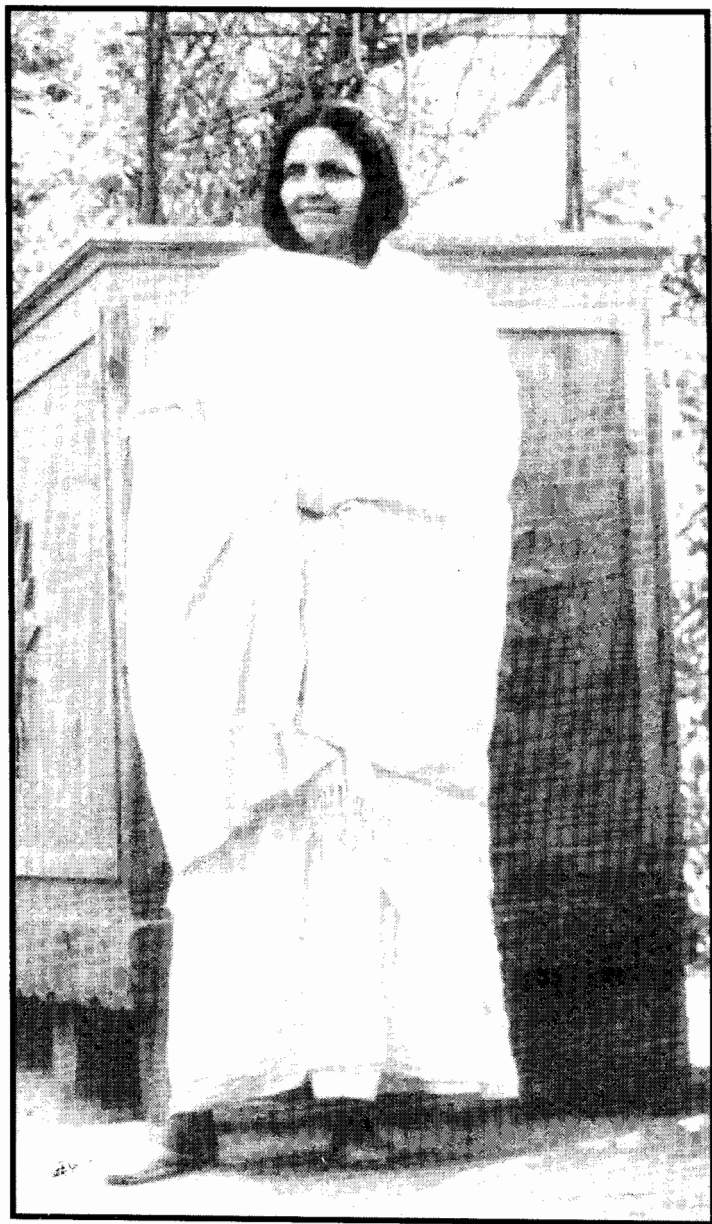


PRELUDE



It was in Almora, where I spent my summer holidays in May–June 1943, that I had my first darshan of Mataji. I had heard about Her from various people and all of them had spoken highly of Her, but for some reason or other I had not been to see Her until then. I was in fact searching for spiritual guidance, however, the thought that She could be the one I was longing to find, did not enter my mind. I was therefore not in a hurry to meet Her.

One morning, I went to Kalimat near Almora for a walk. The Danish *sādhū* who lives there, said to me, "The Holy Mother is at Patal Devi, why don't you go and see Her on your way back ? Her surroundings are noisy, but She is real." I did not quite know what he meant by 'real', but I did go to Patal Devi.

At that time the Ashram had not yet been built, or perhaps only a small portion of it, in any case, it looked very different then from what it is now. Mataji was sitting on a string cot in the open, with a few people squatting round Her on the grass. She seemed all joy and beauty, with Her long black hair falling loosely over Her shoulders and back, Her radiant face smiling. She addressed a few words to me and I noticed that She did not treat me as a stranger, but as if I were well-known to Her. "She does certainly look very lovely," I thought, "but that alone will not help me." I could not see any way of getting to know more about Her. I knew no Bengali and only some colloquial Hindi, not nearly enough for a serious conversation. There were no books in English about Sri Anandamayi Ma, except a small one, "Sad Vani", and even that was not available. Moreover Mataji travelled about a good deal and did not remain anywhere for long. All my life, I had been taught to look at things critically, not to accept anything on authority, to watch and weigh, to think and find out for myself. Besides I had heard much about false Gurus and fake *Mahātmās* and how difficult it was to distinguish between genuine holiness and first-hand knowledge or a mere semblance of these.

There was another factor which was against me. I was wearing European dress, a solar topi, shoes and socks and carried a hand-bag in one hand and a mountaineering-stick in the other. My appearance seemed to clash painfully with Mataji's surroundings and I was sensitive to the curious glances of the people who were grouped around Her. Nevertheless I remember distinctly being struck by the inward beauty and purity that shone in the faces of two or three of these people. After about fifteen minutes, I got up to go. Mataji remarked about my leaving so quickly, but I said it was getting late as I had to walk about three miles to the cantonment.

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It was several months later that I had Mataji's darshan again, at Varanasi, where I was a teacher at Rajghat School. On a Sunday, I went to see some friends at Assi Ghat and intended to visit also Sri Hariharbaba who had a tremendous reputation as a great *Mahātmā* and lived in a houseboat on the Ganges near Assi Ghat. The famous veena player, Sri Basu, happened to be at the house of my friends. He said they would all go to see Sri Anandamayi Ma, who was somewhere quite near at the moment, would I care to accompany them. I readily agreed.

Mataji was sitting amongst a huge crowd of people under a pandal on the banks of the Ganges. As I came to know later, this was the site for the Sri Anandamayi Ashram. The land had already been acquired, but the construction of the buildings had not yet begun. There was kirtan going on and some of the singers and players were moving round a central altar, dancing as they sang. I was then not used to this kind of spectacular worship and felt rather out of place. Mataji was sitting far away from the entrance and the whole of the available space being packed, it seemed well nigh impossible to approach Her. We stood at a distance for a few minutes; when suddenly the mother of one of my pupils, who was a devotee of Mataji, emerged out of the throng, took

me firmly by the hand and without any further ado led me straight to Mataji, where she somehow managed to make space for me to sit down right next to Her. I felt the looks of several hundreds of men and women piercing through me like arrows and would have given anything if, by some magic, I could have vanished from their sight. But there I was right near Mataji, and She smiled at me encouragingly and even remembered my short visit to Her at Almora the summer before. In spite of the dense crowd and the loud singing and dancing which disturbed me, I distinctly felt that there was something very special about Mataji which I could neither gauge nor define, but which had a fascination and was undeniable and worth pursuing.

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In winter 1944 an English *sādhaka*, Lewis Thompson, who had lived in South India for a number of years, came to stay at Rajghat School. Being the only other European, I was requested to receive him and see that he was comfortable. It did not take me long to find out that he was a quite unusually earnest seeker after Truth, in fact ruthlessly single-minded. He had come to Ceylon at the age of 23 and one year later proceeded to South India in quest of spiritual guidance which he had sought in vain in England and France. He had stayed in Sri Ramana Maharshi's Ashram for seven years with intervals and had received initiation from a well-known Guru, a *jñāni* of the South. He had made it a point to meet and study closely everyone who was believed to be highly advanced spiritually. He had been to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram twice for some length of time, had met Swami Ramdas and Mother Krishnabai, J. Krishnamurti, Sri Jogaswami of Ceylon and a number of others who are difficult to approach and known only to a very few. He had obviously developed an intuition as to what was real Knowledge and Attainment rather than booklearning or discursive knowledge. To my question why he had come to North India when he had found so much in the South, he gave as one of his reasons that he had seen a

photo of a Holy Mother who travelled in the North for whom he had immediately felt a strong attraction. He consulted his Guru who had said, "Yes, go and meet Her." He showed me the picture. "Oh," I exclaimed, "this is Sri Anandamayi Ma, I have had Her darshan." He confirmed, "Yes, this is the name by which She is known." "I believe She is in Varanasi at present," I said, "one of the teachers of this school goes to see Her often." The next morning Thompson set out to meet Sri Sri Ma and was not seen again at Rajghat that day. It must be made clear that Thompson had a very sharp, critical intellect and was extremely difficult to please. Only the very best, the highest interested him and he coldly used to dismiss everything else.

To my amazement, I found him all but in raptures when I asked him about his impression of Sri Anandamayi Ma. "As soon as I saw Her," he said, "I knew that my intuition had been correct – except that I found far more than I had expected. I simply could not tear myself away. When She retired for Her meal and rest I spent the time somewhere near about and went back to see Her again in the evening and remained till late at night. I have never seen anyone like Her. There is not the slightest trace of an ego to be detected in Her. Her eyes look right through you into the far unknown distance; Her voice is absolutely impersonal and so is, Her walk." "How can you possibly judge in a single day?" I questioned, "you have not even talked to Her." (Thompson did not know either Bengali or Hindi.) "I am quite certain," he declared with emphasis, "I have spent many years studying the great men of India and have developed some insight in this respect. There is no need to talk. I watched Her very carefully; I have never before come face to face with such perfection; there is no flaw in Her, none whatever."

It naturally made a deep impression on me to hear someone talk in this strain, whom I had found utterly unemotional, detached and one-pointed. I could hardly help wanting to know Mataji for myself and at closer quarters. But opportunity did not offer so quickly.

That summer I arrived at Almora only in June. Mataji was just on the point of leaving for Dehradun with Her whole party. I found Her engaged in an animated conversation in Hindi with some visitors, but alas, I only understood fragments of it which I could hardly piece together. After a short while Mataji left. I deemed myself lucky to have caught at least a glimpse of Her that day.

Mataji can sometimes be heard to say; "There is a time for everything. No one can come to me until the time is ripe." Almost two years after I had had my first darshan of Mataji my lucky stars allowed me at long last to make closer contact with Her.

In the second half of March 1945, Thompson received a letter from a Buddhist bhikkhu, an old Ceylonese friend of his who had come to Sarnath, asking him to see him there. By road Sarnath was then about 10 miles from Rajghat, but by footpaths across the fields only 4 to 5 miles. Thompson walked to Sarnath that evening, announcing that he intended to return the next morning. He did not take anything with him, but stayed away the whole of the next two days. When he did not come back even in the afternoon of the third day, the Principal of the school and myself decided that he must have fallen ill. He had not even taken a change of clothes with him. There had been a case of cholera in the servants' quarters opposite to where he stayed at Rajghat. There was then no phone at Sarnath. The only thing was to go there and see what had happened. Equipped with some medicines from the school dispensary I went there by cycle rickshaw.

I found Thompson sitting very happily in the room of one of the bhikkhus. To my astonished inquiries, he replied, "Sri Anandamayi Ma is here. My friend and I went for Her darshan the evening I arrived. I had no intention of talking to Her. But She Herself started by asking me about myself. There is an excellent translator here, such as I have rarely come across. He has known Mataji closely for 18 years and I can feel that he really understands what She says and is able to render it into

good English." (It was Sri J. C. Mukerji, Sri Gurupriya Devi's cousin.) "At first, I was hesitant, but once the ice was broken I had more and more questions to ask. It is amazing how subtle Her replies are. Though She is almost illiterate, all our learning is put to shame by Her great wisdom. Every morning Mataji, J. C. Mukerji and myself have been discussing in private for two or three hours. She Herself offered me this unique opportunity. How could I possibly leave before I had put before Her every point that was puzzling my mind. However, now there is not much left to be talked over and I shall probably return to Rajghat tomorrow."

I spent that evening in Mataji's presence on the roof of the Birla *Dharmaśala*. At Sarnath no crowd thronged round Mataji – only a few of Her companions, another dozen or so who managed to come from Varanasi, and some of the bhikkhus. It was an informal and quiet gathering, no loud singing or dancing. This time I did not feel out of place, everything seemed friendly and congenial. Sarnath had been my favorite place of pilgrimage and rest ever since I had come to Rajghat nearly ten years before. On many Sundays, I used to walk there early morning and spend the day reading Buddhist scriptures, sitting either in the library or in the open near the stupa, enjoying the peace, solitude and the natural beauty of the setting, wondering how it was that even after millenia the presence of the Lord Buddha could still be felt so strongly. , Ever since my adolescence I have felt drawn towards the Lord Buddha, in fact I had read his talks first in German translation when I was 15 or 16 years old. But little did I dream that Sarnath, where Lord Buddha had delivered His first sermon after He attained Illumination, would be the setting for the most decisive and important turning point in my life.

Sri Mukerji asked me whether I wished to make use of his services as an interpreter, but I just wanted to sit quietly near Mataji and imbibe the atmosphere. I returned to Sarnath the next evening on foot, stayed

for— the night and walked back at early dawn to be in time for school. This I repeated almost daily. Occasionally however, I found that Mataji had gone to Varanasi and was not returning to Sarnath until the next day. Sri Mukerji threatened every day to leave for Allahabad, but I always found him still at Sarnath. The 24th of March was a Saturday and I came prepared to remain for the week—end. I asked a question during the evening gathering and late at night had a long private talk with Mataji. What She said was so simple and so completely convincing, there was no room for doubt. "How strange that I had not been able to find this out for myself," I thought. In fact, it was not another talking to me, but my Self conversing with myself. This cannot be explained, it must be felt. It was an experience beyond words, but all the more real for that. What Mataji said was evidently only the outer expression of something that took place simultaneously on a much deeper level or perhaps on all levels. The next morning I had another talk with Mataji to clarify some details and then Sri Mukerji actually left for Allahabad.

During my conversation with Mataji, She asked me whether I had to support anyone of my family. Several weeks later I received a letter to announce the death of my aged father, the only near relative I still possessed. He had died a refugee in America just three days after Mataji had talked to me on the roof of the Birla Dharmas'ala at Sarnath. The time to make close contact with Mataji had come for me the moment all my worldly ties had been dissolved.

After I had my first talk with Mataji, I never ceased to marvel at the extraordinary ease and naturalness with which She had exploded my problem. Where there had been an almost constant dilemma, there was now a straight path. It was as if an open door had been shown to me. As I then saw, it had always been there, but I had not noticed it until She pointed it out. She had uttered just a few simple words, nothing particularly striking or unheard of, yet the effect was quite out of proportion. It may perhaps be likened to the miracle of electricity : by

the mere pressing of a button a whole town can be lit up. Mataji's words evidently—are not just ordinary words, but vehicles of power and light that open up one's understanding, that bring about definite changes in the person to whom they are addressed. The mind did not cease from wandering, but it ceased from worrying; there suddenly was nothing to worry about. I could perceive the next step, and full confidence had been awakened in me that I would always see the next step as I walked along. A new life had begun.

I conceived an overwhelming desire to be able to talk to Mataji without the help of an interpreter; to find out more about Her and Her teaching, which seemed so simple and yet again so very, very subtle and far-reaching. I thus began to devote every free minute to the study of Hindi.

Bengali would have been more satisfactory, since it is Mataji's own language, but I already knew the Hindi script and had an elementary knowledge of the language, so, being impatient by temperament I naturally chose the quicker way. It took me about a year of strenuous effort to understand well what Mataji said in Hindi and to talk to Her without help. No sooner had I achieved this than Mataji would quite often call me to translate for foreigners and sometimes for South Indians. I, thereby, got a unique opportunity to witness many private interviews with people of greatly varying backgrounds. This enabled me to get first-hand experience of the great universality of Mataji's teaching, of its innumerable aspects and facets. I could see for myself how She modified it to appeal to each person's nature, conditioning and need of the moment – and yet She never stepped it down. My desire was being fulfilled. Slowly and gradually, I got a certain grasp of what Mataji taught by Her Presence as well as by Her words.

Translating private conversations moreover gave me the chance to get to know intimately *sādhakas* from various countries, to get an insight into their problems, their approach. Fellow-travellers who meet on the way can often learn from one another.

My efforts were thus rewarded a millionfold; in fact, tenacious as they had been, they were negligible compared to what I had gained.

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In November 1945, I wanted to spend my Divali holidays with Mataji. I had never before stayed in any of Her Ashrams. Mataji was to be at Vindhyachal on that occasion. The war was not yet over, and, being an 'enemy alien,' I could not leave Varanasi without obtaining a special police permit. I applied and was wondering whether the permit would reach me in time. How great was my joy and amazement when I received the reply that I did not require any more permits ! Henceforth, I was free to travel where I pleased within India, provided I kept the police informed of my itinerary.

Ever since the beginning of the war in 1939, my movements had been severely restricted. I had had to apply, giving valid reasons, every time I wanted to leave Varanasi even for a single day. Permits, had often been granted, but by no means always. Was it a coincidence that the moment I had no more desire to go anywhere except for the sole reason of being near Mataji, I was suddenly free to go wherever I liked ?

At Vindhyachal Kali Puja was celebrated. I had never before witnessed a puja of this kind, nor was I used to staying up all night. In those days the crowds that thronged round Mataji were not so formidable as they are now. Besides, being a newcomer and a foreigner at that, I was readily helped to a good place right in front, from where I could watch Mataji and every detail of the puja. Mataji was present throughout the night in the room where the puja was being performed. She seemed to be keenly alive to everything that happened. I observed Her closely and was fascinated to see Her face change continually. A whole drama appeared to be enacted on Her features. She looked not only radiantly beautiful but also extraordinarily young that night –I could

have sworn She was not a day older than 16 and yet I knew She had been born in 1896, nearly fifty years before. Was it a human being or a Goddess sitting there in front of me, I mused. I cannot claim to know how a Goddess looks but surely this was not the countenance of a human being.

Another peculiar thing happened to me that night. My own mother had died when I was just two years old ; although I had seen a number of photos of her, much as I tried, I had never been able to imagine how she had looked. This puzzled me much, especially in my childhood. During that Kali Puja, the thought suddenly flashed through my mind, "I have seen this face before, long ago – Oh, now I know how my mother looked, this (Mataji) is my mother !" It was a strange experience, inexplicable, which left a deep and lasting impression – unforgettable.

When the Puja was over, I was told that it was 3 A.M. Three A.M. ? Was it possible ? We had been watching since 10 P.M. Had I really sat glued to the spot for five long hours ? I did not feel sleepy even when I got up and I could not fathom how the time had flown so quickly —five full hours ! It seemed quite incredible. I went to my room and lay down. I had not yet fallen asleep when someone knocked at the door, calling my name. It was Sri Gurupriya Devi, holding an *āsana* in her hand, "Mataji sends you this," she said. It was just 4 A.M., the time when at the Ashram we are supposed to rise for meditation. 'How very subtle of Mataji,' I thought, to present me with an *āsana* in this memorable night and at this hour, to remind me, no doubt, that this is not the time to sleep but to sit in meditation.' I went outside to thank Her. Mataji had not gone to rest; I found Her busy, surrounded by people. She smiled at me. "You were feeling cold, sitting without an *āsana*," She said. The *āsana* is still with me, but with the years it has become badly worn.

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It was probably in 1947 when Thompson received a letter, from a friend in Pondicherry, recommending an old French gentleman to him who had spent the greater part of his life in Africa and had now come for a short holiday to India, the land of his dreams. He wished to spend a few days in the holy city of Varanasi ; would Thompson kindly assist him and show him round, since the old man did not know much English and of course not a word of Hindi. Thompson did what he could for him. However, when he found that the old gentleman was a serious aspirant, who had practised meditation for about 30 years with the help of Swami Vivekananda's books, he said to him, "What will you gain by all this sight-seeing ? The one whom you really ought to meet is Sri Sri Anandamayi Ma." The old man had never before heard about Mataji, but when he was told more about Her he was only too eager to have Her darshan. There was only one difficulty : Mataji was not in Varanasi at that time and the gentleman's visa was about to expire in a couple of days. "I cannot possibly risk staying on," he said. "I must go to Delhi at once to have my papers put in order and then leave India, or I shall get into serious trouble with the authorities." But Thompson was not the man to listen to such arguments. "Nonsense," he retorted with vehemence, "visas, police, authorities, etc., etc., all these are creations of the mind. The moment a human being attends to Reality all these phantoms lose their power, they simply cease to exist for him. You need not worry at all about those formalities, rest assured that nothing will go wrong. You cannot leave Varanasi now. Mataji is expected here in a few days, you will have to wait." Thompson could be fierce in his determination on occasions and the old man had not the courage to contradict him. Moreover, he felt utterly helpless at Varanasi without Thompson's assistance and guidance. So he obeyed.

He was waiting at the Ashram when Mataji arrived. Once he had seen Her and She had glanced back at him he could not take his eyes off Her. Fascinated, for hours together he stood speechless on the terrace

over-looking the Ganges, with tears trickling down his cheeks, unaware of the passage of time. When late at night he got back to the Ramakrishna Mission, where he was putting up, he found the gate locked. With difficulty, he roused the door-keeper. Everyone was asleep and he had to go to bed without his dinner. The next few days he spent at the Ashram. He had one or two private talks with Mataji, which I had the privilege of translating into French with Thompson's help. Mataji asked the old man when he would return to India. He-replied, "I am afraid there will be no more chance of that. I have come with considerable difficulty even this time and I shall not get permission again to take money out of the country in which I live. Besides, I am old." (He was nearly 70). Mataji made no comment. The gentleman left and he really encountered no difficulties due to having overstayed his visa.

Soon after reaching his destination, he began to write letter after letter, all of them dealing with the same theme in endless variations : He could not bear the thought of living for the rest of his life far away from Mataji and from India. By hook or by crook he would have to return. "Where there is a will, there is a way," he would manage to come somehow, sooner or later, the sooner the better.

Lo and behold – he quickly discovered a way. India had just gained political independence and every country had to start an embassy or a consulate in New Delhi. In no time the old gentleman secured a post of some sort at his country's embassy in New Delhi. He consequently was not only granted a visa but also permission to bring his money to India.

When he arrived he went straight to Mataji and subsequently followed Her about wherever She happened to go for some two or three years. Notwithstanding his advanced age and the fact that he had been used to a very different and settled kind of life, he did not seem to mind hardships and discomforts ; he was blissfully happy, having found what he had longed for most of his life.
