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—Dehradun, 1969



A scene from the Bhāgawat Pārāyana

Varanasi, 21st February, 1970

Just as there is a veil of ignorance for the individual,
So there is also a door to Knowledge.

MĀTRI VĀNI

The remembrance of God must be with a human being day and night so that he may be cleansed from his shortcomings and errors.

* * *

In order to solve his queries and doubts, it is incumbent on man to be engrossed in spiritual practice.

* * *

Human beings have to be dwellers of the inner cave so that God who resides within may be revealed.

* * *

A man can be recognized as a human being by his worthy character. A human being is in fact a traveller towards the realization of the superman. Each one should advance with his gaze fixed in this direction. A spiritual atmosphere and satsang will be helpful in this pursuit.

* * *

Those who have adopted the ashram of the householder should be model householders and live according to the precepts of *dharma*. Endeavour to know yourself.

* * *

Through the ever new transformations of a life dedicated to the Supreme Quest, one must strive to become firmly established in one's true Self (*Swarūpa*).

* * *

In the proximity of Him from whom Creation and Preservation emerge is all coming and going. Everything is within His dispensation, is indeed with Him. Thus, solely by the remembrance, the realization of Him, everything is found—supreme peace and supreme bliss.

* * *

God is the one and only friend of the pilgrim to the Ultimate. He should act in this spirit so that he may come to accept Him as his all in all. Unless one is single minded there will be obstacles at every step.

* * *

To keep company with Mahātmās, to associate with great souls means to put into practice precisely what one has heard them say.

*

*

*

Just as a flower contains seeds that can be seen only when it opens, and in the seed again the tree is potentially present, so also He resides within you. By practising *sādhana* this may come to light—in other words, if the veil of ignorance can be destroyed, the One who is Self - effulgent will be realized. Just as the whole tree is potentially contained in the seed, in a similar manner, He in His fulness is enthroned within you.

SOME ASPECTS OF THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF THE EAST BENGAL SAINT SRI SRI ANANDAMAYĪ MĀ* †

Dr. Alexander Lipski

(Professor Alexander Lipski, Ph. D. is the Director for Asian Studies at the California State College, Long Beach. On the occasion of his visit to India in 1965 he met Mataji several times).

One of the striking features of Indian culture is the continued vitality of Hinduism. Throughout the ages Hinduism has produced inspiring personages, capable of infusing Hinduism with new vigor. In modern times, in response to the challenge of the West, it has demonstrated again its remarkable resilience. Any assessment of the interaction of modernization and tradition in India must, therefore, give due consideration to the strength of traditional thought. It is well known that Bengal has not only played a significant role in India's modernization but also in the preservation of tradition. Even the most secularly inclined historian will admit the importance of the Hindu revival brought about by the great saint from

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† This article was originally presented at the Fourth Annual Conference on Bengal Studies, May 17, 1968, at Colgate University.

1 The most important source for the life of Ānandamāyī Mā is Brahmācārinī Gurupriyā's *Sri Sri Mā Anandamāyī* (hereafter cited as "S. S. M. A.") (3d ed. ; Bhādāinī, Benares, 1956-64). So far, thirteen volumes of this most detailed record of Ānandamāyī Mā's activities have appeared. Other important books published by Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha in Bengali are *Gangāsamīran* and *Bibhupada Kīrti, Anandamāyī Mā* (Bhādāinī, Benares, 1952); Kumārcandra Bhaṭṭacārya (comp.), *Sri Sri Anandamāyī Updesamṛta-Samgraha* (Bhādāinī, Benares, 1952); Śaileś Brahmācārī, *Sono Bali Mayer Katha* (Bhādāinī Benares, 1955); Gurupriyā Devī, *Akhanda Mahayajna* (Bhādāinī, Benares, n. d.); Bhāiji, *Matydarśana* (3d ed. ; Bhādāinī, Benares, 1966), translated into English by G. Das Gupta under the title *Mother as Revealed to me* (3d ed ; Benares, 1962); Gurupriyā Devī, *Matyvanī* (Bhādāinī, Benares, n. d.), translated into English by Bramacharinee Atmananda under the title *Matyvanī* (Benares, 1959). In addition, Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha published in English *Mother as Seen by Her Devotees* (Bhādāinī, Benares, 1956) and *Words of Sri Anandamayi Ma*, trans. and comp. Atmananda (Benares, 1961). A quarterly, *Ananda Vārtā*, has been published since 1951 in Bengali, Hindi, and English. From 1955 on, three separate editions have been issued : (a) Bengali-English, b) Hindi-English, and (c) English. The English edition does not always contain the same material as the Bengali or Hindi editions. In 1965 Gaṅgeścandra Cakravartī published the first volume of his *Viśvajānani Ananda-Māyī Mā* (Calcutta ; Viśvanāth Mukhopādhyāya).

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West Bengal, Rāmakṛṣṇa. Just ten years after the death of Rāmakṛṣṇa, East Bengal gave birth to another great religious leader, Ānandamayī Mā, whose life in some ways bears a resemblance to that of Rāmakṛṣṇa. To this day Ānandamayī Mā continues vigorously to uphold traditional Hinduism.

The historian who ventures to deal with Ānandamayī Mā's life encounters considerable obstacles. Her followers have stressed the fact that she was a fully realized being from birth. Also, those who know her consider her being more important than her actions. Even a poet cannot easily portray being, much less so a historian. Moreover, after 1926, when her *sādhana* was completed, there has been no noticeable evolution in her life. As far as her teachings are concerned, they appear fully formulated from the beginning. Thus the historian cannot show a gradual unfoldment of ideas.

Nirmalā Sundarī, later to be known as Ānandamayī Mā (Bliss-permeated Mother) or briefly as *Mātājī*, was born in the tiny village of Kheora in the Tripurāh district of East Bengal on April 30, 1896 (19th Baisākh 1303 Bengal Era) in an orthodox Vaiṣṇava family. Her father, Bipinbihārī Bhaṭṭācārya, a Brahman originally from the village of Vidyakūṭ, was ascetically inclined and a great lover of *kīrtana*. For long stretches of time he would leave his family and accompany visiting *kīrtana* parties. Her mother, Mokshadā Sundarī later known as Didimā, came from a family that had produced many pandits³. It was a matter of family pride that there had been a recent case of joyous *sati* among Didimā's paternal relatives⁴. The house in which Ānandamayī Mā grew up was surrounded by the homes of Muslims, chiefly illiterate peasants. Apparently the

There is a German work by Melita Maschmann, *Der Tiger singt Kirtana* (Weilheim, Oberbayern : Otto Wilhelm Barth-Verlag, 1967) and a French work by Arnaud Desjardins, *Ashrams—Les yogis et les sages* (Paris : La Palatine, n. d.). Desjardins' book was not available to me. However, portions of the book have appeared in *Ananda Vārtā*. A brief reference to Ānandamayī Mā can be found in Richard Lannoy, *India : People and Places* (New York : Vanguard Press, 1955), pp. 17-18. Arthur Koestler devotes a portion of his chapter "Four Contemporary Saints" in his book *The Lotus and the Robot* (New York : Macmillan Co., 1961), pp. 63-84, to an appraisal of Ānandamayī Mā. It appears to me that Koestler was prevented by his ethnocentricity from understanding some of the deeper aspects of Indian spirituality. He himself admits : "Thus, in a sense, I came back impoverished rather than enriched. I felt that I had been put in my place—and that my place was Europe" (p. 282).

Finally there are two brief accounts of Ānandamayī Mā's life in Benoy Gopal Ray, *Religious Movements in Modern Bengal* (Santiniketan : Visva-Bharati, 1965), pp. 128-29, and in P. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (New York : Philosophical Library, 1946), pp. 454-59.

3. S. S.M.A., I, k (Introduction).

4. *Ibid.*, p.g: Bhāijī, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

Muslim neighbours were extremely fond of Ānandamayī Mā, who frequently visited their homes. Indicative of her mother's orthodoxy is the statement attributed to her : "As long as *annaprasanna* [ceremony when a baby first takes rice (solid food) at about five or six months] has not taken place, it is no sin to touch a Muslim. After that such contact requires an ablution."⁵

As a result of her father's disregard for worldly success, Anandamayī Mā's family was in extremely poor financial circumstances and could not afford to let her attend school regularly. Often she was kept at home to help with the housework and to take care of her little brothers.⁶ At most, she attended elementary school for two years, and she never acquired a mastery of reading and writing. In later years when asked to autograph a book, she would sign with a dot.⁷

In 1908, when Anandamayī Mā was almost thirteen years old her parents married her to Ramanimohan Cakravarti, a Brahman from Aṭpā rā near Dacca. Her husband, later on usually referred to as Bholanāth or Pitāji, was a Śakta. Through him Anandamayī Mā changed from Kṛṣṇa to Kālī worship. It must be pointed out that the marriage was never physically consummated. Bholanath apparently had implicit faith in Anandamayī Mā and was willing to accept the exceedingly unconventional marriage which initially placed him in an awkward position toward his family. Ultimately he looked upon her as his guru. Anandamayī Mā, on the other hand, throughout their married life (Bholanath died in 1938) combined the role of a devoted wife with that of a spiritual guide.⁸

The first four years after the wedding, Bholanath continued to live in Aṭpā rā, where he was employed in the police department, while Anandamayī Mā kept house for his eldest brother, Revatimohan Cakravarti, in Śripur. While she was normally extremely efficient in performing various household chores, there were times when she was overcome by spells of fainting. On one occasion, she was found lying unconscious on the kitchen floor when the smell of burnt food attracted the family.⁹

5. S.S.M.A., I, j.

6. Ānandamayī Mā was the second child. One elder sister had died prior to Ānandamayī Mā's birth. Four brothers and two sisters were born afterwards. *Ibid.*, pp kh, ch—j

7. B. Mukerji, "From the Life of Sri Sri Mā Anandamayī," *Ānanda Vārtā*, English sec., V, No. 1 (May, 1957), 50; Swami Madhav Tirtha, "Conversations with Mataji at Gujrat," *Ānanda Vārtā*, English sec., VIII, No. (November, 1960), 158.

8. Mukerji, "From the life of Sri Sri Mā Anandamayī," *Ānanda Vārtā*, English sec., V, No. 2 (August, 1957), 151-52; S.S.M.A. I., jh—n

9. S.S.M.A. I, n: Mukerji, "From the Life of Sri Sri Mā Anandamayī," V, No. 2 (cited in n 8 above) 152—54

In 1913, at the age of seventeen, Anandamayi Ma joined Bholanath, who had found employment in the Land Settlement Department in Aṣṭagrāma. In Aṣṭagrāma they were the tenants of one Jaiśankar Sen, whose wife was so charmed by Anandamayi Ma's blissful nature that she referred to her as "Khusir Ma" (Happy or Cheerful Mother).¹⁰ Harakumar Ray, a brother of Sen's wife, was the first to address her as "Ma" and to prostrate himself in front of her. He started coming daily for *prasāda*.¹¹ Supposedly he predicted : "You will see, I began calling you Mother. Some day the whole world will call you so."¹²

A new phase in Anandamayi Ma's life began in 1917, when Bholanath procured a position in Bajitpur. In later years Anandamayi Ma referred to the next six years (1917-23) as the period when it was her *kheyāla* (free will manifesting itself spontaneously)¹³ to play the role of a *sādhikā* : "Let me tell you that what I am, I have been from infancy. But when the different stages of *sādhana* were being manifested through this body¹⁴ there was something like a superimposition of *ajñāna* [ignorance]. But what sort of *ajñāna* was that ? It was really *jñāna* [knowledge] masquerading as *jñāna*."¹⁵ During these years various strange phenomena have been recorded by her followers. Often during *kirtana* her body would suddenly stiffen, and she would lose consciousness. At times mantras spontaneously proceeded from her lips; or her limbs formed into various yogic postures. It is reported that she passed at a rapid succession through every kind of *sādhana* described in Hindu scriptures as well as those of other religions.¹⁶ At first Bholanath was greatly disturbed and consulted various exorcists and doctors. Finally, a distinguished physician, Dr. Mahendra C. Nandi from Kalikaccha, assured him that what appeared to be fainting spells, resembling attacks of epilepsy, were in fact signs of God intoxication.¹⁷

10. S.S.M.A., I, t—th.

11. *Ibid.*, I, th—d.

12. *Ibid.*, I, dh.

13. Ordinarily *kheyāla* means fancy, whim, tendency, or imagination. In Anandamayī Mā's case the translation given has been suggested. See "Matri Vani" *Ananda Vārtā* English sec. III No. 3 (November 1955), 204.

14. Anandamayī Mā refers to herself usually as "this body" or as "this little daughter of yours"; see "Mataji's Amara Vani," *Ananda Vārtā*, English sec. III, No. 3 (November 1955), 206.

15. Vijaiananda (A. J. Weintrob). "What Mother is Not," *Ananda Vārtā*, English sec. VIII, No. 1 (May, 1960), 20.

16. "Matri Līla," *Ananda Vārtā*, English sec., VI, No. 3 (November 1958) 250; S.S.M.A., I, n—d.

17. S.S.M.A., I, dh.

In 1922, at the time of *Jhulana* (Swing Festival), Ānandamayī Ma bestowed upon herself *dīkṣā* (initiation). There were no external accessories. She herself assumed the role of guru, mantra, and *iṣṭa* (chosen deity). Even now her followers observe the time of her *dīkṣā* with meditation.¹⁸ Five months after her own initiation, Ānandamayī Mā conferred *dīkṣā* upon Bholānāth. There is only one other instance known when she gave *dīkṣā*. As a rule she insisted that she was not a guru, and she refused to initiate her disciples.¹⁹ Before the end of 1922, she began a three years' period of silence, with occasional interludes, when she would utter Sanskrit mantras or give short talks to the increasing number of visiting devotees.²⁰

While Ānandamayī Ma was still observing silence, she moved with Bholanath to Dacca in 1924. Bholanath had lost his position in Bajitpur and concluded that it would be easier to find employment in a larger town. He secured an appointment as manager of the nawab of Dacca's Shah-bag garden. For the next six years (1924-29) Bholanath and Anandamayī Ma lived in a little cottage in that garden. Six months after her arrival in Dacca, Anandamayī Ma terminated her silence. Immediately thereafter, however, she started on a dietary regimen. For a while she did not eat more than three morsels a day. Then again she would fast completely, once for sixteen days and another time for twenty-three days. Before the end of 1924 she lost the ability to feed herself. Food would simply slip through her fingers when she attempted to raise them to her mouth. To this day she is being fed by one of her disciples.²¹

Knowledge of Anandamayī Ma's strangely exalted spiritual state had preceded her arrival at Shah-bag. There was, therefore, a steady stream of visitors to the "Mother of Shah-bag." as she was soon called. Daily *kirtana* was performed in her cottage. Her first public appearance occurred during the Kali *pūjā* of 1925. When first requested to perform *pūjā*, she declined claiming that she did not know sufficiently the *śāstric* rites. Ultimately she did perform *pūjā*, and to the astonishment of the audience, she placed flowers and sandal paste upon her own head instead of on the image of Kali. One disciple describing the *pūjā* stated : "At that time all were under the spell of the compassionate Mother's uncommonly beautiful sight and throughout the ceremony all were deeply absorbed."²²

18. *Ibid.*, pp. dh—n ; "Matri Lila." pp. 250-51.

19. S. S. M. A., I, p—b ; in 1937 she initiated J. C. Rāy (Bhāiji) in *samnyāsa*. Bhāiji, *op. cit.*, p. I (Preface).

20. Bhāiji, *op. cit.*, p. 28 ; S. S. M. A., I, b.

21. S. S. M. A., I, 11-13, 58-59, 88-92 ; Bhāiji, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-87.

22. Bhāiji, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

During a public *kirtana* in Anandamayi Ma's home on the occasion of the winter solstice, Anandamayi Ma suddenly arose and, totally oblivious to her surroundings, ecstatically danced in rhythm with the *kirtana*. One disciple later declared that it reminded him of the *Mahābhāva* of Lord Gauranga. To others she appeared to be the visible embodiment of the Mother of the Universe.²³ In 1926 Anandamayi Ma was again asked to perform the Kali *pūjā*. Without explanation she again deviated from the usual procedure. When the *pūjā* drew to a close and *pūrṇahūti* (the last oblation) arrived, she did not permit it to be offered and ordered the preservation of the sacrificial fire. The fire is still kept burning in Vindhya-cala and Benares, where it was transferred at Partition.²⁴ On the following day, when the immersion of the image of Kali was to take place, Anandamayi Ma took the further unusual step to order the preservation of the statue for the purpose of making it available for future worship. She issued specific instructions to the effect that on her birthday the image be made accessible for *darśana* to people of all castes and creeds.²⁵

The performance of Hindu rites in the nawab's garden did not encounter opposition from the Muslims. Anandamai Ma even gained the respect and affection of the nawab's family and of many neighbouring Muslims. Two incidents are reported that help to explain her popularity with Muslims and indicate that she was beyond narrow creedal confines. Once when Anandamayi Ma passed close to the grave of a *faqir* in the Shah-bag garden, she was observed performing *namaz* (Muslim prayer) and uttering phrases that upon examination proved to be verses from the Koran.²⁶ On another occasion, during *kirtana*, she noticed a Muslim watching her from a distance. She thereupon moved toward him chanting "Allah, Allahu Akbar."²⁷ Anandamayi Ma gradually acquired a number of devoted Muslim disciples. Partially this can be explained by the fact that there are quite a few Muslim worshippers of Kālī in East Bengal. In any case, she always stressed that she had equal respect for all religions and that in her eyes *kirtana* and *namaz* were one and the same.²⁸ She also stated that she considered herself "a Christian, a Muslim, anything you like."²⁹ With her emphasis on the equality of all religious paths, she, as

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35 ; see also footnote in the English translation, *Mother as Revealed to Me*, p. 44.

25. Bhālji, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

29. Atmananda, "Old Diary Leaves," *Ananda Varta*, English sec., XIV, No 1 (May, 1966), 32.

many an Indian, understandably objects to the exclusive claims of Christianity : "If Christianity claims a special position for itself and places itself apart, it thereby breaks up all other religions. We recognize Jesus Christ, but within the unity of all religions. He Himself stands above this aloofness."³⁰

As Anandamayi Ma became increasingly accessible to the public, it was becoming quite common for people from all over East Bengal to seek her *darśana*. By 1926 some of her most loyal disciples—the nucleus of a future inner circle—had appeared. Among them was Śaśāṅkamohan Mukhopadhyaya, a retired civil surgeon from Dacca, who was later initiated in *sannyāsa* under the name of Swami Akhandananda Giri. His second eldest daughter, Didi Gurupriya Devi, usually referred to as Didi, became Anandamayi Ma's close assistant. When Anandamayi Ma first met Didi, she is said to have exclaimed : "Where have you been all this time ?"³¹ This reminds one of Ramakṛṣṇa's similar exclamation upon meeting Narendranath Datta, the future Swami Vivekananda. Didi carried out almost singlehandedly the administration of the various ashrams founded from 1929 onwards and after, until the establishment of a regular organization, the Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha, in 1950. At the same time she compiled in her diary an extensive record of Anandamayi Ma's daily life.³² Reputedly the most devoted disciple was Jyotiścandra Ray, known as "Bhaiji," a personal assistant to the director of agriculture in Dacca. Deeply impressed by the blissful nature of the "Mother of Shah-bag," Bhaiji was the first to suggest that in future she be called Anandamayi Ma.³³ And Bhaiji was also chiefly responsible for the establishment of the Ramaṇa Ashram in Dacca in 1929 the first of twenty-one Ashrams in northern and central India, to serve as centres for Anandamayi Ma's spiritual activities.³⁴

With the founding of the Ramaṇa Ashram, the "Shah-bag" phase of Anandamayi Ma's *līlā* ended. Henceforth she abandoned all stationary life, and since that time she has been incessantly traveling throughout northern and central India, and occasionally in southern India, following her *kheyāla*. She remains at a certain place for several days or at the most for a few weeks or months. Wherever she stays, there ensues an intense spiritual activity : chanting of *kīrtana*, meditation, recitations

30. Atmananda, "New Diary Leaves," *Ananda Varta*, English sec., XI, No. 4 (February, 1964), 185.

31. Mukerji, "From the Life of Sri Sri Ma Anandamayi," *Ananda Varta*, English sec., VI, No. 3 (November, 1958), 241—42.

32. "Matri Līlā," pp. 248—49.

33. *Bhāijī*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 121—24.

from the Gita, the Upanisads, the *Puranas*, discourses by visiting mahatmas and scholar-disciples, general question and answer periods, interspersed with individual interviews, known as "privates," one of the English words Anandamayi Ma has incorporated into her vocabulary (she has also acquired a good knowledge of Hindi). All Hindu festivals are celebrated with careful observance of *śāstric* rites.³⁵ While Anandamayi Ma personally has no need for ceremonies, she knows that the majority of people have not attained her level of understanding, and she tries to wean them from a mere mechanical observance of rites and to make them aware of the underlying significance of ceremonials: "Pūjā is done so that real pūjā may come about.... What does it mean to perform real pūjā? To give oneself entirely to the object of one's worship.... When one's dedication becomes complete, He reveals Himself. To find Him means to find Oneself and to find Oneself means to find Him."³⁶ Not only are pūjās regularly performed at her ashrams, but she also does not belittle Vedic yajñas. In fact, from 1947 to 1950 a giant yajña was performed at her ashram in Benares "for the good of the whole world."³⁷ Mahatmas from all over India participated, and thousands of Brahmans were entertained.³⁸

By dedicating a *mahā yajña* to the entire world, Anandamayi Ma clearly indicated the fact that she did not consider the scope of her activity limited to East Bengal: "From a practical point of view this body belongs to East Bengal and is a brahman by caste, but if you detach yourself from all these artificial attributes, you will understand that this body belongs to one common human family."³⁹ After 1932 she only occasionally visited East Bengal until Partition, when such visits naturally ceased. Visits to West Bengal occur at regular intervals, and when Durgā pūjā is celebrated in Calcutta it turns into a mass affair. Thousands of *darśana* seekers literally mob Anandamayi Ma.⁴⁰ Even at the present time, Bengalis constitute a large proportion of the "inner core" of

35. Gaṅgāsamīran and Bibhupada Kīrti, *op. cit.*, pp. 18—19 (Appendix); Gurupriyā Devī, "Dāyerīr kayek prṣṭā," *Ananda Vārtā*, Bengali sec., XII, No. 1 (May, 1964), 3—10; XIII, No. 4 (February, 1966), 142—45; XV, No. 3 (November, 1967), 128—37; *Mother as seen by Her Devotees*, p. 38.

36. Atmananda, "New Diary Leaves," *Ananda Vārtā*, English sec., VIII, No. 2 (August, 1960), 92.

37. *Mother as Seen by Her Devotees*, p. 50; The yajña is described in detail in *Gurupriyā Devī, Akhanda Mahayajña*.

38. *Mother as seen by Her Devotees*.

39. Bhāijī, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

40. "Matri Lila," *Ananda Vārtā*, English sec., XII, No. 4 (February, 1966), 180—81; III, No. 3 (November, 1955), 241; information about the Durgā pūjā in Calcutta has also been supplied to the writer by several eye witnesses.

devotees. The general following, however, has become all-Indian and includes foreigners. Political leaders, university professors, medical men and artists are among her adherents. Through Kamala Nehru the whole Nehru family has been closely associated with her. Kamala Nehru frequently spent whole nights in deep meditation with Anandamayi Ma in her ashram, in Kishenpur and in Dehradun.⁴¹ She introduced her husband, the agnostic Jawaharlal Nehru, to Anandamayi Ma. Jawaharlal continued to go occasionally to Anandamayi Ma for *darśana* after the passing of his wife. On February 29, 1964, three months before his own death, he had her *darśana* for the last time.⁴² His daughter, the present Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, has been a regular visitor with Anandamayi Ma since the 1930's.⁴³ Well-known devotees include Subodharañjan Dasgupta, chief justice of Mysore; Vijayaraje, maharani of Gwalior; Jugal Kishore Birla, the great industrialist and philanthropist; the singer Dilip Kumar Ray; the dancer Uday Shankar; Rehana Tyabji, a close follower of Gandhi; and, above all, Dr. Gopinath Kaviraj, the great Sanskritist.⁴⁴

One of the first Westerners to be attracted to Anandamayi Ma was Blanca,⁴⁵ an Austrian refugee who met her in Almora in 1943. Upon the death of her father in 1945, Blanca became a *brahmacārini*, assuming the name Atmananda. Having acquired a good knowledge of Bengali and Hindi, Brahmacarini Atmananda serves frequently as an interpreter when foreigners request interviews with Anandamayi Ma. She also is on the editorial board of *Ānanda Vārtā*, a quarterly founded in 1951 to disseminate Anandamayi Ma's teachings and to promote spirituality in general.⁴⁶ Another western monastic is Vijayananda, the former Dr. Adolphe Jacques Weintrob. A successful medical doctor from Marseilles, he gave up a remunerative practice in 1951 to go to India on a spiritual quest. Upon Anandamayi Ma's instruction, he has been living largely in solitude in Almora.⁴⁷ Greatly influenced by Anandamayi Ma's person and teachings

41. Gurupriyā Devī, "Dāyerīr kayek pṛṣṭā," *Ananda Varta*, Bengali sec., XI, No. 4 (February, 1964), 166—67.

42. 'Matri Lila,, *Ananda Varta*, English sec., XII, No. 1 (May, 1964), 47.

43. Seen n. 41 above.

44. Gurupriyā Devī, "Dāyerīr kayek pṛṣṭā," *Ananda Varta*, Bengali sec. XI, No. 3 (November, 1963), 12; XII, No. 1 (May, 1964), 4—5; S.S.M.A., VIII, 91—92; 'Matri Lila,' English sec., X, No. 4 (February, 1963), 234.

45. I have so far been unable to find her second name.

46. Atmananda, "Reminiscences," *Ananda Varta*, English sec., VI, No. 4 (February, 1959), 325—30; S.S.M.A., IX, 210.

47. N.R. Das Gupta, "The Divine Mother," in *Mother as Seen by Her Devotees*, p. 128; Adolphe Jacques Weintrob (Vijayananda), "My First Impression," in *Mother as Seen by Her Devotees*, pp. 59-66.

were also the well-known British photographer Richard Lannoy, the French film producer Arnaud Desjardins, and the German novelist Melita Maschmann.⁴⁸ It is not surprising that Anandamayi Ma has drawn foreigners to her, given the fact that in this century an increasing number of westerners dissatisfied with the answers that western religions and philosophies offer have turned to India in the hope of finding there more satisfying solutions to perennial problems. An atmosphere of serenity, peace, and bliss emanating from Anandamayi Ma seems to account primarily for the great attraction she exercises over her devotees. All seem to agree that in her presence they feel lifted above ordinary worldly problems.⁴⁹

Those who have fallen under the spell of Anandamayi Ma have understandably speculated about her real nature. She has not had a guru. At no time has she made references to previous incarnations. As pointed out earlier, she emphatically insists that she is not a guru and refuses to give *dīkṣā*. One is mystified by the fact that she never enters the home of householders, while permitting her disciples to do so. Her seeming inability to feed herself adds to the enigma. When asked who she is, her usual answer is, "Well, I am what you consider me to be, not more, not less,"⁵⁰ or, "This body is like a musical instrument; what you hear depends upon how you play it."⁵¹

An interesting assessment of Anandamayi Ma has been made by Vijayananda in an article entitled "What Mother Is Not."⁵² He points out that "a vedantist, for example, when talking to Mother for the first time, will feel convinced that She is a pure *advaita vedantin*; a śakta may very likely say that She is an incarnation of the Divine Mother, advocating the cult of śakti; while a vaiṣṇava will see in Her a great *bhakta*, and so on."⁵³ He then emphasizes the fact that Anandamayi Ma cannot possibly be considered a Tantric in the way this is commonly understood in the west, that is, in association with sexual rituals. *Brahmacarya* is strictly observed in all her ashrams. She herself clearly states: "It is the pure undefiled flower that finds a place at the feet of the Lord and nowhere else. Take great care to spend your life in spotless purity,

48. The works of Lannoy, Desjardins, and Maschmann are listed in the initial footnote of this paper.

49. This conclusion is chiefly based on *Mother as Seen by Her Devotees*, and personal conversations with some of Ānandamāyī Mā's disciples.

50. *Mother as Seen by Her Devotees*, p. 199.

51. Bhāijī, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

52. Vijayananda, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-22.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

worthy to be dedicated in worship to the Lord."⁵⁴ Does she recommend the cult of Śakti? Undoubtedly among her followers are a great number of Śaktas. Moreover, it is quite customary for Anandamayi Ma's devotees to greet each other with "Jai Ma." And *kīrtanas* in praise of "Ma" are regularly chanted in her ashrams. However, other *kīrtanas* are devoted to Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, or just to Bhagavan (Godhead). Vijayananda draws attention to the fact that her earlier *bhāvas* have ceased. Moreover, Anandamayi Ma strongly warns against emotionalism: "At the supreme summit of love which is *mahābhāva*, exuberance, excessive emotion and the like cannot possibly occur. Emotional excitement and supreme love are not to be compared at all, they are totally different from each other."⁵⁵

A discussion of the teaching of Ānandamayī Mā must be prefaced by some reference to the amazing ease with which this illiterate woman handles complex questions posed by eminent scholars. Answers are couched in a simple, homely language and include parables. Ānandamayī Mā is especially fond of making puns, such as *Vedanta* means *bheda anta* (end of difference); where Rāma (God) is, there is *ārāma* (rest); where Rāma is not, there is *byārāma* (discomfort, disease); desire (*vāsanā*) is where God does not dwell (*vāsanā*); to understand intellectually (*bojhā*) is but to be burdened (*bojhā*); *sādhana* has to be practiced to discover *svādhana* (one's own wealth.)⁵⁶

When people come to Ānandamayī Mā with their problems, she does not offer one specific solution. Instead she points out various ways of viewing a problem. For instance, someone asked her whether it was proper for him to engage in a suit in view of the fact that he had been cheated in a business deal. In reply she stated that one could argue that one must go to court to teach the culprit a lesson and to keep him from further malpractices. On the other hand, who is really cheating? "Are not all forms, all beings, manifestations of Him? What I have been deprived of was evidently not my due, it is God who has taken it from me."⁵⁷ Another way of looking at the problem is that through generosity and forgiveness one might bring about a transformation in the criminal.

54. *Matyvanī*, p. 99.

55. "Words of Sri Anandamayī Ma," p. 37.

56. "Sri Mukher Kathā," *Ananda Varta*, Bengali sec., XV, No. 1 (May, 1967), 1; "Matyvanī," *Ananda Varta*, Bengali sec., VII, No. 1 (May, 1959), 1-2; Krishnanath, "With Mataji on the Bank of the Gomati River," *Ananda Varta*, English sec., IX, No. 3 (November, 1961), 135; "Mataji's Amara Vani," *Ananda Varta*, English sec., III, No. 4 (February, 1956), 292; "Bhasa Dharana Mala," *Ananda Varta*, English sec., XIII, No. 3 (November, 1965), 126.

57. Atmananda, "Old Diary Leaves," *Ananda Varta*, English sec., XV, No. 1 (May, 1967), 42.

Or one might refrain from going to court, considering it sufficient punishment that the villain had caused bad karma for himself. Finally, one could reason that one would not go to court if the wrongdoer were one's own brother. "Whichever of these points of view appeals to you, according to it you should act."⁵⁸

When someone complained to Ānandamāyī Mā about her unwillingness to give clear-cut answers to problems, she retorted : "At least you have understood that there is a state where problems are no longer settled in any particular way...But now you will have to realize that no solution is ever conclusive ; in other words, you will have to go beyond the level where there is certainty and uncertainty. The solution of a problem arrived at by the mind must of necessity be from a particular point of view ; consequently there will be room for contradiction, since your solution represents but one aspect."⁵⁹

An examination of Ānandamāyī Mā's teaching leads one to the conclusion that she considers a life combining *karma yoga* and *mantra yoga* most suitable for the majority of householders. At the same time, she urges disciples to spend at least a few minutes a day in *dhyāna yoga*. In general, it seems that she varies her instructions according to the temperament and development stage of the particular disciple. While making allowance for different religious approaches she constantly stresses the fact that ultimately all paths merge in one : "While engaging in *sādhana* one must concentrate in a single direction but after it has been completed, what comes then ? The cessation of difference, distinction and disagreement. Differences do indeed exist on the path, but how can there be a difference of Goal ?"⁶⁰ Her strict monism is borne out by such statements as : "The One, who is the Eternal, the Atman, He Himself is the traveller on the path to immortality, He is all in all, He alone is,"⁶¹ or : "In the Supreme, in the Ultimate, when limited vision has disappeared, how can there be distinctions, such as duality or non-duality ? He who inquires, perceives the two ; and there is likewise duality for him who practises *sādhana*, although he aims at Oneness. You must grasp the truth that He who is dual is indeed the One who is non-dual—just like ice and water."⁶²

Essentially her teaching is based on the wisdom of the ancient Indian sages : "This body presents the matter from the standpoint of the

58. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

59. *Words of Sri Anandamayi Ma*, p. 1.

60. "Words of Sri Anandamayi Ma," p. 6.

61. "Matri Vani," *Ananda Varta*, English sec., VII, No. 2 (August, 1959), 41.

62. *Words of Sri Anandamayi Ma*, p. 123.

