

THE MOST GRACIOUS PRESENCE
SRI MA ANANDAMAYI



BITHIKA MUKERJI

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TO
ALL THOSE WHO ARE IN SEARCH
OF PEACE

ABOUT THE BOOK

The first English biography of Sri Ma Anandamayi entitled **From The Life of Sri Ma Anandamayi** was published in 1964. It was written by Bithika Mukerji at the request of Atmanandaji (Miss Blanca Schlamm), the first editor of the quarterly magazine *Ananda Varta*, begun in 1952.

Atmanandaji was very concerned about devotees who did not speak Bengali. She herself acquired Hindi and Bengali very quickly and undertook the task of rendering Sri Ma's words into English. She always worked in close collaboration with Bithika Mukerji because it was her considered opinion that Bithikaji had a feel and flair for the nuances of meanings of Sri Ma's words.

Due to unavoidable circumstances Bithikaji could not continue with the biography. The two early volumes have been out of print for many years. Now the author has undertaken to complete her earlier work. The original two volumes are combined, revised as well as enlarged to form the first volume of a set of three. The second volume brings Sri Ma's *lila-katha* up to 1959. The third volume completes the biography and includes some incidents depicting the ever abiding presence of Sri Ma.

Many books are now available about Sri Ma Anandamayi, written in English as well as regional languages, such as Bengali, Gujarati and Hindi. Some literature is also available in French, German and Spanish. Even so a complete biography by the pen of an author who is acknowledged to be a competent raconteur of the enigmatic ways of Sri Ma is very welcome. The author personally knew

many of the earliest devotees. She came to know Sri Ma while Bholanathji and Bhaiji were both alive.

With the passage of time questions of authenticity arise. The absence of eye-witnesses create lacunae which can only be filled by words which keep memory alive and faith anchored. We hope this biography will forge another link in the chain of an ongoing process of *matri-satsang*.

—Publishers

PREFACE

I was started on my career of writing about Sri Ma Anandamayi by Atmanandaji. She was a good friend and we had many occasions of staying together in some of the earlier ashrams. She was totally dedicated and focussed on her mission of making Sri Ma's words available to all who wished to come close to her.

Another person who inspired me was Prof. B. Sanjiva Rao. He was one of my father's friends. I came in contact with him when I was a college student. He used to talk with me about Sri Ma and urged me to write a book about her. I asked him if he would write the Foreword in case I ever managed to do so. He most graciously agreed.

Many years passed. I was in regular correspondence with him while I worked on my book. He was truly a person of exquisite understanding. When I was ready with my book, he had retired to Madras and was not in good health. Samantji of Rajghat School very kindly took the manuscripts to Madras and read out the book to Professor Rao. Samantji brought back the Foreword and a message from the scholar. He had said, "I am very happy to have lived in the memory of Sri Ma all these days." This was very important to me because very sadly he passed away soon after he had written the Foreword for me.

Prof. B. Sanjiva Rao had found some faults with my book, mainly that I had recounted incidents without interpreting them. In this edition of the book I have included my understanding of many incidents as a mark of respect to his memory.

After the first publication of the book in 1964 I became

involved in writing about Sri Ma in different ways. I was required to write for magazines, brochures, commemorative volumes, seminars and one Encyclopaedia. I had always intended to finish this book. Now in my old age I have the freedom and leisure to complete the book started more than half a century ago.

I write just because I like to write about Sri Ma. I do not think that I know more about her than others or that I make clear what is essentially unfathomable. In this context I always remember Bhaiji's words, "In my enthusiasm to explain about Ma I place her on a high pedestal, but no matter how high I think her to be, I am soon brought to realize that she is ever beyond my highest conceptions."

I do not think that I can succeed where Bhaiji failed but to talk about Sri Ma Anandamayi is to live in the memory of her joyous and most gracious presence amongst us. May her *kheyala* be with us forever.

Jai Ma.

31 George Town
Allahabad
September 25, 2009

Bithika Mukerji

FOREWORD

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

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

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

Light is invisible, but makes all things visible. Its function is to reveal the structure and beauty of things. We do not know what Light is; we can know its existence by its effects.

Likewise Love is invisible. It can be known only by what it reveals to us—the beauty hidden in the heart of man.

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

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

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

To relate any individual to our personal well-being is false

love. Such personal love is the basis of all social and family traditions. True love comes into being the moment we become aware of the falseness in our "loving".

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

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

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

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

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

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B. Sanjiva Rao

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CHAPTER ONE

Early Years in Village Retreats

Once in a long while Humanity puts forth a rare flower of exquisite Beauty and Fragrance. It cannot be said to teach, to have a message; it lives for only one purpose, to demonstrate the existence of a Power, that is ever at work, creating by its transforming influence Beauty out of ugliness, Love out of strife. Such a Power is Sri Ma Anandamayi. May she bring peace and harmony into this world of strife.

B. Sanjiva Rao

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

In one of the little cottages of this village lived Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya with his wife Mokshada Sundari Devi. The traditional *tulasi*² in the neat and clear courtyard indicated that it was the residence of a Hindu and the

*Narayana Sila*¹ within the cottage that it was the home of a devout Brahmin.

In our own time, the site of this little cottage has become a hallowed place of pilgrimage for all devotees of Sri Ma Anandamayi for here she was born and nurtured as a child. Kheora was her birth place but her parents came from other villages of Eastern Bengal. Her father, Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya, came of the distinguished *Kasyapa* clan of Brahmins of Vidyakut, another village in the same district of Tripura. In his own village and in Kheora, where he had inherited the property of his maternal grandfather, he was highly respected and loved for his honest upright nature and his otherworldliness. Much of his time was taken up with the worship of Narayana, the presiding deity of his family. His favourite occupation, however, was the singing of devotional songs. He was gifted with a fine musical voice. Sometimes his inspired singing seemed to establish palpable rapport between him and the Divine. The villagers would compare him with Ramprasad, the well-known saintly poet of Bengal who, it was believed, had invoked and experienced the presence of God. His devotional songs were his prayers.

Bipin Bihari's family was a large and prestigious one. He had received suitable secular education along with orthodox training in religious ritualisms. At one time, he had been persuaded by an affluent nephew to help in his business by keeping accounts. The nephew wanted an honest man he could rely upon. This arrangement was short-lived. Bipin Bihari was too independent in spirit to take kindly to a form of service under another, albeit a respectful junior.

There was a strong streak of asceticism in Bipin Bihari's character, which would not permit him to become absorbed in

his family affairs. He had no aptitude for household management. His negligence was overlooked or condoned in a large joint family. His mother, Tripura Sundari Devi, had inherited a dwelling with some lands from her father in Kheora. This she bequeathed to her son. After a few years of his marriage he came to Kheora with his wife and their first born infant daughter to assume charge of this small inheritance. His wife Mokshada Devi was the only daughter of Ramakanta Bhattacharya of Sultanpur in the district of Agartala.

The House of Ramakanta Bhattacharya :

All Brahmin families of those times were universally looked up to by virtue of their saintly ways of living. Ramakanta Bhattacharya, his brothers and sons were specially respected for their scholarship and other-worldliness. The heads of this family were recognised as *sabha-pandits* (court priests) of the Maharaja of Tripura. Their cottage was the focal point for neighbourly gatherings irrespective of caste or religion. The outer reception-room was nearly always full of visitors who came for various purposes; some seeking advice, some with questions regarding religious rites, others with major or minor problems needing resolutions and, lastly, just friends.

The big cottage was surrounded by cultivated gardens and hedges. There were two ponds beyond the gardens and plenty of fruit trees. Whatever came in from the fields, gardens or orchards was first dedicated to God. The daily worship of the family deities was the main business of the day. Throughout the year, many festivals were celebrated with great care and circumspection. The most important was the annual Durga Puja in *asvin* (September/October). With Bengalis, it is the

yearly renewal of a deep-seated belief in the legend that the Goddess comes to visit her erstwhile earthly home for three days. The whole of Bengal prepares for this advent with music, flowers, incense, sweets, each household doing whatever lies in its power to add to the festivities.

At Sultanpur preparations would get underway much ahead of the date. Large quantities of grains were stocked. The women made marvellous sweets from coconuts and sugar. The incense-laden air and the sweet strains of invocatory songs (*agamani*) would proclaim that Durga Puja was at hand.

For the three days of the puja the cottage of Sri Ramakanta Bhattacharya became a temple of worship for the entire neighbourhood. Everybody was welcome to partake of the *prasada* (consecrated food) which would be available in large quantities. No invitations were necessary; all were equally welcome to come and join in.

The children of the family would be given new clothes. Those who were old enough would be engaged in stringing garlands of flowers gathered from the gardens. Paste was made from red and white sandalwood. The emerald green *durva* grass was carefully plucked and arranged in neat bundles. There were hundred and one things to be done and everyone could be busy in the service of the Goddess. All this Sri Ma Anandamayi saw in her childhood when she visited Sultanpur on these occasions. Every festival has a religious overtone in India, but in some places and at certain times it acquires a special quality of solemnity which raises it above the ordinary. Ma Anandamayi has said that the Durga Puja at her grandfather's always did assume an extra-mundane aura, as if the prayerful invocations were truly answered.

Not only the Durga Puja but other religious festivals were also solemnised : Mahasivaratri, Sri Krishna Janmastami, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja, Sri Rama Navami and so on. We can be reasonably sure that such a way of life was not peculiar to Bengal. In other parts of this ancient land, there must have been such villages which resembled the hermitages of Upanisadic times, where people lived in obedience to the precept of :

*Isavasyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat :
tena tyaktena bhunjithah ma gridhah kasyasviddhanam.
Isavasyopanisd I*

All this (Whatsoever moves on the earth) should be covered by the Lord. Protect (Your Self) through that detachment. Do not covet, for whose is wealth?-Tr. by Swami Gambhirananda.

Enjoyment of the good things of life only as *prasada* (heavenly gift) created that milieu of self-sufficiency and contentment which is the hallmark of inner peace. Such life styles do seem to forge a link with the age of the *rsis* (seers), thereby making it a living tradition even in modern times.

A joint family owes its inner harmony to the judicious management of the mistress of the house. Ma Anandamayi's grandmother Srimati Harasundari Devi was an ideal chatelaine. She exercised a benign influence on the entire household. She diffused all conflict situations; tale-telling was not countenanced. In fact, if somebody made a mistake, she would expect another to render help and not seek to be praised for it. There was, thus, an overall feeling of friendliness and mutuality in this household. Ma Anandamayi's mother Srimati Mokshada Sundari Devi, a

daughter of this house, was a living example of the ideals inculcated in such a family. Born in 1877 in the month of May, she lost her mother when she was little more than a child. It is reported that Srimati Harasundari had predicted that her end was near. Her daughter thereupon asked her, 'I hear that you are going away?' The mother reassured her saying, 'My eldest daughter-in-law will take my place.'

Srimati Mokshada Devi, thereafter, enjoyed a privileged position with her brothers and sisters-in-law as a special protégé bequeathed to them by their mother. In the fullness of time she was married to Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya of Vidyakut. The quietly affluent atmosphere of her brother's household was not matched by her new home. Not that the circumstances were so very different. In fact, they were not; but as written above. Bipin Bihari turned out to be a householder who would have been better suited to the calling of a wandering minstrel.

If may be a fanciful thought but it cannot but come to the mind that the transition from Sultanpur or Vidyakut or rather to Kheora is comparable to a going toward asceticism, a moving away from the hermitages to penetrate deeper into the forest for a life of total renunciation. Srimati Mokshada Devi realized very soon that her husband was an ascetic at heart. She accepted his way of life not only without demur but with complete understanding. Life in Vidyakut would have been easier for her in a joint family but she readily accompanied her husband to Kheora to live with her mother-in-law Tripura Sundari Devi, who herself was living alone like a recluse.

We do not know why Bipin Bihari chose to leave Vidyakut for Kheora. Maybe he wanted to leave his wife and daughter under the care of his mother because very soon he

left home to become an ascetic. Both women were remarkable in their qualities of fortitude and piety. A very close bond of friendship developed between the two. Tripura Sundari assumed charge of her son's abandoned family.

It so happened that the baby did not survive her infancy. The untimely death of the child left the two women in sudden loneliness of spirit. Mokshada Devi was undemonstrative but the anguish of being bereft of husband and child was real and tragic. Members of her family took it upon themselves to look for Bipin Bihari. He was approached in his place of retreat and persuaded with some difficulty to return to Kheora to look after his wife and mother. After almost three years Bipin Bihari rejoined his family. Although he took up the reins of his household once more, a strong streak of detachment (*vairagya*) characterised his way of life. Sometimes he would join a group of wandering minstrels and walk away with them to other villages. These absences were of short duration. Sooner or later he would return home.

Bipin Bihari was a good musician. His wife Mokshada Devi had a poetic soul. In the privacy of her cottage, she composed many songs and lyrics full of gentle wisdom and religious aspirations. These simple compositions show a buoyancy of spirit quite unrelated to the physical circumstances of the writer.

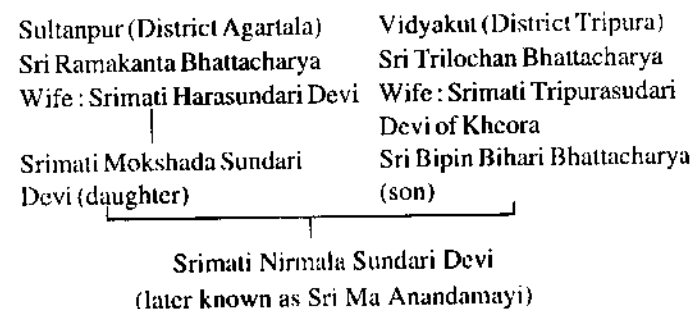
There is a famous temple of Kali in Kasba, the nearest town to Kheora. Tripura Sundari was in the habit of trekking to this temple to pray for her son's return while he was away; after his return she went to pray for a grandson. She recalled with great wonder that at the time of uttering her prayer she found herself saying "a daughter" instead of "a son". In any case, she thought a child would perhaps anchor her son's

thoughts to his hearth and home. Tripura Sundari's prayer was answered. To her son a second child was born on April 30, 1896 (19 Vaisakh, 1303 B.S.), a daughter, who became known all over India as Sri Ma Anandamayi, or simply as Mataji.

Before and immediately after the birth of this child, Mokshada Devi had frequent dreams of gods and goddesses. She dreamt that they were coming to her humble cottage filling it with radiance and that she, overwhelmed by awe and wonder, was worshipping them. She has said that at the time of birth she hardly suffered any pain. The attending women remembered another unusual feature. The new-born baby could not be made to utter any cry. Their apprehension that there was something vitally wrong with the baby, however, proved groundless. The infant began to thrive normally.

Brahmacharini Chandan, a third generation daughter of the house of Ramakanta Bhattacharya of Sultanpur, had the privilege of listening to Ma Anandamayi when she was answering some questions regarding the manner of her presence on earth and was moved to think in terms of the *triveni sangam*, the holy confluence of the three rivers, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. The simile came to her mind specially because the third river Saraswati is said to symbolize *brahma vidya*, the Highest Knowledge; moreover the faithful believe that Saraswati is a mysterious trans-natural presence at the *sangam* because this river is not visible to the pilgrims now.

The two families of Ma Anandamayi were related like this:



Ma Anandamayi's given name was Nirmala Sundari, which in English would mean 'the taintlessly beautiful one.' By all accounts this name was appropriate. She was a very winsome little baby. Everyone who came to see her was immediately enamoured of her and could only leave her presence with some difficulty. Her mother got used to the sight of even strangers stopping over to admire the baby or play with her for a while. One occasion especially lived in her memory for all time. They were visiting Vidyakut at the time. One day Mokshada Devi saw an extraordinary-looking person, with an air of luminosity about him, approaching the playful infant, who was about ten months old at this time, and squat in front of her as if paying homage. Glancing at the mother, he said, "You have a very special child. You will not make an ordinary housewife of her. She is the Mother. She belongs to the world."

Mokshada Devi thought he was an eccentric, but his words lingered in her memory.

Kheora-The Playground for the Lila of Childhood

Kheora was a small village. The west-side consisted of just two Brahmin households, surrounded on three sides by Muslim neighbours. There were other Hindu families on the east-side. The two sides were separated by big fields and forests. There was a shortcut through the habitation of the Muslim families. As soon as Nirmala was old enough to walk

by herself, she could be seen skipping and dancing along this path ever so often and also stopping at all doors which were opened to her. According to Indian custom all elders are given family epithets by the children. The Muslim elders also were known to her variously as *Nana* (grandfather), *Chacha* (uncle), *Dada* (brother) *Bua* (aunt) and so on. The entire village, no matter how far flung the cottages, became one big home to the little girl.

Nirmala was a very friendly child. She would readily render whatever service she was capable of to whosoever was in need of it. She fetched and carried for all neighbours as well as her own family. She was uniformly good-tempered and never gave any trouble to anybody; in fact her mother did not recall that she ever threw tantrums or cried in distress. Yet two incidents are recalled which were exceptions to this rule. It so happened that after the birth of Nirmala three sons were born to her parents in due course of time. Unfortunately, the eldest Kaliprasanna died at the age of seven and the other two in childhood and infancy. Mokshada Devi, at all times the personification of courageous fortitude, at odd moments would succumb to grief and shed quiet tears. If Nirmala happened to see her at such times, she would set up such a wailing that her mother was obliged to hasten to her comfort, her own tears forgotten.

While the brothers lived Nirmala was devoted to their care. But she did not mourn their loss. This characteristic of total concern and yet a detachment remained with her creating an aura of inscrutability and mystery.

The other instance of crying took place when Nirmala was yet an infant. A young girl called Ekabbar from one of the neighbouring Muslim houses was specially fond of Nirmala

and came to play with her every day. One day Ekabbar started a new game by beckoning the child from a little distance. When the baby eagerly and smilingly started to crawl forward, she would step further back and beckon again. After four or five times of this tantalizing manoeuvre, the baby sat back and started to cry loudly. Ekabbar then quickly picked Nirmala up and sought to quieten her. The sobs and wails increased to such a degree that Ekabbar was frightened into giving the baby back to her grandmother. She never played such a teasing game again. When both girls had grown up, Ekabbar would sometimes recall this incident, "What a baby you were! How you cried! It was an extraordinary experience for me. My hair still moves on my scalp whenever I think of it!"

There were others who could recall strange experiences with the baby. Kheora was inhabited by many of her grandmother's contemporaries, who were all Dadas (grandfathers) and Didis (grandmothers) to her. One Dada (Krishna Sundar Bhattacharya) was in the habit of tossing up the baby and catching her again in his arms. The child expressed her delight in gurgling laughter. Once as he held her up she placed one foot on his shoulder and stretched out the other as if to place it on his uplifted arm. Suddenly he cried out, 'Catch! Catch!' and almost fell down to his knees. It was not quite clear whether he wanted people to catch the infant or support him! He put the child down, ejaculating in great wonder, "What a strange girl!" It was conjectured by the onlookers that the weight of the baby had suddenly become unbearable. The family noticed that when playing with the child he never again attempted to toss her aloft.

As Nirmala grew up, her family and neighbours found her a joyous elfin creature ever at hand, making herself useful to

everyone in the village, irrespective of caste, religion or social position.

The little girl found anything and everything a source of delight. One night a portion of the thatched roof blew away in a sudden storm. The inmates took shelter under what remained of the roof. Nirmala clapped her hands and laughed aloud, "Ma, Ma, we can see the stars from here! The outside and inside have become one - what fun!" Nirmala was not very much affected by the heat of summer, the cold climate, or the monsoons. She would dance around in a heavy downpour or play on a sandhill in the scorching sun quite unmindful of the heat. She was not a prey to childish ailments. Her sunny disposition earned her many nicknames in the village, such as Hasi (Smiles), Khushir Ma (the Happy One) and so on.

Nirmala had a disconcerting trait of almost literally obeying the bidding of elders. Her family came to a full realization of this after many an aggravating incident. One day her mother asked her to go and wash an agate cup at the pond. Wishing to draw the child's attention to the fragility of the cup she said, "See if you can break it also." Nirmala returned after a while holding carefully the broken pieces of the cup in her small hands. She said that the cup had just dropped. Her mother, trying hard not to laugh, asked why she had brought the pieces back. Nirmala said that she had seen the shards being used for treating burns, so perhaps they were still useful. At such incidents Nirmala never got a reprimand because her innocence was so palapable.

One favourite story is about the 'full stop'. While teaching her to read, her father had pointed out that she should pause at the full stop before beginning another sentence. Some time later he was amused and rather appalled to see how Nirmala

was following his instructions. If the sentence happened to be a long one, she would twist and contort her little body to arrive at the full stop in one gasping breath.

As a matter of fact, this trait of abiding by the spoken words or wishes of the people around her was a constant feature of her behavioural pattern. It was a veil drawn over her true *kheyala*. Even people who were supposed to be close to her, never penetrated this veil.

The word *kheyala* needs to be explained because it is going to be used very often in this narrative. Ma Anandamayi used this word when others would have said, "I wish," or "I will" or "it is my desire." She had no wish, or will or desires, but sometimes a towardness for a certain course of action, perhaps dictated by the needs of the people around her; a spontaneous thought which took shape out of the circumstances rather than any spring to action from within. It took considerable time for her family and early devotees to figure out what she meant by this word, that is, if ever at all it has been understood.

When Ma Anandamayi was a child her total egolessness which led to her ready acquiescence in all things suggested by her elders was construed to mean a docility and even a little simplicity of the mind. She was sometimes considered to be a little below par because no normal child could be so uniformly joyous and good. Even if people doubted her intelligence, she met with no dearth of love and indulgence. Moreover, her undeviating truthfulness also had to be taken into account. In time the elders came to rely on her implicitly for her version of any controversial situation because it was noted that she never could be persuaded to undertake anything remotely untoward or unseemly. Perhaps Nirmala

herself enjoyed all these puzzlements about her. One day she happened to be carrying a pitcher of water on her hip and watched her shadow on the ground. When she stood in front of her mother she said, "You say I am straight, (*soja* meaning also a simpleton) am I not crooked (*banka*, meaning also clever) now?"

There was a private school for children near the village. Nirmala attended this school for a while. She could not go everyday because some days she would be helping her mother with the children and sometimes her mother could not find a suitable escort for her. Even so, the teacher always found her keeping up easily with the class. So much so that after a visit by the Inspector of Schools she and two other regular bright girls of the class were promoted to the Lower Primary School.

This school had a young Headmistress. Once, when the Inspector called, she became nervous because her girls could not answer one of the questions. From outside the window of the classroom she held up a slate on which she had written the answer. It was Nirmala's turn; she could see the slate plainly but took no advantage of this manoeuvre. Such deceptions were quite foreign to her nature. This Headmistress visited Ma Anandamayi in later years in Varanasi, where we heard this anecdote from her and various other incidents of Nirmala's very short school career.

Nirmala was always very keenly interested in all kinds of religious rites even in other religions. While they were visiting in Sultanpur, she and her cousin met two Christian nuns who were selling some tracts. Nirmala ran back to her mother for the small coins needed for buying this booklet. In the evening she was as if irresistibly drawn to their camp

outside the village. She stood outside the tent listening to their prayers and then ran back home before she could be missed.

Nirmala had a fine sweet voice. She would very often sit with her father and sing with him. One day she asked him,

"We are always singing hymns to Hari. Who is Hari?"

"Hari is one of the Names of God. He has many Names. If you sing His Names, He will come to you—just as when we call out to you, you come and do whatever we ask you to do for us. So He also does as much for us because He is everywhere and He hears us when we call out to Him."

"Is he then very big?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"As big as this field here?"

"Much bigger. When he appears you will see how great, how magnificent He is, and he will appear if you call upon Him to do so."

Bipin Bihari, it seems, gave expression to his own sentiments regarding his personal *Ishta-devata* as if sharing them with a friend. Nirmala thereupon joined her sweet young voice to his rich and melodious one. *Hari-kirtan* must have reached new heights on such occasions and these were quite frequent because father and daughter sang together whenever possible.

The child Nirmala was constantly with her parents, helping, running errands or just talking. She would sit near her mother and ask:

"Ma, people speak of heaven. Is it possible to go to heaven?"

"Yes, certainly. Whoever is keenly desirous of going to heaven can do so."

"Do you know the way? Tell me!"

"Whoever yearns for it, finds the way."
 "What is so special about heaven?"

"People say 'Heaven' when they mean God. God knows everything and He cares for us. He is everywhere but remains untouched. We do not know this because we belong to this earth only. To go to heaven means to know about all such things."

It seems that Nirmala elicited many a religious conviction through such dialogues with her elders. As written earlier it was a common village custom for wandering minstrels (*vairagis*) to go around from door to door at dawn singing *usakirtan* (morning-hymns). The burden of their songs would be "a new dawn is breaking, arise, it is time to engage in the worship of God. Do not waste time in sleep." The little girl learnt to sing all these songs and could be heard singing them to herself at times.

Her grandmother was another of her favourite companions. Tripura Sundari Devi belonged to a family of spiritual preceptors and scholars. She could easily have called upon many of the disciples for support but she remained very aloof from such ties. She was committed to a rigorous effort toward fulfilment. Even if she were engaged in household work she would continue her *japa*, that is, the repetition of her mantra. Once little Nirmala asked her, "Thakurma (Grandmama), what is the meaning of this 'word' that you repeat all the time?" The old lady said, "Hush! you should not utter such 'words'. When you are older, you will learn about them."

Nirmala acknowledged the reproof and hung her head a little. But it is possible that she conferred the blessing of '*diksha*' on this very deserving companion of her childhood.

Thakurma had after all heard her mantra pronounced by the little girl.

Nirmala's childhood was spent mostly in Kheora. She occasionally visited Sultanpur, her maternal uncle's village, where she had some cousins to play with. One such cousin, Sushila, later came to the Ashram and became a permanent resident. She used to narrate that even animals were attracted to Nirmala. Cows returning from the pasture would stop near her and nudge her gently. Sushila also said that some times they would find Nirmala as if talking to trees and plants; this used to scare the other children because they could almost imagine that it was a conversation and that the plants were bending forth a little. Before they could really think anything more of it, Nirmala would run along and join them and they would forget about her odd behaviour with the trees.

All these traits which were noticed by one or other of her relatives and playmates remained with Ma Anandamayi all her life. She was seen often not to differentiate between animate or inanimate objects. Didi Gurupriya had noticed that when Ma Anandamayi was about to leave a habitation for good, she would go round touching the walls, almost as if she were bidding farewell to old friends. That she easily communicated with plants and animals was witnessed by many people and in due course ceased to strike them as anything unusual in her. Her magnetic attraction, even for complete strangers, similarly, was taken for granted and not wondered at later.

It has already been said that Nirmala was a child with a very happy disposition. After the untimely death of her brothers she was left alone. Ma Anandamayi has said that it was her *kheyala* to have some playmates. Two sisters were

in due course, Surabala and Hemlata, and lastly another her, Jadunath. Nirmala was a devoted nurse and guide for the children. Surabala was a specially beautiful girl and was strongly attached to her sister. Of the three, only Jadunath (more familiarly known as Makhan) survived Ma Anandamayi.

Nirmala had many playgrounds in Kheora. There was a sand-heap near their cottage. She could be seen constructing many shapes with the sand. One day she made a round ball. When asked by her mother as to what it was, she said, "It is Narayana, Lakshmi, Siva, Parvati, Radha, Krishna and many other Gods as well. Didn't you tell me that the sand contained within one and the one is everything?"

Mokshada Devi was taken aback a little but said mildly, "Right, but come away now, or you'll get sunstroke." Nirmala immediately broke the carefully constructed mound and followed her mother without a backward glance.

The forest provided her with flowers of many colours, which she would gather and arrange in intricate designs. The mother could not but notice that the child's absorption was tinged with a kind of aloofness. She would suddenly abandon everything and walk away with an withdrawn expression on her face. This was true as regards her friends also. She would play with them or by herself without seeming to miss their company.

What was really extraordinary about little Nirmala was a sudden change from the ordinary playful child into an extraordinary ethereal being. In the midst of some mundane activity she would suddenly seem not to be with her playmates or with her elders. Her expression, always serene and beautiful, would be as if shot with an inner luminosity. The best description that people could think of was to say that

It was like a play of lightning in the skies. How did they behave with the child after they had seen her as an ethereal being with the spark of divinity in her? The same people hastened to recall her, as it were, to their stratum of life; they would seek to draw her attention toward play and make her talk and laugh in her usual way. They wanted her with them and not lose her to something unknown.

When later in life Ma Anandamayi was questioned on these recollections of her family and neighbours she said, "You are using the words 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'. To me there is no difference; it is like the blinking of the eye."

Marriage

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

Nirmala was married to Sri Ramani Mohan Chakravarty on February 7, 1909 (25th Magha 1315 B.S.) at the age of twelve years and ten months. Although Bipin Bihari was a simple villager the marriage of his eldest daughter was celebrated as a big function. Relatives from Vidyakut and Sultanpur arrived with gifts. Mokshada Devi's youngest brother, known as Sonamama to the children, was specially fond of Nirmala. He took it upon himself to make the ritual a very happy occasion for all. Even the ruler of Tripura participated by sending a caparisoned elephant to escort the bride-groom's party from the railway station at Kasba. The over-all magnificence of the event made it memorable. At the

time of the marriage, one of the elders, Lakshmikanta Bhattacharya, said to the bridegroom, "Son, you do not know what a treasure you are taking home today!"

Ramani Mohan's father was not in good health. He had appointed his eldest son-in-law Seetanath Kushari to act in his place. After the marriage ceremony Seetanath Kushari led the bridal party back to Atpara. At Kasba railway station they by mistake entered a compartment in the train which was not going through to their destination. It had to be changed. The bride was sitting demurely surrounded by a veritable mountain of baggage. Seetanath Kushari asked her to come down quickly. He was flustered because the train was about to leave. Nirmala seemed to understand the whole situation at a glance. She seemed to move like a streak of lightning managing to shift the baggage to the new compartment within a very short time. It was her first railway journey, yet she, a slim girl dressed in bridal clothers, accomplished the change-over without any fuss or commotion. Seetanath Kushari used to refer to this incident in later life as his first experience of the extraordinary character of the bride he was escorting to her new house. He, as well as his entire family down to three generations, remained totally devoted to Ma Anandamayi all their lives.

In villages, the bride after the marriage ceremony either goes back to stay with her parents or lives with her husband's family as another daughter of the house till she attains maturity. In any case the bride is allowed to visit her own family very often as she may feel homesick, and it also gives her time to adjust to her new environment. Thus Nirmala returned to Kheora after her ceremonial reception in Atpara and remained with her parents for some time after her marriage.

Ramani Mohan had been told that she was a student of the

Lower Primary School. This encouraged him to write her a letter, which created a great sensation in the village. The arrival of a letter was a rare event in a village. Everybody came to know of it. Mokshada Devi propped up the letter in a prominent place so that her daughter could take it to read without the self-consciousness of receiving it from an elder. The letter remained untouched because Nirmala, not being told to take it, did not do so. Her mother then told her friends to ask Nirmala to open and read it. Then, amidst much laughing and teasing, Nirmala and her friends sat down to compile an answer. This joint literary effort was painstakingly copied out by Nirmala and mailed.

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

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

Revati Mohan was employed in the Railways as a Station Master. He used to be posted at various stations on the Dhaka

Jagannathgunj line. At the time of his marriage Ramani Mohan was working in the Police department. About seven months later he lost his job and failed to secure another for some time. He then left his village home and went to Dhaka to look for work. He occasionally visited Revati Mohan's family and sometimes brought simple presents for his wife. Recalling these days Ma Anandamayi has said, "In the beginning he used to bring me one or two books. One night he asked me to read aloud to him while he settled himself down to rest. I sat on the floor and read a few passages in my usual laboured style. After a while he asked me to stop. He then turned over to the other side muttering to himself, 'Lower Primary, indeed!'"

After one or two years of Nirmala's departure to her husband's family Bipin Bihari and his wife, with their remaining three children, the daughters Surabala and Hemlata, and son Makhan, left Kheora and returned to their own village, Vidyakut.

CHAPTER TWO

The Young House Keeper

So the humble parents selected an equally humble husband for their girl as soon as she stepped into her twelfth year; and she went to live with the husband's family in Dacca district, hiding her angelic face under a cubit long veil, as village girls of those days invariably did for years after their marriage. Something unusual was noticed in the girl even in her childhood. She was often absentminded, seeming to dream of one knew not what, but nothing connected with play or work in hand. The trait developed after marriage into frequent fits of apparent insensibility to external surroundings - although other times she was perfectly natural doing all that was required to do to the satisfaction of every person concerned.

-Raisahab Sri Akshay K. Datta

Nirmala embarked on her life with her husband's family. Her mother was a bit nervous and anxious about her daughter's capabilities. Although always willing to help, Nirmala had not been required to perform heavy household duties before her marriage. Mokshada Devi need not be worried. Pitchforked into a new and demanding situation, Nirmala proved herself more than worthy of it. From the beginning, she took upon herself the duties of her brother-in-law's entire household. Her work included fetching water from the pond, helping with the cooking, looking after the children and running errands for her somewhat elderly

sister-in-law.

It took some time for her new family to understand Nirmala's ways of total obedience and selfless service. It is the custom for a bride to keep her face veiled in the presence of elders. Nirmala had been instructed to do this at the time of her marriage by her mother. With her face covered her movements became very restricted because she could see only a small bit of ground at her feet. Moreover, because Nirmala was quite incapable of peeping from under the veil, she would not understand injunctions such as "Bring it here". She would have to be told in words to bring what and where. This uncompromising obedience at first exasperated her new family, but exasperation turned to indulgence when they realized that Nirmala was consistent and sincerely obedient toward her elders.

Revati Mohan's second brother Surendra Mohan had been married a few months earlier than Ramani Mohan. Surendra Mohan's bride Prafulla also came to Sripur almost at the same time. The duty of receiving the brides of the family had devolved on Revati Mohan and his wife Pramoda Devi.

Pramoda Devi was pleased with her two young sisters-in-law. Prafulla was a little younger than Nirmala. Pramoda Devi solved the problem of age and protocol by ruling that Prafulla would be addressed as *Mezdi* (second sister) by Nirmala and herself would be addressed as *Sezdi* (third sister) by Prafulla and not by her name.

Although both girls were well-behaved and hard working much of the work fell to Nirmala's share simply because she was more competent and willing. The family preferred her cooking more than Prafulla's or even Pramoda Devi's. The children of the house, Kalipada to begin with and later

Labanya and Ashu, became so attached to her that their entire nursing and care-taking fell to her lot. There were no misunderstandings. Nirmala's sunny-tempered outlook created a happy atmosphere.

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

In spite of the heavy household chore, Nirmala found time to learn various arts and crafts. During her short hour of leisure in the afternoon, when the men were out at work, she would visit the houses of neighbours. Her sweet disposition made her welcome in every home. Although she was shy and retiring as befitted a newly married girl, she had a friendly

and pleasant smile for other young women of her age. During these enjoyable sojourns in neighbouring houses, amidst friendly talks, Nirmala learnt needlework, cane work, the spinning of fine threads, and other handicrafts. She displayed a keen interest in anything new and was quick to learn. She could spin thread so fine that she was able to put a whole length of the sacred thread (about 18 yards) inside the empty shell of a cardamom. She used to present such threads, packed in this manner, to various members of the family.

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

Nirmala was subject to spells of "absent-mindedness" in her childhood. She would sit inert or stare fixedly into space sometimes. Her mother would shake her and try to recall her attention back to the matter at hand. Now also sometimes in the midst of work, she would unaccountably become inert as if sleeping. Once or twice, Pramoda got the smell of burning food from the kitchen. She found her young sister-in-law lying motionless on the kitchen-floor amidst the litter of cooking utensils. When shaken and aroused, she would appear to be embarrassed at the damage caused, and quickly set about repairing it. Pramoda thought that she had been

overcome by sleep and left it at that.

Revati Mohan and his wife Pramoda came to love Nirmala as their own daughter. Pramoda met her once or twice when she had become well known as Sri Ma Anandamayi. In 1948 Ma Anandamayi went to Kolkata to grace with her presence a big function organized by the devotees of the town. Pramoda, a very old woman at that time, came to visit her sister-in-law. Circumstances were changed beyond her imagination. It may be surmised that Pramoda must have felt bewildered and lost amidst the great concourse of devotees. Ma Anandamayi had a very crowded programme and was almost always unapproachable.

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

them all laugh by her funny stories of village life. Ma Anandamayi turned to her sister-in-law and said laughingly, "Look, all these housewives think that they are great experts in household work. Tell them whether I too did not look after your house satisfactorily." Pramoda considered the question for a while and then quite seriously told the ladies, "You cannot imagine how sweet and good she was. She not only did my entire work, but I will acknowledge that she did not give me any cause for dissatisfaction throughout the years that she was with me. Truly, such spirit of service (*seva-bhava*) is rare nowadays."

To a few of the onlookers (including the author), what appeared to be more wonderful than this ungrudging testimonial was Ma Anandamayi's look of absolute gratification. Modest as she was, she appeared to be very pleased to have her services recognized and appreciated. She never took for granted that she would be perfect in whatever she did. She always disclaimed humbly when people extolled her achievements.

During her stay with Revati Mohan and Pramoda Devi Nirmala once had occasion to visit Kheora before her parents went back to Vidyakut.

The visit was very pleasant. She went round all the houses in the village accompanied by her sisters and brother. She met her childhood friend and name-sake Nirmala Devi amongst others.

In 1913, about four years after Nirmala's marriage, Revati Mohan fell ill in Narundi, his place of posting. Ramani Mohan brought medical help from Dhaka. He was taken to Dhaka for treatment by his brothers but Revati Mohan passed away

plunging his family in grief. The widow, her sister-in-law Nirmala and the children came to live in Atpara, their village home. Prafulla had already left to be with her husband in Dhaka.

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

Atpara

Nirmala stayed with the bereaved family for about six months helping Pramoda Devi to adjust to their reduced circumstances. There was a settlement of poor-caste people near their house. The girls from the settlement became very attached to Nirmala. They would help her to perform many of the daily chores. They would clean the utensils and arrange them for her on the steps of the pond. They sometimes brushed out her long hair or washed her clothes. Nirmala on her part gave them whatever she could spare from the storeroom or from her own share of fruits and sweets. An interesting incident occurred during this time. One day a bell-metal plate slipped and broke while Nirmala was returning from the pond with a stack of them in her hands. The girls saw the accident. They immediately approached Ramani Mohan who was visiting at the time and prevailed upon him to assume the blame. They knew Pramoda Devi would not scold her brother-in-law as definitely she would Nirmala for carelessness. Ramani Mohan got carried away by their concern for Nirmala although he himself was not prone to

deviousness of any kind. He pretended that it was he who had broken the plate and so saved Nirmala a reprimand. It was lucky that no one asked Nirmala, otherwise the truth would have come out to the consternation of the conspirators ! It was a small incident but it demonstrated the love and concern of the poor people for their 'friend'. As far as Ramani Mohan was concerned he never found fault with her either then or in later life.

From Atpara Nirmala went to Vidyakut to stay with her parents for a while. She remained with them for about six months.

During this time Ramani Mohan found a permanent job as Law Clerk in the Settlement Department of the Estates of the Nawab of Dhaka in a township called Ashtagram. Now he was in a position to bring his wife to be with him. He went to Vidyakut to fetch her himself. This was his first visit to Vidyakut since his marriage and he was feted and made much of by Nirmala's family of uncles and cousins.

Bidding a tearful farewell, Mokshada Devi gave her daughter the following instructions regarding future deportment: "Now you must look upon your husband as your guardian and obey and respect him, just as you did your own parents."

Nirmala followed this advice implicitly and completely, as was her wont with all instructions received from elders, especially her mother.

Ashtagram

Ramani Mohan and Nirmala came to Ashtagram in the month of May (or early June) 1914 from Vidyakut. They

occupied rented rooms in the big house of Jaishankar Sen. His wife, an elderly lady, was the mother-figure for young women of the neighbourhood, and automatically became *mashima* (aunt) for Nirmala. Ramani Mohan's fellow-worker Madhu Babu and a friend Kshetramohan also had rooms in the same house where they lived with their wives. We have the record of a spontaneous opinion of a stranger who saw Nirmala for the first time. Kshetramohan's wife was not in Ashtagram at this time. He wrote to her, "Ramani Babu has brought his wife back with him. There is an aura of luminosity around her which is extraordinary - she is like a glowing flame inside a lantern !"

To begin with, Nirmala enchanted all neighbours by her radiant smile and happy deportment. Jaishankar Sen's wife used to call her "Khushir Ma" (the Happy One), which was one of her childhood names. Nirmala came to be known by this name in Ashtagram. Very soon all the neighbouring women developed an admiration for her neat and clean rooms, a high standard of cooking skill and her exemplary spirit of service toward her husband.

In later years Ramani Mohan became better known as Bholanath, a name given to him by Ma Anandamayi. Henceforth we shall use this name for this narration.

When Bholanath and Nirmala had settled in he one day asked her in some curiosity if she had never felt the slightest desire to get news of him. He was moved to ask because although all his letters had been scrupulously answered by her, he had guessed correctly that they had been dictated by her parents if she were in Kheora or Vidyakut or by Pramoda Devi, if she were in Narundi, Sripur or Atpara. Nirmala answered in the negative saying that no, it had never occurred

to her to think about him. Bholanath persisted, saying, "If I go away, or am taken ill, or even if I were to die, will you not mind at all?" Nirmala answered, "What is there to mind? Will it be any different?" Bholanath was not offended or saddened by this equable attitude. He said in some wonderment, "You are innocent like a child. It will be all right when you grow up!" Ma Anandamayi recalling this conversation added with a smile, "But it seems I never grew up!"

In Ashtagram, Bholanath came to know Nirmala as she was. He realized that she regarded him with respect and was mindful of his comforts. Her pleasant friendly manner was as endearing as a trusting child's. Like a child she was obedient, seeking permission to do whatever had to be done. This obedience was not withdrawn even when Ma Anandamayi became well-known as such.

She scrupulously observed all rules of behaviour extant in villages. She was a thrifty housekeeper. She used to keep aside one measure of the rice from the ration used for daily cooking. When the rice saved in this way came up to ten seers or so (approximately 20 pounds) she would take its cost from Bholanath. This money she kept aside for religious purposes, like fruits and sweets for temples or almsgiving. She planted a *tulasi* in her side of the courtyard and tended it carefully.

Ma Anandamayi has said that she had a propensity toward identifying with the elements, but as before, the eye-witnesses mistook the states for a sudden onslaught of sleep or just absentmindedness. There was a large lake in Ashtagram. During the rainy season it seemed almost like the ocean because the other shore became invisible. One day Ramani Mohan and some of his friends and their wives went out on a boating expedition. Ma Anandamayi recalled, "I had never



Sri Ma with her parents.



Sri Ma with Bholanath in Ramna Ashram, Dhaka.



Sri Ma during the period of her *lila* of *sadhana*.

before seen the ocean. The huge expanse of water seemed my own self. I felt a *kheyala* toward integrating with it. Sometimes these sudden spurts of movement toward a boundlessness became visible to onlookers like flashes of light. Lest people should see me in this state now, I covered myself with my wrapper and lay down in the bottom of the boat." Their friends thought she was overcome by sleep.

Ma Anandamayi also recalled that in spite of her tendency toward concealment many people came to notice her absorbed demeanour in front of Images in temples, or other places of religious worship. But all these sparks from a latent immeasurable source of *sakti*, as it were, did not quite disturb her friends because Nirmala's overall deportment remained normal and friendly as usual.

Bholanath (Ramani Mohan) and Ma Anandamayi

It may be definitely stated that throughout the lifetime of Bholanath Ma Anandmayi never did anything without his consent and permission. Regarding her marriage she has said, "They told me at the time of my marriage that I should respect and obey Bholanath. Consequently, I gave him the respect and obedience due to my father. Bholanath from the very beginning was just like a father to me. He had implicit faith in me and appeared to be convinced that whatever I might do would be right."

In a more serious mood of recollecting her early life with Bholanath, Ma Anandamayi has said, "After all, this body was given unto his care, it was for him to do as he wished; but he saw that even a trace of worldly thought was repelled by it. Even a slight change in his demeanour toward it used to produce death-like symptoms; he would be scared and immediately engage in *namajapa* because he knew that alone

would restore it to its normal state. His behaviour was always exemplary; he was wholly concerned about my well-being. He was just happy to have me with him."

Bholanath's continued proximity to such a presence of luminous purity must have metamorphosed his total being; perhaps it is not entirely right to say this because no one but he could have so occupied the position of a guardian, a bulwark, for Ma Anandamayi while she went through the years of house-keeping as well as her *lila* of *sadhana*. He evidently was the person-elect for this onerous post, which he graced easily and competently till the time of his *samadhi* in 1938.

To the question as to why Ma Anandamayi had rejected the legitimate scope of enjoyment for a married couple, she once made this very crucial answer:

"For this body there is no question of enjoyment or rejection. Whatever happens to it is necessary for all of you--perhaps this aspect is not so necessary (for human beings)."

Can we read in these words an ideal interpretation of what it means to be a human being? All her other *vanis* derive straightly from this supreme elevation of dispassion in life, as for example:

"The one and only duty for man is to engage in God-remembrance."

or

"To talk of God alone is worthwhile, all else is pain and in vain."

These aphoristic statements have been commented upon by many great scholars. They all agree that renunciation

seems to lie at the heart of her message to humanity.

The First Stirrings of *Mahabhava*¹

The inhabitants of Ashtagram had to contend with sudden cyclones. During one such onslaught Bholanath and his wife had to remove to a safer place. They returned home after some days. Bholanath undertook such repairs to his rooms as were necessary. During the cyclone, the cane-work matting used for fencing had been blown off. A few of these mats lay on the ground nearby. When Nirmala picked these up, she was interested to find the ground underneath free of the dreaded weed which was the bane of life of the people of Ashtagram. This quick growing grass defied control and was forever encroaching onto paths and courtyards. Nirmala now collected the discarded matting and spread them around her courtyard. This worked like magic. The clean surroundings evoked admiration from neighbours. This led to other events. It was the custom in Ashtagram to hold *kirtans* in all houses from time to time. All neighbours would gather to sing *kirtan*, sometimes augmented by organized groups who could be invited to participate in these functions.

Bholanath also took his turn and a *kirtan* was arranged in this courtyard. Nirmala sat with the wife of Madhu Babu who was ill at the time. Ma Anandamayi recalled, "I was sitting on her cot and watching the *kirtan*-party through the gaps in the fence. Suddenly I saw the whole house illuminated by a bright light and this body at the centre of the *kirtan* mingling in with the effulgence and the joyousness. At that moment the body slipped down from the cot on to the floor. It rolled a little and then became still and inert. I was not unconscious. I heard the invalid cry out in alarm; Bholanath was fetched. He was

told that Khusir Ma was in a fit. They sprinkled water on my face and raised the body to a sitting position. Bholanath helped me to walk back to my room. On being asked by him, I explained to him a little of the true state of my experience. This was the first time that I saw how it was that a person may be affected by the strains of devotional music."

This phenomenon was repeated in a more powerful form when a well-known singer Gagan Rai came to Ashtagram to sing *kirtan* for them. He was a famous minstrel, a *sadhu*, respected by everyone. Bholanath had invited him and his companions to have food at his place at the conclusion of the *kirtan*. Nirmala, after cooking the meal, went out to sit with the other women who had gathered to listen to the singing. The *kirtan* started in the evening; soon it was dark. At its conclusion, the women left one by one and, since there was no light in the place, without noticing that Nirmala's inert body was lying on the ground in *samadhi*. Only one elderly lady whose little grandson had fallen asleep was left sitting by. When Bholanath found her absent from their room, he started looking around for her; the elderly woman then called out to him and the others that Khusir Ma was lying on the ground near her. This time Nirmala could not be roused at all. So Bholanath with some help carried her to their room and laid her down in a corner of it. In the meantime, dogs had entered the room and spoiled all the cooked food. Bholanath was distracted, but first he had to make alternative arrangements for providing a proper meal for his guests. By the time everybody had been fed and bidden farewell to, it was almost dawn. Nirmala was lying as she was, no trace of returning animation was visible in her. There was an effulgence surrounding her body. Nobody could mistake this state for a

hysterical fit or unconsciousness or even death. There was an atmosphere of the sublime all around her. Even the site of the *kirtan* was pulsating with it. All those who had helped to carry her inert body were experiencing an ineffable joy and seemed transported to a different world. Bholanath, however, was at his wits' end, not knowing how to recall Nirmala to her normal state. Her normal appearance after all was the best and most endearing sight. The majesty or glory of Divine Presence can not be borne in comfort by human beings for long. Even in later years in Dhaka, no matter how exalted the *samadhi*-like states were, Ma Anandamayi's companions always sighed in relief when her inimitable smile dawned to dispel the awesomeness and confirm the restoration of the normal. Now in Ashtagram someone had the happy idea of performing *kirtan* again. Gagan Rai was fetched from a neighbouring village. He was overwhelmed to see that Nirmala had entered into *samadhi* which had apparently been induced by his singing. He regretted that he had not been told about it the previous night. Now with a full heart, he sang again the songs with which he had started the evening before. To him it was the fulfilment of his constant efforts toward the evoking of the Divine Presence of the two Princes of *samkirtan*, Sri Gaur and Sri Nitai. He recognized in the young housewife the *lakshanas* (symptoms, indications) of the *mahabhava* described in Vaisnava literature. He made his obeisance to her when she roused out of her *samadhi* after almost 19 hours. It was again evening when the *kirtan* was concluded.

The entire village was affected by the atmosphere of spiritual influence, but Nirmala herself diffused, as always, any attempt to raise her above the ordinary. She was again the same friendly young girl not claiming any special recognition for her state of *samadhi*. On other occasions when she felt the

stirrings of *mahabhava*, she would quickly return to her room and shut herself in. Nevertheless, a rumour spread that Khushir Ma was prone to fits and this reached her parents in Vidyakut. They wrote to Bholanath making anxious enquiries. Even in those early days, Bholanath proved himself worthy of the very crucial position he was destined to occupy. He wrote back to say that their daughter was perfectly well and that there was no need to worry about her. From the very first days of their life together, his faith in her integrity remained unwavering and steadfast despite the many vicissitudes, which threatened to engulf it at times.

There was another person in Ashtagram who had the distinction of penetrating the veil of anonymity with which Ma Anandamayi surrounded herself. This was Hara Kumar, the brother of Srimati Sen, then living at his sister's. He was educated and well employed, but at times would be carried away by religious fervour and during these spells it became impossible for him to work normally. Hara Kumar's mother had died in the room which was given to Bholanath and Nirmala when they came to Ashtagram. Either because of this or for some other reason best known to himself, he prostrated himself before Nirmala and addressed her as "Mother". He would look for opportunities to render her some little service and was transported with joy when he received any hint of recognition from her. Village customs prevailed in Ashtagram. Ordinarily Nirmala would not speak to men who were not members of her family or very close friends of Bholanath. But Bholanath himself developed a kindness for Hara Kumar and allowed him the privilege of belonging to the family. Hara Kumar used to declare, "Now it is only I who call you Mother. The day will come when the world will recognize you and call you so."

Nirmala became slightly indisposed for some time in Ashtagram. Bholanath did his own cooking and took care of her as best as he could. She recovered very soon and resumed her happy way of life.

Nirmala used to be alone in her room for many hours when she had nothing to do. She sometimes sat quietly and watched herself repeating "*haribol*", the word which is used in the refrains of a *kirtan* or sung as a chorus at the end. This was also the word she had learnt to sing from her father in her childhood.

One night after the day's work was done and Bholanath had lain down to his rest, she said, "Shall I sit up for a while? You go to sleep" Bholanath acquiesced. Nirmala sat quietly repeating the sacred word. She watched her limbs arrange themselves in a yogic posture which much later she found was called the *siddhasana*. There was a feeling of joyousness within. Everyday she had new experiences. Her body would undergo other transformations; sometimes it became heavy and inert; at other times very light as if it had no contact with the earth. Once while she felt she was extraordinarily powerful, her hand happened to fall on Bholanath who was sleeping at her side. He woke up with a start and in the dark mistook it for a man's hand; he grasped it strongly shouting, "Thief, thief!" When he realized his mistake he was puzzled, but Nirmala persuaded him to go back to sleep again.

One day she saw herself assume the *padmasana*. Her back straightened, she felt a tremor near the base of the spine and to the accompaniment of a slight rhythmic sound the spinal column seemed to get locked in an upright position block by block. It came to her *kheyala* that it was almost like what she had seen in Narundi when a derailed train had been hoisted up

on the rails piece by piece making a rhythmic noise. She described it by using another image, that of the placing of smaller and smaller pots on the firm base of a big pot like the topmost spire of a temple. She envisioned a cluster of nerves at each centre which looked like lotus flowers in bloom. At this time she said she had a feeling of utter ease and freedom. The body was itself a help rather than an obstacle to meditation and *namajapa*. She felt a tremendous power inside her. Then, suddenly she would think that it was very late and she should sleep, so at once the whole phenomenon seemed as if switched off. She lay down and went to sleep.

Ma Anandamayi from time to time has described many such experiences which in their range and variety defy an exhaustive compilation. Moreover she has said that she has not disclosed even one hundredth of the entirety of her spiritual adventures. It is however clear from the description that she was aware of what was taking place and she was also not helplessly given over to the surging tides of this spiritual *lila of sakti*.

During her stay in Ashtagram Nirmala had occasion to go home to Vidyakut for a few weeks.

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

In her parents' village, Nirmala could dispense with her heavy veils and move about freely. Mokshada Devi related

that Hindus and Muslims alike loved to have Nirmala visit their homes and talk to them. Nirmala and her friends were great enthusiasts for the game played with *cowrie* shells. Bholanath had not liked this game and had asked her not to play. Now at Vidyakut when other young girls played, she would not participate in their games. Her friends told her that her husband would not know anything about it if she played at Vidyakut only, but Nirmala smilingly declined.

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

The magic words which Nirmala had whispered into her ear were: "Don't be upset. You will receive a letter from your husband very soon." Ma Anadamayi humorously recalled that the village-folk thought that she had used some spiritual powers to cure the girl. She related this incident to show that ordinarily it was difficult to distinguish between a genuine *bhava* and other apparently similar conditions of the body.

After a stay of almost four years at Ashtagram, Bholanath was transferred to Bajitpur. Before joining his service there they decided to pay a short visit to Vidyakut. Madhu Babu and his wife were very friendly with Bholanath and Nirmala.

They were invited to come with them on a visit. The journey was undertaken by boat. In midstream they were hailed by another big boat, which wanted a little fire from them. Bholanath and Madhu Babu had been warned against river-dacoits on this stretch of the river. They asked their own boatmen to quicken their pace to outstrip the boat which was following them. Their own boat was loaded with baggage as both families were changing houses. The women were wearing lots of ornaments as was usual in those days. Evening was upon them and it started to drizzle. Soon it was quite dark but the big boat seemed to be pursuing them swiftly. Nirmala signalled to Bholanath to ask the boatmen to enter a narrow channel of water which was just discernible in the dark. This was done, and rowing carefully they came to a village of fishermen. The big boat obviously had missed this manoeuvre. The villagers told them that they had escaped in the nick of time because no doubt they were being followed by dacoits. They spent the night in this village and next morning arrived at Vidyakut.

Vidyakut

There were scenes of rejoicing at this homecoming. Madhu Babu and his family were entertained to a feast and then bidden an affectionate farewell by Bholanath and Nirmala. They continued on their journey to their own village. Nirmala resumed her playful activities with her little cousins who became her playmates and also she would visit the host of aunts, uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers who abounded in the village; also the neighbours who would eagerly await her coming. The elderly people would marvel at her playing with the children, "It doesn't seem that she is a grown-up young woman, she is so childlike" Nirmala did not practise her *nama-japa* or meditation in Vidyakut, so up to this

time Bholanath only knew about the *yogic kriyas*.

The whole village of Vidyakut assumed a festive look with the coming of their beloved Nirmala. She unexpectedly met Harish, the postman in Vidyakut, who had previously been in Sultanpur while Nirmala was a child. He had been very fond of her; now he met her with affection. Ma Anandamayi recalled that when she looked at him it was as if a torch light was shone on his face—it looked so lighted up. This man later became an ascetic and spent his life in *sadhana*.

Bholanath's joining-time leave came to an end. It was decided that while Bholanath would proceed to Bajitpur to find suitable quarters etc., Nirmala would go to Atpara to stay with his family for some time. Farewells were difficult. The whole village was plunged in gloom. The girls even from Muslim households walked with the family to see the ferry-boat off. Nirmala looked sad and her smile was misty when she tried to answer everybody's repeated question, "When will you come again?"

Bholanath went separately to Bajitpur. Nirmala's father escorted her to Atpara. Disembarking at the *ghat* (shore), a *palki* (a palanquin, borne by four bearers) was engaged for Nirmala by Bipin Bihari while he planned to accompany her on foot with a coolie carrying the baggage.

The palanquin-bearers soon outstripped Bipin Bihari and the coolie. They wouldn't listen to Nirmala's appeals to go slow. Soon they arrived at a junction of lanes and did not know which to take. Belatedly obeying Nirmala they advanced along one lane but soon lowered the palanquin and sat down at the roadside because they felt they were just lost. Nirmala then asked them to fetch any passerby they could

find. So after a while she heard an educated voice ask, 'Where do you wish to go?' Now this being her husband's village, she could not show herself or talk to him. She would be expected to behave like a bride. She put out her right hand through the curtains and wrote Revati Mohan's name in the dust of the road with her finger. The gentleman then escorted her to her home. Bipin Bihari arrived much later.

Nirmala was already well known in Atpara. She had stayed at the village for six months with Pramoda Devi and her family after the passing away of Revati Mohan.

Now she met again her friends from the nearby settlement who were delighted to see her. She also became involved in household activities because she would not allow her elder sister-in-law Pramoda Devi to do anything while she was at hand. After a few weeks there was a theft in the house, which upset Pramoda Devi, already suffering from her bereavement. Bholanath came from Bajitpur and took all of them back with him. After a few months Pramoda Devi with her two children, Kalipada and Labanya, returned to Atpara. Her son Ashu remained back at Bajitpur with his uncle and aunt. Pramoda Devi was a little bit more relaxed and able to cope with her depleted family.

CHAPTER THREE

The Lila of Sadhana

If somebody has an experience about any occurrence, then he feels it as the greatest truth vouchsafed to him. If somebody feels awe and reverence then, of course, he will automatically believe in the words of that person. But until such an authority is found, one in general remains bound up within his system of beliefs. I have told you so often even within a group which, say, worship Krishna, there are differences. Not all of them adore the same Krishna. The aim of all spiritual endeavour is to realize that the Krishna they adore is the same Krishna being worshipped by others, that is, to discover the unity of all ways of understanding the Lord (the Ista). To see yourself in everyone and to realize that everyone is in you is the supreme aim of spiritual knowledge.

- Sri Ma Anandamayi

In the decades of the sixties and seventies Sri Ma Anandamayi came into close contact with nearly all the heads of our famous ascetic orders known as Mandaleshwars or Mahamandaleshwars. Everyone acknowledged her as a being who had descended to the earth for the benefit of mankind. These great scholars, savants and erudite renunciates saw in her a personification of *Brahmavidya* itself. She was the vindication of their way of life. She resolved all doubts and confirmed the worthwhileness of a life dedicated to the search for Truth.

How was this possible for Nirmala, a simple village girl untutored in Vedic literature and untrained in any way in yogic rigourisms necessary for a spiritual journey? The answer is simple: Nirmala had a *kheyala* to perform *sadhana* as a pilgrim in search of fulfilment. For nearly six years she engaged in this *lila* of *sadhana* in Bajitpur.

Bajitpur : (1918-1924)

How this came about may be best related in her own words: "One day in Bajitpur I went to bathe in a pond near the house where we lived. While I was pouring water over my body, the *kheyala* suddenly came to me, "How would it be to engage in a *lila* of *sadhana*?" And so the *lila* (play) began." In later life Ma Anandamayi explained, "The *yogic kriyas* were just like the playfulness of earlier years. For me there was no difference or necessity either for the one or the other."

Again,

"It was not that I achieved anything I did not have before. I am always as I am. So it was *lila* only."

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

The change was very gradual. As before, Nirmala performed her household work with scrupulous care. Her household consisted of Bholanath, his nephew Ashu, a school boy, and their pet dog Toma. Bholanath was a sociable person. He liked to invite people to his house. His wife was a good cook and took pains to prepare imaginative meals for his guests. She also had a lively sense of humour. One of

Bholanath's friends happened to mention in her hearing that he could eat everything but radish. Some days later he came to their house for dinner. After enjoying a hearty meal he was not a little staggered to discover that he had eaten nothing but radish from the beginning to the end of the meal, including the sweet dish!

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

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

As related above, she had the *kheyala* to perform *sadhana*. She had never acquired proficiency in reading and had not learnt from religious books or scriptures how *sadhana* might be practised. First she asked Bholanath's permission to begin the ritual of simple *nama-japa*. (The repetition of sacred Names) Bholanath readily agreed thinking it would be congenial occupation for her because she was mostly alone in the house. Nirmala then went about her *sadhana* as she had seen her mother and grandmother and various other devout

women perform their evening rituals. After the day's work was done (She even prepared the after-dinner smoke for Bholanath known as *chillum* or *Hookah*), she would carefully clean and sweep her room and the surrounding area till not a speck of dust was visible anywhere. Then she would burn incense, and the stillness of the evening would be impregnated with the pure fragrance of sandalwood. She would then take Bholanath's permission to seat herself in one corner of her room for the ritual of *nama-japa*¹ and orally start to repeat the Name : Hari, Hari. After a few days of this routine she saw that her limbs would adjust themselves to the postures of *padmasana*, *siddhasana* or some other *asana* whenever she sat for her *nama-japa*. Nirmala at that time did not know the names of those meditative poses. She merely watched her body assume these postures.

Other *yogic mudras* and *kriyas* (positions of fingers and hands) manifested themselves on her body during this time of evening worship. Bholanath, resting on his bed after his meal, would sometimes lie awake and watch her spellbound until late into the night; at other times, overcome with fatigue after the day's work, he would fall asleep while Nirmala sat absorbed in a world of her own. Some of these *kriyas* he recognized for what they were, but most of them in their variety were beyond his comprehension. It was apparent to him that these motions were gone through as if they were happening to her naturally.

Nirmala used to repeat the name of Hari for no other reason than that her father had taught her to sing this name. Bholanath, a devout *Sakta*, was a little perturbed by this. He asked her one day, "Why do you repeat the name of Hari? We are not *Vaisnavas*, we are *Saktas*." Nirmala said, "What shall I

do then? Shall I repeat the names of Siva?" Considerably relieved, Bholanath agreed that she might do so.

The *kriyas* which manifested themselves in her body did not appear to be affected by this change of names. Ma Anandamayi has said, "The Names did not relate to particular images. The sound of the sacred syllables on my breath united me as if to infinity. The resonance of the repeated words eddied away in rippling waves as if spreading away to all quarters...."

Nirmala continued to practice her *sadhana* in a corner of her room. The sound of the sacred syllables as pronounced by her was the profound music to which her own body responded in a display of yogic *sakti*.

Generally, these *kriyas* took place after nightfall, but there was no definite time for them, and they would occur during the day as well. The external stimulus of *nama-japa* also was not always necessary to bring them about. Some of the neighbours happened to see a few of the *kriyas* through the chinks in the cane-work fence. The simple villagers were at a loss to account for such strange behaviour. Nirmala did not appear to be ill or abnormal, but completely lost in a world of her own. Not having come across this phenomenon before, they thought that she had become possessed by strange spirits. Nirmala appeared a changed person even during the hours when she was not actually engaged in *sadhana*. She seemed withdrawn and there was a far-away look on her face. The erstwhile popular young girl began to be shunned by her neighbours. Her companions and friends, puzzled and mystified, began to avoid her. Nirmala, on the other hand, welcomed this solitude. Now that she was left severely alone, she had more time to devote to her *sadhana*. Solitude is

necessary for the *sadhaka*.

Many came and suggested that Bholanath should take the help of *ojhas* (men who profess to drive away evil spirits) to cure her of evil spirits. The educated among his friends advised him to consult doctors, as they were convinced that she was suffering from some unusual form of hysteria. Although loath to do either, Bholanath felt rather helpless in the face of strong adverse criticism as well as sincere friendly advice. Finally he called in one or two *ojhas*. But they could effect no cure. One of them was specially well-known for his powers to expel evil spirits. When he came, Nirmala was sitting in a corner, seemingly oblivious of her surroundings. The man pronounced his exorcisms and then sat down to watch the effect of his performance. Suddenly, uttering loud groans, he rolled over on the floor in a spasm, as if he was in great pain. Bholanath tried in vain to bring him round. Then, thoroughly alarmed by the man's groans and writhings, he bethought himself to appeal to Nirmala. Accordingly, he implored her saying, "What has happened to this man? Do please put him right again." Immediately the man regained his consciousness. When he had fully recovered, he prostrated himself before Nirmala, who had sat throughout with unchanged demeanour, saying, "She is the Devi. It was foolish of me to have had the audacity to try my powers on her."

Bholanath luckily had a friend in Dr. Mahendra Nandi who, in addition to being a good physician, was a wise and intelligent man of the world. After observing Nirmala for a few days, he said to Bholanath that she was in an exalted spiritual state and should on no account be exposed to the gaze of common people. Bholanath was only too glad to follow this advice.

Nirmala's *sadhana* underwent a perceptible change from the month of May, 1922. She became more fully occupied with it. After three months on August 3, 1922 (the night of *Rakhi Purnima*), Nirmala had the *kheyala* to go through the process of spiritual initiation or *diksa* or it may be said that she saw herself being initiated by herself.

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

Nirmala had no *Guru* in the ordinary sense of the word. On the night of *Rakhi Purnima*¹ she, as usual, cooked and served the evening meal to Bholanath and his nephew Ashu at about 9 p. m. Her own food she used to keep aside and eat only late at night when she got up from her *sadhana*. Indeed, for months she had only this one meal daily at midnight or later and frequently, none whatsoever. Earlier that evening her neighbours had come to invite her to go with them to see the special decorations in the temples, but she had declined to

accompany them. When her family had retired to rest, she sat in her corner for her daily worship. After some time she watched her finger draw a mystic design (*yantra*) on the floor. Although imaginary the design seemed vibrant. She herself became the *Guru*; a *bijamantra* (name of the Lord in the form of a sacred syllable) came from within her, as it were. This *mantra* she wrote with her finger inside the design already drawn on the floor; she now became the *sisya* (disciple). She accepted the *mantra*, and started repeating it. It was a moment of profound realization that the *mantra* was not separate from her and that *Guru*, *mantra* and *Ista* (God) were one.

For the next five months her *sadhana* assumed a more concrete form. After the *lila* of spiritual initiation, Nirmala at times would hear *mantras* and hymn-like compositions in Sanskrit issue spontaneously from her lips, generally preceded by the utterance of the single syllable OM. She had no previous knowledge of either Sanskrit or these compositions, but her enunciation was perfect.²

These *mantras* were co-ordinated to the movements of her body. Her body became as if an instrument for the play of this profound music. Her entire body moved as if in vibrant dance forms, trembling and responding to an exhilarating choreography of inner *Sakti*.

During this time the normal functions of her body were suspended for hours and even days. She did not feel hungry or sleepy. Her days were not divided into mornings, evenings and nights; there was only one prolonged period of indescribable bliss. She has said that her mouth would have the flavour of a honey-like substance which came from within and which became so profuse at times that she would have to swallow it down. But it left no bad after-taste in her mouth as

is usual with sweet things. Sometimes she felt that her body had become as light as a feather and had risen from the floor or again that it had become as heavy and immovable as a rock. Both these conditions of her body have been physically observed subsequently by many. While engaged in *sadhana* she had no sense of bodily pain either. Sometimes, while engaged in performing a complicated *yogic asana*, her long black tresses got entangled with her limbs and her hair was sometimes torn out from the roots but she felt no pain.

At this time she could not attend to her household work. But Nirmala's family were not inconvenienced by her spell of *sadhana*. A young maid-servant who used to come daily to help had become very fond of her young mistress and now very willingly did the entire work around the house. There was another devotee to look after Nirmala at this time. This was Toma, the dog. He would sit or lie near her while she was alone in the house. If she was lying in a state of *bhava*, he kept watch near her till Bholanath came home.

In later years when the cognoscenti realized that Sri Ma Anandamayi spoke of spiritual matters from a position of invincible authority they became interested in this *lila* of *sadhana*. Many scholars of distinction had the opportunity of engaging her in philosophical dialogues. They found her well able to satisfy their queries and that in a spontaneous manner which was totally convincing. Sri Ma Anandamayi's *lila* of *sadhana* is a unique phenomenon. It was a spontaneous burgeoning of a fount of knowledge which was all-comprehensive.

We know of no parallel phenomenon. It seems that this *Sadhana* culminating in *Siddhi* (fulfilment) was undertaken for the benefit of mankind only because Ma Anandamayi, in

answer to the question of why it was performed at all, has said:

"For all of you! Don't you feel confident when I understand exactly what your problems are? Also your experiences, your doubts and despairs and also your attainment? I had the *kheyala* to be with all pilgrims who are in search of truth! Not only those of our own tradition but what you think of as alien ways. All paths of spiritual endeavour were illuminated and experienced at this time, Every human endeavour to find God finds its echo in this body because it has embraced the entirety of this search, albeit in a condensed form within a time limit, but which nevertheless is exact and complete."

Again in later years when Ma Anandamayī had occasion to answer questions from ordinary people as well as renowned scholars the truth of this statement was borne out fully. She spoke from a position of authority in clearcut language which was lucid yet profound. Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, Jains as well as Hindus found in her a breadth of vision possible only in a teacher who belongs to humanity (*Jagadguru*).

In Bajitpur, where this momentous *sadhana* was taking place, all was quiet and peaceful. Bholanath sometimes watched her performing yogic *kriyas* or adopting *asanas*; more often he would fall asleep after a hard day's work, while Nirmala sat in one corner of the room in deep meditation. Bholanath did not doubt the authenticity of Nirmala's ways and he was content to watch over her well-being to the best of his ability. Moreover, Nirmala was totally beautiful in whatever she did. Her yogic postures were perfect, her expression of total inwardisation awe-inspiring. If she lay on the ground in a state of *samadhi*, the inertness was offset by a

glow which radiated from her body. Bholanath knew that she was not being carried away by any alien force because he saw that she was always in full command of herself. Neither was it a sham performance for anybody's edification, because mostly she was alone and in any case any kind of make-believe was foreign to her nature. She was as genuine as a lustrous jewel of pristine purity.

The time evidently had come for a kind of recognition of this manifestation of Grace. An incident took place at this time which in a way was quite dramatic because it brought forth many of the *rasas* (flavours) which constitute it, such as fear, wonder, awe and finally that of sublime peace (*Shanti*).

It so happened that Ma Anandamay's cousin Nishikanta Bhattacharya had come to stay with them for a few days. He was amazed and somewhat displeased to see his sister living like an ascetic and not at all as a normal housewife. Although she, with the help of a young maid servant, performed all the household chores, yet she seemed quite untouched by these mundane actions. She looked different from the shy, demure girl of his recollection. In his annoyance he took Bholanath to task for his indulgence of such an odd way of life. Ordinarily no course of *sadhana* may be adopted without benefit of a competent *guru* and the prescribed ritual of a formal initiation. (*diksha*).

Bholanath was a little in awe of his brother-in-law and agreed to question his wife about her *sadhana*.

The two brothers-in-law used to play a game of chess after their lunch. After the game Bholanath would go back to his office while Nishikanta reposed himself. One day (probably the fourth day after the ceremony of initiation) instead of their

daily game of chess they entered Nirmala's room with the intention of expostulating with her about the matter. Nishikanta said to Bholanath rather roughly, "Why don't you ask her what she is doing?" Normally, in accordance with village customs, she kept her face veiled if her elder brother and her husband were present together. But that day she did not attempt to cover her face. Moreover, when Nishikanta spoke, she looked straight at him and said, "What do you want to know?" She spoke in such a strong voice that he was taken aback and was silent. Then Nirmala said in a milder tone, "Don't be afraid. What is it?"

"Why do you practise all these *kriyas* (exercises). Have you been initiated into spiritual life?"

"Yes"

"Has Ramani (Bholanath) also been initiated?"

"No, but he will be after five months." (Nirmala named the exact day and date with its presiding star).

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

"Go and ask Janaki Sen. He is fishing at the pond."

"Why do you speak in such an unnatural manner to us?"

"It seems so to you. I am same, as always."

Bholanath and Nishikanta were thoroughly upset. It was apparent to them that they were in the presence of an exalted person. Nishikanta asked humbly "Who are you?" Prompt came the answer, "*Purna Brahma Narayana!*" Before they could react she added "*Narayani*". She also uttered the names, "*Mahadeva*" and "*Mahadevi*".

Janaki Sen was fetched from the pond. Nobody had time to wonder as to how Nirmala could know his whereabouts, especially as he should have been in his office at the time. Janaki Sen had never before seen Nirmala without her veil pulled decorously over her face. He also was astonished at her aura of a powerful and divine personality. After some questions and quick rejoinders from Nirmala, Janaki Sen said, "Who are you?" To this question she returned the same answer, "*Purna Brahma Narayana* (the Supreme Being)." Janaki Sen said, "You are the devil, the devil, the devil!" Nirmala seemed amused and said, "You wish to test me, don't you?"

"Yes! If you have any spiritual powers, give us a demonstration." Nirmala beckoned Bholanath to seat himself. She then lightly touched his head. Immediately he seemed to go into a deep state of meditation. He became utterly still and his face was calm and serene. His friends were nonplussed. Most probably they had expected some miracles from her; they did not have the calibre to understand that a gift of *samadhi* by a mere touch of the hand is possible only in the dimension of Divine Grace. *Samadhi* is a state coveted by the *sadhakas* of all ages; life-times are spent in rigorous spiritual exercises in the hope that they will culminate in *samadhi*, and here Bholanath received the bliss of attainment as a gift. They did not understand that Nirmala had done what was asked of her.

All this was conjectured by scholars later on; at the time everything was confusion. Both Nishikanta and Janaki Sen were frightened. Ashu, Bholanath's nephew, on his return from school, was bewildered to see his aunt looking somehow different and his uncle sitting immovable as if lost to the world. He began to cry. Both men now requested Nirmala to

restore Bholanath to normalcy. More in response to Ashu's distress than their request, she again gently touched Bholanath. He gradually roused out of his *samadhi*. Questioned about his experience, he said with some difficulty that he had never known such bliss, that he had been indescribably joyous and at peace.

The time for revelation was not yet, so this interlude was allowed to sink down in the memories of the people concerned. It is true that Nirmala was not doubted any more. Neighbours and friends thought that she was extraordinarily gifted and seized by the religious way of life. The main reason that she did not cause any stir in the neighbourhood was her own quiet, unassuming deportment of normal behaviour, not the least remarkable feature of which was her charming smile which seemed at once to dispel doubt and inculcate an irresistible attraction. Thus no radical change took place in Nirmala's vicinity. She continued with her *sadhana*.

In later years many scholars of distinction became interested in this *lila* of *sadhana*. Speculations and theories were mooted but as Pandit Gopinath Kavirajji has stated clearly it could not be classified under any rubric mentioned in the *Sastras*. Ma Anandamayi has, on occasions, spoken about this *lila* in her own inimitable style, which is simple but profound:

"Whatever anybody judges this body to be is how he looks at it. Some others say that if *sadhana* has been performed in previous lives, then the last life sees a culmination of it. But here, when we speak of *sadhana*, wherefrom did this body learn the way of it? There was no outsider who came to teach this body anything! Have I not said many times that *sadhana* is just playfulness. Don't I say sometimes 'Let us visit such and such a place', although the place is already known to me. In truth it was just a *kheyala* and nothing else."

Referring to authenticity Ma Anandamayi has said,

"Sadhana must conform to scriptural injunctions. If you do not find it in one place, you will find it in another. How much can be written after all? In a Railway Time-Table you can see the names of big cities. If you keep on travelling you will see much of what is not mentioned in a travelogue. The indications are all given in the Scriptures. If you come across some exceptions as far as *sadhana* by this body is concerned then you will know it as other than the orthodox way. At least you will find them mentioned as unorthodox procedures!, So, after all, you have found them mentioned, haven't you?

"Here there was no question of a gradual advancement. Some later stages happened earlier or in the usual way. There was no distinction between upper and lower or later and earlier or simpler and advanced.

"It all came from within. Sometimes I used to hear distinctly, 'Repeat this *mantra*'. It was again I who asked, 'Whose *mantra* is this?' At once the answer came, 'Ganesa or Visnu or some other Form'. A query rose in me again, 'How does he look?' A Form seemed to take shape out of my body and then vanish within. Do not think that I encountered the Forms of your ways of worship only; what you would call alien Forms were also manifested in a similar way and worshipped by me. This is why you find me so conversant with the details of ritualistic procedures of countless ways of relating to God.

"Then it would come from within me, 'What do you need to worship? You are everything!' At once- the Realization! Partial knowledge submerging into an integral knowledge! I was the one that appears as many.

"This body, therefore, responds to the state of understanding of the interlocuter. What limits can be set to the opinions of this body? But if you go along a traditional line of approach, you can reach the goal and again beyond that remains the unattained. But where the distinction between the attainable and the unattained does not arise it is that itself. What you hear from this body depends upon how you play the instrument. For this body difference of opinions remains a non-issue."

Pandit Gopinath Kaviraj summarises Ma Anandamayi's *lila* of *sadhana* in these words:

"In this play she started with ignorance and proceeded through various austerities, observing silence, regulating diet, practising *japa* and yogic exercises and performing *puja* and other similar rites. Dawn of knowledge formed also a part of this play. A sense of agony and dryness of the soul followed by the bliss of union had their own places in this self-enacted drama... One should not take it as an illustration of divided self and of its activities. It is rather the outcome of an eternally vigilant and self-conscious will playing the double part of impersonation of a *sadhika* passing through the shadows and lights of a disciplined life and of the still witness behind observing and directing its own play on the stage."³

Pandit Gopinath Kavirajji's words were read out to Ma Anandamayi. Her response was:

"Acting? What is not is to be presented as real? At a set time, for the pleasure of onlookers, isn't it? Then a rehearsal is required for bringing about in the imagination a well-ordered sequence.

"Where One alone is, how to distinguish between the player and the witness? Consider, whatever can be burnt

down by a big fire can be accomplished by a spark as well. The conflagration and the little burning cinder are one. If you say the whole and its part, it is still the same. Oneness. If there is no other than the One only, then what should be drama and what real?"⁴

A Note on Ma Anandamayi's Disclosure of Identity:

In later years Ma Anandamayi was asked the question, "Who are you?" many times by different people. She always answered in words which were variations of the statement, "Whatever or whoever you think I am, I am that!" The answer that she gave in Bajitpur to Bholanath and Nishikanta is therefore a unique statement.

It was evidently her *kheyala* that both men should accept her presence unquestioningly. The term "*Purna Brahma Narayana*" was familiar to both as signifying the Supreme Deity. That she spoke especially to her audience becomes clear because she added the word *Narayani*. She knew the men would not be able to see beyond her female form. That she was in tune with the immediate reactions to her words is demonstrated by her use of the subsequent words, *Mahadeva* and *Mahadevi*. These were evidently for Bholanath, who being a devout *Sakta* would not feel comfortable with what he would take to be Vaishnava terms.

That Ma Anandamayi's vision was not limited by any image we already know from her statements about the words "*Hari*" and "*Siva*". These sacred syllables were vibrant links relating her to the cosmic pulsating movement of creation. The phrase "*Purna Brahma Narayana*" evidently was not used to describe an image but a *mantra* of great significance indicative of a pervasive reality.

The word *Narayana* is sometimes exegeted to mean. "One who is all-pervasive" or "He who dwells inside all creatures."

(Visnupurana I, IV, 62) The use of the word *Narayana* with *Brahman* is therefore very meaningful. This *mantra* seems a reminder of the constant theme of our sacred literature of holding together transcendence and immanence. The word *Brahman* signifies the greatest, the everywhere-presence, the reality which nullifies any beyondness to it. It is possible to understand the phrase *Purna Brahma Narayana* to mean that the indwelling *antaryamin* (The witness self of the renunciate or *ista* of the devotee) is the same as *Brahman*.

The Vedas speak of *Brahman* as ultimate reality. The impersonal nature of this cosmic reality is personalized as God, even as the creator, in many Texts:

"I shall become many : He practiced austerities. Thereupon whatever is here He created. After creating He entered into it." (Taittiriyaopanishad II 6.)

At first glance the passage seems to contradict the beyondness and unity of *Brahman*. Sri Sankaracharya, the great commentator, writes that this passage is addressed to the persistent doubt in the mind of man regarding the reality of *Brahman* namely, if *Brahman* is unknowable, completely transcendent, then why should it not be considered a cipher or a mere zero? The answer is: because you already know Him (It) as immanent in the innermost texture of your being as the self. The Text by saying "He entered into it" propounds the proximity and the accessibility of *Brahman* to every individual. After all how is the individual to "attain" the supreme? The word "attain" or its equivalents could mean only a realization of that which already is. The movements of seeking and finding are not two, but one only, the sudden enlightenment, the realization of fulfilment, when all is bliss—*ananda*.

Bholanath and Nishikanta were educated brahmins; but it cannot be said that they understood Ma Anandamayi to indicate all this in her answer. Whatever their understanding the two men (and also Janaki Sen) experienced the powerful aura which scintillated from her personality! This was the first occasion of a display of majesty and splendour. It would happen many times later in Dhaka when her audience would be overwhelmed with awe, but never for long. Gurupriya Devi (Didi) used to explain this phenomenon to us, "Ma herself would revert to normalcy so quickly that we were prevented from losing our bearings. It was as if she drew a veil over her glorious presence, or suddenly withdrew within herself the aura of divine beauty. Evidently she did not have the *kheyala* to endow anyone with the requisite eyesight which could sustain the vision for more than a few moments. We know because we have experienced it. We truly are all like children playing with fire!"

Normalcy returned in Bajitpur also after this incident.

Bholanath's Initiation

Although Nirmala had not mentioned the matter again, Bholanath remembered the date of his promised initiation. With a vague idea of avoiding anything that might happen he hurried off to his office without his breakfast. The disciple is expected to keep complete fast until the rite is over. Unintentionally Bholanath fulfilled this condition. At the appropriate hour Nirmala sent word to him to come home. Bholanath replied that he was busy and could not leave the office. Nirmala then had the message conveyed to him that if he did not come immediately, she would herself come to the office. Not daring to risk this, Bholanath reluctantly came home. Nirmala gave him a change of clothes and told him to bathe and put them on. She had set an *asana* for him,

Bholanath seated himself and composedly awaited further developments. Nirmala was walking up and down the room. He saw that she was in one of her states of *bhava*; beautiful *mantras* issued from her lips, their sound and cadence exquisite and awe-inspiring. After a while she came and sat near him. He heard her repeating just one *mantra* softly to herself. By leaning forward and bringing his ear close to her lips he heard this *mantra* clearly. He concluded correctly that this was meant for him.

When the exalted mood had passed, Nirmala gave him detailed instructions as to how to use the *mantra* he had heard. He did not doubt her teachings, because from his own knowledge of ritualism, he saw the perfection with which each detail of the initiation was explained by her.

This incident marked a new turn in their relationship, every phase of which was exemplary and beautiful; as a guardian and young ward, as friends, as *Guru* and *sisya*, and as just companions who understood each other with perfection on one side and unquestioning dependence on the other. This was a unique relationship, because we cannot call to mind any parallel. In later years Bholanath was automatically expected to adopt the role of the priest who could offer ritualistic worship to Ma Anandamayi when the devotees began to celebrate the time of the advent of their adored Ma. No one else was considered suitable for this rare service.

Ma Anandamayi herself remained unchanged in her attitude toward him. She would ask his permission for all suggestions regarding her movements, render him service if he so required it of her. She treated him like a close friend, with humour and understanding, coaxing him back into good humour if he were annoyed with anything. She herself never

said or did anything to diminish his position as the head of the ever expanding family which began to collect round her as soon as she emerged into the limelight of public acclaim.

The time of emergence was approaching fast but in Bajitpur all was quiet and serene. After Nirmala's own initiation she followed an intensive course of one-pointed, relentless, all-encompassing *sadhana* for approximately five and a half months. It culminated in an experience of fulfillment which is described in the scriptures as "Getting which everything is attained" (Taittiriyaopanisad 11-1)

From the month of December 1922, Nirmala became *mauni*, that is, completely silent. This state, like all other changes, came about spontaneously. This quietude was the outer manifestation of an inner state of complete self-sufficiency (*aptakama*). The special feature of Nirmala's *mauna* (silence) was that it precluded not only speech but also gestures of any kind. Even her facial expression did not change, to indicate approval or disapproval. During this time Bholanath's youngest brother Jamini Kumar came to Bajitpur for a short visit. He was very depressed to find his sister-in-law observing silence. He would follow her about imploring her to talk to him. Nirmala was always very affectionate toward her young relatives. Jamini's wish was granted in a unique manner. One day Nirmala was, as usual, sitting in a *yogic* posture. With the index finger of her right hand she drew an imaginary circle (*kundali*) round herself, (She made swift movements to the right and left, the body twisting at right angles, the imaginary arcs would meet at her back and so complete the circle). After this, some *mantras* became audible as uttered by her. Then, in an indistinct voice, which gradually became stronger, she spoke to her young brother-in-law, while sitting inside the *kundali*. After sometime she wiped off

continued to look for work. Nirmala was observing *mauna* but she conveyed her *kheyala* to Bholanath that he give them another three days. If he were still without a job at the end of that time they would go away to Atpara.

On the third day of the stipulated time Bholanath found a job very much to his liking and convenient for his family. The Nawabzadi Pyari Banu had extensive property in Dhaka. One big estate was known as the Shahbagh Gardens. The Nawabzadi's property was under the trusteeship of Rai Bahadur Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, a very prestigious citizen of the town. He was related to Bhudeb Basu. He liked Bholanath and appointed him manager of Shahbagh Gardens on April 17, 1924.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ma of Shahbagh

Whenever my father (Pran Gopal Mukherjee) spoke of Sri Ma, there was a thrill of awe and reverence in his voice which remained undimmed over the years. He knew her to be a teacher who had come to show the way. He would ask her very often, 'When are you going to reveal yourself?' She would just smile.

—Gour Gopal Mukherjee'

The Shahbagh gardens were very extensive, filled with a variety of fruit-trees and also seasonal flowers. In one corner of the big Estate, adjoining an artificial swimming pool, there was a small building for the Manager. The entire property was enclosed by a high wall, because ladies from the Nawab's family sometimes came to visit the gardens and bathe in the swimming pool. The property was so big that much of it had remained unkempt and overgrown with wild shrubberies and creepers. It contained a few ponds also. It was Bholanath's job to supervise the work of a gang of labourers and to look after the property.

The Manager's house consisted of three rooms and verandahs. There was a beautiful hall nearby, formally used by the owners for dances and other cultural programmes. The cottage was like a forest hermitage, a fit environment for the culmination of the *lila* of *sadhana*.

Nirmala was still observing silence. For the greater part of

the day she would be in an exalted state, abiding in a world of her own. Even so, she would get up early in the morning to prepare a hot meal for Ashu. After sending him off to school she would take the used utensils to the pond, clean them and again cook for the midday *bhoga*. She cooked twice because she did not give leftovers to Ashu and *bhoga* can not be partaken of before it is consecrated, so she cooked it afresh.

The exalted moods and states of *bhava* became more frequent and of longer duration from the days of her *lila* of *sadhana* at Bajitpur. While serving food, her hand would stop midway; while cleaning utensils at the pond, she would fall into the water and lie half-immersed in it for a long time; she would get scorched by the fire in the kitchen or imperil herself in other ways. One day Nirmala spoke to Ashu, "See how it is with me. I am not able to look after you properly. Would you not like to go to your mother?"

Ashu answered emphatically, "I would rather go without food to school, but I will stay with you."

Bholanath was obliged to be away from home for long hours everyday. He began to worry about her physical well-being. He decided to ask his widowed sister Matori to stay with them. Matori *pisima* [Aunt Matori] had visited Revati Mohan's family before and was very friendly with Nirmala. An enduring bond of friendship had developed between the two sisters-in-law, which lasted till Aunt Matori's death in Varanasi in 1959. (Many devotees cherish grateful memories of Matori *pisima*'s wonderful cooking and affectionate way of serving food). The little family at Shahbagh was thus extended by two new members, Aunt Matori and her son Amulya. Nirmala now had a companion who lightened her work considerably and Ashu had a friend to play and go to school with.

Janaki Sen and Bhuded Basu had also found work in Dhaka. From them and other chance visitors at Shahbagh people began to hear about Nirmala. They heard that a lady of extraordinary spiritual eminence was residing in Shahbagh. Some curious souls sought introductions from Bholanath's friends in order to have an audience with Nirmala. This was difficult because neither Bholanath nor Nirmala was looking for any kind of acknowledgement or publicity. Bholanath would receive the visitors and sit with them in the outer room. If he were convinced of the sincerity of purpose of the newcomers he would usher them into Nirmala's room. She would sit quietly, her face hidden behind her veil. The men had to be satisfied by the *darshan* (audience) of a quiet, veiled figure. Women, however, had better luck. They were enchanted by Nirmala's smile of welcome. Although she did not speak, she offered them mats to sit upon, some light refreshments and the inevitable *paan* (chewable betel leaf with its special filling). They were happy to look upon her radiant countenance and found it difficult to leave her presence.

Prominent among these early visitors was Hiranbala Ghosh, later known to all devotees as Hirandidi. She was the daughter-in-law of Raibahadur Jogesh C. Ghosh. It became Hirandidi's daily practice to visit the "vadhu" (bride) at Shahbagh. Her mother-in-law was not happy. "Why do you need to go to Shahbagh everyday? Religion can be practised at home also", she would say. How could Hirandidi explain to her mother-in-law that she had no religious aspirations, but simply could not rest at home till she had seen Nirmala at least once every day? She humorously recalled that her first impression of Nirmala as related to her family was, "She is such a beautiful and charming girl. What a pity, she is dumb."

But she smiles so sweetly and is marvellously neat and efficient in all her work. If only she could speak!"

The number of visitors at Shahbagh grew rapidly. Especially when Nirmala's '*maunam*' of nearly three years came to an end in (probably) December, 1925. She now spoke to the women in a soft voice making enquiries about their welfare. She also spoke to some of the men folk if Bholanath presented them to her and asked her to do so. Acquaintances soon became friends. Bholanath's boyhood friend Baul Chandra Basaak became almost a member of the family.

Baul Chandra used to bring cleaned and powdered spices to save Nirmala the work of grinding them for the day's cooking, as is the practice in Indian households. One day, while she was arranging these packets, Bholanath was tempted to ask her, "You say, it makes no difference to you what you eat. Can you eat some of this chilli powder?" Nirmala took a handful of the red powder and put it in her mouth. Even a pinch of the raw powder would burn the tongue and palate of normal human beings, but there was no change of expression on Nirmala's face. After a little while she got up and went about her normal household work. The same day Bholanath had an attack of acute blood dysentery. He suffered terribly for a couple of days. Nirmala nursed him day and night indefatigably, not leaving his bedside for more than a few minutes at a time. One day she said to him, "You were testing me, weren't you?" Bholanath answered humbly, "I shall not do it again." Responding to treatment and nursing, he slowly recovered from his illness.

The time had come for a change of circumstances. Shahbagh was gradually becoming well-known in the town.

One day Bholanath met a gentleman sheltering under a tree from a sudden shower near the gates. Bholanath invited him to come to his cottage. He was Professor Nani Gopal Banerjee, a teacher in the town. Bholanath was impressed by the quality of gentlemanliness of this scholar and presented him to Nirmala and asked her to speak to him. This meeting was crucial. Nani Gopal confronted by Nirmala became aware of the aura of a powerful personality of great spiritual eminence. He made his obeisance. He was so impressed that he immediately spoke to his friend Pran Gopal Mukherjee (Asst. Post-master General) about his experience.

Pran Gopal Mukherjee was a man of some experience in the ways of *sadhana*. He was a disciple of the well-known saint of Deoghar, Balanandaji Maharaj. He came with his friend Nani Gopal to visit Shahbagh. Bholanath took them to Nirmala's room. They had a little conversation with her. Pran Gopal, a man of discernment, seemed to recognise in her a personality of supra-normal dimension, a tangential descent to the mundane world. He sat in bemused silence for a while wondering at the unexpectedness of the encounter.

Bholanath was pleased with these cultured men. He raised no objections when Pran Gopal began to usher in many of his other friends from the city as well as from other towns. This is how Prof. Girija Shankar Bhattacharya (Professor at Kolkata) and Atal Bihari Bhattacharya (Professor from Rajshahi) and their colleagues became regular visitors at Shahbagh.

So far Bholanath had carried the knowledge of Nirmala's remarkable achievements all alone. Maybe he had been perplexed at times. He could not share his cares and concerns with anyone. He now felt strengthened by the spontaneous

devotion shown by these men. Their allegiance was most supportive at this time. Nirmala became known as the "Ma of Shabagh."

Bholanath was hospitable. He liked to entertain guests to meals. These early visitors who became devotees quickly acquired a taste for Sri Ma's cooking. They would bring fish, vegetables and other things to Shahbagh. It was Sri Ma's practice to use up everyday whatever had been brought by them. She would keep nothing for the next day, not even a green chilli or a piece of ginger. The meal was always balanced and tasty. Sri Ma with her imaginative ideas would prepare wonderful dishes from the material at hand and win the admiration of the women folk who were frequently at a loss to understand how this was done. Not the least remarkable feature of these meals was that the food would be just sufficient for the number of partakers. Nothing would be wasted and nobody would go away disappointed. This sort of coincidence or concurrence of incidents and timings was a regular feature of Sri Ma's life. Anybody who stayed with her for sometime would see one or two instances of it.

Walking through the Shahbagh gardens one day Sri Ma came across a small mausoleum. She was informed by the labourers that many years ago two *fakirs*, a *guru* and his *chela*, had come to Dhaka from Arabia. The Nawab and his family had respected them deeply and had asked them to make Shahbagh their home. After their death their remains had been interred at Shahbagh itself and the Nawab had constructed the mausoleum to house their graves. While at Bajitpur, Nirmala had asked about these very *fakirs*. It was evident she had come to the place of her vision.

Siddheshwari :

On coming to Dhaka, Sri Ma had once enquired of Bholanath if he had heard anybody mention a "*Siddheshwari* tree". He had not, but offered to make enquiries. Sri Ma had told him it was not necessary. She had a vision of this tree, at Bajitpur. Soon she was to see the tree of her vision too.

The Shahbagh gardens were situated near the huge race course and polo grounds of Ramna. Sri Ma frequently walked across this sea of green grass to the *Kali* temple on the other side, known as the *Kalibari* of Ramna. With a few companions she would sit on the *verandah* of the temple for many hours. Baul Chandra sometimes accompanied them on these visits to the temple. On their way back, late at night, he often went off on a road which was hardly more than a rough track. These places were very lonely and unfrequented at that time. One day Bholanath asked him in some curiosity, "Where do you go at such a late hour?" Baul answered, "There is a *Kali* temple at Siddheshwari, a little distance off. It is a very ancient and beautiful place. I would like to take you both there some time".

The name "Siddheshwari" struck a chord of memory in Bholanath, but he did not say anything to Baul because Sri Ma signalled to him not to do so.

A few days later, they went to Siddheshwari with Baul. There was no proper road. The rough track had neither been cleared of the encroaching undergrowth nor repaired for many years. A thick cluster of trees smothered by wild creepers made the place dark. It was like walking through a jungle.

In the midst of this wilderness, they came to a very ancient temple of *Kali*. In front of the temple they saw a huge fallen

peepal tree. Although the tree was uprooted it was not dead, there were leaves sprouting from it. Sri Ma recognized it as the tree of her "vision". She put her hand caressingly on it. Baul told them a little of the history of the place. It was a *siddhapitha*, that is, a place of great sanctity, where *sadhakas* had performed vigorous asceticism and had attained *siddhi* [literally, success] or Self-realization. The local people associated the place with Sri Sankaracharya (788-820 A.D.) also. Hundreds of years ago there had been only three trees to which the place owed its other name '*Tintiri*'. Now there was this one fallen tree only. According to the legendary history of the place the temple had been constructed by a *sannyasi*, named Sambarvan. A story was also related about the tree, namely, that when it had fallen, a light had emerged from it and had entered the image of the deity inside the temple.

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

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

In August, 1924, Sri Ma's younger sister Surabala was taken ill at Jaidevpur, a town nearby, where she was living with her husband's family. Surabala was greatly attached to

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

At Bholanath's invitation, Sri Ma's parents came to stay with them at Shahbagh after the tragic death of the young girl. Bholanath thought that it would be a change for the parents to stay with their eldest daughter and that it would be a preoccupation for Sri Ma also. Bholanath had yet to learn a lot more about Sri Ma. He had surmised that as she was so fond of her younger sister she would be grief-stricken. The realization that health or illness, life or death, meant the same to her came to him gradually.

The devotees also had to go a long way before even a partial understanding of this personality came to them. For the time being, they were happy to have her parents stay at Shahbagh. Sri Ma's mother came to be known as *Didima* (grandmother) and her father as *Dadamashai* (grandfather). From them they heard about her childhood and early years. The parents in their turn understood many of their little Nirmala's unusual characteristics, when they saw her in states of *bhava*.

In the beginning of September, 1924, Sri Ma asked Bholanath to purchase some rice, pulse, potatoes, a little *ghee* (refined butter) and a coconut. One day she and Bholanath went with these articles to Siddheshwari. She cooked the foodstuff she had brought with her (rice, boiled and mashed potatoes, dahl and cubed coconut fried in *ghee*), consecrated it to the Deity and then shared it with Bholanath. She then told him that it was her *kheyala* to stay on in the temple for some days. Bholanath at first demurred since he

could not leave her alone in such a lonely place. Ultimately, it was decided that *Dadamashai* would be asked to stay at Siddheshwari during the day and that Bholanath would come back every evening from Shahbagh after work. Thus, in this most natural way both Sri Ma's father and husband came to be staying in a temple for a few days in the manner of homeless ascetics. Unknowingly, they had started on a new career.

Bholanath's friend Baul Chandra came to Siddheshwari at the end of the day with some fruits and sweets which sufficed as the evening meal.

Sri Ma took up her abode in a small room at the side of the temple. She would bathe and change early in the morning and then enter this room. Throughout the day she never came out. There was no question of cooking or partaking of meals. She would emerge late at night and they would all share the fruit brought by Baul. Both friends were courageous men. They came and went through these lonely unfrequented tracks often in total darkness. Bholanath stayed in the main temple, sometimes doing his *sadhana*, sometimes just resting. Baul posted himself at the main entrance of the temple. He had a feeling that something miraculous was going to take place, and in order not to miss it, he would keep awake the whole night. In this manner they spent a week at Siddheshwari.

The following incidents are best related in Sri Ma's own words. "On the eighth day, it was drizzling at dawn. Beckoning Bholanath, who was awake, to follow me, I stepped out of the temple. We almost had to walk over Baul Babu. Tired out by this night-long vigil, he had fallen asleep at the break of day.

"Although we were not familiar with the surroundings, I

unhesitatingly advanced in a northern direction from the temple. Walking a little distance through the wilderness we came to a small clearing. I seemed to have arrived at my destination and walked round the spot of ground thrice, performing *pradaksina*³. Then, drawing a circle⁴, I sat down where I was standing, facing south. What you call *mantras* were then pronounced. In the meantime, I had placed my right hand on the ground and was leaning on it. The ground had looked solid enough but my hand went down into the earth unresisted. I felt as if layer after layer of the solid earth was sliding off like curtains, and my hand and arm went down unimpeded right up to the shoulder. Bholanath was frightened and pulled out my arm, saying, 'Let us go away from here.' At the same time, warm reddish water gushed out of the hole in the ground. The water was so red that my white conch bangles turned red. The colour lasted for many days.⁵

"I then asked Bholanath to insert his arm into the hole. At first he felt a little reluctant. I asked him not to be afraid and that it was necessary for him to do it. Thereupon Bholanath also put in his arm, and the warm reddish water again welled forth from the mouth of the hole. We stood there for sometime watching the water trickling away on the ground. Then, after stopping the mouth of the hole, we came away".

Baul was very sad when he realized that he had after all missed witnessing this strange incident, but took it upon himself to clear the space all around the spot and later thoughtfully planted a few flowering shrubs and a *tulasi* to mark the spot.

Pran Gopal, on hearing of this incident, contributed toward the upkeep of the place. With the money a brick platform (*vedi*) about 22½ inch square was constructed over

the hole. A light bamboo fence marked off a piece of ground, 5 yards square, with the *vedi* at the centre.⁶

Sri Ma paid frequent visits to Siddheshwari. She would sit on the *vedi*, surrounded by her companions. Sometimes they were so carried away by feelings of exaltation that they passed whole nights in this fashion, returning to Shahbagh at dawn. Pran Gopal said that a few months earlier, he would not have believed it possible for him to spend nights in the open without sleep with no adverse effect on his health. The educated people of Dhaka were experiencing a new kind of life. Religion earlier was mostly looked upon as a duty or a worthwhile ideal in life, and nothing more. Now it moved to the centre. A new vista of joy and beauty in religious endeavour opened out for them.

The Gathering of Devotees

The first amongst the galaxy of pioneering names must always be that of Jyotish Chandra Roy, I.S.O., Assistant Director in the Ministry of Agriculture. The story of his surrender at Ma Anandamayi's feet, his sustained allegiance, his asceticism and final renunciation will always inspire all pilgrims on the path of God-realization. He had to face many problems in his life to which he did not find easy solutions. Since he occupied a high position in society, his behaviour was noticeable and a matter of general interest. For quite sometime he and others like him were criticised adversely for running after "a woman saint", who was young and beautiful. They had to face a gamut of aspersions till Sri Ma emerged in Dhaka in her resplendant personality of a self-authenticating Teacher of men.

In time devotees came to believe that Jyotish Chandra Roy or Bhaiji as he came to be known later, came nearest to understanding Sri Ma's *svarupa*. He could understand her *kheyala* and would act on it. He alone of all the early crowd had to fight many obstacles to come to her, or rather he was tested very severely before he acquired his position of honour among devotees. At his death in 1937, Bholanath as well as others felt that a bulwark had fallen and they experienced a sense of irreparable loss which was never overcome.

Bhaiji was a man of great dignity and very reserved temperament. During his life-time very few people had any inkling of the thoughts passing through his mind. He was a man of few words but always ready to help others. He was in the habit of maintaining a diary. These journals were published posthumously. From these writings we can gain a little knowledge regarding his life at Ma Anandamayi's feet.

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

After his first meeting with Sri Ma in 1924, he did not go to Shahbagh for almost a year. He did not doubt that she was all that he spiritually aspired to, but as far as he was concerned her position of a young housewife was an insurmountable barrier. To him it appeared to be an effective disguise. He

would think to himself, "If that is Her will, be it so. Evidently She does not want us to approach Her now. It will be time for us when She emerges out of Her retirement."

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

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

This stage lasted for a few days only. It was Sri Ma's custom to give away whatever was brought for her, after a few days or even immediately. She would distribute amongst the

people clothes, ornaments, of which she was given quite a good number, and other offerings. Sometimes she would give them back to the person who had brought them, saying, "Now it belongs to me. Please keep it for me."

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

After a week of this sanctuary in the temple of Reason, a stranger called on him, who turned out to be an old Brahmin gentleman named Kalikumar Mukherji. He said to Bhaiji, "I have heard that you are one of the devotees of Sri Ma. I went to see Niranjan Roy and Shashanka Babu, but they were not at home. Can you tell me what Sri Ma is like?" Bhaiji was unable to utter a word but looked at his visitor with eyes suddenly brimming over with tears. For a few moments the old man watched him fighting for control over his emotion, and then said quietly, "You need not speak. I have been answered. Please take me to Sri Ma now, if you will." Later, the old man told him, "My own mother died many years ago. Today I feel like a child who has found his long-lost mother."

Bhaiji's concentration was so deep that he would often see Sri Ma while he was at home or even in his office. One day he was pacing up and down the open *verandah* of his house. The world was flooded with moonlight. He suddenly saw Sri Ma walking beside him like a shadow. He had returned from

Shahbagh a while ago. Sri Ma now appeared dressed differently from when he had seen her last. When he saw her next, she was dressed as seen in his vision. On being asked about this she smiled and said, "I went to see what you were doing."

Shashanka Mohan Mukherjee-When he met Sri Ma he was 66 years old. He was a very well-respected Doctor in Dhaka; his demeanour of grave self-sufficiency easily marked him out as a person of some consequence. He was the head of a very large household. In time all his children and their families became devoted to Sri Ma. His eldest son Birendra Chandra Mukherjee was Professor of English in Agra College, Agra. He became one of the group of interlocutors for the daily *satsanga* at Shahbagh whenever he was in Dhaka. Sri Ma generally had the *kheyala* to speak at length when he was among the audience. Birendra Chandra was one of those who had the distinction of being initiated by Bholanath. Shashanka Monhan's adoption of the ascetic way of life in his old age, his subsequent life, one-pointed *tapasya* (austerities), his total obedience to the *kheyala* of Sri Ma are ideals which can be emulated by many a younger person.

Gurupriya Devi-Gurupriya Devi was the third child and second daughter of Shashanka Mohan. Her family name was Adarini Devi. She was a studious girl, not given over to the general forms of amusements indulged in by young girls. She would tell her parents not to arrange a marriage for her, but they mistook her disinclination for shyness and at the appointed time a suitable ceremony did take place. When she was old enough to be sent to her husband's home, she made it very clear that she was not interested. In fact she wrote a letter to her husband, apologising for her disinclination for a family life and begging him to get married again to a more suitable

girl. (Her husband Upendra Nath Banerjee of Kolkata did marry a second time. This lady, Amala Devi, along with her sons and daughters, became devoted to Sri Ma in later years. They were very attached to Gurupriya Devi as well).

The name Gurupriya was given by Sri Ma. In the Ashram she was generally known as Didi (sister). Her diaries are today invaluable as source material for the early days in Dhaka and also Sri Ma's incessant travels all over India.

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

Sri Ma smiled a welcome and said familiarly : "Where have you been all this time?"

Didi used to go to Shahbagh every day with her father. She would eagerly wait for her father's return from the Medical School in the evening. If he were delayed, she would be in an agony of suspense. The time she had to spend at home away from Shahbagh seemed meaningless to her. She gradually began to assist Sri Ma in looking after her ever expanding household. She would help with the cooking, serving of food, or guarding her person when in an exalted state. In time she became a member of the household at Shahbagh.

Niranjan Ray and his wife Vinodini Devi-A devout

couple, well-beloved of the entire community of devotees in Dhaka. It so happened that Vinodini Devi died after suffering a short illness. Sri Ma used to visit her everyday. The invalid waited anxiously for this daily visit. If there were clouds in the sky, her anxiety lest it should rain would know no bounds, but without fail, Sri Ma came and sat with her for a while. Vinodini Devi's untimely death had a very tragic sequel. Niranjana Ray, unmindful of all advice from his friends, took to going away to the cremation *ghat* and sit for hours at the site of his wife's funeral pyre. Bhaiji spoke to Sri Ma about him. Sri Ma herself one day accompanied Niranjana to the *ghat* and spoke at length about the undesirability of such a vigil. He could not make the turning around in spite of all such efforts. He died very soon after. In the last year of his life, his only efforts in the world were directed toward the construction of the Ashram at Ramna for Sri Ma and Bholanath. It may be of interest to many to know that the gold bangle seen always on Sri Ma's left wrist was a gift from Vinodini Devi.

Nishikanta Mitra-Another of the elders among the early devotees of Dhaka. He was the Zamindar of Samsiddhi. In his old age, he lived for many years in the Ashram at Varanasi as an ascetic.

Baul Chandra Basak-Bholanath's boyhood friend and subsequent devotee of both Sri Ma and Bholanath. He was a constant support and a reliable worker ever at hand at Shahbagh, Siddeshwari and later at Ramna.

Other names which should be mentioned are those of Dinesh Chandra Ray, Ashwini Kumar, Mathur Babu, Nagen Babu, Anadi Babu, Jotu Bhai and many more, some of them not less in any way than those we have written about.

Moreover, we have written in some detail about people who came to our part of the world after the partition of Bengal. There were dozens of families who were rehabilitated in other parts of India. Sri Ma's extensive travels not only attracted new devotees but gave the solace of her *darsana* to older ones as well.

Life at Shahbagh and Siddeshwari

The city of Dhaka was a big metropolis. The visitors to Shahbagh were well-placed in life and enjoyed such facilities as wealth can command. At this time Indians could rise only to the posts of Deputies or Assistants in Government Offices. Top positions were held by British Officers. The cultural atmosphere was an admixture of Hindu orthodoxy, Islamic good manners and the western influence of modern times.

The quiet life at Shahbagh, however, was about to undergo a change. The crowd of visitors swelled steadily. Some were known to Bholanath as friends and relatives, people who had been coming to Shahbagh; others were total strangers. If Bholanath asked Sri Ma to speak to these people, she would do so, but not otherwise. Bholanath was a large-hearted man. He saw the sincerity of these devout men and women, and it was not in him to disappoint them for the sake of convention.

Sri Ma told him one day, "You must think twice before you open the doors to the world in this manner. Remember that you will not be able to stem the tide when it becomes overwhelming." Bholanath did not heed this warning. Or perhaps, who could know better than he that Sri Ma's personality was not meant to be hidden within the four walls

of his home? So, acceding to Bholanath's request, Sri Ma now mixed more freely with the people.

One day, the Rai Bahadur's son Prafulla (Hirandi's husband) spoke to Bholanath disapprovingly of the large number of visitors inside the Shahbagh gardens. Bholanath was greatly angered by this rebuke, because he was very conscientious about his own work and took good care of the property under his management. He was ready to hand in his resignation but was dissuaded from doing so for the time being by Sri Ma. Meanwhile Prafulla reported to his father that a number of unauthorized persons were coming to Shahbagh every day and causing a disturbance.

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

At this time, the *Nawabzadi* Pyari Banu, the owner of the estate of Shahbagh, was in Kolkata. She had not come to Dhaka for many years due to personal reasons. She was engaged in a law suit concerning her estate in Dhaka. The day Sri Ma came to the Rai Bahadur's house, he heard some adverse news about the case. He appealed to Bholanath to request Sri Ma to ascertain the details of the case being conducted in Kolkata and also prayed that it should go in favour of the *Nawabzadi*. It has already been said that Bholanath was a very kind-hearted man. He could not remain indifferent to the agitation and perturbations of this family. Even strangers could nearly always prevail upon him to ask Sri Ma to cure illnesses or redress other ills. Sri Ma always did her best to obey him. So now at his insistence she described

the events taking place in Kolkata and said that they would win the case. Before answering the questions she had, unknown to others, placed a small live coal on the back of her left hand. The scar remained for all time. Much later, she explained the reasons for this deliberate infliction of a wound : "Well, it is possible to perform a certain action (*kriya*) which will have some concrete effect in some other sphere. Or it is also said that if yogic powers are used deliberately, the *sadhaka* has to perform penance (*prayaschitta*) for it. This body sometimes had the attitude of a *sadhaka*. I do not say that this was so; but these as well as other explanations are possible."

What Sri Ma had said about the law suit was fully confirmed later. With Sri Ma's visit, a new influence permeated the household of the Rai Bahadur. A subtle change was effected which became noticeable as time passed. The entire family became devoted to Sri Ma. His granddaughter Bhramar Ghosh remained very close to Sri Ma for many years.

Many families in Dhaka became very attached to Sri Ma. Whoever came first wanted others to share in the joy of this unparalleled experience, and so entire families, old and young alike, would gather at Shahbagh. The men would sit with Bholanath. Sometimes Sri Ma, accompanied by their wives and daughters, would sit in the same room and talk to all of them. But the time was fast approaching when Sri Ma's circle would expand beyond the imagination of this exclusive group of people.

On the occasion of a solar eclipse on January 26th, 1926, the devotees wanted to perform *kirtan* on a large scale. Bholanath welcomed the suggestion and enthusiastically set about

making arrangements with the help of Baul, Atal Bihari and others. The owners being devoted now the dance-hall was made available to them for this purpose. A large number of people were invited. All those who came would partake of a lavish meal at night at the conclusion of the *kirtan*.

Sri Ma's *Mahabhava*

Shahbagh saw the gathering of a great crowd on Sunday. The *kirtan* started at about 10 in the morning. Sri Ma, with her women companions, sat in a room nearby from where they could watch and hear the *kirtan*.

The very first display in public of Sri Ma's *Mahabhava* has been described by many eye-witnesses. The following is from Didi's journal :

"At one moment Sri Ma was sitting like one of us. The next moment she had changed completely. Her body started swaying rhythmically. Her *sari* fell back from her head. Her eyes were closed and the entire body swayed to the rhythm of the *kirtan*. With her body still swaying, she stood up or rather was as if drawn upwards on her toes. It looked as if Sri Ma had left her body which had become an instrument in the hands of an invisible power. It was obvious to all of us that there was no will motivating her action. Sri Ma was evidently quite oblivious of her surroundings. She circled round the room as if wafted along by the wind. Occasionally, her body would start falling to the ground - but before it touched the ground it would regain its upright position, just like a wind-blown leaf which flutters towards the ground and then is uplifted and blown forward by a fresh gust of wind. It seemed her body had neither weight nor substance. Moving in this manner, Sri Ma crossed the *verandah* and entered the *kirtan* hall, her gaze unblinkingly fixed in an upward direction, her

face glowing with a wonderful light. Before the crowd had time to realize that she was in their midst, she fell to the ground from an upright position but did not appear to be hurt at all. Like a leaf in a whirlwind, her body started rolling at tremendous speed while she was lying prostrate. Some of the women tried to hold her, but it was beyond their power to check even a little of that force.

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

After sometime, Sri Ma began to sing a few lines of a *kirtan* -

Hare Murare, Madhukaitabhare

*Gopala Govinda Mukunda Shaure*⁷

Sri Ma's wonderful voice and melody made the *kirtan* sound celestial and thrilled the hearts of the congregation, already overwhelmed. People were standing with folded hands as if in the presence of a Deity. Many were reciting prayers to the Devi Durga.

After a few moments, Sri Ma's body slumped down in a heap on the floor, as if lifeless. She lay in that condition for a long time. Bholanath roused her with great difficulty. Sri Ma sat up although it was clear that her limbs were not yet under control. She spoke a few words to the women around her. Her words were indistinct and slurred and could hardly be made out, but her ineffable smile was never absent for long from her face.

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

After some time, Sri Ma again got up and moved into the midst of the *kirtan* party. A variety of *bhavas* manifested on her body, all marvellous to behold. Now it seemed that she was engaged in a great battle - the expression on her face was fierce and even her complexion had darkened - then it appeared that she was performing *arati* with her entire body. The fierce expression of a moment ago changed into a beautiful gesture of supplication. The *bhavas* were too numerous and were changing too rapidly to permit more than a glimpse of them.

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

It had already become quite late. The *kirtan* was over. The devotees were waiting to take *prasada*. Bholanath and the women tried to rouse her, calling her repeatedly and rubbing her hands and feet. She got up with an effort after a little while and said to Bholanath, "Please collect everybody; we shall serve the food". Sri Ma now organised the team work of serving food to a large crowd. She proceeded to walk

through the rows of people serving food neatly and efficiently. One could hardly imagine that this was the same person who had been in an ecstatic state earlier in the evening.

A great concourse of people partook of the *prasada* that day. They went away with full hearts. They felt that they had been vouchsafed a glimpse of a wondrous world, unutterably beautiful and ennobling.

Didi records that she had read about the *mahabhavas* of Sri Gouranga and Sri Ramakrishna. But she could not have imagined anything as awe-inspiring and enthralling as what she had seen that day. Such must have been the experience of all eye-witnesses on that occasion. It was almost dawn by the time the last visitor left.

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

After the day of the solar eclipse, many people got the opportunity of witnessing the *bhavas* manifesting in Sri Ma's body. The external stimulus of *kirtan* was not necessary to bring them about. As a matter of fact, Sri Ma was more often in an exalted state than in the normal. Or, rather, the exalted and the normal were so mingled in her that they were one. As before in Bajitpur, her days were not divided into mornings, evenings and nights. Sometimes she would stay awake the whole night and with the coming of dawn curl up in a corner of the room. She very rarely used her bed. She would more often

lie or sit on the bare floor. Sometimes she would lean against her cot and spend the whole night in that posture.

The eye-witnesses say that Ma Anandamayi's *bhavas* cannot be described easily. The shape and substance of her body, the colour of her skin and the expressions would be flushed and glowing. At times, her body would move at a tremendous speed and then be immovable like a rock. Actions, gestures and facial expressions would change so rapidly as to defy observation. Her movements were like swift flashes of lightning. It was well-nigh impossible for anyone to keep track of her progress through the crowd. Even a glimpse of the matchless beauty of this display of the ecstatic mood held the devotees enthralled.

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

After a *bhava*, Sri Ma would sometimes lie inert for hours together. People conjectured that this was the *yogic* state of *samadhi*. Not only after a *bhava* but in the midst of conversation or work, her gaze would become fixed, and her body rigid and statue-like. Or, her eyes would close and the body sink down on the floor. Like the slowly setting sun in the west, all bodily functions would gradually disappear as if withdrawing inwards. Breathing would slow down and

finally stop altogether. Her limbs occasionally became rigid like wooden appendages and then limp like cloth. The entire body would become luminous and on her face there would be an expression of indescribable peace.

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

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

Shahbagh seemed to be pulsating with a spiritual fervour. Visitors began to treat it as a Temple where one may pray for redress of physical ills or for mental peace.

A devotee asked Sri Ma one day, "Do you have visions of gods and goddesses during these *bhavas*?" (Sri Ma was sometimes seen in the posture of various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and perhaps others not recognized by the people.) Sri Ma answered, "All of you want to see these manifestations and, therefore, they now and then occur of their own accord. For me, the states of *bhava*, as you call them, are not different from what you call a normal state."

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

CHAPTER FIVE

The Atmosphere of the Miraculous

All of us children were studying upstairs. Somebody called out from below, 'Come down, the Ma of Shahbagh has come.' We were struck dumb; 'the Ma of Shahbagh?' 'the manus-kali (Kali in human form) in our house?' We descended slowly trembling with fear. When we entered the room we saw a beautiful lady with a radiant smile. We approached her eagerly. We did pranams, one by one. To me she said, 'You are a good boy!'

These words have been like a bridle-rein in my life. Whenever I have been tempted to go astray, and I have been so tempted, the memory of these words has saved me. Jai Ma !"

-Shakti Kumar Ghosh

(Second son of Sri Manamohan Ghosh of Dhaka)

Various theories were advanced, contested and held in Dhaka about Sri Ma at that time. The simple people believed her to be an incarnation of the Goddess Kali, the presiding deity of Bengal. She was known as "*Manus Kali*", that is, "Kali in human form". The more sophisticated opinion was that she was a *sadhika* of great spiritual powers or alternately a person who had attained self-realization and remained in the world in order to help other pilgrims on the way.

Pramatha Nath Basu had come to Dhaka to assume the post of Asst. Post-Master General in place of Pran Gopal

Mukherjee who retired at this time. He and his wife were constant visitors at Shahbagh. They were a devout couple. One day Pramatha Nath's wife came and said to Sri Ma that she wished to observe silence on Mondays and devote some time to her religious practices. Unless she made some rule, it was difficult to snatch even a few moments from her housework.

Sri Ma approved of this resolve. As soon as Pramatha Nath heard of this, he came to Sri Ma and said, "I can't allow my wife to forge ahead in religious matters and leave me behind. Please permit me to observe silence one day ahead of her. If she keeps silence on Mondays, I shall do so on Sundays." Sri Ma smilingly agreed to this and told him the *kriya* for becoming *mauni*.

On Monday morning, his son Pratul came to Shahbagh with a message from his father that he could not speak! It was time for him to go to his office. A whole day's work lay ahead. His staff was waiting for him and he was unable to utter a word! Sri Ma went to their house and communicated to him the *kriya* for breaking silence. She said to him, "What can I do? You only asked me to tell you how to become silent; you did not ask me to tell you how to terminate it."

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

After some time, Pramatha Nath was assailed by doubts. He bethought himself, "Everybody says that she is the Devi Kali, but I personally have not seen anything which might confirm this view." He secretly made up his mind that he would believe in her only if she appeared to him in the form of Chhinnamasta¹, that is, the most distinctive of the ten forms of *Mahavidyas*² of the goddess, described as being headless.

It so happened that on that particular day, Sri Ma, and Bholanath went to Siddheshwari, as they did quite frequently. Pramatha Nath accompanied them.

Bholanath being tired after the day's work lay down on the temple *verandah*. Sri Ma sat close by. Pramatha Nath and his very devout orderly sat near them, both doing *japa*. It was very peaceful. Sri Ma, they realized, was in a state of *bhava*. They were not perturbed, because whatever be Sri Ma's physical condition, she never evoked anything but reverence in the onlookers. There was always beauty and grace in the most startling of her states of *bhava*. The two men gazed at her with folded hands. Suddenly she stood up; her complexion darkened, her black hair fell all around her in a cloud; her eyes were elongated and unblinking like those of a statue; her tongue hung out over her chin. In an instant, her head bent completely back to rest between the shoulder blades. The body appeared to be headless. A moment later, she sat down and looked to be her normal self. When Pramatha Nath had recovered a little from the impact of this vision, he looked round toward his orderly and asked him if he had seen anything unusual in Sri Ma. He also, obviously overwhelmed, was sitting with folded hands. "Yes, Sahib", he answered, "I saw the forms of the *Mahavidyas* in Sri Ma when she stood up just now." Pramatha Nath got up and embraced his orderly, "you are luckier than I", he exclaimed.

These families came very close to Sri Ma. In future their children who grew up to have children of their own continued to visit her in distant parts of India. She was kept informed of all important (and not so important) changes and incidents connected with their lives.

Sri Ma's life, during this period, was full of extraordinary incidents. Manifestations of *yogic* powers became the norm rather than an exception. However, no line may be drawn between stages of Sri Ma's life. She did not become different from what she was but there was an accentuation and a proliferation of what ordinarily is called the miraculous at this time. Sri Ma has said, "I had the *kheyala* to be like a *sadhaka*³, so it was but natural that the characteristics attending intense *sadhana* should occur spontaneously. The earnest *sadhaka* does not attach any importance to these powers, which develop in him. He may not make any deliberate use of them. But all the same people may derive great benefit from the abundance, which overflows his conscious efforts like water from an overfull pitcher."

People from far and near came to Shahbagh to beg her to cure physical ailments. Cures would be effected by a glance, a touch, the gift of a flower, or in a hundred other ways. Instances of such cures are numerous indeed. In fact, every devotee will be able to relate from his or her own experience one, two or more of such examples.

Sri Ma's way of helping people was unspectacular but effective. One day a very sick child was brought to Shahbagh. The child had lost the use of her limbs and could not move by herself. Sri Ma was engaged in the mundane task of chopping betel-nuts. She tossed one of the pieces a little in front of the child saying, "Catch". The child, with great difficulty, made an effort and picked up the piece of nut. After some days the mother came and reported gratefully that her child had recovered completely and was slowly regaining the use of her limbs.

Ordinarily, Sri Ma did not attempt to heal anybody. On the contrary, she would say, "Pray to God. He will do what is best for the patient. You cannot know if physical recovery is desirable for him. The only thing for you to do is to look after the patient to the best of your ability and get the best medical advice available. For the rest you must put your trust in God."

Sometimes people insisted on her visiting the patient, in the belief that he would recover if she did so. In such cases, Sri Ma had her own way of prophesying the future. She would look about her and ask her companions, "What do you say? He is asking me to go because he thinks the patient will pull through. Will it be so?" The companions would answer in the affirmative emphatically. She would make them repeat the answer twice more and then continue, "Who knows, since you all say so, perhaps he will come round." In such cases, it was seen that the patient invariably recovered. Didi wrote, "Although we had all come to know Sri Ma's peculiar way of foretelling the future, we would, at times, unaccountably hesitate, stammer and fail to give an emphatic reply in the affirmative. Sri Ma would observe, 'Why are you hesitating like this? Then perhaps the patient won't regain health', and so it happened always."⁴

One day, the wife of Atul Prasad, who was a frequent visitor, came to request Sri Ma to visit her home to see her son who was seriously ill. Sri Ma continued with her usual pursuits, seemingly not paying any attention to what was being said to her. The lady, therefore, appealed to Bholanath, knowing that Sri Ma would not disoblige him. When Bholanath came to Sri Ma to speak about it, she at once declared, "What is the use? The boy won't recover." On hearing this, another devotee, who was present, remarked, "In that case She need not go. The family should be told what Sri

Ma has said." But nobody liked to say this to the parents. Bholanath had promised the lady in question that he would bring Sri Ma; so they went to see the patient on that occasion. After a few days, the lady again came to Sri Ma to beseech her to save her child. Sri Ma replied, "Even if I tell you what to do, you will not be able to carry it out."

The mother promised to follow instructions faithfully. The simple instruction was not to allow the boy to get up from his bed for a certain number of days, probably 18. Immediately after this, the boy started improving slowly, but then he took a turn for the worse. On seeing the mother again, Sri Ma said, "What could I do? He was allowed to get up on Monday". The mother would not believe this, insisting that the boy had not left his bed at all. The boy died a few days later and the mother lost all faith in Sri Ma. After quite some time she came to know that on the specific day the boy had actually got up from his bed and had come out on the *verandah* to see a passing procession. Full of remorse, the bereaved mother came again to Sri Ma, who now had to comfort her in her double sorrow.

On occasions, Sri Ma, would go out of her way to cure people. One day she was strolling about in the field outside Shahbagh. A cab drove by. Sri Ma asked her companion to signal to the driver. When he drew near, she climbed in. The cabman asked, "Where will you go" Sri Ma answered, "To your house". The man was a Mohammedan. Without saying another word he drove home. On arrival, they found an old man lying on his death-bed. The relatives were weeping. Sri Ma asked her companion to fetch some sweets. These were distributed amongst the family and neighbours. Sri Ma then came away. Sri Ma's companion took pains to find out that the old man had recovered from what had appeared to be his last

illness.

At times, Sri Ma would take upon herself the illness of others. The person who had asked for a cure would recover, but she would suffer from the disease for a few days or for a few hours. Didi one day came to Shahbagh to find Sri Ma suffering from a sudden cold and cough. On enquiry, she discovered that Pramatha Basu's young son Pratul, who was due to appear at an examination, had felt a severe cold coming on and had prayed to Sri Ma to prevent this. On that occasion Pratul escaped from any inconvenience due to cold.

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

This aspect of Sri Ma's life has been expressed very clearly by Sri Vijayananda: "Something that has struck me from the very first day is the atmosphere of the miraculous in which one moves when one is with her. Let me explain: In Europe (and no doubt here also) by the word 'miracle' one conceives of a breaking away from the laws of nature, something that strikes one as impossible, as absurd. But this is only its crude objective side, its subtle subjective aspect is quite different. What does it matter to me if a certain *yogi* has walked across the waters or flown through the air? The real miracle is, when that which one needs, which one desires keenly or feebly, comes at the very moment it is needed. And still better when it

comes, not only as one desired it, but as one would have loved to see it in the innermost depth of one's heart... 'Coincidence!' I thought at first. But a coincidence that goes on repeating itself daily cannot be called so anymore. and all this happens without apparently violating the laws of nature- for the Lord has no need to break any law. He is the Law. Should I give examples? No, for those who do not know her will not believe me and those who have lived near her have already understood."⁵

Abstinence from Food

Since the time of the *lila* of *sadhana* at Bajitpur, Sri Ma hardly ever ate a full meal. When she came to Dhaka in April, 1924 she was taking three mouthfuls of food including water, twice a day. When Didi first met Sri Ma, she was eating even less. On Mondays and Thursdays she would partake of three mouthfuls, and on the other five days nothing but nine grains of rice. There was no rigid rule for her. She broke it now and then in reponse to the importunities of members of her family or of devotees. At the insistence of Pramatha Nath's son, Pratul, she once agreed to take a full meal on the day of the new-moon (*Amavasya*). Other devotees quietly turned this into a regular feature at Shahbagh. They would organize a *kirtan* and everybody would partake of *prasada*, thus ensuring that Sri Ma also would have a proper meal.

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

At about this time it was noticed that Sri Ma could not anymore raise her hand to her mouth. Her hand would stop midway, and she would bend her head down to take food from

her hand. Sometimes, instead of eating, she would smear the ground with the rice. None knew better than Bholanath that all phases in Sri Ma's life came about naturally and spontaneously. It would be futile to remonstrate with her. He took upon himself the duty of feeding her like a child. Didi was pleased to be given the opportunity of rendering this service to Sri Ma, when she came to stay with them at Shahbagh.

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

"At one time I had the *kheyala* that I was one with everything. At that stage I would give food for whosoever and whatsoever was in front of me. Sometimes I even smeared the earth with rice and vegetables. When Bholanath saw me

doing this, he removed the food from in front of me and fed me like a child that has not learnt to use its fingers for eating."

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

For sometime Sri Ma followed the rule of eating only fruits found under trees in Shahbagh. The fruit trees in Shabagh were mainly mango and *leechi*. When it was not the season for either, Sri Ma lived on practically nothing. She would sometimes take fruits if brought by somebody of his own accord. But her companions were strictly forbidden to make any arrangement for procuring fruit. On the other hand, if fruits were plentiful one day, she would not allow them to be stored for the next.

It was obvious that Sri Ma did not require a normal meal, but just wanted to keep up the habit of taking something or other. This must have been the reason for her taking, for some days at Shahbagh, whatever a person could give her while holding his breath. Probably, even this quantity was not small enough, so she qualified her rule by saying that she would eat whatever could be given during the one minute or so with three fingers only, the middle, the fourth and the thumb. It was also made clear that an intake of food was not a problem for her because sometimes Sri Ma ate large quantities much to the awe of her companions. During the Christmas holidays of 1925, one of Bholanath's sisters, Mokshada Devi (wife of Sri

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

Didi related that once a devotee, seeing Sri Ma's lack of interest in food, implored her to take a full meal. Acceding to his request, she began to eat. Didi was feeding her. Sri Ma seemed to be swallowing the food at double the normal rate. She impatiently remarked, "You are not quick enough. Call someone to help you". But even two people could not keep pace with her that day. The devotee, now quite frightened at

the unexpected result of his request, with folded hands implored her to desist from eating. Sri Ma said plaintively, "First you ask me to eat, but as soon as I start, you tell me to stop. Now, what am I to do?"

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

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

Desires, needs, dislikes or preferences play such an important role in our everyday life that it is next to impossible for us to understand a person not affected by them. When Sri Ma became better known it seemed just right that she would not eat like everyone else. How would she choose or determine the amount of intake when food itself was not necessary for her? She truly had no preferences, so people became quite used to the sight of Sri Ma being fed like a child who eats whatever is given to it. Sometimes children suffer due to the heedlessness of their elders. Sri Ma also underwent many hardships but without any change of expression or diminishing of her graciousness.

Once in Raipur (in later years) after she had finished her meal, she asked the person who had fed her to taste a little of

the *kheer* she had been given. The girl took a mouthful, but it was still so hot that she could neither swallow it nor retain it in her mouth. In spite of Sri Ma's presence she had to spit it out. Sri Ma then opened her own mouth to reveal some red patches in her throat. She suffered from this sore for months.

Didi always maintained that it was easier for people to worship Sri Ma than to render her personal service. She made no demands, showed no preferences and accepted everything, or their lack with the same equanimity. Moreover she was the same with newcomers and companions of long standing. The stranger might think that the persons surrounding her were intimate with her. That was not really so. It is a fact that she was as close or as distant with a stranger as with a constant companion.

Vasanti-Puja at Siddheshwari

In April, 1926, Sri Ma suggested to Bholanath that a covering be constructed over the *vedi* (platform) at Siddheshwari. Shashanka Mohan offered to get this done. Sri Ma said, "It is all the same. Either you or Bholanath may arrange for it. But try to get it completed within seven days." Shashanka Mohan purchased a little land at Siddheshwari, including the site of the platform, and constructed a mud-walled hut (as directed by Sri Ma) around it. A hitch occurred when the workmen unaccountably felt hesitant to demolish an ant-hill within that plot of ground. At Sri Ma's word, Bholanath went and broke up the ant-hill for them. The platform was left as it was, so that when the plinth of the room was constructed it became a hollow square in the floor of the room.

On the seventh day, Sri Ma and Bholanath, accompanied by many devotees, went to Siddheshwari and the night was

spent in singing *Kirtan*. Sri Ma sat on the platform, that is to say, inside the hollow. Sometimes she would manage to lie in it also. People who have seen her do so have felt that unless she exercised some yogic power, it would not be physically possible for her to curl up in the confined space as she did. Sri Ma continued to visit Siddheshwari very often.

After a month or so of the *kirtan* at Shahbagh the devotees heard that Sri Ma had suggested that Vasanti-Puja might be performed at Siddheshwari⁶. They took up the proposal joyfully and preparations went on vigorously. Many friends and relations came to Shahbagh to join in this festival. Didima and Dadamasai were already at Shahbagh. Amongst others were Bholanath's eldest brother-in-law, Sri Sitanath Kushari, and his family, his eldest widowed sister-in-law Pramoda and her family, his second elder brother, Surendra Mohan and his wife Prafulla. The last two already lived in Dhaka and had become frequent visitors at Shahbagh. Another sister and her husband came from Salkia. Bholanath's family priest came from Vikrampur to perform the *puja*. Prof. Atal Bihari Bhattacharya arrived from Rajshahi.

Jogesh Banerji was entrusted with the task of providing food for the large party. They all came to Siddheshwari before the first day of the *puja*. The place was not as lonely or desolate as when Sri Ma had first visited it. The road was more negotiable. Some houses had been built near about the temple. Many of those who lived in them had become devoted to Sri Ma. It was arranged that the women would stay in one of these houses, and the men on the open *verandah* of the *Kali* temple. The temple was in good repair now.

Sri Ma suggested that *prasada* would be distributed to all who came, but *bhoga* would be cooked once only. That is,

bhoga (the cooked food which is offered to the Deity) would be prepared in accordance with the *puja* rules. At the end of the *puja* the *prasada* would be available for the midday meal. No meals were to be cooked separately for the people. Since nobody felt competent to make an estimate of the amount of cereals which would be required everyday, Sri Ma herself came to the kitchen in the morning and decided on the quantities to be cooked. The cooking of the *bhoga* was entrusted to Bholanath's sisters and their daughters-in-law. Chinta Haran was put in charge of the storeroom. Everybody was busy arranging and preparing for the *puja* in some capacity or other.

The elaborate Icon of Goddess Vasanti was installed in the new room which had replaced the mud hut. As the *puja* started, Sri Ma took her seat in the hollow which was very near the *asana* of the priest. She sat there the whole of the first day. In the evening, the sky clouded over and strong gusts of wind presaged a violent storm. Bholanath and others felt afraid that some harm might come to the Image since the room had a thatched roof only. He quickly came to Sri Ma and said, "You must see that nothing happens to the *pratima* (Image)."

Within a few minutes a tempest raged round the small building. The kitchen shed was blown off. All the people gathered together in the *puja*-room, dreading its collapse at any moment. Sri Ma seemed to find the inclement weather quite exhilarating. Her demeanour underwent a swift change, and she seemed to have become one with the very spirit of the storm. She got up from her seat in the hollow swaying to the rhythm of the raging hurricane outside. Pramoda's daughter Labanya had never seen her aunt in a state of exaltation before. "What has happened to *Kakima* [aunt]", she cried

and rushed forward, to put both arms round Sri Ma. She fell away almost at once and in the crowd thereafter nobody noticed her. By this time people had begun to sing *kirtan*. Sri Ma stepped right out into the lashing rain. Followed by the *kirtan* party, she first visited the Kali temple and from there went to the house where the women devotees were staying. Gradually the strains of the *kirtan* rose above the howling storm, and then as suddenly as it had arisen, the gale subsided. The people dispersed to change into dry clothes and repair minor damages.

Shashanka Mohan returned to the *puja*-room alone and was astonished to hear a clear and beautiful voice repeating the name of the Lord in the manner of a *kirtan* : "*Haribol, Haribol*". The utter beauty of this sound held him spellbound for some moments. As he could see no one, he almost believed that it was an ethereal voice. Then, following the direction of the sound, he found young Labanya lying on the ground in a pool of mud and water. She was so covered with mud as to be almost indistinguishable from the ground. When he picked her up, she seemed quite oblivious of her surroundings. There was an ecstatic expression on her face. She was taken home to her mother, bathed and made to put on dry clothes. But there was no change in her manner. She seemed bewitched by the Name that she uttered. Her mother became very perturbed and alternately scolded her and remonstrated with Sri Ma to restore Labanya to her normal condition. Labanya was not affected in the least. She smilingly said to Sri Ma, "Look Aunty, have I gone mad that mother should behave in this manner? What else is there in this world except this Name?"

Her mother did not understand this phenomenon. She kept on insisting that Labanya should be brought back to normalcy. She scolded her daughter, "I won't ever let you go

to your Aunty if you behave like this."

Sri Ma then took Labanya with her to another room. Didi also accompanied them. Sri Ma told Didi that this ecstatic state had come about after Labanya had put her arms round her when she had stood up on the little platform at the commencement of the *kirtan*. She further said, "Look, this state of bliss is coveted by *sadhakas*. She has come by it so naturally, but what can I do? Her mother is so determined to discourage her." Sri Ma then touched Labanya and seemed to perform certain *kriyas* on her body. Labanya's manner underwent a change temporarily. She would be silent for sometime and then again revert back to her ecstatic singing. Sri Ma commented, "Do you see? It is like putting out a large conflagration. You control it at one end, yet the fire bursts out with greater vigour at another end."

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

On *Mahastami* (The second day of *puja*) a crowd of people arrived late in the afternoon from Dhaka to see the Image. Nobody remembered Sri Ma's injunction that no extra cooking was to be undertaken for visitors. A few pots of rice were quickly put on the fire. Didi said to Sri Ma, "Some visitors have come, but there is hardly anything left of the

prasada." Without turning her face, Sri Ma answered, "Give them whatever you have. Don't cook anything." Strangely, it was seen that the left-over *prasada* not only sufficed for the new arrivals but was also just enough for the workers who had not yet eaten.

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

The Vasanti-Puja Bholanath had wished for came to a successful end. Following custom, the clay Image was immersed in the pond nearby on the fourth day. The entire party then returned to Shahbagh. Mokshada Devi (Bholanath's sister) said, "I had not seen my relatives for so many years. After the death of our eldest brother Revati Mohan, we had all become separated. Now *Vadhuthakurani*⁹ (Sri Ma) is making it possible for us all to meet again and come together as a family."

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

CHAPTER SIX

Beginning of the Ceaseless Wanderings

"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 round in my house-I don't go anywhere. I am always at rest in my own home."

Sri Ma Anandamayi

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

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

The following day Sri Ma had beautiful *bhavas* during the

kirtan at the Ashram. She stood upright on her toes with her arms raised and for a long time danced to the rhythm of the *kirtan*. The Brahmachariji was awe-struck at the scene. After the *kirtan* Sri Brahmachariji conversed with her for a long time regarding the nature of the Supreme Being. He posited a Duality, saying Brahman and Maya, but Sri Ma would not be shaken out of her position of the one alone who is everything. The saint after a while smilingly accepted her position.

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

An eye-witness account of this visit is given by Prof. N. K. Brahma: "I had the good fortune of seeing Mother next in the summer of 1926 at Deoghar... She sang in such a sweet and melodious voice that it seemed to all present that she could not be any human being but must be a goddess in human form. Sri Brahmachari Maharaj was very much impressed by Sri Ma and it was at his special request that she agreed to stay for a week changing her original programme of remaining at Deoghar for three days only."¹

On their return to Kolkata, they put up at Surendra Mohan Mukherjee's place. He had not seen Sri Ma before, but had agreed to receive them as guests. After this first *darsana* he and his aged mother became life-long devotees of Sri Ma.

On the day of her departure from Kolkata, Sri Ma visited Pramatha Nath's house also. Many people who were to become devotees later came to meet her there. It was arranged that she would go to the station from Pramatha Nath's house. At the time of her departure, Pramatha Nath prostrated himself before her and stayed in that posture for a long time. Since she could not step over him, he prevented her from

moving away. This delay resulted in the train being missed for the day. Many people had come with food for the journey. There was a heap of fruits, sweets, *saris* and flowers at her feet. It started raining heavily.

The assembled people standing about in the rain began to sing *kirtan*. Strangers became friends. An air of great rejoicing prevailed. When the rain stopped a meal for everyone was improvised out of all the available eatables brought for Sri Ma and her party. There were dry clothes also for those who needed them. Much to the joy of her new acquaintances she remained in Kolkata for one more day.

Life in Shahbagh continued as before. Throughout the day the people would cluster round Sri Ma's radiant person. She with the help of Didi and Matori *Pisima*, cooked large meals and served them also to the devotees. There was always an air of plenitude around Sri Ma although she herself was as if austerity personified.

The *Kheyala* for a Name

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

Bhaiji left the files and papers as they were on the table, and went to Shahbagh. Sri Ma said, "Let us go to Siddheshwari." Arriving at Siddheshwari, Sri Ma sat in the hollow, her usual seat. Looking at her radiant countenance, a name came spontaneously to Bhaiji's mind. He turned to Bholanath and said, "We shall call her 'Sri Ma Anandamayi'". Bholanath smilingly agreed to this. The name seemed entirely appropriate! On their way back Sri Ma remarked, "You were

cheerful enough so far but now you look worried." Bhaiji answered that he was reminded of his office. No doubt the Director would be amazed at his irresponsible behaviour. But he did not need to be worried. The Director had been delayed and had not arrived during his absence. Later, Bhaiji asked Sri Ma, "Why did you send for me like this?" Sri Ma answered, "I wanted to see how far you had progressed in these months. Besides, how else would I have got my name?"

Bhaiji had a devout Muslim friend. Maulavi Ziauddin Hussain. One evening, Bhaiji, Niranjan Ray and the Maulavi went to Shahbagh. They found that *kirtan* was in progress in the hall. They stood outside, watching it. After a while Sri Ma came out of the room followed by a few of the people. Somebody brought a lantern. Sri Ma was in an exalted state of *bhava*. She walked straight to where the three friends were standing in the dark. She lightly touched the Muslim gentleman with her right hand and walked on ahead without pausing. The three friends followed. Sri Ma went to the small mausoleum of the Arab *fakirs*. To the amazement of the assembled people she started to perform the *namaz*. After a few seconds the Maulavi stepped forward and joined in the prayer. After completing the *namaz*, Sri Ma returned to the *kirtan* hall. The Maulavi also entered the hall with her and joined in the *kirtan* clapping his hands to the rhythm of the music. By a coincidence, the man who was supposed to offer a light and a few *batasas* (sugar-puffs) at the grave-side had not come that day. Sri Ma asked the Maulavi to perform this duty. He was given a plate of sugar-puffs for the purpose. After offering the sweets at the grave, he had a strong desire to give a few to Sri Ma. When he reached the hall and approached Sri Ma, she opened her mouth so he could put one *batasa* in it. At the end of the *kirtan* he partook of the *prasada* that was distributed amongst the people. He was a very staunch

Muslim. After this incident Bhaiji noticed that many of the Maulavi's ideas about his own religion had undergone a change. He became as devoted to Sri Ma as any of her Hindu devotees.

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

Bhaiji and his close friend Niranjan Ray went to Shahbagh one day to find that Sri Ma had just finished drawing some diagrams on the floor with a piece of coal. Bholanath remarked with a smile, "Your mother has been drawing the *Satchakras*." Sri Ma commented, "This afternoon I sat in an *asana* and measured with my fingers the distance from the center of the head to the middle of the eye-brows, then to the neck and down to the end of the spine. I have a *kheyala* that there are centers at these specific spots within the body. From the lowest to the highest they range from gross to refined. I have not drawn these diagrams deliberately, but they have drawn themselves as it were. These centers are formations of nerves only. The aptitudes and propensities of the human being, determined by the experiences of his sense

organs, are located in these centers. The stream of vitality flows through them slowly or fast, determining the emotions and actions of the individual. Just as the world has different strata such as earth, water, the void and so on, the human body also has different levels. The vital force lies as if somnolent at the base of the spine. By perseverance and faith, thought and action are purified. The vibrations engendered by the action of inner and outer purity shake this sleeping power into motion; this power then moves upwards penetrating level after level so the *sadhaka* feels freed from many ties." Sri Ma went on describing the various *chakras*, their inner significance and some of the experiences that may come to a *sadhaka* who treads this path. Bhaiji had read of these things in treatises on Yogas and Tantras, but he now realized that what Sri Ma was describing from her own direct experience was so much more vivid and meaningful than the mere diagrammatic representations given in books.

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

Both Bhaiji and his friend Niranjana Ray were men of reserved temperament. They did not approve of *kirtan* very much. One evening, after the *kirtan* at Shahbagh, they were

taken aback to hear Sri Ma say. "All those who did not join in the *kirtan* today, must sing now." Bhaiji, Niranjana and a few other culprits, to the amusement of the people present, then very sheepishly sang *kirtan* for a little while. When everybody had gone away, Bhaiji felt inspired to sit alone and sing for sometime. He now understood the ecstasy that people felt when they heard or joined in an inspired *kirtan*. He resolved not to look down upon *kirtan* as a very inferior mode of *sadhana*.

At about this time Bhaiji was able to elicit from Sri Ma a few crucial words regarding her identity. In the future she was heard to use variations of these words in answer to similar questions. He had asked: "Please tell me who or what are you?"

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

"But this is not a very satisfactory answer.." Before Bhaiji could complete his sentence. Sri Ma's expression underwent a change. In a voice which struck fear in Bhaiji's mind she said, "What more do you want to know, tell me, what more do you want to know?" Bhaiji's words faltered into silence and he did not have the courage to pursue the question any further.

The Kheyala to Respond to Pran Gopal Mukherjee's Plea for Teachings:

It so happened that Sri Ma went to Siddheshwari with

Pran Gopal who was visiting Dhaka at the time, one day as she often did, accompanied by a small group of people (August 6, 1926). She sat in the hollow, surrounded by the others. Sri Ma looked about her and spoke in a firm voice, "All of you must endeavour to mould yourselves. You must strive to overcome anger and jealousy and be united in your search for Truth. This is merely the beginning. You will have to endure much. Storms will arise and sweep away many from amongst you."

Sri Ma no longer covered her face with the folds of her *sari*. It was left drawn up on her head only. There was no shyness or restraint in her manner now. Once more she spoke in a very forceful voice, "Look, people mostly ask me about their worldly problems. I have nothing to say about such matters, but I tell you that when I come and sit in this hollow I shall answer whatever question you choose to ask, but not at any other time."

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

Didi was overwhelmed by the aura of magnificence around Sri Ma. She knelt in front of Sri Ma reciting aloud the hymn to Durga, a demonstration which was entirely foreign to her nature. The others also seemed similarly overcome and stood gazing at Sri Ma with folded hands.

This incident may be related in the words of one of the eyewitnesses: "Mother sat upon the platform that *Ambuvachi* day and the change that came over her person was simply astounding. Her whole body seemed afire-but it was a fire that emitted the sweetest, the most comfortably cool rays you could imagine. She shone gloriously but did not cause any pain to our vision. To this day I have a vivid recollection of this transfiguration.... She called one by one the four or five who had gathered there, except only one. She had, I should say here, not yet 'come out' and very few people had any knowledge about her. I remember Mother called Rai Bahadur (Pran Gopal Mukherjee) first and said in an admonishing tone, 'You are publicising me?' He smiled and said, 'Yes Mother, I am'. She then said something to him, which I cannot remember. The next person to be called was myself and Mother in deep-toned voice said to me: 'I know but One'. (*Aami jani aik*) Then she launched into a *stotra* (a hymn in Sanskrit) the like of which used to gush forth from her on many an occasion in those days. It was not possible to follow her in it, so rapid was the stream of words welling forth, but it was clearly understood that she was speaking of the unity of all things, and I seem to remember the word *abrahmasta-imbaparyantam* (from the blade of grass to Brahman). Thus, even at the beginning of my acquaintance with her, Mother spoke of Unity in Diversity-the truth which has been so forcibly borne upon me by her utterances and conduct subsequently..."²

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

Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, a professional photographer from Chattagram, had come to Dhaka during the Puja vacation of 1926. He was very anxious to take a few photographs of Sri Ma. One morning, accompanied by Bhaiji, he visited Shahbagh. Sri Ma was lying in one of the rooms in a still condition of *samadhi*. Shashi Bhushan, who had to leave the same evening, sought Bholanath's permission and help. Bholanath, assisted by Bhaiji, guided Sri Ma's steps to a sunlit spot outside. Shashi Bhushan exposed 18 plates. When he developed them he was amazed to find that the first 17 were totally blank. The last one showed the sitting figure of Sri Ma, but there was a shadowy form at her back. In great haste he printed this negative and to his amazement found that the form was that of Bhaiji. Actually, Bhaiji had been standing beyond the range of his focus while he took the snaps. There was also a semicircular mark on Sri Ma's forehead.

Questioned about this phenomenon, Sri Ma later said, "When Bholanath and Jyotish (Bhaiji) came to take me outside I had the *kheyala* that my body was surrounded by a very bright light. This may have spoilt the earlier plates. This light began to diminish gradually until it remained concentrated on the forehead only. I did not see Jyotish but I had a *kheyala* that he was standing at my back."³

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

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

"Do you always know the thoughts of others?"

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

"What is the difference between a *sadhaka* who has attained fulfilment and a Divine Incarnation?"

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

The Kali of Ramna Ashram

The day of the annual *Kali-Puja* drew near (October/November 1926). Kali was the presiding deity of Bholanath's family. They were expected to perform the annual *puja* wherever they might be. Bholanath and his brothers had to move from place to place on account of their various occupations, and it was not always possible for them to get together for this annual festival. The brothers had, therefore, decided to perform this duty by turn. Bholanath had once celebrated the *puja* while at Bajitpur. After coming to Dhaka Ma Anandamayi had, at the request of Bholanath and others, herself performed the annual *puja* in 1925. This was the first

time that Sri Ma had performed a *puja* publicly with the assistance of others and in accordance with scriptural rules. On both these occasions some miraculous incidents had taken place. The devotees were keen to see Sri Ma perform the *puja* again. The year was marked by many changes in her life. She had become very widely known and Shahbagh was swarming with more and more people everyday.

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

Just one day before the *puja*, late at night, Ma asked Bholanath, "What was Bhudeb Babu talking to you about?" Bholanath did not ask how she knew but answered that he and others had been trying to persuade him to celebrate the *puja*. Ma said, "Why don't you yourself perform the *puja*?" Bholanath interpreted this to mean that she now had the *kheyala* for this *puja*. He went out and gave the good news to Baul, Suren and others who were just about to go home. Since time was so short the image had to be procured that very night and all arrangements expedited. Baul and a few others went to town to fetch the image. They found that all images but one had been sold out. The colour of this image was somewhat unusual—more bluish than black. When Sri Ma saw the image next day, she said, "Well, evidently Kali has decided to come to us this year and so things have arranged themselves in this manner. I saw an image of Kali of exactly this shape and hue, wearing a garland of red hibiscus, coming down from above as if to fall into my arms. The image was so vivid that I lifted

my arms to take it. Now that she is here, you should make arrangements for the *puja* to the best of your ability".

Perhaps it will not be out of place to give here a few details of these forms of worship. The presiding deity of Bengal is Kali or Durga. The bright Image of the goddess Durga is thought to be the personification of the Divine Mother. According to scriptural stories, although the daughter of a king, she chose for her husband Siva, the personification of the very spirit of renunciation. To his abode of utter desolation on the snow-clad mount Kailasa, she brought the magnificence and grandeur of a princely household. For three days every year she comes to visit the earth, her erstwhile home. Bengal prepares for her advent with hectic enthusiasm. She is worshipped with flowers, fruits, sweets, clothes and music. For three days Bengalis can think of nothing else. Then wiping off the festive mood, as if by magic, the Goddess departs to the abode of her Husband, burying the whole countryside under a pall of gloom.

The Divine Mother in the form of Durga or in various other forms is worshipped in all parts of India. The worship of Kali, however, seems peculiar to Bengal. Kali is the destructive aspect of Durga. Durga is beautiful to look at, Kali is fearful. The golden image of Durga is clothed in shining garbs and the light that flashes from her ornaments fills the universe: Kali's dark hue mingles with the black waves of her hair cascading down all round her. As Kali is the reigning deity of the battle-field, she is bespattered with blood. She has four hands; the left upper hand holds aloft a *khadga*, (a dagger-like weapon) while the left lower hand grasps a human skull; while the right upper hand conveys the message of *abhaya*-(do not fear), the right lower hand is held out in a gesture of benediction. She is so bent upon her devastating

course of slaughtering evil-doers that she inadvertently steps on the prostrate form of *Siva*, and then bites her tongue in confusion at what she has done. It is thus that the artist likes to create her image for the annual *puja*. The inspired songs of Ramprasad invoke an image of beauty and benign presence. Poets of Bengal, such as Atulprasad Sen and Kazi Nazrul Islam, have sung songs of praise about Kali as the most compassionate Mother. Proper understanding of the paradoxical appeal of Kali is not possible without some understanding of the traditional and cultural context. *Durga-Puja* is a festival for everyone. *Kali-Puja* is for the *sadhaka*. It takes place in the stillness and quiet of midnight.

Bholanath himself was a *Sakta* and a staunch believer in ritualism. All of the early devotees of Sri Ma were used to this form of *Kali-Puja* since their childhood. Preparations went on in full swing. Shahbagh was crowded with people. Midnight drew near. There was not an inch of empty space in the *puja*-room. Ma was sitting in her own room in a state of *bhava*. Bholanath with the help of Didi and others guided her steps to the *puja*-room. An astounding transformation took place here. Ma Anandamayi went like a flash of lightning through the congregation and seated herself near the clay image of Kali.

For a few seconds the entire assembly saw two images of the goddess in front of them. Ma Anandamayi's fair complexion had darkened; the eyes were wide-open and fixed, even the tongue hung over her chin. Before the audience had time to react the upper half of Sri Ma's body lay prone on the floor in a limp pliable posture peculiar to her. She was heard to say, "Close your eyes."

The congregation sat in meditative silence with closed

eyes. Sri Ma was heard to say, "Mahadeiya has not closed her eyes."

Mahadeiya was the gardener's wife and was standing outside a little way off. On being told she also closed her eyes.

The congregation listened to the Sanskrit *puja mantras*, pronounced by Bholanath. He had automatically occupied the seat of the priest when he saw Sri Ma sitting next to the Image. After a while Bholanath asked them to open their eyes. They were now rewarded by the sight of Sri Ma's usual radiant form and countenance. She was still sitting near the clay-image of Kali. Both were covered with flowers of many colours. Bholnath had performed the *puja* as if to two images.

Ma Anandamayi had given expression to her disapproval of animal sacrifice the previous year, so this ritual had been discontinued. This was a major innovation right in the heart of Bengal. The last ritual was the fire-sacrifice (*yajna*). When the final oblation is put in the sacred fire, the *puja* is deemed to be concluded. On this occasion a departure from the norm was inaugurated by Sri Ma. The *yajna* was concluded as far as the *puja* was concerned but no final oblation was given unto the sacred fire, so it remained smouldering and flickering in its bronze receptacle. The congregation knew that they had witnessed miraculous events and that they were indeed blessed.

In the early hours of the morning a few close companions who were still at Shahbagh sat with Ma Anandamayi and Bholanath discussing the *Kali-Puja* just completed. Somebody remarked that the image was lifelike and that he would be quile afraid to sit alone in the *puja*-room at night. The others concurred that the image was extraordinary. Sri Ma not paying attention to this asked Didi to fetch a little of

the sacrificial fire from the *puja*-room. Didi put a few pieces of live coal in a receptacle and brought it to her. Sri Ma took it in her hand and shaking the coals playfully remarked, "The fire of a *Mahayajana* will be lighted from this fire." This prophecy came true (after twenty years) but at this time nobody understood the implications of this utterance, so they kept quiet. After a short pause she spoke again, "Who can undertake to preserve this fire in Kali's room?" Nobody said anything immediately because this task would be very difficult. The daily worship of Kali is meant for ascetics only as she is supposed to destroy all bondage. Some people are even afraid to keep a picture of Kali in their homes. Maintaining the fire would entail the offering of daily oblations for its worship and constant vigilance. In short, these things could not be done by a man leading a householder's life. So expressing the general opinion, Didi's brother Birendra Chandra answered, "No, Ma, I cannot, I have my wife and children to look after." The others merely kept quiet. But Sri Ma repeated, "Who amongst you can do it?" Now Shashanka Mohan had been dozing for a while. He had not heard the statements about the sacrificial fire or so Didi thought. This time he heard the question and connecting it to the previous conversation about being afraid of the lifelike image of Kali, he said emphatically, "I can. What is there to be afraid of?"

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

receptacle of live coals and went away to begin a vigil which is still being kept up in several places. Sri Ma asked Didi and her brothers to go home. After a while Sri Ma took a couple of blankets to the *puja*-room, so that Shashanka Mohan could rest a while in some comfort.

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

A young boy called Kamalakanta who had just passed his Matriculation examination had come to Shahbagh. He had fallen ill some time ago but had recovered, as he believed, due to Sri Ma's grace. He had stayed on at Shahbagh. Ma assigned to him the duty of looking after the image of Kali. There would be no *puja*, but he was told to put a garland of red hibiscus flowers on her every day without fail.

One day Ma Anandamayi asked some of the men to remove the image of Kali to another room of the house. With great care the clay image was shifted to the new place. A storm arose that night and the door of the original *puja*-room crashed down on the very spot where the image had been.

The subsequent history of the image of the goddess Kali is as interesting as her advent at Shahbagh. It was moved five times before being installed permanently. Images for annual festivals are made of unbaked clay and not processed for durability. Whenever the devotees were obliged to move the image, they would be apprehensive about its safety, but

nothing untoward happened. In spite of so much handling, the image remained intact.

A few anecdotes relating to this goddess Kali will perhaps not be out of place here. Sometime after the Kali *pooja* described above, Sri Ma happened to be travelling in Uttar Pradesh near Mirzapur. Bhaiji was also there. Leaving him at Mirzapur, Sri Ma and Bholanath went on to Rajasthan. Bhaiji came to the station to see them off. Sri Ma told him, "On your way back, look out for a garland of hibiscus flowers on the hillside of Chunar [a village nearby] and keep it with you."

Chunar is an arid hilly region where a type of thorny bush is the only vegetation. There are absolutely no hibiscus shrubs for miles around.

On his way back from the station, Bhaiji kept a skeptical look out for a garland of flowers. In fact he saw the garland quite easily and clearly. It was a bright red spot visible from afar against a uniform drab background. The flowers were fresh and glowing.

Bhaiji wrote to the devotees in Dhaka to enquire if anything unusual had happened on that particular day. He heard by return of post that Kamalakanta had forgotten to garland the image of Kali that day, and that they were all remorseful for the omission. Bhaiji now saw a meaning in this incident. He realized that Sri Ma's *kheyala* of the daily offering of a garland had been fulfilled in spite of Kamalakanta's forgetfulness.⁴

Another interesting event took place a few years later. In 1931, an Ashram was built at Ramna for Ma Anandamayi by the devotees of Dhaka. The details will appear later. At Ma Anandamayi's suggestion the image of Kali was installed in a small temple in the Ashram. A few months after the

installation, Ma Anandamayi happened to be in Cox's Bazar, a coastal town in Chattagram.

One new-moon day, Ma Anandamayi, while walking back from the house of a neighbour along the beach, suddenly began twisting one hand with the other. There was a smile on her lips but her eyes were full of tears. She made no reply to Didi's anxious questions. The whole night she was restless. The next morning also, Sri Ma's eyes would fill with tears, although her expression remained normal. After a few days, a letter from Bhaiji conveyed the news that thieves had broken into the Kali temple at Ramna, on new-moon night, and had removed the gold ornaments from the deity, damaging one of the arms of the image in the process.

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

Later, when Sri Ma returned to Dhaka, the image of Kali was repaired and installed by Bholanath again in its original place. The devotees were planning to build a bigger temple to house the images of Annapurna, Siva and Vishnu. Under Sri Ma's guidance the existing small temple was left undisturbed. The foundation of the new temple was laid around it. The construction work proceeded around the original shrine. The new walls enclosed the little room. The new floor came up to almost the roof of the old temple. The Kali-shrine, became an underground cell in the new room. A door and a flight of steps led down to this inner sanctum. The deities - Siva, Annapurna,

Kali and Vishu-were installed on the roof of this original shrine which, in the new temple, appeared like a raised platform.

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

The new arrangements were followed for about seven years. The devotees of Dhaka would gather in the Ashram for the opening of the door once a year. As early as 1931 Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to open the temple doors for everyone. For one day there was no restriction for anyone.

The annual *darsana* of Kali came to an end in May, 1938. The intervening years had brought about many changes in Ma Anandamayī's way of life. In 1938, Bholanath had passed away, much to the grief of all devotees. Didi and her father came to Dhaka to attend the *puja* celebration on Sri Ma's birthday. Sri Ma herself was away in Dehradun. On the specified day the door of Kali's room was opened. The devotees were filled with sadness to see that an arm of the image had fallen from the body. Earlier when the image had been damaged, Bholanath had performed the *abhiseka* and *puja* of the deity and had reinstalled it in the shrine. Now Kulada Babu, who was in charge, did not feel equal to it. He was afraid to touch or perform the *puja* of the broken image.

He decided to leave it alone and performed the ceremony of the annual worship on the *yantra* (symbol of the Goddess).

A telegram was sent to Sri Ma for her instructions. A reply was received in due course: "Let this form of the image of Kali become invisible now. There is no need to perform *puja* to the broken image."

Sri Ma had previously told Didi how to seal up the shrine, should such a contingency arise. Now that Didi happened to be (by a strange coincidence) present in Dhaka, she could give the necessary directions. The small shrine with its presiding deity was completely sealed. It was already three fourths underground. There was no need to undertake any major construction. The simple blocking up of the inner passage left the main temple undisturbed and accomplished the complete sealing of the temple of Kali.

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

The devotees of Dhaka had further reason to be thankful for Sri Ma's foresight regarding this image of Kali. At the time of the partition of Bengal, Ramna Ashram was razed to the ground but Kali remained safely underground in her special temple.

Referring to this Kali, Sri Ma has said, "I saw a moving image of Kali, with no Siva under her feet. Now why should there be no Siva as is usual? Why should such an image take form? Whatever attitude of mind all of you have is reflected here. It was time for the annual Kali-Puja. All of you were eager for the performance of the worship-that is why Devi herself appeared in the form of Kali. Since the image was the

personification of *Adya Sakti* there was no need for Siva under her feet."

Jogesh Rai :

Jogesh dada as he came to be known later was one of the special people singled out by Ma Anandmayi for a life of renunciation. He was a young man working in Dhaka at this time. He used to visit Shahbagh, attracted by the music rather than the religious activities. One day, during a *kirtan* Sri Ma touched him while she was in an exalted state of bhava: This touch brought about a great change in him. He became a devout follower. Jogesh Rai was a quiet man. He would remain unobtrusively at the fringe of the crowd of devotees. Ma at that time did not speak very freely to people visiting Shahbagh. Yet this did not prevent her from conveying her *kheyala* to Jogesh dada. Ma asked Bholanath to tell Jogesh dada to take one year's leave from his service. Then he was to leave Dhaka and go on a pilgrimage to distant places where nobody would know him. For one year he was not to make himself known to anybody. He was to inform his mother only, before leaving. Jogesh dada unhesitatingly obeyed these instructions. All his friends were surprised to learn of his sudden and unaccountable departure from Dhaka.

Jogesh dada had no money, so he was obliged to beg for food. But he did not know how to beg. He would stand near a house and repeat the names of the Lord. Mostly, people did not heed him. He did not look like a beggar or a *sadhu*, so this was also a handicap. Jogesh dada said that it became slightly easier for him when he grew a beard and his hair became matted and his clothes shabby. He worked his way to Hardwar, the hill town at the foothills of the Himalayas. He met Sri Ma unexpectedly in Hardwar during this year of pilgrimage. He was surprised to see Sri Ma and her party of

people walking along the road. Nobody recognized him because he was greatly changed in appearance. He looked like one of the *sadhus* to be met with so frequently in that part of the country. Since he was not supposed to make himself known, he did not approach them. He was also not sure whether Sri Ma had noticed him or recognized him. He stood and watched the whole party walk past and go on ahead. After a short distance the road turned sharply. When Sri Ma passed this turning, she looked back at him standing by the wayside, and he knew from her expression that she had recognized him.

After completing one year Jogesh dada returned to Dhaka. Sri Ma asked him to resume his service saying, "This is enough for the time being." Off and on Sri Ma would entrust him with various duties. By 1931, he was staying at Ramna as a resident of the Ashram. He was made the caretaker of the shrine of Kali. Jogesh dada was selected by Sri Ma for showing the way toward asceticism. Evidently her *kheyala* was enough to transform the life of a man. No doubt Jogesh dada was fully deserving of this honour.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Widening Circle

One who has seen Mother even once cannot doubt that there is such a thing as perfect Bliss or Ananda. One really feels in her presence something like an unmixed joy which is pure and unique, a higher and nobler happiness than the transient pleasures of the sensory plane. Her illuminating discourses show unmistakably the presence of a Jnana, a realization or an anubhava that is not due to the training of the intellect and which is above the piecemeal working of the faculties...

-Dr. Nalini Kanta Brahma

Dhaka was a town of many cultures. The trustee of Shahbagh Gardens, Rai Bhadur Jogesh C. Ghosh, was very close to his Muslim employer, the Nawabzadi Pyari Banu. His household was cosmopolitan rather than orthodox Hindu. When he and his family became attached to Sri Ma Anandamayi they began to familiarise themselves with ritualistic *puja* and other religious rites. In December, 1926 Jogesh Chandra invited Sri Ma and Bholanath to Paruldia, his village home. The occasion was the *shraddha* ceremony of his mother, that is, the rites performed in honour of a departed soul.

On this occasion Sri Ma assembled the girls of the house and said, "You have no specific duty to perform in the *shraddha*, but you can all sing *kirtan*." The eldest granddaughter, Bhramar, who could sing beautifully, led the *kirtan*

and within a short while the entire household gathered round them. This was something quite unheard of in his house. There were many who had never heard a *kirtan* before. Sri Ma moved about gracefully, surrounded by the girls. She went all over the house in this manner. Some Mohammedan workmen were standing on one side. She went up to them and sang the name, Allah, Allah as part of the *kirtan*. The workmen joined in and became part of the whole congregation.

For some time Bhaiji and Niranjan Rai as well as other devotees had been planning to build an Ashram for Sri Ma and Bholanath. Sri Ma had said, "Why do you need a separate place? The whole world is an Ashram." Bhaiji had said, "We should have a place where we can gather and sing *kirtan*. It will not be possible for us to do so always at Shahbagh." Sri Ma had said, "In that case try for the plot of ground in Ramna which has a derelict temple on it. It is hallowed ground. I have seen many saints and ascetics who had lived in that place in the past and had practised rigorous *sadhana*."

Bhaiji found that the property was owned by the priest of the Ramna Kali temple and had originally belonged to one Gokul Thakur. Bholanath now recalled that Sri Ma had mentioned this name to him at Bajitpur. He was struck by the coincidence. The priest wanted a very large sum of money for the plot and so nothing could be done about it at the time.

In the first week of April, 1927, Sri Ma and Bholanath left Shahbagh to attend the *Purna-Kumbha* at Hardwar. Plans were made carefully for this long journey right across Northern India. Her party included Shashanka Mohan and Didi, Sri Rajendra Kushari and his wife, Matori *Pisima*, Didima, Dadamasai and Bholanath's youngest brother Jamini

Kumar. So far they had only travelled around places close to Dhaka and Kolkata.

The travelling party made a brief halt in Kolkata where they put up in an unoccupied house thinking it would be inconvenient for anyone to accommodate such a large party.

Rai Bahadur Jogesh Ghosh was in Kolkata at this time. He was now very keen to bring about a meeting of Sri Ma and his employer the Nawabzadi Pyari Banu. Sri Ma could be invited to a religious ceremony only, so he now arranged a *kirtan* at Pyari Banu's house and brought an invitation from her for Ma and her companions. The Nawabzadi was very pleased to see Sri Ma. Although a Muslim lady, she with her son and daughter joined in the *kirtan* with Hindu devotees.

From Kolkata the travellers came to Varanasi. Didi's eldest sister was married to Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee, lawyer in Varanasi. Both had seen Sri Ma in Dhaka previously. They came to the station to receive her. Sri Ma and her party were accommodated in their big house in Ramapura. Shashanka Mohan's younger brother Kunja Mohan also lived in Varanasi. He also became a devotee now.

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

On the eve of her departure from Hardwar, Sri Ma asked Shashanka Mohan and Didi to remain there for three months and practise *sadhana*. She said, "It is necessary for everybody

to do his own work (*sadhana*) in solitude, if possible." After the *Kali-Puja* Shashanka Mohan had stayed at Shahbagh for five months. He would go to the Medical School once a day. On his way back he would visit his home and then return to Shahbagh. It was natural for Didi also to come and stay with her father so that she could look after his needs. Since she had her father as escort, her relatives could not object to her living in this unorthodox style with such strange people as Ma Anandamayi and her family. Shashanka Mohan had embarked on a career which later culminated in the highest renunciation. In his old age he was getting used to all sorts of hardships which ordinarily he would not have considered possible for him to bear. Walking long distances in hilly regions, bathing in cold water, eating at irregular times, or fasting for many long hours, all such things had woven themselves into the fabric of his daily life now. Yet, he seemed to be gaining in health. However, *sadhana* and health were not the main considerations for Shashanka Mohan or Didi.

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

In the meantime, Bhaiji had been ill. On recovery he and Niranjana Rai and other devotees decided to celebrate Sri Ma's birthday at Shahbagh. It was the first celebration of this kind.

Sri Ma and Bholanath had just returned from Hardwar. The devotees gathered in Shahbagh in large numbers to perform *puja* and *kirtan* in commemoration of her birth on April 30, 1896. She was now 31 years old.

Bhaiji was taken ill again. Sri Ma and Bholanath went to see him almost daily. Bhaiji once told Bholanath that he sometimes had a longing for a cool and refreshing bath. Sri Ma said, "Why don't you have one? There is a pond nearby." Without any hesitation Bhaiji got up, although he was under strict medical orders not to leave his bed. Bholanath helped him to walk the distance of 60 to 70 yards to the pond to take a refreshing bath. Bhaiji was usually closely watched over by his wife, son and daughter and his faithful servant Khagen. But by a coincidence nobody was nearby at this particular time. His daughter, who was near at hand in case he wanted anything, had fallen asleep. She woke up to find Sri Ma sitting close beside her, and her father lying in bed as usual. The next day Bhaiji's wife complained to Sri Ma, "Look, Ma, he is supposed to be strictly confined to his bed. But as soon as he gets the slightest opportunity he goes out." She pointed to the burrs stuck on his *dhoti*, which showed that he had been walking in the field. It was only when he had fully recovered a few months later that he related the incident of the bath to his wife. She would not believe him at first, arguing that he could not have survived such exertion. But he confirmed it in all seriousness and reminded her of the burrs she had found on his clothes. Thereupon she had wonderingly accepted the statement.

Crowds were still on the increase at Shahbagh. Many persons would arrange for *kirtan* and invite Ma Anandamayi and Bholanath to their homes. Wherever Sri Ma went, a

crowd would follow, invited or not. Different people had different reactions toward this phenomenon according to their temperaments. Some would deem it their good fortune that their home was sanctified by a gathering of devotees; some would be annoyed at the presumption of an uninvited crowd trampling down gardens and making themselves at home where they were not welcome. Even ladies from conservative homes followed Sri Ma about without any restraint. Men who could not have imagined themselves running after a "woman saint" were now jealous of the women-folk when the latter surrounded Sri Ma and they themselves were obliged to catch only a glimpse of her from a distance. A glance, a word, a smile would throw out of gear the standards of behaviour of a lifetime. The customs and conventions of a whole community were set at naught, as it were. The devotees of Dhaka could not imagine a future without Sri Ma residing at Shahbagh like the presiding deity of the town. They had yet to learn that Sri Ma would not settle down anywhere and still be completely at home wherever she might be.

One evening in July, Sri Ma accompanied by Bholanath visited a number of houses including those of Didi and Bhaiji. From Sri Ma's manner both Didi and her father concluded that she was about to leave them again. She had been paying short visits to neighbouring villages and towns. Bhaiji also had a similar premonition. He sent his servant Khagen to Shahbagh but was told that both Bholanath and Sri Ma were there. Shashanka Mohan, who was once more staying at home, felt very restless. It was then past midnight, yet he went to Shahbagh on foot. Sri Ma and Bholanath were surprised to see him at that hour. He said, "Ma, I cannot reassure myself that

you will not suddenly go away without informing us." She smiled and said, "You will come to know of it if I leave, won't you?" This answer was far from satisfactory but he could not do anything more and so returned home. Next morning he went to Shahbagh only to find that Sri Ma and Bholanath had already left for an unknown destination. In great distress he came to Bhaiji, who also did not know anything about their departure. Later in the day they heard from a messenger that Sri Ma and Bholanath had gone to Narayangunj, and from there they intended to visit other places. Sri Ma sent a message because she had said to Shashanka Mohan that he would come to know if she left Dhaka. The travellers did not stay long in any place. From Narayangunj they went to Rajshahi (Atal Bihari's house), Kolkata and Deoghar.

Bhaiji in the meantime had been asked to go for a change. He had arranged to go to Vindhyachal in Uttar Pradesh, which is a health resort as well as a place of pilgrimage. How great was his joy when a few days later Sri Ma and Bholanath arrived at Vindhyachal to stay near his house. Kunja Mohan's family came from nearby Varanasi to spend a few days with Ma. His younger sons were little boys of about nine and seven. One evening the entire party went for a walk. The region is hilly, the footpaths at places strewn over with rocks and boulders. Coming to a narrow track Sri Ma went ahead and outdistanced her companions. She stopped suddenly and signalled to others not to advance. Bholanath, however, ran forward and found a cobra with raised hood near Sri Ma's feet. Sri Ma said she had stepped on it. Without answering the question whether it had bitten her, she again started to walk ahead. The snake slipped away before they could do anything about it. The younger of the two boys suddenly said to his

mother, "Ma, isn't it written in my brother's horoscope that he will die of snake-bite? Sri Ma has made the snake bite herself today instead of my brother." Everybody was surprised that the child should remember about the horoscope of his brother and remind his parents of it. When Bhaiji heard that Sri Ma had stepped on a cobra, he hurriedly procured all sorts of medicines and rubbed them on her foot. Late at night two bluish fang marks became visible on her left foot. Everyone was highly amused at Bhaiji's expense because he had applied the medicines on her right foot!

After visiting Chunar and other places in the neighbourhood Sri Ma and Bholanath returned to Dhaka.

Vidyakut and Kheora Revisited

The devotees were keen to see the places where Sri Ma Anandamayi had lived as a young girl. Sri Ma and Bholanath escorted a huge party to Vidyakut. Ma's parents also were with them. Vidyakut was full of her relatives and friends. They all came to see Sri Ma. She visited their homes also. Didi was introduced to Sri Ma's playmates and much time was spent in pleasant recollections of her childhood. The villages are usually connected by narrow streams or broad waterways. From Vidyakut they went to Kheora by boat on August 3, 1927. The cottage where Sri Ma was born was now in the possession of a Muslim family. Many of the Muslim neighbours whom she called uncle, brother and so on diffidently came forward trying to recognize in Sri Ma the bright-looking little girl who had won their affection. The devotees asked Didima to point out the exact spot where Sri Ma had been born, but the surroundings were so changed that Didima felt rather bewildered. Sri Ma was strolling about, talking to people. She went round the cottage and stood still

near a place where a heap of cow-dung had been stored. She picked up a little of the earth from this place and started to weep aloud. Didima now recognized many of the landmarks and stated definitely that this was the spot where Sri Ma had been born. It had been enclosed by sheets of canemattings and had a temporary roof. She had not recognised it at first because it was now open ground.

Bholanath was upset to see Sri Ma cry and wanted to leave immediately. She then wiped her tears and called out to the owner of the place. She said to them: "It will be beneficial for all of you if you use this place for prayers and meditations only." They all readily agreed to do so. Shashanka Mohan wanted to give them some money toward the upkeep of the ground, but they would not accept it, saying that they themselves would do whatever was necessary. Didi brought away the clod of earth that Sri Ma had picked up.

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

They spent a few days in Vidyakut. On the day of departure, Sri Ma caught hold of the arm of one of her old cousins and started weeping in the time-honoured manner of a young woman going away from the village of her parents to her husband's home. The cousin placed his hand on her head and attempted to console her. All the relations and friends

who had come to see her off now started weeping with her. Sri Ma stepped into the boat. There were tears in her eyes and a smile on her lips. Birendra Chandra said, "Ma wanted the others to cry for her and remember her. That is why she started them off by shedding a few precious tears herself."

Didi and the other devotees from Dhaka were amused and charmed to see Sri Ma in the role of a newly-married village maiden bidding farewell to her people.

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

After the ceremonies were over, the Nawabzadi told Sri Ma that for many years there had been a misunderstanding between her and the Begam. A meeting had been arranged to talk over their differences. The Nawabzadi requested Sri Ma to be present with them. "If you sit with us," she said, "I am sure we shall arrive at a solution of our difficulties." Ma conceded to her request and the Nawabzadi's expectations were borne out. Long-standing differences were smoothed out and she and her mother-in-law were reconciled after many years. The Nawabzadi announced her intention of returning to Dhaka now, which she could not do earlier because of the estrangement with the Begam.

On the occasion of these marriages, many notable people of Kolkata had been invited, including Aparna Devi, the daughter of Deshabandhu Chittaranjan Das. When Aparna Devi saw Sri Ma she related that many years ago her mother Vasanti Devi had dreamt of a lady in white telling her to beware of an approaching calamity. From the description her

mother had given Aparna Devi thought that the lady in white must have been Sri Ma. Her father had passed away shortly after the dream. This dream had a sort of confirmation not known to Aparna Devi. A few days before the death of C.R. Das, somebody had shown Sri Ma a photograph of Vasanti Devi and her husband. Sri Ma without knowing anything about them had said spontaneously, "This lady is facing a bereavement. She will be a widow soon."

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

Soon after Sri Ma's return to Shahbagh, Pyari Banu with her son and daughter also arrived in Dhaka. They expressed a wish to eat a meal cooked by her because they had heard a lot about her culinary art. Sri Ma invited them to Shahbagh one day and cooked an elaborate meal with the help of Didi and Matori *Pisima*. The Nawabzadi and her children found all the preparations most delicious. The Nawabzadi made an offering of a necklace of gold to the image of Kali. They had heard that Sri Ma had once performed the *namaz* like a Muslim at the graveside of the Arab fakirs and requested her to do so again in their presence. One day they took Sri Ma to the mausoleum and sat near the grave in silent meditation. After some time Ma in an exalted mood began to speak in a strange language. Pyari Banu's daughter exclaimed: "She is reciting a passage from the Quran." Although they realised that they had not invoked the *kheyala* for a *namaz* that day, they had been blessed in a different way.

Sri Ma Anandamayi was constantly invited by the new devotees to visit their towns and villages so that others might also share in this unique experience. One of them, Dinesh Chandra Ray, the Munsif of Pirozepur, had invited her to visit the place. Another devotee, Girija Shankar Ray, was pressing her to come to his village, Baishari. It was arranged that Sri Ma would go to Gauhati on pilgrimage to the temple of Kamakhya Devi. On her way back she would visit Pirozepur and Baishari. Many accompanied her from Dhaka. Some devotees came from Kolkata to join her at Gauhati. In the meantime, Dinesh Ray sent a telegram saying that he had been transferred from Pirozepur and was, therefore, obliged to go away, but Sri Ma should not change her plans because the whole village was looking forward to her arrival. Many from Dhaka were also waiting for her at Pirozepur.

On arrival, they disembarked from the steamer into small boats. Before the boats drew up at the bank, they heard the sound of melodious *kirtan*. A huge crowd was approaching with flowers, garlands and incense to welcome Sri Ma who immediately seemed to become the spirit of the *kirtan*. She walked along with the *kirtan* party swaying to the rhythm. The people looked at her flower-decked radiant form and were transported into a world of indescribable joy. In this joyous mood they reached the house where Sri Ma and her party were to stay. They were told that with the exception of one old woman who was unable to walk, everyone in Pirozepur had come to see Ma. The local people later took Ma to the house of this woman.

Girija Shankar came to take Ma to Baishari. Here also she had beautiful *bhavas* during *kirtan*. Wherever she went, *bhoga* was cooked on a large scale and the assembled people partook

of the *prasada*. It seemed as if the entire countryside was celebrating a festival. Sri Ma went on to the village of Sohagdal. Transport was mostly by boat. Sri Ma would sometimes walk along short distances with the *kirtan* parties from village to village. The entire population would accompany her singing *kirtan*. They had a simple faith that if *kirtan* could be kept up incessantly, Sri Ma would not be able to leave them.

The devotees experienced a sense of togetherness and belonging. Visitors became friends. Differences of position, caste and creed became meaningless. All of them mingled together to make up a throng of happy people. The continuous *kirtan* was creating an out-of-this-world atmosphere. But departure could not be postponed indefinitely. The festivities came to an end. Everyone sadly bade farewell to Sri Ma asking her to come again.

The End of Shahbagh-Lila, 1928

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

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

Bhaiji was at Giridih, a health resort, because he was still convalescing and was on leave. Perhaps, in response to his mute prayers, Sri Ma again prepared to leave Dhaka with Bholnath, Maroni and a few others. Whenever she travelled she took with her such members of their family who otherwise would never have had the chance to see a little bit of their country. For this reason, Sri Ma's retinue while travelling was always large.

Prafulla Ghosh's wife Hirandi said jokingly, "You had better come back soon, otherwise we shall close the gates of Shahbagh and not let you in." Sri Ma smiled and merely said, "Is that so?" On the day of her departure from Shahbagh, Didi saw Sri Ma walk around the extensive gardens in a particular mood of her own. Here and there she touched the walls caressingly. But her expression was remote and inscrutable and Didi did not dare ask her why she behaved in this strange manner. Many years passed before Didi and others came to understand Sri Ma Anandamay's quiet gestures of farewell from a place she had resided in for sometime. She evidently knew at this time that they would not be returning to Shahbagh again.

Sri Ma travelled to Giridih, returning to Kolkata for a while and then went westward to Vindhyachal, Chunar and Mirzapur. She was constantly on the move. This time they went as far as Jaipur and Bharatpur. An odd incident occurred here. Sri Ma's party was touring the city in two *tongas* (horse carriages). Sri Ma and her women companions were in the first *tonga* which drove away very fast and they were separated from Bholanath. The driver halted his *tonga* in a lonely spot and advanced in a threatening manner toward the women. As usual the women were wearing a lot of gold ornaments. But as he met Sri Ma's direct gaze, he stopped in

his tracks and cowered away. When Bholanath came up they resumed their journey. It was the opinion of the women that the man had been petrified by the blazing eyes. A glance from Sri Ma was enough protection for her companions.

While Sri Ma Anandamayi and Bholanath were travelling in Rajasthan, the estates of the Nawabzadi Pyari Banu were handed over to the Court of Wards. As a result, Rai Bahadur Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, Bhudev Basu and Bholanath lost their jobs. Bholanath was an enthusiastic traveller. He keenly enjoyed the visits to far flung places. He was so preoccupied with his busy schedule that he did not feel too disappointed with the tidings from Dhaka.

In the absence of Bholanath and Sri Ma the devotees sadly undertook the task of vacating Shahbagh; the image of Kali was removed as well. The devotees rented a house in the city. Exercising great care they brought the image to that house. Didima, Dadamashai, Makhan, Amulya, Matori *Pisima* and Kamalakanta also came to stay in the rented house in Tikatuli, a locality of the city. Sri Ma returned to Dhaka in the last week of April 1928. Niranjan Rai's wife was very ill. From the station Sri Ma went straight to see her, and then came to the rented house in Tikatuli.

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

This time Bhaiji had returned to Dhaka from Kolkata with Sri Ma and Bholanath. He was still far from well. The doctors in Kolkata had advised a retired life of complete rest. Bhaiji told Sri Ma that he had understood from the doctors that he

had only a few more months to live and must not do anything to shorten that time. She answered, "Nothing will happen to you for the next few years. Come back to Dhaka and rejoin your service. Then we shall see."

On the day Bhaiji rejoined duty, Sri Ma and Bholanath went with him to his office and saw him seated at his table.

He as well as everybody else was convinced that he had received a new lease of life due to Sri Ma's grace. Mr. Finlow, the Director of Agriculture, Government of Bengal, had great regard and affection for his subordinate. He asked Bhaiji one day, "How did you cure yourself of this terrible disease?"

Bhaiji answered unhesitatingly, "I have been cured by the grace of Sri Ma Anandamayi. She did not give me any amulets or charms, I have been under medical treatment, but the doctors said that the disease (tuberculosis) was incurable, and I too know that without her grace it was so." Mr. Finlow answered quietly, "I do not disbelieve you. We have heard of similar cases of divine grace in our country also."

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

protective grace of Ma Anandamayi."

The time of the birthday celebrations drew near. The devotees decided to hold them in the new room in Siddheshwari.

Siddheshwari henceforth played an important role in the lives of the devotees of Dhaka. It was the site which witnessed the transformation of many into ascetics of a high order. It became for many of Sri Ma's followers as if a forest hermitage of ancient times. It was the place where Bholanath later passed the most difficult period of his life and emerged triumphant. This was also the place where he had realized his dream of performing a *Vasanti-Puja* with all the members of his family gathered round him.

The mystery of the Siddheshwari *asana*, that is, the original mud-stoppered hole and later the platform covering it, was never made clear by Sri Ma. That it was in some way connected with Bholanath, further that it was a very holy site where generations of ascetics had achieved self-realization down the centuries was understood by everyone. Could Bholanath himself, in a previous life, have practised austerities invoking the presence of Divine *Sakti* in human form was a question which rose in every mind because Sri Ma was seen and heard to declare herself at this spot. Her *kheyal* nearly always arose out of the wishes and desires of the people around her. Maybe this revelation was brought about by Pran Gopal's repeated requests for her to declare herself. At Siddheshwari, Sri Ma Anandamayi was given the name by which she became well-known.

The celebrations on the occasion of Sri Ma's birthday in May, 1928 were held with great festivity at Siddheshwari² She was ever ready to help or give advice if asked, in all matters

pertaining to religious practices. This fact became the mainstay of the celebrations. The devotees arranged for *akhanda japa*, *kirtan* and various *pujas* to fill up the days between the two dates of her birthday, one according to the usual Calendar and the other according to the Lunar Calendar. In this way the devotees made sure of Sri Ma's presence and participation in the festivities. The devotees were desirous of performing a *puja* at 3 a.m. (coinciding with the time of her birth) as the culmination of the functions.

Accordingly on the final day, Bholanath was requested to perform the *puja* on their behalf as he had done at Shahbagh the previous year. The people gathered round Sri Ma where she was lying in a state of *samadhi*. The devotees arranged the accessories of *puja* in front of her motionless body. They sat around in silent meditation or singing *kirtan* or doing *japa*, each according to his own aptitude. In deep devotion the assembly watched Bholanath offer *puja* to the deity most dear to their hearts. The devotees of Dhaka believed that Bholanath's dedicated worship could invoke the presence of the Divine in clay images. Here the divine was already personified for them by Sri Ma Anandamayi. The *siddha-pitha* of Siddheshwari pulsated with an aura of spiritual fervour. Sri Ma's motionless body was covered with flowers, garlands and silks.

Dawn was breaking by the time the *puja* was over. This early pattern for the celebration of Sri Ma's birthday has remained unchanged. Devotees came from far and near. People from Kolkata, Varanasi and other towns came to join in the festivities. This gave them a unique opportunity of coming together as a family.

A few days after the *Janmotsava* (birthday) Sri Ma with

Bholanath and Bhajji went to Tangail in district Mymensingh. During her absence from town, another house named 'Uttama Kutir' was rented for them. The first rented house in Tikatuli had proved not to be very convenient. The image of Kali was moved also with great care from the house in Tikatuli to Uttama Kutir. This was the third time that the image was moved. Sri Ma came to Uttama Kutir on her return from Tangail in June, 1928. She again left Dhaka to visit Barishal, Vikrampur and Munshiganj at the invitation of devotees. She visited Atpara, Bholanath's village. Her sister-in-law, Pramoda devi, was living in their home. She wanted Sri Ma, who had come to another house in the village, to stay with her in their home. Ma very humbly sent back a message to say, "She knows that I have never disregarded her slightest wish or command. But now I am unable to comply with this request. Please ask her to forgive me."

Sri Ma returned to Dhaka for a few days. In the meantime Kunja Mohan had been repeatedly inviting them to visit Varanasi. This invitation was accepted. Sri Ma and her entourage visited Dinesh Ray at Tangail. This time also she had an aunt with her as well as Didi and her father and a few others.

At Tangail Dinesh Ray had arranged for *puja*, and the entire household warmly welcomed Sri Ma and her party, striving to be of service to them in every possible way.

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

On reaching the boat, Sri Ma's body slumped down in a state of *bhava*. After a few moments she raised herself and her face assumed a terrifying expression. Bholanath immediately

calmed down and started to plead with her in his own characteristic manner, which was a nice mixture of coaxing and scolding. He was by no means humble by nature but on such occasions would do anything to appease Sri Ma. (This was not the first time that Bholanath's anger had brought such a change in Ma's demeanour. Perhaps she found this the most effective way of teaching him to control his temper.)

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

The whole family were beside themselves with joy to see Sri Ma return to them and to find that Bholanath's anger had evaporated completely and that he was his usual cheerful self. The festive mood thus restored, Sri Ma left for Dhaka the next day.

The First *Satsang*

Sri Ma came to Varanasi in September, 1928. Kunja Mohan had arranged for an elaborate programme of *kirtan* and Sri Ma was seen in some of her ecstatic moods. Her whole countenance radiated an effulgence beautiful to behold. Kunja Mohan had invited many persons to come and have *darsana* of Sri Ma. So there were large crowds around her. In the evening she sat out in the open on the terrace of the house facing the assembly of visitors. People from the audience asked her questions and she replied in her own characteristic way. She never paused to think or reflect; the answers seemed to come spontaneously to her. This was the first of such occasions when she sat in an open gathering talking freely to a host of strangers. It was during this visit to Varanasi that Mahamahopadhyaya Sri Gopinath Kaviraj, who was then

Principal of the Queen's College, saw her for the first time. He listened to her answers and remarked : "Wonderful, this far exceeds anything of a like nature I have ever heard before." Many persons such as Nepal Chandra Chakravarty (Narayan Swamiji) and Swami Shankaranandaji also met her then and became lifelong devotees.

From early morning till late at night, there would be a constant stream of men and women passing in and out of the house. Nobody cared to find out who the owner was. The people came singly, in family groups or in crowds, bringing offerings of flowers, garlands, sweets, fruits, incense and clothes. They would besiege Sri Ma so uninterruptedly that she did not have time to wash, eat or change. Days and nights merged into each other. Bholanath was taken aback and wanted to stem the tide of ever increasing crowds of strangers of all types. The situation was getting out of hand. He tried in vain to persuade Sri Ma not to go on giving unstintingly of her time, leisure and energy. She reminded him of her warning in Dhaka. She said, "When there was yet time, I warned you, but you did not heed my warning. Now you cannot turn the tide back." Bholanath himself realised that Sri Ma belonged to the world; his misgivings were temporary only, and the general air of great rejoicing was not marred in any way.

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

On the day Sri Ma was due to leave Varanasi, she said to Didi, "Today is full-moon day,³ but I feel like eating rice and mashed potatoes (*alubhatebhat*). All of you, however, must

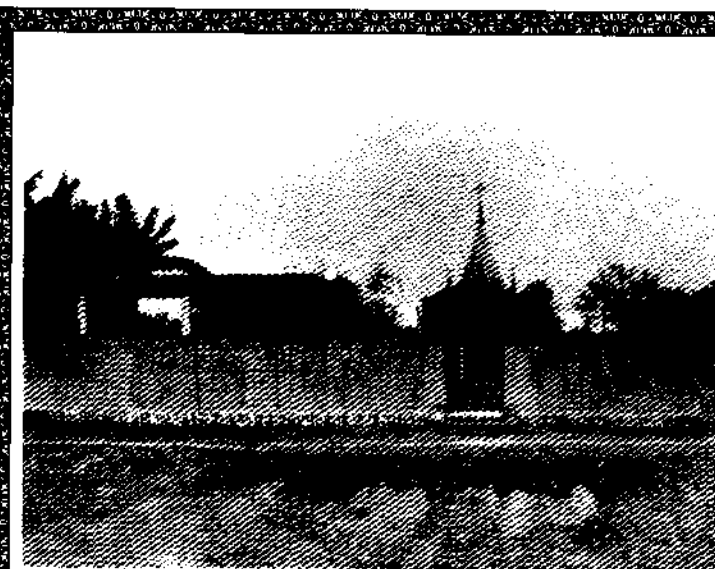
observe the rule of fasting. I do not eat on so many other days when you eat. So my example need not be followed by you today." Didi was amused and astonished also because the previous night her aunt, Kunja Mohan's wife, had said to her, "There is such a crowd always. I don't seem to get close to Sri Ma at any time. One day I wanted to feed her rice and mashed potatoes in big mouthfuls like one of my children in my kitchen." Didi had not said anything knowing Sri Ma would not eat rice on a full-moon day.

Kunja Mohan's wife was overjoyed when she heard that Sri Ma herself had asked for rice that day. Sri Ma ate an unusually hearty meal from the hands of her hostess before her departure to the station. The family bade her a sorrowful farewell. Sri Ma returned to Dhaka via Kolkata. While in Kolkata, news was received by telegram of the sudden death of Kunja Mohan's wife. This lady's strong attachment to Sri Ma may be gauged from the following incident. Didi related : "It so happened one day in Varanasi. Ma was at my sister's place. My aunt could not bear this separation from Ma while she was in the same town. Almost everybody was with Sri Ma already. My aunt was alone at home to look after the needs of her family. When her children had settled down, she quietly donned the clothes of a man. She wound a turban on her head to hide her hair. Then with a stick in her hand, looking like a villager, she came to my sister's house walking through the lanes of Varanasi at dead of night. Everyone marvelled at her ingenuity and courage." Now hearing of her sudden death, Didi understood why Sri Ma had gone out of her way to fulfill her aunt's wish.

At the invitation of Prafulla Ghosh, the Rai Bahadur's son, Sri Ma went to Comilla for a few days. From Comilla she came back to Kolkata. The Rai Bahadur and his wife were also there. The Rai Bahadur had greatly changed in his ways

of living. Although outwardly he did not appear to be devout, he had the heart of a devotee. One day he told Sri Ma, "I had a dear friend in my college days. He went away to become a *sannyasi* and look, what a life I have led." Once, when Sri Ma was partaking of some fruit and sweets, he said, "I wish I could feed Sri Ma a little of this. But I have never observed restrictions in matters of food. Will Ma allow me to feed her?" Sri Ma said, "It does not matter. If you wish to do so, you can feed me something." After she had taken a little fruit from his hand, she said to him, "From now on, whatever you eat, you must offer to God first." He demurred, saying, "I eat all sorts of things." Ma said, "Never mind, whatever you eat, you must first mentally dedicate to God." This method effected a radical change in his eating habits.

Sri Ma and Bholanath returned to Dhaka. At about this time Nirajan Rai's wife fell seriously ill. Sri Ma went to see her every day. Ma's companions were very fond of this devout couple and felt concerned about her illness. One day Didi's eldest brother, Biren Chandra, sat in Sri Ma's room praying fervently for the recovery of the patient. When he opened his eyes he found Sri Ma looking at him with very bright eyes. He had a strong feeling that his prayer had been heard and the lady would recover. However, a few days later (26th November, 1928) she died. Biren Chandra felt deeply upset. His conviction that Sri Ma had granted his prayer had been very powerful. While sitting in Sri Ma's room he fell a prey to all sorts of mutinous thoughts. Sri Ma looked at him and said, "Didn't you ask me to make her well? Recovery of the body is not the ultimate welfare. I have made her well." Biren Chandra was amazed to hear this answer to his unspoken question and bowed his head in penitence.



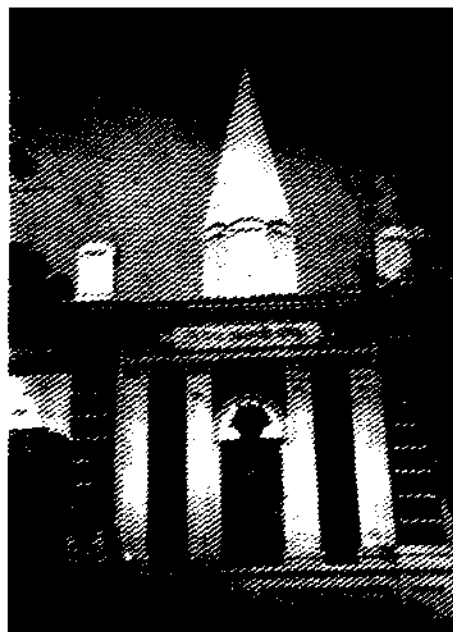
The holy birth place at Kheora (Bangladesh).



The small ashram at Kheora.



The original ashram at Siddheshwari (Dhaka).



A view of the main temple in the ashram at Ramna (Dhaka)-not in existence now.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Kheyala to Leave Dhaka and Its

Aftermath (1928-1932)

A question : Ma, Your Lila in Dhaka was fascinating, but it was so short and enigmatic, wasn't it?

Ma Anandamayi : Dhaka? (lit, a cover) Dhaka will remain dhaka (hidden) forever!

As in Shahbagh, so also now at Uttama Kutir, people flocked to visit Ma Anandamayi and Bholanath at all times. As written earlier, Bholanath was a warm-hearted person. His friendliness and affectionate nature quickly dispelled the diffidence of newcomers. Uttama Kutir became a venue for the gathering of friends and acquaintances. But Sri Ma in a way which is so peculiarly her own broke up this atmosphere of a home very soon. One day in December, she walked out of Uttama Kutir with Bholanath and came to Siddheshwari. She expressed a *kheyala* not to return to Uttama Kutir. The devotees came to know of this sudden decision to leave the house in Dhaka. One by one they collected at Siddheshwari. Beddings and other paraphernalia were brought over from Uttama Kutir. The image of Kali also was fetched. This was the fourth time that the image was moved. The *yajna* fire was being kept alive by daily oblations. Along with the image of Kali this also was moved with every change of residence. Didima and Dadamashai left for their village, Vidyakut. Makhan, who had been staying with them, went to Shashanka Mohan's house. Bholanath's nephews, Ashu and Amulya, were now in service and in other towns.

Following Sri Ma's instructions, Bholanath took up his residence in the small room of the Kali temple at Siddheshwari and became engaged in *sadhana*. Sri Ma stayed almost alone in the single room of the Ashram. Kamalakanta cooked for her. Kulada, as usual, came every day to offer oblations to the sacred fire.

The devotees were asked not to stay for more than ten minutes during their visit to Siddheshwari.

Bholanath's *Sadhana*

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

The next day Sri Ma, Didi, Bhairji and others went to the station to see him off by the Kolkata Mail. Jogesh dada was to accompany Bholanath. They took a little of the *yajna* fire with them. Breaking his silence, Bholanath talked to everyone, bade them farewell and then embarked on his journey with Jogesh dada.

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

After a few days, Surendra Mohan Mukherji arrived from Kolkata with a letter from Bholanath. Bholanath had written from Tarapeeth in Birbhum district, directing Surendra Mohan to go to Dhaka and to escort Sri Ma to Tarapeeth. He had also written to Sri Ma

Arrangements were made for Sri Ma's departure. She put one or two old blankets and a few articles of clothing in a bundle and this was all she took with her. She had no proper bedding as she hardly ever used a bed. Her method of resting was to wrap herself up in a sheet and lie on the floor. Sri Ma never permitted herself more than the bare minimum of personal effects.

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

Sri Ma had left Dhaka many times before, but never in this strange manner. Tarapeeth was known to be a desolate place, meant for ascetics only. It was famous for its cremation ground of great sanctity, and it was far from a residential locality. Besides, Sri Ma would be practically alone. Didi was overwhelmed with worry about Ma's welfare. She was grieved that Ma was going to be alone and unattended in an unknown place, although she could have stayed in comfort in Dhaka surrounded by a host of devotees. But Sri Ma's *kheyala* had to be obeyed.

The days of uncertainty were not prolonged. Soon Shashanka Mohan received a letter from Bholanath asking him and Didi to join them and to bring Matori *Pisona* and

Maroni.

When Didi and her father arrived at Tarapeeth, they found that many devotees from Kolkata were already there. At night, Didi and Shashanka Mohan heard from Bholanath the reason for his coming to Tarapeeth. While practising *sadhana* at Siddheshwari, he had a vision of a headless Kali. He told Sri Ma about it. She advised him to go to Tarapeeth, although she hardly knew anything about the place. Bholanath came to Tarapeeth and took up his abode on the open *verandah* of the temple of Tara Devi (a form of Kali). Bholanath could not understand why he had been directed to come to Tarapeeth because he could not see any resemblance between the image of Tara and the image of his vision. However, he stayed on practising his *sadhana*. In a few days he became well-known to the priests as a serious-minded ascetic. One night while he was sitting in the temple in meditation, the priests came to make arrangements for the night.¹ They were now used to Bholanath and treated him with respect. He was not asked to leave the temple. The priests took off the ornaments, and then Bholanath was amazed to see that the head itself was removed from the body. Before opening the temple doors in the morning, the head was replaced and the image was decorated with ornaments, flowers and garlands. Only the priests and their families knew that the image of Tara had a headless body.

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

obvious that he was absorbed in a blissful state. Jogesh dada had looked after Bholanath very faithfully. He now related to them that he had witnessed what was evidently a crucial experience. One night he had watched Sri Ma sit with her hand lightly touching Bholanath's shoulder while he was in the throes of some radicalizing physical sensations. Bholanath emerged in control of himself and evidently experienced some fulfilment. At Tarapeeth Bholanath became an ascetic. *Sadhana* became the goal of his life.

Tarapeeth was sparsely populated by the families of the priests. It was a vast cremation ground. The evidence of countless funeral pyres was everywhere. After nightfall none dared to walk there. Sri Ma used to roam about by herself during the day and sleep in the Siva temple at night. The wives of the priests would invite her to their houses and entertain her with fruits and sweets. The day Sri Ma left, they were all very sad. One of them said, "We are poor people. We can give you a poor man's fare only." Another said, "As soon as I heard the horn of the car, I felt depressed thinking that the car has come to fetch you, even as Akrura had come to take away Sri Krishna."

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

Didi in great humility realized how foolish and unnecessary had been her fears concerning Sri Ma's welfare.

Even in this remote and desolate spot, Sri Ma had been cherished and looked after as devotedly as anywhere else. In a few days she had endeared herself to those, simple people. Permanent bonds of love and loyalty had been forged between them.

Sri Ma and her companions came to Rampurhat by car and then entrained for Kolkata. They came to Bholanath's sister's place at Salkia. Jogesh dada went to stay in an abandoned derelict house with the sacred fire which, Sri Ma said, was not to be brought inside a residential home. Bholanath, who had received some instructions at Tarapeeth, carried on with his *sadhana*. He believed he had been told to visit Tarapeeth for one day every year for the next three years.

The Bird on the Wing

Sri Ma Anandamayi many times described herself as a *Uda Pakhi*, that is a flying bird. A bird flies aloft, alighting for short whiles on random perches. After leaving Shahbagh, Sri Ma was seen to adopt a carefree-style of travel. A pattern of being constantly on the move was established. She responded to invitations but did not abide in any place for long. Her travels were undertaken spontaneously to new places without planning or any special preparation. Whatever came to pass was acceptable. Devotees learned to accustom themselves to this haphazard way of being in the world, they learned not to look for permanent abodes and abide by Sri Ma's oft-repeated saying. "Jo ho jaye" (whatever comes to pass is acceptable).

At Biren Chandra's invitation Sri Ma and Bholanath paid a short visit to Agra. On their return to Kolkata from Agra Sri Ma received a telegram from the students of the Medical School at Dhaka asking her to permit Shashanka Mohan to

return to Dhaka for a few days. They had not written to him directly assuming that he would not come without Sri Ma's permission. The students knew Sri Ma quite well because she had once been invited to the School and had most satisfactorily answered their questions after the reception ceremony was over. Some of them had visited her at Shahbagh also. Shashanka Mohan and Didi went back to Dhaka. Sri Ma and Bholanath left for Puri whence they proceeded to Vidyakut. Now that Bholanath had no job to go back to, there was no particular need for them to return to Dhaka. Shashanka Mohan and others realized that Sri Ma might not return to Dhaka at all. He, accompanied by Nishikanta Mitra, Bhaiji, Niranjan and a few others, went as a delegation to Bholanath in Vidyakut. They persuaded Bholanath to come back to Dhaka a few days before Sri Ma's Birthday in May, 1929.

The Ashram at Ramna

In the meantime the efforts of Bhaiji, Niranjan Rai and others had borne fruit. The plot of ground indicated by Sri Ma at Ramna had been procured and a small mud-hut constructed for Sri Ma's use. She had expressed her *kheya* not to stay in a permanent brick-building. Arrangements were made for her to come to the new room after the *Janmotsava*. The *Janmotsava* or the celebrations on the occasion of Sri Ma's birthday were held again at Siddheshwari with great enthusiasm by the devotees of Dhaka and visitors from Kolkata and other places. Sri Ma was invited to enter the precincts of the new Ashram at Ramna in May, 1929 amidst great rejoicing. Baul Chandra had brought ornaments made of flowers for Sri Ma. She sat on the steps of the new Ashram, dressed in a red-bordered sari and decked in beautiful flower ornaments. There was a glow on her face. Sri Ma Anandamayi looked like a luminous image of indescribable

beauty, or rather like the personification of the human concept of the glorious and majestic form of the Divine Mother.

The devotees were offering *pranama* one by one. Sri Ma looked at Bholanath with a mischievous twinkle in her eye and said, "Won't you also offer *pranama*?" Bholanath smilingly shook his head. Maroni², who was standing nearby, piped up, "I have seen grandfather doing *pranama* to grandmother." Everybody laughed to hear this disclosure from an unexpected source. The happy throng of devotees had been up and awake the whole night; in fact, they hardly realized that the night was over. Sri Ma had not entered the new room. In the morning she was still sitting outside under the canopy put up for the celebration. The *kirtan* that had been continuous for many days was now concluded. The day after the Janmotsava was spent in a mood of quiet happiness, everyone savouring the feeling of a joyful undertaking accomplished successfully.

At this time Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to leave Dhaka. In retrospect it becomes apparent that had Sri Ma been able to follow her own *kheyala* the devotees of Dhaka would have been spared the pain and anguish of experiencing the ruination of their cherished new Ashram. But Sri Ma's devotees had not as yet learnt to abide by her *kheyala*. Although she did bid farewell to Dhaka this time she was not able to stay away. She returned to Dhaka again and again at the importunities of its residents. A spacious new Ashram was built giving delight to the townspeople for a few more years. Sri Ma accepted the temporary overcoming of her *kheyala* with her usual equanimity and gracious words, "Jo ho jaye" (Whatever comes to pass is acceptable). The future lay hidden on this day.

After the *Janmotsava* Sri Ma became quiet and withdrawn. She slowly made a tour of the new Ashram, touching its boundary walls caressingly at places. Didi was suddenly and a little apprehensively reminded of how she had touched the walls of Shahbagh before leaving it for the last time but she did not have the courage to say anything. Sri Ma's close companions knew that there were times when the boldest among them dared not say a word. Not that she looked grim or forbidding, but absolutely remote and unapproachable. It did not seem at that time that she knew or recognized anybody or cared in the least about their opinions. The whole day was spent in an atmosphere of uncertainty.

Everybody now guessed that Sri Ma would do something which would be difficult for them to accept, but no one spoke. In the evening she went and sat with her father, who at her request was singing *kirtan* in the marquee put up for the festival. She sang with him for a little while. After some time, *mantras* spontaneously poured from her lips in a stream. The music and sound of that ethereal language held everyone spell-bound. Shashanka Mohan had always wanted to write down a few of the *mantras* she uttered. Sri Ma now looked at him and said, "You may write if you can." He and a few others noted down some of the *mantras* as best as they could.

After some time Sri Ma moved around with the *kirtan* party for a few minutes. She abruptly halted and said, "All of you must allow me to go away now. I shall leave Dhaka today."

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

Like a small child in anguish, Sri Ma appealed to her companions; "Please don't put obstacles in my path,

otherwise I shall leave this body here with you and go away."

There was a hush of silence now. Everyond looked at her with tearful eyes. Shashanka Mohan offered to fetch Bholanath, who had gone out to visit Niranjana Rai's ailing son. Sri Ma said it was not necessary. She said again, "Please explain to Bholanath when he comes. Tell him not to say, 'no' to me."

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

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

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

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

"At midnight," somebody answered.

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

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

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

Bholanath was silenced. He was the last man to call into question the truth of her statement. Sri Ma had never before expressed her *kheyala* so forcefully. Perhaps he found himself helpless in the face of this quality of her *kheyala* and was reconciled to its acceptance. In great dejection he said, "Very well, I am not withholding my permission." After some

time he said, "People will speak ill of you if you travel about alone without me."

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

A car was sent for. But Sri Ma did not use it. She walked to the station with all the people. Many carried lanterns and torches. Sitanath wanted to go with her and she agreed to it. Bhaiji had been standing at the fringe of the crowd. He had not approached Sri Ma. After some time he and Bholanath with a few others came to the station. Many devotees, knowing that this parting would be very hard for Didi, said to Sri Ma, "Ma, take Didi with you." But she smilingly declined. Money was collected from those who had come to see her off. Sri Ma said that she would first go to Mymensingh and put up with Bholanath's nephew, Kalipada. She had at first suggested the name of Ashu, but nobody knew his exact whereabouts. The train arrived. At the last moment, Bhaiji got into Sri Ma's compartment. She looked enquiringly at him. Bhaiji explained, "Baba (father-meaning Bholanath) has asked me to go with you." Sri Ma made no comment. The train sped away into the night, carrying her to new places and new people.

Sri Ma Anandamayi evidently had the *kheyala* to travel away from Dhaka and from people well-known to her. The devotees, however, could not or rather would not understand this *kheyala*. Relays of people flocked to her, as soon as they knew about her whereabouts. Sri Ma would send them away or go away herself to another new place. Ashu was told that she had made enquiries about him, so he came to be with her.

Bholanath also could not reconcile himself to this parting. After a few days he and Sitanath, who had been sent back, joined her in her place of retreat. Unfortunately Bholanath was taken ill. Sri Ma came to Kolkata with the ailing Bholanath to put him under proper medical care. They came to Salkia, to Bholanath's sister's house where he started to recover a little. Sri Ma persuaded him to remain in Salkia till he should regain his health. Sitanath also would stay to look after him.

Sri Ma, accompanied by her father and Ashu, went right across northern districts of India to Hardwar.

From Hardwar Sri Ma went to Dehradun and the springs at Sahasradhara for a short time. After a few days, she had a sudden *kheyala* to proceed to Ayodhya, another holy place in Uttar Pradesh. She and Ashu were walking along the banks of the Ganges at Hardwar at that time. She asked Ashu to fetch their few belongings, and they started off toward the station without informing anybody. The probable reason for going quietly away like this was that Kunja Mohan from Varanasi had joined them in spite of Sri Ma's oft-expressed *kheyala* to the contrary.

Sri Ma and Ashu did not know anything about Ayodhya. But they experienced no difficulty. The ticket collector at the Railway station came forward and invited them to his own house. Sri Ma did not stay long. For two days they roamed around the holy places in the town and then returned to Hardwar. Sri Ma went to the Ashram of Bhola Giri Maharaj. Sri Gopinath Kaviraj was staying there. He was very pleased at this unexpected meeting. He now sent word to Dadamashai. Dadamashai knew that Ashu was with Sri Ma so he had not worried too much about her but naturally he was now relieved to get news of her arrival in Hardwar. He and

Kunja Mohan came to the Ashram and were glad to see Sri Ma's usual radiant smile. Kunja Mohan now fell ill and had to remain in Hardwar while Sri Ma proceeded to Varanasi.

At Varanasi Dadamashai caught a fever. He was, therefore, obliged to stay with Didi's sister and brother-in-law, Nirmal C. Chatterjee while Sri Ma continued to travel. Along with Ashu, she now had two more youngsters with her, Nani (Kunja Babu's fourth son) and Manik (a young student). Sri Ma had no particular destination in mind. Arriving at Moghalsarai, Nani said, "Let us go to Vindhyachal." She agreed. In the meantime, Didi's sister and cousin, who had gone to Hardwar to fetch Kunja Mohan, returned to Varanasi and were greatly disappointed to find that Sri Ma had left. Taking a chance they came to Vindhyachal. They persuaded Sri Ma to go back to Varanasi.

Sri Ma expressed her *kheyala* to stay at a place where nobody would recognize her. Kunja Mohan's eldest son J.C. Mukherjee, escorted her to Kolkata and suggested that she could stay with a close friend of his. His friend, Dr. Girin Mitra was not too well known in the circle of Ma's devotees. Dr. Mitra had previously met her at Pyari Banu's house.

Sri Ma had once been to Navadweep, a famous place of pilgrimage in Bengal, and had been taken to see a *sadhu* who was observing total silence. One day a reference about this *sadhu* was made by someone at Dr. Mitra's house. This evoked Sri Ma's *kheyala* to go and see this *sadhu* again. Accordingly, they proceeded to Navadweep and put up at the *sadhu's asrama*. Dr. Mitra left his widowed sister-in-law with Sri Ma and returned to Kolkata.

Sri Ma and her companion took up their abode in the verandah of the house. An old woman used to look after the

sadhu. She did not like the idea of these two ladies staying on the premises. But Sri Ma assured her that they would not disturb her in any way. Dr. Girin Mitra's sister-in-law would prepare a few *rotis*. Edible green leaves plucked or gathered from the courtyard sufficed as a vegetable. The *sadhu* used to sit still like a *statue*, not even blinking his eyes. The attendant told everybody that he was a person of great spiritual achievement and that he did not move from his seat at all. On their previous visit, Bholanath and others had been of the opinion that it was a clay figure rather than a human being.

Gradually Sri Ma, in her own inimitable way, penetrated into the secret of the *sadhu*. He moved and ate secretly during the night. He confessed to her that he did not like the idea of duping the public, but the old woman had a hold on him and would not allow him to go away. Later it was reported to her that one morning the people of Navadwee were astonished to see the seat of the *sadhu* unoccupied and the *Ashram* vacated. Nobody knew when or where he had gone.

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

After some days Dr. Mitra (or rather, Girinda, as he came to be known later) heard that Bholanath was not keeping good health. Bholanath had been on a pilgrimage to famous temples in neighbouring towns. On becoming indisposed, he had gone to the house of his nephew, Dr. Girija Shankar at Chandpur. Girinda learning about Bholanath's illness escorted Sri Ma to Kolkata. Bhaiji was in Kolkata at that time on official business. He arranged for her to stay at the house of his friend, Gyan Sen. Kamalakanta was sent for from Dhaka. Other devotees in Kolkata were informed about Sri Ma's

return to the city. A wire was sent to Bholanath, who came from Chandpur to Gyan Sen's house. He was quite displeased to have been left without information of Sri Ma's whereabouts. She kept quiet, not trying to explain why she had moved about so erratically without plans and preparations.

Bholanath expressed his intention of going back to Chandpur. The devotees of Dhaka, who were eagerly awaiting Sri Ma's return to the city, were disappointed to learn that she and Bholanath had gone to Chandpur, accompanied by Kamalakanta.

Bhaiji, Shashanka Mohan and Nishikanta went to Chandpur to request Sri Ma and Bholanath to return to Dhaka. They conveyed the prayers of the devotees, to which Sri Ma had nothing to say. Bholanath was a little undecided but agreed to return to Dhaka after some time.

Sri Ma and Bholanath returned to Dhaka this time in an atmosphere of sadness. Niranjan Rai, who had taken the initiative in building the new Ashram at Ramna, had passed away on June 15, 1929, about a month after Sri Ma had left Dhaka. He had been very depressed after his wife's death. He had just one interest in life, namely the construction of the Ashram for Sri Ma at Ramna, Ma had stayed for twentyfour hours only in this Ashram. Now that she returned to Dhaka about three months after leaving it so abruptly, he was no more. Everyone was keenly aware of the tragedy of his death and his absence from their midst.

Bholanath and Sri Ma came to Dhaka, but they did not occupy the new Ashram at Ramna. Bholanath preferred to stay at Siddheshwari, Didima was there and also Matori *Pisima* and little Maroni. They were accommodated in the

house of Aswini Kumar, a devotee at Siddheshwari.

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

Sri Ma now tried to cook meals with the help of Didima and *pisima*, but was unable to do so. She had said to Didi in Shahbagh one day in a different context that human beings do not have to forsake anything wilfully. When the time comes all distractions fall away by themselves. Now when Sri Ma tried to help with the housework, she could not clasp or hold things. Her hands were uncoordinated like the hands of a child. She had, at one time, accomplished single-handed the entire work of a big family-the same hands were now powerless to do anything.

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

Since their marriage Bholanath had never interfered with Sri Ma's way of life or her movements. But during the last two months he had been advised by many members of his family to lead a normal life and not roam about like an ascetic or allow his wife to do so. Bholanath probably did not altogether ignore this advice. He spoke to Sri Ma about it. What happened between them at that time was described by Sri Ma to Didi much later, that is, after Bholanath's death in 1938: "After almost three years Bholanath wanted me to cook his

meals for him and look after the household as I used to do before. Do you remember- I tried to cook for a few days with mother's help at Siddheshwari? I had no objection and it made no difference to me. I made an attempt as he asked me, but evidently it was not to be. Bholanath fell ill after a few days and then I myself was ill. So it did not, after all, come to anything at all.

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

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

"Bholanath was very fond of his family also. At that time he came under the influence of his worldly-minded relations. He always had great faith in me, but he was at times blinded by his anger which clouded his judgement. But this mood of

house-keeping lasted for a few days only."

Sri Ma said again, "All of you know that Bholanath was prone to fits of great anger. It is said that even *Risis* (seers) were subject to the emotion of anger. Not that I am saying Bholanath was a *Risi*. If I did, people would think I was praising my husband. But you have all seen for yourselves that he led an extraordinary life of self-denial and rigorous asceticism."

Didi found this defence of Bholanath very charming. Sri Ma is so completely beyond the comprehension of even her most constant companions that these revelations of a compassionate understanding are eagerly treasured. This analysis of the situation at Siddheshwari is also very typical. Sri Ma emphasized the good points only. She never underscored the weaknesses or failings in her companions or her family. From what she left unsaid, Didi surmised that Bholanath had been advised by his family to acquire wealth and all amenities of a gracious way of life. After all no body doubted that Sri Ma had tremendous *yogic* powers. *Rishis* of ancient times had lived in forest hermitages with their wives and surrounded by disciples who did their bidding. Such a way of life was considered exemplary. Perhaps it was necessary for Bholanath to stand at a crossroad and make a final choice, otherwise why did Sri Ma go away leaving him with his family? That Bholanath was an ascetic at heart was borne out fully in time. Perhaps it was necessary that he pass through this crisis to become aware of his own priorities.

The conflict in Bholanath's mind was short-lived. While it lasted, Sri Ma looked very ill. Her normal glow and radiance vanished. She, moreover, observed silence although she would say one or two words to Bholanath and sometimes to the others in an indistinct voice. Nobody, however, knew the

reason for this change in her demeanour.

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

Sri Ma Anandamayi's strange illness

In the month of August, Sri Ma started running a temperature which developed into high fever within a few days. But a chart could not be maintained; the temperature would suddenly shoot up to 106° and after a few moments come down to 100°. A little later, again the thermometer would record 104° or 105°, although there was no change in Ma's outward appearance. With her illness Sri Ma appeared to have regained her cheerfulness. She would smile, talk and behave like a healthy person, even when she had very high fever. So, Didi and others stopped using the thermometer as it served no purpose. After a few days of the fever, Sri Ma's body became absolutely limp. She could not use any of her limbs and had to be picked up and carried. Even so, the smallest part of her body that was left unsupported would hang limp in a disjointed fashion. Bholanath now permitted Didi to stay at Siddheshwari to look after her. Aswini Babu's daughter Chhana and other local people came to help Didi. It seemed like a stroke of paralysis, except that Sri Ma spoke and laughed in a normal manner. Sri Ma herself would say, "Why do you lift the body so carefully? It has become like a bag of flour. You can shove it around." Didi in sheer desperation appealed to Ma; "We are unable to look after your

body in this condition. Please get well now." In response to this prayer Sri Ma was seen to lift her hand without any aid. This was the first voluntary movement of her body after four or five days. The next day, she walked a little by herself and then slowly regained the use of her limbs. But the fever persisted and symptoms of dropsy began to appear besides blood dysentery. Her cheerfulness, however, remained unmarred. Bholanath thought that if she continued to enjoy her illness like this, she would never have the *kheyala* to get well. So, he said with a show of impatience, "Illness is nothing to be so cheerful about. Get well now."

After Bholanath's scolding, Sri Ma's expression became that of a seriously ill patient. She would keep quiet and not talk to anyone. Many devotees from Dhaka were now staying at night at Siddheshwari and the local people also were in constant attendance. Siddheshwari was quite populated now. Housewives would leave their homes and gather round Sri Ma for long hours. If the devotees asked her to get well, she would say, "I don't ask you all to go away when you come. Why should I send away illnesses? They will leave in their own time." Indeed, the diseases took their own reluctant time to go. The fever continued for many days after other symptoms had vanished.

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

At Siddheshwari, the fire had been placed under the peepul tree. Whenever necessary, Sri Ma gave suitable instructions for its preservation and maintenance.

The devotees were now desirous of establishing the image of Kali and the *agni* at the Ramna Ashram permanently. They also wanted to enlarge the Ashram. Nagen Babu took charge of the building programme. Several graves were uncovered when the earth was dug up for laying the foundation. Some were in a good condition of preservation. Skeletons, ashes from sacrificial fires and earthen lamps were disinterred. People now recalled what Sri Ma had said about this site, namely, that many ascetics had lived there and practised *sadhana* in the past.

At Sri Ma's *kheyala*, the graves were left undisturbed. Three of the main *samadhis* came below the big room of the Ashram. Another became the foundation of the Siva temple, yet others were under Sri Ma's room. Sri Ma suggested that the Goddess Kali could be installed where a broken *Sivalingam* had been found. A place for the keeping of the sacrificial fire was also constructed according to her instructions.

On Mahalaya, 1331 B.S., that is sometime in October, 1929, Sri Ma and Bholanath came to Ramna. Both were ailing and remained confined to bed for several days. It took a long time for Sri Ma to get back to her normal state of wellbeing. Once for 15 days she hardly left her bed. She would get up for a few minutes only, otherwise she would lie or sit in her bed all the time. One day, Bhaiji came early in the morning and persuaded her to take a walk in the Ramna Polo grounds. This started off another reaction. She began walking for three or four hours every day.

One morning she did not get up at all. Two days passed, Sri Ma remained lying inert on her bed. Bholanath was very upset. He assembled the devotees for a *kirtan* which was kept up throughout the night. The next afternoon, Sri Ma sat up and

slowly resumed her activities of daily life. She would say in answer to inquiries, "This inert condition is the same to me as an active condition. I feel no difference whatsoever, so what is there to explain?"

During this time Sri Ma Anandamayi in her own unobtrusive way brought about a major change in Bholanath's life. Bholanath was not indifferent to creature comforts. He had a soft and comfortable bed, whereas Sri Ma had a blanket only. One night Sri Ma roused Bholanath from his fine bed and expressed a *kheyala* to recline on it. Bholanath being deprived of his bed had to roll up some clothes to serve as a pillow and use Sri Ma's blanket for the night's rest. After a few days Sri Ma rolled up Bholanath's elaborate bedding and had it put away. She took another blanket for herself.

A Landmark in Public Acclaim

The Indian Philosophical Congress was held in Dhaka in 1929. Some of the delegates came to see Sri Ma Anandamayi and had a long talk with her with the help of a translator. One of the delegates asked her, "If the human character changes and everybody becomes unselfish, will the world then become perfect?" She at once replied with a smile, "But such it is already." It was evident to the delegates that she was speaking from the standpoint of her own understanding in which everything is the perfect expression of the perfect Being.

Dr. Mahendra Nath Sircar, the well known philosopher, recalling the same meeting, writes, "All the delegates assembled in Ma's house. A professor of Wilson College led the discussion that lasted for three hours. All sorts of questions were put, mostly philosophical, and Sri Ma was ready with answers spontaneously and immediately. There was no hesitation, not the least conscious thinking, nor the

least sign of nervousness in her. Her answers hit directly the point, free from metaphysical technique." He added that all who were present were impressed by "the profundity of her wisdom, the fluency of her expression and the luminosity of the smile on her face."³

In the beginning of 1930, Sri Ma asked Bholanath to practise his *sadhana* at Siddheshwari. Atul or some other young *brahmachari* would stay at night at Siddheshwari with him, to look after his needs, if any. Otherwise he was practically alone. Here also, as in Tarapeeth, he attained the capacity of deep concentration. He would sit for hours together in one posture. Some of the *brahmacharis* took spiritual initiation from him at this time.

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

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

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

Sri Ma's birthday celebrations of 1930 were held at the Ramna Ashram and the *puja* was performed in the *panchavati*. A small platform had been constructed for Sri Ma in the middle of the enclosure. Bholanath came to Ramna to perform the *puja*.

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

The Visit to South India

In August 1930, Sri Ma Anandamayi and Bholanath, accompanied by Didi, Shashanka Mohan, Jogesh dāda, Ashu and a few others, went on a tour of South India. They spent three or four days in Waltair and from there went to Chennai (Madras), where they stopped for about a week. Then they visited Chidambaram, Srirangam, Kanchipuram and Madurai. They stayed for a week in Rameshvaram and for about fifteen days in Kanya Kumarika.

The beautiful temple of Devi Kumari captivated their hearts. In the evening, young girls from the families of priests

sang and danced inside the temple. Sri Ma had picked up one or two words of their language. They sometimes came to the *dharmaśala* to sing for Sri Ma. They would hold hands and make a ring around her. At Sri Ma's *kheyala*, the priests and these young girls were invited to *bhoga* on two days. The children were each given a set of clothes, garlands and sandalwood.

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

Shashanka Mohan had a wonderful experience in the Temple of Kumarika. One day, when sitting in meditation inside the Temple, he was suddenly impelled to open his eyes. He saw a small beautiful girl standing inside the door. As soon as he looked at her, she retreated into the inner sanctum. He kept on gazing at her while she was moving backward till she reached the image of the Deity. Then she vanished and he saw her no more. Shashanka Mohan was a very reticent person. It is not known what exactly he made of this incident experienced by him. It was related by him many years later.

After Kumarika they visited Trivandrum and Mangalore and proceeded to Dwarka via Mumbai (Bombay).

Sri Ma Anandamayi took keen interest in all the temples and cities through which they passed. She noted the different dresses, customs and appearances of people belonging to the various provinces. She would point out to her companions the peculiarities of different temples with regard to their architecture and ritualistic observances. She would note the different styles of decoration in different temples. People were attracted by her radiant personality. Although she could not speak their language, she found no difficulty in

establishing contact with them. She was completely at home in all these new places.

Just before the annual Durga-puja in October 1930, they arrived at Vindhyachal from Dwarka. Many devotees from Varanasi had come to Vindhyachal. A small land had been purchased on the top of the Ashtabhuj hill by Shashanka Mohan. Durga-puja was performed at this site. The lonely surroundings came to life. The whole neighbourhood reverberated with the sounds of conch shells and bells, *kirtan* and the play and laughter of children.

From Vindhyachal, Sri Ma proceeded to many other places and then went to Jamshedpur.

Jogesh dada's younger brother, Krishna Chandra, was working in Jamshedpur and he had made arrangements for Sri Ma and her party. Krishna Chandra had organized a *kirtan* during which, after quite an interval, Sri Ma had beautiful *bhavas*. Jamshedpur is an industrial town. The people were not particularly interested in religion. In fact, many of them had never before heard a *kirtan*. This *kirtana*, which centred round Sri Ma, opened for them a vista of a world wonderful in its possibilities.

Next day, Krishna Chandra's house was teeming with visitors. Till 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, people would sit surrounding Sri Ma and listen to her talk. After Sri Ma left for Kolkata, the people of Jamshedpur formed a *kirtan* party. They organized themselves trying to keep up the atmosphere created by Sri Ma's visit. They would meet in one house every week to perform *kirtan* and to talk about Sri Ma. To this day, the organization formed by them is doing commendable work. Many of them took initiation from Bholanath later on. Sri Ma did not visit Jamshedpur as often as she visited other towns, yet the devotees got together to organize *satsang* of a

very high order.

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

After about six months of travel, Sri Ma Anandamayi returned to Dhaka. At this time they received news of Bholanath's fourth brother, Kamini Kumar, from a devotee in Kolkata. Nobody had known about his whereabouts for over twenty years. He was known to have adopted Christianity and was a clergyman. It transpired that he was living in Kolkata. He had heard about Sri Ma and wanted to meet his family. He had gone to the house of Charu Ghosh, a devotee, to get news of his brother and sister-in-law.

Bholanath was very pleased with this information. He immediately went to Kolkata with Sri Ma and Ashu to meet his brother and his family.

This was the beginning of a life-long association. Reverend K. K. Chakravarty (as Kamini Kumar was called now) and his wife became very attached to Sri Ma. They came to Dhaka after some time and met her large family of devotees and in their turn became *Kakababu* (uncle) and *Kakima* (aunt) to them.

CHAPTER NINE

From Bangla Desh to the Foot Hills of the Himalayas

Sri Ma was born in Bengal, but can any sense of location be ascribed to her? We are told that she had a vision of a Temple of Siva in the lap of the Himalayas She arrived at the place of her vision in 1932 and resided in this part of the country for many years the people of these regions also became enamoured of her magnetic presence and more loving bonds were forged....

-Dr. Pannalal'

The red-brick building of the Ashram at Ramna was situated in the midst of the green expanse of what used to be the polo grounds. It looked like a red jewel in a green setting. For a short while the devotees of Dhaka enjoyed the satisfaction of achieving their dream of providing suitable accommodation for their beloved "Ma". Life for them had nothing more to offer. Everyday they would hurry over to Ramna. They would attend the *puja* and *arati* at the temple and then spend their time in Sri Ma Anandamayi's company. These were very happy times for the devotees of Dhaka.

In the evenings, Sri Ma would stroll in the extensive green fields of the polo grounds surrounding the Ashram. The men would stand about or sometimes sit on the grass and have discourses on philosophical topics with her. One day, a gentleman said to her, "You were lying in a state of *samadhi*. You were evidently in communion with God. Now you have

to descend to our level and talk to us for our benefit."

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

Many festivals were observed in the Ashram with meticulous care. The festivities generated great enthusiasm among the devotees. Many arrived from Kolkata and other towns nearby to join in these activities. *Kirtan* became an integral part of life. After one such occasion, Sri Ma said, "Why should *kirtan* be sung by men only?" Her suggestion was taken up enthusiastically by the women standing around her. They stayed over for the night. When all visitors had left, the women formed a group and sang *kirtan* all together till dawn.. This was a novel achievement. Other women heard about it during the day. They also asked to be allowed to arrange for another night-long *kirtan*. Sri Ma encouraged them in their new venture. The women were not free during the day. But in the evening, nearly 150 of them collected for this purpose. Sri Ma asked all the men to go home. She nominated a few elderly men like Shashanka Mohan to act as guards as the function would be in the open. These men would watch all approaches so that no outsider could come near the group of women and girls. It was typical of Sri Ma to make proper arrangements and take all precautions against any untoward incident.

The women decorated themselves with flowers, garlands and sandal-wood paste. The fragrance of incense permeated the atmosphere. Quite a few among the women were good musicians and had fine voices. Foremost among them was Bhramar the grand daughter of Jogesh Ghosh. They made the night melodious by, their inspired singing. This was how a

formal *kirtan* party of women was inaugurated in Dhaka which acquired much proficiency and fame later on. It encouraged ladies in other towns also to form similar parties. At that time, it was an unheard of event for women to stay in an Ashram among strangers for a nightlong function but impossible things were made possible by Sri Ma Anandamayi.

The Birthday Celebrations of 1931 were concluded amidst an atmosphere of great festivity and rejoicing. It was an occasion for many to come together and become, as it were, members of one large family. The devotees of Dhaka welcomed the devotees coming from outside. As written above, Bholanath's brother, Rev. K. K. Chakravarty, came with his family and was introduced to everyone. Atal Bihari and his wife came from Rajshahi, Jyotish Guha and many others arrived from Kolkata to create an atmosphere of family reunion. The devotees no doubt congratulated themselves on having at last secured a place, fit for Sri Ma and her ever-increasing congregation of devotees, not knowing that she would leave it for good the next year.

After the Birthday Celebrations of 1931, Sri Ma left Dhaka for Darjeeling. On her way she visited Bajitpur. Many of the ladies, who had come to see her off, at the last moment climbed into cars and joined Sri Ma's party, amidst much laughter and teasing that they would be considered mad by their people and severely chastised and taken to task when they returned home. But nobody was willing to think so far ahead, and adventurously went along with the party to Bajitpur. Sri Ma seemed to encourage such impromptu augmentation to her party. She made them feel welcome.

A tide of festivity passed over Bajitpur for a couple of

days with the arrival of the cheerful throng of devotees. Sri Ma pointed out old landmarks. Her cottage was there, but its roof had fallen in and the walls were crumbling. From the local people who collected round them, Didi and others heard accounts of Sri Ma's life during the time she had stayed there. The girl who used to work for her came and stood near them shyly. She was so happy to see her mistress again who now introduced her to everybody. Didi collected a little of the earth from the corner of the room where Sri Ma used to sit during her *lila* of *sadhana*. This was subsequently placed under the platform of the *panchavati* at Ramna.

The impromptu party returned to Dhaka, while Sri Ma with her usual companions, went on to Darjeeling. They did not know anybody there and were sitting at the station, discussing where to go, when they were suddenly accosted by Biren Maharaj, an old acquaintance. He was overjoyed to see Sri Ma and took them to his house. From Darjeeling Sri Ma came to Kolkata.

After visiting various places they came to Puri to attend the annual festival of *Ratha-yatra*.

The Death of Santosh :

Ratha-yatra or pulling of the chariot of Jagannath is a big festival for Puri. Many friends and devotees had come with Sri Ma to join in this festival. A few days before the *Ratha-yatra*, Ma said, "I see an impending calamity."

Bholanath conjectured that some sort of accident would occur during the great rush hour of the festival and wanted to leave Puri at once, but his companions were eager to see the *Ratha-yatra*, and so he was persuaded to stay back. Nirmal Chandra, Didi's brother-in-law, who had come with his

family from Varanasi, left after staying for a few days. His eldest son, Santosh, and his daughter, Tarubala, remained at Puri because the boy wanted to be with Sri Ma's party. Sri Ma said, "Are they staying back? In that case, all of you must look after them." The mother of Santosh, however, told Sri Ma that she was entrusting her son and daughter to her care. There was reason for some concern about Santosh. He was subject to epileptic fits and had to be watched constantly. A week passed. Then one day, Santosh was found missing. After a frantic search, his dead-body was discovered in the well behind the house. The shock of this discovery nearly paralysed everybody. Only Sri Ma remained sitting quietly in her room. Bholanath, Shashaka Mohan (Santosh's grandfather) and others brought the body to the house. Sri Ma's calm demeanour had a salutary effect on them. Many persons who had come to visit Sri Ma were at the point of turning back at the gate, thinking it would be improper to intrude on her grief. When they were told that Sri Ma was her normal serene self, they took heart and went in to see her.

Death by accident is, in some cases, considered inauspicious. In such a case, the body is sometimes not allowed to be cremated but has to be buried. Apart from the tragedy of death, this was an additional problem to be faced. The local people rallied to their help, and the permission of the *pandits* was obtained for the body to be cremated.

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

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

On the night of the *Ratha-yatra*, Sri Ma and her companions left Puri and went to Vindhyachal. While at Vindhyachal, Sri Ma came to know that an unexpected hitch had occurred regarding the *shraddha* of Santosh. The *pandits* of Varanasi had refused to perform the *shraddha* ceremony, which is held on the 11th day after death. Sri Ma now took the matter in her hands. She sent telegrams to Puri and to many of her companions at Varanasi repeatedly. After prolonged consultation between the *pandits* of Varanasi and Puri, the former gave them permission for the ceremony to be performed as usual. Without Sri Ma's personal intervention, the bereaved parents would have been denied the solace of performing even the last rites for the departed soul.

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

Sri Ma stayed with them for another 15 days. It did not appear that this was a house of mourning. Santosh's parents were busy looking after Sri Ma and the cheerful throng that

always surrounded her, wherever she went. One day the bereaved father asked her, "Ma, why did you cry on the first day?" Sri Ma answered, "Because you did not. I wept to lighten the burden weighing on your heart."

From Varanasi Sri Ma again returned to Vindhyachal. One day, from the verandah of the Ashram, Sri Ma saw some men climbing the hill. They were carrying some refreshments with them and were evidently on an all-day expedition to various places of interest on the Ashtabhuja hills. On arriving at the hill-top, they hid their basket under a bush and went away. Sri Ma asked Didi to fetch the refreshments. On their return, the gentlemen were nonplussed to find their cache missing. After a few moments Sri Ma sent someone to invite them to the Ashram. They were highly pleased that Ma Anandamayi had taken away their food and congratulated themselves on getting her *darsana* in this unexpected manner. Their picnic was augmented by much food from the Ashram. One of the group, Dr. Upendranath Banerjee of Mirzapur, invited her to his place. The next day, he came with his wife to renew his invitation. Sri Ma thus visited Mirzapur and then paid a short visit to Ayodhya before returning to Dhaka.

Sri Ma Anandamayi was gradually effecting significant changes in the lives of many of her close companions. Shashanka Mohan in his old age was acquiring new habits and learning to do without many comforts of everyday life.

Sri Ma had some time back obtained a *kamandalu* (water vessel with a spout, carried by *sannyasis*) which she had given to Didi to keep for her. This *kamandalu* was a metal one. Didi had taken it to Siddheshwari, but thereafter she had forgotten all about it. One day, at Siddheshwari she was suddenly reminded of it. She went to ask the *bhairavi* of the Kali temple

about the *kamandalu* because in their absence the *bhairavi* used to look after the premises. When Didi came near the temple, she saw a man swimming in the pond. As she approached the pond, the man brought out a blackish object which had struck his foot. He asked if it belonged to anyone. Didi recognised the *kamandalu* which had come back to her in this accidental manner and almost as soon as she had thought of it. Sri Ma subsequently got it cleaned and kept it by her bedside. She would sometimes drink water from it. One day Shashanka Mohan and others were discussing the advantage of drinking water from a receptacle with curved edges from which water can be poured into the mouth without the lips touching the vessel. Shashanka Mohan said, "I cannot do it. I can only drink from a glass." Sri Ma promptly handed him the *kamandalu*, saying : "Try to drink water from this from now on." Shashanka Mohan accepted the gift and with great perseverance acquired proficiency in the art of drinking from a *kamandalu*. In this slow but steady fashion Sri Ma was carving out new ways of living for Shashanka Mohan and Didi and many others. Shashanka Mohan had become almost a resident of the Ashram.

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

who can fend for themselves."

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

At about this time, Bhaiji one day was inspired to compose a hymn to Sri Ma Anandamayi, namely "*Jaya Hridayavasini*". This song was so beautiful that everyone loved it. It became a regular feature of the evening service in Ramna. Now, of course, it is sung in all Ashrams of Sri Ma Anandamayi all over India and overseas too.¹

Sri Ma was constantly on the move. At the invitation of devotees she visited various towns and villages. After the annual *Kali-puja* of 1931, she went to Cox's Bazar and stayed at the sea-side bungalow of Dinabandhu Choudhury for more than one month. Dinabandhu's wife expressed the desire to visit some holy places. Although now quite old, she had not travelled at all. Sri Ma persuaded Dinabandhu to let the entire family come with her to Kolkata. From there a huge party of devotees went with Sri Ma and Bholanath to Tarapeeth for one day. Sri Ma also went to Varanasi and Vindhyachal accompanied by Dinabandhu's wife, and then proceeded to Jamshedpur. The devotees of Jamshedpur were at their efficient best in looking after the comforts of Sri Ma and her retinue.

From Jamshedpur Sri Ma returned to Dhaka in the

beginning of the year 1932. Crowds of people would come to the station to see her off and to receive her. Sri Ma stayed at Ramna for a few months this time. Shashanka Mohan and Didi were at Siddheshwari. Didi would come early in the morning and leave late at night with her father. Shashanka Mohan used to rise before dawn and sit down for his meditation. He would get up for a few minutes in the afternoon. At about 6 in the evening he would again sit in meditation till 2 or 3 a.m. He would rest for an hour or so and then it was another day for him. Some nights he would not rest at all. One night, while sitting in meditation he had a vision of Sri Ma at Ramna. He saw her coming out of her room and then going back after a few moments. It was just midnight. Next day he asked Bholanath if Sri Ma had gone out of the room at night. Bholanath answered, "Yes, at midnight, for a few moments."

In April, 1931, Sri Ma came to Kolkata after visiting many places round about Dhaka. This time she stayed with Kakababu's (Bholanath's Christian brother's) family. Days and nights merged into one another. The unending stream of people eager to have a glimpse of Sri Ma did not allow her a single moment's rest. Kakababu and others decided to fix definite times for *darsana*. At noon everybody was requested to leave so that Sri Ma could relax for a little while. After people left rather reluctantly, Sri Ma was asked to rest in one of the inner rooms which was cool. April is a hot month. The sun was blazing down mercilessly and in the open the heat was quite unbearable. Bholanath, Kakababu and others were occupying another room. After a short while Sri Ma got up with a mischievous look on her face. She came to the room where the men were enjoying their siesta, and asked Kakababu to come out for a walk with her. Kakababu

protested, "Now, what is all this? I sent away everybody so that you could rest, and you are going out in this scorching heat! What will people think of me?" Sri Ma did not listen to his protests. She smiled and said, "Don't you know that there is something wrong with my brain? Alas, I am disturbing your rest also." Sri Ma roamed around, sometimes stopping at shops to bargain for some articles. In this manner she arrived at the house of Pashupati Babu. His wife was ill and had not been able to visit Sri Ma so she was overwhelmed with joy because she had been praying deeply for Sri Ma's *darsana*.

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

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

Bhaiji had undertaken the work of remodelling the deities in the temple at Ramna Ashram. The main image was that of Annapurna with Siva on one side and Kali on the other. The image of Kali was so constructed as to look as if she were coming down from above. There was no Siva under her feet. This was in accordance with the vision of Kali as seen by Sri Ma. All these images were made out of an alloy of eight metals and beautifully executed. Sri Ma had already donated a major portion of her ornaments for this purpose. This gold was the main ingredient of the alloy. Sri Ma used to receive a lot of jewellery from her devotees and relatives, but she never kept anything for herself for long. For many years she had worn only a gold chain given to her by Bholanath. In deference to convention she wore a pair of conch-shell bangles and a gold-plated iron bangle on her left wrist worn by all married Bengali women.

The Birthday Celebrations of 1932

This time the birthday celebrations continued for 21 days and during the entire period uninterrupted *kirtan* was kept up together with other religious functions.

As in previous years, devotees flocked to Dhaka. The small red building amidst the green expanse of the polo grounds swarmed with men, women and children. On this occasion yet another facet of Sri Ma's personality was revealed. It was she who with unerring judgement advised how to accommodate the large number of visitors and also how to keep them usefully occupied. Now that the devotees had gathered at one place, she suggested the celebrations of various religious ceremonies. Everyone would joyfully take part in them. She was everywhere at once, advising, taking decisions and making suggestions wherever help was needed.

The highlight of the occasion was the installation of the deities in the various temples. Under Sri Ma's direction Bholanath performed all the necessary rituals.

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

Sri Ma continually received offerings of flowers, sweets, clothes, ornaments and money and untiringly she would go on distributing these amongst the people around her. This distribution of gifts is a singular feature of Sri Ma's personality. She never (by mistake) returned a present to the donor. Even after years she could tell the name of a person who had given her a particular gift. Didi and her other companions were frequently at a loss to know how to accommodate this mountain of offerings which accumulated wherever Sri Ma happened to be. But Sri Ma always found suitable recipients for every kind of article ranging from a priceless gold embroidered velvet carpet, or a sandalwood throne, to cheap oddments. Incidentally, the monetary worth of an item was the least important aspect in Sri Ma's consideration. She tried to find a suitable place or person for every present she received. To everything she devoted the same degree of care and concern. Wherever Sri Ma was there would be an abundance of goods. But she never encouraged neglect, wastage or even taking of things for granted. She appreciated all offerings, the distribution of gifts was in itself a miraculous event. Nobody was forgotten and everyone got what he could cherish most as a boon.

Throughout the twentyfour hours or so it seemed Sri Ma

Anandamayi was surrounded by devotees in large numbers. Yet she found time to instruct the *brahmacharis* of the Ashram in detail on the worship of the newly installed deities, and regarding the maintenance of the sacred fire. There are methods of preserving a sacred fire under its own ashes for different lengths of time. Knowledge of such rituals was spontaneous with Sri Ma. That it was correct and in accordance with strict religious rules was borne out later when she came into contact with *pandits* at Varanasi at the time of the *Mahayajna*². Necessary guidance was given by her to persons immediately concerned whenever the occasion would arise. At the same time each individual received personal instruction from her concerning his own spiritual life. Sri Ma had such an easy way of accomplishing her object that there was no fuss or ceremony about these matters. Sometimes she spoke to people while walking by. She did not disclose to another the advice she gave to any particular person. Sri Ma's ways were unobtrusive yet all-comprehensive. She would say :

"The efforts you make for your spiritual welfare are to be carefully hidden. Guard them as closely as a miser guards his wealth. You do not have to advertise the fact that you are engaged in *sadhana*. It is between God and you only. Do not neglect your duties at home or at your place of work. You may do your work with your hands but nobody can prevent you from keeping your mind on God."

Sri Ma Anandamayi was always in the midst of a crowd of devotees and admirers and did not apparently single out anybody for individual attention. Yet, after Sri Ma had left Dhaka, the devotees realized that she had not forgotten anything or anyone. As occasions arose they found themselves fortified by Sri Ma's instructions. At the time of

the festival, however, nobody could guess that Sri Ma was about to leave them very soon.

Toward the close of the prolonged celebrations, Sri Ma was one day invited to the house of a devotee whose daughter was getting married. This could have brought about the *kheyala* for little Maroni's future. On her return to the Ashram, Sri Ma sent for Bholanath and talked to him for some time. After this she conversed with Kulada Charan and his wife. A little later Sri Ma went to the *panchavati*, asking everybody to join her. Kulada Charan, his wife and their elder son Chinu were present. Bholanath came with little Maroni, decked in silk clothes and ornaments. She was eight years old. At Sri Ma's suggestion, an engagement ceremony was performed between Maroni and Chinu. Bholanath was very fond of Maroni and was somewhat overcome at the thought of this early betrothal. Sri Ma said, "Do not be sad. It is all for the good of everybody concerned. At the proper time, God willing, Maroni will be married to Chinu."

The festival of twentyone days was rounded off by the performance of *puja* in the new temple. The devotees congratulated themselves on the completion of a faultless ceremony. They all felt rather exhausted but extremely happy. The majority of the visitors began to leave but many stayed on. Wherever Sri Ma was, there could not but be people around her.

On the same day, Sri Ma visited Siddheshwari for a short while and before her departure touched caressingly the image of Kali and also the *peepal* tree in front of the temple.

In the evening, she sat on the *verandah* of the temple at Ramna Ashram. Only a small group of devotees were sitting around her. At about 11-30 p.m. she got up remarking in a soft

voice, "I shall go now." Didi's brother Biren, who was present, was unpleasantly struck by these words. He hurriedly said, "Yes, go and lie down. It is late." As she did not say anything, Biren and the others made obeisance to her and went home. When everybody had left, Sri Ma asked Didi to fetch Bholanath. Tired out, he had fallen asleep. Didi roused him and gave him Sri Ma's message. Sri Ma and Bholanath talked together for some time and then Bholanath came away and started putting on his outdoor clothes and shoes. In the meantime, Sri Ma had sent Jogesh dada to fetch Bhaiji from his home, while she herself sat on the platform within the *panchavati*. Kulada Charan, Atul, Kamalakanta and other *brahmacharis* were called and she talked to them for sometime. Didi suddenly heard Sri Ma calling her by name. She came to the *panchavati*. Ma said to her, "Look, fortitude is the prime characteristic of a *sadhaka*. Fortitude is required (of you)." At these words Didi's apprehension increased a thousandfold. Sri Ma continued, "Do not be agitated. I have left Dhaka so many times. But because all of you feel so upset at my departure I have to come back again and again. Let me move about according to my *kheyala*. I cannot do so if you all put obstacles in my path." Sri Ma went on in this strain for some time asking Didi to set an example for others. But these words fell on temporarily deaf ears. Didi could not envisage a future without Ma. She was overcome with grief. Sri Ma then called out to Manorama didi and sent for Girin Mitra who had come from Kolkata for the celebrations. Nobody except Bholanath and Didi had any idea of Sri Ma's *kheyala*. After some time Suren Babu, who had been working late in the Ashram, came to do *pranama* before going home. Sri Ma said, "Are you going? I am also going out of town tonight." Suren Babu said, "Where are you going? When will you

return?" To both questions Sri Ma answered, "Nothing is certain as yet."

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

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

We do not know what thoughts came to Bhaiji's mind. It was obvious to everyone that Bhaiji was required to take the most crucial decision of his life. He answered with composure, "I shall go home first and get some money for the journey."

"No", said Sri Ma, "Collect whatever amount some of these men over here may have with them."

Bhaiji made no answer to this and quietly walked away by himself toward the temple.

Those present formed a silent group round Sri Ma. She then sent word to Didima and Dadamashai. Didima came, but Dadamashai, displeased at this decision, did not come. Sri Ma, as was her usual custom when going away, prostrated herself at her mother's feet and then walked out of the new Ashram. She had not allowed anybody to send for a car. She went on foot to the station, accompanied by a small number of

people. Didi and her father stayed back at the Ashram at Sri Ma's request.

Farewell to Dhaka

On Thursday, June 2, 1932, Sri Ma with Bholanath and Bhaiji finally left Dhaka.

When the travellers arrived at the Railway Station they found a train on the point of departure. On being asked where she would like to go, Sri Ma suggested the terminus of the train standing at the platform. It was the Dhaka-Jagannathgunj Express. Travelling overnight the three of them arrived at Jagannathgunj. At Sri Ma'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 in Katihar who lent him sufficient money for the next phase of the journey. He also brought fruits and sweets for them and looked after their comfort. Following the same mode of travel Bhaiji purchased tickets for Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, at that time the terminus for the meter-gauge line 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, where the Railway line ended. Further travels were possible by cars for a short distance and then by trekking alone. Dehradun (2000 ft about sea level) lies at the foot-hills of the Shivalik range of mountains. The climate was mild compared to that of the plains in hot June. The view of

the surrounding high mountains rising to 5000 or more feet above sea-level was new and fascinating for Bhaiji. The highland people looked quite different and were dressed in heavier clothes. The language they spoke was unintelligible to them. Everything about the place was strange, but beautiful. Sri Ma and Bholanath had come up to Hardwar before but Dehradun being closer to the mountains was more secluded and not as crowded as the pilgrim town.

From the station they came to a *dharmasala* (Rest-house for pilgrims). 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 *dharmasala* attached to an ancient Siva temple which would perhaps suit them as they were looking for a secluded spot. Coincidentally, they met a resident of Raipur, who offered to show them the way. Next day Bholanath and Bhaiji went to Raipur and the former immediately fell in love with the place. On their return they consulted Sri Ma. She said, "Both of you decide. Just anywhere is good enough for me."

On Wednesday morning, June 8, 1932, Sri Ma, Bholanath and Bhaiji took up residence at Raipur. In those days it was a very small village in the interior, surrounded by thickly wooded hills. A little distance from the village the ground rose steeply but the top of this hillock was flat and spacious. There was a small Siva temple in the middle of this big, open ground. There was also a raised platform surrounding a mango tree in one corner. Everything was almost in ruins. From the courtyard on the hill one could command a view of high mountain ranges, across valleys glistening with wide and shallow mountain streams.

Sri Ma and her companions took up their residence on top of this hill near the Siva Temple. One dilapidated broken down room sufficed for Sri Ma while Bholanath and Bhaiji learned to spend their days and nights in the open.

While Bholanath and Bhaiji were settling down to a routine of daily life in the manner of ascetics, the devotees left behind in Dhaka were suffering from the painful loss of Sri Ma's presence. They sometimes foregathered to exchange memories and experiences connected with Sri Ma. 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, Sri Ma, evidently, had taken pains to speak to everyone who depended on her for guidance.

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

CHAPTER TEN

In Ananda Chowk-Dehradun

"Mataji was herself the greatest miracle!"

-Mahalakshmi

Sri Ma Anandamayi continued to stay on at Raipur while Bhaiji and Bholanath followed their own routines of *sadhana*, Sri Ma as often as not lay on the floor of the little room, which was actually the *dharma-sala*, in a state of *samadhi*. Sometimes she walked about by herself in the courtyard. Bhaiji, not used 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 Sri Ma so that he learnt to be self-reliant in the matter of personal care and food.

The villagers thought that Bholanath had renounced the world to become an ascetic. His wife, unable to stay away, had followed him to this remote place. Bhaiji, they thought, was their devoted servant. This opinion was revised when the village post-master told them that he spoke in English when he came to collect his post and that he received many important-looking letters and was evidently a high-ranking Government official.

In time, the people of Dehradun heard from chance visitors to Raipur that a Bengali Mataji of great spiritual eminence was living in the *dharma-sala* of the Siva 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 *darsana* of Sri Ma. 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 Sri Ma. 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 articulate the yearning for spiritual solace which was experienced by many. He would interpret for them Sri Ma's words. To a great extent he was able to bridge the gap between what Sri Ma was and what people could make of her.

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

Bhaiji had applied for four month's leave some time before he had come away from Dhaka so abruptly; but in August he was recalled to his office for some urgent work. He did not like to leave Sri Ma and Bholanath quite unattended, so he wrote to Dhaka directing Kamalakanta to come to Raipur. On Kamalakanta's arrival Bhaiji returned to Dhaka.

He immediately called on all the devotees eagerly awaiting news and for long hours described to them Sri Ma's way of life at Raipur.

In the meantime Sri Ma in her own inimitable way had endeared herself to the villagers as well as to the visitors from the city. Seeing that Sri Ma's hair had got hopelessly matted due to several months of neglect, one of the village women offered to cut it off for her. The coil of matted hair which surrounded her head like a crown was painstakingly 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 Dhaka Sri Ma 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 wraparound. Her head remained uncovered. In this garb she looked like a young *brahmachari* boy. Sri Ma 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, Sri Ma 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 *sadhana*. Sri Ma did not have the *kheyala* that people from near about should flock to Tarapeeth, so a message to this effect was sent to Kolkata, Dhaka and other nearby towns, much to the severe disappointment of the devotees. Nobody thought of disregarding Sri Ma's message, with one exception; Didi's youngest brother Nandu not only went to Tarapeeth himself but implored Sri Ma to give permission for others to visit her. After a few days Bholanath and Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma's permission to send word to the devotees that they were allowed to visit her at Nalhati. Nandu sent a wire to Dhaka and on his return to Kolkata carried the joyful tidings to every home.

Groups of people began to arrive from all nearby towns. Didi and her father came from Siddheswari, Manorama Devi from Dhaka. She asked Sri Ma's permission to leave her home in order to lead a life of renunciation. Sri Ma 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 *sadhana* which subsequently became the very way of life with her. This is how "Maunima (Manorama Devi) started on the road to *sannyasa* and lived a life of unremitting dedication to the search for Truth. Many will remember that she had a special place amongst Sri Ma's devotees till her death in Varanasi Ashram in 1969.

Sri Ma remained in Nalhati for about a fortnight. She and Bholanath were putting up at a temple. Bholanath looked like an ascetic now. Sri Ma was also looking different. The erstwhile housewife could hardly be recognized 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.

Sri Ma Anandamayi, Bholanath and Kamalakanta returned to Dehradun in the beginning of January, 1933. Bhaiji remained in Dhaka. 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 Sri Ma, he had been convinced from something she had said at the time that he had only a 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 Dhaka surmised that this leave was preparatory to retirement and that he would not return home again. This turned out to be correct as Bhaiji devoted these last four years of his life to the service of Sri Ma. 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 Sri Ma now entered was not quite like the "Kali-oriented" community of Bengal, although all sections of the Indian population understand the importance of ritualistic worship of deities. The newcomers were attracted by Sri Ma'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 *darsana* of the revered Sri Anandamayi Ma and Pitaji, (Bholanath had come to be known as Pitaji or father by now) who had been staying there for about ten months... In front of the Sivalaya there was a cemented raised platform under a mango tree. We saw a grave, fair and saintly looking person sitting on that platform reading a book. He wore spectacles and was dressed in white *dhoti* and a white woollen shawl. I took courage and enquired from him about Sri Anandamayi Ma who was reported to be mostly in *samadhi*... As I found out later, he was popularly known as Bhaiji."¹

Hari Ram Joshi writes further that on the occasion of his first *darsana*, Sri Ma's enchanting and smiling expression transformed his mind completely and convinced him that he was in the presence of a *Sthitaprajna* (Perfect Sage) as described in Chapter II of the Bhagavad Gita. He had hitherto not believed that this exalted stage could be achieved by any living person.

Hari Ramji's very first *darsana* of Sri Ma 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 of God. He was so overwhelmed by the magnetic personality of Sri Ma Anandamayi that his previous mood tending toward unbelief totally vanished. He knew he had discovered a new treasure. He became a frequent visitor. He was very active by nature and now was burning with eagerness to see the whole world transformed by Sri Ma's divine presence. Subsequently he brought his friends to Sri Ma 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 realizing his good fortune. He brought his whole family and all his relations to the feet of Sri Ma. 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.

In April, 1933, Sri Ma, Bholanath, Bhaiji and Kamalakanata went up to Mussoorie (7000 ft. above sea level). Here, unexpectedly, they met Hari Ramji 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 Sri Ma's return to Dehradun.

Ananda Chowk

The fortuitous nature of Sri Ma Anandamayī'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 Sri Ma would have passed through Dehradun as through many other places; but this one thing led to others and so on and Sri Ma 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 *sadhana* 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 Sri Ma under Bhaiji's escort, he spent a few months in these hills trekking to remote places or staying in Uttarkashi. Brahmachari Kamalakanata remained with him.

It is now known that Bholanath had requested Sri Ma to stay in Dehradun, till his return. This demonstrated that he could not take it for granted that Sri Ma would not wander off to distant places and that he would lose track of her. On the other hand if Sri Ma stayed in Dehradun, he would 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, remonstrating against his and Sri Ma's way of life. Bholanath, however, was a different man now. He replied to everyone in very clear and firm words that Sri Ma had his full approval in whatever she did and that nobody should think to the contrary. He knew what he was doing and that he depended totally upon Bhaiji to look after Sri Ma while he himself was elsewhere. He influenced his family members with these definitive words. They in time came to regard Sri Ma as she was and not simply as a bride of their family.

During this time devotees from Kolkata and Dhaka once or twice found their way to Sri Ma and stayed with her for a few days. One such person was the Gujarati young man, Vijay Ratanji Vyas, a medical student from Kolkata. He told the present writer that during the summer vacation of 1933 he had come to Dehradun to be with Ma. He was told that she was somewhere on the road to Uttarkashi, so he walked from inn to inn making enquiries about the Bengali Mataji as she had come to be known in these parts. He found her and Bhaiji in one place of pilgrimage. Bhaiji was not too well at the time.

Seeing that Sri Ma alone had to cope with cooking simple meals for him as well as do the cleaning and washing up, Vyas offered his help. Sri Ma smiled and said that he could fetch milk for them in the morning. Vyas was very willing. Very innocently he said to Sri Ma that if she would wake him up in the morning, he would gladly go to bring the milk. Vyas recalled with wonder his request and how Sri Ma would come to his bedside and gently wake him up every morning for this little task, and the graciousness with which she served the simple meals she contrived for them.

They walked the mountain paths with great enjoyment, stopping wherever they felt inclined to. Sri Ma was never at a loss or put out by the lack of facilities in various inns or by other inconveniences. Vyas recalled with amazement that he himself never felt the oddness of their haphazard days. In fact the memory of these halcyon days sustained him throughout his life. In Sri Ma'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 had the distinction of being one of the six people who were initiated by Bhaiji. Bhaiji must have seen in him a person who "belonged."²

About three months or so later, Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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 nor knew how to raise his voice in supplication, his begging expeditions remained mostly

abortive; but as Sri Ma had the *kheyala* at this time that he should live a life of mendicancy, that is a life totally dedicated to and dependant on God, he did his best in this direction. In this manner they walked down from Mussoorie to Tapkeshwar Mahadeva and took shelter in the cave adjoining the temple. As they had come close to Dehradun Bhaiji sent a note to Hari Ramji informing him of Sri Ma's arrival near the town. Hari Ramji with his friend Hansa Datta Tiwari immediately went to Tapkeshwar Mahadeva and requested them 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, Sri Ma and Bhaiji, late in the evening, came to the Manohar Temple at Ananda Chowk in the town proper. Sri Ma settled down on the open *verandah* of the temple. Hari Ramji obtained permission from the manager for Sri Ma to stay in the small room attached to the temple. The next morning the wives of Kashi Narain Tankha and Dwarka Nath Raina came to the temple for their morning *puja* and saw Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma's feet, and Ananda Chowk became another Shahbagh. People congregated sometimes for the *kirtans* or *yajnas* which somehow took place frequently; or they would sit quietly with Sri Ma spellbound by her magnetic presence. Many Bengali families from the area of Karanpur also became close companions of Sri Ma from this time onwards. Ananda Chowk experienced the magic of sleepless nights spent in meditation in Sri Ma'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 Sri Ma who 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 Sri Ma Anandamayi was evinced here also.

Once a few years ago, the present writer asked the wife of K. N. Tankha, Mahalakshmi, who had been close to Sri Ma for more than forty years then, to account for the fact of the powerful attraction they had experienced at the time which remained undiminished down the years. They had not been able to talk very well with Sri Ma in the beginning, neither did she 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." If Mahalakshmi had been familiar with scriptural texts she may have cited the following one:

bhidyate hridayagranthis chhidyante sarva samsayah

kshiyante casya karmani tasmin drste paravare

-Mundakopanisad II, 2.9.

(The knot of the heart is penetrated, all doubts are dissolved, all bondages destroyed on beholding him who is

here and beyond.)

Sri Ma as usual endeared herself to the hearts of these new devotees by her delightful smile and her inimitable glance of compassionate understanding.

This quality of attraction, however, did excite some adverse criticism also in the town. It is believed by the simple people in Western India that Bengal is a land of black magic, probably because of the prevalence of *tantra* as a mode of worship amongst Bengalis. An opinion gained ground that Sri Ma 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 the support of the ground!

The following story has been related by Sri Ma herself at times which exemplifies her own keen appreciation of the ridiculous: There was a lady in Dehradun known to Sri Ma's circle as Barik Mai (She was very bulky and hence this sobriquet meaning "the thin one" given to her in jest by friends). Barik Mai in those days was a redoubtable lady, a staunch freedom fighter in the ranks of the National Congress of 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 Sri Ma eager to see for herself the miraculous things which were reported to happen at night. The secret of

her constant attendance on Sri Ma was not known to anybody at the time. There was no formality in the way of life followed by Sri Ma. 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 guest of the temple keeping wakeful vigilance when Sri Ma lay down on her simple bed-roll on the floor. Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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. When Barik Mai suddenly removed herself from the vicinity of the temple, people were puzzled. Sri Ma herself gave an explanation:

"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. When she had recovered fully he gave her a couple of *ayurvedic* pills for strength which had been given to him for his own use by Gopalji (Dwarka Nath 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 *dharmasala*. 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 when she reported that nothing untoward happened near me, her friends and family had pointed out that she had been given some 'magic pills'. She had suffered a change of heart and had given up her visits to the temple for a short while then she had realized that there was no 'magic' in the pills and regretted her own foolishness. She was now very penitent for harbouring such thoughts regarding us and had to be coaxed back to good humour."

Sri Ma Anandamayi always knew to a nicety the effect she had on her surroundings; she realized that many times people came to wrong conclusions regarding her, but it was rarely her *kheyala* to give explanations or set right a mistaken impression. She did not reject calumny or welcome devotion; she accepted both as offerings from people who give only what is in their power to give. So, in Sri Ma's circle, an opinion gained ground that it was a very lucky person who was taken to task by her, or *commanded* to undertake a particular course of action. This denoted a *kheyala* for the person and as such was very welcome.

Religious Rites

Pujas and religious festivals acquired much popularity in Sri Ma Anandamayi's vicinity. A Hindu by his culture and family tradition is born to the worship of a particular deity. 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 *puja* 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 garments, lamps, incense, the *asana* or square carpet on which the *pujari* (worshipper) is seated, then his own body and mind. He prays to the presiding deities of the stars, the planets, the moon and sun, the ten directions of which he is at the center, etc. etc, to help him in his effort to invoke the Deity in the clay image before him, or instead of the image, it could be a mystic symbol, or simply a flower which for the duration of the *puja* symbolizes for him the concrete presence of God. He then proceeds to pronounce the solemn and beautiful *mantras* of invocation. After this the *pujari* (worshipper) contemplates that the *Ista* (chosen Deity) 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 belong to Him alone. Such being the case the worshipper can only do the best that he can, not because that is what is required but because knowing no better he can but do his own best and pray to God to make complete his shortcomings. The concluding *mantras* are to this effect. Finally the *pujari* contemplates that the Divine presence in the Image has reentered his heart, its permanent abode. This is the mode of *puja* for special occasions at the time of festivals: Sri Krishna Janmashtami (Birthday of Sri Krishna), generally in August; Sivaratri in February; Durgapuja in September/October and so on.

The *mantras* being in Sanskrit are not, often, understood by ordinary people, so *pujas* are relegated to professional priests who are authorized to perform them on behalf of householders. *Pujas* of the various deities follow a very similar pattern although there is variety as regards elaborations. The daily worship of images in temples also is in the same mode, that is a loving and worshipful personalized service (*seva*), as it were, to a most cherished Guest in the house.

In Sri Ma Anandamayi's presence the rituals assumed new meaning, the significance of this way of relating to the Divine was rediscovered by many. Apart from *puja*, groups of people can easily participate in *kirtan* which is the easiest and the only mode of congregational prayer for the Hindu, because Hindu *dharma* is essentially individual-oriented. Through *kirtan* and *puja*-festivals large gatherings got welded into homogeneous groups.

As regards these *pujas* and other modes of ritualistic worship, such as *yajna* etc., Sri Ma Anandamayi always advised scrupulous adherence to scriptural texts regarding

rules and methods of procedure. She showed her appreciation of those who had knowledge of the *Sastras* 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 centralized 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 *sadhana* as well.

While Sri Ma Anandamayi 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 from a relative who had been fortunate enough to visit Sri Ma. One such letter was from Nirmal C. Chatterji, Didi's brother-in-law in Varanasi. He had gone to see Sri Ma during the summer months and wrote to Shashanka Mohan in Dhaka : "Ma 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 *brahmachari*. 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 *kheyala*. Many people are very devoted to her and ready to fulfil her slightest behest."

Nirmal C. Chatterji wrote further that Sri Ma 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 dreaming that he was at liberty to express his desire to leave the place where Sri Ma had asked him to stay. Guessing that perhaps this was one of Sri Ma's ways of voicing her *kheyala*, Shashanka Mohan now wrote asking permission to visit her at Dehradun. This being given by return of post Didi and Shashanka Mohan came to Dehradun in December, 1933 and stayed with Sri Ma for a month. Didi saw for herself the many changes in Sri Ma's way of life. She met the new devotees and observed how eager they were to carry out the slightest *kheyala* of Sri Ma and how close they had become to each other, just like the family of devotees in Dhaka or Kolkata or in other big towns in Bengal. All this was strange but exciting too. Didi and her father experienced a widening of horizons regarding their understanding of Sri Ma. Didi saw that nobody was indispensable for Sri Ma. Anyone and everyone could become a member of the family anywhere and at any time!

Kamala Nehru : Hari Ramji's enthusiasm brought many people to the little temple in Ananda Chowk. He was instrumental in putting a few prominent people of the time in touch with Sri Ma. It was his conviction that if the national leaders could see their way to being guided by Sri Ma, the future of the country would be assured. To this effect he brought Kamala Nehru to Sri Ma, thinking that she would talk to Gandhiji about her. Kamalaji was the wife of Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru was in jail in Dehradun at that time. His wife and his mother Smt. Swarup Rani Nehru were also in town to be close to him. The whole family was close to Mahatma Gandhi. It was Hari Ramji's ambition to bring Gandhiji and

Sri Ma together so that the former would be blessed by her in his crusade against foreign rule. This meeting did take place later; but Hari Ramji had to go a long way before he began to appreciate the mystery of Sri Ma's aloofness from all involvement in the world together with her full understanding of its demands on men and women engaged in living with these demands.

Kamala Nehru, in spite of Hari Ramji's persuasive words, at first did not wish to come to Sri Ma as she knew that her husband did not like her to associate with religious personalities. It so happened that although she went to Anand Chowk in the car to drop Smt. Swarup Rani, her mother-in-law, at the temple she did not herself get down but returned home. Hari Ramji could not countenance such behaviour because he never compromised on the question of Sri Ma'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 Sri Ma, by this stern stickler for correct observances.

Hari Ramji paid a visit to Kamala Nehru to remonstrate against the discourtesy of coming away without paying her respects to Sri Ma. Kamala Nehru acknowledged that maybe it was remiss on her part and that she would go again for a *darsana*. The very first meeting proved to be of great moment in her life. She was as if bewitched! She felt drawn to Sri Ma, but being mindful of her own position, came to the temple late at night after visitors had departed. Very often she would stay the whole night going home before break of dawn. Sri Ma 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. Kamalaji

however knew her own mind. She was so much drawn to her that she wanted to stay with Sri Ma all the time. She said she would write to Gandhiji to ask for his permission to withdraw from public life and be allowed to stay with Sri Ma Anandamayi. She was gently dissuaded from doing so by Sri Ma but as it became evident later, Kamalaji must have written a lot about her to Gandhiji because he was aware of Sri Ma's influence on her. The fact that Kamala Nehru was thinking of Sri Ma 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 when they were away and occasionally "saw" Sri Ma when the latter was not physically present in town. She wrote: "Bhaiji, you never write enough letters to give me news of Sri Ma. 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 Kolkata had made Sri Ma 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" Sri Ma at times. Kamalaji in the manner of the very privileged was short-lived. She passed away in Switzerland after about three years. Till the very end she had kept in touch with Sri Ma. 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?

Sri Ma and Bhairji left the temple at Ananda Chowk after some time and went down to Lakshman Jhula and Rishikesh across the Ganges from Hardwar. The little room where Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma'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).

Within a few months the new gathering of devotees had taken on the shape of a congregation. Bhairji taught the new members the prayers which were sung at Dhaka 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 Sri Ma's presence that year. This time the community of Bengalis arranged for the annual Durga Puja in October to which all the non-Bengali devotees were invited. The *puja* was performed by Manmatha N. Chatterji, who was an elder of this community.

In Sri Ma's presence the worshippers of Kali, Durga, Krishna and Rama mingled their efforts in the service of God. The ease with which Sri Ma would pass from detailing an aspect of ritualistic worship to the teaching of the One-without-a-second was in itself a lesson in understanding the different modes of *sadhana*, as so many efforts in the direction of spiritual emancipation.

The fire from a *yajna* performed during Kali Puja was brought to light the fire of a *yajna* on the occasion of Sri Krishna Janmashtami. It cannot be said that Sri Ma planned these occurrences; they happened naturally because of her

personality. In her presence, nobody could think of one sect, one deity or any other limiting thought. She herself being free of all limitations, boundaries imposed on the Divine dissolved before her.

Sri Ma Anandamayi spoke very often to the new congregation in such words as these :

"By virtue of the *Guru's* power, everything becomes possible; therefore seek a *Guru*. Meanwhile, since all names are His Name, all forms His Form, select one of them and keep it with you as your constant companion. At the same time, He is also nameless and formless; for the Supreme it is possible to be everything and yet no thing. So long as you have not found a *Guru*, adhere to that name or form of Him that appeals to you most, and ceaselessly pray that He may reveal Himself to you as the *Sadguru*. In very truth, the *Guru* dwells within and unless you discover the inner *Guru*, nothing can be achieved. If you feel no desire to turn to a *Guru*, bind yourself by a daily routine of *sadhana*, as school children do, whose duty it is to follow a fixed time-table.

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

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

inherit it in its entirety you cannot remain content.

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

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

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

"A man's belief is greatly influenced by his environment; therefore you should choose the company of the holy and the wise. Belief means to believe in one's own Self; disbelief means to mistake the non-self for one's Self.

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

the depths of your being is it possible for you to acquire knowledge of any kind.

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

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

"Either melt by Devotion the sense of sparateness, or burn it by Knowledge-then you will come to know your self."

The First Sannyasi:

Sri Ma Anandamayi's wanderings in late March, 1934 took her to a wayside temple in Salogra near Solan situated below the hill town of Simla. Solan is the capital of Baghat State. There was a cave adjoining the temple. It was so small that no one could lie straight or stand upright in it. Sri Ma accompanied by Bhaiji and Hansa Datt from Dehradun came to this cave, located 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 Sri Ma and came to pay his respects to her. He found her sitting in this cave, looking completely at ease and her usual radiant self. Recently there had been snowfall in the hills and it was bitterly cold in the cave but Sri Ma did not seem to feel any discomfort.

Sri Ma was invited by Dr. Joshi to come to Solan. H.H.

Raja Durga Singh of Solan 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 this time. Although the Raja had heard about Sri Ma he in the beginning was not keen to have *darsana* of "a woman saint", although he had endorsed Dr. Joshi's invitation to Sri Ma Anandamayi to his state.

Sri Ma at this time instead of visiting Solan came back to Hardwar. She had a sudden *kheyala* that the ideal of renunciation as a way could be exemplified by one of her older devotees. She chose Shashanka Mohan for this role. She sent word to Shashanka Mohan at Dhaka to join her in this hill town. She also sent a message to Swami Shankaranandaji, a new devotee in Varanasi, inviting him to come to Hardwar. Shankaranandaji was already a *sannyasi* 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 establishment of ten ascetic orders of *sannyasa* is traditionally ascribed to Adi Sankaracharya (8th century A.D.). Before his advent, the Hindu ascetics were not organized into orders with specific *mantras*, imparted and received in a ritualistically specified form. The man ready to renounce the world is expected to apply to a Guru or the head of a monastery. If the latter is satisfied then alone he may be initiated and received into the brotherhood of that order. The disciple has to make up his mind first 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 pursue a course of one-pointed search for Enlightenment.

Sri Ma Anandamayi 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 *dharmasala* 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 *sadhana* and attract devout and holy men. I have already suggested to Shankarananda 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 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?" Sri Ma answered gently, "You know that I cannot confer *sannyasa* on you." To this he unhesitatingly replied, "But I have no need of anything that you may not do for me."

Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma'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 rose 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 and 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 Sri Ma 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 *kheyala* and to do as you say."

Sri Ma'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 *sannyasi* of great eminence in Hardwar, agreed to initiate Shashanka Mohan into the order of the Giris. The disciple is required to perform the ultimate of the ritualistic *yajnas* to renounce connection with the world. To 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 *sannayasi* belongs to no one and to no place and therefore to everyone and everywhere.

Sri Ma Anandamayi 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. Sri Ma, by her *kheyala* for Shashanka Mohan, seemed to endorse the ancient tradition. So on Chaitra Sankranti, 1934, Shashanka Mohan was initiated into *sannyasa* 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 Sri Ma after the ceremony, she said to him, "You have so far rendered constant and unremitting (*akhanda*) service to your family and to your profession. From now on devote yourself with the same constancy to Self-realization."

It could be seen that Sri Ma Anandamayi accorded the greatest respect to anyone who wanted to be an ascetic. However, She did not encourage people to give up their duties in the name of religion. In this context an incident could be recounted which took place in Dehradun some years later : While Sri Ma was walking down the road from Mussoorie, she saw a man, obviously an ascetic, standing quietly at one side of the gate of the Kishenpur Ashram. She spoke to him in 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 Sri Ma. She asked him,

"Are you a *sannyasi*?"

"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 *sadhana* 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 *sadhana* 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 worn to solve personal problems or to escape from difficult situations. If you are not engaged in *sadhana* 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. Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma's advice.

On another occasion, a young man belonging to one of the most well-known industrial families of the country, came to ask Sri Ma about his future way of life. At that time he was the disciple of one of the very respected *sadhus* of Varanasi, and 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 Sri Ma what he should do. She 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 Sri Ma's words. Sri Ma 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 *sadhana* one begins to enjoy the many benefits which accrue from it; a subtle hankering after name and fame as a *sadhu* may also cloud the judgement and prevent a disciple from seeing his duty clearly."

Sri Ma Andandamayi at all times was very discriminating about recommending renunciation to those who sought her advice and permission for it. A few of her answers may be recalled here to understand the place she gave to this highest

stage in *sadhana*.

"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?"

When Sri Ma Anandamayi's *kheyala* came that Shashanka Mohan should be initiated into *sannyasa*, 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 Sri Ma late in life, he started on a course of *sadhana* which required concentration, fortitude and above all perseverance. His complete reliance on Sri Ma and his obedience to her *kheyala* belonged 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 Sri Ma'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.

After the *sannyasa* of Shashanka Mohan, Sri Ma again started on her wanderings in and around Dehradun. She

would come and go 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 was never Sri Ma's way to flout the proprieties obtaining amongst the people around her. Within this framework of conventionality she followed her own unpredictable *kheyala*. It also must be said that Sri Ma'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 was always exemplified in her behaviour.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Temple of Kali in Uttarkashi

"For Baba Bholanath the gorgeous beauty of the snow-capped mountains was incomplete without the presence of the Dark Goddess most dear to his heart, so he himself invoked her presence in Uttarkashi."

-A Devotee

Bholanath in the meantime was settled in Uttarkashi engrossed in *sadhana*. 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 orders of the Maharaja of Tehri Garhwal, no householder could stop in Uttarkashi for more than three days. Being the base camp for trekking to Gangotri and Gomukh, it has teams of pilgrims constantly passing through it. Bholanath acquired a very good reputation as a recluse amongst the learned community of ascetics, as well as among local inhabitants for his self-discipline and rigorous *sadhana*. The people developed profound regard and respect for him.

Some time in the summer of 1935 Bholanath wrote to Sri Ma 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. Hari Ram Joshi became interested in the project. At Hari Ramji's behest many people got involved. He did not have too difficult a job since Sri Ma had become quite well-known by now. Bholanath had a natural predisposition toward the ritualistic worship of deities, so his enthusiasm was contagious.

The installation ceremony was scheduled for August, 1935. The occasion may be called a landmark in the lives of Sri Ma Anandamayi's devotees. The new congregation comprising people from Nainital, Almora, Dehradun, Mussoorie, etc. organized themselves as hosts for invited devotees from Dhaka, Kolkata and other towns in Bengal. The guests were received at the nearest 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, about 60-65 miles from Mussoorie. Sri Ma 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 walking on a path which inclined upwards steadily. 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 other modes of transport had been hired for those who were unable to walk. Quite a few of the party could not understand each others' languages. Many were footsore; some found it difficult to breathe and others were overcome by nausea. But nothing mattered very much because Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma was in effect looking after all of them.

One day this motley crowd had to cross a mountain stream. Shallow streams sometimes can be treacherous because they flow over beds of slippery rocks. Sri Ma, seeing

the predicament of the women in the party, stood in the middle of the stream to see that everyone crossed over safely. She would hold hands to give support to wavering steps. One member was so struck by Sri Ma'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 deity in the temple. The ceremony, performed with due solemnity in a place which by itself produced exaltation of the spirit, became an experience to remember for ever after. Bholanath had sent word to his family priest whose son had come in reponse to his invitation. After completing the work of the temple, Bholanath, accompanied by this young man and Atul Brahmachari, went on a pilgrimage to Gangotri, the visible source of the Ganges.

Sri Ma 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: Maharatanji, Sevaji, Mahalakshmi, Hari Ramji, and a host of others. The new devotees on their part were eager to hear about Sri Ma's earlier life in Dhaka. Didi learnt a little Hindi amongst these friends and was impressed by their dedication. She saw that devotees of more than ten years' standing were not any closer to Sri Ma than many who had known her for only one year or so.

Lakshmi accompanied by a few of her friends and relatives went ahead to Dehradun to make arrangements for the new friends. The travellers were charmed by the hospitality of the people of Dehradun. Sri Ma Anandamayi'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 to visiting devotees became the pattern for future congregations. Wherever Sri Ma happened to be staying, the hosts would automatically take upon themselves the job of providing board and lodging to guests coming from other towns. Inevitably some functions turned out to be well planned and well executed, and others not quite so well, depending on the organizational skill of the people concerned. This may possibly be one of the many practical reasons why Sri Ma did not stay long at any place. Not many people could entertain a large number of devotees indefinitely. Sri Ma was always as greatly concerned about the comfort and well-being of visitors as of the convenience of the hosts. Expenses were met by whatever was given voluntarily by the visitors as financial aid to the organizers. This rather haphazard mode of operation worked quite well. Sri Ma was never troubled by the problem of money. It will be remembered that many a time she had wandered about without making any provision for sustenance even for the next day. It has also been experienced that if she had a *kheyala* for a certain *puja* festival or *yajna*, enough would be received, often from unexpected sources. So in Sri Ma's vicinity there was always a kind of order in seeming disorder.

After the visitors had dispersed Sri Ma 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. Some people had already met him at Uttarkashi. Now Bhairaji took him and Sri Ma to the houses of many of the devotees and introduced them to Bholanath, whose outgoing personality immediately made him welcome everywhere. 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. Sri Ma was already known as "Mataji".

Ramna Ashram Revisited

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

After many years Sri Ma Anandamayi again sat out in the fields of Ramna talking to the visitors. The transition from a housewife to a recognized teacher who spoke unhesitatingly about spiritual matters had been so gradual as to be quite unnoticeable. She was the same Ma who enquired about the wellbeing 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 in Dhaka for more than three years.

One day, a discussion arose about man's striving for God Realization. Somebody remarked that although men are constantly urged to practise *sadhana*, it is also maintained that no human endeavour can bring about Realization. Was this not a contradiction? Sri Ma being appealed to, said: "Yes, it is quite true that Grace is necessary. But it is right also that man should make an effort 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

toward 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 toward the world, he should not give up effort for self-improvement either. Relentless striving brings about *shuddha bhava*, a pure and unsullied attitude toward everything. As soon as it comes about one understands also that no action on his part is sufficient unto itself. 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 practised 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 of course can 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 *jiva* (finite being) he is not *Siva* (Infinite).

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

"One may ponder over the question in another way 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 can not recount all that passes through our minds within a few minutes. We can enumerate only a fragment. The depth and breadth of the darting thoughts defy exhaustive 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 one word after another, 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 adequately express this awareness of beauty. We may use any number of words but they still fall short.

"Besides, in the *jiva*, there is another characteristic, *ananda* (bliss). It is in the nature of the *jiva* to look for happiness. Even minds 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 *tapasya* (the rigour of hardship by a greater rigourism).

"It is man alone who seeks God. There is a cover of nescience cast over man, pierced in places by slits of knowledge - like a dark room lit by rays coming through windows and doors. If we make an effort, we can walk out of the room and stand in 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 of a house. The panorama that reveals itself to one who has

reached the topmost terrace does not need to be nor can be described by any Scripture. The *Sastras* 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 individual seeker of truth are not to be denied and yet are necessarily partial. Moreover, every experience can be surpassed by another, just as the lower rungs of a ladder do not disappear but are as if non-existing to the person standing above.

"What is true and what is false after all? If you touch my 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 He is many. He is as complete in a grain of sand as in man, and also in Himself."

While Sri Ma was talking in this strain to the people around her, the Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka 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 Sri Ma Anandamayi. As he approached the group, somebody said to her, "Ma, he is a Mussalman." Sri Ma smiled and said, "So am I a Mussalman."

After greetings, the Khan Bahadur asked one of the devotees: "If Ma Anandamayi has attained peace why does she keep wandering about?" Probably he did not think it polite to accost her directly but Sri Ma 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 the whole place 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!"

Sri Ma said this so spontaneously and humorously and with such an eloquent gesture of her hands that everyone burst out laughing. Then Sri Ma 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 God always. 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."

Sri Ma Anandamayi's words spoken lightly and yet solemnly touched everyone. There were no more questions. The quietude was peaceful. After a short while Sri Ma got up and so the session came to an end. She stayed in Dhaka 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 Sri Ma was there. The small Ashram could hardly contain the swelling crowds, so Sri Ma 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. Bhairji remained quietly at the Ashram although he visited his home. At Sri Ma's suggestion he invited his wife to come away with him so that both of them could adopt the *vanaprastha* 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 Sri Ma and her companions left Dhaka he once more went without his wife.

Slowly but steadily it became clear that Sri Ma Anandamayi was adhering scrupulously, in effect, to one of her own sayings: "Talk of God alone is (worthwhile) talk; all else is pain and in vain (*"Hari Kathai Katha, aur sab vritha, vyatha."*). She entered into the feelings of everybody

regarding their problems in the world, in human relationship, and in their own spiritual life; but like the underlying, unvarying resonance of the *tanpura* which accompanies every other instrument of music, she brought everybody round to the awareness of the supreme duty of man to strive for Self-Realization. That she gave the highest priority to the path of renunciation became gradually clearer as 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, toward family, society, country, humanity she wove around the one supreme duty toward God-Realization. She would say, "To aspire for the realization of Truth is alone worthy of man, It is man's duty to bear in mind that he exists for God alone - for His service and for realizing Him."

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

Sri Ma continued to travel as usual. In October, 1935, on her way to and from Almora, she went twice to see Kamala Nehru at Bhowali Sanatorium where she was staying for

treatment. In Etawah Sri Ma met Dr. Pitambar Pant, a friend of Hari Ram Joshi. In Fyzabad she met the parents of Udasji, 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, Chaudhari Sher Singh, and his family received Sri Ma Anandamayi 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 Sri Ma and listen to her quiet talks. Sri Ma visited Solan also and was received by H. H. Raja Durga Singh. Previously, Sri Ma had come from Salogra to Solan for a day to see Sogi Baba, a saint, 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 comfort for her and her two companions but Sri Ma had suddenly left the place for Hardwar as related above.

The names of the people mentioned above subsequently became well-known in Sri Ma Anandamayi's circle. They differed very much in their style of living, temperament, cultural background and even religiousity. In Sri Ma's vicinity the heterogenous group became as well knit as a family unit. Probably they were united so closely simply by according to her a place in their hearts and by cherishing her undemanding and yet so richly rewarding presence in their midst.

Sri Ma and Bholanath visited Tarapeeth in the winter of 1935 before coming to Dhaka. From Dhaka they went to Paruldia, the village home of Jogesh Chandra Chosh, who used to be the Trustee of Shahbagh Gardens in Dhaka, where Sri Ma and Bholanath had lived for four years. A huge crowd of men, women and children went along with Sri Ma. Like in

old times, there was *kirtan* and much festive activity to welcome the concourse of devotees. From Paruldia Sri Ma proceeded to Kolkata. The jubilant mood of the devotees of this town which Sri Ma 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 drawn to Sri Ma from earliest times. Their house in Ballygunge had long served as a headquarters for news of Sri Ma and also as a meeting place for *satsang* and *kirtan* for the devotees of Kolkata. The depressed atmosphere was dispelled by Sri Ma's presence yet the sense of loss was keenly felt by everyone.

Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma had become 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 out to his two wives, saying, "Come outside and receive my daughter." They would then greet her and make her welcome.

Maroni

For some time past Sri Ma had had the *kheyala* that Maroni and Didi should be invested with the sacred thread. Girls are not initiated like boys in Brahmin families. There was no precedent for this. Enquiries about scriptural injunctions 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 Sri Ma's *kheyala* itself was enough, no further corroboration about its legitimacy was required. Thus, according to Sri Ma's *kheyala*, the sacred

thread ceremony for Maroni and Didi was performed on January 14, 1936 at Tarapeeth. They were initiated into the exclusive Gayatri *mantra* of the Brahmins. Maroni's initiation was done by Bholanath, because traditionally the father is the *diksa-guru* for the sacred *mantra*. Since Didi's father was now a *sannyasi*, his privilege was given to Sri Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya, a revered old Brahmin devoted to Sri Ma¹.

Sri Ma 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 a remote and desolate region. But he need not have worried because by a concurrence of events the marriage actually came to be performed with all the elaborate pomp and ceremony dear to the heart of the womenfolk of Bengal. Some ladies from Kolkata who had come to be with Sri Ma joyfully became busy on his behalf. They with great enthusiasm undertook to deck up the bride and decorate the place of the *yajna*. Since in the Indian community marriages are by arrangement the ceremonies are more of the nature of social and religious festivities. Everybody participates 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 *yajna* 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 ensuring a hilarious and wakeful wedding night. The tradition of wide participation and extensive celebrations is perhaps necessary

to confirm the news of the 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-dhavani*.²

The inevitable day of parting came. Bholanath gave his blessings to the young couple and sadly bade them farewell. Maroni would stay with her parents-in-law till she attained years of maturity. Many of his relations had come to Tarapeeth specially for this occasion. In the perspective of later years, it seems that Sri Ma by her *kheyala* helped Bholanath to discharge his obligations before resuming again his life of *sadhana* in the northern region of India.

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

On the way to Vindhyachal from Tatanagar, Sri Ma stopped for a few hours only at Howrah Railway Station. Kolkata was already notorious for its unmanageable crowds and now that Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma. Just before the train started he came up to Sri Ma and after doing *pranama*, moved aside in a very uncharacteristic grave and aloof manner. Sri Ma looked at him with great understanding and said very gently: "Don't forget that Jyotish at least is your friend. Continue to write to him and give him news of yourself and your family." Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma like a child and so was able to lighten the burden of his grief.

After leaving Kolkata, Sri Ma spent a couple of days at Bettia, the village home of Dr. Girin Mitra. From there she passed through various towns, stopping for a while in some of them as her *kheyala* arose. She visited Vindhyachal, Allahabad, Chitrakoot, Agra, Mathura, Vrindaban and Delhi before returning to Dehradun.

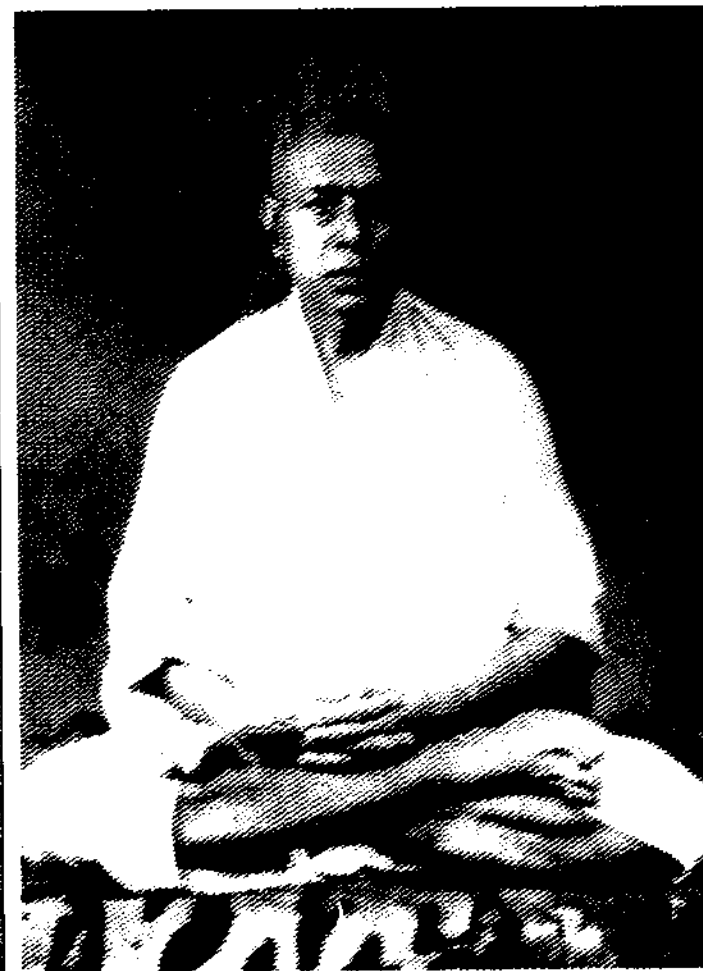
The New Ashram at Kishenpur:

The devotees of Dehradun were desirous of making permanent arrangements for Sri Ma's continued residence in their town. An ashram was being constructed in Kishenpur, about five miles from the city, on the road to Mussoorie. Hari Ram Joshi, Hansa Datt Tiwari and other people of the region requested Bholanath and Sri Ma to come to the new ashram where they wished to perform the *puja* for Sri Ma's 40th birthday. In the previous year the birthday celebration had been held on this piece of land by the devotees of Dehradun. This year they had the pleasure of seeing Sri Ma in an ashram where she could stay in some comfort for as long as she liked. The inns attached to temples as well as *dharmasalas* expect

pilgrims to move on after a few days; they cannot be used as permanent residence by anyone.

Sri Ma and Bholanath were welcomed in the new ashram in May, 1936 amidst a festival of great rejoicing. Manmatha Nath Chatterjee performed *tithi-puja* in Dehradun for the first time. Bholanath was pleased to find a person to be trusted with this important ritual. This year the birthday celebrations were observed in Kolkata as well and in Dhaka it had already become a tradition. Dehradun also experienced the flocking together of a crowd of men, women and children from remote towns, all becoming one big family. Bholanath assisted by four others performed a *yajna*. In Sri Ma's proximity such religious rites easily came within the reach of the ordinary man. Rites which people had read about in books only or 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 Ma'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.

The people of Dehradun had a taste of the experience of the devotees of Dhaka, when Sri Ma announced her *kheyala* of proceeding to Solan, almost before they had time to congratulate themselves on the success of the much awaited function. Sri Ma said she would take with her only Didi, Nepalda and Bhramar; 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 a little dismayed by Sri Ma's *kheyala*. Birendra C. Mukherji 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."



Swami Akhandananda, the first sanyasi among Sri Ma's earliest devotees.



Raja Durga Singh of Solan, popularly known as "Yogi-Bhai".

Sri Ma 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 Solan received Sri Ma and made suitable arrangements for her. He was already very devoted to her and ready to carry out her slightest *kheyala* if he came to know of it. Baghat State was small but beautiful. The princely treatment accorded to all who gathered round Sri Ma impressed her companions. The lavish arrangements were perhaps routine in such households but the quality of the spirit of service in servants, the decorum of the attendants, and their devotion testified to the loyalty and respect they felt for their own Prince. In fact, the whole of Raja Durga Singh's entourage got very close to Sri Ma Anandamayi and to the ashram over the years. Sri Ma said that the Raja Sahib was a prince of yogis, "Yogiraj", so he came to be known as "Jogibhai" in the ashram circle. The Rani Sahiba, as was the custom then, observed *pardah*. So for a couple of hours in the evening the approach to Sri Ma'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 Sri Ma's vicinity the mingling of different cross sections of society was as unremarkable as it was varied. It was a usual feature of Sri Ma's personality that she was at home with everyone. Not that she made an effort or rose to occasions—her response came naturally and she always struck 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.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ma Anandamayi at Simla Kalibari

"I know the Name alone is sufficient for achieving the Supreme."

-Sri Ma

After a fortnight in Solan, Jogibhai heard that Sri Ma had a *kheyala* to go to Simla. Although saddened at this *kheyala* he did not attempt to dissuade her but made arrangements for her to stay at Simla *Kalibari*, that is, the Temple of Kali. All such temples have a few rooms for pilgrims where they can stay for a few days.

This was Sri Ma's first visit to Simla, where subsequently she became very well-known. She arrived at the beautiful hill-station in the evening and at once proceeded to the *Kalibari*. Here they found some unusual activities going on. They were informed by the Secretary, Sudhir Sen, that a *sadhu*, known as 'Dayal Baba', had just passed away. As a matter of fact, Dayal Baba had enquired only a short while ago if Sri Ma Anandamayi, who was to have come, had arrived or not. Sri Ma now went to the room of the *sadhu* 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 so learnt about Sri Ma's arrival at the *Kalibari*. 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 in New Delhi,

so the town at this time was at the peak of its activities. 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 Sri Ma went for a walk. Small groups of people came 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."

Sri Ma's response to these newcomers was as if she were amidst people well-known to her. Within a few days Sri Ma's small room began to overflow with visitors. Many of the new acquaintances came to the *Kalibari* straight from their offices. Much fun and good-natured teasing was occasioned by this because some of them would find their wives already with Ma instead of awaiting them at home. Household routines were thrown overboard. Men, women and children began to crowd round Sri Ma. 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 rush here."

Sri Ma at this time had been joined by Bholanath, Didi, Didi's father, Swami Akhandananada, and one or two others. Didi had been with her from Tarapeeth. She was amazed that within a few days Sri Ma 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 her "Ma, what *sadhana* can a housewife do?"

"*Seva* (Service) and *japa* (repetition). All duties can be performed in a spirit of service (*seva*) 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* (Repetition of God's name)."

"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."

Nama Yajna

The Bengali officers at Simla were mostly members of the *Hari Sabha* or attached to it. This society owes its allegiance to the *Vaisnava Sāṅgha* of Sri Gauranga Mahāprabhu of Bengal. Sri Gauranga is acknowledged to have been the propagator of the mode of *kirtan* 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 *nama-yajna* is described in great detail. A square 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 *Vaisnava* pantheon; all those who are good singers and drum players are to be invited. On the eve of the

nama yajna this assembly of devout men will invoke the presence of the Lords Gaurāṅga and Nityānanda and take a resolution to observe an *akṣanda kirtan* on the morrow from dawn to dusk. This function is called *adhivāsa*. Next day the *nama yajna* is performed from early morning to late evening.

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

A big concourse of people assembled in the *Kalibari* on the eve of the *nama yajna*. The temple, the hall in which the *kirtan* 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 sandalwood was everywhere. The participants, Haran Banerji, Charu Banerji, Durgadas Banerji, Deben Chatterji, Manoj Lal Chatterji, Sudhir Sarkar, Dhiren Datta and Jiten Datta and many others, assembled in front of the altar. Sri Ma surrounded by women sat on the *verandah*. Bholanath, always a great enthusiast for *kirtan*, was happily participating in the function.

First, 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. They were decorated with garlands. The participants adorned themselves with garlands and marks of sandalwood on their foreheads. Guests were similarly anointed and made welcome by them. The evening began with the playing of the

musical instruments in unison in rhythmic cadence. While the resonance of this sound echoed round the hall an invocation to Sri Gauranga and Sri Nityananda was sung in a very solemn tune, praying to them to grace the *kirtan* 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 slowly walked around the altar singing the main tunes of the *kirtan* for the morrow. With this the invocation ceremony known as *adhivasa* was concluded.

Early next morning everyone gathered again for the commencement of the dawn-to-dusk *kirtan*. This time, because of Sri Ma'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 was allowed to introduce variations in the tune but the continuity of the singing remained unbroken. Sri Ma again sat on the *verandah*. The *kirtan* right from the beginning created an unusual atmosphere which was felt by everyone. Didi, Bholanath and Akhandanandaji realised suddenly that after almost five years or so, Sri Ma's body seemed to respond to the rhythm of the music. They had not seen her in a *mahabhava* since she had left Dhaka, but now her face was flushed and there was a look of withdrawal from the world of everyday affairs. Didi who was closest to Sri Ma noticed that Ma herself was trying to keep in check the tides of this *bhava* surging over her body, as it were.

She would talk desultorily with her companions. Once she went out for a walk away from the *Kalibari*. Then again she would retire to her room and lie down for some time. Bholanath, realizing Sri Ma's condition, came to her room and asked her to check the *bhava* if possible. The function was a

public one, Bholanath was not happy at the idea that Sri Ma should be seen in *bhava* by comparative strangers who might not understand the phenomenon. Moreover Sri Ma's *bhava-samadhi* 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 Sri Ma if they were not swept aside by the force of her *kheyala*. In this case Sri Ma's *kheyala* was also for checking the manifestations of *mahabhava*, maybe because she had anticipated his reaction to it. The whole day was spent like this. A restlessness marked Sri Ma'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 *kirtan* was reaching its climax before its conclusion at sun-down. Sri Ma once again came away 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 Sri Ma should suddenly drop to the ground but actually, as Didi knew from her experience, no support or help was needed when Sri Ma entered into *mahabhava*. Didi and others have said that Sri Ma's body was very light on these occasions. Even if her body was seen at times to lean against that of a companion, the experience of impact was very slight. Ma now moved out of her room and entered the *kirtan*-hall. The men of Simla had

never seen anybody in an exalted state of *bhava* before. Nearly all of them were *Vaisnavas*, well versed in the literature of their own *sampradaya* (sect). They realised immediately that they were witnessing the manifestations of *mahabhava* as described in their texts but which they had untill now believed could be possible only in the divine body of Sri Gauranga.

It is very difficult to give description of Sri Ma's *bhava*. If she fell to the ground and rolled over, nothing actually was seen but a blur of white; she was upright in almost less than a second. She was "like a wind-blown cloth", or "like a dry leaf blown along the ground by gusts of wind." Her passage through the crowd was so swift that hardly anybody could be said to have had 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 was all, but that was 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 Dhaka, after a few minutes of terrific movement, Sri Ma sat in utter stillness on the floor. The *kirtan* in the meantime had been concluded. The silence was broken by Sri Ma's voice pronouncing *mantras* in beautiful 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. Sri Ma's body became limp. Didi with the help of others gently brought her back to her room and made her sit on her own bed. Sri Ma's gaze tended to be unfocussed and she seemed to be

on the brink of sinking into a state of *samadhi*. Didi asked the assembled people to call her and talk to her. She knew from her experience in Dhaka that Sri Ma could be recalled to her surroundings at this stage; if she entered into *samadhi*, then it would be more difficult for her to be aroused from it. In response to repeated calls of "Ma, speak to us", Sri Ma was seen to drag open her eyes again and smile and speak a few words.

Bholanath himself had stayed with the *kirtan* the whole day without resting or breaking his fast. All the participants had greatly enjoyed his encouraging presence and involvement in the *kirtan*. Altogether this *nama-yajna* 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 rain. They also wanted to sing *kirtan* near Sri Ma. They had been inspired to this project after experiencing the exaltation of the previous night's festival. Sri Ma encouraged them and *kirtan* began 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 Sri Ma joined them and started walking with them around the alter (which was still standing in the hall), clapping her hands to the beat of music and sometimes singing a few lines herself. Within a few minutes the singing was unified into enthusiastic *kirtan* 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 the percussion instruments in the men's *kirtan* were more than happy to be able to accompany their mothers and sisters. Thus a *kirtan* party of women was inaugurated by Sri Ma as she had done previously in Dhaka and Kolkata. When the men came to the temple in the evening they were informed of this proud achievement by their womenfolk. A few were skeptical 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. Sri Ma smiled and said, "Do not keep your womenfolk away from this aspect of your lives, otherwise you may face quite unnecessary obstacles." In later years, the women became an integral part of the *nama-yajna*. At Sri Ma's suggestion, the women took over from the men after the *adhivasa* and continued through the night till the men took over at dawn. These all-night *kirtans* became very popular and were very successful.

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

Sri Ma returned to Dehradun where Bhaiji had stayed all this time undergoing treatment for an indisposition. Before she left Solan, a few officers had come down again from Simla to invite her to another *nama-yajna*, this time to be performed in honour of Sri Ma herself. Since she was ready to

leave for Dehradun, She did not change her programme but it was arranged that she would go to Simla later. Sri Ma, returned to Simla on July 5, 1936, this time accompanied by Bhaiji also.

The *kirtan* was already in progress when Sri Ma arrived. She and her companions were made welcome and received with great ceremony. The preparation for the *nama-yajna* and its execution was in all details as perfectly done as for their annual *nama-yajna*. Sri Ma had been accepted and given as important a place in their hearts as their own beloved deity. Her photographs also now adorned the altar.

Next day the devotees of Simla were ready to relax and enjoy Sri Ma's presence in the Kalibari. When they assembled in Ma's room, many topics were broached for her advice and guidance. For almost two years now, she 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." Sri Ma 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, maybe, I should do it for your sake. But why do you call it a fast? Don't you have gaps between your main meals? You have a gap of eight or ten hours, so consider that I have a gap of forty-eight hours and that is all. Nevertheless since you say so, this rule may be

changed in good time in the future."

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 Solan, Sri Ma chose to go down to Solan 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 suggestion 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?" That made it clear that he was not to accompany her on her travels. Since he also had nothing to say, Sri Ma arranged for him to remain in Solan much to Jogibhai's joy.

Sri Ma 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. Sri Ma 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." Sri Ma, 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.

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

Sri Ma then went to Serampore accompanied by a large crowd of devotees. She asked everyone to return to Kolkata the same evening. Only Kamal (Atal Behari Bhattacharya's nephew from Rajshahi) and Virajmohini remained with her. Kamal was a newcomer. Virajmohini had been travelling in Sri Ma's company for some time. She was a widow and since the marriage of her two daughters considered herself free to lead a life of renunciation. She wished to devote herself to *sadhana* and had come to Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma now started on a course of erratic travel accompanied by Virajmohini only. Kamal was allowed to accompany them for the first few days. Bholanath wrote to all concerned that it was Sri Ma's *kheyala* 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. Sri Ma left Serampore with Kamal and Virajmohini on August 3, 1936.

Sri Ma Anandamayi Wanders Away

Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to move away from places where she was well-known. Although this was inexplicable to everyone, they were getting accustomed to it. Didi, living in solitude on top of the Ashtabhuj Hill in Vindhyachal, had plenty of time to meditate on this phenomenon. She came to know that Sri Ma had left Kolkata without even a change of clothes or a tumbler for drinking water. It almost broke Didi's heart to think that Sri Ma should again and again choose mendicancy rather than live in comfort amidst an eager crowd ready to serve her to the best of their ability. If Sri Ma 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 *sadhana* taught by her. Perhaps Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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 *sadhana*.

After three months Didi and also others who were waiting for news of Sri Ma received the glad tidings that she was in Tarapeeth and everyone who wished could join her there. Within a couple of days Tarapeeth saw a multitude of devotees arriving from far and near. With great eagerness they made enquiries from Virajmohini about Sri Ma'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 similar questions came 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; invariably someone had been there 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. Sri Ma had been recognized 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:

Sri Ma's first destination had been Puri. Triguna Chakravarty, not being reconciled to Sri Ma's adoption of

complete destitution, quietly gave Virajmohini a blanket and a *dhori* for Sri Ma. 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 *dharma-sala*. 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. On their return she went in to collect her things; the woman asked if she would sell the *sari* to her. Since both Sri Ma and Virajmohini were dressed in *dhori*s, 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 Sri Ma herself entered into the spirit of the discussion and with some difficulty persuaded the lady to accept the *sari* as a gift from her. Sri Ma became her daughter and said that a daughter had every right to present a *sari* to her mother. Next day Sri Ma's new mother brought her a *dhori* as a gift, so that now Ma had a change of clothes.

While she was strolling on the beach, a young boy recognized her as the "Ma of Dhaka", and ran off to inform Makhan Babu of Jatia Baba's ashram. On her return to the *dharma-sala*, Ma 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 her 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 Sri Ma was of some significance. Shyamdas Babaji was an old man, devoted to his *sadhana* and had been living in retirement in Puri for a long time. A few months earlier he had suddenly become very keen to have *darsana* of Sri Ma. Although his health was poor, he had made enquiries about Sri Ma'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 *darsana*, you who are so steadfastly established in your own way of life? If Ma Anandamayi is all that they say she is, then, I am sure she will come to your hut to give you *darsana*." Now this is exactly what happened. Sri Ma went to see this old man who was on the brink of death. His urgent desire for *darsana* was fulfilled through the most unexpected concurrence of events. Could it be that Sri Ma had gone to Puri for this reason alone?

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

At Agra Sri Ma asked Kamal how much money he had. On learning that he had Rs. 10/- only, she told him to purchase a ticket for Kolkata 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. Sri Ma cut a piece about 5 ½ feet long and 2 ft. wide out of the blanket, to serve as a bed-roll. She kept one *dhoti* and a *lota*; Virajmohini was similarly equipped. Leaving them in this state of freedom from encumbrances, Kamal departed for Kolkata from Mathura, where they had gone from Agra. He was able to inform everyone at Kolkata of Sri Ma's welfare up to the time he had left her.

Sri Ma 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 *dharmasala* for three days they had vacated it as is the custom for pilgrims. Virajmohini purchased some fruits and after washing them in the river, gave them to Ma to eat. The passersby, seeing a grown-up person being fed by another stopped to watch the spectacle and a few were highly amused. Sri Ma laughed to see their amusement, and so they went away thinking perhaps she was mentally deficient. When it became dark she 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 be passing by, was thunderstruck to see Sri Ma and Virajmohini. He was known to Sri Ma. He congratulated himself again and again on this chance encounter and wished to take them to his house. Since leaving Dhaka Sri Ma had not entered any living quarters but had always stayed in inns, temples or open *verandahs*. So for this night also Ma was accommodated in a temple nearby. Next morning she proceeded to Vrindavan and put up at the Burdwan Kunj whose manager Jogendranath Bhattacharya 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. Sri Ma 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 how many children she had. Sri Ma replied, "I am myself your child (*baccha*), 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 Sri Ma from one of the vendors. Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma and requested her to meet her again. Within this short time Ma 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 *darsana*. The next day while walking toward the river they saw a passenger bus. On enquiry they were told it was bound for Ayodhya; so Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to go there.

In Ayodhya Sri Ma could stay 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 she 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 Sri Ma 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 a temple. Every evening he and some of his friends would visit her and listen to her answers to their questions regarding spiritual life. In Etawah Sri Ma 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 big papaya leaf for Sri Ma to sit on. She was quite at ease here. Within this short time they became very attached to her.

As soon as crowds started assembling. Sri Ma left Etawah. She went to Naimisharanya, 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 her during the four days she remained there.

From Barabanki Sri Ma and Virajmohini proceeded to Bareilly. They put up at the *dharmasala* 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 Ma Anandamayi but Ma herself to Bareilly.

Maharatan could not be reconciled to Sri Ma's *kheyala* of living a life of mendicancy. She immediately purchased a number of clothes as well as woollens and blankets for Ma and Virajmohini. Bareilly being near the mountains is a lot cooler than other cities of the plains. Sri Ma 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 Sri Krishna Pant at the bus-stop. By the merest chance he happened to be present and was amazed to see Sri Ma getting off from the bus. This time Sri Ma stayed at the temple of Naina Devi. Since this was the time of the annual Durga Puja (Navaratri) many people who visited the temple came to know about her. One day Sri Ma made Virajmohini perform *kumari-puja* near the temple. Just on the eve of Durga Puja Ma 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 go 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. Mukherjee, Dr. Bhargava and many others got the opportunity of enjoying the presence of Sri Ma in their midst. Ma 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 *Kalibari*, Sri Ma left for Amritsar, and from there went to Garhmukteshwar via Meerut. Sri Ma 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, Sri Ma again went to Sultanpur, Ayodhya and Fyzabad. As written 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 Sri Ma came to Deoghar. Although Prankumar Babu was in Deoghar and would have been beside himself with joy to see Ma she stayed quietly in a *dharmasala* without informing him.

In the next room of the *dharmasala* a woman had a sudden attack of some kind of seizure. The manager, sympathizing with the husband in this trouble, advised him to approach "a Sri Ma Anandamayi" 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 Ma Anandamayi was not a doctor and would say nothing about such illness. The man thrust past her and falling at Sri Ma's feet prayed piteously to her to do something for his wife. Sri 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 Sri Ma asked Virajmohini to prepare some fruit juice for her which the woman was given to drink. Sri Ma had the window

opened and after seeing the patient lying comfortably in bed she came away to her own 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 or at all.

From Deoghar Sri Ma came on to Tarapeeth. She 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 all kinds of vegetable and rice and pulses. This meal could be served and consumed quickly and the cleaning up was easy. Eddies of people surrounded Sri Ma. Some were newcomers greeting her on arrival; those who had stayed a day or two were bidding her farewell.

In this way, Sri Ma moved toward 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 Sri Ma in addition to Virajmohini. Didi was happy to be back to perform little personal services for Ma.

Ma Anandmayi and Children

While the train was standing at the platform, Sri Ma 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. Sri Ma 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 climbed up into it and all of them were conversing with Sri Ma as with a friend of long standing. After a while she said to them, "All of you must think of God every day. 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 Sri Ma said, "Take a new copy-book. Write the name of your choice five 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 Sri Ma to let them know when she would return. They said they all lived near the station and would hear if called aloud by name. Sri Ma asked Didi to note down their names and keep the list with her.

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

to her next day to show the written Names.

Sri Ma went up to Shillong visiting many places *en route*. She returned to Pandughat after a week or so. Virajmohini had left Sri Ma's party to be with her daughter and son-in-law at Nowgaon for a couple of days. She was already awaiting Ma's party at the steamer-ghat (ferry). On seeing her the school children came running, thinking Sri Ma had come with her. When they heard that Sri Ma was expected by the motor route they ran off to the bus stand and eagerly scanned the faces of the tourists as they came out of cars and buses. It was late when Sri Ma arrived. The disappointed children were not there. On hearing from Virajmohini that they had been looking for Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma and her party to embark on the steamer so they could not devote more time to the search. Just before they left Sri Ma 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. Sri Ma then left a message for the children saying that she had come and looked for them but because time was short she had to leave without waiting to see them.

From Assam Sri Ma went to Rajshahi and from there to Kolkata where she remained at the Railway Station to wait for the train to Navadweep. Of 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 Sri Ma. Innumerable times dozens of people have travelled like this with Sri Ma taking a last moment decision to go with her. It cannot be said that anybody had been put to any inconvenience on this account. The families of the travellers did not worry because they knew their children were with Sri Ma.

Sri Ma stayed at Navadweep over the Christmas holidays. Groups of families could gather because it was vacation time for everyone. They accompanied her to the temples; sometimes they went down the river singing *kirtan* in a fleet of boats. The evenings were spent in holding discussions on many subjects, everyone waiting to hear how Sri Ma would resolve the questions because these answers were always very satisfying. Sri Ma also visited many of the religious personalities of the town and received many of them in her turn: chief among them was *Sakhi-ma*, a devout Vaishnav of exemplary reputation in Navadweep. This *Sadhika* looked upon Sri Ma as an Incarnation and would welcome and worship her as such whenever she was in town. Breaking up this joyous congregation after a fortnight or so, Sri Ma started on her travels again.

In answer to many requests for a visit Sri Ma came to Dhaka on January 7, 1937. Ramna Ashram again came alive. It had been decorated to welcome her. As before, the people of Dhaka surrounded her at all times and it seemed they could not have their fill gazing at her. Referring to Sri Ma's short visits and long periods of absence, one of them (Arunadi) remarked sadly, "Ma, you do not love us anymore." Sri Ma laughed and said, "Is that so? The truth is otherwise; whether you love me or not, I cannot do without you, Tell me, how are you?"

The lady said, "Ma, not well at all. 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 *samskaras*. Suffering is inextricably mixed up with life. It is necessary to 'burn' (*Jwala* meaning pain as well as burning) 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? It means 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."

Sri Ma'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 Dhaka bade her a sad farewell. Sri Ma 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: "Is it not true that Tulsidas was a great *bhakta* (devout person) as well as a *jnani* (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, that is he knew they are not two but one. But as a devotee he expressed his yearning for the vision of the form he adored. So you see he was both a *bhakta* and a *jnani*." This answer greatly satisfied the young scholar.

From Varanasi Sri Ma again went back to Bengal, or rather what is now Bangladesh. She travelled through Chandpur, Chittagong, Sitakund, Cox's Bazar, etc. At this time she became widely known in these places. She had been there previously also 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 the pattern would be repeated. Often Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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. What is real wealth? That which remains forever is real 'wealth'. *Sadhana* alone is true wealth."

One of the auditors, an eminent lawyer, 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 is proof that the yearning is there. Surrender yourself to this quest. Take guidance from a Guru. There is not much time to lose."

"The ego is a great obstacle. I do not think I can submit to a Guru. I don't find anybody to whom I could 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."

The grave-looking gentleman said, "Ma, it is too late for me. There is no time for me now to render full account."

Sri Ma 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."

No doubt Sri Ma instilled into the hearts of the people a desire for spiritual upliftment. Those who had never thought of *sadhana* now found their attention drawn to it. In Sri Ma's presence the finding of God's grace in human life seemed an easy accomplishment.

Saccidananda

There was a school in the vicinity of Sri Ma's place of residence in Cox's Bazar. The children, whenever free (before or after school or during their tiffin-break), would come

running to Sri Ma. They would walk with her on the sea-shore and gather cowrie-shells for her. Sri Ma one day said to them, "Let us play a game with these cowrie-shells. The name of the game will be *Saccidananda*." The rules of the game were formulated by Sri Ma herself. There would be two teams with equal number 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 "*ananda*" would need all the seven cowries facing up. The team which arrived at *sat*, *cit* and *ananda* in this order would win. If one gained *ananda* before *sat* and *cit* or *cit* before *sat* then it would stand cancelled. The team to win would sing *kirtan* and the losing one would sit aside and to *japa* 108 times before joining in the *kirtan*.

Usually Sri Ma 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 '*Saccidananda*' with Sri Ma on the seashore.¹

Sri Ma stayed over a month at Cox's Bazar. Then, travelling through nearby places via Kolkata, she alighted in Bareilly on April 2, 1937, Sri Ma had become quite well-known there. The pattern of social life was a little different in the U.P. towns. The women had clubs of their own and some drove their own cars. They took Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma to welcome her. The men would come to the *dharmaśala* in the evening after office hours.

A new devotee, Bindu Mukerji's mother, would be with Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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.

Sri Ma proceeded to Nainital from Bareilly. There she put up in a *dharmaśala*. All visitors along with the inevitable crowd of children were introduced to the game of *saccidananda*. 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 Sri Ma had a visitor from the U.S.A., Mrs. Jennings.² This lady had written for an interview and had been asked to come to Nainital. Mrs. Jennings soon became quite attached to Sri Ma. Bhaiji interpreted for her and she would hold long conversations with Sri Ma about her spiritual life. In the company of Mrs. Jennings, Sri Ma travelled to Almora and back to Nainital in a bus hired for the purpose by the American lady.

In Almora Sri Ma stayed at the temple of Nanda Devi. On her arrival a group of young girls introduced themselves as students coming from far-off villages in the Himalayas. They had come to Almora to study. One or two came from a village at the foot of the sacred Mountain Kailash. In a few minutes

they became great friends with Sri Ma and invited her to come to Kailash with them. Now Bholanath had for long entertained a wish to undertake this most hazardous of pilgrimages. He was so fired by enthusiasm that he was ready to leave the same night. He was, however, prevailed upon to postpone the scheme as roads remained unnegotiable before June. It was decided to consider the matter again after the celebration of Sri Ma's birthday in May.

Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma.

"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 proved insurmountable. She had become identified with the motely group which was Ma Anandamayi's family.

Sri Ma did not stay long in Bareilly this time. She left for Kolkata on May 2nd, on her way to Jamshedpur. Many of the towns-people stayed awake the whole night at the *dharmasala* to see her off at the station at dawn. In those days Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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 spread and lie down near Sri Ma for the night. The men followed similar improvisations, trying to sleep on the *verandah* or in nearby rooms. Travellers kept coming and going (as this was a *dharmasala*), picking their way between the sleeping forms. Everybody in India is familiar with this scene.

From Jamshedpur Sri Ma went to Kolkata and then reached Dhaka on May 19, 1937. This was Bhaiji's last visit to Dhaka, although nobody could foresee this at the time. Perhaps only Sri Ma knew because she went to great pains to bring about a reconciliation between Bhaiji and his wife at this time. Bhaiji's wife Manikuntala Devi did not approve of her husband's nomadic way of life. She was concerned about his health. Sri Ma suggested that she should join her husband and live like *vanaprasthis* in various ashrams or retreats but Manikuntala Devi was not prepared to leave home. She remained a little aloof although when Bhaiji went home she served him dinner and even cooked his favourite dishes but she would not come away with him when he left Dhaka at the end of the celebration.

Sri Ma's birthday celebrations were observed with as much ceremony as could be contrived by the devotees of Dhaka. After five years they had the opportunity of celebrating this festival of festivals for them, in the presence of Sri Ma.

On leaving Dhaka Sri Ma travelled back towards Nainital and Almora because it had been decided that they would undertake the pilgrimage to Kailash. The girls from the Himalayas were waiting in Almora to accompany them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Pilgrimage to Mount Kailash

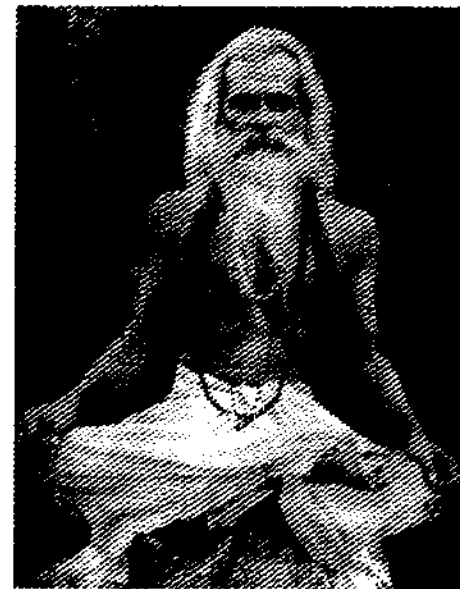
The Himalayas-Indescribable beauty!

The visible concretisation of Infinity-Eternity.

-Didi Gurupriya

In those days Mount Kailash (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. Kailash 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.). Kailash tower over the famous lake Manas Sarovar (apprx. 15,000 ft.). This beauteous 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 many centuries. Every year a few hardy and venture-some pilgrims undertook this pilgrimage to the snow-bound Himalayas for a *darsana* (sight) of the Holy Mountain.

This journey, ordinarily, would not have entered the consideration of Ma Anandamayi's companions but for the coincidence of her visits to Almora at that time. As written above many young people from the hinterland of Almora



Bholanath during his days of sadhana at Uttarakashi (Himalayas).



Sri Ma sitting quietly on the bank of the Ganga at Uttarakashi during her early days.



A rare picture of Sri Ma taken at Patal Devi, Almora.

came to the town every year to pursue their studies. Some of these students had become very attached to Sri Ma and Bholanath. One such student, a married young woman, Parvati, was specially devoted to them and had broached the idea of a journey to Kailash, 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 that they too would have the chance to accompany Ma Anandamayi for at least part of the way.

In response to all these circumstances Sri Ma returned to Almora on June 10, 1937. The students from the villages in the Himalayas were eagerly awaiting her. Many devotees from Kolkata, 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 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 Sri Ma's activities; these valuable records have been made available to us. The only drawback is that Didi was not always in a position to be near Sri Ma, 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 Sri Ma's party. It should be stated here that in Sri Ma's following all orthodox rules of cooking and serving food were

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 Sri Ma's party.

Whenever possible Didi cooked for the entire party which (in addition to Sri Ma and Bholanath) consisted of Swami Akhandananda (Didi's father), Bhaiji, Dasu Ganguly from Chittagong, Tunu from Kolkata and Swamiji's attendant, Keshav 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 this chapter, 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.

Didi's accounts, as always, are prosaic and down to earth. Reading her refreshingly fast moving travelogue one cannot but get the impression that Sri Ma was still looked upon as the centre of a special group. It was true that the circle of Sri Ma's family had expanded many times since the days at Dhaka, 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 Sri Ma's way of life and so they made no move to communicate with outsiders. Didi was content to be in a position to serve Ma and be an onlooker of her "*lila*", as it were.

Translated from the Diaries of Didi Gurupriya Devi'

Thursday, June 10th:

We have arrived in Almora. Arrangements are being finalized for our journey to Kailash. Nagenda from Kolkata,

Narenda 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. Waterproofs, 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 this 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.

Today we started on our pilgrimage to Kailash. The devotees who had travelled with us from Kolkata, Varanasi, and others who had come to see us off were dejected. We took leave of them and started on our journey. Our party

consists (apart from Ma and Bholanath) of Swamiji, Bhaiji, Dasu, Tunu and Keshav Singh, Swamiji's attendant. There are about a dozen porters to carry the baggage. It was considered advisable for us to engage a few *dandees*² as well. There is one old man (Swamiji) in our party and Bhaiji is also not enjoying good health, besides none of us is used to mountain-climbing, so it was felt that *dandees* 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 Barechhina, 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 in Dhawalchina, which is about five and a half miles from Barechhina. I cooked a meal in the open and we spent the night on the open *verandah* of the Dak Bungalow.³

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. Parvati and her friends are of course quite used to this mode of travelling. They are happy to have Ma's company.

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 able to manage the gradually 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. Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma. 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 Sri Ma'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 *darsana*."

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 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 *verandah* 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 Yuvaraj (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, Sri Ma 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 Sheraghat; 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 Sri Ma Anandamayi was travelling on this road. He was going toward 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 *dharmasala*. 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 Solan 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 Sri Ma and her party. This explained the concourse of people at Askote who were waiting eagerly for Ma's *darsana*. It occurred to me that Ma indeed belonged to all and that it was very short-sighted of us to think that she should stay in Dhaka or in Kolkata 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 across 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. 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 Kailash".

Today'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 Balua Kote, 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.

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 a tree. At the first sign of daylight we came away, leaving the porters to follow with the luggage later. 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 had been 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 the crossing. It seems this is how the local people take pilgrims across streams. They are so sure-footed that they are able to keep their feet steady even carrying 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. Bholanath crossed over walking like the locals. Over some mountain streams there are rope pulleys. The way the native people 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 and airing. 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. High 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 *verandah* 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 Sahib came to call on us. He has received letters of introduction from the Raja of Askote and also from Sri Krishna Pant of Nainital regarding our party; he has 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 Sahab said that the new set of porters will 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 reorganized 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 *sadhana*. Everyone was a little relaxed. Bhaiji remarked, "I think people should enjoy themselves in life. One should go in for realizing one's desires and so eradicate them out of one's system. Suppression is not right."

Ma smiled and said, "Desires are legion. You will never exhaust them. Not in this life!"

Bhaiji said, "Fine! One can begin afresh in one's next life!" Ma became serious. She said, "I do not agree. Indulgence is not the way to put an end to desires; it only creates more cravings. What one may do is to take a middle course. Combine the two. One may go in for some enjoyments and refrain from indulging in harmful desires. For example, you are, say, suffering from a stomach-disorder. Such patients often have a craving for food. If his wish is satisfied then he will never regain his health. But he cannot be starved either. Some wholesome food has to be given him."

"There is a time for everything; that is how your body and mind can enjoy good health. Take to such practices which will enhance the yearning toward pure bliss. You will see that dispensable pleasures will fall away by themselves. See,

when time is right the dry leaves fall away from a tree, they do not need to be pulled off which may actually harm the tree. Coercive action or great austerities are uncalled for. A 'take it easy' attitude is also not right. The world demands attention and action. One must discipline oneself into a well-ordered wholesome way of life, then there will be hope for an awakening of true yearning for Truth."

I was glad to be able to write some of these words down.

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.

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 outdistanced 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." (*phire chalo phire chalo aapan ghare*).

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 mountainous regions engenders in the mind peace and tranquility. This panoramic scene of high mountain ranges spreading out unendingly on all sides exercises such a strange attraction that I am sure every pilgrim is gripped by a feeling of homecoming. Somehow one is at peace with oneself.

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 *sannyasini* 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 *dharماسala* 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 back with us. She sat for a long time near Ma 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. 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 track. 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 everpresent music of its rushing waters was felt by everyone. Ma frequently left her *dandee* 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) 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 it also adds to the enjoyment as the presence of Ma inevitably knits everyone together into a big family. At Pangu a big meal was cooked by me with the help of Parvati, and everyone partook of the repast with pleasure.⁴ 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 Kailash with us.

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

Wednesday, June 23rd

It poured almost the whole night. The narrow verandah was lashed by the slanting rain. We were drenched in spite 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 Keshav 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 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 maybe 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 Kailash.

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 *dandees* 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 Sri Ma and surround her even as the crowds at Kolkata or Delhi or Dehradun. It is possible that they make out that Ma is the most important person in our group from our attitudes toward 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 recognize 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. Ma 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 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 also 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 had occurred; one of the porters was bitten by a black snake. Bholanath and some of his companions had tried some remedies to ease the suffering of the poor man. Ma had pointed out some herbs growing nearby and had asked him to chew them which seemed to have helped 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 Ruma 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 book 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 skillfully as Bholanath does. Sri Ma'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 Kailash. 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 *yatra* (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 abide by things as they come." The Kumar bowed in *pranama* and said he would do as she had said. Other members of the party also took their leave of Ma.

The reverberating, unbroken sound of the river is again heard, like the constant roar of the breakers on the Puri beach. The river had 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 Rai Saheb 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 Kailash 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 today. 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 Bhajji 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.

THE HOLY MOUNTAIN KAILASH

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 when 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.

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 Bhajji 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 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 is truly breathtaking. It seemed to me that we were going over a narrow bridge through an ocean of snow. The ponies picked their way

stumblingly 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, 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 most rewarding experience. By Ma's and Bholanath's *Kripa* (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 *darsana*. A few came close to her *dandee* 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 *sadhana* 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 horseback 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 in case they need their firearms quickly. 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. We had our first glimpse of the holy mountain peak beyond the lake. It was truly a wonderful experience. All fatigue seemed to seep out of us and we came alive, as it were!

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 lakeside, 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 *kheyala* 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 *darsana* of the snow-covered top of Kailash 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, "Jai Kailashpati, Jai 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 lakeside. 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 fulfillment 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 Ravanhrada. The legend is that the Demon (Rakshas) King Ravana had practised austerities at this spot to propitiate his adored deity, Kailashpati Siva.

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, marveling 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 lake 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 Kailash. 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. This one 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 had failed to distinguish between the two. Ma, realizing 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 Kailash. 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* (circumambulation). 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.

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 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 *yajna* 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. Gaurikund 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 *arati* concluding our *yatra*. 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 *halwa*.

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 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 Gaurikund.

[End of the account from Didi Gurupriya's Journal.]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bhaiji's Last Days

Human destiny, without dispassion, reaches not the ultimate;

Court dispassion, forsake desires, learn thou to discriminate.

How much dispassion you have attained

You'll know as you work diligently,

And then, oh then, you'll see which way

your mind attracts you endlessly.

Renouncing worldly karma, live the truth of human dharma.

Contemplate ever in your heart the Changeless Eternal Brahman.

From outer things withdraw the mind,

in your heart keep it confined.

Choose the Brahman-raft

for crossing the sea of life.

Once the ego's overcome all dualities will end.

The Self will stand revealed as one with the quest

and Truth Transcendent.¹

[A spontaneous song uttered by Sri Ma Anandamayi in Vindhyachal many years ago. In retrospect it seems a kheyala for Bhaiji or perhaps Bhaiji interiorised it because surely he exemplified it.]

The return journey was equally arduous. Actually the descent is always more difficult than the climb. They were however buoyed by a sense of achievement.

Their feeling of exhilaration, however, was tempered somewhat by Bhaiji's slight indisposition. He was uncommonly quiet and not his usual cheerful self. Everyone else seemed to be all right. They felt they had accomplished a

major achievement due to Sri Ma's and Bholanath's gracious company.

By slow marches they arrived back at Taklakote at noon on Saturday, July 17. Ruma Devi's uncle was awaiting them and made them welcome. Taklakote is a trading post of some importance. A bundle of letters had been brought for them from Garbyang. After a long time the travellers again established contact with the world they seemed to have left behind. The local people, as usual, men, women and children, watched the camping arrangements with great interest.

After a while Sri 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 Sri Ma no place was strange and nobody was a stranger. At her suggestion Didi distributed amongst them their remaining stock of dry fruits - almonds, raisins, cashew nuts, etc. They seemed very pleased with these. The village people seemed very simple and not at all shy or self-conscious like the village women of the plains.

The next day was Sunday, July 18th. At Parvati's suggestion some of the travellers went up the mountains a little to visit the cave of Buddhist lamas. As the climb was very steep, they rode to the very top. The caves were painted yellow and were very spacious. The Governor's house was red. The public was under orders from the Government to provide food and sustenance for the lamas. They found the Chief Lama 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 Buddhist pantheon.

Bhaiji spoke to the Lama on their behalf. Bhaiji said, "Give us strength (to remain on the path to Enlightenment)". Parvati translated Bhaiji's words. The Lama seemed pleased; he was very kind to them and gave them some *prasada* and pieces of coloured cloth. Bhaiji had taken offerings of some tea, dry fruits and money. On their way out of the caves, Bhaiji became interested in some of the rolled up parchments stacked on shelves and platforms. After much persuasion he was able to buy one scroll from an old lama.

After negotiating the difficult Lipu Lekh Pass, the pilgrims came down to Garbyang on Tuesday, July 20th.

The exhausted travellers were rewarded by the sight of tall green pine trees. The sight was soothing for snow-dazzled eyes. Most of their porters were from villages around Garbyang. So they were also very happy to be nearing their homes. Bhaiji went off to the Post-Office and fetched them a big bundle of letters. Didi, Tunu and Dasudada tried to answer as many as possible to inform their friends about Sri Ma's safe arrival at Garbyang.

The travellers stayed at Garbyang for a day for a much needed rest and also to await the arrival of the next relay of porters who would accompany them back to Almora. They thanked and rewarded their guide Sendel Singh, who now took his leave of them.

Parvati also would go back home now. This was a more difficult parting. She and one or two others of these regions took lingering leave of Sri Ma and Bholanath promising to come again as soon as could be.

From Garbyang they descended towards the plains. They travelled to the accompaniment of the incessant roar of the swiftly flowing Kaliganga. They 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 its waters. They walked down the narrow paths with the help of the porters. Some of them clung to the mountain-side and kept their eyes averted from the bottomless gorges on the other side.

The sun instead of being a blessed source of heat now became uncomfortable. On July 23 they arrived at Deepti and took shelter in a room in the village. There was a shop in this place. After a long time they 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 *dal* and vegetables cooked by him.

The downward journey became easier. Kaliganga had receded to a distance. They had left the view of snow ranges behind also. They were received by Ruma Devi near a place called Shasha. She greeted them with great joy and told them that she had been constantly on the road in an agony of suspense that she might miss them. She had already cleaned rooms for the travellers at Shasha, where they took up residence for the night. Ruma Devi brought some beautiful wild flowers and offered them at Sri 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, "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 service, but this does not appeal to me anymore. I wish to carry on my personal *sadhana* in solitude now. I should like to stay with Ma for the remaining years of my life." They were impressed very much by Ruma Devi's sincerity and devotion to her chosen way of life as an ascetic. They were also charmed by her gentle manners, her smiling good nature and her helpfulness. It was agreed that she would

come with them to Almora.

All would have been joy at this time but for Bhaiji's health, which was causing anxiety. He was suffering from fever and his companions were concerned about him. In the meantime the local inhabitants came in groups to pay their respects to Sri Ma. Within a short while her room was crowded and there was a heap of many-coloured flowers in front of her. The sweet smelling roses and jasmines reminded the travellers that they were approaching the plains now.

On Sunday, July 15th they arrived at Khela a little before sundown. They decided to stay here for a day, so that Bhaiji might recover. The porters from around Garbyang were under contract to come down to Khela. Another set of coolies were engaged 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 the travellers would be a very relaxed and happy group now.

Sri Ma's companions decided to stay in the Dak Bungalow at Dharchula. They had stopped at the District Board Dispensary so that the doctor could examine Bhaiji. They bought the medicines prescribed by the young doctor and hoped that with medical care and rest, Bhaiji would soon recover.

The travellers realised that their porters were restive and did not wish to wait but they had to slow down because of Bhaiji. Due to incessant rain the bridge over Kali river had been washed away. The inhabitants of the area improvise by slinging a pulley-like arrangement on such occasions and cross the swiftly flowing mountain stream in this precarious fashion. Although the travellers were reluctant to subject Bhaiji to this mode of travel it was not feasible to wait

indefinitely for the bridge to be repaired and so all of them crossed over in this fashion..

Arriving at Baluakote in the evening they pitched their tent on an open flat ground. Didi cooked a light meal in the open which everybody enjoyed eating under the clear skies.

On Monday, August 2nd the travellers arrived at Askote at about 2 p.m. They were finding the sun very hot now and Bhaiji seemed very uncomfortable in the heat. Many members of the Raja's family and others also came to sit with Sri Ma at the *dharmashala*. She talked to them for a while but very soon it was time again to take leave from these devotees.

Walking very slowly and carrying Bhaiji's *dandee* carefully they arrived at the school-house at Didihat on Tuesday, August 3. The teacher and the students came running and made Sri 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 her. Indeed she seemed to be as close to the people of the hills as she was to her acquaintances of long standing. Didi realised that there were many amongst what they thought chance-met people who considered this meeting providential and the high point of fulfilment in their lives.

Unhappily, for everyone, Bhaiji's condition seemed to deteriorate. Didi now took over the nursing of the rather helpless patient. Bhaiji was very upset thinking he was causing anxiety and also adding to Didi's burden of work. Since Bhaiji was more concerned about others than his own health, Sri Ma took matters in her own hand. She said to Bhaiji, "Do not worry. I shall help and others will also." She herself assisted Didi in looking after Bhaiji and made suggestions regarding diets.

Dasudada, Tunu, and Brahmachari Bharati went ahead with the porters and all extra luggage so that the people at Almora could be warned about Bhaiji's illness.

On the eve of arriving at Almora, the travellers realised that Ma had become silent (*mauni*). The natural radiance of her countenance was also dimmed a little.

With a great sense of relief the travellers arrived in Almora on Tuesday August 10. The local devotees had rented a newly constructed house for Sri Ma and her party. Manik and Juthika were waiting for them at Almora for the last seven days. The joy of a difficult journey accomplished and the pleasure of meeting friends again was all dimmed by the shadow of Bhaiji's illness. The people of Almora, who were so eagerly looking forward to Sri Ma's return, were sad to see that she was observing silence. They had not experienced this phenomenon before but they got used to this fact of Sri Ma's personality and learnt to abide by it.

The Last Days of Bhaiji

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 their 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, but Bhaiji's heart was set on it. He persuaded Sri Ma to give him permission, saying that he would write to his wife and explain everything so that she would not be anxious on his account.

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 ebbing energies. One day, while the attendants, visitors and members of Sri Ma's party were sitting in a dejected group around Bhaiji's bed, they were startled by the most unexpected sound of Sri Ma's joyous peel of ringing loud laughter (*attahasa*). 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 Dhaka, remembered that to her death was not a tragedy; 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. They were now afraid that perhaps he was not going to get well after all. The new members of the crowd of devotees were puzzled and awed by this phenomenon of great care and yet an obvious unconcern toward the main issue. They had seen Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma was beyond their ken altogether because she was untouched by the emotions of the situation. Sri Ma's laughter on such an occasion was a mystery to be pondered over forever.

Slowly the anxious attendants began to lose hope of Bhaiji's recovery. The doctors held out no assurance. One of the doctors, a Muslim, had become so involved that he assisted in the task of nursing the patient as well. He seemed devoted to Bhaiji. 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, almost in a gesture of farewell and also perhaps in acknowledgement of her devoted nursing, said clearly to her, "Khukuni (Didi's nick name), finish (in English)!"

The next day Hari Ram Joshi, Didi and many others repeatedly prayed to Sri Ma to bring her *kheyala* toward Bhaiji's recovery; but she made a gesture indicating that no such *kheyala* seemed to occur to her. After Sri Ma's negative response, everyone knew that they had to prepare themselves for the inevitable end. Sri Ma 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 sundar!) 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 pronouncing softly but clearly one of the *Sannyasa mantras*. Around 3 p.m. Sri Ma signaled 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 soon after, at 3-30 p.m. on August 18, 1937. The serenity of the event of his ultimate departure from the world held the crowd in thrall for some minutes. They had difficulty in realizing that their friend and guide, one to be followed on the path of religious endeavour, was with them no more.

While they were still sitting in shocked silence, they heard Sri Ma'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 *samadhi* (internment) for him. He is to be regarded as an *avadhuta* (an ascetic who has not joined any specific order). Since he has attained to the renunciation required for *sannyasa*, he is to be given the status of a *sannyasi*."

Sri Ma'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 (others in the party on the pilgrimage to Kailash) may recall that on our way to Manas Sarovar we had become separated into different groups. I asked Khukuni (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 toward the mountains in the manner of an *avadhuta-sannyasi*. 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 *sadhana*.

"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 *sannyasis*. Indeed such a state of *vairagya* (non-attachment) 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 Sri Ma. In the most crucial moment of his life he did not fail to surrender his will to her *kheyala*. 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 eligibility which alone can touch the dimension of Grace.

Sri Ma 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 my *sannyasa-mantra* I have now 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 *kriyas* in the lake. Since that time he had constantly kept his *mantra* in remembrance."

Many of the audience remembered that according to the scriptures the awakening of true yearning is simultaneous with the descent of Grace. They believed that Bhaiji had demonstrated this truth for generations of pilgrims on the razor's edge path.

Sri Ma said after a while, "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 *kheyala* 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 (*purna vairagya*). At one time I said to him, 'Since you have acquired a *sannyasa mantra* is these holy mountains and wished to take a vow of silence, your ascetic name will be *Mounananda Parvat*. 'Since he died while in a state of complete withdrawal from the world, he should be buried as a *sannyasi*.

"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 *samadhi*. 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, Sri Ma 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." Sri Ma directed Swami Akhandananda as a *sannyasi* to perform the last simple rites of the burial of an ascetic.

In answer to the telegrams sent to Bhaiji's family in Dhaka, 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 Sri Ma 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 had spoken to Ma about it. Sri Ma had reassured him saying she herself would do what she could and make others help too. This explained now why Ma had been unusually active in the nursing of Bhaiji till they arrived in Almora.

After a few days of the simple *samadhi* 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. Sri Ma, 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 Sri Ma 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 *sannyasi*?' 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 displeased at this turn of events. It was a blessing in disguise. In this way she helped me greatly on my chosen path of *sadhana*. 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 *sadhana* 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 *kheyala* 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 Sri Ma. She regretted that she had disregarded Sri Ma's invitation to reside with her husband when he was living alone in many places engaged in his *sadhana* 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 Sri Ma. There was nobody to take his place. The ability to mediate Sri Ma's *kheyala* was unique with him. She herself has said that many time Jyotish would do things or deal with people according to her *kheyala*, 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.

Those who came after the era of Bhaiji were always eager to hear Sri Ma talk about him. Amongst these Anil Chandra Ganguly could especially evoke Sri Ma's *kheyala* regarding Bhaiji. He writes :

"This time at Vindhyachal Sri Ma talked very often of Bhaiji. All topics seemed to converge upon some aspect of his life. His experience of total dispassion (*vairagya*) was extraordinary. Sri Ma sometimes says, "To suffer the annihilation of hope is to be truly bereft (*ashar nash i sarvanash* - in Bengali)".

"Bhaiji was not afraid to be bereft. The last years of his life found him in ruined health, disturbed family atmosphere, suffering the disapproval of his kith and kin. He never prayed for redress, he never sought so use Sri Ma for his own well-being; his surrender at Sri Ma's feet was for knowing Sri Ma for herself alone. So, what an ordinary person would feel as despair he welcomed as a blessing from Her who for him was the plenum of Blessedness."

Bhaiji's legacy to the family of devotees

For days after Bhaiji's death, the devotees surrounding Sri Ma 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 *gurukula* system but where modern subjects would be taught as well. Sri Ma'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 worthwhile. 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 24 hours in meditation and *japa*, therefore such work is to be undertaken which is conducive and helpful toward this end. Service to humanity, studies, engaging in good actions are necessary for purifying the mind which is to be engaged in *sadhana*. 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 Sri Ma'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 at Almora in the ashram that

gradually took shape around Bhaiji's *samadhi* at Patal Devi.

From Dehradun, Sri Ma sent Didi and Swami Akhandananda to Vindhyachal. Not daring to oppose her *kheyala* Didi left Sri Ma with great reluctance being unable to reconcile herself to the fact that Sri Ma would be left to the care of comparative strangers. Sri Ma 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 Dhaka 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 Kolkata also, tell everyone that if they 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 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 to 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 Sri Ma. When asked if she could convey any message from her to the devotees in the various towns Didi would be passing through, Sri Ma said, "Tell everyone that they should live contently and uniformly in God-remembrance with their attention firmly fixed on the One Goal."

After coming from Almora Sri Ma had for almost a month subsisted on water only. Her body had been very still as if in

samadhi. She would move 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 Sri Ma was quite normal in every respect excepting the utter stillness of her body and they learnt the lesson of abiding by her *kheyala* regarding all matters pertaining to herself. While conversing with visitors her demeanour was so normal that it was hard for the residents 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. Ruma Devi had her heart's desire fulfilled. She had the opportunity of looking after the simple needs of Sri Ma.

Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma was not touched 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 on her needs gained in confidence in daily contacts with her. It could be seen by them clearly that although Sri Ma took delight in all places and as heterogeneous a group as could be contrived by anyone, she retained her way of doing things which was not merely extraordinary but unique.

Sri Ma, 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 down to

Hardwar."

As usual in Sri Ma's presence, improbable things were made possible with comparative ease. Sri Ma'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. Perhaps by calling into question the staid conventionality of accepted norms, she opened up a dimension of freedom for many people. Her *kheyala* was enough to create order out of chaos! For example, there were a sufficient number of conveyances, sufficient money, clothes and food for the large number of her companions. 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 Sri Ma's *kheyala*, no matter how improbable or impractical it seemed. If a more reasonable mode of engaging on a course of action was pointed out to Sri Ma, she would acquiesce immediately but nothing would go right thereafter, and the counsellors themselves would veer round to the original plan. Over the years this fact had emerged with greater and greater clarity, so that no one who knew Sri Ma well consciously tried to modify or deflect her *kheyala*. Sri Ma'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 toward events as they happen. She did not make any effort toward achieving her *kheyala*, neither was she disappointed if it could not be carried out, because either remained equally acceptable to her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Changing Order

Dhaka was celebrating Sri Ma's Birthday when the devotees were stunned by the news of Bholanath's passing away; a cloud of heart-breaking grief spread over the community. They had lost an unfailing friend and guide, a true well-wisher, who was ever ready to render help to all. It was a tragedy for all of us.

-Amulya Kumar Datta Gupta

Sri Ma Anandamayi's First Visit to Gujarat

Sri Ma stayed at Hardwar for three days only. She visited the ashram of Mangal 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 Gujarat. He expressed his readiness to do so any time convenient to her. He could not have reckoned what his guest would say, "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 Sri Ma's party at Hardwar in response to her invitation. Sri Ma 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, ashrams 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. Sri Ma visited the ashram of the Guru of Sri Balananda Brahmachariji, where she was made welcome by Sri Kailashanandaji.

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

Sri Ma's party also included Naresh Chakravarty, a professor from Kolkata, and Shachi Babu, both very quiet and serious-minded men. On their way to Chandod, Sri Ma remarked jokingly on the grave aspect of Shachi Babu, and said, "You seem to have become quite a *gambhirmath babaji*." Sri Ma's use of the word "*gambhirmath*" 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 *tapasya*. 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 being fulfilled in a manner quite beyond his expectations.

Sri Ma 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 townspeople 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 Sri Ma "Is there need for a Guru in one's life?"

Sri Ma replied, "Consider the fact that all one's life one is subject to the influence 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, (from the bondage of *karma*) one must bind oneself down (under the supervision of the Guru), in other words, one must accept discipline."

Another young girl said, "Ma 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?" Sri Ma answered, "In that case, you may 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 Sri Ma one day, "Is transmigration of souls a fact or not?"

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

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

Sri Ma smiled and said, "I did not mean the *samskaras* 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 Sri Ma out of her own *kheyala* explained at some length the Vrindavan *lila* 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 *lila* of Sri Krishna. In the state of union or *samadhi*, 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 *lila* 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 Kolkata, found himself very much at home with this discourse. Perhaps Sri Ma had spoken for him alone, because he agreed enthusiastically and said, "It is my conviction that the *achintyabhedabheda vada* of Sri Chaitanya has touched the ultimate heights of human yearning for God. Whatever one may say, the Advaita Vedanta of Sankara leaves one with a feeling of dissatisfaction because the heart plays a very small role in it."

Sri Ma, however, did not agree and said rather forcefully, "There is no contradiction involved." Naresh Chakravarty was very pleased with himself for having elicited from Sri Ma a defense (as he saw it) of the Advaita Vedanta. 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-lila*?" 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." Sri Ma said with a smile, "Do you know what *maya* is? '*mai aya*' (मैं आया) that is, 'I have come.' *Maya* is coterminous with the experience, 'I am.' If there is no 'I' there is no *maya*."2

During her travels in Gujarat Sri Ma spent a lot of time with her own father and mother who had accompanied her on this journey. As written earlier, Dadamashai (Sri Ma's father) was a music-lover and a singer of considerable ability. On many evenings, he filled the hearts of the congregation by his rendering of beautiful devotional songs. Sometimes Sri Ma also would join in, as she had done in her childhood. One of

the songs which many people have heard from 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;

One who 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 calumny 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."

The quiet days on the moonlit shores of Narmada were made memorable by this beautiful music. Especially because these turned out to be the last days that Dadamasai spent with his beloved daughter. No doubt this is why Sri Ma had sung for him and also with him almost every day.

Sri Ma accompanied by her party, left Gujarat 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 that perhaps Sri Ma 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.

From Tarapeeth Sri Ma and Bholanath came to see Dadamashai in Kolkata who had been taken ill. Sri Ma stood at his bedside. Dadamashai greeted her as Ma and went on repeating the syllable in an adoring voice. In Bengal, little girls are often addressed as "Ma" by elders, but this time the onlookers felt that the old man was addressing the adored Deity of his heart. After a while Sri Ma asked his permission to leave which he gave in a very tranquil manner.

He died peacefully on December 16th 1937 at the age of 71.

Sri Ma Anandamayi's Illness

The beginning of the year 1938 found Sri Ma in Dehradun. She went on travelling continuously to different places in these hilly regions, although suffering from a fever which had persisted for over two months. Many devotees requested her to bring her *kheyala* toward recovery. She smiled and said, 'Why do you have an anti-attitude toward illness? It is not causing me any trouble. Everything is joy.' The fever however caused great anxiety amongst the devotees. The new crowd at Dehradun, not knowing Sri Ma 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 she should be treated by the much respected Dr. Shome. When this topic was raised Sri Ma recalled her words spoken to Dr. Pant in Etawah. As written earlier Sri Ma had travelled incognito for a few months attended only by Virajmohini (August to December 1936). Passing through Etawah, she had developed a few symptoms of stomach trouble. Dr. Peetambar Pant, the Civil Surgeon and Chief Medical Officer of the town, had brought so me medicines to her when Virajmohini got in touch with

him. Sri Ma had received him kindly but said it was not her *kheyala* to take any medicines. She added with a smile that if ever there was a question of medical treatment she would put herself under his care. Somebody came up with the information that Dr. Pant had retired from service and was living in nearby Hardwar. Sri Ma then had the *kheyala* to go to Hardwar and contact Dr. Pant. He was happy to see her again but was very troubled to find her ailing. He agreed to prescribe medicine for her but he did this with great hesitation. He said, "I can prescribe only for ordinary people. My medicine is not going to be effective unless you have the *kheyala* to terminate this illness."

Sri Ma became bed-ridden from the first day of her taking the medicines. To her alarmed companions, she said smilingly, "The illness wants to be with me for some time. I don't ask any of you to go away, do I? I am not ill; but if I take medicines then naturally I have to be 'ill', have I not?"

Acceding to Dr. Pant's request Sri Ma came to his house Peetkuti situated on the bank of the Ganges, in the last week of February. The doctor wished to be near his "patient". The house was very spacious and showily began to fill up with visiting devotees. Sri Ma gradually began to walk about a little. Her illness and recovery, as always, followed a pattern of its own, not correlated with the intake of medicines. Sometimes she would look normal, receive people, talk to them as usual. At other times she would look as if tired and ill. The doctor was puzzled and mystified. One day Sri Ma asked Didi Gurupriya to bring her the midday meal from whatever had been prepared for everyone. The chief dish that day happened to be *taker dal* that is, *dal* cooked with unripe mangoes and thus very tart in taste. It was nowhere near an invalid diet. Sri Ma asked Bholanath if she should eat this

heavy combination of *dal* and rice. He realized it was her *kheyala* so he gave his permission. She then asked him to feed her. After she had taken one or two mouthfuls, she said, 'I shall tell Pitaji (the Doctor) that Bholanath has asked me to eat this *dal* and has fed me himself!'

Bholanath joined in the laughter and said, 'What else! The blame should always be mine!' But Sri Ma seemed to recover a little after this unsuitable meal. Dr. Pant realizing that medicines were ineffective prayed that she should cure herself. Sri Ma was seen to go through certain *kriyas* one day. Her companions deemed that perhaps she had the *kheyala* at last to bid farewell to the illness. She seemed to improve slightly.

1938 was the year of the *Kumbha* at Hardwar. The *Kumbha mela* (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-Prayag, Hardwar, Nasik and Ujjain-so that each town has a turn after twelve years. The festivals held 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 at the indicated moments. People put up in all kinds of temporary shelters, tents, straw huts or any other temporary construction. The residents of the town meet such members of their family and friends as they have not seen for decades.

All pilgrims are expected to gather under the banner of their own *panda* (the professional caretaker 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 *sannyasa asramas* (ascetic orders). In accordance with the tradition of the *Kumbha*, the *sadhus* 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 *sadhus*, 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 campsite. For one month or so, people live in the exhilarating atmosphere of joyful festivity.

Sri Ma has called the *Kumbha* the *dhvaja* (sign, emblem, banner) of the Hindu *dharma*. Sri Ma's description seems singularly apt when we consider the various elements which combine to make possible such an extraordinary occurrence as the *Khumbha mela*. Just as a banner is indicative of the place where people gather activated 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 (*sreyas*) 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.

Hardwar was getting ready for the *Kumbha*. It saw an influx of visitors from far and near. The officers of Delhi/Simla by now were known as the Delhi-party. Their distinctive *nama yajna* was very popular. They arrived from Delhi to sing their special *nama yajna* at Dr. Pant's residence.

The participants believed that their *nama yajna* would bring about Sri Ma's total recovery. This *nama yajna* was therefore specially dedicated to her.

On the day of Holi (mid-March 1938) the strains of *nama samkirtan* permeated the precinct of Peetkuti (the house of Dr. Pant). Even the passersby on the streets felt drawn to it. An eyewitness writes, "The *kirtan* brought together a grand concourse of people. The *sadhu* abandoned his *danda* and *kamandalu*, the officer forgot his assignment, the beggar his begging bowl and the common man his errand; all were drawn to it as if pulled by a magnet. Sri Ma came to the hall and by her graceful presence added to the waves of ecstasy rising and falling in a glorious rhythm. Bholanath was always at the center of the *kirtan* party adding to their zest and at times raising flagging spirits."³

The elements are seen to love *kirtan*. There is always a downpour when *kirtans* are being sung by crowds. This occasion was no exception. The main gates were closed because of the storm. After some time Sri Ma was seen to hurry to the doors through the rains and open them again, saying, "Pitaji, you are wet through, come in, come in." The person for whom Sri Ma had hurried across was seen to be Maulana Talatuff Hussain, a Muslim devotee from Dehradun who had come to see her hearing of her illness. Nobody knew of his being outside the closed gates.

The *kirtan* ended on a triumphant note because Sri Ma was seen visibly to regain her normal radiance. She had said once to this group, "It is all of you who by your devout thoughts maintain the health of this body. The *nama-japa* that you do is medicine for it and a *kirtan* is like an injection for a quick recovery!"

The Passing away of Sri Bholanath

On April 15, the final day of the *Kumbha*, Bholanath accompanied by a great crowd of devotees went to Brahmakunda 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. When he related the incident to Sri Ma on his return from the river, she said, "You live in self-forgetfulness, but others recognize you for what you are!" Unknown to others, Bholanath, while bathing in the river, had performed certain rituals for formally adopting a life of renunciation. He had already accented his *sannyasa mantra* from Sri Ma in the Himalayas on the shore of the Lake Manas Sarovar. He had expressed his wish to enter the state of *sannyasa* formally to Sri Ma. She had endorsed his wish but nothing had been done toward this end so far.

On the occasion of Holi in Hardwar the crowd of devotees was in a festive mood. They wanted to take photographs of Sri Ma and also of Bholanath. In great good humour they asked him to sit at her feet. Bholanath and Sri Ma entered into the spirit of the joyous crowd. Bholanath smiled and sat at the feet of Sri Ma who was sitting on a higher level. Sri Ma placed her hand on his head in the manner of patting the head of a child. She said, "May your renunciation be auspicious!"

Nobody really marked her actual words which were spoken softly to Bholanath. It does seem that she indicated in her own inconspicuous way the future events which were soon to overwhelm the entire family of devotees.

At the conclusion of the *Kumbha* the pilgrims are always in a great hurry to leave the town, creating difficulties with

travelling arrangements. The devotees thought it better that Sri Ma should leave immediately by car for Dehradun. At the conclusion of a function Sri Ma generally moved out first because so long as she was in residence, people lingered, at times causing inconvenience to those who were in charge of board and lodging. In Sri Ma's vicinity all arrangements were temporary; managers always hoped for the best and it may be said that they were never short of money although it was strictly forbidden to ask for it from anyone coming to visit her. It would be more correct to say that the people near Sri Ma never knew from day to day where the money was going to come from how much would be required to meet the expenses and if anything would be left over for the next stage of Sri Ma's journey! To this day nobody actually can say how the huge expenses were met and how Sri Ma's *kheyala* was always borne out satisfactorily.

Bholanath stayed back to escort all those who had come to be near Sri Ma and travelled with them to Dehradun by bus. He returned again to Hardwar on April 14th to attend the *sannyasa* ceremony of Didi's uncle, Kunja Mohan. Bholanath was feeling indisposed but did not regard it seriously. Sri Ma said to Gurupriya Didi, "Bholanath is going to be very seriously ill." Didi, alarmed at these words, wished to persuade Bholanath not to undertake the trip, but Sri Ma said again, "You may try, but he will insist on going and the illness is also inevitable."

Bholanath returned from Hardwar with high fever and complaining of pain in the stomach. The fever persisted. Doctors diagnosed chicken-pox. Sri Ma said quietly to Didi, "It does not appear to me to be chicken-pox. You see, diseases also 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."

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. The eminent Kaviraj Shiva Shankar Sen came from Dhaka at the invitation of Bhupati Nath Mitra, a very old friend and devotee of Bholanath. He had the loving care of the devotees as well as Sushila Mashima, but the terrible nature of the disease made him suffer excruciatingly. Sri Ma 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. Everyone was in despair at this sudden calamity. At this crucial time Sri Ma unexpectedly asked Didi and her father to leave Dehradun immediately and to take Didima also (Sri Ma's mother) with them. She had already sent away Abhaya and one or two others to Raipur Ashram. Sri Ma had spoken quietly; in order to forestall any attempts at deflecting her *kheyala*, she said, "It must be either all of you or myself. If you do not leave, I shall." Didi knew that they could do nothing without Sri Ma's guidance in the matter of Bholanath's illness, so with a heavy heart she started to pack her things. 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?"

Sri Ma said gently, "You are a *sannyasi*. 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 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 Sri Ma, she could only enjoin patience and fortitude. Didi writes in her Diary that Sri Ma seemed to be shrugging off all encumbrances, as it were, to make herself free to be wholly with the patient who like an child in distress, was constantly calling out to her, "Ma", "Ma".

Bholanath, missing Didi and the others, enquired about them. Sri Ma said, "I have sent them away to Varanasi. Was I not right to do so?" To which he immediately answered, "Yes, that was the right thing to do."

Sri Ma was almost constantly in his room the last few days of his life, fulfilling all his expressed wishes. Once he wanted to have her *prasada*. When the thin gruel was brought for him, she took one spoonful of it and fed him the rest slowly. Once he wanted to hold her hands for a while. Bholanath now seemed not to be self-conscious in showing his total surrender at her feet.

Sitting by his bedside, on the last day of his life, Sri Ma asked him, "Are you in great pain?" Bholanath answered that he was but that he could not quite locate where the pain was. His entire body was under the influence of the dreadful disease and his suffering was great. He was lying on his side, facing Sri Ma. She got up and was seen to pass her hands over his entire body from head to toe, thrice; she was also seen to perform some *kriyas* with her hands. She sat in her seat once more. Bholanath seemed to relax. In answer to a question, he said, he did not feel any pain anymore and that he was quite at ease. Since the beginning of the illness this was the first time

he was at peace. Everyone heard him murmur quite clearly, "ananda, ananda." (Bliss, Bliss!)

Some time later, he said, "I am going." Sri Ma responded by saying, "Why do you think so? There are no comings and goings, but just the one totality of being in which there is no scope for any separation." Bholanath seemed to agree and said quietly, "Yes, so you have always said."

Sri Ma's hand was on Bholanath's head when he breathed his last on the night of May 7, 1938. His death was so calm and peaceful that the *brahmacharis* who were attending on him, Sushila Mashima his devoted nurse and the *kaviraj* (doctor of Indian medicine) were not aware of the passing away of a great soul. They were sitting in meditation as if experiencing a great upliftment of the spirit. The quiet atmosphere prevailed till Sri Ma herself spoke softly to the *kaviraj*, "See if all is not over as far as your science goes." Everyone as if awoke to the realization of the ultimate mystery of life. The man who had so joyfully and so completely given of himself to the entire community of devotees was no more.

The bewildered group of attendants looked to Sri Ma now for her guidance. She said that Bholanath was a *sannyasi* and endorsed his chosen name of Tibbatananda Tirtha. Bholanath was fond of people. Now the spontaneous gathering of a huge crowd showed how popular he was. The people of Dehradun took their beloved Pitaji to Hardwar to conduct the time-honoured rituals for the burial of a *sannyasi*.

Sri Bholanath (1881-1938)

One of the many mysteries which was integral to Sri Ma's way of being in the world was the role of Bholanath in her life. He was her first disciple and he was her husband. He

combined both positions with ease and without any tension.

It has already been written that it was Bholanath who made it possible for visitors to approach Sri Ma. He, however, was not looking for publicity. On the contrary, he was careful to satisfy himself that only those with genuine questions regarding their spiritual quest should find their way to her. It is true that very soon the little groups began to swell to crowds but still they were all of a kind, friends of relatives or friends of friends and so on. All those who felt devotion towards Sri Ma began to gather round them and became a family of the faithful.

How did they orient themselves toward Bholanath? It is difficult to focus on him because he was rather taken for granted, even as the priests are when we visit a temple. We forget entirely that the availability of the Deity is made possible only by virtue of their painstaking care and devotion at all times. Further, if some of us wish to know how to conduct ourselves in front of the Deity we look to the priests to guide us with regard to our offerings of flowers and sweets etc. It may be conjectured that something akin to this happened in Dhaka way back in the early twenties. Sri Ma's enigmatic and ethereal personality was attractive but it also had an aura of unapproachability. Everyone looked to him when in doubt regarding their own proper method of approach. When Sri Ma lay in deep *samadhi* for many hours, Bholanath would decide whether to try and recall her to the everyday world or just sit in silent vigil around her inert body. Sometimes he would ask the women to rub her hands and feet or just sit close by doing their own *nama-japa*. If it were too late in the night they would quietly lay Sri Ma down on her bed and leave her to his protective care, and go home. Sometimes Didi and others would stay overnight to be at hand

if necessary; in this way the number of residents at Shahbagh also were augmented day by day.

The few years at Shahbagh (1924-1928) were good and rewarding for Bholanath. He had a satisfying job; his employers were respectful toward them and ready to make many concessions for their comfort. He could afford the schooling of his nephews Ashu and Amulya. He could and did invite many of his relations and Sri Ma's parents to visit them and stay with them for as long as they liked. He was a family-oriented man. He was immensely pleased when Sri Ma got in touch with all his brothers and sisters. They were reunited again at Shahbagh after many years. This gathering of the clan reached its climax when he performed the Vasanti Puja (April, 1926) at Siddheshwari with considerable pomp and ceremony. His family-priest from Vikrampur came for this purpose. His sisters undertook to cook the large meals for three days. All the devotees of Dhaka gathered at Siddheshwari. It was a memorable occasion for many of them for more reasons than the magnificence of the celebrations.

Bholanath had once expressed his wish to Sri Ma that he would have liked to own a house, where he would perform the Vasanti Puja. This dream was at least partially fulfilled at Siddheshwari. Bholanath had a natural openness toward the rituals and ceremonial *pujas* offered to Deities, especially to the various Images of the Devi. He himself was well-versed in these *puja*-forms; his invocatory prayers could create an atmosphere for the devout to feel the presence of the Deity. His robust and outgoing personality delighted everyone during big functions, feasts and the joint singing of *kirtans*. He did not have too melodious a voice but he made up for it by sense of rhythm and enthusiasm. He never seemed to tire of dancing along with the participants filling them with his own

high spirits.

Kirtan and *puja* were easily seen to be his favourite forms of *sadhana*. They could always inspire him. He had another major interest and that was to visit places of pilgrimage. In his time he probably had visited all the major *pithasthanas* dedicated to the worship of the Devi. His genial personality welded the enlarged family of devotees together. He made them feel welcome not differentiating between the elite of the town and the humble folk from villages. In time he became especially attached to Bhaiji. As written earlier when they were in new surroundings he introduced Jyotish Chandra Roy to new comers as his son-in-spirit (*dharma-putra*).

The days of festive gatherings at Shahbagh had come to an end rather abruptly. Luckily for everyone, the small room at Siddheshwari could become a focal point for the gathering of devotees, especially as the venue for the celebrations of Ma Anandamayi's Birthday in 1928. Bholanath was requested to perform *puja* on behalf of the devotees as in the previous year. The people were gathered round Sri Ma, who was lying in a deep *samadhi*.

Perhaps, nothing need further be said regarding Bholanath's position in the eyes of the devotees of Dhaka. He was the screen through which Sri Ma allowed the splendour of her effulgent presence to be felt by all visitors. He bore the first impact of her supra-natural aura like his namesake, the Divine Bholanath, who is said to have sustained the first impact of the descent of the Heavenly River Ganga to earth.

Immediately after the Birthday Celebrations of 1928 Sri Ma and Bholanath had taken to travelling. When his job was terminated he was not in Dhaka. Bholanath rode the waves of these radical changes without any visible adverse effects. The

Nawabzadi had requested him to continue at Shahbagh but he saw it was not Sri Ma's *kheyala* and so nothing had come of it. During this time Sri Ma travelled so widely and rapidly from place to place that Bholanath did not get time to sit back and take stock. Many years later Sri Ma told Didi that this was one of the reasons for these journeys to distant and interesting places when life at Shahbagh came to an end. He was in a way cast in the role of a pilgrim which he espoused joyfully.

Bholanath was now without means of support, and without a place to call his own. But this was not a setback anymore. Due to Sri Ma's presence and over-all *kheyala* for the guidance of his affairs, he did not seem to have felt any kind of wrench during this period of transition. There was a change in the lives of the devotees as well. They had been visitors at Shahbagh. Now they found themselves in the privileged position of making decisions for Sri Ma and Bholanath. This group of people became firmly united, inspired by the one goal of being desirous of rendering service to Sri Ma and Bholanath. Bholanath's stature remained undiminished in their eyes. He remained the much admired Baba Bholanath to them.

As written earlier, in response to the request of the delegation from Dhaka, Bholanath returned to the town with Sri Ma but stayed aloof from everyone for some time at Siddheshwari. This was the most difficult time of his life. Sri Ma was with him exclusively, nursing him when he was physically ill, guiding him in his *sadhana* and sustaining him through his mental turmoil. She suffered his disquiet in silence, till he could shake it all off and emerge in possession of himself once more. She also sat with him (at Tarapeeth) while he underwent the crucial period of his *sadhana*, when a wrong move could have had disastrous results. It may be said

that he never looked back. Everybody saw for himself that Bholanath was a changed person at Tarapeeth. He had chosen the path of asceticism. Only Sri Ma knew about his problems when they happened; he himself took nobody else into his confidence. Sri Ma kept his confidence secure all his life only saying a few words to Didi after his death in order to explain a few puzzling incidents, as has been narrated above.

Once, one of the early devotees from the days of Shahbagh related to the author that Bholanath had been requested to retire from his position of "guardian" to Sri Ma so that the devotees themselves would assume this privilege. The author found this statement so astonishing and contrary to her understanding of life in Dhaka that she asked Didi about it. Didi was equally surprised. She dismissed it summarily as a piece of wild imagination. She said, "Nobody would have dared to suggest such a thing to Bholanath. He was always fully in charge as the head of his family. We were all very conscious of his kindness and generosity and his large-hearted tolerance of the crowds. Indeed, Bholanath made it possible for us to come close to Ma!"

Didi has written about Bholanath's last visit to Dhaka in January, 1938 in rather endearing terms:

"Bholanath seemed inspired. His tall figure dressed in silken ochre robes easily commanded admiration. He moved along with the *kirtan*-party adding to their enthusiasm; they derived fresh impetus from his whole-hearted participation. His retinue of small boys and girls was constantly around him singing and dancing along with him.

"Truly he gave great pleasure to the devotees of Dhaka this time. Although Ma was not with him, they were happy to

have Bholanath with them for a while. He was the greatly revered Baba Bholanath, beloved of them all, an unfailing friend and guide. It was good for them to remember this last visit when the news of his passing away was received in May, 1938."

Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Gopinath Kaviraj wrote his views regarding Bholanath in a letter to Didi, which he wished her to read out to Sri Ma. The letter is translated here. The translation is not verbatim.

"It is indubitable that Sri Ma's mortal frame is unlike any other human body. Ordinary people, even gods, are subject to the influence of personality traits or qualities (*guna*). All bodies are *karma*-oriented. Ordinarily all human beings are born to spend themselves in living out their *prarabdha karma*. After being born they work out the consequences of their previous actions. Since they are possessed of the I-sense and they are identified with their will power they go on performing new actions and so accumulate further *karma*-sequences.

The gods or perfected human beings (*mahapurusa*) who are born out of compassion for suffering humanity are Blissful Persons. They remain on earth to guide human beings on the the path of *ananda* or joy. Compassion is felt as a reality by people on this path. It goes without saying that the great souls are pure and shining in their own light. They are *sattvic* in nature. Ordinarily men are constituted of all three *gunas* (qualities), *sattva* (light, purity), *rajas* (action, energy etc.), and *tamas* (heaviness, darkness) - the Great Persons are *sattvic*, effulgent, of a nature full of all goodness.

"I understand Sri Ma's body to be beyond all qualities, that

is why she is completely aloof and beyond understanding- yet from another point of view all humans are understood by her. She responds to each according to his own propensity. What is the meaning of this? Just as a crystal reflects any colour brought close to it, maintaining its own pristine purity without any loss, so Ma is not limited by any predilections. All those who draw near see their own feelings and thoughts understood fully and responded to. People see her in different ways - as daughter, friend, *Istadevata* or God. Since she is not bound by any particular attitude all is possible with her. I think the difference between one who is pure, good, and he who is beyond every quality (beyond good and evil) may be stated in the above terms.

"Now the question is: Bholanath who lived with Sri Ma at such close quarters, why was he not purified of his worldly inclinations at one stroke? It may be said that because Sri Ma was totally beyond the realm of mortal qualities, she neither indulged these inclinations nor did she repudiate them. Whatever Bholanath felt at times was the manifestation of his own previous *karma-samskaras* (predilections).

"To say this is not enough because it is indubitable that Bholanath attained to a perfection in his life which is exemplary.

"I think the resolution of this question is possible. The difference between the 'state' of pure-goodness and the 'state' of being beyond all qualities is just this that under the influence of the former all dross is overcome and a life of goodness is achieved. The dross is not totally eradicated. Whenever the powerful influence of the *mahapurusa* (Great Soul) is withdrawn then again that which was in abeyance may become visible. The Good gains a temporary victory

over evil and that is all. But, under the influence of Quality-less-ness, all propensities get impetus to express themselves to the full. Such exposure is conducive to their total annihilation. Therefore, this purity is permanent and not temporary. As a last step, when the quality of *sattva* (good) also becomes inactive then the creature attains liberation. Under the influence of Great Souls man may attain to a life of pure goodness but liberation remains within the sphere of the influence of One who is beyond all qualities. I think the mystery of Bholanathji's ultimate state of *ananda* could be explained in this way. He began as a yogi of remarkable ability and attained to a state which is the gateway to liberation. In Sri Ma's vicinity alone is this metamorphosis possible.

"This is my understanding of Bholanathji's position. If Sri Ma makes any comments, please let me know."

Sri Ma smiled a little but made no comment. This response was also typical. She did not speak very much about Bholanath. The memory of his personality somehow remained a powerful presence only.

Manmatha Nath Chatterjee, a devout *shakta* of exemplary behaviour had an experience to relate to his intimate friend Niraj Nath. He said, "I was to perform the annual Durga Puja. I was seated in front of the magnificent image. I started on the rituals of offering *arghya* to the invoked Deities (*arghya* is an offering of flowers, bilva leaves, grains of rice, blades of grass and sandalwood paste held together in a small receptacle). After I had invoked the presence of *Siva* and had welcomed Him, I saw myself reaching out and placing the *arghya* on Bholanath's head instead of the clay image. Bholanath was sitting up straight with his eyes closed. He

gave a start and opened his eyes and looked at me strangely. I was overcome by a sudden awareness. At that moment I felt that Bholanath's presence in the world was a mysterious factor. He was there to make possible the Phenomenon of Sri Ma Anandamayi."

Whatever may be the value of this experience, to Baba Bholanath must be given the respect and love of all devotees. May his blessings enrich the lives of all.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Ongoing Journey

"All the years I was with Bholanath. I did not hear about the many worldly desires which beset mankind. I was effectively shielded from the knowledge of weaknesses of character which create so much unhappiness in the world. It is now that I hear so much about this side of human nature. All of you know that he was prone to fits of great anger. It is said that even rishis were subject to the emotions of anger. Not that I am saying that Bholanath was a rishi. If I did, people would think I was praising my husband"

-Sri Ma Anandamayi

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

In the beginning, as in other cases of bereavement, the local people hesitated to intrude upon Sri Ma but they soon realized how ludicrous it was to think that she would be found grieving over the death of Bholanath. This reaction, however, shows how perfect was Sri Ma's *lila* of a devoted wife. Her attitude toward Bholanath's death was the same as it had been and would be toward the deaths of others closely connected with her way of living in the world, and 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. "What is the occasion for grief?" She had said. "Nobody is lost to me. Do you feel sad when you are obliged to go from one room to another?"

In small numbers the women of the town came to sit with Sri Ma. They found her calm and her usual serene self. They were at first puzzled and then gained in understanding of their beloved "Mataji."

By and by the women of Dehradun felt a little ashamed of themselves for attributing their own emotional reaction to Sri Ma. 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 or that you were married and are now widowed, You are not limited by any of these conditions. You are always the same and just what you are in yourself. So please continue to do according to your *kheyala* now as always."

Gurupriya Didi, waiting anxiously in Varanasi for news of Sri Ma, got reassuring tidings that everything was quite as usual in the ashram at Kishenpur and that there were no changes in Sri Ma's way of life.

She remained quietly in Dehradun for some time, occasionally visiting Raipur.

There were very few people at the Kishenpur ashram. Ruma Devi cooked the simple meals for Sri Ma and saw to the comforts of visitors, mainly the family of Niraj Nath Mukerji from Allahabad. Manmatha Nath Chatterji, who had retired from service, was living in the ashram. Birendra Chandra had come from Agra. Abhaya, a youth who had attached himself

recently to Sri Ma was a constant companion. Abhaya had many disagreeable qualities, such as monopolizing Sri Ma's time to the exclusion of others, answering on behalf of Sri Ma the questions put to her by visitors and being insensitive to the requirements of others to the point of rudeness. His sometimes very impertinent behaviour toward Sri Ma herself would outrage the older devotees. All this was forgotten and forgiven again and again, because of his childlike devotion to Sri Ma on the one hand, and on the other, his golden voice and marvellous repertoire of devotional songs, many of which he composed himself. After a troublesome day, he would disarm the angry elders by expressing his humility and apology in beautiful songs of total dedication. *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 Sri Ma which remained unrivalled. In himself he was a most charming and entertaining companion for all the younger members of the families visiting Sri Ma. Many young boys became his devoted followers in music; many others, with rather unfelicitious results, tried to imitate him in his orientation toward Sri Ma without possessing his guileless spontaneity.

Sri Ma's indifferent health at the time continued to cause anxiety. Abhaya had the happy idea of writing and asking everyone who was willing to do so to engage in *nama-japa*, expressly for the purpose of praying for Sri Ma'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.¹

In the last week of July, 1938, Sri Ma accompanied by Ruma Devi and Abhaya travelled to Solan and then on to Simla. This was Sri Ma's first visit to Simla after the death of Bholanath. The Bengali officers stationed there had become very attached to Sri Ma and welcomed her joyfully. Not finding Gurupriya Didi with Sri Ma they enquired about her. Didi had gone to Varanasi, Vindhyachal, Kolkata and Dhaka in accordance with Sri Ma's suggestions. She had been in Dhaka during the Birthday Celebrations. This was an especially poignant year for the devotees of Dhaka because of Bholanath's death and also because the image of their beloved Kali had to be given its final internment inside its own little shrine.

Didi, although inconsolable at being separated from Sri Ma for so long, had realized how necessary her presence had been in Dhaka at the time. Now she was happy to be recalled to join Sri Ma in Simla. Didi met Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma now had an opportunity to learn about these events. Sri Ma 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", Sri Ma 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 Kavirajji, 'What do you say? As far as your science goes, isn't everything over?'

Then, with a half-smile Sri Ma added, "Some people are amazed to hear me talking like this about the death of Bholanath, and are a little shocked too." Many sitting around her protested saying such thoughts had not occurred to them. She 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." Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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 not knowing how to control its perpetual restlessness." Sri Ma 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 tranquility. Learn to be really 'restless'." The woman was delighted with this answer

to her question.

On August 2nd, Sri Ma expressed her *kheyala* to leave Simla. The residents at once raised strong objections. They were not at all willing to let her leave them after such a short visit. They were then obliged to take note, as it were, of another of the unique facets of Sri Ma's personality. In spite of her gentle demeanour and her unfailing consideration for others, her *kheyala* 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 *kheyala* was borne out. Didi and other close companions had long since given up the idea that they were dogged by a series of coincidences and they had learnt to abide by Sri Ma's *kheyala* to the extent to which they understood what it was that was required of them. The people of Simla were obliged to bid Sri Ma a sorrowful farewell for the time being.

Sri Ma went down 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 at Solan. All officers of the princely household got involved in eager and willing service to Sri Ma and to all those who happened to be with her.

Sri Ma stayed in her usual place which was known as Shogi Baba's temple at Solan. During the week-end the devotees of Simla came down and performed their beloved ritual of the *nama-yajna*, 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 Sri Ma. The Raja Sahib or Jogibhai to all devotees was by now one of the recognised stalwarts of Sri Ma's retinue. He was known to be a special *krpa-patra* of Bhairji's.

From Solan Sri Ma went to Dehradun and stayed at the ashram for a few days. On August 18th, Sri Ma proceeded to Mussoorie accompanied by quite a large group of people. The local inhabitants quickly became attached to Sri Ma and as always and everywhere is the case with her 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 Sri Ma. 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 borne by the same mother, are we not?" Sri Ma concurred and he went on to say. "God alone is real, all else is illusion. But we live in forgetfulness of our true calling. Alas, we are such weak mortals that it is difficult for us to turn away from indulgence and follow the path of self-denial."

Sri Ma'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 this 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. Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma that they would never forget her.

Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma returned to Dehradun and almost immediately went down to Hardwar.

Sri Ma Anandamayi's *Kheyala* For Dr. Pant

At Hardwar Sri Ma was taken ill with severe pain in the stomach. Dr. Pant persuaded her to come and stay at Peetkuti, his house on the Ganges, so that she might be more comfortable than in the *dharmaśala*, Sri Ma herself remarked that the disease was likely to assume its severest form. Dr. Pant 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 sake, bring about your *kheyala* for your recovery."

It may be recalled that Sri Ma had been quite ill in Hardwar once when Dr. Pant had treated her for her ailment. Subsequently he had had an argument with Hari Ram Joshi about the nature of Sri Ma's illness. Joshi had maintained stoutly that medicines were futile in her case and that her own *kheyala* 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; 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 question. Now that he knew Sri Ma 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.

Now he prayed to her to rid herself of the disease, half believing in Joshiji's statements regarding the nature of Sri Ma's illness. It is possible that Sri Ma responded to Dr. Pant's state of genuine conflict. It so happened that the same night the few people sitting near her bed that included the doctor saw the beginning of *yogic kriyas* on her body. As always, the actions did not appear to be performed wilfully, but Sri Ma's limbs seemed to arrange themselves in a variety of beautiful postures. It seemed a fluid demonstration of *yogic asanas* with their appropriate accompaniment of breath control and positions of the head, hands and feet. Those who have seen Sri Ma perform even one *asana* know how beautiful it could look. Her body seemed to flow into a *yogic* stance. She never manipulated her legs or arms but they seemed to settle into the correct posture quite effortlessly. Dr. Pant with folded hands watched enthralled this manifestation of *yogic kriyas*. While her body assumed intricate *asanas*, Sri Ma's face wore its normal expression 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 Sri Ma had recovered her health and was without any of the

symptoms which had caused so much concern to Dr. Pant. Some time later, in answer to a query, she said that it had been her *kheyala* 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."

Sri Ma, in general, would always smile off any ascription of miraculous powers to her, so she now said, "Is that so? Well, you are an upright Brahmin, living like an ascetic on the bank of the holy Ganges. It 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 Sri Ma only to be happily reassured by her usual radiant smile. Much to their amusement, Sri Ma said to Didi, "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.

On September 25th 1938 the foundation for the future "Shree Shree Ma Anandamayee Kanyapeeth" was laid at Peetkuti, Hardwar. Didi had wanted for long 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 Sheo Prasad Sinha, a reputed lawyer from Allahabad, visiting Sri Ma at the time.

Manmatha Nath Chatterji of Dehradun performed the *puja* for the inauguration ceremony in Sri Ma's presence. The first two residents were Bhaktipriya and Shantipriya, two little girls who had been given in Didi's care in Dhaka.²

Sri Ma left Hardwar after the Puja holidays and, visiting many towns on the way, came to Kolkata in late October. Bhramar Ghosh had made arrangements for Sri Ma and her entourage to stay in the school building of Deshbandhu Balika Vidyalaya in South Kolkata of which she was the Headmistress. The school building was available because it was the time of the Puja vacation. The new devotees of Simla came to Kolkata, this time to perform their *Namayajna* near Sri Ma. The devotees of Kolkata witnessed this special function and became enamoured of it.

Dr. Pant was travelling with her this time. He was trying his best to introduce some sort of order in Sri Ma's usual hectic programmes. Others before him had also attempted to organise the chaos which seemed to surround her but he did not know this and tried to normalise her hours of public audience and of rest. Deferring to his wishes, Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma's circle where time was reckoned neither by the clock nor by the sun or moon. Sri Ma's attendants were trying hard to adjust themselves to this regimentation. It must be borne in mind that now there was no one in Sri Ma's entourage who had authority to direct events. If Sri Ma countenanced the wishes of some newcomer then others abided by his arrangements as

well. So Dr. Pant brought about some sort of order in Sri Ma's daily programmes. The devotees of the towns she visited obeyed the new rules and went home at 10 p.m. every night. Kolkata, however, was another matter, where the new order at once came to grief. Impatient crowds were not in the mood to abide by Dr. Pant's requests for short visiting hours. People waiting in anguished expectancy for a glimpse of Sri Ma 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 harassed doorkeepers and entering Sri Ma's room wept out their sense of grievance. Sri Ma 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 voice 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, Sri Ma was weeping in the manner of the deeply afflicted. Everyone now prayed for her *kheyala* 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 Kolkata realized that they had overreacted to a new situation. They should have remembered that it was not Sri Ma'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 till the person concerned is ready for a revaluation or a turning around. In this instance, Dr. Pant 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. Sri Ma 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. Pant understood all this gradually and after a while lost the incentive for introducing order and system into Sri Ma's way of life.

There were many incidents which revealed that Sri Ma could be unpredictable in the midst of a settled routine. At the time of audiences Sri Ma's *asana* (seat) was kept at a distance from the crowd of visitors. Devotees posted themselves at strategic points so that nobody could break ranks to approach and touch Sri Ma. This was necessary in Kolkata where people always wanted to touch her feet. At one such session two old women who looked to be very poor widows attempted to approach Sri Ma. Manoj Chatterjee was alert and barred their way. One of them said, "Don't stop us, son, we are just ignorant people."

Sri Ma laughed aloud and descending from her seat came up to the two women and embraced them both in her two arms. She touched their faces with her own laughing all the while. The women were overwhelmed and their eyes were full of tears of joy. Sri Ma resumed her seat. Manoj Babu escorting the old women toward the exit said, "Now take your leave. My heart is riven by jealousy of you!" Everyone burst out laughing. An eye-witness thought perhaps genuine

humility alone can bring down Grace.

During this visit to Kolkata Bhramar Ghosh arranged for a meeting with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. She brought him to meet Sri Ma while she was visiting Dakshineswara on October 18, 1938. Sri Ma was seated under a big tree on a platform. Her companions and Subhash Chandra sat in front and around her on the ground. Neither she nor Subhash Chandra spoke, so there was complete silence for a while. Somebody introduced Subhash Chandra to Sri Ma. She said, "I met your brother in Ahmedabad." He said, "You have been visiting Ahmedabad?" Sri Ma said, "Yes". Again, there was silence. Evidently Subhash Chandra had nothing to ask and Sri Ma had nothing to say.

Amulya Kumar Dutta Gupta, in response to quiet nudgings from others in the audience, broke the atmosphere of quietude and raised a relevant topic. "Ma, can one find God by serving one's country?" Sri Ma said to Subhash Chandra, "Baba you answer this question. Can God be attained?"

Subhash Chandra : "Do I keep track of God?" (every one laughed)

Sri Ma (also smiling) : "You keep track of, what?"

Subhash Chandra : "The question was not put to me!"

Sri Ma : "You are the reason for this question. (looking at Amulya Kumar) Isn't that so?"

Amulya Kumar : "Yes".

Sri Ma : "Now, say something! Let me put it this way. Why do you work for your country? If you can tell us the benefits of this service then everyone will become involved. I

have heard that you are a marvellous speaker. Say something to us."

Subhash Chandra : (smiling) "I have not come here to give an oration; I find happiness in serving my country and that is why I do it."

Sri Ma : "Is this happiness permanent?"

Subhash Chandra : "The word 'permanent' is a difficult one." Sri Ma : "What lasts forever is permanent. Engagement in the service of one's own True Self generates permanent happiness. Moreover if this service is genuine, then everlasting happiness is ensured. Baba, are you engaged in a service of this quality?"

Before Subhash Chandra could answer, one lady broke into the conversation and engaged Sri Ma's attention away from the previous topic. After Sri Ma had addressed herself to the lady's problem, she turned to Subhash Chandra again and said, "Baba, won't you say something?"

Subhash Chandra : "But I have come here to listen, not to talk!"

Sri Ma : "Only to listen? Will you listen to what I say? Will you do what I tell you to do?"

Subhash Chandra : "I cannot promise. I can only say that I will try."

Sri Ma : "See, Baba, whatever action is done by us is done because of a sense of lack; it is true that when that lack is fulfilled, we are happy. All actions in the world, however, generate fresh wants... This is why it is said that action in relation to the world is ever incomplete and gives fragments

joys only. Action relating to the Self gives true happiness... . You are a great soul. Try to elevate your capabilities still higher. The service to your country is also because of a sense of want; the happiness it affords will be transitory. Everybody looks for that continuing Bliss which is unending. Only such work as is aimed at finding your true nature will lead to Bliss or Supreme Joy. But you may object, 'What is the use of my attaining the state of Bliss when the whole world is suffering endlessly!' To this it may be said that if one attains that Bliss, one can impart it to others as well."

Subhash Chandra : "What is that action which pertains to the search for one's true nature?"

Sri Ma expatiated on true nature and also ways of being, which take one away from one's own nature, not quite answering this question. He again said, "You are not telling me the way to this attainment." At this time, the lady who had spoken before interrupted the conversation again, giving her own understanding of Sri Ma's words. Amulya Kumar, Bhupati Babu, Nagen Babu and other serious minded men felt that the session remained unsatisfactory and incomplete because Sri Ma had no opportunity to answer Subhash Chandra's question. After a while Subhash Chandra made his *pranam* and bidding farewell, left for Kolkata.

Didi had long desired to make some recordings of Sri Ma's words and songs. This time due to the efforts of Shachi Kanta Ghosh (Asst. Income Tax Commissioner) and Bhramar Ghosh, Didi's wish was fulfilled. Sri Ma was taken to the studio of H.M.V. and humbly requested to speak for this purpose. Didi's repeated *pranams* brought a smile to Sri Ma's face. She evidently had the *kheyala* for granting this prayer.

Most of the recording went off well; only in one Sri Ma broke out in an *attahasa* (loud peal of laughter) and continued to laugh. Young Buni joined in, so a very rare recording was created to delight the hearts of all devotees.

From Kolkata, Sri Ma went to Dhaka for a short visit. There were tumultuous scenes of welcome. Crowds of men, women and children surrounded her day and night. This time she was without Bholanath and Bhairji. In finding her in their midst once again the devotees of Dhaka gained new heights in their understanding of her personality. Somehow she seemed sufficient unto herself and in full command.

From Dhaka Sri Ma again wandered back to Uttar Pradesh. She had no definite plans or settled places of residence. She stayed on houseboats on the river at Allahabad and Varanasi. At Vindhyachal she spent many hours sitting under the tree in front of the small ashram. For Sri Ma's companions the natural stillness of the quiet hill-top site was a contrast to the noisy activity in Dhaka and Kolkata. Sri Ma herself was never troubled by crowds and so could not be said to prefer solitude. She felt as comfortable in Vindhyachal as she did in Kolkata.

Sri Ma 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. Sri Ma 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 Sri Mohananandaji Maharaj preferred her to stay at the ashram she had visited earlier, where she was well known. In the evening many people assembled in her room. She talked to them answering their questions and also urging them to a greater effort towards self-enlightenment.

She said: "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 the 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 is 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 *sadhaka* 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."

Sri Ma Anandamayi 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...."

Sri Ma'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 *sadhaka* but the time for farewell inevitably drew near.

From Deoghar Sri Ma returned to Uttar Pradesh again. This time she did not linger at any place but travelled on to Gujarat. Passing through Baroda and Chandod, she came on November 29th (1938) to Vyasatirtha, a remote site for *tapasya* on the bank of the holy river Narmada. She was accompanied by Didi, Ruma Devi, and Sadhan Brahmachari only.

Vyasatirtha had been visited once before by Sri Ma when she had stayed there overnight. It was a forest retreat with only a few ashrams and temples nestling under trees. The local people held the place in great veneration as the site where a great number of renowned ascetics had practised their *sadhana*. Although Sri Ma 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 residents of the ashram of one Swami Yogananda made room for 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.

Sri Ma 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 bank and spent a night or two on temple *verandahs*. Much of the time she sat under a big tamarind tree on the bank of the Narmada. Abhaya had joined them and he would ask her questions about her life in Bajitpur, Dhaka, etc. but mostly they sat in meditative silence in tune with the spirit of the holy place.

Phalahari' Ma

In Vyasa, Sri Ma 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 had come to be referred to as "Phalahari Ma" in Sri Ma's circle. This woman, because of her piety and her grave and dignified deportment, was held in much respect by the local people. Sri Ma used to go and see her every now and then. It was obvious to Sri Ma's companions that Phalahari Ma did not quite

welcome this intrusion in the beginning but after a few days they found that if Sri Ma did not visit her, she would come to their hut to see Sri Ma. In due course she became so attached to Sri Ma that she was visibly upset when Ma went away, even for the day, to the other side of the river. Abhaya remonstrated with Sri Ma 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." Sri Ma smiled mischievously but did not say anything. After a few days Phalahari Ma revealed the story of her life to Sri Ma 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 *sadhana* in solitude. She also confessed that in some strange fashion Sri Ma reminded her of her own daughter. Sri Ma listened in sympathetic silence to this tale of grief and the brave effort toward the overcoming of it.

On her next visit to Phalahari Ma, Sri Ma 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."

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

Phalahari Ma became very agitated and her eyes filled with slow unaccustomed tears. Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma 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."

Sri Ma 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, Phalahari 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 Sri Ma's visit to Vyasatirtha had not arisen out of the mute and real need of this woman, so bravely living a life of renunciation?

Sri Ma had very few companions with her while she travelled in Gujarat during January, 1939. Only 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 Dharmasala at Dakore. Didi was away in Allahabad to see to the affairs of the Kanya Ashram. Sri Ma knew that Didi's naive faith in all people doing their utmost to carry out any work which was started in her (Sri Ma's) name was not justified. Didi came to Allahabad to stay with the girls for a little while. The girls were living in a garden-house near Daraganj, Allahabad at that time. Manmatha N. Chatterjee had been given the responsibility of seeing that the girls were looked after properly.

Sri Ma travelled through Baroda and Ratlam and stopped at Mathura. After a while Sri Ma sent away Sadhan and Abhaya. They wrote to the dismayed devotees that Sri Ma had expressed her wish to remain by herself for a while. There was nothing for them to do but to abide in patience till she should have the *kheyala* to come into their midst again.

Sri Ma, 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 looking lady and her companion on the bank 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, Sri Ma was no ordinary human being but surely a *devi*. The constable was himself likewise impressed, and enjoined on the boatman to look after his passengers carefully.

During the day the boat was rowed away from the crowded shore and during the night it was brought back again to the river bank. Ramraj and his fellow boatmen became self-constituted guards and care-takers of Sri Ma. This was not at all unusual for her because it could be seen that wherever she went, she evoked this response of care and concern in people. It was not necessary for her to speak. Wherever she was people were irresistibly drawn to her as if she were the most cherished person and felt 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 Sri Ma 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 imagination.

By the end of February Sri Ma left Navadweep to go to Puri. From there she went to Deoghar via Kolkata and then to Varanasi on March 5th, 1939. In Varanasi Sri Ma stayed at Hari's Dharma-sala this time, but only for a day. On March 6th, she came to Vindhya-chal. 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 residents eagerly awaited some definite instructions from Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma in order that her *kheyala* might be evoked. In this connection, it may be recalled that Bhaiji had had a totally different approach. He had never wanted to trouble Sri Ma with details of practical matters. Didi, on the other hand, never imagined any issue to be too trivial for Sri Ma. In this instance, to Didi's appeals for some mandatory advice, Sri Ma 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 Varanasi, Allahabad, and Mirzapur, the nearest towns. Sitting among a group of visitors one day, Sri Ma said, "Strive for Immortality."

Somebody remarked, "It is difficult to know which is the true path." Sri Ma 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. Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma. She greeted them in the manner of old friends renewing acquaintance. The women did not immediately perceive Sri

Ma's intention and answered that they had not met her before and that this was their first visit to the Ashram. Sri Ma 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 Sri Ma'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, Sri Ma said, "Look, will you do something for me? Take a little time from your housework every day and devote it toward 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."

Sri Ma left Vindhyachal soon enough and passing through Varanasi, came to Delhi, on March 25th.

The devotees of Delhi had purchased a house, which they had decorated and made ready for Sri Ma. They were happy to accommodate Sri Ma and her party in this new house which was now an ashram for them.

Swami Muktananda Giriji Maharaj

After a few days of celebrations Sri Ma proceeded to Hardwar for a very important ceremony on April 13, 1939. This was the formal ceremony of renunciation, that is *Sannyasa*, for Didima, Sri Ma's mother.

For long Didima had expressed her sole desire to be allowed to accompany Sri Ma on her travels. She had no other wish than to be with her daughter. Her youngest son Makhan had been married recently, but she could not be persuaded to take up residence with them, so that she would be comfortable and looked after properly. Since Dadamashai's death, she had considered herself free 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 simply that she wanted to be with Sri Ma and did not count the cost of the hardships of ceaseless travel. On one occasion Sri Ma 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 otherworldliness. It can be said that in her own characteristic gentle way, she brought grace and dignity to the order of asceticism.

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

The date chosen was the last day of the Bengali calendar, Chaitra Sankranti, which corresponded to the English date of April 13, 1939.

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

Sri Ma 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, Sri Ma, 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 Akhandanada there were Ruma Devi, Abhaya, Keshava Bhai (a Parsi young man), Kanu, Sisir and Kamalakanta in the party. This being the time of Sri Ma's Birthday, they managed somehow to celebrate the auspicious occasion. The simplicity of the *puja* performed by Didi was more than made up by the grandeur of the Himalayas.

In Uttarkashi Sri Ma acquired a following of a bunch of school children. They spent their free time with her, a few venturing to engage in conversation, the rest communicating with shy smiles. Sri Ma 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 would request of them. This also being granted Sri Ma 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 an odd question one day to Didi. He asked if she had ever seen Sri Ma 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. As a matter of fact, I do not think anyone 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 Dhaka, we never saw her dozing or even fatigued. This was the main reason why the fact that Ma was sitting for 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."

Sri Ma joined in the general laughter and said, "You see, her thoughts are always directed here (towards Sri Ma Anandamayi): 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 *kheyala* 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 on the evening of May 16th. Here they were pleased to find Swami Paramanandaji, who had met Sri Ma 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.

Sri Ma and her companions stayed in Gangotri for three days. They put up at the *dharmasala*. By order of the Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal, no householder was 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 climbing and also the prospect of staying for a few days surrounded by the wonderful scenic beauty of the Himalayas.

Sri Ma 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 *mahatmas*, was saying to me, 'Everyone that I have come across seems to have something characteristically his own to say. But Sri Ma Anandamayi's very special characteristic seems to be just her smile.'"

REFERENCES

Chapter One

1. *Mother as Seen by her Devotees*, Benares, 1946, p. 42.
2. A plant with very fragrant leaves, considered holy by all Hindus. A variety of basil.
3. A special kind of dark stone regarded by Hindus as an emblem of Deity.

Chapter Two

1. Spiritual ecstasy : Lord Gauranga is believed to be an Incarnation of God. He inaugurated the custom of *Hari-Samkirtan* (singing the Names of the Lord) in Bengal. *Samkirtan* is especially suited to the Iron Age of *Kali* when men are weak and unsuited to the rigours of arduous *sadhana*. While singing Lord Gauranga used to enter into ecstatic states which were possible only in a Divine body. These states are called *Mahabhavas*.

Chapter Three

1. Rakhi Purnima in the year 1922 was on August 3. This is how the date of the initiation has been fixed.
2. This was confirmed by Mahamahopadhyaya Gopinath Kaviraj in later years when he had the opportunity to listen to them. He wrote, "The pronunciation was so perfect that even a conjunct sound made up of several consonants without any intervocative linking was distinctly audible" *Ma Anandamayi* 1946, p. 11.
3. "Introduction", *Mother as Seen by her Devotees*, 2nd ed., Benares, 1956, pp. i-xxxviii.
4. Amulya Kumar Datta Gupta, *Anandavarta*, Vol. XV, no. 2, 1967.

Chapter Four

1. "Mother Then and Now", *Ma Anandamayi by Devotees*, 1946, p. 200. 2

2. Sri Ma Anandamayi always said "this body" when referring to herself. In these accounts the personal pronoun has been used.
3. The ritual of walking round a Deity or temple three times.
4. *Kundali*, as described earlier, is a circular form.
5. When Bholanath pulled out her arm he found an object clasped in her hand. He took it from her hand and threw it into the nearby pond. Neither Sri Ma Anandamayi nor Bholanath has disclosed what this was. Nobody was able to evoke her *kheyala* toward explaining any of these mysterious events. Richard Lannoy has written a scholarly and convincing exegesis on this incident. (*Anandamayi*, England, Element Books Inc. 1997).
6. The unit of measurement in rituals is the arm of the *yajamana*, that is, the man who is performing the ritual. This *vedi* was according to Bholanath's arm measurement.
7. Names of the Lord.

Chapter Five

1. The form of one of the *Mahavidyas*.
2. "Devi, as Uma, Parvati, and Gouri, is the spouse of Siva. It was as Sati prior to Daksa's sacrifice (*Yajna*) that the Devi manifested Herself to Siva in the ten celebrated forms known as the *dasamahavidya*....Kali, Bagala, Cinnamasta, Bhuvaneshwari, Matangini, Shodasi, Dhumavati, Tripurasundari, Tara, and Bhairavi. When, at the Daksayajna she yielded up her life in shame and sorrow at the treatment accorded by her father to her husband, Siva took away the body, and, ever bearing it with him, remained wholly distraught and spent with grief. To save the world from the forces of evil which arose and grew with the withdrawal of his Divine control, Visnu with his discus cut the dead body of Sati which Siva bore into fifty-one fragments, which fell to earth at the

places thereafter known as the fifty-one *maha-pitha-sthana*, where Devi with her Bhairava is worshipped under various names." *Introduction to Tantra Sastra*, by Sir John Woodroffe; Ganesh & Co. (Madras) Pvt. Ltd. 1960, pp. 15-16.

3. Sri Ma always spoke in the masculine gender when referring to herself. The difference became noticeable when she spoke in Hindi. In Bengali the same verb-form can be used for either gender.
4. As late as in 1981, the same ritual was effective. Sri Ma was in Kankhal. News was conveyed to her that Bindu Mukerji had suffered a massive heart-attack. Everyone was taken aback. He was well-known in Sri Ma's circle. Sri Ma said, "I do not see much hope". All the people standing around her immediately said, "Ma, if you have the *kheyala* for his recovery, he will get well" and repeated it thrice emphatically. Bindu did recover from his brush with death due to Sri Ma's *kheyala* evoked in this manner.
5. *Mother as seen by Her Devotees*, 2nd ed., p. 46.
6+7 The rituals of *puja* are various offerings to the Deity as if to an Honoured Guest-fruits, new clothes, etc., cooked meals at proper times. All these items are distributed as *prasada* to the devotees after *puja*.
8. A term of endearment connoting respect as well as affection used for young wives of the house. In due course, the two younger sisters also came to stay with Bholanath and Sri Ma for some time.

Chapter Six

1. *Mother as Seen By Her Devotees*, pp. 39-40.
2. Girija Shankar Bhattacharya : *Mother As Seen by Her Devotees*, pp. 104-105
3. This was not the only instance of a photograph of a projection by a *kheyala*; in later years also a photograph was taken of a subject who was not actually present.

4. Years later this location was marked out and preserved as holy site by Dr. Pannalal, who very carefully researched the circumstances.

Chapter Seven

1. *Mother as Seen By Her Devotees*, p. 45.
2. The previous year Didi had remembered to take special note of this day. She had performed *Puja* in her own home in Tikatuli. Sri Ma and Bholanath had been invited to a private function.
3. From the days at Shahbagh, Sri Ma Anandamayi and others had been fasting on full-moon and new-moon days, partaking of *prasada* after *bhoga* at night.

Chapter Eight

1. Worship is somewhat "*atmavat*", that is, all you would do for your own pleasure, taking for granted the fact that nothing at all is necessary for God. The image is offered meals, clothes, laid down to rest for the night and aroused in the morning. All this is done by meditation accompanied by relevant *mantras* and *mudras*. The image actually does not have to be moved. Worship with external accessories is of secondary importance. Every deity is symbolized in a *yantra*-a small mystic diagram which is made of metal or crystal and is the real object of worship in front of the priest. The image is the solid form which the pilgrims see from a distance. This is the general practice. Every temple, however, may have its own tradition which is handed down from generation to generation of priests.
2. Bholanath's sister's grand-daughter, who was left in his care by her parents.
3. M. N. Sircar, "A Mystic Rose" *Ma Anandamayi*, Banaras, 1946, p. 37.

Chapter Nine

1. A translation by Ganga Charan Dasgupta (Principal Baroda College, Maharastra). He was Bhajji's uncle :

Glory to Thee, Sri Anandamayi Ma;
Thou dwellest in every soul in absolute purity
through all times, O Mother!

Thy lustre, Mother Nirmala, illumines
the universe; Thou art all aglow with
the radiance of heavenly virtues!

O Mother!

Thou art Gouri incarnate, Queen of all kingly
power; Thou dost symbolise OM in swaha
and swadha, O Mother!

To all eyes Thou shinest, O Mother, with
surpassing divine grace; Thou art the absolute
Reality, supremely beautiful and perfect,
O Mother!

The Sun and the Moon are thy twin ear-drops;
the deep blue of the boundless sky is Thy mass
of hair, the universe Thy Glorious From,
O. Mother!

Thou art the glamour of all the riches
of the world, Sweetness incarnate, radiant
with all the splendour of life,

O Mother!

Thou art as charming as Lakshmi is to Visnu,
ever full of peace, tranquillity and mercy;
all gods and goddesses emanate from Thy Person,
O Mother!

Thou art the dispenser of all happiness,
all blessings of life, of love and devotion,

of divine wisdom and salvation; all flow from
thee, O Mother!

The universe is Thy offspring; Thou dost
nurse it with all tenderness and finally give
it a reposeful shelter in Thy bosom,

O Mother!

The very life of Thy devotees art Thou;
Thou art divine grace incarnate and the saviour
of this world and the two next,

O Mother!

Thou art the very fountain of all causes
and effects, far beyond the bounds of all harmony
and discord; the prime mover of all divine
forces art Thou, O Mother!

Thou art the spell of all wisdom, the charmer
of all Yogis; all the terrors of earthly life
are dispelled by Thy presence,

O Mother!

The Soul of all the *Mantras* and *Bijas* art Thou,
the revealer of all the Vedas, the sustainer
of all worlds with Thy all-pervading Presence,
O Mother!

All *gunas* and forms radiate from Thy Person,
but Thou art quite beyond their reach;

Thou art aglow with the highest bliss of

existence, O Mother!

The entire universe animate and inanimate,
thrilled with Thy touch, sings always
the sweetness of Thy grace,

O Mother!

Let us all unite, with one heart and soul,

to offer our greetings to Thy feet.

O Mother!

Glory and glory again and glory ever more
to Thee, O Mother!

2. The three-year long *Savitri Mahayajna*.

Chapter Ten

1. *From Memoirs of Hari Ram Joshi*, p. 29.
2. The other five are, Sadhan Brahmachariji, Sevaji and her sister, Maharatanji and Ranadeva Ghosh of Delhi. Two others were great devotees of Bhaiji and looked upon him as *Gurupratima*, that is like the Guru. They were Hari Ram Joshi and Jogi Bhai of Solan.

Chapter Eleven

1. In subsequent years several other girls have received this status of the twice born. An obsolete tradition was revived by Sri Ma Anandamayi.
2. A kind of sound produced by the tongue moved inside the mouth by Bengali women on all auspicious occasions.

Chapter Twelve

1. This is from my recollection of the game which we as children played with Sri Ma Anandamayi and Bholanath. It is possible that it may have had more rules which were needed to settle disputes on proper reckonings. (Author)
2. 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 Kolkata.

Chapter Thirteen

1. The translation is close but not verbatim. I have heard about these incidents many times from Didi as well as from Sri Ma Anandamayi herself as have others. I have also read the painstakingly written pages of the Diary and transcribed some of them for publication in Bengali. (Author)

2. A sort of chair of canvas and wood, swinging freely between two shafts carried by four coolies on their shoulders.
3. 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.
4. Didi does not say this but her cooking was always so delicious as to add to the enjoyment of all meals.

Chapter Fourteen

1. A. V. Volume VIII No 5 pp. 151-152 (trans. by author from Bengali).

Chapter Fifteen

1. The word "*gambhir*" means serious or profound; in other words, Sri Ma Anandamayi's statement meant "Why are you looking so serious?"
2. In Hindi "*Mai aya*" sounds somewhat like *maya*.
3. Reminiscences of Dhiren Datta.

Chapter Sixteen

1. In retrospect we realize that these times were crucial in the history of the world. A careful research may reveal some correspondence between Sri Ma Anandamayi's illnesses and retreats with events taking place beyond the ken of people in our own part of the world.
2. The Golden Jubilee year (1988) of this institution was celebrated in Varanasi (the present location of the Kanyapeeth). To this function came all the alumnae of the school including Bhaktipriya and Shantipriya, elderly ladies at this time.
3. One who eats fruits only.
