papers. I have been waiting eagerly these many days for her *darshan*."

Tuesday, June 15th.

We started at 6 a.m. for a place called Berinag, a distance of thirteen miles. We found the heat and climb too strenuous and decided to camp at Rani for a rest and our midday meal. This camp was 3 miles distance from Berinag. The road was so steep that though starting in good time, we managed to arrive at Berinag only at sundown. This seems to be quite a big place with many shops, a dispensary and a school. The dak-bungalow is situated above the village so we decided it was not worthwhile to climb up to it, instead we took shelter on the open veranda of the school-building. One of the girls accompanying us, belongs here; her relations and other persons who seemed to know about Ma, came to see her and we had quite a crowd of visitors in the evening.

Wednesday, June 16th.

Camping tonight at Thala about 11 miles from Berinag. After every couple of miles or so the men carrying the *dandees*



need to rest for a while. At one of these rest camps, Bhaiji declared in great good humour that Swamiji was the *Raja* (king) of the expedition and he himself the *Yuvraj* (prince). After a few miles, Swamiji's dandee broke down and Bhaiji also met with a slight accident and was hurt. I laughed and said, "You've been rightly served for thinking yourselves the leaders of this party." I had of course spoken in jest, but Bhaiji in half-serious tones replied, "you are right. Make a note of this incident in your diary."

At one such wayside camp, Mataji had called out in greeting to an old woman who, accompanied by a few children, was going in the opposite direction. Ma had said, "Where are you going, mother?" The old woman not slackening her pace had answered over her shoulder, "This way" and then, staring at Ma, she had stopped. Turning around she had slowly come back to where Ma was sitting and squatted in front of her. They talked for a long time and then it was time for us to resume our journey. When we had come quite a distance, I was interested enough to look back and saw the woman standing still on the road and gazing in our direction.

We arrived at Thala around 10 o'clock. The road was comparatively easier. We had seen the river Saraju at Shera-ghat; at Thala we found the Ramganga flowing noisily over its rockstrewn bed. We had never before seen such a vista of mountain ranges. Many famous authors have described the beauty of these Himalayan roads. I have no language to express the feeling of exaltation which is induced so naturally by these majestic surroundings.

Thursday, June 17th.

We have travelled a distance of ten miles to-day to a place called Didihat. It is still quite hot in the sun, but the water for the last two days has been rather cold.



We met the Raja of Askote on our way up to Didihat. He had been on the look out for our party, he said, having heard that Mataji was travelling on this road. He was going towards Almora but gave us letters for some officials at Askote and requested us to contact them on arrival.

At sundown, we reached Askote, a distance of seven miles from Didihat and put up at the *dharamidhā*. We have found it more convenient to stay as near the road as possible, instead of making the extra effort to go up to the Dak-bungalows. We were drenched in a sudden shower this morning. We are happy now to be able to spread out our clothes for drying. All of us are feeling quite well; the air is very invigorating. I think we are all improving in health.

The officials at Askote made kind enquiries regarding our requirements. The ladies of the Palace came to visit Ma and invited us to the midday meal tomorrow. I have noticed that the princely families of these Himalayan states are very pious and observe all rules of orthodoxy. I have seen this at Tehri-Garhwal and at Solon and now at Askote also we noticed the same distinguished manners of a devout princely family. The Rani of Askote expressed the wish to have Ma visit her house and bless it by her presence.

It transpired that the Raja's brother and the Peshkar's son were studying in Almora. They had written to their families to look after Mataji and her party. This explained the concourse of people at Askote who were waiting eagerly for Ma's *darśana*. It occurred to me that Ma indeed belonged to all and it was very short-sighted of us to think that she should stay in Dacca or in Calcutta and not travel around to far off places. I see that all places are the same to her and even strangers are able to communicate with her easily. Dasudada told me that once when Ma was walking, a small boy on the roadside had placed a few wild flowers at her feet

and said a prayer standing in front of her with folded hands. In general we all get off our *dandees* whenever Ma does so, but this time her *dandee* being hidden accross a bend in the road I had not seen her. Only Dasudada was walking with her. It is amazing indeed to see the hill people accepting her so naturally as the Devi incarnate and paying her the reverence they would to the Deity in a temple. Who can say who is closer to Ma, we who are most of the time with her, or these wayside strangers who become friends so quickly!

Friday, June 18th.

After our midday meal\* at the Palace we started around 1 p.m. Thus we could arrive at the next camp Balua Kote (ten miles) only after sundown. Five miles from Askote we had seen the Kaliganga. After the Ramganga we had been accompanied by the swiftly flowing Gouriganga. The confluence of the Gouri and the Kaliganga is locally known as the "Gateway to Kailasha".

To-day's journey was uncomfortable because we had to walk in the midday sun. It rained intermittently but the heat becomes almost unbearable when the sun beats down on the bare road. Approaching Baluakote, we realized that we had missed the road to the village in the dusk. We decided to stay where we were for the night and camp in the open. Parvati had thoughtfully brought a tent for just such a contingency, so that Ma could be made comfortable. Ma, however, elected to stay in the open with us. All our baggage, at her suggestion was stacked in the tent instead, in case of more rain. We now realise that it is the greatest discomfort to get the luggage wet.

\* At such invitations the hosts provided grains, vegetables, etc. for the meal which Didi cooked for everybody.

The headman of the village had evidently been informed of our visit. We also had a letter for him and on receipt of this letter he came down to our camp to tell us that a suitable place had been kept in readiness for us in the village. We thought it was too late to strike camp and go up, so we stayed where we were. He fetched a little fresh milk for us which was very welcome.

Saturday, June 19th.

We spent a most uncomfortable night. It rained most of the time and the wind became blustering and cold. Some of us sat huddled in our dandees but it was not really any better than being under the trees. At the first sign of daylight we came away, leaving the porters to follow with the luggage later on. We came to the little Dak-bungalow of Dharchula around noon. We had stopped for a drink of milk at one of the wayside villages. We were obliged to cross two mountain rivers. It was out of the question for us to negotiate the cold waters flowing swiftly over a bed of slippery rocks; so we were unceremoniously slung over the backs of coolies and thus made to cross the rivers. It seems this is how the local people take the pilgrims across streams. They are so sure-footed that they are able to keep their feet steady even carrying a heavy bundle whereas we did not dare set foot in the river even by ourselves. Only Ma's dandee was very carefully brought across by seven or eight men. Over some mountain streams there are rope pulleys. The way the natives fling themselves across, hanging on to the rope which is manipulated by a pulley from the other shore is also quite fearful to watch.

At Dharchula the bright sun was very welcome because of our rain-soaked clothes. After the porters arrived with our luggage we could spread out the damp things for drying



Abode of Lord Shiva

—Sri Kailash



and ailing. This seems quite a big village. The Kaliganga can be heard from afar. The music of its rushing waters has kept company with us for many miles. Still mountain peaks surround the little rest-house. The unseen river sounds like the continuous roar of breakers of the ocean. These magnificent surroundings induce a mood of exaltation. I do not know what benefit may accrue from a pilgrimage, but this journey is more than worth its while for the experience of sheer beauty of the natural scenes. It comes to my mind that these still and vast spaces are a fit background for Ma's divinely mysterious personality.

After our midday-meal I got some time to write my diary sitting alone on the veranda of the Dak-bungalow; the others have retired for a little rest. We are all feeling somewhat relaxed today because we have to spend one day here at Dharchula, so there is no immediate necessity of seeing to the packing of luggage and getting ready for the next stage of the journey. We find that our coolies are tired out. A local man of some standing in the village called Rai Saheb came to call on us. He had received letters of introduction from the Raja of Askote and also from Sri Krishna Panth of Nainital regarding our party; he had been requested to help us as much as possible. He has advised us to dismiss our porters from Almora and engage another set of men from here. He says that the terrain is so difficult that only local coolies can negotiate the trek comfortably and so they should be engaged in relays as we climb higher. These porters can be paid waiting wages which is a little more than half their earning wages; but the hill people are so poor that it seems unfair to keep them sitting idly here until our return when they can earn their full wages if set free. So it has been decided that we shall pay off our porters tonight; they are so tired that they are happy at the prospect of relief.

Rai Saheb said that the new set of porters will have to be sent for from a village seven miles away. This is the reason why we have to stay in Dharchula. Tomorrow the new coolies will take charge of the baggage, which has to be reorganised as these men will carry slightly heavier loads, approximately 70 lbs. each. We are to take 6 *dandees* from here, also a couple of tents.

Sunday, June 20th.

Everybody rose rather late today. Ma accompanied by the others walked a little toward the river while I with the help of Parvati and the girls prepared the midday meal. The afternoon was spent in siesta by some. Swamiji sat apart, doing his own *sādhana*.

The coolies of Dharchula look robust and sturdy; even so there is a crew of six for each *dandee* from here instead of the previous crew of five. This is necessary because of the rough road ahead. There are nine coolies for carrying the luggage; the entire group of porters elected a headman from among themselves who was addressed as "Mate". All these preparations went on till midnight. Some local people told us that not since the Raja of Mysore had gone on this pilgrimage five years ago, had such a big party as ours negotiated this journey.

## Chapter Ten

### BASE CAMP AT GARBYANG

Monday, June 21st.

We resumed our trip. The road was so steep that we preferred to walk slowly rather than sit in dandees which for most of the time are tilted at uncomfortable angles. Although the carriers are very, very sure-footed, I could not rid myself of the nervousness that they would slip with such a cumbrous, swinging burden on their shoulders. Once Ma and I out-distanced the others a little. While we waited for them to catch up with us, Ma sat on a rock and in her inimitable, sweetly melodious voice sang a few lines from the old and well-known Bengali song which begins: "Return now, let us return back home."

These words in Ma's voice evoked in me an indescribable joy. Even without Ma's presence to increase the effect a thousand times, the majestic grandeur of these mountaneous regions engenders in the mind peace and tranquillity. This panoramic scene of high mountain ranges spread out unendingly on all sides exercises such a strange attraction that I am sure every pilgrim is gripped by a feeling of home-coming. Somehow this place appeals to the deepest yearning in man for being at total peace with oneself, which perhaps is called Self-realization.

We met on the road here a very devout lady called Ruma Devi, held in great respect by the natives of the place. She is a disciple of Sri Sarada Devi and is a *sahnyasini* dressed in saffron robes. Ruma Devi has an ashram at Khela, our

destination of today's journey, which is 10 miles from Dharchula. Narayana Swami from Mysore also stays in this ashram sometimes. Many of the girls studying in Almora travel under the escort of Ruma Devi or Narayana Swami while going to and from their homes from the surrounding area. Two of these students from Khela who were at home, now came running to visit Ma as soon as we reached the little *dharamśālā* for our night's camp. They had seen her in Almora only once but now met her as if they had known her all their lives. Ruma Devi had walked with us. She sat for a long time near Mataji talking to her about her life's experiences. Again and again she marvelled at her own good fortune in encountering Ma and declared that her joy was akin to the finding of one's own long-lost mother.<sup>1</sup> She was a charmingly gentle old lady of nearly 60 years. She has dedicated her life to the service of pilgrims who venture on this arduous trek. In fact her life is a life of service. We could see that she was highly thought of in these regions.

Tuesday, June 22nd.

It rained a little in the morning. Ruma Devi and a few students bade Ma a lingering farewell and resumed their interrupted journey to Almora. Before leaving, she advised us against starting in the rain because there might be danger from falling rocks and landslides.

We started a little later than usual, at 7 a.m. The road was not too bad but steep. The Kaliganga after staying with us all these days, receded to a distance. The change to sudden stillness from the ever-present music of its rushing waters was felt by everyone. Ma frequently left her *dandee*

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1. Ruma Devi after some time came down from Khela to be in Mataji's ashram in Dehradun. Several years ago, she died in the ashram at Varanasi, beloved of all inmates and a loss to all who had known her.



to give rest to the coolies. We also walked with her along the steadily climbing mountain path.

At Pangu, Parvati's husband's village, we stopped for a while. Parvati was very keen for her family to meet Ma and Bholanath and had prepared them for this visit. We were invited to have our midday meal with them. They had to be told that it is our rule not to eat food cooked by others. Ma has shown us a way out of this situation (which arises frequently) and which may cause offence if the hosts are not familiar with rules of orthodoxy. On all such occasions we accept the grains, vegetables and condiments and cook the meal ourselves and eat with the hosts who are served by us along with everybody else. In this way not only the togetherness of a meal eaten in a group is maintained but adds to its enjoyment as the presence of Ma inevitably knits everyone together into a big family. Thus it was at Pangu where a big meal was cooked by me with the help of Parvati, and everyone partook of the repast with pleasure. Parvati was delighted that Ma had visited her home. She took leave of her people for the time being in order to complete the pilgrimage to Kailasha with us.

After a short rest we left Pangu at 3 p.m. and came to Sirkha about eleven miles from Khela. We have taken up quarters on the open veranda of the school-house.

Wednesday, June 23rd.

It poured almost the whole night. The narrow veranda was lashed by the slanting rain. We were drenched inspite of our umbrellas, waterproofs, rubbersheets, and what not; but the strain of walking this road is such, that I think we all slept through the rain curled up in our protective clothes. Today's camp is at a place called Deepti, approximately 11 miles from Sirkha. For the last couple of days we have

been rewarded by glimpses of snow-capped mountains. It is a beautiful sight during the day when the distant snow shines like silver in the sunlight.

We found the road slippery and harder to negotiate after last night's rain. We have taken shelter in a small room near the village shop. There is no school-house here. The floor of the room was anything but clean but we had no mind to be fastidious. We merely spread oilcloths over the floor and made ourselves as comfortable as possible in the cramped space to get a hard earned night's rest.

Thursday, June 24th.

We have camped at Malpa travelling only 7 miles. This short journey will live long in my memory. The road was so steep and precarious that no one could use the dandees. In fact it was difficult to climb even on foot without support from the coolies. It was either almost a perpendicular ascent over slippery rocks or a descent down an equally precipitous incline. To add to our discomfort, we had to share this path with herds of sheep either going up or down. The sheep negotiate this treacherous path in a nimble-footed way which could have evoked admiration had we been in any condition to appreciate their skill. Neither did we, or at least I was not in a mood to admire the beauty of shining waters cascading down the mountain sides. We passed many such waterfalls and springs today. We could pay them but scant attention, all our concentration was required to keep our feet on the path without slipping.

We generally choose the site for the night's camp before sunset. By the time we have finished with the business of unpacking, cooking, eating, cleaning etc., it becomes quite dark. If we make a midday camp then this one meal suffices for most of us. The evening meal is cooked only for

Dasudada, Tunu and Keshava Singh. The rest of us partake of something light before going to bed.

At Malpa, the room where we have taken shelter is considerably dirtier than our previous resting places. I was so tired that I was just thankful to be able to lie down for a while and found no fault with my surroundings. Actually these rooms are cattle shelters and the floor is literally made of sheep droppings. An oilcloth spread on it is all the cleaning that suffices for us nowadays. A rather odd phenomenon is that the higher we climb the greater becomes the nuisance of flies. One reason could be that although the nights are cold the days are still warm.

There are no shops here ; we have brought potatoes and wheat flour from Deepti. The midday meal became a major operation. It is a problem to cook in the open ; the fire keeps flickering in the wind and it is a job to keep it going. However, we managed to finish with the task of cooking, eating and cleaning up by 6 in the evening. We were all feeling the effects of the strain of climbing, excepting Bholanath. He alone says : "It was not at all a difficult climb." Bhaiji seems tired and strained. I have not been able to look after Ma at all ; but she looks the same as usual. The serenity of her face under dire circumstances sustains us and perhaps saves us from thoughts of abandoning the trek.

Friday, June 25th.

Starting at day-break, we have come to Bodhi, a distance of about 8 miles from last night's camp. The path was a little easier or may be we have got used to it now. We even sat in *dandees* for short stretches of the road. It is a constant source of amazement to me to observe how surefooted these coolies are. It is marvellous to see them walking so effortlessly, not only by themselves but sometimes carrying an

occupied *dandee* as well. We shall camp here for a short while ; after our meal and a little rest we shall proceed to Garbyang which is the base-camp, as it were, for the pilgrimage to Kailasha.

We reached Garbyang at sunset. The road is now precipitous ; a *dandee* ride is anything but enjoyable. The chairs slung on the poles swing and often hit against the hard mountainside ; although some of the *dandeers* broke down, no one was hurt. We are told that when five years ago the Raja of Mysore made this trip some construction work was done on the roads by the Government but since then no repairs have been undertaken to keep them in tolerable condition.

As soon as we arrived in Garbyang, the local people came and surrounded us. This is quite a regular feature of our trek ; I suppose they are naturally curious about travellers from other lands but there is one very peculiar feature about these village encounters. Wherever we stop and if there are people around they invariably find their way to Mataji and surround her even as the crowds at Calcutta or Delhi or Dehradun. It is possible that they make out that Ma is the most important person in our group from our attitudes towards her ; but this does not explain why they eagerly stay with her the whole time she is available. Ma, on her part, appears completely relaxed.

We have now come so far into the interior of the Himalayas that there is no common language between us. We have learnt to recognise the people of different regions, such as Bhutias, Nepalis, Garhwalis, etc. from their dresses but we cannot talk to them. The coolies speak a smattering of Hindi and so we can communicate with the people with the coolies' help. Mataji sometimes playfully touches their hands and her smile wins hearts here as easily it seems as anywhere else. It is amazing to me that she mingles so naturally with



the inhabitants; I am sure she communicates with them in some fashion because at parting they are always reluctant to see her go. A few would walk a little with her *dandee* at times. Who can tell if some of them are not closer to her than any of us. It cannot be said of Ma at all (and who should know this better than us) that she is most understood by persons who are around her all the time and not by those who may just exchange one glance or one smile with her.

On our way to Garbyang, a mishap occurred; one of the porters was bitten by a black snake. Bholanath and some of his companions tried some remedies to ease the suffering of the poor man. Ma pointed to some herbs growing nearby and asked him to chew them which seemed to help him a lot. He was carried in a *dandee* and it seems he will survive the ordeal.

Garbyang is a large place. It has a post-office. A bundle of letters was awaiting our arrival. After a long time we have news from friends and devotees; they have written to make enquiries about our safe journey. Some local people had heard about Ma's arrival and they came to see us. One is Sri Nandaram, the father of Randra Devi of Almora. Pravati's village is a few miles from here; she will go to visit her parents and then come back to rejoin our party. We are to stay here in Garbyang for a couple of days, which is very welcome news to most of us.

Saturday, June 26th.

We are enjoying a holiday from walking today. Bholanath alone seems not to be tired at all. In fact his enthusiasm and energy is a matter of wonder for all of us. We had been warned that this journey is so exacting that not even a father can stop to look after his son, but Bholanath is indefatigably concerned about the entire party. He walks

down again and again to see to the stragglers and encourage those who are feeling desperate or weak. The porters are moved to admiration saying that they have never seen anybody from the plains walk as comfortably and skilfully as Bholanath does. Mataji's presence and Bholanath's heartening enthusiasm have made the journey less arduous for us and, excepting the last two days, very enjoyable as well. We have come 135 miles from Almora in 12 days. The height of Garbyang is 10,000 ft.

Sunday, June 27th.

We have put up at the school-house as the dak-bungalow is already occupied by more than one party of pilgrims setting out for Kailasha. Some of them came to visit Ma. Amongst these were Swami Jnanananda, a veteran on this trek, accompanied by the Kumar (Prince) of Dinajpur. We are given to understand that it is usual for two or three parties to combine for this last stretch of the *yātrā* (pilgrimage) because of the dangers, not the least of which is an attack by robbers.

The Kumar and his party are starting today and came to visit Ma before their departure. The Kumar said to her, "Ma, I am going on a hazardous trip and am praying for your blessings." Ma smiled and said, "HE alone directs everything. Whatever takes place happens as it is meant to be. On your pilgrimage you should keep your own mantra in constant remembrance (and take things as they come)". The Kumar bowed in *pranāma* and said he would do as she had said. Other members of the party also took leave of Mataji.

The reverberating, unbroken sound of the river is again heard, like the constant roar of the breakers on Puri beach. The river has at times receded to a distance but most of the time I seem to hear it and we are made aware of its presence nearby. This sound matches the beauty of this vast place.

We seem to be swallowed up amidst an unending series of gorgeous mountains. Now that we have time to enjoy our surroundings we see how attractively nature has decorated the mountainside with flowers of all colours. Surprisingly, it is not at all a wilderness of haphazard vegetation; indeed it looks like a carefully cultivated garden of many kinds of beautiful flowers.

The knowledgeable people of this place are advising us regarding the final stage of the journey. The coolies from Dharchula are being paid off here. It is agreed that we shall write to Raisaheb at Dharchula before our return and he will engage the porters for our journey back to Almora. The terrain over which we travel changes as we climb higher; it is customary, therefore, to engage native porters for different stages of the journey. We can see the wisdom of this for ourselves now.

The next big camping station will be Taklakote, considerably higher than Garbyang. We shall cross over to Tibet over the Lipu Lekh Pass which is about 17,000 ft. high but we have to descend again to Taklakote on the other side. The round trip from here to Kailasha and back is estimated to take 20 to 22 days. The charges are as follows: For each pony Rs. 20/- and for the attendant groom 12 annas (75 paise) daily; the luggage will be carried on mules. The owner accompanies his mule and is to be paid 8 annas (50 paise) per day. We are to engage a guide, who will now take charge of what looks to be an expedition of considerable proportions. The guide is to be paid Rs. 25/- and we are to pay for his pony as well. No food stuffs are available beyond Taklakote; so we must carry sufficient rations for the round trip. The men will do the same. We have to hire tents to take with us, for ourselves as well as for the men, because there are no inns or shops or resting places for pilgrims beyond Garbyang.

We have decided to start on Tuesday. In addition to the ponies, we have arranged to take with us one *dandee* for Ma. The charges are Rs. 180/- for the *dandee* plus the cost of a tent for the crew and also mules for carrying their baggage and rations.

Monday, June 28th.

We were happy to be greeted by a strong sun to-day. For the last few days we had often encountered a thick fog which reduces visibility. The sun disappeared very soon, however, and it has rained the whole day. Anyhow, we are at last rid of the flies.

Many of the inhabitants of Garbyang are coming with various kinds of offerings to see Ma. Conversation is difficult although Bhaiji does his best. They do not know any of the languages we can speak. I daresay they communicate with Ma entirely to their satisfaction because that is how they look.

Parvati's village is close-by. Her mother came yesterday to invite us to her home for tomorrow. It was decided that on leaving Garbyang we would first walk to Parvati's home and spend the night there.

Tuesday, June 29th.

We left Garbyang in the morning and walked to the village of Parvati's parents. Only Ma was in the *dandee*. We could see cultivated land all around in series of platforms as is usual with farming on mountains. The mountain tops are snow-covered. The walking was not too easy. Although the distance is not great, we became tired very soon; we are told that this is due to the rarefied air at this height. Parvati had put up a tent in the courtyard and we were able to rest on arrival. It was evening by the time we could finish with the routine of cooking, eating and cleaning up. Parvati is



happy that Ma and Bholanath have come to her home. She will continue the journey with us tomorrow.

Wednesday, June 30th.

It rained last night; the water trickled into the tents. We are beginning to get used to the discomfort of wet and damp clothes and beddings. We have an additional member in our party now. Brahmachari Bharati of Dehradun joined us at Dharchula. He is not feeling too well. I hope he will be able to make the round trip.

It was afternoon before we could resume our journey. Our guide Sendel Singh organised the train of 21 ponies and mules. We noticed that he was fully armed and so were many of the porters. We had to give up our usual mode of dress and don warm trousers, coats, caps and gloves, etc. The novelty of the dress, the strange experience of sitting on horseback brought home to us with great vividness the actuality of this pilgrimage. At last we seem to be ready to leave behind familiar ground for venturing out into least frequented regions.

The guide has called a halt after eight miles only. This has been the strangest journey. We did not see any "road". The ponies stumbled over a bed of stones and pebbles in single file. The open land stretched out in all directions enclosed by snowcapped mountains. This place, where we have camped, is called Kalapani. The guide Sendel Singh says that although tomorrow's lap of the journey will not be more than five miles, the road being extremely bad, it will be advisable for us to start as soon as possible.

## Chapter Eleven

### THE HOLY MOUNTAIN KAILASHA

(Didi's Diary continued)

Thursday, July 1st.

We could not start earlier than 11 a.m. It rained continuously. There is practically no road to be made out now. Only the coolies seem to have a sense of direction. We are given to understand that sometimes even the local shepherds get lost in these trackless mountain valleys. When they don't know where to turn, they allow their herds to lead. The sheep unerringly and instinctively find their way back to their village.

A lonely trek. We had to pick our way with great difficulty over the rough and rocky ground. The only people we met were some traders camping with their herds on their way down to trading posts. We were drenched and thus quite numb with cold. At about 1.30 p.m. Sendel Singh announced camp where we saw a few huts made of rough stones, stacked one on top of another. These shelters are for sheep. We were glad to take refuge in one of these huts out of the benumbing rain and cold. Parvati has thoughtfully brought some firewood. She now managed to get small fires going in one or two of the huts. Some of us are crouched over this fire most of the time. The dirt and lack of ventilation do not weigh with us at all. Bhaiji, Bholanath and Father tried to dry some clothes over the fires. After a while I realised that I was sitting on a floor practically made of packed and dried dung of animals. Notwithstanding, I was glad of this little haven of comfort. This place is called Dobra.

Friday, July 2nd.

We were ready to start but it continued to rain quite heavily. The grooms brought the ponies down from the hills where they had been let off to graze yesterday. The guide, however, decided not to travel today. The road would be too dangerous, he said.

Father and Bhaiji are not too well. The air is so thin that all of us are suffering from varying degrees of breathlessness. Tomorrow we are to cross Lipu. We shall climb up to a height of 17,000 ft. and again descend to 16,000 ft. to Taklakote. We have heard many stories of dangerous falls on this route and also that some travellers lose consciousness on such heights. It is too late to worry about such things now, besides Ma is with us. We have no cause for nervousness or fear. In the evening the sun came out for a while and we had a little respite from the rain. In spite of all drawbacks, the mind feels uplifted in such surroundings. Everyone of us, I think, is under the magic spell of the Himalayas, experiencing a joy quite unrelated to the discomforts of the rain and cold.

Under Ma's direction I made separate packets of antidotes for dizziness and breathlessness for each one of us. Everyone was to carry his own share. With amazing forethought Ma had made me bring all kinds of stuff like camphor, lemon-pickles, etc. which we now are so glad to have. She, like the others, had no previous experience of climbing to this height. It is a constant source of surprise to me to find how accurately she had anticipated our needs and provided for them beforehand. She herself seems her usual self, very much at home in these new surroundings. She always speaks words of cheer which never fail to lighten the strain of this arduous journey.

It is so cold that I find it difficult to hold the pen properly in order to write.

Saturday, July 3rd.

We started in a drizzle and climbed steadily. The path we traversed is too fearful to contemplate. The guide decided to risk the journey; probably because it is not profitable for him to lose days of travel as his contract is for the round trip. We somehow traversed the slippery precipitous path, most of the time with the help of the grooms. We gradually came on to snow-covered ground. I have no words to describe the magnificence of the sight of fields upon fields of dazzling white snow broken only by the many-hued rocky projections of the mountains. The mountains are really very colourful and not at all drab and grey as I had imagined.

The vista of the Lipu Lekh Pass was truly breathtaking. It seemed to me that we were going over a narrow bridge through an ocean of snow. The ponies picked their way stumbingly and precariously and, it seems to me, quite miraculously over this narrow path. We were glad of our ration of antidotes provided beforehand by Ma, which enabled us to ride in some comfort. After the Pass, we negotiated the yet more difficult descent from it. We got off our horses because the incline was too steep. There was many a stumble in the snow but nobody was hurt. Bholanath with undiminished enthusiasm kept track of the entire party, moving up and down the line to see if everyone was all right. When we arrived on level ground again, he clapped us on the shoulders and congratulated us on our achievement.

We arrived in Taklakote at sundown. The guide had gone ahead and our tents were pitched by the time we staggered along. Some people came and stood around silently watching our arrangements for the camp. They did not seem to welcome us as at other places. Later we were informed by our men that they were robbers and dacoits, a constant source of threat and danger to pilgrims. The Government does



nothing to suppress them and they are a very powerful community. This is the reason why some men of our group and Sendel Singh are carrying fire-arms because they have to be prepared for emergencies.

On our way to Taklakote we saw many caves. Sendel Singh told us that at one time they had been inhabited by ascetics. Nearer to the town we saw temples and also some stone terraces, decorated with coloured strips of cloth, gaily fluttering in the wind. We could see cultivated land as well and were given to understand that there are a few shops here too. In this remote region Ma had visitors. Two women disciples of the lamas came and stayed with her for some time. I cannot imagine what they knew of Ma and what was the result of this encounter, but it is apparent that with Ma everything is possible everywhere. She was as kind to these women ascetics as to any of her own people.

The road that we traversed today seems like a dream now. The beauty of the changing colours of the bare mountainside amidst an expanse of snowy fields is truly sublime. It is no wonder to me now that pilgrims attempt this journey year after year. It is a most rewarding experience. By Ma's and Bholanath's *Kṛpā* (grace) we have arrived safely.

Sunday, July 4th.

After a hurried meal we resumed our journey at about 11 a.m. At sundown we arrived in a village called Ringung, approximately ten miles from our last camp. This seems a village of ordinary friendly people. It is very interesting to watch the villagers find their way to Ma as somebody special. They kept standing round her, evidently deriving some kind of satisfaction from this *daršana*. A few came close to her *dander* and bent down to touch her feet. Ma smiled at them and for some time held their fingers lightly in her hand.

We could not talk to them at all as their language is quite different from any that we know.

We saw many temples. Some letters and words were carved on stone walls. One particular letter seemed to be repeated again and again. One of the grooms said that it was the syllable 'OM'. All house-tops were flying small pieces of coloured cloth like strings of buntings.

Today's road was not too bad. We were made to keep close together all the time by the guide as a precaution against attacks from robbers. There were no trees or shrubs but we saw small stretches of cultivated land. We rode across innumerable mountains. I cannot imagine how Sendel Singh plans the trek. To me it seems that we ride over uncharted land. A small group of pilgrims wending their way slowly through a vast silent valley of snow, with towering mountains on all sides. There are no special landmarks that we can see; the journey takes on a quality of endlessness. At a time and place which seems appropriate to the guide he calls a halt and declares camp, following some sense of location, quite incomprehensible to us. For one night this becomes home. Then it is time again to strike camp and move on through the same silent scene of magnificent mountains. The overwhelming impression of this scenery is that of stillness; it is no wonder that ascetics down the ages have come to the Himalayas to concentrate on their *sādhana* for Self-realization.

Monday, July 5th.

Father is suffering a little from breathlessness. Ma persuaded him to sit in her *dandee* today, while she rode his pony. We started at 10.30 a.m. after our usual very business-like main meal for the day. At 2 p.m. Sendel Singh called halt for our overnight camp. He chose this place because

there was food and water for the ponies and mules. We were glad of a longer period of rest and welcomed the early camp.

Tuesday, July 6th.

We started comparatively earlier today and carried hot tea in flasks as no fresh milk is available now. Ma was on horse-back again today as Father is still suffering badly from shortness of breath.

We had been meeting odd-looking riders as we traversed this lonely trek. These, we were told, were the robbers who are a menace to the pilgrims. This morning we saw two riders who came close and rode alongside with us for a little while. They were armed. I was surprised to note that their right hands were uncovered even in this icy cold. Later on, Sendel Singh told us that they take off their gloves at the approach of strangers so that they can use their fire-arms quickly in case of need. After some time we saw two more men on top of a hill watching our approach. The first two raised their hands and moved their fingers in a peculiar manner, evidently some kind of signal between them. The other two then came down and were joined by their friends. They collected at a spot which we would pass following in the wake of our porters. Sendel Singh must have been watching them for some time; now he broke out of the train of horses and cantered ahead and joined this group. He stood talking to them while we slowly rode by, one by one. After we had gone a little distance, he again cantered on and caught up with us.

Probably all guides are known to the dacoits or at least some of them are. A little further on we saw a few men sitting at a small camp of two tents. Sendel Singh again went ahead, dismounted and sat talking to them while we passed by. Then grinning broadly, he rejoined us on the road once



more. We had been feeling quite apprehensive since leaving Taklakote. The sudden appearance of these unfriendly looking armed men in this unbroken solitude was very disconcerting. Sendel Singh evidently saved us from some unpleasantness at the hands of these men.

All such things, however, were forgotten when we suddenly came up to a point from where we could see the great lake Manas Sarovar. The immense sheet of water was the colour of the blue sky overhead; the two blues merging together at the horizon made us feel as if we had stepped into a world where sky and earth were one. It was truly a wonderful experience.

Father's *dandee* was slow in coming. Ma was still riding his horse; she, Bhaiji, Bholanath and myself were a little in advance of the rest of the party. The coolies and Sendel Singh had gone ahead to pitch camp at a suitable site. On our way to this camp at the lake-side, Ma suddenly dismounted from her horse and said she would wait for Father. She asked the three of us to ride on to the camp. We were very reluctant to leave Ma quite unattended in such a lonely place but we had no choice. Her *kheyāla* was not to be gainsaid; even Bholanath did not oppose it but rode along with me and Bhaiji to the camp. Tunu and Dasudada had also not arrived. So our party was split into different groups.

For some time I was alone at the camp as Bhaiji and Bholanath strolled off in the direction of the lake. I decided to utilize the time for writing my journal. Our destination is still a matter of three days but we already feel rewarded by the *daršana* of the snow-covered top of Kailasha which is just visible from here and which looks radiant like silver in the sunlight. As I sit and write I can see swans of many colours gracefully riding the rippling waves of the large blue lake. The encircling august mountains are crested by the silver dome



of the Sacred Mountain, truly the presiding deity of this beautiful scene. It was no wonder that, when the rest of the party came up, they spontaneously burst out in great shouts of joy, "Jay Kailashpati, Jay Kailashpati."

I think I have so far not written about a very strange phenomenon. From Taklakote a black dog has joined our party so to say. The odd thing is that he invariably trots behind Ma's pony or *dandee*. He takes no notice of anybody else. When we pitch camp the dog stays close to Ma. When we are ready to resume our journey he sits quietly near her while others are riding off, till she herself is ready to start and then goes along with her. One day I saw Ma put out her hand and stroke his head. The dog does not look like one of the shaggy mountain dogs; he has a more sleek coat, yet he seems to be managing well in this cold climate.

With the help of others I started preparing a meal while Ma, Bholanath and Bhaiji were still away at the distant lake-side. There has been no firewood for the last few days. The grooms procured for me some kind of thorny little bushes and dried dung from places where herds of animals had taken shelter. The wind is so strong that it is not possible to use oil stoves although the guide says that this wind is mild compared to the usual gale that blows here. Cooking has become a strenuous task. The weak flame has to be guarded against gusty winds. More often than not the flames would be blowing anywhere but under the pot. However, we somehow accomplished the business of cooking, eating and cleaning up by nightfall.

Ma had spent most of the day near the shore of the lake. All of us (excepting Ma) bathed in the lake which was quite an experience. Bholanath took Ma aside and talked to her for some time. Ma then went for a stroll attended by Bhaiji only. Parvati wanted to be initiated. In Ma's presence, she

was given the much coveted mantra by Bholanath at this sacred site. It was no doubt a high point of fulfilment in her life. This young girl has impressed us all by her piety and her devotion to Ma and Bholanath.

We are told that there is a second big lake close to the Manas Sarovar called Rakshas Talao or *Ravanahrada*. The legend is that the Demon (*Rakshas*) King, Ravana had practised austerities at this spot to propitiate his adored deity, Kailashpati Śiva.

Wednesday, July 7th.

The wind, we find, subsides a little in the morning. We started at about 11 a.m. Although we are now used to the routine, yet it takes all this while to make our preparation for the day's journey. The path skirted the lake and we rode slowly along, marvelling at the beauty of the scene. We saw many species of birds after a long time.

We were informed that many pilgrims go round the lakes which means another week or so as the circumference is approximately 60 miles. We did not want to attempt this, so continued our journey to Kailasha. On the way, we paid a visit to a cave dedicated to the worship of the Lord Buddha. We have seen from afar many such caves and Buddhist temples from time to time. This cave was quite big, clean and well maintained. Lamps were burning in front of the images. The stacks of Buddhist Scripture looked well-preserved. There were also many types of musical instruments in the cave. It appears that lamas are deputed to these cave-shrines for a period of three years each. The resident hands over charge to the newcomer before he leaves.

Our camp for the night is at a place called Ju-gompha. We could not get anything with which to light a fire. The hurricane lamps also are out of order. So we just made a

scrap meal out of *sattu* (roasted gram flour, which is edible uncooked). Much later it was discovered that Ma had been given raw wheat flour instead of *sattu*. My hands were so cold and numb that I failed to distinguish between the two. Ma realising my state of extreme discomfort because of the cold, did not say anything but suffered this infliction in her usual manner of accepting normal food. I felt greatly remorseful but what was to be done; more often than not we render her such odd service because she accepts everything without finding fault. Because of this absence of any annoyance in the face of provocation, we have to be extra careful and yet such mistakes occur again and again.

We had planned to make an early start but the cold defeated us. It began to drizzle. The coolies also are feeling the effects of this deadening cold. They are in the habit of drinking alcohol to keep warm, but even this is now ineffective, it seems.

We could start just before noon. The physical discomforts cannot stop us from admiring the flowers decorating the mountainside. Small thorny bushes are smothered with tiny flowers of all hues. They do not look wild or unkempt but as if they had been arranged with a view to colours.

At about six in the evening we pitched camp at the foot of Kailasha. This is a vast field of snow. The white dome of the sacred mountain glittered like silver in the last rays of the sun. The name of this location is Boond.

Friday, July 9th.

Today we start on the *parikrama*.\* This entails going around on three sides of the holy mountain and then the *parikrama* is terminated by bathing in the holy lake called Gaurikunda. That would conclude the pilgrimage also.

\* Circumambulation.



We wanted to start early but again it was nearly noon before we could do so. We passed a village called Dhanken which appeared quite big. After a long time we saw many people and were happy to be able to buy fresh milk and butter. We pitched our camp in another field of snow. All of us are suffering a little from shortness of breath, an inevitable discomfort for plains-people at this height (approx. 16,000 ft.).

It is snowing quite often now—a novel experience for us. This region is not as desolate or bare of human habitations as the tracts beyond Taklakote. We often come across the camps of traders who are taking herds of sheep or yaks to trading posts. When they see us they come out of their tents to stare at us, but this is out of curiosity only; they do not look unfriendly or hostile. The coolies can talk to some of these groups when they speak the same language. There are beggars as well. They raise their thumbs which is supposed to be a gesture of supplication. It is customary to give them some food stuff, which we did. We camped at a place called Sershung.

Saturday, July 10th.

We started at noon. For the last two or three days the journey has been through huge fields of snow, broken by steep climbs as well as sharp descents. We could see the crest of the holy mountain as we went round it on three sides. Today's camp is like a base camp for the trek to Gaurikunda which concludes the *parikrama*. From a cave nearby Parvati brought us some incense and *vibhuti*. This *vibhuti* (ashes) is from the *yajña* performed for Kailashpati. The mountainside has many caves. Lamas as well as Hindu ascetics live here, probably the whole year round. It is wonderful to contemplate man's capacity for enduring any hardship in order to be engaged in the search for Truth.



Tomorrow will be the hardest day of the journey. We must climb approximately another 2500 ft. to Gaurikunda which is at a height of 18,600 ft. The road by all accounts is difficult and to take the *dandee* is out of question. This means that Father also must ride. Looking to his health, someone suggested that he should not attempt the climb but stay back at this camp. This meant that I would also have to stay here with Father till the rest of the party came back. Bholanath, however, would not hear of it and put new vigour and courage into those who were feeling a little shaken by the rigours of the journey.

Ma suggested that we each pack a ration of dry fruits, camphor, lime-pickle and other such things for tomorrow's journey. We would have to do without a meal. The camphor is a god-send. We find it indispensable as a measure of relief from having to struggle for breath. We made our preparations for the morrow as if for a battle and then tried to get some sleep as best as we could.

Sunday, July 11th.

Nobody was able to sleep last night due to the cold. We made some tea to take with us and started as early as possible. Everyone wanted to keep a fast till we arrived at our destination, so there was no delay due to cooking, etc.

The wind was not as fierce as it sometimes can be. The ponies stumbled their way over the rocky path. We went up in a steady incline for about three miles and were rewarded at last with the glimpse of our goal. Gaurikunda is simply a lake of ice. There are no temples or shrines. The pilgrims bathe in the lake and this concludes the ritual *parikrama* of the Holy Mountain.

We dismounted near the lake. A little water is visible near the shore. The pilgrims have to break the ice and make

a space to bathe in. Bholanath, Dasudada and Brahmachari Bharati bathed in the lake. The rest of us contented ourselves by touching the water and sprinkling it on ourselves. Ma had asked me to bring bundles of joss-sticks and lots of camphor. Now these were lighted for the *ārati* concluding our *yātrā*. Those who had bathed were infinitely glad of these flames which dispelled the benumbing cold.

It is a tradition, we are told, that all companions should be treated to a meal on completion of the main objective. We could make no arrangements for this at the time, so at Ma's suggestion we distributed to the porters and coolies our stocks of dry fruits and *halva*.

By Ma's grace and due to Bholanath's undiminished enthusiasm we have indeed accomplished a most difficult task with comparative ease and no undue mishaps. The magnitude of the Himalayan scene is beyond my capacity to describe; I can only say that it is not to be wondered at that pilgrims come here from all over India and consider it the most rewarding of experiences.

In the afternoon, we started on the return journey from Gaurikunda.

## Chapter Twelve

### THE RETURN JOURNEY

(Concluding Didi's Diary)

Sunday, July 11th

We started on our way back at about midday. The descent is always more difficult than the climb. It is not possible to ride because we are not used to sitting on ponies at such angles. The sharp decline seems more negotiable on foot. We stumbled down the snowy path as best as we could and were thankful to our guide Sendel Singh for pitching camp near a spring at 2.30 p.m. Everybody had been fasting. The exigencies of this journey do not allow the travellers to start or continue as they like. We had not been able to stop at Gaurikunda to break our fast. It was more necessary to negotiate the descent as quickly as possible and find a suitable place for the overnight camp. We partook of some light refreshment at the first stop and then covered a few more miles for the night's camp at Didipo.

We are amazed to see a strange phenomenon here: two men prostrating themselves on the path continuously. After lying prone on the ground they gather themselves up to stand where the tips of their fingers have touched the ground, then they lie prone again. We were told that they were pilgrims who chose to perform the *parikrama* in this fashion. I was impressed by their zeal and devotion. Some of us gave them money as we were given to understand that they need this kind of help from fellow-pilgrims. Later, Sendel Singh gave us another view of this kind of pilgrimage. He said these

men could be robbers and acted thus as scouts for dacoits gathering information regarding parties of pilgrims. This was astonishing news indeed. It only goes to show that all manner of things are possible just about anywhere.

We are a bit concerned about Bhaiji. He is uncommonly quiet and not his usual cheerful self. Father on the contrary seems to have come through the ordeal quite well. It is a relief to know that the *dandee* will be available tomorrow.

Monday, July 12th.

We picked up our left-over baggage from Boond and camped at a place called Barkha. The wind is cold but the sun is hot. From here the snow-capped holy mountain presents a glorious vision to the tired troop of pilgrims.

Tuesday, July 13th.

We are happy to see a strong sun today. Everybody laid out clothes to get them thoroughly aired and dried. We purchased some fresh milk and butter from the villagers. The people store butter in receptacles of lamb's skins. Our camp is near the other lake called Ravanahrada. After many days on horseback and on foot, Ma was able to come in the *dandee* today. She had persuaded first Father and then Bhaiji to use it; but both of them were able to ride today.

Wednesday, July 14th.

We have now descended to a more easily negotiable terrain. We can still glimpse Mount Kailasha from time to time. From one vantage point we had a clear view of the lake Manas Sarovar.

It will be another couple of days before we reach Taklakote. The ponies are showing signs of extreme fatigue. After travelling about ten miles we again camped at the shore of Ravanahrada.



Thursday, July 15th.

Ma again had to ride today. I suffered a sudden pain and could not sit up so was obliged to take Ma's *dandee*. We have camped near the ridge called Mandhata.

Friday, July 16th.

At Ma's insistence I came in the *dandee* today as well. Our stock of provisions is almost exhausted. Sometimes we again hear the reverberating roar of mountain streams enhancing the impression of vast spaces and solitude.

Saturday, July 17th.

Making an early start we arrived in Taklakote at noon. Randra Devi's uncle was awaiting us and made us welcome. Taklakote is a trading post of some importance. We were given a bundle of letters brought for us from Garbyang. After a long time we again established contact with the world we seemed to have left behind. The local people, men, women and children, watched our camping arrangements with great interest. The temperature seemed mild to us. With sighs of relief we resumed our normal mode of dress discarding trousers and coats. The relief, however, was short-lived as we had to put them on again as soon as the sun went down.

In the evening Ma brought out her pair of *kartals* (cymbals) which somebody had given her some time ago, and invited the women and children clustering round her to sing to the beat of its melodious sound. The grooms obligingly translated for her. The women delightedly joined hands and formed a ring. There were songs and dances in these unusual surroundings, but for Ma no place is strange and nobody is a stranger. At her suggestion I distributed amongst them our remaining stock of dry fruits—almonds, raisins, cashew nuts, etc. They seemed very pleased with these. The village

people here are very simple and not at all shy or self-conscious like our village women in the plains.

We had noticed that some of the grooms had brought away fish from the holy lake Manasa. To our question if they were carrying the dried fish home for food they answered in the negative. Nobody eats fish from the holy lake, but they serve another purpose. These shepherds are troubled by marauding wild animals who deplete their flocks. The smell of the burning dry fish has a paralysing effect on the attacking panther or wolf and then it can be killed easily. We don't know how far this is true but the faith of these people in the efficacy of the fish is implicit.

Sunday, July 18th.

At Parvati's suggestion we went up the mountains a little to visit the caves of Buddhistic lamas. As the climb was very steep, we rode to the very top. The caves are painted yellow and are very spacious. The Governor's house is red. The public is under orders from the Government to provide food and sustenance for the lamas. We went up a rickety wooden staircase to visit the Chief Lama. We found him seated on a dais accompanied by a little dog. The cave was decorated with many holy symbols and a variety of ikons of Buddha and deities of the Buddhistic pantheon. Bhaiji spoke to the Lama on our behalf. He then said, "Give us strength (to remain on the path to God)". Parvati translated Bhaiji's words. The Lama seemed pleased; he was very kind to us and gave us some *prasāda* and pieces of coloured cloth. We had taken with us offerings of some tea, dry fruits and money. On our way out of the caves, Bhaiji became interested in some of the rolled up parchments stacked on shelves and platforms. After much persuasion an old lama was prevailed upon to sell him one for a nominal price.

We left Taklakote around 1 p.m. We are meeting groups of traders on the trek now. Trading is still done by barter in these regions. Our camp is only 6 miles out of Taklakote. Tomorrow we have the difficult task of recrossing Lipu Lekh Pass.

Monday, July 19th.

This was one of the most difficult stretches. The ground on the other side of the Pass is comparatively flat but on this side the incline is hard and rocky. At this height (approx. 17,000 ft.) even a little distance becomes most fatiguing. We had prepared ourselves very carefully for the journey. Last time Keshav Singh had fainted due to dizziness. Anyway, by making an early start we could come over without any mishap and pitch camp at 3.30 p.m. at Kalapani again. After crossing Lipu we had halted briefly for some light refreshments. On our way to Kalapani, we had procured some potatoes that were far from good—in fact half rotten—but this vegetable seemed a delicacy to us now. All around us are rising ranges of snow-covered mountains. The moon riding a clear blue sky sheds a luminosity over the entire landscape.

Tuesday, July 20th.

We came to Garbyang some time in the afternoon after a most gruelling and terrifying journey. It is a source of constant marvel to me how the ponies maintain foothold on a rocky and slippery incline. The slightest slip, and rider and horse would fall down hundreds of feet to the river gorge. The grooms constantly stood by to help us negotiate the extra difficult stretches of this perilous path. Most of our men are from Garbyang and they were in a very good mood to be nearing home. Many of them broke out into



songs and in spite of the difficult terrain there was a spirit of light-heartedness amongst them. We met groups of traders going up to Taklakote as this was the annual trading time. The sheep are laden with a variety of merchandise. One piece of firewood is strapped to the load of every sheep because wood is not at all available beyond this point as we know to our cost. The narrow and difficult path was made quite hideous by our having to share it constantly with these laden sheep. The only redeeming feature of this journey was some greenery which acted as balm to our eyes dazzled by snow. The tall green pine trees were a welcome sight. We have put up at the same school-house we had stayed in on our way out. By Mataji's grace and Bholanath's unfailing support, we have indeed accomplished a most difficult pilgrimage.

Bhaiji went off to the Post-Office and fetched us a big bundle of letters. I tried to answer as many as possible to inform our friends about Ma's safe arrival at Garbyang.

Some Government officials are on their visit to Garbyang. There is great excitement and activity amongst the people. The officers came to visit us to have *darśana* of Ma. The gentlemen kindly took upon themselves the task of making arrangements for the last lap of our journey. Our grooms bade farewell to us having accomplished their contract of the round trip from Garbyang. Word has to be sent to Dharchula from where the porters who will accompany us to Almora, will come. The weather being mild, we were relieved to be able to take off our tailored clothes and put on our own normal dress.

Wednesday, July 21st.

We are staying here today for a much needed rest. Many people came to pay their respects to Ma, amongst them groups



of pilgrims who were on their way to Mount Kailasha. We were able to give them some information regarding the journey.

Thursday, July 22nd.

We left Garbyang around 11 in the morning. This was a day of parting from some of our companions of the pilgrimage. Parvati and others who had been with us all this while took their leave of us. Parting is always sad and we understood their feelings at being obliged to stay away from Ma's gracious presence. We also were saddened to be separated from such good friends. Bidding farewell we climbed into the *dandees* and resumed our journey towards the plains. We have now a new set of porters.

We travelled to the accompaniment of the incessant roar of the swiftly flowing Kaliganga. We were enthralled by the beauty of the turbulent river, cascading down thunderously, sometimes near at hand, sometimes invisible, but making its presence felt by the reverberating sound of water. The path is so narrow that it seems impossible that anyone can keep a foothold, let alone carry a *dandee* with a passenger riding in it. At times I closed my eyes and I am sure many others did the same, not to be obliged to see the bottomless gorge yawning at almost every footstep. At places we walked down in single file with the help of the porters. The porters were most kind and with great care assisted us to negotiate the worst patches. The memory of the road we have traversed makes one shudder. Habit is indeed invaluable. The path which is so perilous for us is negotiated easily by the natives born to it.

Today we are camping at Malpa. It has started to rain a little. We are now quite used to this discomfort. We make nothing of bundling ourselves up in waterproofs and preparing for a night's rest.

Friday, July 23rd.

We managed to start before sun-rise. The sun is quite hot now. Much of today's journey had to be accomplished on foot. The scenic beauty is captivating but most of our energies are taken up with keeping steadily on the road and we cannot stop to enjoy the marvels of nature. We passed many mountain springs. The water pours down with such force that it raises a white screen around it. We were drenched a number of times from the sprays. At about 2 p.m. we arrived in Dceпти and took shelter in a room in the village. There is a shop in this place. After a long time we could buy some green vegetables and fresh milk. Bholanath was tempted to try his hand at cooking some pulses. Everyone ate with great relish the *dāl* and vegetables.

Saturday, July 24th.

Today's journey was comparatively easier. It is a blessing that it rained in the night and we did not have to travel while it poured. Kaliganga has receded to a distance. Since yesterday we seem to have left the view of snow ranges behind. We did not stop at Sirkha this time, but came on to a place called Shasha. On the way we were received by Ruma Devi. She greeted us with great joy and told us that she had been constantly on the road in an agony of suspense that she might miss us. She had already cleaned rooms for us at Sasha, where we took up residence for the night. Ruma Devi brought some beautiful wild flowers and offered them at Ma's feet. She said that there was much work for her to do at her ashram where many people were waiting for her, but she had no mind to leave Ma again. With great simplicity she said to Ma, "I had decided to spend my life in the service of others. Now that I am old I see that there is no end to this kind of work. I had thought

that I would dedicate my life to social service, but this does not appeal to me anymore. I wish to carry on my personal *sādhanā* in solitude now. I should like to stay with Ma for the remaining years of my life." We were impressed very much by Ruma Devi's sincerity and devotion to the chosen way of her life as an ascetic. We were also charmed by her gentle manners, her smiling good nature and her helpfulness. It was agreed that she would come with us to Almora.

Bhaiji's health is indifferent. He is suffering from fever and we are concerned about him, otherwise all would be well now. The local inhabitants came in groups to pay their respects to Ma. Within a short while Ma's room was crowded and there was a heap of many-coloured flowers in front of her. We again saw sweet smelling roses and jasmines and were reminded of the plains we were approaching now.

Sunday, July 15th.

We arrived in Khela a little before sundown. Bhaiji is not at all well. We shall stay here for a day, so that he may recover. The fever is due to fatigue no doubt. The porters that we had engaged in Garbyang were under contract to come with us up to Khela. We engaged another set of coolies here for the last part of the return journey, that is, approximately ten days' trek to Almora. With eager help from local people all arrangements were made smoothly and without difficulty; but for Bhaiji's indisposition we would be a very relaxed and happy group now.

Tuesday, July 27th.

We are again in the Dak Bungalow at Dharchula. We had stopped at the District Board Dispensary so that the doctor could examine Bhaiji. We have brought the medi-



cines prescribed by the young doctor. We are hoping that with medical care and rest, Bhaiji will soon recover.

Saturday, July 31st.

Bhaiji is considerably better. We shall leave tomorrow. The porters are restive at the unexpected delay but Bhaiji needed this rest. Due to incessant rain the bridge over Kali river has been washed away, we are told. The inhabitants of the area sling a pulley-like arrangement on such occasions and cross the swiftly flowing mountain stream in this precarious fashion. We were very reluctant to subject Bhaiji to this mode of travel but it is not feasible to wait here indefinitely. We have no idea when the bridge will be repaired and in any case the sooner we arrive in Almora the better, as we can get medical aid for Bhaiji.

Sunday, August 1st.

We came to Balnakote in the evening. All of us crossed the river by rope, a fearful experience. A stout rope is stretched across the not too wide river. One has to sit on a plank which is attached to the rope with sliding knots. From the other side this rough contraption is swung across the river by pulling the rope attached to it. We had brought a tent from Dharchula. This was now pitched on an open flat ground. I cooked a light meal in the open and every body enjoyed eating under the clear skies. Tomorrow we shall go to Askote. We are again passing through forest regions.

Monday, August 2nd.

Travelling has become much easier or perhaps we are more used to it. We arrived in Askote at about 2 p.m. The sun is very hot and Bhaiji was very uncomfortable in the heat. We are at the *dharamshala*. The members of the Raja's



family and other people came to sit with Ma. She talked to them for a while. Since the last four or five days Ma has been taking just one very light meal a day. For the rest of the day she takes a few sips of water only. This seems to be her *kheyda* for the time being.

Tuesday, August 3rd.

We made an early start today to avoid the heat of the day. A little way out of Askote one of the *dandees* broke down. Bholanath and Father walked back to Askote to engage another *dandee*. Our progress was necessarily slow because we did not want Bhaiji to sustain more than a minimum of strain. We arrived at the school-house of Didihat after travelling 7 miles. The teacher and the students came running and made Ma welcome. Showing great care and concern for her comfort, they made arrangements for her stay in the school-house. Other people came to see and talk to Ma. Indeed she seems to be as close to the people of the hills as she is to her acquaintances of long standing. I now see that there are many amongst what we think chance-met people, who consider this meeting providential and the high point of fulfilment in their lives.

Wednesday, August 4th.

Camping at a place called Thala. We are again suffering from the peculiar nuisance of this part of the country, the wood termites. They are minute enough to be invisible and the clothes become so infested that there is no respite from them day and night.

Thursday, August 6th.

It generally rains in the evenings, so we have been travelling in the mornings. Today it started raining in the

morning so we changed our schedule and finished with the business of cooking and eating. Starting a little before noon, we came to Berinag before sunset. The teacher at the school let off his class and made the room available to us. He requested Ma to stay in Berinag as long as she liked saying he would hold school in some other place.

The doctor was requested to come and examine Bhaiji. I went into the village to procure a pillow for him.

Friday, August 6th.

We could not continue today because it started raining very heavily in the morning. The coolies do not like to wait, so Tunu, Dasuda and Brahmachariji went on with some of the porters carrying all the extra baggage which we are not likely to require now.

Saturday, August 7th.

Bholanath and I rode today as we have dismissed a few of our dandees. It rained again and we were all drenched to the skin. With extreme care we managed to protect Bhaiji's dandee only from the downpour. On arrival at around 2 p.m. I went immediately to a shop and purchased some shawls so that Father and Ma could change into dry clothes. The porters carrying baggage always arrive much later so that our own clothes were not at hand. Father discarded his wet clothes and wrapped himself in the dry shawls but Ma did not change. She has been rather unusually quiet these last two days. The natural radiance of her countenance has been dimmed a little. This is one of the Forest Bungalows. We are nearing Almora but because of Bhaiji's illness we are feeling impatient with delays and sorry that we cannot move any faster.

Sunday, August 8th.

We travelled a distance of twelve miles and came to a place called Kanera. Here also we took up residence at the Bungalow. Ma has been advising me all along as to how to nurse Bhaiji and take care of him. She has suggested proper diets and has personally seen to Bhaiji's comforts in a hundred different ways. I would have been quite lost without Ma's help to fall back upon. All this is coming to my mind because during our journey to-day, Father noticed that Ma had not spoken at all. We now realize that Ma has become *mauna*. It is a long time since she has last observed silence and we are as always saddened by this withdrawal. It is doubly difficult for me because now I have to decide myself how best to take care of Bhaiji. However, we must abide by Ma's *kheyda*.

Monday, August 9th.

Only five miles to Dhawalcheena. We are to stay here over night so that we can go down to Almora tomorrow in one lap. Almora is thirteen miles from here.

Tuesday, August 10th.

With a great sense of relief we arrived in Almora. The local devotees have rented a newly constructed house for Ma's occupation. Manik and Juthika have been waiting for us at Almora for the last seven days. The joy of a difficult journey accomplished, and the pleasure of meeting friends again was all tempered by the shadow of Bhaiji's illness. The people of Almora, who were so eagerly looking forward to Ma's return, are sad to see that she is observing silence. I do not think they have had this experience before. Well, they will also get used to the different facets of Ma's personality in time, I suppose.

(End of the narration in Didi Gurupriya Devi's words.)

## Chapter Thirteen

### THE LAST DAYS OF BHAJI

The people of Almora, especially Hari Ram Joshi had grown extremely fond of Bhaiji, who had become like a brother to them, and were now stricken with grief to see him so ill. The best doctors of the town were fetched to see him and prescribe medicines. Didi now had many men and women to share in the job of looking after the patient. A number of other devotees from different towns came to Almora on receipt of the news of Ma's return and Bhaiji's illness. Bhaiji's wife had been informed but there was no response from her side. She had been opposed to the idea of his going on this journey. Mataji had tried to dissuade him from undertaking the pilgrimage, when she came to know about this objection, but Bhaiji's heart was set on it. He persuaded Mataji to give her permission, saying that he would write to his wife and explain everything so that she would not be anxious on his account. Nobody of course knew whether she had really been reconciled to the idea or not.

Bhaiji's condition fluctuated; it seemed to respond to treatment at times, while at other times he seemed to be sinking slowly but steadily. The doctors embarked on a struggle with imminent death, trying their best to stem the ebb of waning energies. One day, while the attendants, visitors and members of Mataji's party were sitting in a dejected group around Bhaiji's bed, they were startled by the most unexpected sound of Mataji's joyous laughter. She was sitting on a cot near the head of his bed. Even while she



wiped the perspiration from his forehead, she laughed in her own inimitable fashion. Didi, Bholanath, Swamiji and others who had known her in Dacca, were reminded that to her death was not a tragedy; moreover life and death, health and sickness were accepted by her with complete equanimity. Although they were familiar with this aspect of her personality, they nevertheless felt taken aback, because to them the recovery of Bhaiji was important. The new members of the crowd of devotees were puzzled and awed by this phenomenon of great care and yet an obvious indifference, so to say, to the main issue. They had seen Mataji keeping almost constant vigil at the patient's bedside and knew her concern for his ease and comfort. They could not doubt her compassion and concern; and yet with a sense of awe they realized that Mataji was not at all affected by the emotions of the situation. Mataji's laughter on such an occasion was a strange experience for many of the new devotees.

Slowly the anxious attendants began to lose hope of Bhaiji's recovery. The doctors held out no assurances. Bholanath was overcome with grief and sobbed like a child at the imminent prospect of losing a dear friend. Bhaiji himself was quite aware of his own serious condition and seemed reconciled to it. He actually requested the doctors not to try any desperate means but this request naturally could not be complied with. On the eve of the day of his death, Bhaiji once looked at Didi and, perhaps in a gesture of farewell and also perhaps in acknowledgement of her devoted nursing, said clearly to her, "Khukhuni, (Didi's nick name) this is the end."

The next day Hari Ram Joshi, Didi and many others repeatedly prayed to Mataji to bring her *kheyāla* toward Bhaiji's recovery; but she made a gesture indicating that no such *kheyāla* seemed to occur to her. After Mataji's negative response, everyone knew that they had to prepare themselves

for the inevitable end. Mataji sat quietly by the bedside of the patient occasionally wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

Bhaiji appeared to be quite in his normal consciousness and in fact slightly more alert than on other days. At one time he began to repeat aloud the Names of God and then after a while went on repeating just "Ma Ma Ma....." After a short period of silence he suddenly remarked, "How beautiful!" (*ki sundara!*) Then again in a tone of great conviction he said, "There is One only. There is nought else except the One."

Hari Ramji thinking perhaps that already Bhaiji had removed himself to a region beyond their grasp called out to him in a tear choked voice "Bhaiji?" Bhaiji responded to him immediately saying, "Remember always, friend, that all is One, there is the One only. Ma and I are One, Baba (Bholanath) and I are One, all of us are One; there is nought else but the One."

A few minutes later the people sitting quietly around his bed heard with surprise that he was enunciating softly but clearly one of the *Sahayusa mantras*. Around 3 p.m. Mataji signalled to Didi and others to leave the room for a few moments. After a minute or so she beckoned them inside again. As they trooped back, Bhaiji in a very calm and composed manner said to all of them, "Ma has asked me to sleep now. I shall go to sleep."

These were his last words of farewell to his devoted companions, because he died almost immediately after, at 3-30 p.m. on August 18, 1937. The serenity of the event of this ultimate departure from the world, held the crowd in thrall for some minutes. They had difficulty to realize that their great friend and guide, a pioneer to be followed on the path of religious endeavour, was with them no more.

While they were still sitting in shocked silence, they heard Mataji's soft voice recalling their attention; she was speaking again after a silence of many days. Her voice was very low and she spoke slowly:

"Arrangements will have to be made for a *samādhi* (interment) for him. He is to be regarded as an *avadhūta* (an ascetic who has not joined any specific order). Since he has attained to the renunciation required for *sahnyāsa*, he is to be given the status of a *sahnyāsi*."

Mataji's words immediately gave a new dimension to the death of this beloved companion; all of them listened with rapt attention to her words and had no opportunity for indulging in grief. She continued softly:

"They (meaning the pilgrimage party) may recall that on our way to Manas Sarovar we had become separated into different groups. I asked Khukhuni (Didi), Bholanath and Jyotish (Bhaiji) to go ahead, while I waited for Swamiji's *dandee*. A little later when I also arrived at the shore of the lake, I was met by Bholanath who took me aside and spoke in agitated tones regarding Jyotish. He told me that Jyotish after bathing in the lake had discarded his clothes and had come up to Bholanath and placed at his feet all his belongings which he was carrying on his person at the moment. Kneeling at his feet he had expressed his wish to take leave of all of us and walk off towards the mountains in the manner of an *avadhūta-sahnyāsi*. His manner manifested an urgency as if he could hardly brook any delay. He only had enough thought regarding his position to seek Bholanath's permission before trekking off alone into the unknown regions of the mysterious Himalayas.

Bholanath, not unnaturally, was frightened by this phenomenon and did not know how to deal with it. He resorted to admonition exclaiming, "What is all this that you are saying?"



Get up and put on your clothes immediately. Your Ma is not here, how can you talk like this? What would everybody say to us if we returned without you?"

"Thereupon Bholanath was relieved to see that Jyotish obeyed him without further protest. He put on his warm clothes and waited quietly near the tent for the rest of the party. We came up in groups. As I said, Bholanath told me about this incident at the first opportunity. The others knew nothing about it and having at last arrived at the holy site of the lake, engaged themselves variously each in his own preferred mode of *sādhana*.

"I walked by myself for a while near the lake. Jyotish finding me alone, repeated to me in a very determined voice all that he had already said to Bholanath, and then added, 'Ma, I know I have not many more days to live in this world. I have a great yearning to spend the few days remaining to me in one such cave in the heart of the Himalayas. I wish to walk away from here just in any direction and be by myself till it is time for me to leave the world. May I take my leave of you, now. Allow me to bid farewell for ever. Please persuade Baba (father, i.e. Bholanath) to give me his permission.'

"It was obvious that he did not expect me to deny him this choice of action on his part. At that moment I saw in him the manifestation of that pure spirit of renunciation which is the aim of all *śaṅkṣā*. He was experiencing a complete sense of non-attachment and was wholly under its influence. Indeed such a state of *valrāgya* is the coveted goal of all pilgrims on the path of spiritual life. I saw all this, but what I said to him was, "Nevertheless, you must stay with us for the time being."

"Jyotish did not speak anymore but followed me in grave silence. After a while he said with an effort, 'I have one



small request. Please permit that I take a vow of silence from now on.' To this I answered, 'No, that will not be possible. It will be very inconvenient while we are on this journey.' He said no more."

The listeners to this account of Bhaiji's attempt at disassociating himself from the world, felt that they had caught a glimpse of the magnitude of his total reliance on Mataji. In the most crucial moment of his life he did not fail to surrender his will to her *kheyāla*. For man it is not so difficult to make up his mind toward a particular course of action, but it is rare to see this determination abandoned at the word of the Guru. At that moment no doubt Bhaiji attained to that state of realization which knows no difference between the two orders of human will and an extraordinary *kheyāla*.

Mataji had resumed her narration again: "After some time, while I was walking near the lake, I heard what you call mantras come forth from my lips. This has happened on so many other occasions. Jyotish who was walking behind me, came forward and flung himself at my feet exclaiming in an exultant voice, 'Ma, Ma, this is the *sahyāsa-mantra* which I have heard from you. All my yearning is fulfilled.' Overcome by a strong emotion, he sat by himself for a while, repeating this mantra; later I saw him perform certain *kriyās* in the lake. Since that time he had constantly kept his mantra in remembrance. After a few days I asked him, 'How is it that you wanted to take such a radical step without previous consultations or without asking (me)?' Tears came to his eyes and he answered in a deepened voice, 'Have you allowed me to have a will of my own? Besides I know that you are never more pleased than when a person seeks to follow the path of renunciation. The pity is that we do not remember this always—I thought I was rendering you the greatest service I was capable of. In general I know that in

whatever I do, I carry out your *kheyāla* only; but this mood came over me suddenly and with such force that I was completely in its grip. I did not have the power to check or control it.'

"I saw that he was indeed relating facts. It had been thus with him. He did experience a state of complete renunciation (*pārṇa vairāgya*). At one time I said to him, 'Since you have acquired a *sahayāsa mantra* in these holy mountains and wished to take a vow of silence, your ascetic name will be *Mounānanda Parvat*'. Since he died while in a state of complete withdrawal from the world, he should be buried as a *sahayāsī*.

"Jyotish had asked me not to disclose to anyone all that I have narrated just now but I had told him that I could not promise, and if necessary I would tell the people concerned about these matters. I think the time has come for this disclosure, so that you may act rightly so far as he is concerned."

The listeners were deeply moved on hearing this account of the last days of Bhaiji. Hari Ramji went away to look for a suitable site and see to the arrangements for the *samādhi*. A place called Patal Devi was chosen. It transpired that on a previous visit Bhaiji had expressed a wish to stay there. Now his body would be interred in his chosen place. To the inconsolably grieved Hari Ram, Mataji said, "All of you have loved him so well. The concurrence of events has been such that his body remains now in your part of the world." Mataji directed Swami Akhandananda as a *sahayāsī* to perform the last simple rites of the burial of an ascetic.

In answer to the telegrams sent to Bhaiji's family in Dacca, his personal servant Khagen had arrived in Almora a few days before his death. Bhaiji had been very pleased to see him. To this grief-stricken man Mataji spoke at length again and

again about the last days of Bhaiji. In his illness he had been worried about Didi's added share of work and spoken to Mataji about it. Mataji had reassured him saying she herself would do what she could and make others help too. This explained now why Mataji had been unusually active in the nursing of Bhaiji till they had arrived in Almora.

After a few days of the simple *samādhi* ceremony which was performed with due care and circumspection by the devotees of Almora, the small group of people with saddened hearts left for various destinations. Mataji, Bholanath, Didi, Swamiji and Hari Ram went to Dehradun.

It may not be out of place here to refer to Bhaiji's own words regarding his wife and his attitude toward his family obligations. Directly after leaving home, Bhaiji had occasion to live alone for a month or so at Solan. He was in the habit of recording his thoughts in his diary. The following words are taken from this account written in Solan :

"When I met Mataji in 1924-25, my wife and I were both equally drawn in devotion to her. However, as I surrendered more and more at the feet of Ma, my wife withdrew herself from these contacts. She was unable to sympathize with my state of yearning for, even I did not know clearly, what ! She would remonstrate with me saying, 'Surely, it is not necessary to go about like this in order to lead a life of devotion. You do not take care of your health, you have no time to pay sufficient attention to your son and daughter. Is this a way of life for a householder ?'

"My wife comes from a well-established, highly cultured family and has always had a great sense of self-respect and dignity of deportment. Throughout the years, to this day, the memory of her upright behaviour and straightforwardness remains undimmed in my mind. I did not wish to hurt her in any way. I tried to explain to her that any disruption in the



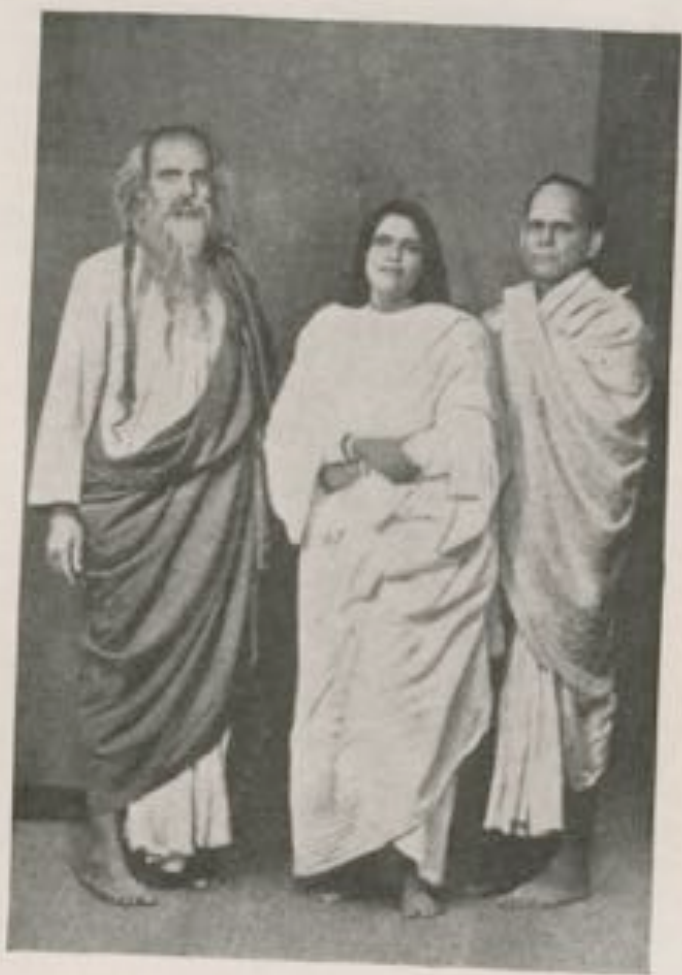
ordered rhythm of life would necessarily appear to be irresponsible behaviour; yet how else was one to strive for something which would take him beyond settled values? My friend Niranjana tried many times to plead with her and to explain to her my point of view, but she was not receptive in this matter."

"One day she said with some impatience, 'You are so indifferent that as far as we are concerned, it is all the same whether you stay at home or leave us and go away altogether.' I made light of the remark, saying with a smile, 'Then you won't mind, if I leave home as a *zāṇyāsi*?' In a hurt tone she answered, 'Of course not!' My son and daughter were also present. Although neither of us had spoken seriously, for me this conversation was significant and I made a note of it in my diary.

"When I fell ill, my wife nursed me with a care and concern which is beyond human conception. Her nursing and untiring service were no doubt large factors in my recovery from that terrible disease. At about this time she lost her younger brother to whom she had been deeply attached. Her grief further alienated her from Ma. She became a prey to dejection and in this mood grew increasingly antagonistic to my attitude of devotion to Ma. She found an ally in my elder brother who also did not sympathise with my way of life.

"I was helpless in the face of so much misapprehension and opposition. I myself did not know what was happening to me, how could I explain it to others? I had discovered a new world and I recognised the people of this world as fellow-travellers, but I could not inspire my own family with any enthusiasm for this venture into the unknown. My wife, at this time was wrongly advised into making many unworthy statements regarding me. I, however, was not





Bholanath, MA and Bhalji

displeased at this turn of events. It was a blessing in disguise. In this way she helped me greatly on my chosen path of *sādhana*. It gave me the opportunity to isolate myself more and more from social obligations and meaningless occupations of the world.

"It was never my aim to renounce the world as something unreal. Neither was I educated to take my responsibilities lightly. It was obvious to me, that while I was real to myself, everything else was equally authentic. However, to establish oneself in the pursuit of that Reality which is the Ground of all and through and by which everything else assumes reality, requires a turning around to a certain degree. For bringing about the desired 'recovery', the medicine of meditation must be supplemented by the invalid diet of solitude.

"My family charge me, saying, 'you have left us !' How have I left anybody behind ? I have removed only my body to a remote region. In every other way I remain where I was or so it seems to me.

"When I think of my wife, I realize that although she has outwardly severed all connections with Ma, in her inner life, because of her antagonistic thoughts, she is engaged in a formidable *sādhana* of deep concentration. She is a person of strong will-power, deep religiousity and purity of heart. It is quite possible that with her greater powers of single-minded concentration, she will reach the feet of Ma much sooner than I can with my desultory efforts. So be it, let Ma's *kheydla* be fulfilled in every way in our lives."

It may be recorded here that a few years after his death, Bhaiji's wife, Sm. Manikuntala Devi, did become reconciled to Mataji. She had come to realize that she had been ill-advised by many people and at the time did not have the fortitude to discriminate between what was in her interest and what was not. She had disregarded Mataji's invitation

to reside with her husband when he was living alone in many places engaged in his *sādhana* and thus had lost the opportunity of being with him during the last years of his life.

Bhaiji's death was a major event in the life of the small group of devotees who had attached themselves to Mataji. There was nobody to take his place and mediate Mataji's *kheyāla*. An exemplary identification with Mataji's *kheyāla* was unique with him. Mataji herself has said that many times Jyotish would do things or deal with people according to her *kheyāla*, without the necessity for her to speak to that effect. Many had found his guidance invaluable and now felt deprived of this sustaining source of encouragement.

Bhaiji was typical of the well-educated man occupying a responsible position in the world, well aware of the demands of modern times and yet firmly established in the traditional heritage of his own culture and background. He had not found easy solutions to his questions. He had had to do the work of a pioneer breaking new ground all along the line. Mataji was not known widely or recognised as an extraordinary personality in his time. He had played a considerable role in mediating this extraordinariness for the people who were daily flocking to visit Mataji. The exemplary self-surrender seen in Bhaiji is not something which happens of itself but is also a matter of constant lived effort. Bhaiji's life will always remain a source of inspiration for those, who would fain understand the phenomenon of yearning for a life of renunciation.

## Chapter Fourteen

### BHAIJI'S LEGACY TO THE FAMILY OF DEVOTEES

For days after Bhaiji's death, the devotees surrounding Mataji, could not think of anything else but the ideals he had upheld for them to follow in life. In the last few days he had talked at length with Joshiji who had broached the subject of a school for boys on the lines of the ancient gurukul system but where modern subjects would be taught as well. Mataji's words with regard to these projects were :

"If you wish to undertake a work of this order, you are certainly free to go ahead with it. I have nothing to say in this matter. As you know I have no *kheyala* for undertakings of this kind. Jyotish, as you know, had some thoughts regarding the establishment of an exemplary school where the teaching of the fundamentals of the tradition would be combined with instruction in all modern subjects. What I say is that any good work which is undertaken with a sense of commitment and service is worth while. I am pointing this out because all of you now have a great desire to do this work of benevolence and merit. All good and selfless enterprises everywhere in the world are services to the One. All of you are as a rule engaged in work for your own selves, so it is desirable that you should become involved in altruistic work also to take you out of the narrow limits of self-centredness. However, one must constantly remember that unflagging endeavour is to be directed towards the realization of Truth alone. Man cannot stay inactive and it is not



practically possible for him to spend all the 24 hours in meditation and *japa*, therefore all works are to be undertaken which are conducive and helpful towards this end. Service to humanity, studies, engaging in good actions are necessary for purifying the mind which is to be engaged in *sādhana*. Enterprises which help one toward God-realization are alone worthwhile. Similarly anything which proves to be a distraction is to be rejected. Discrimination is required. All action must be undertaken with a view to increasing and expanding the sphere of God-remembrance."

Taking these words to signify Mataji's approval of the scheme, Hari Ramji with the help of a few devoted friends of Bhaiji, subsequently laid the foundation of an institution for boys which was situated in Almora in the Ashram that gradually took shape around Bhaiji's *Samādhi* at Patal Devi.<sup>1</sup>

From Dehradun, Mataji sent Didi and Swami Akhandananda to Vindhyachal. Not daring to oppose her *kheyālā* Didi left Mataji with great reluctance, being unable to reconcile herself to the fact that Mataji would be left to the care of comparative strangers. Mataji said to her :

"I am entrusting you with greater responsibility. There are now so many people here to look after this body and you have already done so much in this respect. You have to go to Dacca and talk to the people there. Only you can do this. Tell them that they should all co-operate with one another and proceed with friendship and goodwill for each other. In Calcutta also, tell everyone that if they

1. The Vidyapeeth for boys is still based at Almora where young brahmachāris learn the tenets of their own tradition and are also coached in modern subjects to enable them to appear for the Matriculation Examination at the State level. After this they have the option of either going home or staying on in the Ashram as its inmates or going in for further studies.

so wish they may foregather in one place and practise *japa*, meditation or sing *kirtan*. Different days should be fixed for men and women. If any man or woman wishes to leave worldly life and live as an ascetic, then arrangements could be made for such a person if all of you so desire. You should talk to everyone and encourage them on this path. This will also be service (to me). To help a person to proceed on the path of Self-realization is service to God."

With a heavy heart Didi parted from Mataji. When asked if she should convey any message from Mataji to the devotees in the various towns Didi would be passing through, Mataji said, "Tell everyone that they should live constantly and uniformly in God-remembrance with their attention firmly fixed on the One Goal."

After coming from Almora Mataji had for almost a month subsisted on water only. Her body had been very still as if in *samādhi*. She would move a little with the greatest difficulty and spoke softly when required to do so. The people of Dehradun had not seen her in this condition before, but learnt quickly not to identify it with any kind of illness. They saw for themselves that Mataji was quite normal in every respect excepting the utter stillness of her body and they learnt the lesson of abiding by her *kheyāla* regarding all matters pertaining to herself. While conversing with visitors her demeanour was so normal that it was hard for the inmates of the ashram to believe that she was partaking of nothing but water. On September 3, everyone felt relieved when she ate a little rice. There was no dearth of visitors at the ashram. Many people came from far off towns to be with her for a few days.

Mataji stayed in Dehradun for less than two months. During this time the local people came into closer contact with

her and began to understand something of her unique personality. They saw that Mataji was untouched by Bhaiji's demise although her great concern and thoughtfulness on his behalf could not have been called into question at any time. The comparative strangers who were attending to her simple needs gained in confidence in daily contacts with her. It could be seen by them clearly that although Mataji took delight in all places and as heterogeneous a group as could be contrived by anyone, she retained her own way of doing things which was extraordinary, or rather unique to her only.

Mataji, at the invitation of Manmatha Nath Chatterjee and others, attended the annual Durga Puja Festival of the Bengali community in the city, on October 13, 1937. After the Puja, she said to her companions, "Now that we have come away from Kishenpur (the Ashram) let us not return but go on to Hardwar."

As usual in Mataji's presence, improbable things were made possible with comparative ease. Mataji's retinue, quite considerable at all times, enthusiastically accepted the plan and travelled to Hardwar with her the same day. Changes of clothes were improvised and money was collected from voluntary contributors. All such impromptu arrangements create an atmosphere of holiday and festivity quite peculiar to Mataji's presence. Perhaps by calling into question the staid conventionality of accepted norms, she opens up a dimension of freedom for many people. It must not be supposed that Mataji countenanced anything untoward in such modes of travelling. Always, things would so arrange themselves that her *kheyāla* could be carried out in an exemplary fashion and everyone would be happy at the end of the adventure. As for example, there would be a sufficient number of conveyances, sufficient money, clothes and food for such sudden travels in big numbers. At first Didi and



others used to think it a coincidence, then the regularity with which they encountered this phenomenon, led them to the conviction that it was best to comply with Mataji's *kheyāla*, no matter how improbable or impractical it seemed. If a more reasonable mode of engaging on a course of action was pointed out to Mataji, she would acquiesce immediately but nothing would go right thereafter, and the councillors themselves would veer round to the original plan. Over the years this fact has emerged with greater and greater clarity, so that no one who knows Mataji well, consciously tries to modify or deflect her *kheyāla*. Mataji's words regarding her active mode of behaviour "*jo ho jaye*" (whatever comes to be, is how it should be and not otherwise) is truly expressive of her attitude towards events as they happen. She does not make any effort toward achieving her *kheyāla*, neither is she disappointed if it cannot be carried out, because either remains equally acceptable to her.

**Mataji's first visit to Gujrat :**

Mataji stayed in Hardwar for three days only. She visited the ashram of Mangala Giri Maharaj and also went to see Swami Asimanandaji. She reminded Swami Asimananda that he had once offered to escort her to the holy sites on the banks of the river Narmada in Gujrat. He expressed his readiness to do so at any time convenient to her. He had reckoned without his guest, because Mataji immediately said, "Let us then start, today, by the first available train !"

Initially thrown into considerable disorder by her suggestion, everybody got used to the idea very quickly, and when they steamed out of Hardwar that evening, it was realised that it was not such an impossible scheme after all. Didi and Swami Akhandananda had joined Mataji's party at Hardwar in response to her invitation. Mataji accompanied by a



comparatively smaller party came to Chandod, a small town near the river Narmada on October 18, 1937. Swami Asimananda was quite well known in this part of the country. He made arrangements for their stay at the Vishnudasa Temple.

The visitors found the local people very hospitable and courteous. The temple catered to people of all denominations and welcomed all travellers who were desirous of visiting the famous sites for *sadhana* near the shores of the holy Narmada. Down the centuries ascetics of great repute had practised austerities in these places. The entire region is sprinkled with temples, shrines, ashramas and also less frequented huts and caves where one may spend years in absolute solitude. In one of these caves Sri Balananda Brahmachariji of Deoghar had spent several years. Mataji visited the ashram of the Guru of Sri Balananda Brahmachariji where she was made welcome by Sri Kailashanandaji.

Mataji went to other places of interest, travelling by boat after sunset. This seemed to be the usual mode of procedure because the sun made the open boats very uncomfortable during the day. The local people could not speak Hindi and nobody in Mataji's party (excepting Swami Asimanandaji) knew any Gujrati. Conversations therefore were limited. This however did not prevent Mataji from exercising her ineffable attraction on men, women and children. Slowly but steadily the number of people visiting Mataji's camp site increased.

Mataji's party included Naresh Chakravarty, a professor from Calcutta, and Shachi Babu, both very quiet and serious-minded men. On their way to Chandod, Mataji remarking jokingly on the grave aspect of Shachi Babu, had said, "You seem to have become quite a *gambhīrnath bābaji*."<sup>1</sup> Mataji's

1. The word "*gambhīr*" means serious or profound, in other words, Mataji's statement meant "Why are you looking so serious?"

use of the word "gambhīrnath" stirred the memory of Shachi Babu who recalled with some surprise and a great deal of excitement that long ago while reading a biography of the saint so named, he had experienced a great longing for visiting the sites of the saint's *tapasyā*. He now realized that he had come to the Narmada but had quite forgotten that he had once been very keen to do so. His wishes were fulfilled in a manner quite beyond his expectations.

Mataji went to Ahmedabad and to Baroda for a few days, then returned to Vyasa and Karnali on the Narmada in the first week of November. She became known to people from all strata of society, business magnates from Ahmedabad, professional men and women, and also the villagers from along the banks of the river. The towns' people could talk to her a little in Hindi and she spent as much time with all those who came to seek her advice as she always did wherever she might be. One educated young lady asked Mataji, "Is there need for a Guru in one's life?"

Mataji replied, "Consider the fact that all one's life one is subject to the influences of people around one. To begin with, the parents, then the teachers, in fact there is no end to the number of persons from whom we require to learn something or other. So a teacher is always necessary, a teacher who will direct one's effort in the right direction. You may look at it from another angle too. Supposing you wish to undo a difficult knot. You have to bring it under focus and study the twist of the chords so that you may unravel it. Similarly, in order to achieve freedom, one must bind oneself down (under the supervision of the Guru), in other words, one must accept discipline."

Another young girl said, "Mataji, I cannot meditate on any form of God. As a matter of fact I do not care for any symbol whatsoever. How can I get control over my mind?"

Mataji answered, "In that case, you may just sit still and concentrate on the natural process of breathing. If you train yourself to do that, this itself will act as a symbol for you." The girl professed herself very pleased with this answer.

One gentleman asked Mataji one day, "Is transmigration of souls a fact or not?"

"Yes, but only for those who have such a *sauśkāra*; those who are not determined by their belief in this matter are not re-incarnated in other bodies."

"In that case it would perhaps be better to be born as a Christian or Muslim, who do not believe in re-incarnation and for them all is over in just one life-time."

Mataji smiled and said, "I did not mean the *sauśkāras* engendered by one's religion. Predilections may cut across religious faith. It all depends upon the status achieved by the individual soul. What is thought to be true is that all souls are not necessarily reincarnated."

One day Mataji out of her own *kheyālā* explained at some length the Vrindaban life of Sri Krishna. She said, "Unless the mind has attained a level of being in rapport with the Divine, one cannot hope to understand the *līlā* of Sri Krishna. In the state of union or *samādhi*, the senses are transcended and then only one may experience the bliss which is sublime. Some people, unable to grasp the nature of this spiritual experience, try to impose upon it their own understanding of such matters and thus reduce it to their own level. This is why we hear so often people voicing their reservations regarding the *līlā* of Sri Krishna. The fact of the matter is that unless one transcends totally the mundane sphere one cannot step on to the divine ground of Vrindavan."

Naresh Chakravarty, the professor from Calcutta, found himself very much at home with this discourse. Perhaps, Mataji had spoken for him alone, because he agreed enthusias-



tically and said, "It is my conviction that the *achintyābheda-bheda* of Sri Chaitanya has touched the ultimate heights of human yearning for God. Whatever one may say, the Advaita Vedānta of Sankara leaves one with a feeling of dissatisfaction because the heart plays a very small role in it."

Mataji, however, did not agree and said rather forcefully, "Only those who do not have a proper understanding of these matters, will hold such opinions. There is no contradiction involved." Naresh Chakravarty was very pleased with himself for having elicited from Mataji her definitive preference (as he saw it) for the Advaita Vedānta. He said, "I feel Ma prefers the Advaita point of view. But how can that be when she has just now given such a heart-warming discourse on the Krishna-IIIā!" Then a little ruefully he added, "I see that I am only beginning to get a glimmering of the scope and range of Ma's understanding." Mataji said with a smile, "Do you know what *māyā* is? "*mai āyā*" (मैं आया)\* that is, "I have come." *Māyā* is coterminous with the experience, "I am." If there is no "I" there is no *māyā*."

During this visit to Gujrat the foundations for future contacts were laid. Mataji moved amongst the people as if she had known them for a long time. She seemed at home in all these new places and the local people came to look upon her as the personification of their most cherished object of worship. Their total acceptance of her was matched by Mataji's attitude of being completely at ease with them, as if with friends of long standing.

Mataji, accompanied by her party, left Gujrat at the beginning of December and, travelling right across the north of India, she came to Tarapeeth on December 9th, 1937. She had sent away Didi again ahead of her to Varanasi, but this time without Swami Akhandanandaji. It came to Didi's mind

\* In Hindi "मैं आया" sounds somewhat like *māyā*.



that perhaps Mataji wanted her to be trained in the ways of travelling alone and becoming quite independent of escorts. This was probably true because she was asked to join the party of travellers at Moghulsarai after a few days only.

During her travels in Gujrat Mataji spent a lot of time with her own father and mother. As written earlier,\* Dādā-mafai (Mataji's father) was a music lover and a singer of some considerable ability. On many evenings, he filled the hearts of the congregation by his rendering of beautiful devotional songs. Sometimes Mataji would join in, as she had done in childhood. One of the songs which many people have heard from Mataji herself is as follows :

"Can I ever abandon that one, who desperately calls  
'mother where are you, where are you'. The one who  
remembers (Me) in his heart and fills his life with the Name,  
Sees nothing in the universe excepting the form of My  
Image  
One who does not speak of any other (than of Myself) and  
is pained to see the sorrows of others,  
One who remains tranquil in his own sorrow and joy and  
does not hearken to calamity of others,  
When a child cries for his mother and his tears flow, can  
I then stay away ?  
Immediately I give him the shelter of my arms."

At this time Mataji inaugurated a new nāma-sankirtana amongst her companions, adding a line of her own to the line which was more familiar to the ears of the northerners, namely : "Raghupati Rāghava Rājārām, jayati Śiva Śiva Jānaki Rām, patita pāvana, jay Siyarām."

This period of quiet life on the banks of the holy Narmada, spent sometimes on temple verandas, sometimes in dharamśālās,

\* Vol. I, Chapter One, p. 2.

was made specially memorable by the devotional music sung by Dādāmaśai. These were his last days with Mataji because after a few weeks of his leaving her, he was taken ill. Mataji at that time was in Tarapeeth. About three days before his death Bholanath brought her to Calcutta for a day to see Dādāmaśai. This proved to be their last meeting. While Mataji stood at his bedside, he looked at her with great concentration, calling out, 'Ma, Ma, Ma'. To many it seemed that he had at that moment changed from being an affectionate father to a child seeking shelter with his mother. Perhaps he experienced the meaning of the songs he had sung to her many times. After a while, on Mataji's seeking his permission to go, he readily bade her farewell with a tranquil mind. Thus ended a life of great dedication towards the One Goal so constantly on the lips of Mataji. He died on December 16th, 1937, at the age of 71.

While Mataji was in Tarapeeth, the usual number of devotees from Calcutta, Jamshedpur, Dacca and other towns flocked to the remote place which yet once more came alive with the sound of voices, laughter and busy activities of the people. It will be remembered that Bholanath had practised *tapasyā* at Tarapeeth and was especially devoted to this image of the Devi Tara. He undertook the performance of a special *pūjā* in the temple, which was attended by the big gathering of devotees and turned out to be a festivity of great rejoicing. This was Bholanath's last visit to his cherished Deity since the time for his passing away was also drawing near.

## Chapter Fifteen

### THE PASSING AWAY OF BHOLANATH

1938 was the year of the *Kumbha* at Hardwar. The *Kumbhamela* (the festival of the *Kumbha*) is a religious event of great moment for all Hindus. This festival is held in rotation of three years, at four places, viz. Prayag, Hardwar, Nasik and Ujjain, so that each town has a turn after twelve years. The festivals in Hardwar in April and in Prayag in January are considered specially important. Pilgrims from all corners of India foregather on the banks of the Ganges, to bathe on the auspicious days and at the indicated times. People put up in all kinds of impromptu shelters such as tents, straw huts or any other type of temporary construction. The residents of the town meet such members of their family and friends, they have not seen for decades.

All pilgrims are expected to gather under the banner of their own *panda* (the professional caretakers of pilgrims at holy places), for facilities of food and shelter. The fluttering of differently marked flags of the *pandas* indicate their destinations to the pilgrims from afar. The riverside becomes alive with the voices of thousands of people. The highlight of the mela is the gathering of all the ascetic orders of the Hindu religion. This is the place and time when the lay people get glimpses of all the *sannyāsa āśramas* (ascetic orders). In accordance with the tradition of the *Kumbha*, the *sādhus* are shown the highest respect and given precedence over all other participants. The lay people go around visiting the camps of the renowned ascetics, monks or *sādhus*, listening to discourses on their

favourite scriptures or attending other religious events, or simply joining in any *kirtan*, the strains of which can be heard as a matter of fact, from almost any corner of the vast camp-site. For one month or so, people live in the exhilarating atmosphere of a joyful festivity.

Mataji has called the *Kumbha* the *dhvaja* (sign, emblem, banner) of the Hindu dharma. Mataji's description seems singularly apt when we consider the various elements which combine to make possible such an extraordinary occurrence as the *Kumbhamela*. Just as a banner is indicative of the place where people gather actuated by the same purpose, so perhaps is the *Kumbha*, a place and time which discloses to the Hindu his religion as an option which is viable (*ireyasa*) and is to be existentially experienced as such. The tradition brings together the ascetic as well as the householder in an experience of personal commitments (*sankalpa*) to the common goal. This again recreates the opportunity of a religious experience which is perpetuated by such repeated celebrations.

Mataji, in general, accepts invitations and suggestions for attending the *Kumbha* festivals, mostly because her presence makes it possible for many people to take part in it. Hundreds of devotees have had occasion to become alive to her kindness and thoughtfulness in bringing the *Kumbha* within the bounds of possibility for them. In 1938, Mataji already happened to be in Hardwar, having arrived there a few months before. She was staying at the house of Dr. Pitambar Panth on the bank of the Ganges. Dr. Panth had retired from service and had settled in Hardwar. He had met Mataji previously when She had been travelling around with Virajmohini Devi. While in Etawah, Mataji had suffered from some stomach upset. Dr. Panth, who was the Civil Surgeon of the town at the time, had brought some medicines



for her. Mataji had said to him that although it was not her *kheyāla* to take any medicines at the time, if ever she did have the *kheyāla*, perhaps she would begin by placing herself under his medical care.

It so happened that Mataji was quite ill at the beginning of the year. She ran high temperatures and suffered from pain in her arms. While in Dehradun the doctors wanted to treat her for the fever which became very alarming at times. Bholanath was put in a quandary over this matter because he knew only too well that Mataji's *kheyāla* should not be interfered with. The new devotees of Dehradun, however, not knowing Mataji so well, began to demur at Bholanath's reluctance to put her under medical treatment. At length, he gave way in the face of general opinion and agreed that Mataji should be treated by the much respected Dr. Some of Dehradun. When this question of medical treatment came up, Mataji recalled her words spoken to Dr. Panth years ago. Somebody came up with the information that Dr. Panth had retired from service and was living in nearby Hardwar. Mataji thus had the *kheyāla* to go to Hardwar and contact Dr. Panth. He was overjoyed to see her again but very troubled to find her ailing. He agreed to prescribe medicine for her but he did this with great hesitation. He said to her, "I can prescribe only for ordinary people. My medicine is not going to be effective unless you have the *kheyāla* to terminate this illness. Please, for our sake, get well now."

Mataji became seriously ill from the first day of her taking the medicines. To her alarmed companions she said smilingly, "Why do you have such distaste for the illness? I don't ask any of you to go away, do I? The illnesses want to be with me for some time. I am not 'ill'. But if I take medicines then naturally I have to be ill."

Acceding to Dr. Panth's request, Mataji came to his house on the Ganges in the last week of February. It was very spacious and slowly began to fill up with visiting devotees. Mataji gradually began to walk about a little. Her illness and recovery, as always, followed a pattern of their own, not correlated with the intake of medicines. Throughout this time she continued to receive people as usual and talk to them. There was a constant flow of guests from Delhi, Dehradun, Bareilly and other places. Niraj Nath Mukherji came with his family from Etawah for a few days. Bholanath was very pleased with Niraj's young son, Bindu, whose singing was liked by everyone. Bindu learned to sing kirtan and accompanied Bholanath on his *nagar-kirtan*, sometimes hoisted on his shoulders, so that the boy's voice could be heard over the general din of the crowds.

Bindu's mother asked one day, "Is it necessary to perform the yogic disciplines of *āsana*, etc.?"

Mataji replied, "It is advisable always to discipline oneself. After all, everybody is sitting or standing or lying in some posture or other. The bodily attitudes reveal the state of the mind. It can be easily seen that all feelings and emotions correspond to a stance of the body. The mind can be controlled only when the body is adjusted appropriately. But one must not despair. The mind which appears to be singularly unamenable to discipline, is also to be appreciated as a great 'ascetic'. It is never satisfied with what is given down here but is forever turning away to look for something beyond."

Hardwar was becoming crowded with the rush of pilgrims for the coming *Kumbha* on April 13th. Bholanath was always happy on such occasions of religious significance. Every morning, he would collect all available men and set out walking through the streets of the town, singing kirtan

(*nagar-kirtan*). His tall and dignified personality commanded respect from all passers-by. Strangers came up and bowed to him and stayed to swell the throng of his *kirtan* party.

On April 13th, the final day of the festival, Bholanath accompanied by a great crowd of devotees went to *Brahma-kunda* for the ceremony of the bath. He was spontaneously acclaimed by the other ascetics gathered there for the same purpose. They did not know who he was but must have perceived in him an exalted personality commanding respect.

Unknown to others Bholanath, while bathing in the holy river, performed by himself the rituals of adopting formally a life of renunciation. This was in pursuance of some conversation he had had with Mataji, earlier.

At the conclusion of the *Kumbha*, the pilgrims are always in a great hurry to leave the town, creating difficult travelling conditions. The devotees thought it better that Mataji should leave immediately by car for Dehradun. Bholanath stayed behind to escort all those who wished to go on to Dehradun. It was easier to find railway accommodation from Dehradun at this time rather than from Hardwar. At the conclusion of a function Mataji is always required to move first, sometimes at great inconvenience to herself, because so long as she is there hardly anybody likes to leave, if he can spend a few more hours or days with her. This becomes a problem for those who are in charge of providing food and shelter because with Mataji all arrangements have to be impromptu and temporary. So the easiest method of striking camp is for Mataji to leave for another place.

In Dehradun many people who had been with her in Hardwar bade her reluctant farewells. Jyotish Guha's daughter, Buni, cried so much that everyone's heart was touched. Mataji said to her, "Why do you cry for somebody who is smiling?" All those who have come close to Mataji



will have experienced for themselves that this question is unanswerable.

On April 24th, Didi's father, Swami Akhandananda, and Bholanath returned again to Hardwar to attend the *sahnyasa* ceremony of Akhandananda's brother, Kunja Mohan. Bholanath was feeling indisposed but did not regard it seriously. Mataji said to Didi, "Bholanath is going to be very seriously ill." Didi, alarmed at these words, wished to persuade Bholanath not to undertake the trip, but Mataji said again, "You may try, but he will insist on going and the illness is also inevitable."

Bholanath returned from Hardwar with a high fever and complaining of pain in the stomach. The fever persisted and in a few days the doctors pronounced that he was suffering from chicken-pox.

Mataji said quietly to her companions, "It does not appear to me to be chicken-pox. You see, diseases reveal themselves to me just like persons. The personification seen by me I have heard described by all of you as being much more fearful than chicken-pox. I do not know about symptoms, but I can tell you what I have seen."

Within a short time nobody was left in doubt about Bholanath's illness which turned out to be the dreaded small-pox. Bholanath was given the best medical treatment available in the town and the very loving care of the devotees but the terrible nature of the disease made him suffer excruciatingly. Mataji visited his room at frequent intervals and made such suggestions for his care and comfort as she alone knew how to do.

Bholanath's condition deteriorated rapidly. Everyone was in despair at this sudden calamity. At this crucial time Mataji unexpectedly asked Didi and Swami Akhandananda to leave Dehradun immediately and to take Didima with them.



Although Mataji had spoken quietly in her usual manner, Didi knew that this was one of those occasions when Mataji's *kheyāla* was not to be deflected. To forestall any pleadings toward this attempt, Mataji further said, "It must be either all of you or I. If you do not leave, I shall." This was not to be thought of, so Didi with great misgivings in her heart, and in utter dejection of spirit at being obliged to leave Mataji under such difficult conditions, set about making arrangements for their immediate departure. Swami Akhandananda expressed his bewilderment by saying, "Ma, why are you sending us away when we require as many as we can have here to look after Bholanath?"

Mataji said gently, "You are a *sacheyāsi*. You are not required to render Bholanath any physical service. The only way you can be of help to him is to engage steadfastly in your own undertaking of the contemplative life."

To inconsolable Didima, she said, "Is it not agonizing for you to watch Bholanath's suffering? At this time he does not require your physical presence. You can help him by your prayers and healing thoughts. Do that for him now." On Didi, to whom nothing at all made any sense apart from Mataji, she could only enjoin patience and fortitude. Didi and others left for Varanasi on May 4th.

Mataji spent most of her time in Bholanath's room. Bholanath had been calling out to her 'Ma' like a child in distress and Mataji responded to his call naturally and spontaneously. Proximity to death had dissolved the unauthentic barriers to a disclosure of this relationship. Bholanath now was not self-conscious anymore in showing his total surrender, publicly. Sitting by his bedside on the last day of his life Mataji asked him, "Are you in great pain?" Bholanath replied that he was but that he could not quite locate where the pain was. His whole body was under the

influence of the dreadful disease and his suffering could be easily imagined. He was lying on his side facing her and Mataji was seen to pass her hand over his entire body, from head to toe and seemed to perform some *kriya* over it. After some time, in answer to a question, Bholanath replied that he did not have any pain and was completely relaxed. Since the beginning of the illness, this was the first time, he was at peace. He murmured "Ānanda."

At one time he said, "I am going." Mataji responded by saying, "Why do you think so? There are no goings or comings, but a presence only in which there is no room for such things." Bholanath seemed to agree, saying, "Yes, so you have always said." Mataji's hand was on Bholanath's head when he breathed his last on the night of May 7th, 1938. His death was calm and peaceful. For the people who were keeping vigil at his bedside this created an atmosphere of reverence in the face of the most mysterious event of life.

The man who had so joyfully and so completely given of himself in the service of Mataji and who was like a beloved parent to the devotees was no more.

## Chapter Sixteen

### AFTER BHOLANATH'S DEATH

Bholanath's passing away brought about many changes in the lives of the devotees, firstly, because it was an irreparable personal loss for all those who knew him, and secondly, because nearly all of them had in some measure or other to reorient themselves in their understanding of Mataji.

In the beginning, as in other cases of bereavement, the local people hesitated to intrude upon Mataji, but they soon realized how ludicrous it was for them to think that Mataji would be found grieving over the death of Bholanath. Mataji's attitude towards Bholanath's death was the same as it had been, and was to be in future towards the deaths of others who were closely connected with her way of living in the world, and who were totally dependent upon her for their well-being. While they were alive she seemed entirely concerned with their welfare, but she did not mourn their deaths. She has said in this context, "What is the occasion for grief? Nobody is lost to me. Do you feel sad when you are obliged to go from one room to another?"

The ladies of Dehradun felt a little ashamed of themselves for attributing their own emotional reaction to Mataji; they acknowledged this to her very soon. The general opinion was voiced by someone who said, "It is due to our limitations that we see you go through changes in time, like growing up or growing old, or changes in material or social status. You are always the same and just what you are in yourself. So please continue to do according to your *kheyāla* now as always."

Thus, no drastic changes were brought about in the mode of Mataji's life. Didi, waiting anxiously in Banaras for news of Mataji, got reassuring tidings that everything was quite as usual in the Ashram at Kishenpur. The attitude on the part of the devotees in this context brings to light Mataji's unique way of 'playing' the roles that she adopts. Nobody could doubt Mataji's concern for her people, yet in the beginning they had to learn by experience about her total self-sufficiency. An understanding and a compassion which are compatible with extreme detachment are hard to comprehend, especially when the enigmatic personality herself has nothing to say in explanation of her own way of projecting this image.

Mataji remained quietly at Dehradun for some time, occasionally visiting Raipur. There were very few people at the Kishenpur Ashram. Ruma Devi cooked the simple meals for Mataji and saw to the comforts of visitors. Manmatha Nath Chatterji, who had retired from service, was living in the Ashram. Abhaya, a youth who had attached himself recently to Mataji was a constant companion. Abhaya had many disagreeable qualities, such as monopolizing Mataji's time to the exclusion of others; answering on behalf of Mataji the questions put to her by visitors; being insensitive to the requirements of others to the point of rudeness. His sometimes very impertinent behaviour toward Mataji herself would outrage the older devotees. All this was forgotten and forgiven again and again, because of his childlike devotion for Mataji on the one hand, and on the other his golden voice and marvellous repertoire of devotional songs, many of which he composed himself. Kirtan, before and since has never been the same, according to some people. Abhaya had the unique distinction of evoking a most indulgent compassion from Mataji which remains unrivalled so far. In himself he was a most charming and entertaining companion for all the younger



members of the families visiting Mataji. Many young boys became his devoted followers in music ; many others, with rather unfelicitious results tried to imitate him in his orientation toward Mataji without possessing his guileless spontaneity.

These events are demonstrative of Mataji's mode of affirmation or reformation of individuals strictly in their own rights. Cries of favouritism or partiality can be heard amongst the people around Mataji. But a little reflection shows clearly that everyone evokes from Mataji the response that he merits and needs. This is a fact which is hard to comprehend because it is not met within our ordinary everyday world. It can be experienced in the proximity of Mataji alone. Ordinarily, Mataji does not give definitive directions to people who come seeking her guidance but only suggestions, which if they so wish, can be complied with. In other words, Mataji responds to the total personality of an individual, which she seems to perceive at a glance, and thus, no two people will get the same treatment. The one common denominator is that she calls everyone to his best efforts toward the highest endeavour, and she shows limitless concern for those who try. For failures she has nothing but compassion, and so, having once taken refuge with her, no one need ever be afraid again. This also accounts for the very motley nature of Mataji's entourage. People from all walks of life, all age groups, any or no religious persuasion, ascetics as well as householders, find the same quality of affirmation in Mataji and experience a sense of home-coming. The onus of understanding even a little of this entirely unparalleled personality, rests totally on the visitor. Nobody can explain things to everybody's satisfaction, because nobody has a clue to the mystery of Mataji's *kheyda*.

Mataji's indifferent health at that time continued to cause anxiety to the devotees. Abhaya had the happy idea of

writing and asking everyone who was willing to do so to engage in some *nāma-japa*, expressly for the purpose of praying for Mataji's health. He wrote to Didi also, who in turn conveyed the idea to others; in this way, probably for the first time, devotees distant from and unknown to each other, became united in a common resolve for prayers.

In the last week of July 1938, Mataji travelled to Solan and then on to Simla. This was Mataji's first visit to Simla after the death of Bholanath. The devotees of Simla largely consisted of Bengali officers of the Central Secretariat, since Simla at that time used to be the summer Head Quarters of the Government. The periodic reassemblies had forged a common bond between such of the men and their families as were interested in keeping alive the tradition of *nāma-sankīrtana*, sanctified by Sri Gaurāṅga Mahāprabhu. This group of people had become very attached to Mataji and welcomed her joyfully in their midst. Not finding Didi with Mataji, they enquired about her. Didi had gone to Varanasi, Vindhyachal, Calcutta and Dacca according to Mataji's suggestions. She had been in Dacca during the Birthday celebrations. This was an especially poignant year for the devotees of Dacca because of Bholanath's death and also because the image of their beloved Kuli had to be given its final interment inside its own little shrine.

Didi, although inconsolable at being separated from Mataji for so long, had realized how necessary her presence had been in Dacca at the time. Now she was happy to be recalled to join Mataji in Simla. Didi met Mataji for the first time since Bholanath's death and now eagerly listened to her description of the events leading up to it. The devotees of Simla who had wanted to hear about it but had hesitated to broach the subject to Mataji now had an opportunity to learn about these events. Mataji, in her inimitable style

related the whole incident in detail, recreating for her audience the last hours of Bholanath's life.

Describing the last few hours which were characterised by Bholanath's serenity and calm acceptance of his imminent death in the face of which he had said "ananda", Mataji asked Didi, "Did I not do well to send my mother away with you and Swamiji? Without a doubt she would have made this incident a matter of grief and lamentations. Whereas Bholanath's last minutes were so quiet and peaceful that not even the people in the room realized what had happened till I drew their attention to it by saying to the Kaviraj (ayurvedic doctor), 'What do you say? As far as your science goes, isn't everything over?'"

Then, with a half-smile Mataji added, "Some people are amazed to hear me talking like this about the death of Bholanath, and are a little shocked too." Many of the group of people sitting around her protested saying such thoughts had not occurred to them. Mataji turned and looked at an elderly lady and asked lightly, "What do you say, mother? Isn't it shocking the way I talk so unconcernedly about the death of Bholanath?"

This lady then joined her palms together and said humbly, "Yes, Ma, I must confess that such was exactly my reaction to your narration. However, I see that this is due to my lack of understanding of what you are. We are unable to disassociate ourselves from human relationships and therefore automatically ascribe them to you. I am now taken aback at my own folly in thinking that you should be bound by such ties as we experience. Forgive us and bear with us." Mataji laughed away her apology and said that such thoughts were quite natural after all. The slight constraint which the people of Simla had created for themselves vanished and they gave themselves over to the joyous experience of having Mataji amidst them for a few days.



A woman asked her one day, "Ma, I am quite unable to calm my mind and am in despair how to control its perpetual restlessness." Mataji smiled and said, "What I would say is that your mind is by no means 'restless'. If you experience the restlessness of ardent yearning for God then you will at once be on the way to tranquillity. Learn to be really 'restless'." The woman was very delighted with this answer to her question.

On August 2nd, Mataji expressed her *kheyāla* to leave Simla. The residents at once raised strong objections. They were not at all willing to let Mataji leave them after such a short visit. They were then obliged to take note, as it were, of another of the unique facets of Mataji's personality. In spite of her gentle demeanour and her unfailing consideration for others, her *kheyāla* was not easily deflected. It was not that she sought in any way to impose her decisions on anybody, in fact it was quite to the contrary; but it always so happened that things arranged themselves in such a manner that her *kheyāla* was borne out. Didi and other close companions had long since given up the idea that they were dogged by series of coincidences and they had learnt to abide by Mataji's *kheyāla* to the extent to which they understood what it was that was required of them. The people of Simla were obliged to bid Mataji a sorrowful farewell for the time being.

Mataji went to Solan, about 2000 ft. below and 30 miles away from Simla on the same mountain range, the home of Jogibhai and his wife, the Rani Saheba of Baghat State, a princess of great ability and remarkable generosity, who always made people feel welcome and at home in Solan. All officers of the princely household became involved in eager and willing service to Mataji and to all those who happened to be with her.



Mataji stayed in her usual place which was known as Shogi Baba's temple in Solan. During the week-end the devotees of Simla came down and performed their beloved ritual of the *adma-yajña*, under the aegis of the Raja Sahib of Solan. Nothing gave these men greater pleasure than to be able to celebrate this function in the presence of Mataji.

From Solan Mataji went to Dehradun and stayed at the Ashram for a few days. On August 18th, Mataji proceeded to Mussoorie accompanied by quite a large group of people. The local inhabitants quickly became attached to Mataji and as always and everywhere is the case with Mataji, the crowd of visitors kept on swelling continuously. One day, the entire party went on an expedition to see the view from the highest point of the mountain-town. Two dandees were hired to go along with them. While they were resting near a church, the coolies who carried the dandees started talking to Mataji. One of them said, "Look Mataji, (all women are addressed as such in India), this is called a church. The foreigners worship God here just as we worship Him in temples. After all, what difference is there amongst people of different religions? We are like brothers born by the same mother, are we not?" Mataji concurred and he went on to say, "God alone is real, all else is illusion and this is a source of our forgetfulness of our real Self. But alas, we are such weak mortals that it is difficult for us to turn away from indulgence."

Mataji's companions were thoroughly enjoying this interlude. She herself was totally involved with her newly found teachers. She said, "Is that so Pitaji? Then I must begin to carry out the lessons you are teaching me. I shall give up the comfortable way of travelling and walk the rest of the way." With a mischievous look she left the coolies behind and started walking down the steep mountain path. The coolies were

alarmed at this prompt obedience on the part of their student and ran after her to persuade her to sit in the dandee again. Mataji went on with her dialogue with the coolies, and ended up by saying that in remembrance of their conversation they should promise to devote a few minutes of every day to spiritual endeavour. They agreed readily and assured Mataji that they would never forget her.

Mataji stopped in front of a sweets shop. Didi, interpreting this rightly, purchased lots of sweets which were distributed to all the coolies.

In the second week of September Mataji returned to Dehradun and almost immediately went to Hardwar.

## Chapter Seventeen

### MATAJI'S ILLNESS AND RECOVERY

In Hardwar Mataji was taken ill with severe pain in the stomach. Dr. Panth persuaded her to come and stay at Peetkuthi, his house on the bank of the Ganges, so that she may be more comfortable than in the *dharomiddi*. Mataji herself remarked that the disease was likely to assume its severest form. Dr. Panth diagnosed some type of ulceration and was very perturbed about her condition. He said to her, "Ma, this disease, if left to run its course, can assume terrible proportions. So please, for our sakes, bring about your *kheyāla* for your own recovery."

It may be recalled that Mataji had been quite ill in Hardwar once before, when Dr. Panth had treated her for her ailment. Subsequently he had had an argument with Hari Ram Joshi about the nature of Mataji's illnesses. Joshi had maintained stoutly that medicines were futile in her case and that her own *kheyāla* for recovery was all-important. The doctor, on the other hand, saw no reason for disregarding the efficacy of medicines in cases of maladies of the body; but he was also well aware that the 'patient' in question was anything but an ordinary sick person. As he confessed later, he had all the time been experiencing a conflict with regard to this matter. Now that he knew Mataji a little better, he was a bit wary of glibly prescribing medicines and yet he did not quite see his way to ignoring the clear symptoms of disease apparent to his professional eye.

It may not be out of place here to point out that with Mataji there is no question of pretence to any mood or any

type of behaviour. On occasions she is seen to relegate, as it were, her usual state of joyousness to the background; as for example when she mingles her tears with those of some afflicted person. At such moments nobody could be nearer or dearer to the heart of the sorrowing. She does not grieve but without fail shares in the feelings of those who stand in need of solace from her.

At times again it is seen that Mataji becomes completely remote and unapproachable. It is not that a barrier is thrown up but she seems entirely withdrawn within herself. A perfect image of aloofness forestalls all language of familiarity. At such times all ties of various relationships stand as if dissolved. Until and unless the beckoning smile dawns on her face, it remains completely inscrutable for even those who consider themselves close to her by virtue of long years of personal service. This is the reason that no one has a privileged place in her vicinity. Everyone knows himself or herself to be as close or as distant as the other or even the merest stranger or newcomer.

On rare occasions a few people who are conscious of having erred, have experienced in Mataji a flash of anger, comparable to a sudden streak of lightning, yet at the very same moment others do not see any change in her serene countenance. It is very difficult to describe these aspects because the simultaneity of opposites is without parallel in our own experience. Mataji's moods, therefore, can be said to be neither real nor pretended. They are called forth, if such be her *kṛeyāṇā*, by the circumstances brought about by the time, place, people and events. The illnesses which affect Mataji's body can also be understood as such. Just as Mataji declared herself to be a witness to the *bhāvas* playing over her body at the time of *kīrtan*, so also she sees her illnesses as visitors inhabiting her body. Mataji's fully Self-



possessed behaviour under both conditions, confirms this view. All witnesses to these conditions of her body, whether in a *bhāva* or when ill, can see easily that she remains independent and self-sufficient in herself all the time. If called repeatedly by the devotees, who naturally cannot bear to see her in any condition but that of her natural state of joyousness, she responds and 'returns' to the mundane world or 'recovers' from an illness, as the case may be. Her companions therefore have learnt that it is best to invoke her own *kheyāla* towards anything which is beyond their own understanding or control. It has been seen again and again that Mataji's *kheyāla* is not impossible to evoke because her compassionate understanding is not proof against earnest prayers or desperate appeals for help.

In Hardwar, at this time, although her bodily suffering could not be doubted by Dr. Panth, he prayed to her to rid herself of the disease, half believing in Joshiji's statements regarding the nature of Mataji's illnesses. It is possible that Mataji responded to Dr. Panth's state of genuine conflict. It so happened that the same night the few people sitting near her bed which included the doctor, saw the beginnings of *yogic kriyās* on her body. As always, the actions did not appear to be performed wilfully, but Mataji's limbs seemed to arrange themselves in a variety of beautiful postures. It seemed a fluid demonstration of *yogic āsanās* with their appropriate accompaniment of breath control and positions of the head, hands and feet. Those who have seen Mataji perform even one *āsana* know how beautifully her body seems to flow into a *yogic* stance. She never manipulates her legs or arms but they seem to settle into the correct posture quite effortlessly. Dr. Panth with folded hands watched enthralled this manifestation of *yogic kriyās*. While her body assumed intricate *āsanās*, Mataji's face wore its normal expression



Didi Gurupriya

and she spoke a few words also to the persons sitting at her feet. Once she said, "How interesting ! The whole body is as if righting itself in and out !"

This phenomenon lasted for about an hour. At the end of it Mataji had recovered her health and was without any of the symptoms which had caused so much concern to Dr. Panth. Some time later, in answer to a query, she said that it had been her *kheylla* to speak a few words, which is unusual on such occasions, in order to preclude thoughts of fits or seizures from the mind of the doctor. This was however far from his thoughts. He realised that he had witnessed a manifestation of great yogic powers. He now admitted that up to that moment he had not been entirely convinced by Joshiji but now all his doubts were laid at rest. He said, "Ma, I am sure, you have rid yourself of all vestiges of illness and are now completely cured."

Mataji, in general, always smiles off any ascription of miraculous powers to her, so she now said with a smile, "Is that so ? Well, you are an upright brahmin, living like an ascetic on the banks of the holy Ganges. If I have recovered, it is because you have said so and your words cannot be in vain."

Many devotees from far and near, alarmed by Didi's letters, came to Hardwar to see Mataji, only to be happily reassured by her usual radiant smile. Much to their amusement, Mataji said to Didi, "You see, you will be made to look a fool now." Didi joined in the laughter and was understood to say that she much preferred being made to look a fool on this occasion to the other alternative.

On September 25th, the foundation for the future Sri Sri Anandamayee Kanyapeeth was laid at Peetkutti. Didi had wanted to establish an educational institution for girls on the lines of the Vidyapeeth for boys at Almora. The first sponsors

of this scheme were Swami Akhandananda and one Shoo Prasad Sinha, a reputed lawyer from Allahabad, who was visiting Mataji at the time. Manmatha Nath Chatterji of Dehradun performed the *pūjā* for the inauguration ceremony in Mataji's presence. The first two inmates were Bhaktipriya and Shantipriya, two little girls who had been given in Didi's care in Dacca.\*

Mataji left Hardwar after the Pūjā holidays and, visiting many towns on the way, came to Calcutta in late October. Dr. Panth was travelling with her this time. He was trying his best to introduce some sort of order in Mataji's usual hectic programmes. Others before him had also attempted to organise the chaos which seems to surround Mataji, but he did not know this and tried to normalise her hours of audience to the public and of rest. Deferring to his wishes, Mataji retired to her room every night punctually at 10 p.m. Nobody was allowed to disturb her after the time for public audience was over. He fixed hours for her meals as well.

This type of routine was quite unheard of in Mataji's circle where time was reckoned neither by the clock nor by the sun or moon. Mataji's attendants were trying hard to adjust themselves to this regimentation. It must be borne in mind that there was no one in Mataji's group who could assume power over others. If Mataji countenanced the wishes of some newcomer then others abided by his arrangements as well. So Dr. Panth brought about some sort of order in Mataji's daily programmes. The devotees of the towns she visited obeyed the new rules and went home at 10 p.m. every night. Calcutta, however, was another matter, where the new order at once came to grief. Impatient crowds were not

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\* This school for girls is now housed in the Ashram in Varanasi and is affiliated to the Sampooranand Sanskrit University. The girls study up to the degree of *schūrya*.



in the mood to abide by Dr. Panth's requests for short visiting hours. People waiting in anguished expectancy for a glimpse of Mataji and perhaps a few words, were upset by doors being closed to them. Many turned away deeply hurt. The feelings of frustration gained ground. One day, a few hardy souls worked their way past the harrassed door-keepers and entering Mataji's room wept out their sense of grievances. Mataji smiled at their disgruntled accusations against all those who had wanted to prevent them from entering her room. Then she said, "You are shedding tears. Let me also do so." Then in the same light tone of jesting she went on invoking the tears to come to her. In a few moments the atmosphere of the room had changed completely. The visitors were quiet and still, not knowing how to stop the train of events they seemed to have set in motion. Within a minute, Mataji was weeping in the manner of the deeply afflicted. Everyone now prayed for her *kheyāla* to desist from crying. After a while the deeply troubled devotees, their own mood of unhappiness forgotten completely, were relieved to see her smile break through the tears, restoring the usual atmosphere of serenity and joy near her.

The devotees of Calcutta realized that they had over-reacted to a new situation. They should have remembered that it was not Mataji's way to inhibit anybody from doing what he obviously thought was the very best thing to do for her. She, in general, does not force any issue, but waits patiently till the person concerned is ready for a re-evaluation or a turning around. In this instance Dr. Panth realized very soon that he was trying to guard somebody whose freedom could not be curtailed or even affected in the least by anything or anybody. Mataji gave herself freely to the people, or rather as she herself sometimes said, there were no 'others' for her. She was always with herself only. Dr. Panth

understood all this gradually and after a while lost the incentive for introducing order and system into Mataji's way of life.

From Calcutta, Mataji went to Dacca for a short visit. This time she was without Bholanath and Bhaji. In finding her in their midst once again the devotees of Dacca gained new heights in their understanding of her personality. From Dacca Mataji again wandered back to Uttar Pradesh. She had no definite plans or settled places of residence. She stayed on house-boats on the river at Allahabad and Varanasi. At Vindhyachal she spent many hours sitting under the tree in front of the small Ashram. For Mataji's companions the natural stillness of the quiet hill-top was a contrast to the noisy activity in Dacca and Calcutta. Mataji herself is never troubled by crowds and so cannot be said to prefer solitude. She felt as comfortable in Vindhyachal as she did in Calcutta.

Mataji had the *kheyala* to visit Deoghar and arrived there on November 17th. Pran Gopal Mukherji, getting news of her arrival, came to the inn and requested her to shift to their Ashram. He remonstrated with her for not informing him beforehand so that he could have made proper arrangements for her. Mataji disarmed him from being reproachful by saying, "Is the inn different from the Ashram? You, who live in the Ashram should not identify yourself with it. I do not visit different places, I am always at the same place, you know that, don't you?"

It goes without saying, however, that he and Mohanandaji Maharaj preferred her to stay at the Ashram where she had visited earlier and was well known. In the evening many people assembled in her room. She talked to them answering questions and also urging them to a greater effort toward Self-realization. She would say, "Everyone has to walk along a particular path and so one should not hastily conclude that

one's own path is the way for all. And why not? Because while one is still in a state of endeavour one is naturally operating within the dimension of want and ignorance. This state of incompleteness should bring home to us the vastness of the area of the as yet unknown and unattained. Final resolution is not a matter of legislation, but an overflow of enlightenment which brings with it the light of total vision. Don't you see how a pot while being filled makes a great deal of noise; when it is full, it becomes quiet, even the overflow spills over noiselessly in all directions. The right to speak and a state of overflowing plenitude are the same.

"Everyone is a wayfarer on the path to the Knowledge of Self. The Self is One. All is One. It is an inadequacy to describe it thus, however, because to say that all is One is still not to state the One. Moreover, one may ask, 'If the Self is One, how is it that the death of X does not bring about the death of Y?' To this may be said that births and deaths are to the Self what a rising and falling of a breeze is to the air. We only feel the air when there is movement in it. We are not aware of it when it does not manifest as currents of air. Births and deaths, manifestation and non-manifestation, indicate the presence of the One unchanging consciousness (Caitanya)."

"The crux of the matter is, to know oneself. Actually, the enquiry into Self-knowledge comes naturally to us, because, everyone, in truth, loves himself only. Sometimes people say, 'I put so and so, or such and such a thing above myself.' That is not so. If one were to look closely enough one would discover the affinity which underlies such ties. Look at it this way: If it so happens that some action has to be performed which is completely against our self-expression, or some one accommodated, who is totally an outsider, then such actions are felt as curtailment of our freedom to be ourselves.



"Not only is Self-enquiry a natural thing for us to be engaged in, but we constantly participate in the play of the One and the Infinite. This single tree here is part of a series extending infinitely both before and after. Our bodies have a beginning, middle and end and yet from within this finiteness we get a glimpse of infinity. How? Because, if I touch your hand you will say 'It is I'. If I touch your foot or head, you will still say 'It is I'. The 'I' would fain not identify itself with any part of the body.

"The mind is yet more interesting. You cannot give a full account of your mental activity even of the last five minutes, let alone of months and years. This mind which is defeated by five minutes, yet dares to understand the Infinite. So you see, an awareness of our own desire to know more is all that is required to begin with. It is like cutting one's way out of the forest. The bewilderment of being lost in a multitude of ways and means, is the natural state of the human being in the world. A sustained, uni-directional effort is required to work one's way out to a clearing to gain an unclouded vision. In other words, to attain to the stillness of perfect tranquillity, one must begin by focussing on the constantly wavering ebb and flow of one's own life-breath.

"The *sādhakā* knows that his aim is to know himself. He proceeds to harness the powerful force of the mind to a one-pointed attention toward this goal. The questions of Infinity, Oneness and other such questions must remain unanswered till the goal is reached. It is right that this should be so, because, unless one experiences a state of burning insufficiency one cannot go beyond, to the region of certitude, which transcends speech as well as silence."

Mataji would smile at the visitors and say, "How much more time will you spend at a wayside inn? Do you not want



to go home? Truly, how exquisite is the thought.....that all is One only. One is in himself the wanderer, the land of exile, the home-coming and the home.....Oneself is all that there is.....".

Mataji's words filled the hearts of the serious minded people who had gathered to listen to her. Nobody could hear enough of her beautiful exposition of the aspirations of a *sādhakā* but the time for farewell inevitably drew near.

From Deoghar Mataji returned to Uttar Pradesh again. This time she did not linger at any place but travelled on to Gujrat. Passing through Baroda and Chandod, she came on November 29th to Vyasatirtha, a remote site for *tapasyā* on the banks of the holy river Narmada. She was accompanied by Didi, Ruma Devi and Sadhanda only.

Vyasatirtha had been visited once before by Mataji when she had stayed there overnight. It was a forest retreat with only a few ashrams and temples nestling under the trees. The local people held the place in great veneration as the site where a great number of renowned ascetics had practised their *sādhana*. Although, Mataji was not known in this secluded corner, it was not long before she began to attract the notice of men and women living in retirement in huts and ashrams. The inmates of the ashram of one Swami Yogananda made room for her and her companions in their own building. She received as much care and attention from these strangers as in any place where she was well-known.

Mataji stayed in Vyasa for more than a month. Off and on people from Chandod, Baroda and other nearby places came to visit her. Sometimes she herself crossed the river by boat to the other shore and spent a night or so on temple verandas. Much of the time she sat under a big tamarind tree on the banks of the Narmada. Abhaya had joined them

and he would ask her questions about her life in Bajitpur, Dacca, etc. but mostly they sat in meditative silence in tune with the spirit of the holy place.

In Vyasa, Mataji came to know an elderly woman living in a cottage by herself, in retirement from the world. She subsisted on fruits and uncooked food only and thus came to be referred to as 'Phalāhāri Ma' in Mataji's circle. This woman, because of her piety and her grave and dignified deportment, was held in much respect by the local people. Mataji used to go and see her every now and then. It was obvious to Mataji's companions that Phalāhāri Ma did not quite welcome this intrusion in the beginning but after a few days they found that if Mataji did not visit her, she would come to their hut to see Mataji. In due course she became so attached to Mataji that she was visibly upset when Mataji went away, for the day, to the other side of the river. Abhaya remonstrated with Mataji on this issue, saying, "This poor soul was living in peace and solitude, why do you distract her attention? When you go away she will not know a moment's peace and yearn for your presence and all to no purpose, it seems to me." Mataji smiled mischievously but did not say anything. After a few days Phalāhāri Ma revealed the story of her life to Mataji in private. She was a widow. Her only daughter, the joy of her life, had died at the age of twenty. The light of the world had gone out for her then and she had abandoned it seeking forgetfulness in this remote place. She had carved out a life of strict regimentation for herself and was trying to engage in *sādhanā* in solitude. She also confessed that in some strange fashion Mataji reminded her of her beloved dead daughter. Mataji listened in sympathetic silence to this tale of grief and the brave effort toward overcoming the grief.

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1. One who eats fruits only.

On her next visit to Phalāhāri Ma, Mataji said, "Ma, you have said that I am like your daughter, so you are my mother, right?"

"Yes, yes."

"Then you will not mind if I call you 'Ma'?"

"Of course not."

Mataji at once began to call out in the appealing tones of a youngster for his mother, "Ma, Ma, Ma, Ma...."

Phalāhāri Ma became very agitated and her eyes filled with slow unaccustomed tears. Mataji stopped and then said to her in a very gentle tone, "Ma, you have in your time shed bitter and profuse tears. I have today mingled mine with yours."

On their way back Mataji was taken to task by Abhaya. "Why did you remind her of all that she is trying so hard to forget? Now you have destroyed her peace of mind altogether."

Mataji said, "It is not proper to bury your problems and sorrows and smooth them over. It is best to bring them out into the open so that they can be overcome and left behind."

After this incident, Phalāhāri Ma did seem a little more relaxed and approachable. She seemed less prone to stand aloof from any contact with the world and people. Who can say if one major reason for Mataji's visit to Vyasatirtha had not arisen out of the mute and real need of this woman, so bravely living a life of renunciation.

## Chapter Eighteen

### TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF MATAJI'S TEACHING

January 1939 : Mataji had very few companions with her while she travelled in Gujrat ; Ruma Devi and Abhaya, and at times Sadhan Brahmachari. But, as was only to be expected, it took hardly a little while for people to find out that she was in town and to gather at whatever place she was staying. She put up at Rambagh Dharmasāla in Dakore. Didi was sent away by Mataji to see to the affairs of the Kanya Ashram, saying that it was not proper to neglect a project after initiating it. Mataji knew that Didi's naive faith in all people doing their utmost to carry out any work which was started in her (Mataji's) name, was not justified. Didi was obedient to Mataji's suggestions regarding her own responsibilities for the institution she had brought into existence ; but she could not be convinced by Mataji or by anybody else that she would serve any good purpose anywhere, away from Mataji. In this instance, Didi, with a heavy heart, went to Allahabad to stay with the girls for a little while. The Kanya Ashram was housed in a garden-house near Daryaganj, in Allahabad at that time.

Mataji travelled through Baroda and Ratlam and stopped at Mathura. The people who were most concerned about her whereabouts and welfare lost contact with her after Mathura. Sadhanda and Abhaya had both been sent away and they wrote to the dismayed devotees that Mataji had expressed her wish to remain by herself for a while. There



was nothing for them to do but to abide in patience till Mataji should have the *kheyāla* to come into their midst again.

Mataji, it transpired later, had travelled right across North India and had come to Navadweep, accompanied by Ruma Devi only. For about thirteen days they lived on a boat on the Ganges, belonging to one Ramraj. Ramraj was at first a little wary of his unusual passengers. Unobtrusively, he would keep watch on their activities. Soon word travelled regarding the presence of a striking lady and her companion on the banks of the Ganges. The local Police Station sent a constable to make enquiries about these visitors. Ramraj had a long talk with the constable. He said that as far as he could see, Mataji was no ordinary human being but surely a *devi*. The constable was himself likewise impressed, and enjoining on the boatman to look after his passengers carefully, he left.

During the day the boat was rowed away from the crowded shore and during the night it was brought back again to the river-side. Ramraj and his fellow boatmen became self-constituted guards and care-takers of Mataji. This was not at all unusual for her because it can be seen that wherever she goes, she evokes this response of care and concern in people. For this it is not necessary for her to speak. As a matter of fact not many people could understand Hindi in Gujrat, where she had travelled extensively. Wherever she is, people are irresistibly drawn to her as if she were the most cherished person and feel impelled to do their best for her. And so it was with the simple men who plied boats on the Ganges for a living.

Abhaya managed to find his way back to Mataji and procured her permission to inform other people about her whereabouts. Within a day or two a crowd collected at Navadweep. The grateful devotees felicitated Ramraj on his good fortune

and the latter received so many gifts as would be beyond his wildest imaginations.

By the end of February Mataji left Navadweep to go to Puri. From there she went to Deoghar via Calcutta and then to Banaras on March 5th. In Banaras Mataji stayed at Hari's Dharmaśālā this time, but only for a day. On March 6th, she came to Vindhyachal. Didi, who was waiting all this while impatiently for permission to rejoin her, was able to do so now.

Didi was troubled by practical problems concerning the arrangements to be made at the various ashrams. The inmates eagerly awaited some definitive instructions from Mataji regarding daily life. They were not prepared psychologically to obey any other authority. Didi was always put in a quandary over this matter because nobody had relegated any authority to any one person and everyone was, more or less, free to do as he or she liked. In general this worked quite well, but at times some readjustments had to be made. Didi stuck to the principle that everything should be brought to the notice of Mataji in order that her *kheyāla* might be evoked. In this connection, it may be recalled that Bhaiji had had a totally different approach. He had never wanted to trouble Mataji with details of practical matters. Didi, on the other hand, never imagined any issue to be too trivial for Mataji. In this instance, to Didi's appeals for some mandatory advice, Mataji answered, "I have only one thing to say: All of you together, in conformity with each other, should strive for your spiritual well-being. You, who are looking for that great Unity, can you not be united in your search for it?"

At Vindhyachal, visitors arrived from Banaras, Allahabad, and Mirzapur, the nearest towns. Sitting among a group of visitors one day, Mataji said, "Strive for Immortality."

Somebody remarked, "It is difficult to know which is the true path." Mataji rejoined, "If you sit with all doors and windows closed, how can you see the path? Open the door and step out, the path will become visible. Once on the way, you will meet other way-farers, who will advise and guide you as to the path. Your job is to muster whatever strength you have to get underway—thereafter help is assured."

Another person raised the question of will and grace. Mataji said, "Yes, it is true that there is naught else but grace, but one has to bring oneself to the realization that *this is so*; that one has no independent power to go counter to the flow of grace. What I say is that a little effort is required to reach the current, as it were. Supposing you are going to the river for a swim. First you will have to walk to the river. Secondly you will have to swim out to the current. Once there, you will find that the current is guiding you; that you have nothing further to do but relax and float with it. It is also true that the initial effort which is required of you is possible because of the gift of the will in you. It is only right that you should make proper use of this gift which you know as your will."

One day a group of women came to see Mataji. Mataji greeted them in the manner of old friends renewing acquaintance. They did not immediately perceive Mataji's intention and answered that they had not met her before and that this was their first visit to the Ashram. Mataji expressed great surprise, "How is this! You have forgotten me! Forgetfulness creates difficulties, you know. When you are in possession of something and forget about it, much hardship is caused in looking around for it when the need for it arises."

The women then caught the trend of Mataji's talk and in answer to her further question, "What family do you have?" one of them answered, "We have nobody but you."



"Then you should never 'go away and leave me!'"

In a more serious mood, Mataji said, "Look, will you do something for me? Take a little time from your housework every day and devote it towards acquiring peace. Even the Government gives leave of one day a week from work. Break the routine of housework every day for a little while to remember His name. This will be my sustenance too."

Mataji left Vindhyachal soon enough and passing through Banaras again, came to Delhi, on March 25th. The devotees of Delhi received her at the Railway Station and escorted her to the new Ashram in the city.

This visit was of specially great moment to the people of Delhi, because Mataji had not been there since the purchase of a building, which was to be the Ashram for the time being.

Crowds began to assemble. The women left their household duties to come to the Ashram. The men came from their offices as soon as they could. Delhi, like Dacca had a great tradition of *kirtan*, because the nucleus of the party of devotees, in general, belonged to the Harisabha. This was the time for Vāsanti Pūjā as well. Elaborate arrangements for pūjā, kirtan and other festivities were made. Mataji's presence enhanced the joyous atmosphere a thousandfold.

On invitation, Mataji visited the Birla Temple and also the Valmiki Temple to participate in kirtan with the Harijans. One day Dr. J. K. Sen, one of the elders of the group of devotees, took her to visit a friend, who was a renowned Kaviraj (an authority on Indian medicine). After a little conversation, the Kaviraj asked Mataji, "What proof is there, that there is God?"

"What proof is there that you are?"

"Simple. I perceive that I am."

"Who is this 'I'?"



"Ma, I do not want to engage in a philosophical discussion, I want to know from you plainly and simply if God is a reality."

Mataji, entering into the spirit of the question, answered emphatically, "God is a reality just as you are to yourself."

The Kaviraj professed himself happy and satisfied with this answer.

Mataji's visit to Delhi drew to a close. She gently countered innumerable pleas for staying longer. The people of Delhi sadly bade her farewell even while the devotees of Dehradun were preparing to welcome her in their midst. This was the inevitable pattern of Mataji's unceasing travels. The various towns had come to know the thrill of excitement at the prospect of her visit and also the dejection of spirit which followed her departure.

Mataji came to Dehradun on April 9th. An important event took place on April 13th, 1939. Didima was initiated into the order of Samnyāsis by Mangal Giri Maharaj of Kankhal.

For long Didima had expressed her sole desire to be allowed to accompany Mataji on her travels. She had no other wish than to be with Mataji. Although, her youngest son Makhan had been married recently, she could not be persuaded to take up residence with them, so that she would be comfortable and looked after properly. Since her husband's death, she considered herself as having discharged fully her obligations to her family and ready to take up the life of an ascetic. It is not that she thought out the matter in this way or that her whole life had not been one of self-sacrifice, discipline and fortitude. The fact was plain and simply that she wanted to be with Mataji and did not count the cost of the hardships of ceaseless travel. On one occasion Mataji had mentioned that in general, her constant

companions were renunciates; Didima had no difficulty at all in accepting this as a prerequisite for this privilege as it were. All those who have known Didima will readily understand that the ritualistic transformation was a formal recognition of her whole way of life. She always had been the very personification of self-effacement and other-worldliness. It can be said that in her own characteristic gentle way, she brought grace and dignity to the order of asceticism.

The *sahnyāsa* of a woman is not at all usual. An opportunity presented itself for this rather rare event when the very much revered and renowned Mangala Giri Maharaj of Sri Bhola Giri Ashram, Hardwar, agreed to initiate Didima into *Sahnyāsa*. The holy man was, in general, a recluse and did not encourage random visitors to his Ashram. Mataji, however had always been a privileged guest. It may be said that Mangala Giri Maharaj had the distinction of according due recognition and honour to Mataji at a time when she was yet to be known in ascetic circles.

A crowd assembled in Kankhal at Giriji's Ashram for the ceremony. In the early hours of the morning, after a night's vigil, Didima was initiated into the ascetic order and given the ochre robes of the *sahnyāsi*. Her new name was now Muktananda Giri.

Mataji said, "You always say that I never give you any advice as I do to others regarding spiritual well-being. Have I not spoken to you now in asking this of you? It is indeed a great good fortune for anyone to attain freedom to devote oneself wholly toward Self-realization."

After a few days, on May 3rd, Mataji accompanied by a small party, started for Uttarkashi. The mountain path was long and arduous, being used only by pilgrims and ascetics. Covering the distance in slow marches they arrived at Uttarkashi on May 7th. In addition to Didi and Akhanda-

nandaji there were Ruma Devi, Abhaya, Keshava Bhai (as he is known now), Kanu, Sisir and Kamalakanta in the party. This being the time of Mataji's Birthday, they managed somehow to celebrate the auspicious occasion. The simplicity of the pūjā performed by Didi was more than made up by the grandeur of the Himalayas.

In Uttarkashi Mataji acquired a following of a bunch of school children. They spent their free time with her, a few venturing to engage in conversations, the rest communicating with shy smiles. Mataji asked if they would have her as their friend. This being readily accepted, they were asked if they were willing to do what their friend may request of them. This also being granted Mataji told them about her five-point programme for children : (i) To remember God every morning and then pray to Him to make one a good boy/girl ; (ii) to obey one's parents and teachers, (iii) to be truthful ; (iv) to study well ; (v) in case the above four were carried out, to feel free to be a little naughty if one were so inclined. The children laughed with her and promised to remember her words.

Abhaya raised a characteristic question one day to Didi. He asked if she had ever seen Mataji doze at any time ? Didi, not uncharacteristically, had never given this matter a thought, and answered with growing wonderment, "You know Abhaya, I never have, for the matter of that, nobody has ever seen Ma overcome by sleep. Even when she was sitting for more than twelve hours at a stretch, as so frequently happened in Dacca, we never saw her dozing or even fatigued. This was the main reason why the fact that Ma was sitting for long hours, went unnoticed. On the other hand I must say that whenever I happen to doze off while sitting in a satsang, I wake up with a jerk to find Ma's eyes on me ! This happens without exception. When I am quite alert and



listening to kirtan or the discourse, I hope that Ma would notice what an intelligent interest I am taking in the proceedings, but no, as soon as my eyes begin to close, I find her regarding me steadily !"

Mataji joined in the general laughter and said, "You see, her thoughts are always directed here (towards Mataji) ; no matter what she is doing or with whom she is talking, her thoughts remain one-pointed ; but when she dozes off this thread is broken and my *kheylla* is drawn to her."

After a few days it was decided to attempt the hard climb to Gangotri (10,000 ft.), the visible source of the holy Ganges. Starting on May 12th and climbing slowly the hazardous mountain path, they arrived at Gangotri in the evening of May 16th. Here they were pleased to find Swami Paramanandaji, who had met Mataji previously, and who now was happy to be able to be of considerable service to the party. Paramanandaji had been living in Gangotri for the past few years and was familiar with local conditions. He dissuaded Abhaya and others from attempting the further climb to Gomukh, the site of the cave out of which the Ganges is seen to emerge. Gomukh is considered to be the end of the journey because nobody can penetrate any further into the cave. It seemed that the hard climb had been made harder at this time by frequent avalanches. The project was therefore abandoned.

Mataji and her companions stayed at Gangotri for three days. They put up at the dharamsālā. By order of the Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal, no householders were allowed to stay in Gangotri. The few log huts were occupied by ascetics and pilgrims. During the winter, the hard core of inhabitants had to descend to Uttarkashi. This is how Paramanandaji had spent 6-7 years of his life in these places.

The party returned to Uttarkashi on May 23rd. Everyone was in need of rest, so they welcomed the respite from climb-



ing and also the prospect of staying for a few days surrounded by the wonderful scenic beauty of the Himalayas.

Mataji had a visitor even in this remote place. Bankey Bihari, a lawyer from Allahabad came to Uttarkashi in the hope of spending a few days with her. He said one day, "One of my European friends, who makes a practice of visiting mahātmās, was saying to me, 'Everyone that I have come across seems to have something characteristically his own to say. But Mataji's very special characteristic seems to be just her smile.'"

On another occasion, but somewhat in the same context, Abhaya said to Mataji in a mood of dissatisfaction choosing deliberately to misinterpret her smile. "It would have been much better if you were a creature (*jīva*) like us. Then you would be able to understand our misery, and not be amused at our predicament. Sri Paramhansadeva and Sri Chaitanyadeva were much better than you. They commiserated with the sorrows of men."

Mataji entered into the spirit of Abhaya's disgruntled accusation, saying, "You can't expect everyone to be the same as everyone else! There are infinite manifestations of the Infinite, there has to be better and worse!"

Abhaya persisted, "If we cannot receive anything from you, in what way should you be called higher than us?"

"Who says I am higher? Just because they make me sit on a cot, and you are sitting on the floor? I am just like one of you."

Abhaya was silenced for the time being. His question in effect, continues to be asked many times and in many ways by the merely curious, or even by the *sādhaka* who yearns for Knowledge. How should we understand the presence of Mataji in our midst? We find that she does not seek to establish any philosophy of her own because she affirms the

faiths and convictions of all religious disciplines. The only 'message' she seeks always to convey to all who come to her is that man's only and highest duty is to be established in Self-realization. To the question: "If you have no mission to fulfill or message to give, why do you tell us to worship God?" Mataji has replied, "If you do not ask, then I have nothing to say; but if you ask, and if it is my *kheyāla*, then certainly I shall tell you about the better way of life (*Śreyas*)."

So we see that Mataji in effect teaches us how to live in the world in which we find ourselves. In listening to her we glimpse the possibility of understanding the meaning of life. The Indian tradition is one of holding together the ideal of renunciation and also a full involvement in the world as responsible citizens. Mataji by her living example shows the people the ideal form of this unity, a state where the two are not two but one. She is a living personification of the identity of this world and the spiritual world. She has no reason to choose, elect, or reject and therefore everyone experiences the same quality of welcome from her. She asks her people to live constantly in the remembrance of God and that all else would be made available to them.

This brings us to the crux of the matter: Everyone, who is touched with yearning for Knowledge so to say, knows that God is to be worshipped. Even for the devout, this knowledge is not enough to engage the will toward God or Self-realization. Or in other words, men are helplessly enmeshed in the world and are a prey to despair. The words of promise read in scriptures are not enough to dispel moods of hopelessness. In a world given over to considerations of mundane activities, Mataji appears as the living presence of Divine Grace. In hearkening to the following words spoken by her some time after Abhaya's question and perhaps in answer to it, one may learn to hope again: "There is no cause for anxiety

at all. I ask you to make an effort toward Self-knowledge, because all of you exercise your will in the world. You have a sense of obligation which prevents you from being negligent or unmindful of your duties ; so I enjoin upon you not to be indifferent towards that which is of ultimate importance. However, it goes without saying that nothing is possible without God's grace. It is somewhat like—and yet unlike—applying for a job. You cannot hope to be considered unless you apply. But there is no surety of getting the job either. One must make an application and then await results. The difference is that no effort is futile in the sphere of grace. I tell you there is no cause for despair. Be convinced that success is assured. Never allow yourself to think to the contrary. Despondency and doubt are uncalled for. Pursue your goal with the greatest optimism you can command. I tell you it is as I say it is !”

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